



59. Dan Graham, *Three Linked Cubes/Interior Design for a Space Showing Videos*, 1986.

the Kunsthalle in Berne, consisted of musicians and audience sitting facing each other through a large two-way mirror. A live feed video with a six-second delay was projected on the mirror, creating a virtual kaleidoscope of perception-bending images during which the audience watched the performers only through the filter of the mirror and video as they were also watching themselves and the performers on a time delay. This sense of disorientation challenged their position as observers. Graham continues to create viewing environments, such as *Three Linked Cubes/Interior Design for a Space Showing Videos* (1986), a space with transparent and mirrored glass, featured in the Guggenheim Museum's 1997 exhibition, *Rooms with a View: Environments for Video*; and an updated version of this, *New Space Showing Videos* (1995). In both cases the environments allow for viewing and being viewed; the viewer becoming at once the performer and the audience.

Politics, Postmodernism, and the New Spectacle

Graham's interactive practices reflect the theories of the Situationist International, a loose collective of European artists and intellectuals, whose chief spokesman, Guy Debord (1931–94), had a profound influence on artists in Western Europe and America. Central to Situationist thought (a combination of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and existentialism) was that theory can and should be the locus for 'aesthetic actions' by artists and other concerned individuals. Guided by Debord, especially in his 1967 essay 'The Society of the Spectacle', Situationists, largely through writings, agitated for popular control of urban spaces. One of their publications, *On the Poverty of Student Life* (1966–67), foreshadowed the



60. T. R. Uthco and Ant Farm (Doug Hall, Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Judy Procter), *The Eternal Frame*, 1975. Abraham Zapruder's amateur 8-millimetre film of President Kennedy's assassination has received more frame-by-frame scrutiny than any other film in history.

worldwide student uprisings of 1968. Artists like Graham and Doug Hall reflected variations on the Situationist manifestos in their own work. Hall became directly associated with political theater as one of the founders of the San Francisco-based, multimedia performance collective T. R. Uthco. Begun in 1970, the group became known for its 1975 collaboration with another media watchdog group, Ant Farm, on *The Eternal Frame*, a filmed re-enactment of Kennedy's 1963 assassination. Combining live performance spectacle, archive footage of the actual assassination, and spectators' filmed reactions to the 're-staging' of the event, this project became a biting record of American fascination with myth, heroes, and the televised image.

Hall also parodied American politics in his video performance *The Speech* (1982), during which he delivered an empty, cliché-ridden stump speech while standing on a platform surrounded by 'media' and 'supporters.' In *Amarillo News Tapes* (1980) and *This Is the Truth* (1982), Hall contested the very notion of 'truth' in the context of media, while engaging his ongoing inquiry into the power of language in the context of 'the public spectacle.' Making no apologies for a lack of intellectual content, Mike Smith (b. 1942), in his performances, videos, and installations since the late 1970s, has skewered the banality of US commercial television in the person of his fictive character 'Mike.' Mike, with no ideas of his own, is a welcome, empty receptacle for all television has to offer. Smith created numerous performance comedies, showcasing his deadpan, conceptual humor in works such as *Down in the Rec Room* (1979), *Secret Horror* (1980), and *Mike Builds a Shelter* (1985). 61-65

Such 'conceptual humor' was evident from the late 1960s and reached an apotheosis in 1980s postmodernism. While scholars still argue over definitions of postmodernism, certain trends in the practice of artists help us to define it. In multimedia theater, the hyperkinetic works of New York's Wooster Group are representative of postmodern performance. The group offers media-mingled interpretations of classic plays such as Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*, first performed by the group in 1994, *Hairy Ape*, 1995, or *House/Lights*, 1997, based on Gertrude Stein's *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*. The plays' original texts, though intact, are almost unrecognizable in the midst of high decibel sound scores, amplified voices, and live performers competing for viewers' attention with videotaped versions of themselves on multiple monitors that litter the stage. In capitalizing on the uniqueness of O'Neill or Stein, they offer graphic representation of what social theorist and critic Fredric Jameson cites as the postmodern artist 66

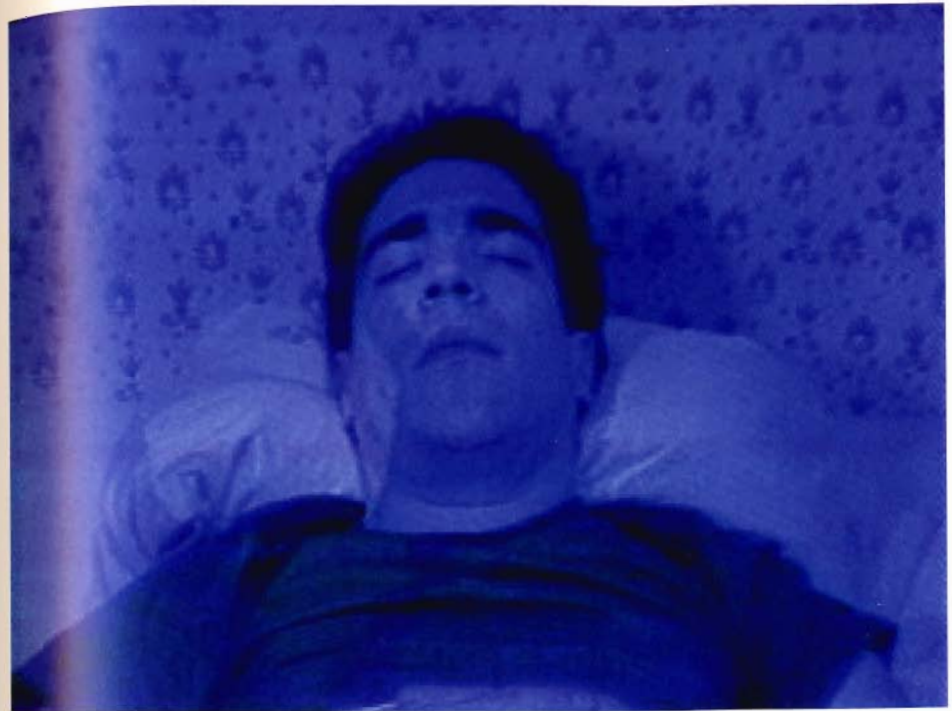


61, 62. (above right, right) Mike Smith, *Down in the Rec Room*, 1979, re-edited 1981.



63. (below) Mike Smith, *Mike Builds a Shelter*, 1985. Mike Smith's alter-ego 'Mike' is a living sponge for all that mass media have to offer. He easily succumbs to the lure of advertising but has nightmares over all that he's trying to consume.

64, 65. (far right) Mike Smith, *Secret Horror*, 1980.



66. Wooster Group,
House/Lights. Performance at the
Performing Garage, New York,
October 1998.



67. Wooster Group,
Brace Up!, 1991.
Actors including
Willem Dafoe, Kate Valk.
Photograph: Paula Court.
The Wooster Group turns classic
plays into media frenzies with
multiple video monitors and
fractured texts.



'seizing on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original.' But, rather than participate in the banality of media culture, these artists (led by Liz LeCompte who directs most of their productions) actually elevate media culture through their sophisticated use of technology to an artistic level of its own that eschews low-tech associations with the commonplace satirized by Mike Smith. If anything, the Wooster Group creates high-brow art as evidenced by their attraction to writers such as O'Neill or Stein. Among their collaborators is one of the principal architects of postmodern theater, Richard Foreman, founder of the Ontologic Hysterical Theatre, who wrote *Miss Universal Happiness* and *Symphony of Rats* for the Group.

John Jesurun's media theater illustrates another tenet of post-modern genres, namely what French theorist Jean Baudrillard called 'the death of the subject.' Spewing forth comments on everything from old films, to rock music, to pop psychology, Jesurun's theatrical pieces, which often incorporate multiple video images of the actors, feature characters lost in a universe of words and emotional deprivation. Jesurun's 'subjects', or characters, are in a sense dead, drowned in a sea of free associations and psychobabble that suggest a disembodied mouth in a Beckett play that rambles on eternally. Unlike Beckett, however, whose poetic tracts are more akin to romanticism than postmodernism, Jesurun creates settings which evoke paranoia and hopelessness, like *Deep Sleep* (1985) in which live actors gradually become 'consumed' by filmed images of themselves, or *Slight Return* (1994) in which the audience only sees the projected video image of a performer trapped in a room with a surveillance camera.

68. John Jesurun, *Everything
That Rises Must Converge*, 1990.
Photograph: Paula Court.



The Wooster Group and Jesurun have influenced many younger artists in the United States and abroad, especially another collective called the Builders Association, whose self-description is a virtual definition of a postmodern media theater: 'We reanimate classic theatrical texts by infusing them with new media, and then re-working them within the chaotic context of contemporary global culture.' Their 1997 *Jump Cut (Faust)*, with texts by Jesurun, and staging clearly influenced by the Wooster Group, involved highly sophisticated interactive video scenes in which characters from Goethe's *Faust* played off scenes from a silent era film of *Faust* (1926) by F. W. Murnau, and reacted to live video feed from a camera placed on stage.

Like Robert Wilson, French-Canadian director Robert Lepage works in large, multimedia formats. With his company Ex Machina, he has created several media-based theater works, including *Polygraph* (1990), *Needles and Opium* (1992), and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (1996), a seven-hour work that combined film, video, music, and Japanese Butoh and Kabuki-inspired dance. This elegy for the twentieth century was inspired by his visit to

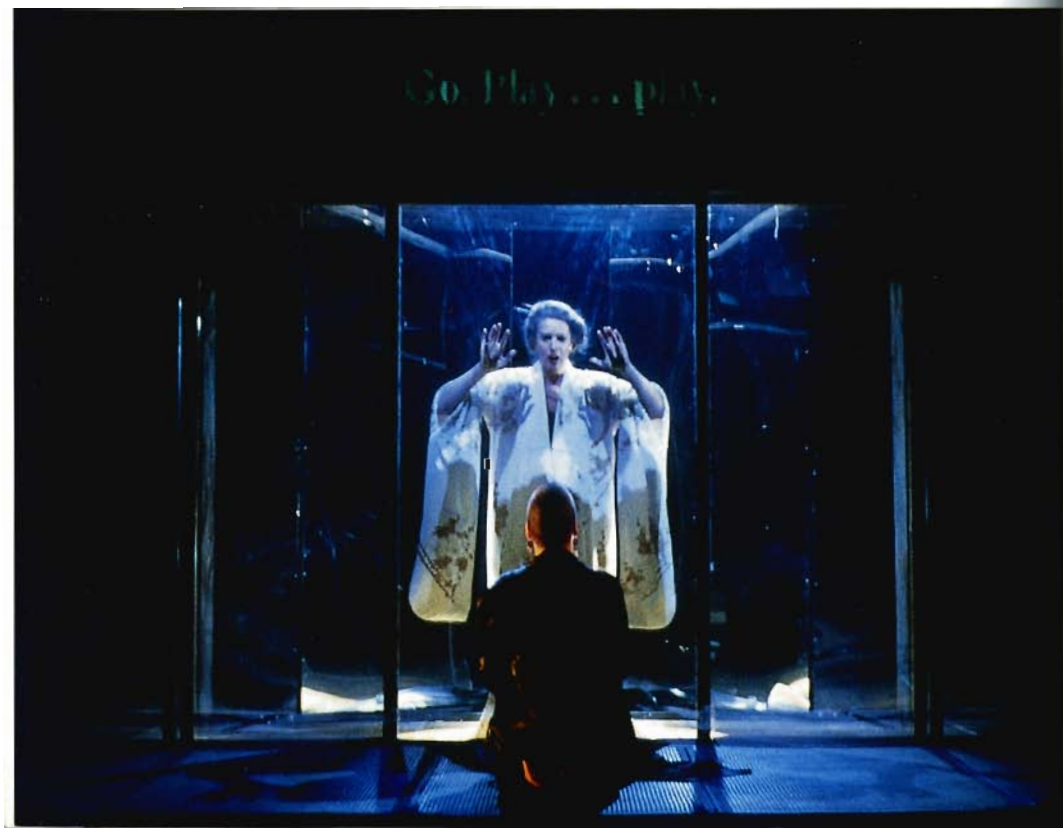
Hiroshima; it is a complex work which collapses time by weaving together lives of people who experienced the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the AIDS epidemic. 'The theater is implicitly linked to technology,' Lepage has said. 'There is a poetry in technology, but we try to use it in a way that does not eclipse the action on stage.' La Fura dels Baus, the international performance group founded in Barcelona in 1979, confronted media head on in their phantasmagoric *F@usto: Version 3.0* (1998). Bloodied bodies and hellfire projected onto huge screens and actors swinging from the ceiling or floating through the air in water-filled, mechanized 'wombs' made boldly graphic representations to illustrate Goethe's tale of the pact between a man and the devil.

Lepage states that he was influenced by the improvisatory working methods of British theater director Peter Brook (b. 1925), whose Paris-based international company has created works often based on literary and classic sources (e.g. *The Mahabharata*, a nine-hour epic developed over several years in the 1980s). Although Brook was also a film director early in his career, he is not associated with media. Nonetheless, he made significant use of large format, live video in his

69. (left) Robert Lepage, *Polygraph*, 1990.

70. (below left) Robert Lepage, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, 1996. For theater and opera director Robert Lepage, video and film become living characters alongside actors in his technology-based stage works.

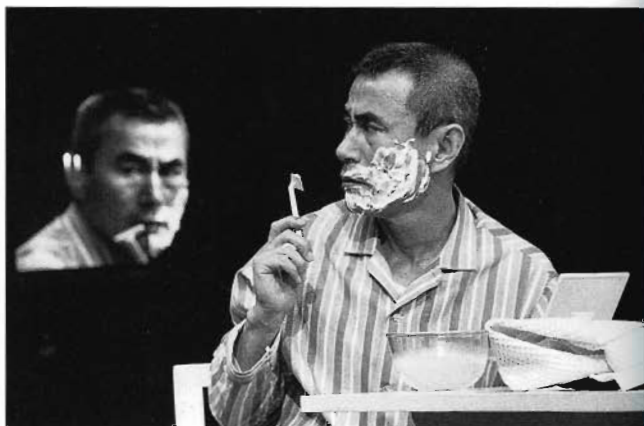
71. (below) La Fura dels Baus, *F@usto: Version 3.0*, 1998.





72. (above) Robert Lepage,
Needles and Opium, 8–12
December, 1992.

73. (right) Peter Brook,
The Man Who, 1992.
In Brook's adaptation of Oliver
Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook
His Wife for a Hat*, video images
function as mirroring devices for
the central character who forgets
moments as soon as they pass.



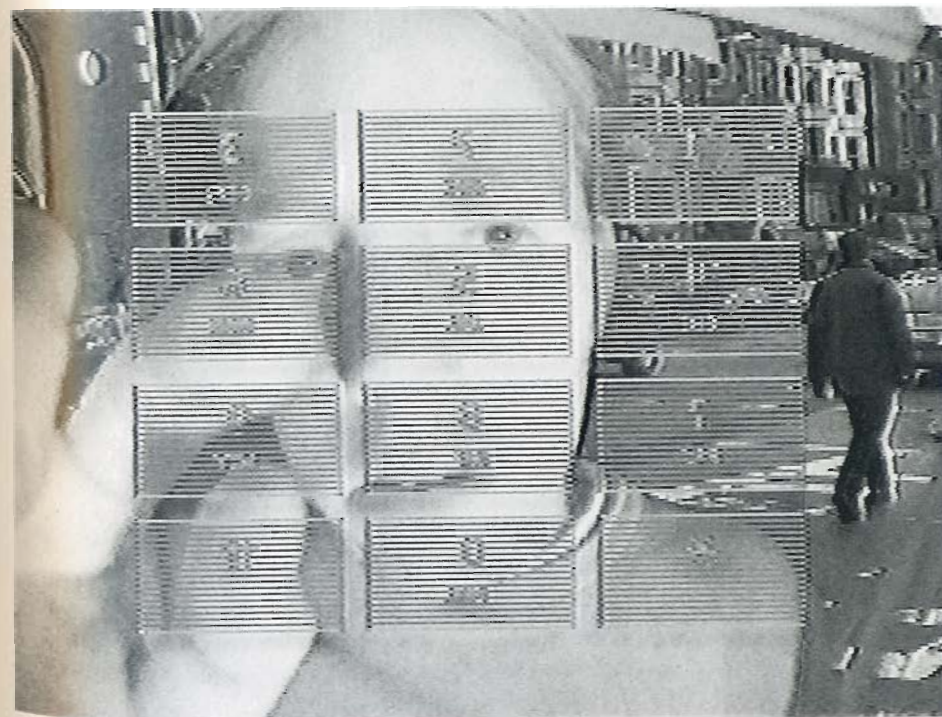
1992 production, *The Man Who*, based on Oliver Sacks's book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* about a man with brain damage.

Several other experimental theater companies that often use media in their work include groups like Squat Theater (founded in Czechoslovakia), Japan's Dumb Type, Impossible Theater (a 1980s American collective whose use of sophisticated media methods in productions like *Social Amnesia*, 1986, was intended as a critique of technology) and companies associated with

74. (right)
Ping Chong, *Deshima*, 1993.

75. (below)
Kristin Lucas, *Host*, 1997.
The video camera functions as
an extension of her own body
for Kristin Lucas, who often
straps small cameras and
projectors on her head during
live performances.

alternative performance spaces, like LaMaMa ETC in New York, for which artists like Ping Chong, trained in film and dance, and the author of this book, who trained in theater and photography, use media as poetic elements in abstract works that combine music, dance and texts, in imagistic visual environments.



Though sophisticated use of media entered experimental theater productions in the 1980s, plenty of low-tech performance is practised by younger artists whose pared-down presentations are more akin to Fluxus events than theater. In the United States Kristin Lucas (b. 1969) is representative of an energetic young breed for whom the hi-8 video camera functions like a found object, allowing the creation of media collages (or 'video improves,' as she likes to call them) that are elegant in their simplicity. Strapping a camera or a small projector to a helmet, Lucas, often dressed in a pair of orange workers' overalls, as in *Host* (1997), makes real-time performances, projecting recently recorded images of encounters with policemen or other

76. Broadway staging of the musical *Tommy*, 1995. Video technology has become a trademark of rock music shows and many large-scale commercial theater productions such as The Who's *Tommy*.



people she meets onto the walls of makeshift gallery or performance spaces.

By the late 1990s, multimedia techniques, begun so spontaneously by experimental dance and theatre groups in the late 1960s, had infiltrated mainstream theater and stadium spectacles, especially rock music shows. The Broadway musical *Tommy*, written as a rock opera by The Who in the 1970s and presented on Broadway in 1995, featured multiple video projections around the theater's proscenium. Nearly every rock show now offers live feed video projection of the performers, which serves to expand the viewing field for large crowds and also adds to the feeling of a hyperkinetic, 'significant' event occurring on stage.

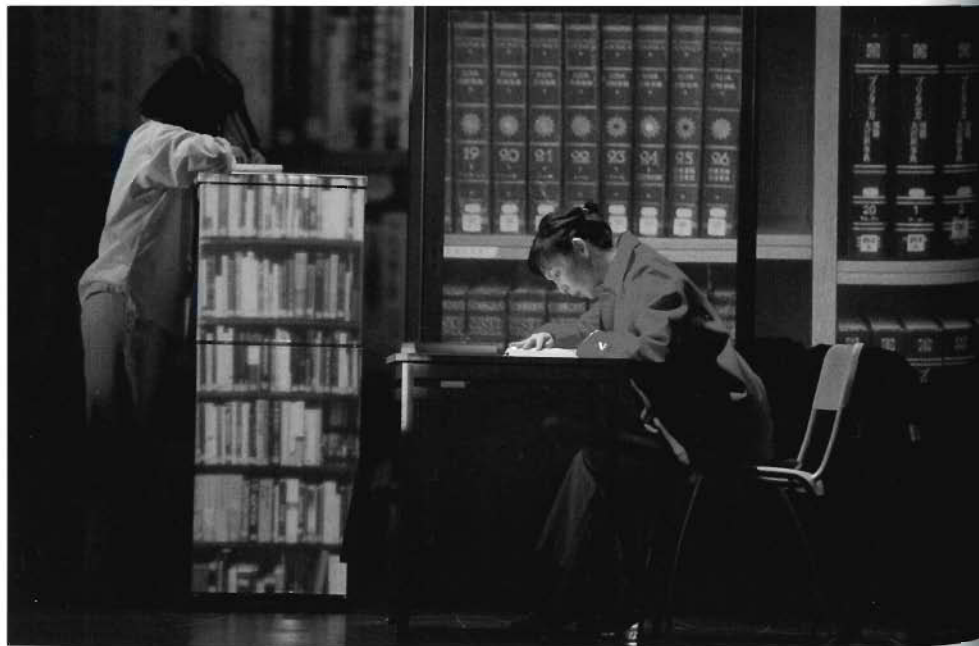
77. (below) Samuel Beckett's *Foirdes/Fizzles*, adapted and directed by Michael Rush, 1994. Moving and still camera images add layers of time and memory to the voices of Beckett's characters.



Located behind the scenes of most contemporary, large-scale media-infused performances are digital control boards that, with a touch of a button, control lights, sound, videos, films and much else. The British-based performance company Complicite, founded in 1988 by Simon McBurney (b. 1957) and a few collaborators, demonstrated the highest level of media sophistication in their 2003 production *The Elephant Vanishes*. Based on the short stories of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, McBurney and company explored the emotional turmoil of contemporary city life through surreal events occurring to three characters whose routine, everyday lives appear anything but. Objects, projection screens, videos, and all manner of technology conspire to visualize the dreamy scenarios of Murakami's narratives.

Reflecting on the complexity of this project, McBurney writes: 'His [Murakami's] stories are extraordinary, springing out of ordinary, mundane urban life. People iron their clothes, make dinner, go to work, watch TV, listen to Haydn and Mozart, get into bed and start again the next day. Yet extraordinary things happen to his characters. They cease to sleep, monsters crawl out of the ground or the television and change their lives. The effect of these intersecting events is to slice through to the heart of what it means to live in this ultra-consumer, disconnected world of ours.'

78. Complicite, *The Elephant Vanishes*. Performance at the Lincoln Center Festival, New York, 2004.



McBurney describes Complicite's work as a series of 'intricate collisions' with stories, memories, movement, technologies, and everyday objects.

The American artists Paul Kaiser (b. 1956) and Shelley Eshkar (b. 1970) have been pushing the boundaries of dance into the realm of new media since the late 1990s with works such as *Biped* (1999) and *Motion-e* (2002–5). In *Biped*, an otherworldly dance project choreographed by Merce Cunningham, Kaiser and Eshkar projected digitally animated figures that interacted with live dancers on stage. In a similar vein, *Motion-e* is a series of virtual dances Kaiser describes as 'realtime, interactive, motion-capture-based performances,' made in collaboration with US choreographers Bill T. Jones (b. 1952), Bebe Miller (b. 1950), and Trisha Brown. Brown, who has been at the forefront of experimental dance for more than forty years, created one of the first media dance performances in 1966. In *Homemade*, a collaboration with artist and filmmaker Robert Whitman, she attached a projector to her back which thrust prefilmed images of the same dance she was performing live onto a screen at the rear of the stage. This self-reflexive act operated on many levels. It was both spectacle and challenge. How could the live performer compete for viewers' attention with both the mystery and beauty of the filmed image? Which performance was more 'real,' the filmed or the live? The filmed dancer was, in a sense, both a ghost and a companion, a reflection and a mirage.

In contemporary dance, the artist most identified with media and choreography is Cathy Weis who has been staging dances with interactive video projections for several years (e.g. *Face to Face*, 1996; *A Bad Spot Hurts Like Mad*, 2001).

Not all artists work at such a level of technological wizardry. Some are decidedly and determinedly low-tech. The German-born but US-based Oliver Herring (b. 1964), an artistic descendant of John Cage, who built an artform around highly aesthetic and conceptual chance encounters, believes in the potential artfulness of everyday gestures and mundane objects. *Spit Reverse* (2003) is a multi-screen, videotaped performance that explores his interests in the ever-new 'vocabularies' that emerge when a group of strangers (previously unknown to the artist as well) come together for a self-generated, unscripted performance. Here participants are filmed playing a water-spitting game and the action is projected in reverse.

Herring's video projects link his performances to the sculpture and painting he has practiced in other contexts. For Herring artistic media, whether paper, Mylar, videotape, or the body, serve

79. **Oliver Herring**, *Gloria*, 2004. This sculpture consists of thousands of photo fragments mounted on a polystyrene base, resulting in a work that is at once hyper-real and otherworldly. Echoing Warhol's Polaroid-based silkscreen and painting portraits and Hockney's photo assemblages, Herring's sculpture pays homage to the photographed image even while deconstructing it.

Following pages:

80. **Shelly Eshkar and Paul Kaiser**, *Arrival*, 2004.

In this installation, viewers look down at small, cyborg figures moving in a non-specific, but familiar-looking space. Some figures move forward in time, others in reverse. Looped to play endlessly, the video makes time and human interaction appear terrifyingly mechanized.

his need to explore ideas, emotions, and new modes of communication. A painterly sensibility permeates his videos. From his earliest *Videosketch #1* (1998), through *The Sum and Its Parts* (2000), *Little Dances of Misfortune* (2001), and *Sleepless Nights* (2001), among several others, performers appear with bodies painted in Mondrianesque patterns or shielded with fluorescent paint. Herring films the performers often through grueling hours of minute gestures and physical interactions. Eschewing digital after effects, he creates his complex-appearing choreography through stop-motion filming, much like early cinematic innovators Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

The South African-born artist Robin Rhode (b. 1976), who now works in Berlin, also uses the stop-action technique in his videos, which are taped street performances that incorporate drawing and movement. In *White Walls* (2002), for example, the artist is taped drawing a car (in the manner of early Jean-Michel Basquiat or Keith Haring) on a large street wall. In the animated video, Rhode jacks up the car to fix a tire. For viewers, this is as close to a live performance as a tape can get. The same can be said of the Indian artist Sonia Khurana's (b. 1968) video *Bird* (1999), in which, nude and unselfconsciously porcine, she engages in a wild dance that is her attempt to fly.

The pervasive presence of Performance in contemporary media art is undeniable. The link between video and the body from the early 1970s to the present day has been central to the work of numerous artists, including, to name a few, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, Robert Rauschenberg, Carolee Schneemann, Nam June Paik, Valie Export, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Robert Wilson, Martha Rosler, Jurgen Klauke, Steve McQueen, Lucy Gunning, Tony Oursler, Paul McCarthy, Gary Hill, Klaus Rinke, Nayland Blake and Pipilotti Rist.

It has been the availability of affordable technology that has always paralleled developments in art and media. At the same time that artists were taping performances in their studios or incorporating film and video into Performance art and theater, artists were making single-channel videos that were often personal responses to a medium that rarely professed to be art: television.

