

SPECTACLE AS CIRCUIT: THE CONTEMPORARY NEXUS OF BODIES, IMAGES, AND MEDIA

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From the 1950s onwards, Guy Debord articulated trenchant dismay at the expansion of post-war consumer society and its dependence on a steady stream of images. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) he terms the condition as “spectacle” and characterizes it as a form of reification. Experience becomes commodity and capital becomes image.¹ The “real world becomes real images” and “mere images are transformed into real beings.”² It is no longer commodities alone, and commodity fetishism, that mask relations between subjects. Rather, the spectacle is “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”³ This image processing allows the logic of exchange to erode social relations while producing only “mere representation.”⁴ Throughout his account of spectacle, Debord describes these processes in terms of conversion, transformation or becoming. With this, he implies that it was still possible to occupy a position outside of it. As these spaces of art, or other resistant activity were colonised, those outside positions were converted into yet more images for circulation as part of the processes of capitalist valorisation. Spectacle serves as both a process and result.

Subsequent technological, social and cultural developments introduce new capacities into the spectacle while also complicating this unidirectional relation between experience and representation.⁵ Already over 35 years ago, Jonathan Crary posited the replacement of the Debordian spectacle by a flux of binary computer codes.⁶ Today, the expanding “Internet of Things” of comprises devices linked through digital networks that appear to spread without end. The dominance of digital communications does not spell the end of representation, or of images more generally. Rather the opposite. Given the scales involved and abstractions necessary, images become essential to digital design and computer production.⁷ A focus on images, though, obscures the capacity for those technologies to dispose bodies. Recent scholarship on the transformation of the spectacle characterizes it in terms of interaction facilitated by digital technologies, especially the widespread adoption of Internet-enabled mobile phones.⁸ Contemporary spectacle operates as a digital circuit encapsulating images, bodies and media. To inhabit the informational spectacle

¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 43.

² Ibid., 17.

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ By the late 1980s Debord would revise his thesis in recognition that the space outside had drastically shrunk. He declared the global reach of an “integrated spectacle” that had subsumed “almost the full range of socially produced behaviour and objects.” Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 9.

⁶ Jonathan Crary, “Eclipse of the Spectacle,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1984), 287.

⁷ Kyle Stine, “Critical Hardware: The Circuit of Image and Data,” *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 762–86. Stine responds to work that has tended to reject the fundamental place of images within computing. See, for example, Jacob Gaboury, “Hidden Surface Problems: On the Digital Image as Material Object,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 14, no. 1 (2015): 40–60.

⁸ Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano, “From the Notion of Spectacle to Spectacle 2.0: The Dialectic of Capitalist Mediations,” in *The Spectacle 2.0: Reading Debord in the Context of Digital Capitalism*, ed. Marco Briziarelli and Emiliana Armano (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017), 30–40.

today means to operate in a circuit of images (moving and still) that are equally data. Amassed and analysed, these images constitute key elements of the process of value creation in contemporary networked capitalism.⁹

Examining the contemporary spectacle might therefore proceed through an analysis of those relations between images, bodies and media. Hans Belting investigates the interpretative possibilities opened by emphasis on this nexus of elements. He writes that the “self-perception of our bodies (the sensation that we live in a body) is an indispensable precondition for the inventing of media, which may be called technical or artificial bodies designed for substituting bodies via a symbolical procedure.”¹⁰ Embodied subjects produce and respond to images that are conveyed by media. For Belting, the body serves as a kind of living medium that is historically conditioned and bound to processes of representation; “*Representing bodies* are those that perform themselves, while *represented bodies* are separate or independent images that represent bodies. Bodies *perform* images (of themselves or even against themselves) as much as they *perceive* outside images.”¹¹ While a useful model for considering possible functions and states of the body, the division is too neat, and does not readily account for processes of feedback facilitated by media technologies. Such a framework must account for the conditions in which those bodies, media and images are arrayed.¹² There remains the need to examine how these aspects are disposed by techniques and technologies that are already fundamental to the operation of contemporary capitalism, without lapsing into rhetoric of control or causation. Media objects, David Panagia maintains, might be usefully conceived as “sentimental instruments that arrange dispositions, attentions, and perceptibilities.”¹³ The capacity to dispose the body in its relations with media and images hinges upon the contingency of relations between these elements. This conjunction of bodies, images and media lies at the heart of contemporary interactive technologies.

From recent work with virtual and augmented reality devices to endless location services, the body becomes a conduit between experience within lived reality and the virtual domain of technical images. This condition of mediation is addressed in Adelle Mills’ *Moving Through Phone* (2015) (fig. 1 and fig. 2). To initiate the work, Mills instructed each performer to improvise a set of movements to be recorded. One performer then selected their own or the other’s recording. The other performer held the smartphone, moving slowly around a nondescript interior space while the first performer attempted to mimic the moving image. After the recording finished they swapped roles, so that the second performer mimicked the same recording that the first performer chose. Meanwhile, each performance is recorded, and the final videos replayed simultaneously

⁹ Jonathan Beller, *The Message Is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 158–68.

¹⁰ Hans Belting, “Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 306.

¹¹ Ibid., 311.

¹² Originally writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, he remained hopeful that Internet technologies would allow culturally specific forms of communication and representation to be maintained and developed. See Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (2001; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 58. Such optimism is deflated, in part, by the spread of protocols and standards. See Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

¹³ Davide Panagia, “On the Political Ontology of the *Dispositif*,” *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 716.



↑fig. 1 Adelle Mills, *Moving Through Phone*, 2015, HD two-channel video performance, with Lauren Burrow and Jimmy Nuttall, 12:08 minutes, installation dimensions variable.



↑fig. 2 Adelle Mills, *Moving Through Phone*, 2015, HD two-channel video performance, with Lauren Burrow and Jimmy Nuttall, 12:08 minutes, installation dimensions variable.

as a dual-channel installation. Throughout the work the smartphone produces as much as it records events, resulting in an overlay of real-time and recorded actions.

The most immediately striking element of *Moving Through Phone* is the degree of focus on recorded images of the body. This fixation on the body is itself a long-standing aspect of video practice and criticism. Approximately ten years after Debord formulated his position on the spectacle, Rosalind Krauss argued that self-absorption defines video art. As a medium, she contends, video art is “a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self.”¹⁴ The narcissism of video art lies in the treatment of the recording device as a surrogate mirror for self-production. She focuses on works concerned with the “present” of the mirror, which evacuates history and isolates the self.¹⁵ Yet, as William Kaizen argues, video is equally capable of undercutting the supposed immediacy afforded by instant playback.¹⁶ By addressing the matter of its mediation, it can focus instead on the formats and institutional structures in which video is produced and consumed. Mills’ work points to a condition that combines elements of both accounts. The self-regard in Mills’ work derives not from instant playback or reflection but from pre-recorded video. In turn, video is now recoded as a stream of digital information and deployed in a recursive structure. Rather than maintain any pretence of immediate presence, bodies are thoroughly enmeshed in a circuit of perception and response, recording and replay. The reiteration of prior images points to the dispositive effect of visual interfaces which Wendy Hui Kyong Chun identifies as a crucial mechanism in contemporary media technologies.¹⁷ Insofar as the specular subject produces itself, it also depends upon the device.

The condition of self-constituting feedback can be further examined through reference to transformations of the spectacle. Although focused on formal elements of video, Krauss suggests that detachment of the self is possibly indicative of wider cultural conditions.¹⁸ For his part, Debord notes the production of isolated individuals as part of the spectacle.¹⁹ Accounting for shifts in critical perspectives on the nature and operation of spectacle can be undertaken through examination of performance and video, particularly those produced around the time of Debord’s reflections on the spectacle. Examining such period work offers a means to chart the shifts in approaches to the forms and techniques of spectacle, illuminating how it might be interrogated. In particular, Mills’ work can be situated in relation to various practices from the period that incorporate elements of performance and recording, specifically Yvonne Rainer’s performances of everyday actions, Dan Graham’s filmic installations and Bruce Nauman’s performances for video.

¹⁴ Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ William Kaizen, *Against Immediacy: Video Art and Media Populism* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 59–68.

¹⁸ Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” 59.

¹⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 22–23.

When the spectacle reaches across the everyday, art, as a site of illusory autonomy, becomes a form of refuge. By the mid-1960s, Yvonne Rainer was already writing and choreographing against the spectacle, outright stating as much: “NO to spectacle.”²⁰ *Trio A* (1966) works through the results of such a stance (fig. 3). Choreographed for a single dancer, it comprises everyday actions, from walking to lying. In her analysis of the work, Carrie Lambert-Beatty notes that Rainer develops her model of dance at the same time as Debord was formulating his critique of the spectacle.²¹ To register the kind of estrangement wrought by that condition, it is instructive to consider the bodily movements in each case. Where Rainer’s dancers move continuously albeit mechanically, Mills’ performers punctuate their movements with pauses as they respond to the digital video. One might further reflect on the indexical charge by which Lambert associates Rainer’s dance with the semiotics of photography.²² If *Trio A* finds a complement in analogue photography, the structure and form of *Moving Through Phone* finds an analogue in digital recording. The performers’ pauses and hesitation, layers of editing and potential for recombination parallel the iterative, discrete and modular qualities of the digital. The performers are both observers and observed of their own bodies and images. Dependent on one another, standing “behind” the screen, holding the device — the other performer guides the direction of movement in tandem with the pre-recorded video.

²⁰ Yvonne Rainer, “Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called ‘Parts of Some Sextets,’ Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 178.

²¹ Carrie Lambert, “Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A*,” *October* 89 (1999): 108.

²² *Ibid.*, 102–6.



← fig. 3 Yvonne Rainer, *Trio A*, 1978 (choreographed 1966), video (black and white, silent), 10:21 minutes.

Mediated apprehension and response were an integral component of Dan Graham's works. His *Two Correlated Rotations* (1970-2) is a pertinent example combining film and performance (fig. 4).²³ While an initial version in 1969 employed 35mm cameras, the 1970-2 version makes use of Super-8mm Instamatic cine cameras. Each holding a camera, the two performers begin circling one another in counter-spirals. Spiralling inwards and outwards from one another, each performer maintains a continuous fixed focus on the lens of the other, producing a feedback system of interrelated recordings. When shown as a two-channel projection in the gallery space, the films appear on adjacent walls, meaning they require either fixed albeit peripheral attention, or continuously alternating attention. Mills elaborates the feedback system by replacing the focus of each performer with their own image, rather than the apprehension of one another, turning the other into a spectator of self-spectatorship. Apparently mundane activities of observation and apprehension are mediated, converted into electronic signals and routed through a self-contained network in which real (as concretely extant) and virtual (as visually represented) spaces converge.

A focus on interactions between the body, environment and video also motivate Bruce Nauman's early performance pieces. Over the course of an hour in *Wall/Floor Positions* (1968), he adopts a range of different poses at the juncture of the wall and floor (fig. 5).²⁴ While the work functions partly as a corporal riposte to Minimalist objects, the form of the video is particularly pertinent. Angled down onto Nauman, the single camera remains fixed on his movements, which



²³ For Graham's notes on the work, see Dan Graham, "Two Correlated Rotations," in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 85-87.

²⁴ A version of this piece was first performed in 1965 and recreated for video in 1968. See Bruce Nauman and Willoughby Sharp, "Nauman Interview," in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words: Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 130, note 4.

← fig. 4 Dan Graham, publicity photographs Dan Graham made of rehearsal of *Two Correlated Rotations*, 1969. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris



↑ fig. 5 Bruce Nauman, *Wall-Floor Positions*, 1968, video (black and white, sound), 60 minutes.

do not exceed the frame of the video. It is as though his body remains confined within both the physical space of the room and the specular space of the video recording. Within the similarly non-descript space of *Moving Through Phone*, performers remain confined with the realm of the recorded video, though in this work they are virtually suspended between two screens — that of the recording and that of playback. The work substitutes a set of images for a physical environment to invite a response, which in turn is pre-scripted in a manner opposed to Nauman's improvised movements.

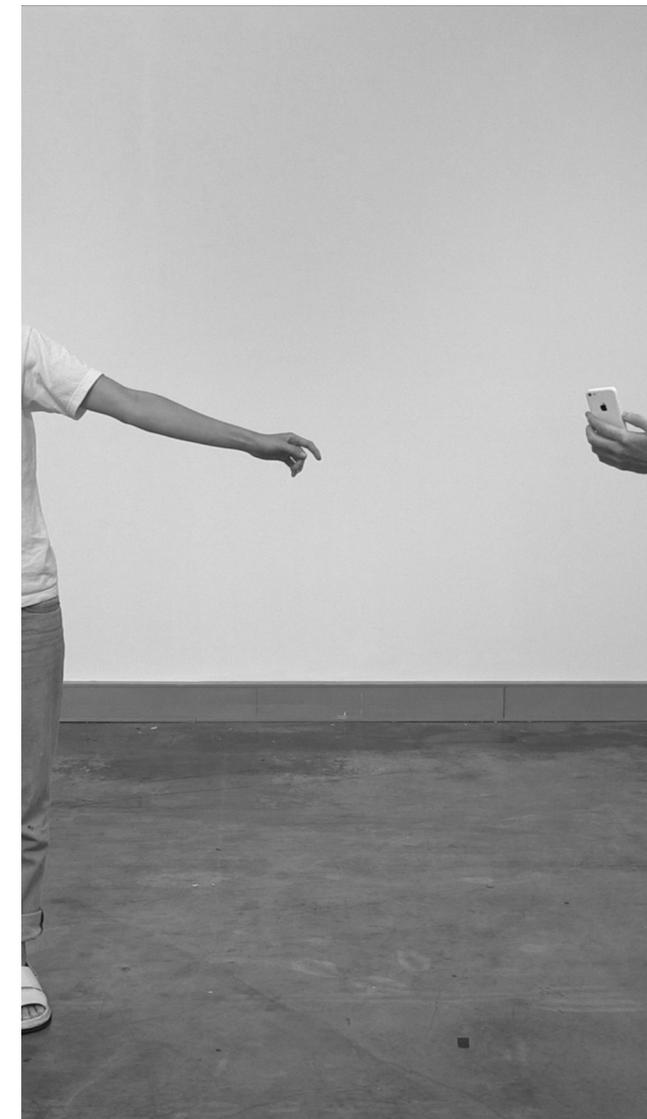
When read against these works, *Moving Through Phone* indicates changes in the spectacle and attendant criticism. In Rainer's performance works, commonplace behaviours are choreographed. Graham's filmic installation inserts actions of observation and movement into a feedback circuit. Nauman's performance for video subjects the body to a set of actions locking the body between physical and virtual space. Rainer choreographs the commonplace; Graham mediatizes the mundane; Nauman virtualizes the concrete. On the terms of these works, the image does not circulate. It is presumed to remain within a delimited field of art. Mills points to the convergence and expansion of these models. In her video consumer devices capture quotidian, repeated gestures in an integrable cycle. Crucial differences lie in the feedback between those bodies, images and media, and the manner in which that feedback itself is embedded in the contemporary spectacle.

As is all too familiar, the smartphone provides the means for constant and insistent interaction. Even as it remains out of reach, its dispositive capacity remains the motor of self-spectatorship (fig. 6). In typically pessimistic fashion, Paul Virilio contends that the mobile phone portends a system of "universal remote control" in which "the individual will be kept in constant contact, at every moment and at every point in their trajectory ... we will suddenly all be collectivised in our affects, in our most intimate emotions, slipping and sliding or, more precisely, 'surfing' as we will then be a new sort of epidemic of cooperation."²⁵ With all manner of location tracking possible and image distribution available, spectacle seems ever more entrenched. Collective affective regulation appears the *verso* of mediated atomization, as Mills' performers demonstrate. Mobile phones comprise part of a technological shift that acclimates subjects to the rhythms of algorithmic modulation. The associated overlap between performance and spectatorship undercuts the division that Belting draws between represented and representing bodies. Consequently, bodies become increasingly less distinguishable from their specular counterparts and technical media, given their co-constitution. When viewing the work in the exhibition space, the spectator is further distanced from the performance (fig. 7). The two-channel work is synchronised such that the spectator simultaneously views a symmetry of roles (performer A leads performer B, performer B leads performer A). This form distances the viewer to multiple degrees: from the initial improvisation, from its recording, and from the re-performance.

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Paul Virilio, *The University of Disaster*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 88.

→ fig. 6 Adelle Mills, *Moving Through Phone*, 2015, HD two-channel video performance, with Lauren Burrow and Jimmy Nuttall, 12:08 minutes, installation dimensions variable.



These layers of mediation dispose both bodies and their images, which in turn operate at different temporal and spatial removes. Reliant upon these elements, the subject is thus simultaneously dispersed.

Insofar as the spectacle could be said to support a subject, it is one under constant pressure to perform itself across the network, to produce itself constantly as an image for distribution. New images feed demands for novel consumption. When discussing the use and abuse of time within spectacle, Debord remarks that "[i]nnovation is ever present in the process of the production of things. This is not true of consumption, which is never anything but more of the same."²⁶ The character of the performers' movements undercut the promises of spectacular production and consumption. Languid, non-productive

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Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 113.



↑ fig. 7 Adelle Mills, *Moving Through Phone*, 2015, HD two-channel video performance, with Lauren Burrow and Jimmy Nuttall, 12:08 minutes, installation dimensions variable.

bodily movements work against the demand for generative novelty that all too easily aligns with demands for ‘innovation’ (the more “disruptive” the better, so the mantra goes). These performers’ actions belie an exhaustion of a kind related to Bernard Stiegler’s diagnosis of widespread “symbolic misery.” This condition of common despair arises because industry captures the means of symbolization, the very terms, codes and possibilities of communication. Stiegler claims that entering an age of hyper-industrialization entails “*an extension of calculation beyond the sphere of production along with a correlative extension of industrial domains*”.²⁷ Instrumental and calculable control is not limited to the immediately quantifiable. As Sven Lütticken notes in relation to the place of gesture in contemporary culture, procedures for regulation increasingly extend to qualitative aspects of life, from sleep to diet, exercise to affect.²⁸ Bodies become sites of inscription, their gestures tracked and repeated, by an industry built on an integrated architecture of surveillance.²⁹ As Mills so succinctly shows, art remains a space to survey the bodily effects of technological enchantment.

Struggle, enervated as it may be, takes place amidst machines, media and techniques. For all the attempts at rationalized optimization, there can be no absolute control, no obliteration of the unexpected. Contingency remains the *pharmakon* of the spectacle. It requires ever more bodily movement, distributed images and media formats to be analysed and evaluated, otherwise its own process of valorisation collapses. The necessary preservation of contingency leaves an open space for the body to evade total capture. Whereas the time of the spectacle “manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its *exchangeability*,” re-performance marks out points of qualitative difference in time.³⁰ In contrast to the demand for constant, rapid action of unerring predictability, the performers of *Moving Through Phone* constantly and irregularly pause, suggestive of those acts of apprehension and decision that the spectacle attempts to suppress. Those moments impede the smooth and seamless logistics of the interactive spectacle and the demands it places upon the body. In those considered gaps between perception and execution — in acts of reflection — lie opportunities to formulate alternative dispositions. Within the circuit between bodies, media and images, contingency ultimately implies that the forms, both of art and spectacle, may be otherwise, but offers no guarantee other than the spectre of dissolution.

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Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery. Volume 1, The Hyperindustrial Epoch* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2014), 47. Emphasis in original.

²⁸

Sven Lütticken, “Gestural Study,” *Grey Room*, no. 74 (Winter 2019): 106. Debord notes this preference for quantity over quality within the spectacle, also finding that quality remains an irrepressible element. See Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 27.

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Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

³⁰

Ibid., 110. Emphasis in original.

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