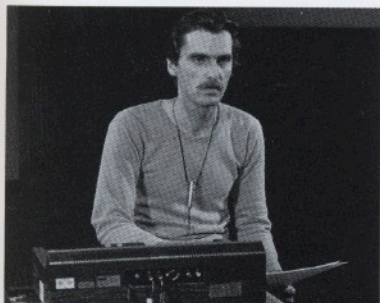


Between Surfaces

TIHOMIR MILOVAC TALKS TO DALIBOR MARTINIS (1995)



Dalibor Martinis Talks to Dalibor Martinis, video performance, 1978

T.M: Is Dalibor Martinis alive?

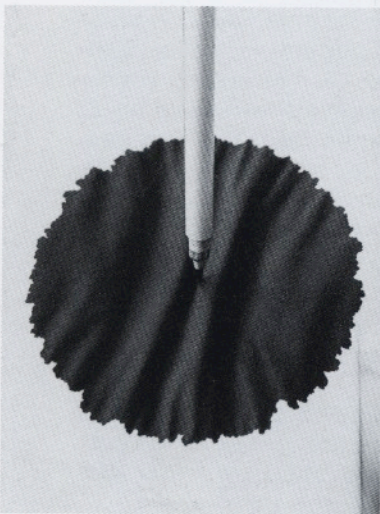
D.M: That's a fair question and I should think twice before answering it. I suppose you are referring to my work *Dalibor Martinis Talks to Dalibor Martinis* which I began in 1978 with a video performance at Western Front Center in Vancouver and which should be completed in the year 2000. Seventeen years ago, in front of video cameras and the audience, I asked myself 22 questions which I will answer in 2000. The idea is to tape my answers on the same tape that contains my questions posed in 1978 in order to complete the project as a video interview with myself. I asking the questions am 31, and I answering them am 53. The empty space between questions and answers contains 22 years of my physical existence and my artistic work. Of course, this 22-year long project will be completed only if the main condition is fulfilled: that I will be able to answer my first question, identical to yours. The affirmative answer would be, at worst, a positive clinical statement and, at best, an indication that I am alive and active as an artist. This work is intended as a journey through my own time, conceived, I hope, with a sufficient degree of Fluxus unpretentiousness. It certainly does not involve a linear time that moves from the beginning towards the end, but rather time which moves in all directions simultaneously, as an image in the space built of mirrors. After all, it was my interest in the temporal dimension of art that has made me opt for video as early as 1973.

T.M: At that time, the late Sixties and the early Seventies, video was still a new medium. Relatively unexplored, it offered possibilities for new artistic investigations, of both its own language and one's own artistic procedure determined by this particular medium.

D.M: Video absolutely fascinated me, although in the early Seventies portable video equipment could provide only black-and-white image of rather poor quality, certainly inferior to the cinematography of the time. The elimination of time between shooting and reproduction of the image was something entirely new, an untapped source of vast artistic potential. It also seemed highly challenging to start working in the medium that would obviously change and develop parallel with and independently of my own artistic evolution. There must have been a dose of provincial heroism in that decision because, frankly, at that time the conditions for such a career in this country were far from favorable. My work was focused on work as process and the question of identity, and I was particularly intrigued by close circuit television. It can screen our image simultaneously with our own view, yet no longer as a mirror reflection of our eyes but as a result of the presence of another eye. While both images are created virtually at the same instant (discounting the infinitesimally short time it takes for light to reach from the mirror, or the TV monitor, to our eyes), they are different. In the first instance, the mirror caters to our narcissistic needs, the kind shared by the wicked queen in the story of Snow-white. In the second case, an image of ourselves which is projected onto the cathode tube is no longer controlled by our eyes. The mirror is where our reflection is and, looking into the mirror, we look at ourselves we want to

see, while the monitor screen is always dislocated from the eye of the camera. If you look at the camera, you will appear on the monitor looking straight towards you but you won't be able to see it. If you look at the monitor, your eyes will be averted from the camera and you will see yourself looking to the side. Your own image on the screen cannot or will not return your look. The monitor is the queen's mirror in rebellion. In time, surface has become interface, as the reflection has turned into a projection.

T.M: Video is a testimony of time that runs out like ink and objects become the repositories of the image of time as Duchamp's reliefs.



Artist at Work, detail, 1978

D.M: That's correct, video is a medium based on the passage of time. Even if the video camera is placed in front of an empty white wall, the recorded tape will turn the emptiness into an event. It will be «emptiness multiplied by time». In the Seventies I made an installation (*Artist At Work*, 1977) in which an absolute absence of happening, a total immobility, was transformed into an event. The installation consisted of a felt-tip pen hanging from a thread tied to a desk lamp so that its tip touched a paper on the desk. A chair was standing by the desk. There was nothing visible going on. The surface of the paper was white and completely empty, there was only a tiny black dot under the tip of the pen as the starting point of a line that would never be drawn. After several hours, a viewer noticed a tiny stain, somewhat bigger than the tip of the pen. Two or three days later, another viewer saw a large black stain spreading across the paper from its center. What the audience saw was not an art drawing, but rather the moment when the presence and arrangement of parts which make for a work of art were established, while the artist and his gesture were absent. Although it does not involve the medium of video, this work seems to be quite representative of my concept of the work of art as a metronome defining its own time.

T.M: Are you aware of transience implied by time?

D.M: O yes, it underlies practically all of my installations. This is the fourth dimension which was encompassed by my work once I adopted video as the means of expression. This goes much deeper than a superficial thematic interest. Contemporary image has been termed «time-image» by Paul Virilio. According to him, before the invention of photography there was only the aesthetics of appearance. The image existed due to the existence of its medium – stone, wood or painted canvas. With the arrival of photography, followed by film and video, we enter the domain of the aesthetics of disappearance. The existence of image is now only retinal. Transience is therefore built into all my works. Each video installation exists only in a particular time and the space it is exhibited in. Before and after, only some of its elements exist that, however, are not in the least representative of the work as a whole. The awareness of transience is often expressed in the very subject. A work I made in 1981 was entitled *Sic Transit*.

T.M: In your installation, the video image on the monitor or as a projection becomes what it represents. For instance, in Dinner At Last, the video of

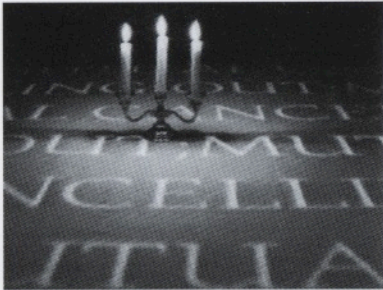
a dinner at the table is projected onto the identical table; the image of rocks on the monitors in Rock Garden is embedded in real pebbles, the submarine interpreters of Zen stories in Circles Between Surfaces are projected from the depth of a well.

D.M: This has been particularly true since the second half of the Eighties, when I began largely to employ the projected video image and this has enabled me to focus even more on the relationship between objects and time.

Now I can freely use any object, space, or shape as the material element of the installation and envelop it in a live image, or event, by means of projection. The inanimate object thus acquires a »live« membrane, a tissue which consists of remembrances of events past. Sculptures or spaces become repositories of electronic images. This may sound as a metaphor, but is in fact reality; a technique of decomposing images and coding them in digital signals enables us to store them in various materials.

T.M: In your more recent works there is a story, not in the form of a linear sequence but rather as a complex fragmented structure »edited« from a series of small units. This opens a possibility for experiencing in various directions and on various levels. In the Seventies, your video tapes were chiefly records of actions and performances which as a rule carried out previously conceived drafts, in other words, procedures that were defined and planned in advance. When did the change occur?

D.M: I have mentioned that in the Seventies I was chiefly interested in the process and much less in the material object. At that time, I staged several actions and performances which existed as events in time, yet they did incorporate the principle and the medium of documentation which was also part of the structure. *Self-execution* was such a performance. It took place in front of the audience in a pentagram-shaped space, with a photographic camera at the tip of each of the five arms; I ran from one camera to another to press the delayed action button. Later I exhibited a series of 180 photographs that documented my action from five different angles. In video actions *Open Reel*, *Manual* and *Video Immunity*, similar procedure was used, but video was the subject of exploration and the medium of documentation. I was never interested in a strictly narrative structure, the linear unfolding of a story. Working with Sanja on joint projects has imposed a need to introduce »characters« that would appear instead of us, because we have always been intrigued by the universal aspects of the male-female relationship. Along with characters, elements of narration entered the works. My interest in video, however, is based on the specific features of the medium and its undeniable ties with television which, seen as a complex system of communication, does not obey the principles of linear dramatic structure. My TV video, *Dutch Moves* (1986), contains 4 or 5 narrative strands, the narration is broken as if occurring parallel on different TV channels which the viewer keeps switching by the means of remote control. In my video installations there is no narrative structure, the story is usually one of the materials I use to construct my work. In *Supper At Last*, it is the Biblical story of the Last Supper, and in my most



Supper at Last, video installation,
1990-92

recent work *Circles Between Surfaces*, stories are submerged under water and disguised in sign language used by the deaf.

T.M: You believe that a fragmented structure is adequate for our experience of the world?

D.M: Yes, I believe that contemporary civilization functions precisely because of its fragmentary character, parallel existence of various cultural, political and societal currents. During the war in Croatia, it was sufficient to travel 100 kilometers north of Zagreb, to Leibnitz in Austria, to realize that our tragedy is but a fragment in global history. Of course, no one can predict with certainty whether and how a minuscule fragment will eventually affect the whole. The chaos theory allows for the possibility that a storm on the Philippines was actually initiated by a flutter of butterfly wings somewhere in Finland.

T.M: Why are you so inclined towards installation as the medium for your work?

D.M: Our attitude towards the object is possessive, we feel that the object is subordinate, that we can take it in, if not by hand than certainly by looking at it. The iconic art of the image places the viewer in the position of omnipotence. All objects in the image are arranged so that the viewer can enjoy the best, the ideal view of the world. Anish Kapoor supports this with the statement that you cannot approach God from behind. Naturally, the viewer feels safe and satisfied when observing such an art work. Yet, today we live in a time when the linear structure of perspective recedes before the television and telematic structure of a general simultaneity of all possible perspectives. The viewer can no longer be certain that he himself is not part of an image. Therefore, installation began to attract me when I was still a young artist. It is a negative form of sculpture, its inner void. And »nothing is larger than empty things«, said Bacon. Space surrounds us, it is behind us, it never reveals itself to us completely. Dreams also plunge us into unfamiliar and oblique spaces that keep changing, that elude our experience and seem constantly to rekindle our fear of them. If the outer space eludes definition, one must resort to one's own inner space. The space within is a personal sanctuary. It can, however, often be frighteningly dark and, in search of an orientation point, we flee into the outer space. Exits and entrances from inner into outer space, the perpetual motion from and towards oneself are particularly interesting for me as an artist.

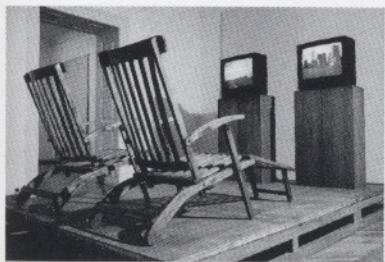
T.M: In what way does video change our perception of space?

D.M: Once the medium of video is introduced into an installation, the very definition of space changes. The classical Euclidean space is replaced by what is in modern physics termed space-time. Space can no longer be grasped without the time in which it exists and vice versa. For the observer, video image is an event, an occurrence in time. It is an event of light. Time is a cycle of light. Space is nothing without light, claims Paul Virilio. In the

era of electronic images, line, surface and volume are aspects of projectivity. An event taking place in the fourth dimension and within the three-dimensional space turns the space into a time sequence. Time and space are amalgamated. According to Einstein, events do not happen, »they are there in front of us and we merely encounter them on our way«. Let us say that a video installation is a spatially determined event of light waiting to be seen by viewers.

T.M: In most of your installations, an involvement or participation of the audience is required. The viewers become direct consumers of events or are drawn in to make the work alive with their presence. This is by no means an arbitrary interactive system. The installation maintains its uninterrupted course, its time determined by the constant element of the video image which is screened continuously, irrespective of the audience and its participation. The viewers walk through the *Rock Garden*, sit at the table in *Dinner At Last*, peep through the holes in the wall in *A View of Another View* or relax lounging in deck chairs »traveling« in the installation *New York, New York*.

D.M: Video installation uses space as its medium and material. This means space is not neutral and undefined, as the exhibition space of a gallery is. In such a space, the audience must feel certain forces, vectors that pull them into the work. This does not necessarily imply a physical shaping of space, but rather an arrangement of events and time sequences. In the work *New York, New York*, it is very important that the viewer sits in one of the two deck chairs in order to observe the city from the ship approaching and the ship going away. In *A View of Another View*, a peep through the hole in the wall and the picture reveals yet another possible view indicated by the story. In the *Rock Garden*, the motion of the viewer is restricted to an L-shaped boardwalk which is, just as the arrangement of monitors in the pebbles, a copy of the Zen garden in the Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto. In the video installation *Supper At Last*, the viewer can sit on one of the 13 chairs around the table. Whichever place he chooses, he will find the traces of another person who took part in the event or the ritual of dinner the images of which are spread across the tablecloth.



New York, New York,
video installation, 1982

T.M: In this conversation, as well as in the titles of your works, the word »between« has been used often.

D.M: This is a space without clear-cut borders or sharp edges. It belongs neither to the physical nor the spiritual domain. My three most recent installations, *The Line of Fire*, *Membrana tympani* and in particular *Circles Between Surfaces*, deal with the space between between silence and speech, between light and darkness, between the viewer and the work.