RADICAL HOME

CONTAINER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT,
SEDUCING THE GHOST THROUGH
THE LENS OF PERFORMANCE AND VIDEO

DOMINIQUE ZELTZMAN
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imda

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Intermedia and Digital Arts:
UMBC Visual Arts

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Lisa Moren
Graduate Program Director, IMDA
Professor, Visual Arts

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DIRECTED BY
Kathy O’Dell, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Visual Arts
Art History and Museum Studies
Special Assistant to the Dean for Education & Arts Partnerships

BOOK AND COVER DESIGN
Guenet Abraham
Associate Professor, Graphic Design
Visual Arts
FOR
MY
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RADICAL HOME
ABSTRACT

*Radical Home* is a video installation in which the viewer is surrounded by life-size images of a female figure creeping, crawling, crouching, scurrying, and sliding along the room’s perimeter. She is set against a background of alternating banal domestic scenes and landscapes taken from small segments of *New York Times* front-page color photographs. On a fourth wall play three 10'x18' layered videos: a woman standing, squatting, searching, and dancing alone; a Baltimore City formstone row house with an occasional passing pedestrian or car; and a sidewalk scrolling by to the sound of footsteps on concrete and the interminable voice of a child saying “Mama?” The piece is inspired by examples of containment in our personal and public lives. In this thesis, I explore the concept of the container as a social construct. I also question the differences between live performance and that made for video.
FIG. 1
Dominique Zeltzman
Delritustrata
2011
As a little girl, I had recurring dreams in which I would seduce a ghost to disarm it. I knew that through objectification I could minimize another's power and maximize my own. By proactively objectifying myself, I could beat the perpetrator to it and reclaim control.

One evening in 2010, feeling particularly depressed and overwhelmed by the sink of dishes that waxed like the moon, I picked up my point-and-shoot camera and took a photo of the pile (figure 1).

I took those pictures every day for a year. It was exhilarating to manipulate something sinister into an object of beauty, for in my state that is how powerful the dishes had become.

I used the opportunity of my M.F.A. project to research the concepts of objectification and power through the metaphor of the container as a social construct. In the following pages I explore this idea, as well as the legitimacy of video performance versus live performance, and the use of quotidian content, extended duration, and endurance in my work.
Dominique Zeltzman
Radical Home
2014
video stills
1

CONTAINERS

The container is both a form of oppression and a set of borders we create for ourselves. Like a good parent, such an enclosure functions as a tether that allows one to wander but not stray. We begin to categorize early. Every faux-brick cardboard block that friends and I used to build cities that covered our nursery school floor is a model for each of our personas—for taxonomies of gender, class, race, religion, sexual orientation, dis/ability, education, political affiliation, and citizenship; and for practices of border control and punishment. I have a photograph of me at age four,
standing on a stack of these blocks. The boys allowed me to do so because I was wearing a long dress—blue skirt, red top with white stars. My friend in pants was not granted this privilege. By creating such classifications and parameters, we can begin to make sense of what would otherwise be chaos. Through sequestration we at once imprison and protect, for there can be safety in isolation.

Around the time of the dish photos, I began to notice I was living two separate lives, in two separate containers. I had dual personas, both of them imposters. I was a new single mother and a corporate administrator and could not relate to either role. I dressed and performed the part of sexy femme executive by day and cruddy eccentric domestic by night. While a boundary between professional and private life is common, I was uncertain whether others in the same bifurcated situation felt as artificial as I did.

At age seventeen, I worked at a health food store deli. When a regular customer approached me leering, “Mmmmm I like it. Very fresh,” the owner replied, “Yes, that’s our new girl. We like her.” I was instantly made aware that I was both physically trapped between the wall and the counter, and placed in the container of desirable virgin. In “Gawking, Gaping, Staring,” writer and activist Eli Clare discusses breaking out of this type of imposed sex and gender trap by reversing
the gaze. “These days I practice gawking at the gawkers and flirting as hard as I know how. The first is an act of resistance; the second, an act of pride.”¹ Like the girl-child of my dreams exploiting the archetypal temptress, Clare employs seduction as a way to reclaim the containers he has been put in—queer, transfag, crip, freak, sinner, dyke, femme, sex object, whore, and so forth.²

Temple Grandin, an inventor and scholar with autism, describes physical and emotional experiences that humans, and in particular those with autism, share with animals. In her book *Thinking In Pictures: And Other Reports from My Life with Autism*, she explains how the container is used to provide physical comfort and sanctity in traumatic situations. Early in her career she encountered a device called a cattle squeeze chute, which was made to hold cows in place during vaccinations. She noticed how calm the animals became as the sides of the chute gently pressed on their bodies. While she had always craved pressure stimulation, hugs and any touch triggered fear and flight. One day after a severe panic attack, she asked her aunt to put her in the cattle chute. Thirty minutes later she was ready to be released and remained calm and serene for the first time. And so she built a squeeze machine for herself.

Grandin describes how people with more severe autism feel bombarded with noise and overstimulation.

² A similar reclamation of power occurs in the “hysterical” patients of nineteenth-century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. The women were suspected of acting out their symptoms. By embodying and exaggerating the characters and characteristics placed upon them, they took control of their own containment and objectification. Ulrich Baer, “Photography and Hysterics: Toward a Politics of the Flash,” in *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 30.
Much of their time is spent trying to figure out patterns to make sense of the chaos around them. For example, Donna Williams, the author of *Somebody Somewhere*, would succumb to the noise and “let her attention wander into fractured patterns, which were entertaining, hypnotic, and secure.” Williams writes, “This was the beautiful side of autism. This was the sanctuary of the prison.”

Architectural theorist Eyal Weizman indirectly refers to containers and the body while discussing national identity in his analysis of Israeli border terminals used to control the flow of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians. Travellers are literally corralled into tight turnstiles designed to prohibit the concealment of items under their clothing. In the process, heavier people, the elderly, and mothers with children are often trapped and injured. Their papers are inspected by Palestinian guards, whose presence creates the illusion of an independent nation, but the actual approval or disapproval of travel is undertaken by Israeli security on the other side of a one-way mirror. “The architecture of the terminal is designed to hide from the passengers the mechanism of power and control altogether.” The identity of the parental colonizers, in other words, is invisible. I would venture to say the terminals, though causing physical distress, serve to create a simulacrum of political autonomy, and in this way they offer the

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notion of comfort and even parenting addressed at the beginning of this chapter. The terminal is a container that at once imprisons and liberates, for a feeling of independence can be comforting, even if it is a fantasy.

Containers abound in the art world in the form of material constraints that can be manipulated to affect the viewer’s experience. Proscenium stages create a box for the audience within which the choreographer manipulates lighting and blocking to control the viewer’s perspective and prescribe mood. Cultural mores mandate that theatergoers sit through performances to their conclusion, allowing the artist to create a temporal or narrative arc that engages the audience. An art gallery provides more freedom for visitors who can wander, crouch down or stand on tiptoe for a closer look, make critical comments aloud, leave after a minute or dawdle for hours. However, through the creation of enclosed installation spaces that minimize distractions of other artworks or guests, the visual artist, similar to the choreographer, can establish a particular atmosphere for viewing. This is what I attempt to accomplish in Radical Home for the purpose of bringing the gallery visitor’s attention to the container itself—as both a material reality and a social construct, central to which is the power of vision.

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7 As opposed to theater in the round where the audience surrounds the performers, proscenium theaters are more traditionally structured where the audience is limited to viewing only the front of the stage.
In *The Sweatshop* (2004), artist Kader Attia explored the concept of containment physically and figuratively, using a shipping container as both an installation space and a metaphoric receptacle of identity (figures 2 and 3). He outfitted the container like a store, a place meant to distract people from their routine thoughts and to focus instead on objects of desire, imagining themselves part of an entitled class. In *The Sweatshop*, Attia’s own Halal brand products, designed to comment on the containers of consumerism and religion, are displayed in sparkling untouched purity, obscuring thoughts of the sweaty physical labor that created them. But through a red translucent curtain that divides the container, one can see a makeshift sweatshop where illegal workers from Haiti and Cuba sew the store’s merchandise.

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8 Part of the “Art Positions” container project at Art Basel Miami in 2004.
9 As an Algerian raised in both Algeria and the suburbs of Paris, Attia is interested in issues of belonging among young Muslims in Paris and the influence of Western ideas and capitalism on the East. Tami Katz-Freiman and Jean-Louis Pradel, *Kader Attia*, ed.
10 Attia designed the Halal brand to comment satirically on continuing traditional religious practices while participating in Western culture. Halal means lawful or permissible under Islamic law. It is similar to the Jewish word, kosher.
Introduced to a theatrical simulation of another kind of container—the world of forced and underpaid pattern cutters and machine operators (mostly women)—visitors are reminded of the hands that craft products bought in a "search to belong." Here I am speaking from the perspective of the viewer, but as I discuss in Chapter 5, what of the experience of the performer? I would surmise that the ones who sew under the gaze of the art-going set get a sense of power, for to watch oneself being seen reverses a dynamic of control.

11 Katz-Freiman and Pradel, Kader Attia, 022.
2

RADICAL HOME

As the idea of *Radical Home* evolved, I was reminded of two books I read in the 1980s: Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Both books make reference to containers that provide a sense of safety and freedom, while paradoxically imposing confinement.

“Containment” was the name the United States gave its chief Cold War policy, which fostered strategies for keeping Soviet influence at bay after WWII.\(^\text{12}\) Bradbury’s story is often interpreted as a critique of

one such strategy—censorship, deployed especially at the behest of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s—and as an analysis of our lost connection with humanity and community. Censorship can be likened to the incarcerating/protecting attributes of the container, in this case ostensibly shielding Americans from Soviet influence during the “Red Scare,” but ultimately imprisoning the mind. Instead of forging personal relationships, characters in Bradbury’s book become friends with television personalities known as “family” with whom they interact in “parlors”—rooms made of wall-sized TV screens. Watching his wife in the parlor, the protagonist Montag reflects on the televised announcer: “He was a friend, no doubt of it, a good friend.”

13 “Montag turned and looked at his wife who was sitting in the middle of the parlor talking to an announcer, who in turn was talking to her. Mrs. Montag, [the announcer] was saying. This that and the other. ‘Mrs. Montag. Something else and still another. The converter attachment, which had cost them one hundred dollars, automatically supplied her name whenever the announcer addressed his anonymous audience, leaving a blank where the proper syllables could be filled in. A special spot-wave scrambler also caused his televised image, in the area immediately around his lips, to mouth the vowels and consonants beautifully.” Ray Bradbury, "Fahrenheit 451" (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1953), 64.

The book’s characters seem to find respite and a sort of privacy in simulated company. I like the idea of
entering Bradbury’s parlors, spaces where I would be surrounded and consumed by life-size images of people with whom I could talk, laugh, and carry on. This TV room might provide the best aspect of a container—a meditative virtual space into which one can escape everyday thoughts.
The narrator in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a writer confined to a room upon orders of her doctor husband, who feels that complete rest, involving no access to writing materials or intellectual activity, will cure her nervous condition. She begins to imagine a figure within the ornate wallpaper—a woman who creeps around the edges of the room—and sees herself as that figure. I have always related to the heroine who creeps: “Here I can creep smoothly on the floor,” the narrator writes, “and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.”

In the initial image, she is trapped, a victim of her husband’s control and her own (alleged) mental illness. But her behavior is also a way of marking her territory, whether hers by choice or coercion, and her movement turns into a vehicle of liberation as she methodically rips down the wallpaper. “I’ve got out at last, despite you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most the paper so you can’t put me back!”

Radical Home is a 16’ x 20’ walk-in installation where the viewer is surrounded by video and still images projected across three walls (figures 4 and 5). Landscapes of typically unnoticed areas in my home—the corner of a toilet, sink, and shelf with hairbrush, plug, and hair bow; the underside of a bed with the corner of a flowered sheet and blue plastic desk; and a pillow against the dark wood of the headboard—alternate with extreme close-ups of New York Times front-page color photographs: an abandoned playground with a bit of a child’s dark hair and red hair bow; a Syrian disaster scene with a silhouetted figure just inside the frame; and a blue tornado.

The drama and mystery of the Times photos contrast with the mundaneness of the domestic scenes, but the size of each brings them so far from any relatable scale, they become completely abstracted from their original meaning (See Appendix 1).
A de-saturated image of a woman in business dress—skirt and heels, hair up—appears and disappears alone and in armies of herself, sidestepping, crawling, sneaking, squatting, and dragging herself along the desert landscape of her pillow. Traversing the tricky terrain of the hairbrush, bow, and plug, she is a specter, a mouse, trapped and self-possessed at the same time. It is unclear whether she is pacing her prison or marking her territory.

Recorded questions, delivered through speakers, directly address the viewer. Among them:

What do you eat when I’m not there? Are you afraid to shower? What do you wear when you sleep? I don’t want to get old or die. Who can I tell that I don’t want to? Do your towels match? Are you reaching up her skirt? Is your mother dead? Want to come over for dinner?

Some questions are poignant, some are jarring, most are dull, and all are incongruous. Like photographs of unnoticed places in the home and photos that do not reveal their actual subjects, the unconnected questions expose their medium—words separated from content—and become a peripheral drone.
FIG. 6
Dominique Zeltzman
Fourth Wall
2014
video still
On the fourth wall is a vertical projection of a woman superimposed on the formstone-covered façade of a Baltimore row house (figure 6). The shadows in the molded concrete cast a pattern upon her body as she stands deadpan, dances to an unheard song, paces, and squats, searching the floor. An occasional car or pedestrian passes by. Overlaid on these two shots is a view of a sidewalk passing underfoot and the occasional twirl of little circling feet in shoes and pink socks. Sounds of walking are interrupted by the age-old question, “Mama?” until the repetition becomes an ambient drone. The image is mundane and cyclical, like life within the container of motherhood.
3

MY HOUSE IS MY STUDIO

The home is a radical place to make art. I make stuff when inspiration hits and am stimulated by what is immediately around me. In the words of Carrie Mae Weems, “I could actually do in my own environment whenever I chose in which ever way I wanted at this very particular spot and moment in time.” Why go outside when everything inside—my kitchen, my daughter’s bedroom, the bath—is so interesting? Marshall McLuhan addresses this appreciation for the peripheral when quoting Wyndham Lewis in *Understanding Media*. “The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed

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16 I honestly cannot remember if these are my words. I have searched the Internet without result. I am footnoting it, just in case.

history of the future, because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present.”18 And, I would add, the artist is accustomed to looking at things from new and unpredictable perspectives.

I am both confined and inspired by my position within the containers of single parenthood, relative poverty, gender roles, and the female body as object. I choose to look for the amusing parts of each condition and use them as source material.

Three of the best performances and videos I ever made were done in my kitchens at 2611 Folsom Street, San Francisco, and 3 North Rose Street, Baltimore. The first is No Ordinary Chore (2000), which explores the mental prison of suicidal ideation and the relief that comes with devising a plan of escape.

The second is *Kitchen* (2012). I hoist myself onto the table, counter, and stove, and then attempt to move around while constrained by the limited space and my yellow high heels (figure 7).

The third is *Balance* (2012) (figures 8-12). A lower leg bedecked in stockings of varied colors and high-heeled shoes stands on one foot for an extended period of time—first on the toilet, then in the kitchen sink, on the stove, on the kitchen table, and on the bed.
The verticality of the shots with the knee and thigh disappearing above the top of the frame suggests the rest of a massive and teetering woman, and infers a contrast between two containers of identity: femme drag and the domestic.
4
WAITING FOR SOMETHING TO HAPPEN

Duration requires endurance, which can induce exhaustion. An audience submits itself, voluntarily entering the container of the theater, to long periods of viewing sometimes limited action. Artists submit themselves to physical and psychological ordeals that can last days, months, or years. My videos involve endurance on both sides of the camera. Relying on long takes with no camera motion or angle modifications and with few edits, the works reveal the relative lack of activity on my part as videographer and call on viewers to wait for something to happen or change. Examples
include the two-minute image of nothing but a teetering ankle in *Balance* (2012), the quasi-pornographic poses of *Kitchen* (2012), the litany of regrets in *Sorry* (2013) (figure 13), the long-take shot of pedestrians and traffic moving past an apartment building’s façade in *Ramey* (2012) (figure 14), and the twenty-minute video loop in *Radical Home* (2014). In each piece, the viewer is challenged to face and move beyond boredom.

In “An Immense and Unexpected Field of Action: Webcams, Surveillance and Everyday Life,” J. Macgregor Wise discusses the popular fascination of webcam art on the Internet. Part of the allure of looking at something where “nothing happens most of the time,” as Daniel Palmer writes (and Wise quotes), is the expectation or hope that something will happen, eventually. Wise gives the example of Andy Warhol’s film *Empire* (1964), in which viewers are challenged to endure eight hours of a static shot of the Empire State Building without much

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19 For more on *Kitchen, Sorry, and Ramey*, see Appendices 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

FIG. 13 [top]  Dominique Zeltzman, Sorry, 2013, video still
FIG. 14 [top]  Dominique Zeltzman, Samey, 2012, video still
hope of ever seeing change except perhaps the sun rising or a pigeon passing. Warhol’s first film, *Sleep* (1963), features his friend John Giorno sleeping for 320 minutes. This film promises a bit more action—perhaps he will twitch, roll over, or snore. Also, *Sleep* provides us with an intimate look at the interior of the container (the bed and the private act of sleeping) that might be considered more intriguing than the exterior of the container (the building) and, in this way, inspires more acquiescence on the part of the viewer. “Our impatience over the speed and eventfulness of webcam images reveals as much about our own cultural presuppositions and habits,” Wise continues, as “the historical construction of attention itself.”21 Watching long takes in film requires discipline. I would suggest it provides an opportunity to meditate, slow down, and allow our thoughts to flow unnoticed.

The monotony of repetition also affects our sense of time, making moments seem longer than they really are. *Careful* (2012), a live performance in which I hold dangerous and painful poses while balancing on a six-foot aluminum ladder, also features a soundtrack of me reading a comprehensive list of the warning labels in my home (figures 15 and 16). All my endurance-oriented pieces exploit time and space in the viewer’s frame of reference, commenting on and simultaneously confronting the viewer with the psychodynamics of existing within the container of daily life.

In film, extended static shots with no voice or movement facilitate viewers’ experiences of their own associations and memories, rather than dictating a narrative. As *New York Times* film critics Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott state in their essay “In Defense of the Slow and Boring”: “Faced with duration not distraction, your mind may wander, but there’s no need for panic: it will come back. In wandering there can be revelation as
you meditate, trance out, bliss out, luxuriate in your thoughts, think.”

Examples of extended time can also be found in the films of Chantal Akerman who uses long shots to frame details of the day-to-day (see Appendix 5). In Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), Jeanne is a mother and impeccable housekeeper who turns tricks during the day. She obsessively flicks light switches as she moves from room to room, and Akerman lets the camera roll long after the lights have been turned off. Jeanne cooks and waits at the table for her son to return, in real time. Akerman addresses the place in which her character resides as a type of container that simultaneously incarcerates and preserves a sense of order:

The jail thing is very, very present in all of my work... Jeanne Dielman, it’s the same. She is also in her own jail, and she needs her jail to survive.... And the jail is coming from the [World War II Nazi] camps, because my mother was in the camps, and she internalized that and gave it to me. Thank you.

When Jeanne has an orgasm, she becomes so distressed by her accidental submission to the john that she kills him, her perpetrator, invader of her sanctuary.

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My hips and mid-spine were scraped raw. My hands, red and swollen from the sharp edges of the aluminum rungs. My head hit the lower step as I tried to squirm under and lie down on the dirty floor. When I was finished, my skin hurt, my arms tingled, and I felt better than I had in years.

I don’t know why I started cramming myself through the rungs of the ladder in my kitchen (a prelude to Careful), but after I did and lay limp on the ground, I realized that for the past six years I had been missing
the pain and exhilaration of moving my body in the odd ways of dance, performance, and aerial arts. Not all exercise produces this euphoric effect. Running and yoga do nothing for me. They are private and programmed—sterile. Crawling, contorting, and hanging are weird—titillating.

Today I cannot handle what I used to. I like a mild hurt. As I write this, I bite the canker sore that bores a hole in the tip of my tongue, push my fingernails into the gums between my front teeth, and dig my shoulder blades into the wooden chair back. I push the edges of my thumbs hard into the nail with my forefingers, chew the inside of my cheek, and worry the sore. But while crawling again and again across the studio's asphalt tile floor in front of the green screen during the making of Radical Home, my knees felt like they were being pulped. And repeatedly walking backwards,
twisted hard to the left, cemented my scoliosis more firmly into place. It felt horrible. But I was still moving. The camera was still running. And that felt good.

What is it about pain and exhibitionism that is empowering? This isn’t unique to me. There are many diagnoses for the disorder of being a dancer, a woman, a narcissist, and a hysteric. By self-inflicting and self-objectifying, I place myself in a container where I’m in charge and also trapped.

Poet Anne Sexton said: “Creative people must not avoid the pain that they get dealt.... Hurt must be examined like a plague.”24 While I do not recognize my own art-making as an antidote to insanity—Antonin Artaud wrote that artists only make work “literally to get out of Hell”—it does provide a temporary elation and feeling of purpose, a legitimizing of my daily life.25 Most of my work stems from the psychological, and while I am not interested in psychoanalytic theory, I am fascinated by states of madness and obsession as represented in art and literature. In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath remarked, “It seemed silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next. It made me tired just to think of it. I wanted to do everything once and for all and be through with it.”26 From *No Ordinary Chore* (2000), in which my character goes through the motions of planning her suicide, to *Careful* (2012), in which a woman teeters close to the breaking point

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in unlikely and confining domestic situations, the sources of the work stem from instability, discomfort, and exhaustion. These three conditions exist in varying degrees in all of us. My hope is that the viewer will relate—if uncomfortably—and if not, form a more fascinating interpretation (which in my experience is often the case) than my own.

On a practical level, the expansion of my professional container—from a 15-year career of making live performance works to performing for video—has been liberating. I no longer have to warm up my body or pay attention to what or how much I eat before a show. My work can be viewed in my absence for the length of the exhibition, and indefinitely on the Internet. In “The Aura of the Digital,” Michael Betancourt states that because of video’s mass reproducibility and complete loss of degradation in reproduction, it makes the ultimate capitalistic promise to create “value without expenditure.”

Thanks to the convenience of video, there is no need for me to live in a gallery, be tied to my best friend, or be made in any way uncomfortable. I might get famous while I sleep in, go to work, or leave town.


6

TWITCHING IN SYMPATHY

Within the evolution of my artistic focus, I have begun to question the difference between the experience of watching or performing a live piece versus experiencing one that is constructed specifically as an interaction between camera and subject. In pondering the dichotomy and/or synthesis of video and live performance, I am attempting to find my answer in the experience of the performer, as expressed above, as well as in the concept of aura. To what extent does a video work contain aura (see Appendix 6)? Would a performance specifically made for video have aura?
And what about video installation, where location is of prime importance?

One artist who has addressed video in dance and implicitly prompts the question of location is choreographer Trisha Brown. In her piece *Set and Reset, Version 1* (1985), it is as if within video Brown is trying to replicate, or at least approach, the experience of the viewer in live performance. The camera’s presence is apparent and its movements are choreographed as if it were one of the dancers. The resulting video appears three-dimensional rather than as a flat document of the dance. The viewer is immersed within the performance instead of resting in front of it. My goal in *Radical Home* is also to use video to create a bodily experience for the viewer.

Betancourt argues that apart from the device that delivers it, video—a “digital object,” each work made

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of the same binary code—does not inhabit material space, and thus does not require a gallery; rather, video “demands that the spectator ignore the presentation... in considering the ‘context’ of the work.”

30 I disagree, as I am unable to separate the content of the video from the distracting glare of the Sony® flat screen mounted to the gallery wall. The TV itself has a story. Perhaps it was bought from Best Buy or Walmart with the intention of returning it at the close of the exhibition. The object provides a context whether we want it to or not, and so the art is not “divorced from physicality.”

31 Video can be seen in Betancourt’s terms as “transcend[ing] physical form” and creating an illusion within an “aura of information.”

32 When video is used to create a space, however, instead of eliding the specifics of location, the video becomes the location, the container that holds the viewer. Thus the video is endowed with both informational aura, and what I would call “place aura.” Video becomes an architectural intervention. Together, the walls and the video form an alchemical relationship, a dynamic and mutually transformative artistic collaboration.

As a viewer of dance in a theater setting, I can hear the performers breathing. Sometimes (unpleasantly) I can smell them. If I am engaged, I find my muscles twitch in sympathy with the dancers. This mirroring phenomenon can be compared to what Walter
Benjamin called “nonsensuous” similarity, which social theorist Brian Massumi, quoting Benjamin, explains as follows: “Tied to the senses but lacking sense content, it can nevertheless be ‘directly perceived’ – but only ‘in feeling.’” 33 I am not the one moving, and yet I am moving. Philosopher Suzanne K. Langer examined such phenomena in depth in her 1953 book Feeling and Form, and one of her key and most pertinent findings relative to my own work has also been summarized by Massumi: “Instead of activating kinesthetic qualities of experience through vision, dance may activate visual and other qualities through kinesthesia.” 34 As viewers, we make connections among ourselves that function, in Massumi’s terms, as “nonlocal linkages” that allow us to make sense out of what, without them, would be chaos. 35 In questioning the legitimacy of video, I ask if the experience Massumi describes actually exists in the witnessing of video, and if not, how might it be?

In discussing the death of aura, Benjamin pronounced: “A man who concentrates before a work of art [with aura] is absorbed by it... In contrast, the distracted mass [that is, distracted by the work of the camera] absorbs the work of art.” 36 I agree with both sentiments. What could be more profound than to consume a work of art and/or to merge oneself bodily with it? Mark Rothko said, “To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view with a reducing glass.

34 Ibid., 149.
35 Ibid., 147.
However you paint the larger pictures, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.” 37 I believe the same holds true for the viewer. When I stand before one of Rothko’s paintings, I feel I could step inside as if it were a room, and in so doing, I am no longer a passive viewer. By entering Radical Home, the guest is at once spectator and participant, consuming and being consumed. In my experience as an artist, I miss the act of creating the large picture, which for me was organizing bodies in a dance (I do not, however, miss the necessity for lengthy transitions only avoidable with blackouts, which I can now edit digitally, creating a less predictable physical patterning). The immersive experience I am creating is for the audience, but my own process involves jutting my head at a sharp angle from my neck in order to peer at a 15” laptop screen, manipulating 3/4” figures on a 1 1/2” After Effects project window.

FIG. 17 Dominique Zeitzman, screen shot of Radical Home
After Effects project
One might consider engagement with digital moving imagery as an opportunity to take a break through a dumbed-down version of meditation in a private container where we are free to be truly alone, maybe even separated from our own selves.\textsuperscript{38} Regarding his love of boring things, Andy Warhol said that “the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.”\textsuperscript{39} While performance provides a shared experience between the audience and the performer and among members of the audience, video can provide an extreme solitude.

\textsuperscript{38} After writing this, I googled \textit{Meditation For Dummies} and found that, yes, this book actually exists.

\textsuperscript{39} Andy Warhol, “POPism: The Warhol ’60s,” in \textit{Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art}, ed. Stiles and Selz, 390.
As I stated earlier, my goal in *Radical Home* is to create a phenomenological experience with video in an attempt to approach that of, or compare it to, performance. While I am still curious about that difference or similarity, and proudly own my phrase “place aura,” part of the allure of video for me is its versatility. *Radical Home* is uncanny and resonant and funny and creepy and beautiful in a room, on a wall, and on the 5-inch screen in my After Effects composition window (figure 17). Performance is there and here. Video is here and there and here—as viewers, we own it.

Therefore, to me, the legitimacy of my video versus performance works resides solely within my experience creating them and the various shapes they can take with regard to the concepts I find compelling—the everyday, endurance, objectification, ownership, and power—all explored in *Radical Home* through the material and metaphor of the container.
The bodily feeling of performing live and having that feeling witnessed can be linked to ego or, more positively, a feeling of empowerment. And yet there is no absolute need for human interaction. Performance is at once a very private and very public act. On stage, it is definitely me. And when I watch the documentation, it is me. But it has been pointed out that, when discussing my videos, I unconsciously refer to myself in the third person. I say “she” or “the woman” or “the figure.” And when I look at the videos, she is not me. She resembles me if I can see the face and the hair, but I don’t identify with her personally.

Live performance and video performance are separate containers of myself. In the first, I move before a one-way mirror and can’t see the audience for the lights. In the second, I am inside an opaque box. My image—what the audience will eventually see—is in the camera, and I am essentially invisible. When my image is finally revealed, I am gone. As an act, the first is more public, the second more private and yet so much less personal, since anyone can “download me.” Video performance, an anonymous experience for me, is ultimately more public in that it is infinitely reproducible and impossible for me to own—or to contain.
APPENDICES

1. NYT (PAGE 28)

In a recent conversation with artist Cecelia Condit, we addressed the notion of claiming authorship over appropriated imagery. She described her experience of having found 1950s video footage of institutionalized people with epilepsy. The films were exploitative. The people were objectified and categorized as specimens. To put them into a work of art, she felt, would bring up the question of ethics. But because she herself has epilepsy, she felt the images were in a sense her own, and it felt right to include them.

In spring 2013, I got sick of making work about myself and my house. I started taking pictures of front-page New York Times photographs. I liked them. They were pretty. Some were evocative. They spoke to a world bigger than mine. A world I felt I should know better than I do. But cropped images of cops, and smugglers, and factory workers, and gravediggers are not mine—they are not within my experience. And so, in keeping with my aesthetic, I chose those pictures I had framed with the camera to appear as landscapes, abstracted and yet connected to their original mundane contexts: a playground, a child, a mess, a desperate situation, all contexts that I share, that are my own.

2. KITCHEN (PAGE 34)

The piece presents a clothed individual, contained and trapped, but it implies unadorned female nudity. The plain and dowdy white and yellow striped shirt-dress I wear is in stark contrast with the open-toed, sling-back, stacked-heel
shoes with their labia-like frills, and the pseudo-pornographic poses. I was thinking about enclosed areas, discomfort, vulgarity, precariousness, awkwardness, absurdity, sexiness, and the opposite of sexy, or what artist Pipilotti Rist calls "the power of weakness and the beauty of the non-elegant." 40

I was also contemplating the multiple roles women play, the positions in which we place ourselves physically, theoretically, and politically, and how those roles are often fostered if not dictated by the principles and mechanisms of representation—in this case, by the mechanics of framing inherent in photography and filmmaking.

I am consciously doing a performance with the camera, not for it. Through the camera's zoom, I fill the frame, becoming larger than the domestic enclosure in which my body tries to shape and define itself. The camera, then, becomes a container for the subject.

3. SORRY (PAGE 37)

Sorry is a video featuring two images of a moving female figure accompanied by a litany of "Sorry's," some my own and others mined from Google. What does it mean for a woman to advance and recede? To prostrate herself, grovel, and slide away? To say "sorry" over and over? Is showing sympathy the same as accepting blame? What does it mean to juxtapose "Sorry I tried to kill myself in your house" and "Sorry I can't hear you over the sound of how awesome I am"? Why do we become uncomfortable and embarrassed when forced to listen to this long and arduous list?

40 Pipilotti Rist, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," in Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art, ed. Stiles and Selz, 542.
4. RAMEY (PAGE 37)

In 2012, I travelled to Paris to find the home from where my father and grandparents fled occupied France during World War II. The result is Ramey, a six-minute video that tells the story through images and text. The shots are static—an exterior of the building at 38, rue Ramey, with passing cars and pedestrians; the serene courtyard where neighbors greet one another; and the garden of the concierge who helped hide my family. Subtitles tell the story of my family's persecution, but the focus of the video is on the building and the ghostly history it embodies.

5. CHANTAL AKERMAN'S NEWS FROM HOME (PAGE 41)

In News From Home (1977), Akerman presents long fixed camera shots of 1970s New York City streets and subways. The images, architectural and often nearly still except for an occasional passing car or pedestrian, are accompanied by her voice reading her mother's notes from Belgium and her implorations that Chantal write more often:

My dearest little girl, I just got your letter and I hope that you'll continue to write to me often. Anyway, I'll hope that you'll come back to me soon. I hope that you are still well and that you're already working. I see that you like New York and you seem to be happy. We are very pleased even though we'd like to see you again very soon.41

The mundaneness of the scene and the flat affect of Akerman's voice reading letters that repeat the same sentiments, create a mesmerizing boredom that allows the viewer to see and hear beyond the narrative content. In this type of film, the story, if there is one, does not dominate, but shapes the spectator's experience just as a passing pedestrian, a moving car, or a whistling teakettle might, if given attention.

According to Walter Benjamin, aura can only emanate from an original live work of art. In writing about the difference between an actor performing on stage and on film, he asserts that aura “is tied to [the actor’s] presence,” for which “there can be no replica.” Thus, aura “cannot be separated for the spectators from ... the actor.” When the camera enters the picture, however, things change as “the camera is substituted for the public.” Inserting myself (in brackets) into Benjamin’s subsequent words: “Consequently [in Radical Home] the aura that envelops the actor [me] vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he [I] portrays.” But would Benjamin believe this to be true when the performance of the creeping woman was originally choreographed for the camera, and not for a live audience? I would argue that part of aura lies in the intention of the artist and in the necessity of a live viewing, and so, yes, Radical Home emits aura.

Michael Betancourt expands on Benjamin’s idea of aura existing only in terms of authenticity, by pointing out that the original becomes meaningful and gains value by virtue of its replication. Posters of the Mona Lisa may give the masses access to an image, but the original is not cheapened as a result. On the contrary, the value of the actual painting rises as its popularity spreads. “Cultural tourism is based on this idea of encounters with originals whose aura is a function of their being widely reproduced.” Betancourt describes how, in addition to uplifting the original, replicas can create the original, as with Andy Warhol’s stars who are famous for being famous wherein images create an illusion of a valuable original, in this case a personality whose aura is socially constructed. While mass reproduction reinforces notions of authenticity in the plastic arts and architecture, with video there is no original. This ability to exist in infinite identical pieces is, in Betancourt’s terms, the “aura of the digital.”

In her essay “In defense of the Poor Image,” Hito Steyerl takes another angle on the “original,” discussing the popular phenomenon of ripping digital images into grainy pictures and pirated videos. For her, digital reproduction is not all about preserving high definition. “The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.”

And what is more authentic and emitting aura, than the real?

7. GALUMPHING THROUGH SPACE

Between 1991 and 2005, I co-directed a dance company called Zeltzman and Colburn. Selene Colburn and I were “naïfs with a sly and intentionally raw view of how girl bodies hurl and fall and galumph through space like thrown rods in a giant engine, ...shuddle to the tics of someone on Thorazine...(and) show the dreamy, sputtering side of physical action.” Non-lyrical and irreverent, our work emphasized the awkward, painful, and clumsy in regular movement and attitude. In a segment of our performance House (1995), we stood with heads down, still but for an occasional foot shuffle or head scratch, while a litany of things we wished for droned on in the background: “I wish I didn’t fight with Dominique so much,” “I wish it weren’t so easy to make this list,” “I wish I were rich,” “I wish I had a cup of coffee,” “I wish I had a real job,” ad nauseum. What at first made the audience laugh soon evoked tears, as the absurdity and familiarity of our neurotic notions were driven home.
Influenced and inspired by the Judson Church and other postmodern choreographers of the 1960s and early 1970s, our pieces centered on ordinary movements: walking, running, crawling, falling, and rolling.⁴⁶ Our costuming was bland: sneakers (Converse® – a nod to our punk rock adolescence), work pants, men’s button-downs, velour sweat suits. And we wore our glasses. We explored the dynamics of the crowd, creating pieces for groups of “non-dancers,” simultaneously spotlighting the everyday and bringing down notions of dance as high art.

8. SNEAKERS

Postmodern dance was born in the early 1960s as a reaction to modern dance, which focused on mythology, narrative, and movement as aesthetic representation. That is not to say that postmodern choreographers ignored their predecessors. On the contrary, they often nodded to their heritage, even if ironically as in Yvonne Rainer’s Three Seascapes (1962), in which she screamed from a pile of white tulle, poking fun at the drama of modern dance and the frills of ballet. Postmodern choreographers focused on movement for movement’s sake, which was a way to embrace normalcy. They created works based on self-imposed rules, maps, concepts, and chance.⁴⁷ Like Fluxus, postmodern dance opposed the conventions of art, opening up the possibilities of what could be considered dance and broke down boundaries between life and art, dance and visual art, and performer and audience.⁴⁸

“Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.... The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Judson Church was the name of a group of choreographers in the 1960s, that included Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Judith Dunn, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Meredith Monk, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Carelee Schneemann, and Valda Sutterfield, among others.


⁴⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁴⁹ Susan Sontag, quoted in Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers, xvii.

Original quote from Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" (1964), in Against Interpretation and Other Essays (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 14.
Today, my pieces that highlight clothing and routine tasks (Careful, Balance, Kitchen) can be compared to Steve Paxton’s Flat (1964), in which he got dressed and undressed as if in his home, and occasionally froze in various poses.  

Part of Zeltzman and Colburn’s oeuvre included a focus on performance location. We put on shows in galleries, apartments, warehouses, street fairs, and alleyways. Our freedom to do this and still call our work “dance” was thanks to the pioneering work of the early postmodernists. An acceptance of dance by the art world, and the ability for it to fit both aesthetically and physically into the 1960s zeitgeist, stemmed in part from artists expanding their work to include video and performance. Simone Forti was one of the first to gain this acceptance with her staging of “dance constructions” (1961) in Yoko Ono’s loft, where people viewed the static dancers by walking around them.

Another freedom for which we can thank our predecessors was an acceptance of the employment of non-dancers to examine natural movement. We saw in our colleagues a self-consciousness that distracted and annoyed us. We strove to rid ourselves of the habit of technique and poise and looked to non-dancers for inspiration. In my piece Airplane Sketches (1991), the performers walked in tight clumps, exaggerating their own gait. In Perfect Template (1993), they used each other as props, paraded in the section entitled “Miss Nomer Pageant,” and performed synchronized movements that relied on gesture.

**9. MOMMY ART**

In the early 1990s, when Selene Colburn and I were constructing our upcoming show House Heroines (1994), we embarked on a graffiti project, wheat-pasting and sticker-bombing images of our female role models around the streets of San Francisco. Our xeroxed poster—made with scissors,

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50 Banes, Terpsichore in Sneakers, xvii.
51 Ibid., xviii.
52 Ibid.
53 By “acceptance” I don’t mean that of our colleagues did not use the term postmodern (or as we called it post-post modern so as not to equate ourselves with our forebears), and there was a popular return to more traditional, lyrical forms of dance related to the modern period with jazz and ballet influences.
paper, and glue—portrayed the faces of Assata Shakur, Dorothy Allison, Patti Smith, and Carrie Mae Weems, among many others (figure 19). I realize now that, for me, Weems has evolved from teen idol to co-conspirator in looking at domestic interiors as represented history, which usually happens outside the home, and a rich source from which to make art.

In Weems' *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990), she portrays members of her family and friends talking, smoking, eating, reading the paper, putting on makeup, playing solitaire, drinking wine, doing hair, and mourning, while sitting around the table. With these photographs she questions traditional roles, looking at their dangers and solutions (figure 18). In my work, I use my body but hide my face because I want the viewer to have the opportunity to relate personally. While Weems exposes her identity, her aim is similar to my own:

> The role of narrative, the social levels of humor, the deconstruction of documentary, the construction of history, the use of text, storytelling, performance, and the role of memory have all been more central to my thinking than autobiography.... I use myself simply as a vehicle for approaching the question of power, and following where that leads me to and through.
Through self-objectification, we invite viewers to consider their roles within various power structures.

In 2011, I was told to look up the work of Mary Kelly. I had just exhibited a body of work made from colorful dryer...
lint collected from obsessively sorted loads of laundry and felt validated to learn that Kelly had been doing the same thing for years. She manipulates black and white lint, which emerges from the dryer, in elegant, uniform curves, to make an undulating line that encircles the gallery creating a sort of canvas on which narratives in black text are embossed. Kelly uses the ultimate in banal—dryer lint destined for the trash—as a backdrop for the printed testimony of Women Strike for Peace in the 1960s, Mimus (2012); the story of an infant’s separation from his Kosovo-Albanian family during the Balkan war in the 1990s, The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi (2001); and narratives of women and their children reported to the War Crimes Tribunal in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Mea Culpa (1999) (figure 20). In perhaps her most iconic piece, Post-Partum Document (1973-79), Kelly presents the meticulous records she kept of her son’s development from infancy through the toddler years. She takes the voices of mother and child out of the home and into the museum and the world of critical analysis. And she displays another waste product as art—her son’s soiled diaper liners.56

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