

The Downtown Review

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Fall/Winter/Spring 1981/1982

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Double Issue: Film, Video, Art, Music, Dance, Literature



Arrivals and Departures

Beckett knew best, of course. Those expecting the arrival of Godot would only be disappointed. The arrival, though, of *The Downtown Review*—after a sabbatical—proves at least that some things grounded in faith can be rewarded. For “faith” is the only adequate word that can be used to describe the process that has brought forth this issue. The collective faith of a lot of people has supplemented my own, and for that I am extremely grateful. In addition to those individuals and organizations listed below, I wish to thank all of you who have offered advice, support, and continued encouragement over a difficult year. *The Downtown Review* has survived; with this issue, I feel it is beginning to flourish.

It will have to flourish, however, without the assistance of former Associate Editor John Pruitt, who has left his official position with the magazine but will continue to write for us. His counsel has been essential since the founding of this venture in early 1979. Two new editors have been appointed—Kathleen Baum and Carl Little, and one new position—that of Assistant Editor—has been assigned to my invaluable colleague, Tracy Farrell.

This issue is dedicated to Vladimir and Estragon.

R4E

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Listen! There never was an artistic period. There never was an art-loving nation.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

The Downtown Review

Volume Three, Numbers One and Two Fall, Winter, Spring, 1981-82

Table of Contents

- 3 Modernism/Postmodernism/Neomodernism **Victor Grauer**
film and video
- 8 *Jennifer, Where Are You?* **Su Friedrich**
a film by Leslie Thornton
- 11 *Presents* **Rebecca Abbott**
Michael Snow's latest work
- 13 Some Thoughts on Narrative and Collage **Mary Filippa**
- 14 The Mechanics of Robert Breer **Robert Haller**
- 16 Family Rituals **Nora Jacobson**
three films by Allen Ross
- 18 Hilary Harris' *9 Variations on a Dance Theme* . . . **Amy Greenfield**
16 years later
- 21 The Video Work of Richard Foreman **John Pruitt**
- 26 The Maya Deren Award **to Bruce Baillie**
photography and painting
- 28 Notes on Stephen Shore and
His Recent Work **Franklin Parrasch**
- 30 E. F. Higgins III **Kathleen Baum**
paintings and works on paper
- music, dance, and performance*
- 32 "With" The Music **Jacqueline Austin**
Eddie Harris at Sweet Basil's
- 34 The Evolution of *Marin's Song Illuminated* **Cate Miodini**
a new work by Malcolm Goldstein
- 37 How Much Less is Enough? **David English**
Steve Reich and Musicians
- 39 Laura Dean: Textures of Energy **Arleen Kestenbaum**
- 41 Meredith Monk's *Specimen Days* **Cate Miodini**
literature
- 43 On Robert Creeley's Prose **Carl Little**
letters
- 46 **David Lee**
- 48 **Jonas Mekas**
- 49 **Stan Brakhage**
- 52 **P. Rose**

The Video Work of Richard Foreman

Out of the Body Travel (1976)

City Archives (1978)

The opening series of titles for *Out of the Body Travel* contain a kind of slip: Babette Mangolte is credited as cinematographer. Strictly speaking, videotapes do not have cinematographers, yet this slight misnomer points to a fundamental aspect of Foreman's videotapes. Foreman himself has made it clear that both tapes originated merely as expedient solutions to the problem of how he could most effectively conduct a short workshop out of New York City. The result of this pragmatic approach could then serve as a "screen test" (his own words) for a long-planned, though at that time still undetermined, film project. Cinema is the real theme here. The tapes could be said to exist in a strange purgatory—somewhere between Foreman's theater pieces and his now completed first film *Strong Medicine*. In fact the artist has consistently downplayed the importance of these tapes, harped on their shortcomings and grudgingly voiced his preference for the first over the second. With characteristic wit, Foreman even has painted his very attraction to video and film in an ironic light. He has called his entry into filmmaking inevitable once he was no longer sensitive to the peculiarly self-effacing heroism of throwing so much directorial effort into a theater piece, the fruit of which became totally lost when the show had closed. Now he can take comfort in the egocentric enterprise of expending creative energy on things that last.

Nevertheless, to be overly concerned with the inauspicious circumstances surrounding the making of the two tapes would be a mistake. Art rarely works in simple terms of cause and effect, and certainly the last thing we would want to do is accept the artist's own words at face value—especially if he is a good artist. There is an old joke that were Goethe to come back from the dead and consent to an interview, he would insist that his major works were his *paintings*. One would have no hesitancy in proclaiming Foreman to be an important artist with regard to his work in the theater, and while nobody is about to make the mistake of calling *Out of the Body Travel* and *City Archives* his major pieces, they are of great interest if for no other reason than that in them we find an original and fecund talent at work. Despite so much seemingly going against them, it would be surprising if they weren't interesting.

Foreman's relationship to film could actually be more complex and crucial to his work than I have so far implied. Those interested in this question should turn to an excellent introduction to and

interview with Foreman by John Hagen in *Millennium Film Journal* #3. There, an important insight is encapsulated in the title itself, "Through Cinema to Cinema," a title which could be considered a bit on the precious side were it not so apt and provocative for any number of reasons. In outlining the background for Foreman's first film venture (the *raison d'être* for the interview), Hagen's phrase significantly omits something: Foreman is, after all, primarily a playwright and not a video or filmmaker, and if we are to believe his autobiographical statements, he has wanted to be a playwright since his early teens. Somewhere along the line in Foreman's finding himself as an artist (this is more or less his own way of putting it), he left the John Gassner school of play-rewriting (read Broadway) and settled for plain playwriting (read Ontological-Hysteric Theater). When he came to terms with the particular kind of playwright he had been all along (disposing of a fatal prefix), it is not inconceivable that an important catalyst was the American independent film. As I said, there are a number of ways one could look at that relationship. In Hagen's interview, Foreman specifically develops one possibility—that he was influenced by the films of Ron Rice and Jack Smith, most pertinently by their use of non-professional actors (Robert Bresson and Yvonne Rainer also enter the discussion.) I would like to develop a couple of others.

It can be a sad, aggravating fact of theater that a great hindrance to monumental work is simply the lack of a receptive public. More so than some of the other art forms, theater depends on an audience for immediate sustenance. In James' *The Tragic Muse*, which is both an impressive tribute to and diatribe against the "scenic art," a character wittily remarks: "one of his (the playwright's) principle canons is that he must enable his spectators to catch the suburban trains, which stop at 11:30. What would you think of any other artist—the painter or the novelist—whose governing forces should be the dinner and the suburban trains?" Through Foreman's connection with the independent film movement (he worked briefly at the old Cinematheque and staged his first production there), he witnessed a respectable solution to a parallel problem. Filmmakers, working in a supposedly expensive and strictly popular medium, were making worthwhile films inexpensively and showing them to small audiences. Not without irony, Foreman has mentioned how he judged the

level of artistic success in his early productions, namely by the number of people who walked out, the more the better. By his own admittance and implied by his entry into Papp's menagerie on Lafayette Street, Foreman does feel the inevitable attraction of theater for a relatively large and appreciative audience. One needs *somebody* in the house, hopefully somebody sympathetic. Is it going too far out on a limb to suggest that a fair number of those sympathetic somebodies in the early days of the Ontological-Hysteric theater came from a group already responsive to independent films? Perhaps one can infer an answer by noticing how many people on stage at one time or another in those early works were filmmakers: Ernie Gehr, Jim Jennings, Bob Fleischner, Andrew Noren, Larry Kardish, Jim Hoberman, Mike Jacobson, Aline Mayer and Sheila McLaughlin.

Film is assumed to be a rather parasitic art—a follower—finding resources, even whole audiences, in the other arts (cf. the familiar debates of theater vs. film, painting vs. film etc.). Though the argument needs to be qualified, nothing is inherently wrong with the parasite image. That image is a great factor behind the fruitful (but unending) quest by filmmakers and theoreticians for that which belongs to film and to film alone. With Foreman we most likely have an example of a cross-fertilization that operated in the opposite direction from the one usually cited in popular myth. Here film played a part in the genesis of the most worthwhile contemporary theatrical experience of which I am aware. After an 85 year search for the pure film, an old principle re-affirms itself again and again: Cinema is the interdisciplinary art *par excellence*. It has never managed to be off by itself somewhere, presumably in limbo as some detractors of the independent film would like to believe. It both takes and gives in its dialogue with its sister arts and has done so from the beginning. Foreman's videotapes are a relatively recent example of both the give and the take, and as Hagen has observed so deftly, for their maker they represent a strange return home. It makes perfect sense that two of the best works in the video medium should have been made by someone already firmly established elsewhere.

Before discussing each tape specifically, further examination of Foreman's theater will provide more insight. Those who have made a thorough study of his plays and theories (Kate Davy's introduction to *Richard Foreman: Plays and Manifestos* is a good starting place) have already delineated a few basic ways in which Foreman's work differs from traditional drama. He eschews a dramatic action which develops, rises and falls, for a series of moments apparently self-contained, which are picked up and discarded, that being the sole move-

ment of the play. No one moment takes precedence over another; there are no hierarchies. Comparisons have been made with Gertrude Stein's notion of a "landscape play," a series of different yet equal sittings of a static "object" which is always present. This standard way of approaching Foreman is applicable to the experience of the videotapes. But Foreman's work is not only intriguing in how it differs from popular theater, but also in how it embraces a noble tradition, the poetic drama. His theater is one of reflection; among other things it concerns itself with our relationship to language and all that that implies. Through his metaphors and elaborate puns, he demonstrates a great way with words. Foreman has gone so far as to maintain that he is misunderstood if he is not considered first and foremost a writer. I'd say a poet.

A truly poetic drama is an increasingly rare thing—a phenomenon perhaps related to the continuing interiorization of poetry since the birth of Romanticism. To borrow a distinction made by Harold Bloom, a modern poet's theater turns on a kind of oxymoron: solipsistic drama. It is just this oxymoronic tension as it were, from which Foreman's theater derives its power. Actually one sees a series of tensions: between language and image; between an abstract language and the provocative live presence of performers who are sometimes naked; between a sensuous language of word-play and tableaux suggestive of allegory; between violent actions and their dispassionate, stylized presentation; between the interiority of the "landscape" and a quite exteriorized anti-psychological spectacle. It is especially Foreman's role as poet which establishes these tensions. And to invoke poetry here, and the theme of writing *per se*, is once again to stray not far from film. In trying to characterize Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and its strong impact on him, Foreman described it as "Blakean." He recalled furthermore one of his first serious considerations of Gertrude Stein as possibly stemming from Brakhage's discussion of her in *Metaphors on Vision*. There is another woman hanging about in the shadows, one who in 1953 offered to set down, as she put it, "some of the basic aesthetic principles of the poetic film." Like Foreman's theater, her films would contain brilliantly realized tensions, evoking a personal interior world with the contradiction of the filmmaker herself appearing as an objective, exterior presence in front of her own camera. When Foreman once tried to explain why he waited so long before making his first film he said that it had taken time for him not to conceive of his own films as resembling those of a filmmaker he respected but could never really admire or love: Maya Deren. As a brief discussion of *Out of the Body Travel* will make clear, that is one telling statement.

Discussing two works of video by talking mostly about film is almost perverse. Yet Foreman has said "my video pieces were shot sort of as films," and with that in mind, I feel the video nature of these works is largely central to the part of them which seems wrong. For one thing, Foreman's careful sense of composing within a rectangle is seriously undermined by the fact that a video monitor creates no true rectangle; rather, the edges of the frame are amorphously curvilinear. Even more so than with a film projection system, the masking of the images changes radically with the use of different equipment. Again, careful "cinematic" composition is all but destroyed. Because of its relatively poor contrast values, video interferes with the wonderful use of images created in depth—so much a part of the Ontological-Hysteric Theater for instance, whose stage, if not actually, at least gave an impression of being deeper than it was wide. Here the color piece, *City Archives*, has an advantage because color differentiation helps create the illusion of varying planes of action, of extreme background and extreme foreground. Only with inspired lighting techniques (the hand of Babette Mangolte?) does *Out of the Body Travel* manage to maintain those effects consistently. Especially in some low contrast shots, the intended visual impact seems to be lacking. Finally, there is a great loss of sensual immediacy in the image itself—a factor which, as I have suggested, creates a crucial tension in Foreman's work. Though usually considered the lesser of the two works, *City Archives* has the edge here as well. Because of its color, some degree of warmth is achieved. Foreman's images call for an erotic presence video may not be able to provide. Foreman doesn't take up the medium itself as an issue at all. Even the reference to cameras in *City Archives* is film-related: "We have more Super-8 than we need, etc." There is, however, in that same videotape, the opening shot of Foreman, seated and leaning back, microphone in hand, introducing his piece, a shot which momentarily gives the uncanny impression of the talk-show format. But ultimately, if one wants to discuss the positive aspects of these pieces, video remains a tangential issue.

Out of the Body Travel opens with two contrasting elements clashing on the soundtrack: Foreman's own rather monotone voice and a lively piece of jazzlike music. In that incongruity we recognize a familiar Foreman device. We will be listening to that voice almost continually throughout the tape. Foreman, in his role as videomaker, thus remains an unseen presence, as if a controlling factor, exerting an ambiguous power over the imagery. Indeed, his words are put forth almost as if taking on the role of interpreting what we see, and herein we are confronted with the first of the various couplings

around which the tape revolves: language and image. There are other encounters: man and woman, the self and the world, a writer and his writing. These couplings are expressed as erotic events, even the fact that "to write, the pencil has to make contact with the paper." In an erotic engagement one has the illusion of traveling out of one's body. The paradoxical nature of this illusion is initially presented to us by the introduction of the "woman in the library surrounded by the relics of western culture." We see her with books, but she doesn't read them in the normal sense of the word "read." She treats them almost as lovers, caressing them as she reclines on a pillow. Books are used in the tape solely as sensuous objects—at one point spread over a reclining figure like a blanket. Do we see an interiorized image, a single consciousness that is trying to "burst out," or are we really witnessing an encounter between two truly separate entities (i.e., the woman and the book)? Part of the tape's magic is that these two interpretations are seen as one and the same. Though we often see separate personages on the screen, they just as often move and act in absolute unison, as if mere cogs in a larger wheel.

The continual intrusion into the image of a letter "A" on a card suggests that like a letter of the alphabet, each representational image is meant to be taken as an arbitrary symbol inscribed on a blank slate. At times the lack of a strong sense of gravity, of a distinct up-ness and down-ness bolsters this effect. Yet this same letter "A" is seen to burn away, as if even its separateness is transitory. It dissolves (burns) into its surroundings. In a long section where the soundtrack creates an elaborate series of puns on the words "sentence" and "word," the experience of language is suggested as impossible to pin down in terms of recognizably discrete units. Language is itself a complex nexus of various couplings—the erotic metaphor coming into play once again.

Throughout the tape, Foreman uses disruptive effects, e.g. buzzers on the soundtrack and a "jolting" of the image, that is, the entry of an element of disorder into the highly ordered composition. At one point, as if to read the shot of a man and woman before us on the screen, Foreman's voice continually corrects its own pronouncements: "Here is Rhoda trying to relate to her own body to him writing about it trying to relate his writing of her own body. She is writing what she makes of his...(buzzer)...No, you do not really see any of that. Then I said it and you did see it." Here, language vainly tries to explain an image and collapses into its own syllogistic hall of mirrors, hence the disruption. In *City Archives* Foreman tells us that the images fill in gaps left by the words. Yet the image has no content until some kind of linguistic operation is put into play: "Then

I said it and you did see it." At this very moment, however, when Foreman acknowledges his control over the image via his words on the soundtrack, a third person, just her head, enters the frame in the extreme foreground. How is she accounted for? Is the image her projection or Foreman's through her? Foreman's words don't mention her presence at all, yet she is there nevertheless. In any event, Foreman's own relation to the imagery via language is thrown into question. Again and again we see these so-called erotic encounters as highly provisional. There are always disjunctions and interruptions.

Though Foreman claims that his works don't "develop," *Out of the Body Travel* does contain a penultimate moment. Through these continual disruptions and insufficient qualifications, the work suggests an apodictic truth: one can't really travel out of one's body. Towards the end of the tape we hear the phrase "never again" repeated over and over by Foreman. Since we are not yet aware of something that did happen which would never happen again, we take the phrase as saying something different from its usual meaning—a reading enhanced by the continual repetition of the phrase. As if a pun we take the phrase as saying that experience dictates again and again that we will never travel out of our bodies. Since Foreman's voice begins to take delight in repeating the two words, eros is seen to depend on this very "never" and thus the "again" and the oh so delicious "again" is self-explanatory. Earlier in the tape, we heard a related line, one concerned with the definition of the self: "My body came from the world, but it turned into a secret, i.e. *my* body." Therein condensed are a number of paradoxes the tape explores. Not being able to travel outside our own bodies, we can only come to know other outside bodies. It is in our very contact with these outside bodies that we learn that our body is a secret (i.e. unknown) to us and that our body and the world are separate. All that we know of our own bodies comes from our knowledge of other bodies.

At the end of the tape the phrase "never again" changes its meaning entirely, consequently incorporating the numerous paradoxes into one brilliant all-encompassing contradictory relation—the relationship between a video or filmmaker and his film. Foreman, for the *first* time in the tape, stands before the camera and says the closing lines: "It happened to me once many years ago; it never happened again." The first part of the statement must be a veiled reference to the birth of the filmmaker, the only time in his life when he literally came out of a body, his mother's," and into the world. As for the second half of the statement, we must realize that in at least one respect, Foreman is

lying. He *has* traveled out of a body again, his own, right before our eyes. There he is on the screen before us, and presumably before himself if he is also watching at this moment. The film medium allows the filmmaker to be himself (through his unconscious interior creative drive) and observe himself (through his own presence in his own film) at one and the same time. Through a sly trick, Foreman has put off until the very last moment in the tape a device so familiar in Deren's films, Deren's presence before the camera. Even as he emulates the filmmaker whose style he wishes to avoid, he denies it! And if we don't take his statement figuratively, he is perfectly justified in his claim, for Foreman's body is not truly before us, just an image of light and shadow. But the metaphor of birth holds sway here. By stepping into this world of light and shadow, by making a film, the filmmaker gives birth to himself—or rather, to another self which has now been put into the world, and has a separate life of its own. It has its own secret. Yet we can never truly stand outside the body of language, or filmmaking, for it is through that very process of language, of filmmaking, that the self is created.

City Archives, though less ambitious than the preceding videotape, has a charm and humor *Out of the Body Travel* doesn't approach, plus a certain greater accessibility. As the title suggests, it is meant to be taken as a document, but a document as Foreman sees it, that is, a videotape on the very problem of making a document. While *Out of the Body Travel* ends so significantly with Foreman's own image, *City Archives* begins with Foreman introducing his tape. From that initial point on, the task he sets for himself as video/filmmaker is to erase himself from the image, to let something (the city of Minneapolis, itself a set of signs) "speak its own language." The artist or ideal documentarian should serve as mere amanuensis. The tape offers a series of metaphors illustrative of the paradoxes inherent in this initial premise. One crucial difference between this tape and the former, incidentally, is that in *City Archives*, the images themselves do literally "speak;" the players interrupt Foreman's off-screen commentary with their own (albeit scripted) lines. The device introduces new possibilities for building up relationships in counterpoint.

One could take *City Archives* as an improvisation on the circumstances of its own making—Foreman traveling out to the Midwest by invitation to produce a videotape. Alone in a city of strangers, he wants the unfamiliar to impose itself upon him. By their very inhabitation of the city, the people of Minneapolis will do the writing, i.e. make

the tape. Yet by the same token, Foreman has not gone anywhere at all. It is he himself who is visited, as if from outer space—to take up one of the more playful metaphors in the tape (Foreman's work often makes use of popular genres). Ordinary events, then, are revealed to him as strange. Or is Foreman himself the creature from the flying saucer who has descended upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of Minneapolis? It could just as well be his foreign view of the city which makes up the factual report.

At one point we seem to be in a library—a literal city archive. A dog is there also, incongruously there, because naturally dogs don't read. Yet there we find a book on a dog: "A good title if ever I heard one." In that hilarious punning image, we recognize a quandary for the documentation. Transferring the dog into an object of language (book on dog) is to create something foreign to the dog itself—which has "its own image," that is to say, has its own image of itself and acts accordingly (it can't help but act like a dog; it is one and *that* constitutes its imagination). But also, as we perceive a dog with our eyes, it has "its own image" and how do we capture that for what it is, put it into language, into a book, a film, or an archives.

In the sequence with extended puns on "plant grower," we see a similar predicament for the improvisatory artist who wants to dispense with planning: "plan (t) grower release me." Here we should recognize that even if the plant-grower releases the plant, presumably to allow it to grow of its own accord, the plant itself follows a pre-

determined form in its development. The plant's seed contains a plan, the plan for the type of plant it is to be. Thus there is no real choice in the matter, for a plant's internal pattern is as strict as any imposed on it. The style of improvisation is a rigid style, perhaps the most rigid of all modes within which to operate. How does the documentarian dispense with plans, that is, reject any pre-conceived notion of what he is to record? In the first shot of the tape, Foreman presented us with *his* plan.

The documentarian, the city archivist, might ask himself how much film does it take to record a certain city. Ten feet, a million feet? Wherever he decides to stop, he realizes his film could always be longer: "We have more Super-8 than we need." The length of a documentary film is one of its most arbitrary aspects—something the subject matter can never determine unless carefully and hence just as arbitrarily chosen by the filmmaker himself. Try as he might, the artist cannot take his hand off the image; he is omnipresent. Towards the end of the tape, we see an actual hand on the screen, holding a pen, supposedly "drained of energy, empty of purpose," through which something else can do the writing. As he has stated on the soundtrack, Foreman would like to be able to "film somebody other than a writer," but here he has turned away from the city and focused on the very hand of the artist, as if to say that the true documentary relates the story of the impossible task of making a documentary.

John Pruitt

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