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*The Infinite asked God, How can I appear to humans without petrifying them with fear? God disguised the Infinite as the blue of the sky.*

*What about me? Eternity asked. How can I reveal myself to men and women and not annihilate them with fear?*

*Then God said, I want to give them an instant in which they will understand you. And he created Love.*

- Arthur Schnitzler, *Beziehungen und Einsamkeiten*

## LONGING FOR REAL LIFE

Video time is neither a mirror nor a description. It is a "great many times" which attempts to approach (an impossible project) the thin and changeable human reality.

Human time seems to have been formed as an invisible thread between beginning and ending; artists walk the vibrant line, as if they were acrobats, or musicians playing the mind's cords without using a score. Every artist seems allowed to create his own combination of time and space, his own grammar and syntax.

In order to have something really belonging to her, Gertrud Stein dismantled the syntax of English. At the present time artists, if they want to express themselves, might dismantle the world. In a sense, they do. Think about realism in video art, during the last 15 years. Diseases abound, injustice is everywhere, war, loneliness, technological splendor, human misery. It's life that rushes art, it is reality, quite frankly, that has become radical. The artist, as everyone, is bound to the world by a double chain: if he wants to know the world, he must hold it in himself; if he wants to know himself, he must be in the world. Many different answers to many unacceptable conflicts; one by one, scattered, without a common order of language. But a poetry of life is still kept, inside and outside the monitor, recycling our contemporary ruin. Even the poor, worn out, communication material -the Word- is recycled.

As it is cut off from speech it becomes gigantic, a voiceless scream. Nancy Dwyer, 1992: the word is a large block on wheels, as a grocery cart, "CARE" on one side, "LESS" on the other. We can push or drive our very heavy CARE/LESS letters. The certainty that life is lacking something important becomes a moving monument; the way to emphasize emptiness is to make it solid. A market image is made of something that can't be bought or sold. The artist creates an impersonal object, a standard model, a volume which needs human arms and legs to be moved. Words are heavier than ever; lazy, very slow. An old doubt: would LESS objects open new organs in our bodies, or make our organs function better?

Today artists know that it is not a new computer that will improve the quality of their language. Not even intelligence is able to solve conflicts, at least not alone. Video art collects what remains of a language, making a weightless text of light. I wonder if video art is going through a period of "realism" which could be compared to realism in literature, but only as Roland Barthes meant it.

This is my unfaithful transcription of a piece from Barthes, (*Leçon*, 1977):

Freedom's strength in videography doesn't depend on an artist's public image, on his political involvement, nor on doctrines inspiring him, rather, it only depends on how he pushes the limits of language.

Videography includes more than one kind of knowledge. Videography is definitely realistic, or more precisely, it is a dazzling light from reality. Ideas come around, neither fixed nor made a fetish. Videography gives them an indirect place, which is good as gold. It stores and then releases a flash of light, as a stone heated by the sun. Science is rough, whereas life is thin; in order to heal the gap, we take video to our heart.

Art in video doesn't say it knows something, but about something. Better: it knows what's what about human beings.

Knowledge is a statement in videography: it illuminates where the subject is and how strong... it aims precisely at the reality of language: language an immense nebula of implications, effects, echoes, meanders, ravines, addictions. ...Videography is wherever words and images are tasty, colored, sounding, luminous.

If things must taste as they are, the artist has to accept the evidence: reality and language are never parallel, that is why video art is realistic, it longs for reality. It is also stubbornly unrealistic, because it believes it is sensible to wish that which is impossible."

If we need more and more to write, with video, texts soaked in real bits of our actual history, this does not mean that art's territory has been invaded by the need for documentation. Otherwise, what about *War and Peace*, or the combines by Robert Rauschenberg? The fact is that an artist cannot be aware of himself if he doesn't connect his inner anxiety with the common life of everyone; if he doesn't find again a relationship between his own existence and that of the larger human society.

Technology has made his tongue sharper, perhaps richer. We are under the strong illusion that a more fluid writing, discontinuous, unpredictable, having more than one dimension, is closer to life. But the main problem is not canceled: languages of art still long for real life, believing it is sensible to imitate its manner of operation, or to copy the glimmer of reality we are able to perceive. Specific times and processes take the place of accomplished shapes. More and more artists are able to leave the closed room of their body, to break the very closed circuit between their body and its image, captured by the

camera. The limit of experience, in art, has moved from the personal body of the artist to his personal vocabulary, to his dialogue with his instruments. The passage through many kinds of technology -the most primitive are still included- exploring the large landscape of physical and spiritual dynamics, has created a particular way of understanding life, life as made by humans in time, which becomes history, when someone writes it.

This is not far from the experience of Woody and Steina Vasulka; they have been engaged for over twenty years in the attempt to correct the linear geometry of Descartes. Between the two coordinates which define the space for visual elements, they put image's intensity and sound's waves, so that time take the place of space and images become pure moving energy. Nevertheless, this visual invention, and the technological ambiance that produced it, are nothing but a desert if human practice hasn't the power to inscribe new tracks of ideas, or at least a new *Art of Memory* (Woody Vasulka, videotape, 1989). In a strange way, Woody Vasulka has become a worth fellow of Cicero, even if Cicero's house of memory is not, for him, a mere method of remembering. The classic idea of mind needing, literally, an architecture containing and supporting it's activity, becomes an artificial video space where the power of memory can be seen, struggling against a human nature compelled to forget. (See, also, Francis Yeates, *Art of Memory*, .....)

What happens to humans beings when their refusal of memory is nearly a removal?

Woody digs into the continuity of a desert landscape, incredibly beautiful and colorful, the gray caves of history. A long history of wars. The places of memory are computer sculptures of events that only have a visual reality on films and pictures, sound volumes in which colors are forgotten. For men and women of our time, who could go towards their last days without any awareness, memory can be a nightmare. An angel with gold

wings, perched on a mountain, looks from afar at our ugly story. He is perfect, not contaminated. So is the landscape. Man is an isolated presence, a simple intensity of one existence that is not able to find a common place, neither in a natural, forgotten history, nor in History. He would like to be blind. The angel is his impossible perfection already thrown far away, now ready to become a bullet hurting and punishing him.

Images of threatening hostility. The man, torn by conflicts coming from inside and outside, shut in a cage. While he dances his despair, his laugh turns into a grimace, his weeping into a savage pain. Years of intelligent investigation into the language of sounds and images have finally generated such a limpid idea, a true story that brings video art back into our unbalanced world. Human beings coming out from memory's caves rediscover themselves primitive.

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To be in with memory is even more difficult. It means to stay inside time, that is the measure of life. It means that human time is not only subjective. The 70's are not to be forgotten. So close, real time performances, fixed on videotape, interesting as much as impossible to watch. Certainly, they are not objects to use up. Maybe prisoners of their excessive nearness to life as it is, not yet written. Books as well as ideas have become deadened, or they remain unheard. Too much noise and confusion and fear of the unfamiliar things. I still admire the artists of the 70's, so desperately idealistic: wanting to be separated from conventional ideas, they preferred to have their heads cut off. It happened both in Europe and the United States.

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Nil Yalter was living in Paris. She had just arrived from Turkey. As a painter. The first video tape she made is still a milestone in French video art's history. Nil Yalter aimed the camera at her navel. Between the navel and the machine, a closed path in the room. For almost an hour she wrote a widening spiral of words on her belly, around the small mark left by the lost umbilical cord, how women had been lost. The written belly starts dancing and only the central part of the body appears on the screen, the center point of her balance. The unexpressed arguments at the origin of this work belongs to a story that made any woman, for centuries, *La femme sans tête*, (*The Headless Woman*, videotape, 1976).

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The headless man was living in New York. He used to spend his time stretched out measuring the floor, trying to walk with his feet on the wall and, without stopping, moving his back and arms like a large worm on the ground. Bruce Nauman. He will recover the head much later, and this time the head without the body, for a video installation revealing that Nauman's fondness for the closed room hasn't come to an end (*Spinninghead*, 1990). I saw the installation at the Musee Cantonale in Lausanne in November, 1991: one monitor on top of another, one head on the top, and the same head, turned over, on the bottom. Both of them go round the neck as if they were screwed on. Because they are not light bulbs, they cannot be turned on. Green and blue, the colors of asphyxia. It was time for somebody to kill Narcissus.

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Belgium, 1976. Jacques Louis Nyst used to make his head empty. Often absentminded, he sometimes neglected to choose his medium. He shot, drew, wrote (in

which order isn't important) the story of *The Object*: a tiny, blue coffeepot. Nyst lifts the lid: he wonders if it is by chance the top half of a skull. Inside, it is empty. What civilization does it come from? An hypothesis could be: from a civilization whose ideas rest on emptiness. Which is the essential spring of life. The object sleeps. Its body is full. Blue domes, at night, emerge from the sleeping earth.

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In New York, William Wegman was thinking of his dog as if she had a human head and human reactions. Even now, his videotapes are the only ones that crack us up. Really, Wegman was truly serious. With the greatest seriousness he tells us how desperate the artist is in his attempt to resist the dog as a dog, her settled "is-ness", a conceptual artist resisting the concept. Sometimes he didn't expect the dog to think and feel as a human being, and he attempted to feel as a dog.

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John Baldessari, more gently and less successfully, taught a plant the alphabet. Bill Viola put a microscopic camera between his teeth. Rebecca Horn wore long nails touching the floor, as if her fingers couldn't move away from their own shadow.

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If reality was trying to balance mind and feelings of people trapped in a technological conformity, artists reacted by transforming machines into something which was their own, and making clear the absolute, impersonal value of the human body as a filter for our mental experience.

At the same time he was painting the boundless workroom of the mind, Jean Dubuffet hurled his "batons rompus" against the unfaithful culture of the word.

Everything happened at the same time, in the mid 70's. Some artists working with video tape, and also with paint, began to clarify their ideas. "I use video as a knife to cut the heart of the matter and the matter is me," Willoughby Sharp (*Video Art: An Anthology*, 1976).

It was a special moment in which art thinking was going beyond McLuhan's understanding of media, and beyond the natural habit of separating the person who knows, the object known, natural and artificial tools, natural history and the histories of culture. The effect this had (and it is difficult to say if this was positive or not) was the failure to keep a clear line between life and art. The authors and their works were temporary and unsteady. In many cases they still are. Questions opened by artists at the beginning of this century were reconsidered. How to create an imaginary reality connected with our preconscious sensory perceptions? How to think a dynamic syntax joining sounds and images, though not following established cultural codes? Near the beginning of the century Russian artists who invented a poetry and aesthetic for a new language, named ZAUM, had taken to composing sounds slipping through and beyond the limits of words and of their automatic repetition. The subject of a work of art was a perceptive and associative process. A response from the spectator was required.

The problem was not, then and now, merely an esthetic problem. Art was supposed to be the filter, changing the automatic perception of life, increasing our ability to pay attention.

Once more, in the 70's, video cameras and audio synthesizers confirmed that an age of technology had the power to transform consciousness and ideas. For instance, the idea of the point of view, as if the mind was pointed out toward a lifeless, indiscreet



collection of matter. It makes a big difference, when thinking of the connection between subject and object, that we realize video images are a kind of energy spreading from a source of light, creating in us colors, forms, density which can seem to be totally unnatural. But even in our natural life we are not entirely independent from light's neurochemical stimulus on our cells. It is our body, in a sense, which creates the millions of possible colors covering the natural world. How precisely it happens in each of us, and for other animals, is something we don't understand, but certainly nothing is geometrical, foreseeable or inevitable.

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Long before video art was born, artists felt that traditional media, blocking in one way or another what can be expressed by human activity, were not enough. In 1932 Edward Weston complained about how difficult it was to watch through the camera lens in a personal way, a lens which is absolutely impersonal. Alberto Giacometti used to destroy his portraits several times, remaking them by scraping out and erasing colors and signs, in an endless competition with time.

How to face nature without taking any advantage? Letting things reveal themselves. Even cutting them from the world, wanting to create abstract bodies, we open holes in the landscape. Ellsworth Kelly, while driving a truck for the US. Army in France, tried for the first time to separate a church from the panorama, lost his bearings and drove into a ditch.

How to not break the unceasing stream of life, how to listen to the way things happen, how to recreate the unexpected without any .....John Cage.

How to go on using words, knowing their limits too well.

"Tout ce qui précède oublier. Je ne peux pas beaucoup à la fois. Ca laisse à la plume le temps de noter. Je ne la vois pas mais je l'entend là-bas derrière. C'est dire le silence. Quand elle s'arrête je continue. Trop de silence je ne peux pas. Ou c'est ma voix trop faible par moments. Celle qui sort de moi. Voilà pour l'art et la manière." *Assez*, Samuel Beckett.

How to not renounce using the voice, that which comes from me. A pause of silence had to be taken before artists could begin talking again, finding a new vocabulary in a dictionary not yet written.

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Jean Dubuffet's last paintings, from 1974 until the end of his life, can be regarded as a stony ground on which you see the relationship between stone and stone.

*Crayonnages, Parachiffes, Récits, Théâtres de la mémoire, Psycho-sites, Sites aléatoires, Non-lieux*, are a kind of writing, more and more a repetitive handwriting. In video, Ed Emshwiller, in the same period multiplied the human figure, also as a figure of speech, whose outline was sometimes filled with bricks (the bricks of a built reality), sometimes empty, or walking out from itself, coming back, going out again: autistic writing in a fixed, motionless landscape. *Crossing and Meetings*, (Ed Emshwiller, videotape, 1975).

Here the continuity between the living, thinking being and the world surrounding him has broken down. A failure that Dubuffet used to point out as a betrayal: as if culture's function had been to fragment the thousand things which are contained by nouns, nailing them to the dictionary in a list of words. Verbal cords would have tied our thoughts up (*Bâtons rompus*, 1983-1984). Might they fly through new trajectories? If the transmitter

doesn't change, this is impossible. Mankind can only endure its own wasteland. That is why each character painted by Dubuffet is a tiny man, as a child would do. Legs and arms almost nothing, the head is big, features cannot be found. Every tiny man is different only by accident. Not far from automatic writing, with one more paradox. It is the writing which writes the man, not the other way around. Man is it's own writing, once written it takes to splitting and multiplying in space, as if space was time, until the hand is tired, and falls silent.

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A linear connection in space can be different from Euclid's rigid geometry. Wolf Vostell tried to reverse the relationship between a body and a stone. The body is heavy and the stone is light. Is the stone still thoughtless? The video screen says "yes." The stone is transparent and the body impenetrable. Breathing is the only sound coming from the monitor, and it is a most difficult voice to classify. We don't know who it belongs to - *TV Cubism*, (Wolf Vostell, videotape, 1985). An unknown connection is sculpted in light, but Vostell's videography lies on the woman's skin as simple handwriting on paper. Who blesses the surface's funeral? What is beyond? A depth, or nothing? I always thought of a well, the so called well of the mind. Can we really watch our thoughts down there? Why not, instead, fly with Edmond Jabès, the poet who has released every weight from thinking? "The real link is to go from sight to sight, from word to word. Aerial. The wave's memory is a bird."

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Jacques-Louis Nyst is also a poet. He makes books, photographs, paintings, videotapes. Moving continuously from one medium to another, attempting to escape the

danger that every kind of writing traps and imprisons stories and images. Always the same obsession. Dubuffet's obsession that writing writes man, and the written (drawn) character kills the unlimited variation of vision.

"Then, let's imagine we are able to go under the tale, to sneak in the writing's gate, like when we were children, looking for that point from which we can see again, as the first time..." (from *Hyaloïde*, videotape, 1985).

Let's imagine that we go beyond the wall behind which images become "transparent, translucent, hyaloïde," opening the door to the light of a legendary universe. Here the images spark and multiply without order or categories.

"Once upon a time... and, if it was always the first time... which side of the wall we would be on?" It is not thought, but thought's geometry which has broken down, it's fragments littering the ground. Sense and nonsense are aroused by Nyst's video poems, fluid images and precise shapes. Images, words, stories, all have a sexual life. Words, just over the border of the NOMALA Desert (deserted by names), change into images. The pencil's tip becomes a round, soft nipple. The story has lost it's feet, but History has lost it's footing. The poet walks in the emptiness and silence of Written History; living in this Imaginary History, he shifts the wall of thought and discovers what the desert is: a junkyard of words, broken stories, stones. Were we seeing them for the first time? Many triangular sails outline the desert's surface, *As If There Were Pyramids (Comme s'il y avait des Pyramides*, videotape, 1990). The videotape began with a transparent pyramid, the twin of a straw hut. Reason lives in both of them. Perhaps the opaque wall of reason is an obstacle that we need, separating us from visible things, making them imaginable. Maybe we are learning to know our human nature again. We are rediscovering the

changeable life of our soul, and looking for a similar kind of extension of our tools, either natural or artificial.

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"I assume that everything we accept as reality is merely private, a limited construction that is infinitely more alterable than we imagine. At the same time, I live in a culture that has no space for what is not rationally knowable. I find that the only way out of this unrealistic and untenable situation is to change the way to see and hear what I see and hear. When they come, these changes are always sudden, disorienting, almost incommunicable, often elusive, priceless. They leave the world itself surreal, somehow more transparent, full of immanence. Videotape is the means I have of making changes that leave a trace." Ingrid Wiegand, 1976 (*Video Art: An Anthology*, op cit.).

The main trace was in the artist's personal experience, the rest, as much as possible, on the tape. Eighteen years later, our world being what it is, without any confidence in exchangeable, universal values, people making videotapes are often far from a critical vision of our culture. If visual perception itself becomes a value, what isn't visible can be forgotten, once again. And artists often suffer what is normally accepted today as a natural judgment: no harmony or connection between feelings, ideas, imagery, wishes. No hope.

Irit Batsry, for instance, tries to focus *A Simple Case of Vision* (videotape, 1991) as a process of animal life. It could be a metaphor on the page, but not in video: a human neck raises a head up and brings it back slowly: it raises again. Silent profile of a man, an adult. Words in white characters arrive after: "I was born... My vision... Cross eyed... Two dark areas on a human face". It is a mute vision, without any human voice.

The hand's cavity recovers the face, the white light of silent words fades, bends, becomes a swarm of flies burning the screen with a cold flame. We read in the final titles that the text was a piece by Buckminster Fuller about his childhood, but this doesn't explain the tape, which is essentially the declension of a perceptive experience, possible for everybody.

To remember the page is to be walking on the ruins. Let's change the tape: *Leaving the Old Ruin* (Irit Batsry, videotape, 1989). A tiny man crosses a bridge, lifting a leg, disappearing in mid stride, appearing again. He can only repeat and repeat. Where does he come from? War and urban violence. Where will he arrive? For the moment he moves, every time leaving himself, maybe forgetting himself.

We do not know what it is we are like. One of the experimental sciences, neuro-psycho-biology, says that our body is a system of actions and reactions to the molecules moving around us in electromagnetic waves. Our nerves don't receive their stimulus in a codified way. Our nerve cells and neuron tree of knowledge is blind to the source of the stimulus, because they can only respond to the strength and length of the impulses. The brain, in the end, having received the incredible variety of recovered impulses, works out a nearly steady reality in thought. Heinz von Foerster spent most of his life doing experiments about knowledge as a work in progress. Making a hypothetical calculation, he found that our body might have 100 million sensors and about 10 billion synapses in the nervous system. Synapses are nodes, not so different from a plant's nodes, in which an arriving impulse combines with a chemical substance that activates the neuron. Therefore, we are supposed to respond 100,000 times more to our inner changes than to the stimulus coming from outside. "100,000 times," in this

case, isn't a turn of phrase, but a scientific calculation as correct as it is hypothetical in its possible consequences.

Let's imagine each of us as a container and source of a chain reaction. Of course a container having only one mold. Rene Descartes can rest in peace: there is no mechanical connection between the thorn in our finger and our ability to tell the name of our pain: synapses are silent. The passing of quantity into quality is still a secret. As long as life lasts, we bring off an unsuspected number of energetic exchanges, of which we are only vaguely aware. Maybe we realize how important they are if we pay attention to our unconscious or follow the imagination, rather than walking on reason's thread.

I have read more than once the romantic idea that science and art have something in common, artist and scientist both being suspected of a mental disorder, or at least of being acrobats of the mind, forming theories, feeling the beauty of the theoretical, the unseen. Statements emphasizing the gap between mental and physical reality. I have never seen such a clear similarity as that between von Voerster's numbers and the art of Bill Viola. Spiritual and chemical energies are impossible to split. Bill Viola is the only artist that I know who has the courage to show his feeling life as a real life. The metre of his art is the intensity of feelings, which is the inner breathing of the mind. Literally, taking air into the lungs and sending it out again; you have to hold your breathe when you suffer; you are at your mother's death, and you are under water. *The Passage* (videotape, 1991) talks a language that comes before the brain's order: breathing images and sounds of breathing. The normal effects of love. But no one is allowed to be sentimental. Not even the table, flying in an empty room, losing the napkin, the vase with flowers... losing its balance on the ground. The metaphor is dead, the metaphor as idea was too stringent,

nothing but an image moving from one room to another. No, Bill Viola isn't fixing feelings in a shape. He enables us to perceive what belongs to our feelings, when they are still like a kind of sensitive thinking, not yet settled in our mind. There is the *Sleep of Reason* (Installation, 1988) in Bill Viola's mind: just the opposite of Hegel's and Goya's idea that monsters and imaginary creatures emerge when our reason sleeps. Good-bye surrealism. Henry Miller says "When do we begin to know that we know? When we have ceased to believe that we can ever know. Truth comes with surrender. And it's wordless. The brain is not the mind; it is a tyrant which seeks to dominate the mind." (*Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 1956)

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We are terribly disturbed by the evidence which emerges every time we face the mirror of our physical fate, carrying our death since our first day. So we look for illusions, that seem to defy time and last forever. But we do know, as science and art tell us without any sorrow, that we are time-beings. Two spoons turn around a pivot, (*To Sleep as Little Spoons*, sculpture, 1989), Rebecca Horn. Turning as a clock's hands. They are perfect twins, identical. They are short dancing figures in a short time, one after the other. Where is the real time? For whom? Of what? Video art's culture couldn't have found a more ill-timed expression. What Rebecca Horn is saying is clear: time in art is an artifact, not simply because you can alter the clock's click, but because it belongs to a machine just conceived as a source wasting the small energy that makes the movement, wasting in space the tracks of its mechanical life. Sometimes the tracks are impossible to perceive; as the mood: another machine (*La machine de la mariée bleue*



*de Prusse*, installation, 1992), the three legged bride drips the Prussian blue on the shoes hanging from a nail over dirt on the floor. The lady cries blue. It was a hectic exhibition in Paris at the Galerie de France. Even the moon was rebelling.

*La lune rebelle* (*The Rebel Moon*, installation 1991), an horizontal line of typewriters, neither electric nor electronic, looking like a big black insect hung from an iron beam, near the ceiling. The carriages slip down, the black ribbons fall. As the machines write, they loose their tongues. Nobody is writing. But something is typed, characters produced by a small motor. Impossible to read. If we forget the mechanism, we could imagine a spiteful ghost. But it is Rebecca's red head sprinkling writing's decline with magic, and the black ribbons in mourning, sucking the characters in, erasing them each time they return.

She is leaving her first experiences in performance and videotape, and becoming a sculptor and a painter, even when she makes installations. Just a Peter Greenaway, whose installations become sets for his films. Rebecca's hopeless machines are tools creating a non-codified writing, without characters, alphabet or grammar. They produce a visual and audio texture that affects our mind directly, as any physical sensation.

The texture itself becomes something living, that you can't interpret. Maybe our mind could stop being flat on the page, exhausted from interpreting and following abstract threads. We could discover the mind's colors and sounds... Enough.

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Michel Chion, a French composer who wrote a manifesto of concrete music, discovers in recorded sound a creative resource. Tape can capture the most inner and elusive vibrations of a particular sound (or image)... an unsteady reality that we perceive.

The artist and the material of his art are not opposed as a living being and inert material; on the contrary, they are both dynamic, difficult to train, changing each other.

"To compose is for me to work with a soft, escaping matter which slowly hardens, takes shape. I must certainly recover the same accuracy of the written note, therefore I need my hearing which is my own. .... I have to go with and against the sound, for time to time contrasting with its natural movement or creating a new conflict between sounds. The finished work is not fluid, or a continuity starting from the original curve of the sound. I cannot follow that curve without resistance, nor can I ignore it. To question and cut the sound is very interesting, paying attention to what it is saying, what it is saying to me... I have to watch myself. The shape of sound makes many proposals, often awakening my memory of music as a fixed object (on paper). The shape of sound is never an already existing object, my ear is my living instrument. I discover again and again the real sound of my music, changing it until the end." (Michel Chion, *L'art des sons fixés*, 1991).

Finally, what results is a work of art that cannot be separated from the author's senses, and also from a spectator's sensitivity. We can watch and listen endlessly and every time the work is, for the spectator, an experience in real time; every time we are losing or grasping something, every time we perceive something different because we are aware of ourselves in a different way. I doubt that looking at a painting is any different. The real difference is that this kind of contemporary art gave up imitating the surface appearance of nature, and makes the attempt to imitate nature in her manner of operation. This was John Cage's idea about Jasper Johns's paintings: structures, not subjects, signatures of anonymity. Even if sometimes Johns introduces "signs of humanity" to

intimate that we, not birds for instance, are part of the dialogue. A dialogue between art and nature from which John Cage, obstinately, erases every individual point of view, every possible clue.

It remains true, nevertheless, that each manner needs its own time, and the way indelible marks have been engraved by time in human history is something which is impossible to imitate. The human experience of time is only lived experience.

Marina Abramovic creates, in her videotape *Terra degli dei madre* (1987), an experienced time that she shares with the viewer: a shape in time floating between the monitor and the viewer, a flowing connection of camera/eye and microphone/ear. To perceive this time is to feel how passively we endure it. We see on the screen a circle of women sitting around a table. They barely move their eyelids, like statues plunged into a density of sound, a strange language that blends many languages, some dead, some not, a language that doesn't belong to anyone, not even the artist. The voice doesn't reflect any thoughts we can recognize. The images and the voice sound out of history. Never disturbed, neither happy nor unhappy. Human history and time, far from the natural order of things, lie in the peace of art. A spiral of concentration brings everybody to the threshold of hypnosis. Opening the door to the feeling of our physical existence, moving from an anxious consciousness towards the fluctuating quiet that precedes sleep, the frontier between life and death is lost.

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"But once you are in videotape, in a sense, you are not allowed to die." Nam June Paik, (*Video Art: An Anthology*, op. cit.), about the videotapes of Shigeko Kubota, Paul Ryan and Maxi Cohen dealing with their father's deaths. To die, actually, is a long

process not separate from life. Video, in its own way, doesn't die. It can be repeated, repeated, repeated.... The tape, for people watching and listening, is never the same. "Video art imitates nature not in its appearance or mass, but in its intimate structure... which is the process of AGING (a certain kind of irreversibility)" Nam June Paik again.

Only words in video seem ready to disappear, or simply to exist as just another thing in the world of things. White on black, they look like writing itself wishing to forget they had been Utopia's vehicle, or the well organized substitute for an historical situation that has never been really perfect. How to make art after the holocaust and Hiroshima? Jochen Gerz says that a cemetery will never be used as a ready made. (Art Press, 1993)

The "how " is interesting. Shalom Gorewitz makes an attempt in video. *Ten Thousand Things* (videotape, 1992) is to say: everything in the world. Everything is, apparently, difficult to move. Shalom Gorewitz writes on the screen their fragility and his own. The light dissolves, cancels the borders, decreases the image's definition, whitens the colors, empties and dismisses the symbols of a multitude without civilization. The images of the crowd are borrowed from Japan, a country with an old civilization, about to lose it imitating ours. The man of the book, creating in one image a column of soldiers and columns of text telling their story, is finally realizing that the mind's power will destroy the world. Oriental culture comes to his aid, our enlightenment is overturned: "To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by ten thousand things." (Dogen, Japanese Zen master, quoted from the tape). A couple of centuries ago Robinson Crusoe turned to nature, or to a hypothetical state of nature, hoping to find the single man's place in an already senseless history. But our Robinson,

of this time, is so contaminated that he can't help coming back to history, listening to his heart. A fragment of the tape, lifted from *Hiroshima Mon Amour*: she is leaving, he opens his eyes to the city's emptiness and ruin. "Emptiness is no other than form". It is not strange that Shalom Gorewitz needs to empty himself and his images. This has been practiced by artists for a long time. What is new is that, renouncing himself, overloaded by judgment, he writes a story in light, as if light had feelings.

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"Form is no other than emptiness." This is the silence of Samuel Beckett and John Cage, and it is also the reversed perspective of recent video art: recycling cold pieces of reality in a new written body which is filled with feelings, even the desperate feeling of a lost paradise of form. Human reality is the subject, calling for somebody who could understand and listen.

Let's visit its visible surface: a sock with a hole in it sticks out from a bench. The sock, the foot, the leg and the body lie down. We are watching *Homeless* (1989-90), a video installation by Joan Logue. Pieces of life are held within four tiny monitors that pierce the backside of a small, old wooden cupboard, hung on the wall. A series of precious video miniatures in a frame protected by a house which is also a tabernacle. This house is hung on the wall, with no address, no specific site. Without a name. The homeless haven't. On one of the monitors is a burning candle.

Three portraits in the other monitors take the same, very long, time of the candle. The homeless outside in the street, inserted one after the other in one of the tapes, as a stream of bullets. Repetition. Nine times out of ten they are lying down. Their life is parallel to the ground. They don't look upset or anxious. The cardboard houses lie on the

steps, on the threshold of other people's existence. It's an unopened book of sleeping people. Sometimes food is given, to the homeless and the birds in the park. A terse slogan cut into a stone in the park:

You are free to question authority.

You are free to believe what you wish.

Your right to privacy has been guaranteed.

There is someone scratching himself. In the second monitor, no homeless, only a home: a dog tied in the yard, smoke from the chimney in a white landscape. The most frequent sound is that of Joan blowing her nose. Nothing happens. Life is hidden and protected, a no-ness that evaporates into smoke. In the third monitor we are again in the street, in Brazil. Reality? Once upon a time there was a pedestrian island, in the middle of the street between stands of yellow and red buses, going in opposite directions. On the island is a person, very busy with a pile of garbage. The movements are as accurate and as uninterrupted as those of a bird making its nest with recycled material. The black bird is an old woman. When she has finished her work, she sits down on the pile, arranged as an armchair, and watches the world. Waiting. She scratches her back, she stops and waits again. Her face is solemn, her hands in her lap. She picks a louse from her hair and crushes it between her nails. She must have been beautiful. We have no news about her. She is a woman, she is there. The most we can say is: she is a woman who loves to be precise. The artist keeps these three images of life delicately, without disturbing them. She doesn't want to explain. Nothing but love can understand what is always the same in our life, and repeated forever.

-Rosanna Albertini, Los Angeles, August 6, 1993

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