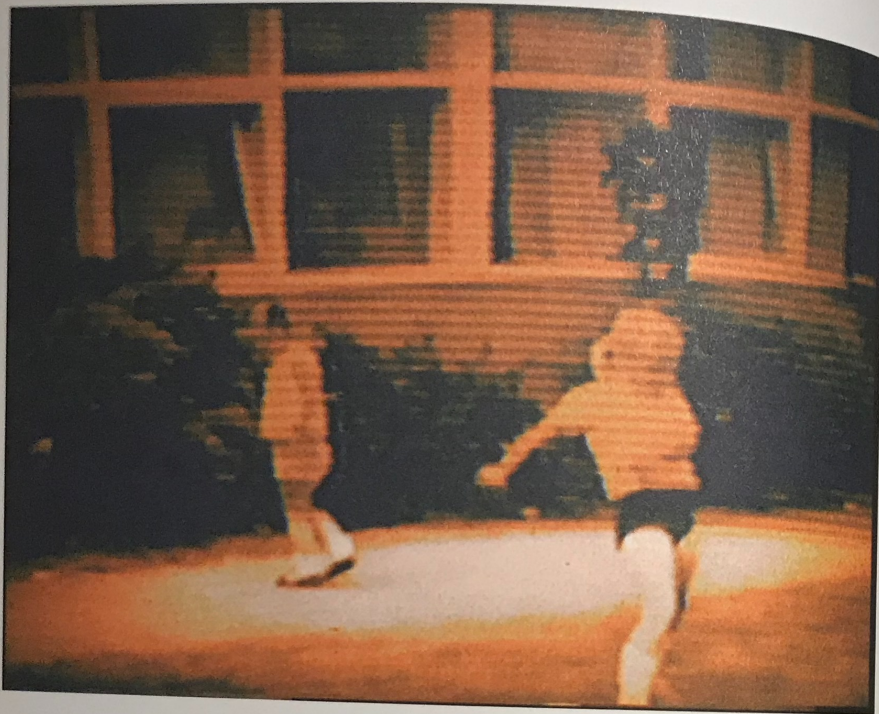


## CIRCLES OF CONFUSION

Jon Davies



*Sleep Study*  
2000  
Super 8, 16mm, video  
2min

I would like to begin by describing two noteworthy and astonishing loops in world cinema. At the end of *Stroszek* (1977), Werner Herzog's surreal, primal denunciation of a cheerily barbaric postwar America, the eponymous outsider hero leaves a stolen truck circling in a parking lot (before bursting into flames) while he visits an arcade stocked with caged animals that perform stunts by rote: the star is the Dancing Chicken. After watching these animals do their amusing but grotesquely mechanical routines, *Stroszek* mounts a ski lift, making the rounds several times before shooting himself. The film ends with an extended sequence of the Dancing Chicken's relentless soft-shoe before mercifully fading to black. Such Sisyphian metaphors of futility and sublime kitsch suggest the perverse way that American ideology keeps motoring ahead, fuelled by its own glorious mythology, ignorant of its morally bankrupt direction. Herzog creates a deformation of the factory assembly line that symbolized the American dream, the aspirations that *Stroszek* himself moved from Germany to the United States to follow: rather than churning out bubble gum or bombs, this conveyor belt to nowhere drags its citizens deeper into soul-killing ignorance and self-destruction.

*Memory for Max, Claire, Ida and Company* (2005), Allan King's jaw-dropping vérité documentary about Alzheimer's disease, is a very different beast than Herzog's epic. Claire is a real person who lives at the Jewish Home for the Aged at Baycrest in Toronto; she also seems much more together than many of her fellow patients. One day Max, another resident and her best friend, passes away. Claire is inconsolable, distraught beyond words. However, after a few days Claire completely forgets that Max has died, and it must be explained to her not only that he has died and that there was already a memorial service, but that she was present at the memorial. We are forced to watch her go through the process of repeatedly being told about his death and grieving anew. The horrible punchline: she is stuck in a short-circuit loop of forgetting that she has no hope of breaking.

Deirdre Logue's *Enlightened Nonsense* (1997-2000) is a series of such circuits, circles and loops. An exceedingly rich and suggestive series of performance documentations that put the material of the queer body and the film medium through rigorous, ridiculous and potentially injurious paces, *Enlightened Nonsense* hovers somewhere between the registers of Herzog's fiction and King's fact like the shaded portion of a Venn diagram: between travesty and tragedy, metaphor and mortal coil, absurdity and anguish.

When a body or a mind like *Stroszek*'s, *Claire*'s or *Logue*'s becomes trapped in a loop, it immediately becomes dysfunctional. Banal, everyday acts and gestures become starkly disturbing the more they are repeated. Human and non-human animals forced to spend extended periods of time in cages will

pace back and forth or pound their heads against the wall. This catatonia is symbolically aligned with trauma and madness because a loop folds back on itself—returns to the beginning—rather than evolving: it is so troubling because it aborts progress. Someone in a loop does not reach any place; they always and only go nowhere. Logue has described her process thus: “The films were shot, hand-processed and edited within a total of approximately one week. Like a week-long performance, self-imposed limitations, a concentration of time and the intensity of the production framework are elements conducive to and in keeping with the subject matter [ ... ] I am the primary performer, director and technician.”

By trapping her own body in a proscribed system, Logue is heir to a fruitful tradition of performers, such as Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, who dramatize a body in crisis. Nauman’s self-explanatory *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–1968) documented his body’s deliberate pacing around a quadrangle of masking tape on his studio floor, while *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1* (1968) featured the artist rocking back and forth in the corner of his studio for a full hour, arms slapping against the walls. Both are archetypal manifestations of Nauman’s preoccupation with irritating and dull repetition, often played out with his own body. Acconci described his *Trademarks* (1970) as “Turning in on myself, turning on myself (my action drives me into a circle): a way to connect, re-connect, my body [ ... ] Reasons to move: move into myself—move around myself—move in order to close a system. Reasons to move: show myself to myself—show myself through myself—show myself outside.”<sup>2</sup> This pure, closed work involved Acconci twisting his body into contortions in order to forcefully bite every part of his body within reach, leaving tooth-marks. Such experiments engender a condition of stasis that permits reflection on and knowledge about both the physical world and the ephemeral—abstract concepts, emotions, limits of the body.

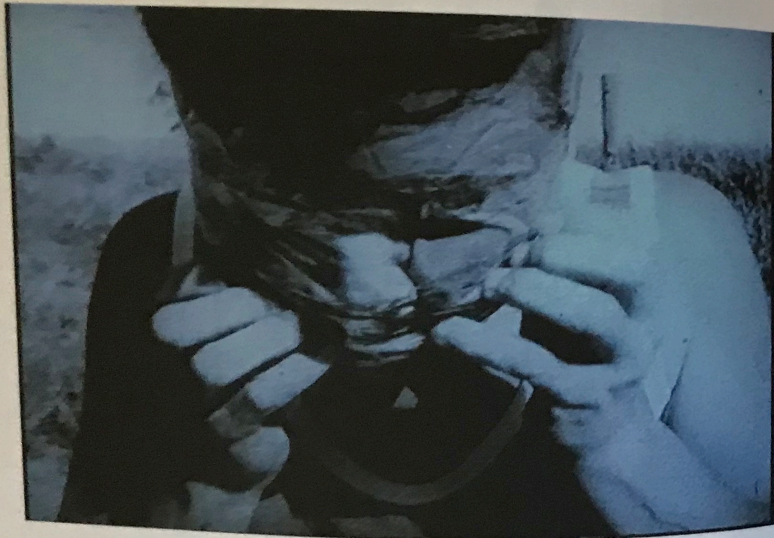
In many ways Logue’s performances mantle the themes and the contradictions of these two canonical, American male artists. The repetitive gesture has very different meanings for Nauman and for Acconci in relation to their view of the self. For the former, the repetitive gesture was the building block for a career-long exploration of the vacuity, absurdity and even sublime horror that is generated by circular patterns, linguistic and corporal. His performances from the late 1960s are not about Bruce Nauman the way that Acconci’s are about Vito Acconci. In Acconci’s work, gestures were repeated to signify the intensity of his obsessive examination of the body’s and the psyche’s relationship to space and territory and to create both a geography of the self and a subjectification of public space. Logue queers both of these practices by matching Nauman’s ludicrous irrationality with Acconci’s ontological mapping, lunacy with severity. In Logue’s work, the artist’s identity is both abstracted and cultivated. Her temporal and queer distance from this period of performance body art allows her to critically work over its tropes.

To employ a queer cliché, Logue’s films are about “processing”: not only of body and mind, but of film. Unlike her body art predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s who used film and video predominantly for documentation, Logue exerts



H20h Oh  
2000  
16mm  
2min

Tape  
2000  
16mm  
5min



as much energy on the recording as on the performance. Logue has claimed, "Each film is about the body versus fill in the blank [ ... ] You'll notice in the films there is always a pairing of at least two things."<sup>3</sup> This quality extends to the post-production process where it becomes a confrontation between Logue and the celluloid. The films are hand-processed, tinted, roughed up—some solarized, some painted, some scratched—and then edited. They bear the evidence of a very raw and tangible contact between filmmaker and film that mirrors those interactions recorded in their frames. The act of representing and reproducing the circular acts onscreen further compounds their repetitiveness by permitting them to be re-viewed over and over again. Such abundant redundancy allows us to pay attention to the small details and fissures that distinguish one action from the seemingly identical next action, or as the critic Kathryn Chiong puts it: "the irregular pulse of a body that falters, accelerates, decelerates."<sup>4</sup>

This attention to the recording medium casts her as both director and star. Logue's consistent use of the close-up in many of the *Enlightened Nonsense* films seems to parody this technique's use in Hollywood cinema and television. Historically, the close-up is intended to draw attention to the intensity of emotion visible on the actor's face, which is often exquisitely made-up and lit. By contrast, Logue's use of the close-up in *Patch* (2000), *H2Oh Oh* (2000) and *Tape* (2000), for example, focuses on her performing unpleasant, distressing and illogical actions to her visage in a rhythmic, non-narrative way: sticking and unsticking a patch on her face clockwise until she has covered its entire surface twice, dousing her head in water—hidden below the frame line—like a torture victim acting as her own unrelenting interrogator (her use of reverse motion in this scene contributes to the sense of uncanniness and inescapability), wrapping and unwrapping her head with packing tape. (I am tempted to subtitle the latter—the most painful to watch, and by far the longest—"mummification for the modern girl.") As opposed to earlier body art, where durable audiovisual documentations—simply framed recordings masking their mediation—were required to evidence ephemeral performances, Logue is a filmmaker, thinking through framing, camera distance and angles cinematically and televisually. By positioning a butch queer female body that is largely invisible in film and television in such a mediated way, *Enlightened Nonsense* exaggerates and burlesques the ordinary ways that the body—especially the queer body—is poked and prodded by a wide range of mechanisms of power on an everyday basis, making a melodrama of queer abjection. One can't help but also think of the philosopher Judith Butler's theories of gender as performativity, an unconscious citation of a fictional ideal, a stylized repetition of oppressive acts. And those who fail to live up to this coherent norm—namely androgynous bodies like Logue's (and mine)—are usually punished through shame. In an interview with the art educator Karyn Sandlos, Logue carefully positioned the work as not freakish and not about self-abuse, but instead as dealing with feelings—despair, humiliation, confusion—and materials—food, water, adhesives—that are very common and mundane. This ordinariness is partly accomplished through its cinematic and televisual codes that resist reification.

Another difference from the early performances of Nauman and Acconci—which seem to have been recorded in studios and galleries (in any case, on indoor sets)—is that all but one of Logue's performances take place in the great outdoors, in what appears to be a dry, hardscrabble plain. This strategy both refuses the myth of queerness as a purely urban phenomenon and also permits a kind of seclusion in an elemental environment away from other—perhaps hostile—bodies of the social world. Queerness has always had a contentious relationship to the "natural," and it is almost as if Logue is crashing her body against the natural world to see what kind of chemical reaction might result. In this way, we can align her repetitive gestures as much to the necessary and inescapable cycles of the earth and heavens as to self-generated obstacle courses; the rotation of the globe and the revolution around the sun are the epitome of "natural," but no human body could endure such regimentation. In *Road Trip* (2000) and *Fall* (1997), the trials she exerts on her body require the environment as a participant; they are as much about exposing the body to the outside world as about performing actions on oneself. Films such as these could not have been shot just anywhere, with the artist crawling on the brushy ground on all fours, licking the terrain with her tongue in *Road Trip* and experiencing the impact of collapsing onto this (presumably) same earth over and over again in *Fall*. (It is interesting to also note that *Fall* affords us the most direct, unobstructed view of Logue's appearance, from many different angles and distances.) This wrangling with the organic is also evident in her preference for an analogue soundtrack, created from playing with the film medium itself rather than bringing in outside music. In pieces like *Tape and Milk and Cream* (2000), the sounds she creates by manipulating the film's optical soundtrack take on a pulsating quality, an unyielding beat that further emphasizes the repetitiveness and oppressive inescapability of her actions (a function that sound also accomplishes for Nauman). Significantly, along with the stark and harrowing *H2Oh Oh*, these two pieces feature Logue in the most danger—of self-suffocation in this case.

However, even though the obvious danger courted or discomfort caused by her activities makes one cringe, *Enlightened Nonsense* maintains a fine balance between suffering and nonsense. In discussing her tone, Logue describes it as "like cynicism, and cynicism is a kind of wit that draws on despair."<sup>6</sup> In *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Bride of Frankenstein* (2000), Logue draws large cartoonish scars on her body with a magic marker, using the process of hand-scratching the film stock to add charges of electricity to the stylus's path, adding a crackle of energy that has a very tactile presence and lends a palpable sting to what are clearly artificial wounds. This piece seems quite loaded precisely because Logue is not harming herself but is instead generating scars—conspicuous visual proof of the imperfect healing of past traumas. (This activity is reminiscent of *Patch* where the stitching in the leather of the old baseball she moves around her face bears a strong resemblance to a scar, but a mobile and impermanent one.) To emphasize the excess of her verbose and witty title, she bookends the piece with a campy excerpt of an unexpected phone call from a cheesy TV melodrama. Perhaps the most outlandish piece—both silly

and unsettling—involves a reclining Logue filling her mouth to bursting with whipped cream and milk in two different performances (and outfits) intercut together. The black and white *Milk and Cream* is stained by hand-painted splotches reminiscent of human waste that visually punctuate the gluttony: yellow spots on the gushes of milk, rust on the mounds of cream. This kind of abject over-consumption and infantile regression has precedents in both high and low culture, from Paul McCarthy's condiment-slayered 1974 performance *Hot Dog* to a rural pie-eating contest on TV.

*Moohead* (1999) is a miniature masterpiece that is incredibly comical, campy, craftily edited and conceptually evocative. It employs a perverse, reddened-with-age television commercial from what looks to be the 1970s to sell a milky gelatin dessert; cutesy children enthusiastically extol the virtues of the jiggling dairy treat. Logue, meanwhile, is subject to a basketball being bounced off her head over and over and over again, and she cuts back and forth between celebratory commercial and sternly wry self-hurt. The great coup is how Logue cuts the piece according to sound, so that snippets of the ad's jingle and sound effects punctuate the precise instant when the ball strikes her noggin; because of this delay, the clips from the commercial itself are largely silent. While Logue's own catalogue entry on the series focuses on her internal and self-contained process, we cannot help but wonder who the invisible, off-screen ball thrower is. Because it references the socioeconomic realities of the outside world of capitalism and consumption through the use of the commercial and the inclusion of this unseen but essential co-performer, *Moohead* opens up what is most often a closed circuit in the other works.

*Enlightened Nonsense* also uses the loop conceptually through the occasional use of found footage, placing Logue's body in the lineage of past celluloid bodies that have now been consigned to the archival heap, their current state unknown. This is especially true of the mysterious, oneiric and near-silent *Sleep Study* (2000). While it is not stated overtly, the protagonist—a young, rugged blonde girl, her image recorded off a television (the other found footage does not employ such mediation)—is clearly Logue, who uncannily resembles the creepily sweet-faced girl at the end of *Moohead*. As we watch this young lass perform for the camera, her show is interrupted by an extreme close-up scan of a sleeping body—the present-day, grown-up Logue—that is wired up for what the title implies is a scientific study to measure her dreams. We then cut back to the young girl who returns to the distant schoolyard from where she had originated. This piece is quite different from the others in its relative linearity, its melancholic air and in the eclipsing of Logue's adult body for the more diffuse and ethereal body of her as a child. There is no repeated action here: instead the loop is a circuit of past and present, child and adult, permitted by the easy access of indexical media to document us at all stages of life.

The final piece of *Enlightened Nonsense* is the fast, complex and dense *Scratch* (1998). The only segment to use intertitles, it acts as a sort of manifesto for the entire series: "My path is deliberately difficult / My reasons endlessly repetitious / But it is through this that I know myself." As with *Moohead*,

*Scratch* juxtaposes found footage—of scissors and other implements, breaking dishes, and a bed that miraculously moves by itself (as is only possible in retro TV commercials)—with another example of Logue's altercations with the natural world: her removal of a nest of burrs from her pubic hair (we also see the Velcro-like flora in exquisite detail throughout). This sole act of groinal self-exposure in the piece—her crotch shot in tight close-up as her face had been—is cleverly bracketed by the bed in the ad stripping through the magic of stop-motion animation as Logue herself undoes her pants and takes down her underwear. After the burr-removal the bed remakes itself as she pulls up her underwear.

While looping one's actions alters the performer's and the viewer's sense of linear time, it is interesting to note that alongside a single-channel version, *Enlightened Nonsense* was also originally installed as a looping multi-monitor mosaic installation in the window of YYZ Artists' Outlet in 2000. By presenting the multiple pieces simultaneously, time is even further spatialized and fragmented, and our attention is splintered over all the loops at once, much like a security surveillance system. And while there might be multiple Logues visible together, the psychic scrutiny taking place, the inner life animating all of these inward-driving closed circuits, remains meticulously hidden.

- <sup>1</sup> This text was posted on Deirdre Logue's website in 2006 but is no longer available.
- <sup>2</sup> Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 19–20.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Kathryn Chiong, "Nauman's Beckett Walk," *October* 86 (Fall 1998): 74.
- <sup>5</sup> Deirdre Logue, "Interview with Karyn Sandlos," Deirdre Logue website: [http://deirdrelogue.com/writing/interview\\_with\\_karyn\\_sandlos.html](http://deirdrelogue.com/writing/interview_with_karyn_sandlos.html), accessed 10 February 2017.

*Scratch*  
1998  
16mm  
3min

