

AT WHAT DISTANCE ...

**(BETWEEN PICTURES
AND PERFORMANCE
IN VANCOUVER)**

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Clapping until mildly exhausted.
About endings.

1/30/1998.

Photo: Fiona Bowie

Judy Radul
Clapping until mildly exhausted. About endings.
(Documents for Performance series), 1998
black and white stills and typography
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

The kinds of knowledge performance art produces and the kinds of questions it poses are, in large part, embarrassing and unreassuring. We resist interrogations that might destabilize our sense of ourselves as subjects or the suggestion that subjectivity itself can be politicized. The potential for a polemical figurative art is performance art's most radical aspect.

— Scott Watson, 1991¹

WHILE VANCOUVER ATTRACTS FASCINATION, PARTICULARLY AT A distance, as a city with a striking concentration of modern masters—artists seemingly in full control of their past, present, and future, and existing in a lineage that links them directly to the great works of the so-called old continent—this emphasis on a pictorial tradition tends to obscure the importance of minor or nontraditional practices, especially performance, within the making of art here. With this in mind, it may be useful to attend to several instances of self-portraiture (inviting a rather loose idea of this term) enacted by Vancouver artists over the past thirty years. When observing the instances where artists assume the roles of both subject/maker and object/product of art (and these instances are increasingly persistent, numerous, and varied), the particular figures that are improvised tend towards inquisitors of splits, tensions, and transitions in subjectivity, rather than fully formed models.

My thinking about performance in relation to the idea of the picture in Vancouver is in part indebted to Scott Watson's attention to embodiment and the photographic tradition. At the time that Watson noted the potential for a radical figurative art in performance cited above, he had also traced a historic disappearance of the human figure from the very photographs that were beginning to define a pictorial tradition in Vancouver. The "Disembodied" he addresses in his title were the Vancouver artists and audiences then taking cold comfort in representations that were: void of human presence, increasingly unified as pictures, related to painting, and breaking from the fragmented, serial quality of photographs made in the Sixties and Seventies that related to the ephemeral nature of performance.² The same conclusion could not be made today. But Watson's charge of a disembodiment inherent in Vancouver's pictorial tradition is a weighty one and begs further deliberation. With this in mind, what follows is a venture into artistic terrain where performance and the picture have been conflated rather than mutually excluded; yielding what may best be considered as figures of thought (or embodiments of several conceptual tensions that exist between the thinking of the subject and the object of art as representation). The underlying attempt here is to close up the

1. Scott Watson, "Judy Radul: Body Art for the Disembodied," *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*, ed. Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), 376. The essay is a revised version of a catalogue essay written on the occasion of Radul's exhibition *To Shine* at Vancouver's Western Front in 1991.

2. See Scott Watson, "Discovering the Defeated Landscape," *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 247–291. A concluding passage on page 261 observes: "The artlessness is gone, replaced by technical mastery and large-scale presentation. The call is clearly to traditions, those of painting and high art photography. The images of two decades ago derived their force through quantity, repetition, and discardability. The current ones are often presented as unique, and claim the 'aura' of painting. The alienation produced by the abstractions at work in the urban environment, however, is exaggerated by the newer presentations, although the institution of art, once eschewed, is now the unquestioned premise of these productions. Such works already run the risk of codifying and perpetuating a local official and academic style, legitimized by an international art market of which few questions are asked. The dispossession of which they speak is only that of a middle class that has abandoned its modernist ideals; their programme assiduously avoids any representation of fragmented subjectivity and the political struggles over how that subjectivity is defined and enfranchised."

3. In conversation, the artist has recalled the exhibition *Endurance: The Information* curated by Jeanette Ingherman and Papo Colo of Exit Art/The First World in New York, which travelled to the Vancouver Art Gallery between January 4 and March 9 in 1997, as an important point of departure for her thinking about the performance document.

4. See *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*, ed. Keith Wallace (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993), 124. The title of this publication, which focuses on all programming at the Western Front, an artist-run centre that was a locus for many artistic experiments, but perhaps most notably ephemeral activities like the performance series, dinners, and cabarets, aptly reflects the unofficial form that performance history often takes.

gap between performance and pictures and to entertain the proximity between artistic practices that are rarely spoken about together.

The Ruse of the Record

It was the problem and potential of the ephemeral nature of performance—the fact that, on the one hand, the lived event is limited to a small community of viewers and a discrete amount of time, yet on the other, that it has the opportunity to produce complex and arresting images—which led Judy Radul to produce a series of photo-text works that were presented at the Or Gallery in Vancouver in 1998 as *Documents for Performance*. The iconic force of a performance document began to interest Radul after close to a decade of her own experiments with live performance.³ These multimedia, multivoiced acts of self-disclosure, division, and distancing had yielded some remarkable photographs—the most philosophically provocative being a shot of the artist bent over and exposing her bare rear adorned with a giant inscription: I KNOW. *The Body of Knowledge* (1988), as this performance was called, illustrates a curious relation between performance and the document. Of what may be gleaned from the published history, the publicly staged actions that yielded this picture of Radul's folded and faceless figure involved:

An hour-long performance positioning the subject within knowledge, involving prerecorded sound, a video created for the performance entitled, *Her Knowing of She Cutting I or Interrogation of the Pear*, several performers lip-synching in succession to a taped explanation of Radul's medical history, monologues by Radul, and the Western Front cats.⁴

A full hour of activity has since been replaced by an image that arguably says it all: the body/mind split is upended and knowledge emerges as a condition of the body and a body that does not duplicate an image of what is known all too well. Radul's multifaceted performance thus gives way to a punk portrait of a bodily intellect that masterfully contradicts most figures of knowledge centred on the head.

Radul explored the capacity of the photographic document to distill the course of performance, but also (and this is crucial in considering the figure of knowledge particular to this practice) to activate its audience's desire to *know more* in the *Documents for Performance*, her first experiment with producing images rather than live performance. However, an emphasis on postures that emphasize the body and compromise subjective composure carries forward from *Body of Knowledge*. Radul

appears again without a head or torso (in *Nice to Meet You*); falling (in *Twenty-five Entrances and Exits*); multiplied (in *One Difference Waiting*); blurred and doubled (in *Clapping Performance*); and as an object of art (in *Collection/Care*). That Radul attempts to exploit the role of the audience as agent in her first pictorial work is perhaps best illustrated in the latter document shot from a stage, where she is photographed standing amidst rows of spectators "clapping until mildly exhausted."⁵

Mirroring the dialectics between artist and audience in performance, Radul emphasizes the uncertain status of pictures by oscillating between the model and the record of an event. Deliberately crafted captions compromise the autonomy of each image. And this is perhaps most evident in *Lead* (undated), a photograph showing an empty hotel room with a neatly made up bed that is void of personal distinction, subtitled to imply a performance which begins with people being invited to a hotel room. There, each takes a turn lying down on a bed in a darkened room, waits, and is then joined by an anonymous person (Radul wearing lead aprons to alter her weight), who waits a little while, attempts to take the guest's hand, with the proviso that further action may be improvised. With this invitation to improvise on a bed, the work offers viewers the possibility of becoming performance artists, turning on the sexual connotation of "performance," and activating the viewer's physical fantasies without producing a wrinkle in the picture.

For Radul, *Documents for Performance* marked a transition point in her practice from live performances (often involving spoken poetry) to installations that question the status of recording technologies in perceiving people as active subjects. Her video installations often posit public places, studio or gallery spaces, and most recently the wilderness, as various stages for performance. Some of the most intriguing figures that have occupied these works (Radul herself having decidedly exited off-camera) are the ones who audition for ghosts (in her latest work *Downes Point*, 2005) or rehearse death (in *And So Departed [Again]*, 2003). Split between multiple channels of projection and, in the case of *And So Departed (Again)*, between the instructions of five different directors, Radul's actors can never be fully constituted as living subjects, assuming the roles of the undead the moment they enter the picture frame.

Two opposing tableaux, each sutured from multiple projections, juxtapose people in various states of blinking, shifty anticipation, lining up to be divided (as if on Judgement Day), and an almost imperceptible director with a booming voice, sharing the space of an arbutus tree grove that is still and old.⁶ Were it not for their occasional disappearance into the projection

5. This quotation is taken from the photograph caption.

6. That this is the place Radul visited upon the death of her friend, artist Kate Craig, adds to the ghostly atmosphere of this place.

7. There has been some speculation about why Wall withdrew *Faking Death* (1977) from his corpus following this early exhibition. What may be certain is that this image of the undead artist approaches the status of a live performance; the moment that it is discussed. Having been viewable only temporarily, it loses the temporality of a picture and exists as a rumoured event. The artist himself recalls no particular interest in contemporaneous performance and explains it was due to the fact that he did not find it to be a good enough work.

seams, these figures would have no spectral presence. *Downes Point* stresses the difficulty of representing and conceiving of death and ghosts—the a priori lifelessness of the picture. A compulsion to live, act, or perform whenever a camera is placed in front of a person is staged in these scenes of audition and rehearsal, as is the provisional quality of the picture. In rendering this confrontation with a number of cameras to depict moments of a very lively kind of death or ghostliness, the artist points to contradictions of photographic technology and the limits of this process in projecting certain subjects.

Death to Performance

Radul may be seen to share with Jeff Wall the desire to enact complex conflations of death and the picture, and often with the aim of exploring the curious life of mortification. At the outset, Jeff Wall conceived of his transparencies in relation to a kind of mortification of the body. On the occasion of his exhibition at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1979, Wall exhibited *Faking Death* (1977), a performative triptych wherein the artist is supposedly seen first, on a bed, flanked by assistants who help ready him for the making of the second and third panels that show him alone, on the same bed, playing dead. Here, death is to performance as the picture is to photography: a kind of central motivation. And these four terms are inextricably intertwined in Wall's work so that to photograph a performance of death illustrates the logic of pictures, particularly as they apply to portraiture. Wall's early moments of self-portraiture are instructive in terms of the limits he places on the visibility of the subject that portraiture is meant to bring.⁷

Also exhibited in the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria show were *The Destroyed Room* (1978), a picture of a woman's upturned and abandoned room fashioned after Eugène Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1828); *Young Workers* (1978), a series of four portraits of young people looking upwards in a modified Constructivist-style; and *Picture for Women* (1979), which presents a bare bones restaging of Édouard Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1881-1882) complete with the barmaid's blank gaze. To accompany this first major presentation of his early work, Wall published a pamphlet titled *To the Spectator*, where he instructs:

All my work, I think, depends on discovering the specific conditions of photography implied by the things I'm interested in, the specific theatricality of them, from the position of the camera . . . Only certain forms of performance can be recorded in this way. Generally, things must be still. This stillness is not that of snapshot photography or movie stills ("interrupted motion"), but that of painting or sculpture

—or, I suppose, of forms of photography which imitate the effects of painting, like a lot of studio portraiture, of forms which parody and manipulate those effects, such as advertising and fashion. This mode of photography finds itself always in a profound relationship with the history of painting and sculpture.

I say instructs because Wall's early œuvre came to the fore in the late 1970s as a kind of didactic exercise about the western tradition of the picture, informed by then current feminist critique; in particular, the critical role of fragmentation and the power of the gaze.⁸ That his ambition for a didactic stance vis-à-vis the audience proceeds largely through the activated concept of the audience in the tradition of vanguard theatre may be detected in the conclusion of his essay "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet," which presents Bertolt Brecht's notion of "functional transformation" (Umfunktionierung) in cultural production as a potentially revolutionary concept prefigured in Manet's notion of the picture—both as ruin and emblem of bourgeois cultural decay. And this ruinous state further positions the picture as an instructive, but insufficient, catalyst of social change.⁹

For his own time, Wall proposes a dual picture-type that is "rooted in the institutionalized culture of fragmentation: totalized montage and "abstract art." Brecht's notion of distancing through an exposition of the modes of production, so as not to draw the audience into an uncritical (or what he termed *culinary* or easily digestible) experience of theatre, figures prominently in *Picture for Women*, wherein Wall's camera is positioned dead centre between the artist and the exemplary woman. Further adding to the self-reflexive and fragmented quality of the image is the presence of the large mirror, which allows Wall's reflection to be on the same side as the subject of his photograph, and in turn he makes a self-portrait.

While the image portrays Wall as the male artist in total control of how the final picture will look—his finger is on the shutter-cord, his female companion inactive except for her enigmatic sideways gaze—his mastery comes at the price of mortification. Wall and the woman are stone still, offering not a live, experimental encounter, but instruction; not eros but a lesson in its mechanics.¹⁰ As the title suggests, the picture attempts to apply the lessons of feminism, insofar as it forces a limit to what can be possessed through sight. But it is in *Double Self-Portrait* (1979), made in the same year as *Picture for Women*, where the performance of a certain limiting look—and, it seems, this is what Wall is in large part after in these pictures—becomes most prominent. Because it emphatically limits the visible expressivity of its central subjects, the image is perhaps

8. In an interview with Jean-François Chevrier, Wall speaks of the critical example of Mary Kelly and Hans Haacke and also cites the feminist theorist Gillian Rose. See Jeff Wall in an interview with Jean-François Chevrier, "The Interiorized Academy: Interview with Jean-François Chevrier 1990," in Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelen, and Boris Groys, *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 104, 110.

9. See Jeff Wall, "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet," *Parachute* no. 35 (Summer 1984), 7. Wall's writing follows the trajectory of modernist painting, beginning with Édouard Manet and Gustave Courbet, which teaches that pictures cannot depict or propel social change positively, only through emphasis on voids, blanks, and abstractions in the modern condition.

10. In the notes for this picture in his catalogue raisonné, Wall states: "I saw the picture as a kind of classroom lesson on the mechanisms of the erotic." See excerpt from commentary in the exhibition catalogue, *Directions 1981*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1981); reprint, *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné, 1978-2004*, eds. Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef, exh. cat. (Basel: Schaulager and Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 278-279.

11. See Wall, "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet," *Parachute* no. 35 (Summer 1984), 6. Perhaps the picture has most often been read psychoanalytically, as it was presented at *Documenta VII* alongside *A Woman and her Doctor* (1980-1981), a doctor who looks remarkably like Sigmund Freud. Indeed, Wall used his own family to complete the Freudian triangle of his picture, as the woman and man depicted are his wife and father (who is a doctor), as noted in the artist's catalogue raisonné. See Jeff Wall: *Catalogue Raisonné, 1978-2004*, eds. Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef, exh. cat. (Basel: Schaulager and Göttingen: Steidl, 2005), 289.

12. It is difficult to determine the meaning of this chair in relation to the portrayed artist. We may see ourselves allegorically prompted to read into its designed commodity status, seeing this as a support for Wall's subjectivity. And this Marxist reading exists in tension with a Freudian one, especially if we consider that while he leans on the chair, the couch in the background, a cipher of both sex and psychoanalysis, has been abandoned. However, focusing entirely on a hermeneutic game can obscure the very impossibility of reading the subject that characterizes the picture. Focusing instead on the abstract blankness of Wall's gaze makes prominent the insurmountable limit to the knowledge of the self as the subject of his portraiture.

best read as two attempts to perfect the blank stare of the girl in Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère*.

If, as Kaja Silverman explains, Wall's pictures frustrate a desire for total visibility, then his *Double Self-Portrait* rehearses the kind of veiling enacted within the enigmatic stares of *Picture for Women*, but through the multiple exposure of the artist. Silverman's point that the most visible subjects are often the most socially underrepresented cannot be applied to Wall wholesale, but insofar as his excessive visibility in *Double Self-Portrait* yields limited information, he has learned from the paradoxical position of a marginalized subject. Like Manet's barmaid, Wall affects someone similar to what he describes, following Walter Benjamin, as "the new 'fragmentary' type of person produced within capitalism, the person who empathizes with commodities."¹¹ Indeed because of the bare set-up of the room Wall occupies, the image prompts us to overdetermine the artist's relation to the circular chair that his right-hand self leans on.¹² Moreover, like a fashion model (or personified commodity), Wall appears in two contemporary outfits at once. His doubling is not a mirror effect, but an optical trick made available through modes of mechanical reproduction. Wall's portrait is the performance of the artist as mechanically produced object in the didactic

Ian Wallace
At Work, 1983
 black and white photograph
 36 x 48 in. (91 x 122 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver



vein of Brecht (though he does not absorb Brecht's emphasis on humour here). Instead, the work's caustic lesson is that, within the portrait as a pictorial trope, there lies the figure of a self for sale in the form of a picture. This commodification is emphasized through the advertising format of the back-lit transparency.

In light of this problem, Ian Wallace's choice of emphasis on the process of art-making and the fugitive temporality of

performance presents another incomplete evasion of the self-portrait as commodity. For the duration of an exhibition in 1983 at Vancouver's newly opened Or Gallery, Wallace took up office in the gallery, mainly to read, but also to take notes and compose his thoughts in writing. The exhibition function of the gallery space was conflated with that of a makeshift studio—a workspace, furnished with a desk, chair, and some papers rather than easel, canvases, and paints or some other image-making apparatus. Wallace continued reading a single text day after day, while visitors to the gallery were invited to view him, but only at a distance. Allowing a limited visibility of his work during the performance, he later produced a small back-lit transparency that documents the event. The remaining image is an iconic view of the artist in the midst of intellectual work—Wallace sits with his hand at his temple; his forearm strengthening a linear composition that leads to his head. This particular transparency is not life-size, like Wall's. Assuming a more portable size, it is easily perceived as a commodity and what it sells is an emblem of an ideal event, wherein the artist was invited to think. Wallace is in so many ways *the picture of an intellectual at work*, and it is partly towards the poverty of this performance as picture that this work tends.¹³

Wallace's image does not stand as a record of his intellectual labour, retaining none of the conversations, notes, or writing that filled his days at the Or. Thus, the iconic image of *At Work* (1983) refuses more than it produces. The image is theatrical in the still sense of portraiture, but Wallace does not look out blankly as Wall does in his self-portrait, offering himself up, however abstractly. Instead, the artist enacts a removal and an absorption in his work. His physical inaction may be seen as a complex undoing of two notions of performance. The first is the sense of performance as a measurable productivity. Wallace produces no quantifiable thing during *At Work*, apart from writing in the classical vein of a Conceptual art. The transparency comes after the fact.¹⁴ Not everyone looking at what remains of Wallace's performance now, nor I presume those peering in through the doors of the gallery then, will know what text Wallace was reading, but those for whom this limited view provokes a need to know more may find out that the artist studied Søren Kierkegaard's *On the Concept of Irony* (with constant reference to Regine Schlegel)—a reading of irony counter to Hegel's criticism of the ironic stance as a position of too great a distance from the world and ultimately prone to inactivity.¹⁵ A perfect, self-conscious circle this may be, but it is also squarely aimed at a different model of artistic "performance" then prevalent in Vancouver. It is this second notion of performance that the work seems bent on undoing.

13. In 2003, Vancouver artist Tim Lee curated a poster project as a document of the restaging of *At Work*, entitled *Clint Burnham, At Work, 2003* (2003). This involved Burnham, a Vancouver-based writer with the academic chops to address art as work, taking office at the Western Front and producing an essay that was then added to a poster that showed him in a remake of the Ian Wallace performance photograph hanging on the gallery wall. The essay considers Wallace's positioning of artwork as intellectual labour and the broader social implications of the type of agency to be gleaned from such activity. Although Burnham did not read up on irony, as Wallace did, the situation of this performance for a poster document at the Western Front has its ironic overtones, given that the Or Gallery, where Wallace staged his performance, was in large part founded in opposition to the Western Front model of artist-run culture.

14. Like Wall's *Double Self-Portrait* (1979) this image has served as a model for subsequent portraiture made in Vancouver and this pedagogic function is perhaps its most long-lasting product.

15. Hegel's reading unfolds despite the fact that the double consciousness of irony approaches his dialectics (or perhaps, his reading aims to ward off the all too easy conflation of the two modes of thought).

16. For debates around the first twenty years of performance at the Western Front, consult *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*, ed. Keith Wallace (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993).

17. The experimental cross breeding of electronic recording devices, visual art and effects, and music (particularly jazz and dance) inspired by Marshall McLuhan's visit to Vancouver in 1959, and finding organizational expression in the collective Intermedia, which predated and fed into a lot of Western Front activity, is discussed by Alvin Balkind in "Body-Snatching: Performance Art in Vancouver, A View of its History," *Living Art Vancouver*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Western Front, Vancouver: Pumps and Vancouver: Video Inn, 1980), 72-77. This catalogue documents the Living Art Performance Festival that took place in various venues between September 27 and October 3, 1979. It was an important cultural event, and continues to be a point of reference as a culmination of live performance activity in Vancouver and a marking of various approaches, not only from the Western Front, but the newly opened Pumps Gallery—a younger, consciously downtown-oriented, punk-inflected performance and pictures scene.

18. Here, it should be noted that the costumed activities of the 1970s were perhaps less interested in phenomenological questions or the phenomenologically inflected sociology of someone like Irving Goffman that influenced Radul's work and more inspired by Beuysian notions of mixing art and life that had filtered into Vancouver through several channels, one of the most important being several visits by Robert Filliou, who produced several important works at the Western Front, including *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts, Part II—Parts A to E, with Footnotes* (1979).

19. Others included the New York Correspondence Dance School of Vancouver, whereby (in a nod to Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School) the artist Glenn Lewis maintained networking and performance activity. Johnson has been an influential figure for several artists in Vancouver.

Second Skins

Wallace's restrained presentation of himself as an intellectual labourer, allegorically installed in the defeatured white cube, was miles apart from the performance art that had grown into a kind of institution in Vancouver by the time he mounted *At Work*.¹⁶ The reigning model of performance was full of play, parody, and pastiche, with artists assuming alter egos such as Lady Brute (Kate Craig), Dr. Brute (Eric Metcalfe), Marcel Dot (Michael Morris), and Mr. Peanut (Vincent Trasov). Inspired by Dada cabaret, the punning self-invention of Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, and buoyed by the plentitude of newly available recording devices, a large cast of camp characters began to fill performance venues like the Lux Theatre at the Western Front, the Grunt Gallery, and, at times, the streets and television studios of Vancouver.¹⁷ Partly prefiguring the underlying assumption of Radul's work,¹⁸ these artists saw that any place could be a stage. The carnivalesque, neo-Dada, multimedia, multicast parodies of publicity that, at least once, turned towards a full-blown pastiche of electoral politics (with John Mitchell managing the Mr. Peanut's Mayoralty Campaign on a "purely aesthetic platform"), also dealt with the question of recording performance, but less as a kind of limit than as a provocation. In other words, rather than constructing a negative response to an object of critique, the aim of many a performance planned at the Western Front was to insert an overblown, faux-celebrity, alter ego into existing promotional circuits.

An important activity, which buffered this approach to performance in Vancouver, was the establishment of Image Bank between 1969 and 1970 by Michael Morris, Vincent Trasov, and for a brief while Gary Lee-Nova (aka Art Rat). Now known as the Morris/Trasov Archive (a life project of both artists), the Image Bank was the most formalized local entity to support an international exchange of images and electronic records gleaned from popular sources or generated through a wide network of like-minded performance activity.¹⁹ While the records deposited in the Image Bank do not have the exclusive art object status of the just discussed works by Radul, Wall, and Wallace, the project in its entirety—an artists' archive that hovers between the publicly accessible depository of primary information and a subjectively formed filter for activity that centred on the split personas of the artists—figures into the current question of the conflation of performance and pictures within the activity of self-portraiture. The Morris/Trasov Archive constitutes a portrait and a particularly rich depository of images and objects that address the fetish quality of a persona. Yet while the artists willfully constructing such personas

often saw their activity as a liberating counterpart to the Hollywood star system, their critique did not often translate fully outside of their own circle.

Indeed (and often fueling this charge is the fact that this pioneering artist-run centre is housed in a hall formerly occupied by a secret society named The Knights of Pythias), by the 1980s critiques of insularity proliferated and a younger generation of artists was searching for new models. But when the camp theatrics of the Western Front are posited as an insular institution, what is lost is the story of the critiques of this mode of performance *from within*. To be addressed adequately this would require another essay, but it is important to mention that some of the most influential works of performance art as critical self-portraiture to come out of the Western Front were marked by an absolute shedding of costume rather than the performance of an alter ego: for example, Kate Craig's video work (with Hank Bull) *Skins* (1975), where Lady Brute tries on all of her leopard spot costumes before discarding them in a trunk; and *Delicate Issue* (1979), which was performed in the same year as Jeff Wall's *Double Self-Portrait*, wherein the artist formerly known as Lady Brute is seen, though at such a proximity that it is really her skin tissue, hair, and orifices that fill the screen. In step with the critiques advanced by feminists, her voice is more fully constituted than her image as she questions or dictates with measured clarity:

At what distance does the subject read? How close can the camera be? How close do I want to be? How close do you want to be? How close do you want me to be? [...] The closer the subject the clearer the intent ... the closer the image the clearer the idea. Or, does intimacy breed obscurity ...

Throughout the excruciatingly slow 12 minute pan, the sound of heavy breathing and intrusions of a quickening heart-beat sustain an extreme sense of proximity. As the camera registers and then enters the artist's vagina, she admits the following limit: "This is as close as you can get. I can't get you any closer." Craig foils the viewer's desire to know her in an optical, biblical, or medical sense, even as she fulfils this desire with an act of deep disclosure. What is perhaps more revealing is the way this gesture complicates the legacy of camp performance that she had been associated with up to this time. Her disavowal and especially her didactic stance offer up her body, but in such a way that the viewer often "cannot take it."²⁰ Thus, unlike the strategic refusals of Radul, Wall, and Wallace, who activate a desire to know more about the subject within their images, Craig's *Delicate Issue* plays on the desire to see and know *less*

20. I screen this video in my classes and it never fails to provoke deep discomfort and a reflex aversion of the eyes.

21. Hank Bull, who married Craig as she was shedding her Lady Brute persona, filmed *Skins* (1975) as well as *Delicate Issue* (1979). However, the works have been discussed as Kate Craig's self-portraits, as she for the most part conceived of them.

Bull's intimate relationship with Craig allowed for the invasive camera work to proceed in a way that further questioned the notion of objectivity and critical distance offered by the camera.

and almost annihilates the distance that is promised by the mechanical eye of the camera.²¹ If Craig made video events out of her rejection of the faux publicity and costumed theatrics of the mid-1970s, her commentary in *Delicate Issue* resists the conclusion that her project was somehow one of full disclosure. Rather (and this may be her most lasting legacy), she seems to have had an investment in committing to tape her transitions, questions, and changes of mind.

In comparison to Craig's unravelling and shedding of skins, the fully clothed figure of Wallace at a desk in the back of the gallery cannot be more different, more distant. The key difference between them is not that one is a man and one is a woman (although this is by no means unimportant) or that one is clothed and the other perpetually sheds her wardrobe, exposes her skin (and finds new skins), nor is it that one is seen at an uncomfortable proximity and the other at an uncomfortable/almost unreadable distance. The distance between them is great and grows because one assumes a singular posture and the other changes right in front of the camera. Whatever changes of mind Wallace may have had, he refused to show them, and this refusal was, perhaps, part of a greater refusal to *perform* in the most expansive sense of the word. And of Jeff Wall's *Double Self-Portrait* it may be added that the same enigmatic gaze of both his selves limits the visibility of transformation, even as his doubling enables a change of wardrobe and a shift in gestures. One must work and compensate and look closer, whereas with Craig the reflex is to look away at times. Although, not unlike Kate Craig, both Wall and Wallace seem to offer themselves as fugitive subjects; they nevertheless embrace fixed forms inflating the static art object's interior contradictions.

Changing Minds

The work of Geoffrey Farmer relates specifically to Ian Wallace's *At Work*, in its constant questioning of how to occupy the space of the gallery and its desire to transform the gallery into a space of immeasurable production rather than a container of products, albeit miles apart from the formal resolution of Wallace's work. In certain ways, Farmer may be seen to absorb the tensions between Wallace's and Craig's approach to performance. The mercurial forms that his works take have involved the artist occupying the gallery for the duration of the exhibition by accumulating, rearranging, and sometimes discarding documents and materials, which function, in part, like theatrical props and also like autonomous sculptures. Though they rarely yield gestalts, his installations are in constant dialogue with

Donald Judd's "specific objects" and the conflicted brawny masculinity of Robert Morris' particular brand of minimalism.²² Farmer appears to be at work to upend Judd's ideas of specificity and Morris' masculinist stance.



22. Robert Morris' 1969 exhibition *Continual Project, Altered Daily*, which shares its title with Yvonne Rainer's dance performance at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970 (*Continuous Project/Altered Daily*) may be seen as a procedural reference point for this work, as well as the more recent *Every surface in somehow decorated, altered, or changed forever (except the float)* (2004).

23. This basic figure of the ghost may have been partly arrived at from the earlier references to E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (who formed the basis for an archive that Farmer presented in his first exhibition at the Or Gallery in 1994). Recall that E.T. was dressed as a ghost for Halloween to conceal his alien identity.

Geoffrey Farmer
Catriona Jeffries Catriona, 2001
 Installation view, Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
 Vancouver, 2001
 Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
 Vancouver

For the most performative of his installations, *Catriona Jeffries Catriona* (2001), titled after his Vancouver gallerist, Farmer donned a long-haired black wig (barely approximating the hair style of his dealer) and went about his business inside the gallery for the duration of the exhibition. At night, from a distance, his figure may have been mistaken for Catriona Jeffries herself, working amidst a loosely composed assembly of objects and forms that took on increasingly specific references to the legacy of feminist body art and the objective viewing stance of Vancouver's photographic tradition, which has been critiqued for being founded almost exclusively by men. Doubling as his gallerist, a woman who has played a significant part in both expounding and redefining the idea of Vancouver art, Farmer assumes the role of a kind of prop master, reconfiguring a "set" to redefine the (Vancouver) scene. Within this black-haired figure, Farmer also resurrects a more abstract and menacing character-type that had been particularly prominent in his work (alongside the hollow-eyed, barely-there figure of a ghost that is easily achieved by cutting two holes in fabric or a wall or a paper

24. Another such figure is Victor Hugo's hunchback, which Farmer evoked and continues to work through within the *Hunchback Kit*, an installation that was first developed at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in 2000.

25. Carolee Schneemann's retrospective exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York bore the title of one of her earlier performance works, *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973).

26. Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975) was likely an important reference point for Kate Craig's interior probing in *Delicate Issue*. If Kate Craig's legacy is (as I mentioned) somewhat obscured in Vancouver and beyond, this may be in part because she corresponds locally to Schneemann's figure, which has become an embarrassing emblem of feminism—recall Julianne Moore as the future Maude Lebowski naked and sliding into the picture frame on a suspended harness in the Coen brothers' *The Big Lebowski*. One of Maude's first verbal provocations being: "Vagina... does that make you uncomfortable?" it is clear that this character depends on the "bad reputation" of (especially feminist) performance art. In an essay accompanying *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, Beverly Best and Lindsay Brown describe it clearly: "In *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, which he originally intended to call 'Herstory' and then later, in a stubbornly anticonventional variation, 'Herstory', Farmer investigates his relationship to an artistic lineage of installation art, performance, and video work that emerged largely from feminist concerns of the 1970s. Such work frequently involved elements of personal, even intimate autobiography, as well as a focus on the body. Much feminist work also defiantly incorporated formal elements and processes that had traditionally been denigrated as domestic or feminine 'craft' and had thereby been excluded from exhibitions in high art venues and by extension from the status of art itself. Added to this collection of historical embarrassments are utopian art in general, shamelessly sincere political commitment, a confessional brand of identity politics, as desire for art as healing ritual, and anything else that has been made uncomfortably unfashionable within the tasteful and discerning confines of visual high art. Virtually this entire history has been referenced in Farmer's installation." See Beverly Best and Lindsay Brown, *Black Figure No Black Figure Black Figure: Geoffrey Farmer's Catriona Jeffries Catriona Expendables* (Vancouver: Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 2001). Published electronically at www.catrionajeffries.com

bag).²³ Such grim and ghoulish entities appear within well-worn narratives at moments of reckoning, and Farmer's activity was doubtlessly inflected by a need to contend with the conditions of art-making in his native city and beyond. Catriona Jeffries, whose activity as a dealer has both drawn on the conceptual rigour specific to Vancouver and also provides a space where that tradition can be reformulated, is a powerful female presence and a hilarious foil to Farmer's persona for this project.

As with most of Farmer's installations, this one is persistently difficult to describe, as it was never recorded in full (though videos often constitute a part of the production) and existed in a perpetual state of flux. What is clear is that the personas that occupied the gallery in *Catriona Jeffries Catriona* were rudimentary, alternately menacing and marginal, and ultimately at odds with Farmer's actual boyish and blond-haired presence. It was necessary, it seems, for the dark agent of *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, who continued to search for marginal, spectral figures to evoke,²⁴ to confront the kind of feminism that often provokes embarrassment or produces clichés. At one point, Farmer filmed himself suspended in a harness, swinging between the walls of the gallery in homage to Carolee Schneemann's *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973),²⁵ exerting considerable physical effort to yield inarticulate marks.²⁶ Without total irony, Farmer's attempt to prioritize bodily presence in general and the feminist strategies of embodiment in particular eschew the idea of masterful masculinity and the feminist strategies that have so actively constructed it.

Much of the installation involved Farmer thinking through Vancouver's conceptual legacy, which he recognizes as unemotive or distanced from its object of study. Rejecting the distancing stance himself, Farmer performs both paradigms that he sets in opposition, so that alongside the "Carolee Schneemann redux" there is also a video of Farmer wryly residing within the head of a "Vancouver photo-conceptualist." This involved a typically unromantic Vancouver vista, shot through the hollow eyes of a makeshift ghost whose deadpan narration speaks of the all too dry intelligence of photography. With a diametrically different formal resolution, Farmer furthers Wallace's interest in inhabiting the artistic models that interest him most, with some degree of irony and an equal measure of skepticism towards irony itself.

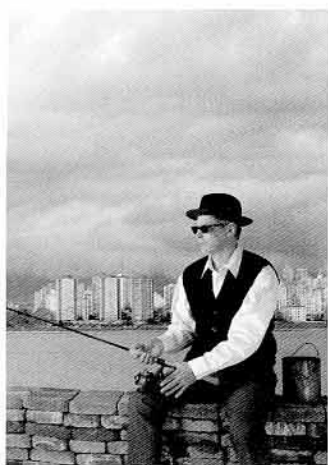
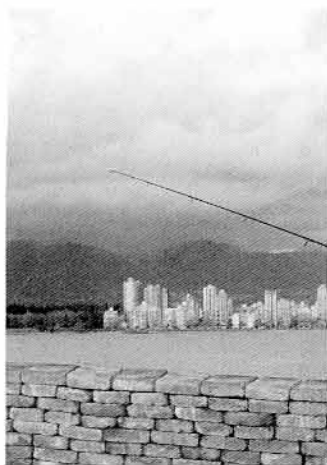
City/Self

This dialectical dimension of a "critique from within" permeates the performance works of Rodney Graham in that he has

questioned a tradition of critically and historically grounded picture-making particular to Vancouver, all the while furthering many of its pictorial concerns. Graham (who, previous to Farmer, had been the Vancouver artist most interested in challenging Judd's gestalts and converted them into functional bookcases) changed his artistic practice considerably in the mid-1990s by incorporating filmed, photographed, or video taped performance into a (most often) costumed self-portraiture. Indeed, this performative turn makes his practice emblematic of the merging of performance and pictures as self-portraiture under scrutiny here, and not only may be credited for inspiring artists of a younger generation,²⁷ but topples the masterful notion of the father figure, both as a founding force of the now defunct Vancouver School, and as a general disguise of masculinity.²⁸ *Fishing on a Jetty* (2000), a picture showing the most idyllic and recognizable depiction of Vancouver in the history of the city's

27. In particular, Damian Moppett's recent work *1862/1962* (2003), which includes a video projection wherein the artist in the garb of a mid-nineteenth century fur trapper wanders through a sublime patch of the West Coast rain forest only to settle in a clearing, where he erects a trap close in form to Anthony Caro's *Early One Morning* (1962).

28. William Wood's review of Rodney Graham's exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in the spring of 1994, in the year that Graham conceived of his first performance work, reads this critique of a blind masculinist mastery into Graham's later object works such as *Dr. No* (1993), *White Shirt for Mallarmé* (1993), and *Irradiation* (1994). The latter is a bookwork about the nineteenth-century scientist Joseph Plateau, who went blind staring at the sun. See William Wood, "Rodney Graham: Lisson Gallery," *Canadian Art* (Spring 1994), 70-71.



Rodney Graham
Fishing on a Jetty, 2000
2 chromogenic prints,
edition of 3, 1 artist's proof,
1 production proof
96 × 72 in. (243.8 × 182.8 cm) each
96 × 162 in. (243.8 × 411.5 cm) overall
Courtesy of the artist and
Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

conceptually inflected tradition of photography, features Rodney Graham as Archie Leach (aka Cary Grant) playing the secret agent Donald Robbie disguised as a blind fisherman from the 1955 comedy *To Catch a Thief*. This elaborate doubling of disguises into an expansive depiction of the artist in/as his own picture yields a dramatically split image. Divided between two framed panels, Graham's fishing rod (as Rod[ney]'s hilarious, phallic double?) is both ridiculously elongated and broken, putting the lie to its phallic assertions and accentuating the deceptions of the picture. This double image reforms the Vancouver tradition of landscape photography along terms that partly absorb Scott Watson's critique of this genre as all too unified, defeatured, and masterful. And throughout Graham's costume dramas, a relentless looping structure positions so many variations on the "typical western man," as a subject caught in

29. See "A Little Thought," *Rodney Graham*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2002), 80.

30. The work may also be read as a prefiguration of *City Self/Country Self* (2000) in that Graham's trip takes him from the suburbs (the proverbial country) to the city centre, mapping the double nature of Vancouver.

31. Graham has also noted that he chose to take a double-dose of halcyon, as the sedative came with the promise of pleasant dreams. See "A Little Thought," *Rodney Graham*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2002), 78. Graham's Freudian inflections through jokes, pathological repetitions, and the dreamy paths into the subconscious continue from the artist's serious, year-long study of the founder of psychoanalysis that was meant to prepare him for a career in psychoanalysis, but resulted in a prolonged, marked hiatus from art-making. For a year and a half, beginning in 1983, Graham devoted himself entirely to the study of Freud's writings—a process that eventually led to making his series of looping, sculptural bookworks driven by Freudian notions of the fetish and the uncanny.

vicious circles of mind-blowing confrontation with the colonial wilderness (*Vexation Island*, 1997), ass-kicking humiliation (*City Self/Country Self*, 2000), and the lonesome melancholy of the western frontier (*How I Became a Ramblin' Man*, 1999). With *City Self/Country Self*, Graham's positioning of his self as an allegorical figure of both a site and a split (often-times with direct reference to a decentred Vancouver) is perhaps most clearly announced.

The psychedelic reveries of *Halcion Sleep* (1994) and *The Phonokinetoscope* (2002) round out Graham's costume trilogy with an emphasis on an often-absent or inadequate body; one that cannot align with an overstimulated mind, except briefly and with absurd consequence. If psychedelic was a term conceived to evoke a manifestation of the mind, Graham's performances on drugs offer up not the expressive embodiments of a hippie dream, but allegories of mental blocks. Of *Halcion Sleep*, Graham has said that he made it "when [he] was feeling very unproductive, and perhaps a bit desperate."²⁹ This first performance work may be seen as an allegory of Graham's anxiety about performing as an artist, wittily subsumed within the noir-inflected figuration of not performing as a man.³⁰ Pajama-clad, curled-up, and sleeping in the back of a car, Graham's figure is far from a picture of virility. Thus, for his on-screen debut, the artist stages an escape from a Freudian type of failure, using Freud's own short cut into the mind in the form of a drug-induced sweet dream.³¹

Rodney Graham
City Self/Country Self, 2000
35 mm film transferred to DVD
produced by Lisson Gallery, London
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery



In *The Phonokinetoscope*, footage of Graham cycling around Berlin's Tiergarten is set to a song about a girl that evokes Syd Barrett's sublimely mellow melodies and his lyrics of oh so seductive narcissisticism. The refrain of "you're the kind of girl that fits in with my world" at times accompanies scenes of the

Queen of Diamonds clipped with a clothes peg between the spokes of Graham's bicycle wheel or, following a brief pan along a row of girls sitting on the steps of a statue, a long-shot of Graham contemplating the stone figure of a woman. These scenes lend an edge of wry misapprehension to the adoring lyrics (*Is this* the "girl sitting on a rock," whom the artist also sings of?). With Graham's characteristically dead-pan humour, *The Phonokinetoscope* dramatizes an utter inability to visualize a living, breathing woman. Within the allegorical logic of Graham's performance films and videos, most of which refer to the specific condition of making art in Vancouver, the repeated evasion or abstraction of the "kind of girl that fits in with my world" may also be seen to speak to a more general lack of imagination about female agents within the city's art scene.³²

While Graham's work is miles apart from Geoffrey Farmer's evocation of feminist art in *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, both artists raise the question of an unrealized transformation of the Vancouver art scene that would admit an idea of women as something other than a marked absence. Here, the spectre of an identity-based reading of art rises and this is often difficult to follow through without reducing or sociologizing the subjects at hand. For many of the artists working through the question of feminism, an evasion of reductions is crucial. And the recent deployment of disguises by artists like Farmer in *Catriona Jeffries Catriona* and in Graham's elaborate costuming of his easily recognizable figure signals an evolving dialogue about the figuration of multiple, veiled, and split personas as vehicles for a critique.

Specific Subjects³³

In recent years, the work of Tim Lee has confronted the question of self-representation by offering a subject that is highly specific but never singular. Indeed, it takes at least two looks to recognize the persons represented in Lee's photographs and videos. The elaborate titles help. An image showing Lee cross-eyed and upside down in a ridiculous impersonation of a Rodney Graham tree³⁴ is named *The Jerk, Carl Reiner, 1979* (2004). We are therefore asked to look at this image not just as Lee's tongue-in-cheek homage to an icon of conceptually inflected photographic practice in Vancouver,³⁵ but as an impersonation of another type of legend. In the kind of ironic, inward looping, allegory of his actual position as producer of the Steve Martin comic vehicle *The Jerk*, the image recalls in inverse Carl Reiner's cameo as an inventor selling a special pair of glasses that end up offering a "funny vision" of the world.

32. It may be interesting to consider here the alternate image of "a girl sitting on a rock" offered by Althea Thauberger, whose work to date has emerged as a protracted study of young women in states of empowerment; albeit, such is the innocence of her subjects' seeming self-possession that they often provoke embarrassment and discomfort in the viewer. In *Not Afraid to Die* (2001), a video made to be presented on a television monitor, a young, fresh-faced, parka-clad girl is seen pausing to consume a granola snack in the midst of a west coast forest (a setting that is in actuality a strategically framed museum diorama made menacing and realistic with a soundtrack of sudden bird calls and rustling trees). The work operates in oblique reference to *Little Red Riding Hood* and, one would deduce given the thrust of the title, in defiance of the menace of any proverbial wolves.

33. In considering the intersection of pictures and performance in the work of Tim Lee, I have benefited from our ongoing dialogue about art-making in Vancouver. My notion of "specific subjects" in part nods to Lee's talk titled "Specific Objects and Social Subjects: Industrial Facture and the Production of Polemics in Vancouver," presented at the Emily Carr Institute on October 13, 2005, in conjunction with the symposium *Vancouver Art and Economics*. Lee considered the work of Stan Douglas and Ken Lum and their use of industrial production models following Donald Judd to investigate the social formation of subjectivity.

34. Here, then, is an instance of the dialogue between works with other Vancouver artists I have alluded to and that Lee's practice extends to canonical works of minimalist, conceptual, and performance-based art, much like Jeff Wall did with the canons of nineteenth-century history painting and the painting of Modern Life. Graham's comment to Barry Schwabsky that in arriving at the upside down trees, he was "looking for a category of portraiture" taken to a kind of absurdly logical conclusion by Lee. See Barry Schwabsky "Inverted Trees: An Interview with Rodney Graham," *Art on Paper*, vol. 5, no. 1 (September-October 2000), 65-66.

35. Rodney Graham's first tree was shot in 1979 to accompany the maquette for *Camera Obscura* (1979); a camera obscura that Graham installed in a field adjacent to his uncle's ranch in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

36. According to an unpublished lecture given by James Meyer at the University of British Columbia in 1999, on the occasion of a symposium about the Sixties titled "Pop Goes the World," Michael Fried found the famous last lines "Presentness is grace" in his much contested 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" inscribed above the gates of a baseball stadium.

That this film ultimately concerns a white man's blind belief in his black identity, allowing for a hilarious reckoning with various clichés of this racial divide, is all the more meaningful given that, in order to complete this performance for the camera, Lee himself becomes a jerk of sorts as a Korean mistaking himself for a white man.

Every one of Lee's works portrays the artist in the guise of famous persons (and to date these celebrities have all been white, though occasionally fronting black culture); all are chosen with great precision to evoke notions of performance that often expand or cut against the grain of performance in art. Canadian hockey legend Bobby Orr offers a model for an updated, reversed reenactment of Bruce Nauman's *Failing to Levitate in the Studio* (1966). Lee flies through the air, mimicking a famous photograph of Orr scoring the winning goal in the 1970 Stanley Cup final. Ted Williams, who Frank Stella thought was the greatest living American because of his exceptionally quick eye, becomes the object of another portrait work, fittingly executed with great speed, in the span of a single day. Lee found the Stella/Fried factoid by reading Rosalind Krauss' *The Optical Unconscious* wherein the modernist theorist recounts gleaning the anecdote meant to enlist her onto the "team" of Greenbergian modernism from Greenberg's student, her mentor and devout baseball fan, Michael Fried.³⁶

Particularly within Lee's still pictures, which present his figure in the most contorted forms, there appears a yearning for the corporeal—the strain of sports and the bodily distortions that physical humour relies on are mimicked, but frozen (with the acute precision of large format photography). In this between live performance and the picture, the frozen figure and the moving body. And it is telling that, in this era of projections, the artist presented his first work *The Move, The Beastie Boys, 1998* (2000) on three monitors supported by bulky plinths. His first move, then, was to split himself into the three members of an all-Jewish rap group, who became the performative historians of old school hip-hop by bringing back the old (tag team) method of delivery (just as Lee brought back the monitor) and reintroduced cultural concerns into a changing musical form (rapping about Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec rather than a Lexus). If Lee's performative reading of Rosalind Krauss' art history commemorated the populism imbedded within Michael Fried's anti-objecthood/anti-life-as-art tenets of modernism, then with his embodiment of The Beastie Boys, the operation is reversed. A vanguard artistic consciousness is found buried within the break beats, waiting to transform the form being sampled and about to reform racial identity.

But in all these dreams of embodiment Lee remains far removed from the reality of his popular references, maintaining the neutral ground of the studio, a casual dress and deadpan delivery. The viewer may strain to recognize the web of real-life references collapsing onto his body. But Lee's Bruce Nauman-style stance also depends on a certain difficulty of accepting his specific body as neutral. If what drives race-based or otherwise reductive definitions of the subject is the overdetermination of specific surface features, an all too easy recognition based on a person's look, Lee's strategy seems to be to accelerate and derail this condition of specificity towards a different end, adding layers of reference to a figure that appears all the more incredulous as the allusions multiply. The aim, I think, is epic, not so much in the Greek sense, but in that ability to provoke convulsive laughter or the "involuntary movements of the diaphragm" that someone like Bertolt Brecht would recognize as the goal of revolutionary theatre.³⁷

If Lee's impossible body asks the viewer to look at least twice, to see him as another person, it is to refuse a singular idea of the specific subject. The actual multiplying and splitting of his body across photographs and between monitors is important in this regard. To walk into an exhibition of his works one might see the same artist simultaneously flying, up-turned, bent-over, fragmented, multiplied, or mirrored. Absent from Lee's oeuvre is the effect of an almost imperceptible change between the multiple renditions of the same self that may be found in Jeff Wall's *Double Self-Portrait* or Rodney Graham's *Fantasia for Four Hands* (2002); the latter an ironic doubling of the double Jeff Wall. Indeed, to extend the artist's contention that each one of his works constitutes an entirely unique joke,³⁸ it may be said that his work thrives on the transformations of the self within a singular representational idiom—each performance is predicated on the utmost photographic precision,³⁹ so as to make gravity-defying physical feats seem plausible (though only at first glance)—and a single body, which by now can barely be called that. Lee continually transforms his performative references, thereby asking viewers to reconsider what they see of him.

Self-centred Art for Decentred Selves (with allegories of the city)

As with many of his Vancouver peers, there is always an art history lesson in Lee's works, in terms of the careful look, the merging of popular and high art reference and the collapse of chronology. This collapse is perhaps most telling. Lee's body, caught on camera, made into a moving or still picture, named

37. As Walter Benjamin surmised of Brecht's epic theatre: "Spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul." See Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1973), 101.

38. See *When the Serious is Tinted with Humor, it Makes a Nicer Color, A conversation with Tim Lee by Jens Hoffmann – April 21, 2004* (Frankfurt: Revolver Press, 2004). Published electronically at www.cohanandleslie.com

39. And the effort he exerts in producing one seemingly simple "sight gag" may itself be seen as a bit of a joke on the tradition of extreme photographic precision in Vancouver.

40. The most obvious example of this phenomenon would be that Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace were both art historians before they were artists. Stan Douglas' engagement with localized social history through historically specific representational idioms in his video would be another instance of this intersection.

41. See *When the Serious is Tinted with Humor, it Makes a Nicer Color, A conversation with Tim Lee* by Jens Hoffmann – April 21, 2004 (Frankfurt: Revolver Press, 2004). Published electronically at www.cohanandleslie.com

42. Acconci goes on "... 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 " And if a feeling of repulsion or greater distance is evoked with Acconci's projection (into history; against the wall [this being his first video for projection] and inside the mind of his listeners/viewers—and the view is of Acconci standing in front of the American Flag), then this repulsion can paradoxically bring one closer to one's own body.

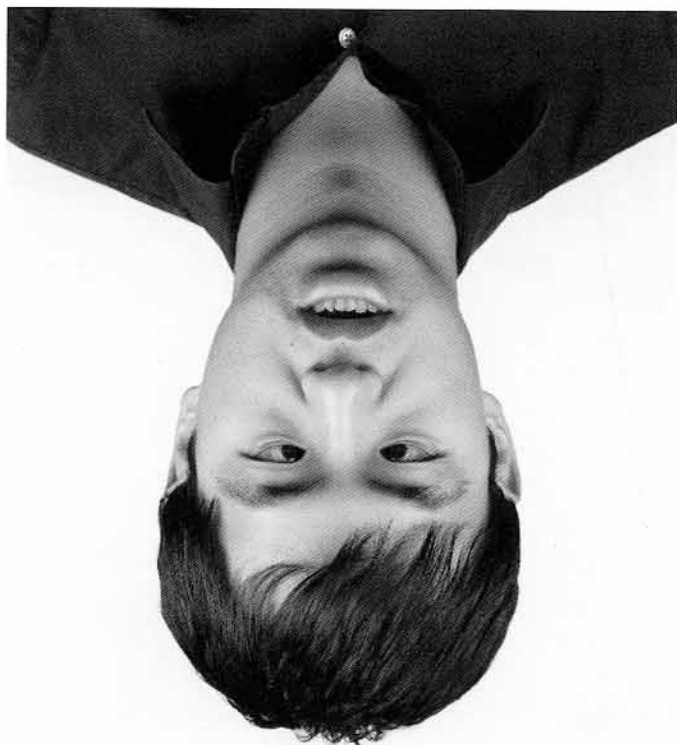
and dated twice, asserts that there is no real distance between 1933 and 2003 or 1970 and 2003 (as in *Funny Face, George and Ira Gershwin, 1933* [2003] or *Untitled (James Osterberg, 1970* [2004]). Perhaps this temporality of Lee's specific subject offers a type of presentness that Michael Fried denied to the specific objects of Donald Judd in his seminal 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood." It is difficult to say whether Lee thereby searches for some form of grace. What is clear in his work is a conviction that art history can be performed by the artist and when this transpires that history can also be changed. This parallel between the artist and the art historian in Lee's practice continues a veritable tradition in Vancouver and could constitute a history in itself.⁴⁰

The last lesson that may be gleaned from Lee's work is one of affect. For him, this is paramount, and he searches for a very specific type of influence, always predicated on the ability to make his audience laugh.⁴¹ If you do not find his work funny he has failed. This is the self-proclaimed measure of his performance. For others, the goal is not often so clear. Most artists do not divulge so precisely how they want to affect their viewers. Vito Acconci is an obvious exception. In the opening lines of his last video work, *The Red Tapes* (1976), wherein the artist is about to give up on performance, wishing out loud: "If only you could read my mind, if only I could shock you "⁴² Acconci's lines point to the problem and the promise of an artist performing on camera. This confrontation with the viewer is not, for the most part, a one to one equation, particular in light of the fragmented, doubled, and disguised personas discussed here. But it is clear (more so perhaps than in live performance) that when artists become pictures (be these moving or still) and thereby remain to be viewed again, they more emphatically invite the corresponding performance of apprehending their artistic enterprises—as an exchange of records.

The pictured performances recorded here considered several Vancouver artists who, for the purpose of apprehension, come close to art objects. Founding this objective base for their memory in pictures, they all the while keep themselves visible as unique though not singular subjects. One irony that cannot escape this conclusion is that, despite the fragmented, mutable, masked figures that populate self-portraiture in Vancouver, so much of the dialogue about art in the city (particularly the dialogues which occur at a distance, in European or American cities) have searched for a singular scene to the detriment of a consideration of these acts of self-presentation as allegorical figures, as ciphers of a multiple and fragmentary city. The act of writing about these disparate works is one attempt to articulate a disparate memory and to change the city's art history in some

way. If, as the recent work of Rodney Graham perhaps most clearly testifies, the idea of the city is often imbedded in the idea of the self, then at this time when Vancouver as an art community is experiencing one of its most introspective moments in a while,⁴³ the representations of the split, decentred, and disguised selves produced by so many of the city's artists may be seen as a collective allegorical prompt. The types of knowledge to be gleaned from these acts of self-portraiture have barely begun to be considered, and will doubtlessly continue to provide a sound base for discussing art in Vancouver.

43. This book and the symposium and projected publication titled *Vancouver Art and Economies*, organized by Melanie O'Brian at Artspeak artist-run centre as an update to the 1991 *Vancouver Anthology*, edited by Stan Douglas, are the main catalysts of this introspective energy.



Tim Lee

The Jerk, Carl Reiner, 1979, 2004

lightjet print

82 × 72 in. (213 × 183 cm)

Courtesy of the artist; Cohan and Leslie, New York; Lisson Gallery, London;
and Tracey Lawrence Gallery, Vancouver