

VIDEO ART, THE IMAGINARY AND THE PAROLE VIDE

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'The relations between this Homo psychologicus and the machines he uses are very striking, and this is especially so in the case of the motor car. We get the impression that his relationship to this machine is so very intimate that it is almost as if the two were actually conjoined – its mechanical defects and breakdowns often parallel his neurotic symptoms. Its emotional significance for him comes from the fact that it exteriorizes the protective shell of his ego . . .'
Jacques Lacan¹

It is surprising that although video was hailed in quasi-cybernetic eulogy as the most important new medium to be appropriated by artists, it has suddenly found itself with few places to go. If video art is in a state of malaise (which I tend to think it is), it is for a variety of reasons. The problem of accessibility has to be a central one for artists, galleries, gallery alternatives and the art audience alike. Seven or eight years after artists' video tapes were first produced, very few people have seen the tapes or installations that they have been able to read about at length. Although one should differentiate between the situations in Europe and the US, this observation does seem generally to hold true. Many video works stand in the same relation to the potential video audience as the dream stands to the psycho-analyst, only to be 'understood' through the dream text which in this case is provided by critics and magazines.

The situation is undoubtedly complex, involving the economics of the art world, the politics of television and the paucity of theory, but also affecting the work of artists themselves. Their discourse becomes more solipsistic as the predicted video distribution channels fail to materialise, and certain galleries with the money and the inclination to provide viewing-rooms and taping facilities monopolise more of the action. It should be noted that British television has been particularly resistant to this infringement on its medium in comparison with the television companies of Holland, West Germany and the US (not including the network), which have shown several 'amateur' video tapes.

My intention is not to establish quite who is to blame if the video artist ends up talking to him/herself, but rather to point to the effects that such repression can have when applied to a medium with a decidedly solipsistic pull of its own. If the artist does not literally end up in a situation of monologue, the technology itself can function as a barricade, a kind of externalised ego, hiding the artist's alienation by providing situations in which the audience members can become engrossed in their own alienation as objects of their own consciousness.

The dearth of theoretical work on video beyond the level of description is probably excusable in the light of the medium's inaccessibility, but it results in a difficulty in identifying with a collective praxis. Many people (myself included) disagree with even the simplest categorisation of video work into: 'recorded performance', 'installation', 'community/political' and 'video art proper' (whatever that might be)². With a

lack of references, history or shared objectives, it is predictable that artists begin from the deceptively benign artist/video equipment confrontation, not only in an attempt to discover what they can do with the medium but also to discover just what the medium does to them. This elementary configuration consists of a video camera connected to a video recorder, which is in turn connected to a video monitor providing the live camera view. The possibility of feedback suggests itself immediately: the camera views the monitor and a regression of monitors appears within the monitor. Tautology has been a mainstay of video art, and although reflexivity has characterised much of the art of the sixties and seventies, nowhere has it appeared as frequently as in video. In a sense this image is a metaphor of any theory capable of examining its own axioms (semiotics, mathematics, psycho-analysis etc), and it is in this way that video artists have become theorists, often attempting an analysis of video codes as a central aspect of works themselves. The medium becomes the subject-matter of the work, the process of structuring, and manipulating the image being dictated by artists' intuitions about the plays between illusion and reality that the medium most readily (truthfully) supports.

If the elementary artist/video equipment confrontation results in the medium acting as its own object, the most obvious re-deployment takes the form of the medium acting as a feedback system enabling the artist to become an object of his/her own consciousness. Here the artist confronts both equipment and image of the self, and it is at this point that the curiosity of the artist about the medium becomes diverted into a curiosity about the self. The artist's theory of video has therefore frequently developed into an examination of the notions of consciousness and selfhood, an area readily associable with psycho-analytic theory. From the viewpoint of this theory, the work suffers from being at the same time the discourse of the medium and discourse about the medium. This is not necessarily to criticise the works as art works but rather as theoretical bases. The confusion of logical typing or meta-levels that this work displays gives rise to a neuroticism in the works as theory, in that the theory serves to disavow (as a mode of defence) aspects of the art works. The constant lure of the discourse of the medium will be the central concern of this article. It poses problems for artists and theorists alike.

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Recent work on a psycho-analytic theory of film appears to be applicable to video, several articles about which have appeared in *SCREEN* magazine, notably Christian Metz's 'Imaginary Signifier'.³ The augmentation of semiotic theory by psycho-analytic theory has revitalised semiotics after a certain impasse, its value having been recognised by the Tel Quel group in Paris, who have paid particular attention to the Freudian tradition as presented by the aphoristic and hermetic work of Jacques Lacan of the Ecole Freudienne. In an article in the *Times Literary*

Supplement⁴ Julia Kristeva presented her notion of semanalysis:

'The theory of meaning now stands at a cross-roads: either it will remain an attempt at formalising meaning systems by increasing sophistication of the logico-mathematical tools which enable it to formulate models on the basis of a conception (already rather dated) of meaning as the act of a *transcendental ego*, cut off from its body, its unconscious and also its history; or else it will attune itself to the theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) and go on to attempt to specify the types of operation characteristic of the two sides of this split; thereby exposing them to those forces extraneous to the logic of the systematic; exposing them, that is to say, on the one hand, to bio-physiological processes (themselves already inescapably part of the signifying processes; what Freud labelled "drives"), and, on the other hand, to social constraints (family structures, modes of production, etc.).' The semiotic tradition now referred to as classical semiotics has in this case shifted emphasis from the transcendental subject towards the divided subject and the transgression of systematicity.

The application of psycho-analytic theory to a sign system hinges on the subject's relation to language and the symbolic function. Lacan's Symbolic order is derived from Lévi-Strauss's formulation of the symbolic function, which is held to be a fundamental structure of the human mind.

The unconscious 'is reducible to a function – the symbolic function, which no doubt is specifically human, and which is carried out according to the same laws among all men, and actually corresponds to the aggregate of these laws'.⁵

'Every culture can be considered as an ensemble or set of symbolic systems, amongst which the most important are: language, marriage-rules, economic relationships, art, science and religion.'⁶

A psycho-analytic reading of video therefore attempts to explain video as a sign system in terms of a symbolic function, by reference to the psycho-analytic theory of inter and intra-subjective communication.

'Psycho-analysis will not lay down a scientific grounding for its theory except by formalising in an adequate fashion the essential dimensions of its experience which, along with the historical theory of the symbol, are: intersubjective logic and the temporality of the subject.'⁷ It is an attempt to discover how we speak it and how it speaks us.

In this article I will concentrate on the work of Jacques Lacan with particular reference to the 'Imaginary', not only in an attempt to avoid the most phallogocentric⁸ aspects of the 'Symbolic' but also because my thesis is that much video art is in a state of Imaginary regression. It is arguable that the concept of the Imaginary is in itself the construct of a pathological epistemology,⁹ and the 'psychic causality'¹⁰ of the mirror phase, its independence of socialisation, should be examined more closely.

The birth of video art was made possible by the sudden availability of cheap video equipment of technological simplicity and sturdiness which was readily portable. This widespread availability has been one of the major reasons for a lack of institutionalisation in terms of prescribed modes or usage. Although it is possible to speak of elementary video codes, the structuring of the syntagm is not so much characterised by conventions or types of usages as by a kind of expedience or faithfulness to use. For instance, it is almost impossible to categorise video shots (extract syntagmatic units and establish paradigmatic relations) for the simple reason that the lack of complex editing equipment has in itself made extremely long running shots a necessity, and the camera is very often totally stationary (in some cases because the making of the tape involves the artist alone working as a 'performer'), or simply 'follows the action'. The characteristic focus pull at the end of a zoom is also a result of the difficulties of editing rehearsed shots together, rather than the conscious or unconscious use of a video

convention. The use of long shot is limited because of the medium's lack of definition.

A limited categorisation would be possible within a genre (say the work of one artist), but the constant pointing-back from usage determined by convention, to use determined by technological constraints; locates the imprint of the Law¹¹ in the relations between human beings and their machines and in the transforms of reproduction.¹² The absence of complex filmic structuring becomes a significant absence signifying, on the level of connotation, 'video-arness'. This is one of the clearest distinctions between video and television apart from the subject-matter and the viewing context.¹³

Many theories of a medium attempt to isolate a particular mode of signification, a relation between the signifier and the signified appropriate to that medium alone. (Consider the art school criticism of 'literariness' levelled at a painter). I limit my approach to the video signifier not in an attempt to 'reveal' a 'matched' signified, but rather to suggest why an infatuation with the signifier leads to an inter and intra-subjective conflict so often evident in video art.

'And one will fail to even keep the question in view as long as one has not got rid of the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified, or better, that the signifier has to answer for its existence in the name of any signification whatsoever'.¹⁴ This is not a nosographic approach, nor an explication of psycho-analytic theory. It does not attempt a textual study of a video work or genre.

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Lacan first presented the 'mirror phase' and the Imaginary order as a psycho-analytic 'stage' at the International Congress of Psycho-Analysis at Marienbad in 1949. The most readily available account of the mirror phase, Lacan's 'The Mirror-phase as formative of the Function of the I', was published in *New Left Review* 51 (1968). Citing work by Charlotte Bühler, Elsa Köhler and the Chicago school of psychology on transitivity, Lacan proposes a dramatic event which takes place between the ages of six and eighteen months in the form of a primary identification with the image of the self. He describes a situation in which the child in a state of dependency (lack of motor co-ordination) and incomplete neuro-physiological development (the result of what Lacan terms 'a specific prematurity of birth') perceives itself as a gestalt in a mirror, as a harmonic and unified image of an anticipated maturity. The ego is consequently precipitated as an Imaginary construct, as a misconstruction, alienating the subject in his/her own image. The oscillation inherent in this situation (the self is always another, the other is always the self), snares the subject in a constant search for a lost self (the anterior state of asubjectivity). Laplanche and Pontalis in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* suggest that the Imaginary involves a 'sort of coalescence of the signifier with the signified'.

It seems fairly apparent that much video art is entrenched in the Imaginary, not only in the everyday sense of fantasy but also in the Lacanian sense of dualisms, oppositions, anguished searches for self-realisation and nostalgia for a lost self. 'When the camera is on me I am more than myself; I am myself and my complement'.¹⁵ 'I have a series of video tapes SELF IDENTITY in which I talk to myself in video'.¹⁶

Artists frequently refer to video as a mirror: 'You search your approach in the mirror for some truth about how you appear in the world'.¹⁷ 'Here is an example showing how a video tape, used as a mirror, becomes necessary too. It would have been impractical to film such a situation with a movie camera, since the presence of a cameraman would have been embarrassing'.¹⁸ Such notions of the nature of selfhood have much in common with Sartre's transcendental ego,¹⁹ that aspect of self which can be examined as an object of

consciousness.

Mirrors frequently appear in video tapes, not only demonstrating this dialogue with the self but also constituting a metaphor for the duality of self, as witnessed in the taping session when the image being taped is available on a monitor. Cameras and mixers equipped with mirror reversal and image combination facilities allow for the making of complex electronic mirrors, where a present self interacts with the image of one or many 'past' selves. The examples are numerous, including: *Duet* (1972) by Joan Jonas in which the artist howls at her pre-recorded monitor image, and *Left Side, Right Side* (1972) which explores the relations between video's non-reversed image and the mirror's reversed image; Vito Acconci's *Centres* (1971) in which the artist points at his own monitor image, and *Recording Studio from Air Time* (1973) in which he attempts to view himself as another by looking in a mirror, 'seeing himself' in the same way that the woman he is thinking about does; Lynda Benglis's *On-Screen* (1972), *Document* (1972) and *Now* (1973), which all involve the interaction of many layers of self-portraits; and Hermine Freed's *Two Faces* (1973) in which Freed confronts her own image.

Video's possibility of instant playback, in comparison with the long delays of film processing, has been remarked upon repeatedly by artists as being an important factor in their work, and it would not seem too extreme to describe this quality of image translation and re-presentation as having the 'insidious capturing effect' (captation) described by Lacan as appropriate to the mirror phase. This specular identification with the image of the self is, of course, very different from the child's first confrontation with its image in the mirror, as it is that experience which inaugurates an awareness of selfhood, the precipitation of the *je*,²⁰ from a state of undifferentiated asubjectivity. Later confrontations between egos and alter egos constitute a secondary identification, a ritual-like repetitive re-miscognition serving to affirm the notions of selfhood arising after the mirror phase.

The video system is a very new and different mirror, not only presenting a non-reversed image but also allowing for an observation of the self which is not spatially or temporally fixed, all the more effectively promoting the reification of the self. Video's power as a mirror lies in this novelty, and many of the works of Dan Graham and Peter Campus have consisted of simple installations exploring these aspects of the video mirror. The suggestion that these aspects of video can be used to achieve a hitherto impossible subjectivity, a therapeutic heightened self-awareness, is as suspicious as ego psychology. These explorations usually lead to an indulgent video narcissism and a chasing of the subject of the Cogito.

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It was the discovery of narcissism that led Freud to postulate a stage between auto-erotism (the satisfaction of a component instinct without resort to an external object) and object love proper. In this stage the subject 'begins by taking himself, his own body, as his love object'.²¹ Freud links the birth of narcissism with the formation of the ego (in order that it be taken as love object) – the taking place of 'a new psychical action',²² and with the neuro-physiological development of the cerebral cortex, the 'cortical mirror'. The relations between the ego, narcissism, notions of selfhood and the constitution of the bodily schema, are all tied together in the primary identification of the mirror phase as the internalisation of a rivalrous relationship. If the mirror phase is the primary identification then it is also 'the root-stock for secondary identifications'.²³ The identification with and introjection of the self as other marks the emergence of narcissism (secondary narcissism in the later Freud). The taking of the image of the self as love object leads to a dual relation of aggression and love, aggression being closely linked to identification particularly in the case of paranoia. As

Lacan pointed out in his doctoral thesis,²⁴ where he demonstrated that the persecutors of a young paranoiac were identical with the images of the ego-idea (for which the ideal-ego of the mirror phase is a precursor), the other we fear can frequently be the other we love.

For the video artist observing him/herself on the video monitor there is a repetition of the primary identification of the mirror phase in the form of a secondary identification, and/or an identification with the absent audience member through an identification with the look of the camera (fantasy). The artist is consequently prone to make a narcissistic identification with the body image (a withdrawal of object cathexis and a surging of ego cathexis), and a masochistic identification with the other for whom he/she is an object of voyeurism. According to Freud, the sado-masochistic relationship consisted of a dialectic of activity and passivity, identification with the other transforming sadism into masochism and vice versa.²⁵ It is this play of activity and passivity which also describes the identifications of the audience member. Identification with the camera (which in many tapes seems to stare at the artist) places the audience member in the role of voyeur, ultimately a position of sadism; identification with the artist placing him/her in a position of masochism. These identifications are somewhat paralleled by the process of image production. The camera as a kind of monstrous all-seeing eye 'introjects' the image of the artist and the monitor 'projects' towards the audience members, spraying an image at them.

Underlying these identifications, which steep both artist and audience in the Imaginary, is the streaming of unconscious desire towards a lacked and unattainable object.²⁶ The impossibility of the satisfaction of desire in the Lacanian sense is explained by his reduction of desire to the impulse to destroy the self or other as independent subject. Desire is directed towards what the other desires (desire to take the place of the other in desire). And video work is most suited to be the object and catalyst of desire, in that it is the presence of an absence, 'a lack which is brought into being'.²⁷ 'When the world comes to us only as an image, it is half-present and half-absent, in other words, phantom-like; and we too are like phantoms.'²⁸ As a recording its lifetime is short, and every play brings it closer to its eventual disintegration into electronic noise. In its Symbolic mode it is the re-presentation of 'another scene', and in this respect is similar to the dream thoughts or unconscious messages subjected to the major mechanisms of the unconscious: displacement (in time and space) and condensation (it appears laconic in relation to the meanings for which it can 'stand'). It is also an object of the drive to see (scopophilia) and the drive to hear (pulsion invocante), the former being one of the component sexual drives described in the 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality',²⁹ where each drive is assigned a specific source. In 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes'³⁰ Freud is concerned with demonstrating how a component drive can be transformed, and he distinguishes the auto-erotic drives from those which are from the beginning directed towards the object. These include sadism (its source being the musculature) and scopophilia (its source being the eye). It is only this latter type of drive which can be modified by a 'reversal into the opposite' – the reversal of sadism into masochism and voyeurism into exhibitionism, both involving a change of object, the 'turning around upon the subject's own self'.

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The situation in which the tape is seen obviously plays an important part in the way the tape functions as an object of voyeurism for the audience member. It is interesting that the lighting conditions necessary for the making and viewing of video tape almost reverse those of filming. Filming requires high levels of lighting while projection requires darkness; video taping often takes place in low lighting conditions but can be viewed in a

brightly lit room. Video tapes are in fact usually shown in a dimly lit room, probably in an attempt to de-emphasise the monitor (a most anomalous object), but unfortunately reminiscent of 1950s-style television viewing. The connotations of the sitting room, the paradigm viewing situation of the television image, cause video artists enormous anxieties (which a regression of images of the monitor can only amplify). And artists have become most devious in their attempts to prevent these connotations foregrounding.

Vito Acconci has been particularly aware of these problems, and has achieved a high level of medium transparency by constructing unusual viewing situations and engrossing the audience member in a seductively direct discourse. In an installation version of *Command Performance*, shown at 112 Greene St., New York in January 1974, Acconci positioned a video monitor showing a pre-recorded tape on the floor in front of a spotlit stool. The seated spectator's image was transferred live by means of a camera to a monitor behind him/her, in front of which a seating rug provided a viewing position for other audience members. In this configuration the single spectator watching the tape is placed in a position similar to Acconci's when the pre-recorded tape was made, he/she literally being 'in the spotlight'. The viewing situation consequently draws the spectator into the work, in that he/she becomes an object of voyeurism for other spectators in the same way that Acconci is an object of voyeurism for him/her.

Such viewing situations promote voyeurism even more effectively than the cinema, where spectators isolated in darkness are only the subjects of voyeurism. To be both subject and object of voyeurism is also a characteristic of many live installation works. As Metz has pointed out, scopophilia and the pulsion invocante are both particularly dependent upon the maintaining of an actual distance between the subject and the object.

'Lisa Bear: Do you want to keep a distance between you and the audience?

Vito Acconci: Yeah. (Sounds doubtful).

LB: Or do you want to change the relationship?

VA: It's more that I want the relationship to be changed, but I'm not sure how . . . I think I mean something like this: I want the ground for these pieces to be contact between me and passers-by, but I want to change the mode of my presence. That's why there's been an urge recently to leave out actual performance. I want my presence to become so unfocused that contact with it becomes difficult . . . rather, so that physical contact with me becomes almost a false problem'.³¹

In video tape, as in film, this symbolic distance from the desired object is augmented by the spatio-temporal recording distance. The restraints upon voyeurism are therefore lessened, as the look is sanctioned (the object is there to be seen, it is being displayed) and the subject of the look cannot be challenged by the object of the look. 'When the world is perceivable but no more than that, *ie* not subject to our action, we are transformed into eavesdroppers and Peeping Toms'.³² Unlike film, which places the audience member within the space activated between the image producer (projector) and the screen, video is produced within another space (the cathode ray tube) and the spectator is always on the outside looking in. Voyeuristic excitement can be heightened by the look of the artist - video works often break the long-standing rule of the performance arts, that one should not establish eye-to-eye contact with the audience.

Another aspect of the video image which makes it an ideal object of the scopophilic drive is its lack of definition, the medium itself maintaining the most fixed viewing distance of any time/space art form. If the image is approached it disintegrates into a blurring of electronics; as an object of desire it is elusive. This lack of definition becomes a titillation, a withholding of the possibility of total visual identification and a denial of the fusion of the look and its object. Much the same conditions hold for the taping itself. Camera work

tends to be close-in, as evidenced by TV camera jargon (head shot, medium shot). According to the principle of the 'reversal into the opposite' these conditions obtain for both artist and audience, the making and the viewing of the tape stimulating the projection of repressed desire in a complex and antagonistic conflict.

'Step into the spotlight, that's where you belong . . . like a little dog, jump up, beg . . . you need me, you have to depend on me . . . yes, my little dancing bear, now you're there where I used to be. I don't have to be there any more . . . wiggle your prick, now it's your turn, you'll play the fool for them now . . . you'll show them you're stronger than they are, that's what I couldn't do, you won't betray how much you hate them'.³³

The major problem for the video artist is to direct his/her discourse towards the recognition of Truth rather than towards the miscognition of Knowledge,³⁴ or, to put it another way, to produce a Symbolic object with a Symbolic function.³⁵ The Imaginary is a constant lure and at the level of the parole vide, the self is always another. It is the Imaginary that serves to block intersubjectivity, the parole vide being a discourse between egos which serves to mask the unconscious discourse of the parole pleine. Here I am obviously considering the 'therapeutic' effect of the work, but this effect holds for artist and audience alike. 'To write the history of oneself is to write the confession of the deepest part of our neighbours' souls as well'.³⁶ As the aim of the psycho-analytic session is the radical intersubjectivity of the Symbolic, the dispelling of the mirages of the Imaginary and the curative recognition of unconscious desire, it would seem relevant to examine the psycho-analytic notion of transference.

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The relationship between analyst and analysand commences in the Imaginary as the analysand projects onto the analyst his/her alienated ego. The analyst, by means of silence, refuses to respond at the level of the analysand's demand, eventually becoming the Other (the collective unconscious) with whom the barred unconscious subject of the analysand is communicating in the language of unconscious desire. This relationship is one of Symbolic exchange based on recognition (Truth), while the Imaginary relationship is one of opposition and rivalry taking the form of a constant attempt to take the place of the other, based on miscognition of the mirror phase (Knowledge). It is difficult to consider the communications of a video tape as transference (this problem has already arisen in the application of psycho-analytic theory to literature), and one has to establish to whom and for whom the artist is addressing his/her discourse. For the artist the audience is only symbolically present as the camera, and for the audience the artist is only symbolically present as the inscription on the monitor screen. The video tape shares many of the characteristics of the text in its trace aspects, but is not as conducive to extensive 'secondary revision'. It is conceivable that the artist addresses him/herself to the absent audience as Other, the silent camera standing in for the silent analyst. But the possibility of censorship (decision to withhold the tape), and the fixing or inscribing of the Word, mitigates the radical intersubjectivity of the Symbolic. 'When the world speaks to us, without our being able to speak to it, we are deprived of speech, and hence condemned to be unfree'.³⁷

A possible escape from the Imaginary could be seen to lie in self-analysis. In 1910 Freud remarked: 'If I am asked how one can become a psycho-analyst, I reply, "By studying one's own dreams"'.³⁸ But he later declared: 'My self-analysis is still interrupted and I have realised the reason. I can only analyse myself with the help of knowledge obtained objectively (like an outsider). Genuine self-analysis is impossible; otherwise there would be no illness'.³⁹ Self-analysis has been commonly seen as a narcissistic resistance to psycho-analysis, missing out on the essential aspect of the

treatment' which is transference.

My intention is not to dismiss video as an unavoidably Imaginary medium, but rather to point to some of the nets it can cast. It has been suggested by both artists and psycho-therapists that the use of video can lead to an 'authentic' awareness of self, but its potential strengths lie in its narrative core (in the sense of the subject's position in respect to the Word rather than in the diegetic).

'This relationship between man and machine will come to be regulated by both psychological and psycho-technical means; the necessity for this will become increasingly urgent in the organization of society.

If, in contrast to these psychotechnical procedures, the psycho-analytical dialogue enables us to re-establish a more human relationship, is not the form of this dialogue determined by an impasse, that is to say by the resistance of the ego?

Indeed, is not this dialogue one in which the one who knows admits by his technique that he can free his patient from the shackles of his ignorance only by leaving all the talking to him?⁴⁰

¹ 'Some Reflections on the Ego', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 34 (1953) pp. 11–17. (Address to the British Psychoanalytical Society, 22 May 1953.)

² See for example Allan Kaprow, 'Video Art: Old Wine, New Bottle', *Artforum*, June 1974.

³ *SCREEN* magazine, Vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 1975.

⁴ 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *TLS*, 12 October 1973.

⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' in *Structural Anthropology*, Penguin University Books, 1972, p. 203.

⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss' in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, Paris: PUF, 1966, p. xix.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, 'The Function of Language in Psycho-analysis' in *The Language of the Self* by Anthony Wilden, Delta Books, NY, 1975, p. 51.

⁸ It is not without hesitation that I propose a psycho-analytic reading of video art, because the history of the theory is so strongly entrenched in pseudo-science as the rationalisation of prejudice and, to use Gregory Bateson's terminology, the construction of complex theoretical double binds. The phallogocentrism of psycho-analytic theory should by now no longer need pointing out (but unfortunately it does). The major problem lies in the confusion of the ontological and the ontic – or the imputing of an ontology to the ontic – and the recent interest in psycho-analysis by feminists suggests that this confusion will soon be laid bare. Lacan's theories are particularly impervious to contextualisation with their refusal of a meta-language. A law which validates itself always leads to paradox (Russell), and Freud himself was aware of the problems of a theory which allows for no possibility of falsification (Popper).

⁹ See 'The Ideology of Opposition and Identity' in Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure*, Tavistock Publications, 1972.

¹⁰ *NLR*.

¹¹ That which the Symbolic order is based upon. Comparable to the primary law of Strauss's symbolic function – the prohibition of incest.

¹² See Umberto Eco on 'codes of recognition' in 'The Articulation of Cinematic Codes', *Cinemantics*, 1 January 1970.

¹³ See David Antin, 'Television; Video's Frightful Parent', *Artforum*, December 1975.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious', in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrman, Anchor Books, NY, 1970, p. 106.

¹⁵ Bruce Kurtz, 'Shooting Star', *Art-Rite 7*, 1974.

¹⁶ Taka Jimura, 'The Question', *ibid*.

¹⁷ Eleanor Antin, 'Dialogue with a Medium', *ibid*.

¹⁸ Jean Dupuy, 'The Dipthong I', *ibid*.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Transcendence of the Ego'.

²⁰ *NLR*.

²¹ 'Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia' (1911) in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Standard Edition)* ed. James Strachey, 24 vols, Hogarth Press, 1953, XII, pp. 60–61.

²² 'On Narcissism: an Introduction', 1914, *SE*, XIV, pp. 75–76.

²³ *NLR*.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, 'De la Psychose Paranoïaque dans ses Rapports avec la Personnalité', Paris Le François, 1932 (Thèse pour le doctorat en médecine, Diplôme d'état).

²⁵ *SE*, VII, p. 159.

²⁶ The relation between drive, desire and the object has a complex history. The Freudian term 'Trieb' introduced in the 'Three Essays on Sexuality' has frequently been translated as 'instinct'; but although it is a bio-energetic concept with the sense of 'heaving' or 'pressure' it has little to do with 'instinct' as behaviour determined by heredity. (Trieb is hereafter translated as 'drive'). In 'Instincts and their Vicissitudes', Freud also introduced the terms 'source', 'aim' and 'object'. Freud describes the sexual drive as labile denying the specificity of its aim (sexual union) and its source (the genitals) as commonly thought. The sexual drive is said to consist of component drives (polymorphous perversity), associated with various erotogenic zones (sources) only later to be organised and assigned to one erotogenic zone and a particular mode of object relation which is determined by the subject's history. (The early aim of the component drive is the release of somatic tension at the source). The sexual drives are distinguished from the

drives of self-preservation by the specificity of the latter's aim and objects (eg hunger – food). The sexual drives are accommodating with respect to their aims and objects. Later work distinguishes the part-object from the love object by associating the former with its closer relation to drive and direct satisfaction, and by associating the latter with its relation to the total ego. The term 'wunsch', usually translated as 'wish' or 'desire', is described in the theory of dreams in the following manner. Need (drive) achieves satisfaction through a specific object (eg food). The experience of this satisfaction becomes a mnemonic image associated with the memory trace of the need's excitation. When the need reoccurs the mnemonic image is re-catheted, evoking the perception of the earlier satisfaction. The wish is consequently bound to the memory trace, and attempts to satisfy it result in a hallucinatory reproduction of the earlier perception (fantasy). The object of the wish is consequently bound to the signs which constitute it.

Lacan uses a genetic viewpoint of the object relation in the mirror phase, and his later work on a 'logique du signifiant' is concerned with the child's earliest relations to objects. The early theory is more or less a re-presentation of the Hegelian theory of desire, as the desire for the object of the other's desire, and here the object is 'l'autre'. The 'logique du signifiant' develops the Kleinian theory of the part-object and establishes a relation with 'l'objet a' at a much more primordial stage. The part-object is a symbolic object mediating the relations between mother and child. For the object to be constituted it must be discovered to be absent or lacking, and from this time the satisfaction of need does not do away with what has become the memory of the need and the lacked object. The part-object therefore conveys a lack, and its importance in the genesis of desire is stressed in 'La Relation d'objet et les structures freudiennes'. (*Bulletin de Psychologie*, XI/1, Sept. '57, pp. 31–34). Lacan interprets the early speech sounds of Freud's grandson as re-presenting the earlier discovery of the opposition of presence and absence by means of phonological oppositions. The lack of object becomes the gap in the chain of signifiers which the subject attempts to fill at the level of the signifier. 'It is the connection between signifier and signifier which alone permits the elision in which the signifier inserts the lack of being into the object relation, using the reverberating character of meaning to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports' ('The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious').

Consequently discourse becomes a movement towards something and is as governed by the lack, as is desire. The upshot of this reworking of the theory of desire is the distinction between need, demand and desire. Desire is 'an effect in the subject of that condition which is imposed upon him by the existence of the discourse, to make his need pass through the defiles of the signifier' ('Direction of the Cure'). The acquisition of language allows for the conscious demand (ultimately for love), which is to be distinguished from need in that its object is non-essential. Unconscious desire as a lack which cannot be filled is engendered by the detouring of need (which can be satisfied) through demand (which cannot). Desire is introduced into being by language itself, lies out of consciousness (unconscious) and is irreducible to an object of need (its recognition constitutes the 'cure').

²⁷ 'Manque à être'. It is the representation of an absence which is exchanged within the Symbolic order.

²⁸ Gunther Andrews, 'The Phantom World of TV' in *Media for Our Time*, ed. Dennis De Nitto, Holt Rinehart Winston, NY, 1971, p. 248.

²⁹ *SE*, VII, p. 125.

³⁰ *SE*, XIV, p. 111.

³¹ Vito Acconci, 'Fragile as a Sparrow but Tough', Interview with Liza Bear in *Avalanche*, May 1974.

³² Andrews (op. cit).

³³ From the text of the video tape *Command Performance* by Vito Acconci.

³⁴ Truth is not Knowledge but recognition, mental 'illness' being a refusal to recognise truth. Human knowledge is 'paranoiac', 'it constitutes the ego and objects under attributes of permanence, identity and substantiality, in short as entities or "things" . . .' (J. Lacan, 'L'Aggressivité en Psychanalyse' in *Écrits*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1966, p. 104.)

³⁵ The only release from the Imaginary is to be found in the intersubjectivity of language, which is acquired from the Other (the locus of the Word). The subject is constituted as an object in the Symbolic from before his/her birth, and has to find his/her place in it. The Symbolic is governed by language (which is not to be confused with 'any semiology more or less hypothetically generalised'), and it re-presents the other orders (the Imaginary and the Real). It is the domain of overdetermination and the symptom. In the Symbolic Lacan asserts the primacy of the signifier, and any correspondence between a signifier and a signified (as dismissed by the extension of Saussure's diacritical theory of meaning) is seen as an impregnation by the Imaginary (resemblance, correspondence). It was Strauss's concept of the unconscious as the locus of a set of rules in some way similar to the rules governing language, which provided the main source of Lacan's slogan 'the unconscious is structured like a language'.

³⁶ Footnote to 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious', p. 136.

³⁷ Andrews (op. cit).

³⁸ 'Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis', 1910, *SE*, XI, p. 33.

³⁹ *SE*, I, p. 271.

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, 'Some Reflections on the Ego' (*ibid*).