

ART FORUM

September, 1975

In an October, 1973, article in *Artforum*, DOUGLAS DAVIS stressed the need for "a proper understanding and use of content [in art]—of symbols and meanings that point outside toward the world." He was particularly critical of American artists' avoidance of, or naive, often "bathetic" handling of subject matter in their tacit continuation of the formalist emphasis on "art" structure. The predominant fear he pointed to is that "by dealing in meaning the work of art may immediately absorb itself into the world, losing its privileged (esthetic) shelter." "We are all caught in the tautology that art counts only as art when it is about art. The essential step is to break out of this restrictive trap, which requires a willingness to integrate the complex self (with its feelings about the outside world) and the work of art."

In some sense, Davis's notes toward a definition of content serve as a commentary on his recent work. His videotape *Fragments for a New Art of the 70's* offers a verbatim adherence to his insistence on the "complex self," the artist who thinks not only about art but also about the world. Davis is seen feeding his thoughts as they occur into a teletypewriter, which in turn spews them onto the screen (typos and all). A clock records the real time flow of this tract in the making. One of Davis's major complaints in his article concerns the banality of content used. This video provides an example. For what one gets is a succession of platitudes without the thinking that might inform them. "Almost every act



Douglas Davis, *Holding*, 1974

is political (to say 'every' depoliticizes the statement)." "Art is a mental fact—the propositions not analytic." At one point there is an abrupt switch to the "real" world—"today's newspaper still in my mind." A series of glib reflections follows... the "complex self" emerging? In the end, it is the form that predominates, the way the piece is staged. Davis is always the self-conscious performer, and his language is a contrived gesture toward content. One loses the entry-point to the mind—the process, the questioning of thinking—in receiving its packaged artifacts.

In other tapes, Davis engages the viewer in a more direct (physical) confrontation. I could only see these tapes in the gallery, although they were supposed to have been played on cable TV. And this perhaps distorts the interplay between the safe distance of the video image and the intimacy of home TV-viewing (for which they are intended). But try to imagine. The *Austrian*, *Florence*, and *Caracas* tapes all involve prescribed tasks which the viewer, in the privacy of his home, is to perform with the public Davis acting on the screen: touching hands, lips, backs together; undressing, walking, dressing together; drawing together on the monitor, on one's body. Implicit throughout is the contrast between contact, sharing with the other, and separateness from him. Yet Davis's repeating monotone instructions and his neat comments as to what one should be experiencing convert the actions into a drill routine. The interchange remains on the surface. And the possible psychological content takes shape as a didactic art exercise.

What disturbs me in Davis's approach to content is the underlying triteness of his means—a presentation



Roger Welch, *The Roger Woodward-Niagara Falls Project*, 1975

of ideas which accentuates their manipulation, their artificial context. Two 1975 pieces rely on images as evocative expression of the mind (the reference, I think, is Beuys). But *The Last Videotape (in the World)* is supermelodrama. As the words of the title appear over a hard-to-decipher picture of Davis's reposing body, one hears dogs growling and a phone ringing without answer. Sure, there's an eeriness to this, but it's an eeriness one has learned as convention. More effective is Davis's *Images from the Present Tense II*. The poster announcing this piece shows Davis seated beside a tied-up, mummylike package. The unveiled work exhibits a "flying man" dummy suspended from the ceiling. Alone, spotlight in the large room, this object insists on its presence, while the remnants of past performance (the wrappings) lie below. The incessant ticking of a nearby clock reinforces the drama of now.

Humanness. The word points to the appeal of ROGER WELCH's work. His recent piece *Rodger Woodward—Niagara Falls Project* is part of a planned series on "Near Death Experiences," an attempt to recapture, to understand what it means almost to die. It is not the "Drama in Real Life" of *Reader's Digest* fame, nor simply storytelling, but more a projection into, a sharing of, another's experience, which reflects on one's own. As in Welch's earlier works, the narrative occurred in the past. One reaches it, not through distance as documented event, but through presence as remembered meaning. In July 1960, at age seven, Rodger Woodward survived going over the falls after his boat capsized in the Niagara River. His sister was rescued off Goat Island before the falls. The other person in the boat

was killed. Welch's piece consists of a video interview with Rodger (now in his twenties) and, projected across the opposite wall, a film loop—traveling down the river to the falls, ending at the brink, repeating. Periodically the sound of rushing water drowns out the voice on the monitor. One is caught in the middle. The film visualizes the objective reality of the experience, and sets the situation, while the interview questions and answers probe the subjective import. It is not so much that one theatrically sees oneself going over the falls. It is more that one becomes involved in a process of trying to understand, to come to terms with the closeness of death. Again humanness. That contact, communication with the other through which one expands (and also confirms) one's perception. For, if one's comprehension of Rodger's experience depends on one's knowledge of self, at the same time it entails the extension of self into another.