UNSAFE BUILDING:
COMING AND READING INTO VITO ACCONCI’S ‘THE RED TAPES’

by
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ABSTRACT

In the United States, the transition between the early and the mid to late seventies is perhaps best understood as the before and after of a series of shocks: the shootings of anti-Vietnam War protesters at Kent State University following Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, the removal of US currency from the gold-standard in 1971 to pay for increasing war debts, the 1973 OPEC Oil Crisis, Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974, and the embarrassing withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. The invasion of news into the domestic sphere may be understood as a kind of sustained shock of the period between 1963 and 1976. Following the televised moon landing that briefly made the United States seem frontier-less and invincible, a stream of traumatic 'television events,' which harked back to the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, eventually turned television into a key agent of the erosion of American hubris. While the United States continued to emerge as the most powerful nation in the world, this condition was becoming increasingly problematic for its citizens. The American bicentennial in 1976 was thus marked by a historic ambivalence regarding national identity. The role of video art within this cultural shift was unresolved. In the case of Vito Acconci, the eve of the American bicentennial seems to have provoked a confrontation with American myth through a critical re-enactment of national hubris and the reassessment of video as a medium.

Judging by its length – two hundred and twenty minutes – The Red Tapes may be said to be a hubristic tape; and it feels infinite due to the lack of conventional plot or character. But this hubris is highly self-conscious. Not only does The Red Tapes bulge in length, it is also impossible to contain thematically. With this expansiveness, the work deviates from the notions of narcissism or self-encapsulation that were leveled at video art in the mid 1970s, including Acconci's earlier work. Unlike the earlier video work, which most often involved a single take of
the artist facing the camera/viewer talking directly to the viewer (and himself) and enacting psychological exercises in pursuit of self-definition, *The Red Tapes* combines a number of vignettes, which are intertwined with disparate references to the constitution of a community or nation. The result may be described as a Humpty Dumpty America – a broken up nation/narration that Acconci and the audience try in vain to put together again.

In order to offer another model of looking at Acconci’s last video work, the notion of video as a separate system needs to be discarded. My contention is that *The Red Tapes* is based on incremental, imperfect, constantly reformulated action which effects its cultural subject as much as its status as an art object. In other words, the interrogation of Americanism in *The Red Tapes* proceeds through a parallel questioning of late-modern aesthetic models which stood for the dominance of American culture abroad. It poses a labyrinth in relation to the abstract monoliths and meta-theories of Minimalism and conceptual art, which arrived at an impasse by the mid-1970s. I will demonstrate that, despite its grandiose subject, *The Red Tapes* seems to substitute distance with intimacy as a mode of critical engagement and conjures a multitude in place of the hermit who interprets a work to gain a solidified sense of self. The constant revisions to actions and plotlines, a kind of improvisation of the work before the eyes of the audience, continually defer a finalized portrait of America. Instead, there is evidence of building a heterogeneous, transforming community with the historical consciousness to confront the limits of the present. Importantly, Acconci posits collective subjectivity as a question, perhaps the question.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 ‘Beware of Abstractions’</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 ‘Connect’</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 ‘Come into <em>The Red Tapes</em>’</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpublished Sources and Ephemera</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LIST OF FIGURES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fig.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Invitation to the first screening of a complete version of <em>The Red Tapes</em> ..........................69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vito Acconci, <em>Service Area</em>, June-September 1970. ........................................70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Vito Acconci, <em>Following Piece</em>, October 3-25, 1969. ........................................71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Vito Acconci <em>Proximity Piece</em>, September 10-November 8, 1970. ............................71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Vito Acconci, <em>Centers</em>, 1971. ........................................................................72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>James Montgomery Flagg, poster for army recruitment, 1917. ..................................72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dan Graham, <em>Homes for America</em>, 1966-67. ................................................................73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dan Graham, <em>Picture window piece</em>, 1974. .........................................................74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Vito Acconci, <em>Venice Belongs to Us</em>, 1976. .........................................................77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-37</td>
<td>Stills from Jean-Luc Godard, <em>Sympathy for the Devil</em>, 1970. .................................79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38-39</td>
<td>Stills from Jean-Luc Godard, <em>Sympathy for the Devil</em>, 1970. .................................80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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“true history” is not that which cloaks itself in indisputable “philological proofs,” but that which recognizes its own arbitrariness, which recognizes itself as an “unsafe building”

– Manfredo Tafuri *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (1980)

Stuck around St. Petersburg when I saw it was a time for a change
Killed the Tzar and his ministers, Anastasia screamed in vain
I rode a tank held a gen'ral's rank when the blitzkrieg
Raged and the bodies stank.

Pleased to meet you hope you guess my name
Ah what's puzzling you is the nature of my game.

I watched the glee while your kings and queens fought for
Ten decades for the Gods they made.
I shouted out "Who killed the Kennedy's?" when after all
It was you and me.

INTRODUCTION

In 1975, Vito Acconci addressed video as a timely working method, but one in need of revision. In his “10 Point Plan for Video”, Acconci formulated the notion, not of a medium, but of a spatial surround:

It’s time to break out. Consider, for example video projection: The “punch” of video, the quality of the image coming out at you, is a punch that can be thrown, like throwing a voice—now you see it, here it comes, it’s going to hit you smack in the face—now you don’t see it—there it is in the back of your mind—a punch in the back of your head.¹

In the following year, Acconci began work on The Red Tapes, a video of a length and thematic scope that were epic. It is distinctive as one of the first video works of its time to specify projection instead of monitor display, a requirement that profoundly shifted the viewing space of video. Acconci’s call for ‘breaking out’ came at a time when the increasing acceptance of video works into galleries and museums rendered questionable many of the revolutionary claims that had been associated with this novel technology in opposition to modernist aesthetics and institutionalized art. Yet Acconci’s ‘breakout’ does not intimate an escape from the museum and gallery. The production of The Red Tapes follows a concession in the “10 Point Plan” that “the most available showing places for [his] work [were] museums and galleries.” The work was commissioned by the Anthology Film Archives in New York in 1976 and was previewed there on January 15th, 1977, as part of that year’s showing of the CAPS Fellowship Winners.² The first New York showing of the completed version took place on May 24th of that year at The Kitchen in Soho (Fig.1). The following January, the The Red Tapes was screened at the Whitney Museum

² The Creative Artists Public Service (CAPS) Fellowship was established in New York in 1970 to promote exploration of new media.
of American Art. Taking this growing institutional support as a given, the 'breaking out' intimated by Acconci had to entail a re-definition of the exhibition space rather than its abandonment.

It is useful to consider the beginnings of the institutionalization of video from the present vantage point of an exhibition culture saturated by video projections. Yet, as a close study of The Red Tapes makes clear, the first challenge of the inquiry is to resist a conceptual trap – one that was intensified by this very institutionalization – namely, the persistent notion of video as a medium. While this may, at first, seem like a paradox – the evasion of the very object of inquiry – the study of video’s entry into the gallery requires the elaboration of an aesthetic economy that was in the process of abandoning the notion of video and the medium as such. The second challenge – one that particularly animates the study of The Red Tapes – is to discover a mode of analysis appropriate to a work that eludes formal and thematic description because of the sheer complexity of its temporal and spatial organization as well as the breadth of cultural references which it draws on. The working premise, with which I develop a method to face this challenge, is that The Red Tapes constitutes an attempt to forge a new historical consciousness. This, of course, must involve a new notion of the subject of history, which further necessitates an aesthetic shift.

* *

In the United States, the transition between the early and the mid to late seventies is perhaps best understood as the before and after of a series of shocks: the shootings of anti-Vietnam War protesters at Kent State University following Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia, the removal of US currency from the gold-standard in 1971 to pay for increasing war debts, the 1973 OPEC Oil Crisis, Watergate and Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974, and the embarrassing

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3 The Whitney Museum of American Art screening took place between January 10th and 15th in 1978 as part of the
withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. Indeed the invasion of news into the domestic sphere may be understood as a kind of sustained shock of the period between 1963 and 1976. While the televised moon landing had briefly made the United States seem frontier-less and invincible, the stream of traumatic ‘television events,’ which harked back to the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, eventually turned television into a key agent of the erosion of American hubris. While the United States continued to emerge as the most powerful nation in the world, this condition was becoming increasingly problematic for its citizens. The American bicentennial in 1976 was thus marked by a historic ambivalence regarding national identity.

The role of video art within this cultural shift was unresolved. The relation of television media to most tapes produced by artists within a context that had been established by certain commercial galleries for the promotion of conceptual art is tenuous. Unlike the television and alternative programming produced by community video collectives, tapes produced by artists like Vito Acconci tended to evade notions of historical subjectivity in favour of more abstract concepts of psychological interaction in a shared space. However, the eve of the American bicentennial seems to have provoked a shift in strategy—a confrontation with American myth through a critical re-enactment of national hubris and the undoing of video as a medium.

Judging by its length – two hundred and twenty minutes – The Red Tapes may be said to be a hubristic tape; and it feels infinite due to the lack of conventional plot or character. But this hubris is highly self-conscious as Acconci’s own intention for the work attests: “I started it as an attempt to make a tape about America. I started with the idea of it being two-and-a-half hours long because I thought if you can think about conventional movie length as about two hours, and

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this is about America, this has to be too big for itself. It should bulge.”

Not only does *The Red Tapes* bulge in length, it is also impossible to contain thematically. With this expansiveness, the work deviates from the notions of narcissism or self-encapsuation that were leveled at video art in the mid 1970s, including Acconci’s earlier work. Unlike Acconci’s earlier video work, which most often involved a single take of the artist facing the camera/viewer talking directly to the viewer (and himself) and enacting psychological exercises in pursuit of self-definition, *The Red Tapes* combines a number of vignettes, which are intertwined with disparate references to the constitution of a community or nation. The result may be described as a Humpty Dumpty America – a broken up nation/narration that Acconci and the audience try in vain to put together again.

Because of these constant narrative and visual dispersals, the critic or historian has an equally difficult time entering *The Red Tapes*. It may be possible to offer a ‘scene-by-scene’ description of the work and elucidate its numerous allegorical references, but this hermeneutic exercise does not entirely solve the problem of critical inquiry. For one, the hermeneutic approach presupposes a singular viewing subject. But Acconci’s incessant speech asserts the audience as a provisional collective, continually distracting the viewer from interpretive acts. Beyond this, the abundance of seemingly unnecessary, overcomplicated and obtrusive utterances – a kind of poetic red tape – further block hermeneutic enquiry.

According to Fredric Jameson a ‘resistance to theorization’ is the subject of video. Jameson claims that an impossibility of analysis is endemic to video, in its guises as commercial television and artwork. In *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he devotes an entire chapter to the problem of analysis posed by video. For him, video is the definitive

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medium of postmodern culture (a stage of capitalism which he dates as dominant after 1973)\(^7\) precisely because video resists analysis by reflecting a culture of impenetrable surfaces that allow for an unprecedented flexibility of value and of signification. This opacity of video is directly linked to the condition of *total flow* – we are confronted with a constant stream of images (or programming and commercials) from which there is no real rest for the mind.\(^8\) For Jameson, this amounts to the erasure of ‘critical distance’:

> The helpless spectators of video time are then as immobilized and mechanically integrated and neutralized as the older photographic subjects, who became, for a time, part of the technology of the medium. The living room, to be sure (or even the relaxed informality of the video museum), seems an unlikely place for this assimilation of human subjects to the technological: yet a voluntary attention is demanded by the total flow of the videotext in time which is scarcely relaxed at all, and rather different from the comfortable scanning of the movie screen, let alone the cigar-smoking detachment of the Brechtian theatergoer.\(^9\)

The shortfall of Jameson’s analysis is that it practices a kind of media-essentialism—video is considered in its entirety to elucidate the definitive social consequences of this most dematerialized of visual signals. Unlike film, video is stored as a digital code rather than physical index on a strip of celluloid. And it is perhaps these physical particularities that have often provoked a consideration of the video image in isolation. In keeping with this tradition, Jameson divides *Postmodernism* into chapters that separate video from considerations of film or architecture. Yet a critical inroad into *The Red Tapes*, which initially confounds the historian with its often excruciatingly slow flow of loosely tied vignettes, may be to trace the *intersections* of video, film, spoken word and built space that the work produces.

In order to offer another model of looking at Acconci’s last video work, the notion of video as a separate system needs to be discarded. My contention is that *The Red Tapes* is based on incremental, imperfect, constantly reformulated action which effects its cultural subject as much as its status as an art object. In other words, the interrogation of Americanism in *The Red

\(^7\) Ibid., xx.
\(^8\) Ibid., 69-70.
*Tapes* proceeds through a parallel questioning of the late-modern aesthetic models which stood for the dominance of American culture abroad. It poses a labyrinth in relation to the abstract monoliths and meta-theories of Minimalism and Conceptualism, which arrived at an impasse by the mid-1970s. I will demonstrate that, despite its grandiose subject, *The Red Tapes* seems to substitute distance with intimacy as a mode of critical engagement and conjures a multitude in place of the hermit who interprets a work to gain a solidified sense of self. The constant revisions to actions and plotlines, a kind of improvisation of the work before the eyes of the audience, continually defer a finalized portrait of America. Instead, there is evidence of building a heterogeneous, transforming community with the historical consciousness to confront the limits of the present. Importantly, Acconci posits collective subjectivity as a question, perhaps *the question*.\(^9\)

*It has taken me a very long time to write about Vito Acconci’s *The Red Tapes*. But then *The Red Tapes* is a very long tape and it takes a long time to think about it. Completed in the Spring of 1977, Acconci’s last and most complex video work is often left out of accounts of the artist’s seminal video practice and remains to be written about in detail. My interest in the work stems from a consideration of the mid 1970s as a historic moment of transition into the dominance of post-modern consciousness, which is best understood as a cultural and aesthetic impasse with regard to social engagement. This moment extends into the present. It is marked by the transition of American identity from nation to the defining force in Empire and the generalized belief in the impossibility of social transformation. *The Red Tapes* confronts this*

\(^9\) Ibid., 73-74.  
\(^{10}\) Since this potential *multitude* has been taken up more recently within Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s *Empire*, it is important to distinguish in the case of *The Red Tapes* a primacy of national historical consciousness that Negri and Hardt tend to oppose. However critical and uneasy Acconci tends to be of American mythology, he retains the idea of the nation as a key myth with which to begin addressing collective subjectivity. See Michael Hardt and
social space directly, making the work an important conceptual anchor for rethinking this notion of impasse. Because these social phenomena are addressed through an artwork, the central concern here will be the transition of aesthetic economies – an inquiry into how cultural ruination and exhaustion can be used as an invitation to transform a viewing space and the concept of the audience. The notion of building, as opposed to structure, is continually interrogated in relation to *The Red Tapes*. Throughout, ‘building’ implies breakdowns and breaking-outs as much as new constructs and retains a focus on the spatial dimension of this projected video.

As a historical project this study of Acconci’s last video work is in large part energized by questions regarding the artist’s position as the definitive practitioner of video art’s aesthetic of narcissism. Rosalind Krauss’ assessment came at the very moment when Acconci was turning away from earlier video practice and exploring the notion of video projection as a public space and a means of encountering history. In examining *The Red Tapes* my aim is not to build a stable structure – to replace Krauss’ argument with another definitive commentary on the times – but to explore the ambivalence of this period with regard to the aims of cultural production. My contention is that a crisis of aims within video practice and critical artistic practice in general requires a historical method that approximates an ‘unsafe building.’ This is to avoid a tendency to compensate with theoretical clarity for the messiness of transitional practice, a tendency that closes the door to some important possibilities. By interrogating the unresolved subjective and spatial coordinates of a singularly complex video work, I hope to contribute to a conversation about the breakdown of modernist critical distance without mourning this aesthetic paradigm as Fredric Jameson tends to.

For Jameson, the existence of “critical distance” is bound up in a notion of memory that “seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise [...] nothing here haunts the mind or leaves afterimages in the manner of the great moments of film.” He links the loss of critical distance with the loss of an autonomous modernist art – understood as a “realm of the aesthetic which redoubles the world without being altogether of it, thereby winning a certain negative or critical power.”¹¹ The task here is to complicate notions of an immersive practice which Jameson’s Frankfurt School formulations implicitly distrust.

I begin with a historical outline of the critical status of minimalism, with an eye to the precedent that minimalist space presented for the shifting notions of aesthetic experience and aims. This chapter does not present a smooth transition, but explores the terms that complicated aesthetic innovation, particularly the persistent investment in abstraction and how this inflected the use of systems theory in performance and institutional critique. The purpose of this brief and selective history is to lay a foundation for the treatment of the minimalist legacy in The Red Tapes as both a model (of immersive experience) and a problem (of the monolith). Next, I discuss the early promises associated with the use of video technology and the growing doubts about video as a separate medium and an alternative distribution system – a debate which was energized by the entrance of video into public museums. This chapter implicitly aims to complicate the notion of institutional critique in preparation for a study of The Red Tapes as a work that not only cuts against the grain of media specificity but also reinvests the space of the cinema or the gallery with social potential, rather than attempting to circumvent it. The third and final chapter engages in a detailed consideration of The Red Tapes as an emblem of aesthetic uncertainty, as well as a rehearsal for some key possibilities for postmodern artistic practice. Attention to the historical consciousness of The Red Tapes reflects the growing illegitimacy of

¹¹ Jameson, 96.
utopian and progressive aims in national mythology and aesthetic practice. In their stead I interrogate notions of the continuous transformation of the here and now as antidote to expansion into new and pure territory, and the constitution of a multitude against the notion of a singular subjectivity, be this construed as coherent or (as in Krauss’ case) pathological. This last chapter proposes a potential for viewers’ productive engagement with (in) *The Red Tapes*. 
CHAPTER I

‘Beware of Abstractions’

The cultural impasse of the mid 1970s requires some clarification. It followed experiments that date back to the early 1960s including institutional intervention, performance, and text-based works that sought to redefine the social power relations emblematized in cultural production. Among other effects, performance works destabilized the subjectivity traditionally assigned to artists and viewers while text works often questioned aesthetic boundaries through semantic distortions and philosophical propositions. In the sixties, the emphasis placed on ephemera, situations, and text has often been characterized as an assault on the ‘traditional’ art object – on so many paintings, drawings, and sculptures which fit all too neatly into the world of commodity exchange.\(^\text{12}\) It cannot be denied that the revised notions of the artist, the spectator, or the object of art had challenged the gallery system. Increasingly, however, internal semantic problems that strayed ever further from social reference came to occupy artists and critics. Moreover, as the capitalist economy entered its new information-based ‘late’ stage, a certain affinity between commodity flows and the ‘dematerialized,’ text-based objects of conceptual art became perceptible.\(^\text{13}\)

Speculation about the possibility of resisting capitalist modes of production became increasingly pessimistic by the mid 1970s. In *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, which was first published in Italian in 1973 and translated into English in 1976, the architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri argued for the abandonment of architecture as a basis


\(^{13}\) This argument is developed by Benjamin Buchloh in his essay “From the Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Concept Art 1962-1969)” in *L’art conceptuel, une perspective*. Paris: Musée de l’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1990. 41-53.
for social transformation. For Tafuri, architecture had proven to be irretrievably tied to capitalist
development, lending priority to abstract notions of profit over social welfare. He concluded that:

\[\text{...it is useless to propose purely architectural alternatives. The search for an}\
\text{alternative within the structures that condition the very character of architectural}\
\text{design [i.e. capitalism] is indeed an obvious contradiction of terms.}^{14}\]

Rather than point to some correct alternative to architecture, however, Tafuri’s critical agenda
remained to warn against the “anachronistic ‘hopes in design’.”

The timing of Tafuri’s historical polemic (he traces the development of utopian design
from the seventeenth century to his present) is significant. In the early 1960s, there was a
renewed interest in (particularly Soviet) architectural avant-gardes.\(^{15}\) One group of artists, who
took an acute interest in the work, were (what later came to be known as) the minimalists.\(^{16}\)

Robert Morris explicitly located his influence in the Constructivist concern for a non-imagistic or
non re-presentational work by referring to Russian artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and El
Lissitsky. Morris’ and Donald Judd’s installations attempted to abandon painting and sculpture
by producing simple forms that were more architectural than sculptural.\(^{17}\) One of their principal
aims was to shift the focus of the gallery experience away from the art object to the very act of
viewing. It was believed that a confrontation with the brute geometry and serial arrangement of

Press, 1976. 181

\(^{15}\) According to Hal Foster, this attention to the experience of architectural space in the 1960s was a return of the
repressed aim of earlier avant-gardes to readjust the boundaries of art. Foster’s conception of a ‘return of the
repressed’ does not obscure the unique features of the sixties project. Indeed, one of his central claims is that the
critique of the institution of art – beginning with the built space of the gallery and extending into the bureaucratic
infrastructures of cultural centers – was only fully formed in the 60s. The attack on art, attributed to the early
twentieth century avant-gardes can only be understood as such with the filtering of their project through the work of
artists who revitalized it after WWII. See Hal Foster. *The Return of the Real*. Boston: Cambridge, Massachusetts:

\(^{16}\) The term was introduced by Richard Wollheim to underscore the minimal ‘art’ content of the work. Foster, 38.

\(^{17}\) This approach to architecture stems from the three dimensional presence of forms that do not re-present anything
beyond themselves. In his “Notes on Sculpture, Part II” which was first published in *Artforum* in 1966, Robert
Morris specifies his objection to painting and sculpture as follows: “Every internal relationship, whether it be set up
by structural division, a rich surface, or what have you, reduces the public, external quality of the object and tends to
eliminate the viewer to the degree that these details pull him into an intimate relation with the work and out of the
machine-manufactured materials would retain the presence of the viewer in the here and now. The result was an experience that was difficult to frame within existing aesthetic economies. In other words, relationships or meaning could no longer be sought within a painting or a sculpture, but increasingly depended on a body moving through a semi-architectural environment.

It is significant that, in vilifying the effects of minimalism in his seminal essay “Art and Objecthood,” first published in the summer 1967 issue of Artforum, Michael Fried used the example of a drive along the New Jersey turnpike. The example was not his own. Fried recalled in distaste the aesthetic realization described in an essay by Tony Smith. What becomes significant about Fried’s analysis of minimalism is that it is skeptical not so much of the new form but of the new space of aesthetic experience:

There was, he seems to have felt, no way to ‘frame’ his experience on the road, that is, no way to make sense of it in terms of art, to make art of it at least as art then was. Rather, ‘you just have to experience it’—as it happens, as it merely is. (The experience alone is what matters.)

This celebration of an aesthetic shift, which transferred the focus of art from object to experience, was deplorable for critics like Fried, who wanted to keep a clear distinction between the purely visual space summoned in the modernist gallery and the space of the rest of the world. Fried’s urgency—his vilification of minimalism—is best understood as an attempt to protect the gallery from outside encroachments. For him, the visual stimuli inside the white washed confines of the modernist cube provided a retreat for moments of self-possession and clarity. While the lack of faith in the gallery as the only place for aesthetic experience was not new, minimalist attempts to bring the gallery space closer to everyday space posed a threat of new magnitude. Fried’s remark that: “What seems to have been revealed to Smith that night was the pictorial nature of painting—even, one might say, the conventional nature of art” stresses the fundamental nature of the challenge posed by minimalism’s rejection of representation and the

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frame. Rather than leave the gallery behind in favour of the New Jersey Turnpike, the
minimalists filled it with objects that did not function like modernist painting and sculpture. In
order to grasp fully the stakes of this debate, this breakdown of modernist aesthetics must be
positioned within the contemporaneous attempts to produce a secure subjectivity.

Fried’s defense of the meaningful signification of modernist painting and sculpture rested
on his linkage of an absorption in complex and abstract compositions with ‘presentness’ – a
moment of subjective clarity or insight into the inter-relatedness of elements.20 Using the
example of the British sculptor Anthony Caro, Fried celebrated the interconnectedness of
separate I-beams, girders, cylinders and beams in Anthony Caro’s sculpture for their mutual
inflection – this in turn signified an overall meaningfulness to the viewer. Critics like Fried and
his mentors Stanley Cavell and Clement Greenberg further praised the immaterial effect that
Caro achieved by painting his sculptures in a single primary hue. In contrast, Fried likened the
effect of minimalist objects to the experience of “being distanced, or crowded by the silent
presence of another person.”21 Through this anthropomorphism of minimalist objects, Fried
further condemned the world of human interaction to meaninglessness. Fried denounced the
mere ‘presence’ confirmed by minimalist installation as a threat to the subject.22 While the self-
possessed modernist subject had been summoned in relation to a complex, hermetic object –
exemplified by the painted picture – the stresses on subjectivity posed by the world beyond the

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19 Ibid., 827.
20 Fried’s description of “the mutual inflection of one element by another, rather than the identity of any element” in
an Anthony Caro sculpture foregrounds the notion of design, interconnectedness, and meaning which he (as well as
his mentor Clement Greenberg) cannot find in the everyday or in nature, but which they see as essential to existence.
Ibid., 829-830.
21 Ibid., 826.
22 Fried explains: “Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he
take it seriously – and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being aware of it an, so to speak, in
acting accordingly. (Certain modes of seriousness are closed to the beholder by the work itself, i.e. those established
by the finest painting and sculpture of the recent past. But, of course, those are hardly modes of seriousness in which
most people feel at home, or that they even find tolerable.) Thus Fried hopes to preserve a rarified presentness (what
he later links to grace) for those viewers who take the painting and sculpture which he championed – works which
retain the promise of a composed modernist subject – seriously. Ibid., 826.
gallery were proving the need for new forms. Rather than offer escape from life in the metropolis, new means of conceiving urban space were being proposed.

Minimalist artists like Robert Morris addressed the need for a new aesthetic experience by attempting to envelop the viewer with an environment of objects, which would somehow make clear the order of the world beyond the gallery. Morris’ “Notes on Sculpture, Parts I-III,” published in *Artforum* between February 1966 and the summer of 1967, emphasize the inadequacy of the modernist aesthetic in accessing this underlying logic of the world:

> This order is not based on previous art orders, but is an order so basic to the culture that its obviousness makes it nearly invisible. The new three-dimensional work has grasped the cultural infrastructure of forming itself, which has been in use, and developing, since Neolithic times and culminates in the technology of industrial production.\(^\text{23}\)

Morris’ insistence on the near *invisibility* of the underlying order signaled the paucity of purely visual effects in art that were hypostatized in American, post-war modernist art. His harkening to Neolithic times to legitimate the minimalist environment as some primordial confrontation with three-dimensional form exhibits a modernist tendency towards universal claims.

For Morris, attempts to ‘forget the body’ through absorption in the visual field – in other words, the aesthetic tactics of modernist painting and sculpture – denied subjectivity rather than confirmed it. Instead, the artist introduced the need for the same quality of experience from multiple viewpoints. Retaining the notion of art as a clarifying device, he suggested that an embodied, real-time experience of specifically arranged geometric solids unmasked the utopian potential of industrialized living:

> Such work which has the feel and look of openness, extendibility, accessibility, publicness, repeatability, equanimity, directness, immediacy, and has been formed by clear decision rather than groping craft would seem to have a few social implications, none of which are negative. Such work would undoubtedly be boring to those who long for access to an exclusive specialness, the experience of which reassures their superior perception.\(^\text{24}\)


\(^{24}\) Morris categorically opposed this effect to the simultaneity of multiple viewpoints in Cubism. Ibid., 815, 818-819. Morris’ geometric solids were arranged in grids so as to give the impression of extension, though not incompleteness.
This reassuring experience – however boring – held out the promise of certainty that was widely accessible (partly in opposition to Fried’s notion of grace, which could only be available to a few chosen aesthetes).

In researching forms that would produce the clarity of effect sought in Minimalist aesthetics Morris was drawn to Gestalt psychology and Russian Constructivism. He celebrated the notion of ‘order’ underlying the formation of objects that were neither sculpture, nor monument, nor architecture, but formed a world of relations that would always produce a sense of wholeness. Morris contended that wholeness depended on a ‘resistance to perceptual separation.’ In direct contradiction to Fried, Morris’ defended the need to resist drawing the viewer out of the mundane, everyday experience – the operation attributed by Fried to the gracefully complex syntax of Anthony Caro’s sculptures. Minimalist objects would always refer back to the actual space of the viewer rather than the virtual space, which Fried sought to protect.

It is important to consider that this debate transpired at a time when the structuralist certitude of the sign, was subjected to increasing attack. In Morris’ case, the insistence on the non-imagistic nature of minimalist objects was an attempt to resist signification outright. In “Notes on Sculpture, Part III” his aim becomes clear:

The trouble with painting is not its inescapable illusionism per se. But this inherent illusionism brings with it a non-actual elusiveness or indeterminate allusiveness. The mode has become antique. Specifically, what is antique about it is the divisiveness of experience which marks on a flat surface elicit. There are obvious cultural and historical reasons why this happens. For a long while the duality of thing and allusion sustained itself under the force of profuse organizational

or fracture. This perpetual wholeness was the key to the positivism of minimalist installation, so that the viewer could always felt that he or she had experienced something finite. There is a resistance to the sublime, which has often functioned as a critique of reason, in minimalism. The quality may best be described as utopian.

25 Gestalt psychology dictated that the visualization of wholeness requires regular and reductive forms. In “Notes on Sculpture, Part I,” Robert Morris writes: “Rodchenko, and other Constructivists refuted Appollinaire’s observation that ‘a structure becomes architecture, and not sculpture, when its elements no longer have their justification in nature.’ At least the earlier works of Tatlin and other Constructivists made references to neither the figure nor architecture. In subsequent years Gabo, and to a lesser extent Pevsner and Vantongerloo, perpetuated the Constructivist ideal of a non-imagistic sculpture that was independent of architecture. This autonomy was not sustained in the work of the greatest American sculptor, the late David Smith. Today there is a reassertion of the non-imagistic as an essential condition.” Ibid., 814-815.

26 Ibid., 815.
innovations within the work itself. But it has worn thin and premises ceases to convince. Duality of experience is not direct enough. That which has ambiguity built into it is not acceptable to an empirical and pragmatic outlook. 27

Though they were in constant opposition about material means, both Morris and Fried desperately strove to elicit conviction from aesthetic experience. Their argument over the space of aesthetic experience must be seen in relation to an underlying division over the possibility of signification. Fried insisted that the answer lay in protecting a rarefied sign through the construction of a hermetic object that manifested wholeness, totality, and a coherence of complex parts in the visual field. By rejecting signification outright, Morris was attempting to avoid the increasingly uncertainty of signification and, by extension, the threat this posed to modernist aims of subjective certitude.

In the end, it seems that neither of these opposing attempts to secure a certain subject was vindicated. For many artists, the lessons of the debate between Fried and the Minimalists were absorbed at a time when notions of subjective certitude no longer mattered. What came to matter increasingly in the works of the early 1970s (some of which I will discuss in this chapter) was the understanding of a deep structure. In constructing an awareness of the interconnectedness of space, minimalism— at least the minimalism described by Morris – had introduced the notion of aesthetic space as something that could not be framed and set apart from the world. And though his intention had been to discredit the new development, Michael Fried in fact clarified the terms for how minimalism would be translated into subsequent practice. The ‘theatrical’ experience vilified by Fried was explored long after the elemental, geometric forms of minimalist installation were abandoned. In a 1990 interview with Kate Horsefield, Vito Acconci recalled the problem posed by minimalist objects:

I guess the thing I could find disturbing about minimalism was the fact that it was something that appeared as if from nowhere. This was a box, whatever. Who put it there? When did it start? What was its source? In other words it presented itself as if form all time. Almost like the black

27 Ibid., 819.
monolith in 2001. So it might have started with this notion of the viewer can experience it; if you
don't know its source, then the viewer starts to respect it. Somewhere in the back of my mind,
there started to be notions of what I wanted to do to make the source clear. If you can make the
source of something clear, that would demystify the thing a viewer was looking at. Then the thing
wouldn't be like an altar. It wouldn't be like religion. 28

Much of Acconci’s subsequent work in the early 1970s were concerned with a reordering of
aesthetic space – a turning away from the religiosity of Fried’s grace and the altars of
minimalism – tended towards demystification via the artist’s and the viewer’s insertion into
social systems.

In 1970, Acconci had his personal mail delivered to the Museum of Modern Art. This
simple gesture constituted the artist’s contribution to the Information exhibition, held at the
Museum of Modern Art in New York between June and September of that year (Fig.2). The title
of the work, Service Area, emphasizes the spatial import of the gesture. This linkage between the
private space of the home (for which the mail slot serves as metonym) and the public space of
the gallery connected and briefly transformed these separate categories. By placing his most
mundane activities on exhibit, Acconci positioned the gallery viewer as a kind of apartment
voyeur prompting him or her to reconsider the rarefied space of the Museum of Modern Art.
This owes in part to the example of Tony Smith’s New Jersey Turnpike drive. But by importing
his domestic activity into the area where he was invited to exhibit at the MoMA, Acconci’s
collapse of aesthetic and quotidian experience relied less on the aesthetization of everyday space
than on the domestication of aesthetic space.

Changing notions of information flows, which in turn loosened spatial distinctions,
registered in art making at a time of a historic shift from industrial to information-based
capitalism. It may be said that, as this social system became more pliable, it also became more
palpable. In the United States, the emergence of the late stage of capitalism has been dated

roughly from 1945 to 1973. But direct confrontations with this systemic shift as a historic process were slower to come, perhaps because, with the accelerated commodification (even fetishization of) information, historical reflection had became an increasingly fraught exercise. While *The Red Tapes* testifies to an eventual willingness (even necessity) to enter history, in the early 1970s Acconci and others may be said to have explored the notion of deep structure. *Service Area* foregrounds an attempt by Acconci to tie himself into an existing system in such a way as to expose its underlying assumptions (about the museum’s dialectical effacement of quotidian activity, for instance). Indeed, while there was an unwillingness to uphold the value system of modernism in relation to aesthetic institutions and objects, the investment of modernist artists and critics in non-representational forms was not flatly rejected by most critics of modernism, but rather extended into the study of linguistic, institutional and social ‘systems’. The shift towards considerations of a broader social space and the attendant urgency of laying bare social conditions (already evident in Acconci’s call for demystification cited above) have often been linked to the seminal writings of French theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Michael DeCerteau. But in order to address the systemic investigations of the early 1970s in New York by artists such as Acconci, it is perhaps more fitting to consider the spatial theories of Edward Hall and the sociology of Erving Goffman. These two American theorists set out to schematize human relations so as to reveal what is hidden under the surface of decorum in a manner both more pragmatic and more paranoid than their French contemporaries. Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, written in 1959 (but read well into the sixties by artists like Acconci) describes the necessary concealment of means whereby individuals maximize their interests within communities:

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29 Jameson describes this as the ‘brief American century’. See Jameson, xx.  
30 This is Jameson’s argument from the outset. See Jameson, ix. The problem of constructing history within the obsessively present condition late capitalism is addressed throughout his book.  
31 Erving Goffman was born in Canada but gained American citizenship in the 1950s.
The maintenance of this surface agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone feels obliged to give lip service.  

The author’s reflections on the constitution of a community – defined as a group in consensus – are based on the premise that the community is not a given, but must be reconstituted again and again. Not surprising, given the duplicity of human action which he describes, Goffman’s model for social behaviour is theatre – in many ways a precursor to contemporary notions of performativity. We perform certain roles in order to uphold the definition of a given situation as social and communicative – be it the intimacy between friends or the professional exchange of business rivals. The only real and persistent agreement, Goffman states, regards the avoidance of “an open conflict of definition of the situation.” An implication of Goffman’s thesis about the concealment of disagreements is that the notion of a ‘public’ opposes Jurgen Habermas’ definition of public sphere as an arena for debate.

In Goffman’s subsequent writings, particularly Relations in Public, first published in 1971, human behaviour in public takes on an increasingly ominous tone. Goffman’s attempts to identify the structure of “an alarming sign,” – a type of behaviour that might alert us to the suspect intentions of a social interlocutor – puts into question the rational reading of ‘normal’ behavior.  

For Goffman, an individual who is maximizing his or her interest at the expense of others will cloak the events that facilitate his or her advancement with the appearance of chance in order to avoid being caught. The paranoid implication of this analysis is that the most ordinary of events may be carefully orchestrated for the interest of some individual; they may be reread as ‘alarming signs.’ Even, or especially, events that seem to lack design must be read suspiciously.

33 Ibid., 10
A passage in the introduction to Edward Hall’s *The Hidden Dimension* indicates how changing social currents produced this sociology of suspicion and paranoia:

…it is fairly obvious that the American Negroes and people of Spanish culture who are flocking to our cities are being very seriously stressed. Not only are they in a setting that does not fit them, but they have passed the limits of their own tolerance to stress. The United States is faced with the fact that two of its creative and sensitive peoples are in the process of being destroyed and like Samson could bring down the structure that houses us all. Thus it must be impressed upon the architects, city planners and builders that if this country is to avoid catastrophe, we must begin seeing man as an interlocutor with his environment, and environment which these same planners, architects and builders are now creating with little reference to man’s proxemic needs.36

Hall’s analysis is thus prompted by the lack of understanding about the behaviour and needs of ‘other cultures’ whose influx into the city is on the rise and threatens to undo its perceived structure. The passage from Hall provides an illuminating backdrop for the urgent search for systems as well as the increasing illegitimacy of the ideals of transparency and planning in the early 1970s. It would be facile to link Hall’s paternalistic anxiety directly to the social outlook of artists like Vito Acconci. Though the artist cites Hall’s notion of proxemics (a term Hall used to describe his study of “social and personal space and man’s perception of it”) as a useful map of social space, Hall’s paranoid desire for social predictability – his attempt to un-cover a ‘hidden dimension’ and plan the city with this clarity in mind – does not appear to be Acconci’s desired aim. Indeed, the opposite effect may be deduced from Acconci’s proxemic exercises of the early 1970s, where the artist tests the uncertainty of spatial relations without providing a useful social map.

Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece*, supplies a telling antidote to the ‘program’ of the city – and the attendant denigration of a certain subject who produces and is in turn confirmed by this space. This photographed performance was Acconci’s contribution to a month-long project of “Street Works,” commissioned by the Architectural League of New York in 1969. For each day of that month, Acconci would choose a person in the street and follow them until they entered a

article deals with Acconci’s *Following Piece* in relation to the writings of Erving Goffman and Bernard Tschumi’s, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, 1973, a narrative take on paper architecture.
private space. (Fig.3) These unsuspecting objects of scrutiny became subjects by virtue of the fact that Acconci’s movement was guided by their travel through the city. The work’s operation was to cut rather than to frame. Acconci’s movements divided Manhattan according to private and public space. The nature of public space, as the arena of Acconci’s action, was never clarified or imbued with revolutionary potential. Its limits fluctuated. Rather than solve the problem of reading the city, Acconci may be said to retain a questioning tone with relation to “proxemic systems.”

A similar indeterminacy characterizes Acconci’s *Proximity Piece*, a performance executed in the Jewish Museum’s *Software* exhibition between September 10 and November 8, 1970. (Fig.4) Acconci would randomly select a member of the viewing public and stand “closer than the accustomed distance” until the person moved away. There is a tendency in these early works for the artist to double as a minimalist cube, particularly if we recall Fried’s notion of being ‘crowded by presence of another person’ as an analogy for Minimalist spatial effects. It becomes clear that the exploration of broad structures of public interaction hinged on the presentation of self as something both larger than and reduced from the notion of a singular human subject. Acconci recalls that not using his person ‘as person’ in works like *Following Piece* presented a problem and propelled him to explore subjectivity by focusing increasingly on himself and person-to-person interaction.37

The use of closed-circuit video as a proxemic tool for person-to-person interaction will be explored in the following chapter. In concluding this discussion of the shifting notions of aesthetic space, and the attendant shifts in the conception of the space of the city and the gallery, I wish to stress the persistence of abstraction. Abstraction – the blank, open, gesture – had allowed for a broad scope of inquiry and avoided the problems posed by the uncertainties of

signification. However, the tendency to think in terms of base structures, systems or that, which comes before the sign, began to trouble artists like Acconci. In discussing conceptual practice, Acconci points to a pattern of quick exhaustion with respect to social relevance:

At first [Conceptual Art] was a way to deal with everything, rather than an intellectual petrification which I think it eventually became [...] There was that application of mind as device, as instrument, that was, at least for me, the important gesture of conceptualism. Later it almost seemed to be the mind enclosed in itself. And it started to package itself as something almost divorced from the world. But the starting impetus was that the mind can go further into the real world than, say, a paint brush could. So it started with something very opposite from closed intellectualism.³⁸

While the rejection of the gallery as a sanctuary seemed to introduce a vast range of social possibilities to aesthetic action – a way to “deal with everything” – the modernist investment in abstraction pursued artists into the street. Abstraction thus survived a partial dismantling of its container (the challenge of performance in the street) albeit in the altered form of systems theory practiced as blank gestures.

A sign for “SIGNS” in the background of one of the photographic documents of Acconci’s Following Piece alerts the viewer to the dead pan deferral of hermetic meaning within this work.³⁹ The utter vacuity of the awning – which mirrors Acconci’s blank decorum and the matter-of-fact title of the work – announces a lack of means whereby one might read the artist’s action.

One response to the blankness of Acconci’s action has been to attribute a dialectical resonance to the act of following. In his recent assessment of Following Piece, within a broader reconfiguration of the modern notion of the flâneur, Tom McDonough explores the duality of the act of following in Acconci’s work:

³⁷ See Horesfield, 13.
³⁸ Ibid., 11-12.
³⁹ In her discussion of the work, Anne Wagner has read the presence of this sign for SIGNS as a false declaration which provokes distrust in the documentary status of the photographs of Acconci’s Following Piece. Wagner’s commentary that “Nowhere in either of these works, Acconci’s Following Piece and Anderson’s Object/Object/Objection/Objectified, do we find any traces of the urban utopianism or exuberant breadth of vision that might come with making Manhattan your studio and stomping ground” confirms the rejection of the key tenets of
As in [Edgar Allen] Poe's "Man in the Crowd," we seem to have been left here with the mere framework of the detective story: the pursuer, the invisible but ever-present crowd, and the individual being sought. That framework found its own peculiar resonance in Acconci's language, whose insistent matter-of-factness and quantification seemingly derived in equal measure from his earlier experiments in Minimalist poetics and from the laconic tone of the police blotter. The quantifying or, to use a perhaps more appropriate legal term, evidentiary mode here refused the even residual psychologizing tone of Poe or Baudelaire; we are given no privileged access to Acconci's state of mind. Moreover, this absence of a narrative explication for his actions produced a telling ambiguity in Acconci's undertaking, for we are constrained to remain unsure of his motivation: Was he the detective observing his suspect, or was he the sociopath stalking his mark.  

Following Hall and Goffman, McDonough focuses on how the perceived unpredictability of the city space takes on an ominous tone. The city is not safe. There is a criminal potential within the figure of Acconci, the person he pursues, or both. Here then, is the paranoid response to the lack of clear signification. The composed modern subject disintegrates with the deepening uncertainty surrounding motives and means of social action. But why interpret Acconci’s action at all? Perhaps the coincidence of the sign in the background reminds us that signs are not absent, but everywhere, only vacant. The compulsion to read into Acconci’s action runs against the grain of the works’ emphatic emptying of signification. What the frustrated compulsion may attest to is a growing crisis of abstraction. As aesthetic action spilled onto the streets, the purity of abstraction, which survived for decades in the gallery, was becoming a source of suspicion.

In the early 1970s, artistic exercises with transparency were executed in highly reductive conditions, where few socially applicable facts were established. Anne Wagner and Gary Hill have attempted to read these minimal gestures as allusions to real events, which would have positioned the viewer as an allegorical agent of history. However, such analysis should not obscure the tendency of these works to elude historical specifics in favour of some more basic
structure. Wagner’s and Hill’s interpretive exercise does, however, point to the problematic lack of historical engagement, not only in early performance, but particularly in the majority of early video art – a problem which may be seen to provoke the shift from reductive gesture to experiments with historical narrative in Acconci’s final video work.
CHAPTER II

‘Connect’

While some attempts to alter the terms of aesthetic exchange in the late 1960s and early
1970s had taken the form of public performance, street-works and publications, it was the
technology of video which seemed to offer the greatest potential for aesthetic revolution. There
exist multiple and divergent theories and histories addressing the beginnings of video art and it is
not the purpose of this thesis to recount them in a comprehensive manner. However, several
crucial factors about the communicative potential of video – both in terms of public reach and
interpersonal effects – need to be addressed in order to lay a foundation for the particular use of
video in The Red Tapes.

First, a distinction needs to be made between artists using video as a tool or those whose
aim was to define the material essence of the medium and those artists and community activists
who sought to develop a wholly alternate network of communication. While certain overlap
existed between these groups, particularly during the earliest experiments with video, it is
important not to conflate their distinct aims. For those interested in collective activism, the
proximity of video to television – by then the most ubiquitous system of information sharing and
value formation – held out the promise of a novel communicative network. As early as 1971,
the emergence of Cable Access Television (CATV) facilitated the emergence of community and

42 Between 1970 and 1974, Raindance Corporation headed by Michael Shamberg ran the publication “Radical
Software which was co-edited by Shamberg, Beryl Korot, Phyllis Gershuny (now Phyllis Segura) and Ira Schneider.
See David Joselit, “Tale of the Tape” in Artforum, May 2002. A myriad of collectives largely based on community
television programming and, what was termed, guerilla television, sprung up, though their activities cannot be
addressed in any significant form in the current paper. Some are discussed in Martha Rosler. “Video: Shedding the
59 (summer): 46-53.

43 For a broader international context of the independent media movement see Inke Arns. “Social Technologies
Deconstruction, subversion and the utopia of democratic communication” Trans. Michael Robinson. © Media Art
activist television groupings like Top Value Television (TVTV) and Paper Tiger Television. In US, roughly between 1970 and 1976, these newly formed collectives gained limited and temporary access to cable networks and public broadcasting channels, which were then both expanding and incompletely regulated. It is perhaps because of this coincidence of easy access to both production and distribution that an inflated estimation of public access for the medium evolved. The rhetoric of early video artists often centered around gaining control over distribution and content which would allow for an entry into the broader social system on terms that were not dictated by the mass media on the one hand or the gallery owners, collectors and museum trustees on the other.

Within this discourse, Bertolt Brecht’s text “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication” gained new currency by articulating the intersection between democracy, revolutionary change and new media. Brecht’s theories about radio are based on a willful utopianism – an insistence on control over production that was as far removed from the real structures of Radio broadcasting as early video artists quickly became from the structures of Television broadcasting. However, in the early 1970s the increased use of the recently introduced Porta-Pak and the tentative access to broadcast space had conspired to create an inflated belief in the possibility of realizing Brecht’s techo-utopia. Brecht had contrasted the use of radio as communication in public life to its use as entertainment: communicative radio relied on the access of listeners to production facilities whereas the entertained listeners with no interest in production and distribution remained locked within prevailing ideologies. The broad access to

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44 These dates are approximations, roughly bracketed by two indicators: 1970 as the year when “the parameters of a large, international body of activity were visible” according to the introductory statement made by Fred Barzyk, Douglas Davis, Gerald O'Grady and Willard Van Dyke in the preface to a publication which came out of the Open Circuits Conference at the Museum of Modern Art in January 1974. The end-date is set by the coincidence of several publications that explicitly or implicitly announced a crisis of the public reach of video. These include Krauss, Rosalind. “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism.” October, 1:1, 1976. 51-64. This was the inaugural issue of October. The May/June 1976 issue of Studio International was a special issue on video art, which also emphasized the crisis of the medium.
production technology after the introduction of the Porta-Pak in the mid-1960s and certain openings within cable distribution in the early 1970s seemed to afford video practitioners the production possibilities that had not been in place in the early days of public radio broadcasting. Just as Brecht had concluded his writing on radio with a call for utopian innovation\textsuperscript{46} so too, in the early 1970s, video practitioners and theorists stressed the revolutionary potential of video technology to “transcend and reconfigure” information structures.\textsuperscript{47}

From the outset, the discourses attending the formation of alternative video practices tended towards a broader understanding of the medium of video as a democratizing tool and a catalyst for the engagement and subsequent transformation of an increasingly outmoded notion of the public sphere. While Acconci quite quickly acknowledged that his practice would use the space of the gallery, the counter example of alternative video networks may be said to have posed the challenge of public interaction for him and other video practitioners invited to show in private galleries and eventually public museums.\textsuperscript{48} It is therefore not surprising that his practice and writing so often struggled with the space of video exhibition, especially its implications for the construction of new notions of the public sphere. As he attained ever-greater support within the auteur driven commercial and public gallery system, Acconci became increasingly concerned with unsettling the individual subjectivity predicated on the auteur driven video production that these institutions supported.

In a 1989 essay entitled “Performance after the Fact”, Acconci acknowledges the problem posed by the gallery space and the attempts to bring this space closer to that of the street:

> Since the streets, then, were already encoded into another time [that of 60s Happenings] we had to get off the streets and go back home. We had to find a home, or make a home for ourselves. We

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 55
had two choices of housing: that home could have been the theater, or it could have been the
gallery (we wanted to see the gallery) as an analogue of the street, a representation of the street;
our model was the New York gallery, like 420 Broadway, where – rather than having just one
gallery as a destination – you walked from floor to floor, you meandered through five floors. 49

Already evident here is the notion of the public sphere as a zone of intimacy, rather than the
traditional notion of public formed in opposition to private space (which had still been operative in Following Piece). And this lack of spatial definition may further be seen to facilitate novel
notions of subjectivity. In “Some Notes on my Use of Video,” which Acconci submitted to a
special video issue of the new publication Art-Rite in 1974, the artist concludes with the
following worry:

The problem is that a video tape is “thrown into” a gallery. The room is usually darkened,
probably with fixed seating – the tape, then, becomes a spectacle and loses its quality of “home
companion” there is a crowd of people in front of a monitor – too many faces to come face to face
with… 50

The trouble of a plural subjectivity was rendered paramount by the entrance of video into the
gallery. While television, both mainstream and alternative may be said to have foregrounded a
new sense of connectivity, within the gallery this connectivity could be seen to put into crisis
notions of collectivity that involved physical proximity. Thus, the awkward position of video
within the public and commercial gallery can be seen, not so much as a compromise of the
connective possibilities of video, but as a catalyst for reassessing the collective social
possibilities of asesthetic space. Acconci’s subsequent thinking about video as a spatial aide or a
means of facilitating interpersonal contact and subjective shifts emerges from within the dialectic
of the gallery and the street. And this connection of spatial and subjective concerns finds a
counterpoint in the practice of Dan Graham. While they were rarely associated in the 1970s, both
artists’ use of and writing about video prove crucial in addressing the questions of shifting

aesthetic economies that were lingering in the wake of the minimalist and conceptual challenges to modernism.

* Beginning in 1970 and continuing into the late 1970s Dan Graham conducted a sustained inquiry into the social and psychological patterns produced within the architectural structures that defined postwar America: the glass tower, the shopping arcade, and the suburban home. The project may be understood as an attempt to de-construct capitalism's scopic pillars – spectatorship and surveillance – through a combination of critical writing, museum or gallery installations and schematics for architectural alterations. During the seventies, Graham's focus shifted from gallery installations to a more direct involvement with the architectural and social fabric of the modern city.51

In assessing Dan Graham's work of the time, Jeff Wall points out that architecture became "the discourse of siting the effects of power generated by publicity, information and bureaucracy in the city" and that, in the mid 1970s, it "emerges as the determining or decisive art form, because it most wholly reflects institutional structure, and influences behavior through its definition of positionality."52 While his essay Dan Graham's Kammerspiel is particularly concerned with Dan Graham's 1978 intervention proposal entitled Alteration to a Suburban House53 Wall begins his discussion with Graham's seminal essay “Homes for America” which was published in Arts Magazine in December 1966. (Fig.7) The short ‘magazine piece,’ which


53 The Alteration to a Suburban House involved the insertion of a large mirror, parallel to a picture window and recessed about halfway into the living room so that the play of reflections produced by this window now itself plays with a purely reflective image behind. This play is explored in fascinating detail in Jeff Wall's essay. Ibid., 37-81.
Graham illustrated with photographs he had taken of suburban tract housing, is a polemic against the dehumanizing effects of mass-produced modern housing on American cities after the Second World War. In order to emphasize the broader critical significance of Graham’s gesture, Wall categorizes the magazine essay as a Pop strategy and points out allusions to Minimalist installation in the illustrated rows of identical housing blocs. Moreover, Graham’s listing of the possible permutations of prefabricated housing designs: “AABBCCDD, AABBDCC, AACCBDD, etc.” imbeds the serial systems of Conceptual Art into a social context. Consequently, Wall positions Graham in a critical relation to his precedents in Minimalism, Pop, and to his contemporaries in Conceptual art – critical in that Graham is able to refer directly to that which these artistic strategies only allude to abstractly: the city. Although his urban and suburban propositions were never realized and remained paper projects (they remain partly aligned with the radically dematerialized forms of Conceptualism) Graham’s work also departs from conceptual ethics and aesthetics. Indeed, the practical aspect of his architectural proposition foils the tendency of groups like Art and Language to abstract their work from the social and physical fabric of the city.

Wall’s achievement is to enter the moment of the mid-seventies and to identify an ‘architectural turn’ as a means of navigating through the impasse – or the crisis of social reference and critical efficacy – facing artists at the time. He is able to avoid the empty slogans of pluralism and defeatism usually leveled at the art of the seventies by focusing on Dan Graham as an exemplar of this architecturally founded practice. In most respects, I would agree with Wall’s assessment of the moment. Close examination of built space did provide a means of re-anchoring conceptual practice in the social. However, Dan Graham’s Kammerspielis almost

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54 Wall likens the non-built form of *Alteration to a Suburban House* to the condition of Conceptual Art with reference to Lawrence Weiner’s statement in *Arts Magazine* (April 1970): “1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.” Ibid., 79.
exclusively concerned with architectural interventions that magnify the alienating effects of modern architecture through the intensified effects of mirrors and glass. Left out almost completely is the special function that Graham then gave to video. Yet, it was the potential of video to reconfigure the architectural environment, which proved to be a particularly useful basis for rethinking the critical possibilities of the period. Video, it seemed, provided a particular way to regard the ruins of architectural utopias – a way that might carve out new possibilities of movement within the capitalist city.

According to Graham, the architectural environment encoded specific patterns of viewing and moving and, by extension, specific social relations. In an essay entitled *Elements of Video/Elements of Architecture*, published in 1975 Graham specifies the role of video within this ‘architectural code’:

> Video can be observed as synonymous with the architectural environment. The architectural code reflects and helps to enforce a code of social behavior. As video becomes superimposed upon (replaces) traditional elements or functions in architecture it affects the architectural code. One example, no longer science fiction is the ‘video-phone,’ with giant monitors capable of connecting various public/private, indoor/outdoor spaces.\(^\text{55}\)

Graham’s understanding of the video apparatus relied on Jacques Lacan’s notion of the mirror as a catalyst of modern self-perception/consciousness. Lacan had argued that a child seeing him or herself in a mirror produces a fixed, externalized (surface) counterpart of the perceiving subject, which henceforth becomes split from this ‘internal’ perceiving consciousness. For Graham, the anxiety of the split ego – the public and the private self – was reinforced by the architectural code through the division of private and public space. In his conclusion to *Elements of Video/Elements of Architecture*, Graham elaborates on the possibility of a productive video intervention within this architectural code:

> Camera and monitors are analogous to, but different from the window’s or mirror’s architectural function. [...] Video feedback can reverse the mirror

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model of self-perception. Through the use of videotape feedback the performer and the audience, the perceiver and his process of perception, are one and the same. Psychological premises of privacy (versus publicness) which would be derived from the mirror model depend on an assumed split between observed behavior and supposedly unobservable, internal intention. [...] An observer's 'self', like a topological moebius strip, is neither 'inside' nor 'outside'. [...] While the mirror alienates the self, video is a learning process which potentially gives back to the self-perceiver a measure of control through the feedback process. 56

Graham’s architectural proposals constitute learning environments based on video intervention. In considering one of them, I wish to emphasize the revised notion of ‘critical distance’ implied in the proposal – a notion which posits viewing, not so much as detached observation, but as an impetus to move, to place the body into previously un-experienced space.

In the 1974 proposal Picture Window Piece the architecturally determined asymmetry of viewing between home dweller and sidewalk passer-by are altered with the help of video. (Fig.8) Two monitors are inserted on either side of the ‘picture widow’ of a suburban home, so that each displays a real-time feed from one of two cameras trained on either side of the window. The result of this video intervention, as Dan Graham projected, would be a chance to learn about the very architectural feature which encoded a suburban home-dweller’s relation with the street. Graham began with a notion of an anxiety produced by this large glass breach of the domestic façade: “convention dictates that a street-facing window ‘picture’ an acceptable view of privacy for the public on the street, but it also paradoxically dictates that this public quickly avert its eyes rather than gaze inside and make contact with the home dweller.”57 The ‘picture window’ is therefore made invisible through convention. In response, Graham’s proposed insertion of video monitors into the window relied on their small size and novelty in the suburban environment to beckon the walking public to leave the sidewalk and approach both video and ‘picture window.’

56 Ibid.
The new position of the pedestrian vis-à-vis ‘picture window’ and the presence of video monitors were to initiate a learning process. Approaching the video monitor, the pedestrian gained an opportunity for a closer scrutiny of both the material and symbolic properties of an architectural element that conventionalized his or her anxious looking from the street, as well as a scrutiny of the self and the home interior beyond. Likewise, the inside monitor would afford the home dweller an image of him or herself confronting the outsider’s gaze. This person also gained a closer view of the passerby he/she had previously only observed on the sidewalk. Ideally, the new proximity would allow for a series of longer, more considered, and more self-conscious looks and the experience of a new space between home and sidewalk. Here then, was a new ‘critical proximity’ – learning envisioned through nearness and physical participation, not of distanced observation and neutrality.\(^58\)

The problem of critical distance was somewhat differently theorized within Acconci’s writing at this time. He begins “Some Notes on my Use of Video,” by positing video as an ideal tool to forge “intimate distance” – a term culled from Edward Hall’s proxemic theory. For Hall, “intimate distance,” which was characterized by the blurring and distortion of vision at close range, allowed for the dissolution of neutral, stable subjectivity. Due to its flat and grainy appearance and its rudimentary sound, Acconci saw video as a perfect tool for accentuating the breakdown of the certain, modern subject. For Acconci, the intimacy of video did not imply a communicative utopia, a clear exchange of information, but the demise of modernist ideals of stable subjectivity. Acconci’s questioning mode broke with Graham’s search for new information within the erasure of distance posited by video technology. For Acconci, the proximity induced by video technology made space for another sensibility, one which retained a critical dimension through skepticism towards the very notion of information.

\(^58\) Michel DeCerteau considers the notion of being ‘a viewpoint and nothing more’ as a persistent trope of navigating
In *Centers* an earlier performance work from 1971, Acconci had explicitly tested the effects of physical proximity in video. The work presents a kind of structural opposite to *The Red Tapes*. In total silence, for over forty minutes, the artist points his index finger at the center of the screen/camera/viewer. Because of its proximity to the camera, the finger is blurred and so large that it fills up our field of vision, obscuring Acconci's face. (Fig.5) The gesture seems to summon the viewer, implore their gaze to attend to the image, but at the same time fails to deliver a clear picture. Writing later, in “Some Notes on My Use of Video,” Acconci quotes Martin Joos: “An utterance in intimate distance avoids giving the addressee information from outside the speaker’s skin...The point is simply to remind – hardly “inform” – the addressee of some feeling inside the speaker’s skin.”59 In the case of *Centers*, the transmitted *feeling* may have been one of dominance, accusation, or coercion.

In her study of video and performance in the early 1970s, Anne Wagner explores the continuum between minimalist installation and certain video and performance works of the time. Her argument emphasizes the coercive dynamic of the rhetoric of presence, which tied early performance video to minimalist aesthetics. Wagner's reading of *Centers* focuses on the mirror effects implied in the production of video within a closed-circuit, where the performer is able to see his image as it is being filmed. But she partly counters the notion of the mirror as a marker of narcissism that had been explored in a seminal essay on video by Rosalind Krauss. Instead, Wagner characterizes performance works using mirrors and video as coercive, but lacking the “limitless confidence [of the minimalist object] that it can and will manipulate such witnesses as

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59 See Vito Acconci. “Some notes on my use of Video,” 2-3. In this special video issue of *Art-Rite*, a contribution by John Baldessari begins to address the problem of video as a medium that is taken up in “10 Point Plan for Video”. Beginning with “The use of T.V. today is in crisis,” Baldessari concludes: “I think to have progress in TV, the medium must be as neutral as a pencil. Just one more tool.” What Baldessari does not mention is the use of projection as a way of getting out of the restrictive discussion about the video medium. See John Baldessari. “TV Like 1. A Pencil 2. Won’t Bite Your Leg,” *Art Rite* 7 (Fall 1974): 22.
The coercion of the viewer in works like *Centers* has imbedded in it a marker of futility via the blurring function of the extreme close-up. The coercive effect becomes the (almost defeatist) response to an increasingly faithless viewer. Thus Wagner points not so much to a pathological constitution of an isolated self, but to artists continually worried about their inability to connect to an audience.

Acconci spoke of video as “a place to keep moving, keep talking – improvise – take it back and start again,” at all times attempting to retain the attention of an increasingly skeptical audience. His use of video as a tool may be understood to press the larger concerns of performance art, which the artist later described as fundamentally contradictory. On the one hand performance “inherently feminist and “a revolution against male power-conventions of abstraction and order and public distance;” on the other hand, it was associated with a fundamentally male assertion of Americanism, so that the performance artist was “the re-enactment of Jackson Pollock walking and pouring over a canvas laid on the floor, of John Wayne in a John Ford movie, the performance artist was the anticipation of Ronald Reagan as president.”

While any anticipation of Ronald Reagan is somewhat far-fetched in most of seventies video performance, Acconci’s retroactive investment of this early work with American

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60 For Wagner, a work like Robert Morris’ *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* of 1965 produces an inevitable viewing experience, which robs the viewer of the power to produce any meaning for the work. This is coercive in that the viewers cannot help but look at themselves and the cubes. See Anne M. Wagner “Performance, Video and the rhetoric of presence,” 73.

61 Wagner also relates Acconci’s *Following Piece* and Laurie Anderson’s *Object, Objection, Objectified* as denials of “the utopianism or exuberant breadth of vision that might come with making Manhattan your studio and stomping ground. On the contrary, here vision itself is a faculty to be tracked and erased, documented and suppressed, stymied and deferred. What stands in vision’s way? The first obstacle is privacy; the second [...] is our belief in the document.” Ibid., 59-80.

62 Another work which Wagner writes about in this context, and which relates to the notion of constant talk and movement is *Undertow*, where Acconci is seated at a table, rubbing his legs. He first fantasizes: “I believe there’s a girl under the table...touching my thighs...” then moves onto: “I believe there is no girl under the table...” The tape ends with the following address to the video viewer: “I need you to be out there, to be a screening device, to screen out all my lies, filter out all my lies, to separate all my lies from the real part. I need you to believe the real part, to filter out the lies so that I can have the real part for myself.” It is as though Acconci’s figure were parodying Michael Fried’s increasingly deceptive art world and as if the invitation of his video persona were addressed to Fried’s ideal (discriminating) viewer for the purpose of discovering the modernist work (i.e. ‘the real part’).

63 See Vito Acconci, “Performance after the Fact”, 356.
male mythology does inform the dynamics of the transition within aesthetic practice marked by

*The Red Tapes.*

Acconci’s thinking about video as a spatial aide, a means of facilitating interpersonal
contact and subjective shifts, firstly needs to be situated within a larger debate about the potential
of the technology and its definition as a medium. There was relatively little written about this,
particularly in terms of the notion of video as a medium until about 1974 – the exception being
small publications like *Radical Software* which were produced by Raindance Corporation, a New
York-based video collective. In contrast to this earlier lack of broad critical engagement, the
short interval, roughly between 1974 and 1977, is marked by an abundance of propositions and
‘video theories.’

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By roughly 1974, due to the rapid commercialization of cable television, the disparity in
control over distribution versus production facilities on the part of artists and community
activists grew. To maintain some semblance of distributive control video practitioners who had
organized collectives focused increasingly on programming regular screenings of members’
works. Several commercial galleries had by this time also become distributors of video. In 1969,
the Howard Wise Gallery organized the exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium.*64 Sonnabend-
Castelli Gallery, which was briefly located in the same building as the Howard Wise Gallery
before moving to Soho, shortly followed suit by inviting artists like Acconci and Dan Graham to
show video works.65 Notable alternative spaces in New York which focused on video
distribution included The Kitchen, Raindance Corporation (which published *Radical Software*)
and the Anthology Film Archives, one of New York City’s best known independent film venues
which was then housed on Wooster Street.
The success of these establishments attracted the interest of curators and boards of trustees within the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art. It quickly became apparent that galleries and museums, rather than cable channels, would be willing to fund and host some of the most experimental projects involving video technology. Amidst the excitement over the utopian possibilities, which this new technology seemed to return to public institutions, there is evidence of unease about the lack of definition for the video medium. In January of 1974, MoMA sponsored a three day event entitled *Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television*, which was organized by Fred Barzyk, Douglas Davis, Gerald O'Grady, and Willard Van Dyke and brought together practitioners, theorists, and curators to discuss how best to take advantage of openings within the established television structures and of new funding for video production. An inescapable irony of these proceedings lies in the fact that the institutions sponsoring the conference were the ones that many artists, including Acconci, were hoping to circumvent via alternate media.66

The proceedings of the conference, which were published in expanded form in *The New Television: A Public/Private Art* evoke a struggle to contend with the breakdown of modernist paradigms that had governed MoMA's sponsorship of art in the post-war decades. The title of the final publication is telling, as it attempts to situate video beyond the closed circuit system. The implication that video can be everything to everyone and that it provides something “new” or revolutionary is not as resolute as the title implies. The editors assert a lack of theoretical consensus regarding video, yet observe its acceptance by 1976 into “almost all major museums of contemporary art in Europe and the United States.”67

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65 Acconci characterizes their support as an attempt to get the right 'window dressing' to make sales.
By 1976, despite (or perhaps because of) its speedy entry into the museum circuit, practitioners and critics involved in video art became increasingly aware of the lack of a centre, the absence of a theoretical base, a veritable black hole that defined their practice. Two years after the *Open Circuits* conference, the organizers assert in their editorial for *The New Television* that the conference: "was a provocation, not a pacifier. It sent its participants and its public home in a combative, determined mood, primed with new ideas." Several other publications in the latter half of the 1970s, which came out at this time, attest to the provisional nature of the ‘ideas’ that can be applied to video. It is at this time that video “sheds its utopian moment” (as Martha Rosler has put it) and practitioners and critics face a moment of theoretical uncertainty.

In 1976, *Studio International* devoted its May/June issue to video art. In his introduction, Richard Cork recites the utopian mantra: “a synthesis of medium awareness and social democratization ought to arise, so that a mature grasp of technical and contextual issues can go hand in hand with a determination to exploit the unique potential availability of video to the hilt.” The optimism is tempered by Cork’s admission that “it is surprising that this medium has so far failed to establish itself as a prime communications system for contemporary art practice.” Inside the journal, an article by the educator, writer and independent film and video maker Stuart Marshall, asserts a “state of malaise” in video production due to problems of access to wide distribution and a lack of productive theory which has driven the artist “to talk to him or herself.” The author elaborates on the self-indulgence with which he associates video in the terms of a breakdown of the sign:

Many theories of a medium attempt to isolate a particular mode of signification, a relation between the signifier and the signified appropriate to that medium alone. (Consider the art school criticism of ‘literalness’ leveled at a painter). I limit my approach to the video signifier not in an attempt to ‘reveal’ a ‘matched’ signified, but rather to suggest why an infatuation with the signifier leads to an inter and intra-subjective conflict so often evident in video art.  

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In distinguishing video from painting Marshall emphasizes the self-indulgence intrinsic to video art which he distinguishes from the notion of self-reflexivity in painting. Thus absorbed in the questions of the particularities of video, Marshall’s analysis exposes the shortfalls of a binary derived from his modernist terms of his critique.

While many of the artists that Marshall sites in his commentary – including Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Linda Benglis, Dan Graham and Peter Campus – explored the closed-circuit system between video and monitor as a complex reflective device, it is not clear that the interest of these practitioners lay primarily in discovering the essence of the video medium. In retrospect, the relentless focus on the closed-circuit system as the material essence of video by theorists like Marshall, missed a crucial opening provided by the Open Circuits conference. One productive uncertainty, which emerges in the title, but is not fully theorized within the publication, is the dissolution of clear distinctions between public and private space – an uncertainty that will be discussed as a point of departure for TheRed Tapes.

Rosalind Krauss’ “Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism”, published in the Spring of 1976 in the inaugural issue of October journal, is perhaps the best known amidst the parade of self-indulgence charges leveled at video. Much like Marshall, Krauss begins with the notion of video as sustained tautology made possible by the closed circuit apparatus of video. Her primary example is Vito Acconci’s Centers, which she interprets by focusing on the video monitor as a mirror reflection of the artist and on his pointing gesture as the act of quintessential narcissism:

For Centers was made by Acconci using the video monitor as a mirror. As we look at the artist sighting along his outstretched arm and forefinger towards the center of the screen we are

70 The first issue of October was published in the spring of 1976. Krauss’ article seems to be part of a zeitgeist. See also Peter Frank. “Auto-art? Self-indulgent? And how!” Art News (September 1976). Frank’s opening comments extend the introspective shift towards non-video art: “The 1970s are acquiring a social topography of their own. The extroverted, optimistic, and aggressively non-conformist character of the previous decade has given way to introspection, doubt and a sometime desperate seeking for spiritual tranquility.” In 1978 Christopher Lasch argued for narcissism as the American ethos emerging in the latter half of the 1970s. See Christopher Lasch. The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978.
watching, what we see is a sustained tautology: a line of sight that begins at Acconci's plane of vision and ends at the eyes of his projected double. In that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as the condition of the entire genre.  

Curiously, Krauss does not mention the prominent blurring of the 'outstretched finger,' or the plural case of the title, which indicates that there is more than one space for this work – that the original act of self-regard is partially transferred into a proxemic encounter. Like Marshall, Krauss deploys painting – Jasper Johns' 1954 painting Target – as a counter example. In contrast to Acconci's singular narcissism, Target exemplifies self-reflexivity or "a fracture into two categorically different entities which can elucidate one another insofar as their separateness is maintained." For Krauss, self-reflexivity in art is tied to an objective view of the self and, by extension, the world. Her model is a psychoanalytic schema, which itself is modeled on the constitution and dissolution of the modernist notion of a singular, stable subject.

For Krauss, one of the main impediments to self-reflexivity in video was its lack of historical awareness produced by the persistent present-time – the simultaneity of recording and transmission in the closed circuit – as well as video's mirror effects. Her notion of history is formal as well as psychological, or dependent on psychic distancing. It relates to Greenberg's theory of the historical progression towards abstraction and self-reflexivity in painting and sculpture, but it is filtered through the objective regard of the self on a psychoanalyst's couch. Hers is not a notion of history that relates to social or political unrest, nation building, negotiation of civil rights, economic upheaval and debates about the status of democracy – all of which had marked American life since the late 1960s. Yet it was social engagement of art in these phenomena, rather than an understanding of the historical as objective distance, which

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71 Krauss, 51.
72 Ibid., 56.
73 Krauss reviews the prototypical situation in the analyst's office where monologue leads to the subject's separation from him or herself and his or her regard of the self as an external object. For Krauss, modernism is allowed this objectivity as indicated by self-reflexive gestures in painting, while video "brackets out" the self as object. Ibid., 51-54.
became increasingly important for artists like Acconci at this time. Thus, Krauss – like many of the video theorists at the time – refuses to draw Graham’s distinction between video as learning tool and mirror as a tool of self-absorption and alienation. Nor does she attend to the assault on the visual faculty and a self-conscious troubling of possibilities of presence or artist-viewer connection that many of the video works she describes were exploring.  

Writing a year prior to Krauss’ “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism”, Acconci seems to anticipate the shortfalls of Krauss’ critique. His “Ten Point Plan for Video” emphasizes the need to “break out” of established notions of the medium; to think of video as “an idea, as a working method, rather than a specific medium,” something to “keep [him] from slipping away into abstraction.” While Acconci’s plan at first seems to make media-specific assertions by associating landscape with film and close-up with video, he does so with the aim of facilitating the relation of the two modes of viewing in a single work. Further anticipating the charge of narcissism, Acconci considers leaving out his own image completely, so that the screen becomes “a depository for objects – an area where Acconci, off screen on one side, can hand things over to the viewer, off-screen on the other side.” Here then, is a prelude to the attempts of merging with the audience in the construction of a multitude of unstable (historical) subjects in The Red Tapes.

By 1976, Acconci’s notion of video became emphatically disassociated from a specific technological support, particularly its display on a television monitor. The one constraint that Acconci stresses – seemingly robbing video of its role as a means for circumventing the gallery – is its increasing institutionalization. But, as will be explored in the next chapter, this may be less a resignation to the constraints of the white cube than a claim of the need to transform the

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74 This argument is more fully developed in Anne M. Wagner “Performance, Video and the rhetoric of presence,” 59-80.
75 Emphasis is my own.
dynamics of the gallery and the position of the audience. Recall Acconci’s final point in the 10

Point Plan for Video:

I’ve depended too much on the video monitor, needed its physical qualities as impulse for content. It’s time to break out. Consider, for example video projection: The “punch” of video…

Acconci’s remarks about the need to see video as a tool for thinking through broader issues rather than a medium must be understood as a counterpoint to the contemporaneous essentialization of video by critics and practitioners (many of whom developed their arguments through reflections on his own works). It must also be located within the broader crisis of social efficacy in seventies art – the impulse to leave the gallery and invest in the broader social world which in large part made television technology so attractive to artists, was being reevaluated, in part due to the growing invitations and funding from large institutions.

In New York, where Acconci and Graham were based, both the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art had hired curators that would specialize in video. In 1974, John Hanhardt joined the Whitney and Barbara London took on the role of Video Curator at the MoMA. In 1976, Video was first included in the Whitney Biennial of American Art. This public endorsement itself followed the private support of influential galleries like Castelli-Sonnabend. What I wish to emphasize here is that these new conditions did not necessarily constitute a triumph. When video first became accessible in the late sixties it was often regarded by artists as a perfect means of circumventing a gallery system already under attack because it rested the balance of cultural authority in the hands of curators and boards of trustees. The digital signal offered the promise of creating an alternate circuit of cultural information and a radical dematerialization of art. But as this promise became increasingly compromised in the later 1970s, a full capitulation did not take place.

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77 Ibid.
In 10 Point Plan for Video Vito Acconci acknowledges the dissolution of earlier possibilities for video:

...my ground is clear: The most available showing places for my work are museums and galleries. To show my face there, with the hope that a viewer will come in front of it, is to make a tacit assumption that the gallery provides fertile ground for relationship. In effect, I'm clouding the economic and social meaning of the gallery. 79

This passage comes immediately prior to Acconci's final propositions about the value of video projection. He struggles to discover how the digital signal might be used to alter the experience of the gallery space and therefore preserve some transformative function within the institution.

In the final chapter, I will explore how these interlocking problems inflect the production of The Red Tapes— not only by the artist, but by the audience in confrontation with the work. I will propose that Acconci's last video work attempts to destroy the categorical assumptions being formulated about video art in the mid-1970s. The labyrinthine structure of The Red Tapes and the method of its projection present a kind of virtual architecture, which challenges then current material definitions of video art. I want to suggest that this aesthetic reordering is necessitated by and, in turn, enables a ruination of the myths of American identity (which may be seen as partly constitutive of the aesthetics of subjective certitude that began to crumble in the late 1960s). The intersection of this skeptical historical consciousness and an aesthetics of uncertainty as critical proximity will then be tested as the basis for the construction of a critical public sphere within the gallery walls—this being Acconci's stated purpose for his last video work. 80

78 Acconci recalls this opposition to the gallery system in an interview with Jeff Ryan. See "Vito Acconci: I never wanted to be political; I wanted the work to be politics." Interview with Jeff Ryan. Flash Art (International Edition) 174, January/February 1994, 84.
Chapter III

‘Come into The Red Tapes’

_The Red Tapes_ is a product of an impasse – a point at which the questioning of aesthetic aims explicitly intersects with a growing crisis of American identity. The work was specifically commissioned and produced with the bicentennial of the American Revolution in mind. Completed in 1976 it also corresponds to Fredric Jameson’s designation of the emergence of postmodernism as a historical period.\(^8\) In hindsight, _The Red Tapes_ may be seen to signal a postmodern consciousness, in part because the work introduces a fragmented sense of history in opposition to both the universal abstract time of modern art and the teleology associated with national narratives. In terms of the development of Acconci’s practice, the year marks a clear shift in strategy – _The Red Tapes_ is longer, more historically and culturally suggestive, and much more complex than any other tape that Acconci (or most artists working within video in the gallery context) made until that time. Approached with the imperative to ‘break out’ articulated in _10 Point Plan for Video_ a few months before, the production of Acconci’s last video work also becomes an attempt to perpetuate and multiply available alternatives to the increasingly narrow theorization of the space of video. Thus, ‘breaking out’ never implies something totalizing and revolutionary, but a state of incessant disruption. The work puts into tension the iconic red of revolution with a less totalizing, more pragmatic and gradual resistance to institutional and theoretical constraints – the proverbial red tape being woven around video as a practice.

In the same way that Acconci’s title disperses the notion of red, it also takes advantage of the dispersive quality of the term ‘tapes.’ By the mid 1970s the term ‘tapes,’ which had been used from the late 1960s to designate video art, gained a much more politically charged

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\(^8\) Acconci discussed the notion of gallery and cinema space as a “town square” in an unpublished interview with the
association. I am alluding, of course, to the infamous ‘tapes’ that were handed over to the US Senate by President Richard Nixon in the lead up to his humiliating resignation in 1974. Acconci never explicitly draws a link to this political context. But the pervasiveness of speech in The Red Tapes, particularly certain whispered passages from anonymous espionage novels, seems to trade on the paranoid poetics of Watergate.

Perhaps my inclination to ‘read into’ this work stems from the incessant presence of textual or poetic stimuli in the form of voice, or voices. From the outset, the equation of video work with image is loosened. Acconci talks himself through The Red Tapes. To foreground the importance of sound, the tape begins without an image. Acconci’s voice comes in slow and clear: “Come in, come in, come into...Red,...Come in...Red Tapes, Part 1, Common Knowledge...The Red Tapes, Part 1, Common Knowledge.” This beckoning radio voice sets the stage for the prominence of speech in the tapes – a mercurial monologue which is often heard in semi-darkness, within a cinema space lit only by the grey square of a blank screen. Apart from a depository for images, the screen functions as a source of light, which occasionally transforms the audience into the only viewable forms within the projection space. For almost half of the 142-minute duration of the tapes – longer than conventional movie length and prolonged by the absence of clear narrative – the audience is kept in the dark. When we do see Acconci, it is rarely as a fully constituted human form, only a blindfolded face, bound feet, hands manipulating props or imagery, a torso that is turned away, half-obsured or otherwise deformed by the camera’s framing. (Figs.9-11) Just as Acconci’s voice evinces multiple and contradictory character, his image works to dislocate the centre of the work, particularly from the figure of the artist. It also effectively brings the audience closer to the work – the fragmentation of Acconci’s figure through close-up and our immersion in his ever-present voice denies any sense of distance.

To consider *The Red Tapes* ‘as a whole’ is to restrict the analysis to a list of negative propositions. The work is not cohesive, not conclusive, and difficult if not outright impossible to subject to a satisfactory summary. I wish, therefore, to probe another means of approaching *The Red Tapes* – one in which the fragment as ruin becomes an operative concept. Allusions to Acconci’s past work continually interact with references to American modernist art and broader national myths. Entering *The Red Tapes* as this fragmented, un-mappable space, has two implications: a refusal of critical distance as a vantage point as well as a rejection of what Jameson would call “the helpless spectators of video time.” The ‘total flow’ (we may read spectacle) of disparate video images, which absorb and immobilize Jameson’s viewer, is continually interrupted in *The Red Tapes*, though the effect cannot be articulated through a Brechtian notion of critical distance.

The spatial, visual and rhetorical strategy of *The Red Tapes* beckons the viewer to come into the work, to experience it from the inside, to take part in its making and also its continual disruption. Indeed, if the work is a space as much as projected image and a sound transmission, it may best be compared to an unsafe building – a place where the foundation is shaky. Yet this space also retains familiar, homely elements; it is recognizable as a Soho loft. Props and sets are formed out of toys, books, playing cards – things that are easily recognizable by the audience as the generic stuff of an urban dwelling. (Figs.12-13) It is this type of space, I would argue, that compounds the notion of what may be provisionally called an aesthetic of critical proximity: a space where critical engagement occurs through degrees of immersion and the translation of the grand or epic (not for the sublime effect of minimalism) but into an effect of the home-made, or local.

81 See Jameson, 73.
82 The re-use of ruin as a historical enterprise is discussed extensively in Manfredo Tafuri’s theorization of avant-gardes in architecture, which he begins with Gianbattista Piranesi. See Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the*
In order to pursue this notion of critical proximity, it is necessary to stay close to the work; that is, to discuss in detail certain fragments of time spent with The Red Tapes. Following the establishing ‘radio-transmission’, the blank video image fades onto a close-up of Acconci’s blind-folded face. The mood is of a forced interrogation and prompts the following concession: “I… I have a statement to make. Yes, I want to say something for myself. For me, there’s no more room for feelings… I’ve entered another room. For now, I have room for form.” This grammatical turn, which expands the economy of a word from figure of speech to concrete space, places the audience on shaky ground.

The fact that the audience shares Acconci’s transitional space is not taken for granted; it is a constitutive problem of the tapes. On the heels of the ‘statement’ comes frustration: “No! No! Cut! Cut!… Begin again. Begin again.” No declaration is adequate. As the monologue at times abruptly shifts or else slowly mutates (from biography, through mystery and suspense, to news reportage, a recurring letter from prison to a friend, and the abstract plays of syntax in between) an improvisational character persists. Words and phrases do not flow, but are repeated until new ones arrive to complete or unsettle previous ones. Reformulations abound. What becomes progressively clear, also, is that Acconci’s constant adjustments are mostly aimed at establishing an illusive common ground – for himself and the audience. The allusion to the making of the tape, its cuts and re-takes, may therefore be seen as an attempt to enlist the audience to build the work they are witnessing.

Acconci’s second proposition explicitly invites our participation: “Let’s say… the Revolution has failed. Everybody… The Revolution has failed. Long live the Revolution. Long live the Revolution.” It is unclear which revolution – an ongoing workings’ revolution, the sixties counter-culture, the Russian, the American (at once furthest and most immediate to the context)
that ‘everybody’ is meant to consider. While contradiction and cryptic generality govern Acconci’s speech, making it difficult to find our footing, let alone a common ground, references to notions of community or generality struggle to undo the singular case as a subject of this confusion. Acconci’s speech implicates the audience as a public or group rather than individual entities. And, in order to provoke this sense of community Acconci cannot engage with his audience qua Acconci. His next utterance, spoken against an image of the artist’s bandaged face, is symptomatic of a double consciousness the artist cultivates towards his own person: “Start here. That’s him! That’s Acconci! ... But you know that, of course you know that...Like everyone else he had a story...like everyone else, he had novel inside him...” Slowly, Vito Acconci merges into a type – an Italian-American who grew up in the Bronx. Yet, as the monologue introduces specifically American anchors, the notion of a national community remains vague, asserted in sweeping references to American historical, psychological and geographic space. Here, a distant view is presented, only to be diminished: we see a sweeping Mid-west landscape, which is revealed to be paper-thin when Acconci turns the page of, what turns out to be, a coffee table book. (Fig. 14)

Indeed, the American national symbols, which form a large part of Acconci’s visual and verbal repertoire may best be described – taking a cue from the music of Charles Ives, which permeates the entire scope of the tapes – as deranged. Indeed, the omnipresence of Ives’ *Old Songs Deranged*, an uncanny take on American popular classics, compounds the strangeness of the verbal and visual cacophony we are presented with. Ives’ music which is constantly punctuated by a lone, muffled, elegiac wail, compliments the improvisational and deliberately rudimentary engagement with American popular iconography, without forsaking an epic character. In *The Red Tapes*, we may be said to confront a ‘homemade epic’ where the seemingly

grandiose subject of American mythology is engaged casually, through means available to anyone. The scopic disorientation is echoed in Acconci’s tenuous personal identification. At one point we see the stages of a ‘make-over’ that transforms a man resembling the artist into a likeness of Abraham Lincoln; but this too never quite materializes. Instead, Lincoln’s likeness is slowly ruined before our eyes. An almost moronic humming (tum-tum-tum...tum, tum, tum...) exchanged with a sly encouragement “one last stroke, one last stroke, they’ll never know the difference...” accompany each stage of the transformation. A deranged Uncle Sam emerges, unable to summon the usual hubristic sentiment. (Fig.15)

The most unsettling instance of Acconci’s symbolic disruption transpires through a verbal rather than visual act. Framed with his back to the audience, in front of an iron grid that resembles both prison and monastery, Acconci submits the following fantasy to his audience:

...if only you could read my mind, if only I could shock you...what I would have done was taken Kennedy’s head and after I had sucked the blood out to make room, I would have pushed my fingers into the bullet hole jabbing the president from the inside. What I would have done was...Once the blood was gone, I would have squeezed my prick into the hole until she could have seen the outline of my prick on his forehead. What I would have done was ...stuck my face under his ass just before he died. Filled up my mouth with his last shit.

The screen goes blank and Acconci’s monologue shifts to allusions of imprisonment, torture, and then pleasure:

Say that you have a reason....Say that you have a past to make up for. Say how it was when they applied the electrode to your body. It felt as if they were dragging your kidney and bladder out with a pair of thongs....Say that you needed the electric shock. Say that you began to crave it....Say that you couldn’t think without it.

A correlation between Acconci’s text and the writing of the Marquis de Sade deserves some elaboration. The Sadian expression of transgressive desire does not mark the limit of Acconci’s virtuous wickedness – to borrow a term used by Pierre Klossowski in *Sade my Neighbour.*

83 This connection has been alluded to by Jan Peacock, who included *The Red Tapes* in the exhibition “Corpus Loquendi/Body for Speaking” which was first held at Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax, Nova Scotia from March 18 to May 8, 1994. Acconci worked on *The Red Tapes* at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax in
Klossowski's argues that de Sade's fundamental achievement is to construct a language that puts into crisis the distinction between the writing of an act and its execution:

The philosopher-decent man sets forth the act of thinking as the sole valid activity of his being. The villain who philosophizes grants thought only the value of favoring the activity of the strongest passion—which in the eyes of the decent man is and always will be only a lack of being. If the summit of villainy consists in disguising one's passion as thought, the villain for his part finds in the thought of the decent man nothing but the disguise of an impotent passion. If we want to render justice to Sade, it is necessary to take this wicked philosophy seriously, since, in a tremendous outpouring of effort, it puts into question the activities of thinking and writing, and particularly of thinking and describing an action, instead of committing it.  

84 If we want to render justice to Acconci's incessant talk in *The Red Tapes*, we may need to allow for a contradictory conception of language—once more concrete and less stable. This language puts into question the distinction between talking and building. To be sure, there is nothing Acconci can say that will truly shock us. But the experience of sitting through his incessant tales, provocations, confidences, and pleas does foreground the question of what collective experience can be once the revolution is no longer possible and national myths lay in ruins.

Such is the structure of ruins that, after the battle, when 'the revolution is over', the venerable crown of Camelot may end up in the rubble, next to a toy cow, or a pile of shit. In *The Red Tapes* (which physically or proverbially features all three elements) this incongruous assembly of generic or domestic and mythical fragments works to provoke re-valuations or equivocation that rob national mythology of aura. It is not difficult to assess the ruinous construction of *The Red Tapes* as a thinly veiled allegory of the crisis of American identity in the aftermath of the events of the early to mid 1970s. The disjunctive filming style and the very architecture of the loft where the video was shot reinforce the overall ruination. Strangely, no reviews and only one interview mention the critique of American hubris in the tapes. Instead the focus remains on the figure of Acconci as someone hoping to move beyond questions of self to

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questions of community. But there is little mention of the fact that, on the eve of its bicentennial, the biggest problem facing the United States was the lack of a cause for national celebration.

During the early to mid-1970s, the American presidency was profoundly de-legitimized through the inability of Presidents Johnson and Nixon to avoid the Vietnam quagmire and the eventual scandal of Watergate. It is in large part due to this loss of the presidential figure as a symbolic national center that American identity reached a state of crisis on the eve of the nation's bicentennial. The loss of ideological unity (the famous 'silent majority' summoned by Nixon) was further precipitated by violent clashes between anti-war protestors and the National Guard. While none of these events are explicitly addressed in *The Red Tapes*, it is reasonable to surmise that Acconci's attempt to construct a community would likely prove in vain, were he to attempt to restore power to American icons at this time. Instead, the basis for community, or 'common knowledge' could only involve the ruination of these icons.

The first part of the *The Red Tapes* culminates in an escalating repetition of “We are the People!” Spoken in the dark, the phrase summons the audience into a group consciousness, albeit a highly ironic one. Then, “Boom!” A close-up on Acconci’s hand slamming down a photograph of a man's face, “Boom” again, this time he places a photograph of a woman and child in place of the first, then workers, a sheriff, a cowboy, a lumber jack, a soldier, a convict in a police car, a man behind bars, a man with a gun, a crowd, mild erotica, a scene from the Vietnam War, and Lee Harvey Oswald. Each time Acconci slams down a newspaper clipping he emphasizes the gesture with the childlike exclamation “Boom!” – a note of absurdity and a rudimentary sound effect that a child might make when playing war. This cartoon of a sound retains an echo of the senseless bombardment of Vietnam. With the last “Boom!” the text, “End of Part I” appears on the screen.
Part II: Local Colour\textsuperscript{85} begins in the dark with another repetitive articulation of the title.

The music of Charles Ives fades in alongside a view of light coming from a square aperture. The camera pulls back to reveal a stark geometric structure, which takes on the feel of a fortress from times immemorial. (Fig. 16) This monolithic fort reemerges a number of times in Part II against the distant monotone wailing of the Ives’ track. The second time, the screen stays gray for the following cryptic reminiscence:

We tried to say it, the seal, the impression on the doorway. The stone that blocked the doorway, the seal, the impression we had pushed the stone aside out of our way. It was an old story, I looked back—I turned to stone....There, it was like the beginning of a descending passage, same width as the entrance and our own height. It was as if we had rigged up mirrors, thrown sunlight in, first light to have entered here since the start of it, since the end. We cleared the corridor, we tried to say it, fragments we couldn’t identify....We held our breath, we braced ourselves. What if the construction of the tomb had never been finished? What if this passage led nowhere? We made our decision. If we did not make a discovery, we would become a discovery. We would stay here. We would be the completion of the tomb. We would be the material for a future search.

As the structure fades in the wail becomes articulate: “Farewell, farewell....my native shore” and envelops the austere structure with a melodramatic sense of national loss, it begins to cohere as a ruin not so much of American political iconography, but of one of the nation’s chief aesthetic icons: minimalist sculpture. \textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{85} The part titles, as well as the main title of the tape remain elusive. Local Colour may be linked to a Document VIII of the New York chapter of Art & Language dated August 1976. The document states: In 1975, (Provisional) Art & Language received an invitation from Carlo Ripa de Meana, the director of La Biennale de Venezia, to exhibit as part of the “Aperto” section. During spring 1976, we discussed the production of a large red cloth banner to bear the following inscription in white: “Ars Longa, Vita Brevis Est. Welcome to Venice: the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie “eternalizes local colour.” The plan was to display the banner on the exterior of one of the venues of “Aperto.” Olle Granath, a curator associated with the Biennale, expressed his horror at the possibility of such an installation actually taking place. In a telegram dated 20 May and addressed to the group in New York, he stated: “I only want to communicate to you that there is no possibility to put your “banner” outside the pavilion of the exhibition, it has to be put inside.” See Michael Corris. ““inside a new york art gang” selected documents of art & language, new york,” Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology. Eds. Alex Alberro and Blake Stimpson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999). 479-480. Acconci ended up representing the United States in Venice with an installation work entitled Venice Belongs to Us. (Fig.21) The artist’s voice “talked down” to viewers from a floor suspended from a skylight and entreating his audience to become part of “a culture, a history,a politics.” I am relying here on the description in Linker’s monograph. See Kate Linker, Vito Acconci. New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1994, 87. The fire escape in The Red Tapes recalls this earlier work in a similarly oblique vein as the evocation of Seedbed in the “I’m coming, I’m coming...”passage; albeit the quotation is visual. (Fig.18)

Acconci has commented that, during the 1970s, minimalist installation rivaled Abstract Expressionism as a chief agent of American cultural influence abroad, due to its prominence in (particularly European) contemporary art exhibitions.\(^{87}\) In 1974, Acconci produced *The American Gift* (Fig. 17). Originally installed at CAPC, Bordeaux and since 1979 on permanent view at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, the gift constitutes of a large bottom-lit monolithic cube enclosed in a chamber.\(^{88}\) The cube emanates a dialogue between Acconci’s English and two French voices. The gist of their exchange is a lesson taught in English by Acconci and learned through repetition in French by the anonymous man and woman. Minimalism had become for the artist a problematic aesthetic paradigm due to its “possible mystification” and its effect of “awe, reverence and veneration”\(^{89}\) which, alongside American myths, Acconci was working to involve his audience in undoing. In parallel to the gift to the French, *The Red Tapes* constitute the first such exchange with an American audience. What was retained from minimalism, in order to move beyond its coded American mystique, was the sense of being inside a space which one had to re-evaluate not only phenomenally, but socially.

Throughout Part II Acconci refers to previous video and performance work, so that what may at first seem to be elemental (a single case joining a group) in fact contains a sly history of the artist’s practice to date. At one point, we see a close-up of his feet bound to a chair, which squeaks as he struggles:

I’m coming, I’m coming. Don’t start without me. I’m coming, I’m coming. Wait a minute. I’m coming. Lemme out. Lemme in. I’m coming. I’m coming. Don’t start without me. I’m coming, I’m coming. Lemme out. Lemme in. I’m coming. Don’t start without me. I’m coming. I’m coming...

\(^{87}\) Ibid.

\(^{88}\) Kate Linker characterizes Acconci’s installation works with audio, which were produced in the mid 1970s when Acconci was invited to represent the US in Europe, as a play on the idea of the “Voice of America”, a falsely neutral language that simulated an ideological radio transmission. Other works in this transitional period include *The American Gift, Venice Belongs to Us* and *Three Columns for America*, all made in 1976. See Linker, 79-87. *The Red Tapes* may be seen as the most complex manifestation of this transition.

Here, a semi-tantric repetition, the tone of both pleasure and pain in Acconci’s guttural plea, the contradiction of being let in and out at the same time, all work to loosen the operative noun. If one is familiar with Acconci’s practice, it becomes easy to conflate coming with cumming – that is, to read this fragment of the tapes as a reference to Acconci’s notorious work *Seedbed* of 1972, where he masturbated under the raised floor of the Sonnabend Gallery in Soho and later the Galeria Alessandra Castelli in Milan (making him notorious abroad and a good American export).

Situated within the ongoing, historico-mythical monologue of *The Red Tapes*, Acconci’s veiled reference to *Seedbed* becomes an allegorical fragment which reinforces a protracted departure from the charge of self-encapsulation (what may be referred to as the ‘masturbatory’ paradigm of his earlier practice) towards considerations of cultural mythology as means to engage a gallery audience in the constitution of a public space. References to other works emerge throughout and are too many to catalogue. Indeed, on some level, *The Red Tapes* accesses American history, the history of modernist avant-gardes, and the history of the artist’s production to date in parallel. Much like the ciphers of minimalism, or constructivism, Acconci’s own work returns as a ruin of sorts – a reminder of the end of an aesthetic regime predicated on abstract forms, subjective inquiry, and psycho-sexual games. What comes to replace these conceptual frameworks is the epic tale and the historical consciousness of revolutionary speech in opposition to the transcendent ‘rhetoric of presence.’ The exhaustion of the exercises of the ego and the monoliths, which correspond to it, is pronounced throughout *The Red Tapes*. A repeated attempt to constitute ‘more than one’, to join a group, emerges in the form of a struggle.

The narratives of imprisonment and seclusion, which continually punctuate Acconci’s monologues, intimate the partial absence of another. At times, the scenario is a Siberian exile: “My message is: I’m outside, I’m out in the cold, I have to move to keep warm…” But this is put
into question only moments later, when Acconci’s ‘letter from exile’ turns. The reflection of solitude in exile is couched in hypothermic dementia:

I see ghosts. No it’s only reflection from a passing plane. The ghosts can’t get me. It can’t happen here. See...I tied black cotton across the doorway. It hasn’t been broken. I’ve shaken black powder across the floor. It hasn’t been moved. No there isn’t a trace of you, I have proof, I’ve proven you aren’t here, Soon I’ll signal, I’ll signal for help, Soon I’ll send my message.

The effect in these missives from exile is of longing and waiting. Time, which already passes strangely due to the lack of narrative convention and long periods of semi-darkness, becomes all the more palpable. The “message” which echoes throughout a semi-dark theatre casts other audience members as ghosts. Acconci’s demented missive may be seen to produce a distrust of the senses that refuses our retreat into an omniscient space of critical distance. And this loss of critical distance has complex repercussions, which need not stop at the impossibility of theorization that Fredric Jameson might later ascribe to video production at this time.

What *The Red Tapes* offers instead of critical distance is a shared time and space where the confusion of the present can be experienced without sublimation. Implied here is a critique of the notion of an outside. This confusion is not left behind for a new frontier. More specifically, the constant reference to the end of revolution in the context of a national reckoning partly implies the terminus of an open frontier, which was a founding trope of American Revolution (the Vietnam experience having de-legitimated an American ethos founded on the possibility of principled expansion). In *The Red Tapes*, the notion of a new frontier is cast as one of the many ruins of national mythology that animate the enclosed space where learning takes place through proximity, experimentation, and rehearsal. The object of learning is not so much the Subject who coheres by gaining critical distance or leaving for the frontier. The questions, which animate The Red Tapes, focus on the reality of incoherent subjectivities in common opposition to myths and archetypes. If *The Red Tapes* is thus approached, from within a historical consciousness of profound cultural and aesthetic indeterminacy, we realize there is no possibility of stepping back
from this work to unveil its underlying structure. Rather, *The Red Tapes* presents subjective singularity and exteriority as problems. Instead of seeking distance, we are continually asked to ‘come into’ *The Red Tapes*, to explore the ruinous ground as a common ground.

Thus, just as ruins are a pervasive trope in *The Red Tapes*, so too is the notion of building. In *Local Color* entire cities seem to emerge within Acconci’s loft. The first form to be seen is the starkly geometric structure, somewhat akin to the monolith in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. (Fig.18) The last scene shows a perfectly square white ‘island’ around which Acconci paces on all fours as if in a primal state, deliberating the construction of a community:

If only there were one other person here we could start a family. If only there were two other people here we could start a tribe. If only there were three people here we could start a village. If only there were five...

This white square (Fig.19), and by extension the blank screen that is intermittently projected in lieu of images throughout the tape, is thereby invested with the potential of an unsettled frontier—a driving theme of American national mythology. Blanks cannot remain abstract.

Throughout Part II, the disparate references to building produce poetic structures in a state of incompletion, negotiation, frustration and re-evaluation: from the assembly of toy towns, to grammatical enunciations, with more novelistic missives from exile in between, there is evidence of building as process rather than a physically stable entity. Perhaps the most evocative evidence of this comes in the form of a speech delivered on the fire escape of Acconci’s loft. Framed from below, in a quintessentially constructivist fashion, Acconci’s figure strikes a balance between the mythical and the domestic: (Fig.20)

And so friends, now is the time to come out from hiding. Now that the coup has been successful we have to give the masses visual evidence, proof of the reality of the coup... Remember there’s a cultural lag between the traditional attitudes and the real development of political life here. The people misplace political power. They associate power with obsolete buildings...make every useful effort to take possession of what is ultimately materially useless. Remember in a confused

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90 As in *Homes for America* stark geometric forms that recall Minimalist installation are reintegrated into a social dialogue, though (unlike Graham) Acconci’s narrative strategy seems to be to foreground the mythic investment in these forms.

91 The framing in this section recalls *Venice Belongs to Us*, Acconci’s 1976 installation for the Venice Biennale.
political period like this, just after the coup, it's still unclear which side is in control. So by possessing these symbolic buildings we give a signal to the masses. We gain the allegiance of those who have been waiting until now to choose sides.... So then to sum up: our bases will be established physically in symbols. Let's make the symbols our home rather than wait for power to grow into symbol. We preserve history. We fit right in. Our power spills out as if by accident. Our power spills out of their symbols.

The text may be read as a clue to the tapes as a whole in its invocation built space and the rich layering of references to the aftermath of a revolution, the negotiation of power, and the historical confusion of a present time. But these layers of meaning are too rich to map out logically. And Acconci seems to confront the issues with intimacy and experimentation rather than 'critical distance.'

The provisional, continually crumbling, character of public space may be ascribed in part to the numerous spatial and scopic reorientations. Mostly through the use of the camera (though some actual architectural alterations contribute to the effects[^92]), Acconci’s loft and, by extension, the cinema space where the tapes are projected are in a constant state of transformation. The use of his loft as the space of the nation as well as a kind of stage for recreating the spaces of his earlier works alongside the works of the historic avant-garde mark a break from the artist’s previous video and performances, where the space of the loft is presented as a neutral, isolation chamber that allows focus to rest on the figure of the artist.

While *The Red Tapes* has been described as a transitional piece between abstract and historic space, the continue use of the loft retains a casual staging of historic events. In this sense,

[^92]: The apartment where Acconci filmed *The Red Tapes* was previously owned by Gordon Matta-Clark, an architect-turned-artist, whose experiments with cuts and alterations to the built environment may be tied to Dan Graham’s critique of the architectural code. This connection in their practice is briefly alluded to in Jeff Wall’s *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel*. See Wall, 33. In *The Red Tapes*, the benefit of Matta-Clark’s intervention is perhaps most palpable in a scene where Acconci is filmed running around a stair-contraption enacting the two partners of a married couple failing to communicate. (Figs.22-25) The miscommunication is compounded by the incongruity of the space and the shaky camera movements. The notion of ruins and ruinous ground I have developed may be further related to Gordon Matta-Clark’s deconstructionist approach to architecture. See Pamela M. Lee. *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*. Boston: MIT Press, 2000, 2-29. The figure of Gianbattista Piranesi (who is explicitly related to Gordon Matta-Clark by Lee and whose ad-hoc re-use of Roman ruin would parallel Acconci’s historical approach) is another model for the spatial disorientation of *The Red Tapes*. See Tafuri, “The Wicked Architect: G.B. Piranesi, Heterotopia and the Voyage” in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, 25-54. Throughout this volume Tafuri’s focus on the role of historicism within vanguard practice recalls Fredric Jameson’s concerns.
the videographic transformation of Acconci’s dwelling space into an uncanny likeness of a Rodchenko photograph in the fire-escape speech exemplifies an intimate relation to public cultural mythology. By ruining American myths, the ludic historical consciousness continually invoked in The Red Tapes, allows room for another form of building.

While the audience is invoked throughout as a yet-to-be assembled collective, this becomes most clear in Part III. Subtitled “Time Lag”, this final section makes time palpable through deferral and repetition. The first scene begins with another blank square; this time it is a piece of paper which the artist covers with expressionist markings. (Figs. 26-27) As Acconci draws, his voice-over collapses expressionist gesture with frontier imaginary: “I had a dream. Land, I said. Land in the middle of nowhere. The land was far off, small no farther away it was floating in the sea…” The Acconci on-screen obeys his own voice off-screen and switches to a circular mark in response to the correction: “No, no, the sea was all around, all around, all around.” Then, he quickly and forcefully administers dots as his voice urgently mumbles: “The land kept shifting, shifting positions we couldn’t get a bearing…no, no! The land blended in blended in, it was like there was nothing there…But something kept drawing us on, something kept drawing us on. A point, a point, something we knew in our mind.” The scene positions the audience as a surrogate to Acconci’s painterly pioneer, through the pronoun ‘we’, and the camera angle, which frames Acconci with his back to the audience, so that we are all facing the white page.

Here then, is the blank canvas of Abstract Expressionism configured as a continent, a frontier to be psychically projected onto – the construction of American desire. National and aesthetic mythology merges, not from the vantage point of a distanced critique, but through the enacted slippage of graphite and text. The drawing exercise equates sweeping line with a collective traversal and settling of land. Thus, while Acconci figures as the lone genius of
Abstract Expressionism the scene does not evoke an equally impassioned singular subject as spectator. Instead, a group is summoned to participate in a boundless territorial imaginary expressed through gestural abstract markings. The final words emphasize the collectivity: “But I do remember I do remember the people, but no I didn’t think I could ever forget the people. Each one was like a mass. Each one was like a mass. No features, no features.” Thus, a collectivity gains emphasis, though not definition. This remains deferred.

In the final fifteen minutes, new characters appear. (Figs.28-29) Acconci’s friends (including Ericka Beckman, Ilona Granet, Richie O’Halloren, Kathy Rusch, David Salle and Michael Zwack) enact the much-deliberated ‘constitution of society’ in the form of a theatre rehearsal of America, where Acconci directs the archetypal American characters with progressive urgency: “Straight man!” The straight man responds to Acconci’s cue with promises of illusive meaning: “I know what’s underneath it all. I know what you could never know.” Acconci echoes: “The straight man knows what’s underneath it all the straight man knows what you could never know. Shut him up. Shut the straight man up….” Then he motions to the women in the ensemble with the following refrain: “Finally, there you are Dragon Lady…come in again Mother of Pearl…you’re in it again Miss America…” Each time these characters respond, their hesitant delivery of lines—“you can’t fight city hall, can you?” or “you don’t owe anything to anybody, do you?”—produces a kind of automatism of the archetype. The America being rehearsed coheres only as cliché.

At all times camera directions equate the space of the stage with the space of the nation: “Move! The camera moves…the camera zooms out. There’s America. America’s everywhere…”. This collapse of stage space and the space of the nation within a kind of rehearsal of America evoke the character of the films of Jean Luc Godard. Indeed in his notes for the last part of The
Red Tapes, Acconci expresses a wish to evoke the feel of Godard’s Sympathy for the Devil.\(^{93}\) (Fig.30-37) This 1970 rockumentary documents the recording of the Stones’ fiendish anthem for the Vietnam generation in London’s Olympic Studios. As Mick Jagger and company improvise through the text to arrive at the final Samba version that can be heard on their 1968 album Beggar’s Banquet, Godard interjects with a series of vignettes showing a post-revolutionary assembly of (presumably) Black Panthers, an existential interview in a garden with a woman called Eve, and scenes of modernist glass dwellings and brutalist architectures being covered by graffiti. In these latter scenes, a neutral male voice over delivers lines from an unspecified cold-war-political-spy novel – text recalling Acconci’s own novelistic introjections.

It is significant that Acconci would choose Godard and Mick Jagger as muses. The ghost of Godard’s controversial film introduces further nuance to the deranged version of America that emerges in The Red Tapes. (The one conspicuous distinction in Acconci’s America is the absence of references to Black Power, which are evoked both as menace and model of funk in Sympathy for the Devil). Like perhaps no other filmmaker of his generation, Godard had an acute sense for the contradictory power of American myths. His films both hypostatize the global effect of American culture and put that culture into crisis. Their critique relies on clichéd representation of cold-war political thrillers, Vietnam protests, and revolutionary assemblies ripe with illusive consensus and political inconsistency. The violent mythology of the outcast, the shoot-em-up and the lone cowboy are alternately presented as a cathartic resolution to the problems of urban collective living.

The figure of Mick Jagger, which is presented with a kind of wicked admiration in Sympathy for the Devil, is visually quoted in the final scene of The Red Tapes (Figs.38-40). Here,

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\(^{93}\) The film has been subsequently titled One plus One. The Rolling Stones insisted on the change due to a falling out with Godard shortly after the completion of the documentary.
Acconci’s loft once again transforms. First, there are gunshots heard in the dark. Then Acconci, framed from below, against a star-shaped concert light, his mouth as prominent as Mick Jagger’s, repeats a dull refrain to the sluggish tune of the The Raveonettes *Chain Gang of Love*: “ba ba ba...ba ba...ba ba-ba. ba ba-ba, ba ba ba ba ba, ba-ba, baba-ba...” This refrain is interspersed with cumulating repetitions of “we’ve found it,” “we’re young,” “we’re ready” “come-on.” As with the ‘Dragon Lady-Mother of Pearl-Miss America” refrain, Acconci’s rock solo introduces a kind of psychic summoning of the audience to participate. Yet the almost moronic nature of the verse, while it announces a collectivity and a discovery, fails to inspire optimism with regard to the founding of community. It is closer to military discipline than to revolutionary anarchy. As if to add to the confusion, a final whispered address to the audience further complicates the political and historical imperatives which have been put into play:


Organ music by Charles Ives drowns out a an appeal which rehearses the paranoid. We are left with a physical awareness of the other members of the audience as political agents. What we lack at the end of *The Red Tapes* is a manifesto. There is a sense, however, of having broken out of earlier notions of video practice as a television medium or a communicative utopia that might lead out of the gallery. If any breakout has occurred, it would be through the kind of complex machinations requisite in surmounting bureaucratic ‘red tape’ rather than the totalizing action associated with any sort of revolution.

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94 The gunshots open up associations to another Stones’ rockumentary – *Gimme Shelter* (1970), a directorial collaboration between David Maysles, Albert Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, which captures the unbearable tension of the last concert of the Rolling Stones’ 1969 American tour. The documentary focuses on the stabbing death of a member of the audience by one of the Hell’s Angels who were hired as security for the free concert at the Altamont racetrack outside of San Francisco. The final scenes of the documentary show the victim pull out a gun before he is tackled and stabbed to death.
EPILOGUE

In concluding, I wish to consider incremental, imperfect, constantly reformulated action as a defining characteristic of the notions of public space that operate in *The Red Tapes*. This type of action permeates Acconci’s movement on screen and it may be an appropriate categorization for his final invitation to the audience in the cinema. This sense of rehearsal (as opposed to performance) relates to the critical impasse, which the abstract monoliths and meta-theories of Minimalism and conceptual art had arrived at by the mid-1970s. The social engagement that these forms lacked could not be recuperated in one dramatic gesture. (Here it may be tempting to suggest that Acconci’s bulging video presentation attempts to do just that, but this would be to discount the casual nature of its historicity.)

This is a rehearsal of history rather than its final presentation. And the space or setting of the video appropriately retains the provisional character of a stage in the midst of rehearsal, where there is no designated audience, where actors may be casually waiting in the house seats ready to read parts which they have not yet memorized. This sense of rehearsal permeates the viewing space of the projected video. As I have attempted to demonstrate, despite its grandiose subject *The Red Tapes* seems to substitute distance with intimacy as a mode of historical and critical engagement. When the space of Acconci’s loft-cum-America intersects with the space of the gallery or cinema where the work is projected, this particular challenge to the act of viewing, coupled with an emphasis on collective but incoherent presence, confounds earlier notions of

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95 The ba-ba-ba-baba-ba-baba humming takes the tune of the original refrain: “I love him, I love him, I love him and where he goes I’ll follow, I’ll follow, I’ll follow.”
96 Martha Rosler pointed out to me the notion of incrementalism as a tactic in political art making in an unpublished interview in her Brooklyn home on January 25, 2001.
97 In another way, Dan Graham’s ‘*Picture Window* Piece’ provides a small-scale architectural alteration using video that invites slight alterations in habitual action with potentially drastic social effects. Jeff Wall links the strategy of the architectural intervention or ‘cut’ with the strategies proposed by the Situationists around the time of mass social unrest in France in May 1968. See Wall, 10. But the notion of architecture with respect to the Situationists needs to
‘critical distance.’ The constant revisions to actions and plot lines, a kind of improvisation of the work before the eyes of the audience constitutes a space where the boundary between performers and audience is blurred. We are therefore inside The Red Tapes. And in coming into the work, we enter a historical consciousness as an unsafe building.

How can a video work, even a projected one, become a building? Acconci’s poetics seem to depend on this kind of paradox. Acconci’s twists of phrase aid the constitution of projected image as a historical space that enters the space of the audience, becoming a kind of architecture. Historical reflection becomes immersive, collective, but by no means liberating. What is therefore unraveled is the stable subjective singularity that Fredric Jameson’s notion of critical distance seems to privilege – a condition with specific resonance in American national mythology. An underlying assumption guiding this analysis of The Red Tapes has been that the mid-1970s marked a point of exhaustion in terms of those attempts to revolutionize political and aesthetic economies that began in the 1960s (a period sometimes seen as a first-wave of post-modernity). These may be understood to preserve modernist aesthetic imperatives by other means. Because this moment of acute ambivalence regarding the aims of aesthetic practice intersects with the broader crisis of American identity on the eve of the bicentennial of the American Revolution, aesthetic and national mythology (the notions of the frontier and the lone pioneer as well as the modern artist and the singular viewing subject) are all put into crisis in The Red Tapes. The ghosts of Acconci’s earlier performances, alongside avant-garde architectures, the monochrome and the abstract expressionist traversal of a canvas reappear as ruins of sorts. In other words, despite the rejection of notions of critical distance, there may be evidence of the kind of images that ‘haunt the mind’ which Fredric Jameson yearns for.

be broadened. The Situationist connection to Acconci’s project is evidenced in his use of Godard’s documentary style as a model for connecting the rehearsal space and the political space of the nation.
By activating the viewing space as a site of collective uncertainty, the experience of *The Red Tapes* presents social possibility on the level of subjectivity or by eschewing the singular and certain subject of modernist aesthetics. The work also rejects the immersive abstract space of minimalism and early video practice that aimed to critique, but often preserved modernist aesthetic paradigms. Social possibility lies in collective, continual transformation, which is partly achieved through the poetic ruination of national and personal myth.

In emphasizing the immersive quality and social provocation of the work, I do not wish to present yet another theoretical umbrella for video. Indeed, the work does not satisfy any of the theories about video as a medium forwarded at the time that it was made.\(^9\) The very notion of projected video blurs the distinction between video and film. And Acconci’s suggestion that projection be approximated to the throwing of a ball profoundly challenges the notion of video as a medium in favour of video as something that is used.

I have attempted to examine Vito Acconci’s *The Red Tapes* closely in order to evoke the notion of coming into the work. This, I believe, is one of its most important and lasting challenges. I see *The Red Tapes* as emblematic of the mid-1970s – a turning point in thinking about not only video but the broader aesthetic economy, particularly the notion of spatial enclosure and collectivity in opposition to critical distance and the singular subject. The shift may be characterized in part as an attempt to *use* video (rather than to seek its essence). This attempt further seeks to reactivate the possibilities of the gallery space, rather than circumventing the gallery for an unconquered frontier. It amounts to the consideration of video no longer as a separate system, but as a tool for incremental action, a punch rather than a revolution.
UNPUBLISHED SOURCES AND EPHEMERA

Unpublished Interviews:


Notes:
Courtesy of Vito Acconci.

Ephemera:
Invitation to original screening of entire *Red Tapes* at the Kitchen, 1977. Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives.


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Boris Groys’ writing about the transformative effect of media art on the museum is perhaps more effective. See Boris Groys, “Media Art in the Museum” in *Last Call* 1 no.2 (Fall/Winter 2001).
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69


THE RED TAPES, A TWO AND A HALF HOUR VIDEOTAPE BY VITO ACCONE.

FIRST NY SHOWING OF THE COMPLETED VERSION. 1. COMMON KNOWLEDGE. 2. LOCAL COLOR. 3. TIME LAG.

THE KITCHEN, 484 BOWLING ST. TUESDAY, MAY 24, 8:30 PM. ADMISSION $3. (MEMBERS $2)

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Anthology Film Archives
80 Wooster Str
New York, N.Y. 10012
Fig. 2 Vito Acconci. Service Area, June-September, 1970. Installation and activity performed during "Information" exhibition. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Kathy Dillon. (Linker, 21)
Fig. 3 Vito Acconci. *Following Piece*. October 3-25, 1969. Activity performed in various locations, New York. Photo: Betsy Jackson. (Linker, 20)

Fig. 5 Vito Acconci. *Centers*, 1971. Photo: Kathy Dillon. (Krauss, 50)

Fig. 6 James Montgomery Flagg. poster for army recruitment. 1917. (Meggs, 253)
Homes for America

Early 20th Century Possessable House to the Quasi Discrete Cell of ’66

G. GRAHAM

The Modern American house of the early 20th century is characterized by a few fundamental elements: a small group of rooms, a large open space for living and working, a division between private and public areas, and a strong emphasis on light and air.

The cell of ’66 is a simplified, abstract representation of the typical American house. It is a single, rectangular box divided into two main sections: the living and sleeping areas. The living area is further divided into a dining room, living room, and kitchen. The sleeping area includes bedrooms and a bathroom.

The cell of ’66 is designed to be adaptable to various uses and climates. It can be easily modified to suit individual needs and preferences. The basic structure and layout can be adjusted to accommodate different types of occupants and activities.

Contemporary attitudes toward housing are reflected in the design of the cell of ’66. The emphasis on simplicity and function is evident in the minimalistic approach to interior design. The focus is on creating a comfortable, efficient, and psychologically stimulating environment.

The cell of ’66 is a symbol of the changing values and priorities of the early 20th century. It represents a shift away from the ornate and opulent homes of the past, towards a more practical and utilitarian approach to living.

The cell of ’66 is a testament to the ingenuity and creativity of early 20th century architects and builders. It is a enduring example of the evolution of housing design and the changing needs of society.

Fig. 7 Dan Graham. Homes for America. 1966-67. Magazine piece. (Arts Magazine, December 1966 - January 1967, 21-22)
In many modern American houses a ‘picture-window’ in the living-room facade gives for those outside a view of a family’s life-style, while, inversely, for that family, it relates family to social surroundings (a community of more or less similar family units). What is pictured in the window represents for those outside the publicly accepted code of privacy; the interior seen by the spectator outside corresponds to the public image. Inversely, the portion of the outside viewed by those inside provides a frame for its contextual to their private existence. Although it would appear that the views from inside to outside, or outside to inside, are reciprocal, in practice a person outside quickly glances at the ‘picture-window’ and then averts his eyes, not desiring to look beyond the immediate sign of conventional normality to look closely at what might be seen inside.

The video camera/monitor is analogous to the window; they both mediate inside and outside space, but from an architecturally socially controlled vantage. These openings define a perspective on the other space by their exact size and shape (frame) and what part of the other space is in view at the central area of their picture plane. Here each of the video monitor’s images in conjunction with the window shows, simultaneously, both interior and exterior views, subverting the exclusive interior private or exterior public perspectives. Both interior and exterior observer’s gaze (and behaviour) are given a self-consciousness. A person is drawn in towards the window. An observer drawn towards the window may alternate his focus:

1. to observe the ‘picture-window’ in itself, simultaneously, material, a certain dimension of glass with varying degrees of exterior- and self-reflections (research and experimentation of the viewer’s sight) in relation to transparency, and signs, the architectural convention, the convention of transparency.

2. To look literally through the window and at what is to be seen inside or outside. An observer drawn towards the ‘picture-window’ mentally compares what it discloses when viewed from the normal distance (it is conventionally intended to be seen from) and what is (differently) disclosed when he is immediately in front of it.

Fig. 8 Dan Graham. ‘Picture window’ piece, 1974. Proposal for suburban video installation. (Graham 1979, 35-36)
Fig. 9 Still from Vito Acconci. *The Red Tapes*, 1976. (RT)

Fig. 10 (RT)

Fig. 11 (RT)

Fig. 12 (RT)

Fig. 13 (RT)

Fig. 14 (RT)

Fig. 15 (RT)

Fig. 16 (RT)
Fig. 17 Vito Acconci. *The American Gift*, 1976. Installation on permanent view at Centre Pompidou, Paris. (Moure, 183)

Fig. 18 Still from Stanley Kubrick. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968.
Fig. 21 Vito Acconci. *Venice Belongs to Us*. 1976. Installation at the 1976 Venice Biennale. Photo: not attributed. (Linker, 87)
Fig. 30 Still from Jean-Luc Godard, *Sympathy for the Devil*, 1970. (*SFTD*)

Fig. 31 (*SFTD*)

Fig. 32 (*SFTD*)

Fig. 33 (*SFTD*)

Fig. 34 (*SFTD*)

Fig. 35 (*SFTD*)

Fig. 36 (*SFTD*)

Fig. 37 (*SFTD*)
Fig. 30 Still from Jean-Luc Godard. Sympathy for the Devil. 1970. (SFTD)

Fig. 31 (SFTD)

Fig. 32 (SFTD)

Fig. 33 (SFTD)

Fig. 34 (SFTD)

Fig. 35 (SFTD)

Fig. 36 (SFTD)

Fig. 37 (SFTD)
Fig. 38 (SFTD)

Fig. 39 (SFTD)

Fig. 40 (RT)