

opportunities, we might do well to reconsider the structure of a promise. For J. L. Austin, promises are exemplary performative speech acts. They bring about the thing they name. But what promises name is precisely the act of promising, as opposed to the thing promised. When I say, "I promise you the world," I am giving you my promise, not the world. Promises, like most performatives, are seductions; that's their appeal and their limit. The new technologies promise new languages, new art forms, new ways to transmit goods, information, and money. But the promised things, we do well to remember, are incidental to the structure of address that promises employ. The relation between the sender and the receiver remains the same. Human bodies still have holes in them. That's their appeal and their limit. And on our good days we still respond to the beckoning allure of what these holy bodies promise. Thank heaven.

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In her "Cyborg Manifesto," initially published in 1985, Donna Haraway sees the conflation of body and technology as constitutive of the cyborg—a hybrid of machine and organism in which technologies of communication and biotechnologies articulate the polymorphous recrafting of bodies.<sup>1</sup> The productivity of Haraway's theory lies in its postulation that the cyborg, as a creature without origins that forms itself through the confusion of boundaries (between the human and the animal, the natural and the artificial, the body and mind), is a fiction that nevertheless maps "our social and corporeal reality" and allows us to imagine beneficial couplings which undo identity in terms of mutability.<sup>2</sup> This proposition is concomitant with Judith Butler's postulation of corporeality as performativity, an act of imitation, identification,

**Christine Ross**

## The Insufficiency of the Performative: Video Art at the Turn of the Millennium

or melancholic subjection to social norms which is always a reenactment of norms. Like the cyborg, the performative body "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality,"<sup>3</sup> and its fluidity of identities "suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization."<sup>4</sup> One decade later, the

question I wish to raise is the following: is it possible to think polymorphous identities with the mutability and the fallibility of the body? The fast-expanding integration of technologies of information into everyday life, the corollary blurring of work and nonwork,<sup>5</sup> the perfecting of eco- and biotechnologies that increasingly confuse the human and the nonhuman (such as genetic engineering, robotics, reproduction technologies, pharmacology, plastic surgery, and body fitness), and the underlying problematic belief in our ability to predict, control, conquer, and improve nature via technology (what Lucien Sfez has designated as "l'utopie de la sur-nature"<sup>6</sup>): all of these turn-of-the-millennium developments confirm the body as a materialization open to incessant reconfiguration, yet they also reveal how the incitement to reconfigure is at once creative and normative, fluid and normalized.

In light of these technological developments, it is interesting to note

1. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.

2. *Ibid.*, 163–64.

3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 136.

4. *Ibid.*, 140.

5. Charles Goldfinger, *Travail et hors-travail: vers une société fluide* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1998).

6. Lucien Sfez, *La Santé parfaite: critique d'une nouvelle utopie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995).



**Douglas Gordon.**  
**24 Hour Psycho, 1993.**  
**Video installation.**  
**Courtesy of Gagosian**  
**Gallery, New York.**

7. On this topic, see Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture: From the Days of Polio to the Age of Aids* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

8. Also see Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 189.

9. Butler, 146.

10. For a sociological examination of identity insecurity in contemporary (post-1960s) subjectivity, see Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi: dépression et société* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1998).

how recent media art is preoccupied not so much with the celebration of fluidity as with insufficiency—fallibility, limits, inhibition, dependency, the need to think fluidity and persistency together, the critical requirement to relate performativity to new entrepreneurial norms of socialization based on performance.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that Haraway and Butler exclude those aspects in their theorization of contemporary subjectivity—Haraway speaks both of the pleasure and the responsibility involved in the transgression of boundaries,<sup>8</sup> and Butler defines agency as the set of necessary failures implied in the injunction to be a norm “that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, performativity characterizes post-1960s subjectivity in what Slavoj Žižek has called the “decline of Oedipus,” a period characterized by the passage from a subject in conflict between the prohibited and the permitted (defined through the Law of the Father) to a subject in cleavage between the possible and the nonpossible (defined through the decline of paternal authority and the rise of entrepreneurial norms of performance).<sup>10</sup> If the Freudian pathology par excellence was neurosis, the main pathology of the current performative subject, who has become the sole player responsible for his or her own subjectivity, is depression. Depression—designated by sociologist Alain



**Rosemarie Trockel.**  
***Sleepingpill*, 1999. Video**  
**still. Courtesy of Barbara**  
**Gladstone, New York.**

Ehrenberg as the disease that “discloses the mutations of individuality at the end of the 20th century”<sup>11</sup>—derives from fatigue due to feelings of insufficiency in the face of overwhelming responsibilities, a fact completely erased by Butler’s reiterated recommendation to “promote the proliferation of representations” and to “affirm identity categories as a site of inevitable rifting.”<sup>12</sup>

At issue here is the integration of insufficiency in the materiality of the electronic image, as an aesthetic strategy that addresses the performative yet tired, responsible yet anaesthetized, enjoying yet compelled to enjoy<sup>13</sup> viewing subject. Aesthetic insufficiency could well be a means to acknowledge and question a society where “no moral law, no tradition shows from the outside who we have to be and how to conduct ourselves.”<sup>14</sup> Depressive processes may sound negative, but I would like to see how they can be developed as potentially critical.

Recent video art plays a major role in such a rearticulation of the cyborg insofar as it considers the multiform ways in which video has shaped contem-

11. Ehrenberg, 10.

12. Butler, “The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess,” *differences: Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 119–20.

13. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

14. Butler, 14.

porary visual culture, not only as the main image technology of television and computer culture, but also as the privileged post-1980s disseminator of film (through the emergence of the VCR). I am thinking here more precisely—and this is not an exclusive set of examples—of the work of Douglas Gordon, Rosemarie Trockel, and Diana Thater. Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) is a first case in point. A mute video projection in extreme slow motion of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) on a free-standing translucent screen, the installation stretches the narrative to an impossible twenty-four-hour narrative, dissolving diegesis to the extent that, more often than not, there is nothing to see.<sup>15</sup> Temporal expansion here corresponds to a depression of the image: it activates, in the viewer, perceptual and memory dysfunction, staging not so much the original film as memory struggle, the reliance on daydreaming and fantasy to fill the blanks, and inhibitory processes of perception such as inattentive blindness and inattentive amnesia.<sup>16</sup> Yet image depression is critically productive. It slows down a film which has been crucial for the representation of the loss of the authoritarian paternal figure at the heart of contemporary polymorphous subjectivity. This loss becomes perceptible through the decrease in perceptibility generated by the extreme slow motion: as the viewer struggles with memory and identity formation, she or he enacts the loss of the paternal and, with this, a mode of perception more porous to imaginary constructions.

Perceptual insufficiency is also set into play in Rosemarie Trockel's triptych installation produced for the 1999 Venice Biennale, an installation composed of three video film projections entitled *Eye*, *Sleepingpill*, and *Kinderspielplatz*. The *Eye* section, which consists of a large screen projection of a human eye whose activities of selection, detection, and recognition have been replaced by somnolent attention, proposes a weakening of perceptual sharpness both as a loss and as a state that might engender new cognitive possibilities. *Eye* in constant dissolution and regeneration, made out of the gradual numeric superimposition of seven left female eyes, devoid of stable identity markers (gender and race remain ambiguous), it moves in saccades with an occasional blinking of the eyelid, yet fails to anchor itself into a fixed position and, concomitantly, to acknowledge the spectator's presence in front of the screen. Framing the cyborg-eye with two other video film projections that bring together the contemporary world of distraction (childhood, entertainment, performance, consumerism, and noise on the one hand), and release (a public sanctuary for sleepers, silence, slowness, and the physiological need to sleep and dream on the other), Trockel stages attention and sleep disorders to propose a model of vision in which the eye sees without seeing something, whose productivity is located in the suspension of identity fixedness and differentiation.<sup>17</sup> Fluidity of identity is articulated but only through the consideration of bodily fallibility.

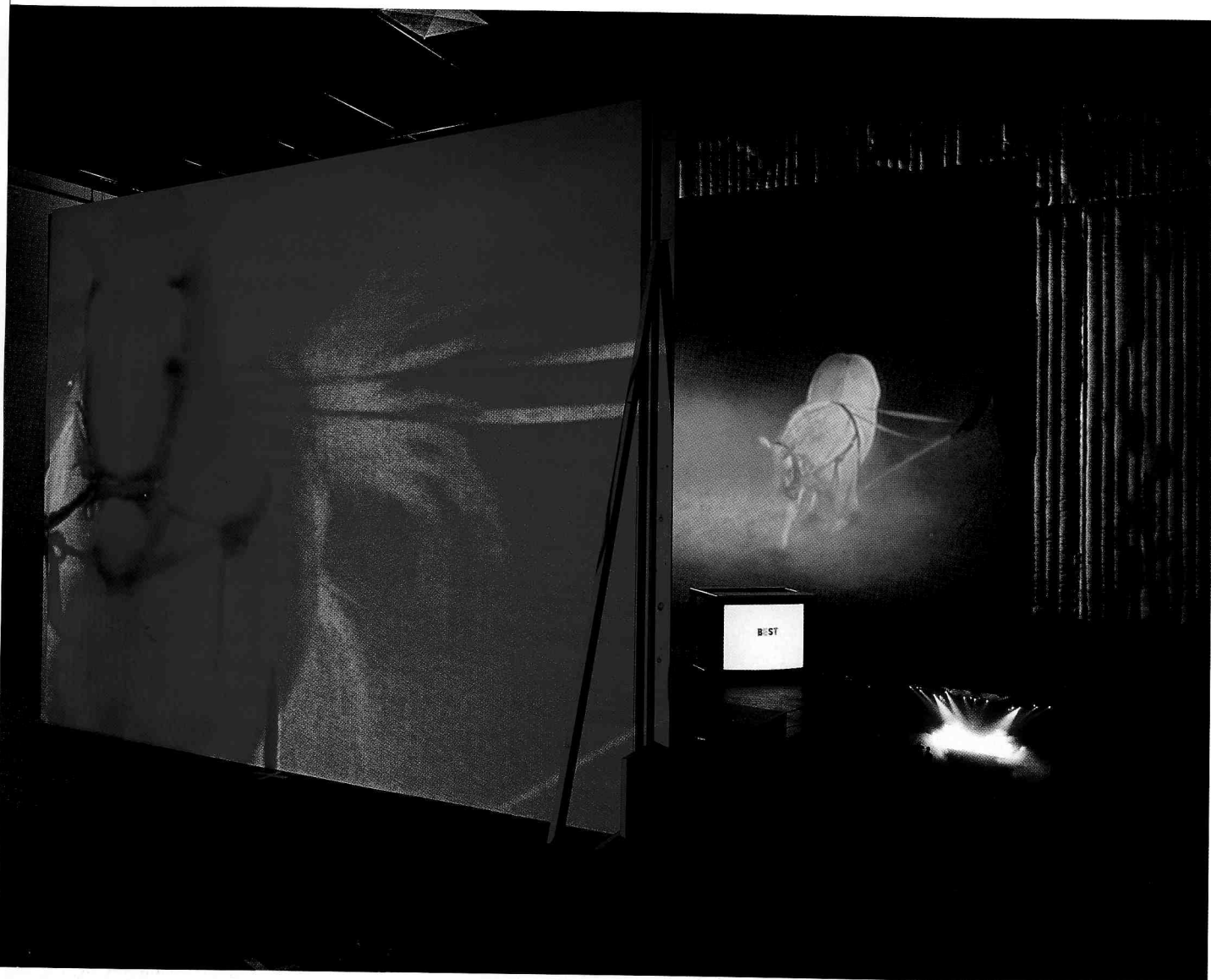
Gordon's and Trockel's rethinking of the performative cyborg in terms of insufficiency must be understood as an attempt both to depress the spectacle of super-nature—our reliance on informational, image, eco- and biotechnologies to transcend and deny the contingencies of the body (mortality, deficiency, dependency, fallibility)<sup>18</sup>—and to activate a perception whose performativity emerges from corporeal limits. The work of Diana Thater is especially important in this regard. Her intermedia spaces stage the spectacle through multi-screen projections of images of nature. Circulating amid the film and video

15. The notion is borrowed from Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Irigaray's "nothing to see" is both a critique of phallogocentric metaphysics (as an exclusion of the feminine on the basis of formlessness and nonvisibility) and a philosophical project to rethink vision from within formlessness, so as to inscribe difference within the symbolic.

16. Inattentive blindness is the failure to perceive in conditions of inattention. See Ariën Mack and Irvin Rock, *Inattentive Blindness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998). By contrast, inattentive amnesia is the failure to memorize in conditions of inattention. See Jeremy M. Wolfe, "Inattentive Amnesia," in Veronika Coltheart, ed., *Fleeting Memories: Cognition of Brief Stimuli* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 75.

17. In this, the trilogy explores the similitude between awakening and paradoxical sleep—both are said to be attentive activities—postulated by R. R. Llinas and D. Paré, "Of Dreaming and Wakefulness," *Neuroscience* 44, no. 3 (1991): 521–35.

18. Such denial is at play, for example, in the Human Genome Project. The HGP is an international project which seeks to map and sequence (with the help of information technologies and biotechnologies) the totality of human genes, with the hope of providing the precise origin of diseases so as to eventually suppress bad genes by genetic manipulation. See Sfez.

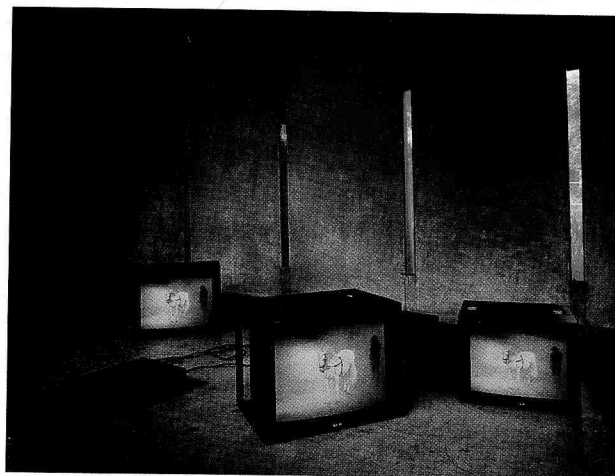


Diana Thater. *The best space is the deep space*, 1998.

Monitor edition. Each: (1) video monitor, (1) laserdisc player, (1) laserdisc.

Installation view, MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles. Photo Fredrick Nilsen.

Photo courtesy MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.



projections, the spectator realizes quite rapidly that she or he is looking at images of a technologically re-created nature: flowers are cultivated flowers, wild animals (horses, zebras, monkeys, dolphins) are actors trained by professionals, natural landscapes are in fact theme parks. The spectacle of nature unfolds, yet is always to be depressed by diverse aesthetic strategies, including the absence of sound, the representation of the training or film crew, the staging of projection apparatus (wiring, monitors, VCRs). But depression also occurs through montage effects including recycling, repetition, and slow motion, as in *The best space is the deep space* (1999), an installation composed of three monitors that project, with a slight discrepancy, the same short repeated sequence of a circus horse filmed with its trainer in a process of genuflexion. Insufficiency here (the recycling of the sequence, the absence of sound, and the use of slow motion) discloses the subjection inherent to super-nature and, in so doing, interpellates the spectator in a grieving of the spectacle.

Insufficiency in recent media art, I wish to argue, is both an acknowledgment of the limits of performativity and an aesthetic strategy that reveals how fallible corporeality may well help us to complexify perception. In so doing, it envisages performative subjectivities which are defiant of the social norms of performance.

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Broadcast in New York in May 1998, this “performance interview” was originally conceived as a conceptual art piece for the WBAI radio show “Voices Against the Wall” in complicity with host Matthew Finch. With the exception of Matthew, who was “performing” himself, the performance personas—Professor Jacques Fromage du Merde, El CyberVato, and El Mad Mex—were extensions of *Borderscape 2000* and *Mexterminator*, two projects Roberto Sifuentes and I were working on at the time.

The content of the interview is a metafiction that navigates the cultural space between imagined signs and social truths. According to my performance diaries, the original idea of this piece was “to present a fictional interview which had been 80% scripted . . . utilizing its outrageous ideas and performative tone as a triggering device for the radio listeners to call in and ‘confess’

their views on Latinos, and immigration.” Some of the “callers’” statements were excerpted from actual Internet confessions and staged during the interview. Others were “real,” whatever real means in radiolandia. Later on, a slightly modified version of the piece was used as a point of departure for a live Internet chat on **Echonyc.com**, which, unlike the radio version, generated several negative reactions from participants due to “its contrived interactive nature.” As one person said, “This is virtual space. You are supposed to be sincere, not to perform.” “Performance, dear X, is just another way to tell the truth.” I answered. An edited transcript of the piece is published here. El Mad

**Guillermo Gómez-Peña**  
(in collaboration with Roberto Sifuentes and  
Matthew Finch)

### **Aztechnology**