

Notes from a Video Performance by Mona Hatoum

These notes are a reconstruction from memory of my own experience during Mona's Performance. I have allowed the associations and personal preoccupations that the work re-activated to be as much a part of my discussion as a report of the actual event. I am grateful to Mona for having provided me with her own perspective on the work which I have done my best to transmit accurately. I hope that our two voices can be clearly heard, although as the author's, mine will inevitably dominate.

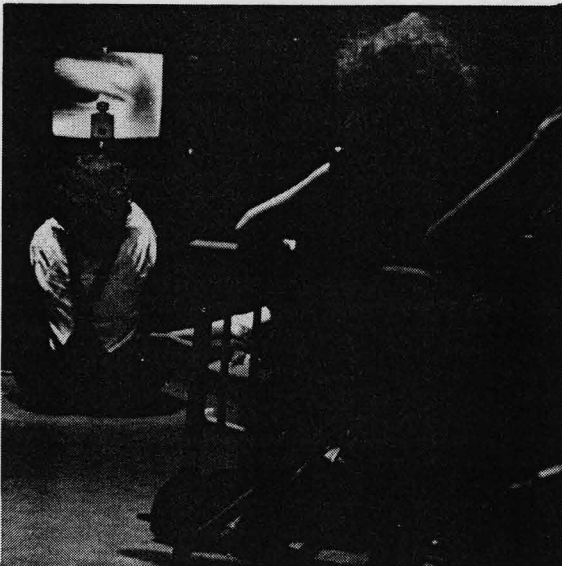
A semi-circular arrangement of chairs face into a central pool of light. I find a seat in the front row and take stock of my surroundings. A large video monitor sits high on a plinth with a deck, camera and an assortment of leads at its feet. There are many familiar faces around and an easy atmosphere combines with the usual sense of expectation to set the scene for the first live work I have watched at the Summer Show. Mona appears, dressed in loose dungarees and soft shoes - her everyday clothes in fact. She moves into the light, picks up the camera and switches on all the equipment. She approaches the audience. Her manner is relaxed and warm. She smiles easily but does not speak. The camera is fitted with a special lens which makes it possible for her to monitor her audience in extreme close-ups. She slowly scans her first subject. The image of a hand appears on the screen, a crumpled shirt sleeve follows, the edge of a face is next then an eye flickers in recognition of its own image. We are drawn across a gesticulating brow down a grinning cheek and on to the next subject. Mona's probe slowly reveals every ruck and wrinkle every last fragmented detail of her audience's physical appearance.

With a gathering sense of alarm, I realise that I am in the direct line of fire. My mind races around those deep-rooted, repressed fears that the situation is forcing into my conscious mind. Suddenly to become the focus of public attention in a situation that is controlled by another individual fills me with a kind of terror that I find hard to define. Memories



of public school humiliation invade my mind. Parental scrutiny, moral judgement and the strictures of Catholic confessionals merge into the single male gaze forever scanning a woman's body, appropriating her sense of self, returning her identity stamped with value X on a scale of desirability. To be in control, to be actively showing, and attempting to direct the attention of the viewer to where I want meaning to emerge - all these possibilities are what draw me to live work. The contrast between that ideal and my present situation suddenly clarifies my own investment in the activity. But I feel trapped. If I get up and move out of the camera's range, I draw attention to myself. If I stay where I am, I become exposed to this electronic voyeurism. The conflicts and contradictions of being a woman and a public spectacle overwhelm any vestige of exhibitionism that may remain and I cover my face with my hands, mimicking rapt concentration.

Mona's electronic eye surveys the woman sitting next to me. She is pleased by the results. Her T-shirt glitters and leaps on the screen as she laughs. A kind of intimacy is taking place. The camera has become an instrument of Mona's perceptions. It caresses her subject and delights in her responsiveness. My elbow comes into view. I can feel the heat of my embarrassment rising into my face. "At least its not in colour!" This observation does little to reassure me and I concentrate on willing Mona with all my telepathic might not to show my face. Somehow the message gets through. Mona briefly scans my arms and moves on. I enjoy a



Catherine Elwes

Film Co-op 11 July 1980

considerable sense of relief and relax into absorbing the rest of the work.

Now that the front row of the audience has been systematically scanned, Mona puts down the camera and switches off the deck. She draws an arm's length circle around herself with a piece of chalk and sits down facing the monitor. Isolated in this way, her territory defined, she effectively establishes herself as object of the camera's scrutiny. (Mona intended this "magic circle" to represent a possible realm of fantasy and fiction. As a result, we are distanced into the role of observer and so occupy a space associated with concrete reality.) Mona raises the camera and points it at her head. (The suicidal overtones of this action reflect the dangers of self-scrutiny with a culturally "loaded" medium.) Taking the risk, Mona becomes both active and passive, subject and object of the work. The artist turns the instrument of her gaze on herself and creates an image. She stands outside herself and attempts to redefine that image of self which sits so uneasily on her intelligence and subjective experience. By setting up a relationship with that image, she tries to displace the authority of the traditional male viewer who has been instrumental in creating her cultural meaning as a woman. She seeks the re-appropriation of her body to validate her experience and undermine patriarchal expectations and values. We are drawn into that struggle as we become aware of her point of view and allow ourselves to be directed into a consideration of her train of thought.

Beginning at the top of her head and using the monitor as a guide, Mona presents an inch by inch close-up scan of her hair and scalp. Very slowly, she explores her face in its minutest detail. The effect is both beautiful and grotesque. I'm reminded of Nan Hoover's videotapes in which her body is depersonalised and transformed into a primordial and timeless landscape by the use of microscopic close-ups and barely perceptible scanning. Mona's face by comparison is seen at a sufficient distance for it to maintain its identity as a face, and indeed as specifically Mona's face. In this way a particular intimacy is being suggested with a recognisable individual and so the work retains a certain level of political relevance. As Mona pans down her own throat and across her shoulders, a discrepancy becomes apparent. The image on the screen is of Mona naked, and Mona live is clothed. The camera would appear to be an x-ray eye, as it were mentally undressing the artist. Once again, the mechanical eye becomes for me, a strong symbol of the patriarchal gaze. Its view constitutes the single "human" perspective against which any individual modification is seen as deviant. (Mona saw this process of self-exposure as a way of sharing the tension felt by the audience who had themselves undergone a similar scrutiny. She now put them in the position of the viewer, a role she had previously played.) I can interpret this attitude as reflecting the cyclic aspect of the viewer/viewed relationship outlined by John Berger.

The viewer (woman) looks at herself and others through the eyes of the viewer (man) and so reinforces the currency of his perspective. The implied question posed by Mona's work is: How do we break the cycle? When can we trust our own eyes and how do we express what we see?

I find myself pondering the difficulties of appropriating the means of looking which any medium offers. How do we avoid being distorted by the inbuilt sexism of these forms of art? Certainly not by suppressing them altogether nor by draining them of any female imagery or content which might suggest a parallel with biological determinism. This spring-cleaning process only adds a structuralist taboo to existing patriarchal censorship. It perpetuates the invisibility and inauthenticity of a woman's desires, emotions, intelligence and particular experience of her body and its changes. What needs to be attacked is the cultural value placed on those experiences and images. Obliterating them only sustains the aims of dominant ideology. I glance

at the audience - men and women in fairly equal proportion. Their perceptions of the work must vary dramatically according to experience, class, race and sex. Does the "male order" distort the work less for the women than for the men? Is our consciousness not more in tune with Mona's intentions? Can we, as women, not alter our own perceptions and create new meanings in art? Somewhat daunted by these questions, I turn my attention back to the screen.

Buttons, clips and studs are appearing at appropriate intervals on Mona's body. A bunch of keys in one invisible pocket and a crumpled shopping list in the other. (Mona tells me that as a child in Lebanon, she would delight in spying on people through binoculars from the safety of her balcony. So, in the work, she has allowed herself "...to deal with the private and the personal in a public situation." This is linked with "...childhood fantasies of a scopophilic nature." Mona goes on to tell us in her introduction: "I imagined that my pair of binoculars were "magic" and enabled me to see through layers of clothes, skin, flesh etc. It is the curiosity of a child wanting to see behind the surface and finding, through fantasy, a way out of social restraints.") At one level, this penetrating action recreated in the work could be seen as a form of aggression mixed with genuine curiosity. At another, it is a way of communicating, becoming intimate with another human being without facing the problems of overcoming those social restraints (represented by the clothes) that obstruct real human contact. By turning the camera on herself, Mona extends the idea and tries to come to terms with the socially constructed inhibitions which prevent her from ever truly "seeing" herself as an autonomous human being. Woman is culturally alienated from her body and her feelings. Mona would, as she says, experience emotionally an acceptance of herself and her body which she had only, so far been able to achieve intellectually. I believe that this is a problem many women share - certainly one that I share.

The personal bits and pieces that Mona has left attached to her body introduce a gentle humour in their reference to the missing clothes. They also stand as a reminder of the particular identity of the artist. Traditionally, the female nude in art has been stripped of any clues that might betray her real existence and subjective experience. Visual information might place her in a social class, but only to establish her status within the totality of a man's property. Stripped bare, she has served efficiently as a vessel for the projection of male fantasy, Mona's clues reverse that tradition. She is reminding us of her existence as an individual woman who lives, breathes, struggles and feels as an artist in our present social system. Much interested by this train of thought, I reluctantly notice that Mona has completed her body survey and is turning off the equipment. The work has ended and I leave with a headful of stimulating impressions that link up with many of the problems I attempt to deal with in my own work.

A postscript: One last thought which Mona's performance inspired: We are very dependent on our outward appearance, our clothes to define and communicate our social position, aspirations and political affiliations. (Dan Graham has "described" his audiences in performances by pointing out the details of their clothes, gestures etc.) Women, in attempting to place themselves in a hostile society have great difficulty in finding the appropriate social signifiers in their clothes. "Have you noticed how feminists seem to have no idea what to wear?" Jackie Morreau asked recently. To dress severely, with masculine overtones would deny our femininity and take on board all kinds of aggressive aspects - we may not want to generate. To wear what fashion houses sell as "feminine" is as restrictive as displaying the "sexy" clothes that are assumed to reflect our sexuality. The only alternative is to buy shapeless, colourless clothes that make us as inconspicuous as possible. Once again we perpetuate our own invisibility.

The following four pages are by Anne Darlington: *Incriminations.*