Displaying a sly sense of wit, Dan Graham launched into a conversation with performance artist Michael Smith in a recent issue of Artforum by jauntily confessing there are two things he loves about television: 'First, the producer, who is something like a conceptual artist—someone like Norman Lear, who did *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, or Allen Funt, who did *Candid Camera*. And then I love the stand-up comic on TV, who is also sometimes a conceptual artist, like Andy Kaufman (Griffin, 2004).’ Some might be a little rattled by this analogy of the conceptual artist to an entertainer—and Graham has some obvious targets in mind—others might be take the comment in jest and leave it at that. But we do well to suppose that there is more to this joke than meets the eye. Although delivered in a seemingly off-handed manner, the artist’s impromptu comparison of the television performer to the conceptual artist possesses a poignancy that reaches beyond any facile presumption concerning the all-too academic or ‘serious’ nature of conceptualism. Nor is it the case that Graham is suggesting that television now be considered a serious or major art, as such recent discussions of so-called ‘quality TV’ propose to do, even though he loves to debate the relative merits of late-night
talk show hosts such as Jay Leno versus David Letterman (perhaps to no one's surprise, Graham endorses the former over the latter) and, more importantly, his own, first writings on television predate the invention of the academic discipline of television studies itself.

Let me clarify, then, why this joke merits our attention. How its further consideration will allow me, first of all, to contribute a few critical remarks on the manner in which the history of conceptual art and performance art has been constructed in dialectical opposition to mass cultural forms, such as television and its spectacular forms of entertainment. And, by way of extension, also to comment on the usefulness of the non-dialectical notions of minor and major practices, as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in order to renew our acquaintance with conceptual and performance art—practices that have been mostly locked into a set of repetitive historical categories and fixed oppositions in the past two decades.² Although conceptual art continues to exert some pressure on the dominant modes of writing art history—Graham's witty comparison of the stand-up comedian to a conceptual artist troubles such knowledge—it seems
reasonable to state that conceptual art has achieved the status of a major art within our discipline. Graham's photo-essay *Homes for America*, for instance, or his film installation *Body Press*, that for a long time led at best a marginal existence in art historical accounts, have achieved widespread recognition since the 1990s. But, of course, the major or minor status of an art practice is not determined solely on the basis of such shifts in critical fortune. Marginality and minority are not synonymous. Nor is it the use of a medium with a potentially broad reach, such as television, that automatically secures the major value of an artistic practice.

In the *Artforum* interview both Graham and Michael Smith express a great deal of skepticism regarding the desire of many artists during the late 1970s, to leave video and performance behind and enter the mainstream. Laurie Anderson being named as one more successful example of such an exodus. Recalling this period, Smith, describes it as 'really curious':

> It was a mixture of idealism, naïveté, and ambition. A lot of us were interested in expanding our audiences (...) There were also artists who made public access programs and were interested in reaching out to the community. I was never clear what that community was. All I know is that it went to bed very late. Then there were those who wanted to deconstruct TV but who had ambitions of making hit TV shows. But there really wasn't much room for artist's television (Griffin, 2004).

Michael Smith's own alter ego as performance artist, who is simply called 'Mike,' appears to be trapped in this curious space (fig. 1). On the one hand, Mike was modeled 'after artists from that time who thought of public-access video as their artwork and a link to the community. Mike was very proud of his cable-access show *Interstitial*. Unfortunately it wasn't that good. The irony is that what Mike really got from all of his social involvement during the 1980s is a valuable piece of property, a loft in SoHo (ibid.).' But on the other hand Mike was also conceived as a 'silent majority' type, the representative of a bland demographics 'who would meet all the statistics of a Procter & Gamble focus-group participant (ibid.).' The premise of Smith's video performances was to ensnare Mike, as it were, in a televisival reality, where the everyday, conformist behavior of Mike would run up against the staged contingency of the variety show or sitcom series. Mike's negotiation of his surreal circumstances necessitated a delivery that followed a 'very slow, plodding timing' and assumed the features of a kind of dream time, as Graham
submits. Mike seems to inhabit a present that appears perpetually out of sync with itself. Indeed Mike dwells within an interstitial space as expressed by the title of his fictional cable-access show.

Here we are getting to the heart of what a minor practice entails. For a minor practice emerges, as Deleuze and Guattari expound in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* from the condition of living a language that is not one's own, or rather speaking a language that is either no longer or not yet known. The function of a minor literature, such as practiced by Kafka or Beckett—the Irish writer is a partial source of inspiration for the Mike character—is to wrest the authoritarian power of a major language away from itself, to cause an arid and stereotypical mode of speech 'to vibrate with a new intensity' by placing its variables in constant variation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 19).

Considering that diversion is the name of the game that Smith and Graham are playing, allow me to insert a slight distraction of my own at this point. In the light of Deleuze and Guattari's argument I might note, namely, that one of Andy Kaufman's own performance routines became known as the 'Foreign Man:' an abject failure of a comedian utterly incapable of delivering a punch line on time. His miserable impersonations of public figures—'Hi, I'm Johnny Cash'—were delivered with the same squeaky, phony accent that he used to introduce himself. The act of mimicry does not even contain a change in intonation or inflection. Until, that is, the moment Kaufman assumes the stage identity of Elvis Presley and realizes an uncanny imitation of the rock star before an astonished audience. Kaufman can be said, therefore, to have perfected the role of the trickster or con man, a perpetual inventor of hoaxes that left the audience in bafflement, unsure how to respond. Is one laughing with the Foreign Man or at him or is one perhaps even laughing in spite of him, to hide one's own embarrassment? Like the fumbling act of the Foreign Man himself, the audience members are placed in a state doubt, confounded about the true nature of the situation they are facing. Our desire to enter into complicity with the comedian, sharing the same object of derision, is thwarted by Kaufman's act, if not completely denied. As spectators we go, as it were, in and out of sync with his stage persona.

I shall have an opportunity to return to Kaufman again, but the tug and pull that he displays between different linguistic ways of being, if you will, is personified as well by the befuddled Mike, who can only respond in a delayed fashion to the
imperatives placed upon him by the majoritarian language of television. When he displays enthusiasm for a cultural trend he is always 'behind the times,' as Graham notes. It is this in-between condition that connects Mike as televisual victim to what Deleuze and Guattari call a collective assemblage of enunciation; that is to say, Mike does not fully inhabit the domain of a major language, where personal concerns are expressed against a neutral social background, as a sitcom figure who is comfortably located in some genetic suburban setting, rather Mike represents a domain of a minor discourse that is immanently and immediately political, even though Mike does not conduct politics in any overt sense of the word.

What is important here is that the character of Mike succeeds in displacing the question of politics away from the 1970s vision of cable-access television as providing the potential of 'out-reach,' to deliver an abstract, but ready-made community. Mike displaces politics that is to say, onto the primary or minor level of language where the relations between linguistic customs and corporeal habits are co-articulated, where language is grafted upon the impulses of the body. Smith's everyman or 'bland man' Mike is a figure who should, in a way, embody a majority language and epitomize a normative mode of behavior, yet he remains trapped within the interstitial, corporeal linguistic realm of the pun and the prank; that is, Mike is an individual who lives in a state of exception where one's automatic, habitual application of rules to a situation break-down. Mike, one might say, is not just hapless, he is clueless.

Significantly, the structural logic of Mike's performance is based on a central device of television programming, namely its division in discrete segments or what Stanley Cavell once called its 'current of simultaneous event reception (Cavell, 1982: 85).’ What Cavell meant by this phrase was, among other things, to call attention to the fact that the formats of television are not only radically discontinuous in and between themselves, but are meant to allow the breaks and recurrences of programming to become instantly legible. ‘The characteristic feature of [the television] programs,’ Cavell maintains, ‘is that they are presented as events, that is to say, as something unique, as occasions, something out of the ordinary. But if the event is something the television screen likes to monitor, so it appears, is the opposite, the uneventful, the repeated, the repetitive, the utterly familiar (ibid.: 89).’ And like a bank of video screens within a control room, television's window that is set within the interior of the suburban home monitors the world like a surveillance device, acting as a protective shield against the unexpected and
unwarranted while providing ‘comfort and company,’ as Cavell asserts. It is the brilliance of Mike’s performance to turn this logic against itself, destabilizing the relation of private to public, that which monitors and that which is monitored.

Let us call this central device of Mike’s performance that of the non sequitur: the radical interruption that structures the simultaneous event reception of television, but that television also strives to de-potentialize or neutralize. The operational logic of television, that is, strives to pre-empt the appearance of a pure, undetermined event—the unexpected occurrence that is out of joint with a uniform, spectacular time—by leveling all televised events along one, uniform expanse of time. As Graham wrote in an essay of 1967, television simply throws together different pieces of information at the same time: ‘It would seem that the medium regards itself transparently; as a stretch of neutral material extending a certain length of time which can be used to occupy a vacuum tube as long as nothing else is occupying it (Graham, 1993: 56).’ But this procedure of the non sequitur is intrinsic to the nature of stand-up comedy as well and therefore makes this genre so conducive to the television medium. As Smith explains, ‘it had this timing where you could just segue into something else without explanation. I was interested in the kind of short attention span of television’ and, he adds, ‘also maybe in drugs, you know (Griffin, 2004).’

Whereas the procedure of the non sequitur informs the whole performance of the stand-up comedian, it also points up the inner logic of the joke as such. A joke operates, namely, by perversely mimicking a syllogistic mode of reasoning, combining two incompatible thoughts in order to arrive at what might seem a deductive fallacy. Such is what Paolo Virno, in an exemplary text ‘Jokes and Innovative Action,’ identifies as the paralogical principle of the joke that places the categories of true and false in suspension and operates by creating a different combination of a set of given elements so that ‘argumentation fluctuates from one to another meaning and in the end it is the least obvious and the most polemical that prevails (Virno, 2008: 143).’ In developing this paralogic model of the joke, Virno is building, among others, upon Sigmund Freud’s Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious (1905) where we can find the famous characterization of the joke in terms of ‘the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, “sense in nonsense”, the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment, the bringing forward what is hidden, and the peculiar brevity of wit (Freud cited in Virno, 2008: 79).’ Not, however that either Virno or I are inclined to follow the psychoanalyst’s insistence on the latent content of the Witze. What I propose, rather, is that we retain
something of Freud's taxonomy of the joke, his analysis of those *rhetorical figures and patterns of thought* that structure the witty remark; in short, what Virno calls its *logicolinguisic form*. Rather than focusing on the unconscious content of the joke, I wish to call attention to its public and implicitly political character. To emphasize, 'the stringent nexus binding jokes to praxis in the public sphere' as Virno puts it so well.

A concrete example that immediately comes to mind in this context is the cut and paste or combinatory strategy that Graham used in his magazine pieces of the 1960s, such as *Homes for America* (1966) (pl. 5). In this case, the artist used the stereotypes and clichés of publicity material and pop sociology to create a magazine piece that occupies a liminal space, a zone of indiscernibility between the different discourses of art criticism and sociology, listing, for instance, the likes and dislikes of adult males and females in relation to the exterior color variables of their standardized homes. *Homes for America* constitutes a network of 'quasi-discrete cells' that lack a perspectival center, like the suburban sprawl itself or, for that matter, the photo-grids of Eadweard Muybridge that provided a direct subtext for the magazine piece. Only a month after 'Homes for America' was published in *Arts Magazine*, Graham publishes 'Muybridge Moments' in the pages of the same magazine:

The shots aren't linked—nothing is necessarily prior to something else. Things don't come from other things...What distinguishes one moment from another is a simple alteration in the positioning of things. Each object is re-arranged relative to every other object and to the frame. Things don't happen; they merely replace themselves in space...The model isn't going anywhere. *Her task isn't completed—no work is done* (Graham, 1967: 24).

Photography as resistance to work, as resistance to the very category of the work: I know no better definition of photography as minor art (even though Muybridge's understanding of his own project would have been quite different). In Graham's reading, each point of the photo-grid forms a singularity that allows movement to branch off in different directions. Paradoxically, the locomotive actions of the photographed body are not subjected in Graham's mind to either the directives of productive labor or the exigencies of narrative causality. Although Graham's interpretation goes against the grain of that *major* science of a disciplinary regime of modernity, namely psycho-technics, his view was shared by many of his fellow conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner. And it is this same
serialized organization of time and space that Graham will come to admire in the television variety show with its sudden, illogical jumps from one heterogeneous event to the next. Indeed the variety show is replete with abrupt deviations from the predictable axis of discourse, as Virno would say.

We do well, therefore, to consider *Homes for America* within the lineage of the hoax or practical joke, treating it as a distant family member of Kaufman’s *Foreign Man*. To do so, of course, is not to dismiss the work on grounds of its being a ‘mere joke’ for that would be to assume the standpoint of a major art history, which, for instance, holds the categories of ‘entertainment,’ ‘spectacle’ and ‘mediation’ in strict separation from those of ‘seriousness,’ ‘performance’ or ‘presence.’ What this realignment of the genealogy of conceptual art achieves is to expose the stringent nexus, as Virno says, that binds the joke to the public sphere. After all, Graham choose to describe the magazine piece in this fashion himself: ‘When I did *Homes for America* [1966-67] it was a fake think piece about how a magazine like *Esquire* would often have a leading sociologist and a good photographer work together on a story. But my project actually wasn’t about sociology (…) It’s a cliché. And it was supposed to be humorous, flat-footed humor.’ *Homes for America* calls into question the authoritarian voice of sociology—a voice that we will encounter again—by creating a parody of ‘high’ or ‘quality’ photojournalism to the great bafflement of the reader who is unsure which conceptual framework one should apply to the piece. And in a similar fashion, Graham would describe the phenomenological experience of Sol LeWitt’s minimal objects as creating a ‘discrete, non-progressive space and time,’ that is to say, a non-hierarchical, non-centralized order, like Muybridge’s photographs. LeWitt’s work applies a (mathematical) rule to the point of absurdity, creating a confusion of the dialectical terms of inside and outside, subject and object at all levels of language, logic and fact. In fact, Graham surmises, this experiential effect is akin to the paralogical effect of the Cretan paradox that states ‘I am a liar,’ whereby self-referential structure, ‘transparently intelligible at the outset, in its extension into complexity reaches a sort of inertia or logical indifference (Graham, 1969: n.p.).’ We will see how this topological zone of blurring where the viewer and the work ‘conjugate themselves in a endless reversal of subject/object positions’ is developed in Graham’s own performances. Suffice to say that Graham likes to stress, in a fully devious way, the entertainment factor of art, which explains his fondness for LeWitt’s own joke that his sculptures functioned as a marvelous jungle gym for his cats.
Here is Virno’s definition of the joke: ‘Jokes are well defined linguistic games, equipped with unique techniques, whose remarkable function consists, however, in exhibiting the transformability of all linguistic games (Virno, 2008: 73).’ In short, he defines jokes as the *diagram of innovative action*. The practical joke dwells fully within the contingent, where the normal rules of the language game are momentarily suspended. What the joke highlights is the gap that exists between a rule and its application or realization within a specific situation. As Wittgenstein once asked: ‘But how can a rule show me what I have to do at this point (Wittgenstein cited in ibid.: 103)?’ The logical conundrum consists of the fact that for every application of a norm to a specific situation one would need a further norm in order to determine whether the norm is correctly applied, ad infinitum. The decision how to apply a rule as Virno states, is an event that is fully heterogeneous to the rule. To apply a rule, is to identify a rule. The fulcrum of the joke is to show alternative ways of applying a rule, to proliferate the possibilities of application. In other words, I don’t continue straight forward as the street sign directs me to do, but turn sideways: to digress is to innovate.

As Virno maintains, practical jokes are triggered on the occasion of a historical or biographical crisis, interrupting the circular flux of everyday experience, causing bafflement, amusement and, quite possibly, illumination of such moments where all our ordinary bearings are lost. He urges that we consider more closely such instants when a form of life, which appeared to be incontrovertible, runs into a kind of paradoxical situation that political theory has identified as a state of exception. That fleeting moment were the distinction between the grammatical plane—the rules of the language game—and the empirical plane—the facts to which those rules ought to be applied—becomes blurred and the arbitrary nature of linguistic customs and behavioral norms is revealed. ‘Strange as it may seem,’ Virno writes, ‘the creativity of the linguistic animal is triggered by a return: by the intermittent return demanded by a critical situation, to the “normal everyday frame of life,” that is, to that grouping of practices that make up the natural history of our species (ibid.: 118).’ Virno refers here to Wittgenstein’s notion of a natural history or *regularity* that forms the ‘bedrock’ of any conventional form of life. When forced to suspend or discredit a given rule, we can only resort to the common behavior of mankind, to a regularity of aptitudes and of species-specific conduct. ‘Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you,’ Wittgenstein inquires. ‘In what circumstances would
you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on (Wittgenstein cited in ibid.: 115)? There is a skit by Kaufman in which he excitedly spouts a nonsensical language, inviting a woman from the audience on stage and proceeds to ask her questions, give her orders, etc., all in an completely unintelligible manner. In order to respond, the baffled woman must rely on such an anthropological notion as Wittgenstein's 'common behavior of mankind' that refers to such basic dispositions of the linguistic animal as commanding, questioning, storytelling, forming and testing hypothesis, guessing riddles or making a joke.

The regularity, to be sure, is not some super-rule, but the condition that allows a distinction to be made between the grammatical plane and empirical plane. It is a hybrid region where grammatical and empirical, nonlinguistic drives and verbal behaviors convert into one another. A threshold or no-man's land where language is grafted upon instinctual reactions, reorganizing them, creating a 'passage from perceptive-motor imagination to the metaphorical and metonymical phrases of language (ibid.: 119).' The regularity is what gives rise to innovative action. On the one hand it legitimizes eccentric, surprising and inventive applications of the given rule. On the other hand, the regularity can cause the transformation or even the abolition of the rule in question. These two forms of innovative action are inextricably intertwined. Only by varying its applications, time and time again, can one come to modify, or to substitute a certain rule.

But how does history enter into all of this? I would submit, first of all, that 'Jokes and Innovative Action' must be read together with Virno's better-known *A Grammar of the Multitude*. To recap the central thesis of the latter book, contemporary life is fully dominated by a post-Fordist organization of the labor process, whereby it is no longer the disciplining of individual bodies that counts, as in Fordist systems of production, but the servitude of the 'general intellect' or common linguistic and communicative abilities that are shared among all workers. Contemporary labor, therefore, has integrated within itself the performative or *virtuosic* properties proper to political discourse (depriving political discourse in turn of its constituent power within the public sphere). 'Every political action,' Virno writes, 'shares with virtuosity a sense of contingency, the absence of a “finished product”' and, as third and final component, ‘the immediate and unavoidable presence of others (Virno, 2004: 53).’ Post-Fordism replicates these three aspects of political or virtuosic performance by means of cooperative labor, requiring the presence of
others in a publically organized space and its mobilization of 'a taste for action, the capacity to face the possible and unforeseen, the capacity to communicate something new (ibid.: 63). In other words, capitalism has been able to find a way to valorize the very faculty of thinking, the potential of language, to confront the contingent and unplanned without a predetermined script.

Of special interest to us is Virno's comment that the culture industry, even though fashioned upon a Fordist regime of production, pre-figures post-Fordism in requiring a space that was 'open to the unforeseen spark, to communicative and creative improvisation.' For Adorno and Horkheimer such unplanned elements were merely remnants of a past, which could not be fully regulated by the culture industry and persisted in those 'abrupt diversions that can enliven a television program,' yet it was such incommensurable events that were to contain the germ of future developments. Cavell already seems to grasp part of this argument when he suggested that television functioned as a kind of apotropaic device. In its constant monitoring of a world lacking consistency or permanence—a phenomenological fact which in itself is due to the serialized nature of the television format—television attenuates the spectator's anxiety even as it prompts it. Watching television, therefore, becomes like a series of random encounters between strangers, giving rise to verbal exchanges of a noncommittal nature. The talk show host is the one who mediates between the spectator and a world in which the old forms of life, with their separate idioms and institutions, are rapidly falling away. In an environment where we need to rely on the general intellect, on those general logical-linguistic constructs or 'common places' that form the skeleton of our patterns of speech, it is the talk show host that shows the spectator how to manage unforeseen situations and to defuse encounters with idle chatter and the exchange of empty pleasantries.

Allen Funt, creator of *Candid Microphone* and *Candid Camera*, and one of Graham's prototypical conceptual artists, actually acquired a degree in fine arts from Cornell University before moving into advertising and, later, the production of radio shows, where he developed his shtick of transforming surveillance into a means of entertainment. In a curious twist on the political aesthetics of the historical avant-garde, Funt's apparent intention was to register 'the beauty of everyday conversation' by means of a furtive technique of 'pure eavesdropping (Funt cited in Nadis, 2007: 14). In doing so, as others have argued so well, Funt invented a new kind of performing artist that combined the roles of practical joker, sociologist, and confidence man (Nadis, 2007: 15). The success of *Candid Camera*, as
Funt has observed himself, relied on five factors: 'pure observation of the ordinary,' which did not prove compelling enough, hence the complementary aspects of 'wish fulfillment' (i.e. the identification of the spectator with Funt as a provocateur), the display of 'human frailties' (i.e. the public shaming of individuals for their vanity or greed), the exposure of the 'tricks of the trade' (i.e. how clients are mislead or cheated) and what he called the 'small crisis,' whereby the normal rules by which we negotiate everyday life are suddenly placed in abeyance, creating no small degree of bafflement on the part of the unsuspecting victim of the show (ibid.: 13). Frequently such pranks involve a kind of language game, using words in an improper sense or employing puns: 'Who do you think is the most superfluous actress acting today?'

In the words of one perceptive critic, Funt quietly probed 1950s Americans for their 'good citizenship' qualities: 'He dared his victims to act badly (ibid.).' A statement into which we may read an interesting double entendre: acting badly not means to misbehave, but also give a bad performance as an actor. I shall come back to this point, but what strikes me is that *Candid Camera* elicited not only a great deal of pleasure on the part of its audience, but apparently also a fair share of anxiety within the intellectual community. To many contemporary social critics, such as David Reisman who is known to have praised Funt as an 'ingenious sociologist,' *Candid Camera* not only revealed the involuntary habits of the average citizen, but also exposed in a damming fashion the supposed conformism of the American public. When confronted with a suspension of the normative framework of one's everyday routine, Funt's victims were only all-too-willing to succumb to the commands of a new authority. The Frankfurt school's psychological theorem of mass culture, which stated that the contemporary subject is highly susceptible to totalitarian rule appeared to have acquired empirical scientific proof.

Virno's post-Fordist multitude appears infected by a similar conformism. Forming a 'publicness without public sphere,' post-industrial labor threatens to subject the basic linguistic and communicative disposition of the human subject to hierarchical control. How might one exit from this subjection of the general intellect to the reproductive demands of capitalism? How is one to diverge from the score of those post-Fordist virtuosos, who perform their own linguistic faculties? To take flight, Virno suggests, is not different from changing the topic of a conversation that is already directed along well-defined tracks. 'Instead of choosing what it is best to do starting from certain basic conditions, we endeavor to modify these
conditions, that is, to modify the very “grammar” that determines the selection of all possible choices.’ Our choice, therefore, is not between subjection or insurrection, but to cause an ‘abrupt deviation in the axis of discourse,’ to create, in other words, a kind of circuit breaker within a signifying system. And it is the joke that is best equipped to this task of creating a diversion, to provoke a variation of a form of life, if only on a microcosmic scale (Virno, 2008: 73).

But then what are we to make of the television show host? Does he epitomize the post-Fordist virtuoso, as Cavell seems to have predicted, or does he retain something of that redeeming factor that the historical avant-garde once associated with the vaudeville tradition or, what Eisenstein called, the ‘theater of attractions?’ This is a very broad question, which I cannot deal with in full here. However, I would like to briefly look at an exceptional essay by Dan Graham, ‘Dean Martin/Entertainment as Theater,’ written in 1967, which will provides us with a partial answer, before I end with a few cursory notes on Graham’s performances from the turn of the decade.

Graham organizes his text around the quasi-naïve question whether Dean Martin’s public image of ‘stiff stupor and slap-happy sloth’ is truthful or not:

Who is the real Dean Martin? His supposed stupor, replete with jarring silences, is a deliberate but awkward concealment, calling attention to the duplicity of his role-playing. The combined lack of grasp of the script role (the ‘real’ Dean Martin presumed drunk and misunderstanding the nature of the character proscribed for him by the lines) gives him an odd self-consciousness (...) shared complicity of audience as structural pivot on which the show totteringly balances (Graham, 1993: 60).

This ‘dumb-show’ put on by a the variety show host, who openly reads his lines from so-called idiot cards, Graham infers is clearly fake. The complicity that is created between the spectator and Dean Martin, acts to eliminate distance, to create an intimacy between the two. Such self-consciousness of the audience members is most intense when Dean Martin ‘levels’ with them, treating them as a ‘dumb prop’ for his confidences. Talking directly to the camera, Dean Martin confides in his spectators—those ‘embarrassed-for him’ intimates—although the viewer needs to consider that show host might have mistaken the camera for a guest in his addled state of mind.
What Dean Martin's charade shows up, in Graham's judgment, is that television presents an illusion of familiarity, yet in the end operates as a medium of self-alienation. The television show has even absorbed a Brechtian device of defamiliarization: Dean Martin's stumbling style of acting, the sloppy, erratic editing; the whole performance shows a *contempt* for the medium. One might equally state, although these are not Graham's words, that Dean Martin personifies a Sartrean project of bad faith, which is typified by the famous example of the café waiter in *Being and Nothingness*—yet another representative of performative labor—who 'plays at being a waiter,' mechanically imitating the customary gestures of his profession. By means of an excessive acting-out, the waiter refuses to identify himself with the social role he is forced to play. Yet by this very act of resistance, the waiter also acquiesces to the facticity of his social station. He lives in a state of permanent self-deception. Dean Martin, on the other hand, openly embraces such a project of bad faith, converting the waiter's existential conflict into an entertaining act of...
self-contempt. The zone of indiscernibility inhabited by the on-screen Dean Martin—is he in full possession of his wit?—brings us to that grammatical/empirical gap, that experiential threshold which gave the sociologist pause in relation to Candid Camera. Yet in the case of the Dean Martin Show, if Graham is correct, the spectacle tames this unruly space by enforcing a complicitous relationship between host and spectator: ‘everything is scripted.’ Alienation has simply become second nature; a joke at our own expense.

Nevertheless, there is an excessive quality to this show that continues to fascinate Graham and comes back to haunt the spectator at the end of the show. After Dean Martin bids his viewers good night, the camera pulls back and we see the technicians clearing the set and hear the sound of the lights being switched off. And at this very moment, Graham declares, ‘we become aware of an incredible, inexplicable time or generation gap, for the image we are currently seeing is evidently after the fact, although live, as we are still watching (Graham, 1993: 63-64).’ What we witness is the phenomenon of ‘dead time,’ but is it the empty, uneventful time of the vacuum tube or that ‘bedrock’ to which all forms of life must return?

Clearly, Graham’s text remains somewhat cryptic, which is only true to the nature of the paralogical terrain it explores. However, in conclusion, I would like to point out a few salient features of Graham’s own contemporary performances. What they hold in common, namely, is Graham’s attempt to hew close to that threshold between the grammatical and the empirical where language appears to sink back into the pulsations of the body. Indeed Graham’s performance approaches that same liminal form of speech that Deleuze and Guattari associated with the phenomenon of a minor literature where ‘language stops being representative in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 23),’ a neutralization of sense, a non-sense, where value may resides in nothing more than an accenting or inflection of a single word, in no more than an unfurled sequence of intensities (ibid.).

In Graham’s Lax/Relax (1969), for instance, the verbal is linked to the aspirative, to a mere breathing of words (fig.2). A girl is instructed to say the word ‘lax’ and then to breath in and out. She repeats this pattern for thirty minutes while her voice is tape-recorded. Later, in front of a live audience, the tape is played while Graham repeats the word ‘relax’ to himself, breathing in and out after each reiteration of the word. As Graham’s performance notes read: ‘I am centered in self-absorption (…)

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[whereas] the audience may become involved in its own breathing responses and thus locate the surface of its involvement; its attention is somewhere between inside my breathing and its relation to the girl or its own breathing (Graham, 1981a).

Other performances tilt towards a more deliberate dismantling of ordinary language games, creating a divergence between two interlocutors whose speech begins to stutter, disintegrating into a series of monosyllabic words, interjections, and pauses. These interruptions of the flow of speech acts as blockages, but also create openings for the other to divert the axis of discourse. In *Past Future/Split Attention* (1972) two people who know each other are located in the same space (fig.3). While the first person (A) continuously predicts the second person's future behavior, the latter (B) recounts by memory the former's past behavior. Here is a part of the transcription:

B: You'll find that you'll need to escape from the kind of... um... escape from the kind of... ah... kind... of limitations that this sort of situation has on the sort of things you are going to say. (...) You'll be silent on and off. You'll have to, be; pause between words, pause will sometimes be greater, sometimes less... ah... you'll not like the idea that I'm making you silent.

A: You have found... have brought about the situation where I find it very difficult to say anything... we have now very much started to talk about... um... very closely, a kind of, a very close thing between me talking about your past and talking about your past and you talking about my future... I WON'T BE SILENT. YOU HAVE NOT MADE ME SILENT.

At which point A struggles to change the topic and escape the dictates of B:

You have been making me listen to you for a short period (...) Sometime ago you used to do pictures which were rather like, um, Frank Ardvark or that other bloke whose name I can't remember (Graham, 1981b).

Graham has explained how his performances of the 1970s were linked to the contemporary desire of artists to establish alternative modes of community; a desire fed in part by the rapid commercialization of the art world. He comprehended the performance, therefore, as a democratic model of constituent power, as a kind of intersubjective, political act that instituted a topological relation of feedback between performer and audience. At the same time, he was interested in 'dissecting' the authoritarian model of the 'performer-politician' epitomized by Joseph
One person predicts continuously the other person’s future behavior; while the other person recalls (by memory) his opposite’s past behavior.

Both are in the present so knowledge of the past is needed to continuous deduce future behavior (in terms of causal relation). For one to see the other in terms of present attention there is a mirror-reflection (of past/future) cross of effect(s). Both’s behavior being reciprocally dependent on the other, each’s information of his moves is seen in part as a reflection of the effect their just past behavior has had in reversed tense as the other’s view of himself.

For the performance to proceed, a simultaneous, but doubled attention of the first performer’s ‘self’ in relation to the other (‘a impressions) must be maintained by him. This effects cause and effect direction. The two’s activity is joined by numerous loops of feedback ↔ and feedahead words and behavior.

Fig. 3 Dan Graham, Past Future/Split Attention, 1972. © Courtesy of the artist.
Beuys. Elsewhere I have described how Graham modeled his performances on the micropolitics of new social groups, their techniques of video feedback and tape delay, in order to disturb or 'unfreeze' their habitual application of rules to life (de Bruyn, 2006). Yet Graham never made the mistake of believing in the actual realization of community as a group-in-fusion. If one is not to duplicate the hierarchical strategies of the performer-politician or the complicitous mechanisms of the television host, one must forever postpone the moment of being in sync with one's audience. Perhaps this is how Graham would have us understand the act of Andy Kaufman, who stands next to a record player in an awkward pose, slightly twitching with his fingers, as he listens in silence to the Mighty Mouse theme song.
(fig.4). Then, suddenly, he springs into action lip-syncing the single line ‘Here I Come to Save the Day.’ For this one fleeting moment, as he raises his arm in triumph and mouths those heroic words, Kaufman appears to connect with his audience, only to sink back once more into a bodily state of unease.

Notes

1 This text was first presented during the conference ‘Minor Photography: The Case of (Post)Surrealism’ hosted by the Lieven Gevaert Centre for Photography in Leuven, 19-20 November 2010. I would like to thank the organizers Hilde Van Gelder, Jan Baetens, and Mieke Bleyen for their kind support as well as Ellen Blumenstein, Fiona Guess and Felix Ensslin who were instrumental in the genesis of the present text.

2 On the writing of a ‘minor history’ in the context of the 1960s, see Branden W. Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage (New York: Zone, 2008), passim.

3 Michael Smith: ‘my influences were Tati, Keaton, Richard Foreman, Accola, Wegman, and Beckett filtered through the construction of stand-up.’

4 ‘Homes for America’ was first published in Arts Magazine, 41, 3 (December/January, 1966-1967), however the original layout of Graham was not used.

5 To cut a long argument short that would include such notions as Peggy Kamuf’s ‘ontology of performance’ or Joseph Kosuth’s tautological conception of the conceptual work of art.

6 As Virno clarifies, this bedrock of which Wittgenstein speaks does not constitute an universal, fixed ground of human behavior but an indeterminate zone of translation between the body and language. In art history a similar discussion has unfolded in relation to Cavell’s notion of the automatisms or conventions of a medium. See, among others, Rosalind Krauss, A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the PostMedium Condition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000) and Diarmund Costello, ‘On the Very Idea of a “Specific” Medium: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell on Painting and Photography as Arts,’ Critical Inquiry, 34, 2 (Winter, 2008): 274-312.

7 I cannot give full credit to this dense text, which roams across examples of avant-garde film (Jean-Luc Godard’s Contempt, Andy Warhol’s The Life of Juanita Castro) and ends with a lurid description of Graham’s visit to a New York nightclub called Cerebrum, where ‘guides’ hand out props for visitors to play with collectively, thus creating a growing awareness that ‘we are our own entertainment tonight (if "stoned", “living” our fantasies) as we are here.’
Bibliography


