

## DEFINING AN ART FORM

Long Beach / Erika Suderburg

*Planes of Memory*, currently at Long Beach Museum of Art, re-creates several video installation pieces from that media's formative period: Bruce Nauman's *Live Taped Video Corridor* (1969), Beryl Korot's *Dachau 1974* (1975) and Peter Campus's *mem* (1975). All three of these pieces convey a sense of the intricacies and challenges inherent in attempting to apply, manipulate and integrate video technology in a sculptural and institutional situation. The works share a commitment to applying a raw and malleable technology to issues of space and representation while fitting this new form into and opposing it to the art world's pigeonholes labeled minimalism, structural film and conceptual art. These pieces are cast in the pseudo-utopian mode of video art that was meant to turn technology back on itself, to introduce the self-reflexive cathode-ray tube, to subvert television's grip on the image and somehow to integrate these concerns into widely divergent applications.

Nauman's *Live Taped Video Corridor* offers a phenomenological/minimalist investigation. The experience of the piece is not one of interpretation, but of actual physical investigation. Nauman creates a thin white corridor that you enter, spurred on by a realization of self-observation and the seductive video glow emanating from two stacked monitors at the end of the tunnel. Displayed on the bottom video monitor is the real-time image of your back disappearing down the tunnel; the top monitor plays an extended tape loop of the empty corridor. The time and space of the piece is defined only by your experience of it. The ability to understand the empty corridor tape for what it is doesn't lessen the discomfort of knowing that somehow your image belongs there—a sister image to what you've watched yourself create for the bottom monitor. The conditioned response of knowing you should in fact be there cancels out your own logical, per-

ceptual explanation. As you confront the light at the end of the tunnel, it is your performance and your interjection into the space that is investigated. The physiological and emotional effects of time become the subject, and you complete the object.

Nauman moves his art toward a kinship with an investigation of man's nature, not the nature of art. Edmund Husserl's phenomenological system of understanding a method of inquiry only after close attention to your own intellect and consciousness, suggests an analogy: Nauman's corridor becomes a laboratory for confrontation. But the corridor also accumulates a distinctly 1980s patina of suggestions of surveillance. As you move toward the image of yourself, you are intensely aware of the camera eye boring into your back. Watching yourself enter the tunnel, you are struck by the desire to observe the camera itself, even though doing so will discontinue the image you are creating. The communication between body/subject and surveillance/object completes the entry into personal temporal and physiological investigations.

Campus's *mem* also utilizes closed-circuit video that pulls you into a lonely but fascinating funhouse. Entering a darkened room, you are presented with an angled plane of light cast from a video projector. You can either passively observe this geometric shape as a type of projected minimal light sculpture or step closer to find faces distorted and projected into the plane. Often, tentative hand dances begin as spectators enter the closed-circuit link. Explorations of the limits of possible distortion and the inclusion of the entire body begin. Spectators stumbling into the room might find a group of people engaged in elaborate, delicate upper-torso "dances" designed to discover the limitations and rules of Campus's system. As in Nauman's piece, the ultimate confrontation is with the visual presentation of self,

the demand of a visage to be recognized and peered at, the pleasure of looking and the license (while engaged in art) to examine your outer image.

Korot's *Dachau* presents four neatly mounted video monitors in a darkened room with traditional audience seating. It has a specific duration (twenty-five minutes) and it plays on the patterning possibilities of a "becalmed" four-eyed view of a monument of monsters. Korot employs structural film methods to compose a strict formal sequence: the road outside Dachau looking like any other autobahn; the bridge entering the gate edged by willows and crossed by padding tourist feet; and finally, one angle of a corridor through which people drift, occasionally glancing at a barely discernible photograph of the living dead once piled into the wooden bunkhouse that spectators now visit. The monitors shift angles and viewpoints with the mechanized "clunks" of surveillance cameras. A "cool" medium is focused on the unthinkable. Unlike Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955) to which Korot's piece bears a certain connection in intent and formal strategies, *Dachau* does not have a voice-over to ask the essential, plaguing questions. Instead, a soundtrack echoes the tourists' feet, repeating in a chilling instant three distinct peals of laughter from off-camera. Like Resnais, Korot removes the site from sensationalism, letting the image of present-day Dachau reflect itself. The tourists appear to be visiting an aged and pristine set of stables—until the image of ovens too large to hold bread is interjected into the formal equation. The strength of the piece lies in its ability to unleash several haunting questions for audience and artist alike who are grappling with the representation of the unthinkable. The questions: the role of tourists at such a site, the continuing debate of leaving these images as

monuments to a memory easily skewed by history and, finally, the question of how horror is represented without the facile narrative excess of American television's *Holocaust* or the complicated brilliant personalization of Edgar Rietz's *Heimat*. Korot raises the same questions Resnais does in *Night and Fog*, but she raises them in a more oblique way by using strict formal constructs without an omnipotent voice authority or the presumption of supplying answers and sensational illustration.

Within her formal and ethical model of representation, Korot goes beyond Campus's and Nauman's spatial and temporal investigations, but she shares with them a rigorous questioning of perception and intent. This collection is an important restatement of issues still pertinent today to definitions of an art form and its representation. □