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"Video Acts" at P.S. 1 - New York

Eleanor Heartney, April 2003

This massive exhibition of single-channel videos presents a fascinating trip back in time. The bulk of the works on view date from the 1970s, with more recent pieces by a few of the participating artists. In general, the work here is the antithesis of the glittering artifice and theatricality of, say, Matthew Barney, or even Pipilotti Rist, whose MTV-inspired video *Butcup* (1993) is one of the most recent items included. Most of the examples hail from a homespun world in which grainy black-and-white images guaranteed authenticity, and events unfolded in real time as artists reveled in real pain, engaged in acts of real endurance and, all too often, inflicted real boredom on their audiences.

The show is intriguing for many reasons. Chief among these is the chance to see now-eminent artists taking their baby steps. Certain elements remain constant, among them Bill Viola's interest in time, Bruce Nauman's fascination with repetition and minutiae, and William Wegman's deadpan wit, while we are reminded how much other artists have changed--how Vito Acconci's unsettling mix of sadism and masochism has mellowed over the years, and how Richard Serra has moved from orchestrating playful group performances to enacting the role of formidable Ur sculptor.

Of particular interest was an entire room devoted to the performance works of Marina Abramovic and her partner, Ulay, during the 1970s. Abramovic's recent exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery [see article on p. 114 of this issue] introduced the notion of endurance performances to a new generation largely unfamiliar with the history related here. Videos of her performances from the '70s reveal a rawness somewhat at odds with the reticence of her recent performance and the estheticism of her spare but beautifully appointed Minimalist perch at Sean Kelly. On the tapes at P.S. 1, she and Ulay perform acts of unsettling violence or self-laceration. In *Light/Dark* from 1977, they slap each other with increasing vehemence, while in *AAA-AAA* (1978) they scream at each other from very close quarters. Other works involve the audience. In the 1976 *Imponderdelia*, they stand impassive and naked in a narrow hallway as gallery visitors squeeze between them. In one of the most disturbing pieces, *Rest Energy* (1980), the violence is only implied, as Ulay and Abramovic stand facing each other, arm's-length apart; Abramovic holds a heavy bow, as Ulay pulls back the bowstring with his arrow pointed at her chest. Nothing happens for the length of the video. But the emotional and psychological stakes are, implicitly, life and death.

Videos by Valie Export and Vito Acconci reflect a strain in performance art which later took on more explicitly political overtones in works by such younger artists as Karen

Finley and Ron Athey (not in the show). Similarly inspired endurance art has also taken root among a group of Chinese artists (not included here) who have adapted it to a more Asian perspective. "Video Acts" leaves such connections unstated, but they hover in the background, reminding us how much the contemporary art world owes to these intrepid pioneers. In the end, one left the exhibition feeling slightly nostalgic for a moment when artists still believed in the efficacy of the avant-garde--and that in pushing the boundaries of art, they really were moving something important irreversibly forward. ["Video Acts," drawn from the collection of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and the New Art Trust, was curated by Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator of P.S. 1, Barbara London, associate curator of film and new media at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and Christopher Eamon, curator of the Kramlich Collection, San Francisco. The show is on view through Apr. 13 at P.S. 1. Travel plans will be announced.]