ANN-SARGENT WOOSTER

A CONCEPTUAL ARTIST who also makes films and videotapes, Lawrence Weiner has historically used film and video to make his dry, ironic, theoretical texts more accessible. Sex is often added as a sweetener. In his two most recent films, Passage to the North (1981) and the short feature, Plowman’s Lunch (1982), Weiner’s analytical propositions take a back seat to the erotically charged action. Passage to the North revolves around a reverse Ibsen situation to take place in a Northern Art Center. Plowman’s Lunch—with its allusions to both a plowman’s lunch (pickles and cheese) and a “hot lunch” (sex for lunch)—is the adventure of a group of deliberately casteless people of various ages and sexual persuasions who embark on a voyage or quest which is taken to the point of failure. Class, nationality and personal relationships are kept ambiguous in the search for “the man without qualities.” There are echoes of Robert Altman’s films, as there are of Eric Rohmer’s movies, but Weiner’s characters are particularly aimless and amoral. Their freedom from the responsibilities of daily life suggests they belong to the fringes of society, either the underworld (prostitution is evoked) or the avant-garde. Their freedom not only makes them homogenous but leaves them riddled with angst and ennui. When one of the characters—Weiner’s daughter, Kirsten—talks of her need to return to school, she is thrown overboard and killed. The characters have a great deal of charm—the Fellini-esque transvestite, Joop Vriend; the serious older man, Beno Bremela, who in real life is the head of the Dutch homosexual union; the two women murmuring together (Ingrid von Alphen and Eva Damave); or Alice Weiner (AZW Bentley in the credits) as the sleazy prostitute/mother.

Weiner’s analyses of society and his own propositions are threaded throughout in a far less didactic or overwhelming form than usual. At one point a young girl (Kirsten) and a young man (Lorenz Van Der Mey) have a discussion about style and politics. Using style as a metaphor, Kirsten argues that conservative-reactionary politics impose on the younger generation: Van der Mey endorses the conservative view. At another point, Alice, dressed in one of her deliberately tawdry outfits, states Weiner’s propositions about film in a kind of Platonic dialogue with a female companion in the kitchen.

FILM IS NOT A METAPHOR ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS & OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS BUT A REPRESENTATION OF EMPIRICAL EXISTING FACT

Although Weiner’s ship of fools has been faulted for male chauvinism (Weiner would argue this reflects the dominant culture) his success lies in his increasing skill in the craft of moviemaking, the dynamism of the encounters between the characters, and the charged performances he is able to elicit. Naked intimacy and the other contacts that rage between these characters have great appeal in this world where casual remarks can breed casual murder. With Plowman’s Lunch, Weiner comes closest to abandoning art film for real filmmaking.

In He Saw Her Burning, Joan Jonas returns to solitary performance, but a performance embellished by the presence of other characters on film and television, a prominent feature of Lunar Double Dogs last year. Jonas uses found stories as the grist necessary to form her pearl—a structure filled with her drawings, sculptures, and dances. He Saw Her Burning is an almost ritual enactment of two unrelated stories (both rewritten for these performances by Shawn Lawton). In one, a soldier inexplicably steals a tank in Manheim, Germany. After taking it for a joyride, he crashes it in the water. In the other, a woman for no apparent reason bursts into flames. Using props and other toys, Jonas enacts both parts—wheeling a large cardboard drawing of a tank, dancing the flame death with a giant red lacquered fan and streamers, or imitating the action of fire with a sheet of black plastic. She uses multi-media not only to extend and deepen her performance, but also to set up an opposition between the rational and the irrational, between authority and the circumvention of authority.

Television becomes her weapon. She employs its credibility to “swear” to the reality of her stories, to supply after-ages, to extend her one-woman band, and in one sequence, to provide on-the-spot animation of drawings. TV becomes the voice of authority. Early in the performance Shawn Lawton appears on the screen, commenting on current events: “Today a woman burst into flames. An American stole a tank.” He is paired with a woman (Y Sa Lo) on an adjacent monitor wearing a flame-colored dress and executing a private, sultry fire dance. Later, both appear on the screen as eyewitnesses to the two crimes. Television is used interactively with the performance, especially in the section where the male character imitates a talk show host, saying, “We would like to interview our special correspondent on berserk affairs.” He then asks Jonas questions. Wearing a mesh mask with a mustache drawn on it, she mimics answers but doesn’t speak. Video and film are also used to posit an unlikely love interest between the two berserkers. A Super-8 film showing them romantically intertwined is shown on floor to ceiling strips of white paper. Seated on the floor, Jonas manipulates the streamers, breaking up the image to underline its nature as synthetic or created reality.

During the question period following Amy Greenfield’s retrospective, she was asked why she called herself a choreographer. The question reveals the problematic radical elements in Greenfield’s “dances” for film and video. She eschews traditional notions of dance to concentrate on what often appear to be natural movements. With the exception of two turn-of-the-century dance films, Greenfield showed as historic references, her selection of her own tapes and films abandoned traditional choreography for a graphic celebration of the body and senses.

She began her long Videotape for a Woman and a Man, a nude pas-de-deux, at the point where the man (Ben Dolphin) slaps the woman (Greenfield), galvanizing them into a violent wrestling match. Except for the lyric passages set outdoors (repeatedly jumping off a cliff or rolling in the waves), the nudity and the intimacy of the camera (an excellent collaboration between the cameramen, Hilary Harris and Pat Saunders, and the performer-director) puts viewers in the position of voyeurs at a private sex act. Distanced by clothes and performed on stage this improvisation would be interpreted differently, but the tape shocks by its apparently graphic portrayal of sexual union in a context where you would not expect to see a blue movie. To a certain extent the tape is a tease, promising climax but providing instead a tautnic ballet of tenderness and violence. Greenfield protests (me thinks too much) that what you see is pure and difficult dance, forging new ground in the history of the pas-de-deux. Her pursuit of the portrayal of the frontiers of ecstasy is limited not only by her denial of real closeness with the male dancer, but also by the fact that this kind of performance can only exist in private and cannot. By its very nature, enter the language of dance at large.

In Greenfield’s other films and tapes the human body collides violently with the elements. In Dirt (1971), newly set to Structure by Glenn Branca, an anonymous faceless woman (Greenfield) is dragged, thrown, and lifted above rough earth—generally treated like a limp rag or the classic female victim. Greenfield’s intention appears to have been to treat the body as an earthwork or process art, but the body always carries an emotive charge. Thus, instead of seeing a symbolic or abstract representation of the body’s response to matter, we come away with is an image of deliberate, almost new wave (because of Branca’s music) brutality.

In the film Elements (1973), shot by Hilary Harris, Greenfield appears as a primordial creature, perhaps a swamp monster or the symbolic enactment of the evolutionary path from water to land. Barely nude under her coating of mud, Greenfield interacts with a slumping, semi-liquid plain of mud in a series of lifts, flings, and crawl. She calls attention not only to the limitations the mud imposes on movement, but to its extreme sensuousness. Although made before female-mud wrestling was a common male spectator sport, the film has that kind of tactile eroticism coupled with a sense of strength and defilement.

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Tides (1982), Greenfield’s most recent tape (also shot by Hilary Harris) builds on the water metaphor for a lifetime and a man. It is the most problematic of Greenfield’s film-video dances, in part because of Greenfield’s face is wholly revealed, we are acutely aware of her individually as she plunges down to the zone of waves break. Like the rictus often produced at climax, Greenfield’s face is being hit first between pain and pleasure. Also, because of the presence of her face and our clear identification of her as a mortal woman—albeit a muscular and powerful one—the sense of mystery and universality is lost. Instead of seeing a form-borne god-crowned gem of the Hirshhorn’s “Directions and sculpture with film and photography. Thacher’s work has consistently dealt with magic and transformation within ordinary circumstances. Here she presents a metaphoric space washed with deeply moving light. Anteroom consists of dissolving photographs of a small room furnished with simple props—a giant fan of dried grasses, a coffee pot, a mirror, and a chair. The room is entered by a door (a real door knob is placed on the wall) on the back wall. A young woman—the solo performer—enters and leaves the space. The constant tides of her presence or absence activate the space, which is further enlivened by the poltergeist-like movement of objects. Freed from gravity, the chair and coffee pot turn the space into a three-dimensional collage. There are suggestions of Robert Wilson’s theater of images, especially in the floating chair, but instead of Wilson’s icy stasis, Thacher’s objects come alive and seem suspended in a fluid visual medium. Thacher’s unique concept of space, time, and reality is deepened by her use of colored shadows. In her belief to the illusionary deep space as if it were a three-dimensional painting, stripping the changing tableaux with free-colored shadowed images, like strokes of paint in a new wave painting. Thacher’s phantasmagoria go beyond sheer visual pleasure to psychological transformation within the space enlivened by a sensorial appraisal of the beauty of domestic life. Unlike the cool abstract paintings of the period, the collection of 60’s film and video work curated by Bob Harris for PS 1 (with a catalogue essay by Davidson戈尔吉拉) is raw and emotionally charged. The tapes seem ever younger than the 15 years that have passed since they were made. The work ranged from Bruce Nauman’s monotonous private performance, Lp Sync (1969) to the experiments with technology sponsored by Boston’s WGBH in the Medium in the Medium (also Tambellini, Trickey, Alan Kaprow, Otto Piene, James Seawright, Nam June Paik) undertaken independently by Eric Siegel in The Symphony of the Planet. The set of back issues of Soap Opera Digest (and back, Jollytime Popcorn, Skinner’s Raisin Bran, and TV set on a TV cart scattered in the kitchen containing shelves filled with Tang, kitchen containingshelves filled with Tang, cinnamon, and a TV set on a TV cart scattered in the kitchen). The scenes with Ashley/Berlioz lack the sense of purpose that gives it a deeper reality than that of radiant kinetics spectacle. Here the spiralling camera movement generates a cocoon of intimacy between the boy and his father. The scenes with Ashley/Berlioz lack the sense of purpose that gives it a deeper reality than that of radiant kinetics spectacle.