

## Introduction: The Precarious Visualities of Contemporary Art and Visual Culture

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Since its emergence in the field of art history in the 1980s, *visuality* – a notion that refers to the visible condition of art, to the fact that art is, partially at least, a matter of vision (in its production, exhibition, circulation, and reception) – has been key to the decentring of both the artist and the viewing subject in its relation to the image. Vision came to be systematically understood as an act conditioned by culture, social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography. The fruitfulness of poststructuralist art historical research in this area of study is clearly noticeable in its manifold assessment of alternative modes of representation that counter the predominance of the perspectival system in Western art to criticize approaches that tend to essentialize the subject (by situating the artist or the viewer outside of language and ideology) or that turn perspective into a foundationalist signifying system (by defining it as an unproblematic mode of representation of the world, structurally similar to human vision). Such models have been shown to reformulate what art historian Hubert Damisch has identified as *costruzione legittima*'s positing of the viewpoint as the counterpart of the vanishing point.<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Alpers' examination of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch art, for example, has demonstrated how the latter's descriptive mode substantially differs from the perspectival-oriented narrative mode of Italian Renaissance art.<sup>2</sup> Norman Bryson has also questioned the perspectival understanding of space, notably in his study of the pictorial production of Vermeer. He highlighted how the gaze can be superseded by the glance – a mode of viewing that

acknowledges the binocularity, mobility, and embodiment of the viewer by the markings of the surface that disrupt the depth structure of the painting.<sup>3</sup> Again on the question of the gaze, Georges Didi-Huberman has shown in his study on Minimalism that the artwork per se functions as a gaze that shatters the central positioning of the subject of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In the field of feminist art history and visual culture studies, especially in the work of Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, Teresa de Lauretis, Elizabeth Grosz, Kaja Silverman, bell hooks, and Rey Chow, visibility was disclosed in its relation to gender, sexuality, and race.<sup>5</sup>

All these studies have been critical of models of vision that position the viewing subject in terms of unity, unhistoricized universalism, pure consciousness, and pure opticality (I follow here Sebastian Zeidler's definition of modern opticality as initially developed by Wölfflin: "the pure opticality of the 'world seen' – a world that does not exist except as unified optically by a disembodied subject").<sup>6</sup> As Martin Jay has maintained in his *Downcast Eyes* (1993), this critique was at the core of French modern thought, which has consistently condemned the occulocentrism of Western philosophy, in as much as it was central to "the retreat of the visual" in conceptual art.<sup>7</sup> To this, we must also add the work of art historian Jonathan Crary and his investigation of the regimes of vision from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Crary has convincingly shown not only how the understanding, representation, and practice of perception change historically but also how they are shaped through a complex interplay of discourses, including philosophy, science, social sciences, popular culture, and art.

To this assessment of the poststructuralist shaping of visibility studies should also be appended the critique of identity politics, which confirmed itself in the 1980s. During this period and still today, visibility in art and media has been fundamentally shaped by the growing awareness that gender, race, and sexuality are intrinsic to representation, recognition, and reception. The emergence of identity politics in the late 1960s, as a set of political actions that aims to improve the rights of members of a group because of a real or alleged shared identity, corresponds, as political theorist Sonia Kruks has argued, to a "demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion

within the fold of 'universal humankind' but for 'respect for oneself as different.'"<sup>9</sup> From a visibility studies perspective, concern about generalizing claims of shared identity, which fail to account for the divergence of meaning given to specific experiences by the individuals of the group and for the multiple identities of these individuals, has been raised by several artists and feminist cultural/visibility studies scholars, including Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, Rey Chow, and Amelia Jones. The field of art has notably been increasingly occupied by the need to complicate processes of representation and recognition so that they may render what philosopher Judith Butler has called the performativity of the subject – both its identification with social norms in processes of socialization and identity's "openness to resignification and recontextualization," when identification makes room for disidentification.<sup>10</sup> Emphasizing the possibility of perpetual self-resignification, a conception according to which identity is understood more as a process of becoming than as what one *is*, artists as different as Cindy Sherman, Ugo Rondinone, and Mariko Mori, for example, have produced significant photographic series of self-portraits that show the self to be in constant metamorphosis, which propels the self towards fictional constructs. Cyborg-artists like Orlan and Stelarc have explored various biotechnologies (plastic surgery and robotics/prosthetics) to literally transform the body in its flesh, nervous, muscular, or genetic constituency. Generally speaking, the postmodernist perspective, according to which identities are both discursively constructed and potentially contested, has played a major role in this reconceptualization of identity as "a fluid process in which 'self' and environment are constantly interacting."<sup>11</sup>

In the last decade, however, visibility studies have gone through a subtle, albeit significant, bodily turn – one that revolves around embodied notions of finiteness, identification failure, interface, polysensoriality, and informational and bio-technology as well as code. Although maintaining the poststructuralist critique of representation as a transparent medium and its correlate attentiveness to vision as a culturally mediated practice, these studies and art practices have focused on new psychosomatic functions of the image. As such, they have surmounted the aniconic temptation of Minimalism and conceptual art while remaining critical of opticality.

Key to this bodily turn is the integration of finitude – fallibility and mortality – in the definition of identity, subjectivity, vision, and visuality in ways that show the limits of the “fluidity” perspective described above. This, we believe, articulates a crucial shift in visuality, in that it has reintroduced experience, agency, and the inseparability of finiteness and openness in the subject’s shaping of visual realms and interpretation of images. In the field of contemporary art, the works of Hannah Wilke, Jo Spence, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Derek Jarman, David Wojnarowicz, and AA Bronson, among others, have been reassessed to explore this sense of finitude through representations of illness (notably AIDS and cancer) and death that trigger affects of mourning, remembrance, and loss in the viewer. The writings of literary historian Elizabeth Bronfen and philosopher Christine Battersby examine how notions of birth and mortality shape the definition and representation of female subjectivity.

More specifically related to visuality studies, art historian Michael Leja, in his study of early twentieth-century American art and mass culture, explains how seeing became a distrusted activity in an era in which the visible world was increasingly confirming itself in its spectacular dimension, as a confusing mixture of fantasy and reality, appearance and truth. This scepticism about seeing, about the possibility of gaining access to truth through vision, was compensated by what Leja has called “looking askance” – both “a way of looking and a way of thinking about looking,” a self-conscious visual practice that could maximize visual acuity and sharpen “mental faculties for critical analysis and interpretation.”<sup>12</sup> Paul Virilio’s examination of the twentieth-century development of machines of vision not only supports Leja’s findings on the crisis of perceptual faith in images but also discloses how the optical technologies, which still seemed to guarantee, for the early-twentieth-century observer, an access to visual truth, have gradually made our link to images more and more precarious.<sup>13</sup> These studies should not be dissociated from the blooming development of new media research, notably the writings of art historian Olivier Grau, visual studies specialist Anne Friedberg, philosopher Mark Hansen, and media artists and theoreticians Lev Manovich and Peter Weibel, which has set into play a reiterated concern with the spatial positioning of the user in virtual reality, the enhancement or reduction of the

user’s experience of VR, his or her partial blindness as to what occurs outside the immersing environment and the concomitant loss of criticality, and his or her immobility in front of the screen. Art historian Caroline A. Jones has also just proposed a polysensorial reading of mixed reality art as a counterpart to Greenbergian formalist opticality grounded in the specialized use of vision. This interest in contemporary art’s questioning of the pure visuality of the aesthetic experience has also been central to Mieke Bal’s study of baroque vision as what resists the mind/body, form/matter, line/colour separation.<sup>14</sup> All these studies, including Leja’s, articulate a shift towards the examination of the viewer/user’s bodily experience of the visible world, of the “finiteness and fallibility”<sup>15</sup> of vision, and of the ways in which visual experience is perturbed (impoverished or heightened) by art, technology, and visual culture.

To speak, as the title of the book indicates, about “precarious visualities” is to ratify this bodily turn – a turn that addresses the agency, yet finiteness and fallibility, of vision, together with its interrelatedness with other senses. It is, more specifically, to seek to investigate new directions in the field of visuality studies – to concentrate on innovative aesthetic strategies that complexify the perceptual experience of the spectator in contemporary art (especially time-based art) and visual culture. Has this specific field of inquiry generated new interrogations, new approaches, new sensibilities? If so, which art and media productions are significantly contributing to these major developments? How and why do experiments in visuality affect the spectator-artwork relational property of the aesthetic experience? Key to this inventive directionality is the notion of precariousness. To look at an image that prevents the stabilization of identification, identity, and place; to perceive a representation that keeps oscillating between visibility and invisibility; to experience screens that blur the distinction between the viewer’s sense of self as “self” and the represented “other”; to be interpellated as a spectator by screen-images that have ceased (even virtually) to mirror, resemble, or refer in that their power lies exclusively in their simulating, hallucinating, or generating function; to relate to an image that entails a perturbation of sight through the contradictory valorization of other senses; to be exposed – as a spectacle and through surveil-

lance devices – to the gaze of new figures of authority, unanticipated Others: all these aesthetic strategies, which are examined here, concern a spectator whose seeing activity is being embodied through precarious attachments. They underlie the distribution of this book's chapters under the following six rubrics, which designate some of the most pivotal post-1990s visualities in contemporary art, art history, and visual culture: (1) the unsettling of identification, (2) the deployment of the image-viewer interface as a threshold of (in)visibility, (3) the staging of hallucination (of hallucinations), (4) the reimagining of place through the aesthetics of doubling, (5) the polysensorialized screen, and (6) the generating image. To better understand the visualities covered by these rubrics, I propose here to briefly discuss their main attributes: failed identification, interrelatedness, doubleness, and difference. These are central to the bodily turn I am trying to describe here.

Precariousness – and this is its first trait – is an unsettling of vision that occurs at the viewer-image interface, a quality addressed to the viewer that troubles the full visual access to the image (and beyond, to the reality to which it refers). The reevaluation of identification plays a major role in this precariousness. In her *Identification Papers* (1995), an examination of the crucial role of identification in viewing processes, critical theorist Diana Fuss has shown how the sheer impossibility of detaching identity from identification, especially in a period in which identification is said to have prevalence over identity (an assessment shared by sociologist Michel Maffesoli),<sup>16</sup> the identity of the represented subject or of the perceiving spectator is already made out of oscillations between nonidentity and disidentification.<sup>17</sup> This question is key to the opening text of *Precarious Visualities*, Raymond Bellour's discussion of the aesthetics of self-portraiture in video art as a practice occupied from the start by the impossibility of articulating a fixed sense of self because of the multiple identifications that shape and reshape it. Johanne Lamoureux's analysis of Andy Warhol's *Last Supper* paintings of 1986 also makes manifest how the self-portrait can sometimes set into play a thick mixture of identification, disidentification, and over-identification that cannot be easily untangled. Once the spectator is understood in these terms, as in Monika Kin Gagnon's study of film spectatorship, it is the precarious perceptual experience of the viewer

that becomes manifest. Diana Fuss's questions on filmic identification formulate quite well the texture of that experience:

Accordingly, any politics of identity needs to come to terms with the complicated and meaningful ways that identity is continually compromised, imperiled, one might even say embarrassed by identification. For example, how might it change our understanding of the political, of the very nature and significance of the social tie, to know that every identity claim ("I am not another") is based upon an identification ("I desire to be another")? How might it change our understanding of identity if we were finally to take seriously the poststructuralist notion that our most impassioned identifications may incorporate nonidentity within them and that our most fervent disidentifications may already harbor the very identity they seek to deny?<sup>18</sup>

To put it differently, self-portraiture, or the viewing of film, may set into play unexpected intermediate couplings between observation and projection, acknowledgment and denial, fantasy and reality, self and other. It may also prevent the identification process, as argued by Beate Ochsner in her analysis of David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*. Contemporary art practices, and visual culture in general, can be seen as exacerbating these psychic processes.

Such is the precariousness of visuality in contemporary art and, more generally, in contemporary visual culture: a setting into play of a range of aesthetic strategies that solicit from the spectator a perception that lacks in security, certainty, and opticality. Vision here comes to appear insufficient or is contradicted by other sensorial registers, but it is also meant to be somewhat augmented by new functions of the image screen. Indeed, in the texts comprising this anthology, if precariousness is to be considered as an aesthetic strategy at all, it is precisely because it has a productive side to it: what perception lacks in opticality it gains in complexity, and mostly interrelatedness – between senses (e.g., the visual and the haptic, as described by Julie Lavigne in her analysis of Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather* and by Amelia Jones in her

examination of video art and Carolee Schneemann's films); between what lies within and what lies without a work (as carefully mapped out in Claudette Lauzon's analysis of Rebecca Belmore's *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition and David Tomas's discussion of Ilya Kabakov's *Looking up*); between the fictional and the physical (Éric Michaud's discussion of the generating function of the image); between body, screen, and place (as suggested by Marie Fraser's and Alice Ming Wai Jim's discussion of place-identities); between bodies (the two or more users wearing Mathieu Briand's *UBIQ* headsets examined by Christine Ross); between identification and disidentification (especially in the self-portraits investigated by Raymond Bellour, Olivier Asselin, Julie Lavigne, Hélène Samson, and Johanne Lamoureux); and between art and science (Thierry Bardini's study of the metaphoric deployment of the genetic code in molecular biology).

These interrelations – the second attribute of the bodily turn of visuality studies – are meant to break with what must be called the *frontality* of the image; that is, what Anne Friedberg has designated as the viewer's positioning “in front of (*vorstellen*) a perpendicular frame.”<sup>19</sup> Theorized by Alberti in his 1435 *De pictura* and still prevalent today in our daily experience of the computer screen, the picture has been, *is*, predominantly “imagined as a flat vertical surface between the artist (and viewer) and the scene depicted.”<sup>20</sup> Precariousness in contemporary visual culture means, contrarily, that the spectator cannot be stabilized by the frontal deployment of the image: by perturbing opticality, it asks of the spectator that s/he not be a mere viewer, that s/he circulate between and around the work to conjoin the inside with the outside, make connections without resolutions, understand the doubleness of specific aesthetic situations, and acknowledge the changing functions of the image in the age of informational and biotechnologies.

As philosopher and aesthetics theoretician Jean-Marie Schaeffer has argued in his *L'image précaire: Du dispositif photographique* (1987), a book that has inspired this anthology, precariousness – and this brings us to its third attribute – entails a form of duplicity. With the term “precariousness,” Schaeffer wanted to describe the complex status of the pre-digital photographic image: the fact that it corresponds both to an imprint of the represented object and an image analogically related to human vision. The precariousness of a photograph lies specifically in its

double status – one that is difficult to reconcile – as imprint and analogy. Some of the texts in *Precarious Visualities* refer specifically to the sorely reconcilable doubleness of the visualities of specific video art and film works, not so much as a characteristic of the image as an aesthetic or interpretative strategy: Marie Fraser speaks of the co-presence of the body and image in Krzysztof Wodiczko's public place interventions; Alice Ming Wai Jim of double mediation between screen and language, movement and locality in Mathias Woo's video; Amelia Jones of the video flesh-screen; Monika Kin Gagnon of the double consciousness of the film spectator; Slavoj Žižek of the film image as a hallucination of a hallucination; Johanne Lamoureux of the identification of identification; Beate Ochsner of the confusing overlapping of fiction over fiction in David Cronenberg's cinematography; David Tomas of the viewer's fluctuation between seeing and non-seeing under Kabakov's huge antenna. Again, but as a move beyond Schaeffer's localization of precariousness in the image, it is the image-viewer interface that is set into play here to articulate a tension, for the viewer, between two experiences. This tension is a productive one in that it carries the aesthetics or, sometimes, the criticality of the artwork.

By “precariousness” we therefore do not necessarily refer to the ephemerality of an artwork or the fragility of its materiality, although this might well be a reinforcing element of precarious difference (let us think here of Antoni's transient chocolate and soap self-portraits discussed by Julie Lavigne, or the in situ performances of Belmore and Wodiczko examined by Claudette Lauzon and Marie Fraser, even the personal webcams described by Olivier Asselin, bound to disappear one day in the ethereal space of the web). Nor do we especially allude to the contingency of the objects of contemporary art. Art historian Martha Buskirk has already shown how authorship, medium, materiality, and originality have become pivotal contingent objects in contemporary artworks and have come to redefine practices and understandings of preservation, copyright, medium specificity, work, and documentation differentiation as well as attributions of authorship.<sup>21</sup> Contingency certainly troubles the physical, conceptual, and economic integrity of the artwork but does not necessarily entail a questioning of visuality or a rupture with the frontal deployment of art. By the precariousness of visuality – and this is what ties together the works

examined in *Precarious Visualities* – we refer to a perceptual operation; that is, to the ways in which the image or the interface of an artwork interpellates the spectator into an “effective” perceptual perturbation. This book should then also be seen as an occasion to raise the possibility of aesthetic difference in the field of contemporary art, within a logic of precariousness. The possibility of critical or aesthetic difference, the fourth and final property of precariousness, is not without a contradiction for, as Schaeffer has argued in his *L’image précaire: Du dispositif photographique* (1987), precariousness is, by definition, a state that signals both the difficulty to reconcile and the difficulty to separate two dimensions, realms, or experiences.

In *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (2004), philosopher Jacques Rancière provides a rich reading of aesthetic difference that helps to situate the link this book seeks to establish between criticality and precariousness. He concludes *Malaise’s* elaborate discussion on the ethical turn of art – the gradual yet affirmed substitution of aesthetics by ethics in the field of contemporary art since the 1980s – by denouncing its dissolution of “difference” (opposition, polemics, contradiction, dissention). The predominance of ethics, notably in relational art practices that replace dissensus by consensus or works that reduce art to the victimized act of witnessing irrepresentable catastrophes, has meant the weakening of the political impact of aesthetics, whose productivity relies on its differential status. Indeed, the waning of *aesthetic* difference is a form of denegation not only of *social* and *cultural* difference but also of art’s ability to provide futurity. As Rancière observes, the emergence of aesthetics (as a regime of identification of art) in the late eighteenth century entails the rupture of the triad – *mimesis*, whose laws defined a regulated relation between *poesis* (as a way of doing) and *aesthesis* (as a way of being sensible) – that guaranteed the order of fine arts. It occurs through two concomitant operations: a fundamental depreciation of the representational regime – namely, the traditional functions of religious illustration and decoration – and a relocalization of art in the separate sphere of the museum. Difference is thus an intrinsic dimension of aesthetics. Relocalization has been crucial to the development of modern art for, as Peter Bürger has already observed, it conferred upon art a certain degree of autonomy and the related possibility of being radically different from (i.e., critical of) a society of which it had

partially ceased to be a part.<sup>22</sup> Twentieth-century art has been repeatedly mobilized by this possibility, belief, or utopia.

Yet difference today, in an era of presentism in which notions of progress, emancipation, and productive utopia are increasingly contested, appears less likely to be achievable. The persistence of realism in mainstream cinema is not without consolidating this assessment. The depreciation of differential aesthetics can noticeably be seen in the morphing techniques of cinema developed since the 1990s, a procedure that consolidates the realistic functioning of the screen. As observed by Lev Manovich, in contrast to the “copy-and-paste” aesthetics of twentieth-century avant-garde cinema, the dominant new media images are increasingly characterized by smoothness and continuity as though the imperative was now to blend elements together and erase rather than accentuate boundaries: “All these examples – smooth composites, morphing, uninterrupted navigation in games – have one thing in common: where old media relied on montage, new media substitutes the aesthetics of continuity.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, while new media has the technology to problematize in a fundamental way the mirror-and-window logic of representation, it uses the interface to service realism, providing a sense of reality as devoid of gaps, contradictions, tensions, fantasy interruptions, or noise. Highly critical of such developments, Manovich advocates the return to an aesthetics of montage that welcomes the semantic clashing of different worlds on the screen. Interestingly, for Rancière also, a form of oppositional discourse remains conceivable but only inasmuch as its precariousness is acknowledged and set into play:

To exit today’s ethical configuration, to restore difference to the inventions of politics and art, this also means to challenge the phantasm of their purity by restoring their character of a cut which is always ambiguous, precarious and litigious. This presupposes indissolubly that we subtract them from any form of time theology, from any thought of original trauma or upcoming salvation.<sup>24</sup>

The above passage makes clear a crucial observation: if art is to be differential at all, this restoration can only come about with the

acknowledgment of the precariousness of artistic difference. Here lies another fundamental productivity of precariousness – its rupture with time teleology – but also a warning: if it does regroup a set of aesthetic strategies, it is never an “emancipating solution” in itself. The productivity of precariousness of difference is precisely what Marie Fraser and Claudette Lauzon disclose in their reading of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s and Rebecca Belmore’s work. Their performances and installations are critical of the foreigner’s or the sex-worker’s exclusion from the public sphere only inasmuch as they successfully transpose the contradictory status of the excluded – oscillating between the representational and the physical (for Wodiczko) and between visibility and invisibility (for Belmore) – into the perceptual experience of the viewer. As such, in their attempt to give a face to the faceless, in ways that disrupt their media representation as elements of threat, they convey what Butler, inspired by the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, has called “the precariousness of life,” if only so that “some keener sense of the value of life, all life, take hold.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, when the users of Mathieu Briand’s viewing headsets can only adequately perceive the space in which they circulate if and when they are worn by at least two users, they are introduced to a form of interdependency in which autonomy of the self is perhaps lost but where the precariousness of life is experienced as what “begins with the precariousness of the Other.” As argued by David Tomas, this effect also governs Kabakov’s *Looking up*’s critique of immersive, closed interfaces. Indeed, such a critique occurs through the viewer’s visual apprehension of the work as s/he oscillates between seeing and non-seeing, the very perceptual oscillation that will open up the spectator/image interface to the moving environment beyond.

*Precarious Visualities* cannot be separated from Rancière’s plea for (“ambiguous, precarious and litigious”) dissensus. It pushes his observation one step further to meet two objectives: first, to examine the ways in which precariousness has increasingly become constitutive of the spectator interpellation in the realm of contemporary art; and second, to claim that such precariousness may well articulate a site of critical difference.

## Notes

- 1 Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
- 2 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- 3 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
- 4 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992).
- 5 See especially Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, 3 (1975): 6–18; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992); and Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
- 6 Sebastian Zeidler, introduction to Carl Einstein, *Critical Dictionary: “Nightingale” The Etchings of Hercules Seghers*, trans. Charles W. Haxthausen, *October* 107 (Winter 2004): 152.
- 7 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). On “the retreat of the visual,” see Benjamin Buchloh, “From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique,” in *L’art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1989), 41.
- 8 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990) and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 9 Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 85.
- 10 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 140.
- 11 Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings, Ian Grant, Kieran Kelly, *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 167 and 249.

- 12 Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art From Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.
- 13 Paul Virilio, *La machine de vision: Essai sur les nouvelles techniques de représentation* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1988), 38.
- 14 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). On the return of the baroque in contemporary visual culture, see also Nicolas Goyer and Walter Moser, eds., *Résurgences baroques: Les trajectoires d'un parcours transculturel* (Brussels: La Lettre Volée, 2001).
- 15 Leja, *Looking Askance*, 12.
- 16 Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Societies*, trans. Don Smith (London: Sage Publications, 1996).
- 17 Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11–12.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 78–9.
- 20 Ibid., 28.
- 21 Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
- 22 Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2004), 16–17. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 23 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 142–3.
- 24 Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, 173 (my translation).
- 25 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York and London: Verso, 2004), xviii.

## PART ONE

### “Am I Still in the Picture?": The Unsettling of Identification

#### Introduction

In an essay (translated here for the first time in English) that has been pivotal to the understanding of the history of electronic arts, Raymond Bellour shows how video art's specific contribution to the realm of moving images lies in its unique deployment of the self-portrait. With video, argues Bellour, the image becomes a site of representation and interpellation of the self – but a self whose identity is more a question or an open-ended project than a definition or a clear determination. The relevance of this text to precarious visibility is indisputable: it discloses a visual writing of the “I” that explores the low-resolution of the image, electronic processing, and the “continuous” presence of the electronic image in order to represent the self of the artist not as a temporal closure (as is the case with autobiography) but as a “totality without an end, where nothing can be given in advance.” The self-portrait – as explored notably in the work of Vito Acconci, Bill Viola, Thierry Kuntzel, John Downey, Jacques-Louis and Danièle Nyst, Marcel Odenbach, and Jean-Luc Godard – video art per se, thus proposes identity as an irresolvable absence to oneself, constantly reopened by multiple processes of identification and disidentification.

Also complicating the notion of the self-portrait, Johanne Lamoureux's chapter on Andy Warhol's last paintings, the *Last Supper* series (1986), investigates the mythographic construction of the self as “saint.” Mythography is not without complexifying the identification process