

EYE FOR I: VIDEO SELF -PORTRAITS

by Raymond Bellour

In Western cultural tradition, the term "self-portrait" immediately evokes painting. It is the special value of Michel Beaujour's *Miroirs d'encre* to have established the existence of the literary self-portrait (of which he has written a history and in which discovered a logic) parallel to, yet apart from, the pictorial model.¹ Adopting a similar perspective, we can speak today of the video self-portrait without feeling obliged to refer to painting, even if this autonomy is relative in each case, as both video and painting converge in a larger context.²

Autobiography, cinema: these are the terms that will allow us, through a kind of negative detour, to zero in on the historical emergence of the video self-portrait. The literary theorist Elizabeth Bruss has led the way in a definitive article that finds cinema lacking a tradition comparable to that of the literary autobiography.³ For this she gives three reasons, corresponding to three criteria that define the genre as such:

1 The value of truth, which charges the author to speak the truth, as it pertains to both the veracity of sources, and the sincerity of intentions. Cinema can *Utile* subscribe to this, torn as it is between the act of simply recording an event and that of re-telling it, between the staged truth of *mise-en-scène* and the truth directly registered by the camera, between the contradictory excesses of documentary and fiction. This is a problem unknown to language, which can never be, in and of itself, too much or too little "real," since it never enters into a direct relation with reality.

2 The value of the act, which recognizes authors as subjects responsible for behavior meant to illustrate their characters. Cinema has more trouble directly expressing this presence." the marks of expression employed for self-representation in the image tend to undermine the effects of authenticity and reality the subject wishes to convey.

3 The value of identity, which draws together in a single person the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. In precisely the place in the text where the "I" who speaks becomes confused, as a matter of course, with the "I" being spoken about, there is in cinema an almost unbridgeable gap between the "I" who sees and the "I" who is seen. In cinema, the subject is either too present or too absent; subjectivity disappears before objectivity/the camera lens (in French, *l'objectif*, meaning both "objectivity" and "lens").

Critics have reproached Bruss for the rigidity of her views, insisting as a counter-argument on various efforts, numerous since the sixties, that have allowed the cinema to express the "I," and to open itself up to the intimate, the personal, the private, the subjective—in short, to the autobiographical." Passing from the extremes of

experimental film to commercial production, these efforts link such diverse figures as Raymond Depardon and Maria Koleva, Boris Lehman and Jonas Mekas, Chantal Akerman and Orson Welles, Jim McBride and Joseph Morder, Chris Marker and Federico Fellini, Stan Brakhage and Jean Cocteau, Robert Frank and Hollis Frampton. Still, it is relatively easy to show, as Bruss has done to some extent, that the films of all these authors, however subjective and autobiographical they may be, only succeed as autobiography by, paradoxically, exposing the marks of the impossibility of autobiography, whose pact they cannot truly fulfill. It is only by virtue of this self-reflexivity that they enter, in their individual ways, into the arena Beaujour defines as the form and tradition of the literary self-portrait.

The essays of Montaigne are, of course, the founding, exemplary texts of the genre; in them, we see how the models of ancient rhetoric and their equivalents in religious thought are bent to the ends of personal expression. The entire rhetorical system of places and images, the dialectic of invention and memory forged since antiquity for the purpose of persuading others, undergoes a metamorphosis in Montaigne's troubled search for himself.

The self-portrait is distinguished from autobiography by the absence of a story one is obliged to follow. Narration is subordinated in the former to a logic, a collage of elements ordered according to a series of rubrics, of thematic types. The self-portrait clings to the analogical, the metaphorical, the poetic, far more than to the narrative. Its coherence lies in a system of remembrances, afterthoughts, superimpositions, correspondences. It thus takes on the appearance of discontinuity, of anachronistic juxtaposition, of montage. Where autobiography closes in on the life it recounts, the self-portrait opens itself up to a limitless totality. The self-portraitist announces: "I'm not going to tell you what I've done, but I am going to try to tell you who I am." To this expression of an absence of self and a fundamental uncertainty about identity, nothing the author writes responds fully, yet everything responds a little. The self-portraitist passes without transition from a void of meaning to an excess, without a clear sense of direction or action.

The self-portrait is a work born of idleness, of the retreat. To writing as action, intervention, belief and dialogue, the self-portraitist opposes writing as inaction, digression, and monologue. The subject of the self-portrait is encyclopedic, grasping its identity through the optic of the world, and in particular of culture—of everything, in other words, that constitutes the individual. The subject becomes the hero of the book and of the book posed as an absolute in the quest for memory and the search for self. The book is thus at the same time a Utopia, a body, and a tomb. Starting from the most personal quest possible, the author opens the self up to the impersonal, moving constantly from the particular to the general, with no other assurance or belief than those of the individual's own movement.

Thus has the self-portrait developed as a proper and relatively stable form from Renaissance to modern times, through entire works devoted to a life (Montaigne or Michel Leiris), in one book or several (Rousseau, Nietzsche, Malraux, Michel Butor, or Roland Barthes). We might try to characterize it as a formula: "an imaginary stroll through a system of places, a repository of memory-images."⁵

This is the tradition to be found, with all the expected displacements, in certain obscure corners of the modern cinema. Here the impossible autobiography of cinema 'ends' toward the forms of the self-portrait in various ways, more or less fragmentary, more or less developed. And it is this same movement that appeared about fifteen years ago in video art, only endowed with a new force and specific possibilities. This happened first in American video art, which took shape in this sense at the beginning of the 1970s. Soon after, the same idea took hold in European video art, with both similar effect and undeniable difference, especially in light of the more profound connection European video art had maintained with cinema.⁶ The tapes I have selected for this exposition are intended to bring this out, though the program is unfortunately burdened with the difficult, but unavoidable, task of tracing the idea of the self-portrait through only two works by each artist, with all the gaps and generalization this implies.

As to why video seems to lend itself more particularly, and certainly more exclusively than cinema, to the pursuit of the self-portrait, there are four major reasons:

- 1 The continual presence of the image in video, its instant feedback, which is always, without delay, like a double of real time; both go on and on, neither ever stops. This is similar, in part, to our relation to language, which provides an ongoing foundation out of which we form sentences in speech.
- 2 The possibility this affords authors of introducing their bodies more naturally and directly into the image, and so to gain direct access to their own images, and a means of wedding themselves to the intimacy of their gazes.
- 3 The third reason has to do with the image itself. It is much easier in video to play with the image and transform it, process it electronically, in both recording and post-production. The video image is thus more adept at translating the impressions of the eye, the movements of the body, the processes of thought. And all transformations the image undergoes seem more "natural," insofar as the video image itself is from the first more precarious, more unstable, and more artificial.
- 4 Finally, video, art video, is directly linked with television, with both its technology and its socio-cultural reality. Video seeks to distinguish itself from television, but depends on it nonetheless, both materially and culturally, setting the fragility of its subjective voice against the creeping tentacles of television's universality. In this regard, the video self-portrait repeats the history of the literary self-portrait as it emerged from a transformation of the means ancient rhetoric employed to assure the transmission of invention and memory. Today, "mass communications," as Barthes said, perform more or less the same positive functions once fulfilled by rhetoric.⁷

THE BODY

Thus, the self-portrait bases itself above all on the experience of the body, of the author's own body as site and theater of experience. As such, the self-portrait has something in common with performance art and can in part be created in relation to it.

But the former can never reduce itself to the latter. For one thing, the experience is inconceivable without the inscription of the body in the technical apparatuses (of sound and image) that allow one to explore the self through the very process of producing the work. For another thing, this inscription of the body occurs in specific places; with the elements of the "world encyclopedia" redefined in the unique context of each work and each experience.

The body of the author is offered as such, a multiple being charged with an intense capacity for presence, and always careful to preserve, as Jean-Andre Fieschi says, "the trace of things as they happen." To give a sense of the weight of this presence, I have put together for this program, in relation to Vito Acconci's *The Red Tapes* (1976), a montage composed of one minute each from twenty-three tapes shot by Acconci between 1971 and 1974. Each tape is conceived on the same model: a single shot, mostly static, altered by slight displacements that suggest a breathing body. There is no editing; everything happens in real time and closed circuit. Acconci strikes a range of poses: seated, lying down, both back and face to the camera, alone or with someone, fragmented images often reduced to a single detail (for example, Acconci's wide open mouth). He is frequently silent or mumbling, but more often he is talking to an imaginary interlocutor, or more directly, to the spectator. And all this appears in the 140 minutes of *The Red Tapes*, the self-portrait par excellence: the experimental body, this time staged as such, simultaneously coherent and dispersed, but always present in his voice, in its various registers.

Consider all the tapes in this exhibition: each one contains, in its own way, the same insistence, the same provocation, the same fragmentation, the same reflection, all threaded through the body. The eight mini-performances of *Tapes* (1979), by Pier Marton, comprise yet another anthology of postures, embracing the destruction of objects and a self-destruction realized through a proliferation of identities. In Peter Campus's seminal tapes, *Three Transitions* (1973) and *Set of Coincidence* (1974), we find a metamorphosed body so involuted and paradoxical that it effaces his image, and seems to exhaust the basic possibilities of layering, of mixing images. Then there is the body of Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1971), cut up, magnified by costume design, broken up in each frame by the constant presence of the skipping horizontal hold bar, or the Jonas body of *I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances)* (1976), the body that witnesses, through a superimposition of images, a story in the process of telling itself. There is Gary Hill's fragmented, tormented, suffering body, curled up, on the verge of death, grunting, mumbling, manipulated like a cadaver in *Incidence of Catastrophe* (1987-88); or, inversely, the very absent body that fills his overcompensatory voice in *Around & About* (1980). There is the elliptical body of Juan Downey, hidden behind the actor, appearing in the guise of the author in *The Motherland* (1986); or the baroque body of the master gamesman, scattered across the game of the double and the mirror, Narcissus burst apart, in Downey's *The Looking Glass* (1981). And finally, the reflexive, meditative, supremely present body of Bill Viola, who seeks in the vocal cry the essence of sound and the nascent image [*The Space Between the Teeth*, 1976], and in the night of solitary creation, the condition of his nameless identity (*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, 1986).

If I have focused first and foremost on "American bodies," for the sake of clarity, it is to register just how close most of them still are to the aspect of performance, which from the 1960s on was so crucial in the development of the avant-garde. Some even go beyond this aspect, at two extremes: Gary Hill's *Incidence of Catastrophe*, in which the diversity extends to the actor's performance; and the lengthy appearance of Viola in the middle section of *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, which has the deceptive (and self-conscious) simplicity of a home movie (cf. one of Acconci's best tapes, entitled *Home Movies*). In the European tapes, by contrast, one notices a greater gap between French and German tapes around the place of performance in video.

Performance has played a major role in Germany, as in the United States. Its impact has been felt by Marcel Odenbach, Ulrike Rosenbach, and Gerd Belz (as well as by Klaus vom Bruch, Valie Export, and others). In *Don't Believe I Am an Amazon* (1975), Ulrike Rosenbach's doubly aggressive and aggressed body, displayed under the Madonna (of Stefan Lochner), which she pierces with arrows, is the direct transposition of her numerous performances, as are her multiple images in a hazy mirror in *Das Feenband—Visual Gong* (1983). The trace of performance also haunts Marcel Odenbach, who comes out of the performance tradition, even if he often seems to hesitate between the forms of a personal diary and an actor's performance, registering the fugitive, elliptical presence of a body we are able to glimpse only quickly, in compelling bits and pieces, often from the back. This is the body cut-up, "geometrized" by the choice of spaces and the proliferation of screens (what I've referred to elsewhere as the "strip form"⁸), a wandering body given to idle strolling, to bricolage: the body-look of surveillance and voyeurism. As for Gerd Belz, his work combines movement and a piercing light, which is thrown on his face, to create a private performance, one that is also quite dangerous (he nearly burns his face), and that forms, in the end, the only self-portrait in this exhibition that is closer to a pictorial than a literary vision.

The approaches taken in the French tapes are noticeably different, more directly linked to a desire for the mutation of the body of the cinema—a desire for the body of the cinema itself. Such is the case of at least two artists, Jean-Andre Fieschi and Thierry Kuntzel, who invest their desire in the possibilities of a wholly new kind of camera: the *paluche*. The *paluche* is an extremely small video camera that is held in the hand, not pressed against the eye; as such, it is liberating for the body that does not know itself. "What I was seeing in the frame," says Fieschi, "was not what I was seeing with my eyes, human eyes; I saw what the eyes were seeing literally from my fingertips, which produced at once a very strange double of the image, the curious impression of being not in front of the image, but run through by it." The *paluche* is also an extremely sensitive camera equally capable of capturing very low lighting levels and high contrasts—so much so that light becomes a kind of corporeal instinct pre-existing thought and intention. Thus in *Les nouveaux mysteres de New York*, it is not so much a question of a body giving itself over to the image—for example, the dilated eye or the hand that is writing at the very beginning of this, the first of three tapes that comprise the work as a whole, entitled *Enfances, une*. Rather, it is a question of a body that is constantly in the process of informing the image, all images, but differently, because he is shooting "from the hip," from the body, instinctively. Of the very first shots of his grand

undertaking, Fieschi says: "I had the impression that they flowed naturally, and from the body."⁹

It is the paluche, and its "writerly," even calligraphic, qualities that inspired Kuntzel to make the leap from film theory to video art. He himself has only appeared twice in his tapes, but for long stretches of time, enough to establish his body as the basis for a double body-image, which in turn forms a wavering pivot to mount his entire oeuvre on. This is a body shot through with holes and fissures, a crumbling body constantly reforming and dissolving in *Nostos* / {1979}, a pure body of affects, processed/synthesized images based on naturally bright contrasts of light and dark. Then there is the "real" body of *Time Smoking a Picture* (1980), the idle, worn out body caught up in a game of double screens and scanning inversion, of hues and lights that mimic the end of a day in real time.

With Godard, it is clear that the two tapes chosen here, like all his video/television works in which he appears, are only meaningful insofar as they connect an intimate, or slightly more intimate, video body with his growing appearances in his films, and beyond this with the whole of his film oeuvre. On the one hand, there is the low-key, but active body of the home movie (*Soft and Hard*, 1985), and on the other, the body at work that opens up a commentary on creation (of his film *Passion*) to a certain supplement of creation, something never before seen in this domain (Godard's video work *Scenario du film Passion*, 1982).

Then there is Nyst, the only Belgian in this exposition, and the only artist to appear in a couple, as he does with his wife Daniele. In *Hyaloide* (1985), we pass from the serene body of the home movie to the literally disintegrating body (even if his physical integrity is not in question) by means of fiction in the form of an endless gliding, an out-of-control swirling of places and images.

PLACES / SITES AND IMAGES

What is striking in these self-portraits is the near absence of autobiography—that is, of explicit, nameable, referential autobiography. There is no story one can follow chronologically, even in a fragmentary way. It is striking as well that everything referring back to the past, to childhood, to what in general lies beneath self-reflection and the search for identity, is in these tapes so feebly established, so completely undetermined. Indeed, these works are practically stripped of references, guideposts without which the literary self-portrait would hardly be conceivable. Without accompanying words, the image says less in saying more, or, rather, implies more, as much for the author of the image as for its spectator. As such, the image is constantly opened up to supplements from outside itself.

Clearly *Hyaloide*, for example, owes everything to childhood. The final image leads directly back to the distant, personal past with the little pink shovel, seen throughout the tape, and placed next to a child's photograph, which surely is a photo of Daniele Nyst as a child. But we arrive at this ambiguous image through a detour, that of fiction, a path planted with simultaneously encyclopedic initiatory and ironic associations. The path

winds around a series of language games, both written and verbal, which take us from one place to another, and from one image to the next. It is a journey recalling one of the components of the self-portrait, those wild verbal lists that are the distant echo of the great taxonomies of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; hence, in *Hyaloides*, the unfolding of the game from word to word and image to image: echo graphie, video graphie, hagio graphie, photo graphie, ortho graphie, etc.

Once, at the very beginning of Acconci's *Ike Red Tapes*, real life shows through briefly in all its veracity: "Like everybody, he had his story. Born in the Bronx, Italian origins. Mother living, father dead . . ." etc. But this position is suddenly reversed by the associative logic of the self-portrait. Acconci can only weaken the imaginary unity of this self, and effect a dislocation made even more radical by the fact that his first utterances give the impression that he "takes himself for himself," so to speak. Thus we get Acconci in *The Red Tapes* furiously naming off all the places in America that are linked to the rudiments of imaginary alphabets, infantile lists, collections of objects. The "I" that searches for itself with an immediate thirst for recognition ("pull me together") disappears before his eyes in the mass and web of places which program it; they become so many points of corporeal splitting, points that compose and recompose to infinity the imaginary mass of his tortured, wasted body.

Similarly, in Downey's *The Motherland*, biography attempts to assert itself: "I have lived in this house for twenty-one years;" "I was born in this bed." But the only way he can recount his life is to return to the fable, the myth (the Christ-angel) and to proceed by comparison, by montage (e.g., the inescapable presence of military power conveyed by that of television). For the subject, the "I," can only grasp itself through a certain number of cultural and personal places, memory-images between which he strolls, losing as much as finding himself. Hence, Downey again, in *The Looking Glass*, recounting how during the summer of 1962 he went every day to the Prado to look at *Las Meninas* and experience before it an intense eroticism, almost an orgasm: "I felt my body disappear behind the silken bust of the Infanta, and my skin became Oeder, adopting a pictorial and feverish texture." The moment of truth, but a moment that is instantly snatched back and dissolved into the path that leads the subject from double to double, in and through painting, itself a mirror among mirrors.

These identifiably personal moments are immediately re woven into the associative movement/by which the author, in the present tense of the tape unfolding before our eyes, departs on the search for himself across the signs of the world that constitute his own world. Each self-portrait constructs a network of obsessions that cuts up and organizes the world according to the law of what Downey, after Klee, refers to as "The Thinking Eye"—in other words, the search for self as the look. He adds, "Culture as an element of active thought," which is also the dispersal, effacement, and dissemination of the self.

Marcel Odenbach adopts a similar approach in his "encyclopedisme," which is revealed visually, across his entire oeuvre, in five great cultural sites that constitute a bottomless well of citations and discrete repetitions: 1) painting, where Goya reigns supreme, 2) architecture, from Versailles to the neo-baroque chateaux of Germany, from the ancient

to the modern; 3) photography, with the photo representing the encyclopedia of the world; 4) cinema, primarily Hitchcock and his disciple De Palma, both of whom inform Odenbach's machine of looking, but also cinema in general, from newsreels to the Western, from the war film to pornography; and 5) television, which has the singular ability to reproduce all the other cultural references, including the cinema—which already performed this role (reproduction) in its own way. Music, which is even more malleable, also plays a part: it can be processed with images it derives from, or processed alone, but it allows Odenbach perhaps the best means of expressing the cultural patchwork he loves so well, and which is exemplified by the beginning of *Vorurteile* (not included in the exhibition) with grandiose music, Hollywood music, Brazilian music, etc.

It is through this polymorphous matter that history becomes Odenbach's place or site—especially German history: Romanticism, Nazism, terrorism. He weaves this history together with images from everyday life, whether created for a particular project, or accumulated over the course of time in an informal journal that is like a bank from which he draws. Somewhat cavalierly and perversely, yet with great sureness, he brings out elements from his personal life and childhood, about which it is difficult to infer anything. These are elements he mingles together quite liberally with everything he's learned or knows about the world. Between these two great worlds of composite images lies his body as a bridge, albeit an elliptical one. Odenbach practices the art of collage with an instinctive subtlety, which ensures a continuous circulation among the three levels in each work, and from one work to another. This is how the most sinuous rhetoric conceivable is used to construct an exemplary self-portrait, one so subtle we are never led to believe that this is the portrait of a "too-real" subject.

At this point I wish merely to emphasize to 'what extent European video art (or at least in many of the works I am considering) has been so much more profoundly animated by cinema than has American video. And by "cinema" is meant the cinema as a cultural object, and an object of love. In a sense, European video comes out of cinema—just as in *Hyaloide*, long before we first see the pink shovel and its accompanying photo, a photograph forms the visual point of departure for the entire tape: a photograph of Lucy Hoiwood, Jonathan Harker's fiancée in *Nosferatu*, a photograph that Van Helsing scrutinizes in *Dracula's Nightmare* by Terence Fisher. This first photograph leads us to the second, the childhood photo that is repeatedly a point of return for the video makers.

It is perhaps clearest in Fieschi's work just how French this very cinephilic foundation in cinema is. In *Les nouveaux mystères de New York*, he creates something unique, suggested by the title, between childhood and cinema: a return to the childhood of cinema, silent cinema, the age of the serial, of innocent images still open, still fresh. But, as Fieschi explains quite precisely, he makes this voyage back in time because of his personal experience, in his own childhood and adolescence, of the cinema as "a search for anterior images"—for him, the bodies and landscape of his native Corsica, and "maybe even the origin of images." The trouble lies there: this oscillation between childhood and cinema, which, thanks to the paluche, is literally a bodily oscillation, as well as a wavering of the black-and-white values of video, tries to achieve that elusive moment when all images are at the threshold of hallucination, through the finger-cum-

eye of the paluche. Carl Dreyer's voice, which is heard from the third shot, bears witness to this cinematic paternity the work harks back to, in order to go forward, through "culture as the nostalgic recuperation of paradise," and toward the archaic time of childhood.

Cinema experienced as an obsession also forms a basis for the work of Kuntzel, who works through this obsession in a more abstract, less referential fashion. In *Nostos I*, his first tape, the scrupulous cinephile will notice in the initial images the memory of one of the greatest American films ever to manifest the imaginary power of the cinematic apparatus: Max Ophuls's *Letter From an Unknown Woman*. In the tape, the protagonist, played by Kuntzel him-self, but as a decomposed/recomposed, processed image, sits by a window on a moving train, very much like the amusement park train "ride" the romantic couple of Ophuls's film takes.

For Godard, it goes without saying: the vibrant memory of the great film classics that runs through *Soft and Hard* is rivaled only by the grand love of the cinema that informs *Scenario du film Passion*. This last work is in its very essence a testament to the various forms the cinema has taken, and of which Godard is its principle incarnate. This assumes that video is for Godard, as for Fieschi (who constantly asserts this), never anything less than the continuation of cinema by other means.

THE APPARATUS AND ITS MARGINS

In introducing these real and imaginary sites, which present so many possibilities for images, the look, and the body, I would like to underline four modalities that strike me as ways of pushing the video self-portrait to the limit. The observations are not all pitched at the same level, and will often overlap.

The first involves the reduction of the physical site to the pure properties of the apparatus, the technology. Peter Campus provides the prototypical example, silently subjecting his body, without deviation, to the properties of the medium. As such, he designates a zero degree of the subject, which is literally annihilated by the technology whose operation (in this case, the chroma-key) he restores to its electronic capacities of transformation, and therefore to its very being. In *Set of Coincidence*, which is more narrative and more developed than *Three Transitions* because the body is less connected to the decor, it is striking how the image is reabsorbed by both the machine and the properties of the medium: the monitor in the room where the protagonist is seated, as well as the vibrations of the "snow" that surrounds and defines the body in the process of mutation, etc.

The second modality derives from a unique ability to interchange the creation of places and the medium's capacities for expansion. This is the case with Bill Viola, an enigmatic subject born of this interchange. By "places" I mean, on the one hand, an immersion in nature and a confinement in enclosed spaces, and on the other, different levels of cultural and anthropological memory that can be brought to bear on this double experience. By "the medium's capacities for expansion is meant a systematic exploration of the technological possibilities of image and sound that video and

computer science together make possible. This is the double condition of the development of subjective experience by the space-time of video, which is conceived as a sort of indefinite present, a vibrant and condensed temporality in which all (autobiography is reabsorbed into itself. The self-portrait achieves a sort of ideal state, passing directly from the grand postures of the Renaissance (Montaigne or Bacon) to the vision of a still virtual subject modeled by the mutations of science and techniques.

(It is between Campus and Viola that we must place Kuntzel, who confines himself less strictly to the properties of the medium than does Campus, is less interested than Viola in extending those properties, and is more careful to recognize above all the psychic functioning of the medium in his art. It is this psychic dimension that the insistent presence of the cinema in his work defines, but also, importantly, that of the photo, the painting, and the book.)

The third modality inheres in a particular attention to the still image, to the photographic, as both a memory image and a smaller, divisible unit in a chain of images. This is the case in several moments of *The Red Tapes*, in instants that are like extended flashes, instants it is interesting to juxtapose: the photos of "American reality," especially nature, that are leafed through at the beginning of the tape; the automobile ads rendered shaky by the camera in long takes; images of the American people targeted by a violent hand; and finally, representations of Acconci himself, growing older and older, until he nearly disappears in the whiteness. In a completely different way, this photographic violence is also the principle that governs the image-by-image decomposition of *Vertical Roll* (1972), with its constant horizontal bar across the screen; and it is the final lesson of *The Space Between the Teeth*, in which the entire tape seems to reduce itself to a single image, a Polaroid photo falling into the water. We have seen what the photo, cinematic or not, meant to Nyst. It means something similar to Fieschi, where all photographs, personal or not, seem to be already detached from the body of the cinema. It would be going too far to say what it means to Godard, in his nostalgic, filmic, double image-effect and its photographic basis. Instead, we will simply repeat his famous adage, "Photography is truth. Cinema is truth 24 times a second." As for Kuntzel, inspired by Freud to reflect obsessively on the "magic writing pad" as an image of psychic reality and the unconscious, the photo for him is made simultaneously writing pad and a detached leaf of the pad. In both *Nostos I* and then *Nostos II*, an installation, the photo is always a hybrid of photography and cinema, just as it is for Godard.

Finally, the fourth modality is that of the Book, as a metaphor for film, creation, and all experience. Also for memory, it is in reality a book of photos of the American landscape that is leafed through at the beginning of *The Red Tapes*, in order to introduce a history merging the body and the continent; it is a science book, placed beside a VCR. that inspires Viola's meditation in */ Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*; it is a book of images that leafs through itself interminably in *Nostos I*, as if to emblemize the adventure of the body and the psychic work effected by the spectator; and it is a book (Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, if I am not mistaken) that Godard is reading while seated in his car, a book he consults to find out where he is in terms of the destiny of the West and in terms of his images, both ancient and new. But the book as ground of subjective experience, as metaphor of the writing pad of images, and thus of film, of videotape, can also

become in its very words and pages, in their very visible physicality, the memory of the writing pad and the memorial of the body. Gary Hill dared to engage this modality in *Incidence of Catastrophe*, which makes use of *Thomas the Obscure* by Maurice Blanchot, the theoretician par excellence of "literary space;" the result is a strange and potent meditation, an intermingling of the material of the book with that of the body. Hill brings the modern self-portrait full circle through the transformation of video: back to Montaigne, to the moment when the book became an object proper, detached from its religious vocation of belief and its rhetorical function of communication—in other words, to the moment when the book became for the author both his body and his tomb, when, well before Romanticism, the Passion of Christ was transformed into the pure passion to write. It is there that, on the other side of the Atlantic, we find Godard, aims crossed, evoking Mallarmé and the Book before the screen in *Scenario du film Passion*, a screen covered with signs of writing, like a gigantic computer keyboard.

—translated from the French by Lynne Kirby

NOTES

¹ *Miroirs d'encre* (Paris: Seuil. 1980) in *English Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

² The self-portrait in painting provides the point of reference for the only text to my knowledge that is devoted to the video self-portrait: Helmut Friedel, "The New Self-Portrait," in *Video by Artists 2* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1986).

³ Elizabeth W. Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1980).

⁴ In particular, Philippe Lejeune in "Cinema et auto- -biographie: Problemes de vocabulaire," in *L'écriture du je au cinema*, *Revue Beige du cinema* no. 19 (Spring 1987).

⁵ Beaujour. p. 110.

⁶ Among the artists who follow, we should also include those in Japan who have emerged from another tradition, i.e. *Video-Letter*, a unique and admirable work by Shuntaro Tanikawa and Shuji Tereyama.

⁷ Roland Barthes, "L'ancienne rhétorique." *Communications* no 16 (1970), p. 223.

⁸ Raymond Bellour, "The Form My Gaze Goes Through," *Afterimage* (November 1988), pp. 4-6

⁹ Jean-André Fieschi was to restore, for this program, three episodes of *Les nouveaux mystères de New York*. However, the physical condition of the tapes required extensive re-editing which was more difficult than initially thought. Thus, unfortunately, restoration was not possible within the time frame of this exhibition.

The historical importance of these works seems, nevertheless, to justify his presence in this essay.