



Gabriele Schor

FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE

Art of the 1970s

The SAMMLUNG VERBUND Collection, Vienna

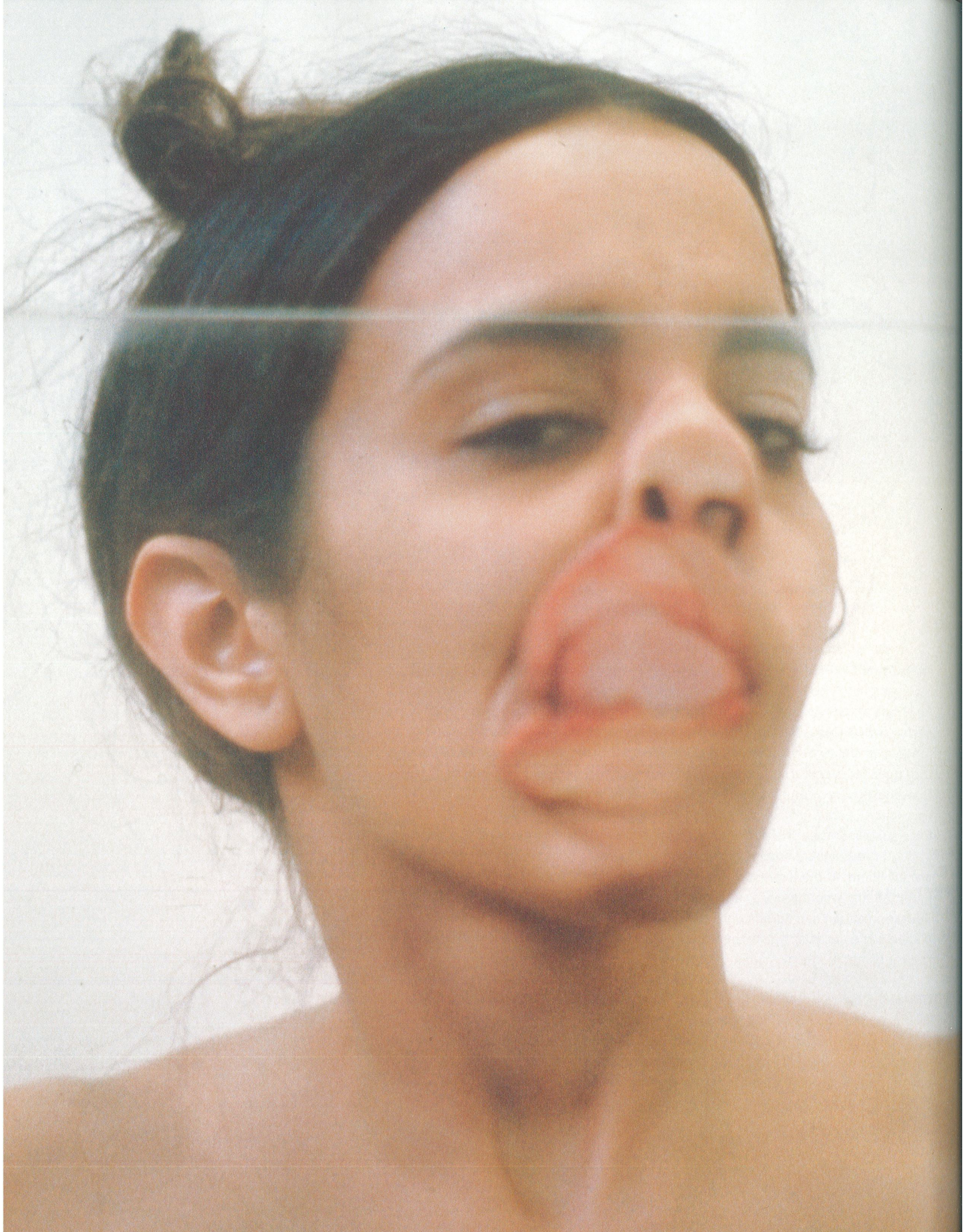
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THE FOURTH WALL TURNS PENSIVE FEMINIST EXPERIMENTS WITH THE CAMERA

Mechtild Widrich

Imagine, at the edge of the stage, a great wall separating you from the audience.

Act as if the curtain did not go up.¹

Denis Diderot

Hannah Wilke's body is slowly moving behind Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Observed by the film camera, she slowly strips out of her white suit in a sequence of theatrical poses, the pins of the "bachelors" suggestively hovering before her crotch. Blending active empowerment with a playful affirmation of male expectations, Wilke's gesture of appropriation involves her counterpart—a highly mythologized monument of classic modernism—in a distinctive and, in the feminist context of the time, controversial² erotic play. In *Through the Large Glass* (p. 74) (the title refers to the surreal metamorphoses of the world in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871)), Wilke activates the female body to insert herself into the male-dominated history of avant-garde art while also responding to Duchamp's interest in gender roles. Yet the French-born artist's *Large Glass* is also, quite literally, materially a glass: an allegory of the cleft between the voyeuristic gaze and a genuine encounter that might lead to actual physical contact. This diaphanous barrier defines the space in which the artist acts, and it redoubles the lens of the reproductive apparatus recording the performance, which was held without a large audience in June 1976. The scene of the action revealed first to the camera and then to our eyes is marked by the institutional definition of the "museum;" but it is also permeable on one side (that of the recording) to the gaze of the viewer, who may see it at another exhibition venue or, nowadays, on his or her computer screen.³ Then again, the glass is also an obstacle and, as such, part of the action, confining the artist to a space apart and drawing our attention to the distance of space and time that separates us from the self-dramatization she performed for the camera. Finally, the glass marks out the space of the stage. These categories—glass, stage/wall, space, and self—are the protagonists in my attempt to elucidate the significance of the transparent barrier as a version of the "fourth wall" that closes off the theatrical stage, which Diderot championed in the mid-eighteenth century.⁴ My purpose is not so much to revive a 'realism' divorced from reality, than to gauge the proximity-in-distance facilitated by photographic media against strategies in postwar performance art.

¹ Denis Diderot, "Discours sur la poésie dramatique" [1758]; selections in *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: *Voltaire to Hugo*, ed. Michael J. Sidnell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 65.

² For a discussion of Wilke's feminist critics, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 171ff.

³ The piece was made for the film "Befragung der Freiheitsstatue C'est la Vie Rrose" by Hans-Christof Stenzel (cinematography: Lothar E. Stickelbrucks).

⁴ Ever since Diderot, the "fourth wall" has been a widely debated feature of naturalist theater. Modernist theater has sought to break it down.



HANNAH WILKE, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976
SV_338_2010 (p. 199)



ULRIKE ROSENBACH, *Glauben Sie nicht, daß ich eine Amazone bin*, 1976 SV_579_2014 (p. 239)

GLASS: shield, window, mirror; an amorphous, fragile, and mutable substance. In architecture, it is modernism's contentious signature material and in commerce, the instrument of the reification of commodities in the display window. In museums, glass not only forms a barrier between work and beholder, protecting one from the other, it is also a crucial visual signifier of the transformation of a thing into an exhibit. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist artistic practices between the iconoclastic deconstruction of the female body's image and an exploration of the essence of sexual existence had another, particular reason to embrace glass. The transparent and simultaneously 'reflective' quality of the camera's lens predestined it for a prominent part in the negotiation—articulated through the artist's own body—of the ambivalence of identity between authentic and socially constructed components as well as the investigation of sexual boundaries that, though not readily visible, were palpable and deeply entrenched. There is a reason the "glass ceiling" that stunts women's careers has remained a popular trope. Moreover, the associated technological possibilities (the self-timer of the photographic apparatus, the instant feedback of the video camera) were ideally suited to pointing to and questioning the positions of subject and object (who stands before and who stands behind the lens?) and their associated power structures. Glass features as a physical material in many of the works on the intersections between performance art and the photography, film, and video presented in this book. Some pieces, like Ulrike Rosenbach's performance *Glauben Sie nicht, daß ich eine Amazone bin* (Don't think I'm an Amazon, 1976; p. 74), even showcase it, as though to reinforce or highlight its characteristics or to remind us of the presence of the camera's lens.

STAGE: The camera demarcates a scope of vision. With regard to the theatrical production, this raises the question of the actual locus of the stage. —Or has the stage as a defined space been summarily abolished? At first glance, the technical medium seems to defeat the concept of performance: like the singularity of the unique execution and its non-salability, the more or less planned involvement of the audience is a characteristic of the happening and performance art, or so an abidingly popular myth has it. Such involvement may be straightforward, as in Allan Kaprow's pieces, or indirect, as in the early performances of Marina Abramović where spectators sometimes intervened to "save" the artist, or—and this strikes me as the most interesting model—mediated by the intensity of the performer's physical presence at the time of the live event. In such works, the artist's presence is said to draw those around her into an interaction that transcends the purely "spectacular" experience of the theater. In other words, performance art has irreversibly shattered the fourth wall, creating a situation in which we are directly addressed as the audience.⁵ In recent years, Abramović has become famous for work in which her own physical presence is almost the sole subject, an exclusive focus that, at least in the rhetoric of her admirers, has sustained an "authentic" live experience not unlike that of nineteenth-century realist drama.⁶ Yet her performance *The Artist is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010), was notably also broadcast live on the Internet. This ambivalence between the paradigm of presence and the presence of the technical medium, I would argue, has played a pivotal role since around 1970.

⁵ See, e.g., Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁶ See Mechtild Widrich, "Ge-Schichtete Präsenz und zeitgenössische Performance. Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present*," in *Authentizität und Wiederholung: Künstlerische und kulturelle Manifestationen eines Paradoxes*, ed. Ute Daur (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 147–67.

WALL: Many of the works shown in these pages were performed for the camera in the absence of spectators—thus, the fourth wall serves as a proxy for the missing “live” interaction. In Birgit Jürgenssen’s *Ich möchte hier raus!* (I want out of here!; p. 75), the glass acts as the barrier between isolation and an escape from the traditional female role. Are we looking at a shop window or at the framed portrait of a primly pretty housewife? The artist takes a pen to the pane, writing the words “Ich möchte hier raus!” The glass might otherwise be invisible were it not for the slight deformation of her cheek and hands pressed up against it. The featurelessness of the space behind her adds to the ambiguity of the scene, making it difficult to assess her situation and rendering the menace oppressing her rather abstract. (Who threatens her and with what?). This indeterminacy is integral to a critique that operates at a flashpoint of conflict, the scene of the self’s contact with the outside world.⁷ Jürgenssen’s self-dramatization for the camera is both performance art and photography, staged for an audience shielded by a physical barrier (other pictures in the series reveal it to be a glass door) as well as a gulf of time. And yet it challenges that audience to empathize with her by a performative gesture (the appeal spelled out on the glass) that has lost none of its force in a displaced and belated experience of her presence. If the work, which dates from 1976, reminds today’s viewers of the flawlessly beautiful and secretly frustrated housewife Betty Draper in *Mad Men* (a nostalgic twenty-first century television show that revives the role-play and profound transformation of society in the 1960s), the resemblance is presumably not entirely coincidental.

Back then, media increasingly shaped society’s self-image (TV sets were rapidly becoming ubiquitous, enabling the advertising industry and Hollywood to broadcast stereotypical gender roles into every living room in the U.S. and soon also in Europe), and so Jürgenssen’s picture must also be read as a critical response to the portrayal of femininity in the media. The new edge lent to the demands upon the individual by the media industry and advertising also looms large in Martha Rosler’s aggressively ironic video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975; p. 75), which is now regarded as a classic of feminist art. Rosler imitated here the then new television format of the cooking show. Intensely aimed directly at the camera, yet “forever locked in the kitchen,” she makes “Zorro gestures with raised knives,” as a film scholar notes—an escape attempt similar to Jürgenssen’s, but seasoned with semiotic vocabulary and thus also decidedly a contribution to the discourse of feminist theory.⁸ Her persona is half intellectual, half actress, but an unsettling incompatibility emerges between the two roles; we notice her smudged apron, the messy hair, the lack of a smile, and her ambivalence vis-à-vis the “fourth wall.” Although she performs her gestures toward the camera, Rosler never attempts to draw us into genuine interaction. Her actions seem strangely self-involved. At the very end, she shrugs. —Does this signal irony or perhaps resignation? Does she even mean to address us? Rosler leaves us in ambiguity. Fiction and meta-fiction become indistinct.⁹

SPACE: Moreover, the widespread experimentation with performance staged for the camera and without an audience suggests that at this time of increasing media coverage artists also scrutinize the specificity and limitations imposed by the medium itself. Vito Acconci’s *Zone* (1971), for example, is quite explicitly about the “demarcated” space of the video camera: the artist (we see only his



BIRGIT JÜRGENSSEN, *Ich möchte hier raus!*, 1976
SV_025_2005 (p. 363)



MARTHA ROSLER, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975
SV_269_2009 (p. 247)

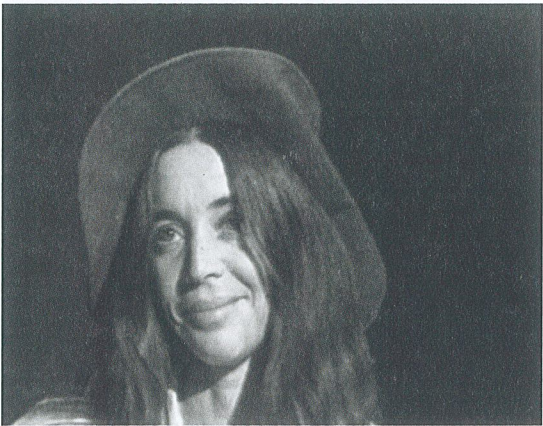
⁷ See, e. g., Katharina Sykora, “Hautbild/Bildhaut oder ein Blatt wird gewendet,” in *Birgit Jürgenssen*, ed. Gabriele Schor and Heike Eipeldauer, exh. cat. (Munich, London, and New York: Prestel, 2010), 57–73.

⁸ Charlotte Brunson, “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 114.

⁹ Reminiscing about the time when she created the piece (for example, during the conference “The Feminist Future” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007), Rosler noted that she was living in San Diego and, because she was unemployed, found herself in a sort of housewifely role. See Lynn Hershman Leeson, “Transcript of Interview with Martha Rosler” (May 12, 2006), !Women Art Revolution archive, Stanford University Libraries, <https://lib.stanford.edu/women-art-revolution/transcript-interview-martha-rosler-2006> [accessed January 7, 2015].



ANA MENDIETA, *Siluetas Works in Iowa*, 1978/1991
SV_321_2009 [p. 343]



ELEANOR ANTIN, *Representational Painting*, 1971
SV_207_2008 [p. 107]

legs) circles around a cat lapping up milk, trying to prevent the animal from scampering beyond the edges of the screen.¹⁰ The insertion of an additional transparent pane, as in Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* (p. 72), redoubles and emphasizes the technical medium's significance for pointed *mise-en-scène*, as well as its constricting effect. The series of photographs Mendieta created as a student in Iowa show her pressing her face and breasts against a plexiglass plate. The barriers she confronts, we are given to understand, are political as well. The pictures hint at ethnic stereotyping and racist clichés (full lips, flat nose). The resistance of the material (the environment) disfigures her body. In Mendieta's later *Siluetas* (such as the *Siluetas Works in Iowa*, 1976; p. 76), such deformation reflects the body's ability to change its natural environment—she explores ways of staking out her own space by means of the camera, but also, more abstractly, through an expansion of the body's sphere of action through interventions into existing orders (be they 'natural' or social) with occasionally aggressive and certainly forceful gestures that open up new spaces of possibility. VALIE EXPORT's *Tapp und Tastkino* (Tap and Touch Cinema; p. 77), meanwhile, deftly switches the two spaces around by taking the issue out onto the urban scene. The (unseen) voyeuristic consumption that takes place in the movie theater is turned into a public act as seeing is replaced by touching. By soliciting passersby to put their hands into her "cinema"—a boxlike construction she has strapped in front of her naked upper body—the artist has broken up the fourth wall for a poignant critique of passive spectatorship. But their interaction is also, in its own right, a scene in the film documenting the action; illuminating a complex and sometimes antagonistic interplay between the (flat) movie screen, the television screen (the film was shot for a television program), and the tactile experience of spatial depth.¹¹ This breakthrough within the work amounts to the building of a new fourth wall—one that perhaps involves us in the cycle of viewing and yet allows us a calm distance from which we can reflect even on this involvement.

SELF: In the inaugural issue of the journal *October* (1976), the American art historian Rosalind E. Krauss criticized performance artists working in front of the camera with a particular focus on video art. The essay's title, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," encapsulates her argument. The artists, she wrote, used the camera's lens as a mirror rather than as an interface connecting them to the outside world.¹² With reference to 'instant feedback' technology, which lets the artist monitor his or her appearance in an almost instantaneous playback of the video being recorded, Krauss drew a line from technology to the subject, diagnosing a narcissistic self-regard that manifested itself in the isolation of the body that is bracketed, she argued, between camera and monitor. The essay glosses over the permeability of these two boundaries by way of a suggestive linguistic analogy: unlike the other visual arts, video technology allows for simultaneous recording and transmission, whence the instant feedback. For Krauss, this leaves the body stuck halfway between two devices that act as opening and closing brackets. The first is the camera, and the second is the screen casting back the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror.¹³

¹⁰ See also, e.g., Acconci's video *Three Frame Studies* (1969/1970), which examines the same issue, and Vito Acconci, "West, He Said (Notes on Framing)," *Vision*, no. 1 (September 1975): 58–61.

¹¹ See my discussion of EXPORT's work in the present catalogue, pp. 202–204.

¹² Rosalind E. Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 50–64.

In fact, the video camera, which can be operated without assistance and produces an instantaneous product without need of further processing, seems to be paradigmatically fit for actions staged for and in front of the camera. But as I have mentioned, similar interrogations are found in photography and film.¹⁴ In most cases, however, what Krauss disparages as a preoccupation with the artist's own self (contained in a time-space capsule determined by machinery) is so obviously intended to be seen by an audience on the other side of the lens that her argument ultimately falls short. The art historian Anne Wagner has sought to revise Krauss's hypothesis, writing that the 1970s mark a particular moment in the history of performance and video art in which the "technological effects of contemporaneity" are felt to be "simultaneously alienating and intimate," a dilemma artists invite—and in some instances, urge—their viewers to experience as well.¹⁵ Many of the works on view in the exhibition might conceivably be staged as "live" performances; yet the camera is both an observer (a counterpart to which the artists respond) and the apparatus that transmutes the body in space into a flat image. There arises with this translating film camera the possibility of dissociation from the self, which is difficult to conceive before an audience—both a self-observation and a self-transformation into another medium. The former also bears social significance, rendering the function of the body as a proxy for the self more conspicuous. Hiding from the eyes of the spectators—a semblance of inviolability achieved by excluding the live audience—is not what the use of the camera is about.

Any ambitious work implicitly envisages its fourth wall, as Diderot has argued, presenting a self-contained space and a self-contained action. In the art discussed in these pages, the fourth wall has ceased to be an invisible barrier. It is a capsule, created within the work and by virtue of its employment of media technology, which preserves the work and simultaneously activates it in its transparency. More or less controlled, the camera comprehends the space allocated to it, sharing responsibility for the *mise-en-scène* and the exclusion of the other side. At a time when interaction emerges as an important characteristic of art, calling the traditional relationship between artist and viewer and the unity of the artistic object into question, artists embrace film, video, and photography as media that lend themselves to an experimental investigation of mediated and immediate constructions of identities and intersubjectivity. Diderot's image is a curtain that never rises. Around 1970, as the high modernist international style with its glazed skyscrapers begins to give way to postmodernist classicisms, it is appropriately the indefatigable transparency of media—the camera's vaunted capacity to render a neutral likeness of reality—that becomes a tool of critical feminist explorations of fiction, reality, and identity.



VALIE EXPORT, *Tapp und Tastkino*, 1968
SV_324_2010 (p. 205)

¹³ Ibid., 52. In addition to works by Acconci, Krauss discusses Lynda Benglis's *Now* as an example of obsessive self-regard.

¹⁴ Nowadays, the charge of narcissism is mostly leveled against the smartphone "selfie."

¹⁵ Anne M. Wagner, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October*, no. 91 (Winter 2000): 79.