

Feedback

?: Feed

Dan Graham: I think when we talk about feedback, we have to go back to the period of the video magazine *Radical Software*. Feedback came up because originally video was about a learning process. Are you familiar with the artist Juan Downey, the Chilean video artist who went into the jungle?

?: Yes.

Graham: He was among the first to come up with that. The idea was to create a feedback loop with yourself. I was also interested in using feedback to create a non-instantaneous present time or a continuous time, if you will. The key piece here is “Present Continuous Past” that the Centre Pompidou has, where a contrast of feedback loop time and instantaneous present time, which is a mirror. So it’s a way of getting away from the Renaissance perspective.

: When did you first come across the concept of feedback? Did you read books on cybernetics in the 1960s, such as the works by Norbert Wiener? After all, that was very popular at that time...

Graham: That came from two different sources: one was *Radical Software*, the video magazine, where video was used in a learning process. The other source was the music of Steve Reich who used time delay. Reich, as I found out later, took the idea of time delay from Terry Riley, and Bruce Nauman in turn took it from Steve Reich and introduced it into the visual arts. And I took it from Bruce Nauman. They took a tape loop to create time delay and thereby a feedback loop.

You mentioned Norbert Wiener. I was not very familiar with his work at that time. I was more influenced by Gregory Bateson, who did this book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. I also read a lot of Science Fiction at that time, which dealt with time paradoxes and time traveling, for example Brian Aldiss’ *Cryptozoic!* (1966). But I think a lot of this also had to do with drug time and with Marijuana smoking.

?: That kind of confirms my suspicion that a lot of Sixties art is really informed by drug use. For some reason nobody ever talks about that...

Graham: That’s because this artist Robert Morris is a real idiot. He is too academic and simplistic. But I think a very big influence on everybody was Ann Halprins dance company and workshop. I think that the idea of psychological self-discovery was also very important. You could get it through drugs or through dance or through meditation, and I think the feedback was also a device to accomplish that.

It was also a way to be more involved with the time inside your brain rather than the real time. And I think that brain time, this idea of being inside your head, that was kind of like

this hippie/drug thing. In other worlds you should probably go to look at the psychedelic culture of San Francisco. A lot of the art from that time, especially the music of Terry Riley and Steve Reich, was really a fall-out of the hippie period. *Radical Software* was from New York, and it was published by Raindance Corporation. So, these two sources were really the most important influences on my own work with feedback.

?: Are you aware of the things that Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters did with tape loops at that time. They had a feedback-loop system on their bus that was very similar to the one you are using in your feedback installations.

Dan Graham: Oh, really? No, I was not aware of that. I had nothing to do with this scene, I never took LSD myself. I only took soft drugs. I was aware of that scene, but I was not part of it. In fact, I never liked the Grateful Dead! I liked psychedelic music from Los Angeles. The Seeds, Love, stuff like that! I was somebody who was not into drug cultures. Most artists at that time were fellow travelers. We were no communists, but we close to being communists. And I was close to being a hippie without really being a hippie (laughs).

Another thing you might only start to find about is the work of Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica in the Sixties in Brazil. They did this book *The Body of Color*, which was on the idea of the topology of the body and about feedback between different parts of the body. I think this not very well-know in Germany. Oiticica is having a comeback now, he had shows at the Jarin de Peume and at the Tate recently. His work was about this idea of the body as a topological form. Like a Moebius strips. That is another form of feedback. I think you should research this because a lot of the things that happened in the United States happened at the same time with people who took drugs in Brazil. Europeans are not as familiar with things that were going on in South America.

?: You mentioned the interest in psychological self-discovery in the art of the late 1960s. How about the Gestalt therapy of Fritz Perls? Your performance *Performer/Audience/Mirror* seems very similar to a Gestalt therapy session, where the patient has to describe all of his perceptions instantaneously in order to create a “fertile void” ...

Graham: I think what was more interesting was this book by Ann Halprin, “Handbook for motion”. I think that Fritz Perls sensationalized a lot of things that other people were doing. But you are right, that was very much of that moment. Everybody was doing it. What I was trying to do in *Performer/Audience/Mirror* was to combine American behaviorism and European phenomenology. I was also very influenced by Joseph Beuys. His idea of the artist/performer – I wanted to deconstruct that! In other words, it was of kind of anti-Joseph Beuys. He had this idea about the artist as a politician and performer. To me the spectators response was more important than the performance of the artist as such. In that I was very influenced by Michael Snow. But I was dealing with clichés of that moment, you are right. The way I described things it was like an announcer on the radio describing a football game... (laughs)

?: In the video documentation of this performances that was filmed at the Apple in Amsterdam, I see surprisingly little interaction between the performer and the audience. People just seem to be sitting there...

Graham: That is your perception. You actually have to be there. A video tape cannot show what happens to the audience. The idea is to contrast how you see yourself in instantaneous instant time in the mirror and having yourself described gradually. And of course, it is about self-consciousness. They are becoming conscious of themselves as the audience. It is meant to be a critique of Joseph Beuys. He wanted to be a magic politician, so I am trying get away from the performer as a magic person.

A lot of what I was doing at that time was to trying to get away from Renaissance perspective. Therefore my work became increasingly baroque. In my pavilions, when you move around in time, there are many changes. Do you know my video *Past Future Split Attention* (1972)?

?: Yes.

Graham: That is also a feedback loop, that is very much involved with Gregory Bateson. Because Bateson talked about the double bind.

?: You mention in your writings this idea of creating a gap in time and to extent the present moment. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Graham: Again, I think it comes from drugs and from phenomenology. This idea of extended present time was very important. In other words, not the mirror time. Marcuse had this idea that we should always live in the present time, with no past and no future. We should experience the immediacy of things. I got more involved with Walter Benjamin's idea of the "just passed". My works were increasingly about reconstruction the "just passed". So that was a shift from Marcuse to Walter Benjamin.

?: Why confront the the viewer with that.

Graham: In the installations, there is always this dialectic between the instantaneous present time in the mirror and the extended present time from the feedback video loop. It is really heavy to experience time.

?: How did you accomplish that technically.

Graham: Well, you made a loop out of the video tape, and ran it through two players, one would record, and the other one would play it back.

?: And that would run through the period of a whole exhibition.

Graham: Yeah. You could buy this box from Sony, and control it. It was first used by Bruce Nauman. Most of these pieces are not in galleries, that was done in store fronts in

Los Angeles that he rented, and you had a time dealy, that ran from one store to another store. You only see the works that Bruce Nauman that he sold to galleries and museums, but these temporary works are actually much more interesting.

You have to be actually present to see these things. That is true for a lot of arts. He also died this performance that I wrote about in *Subject Matter*, where he and his wife and Meredith Monk fell against the wall of the Whitney Museum and created a kind of Steve Reich situation. All that was temporary, it was never documented. So a lot of my work comes from seeing undocumented performance. But it all happened in California, before it was in New York.

Another person who was very influential was John Chamberlain and his Foam Rubber Couches, which I saw in this show Westkunst in Cologne. One of these couches had a television monitor on the side. In Radical Software they talked about furniture that was like a Moebius strip with the body.

?: In one of your interviews you mention that there used to be this 8 and 16 milimeter loops projectors. Did you use those at all?

Graham: I used those for all of my films.

?: Were those the same that Andy Warhol use? The Fairchild ones?

Graham: No, no, what Andy Warhol used was expensive. He was interested in big film and big money. The one I used were much cheaper. When salesmen wanted to present a product they would use these projectors to show a brief advertising clip. They were very inexpensive and portable and easy to set up. The ones I used were called Technicolor Loops. They were produced by the Technicolor Company. James Coleman imitated me and used them very early on at a show in Milano. I know that Dennis Oppenheim used them. A lot of the artists of the John Gibson gallery used them.

What you did was that you took your Super 9 film to this company, and they turned it into this loop, and gave you this kind of cassette that you put into the projector. You had three and a half minute.

?: In one of the descriptions of your Time Delay Room I noticed that they time delay was described as being eight minutes long...

Graham: No, no, it was eight seconds. That is what was technically possible with the loops, the is the time that the tape needs from the recording head of the one porta pack to the play head of the other recorder. It is also the time you need to go from one corner of the room to the other.

?: So, it was due to the technical limitation of the set-up...

Graham: Yes, but it also worked with brain time. As I said I picked it up from Bruce Nauman. They never show these works anymore, because it is based on analog technology and these old-fashioned tape machines. With digital you can't do this.

?: How about your own installations?

Graham: I only did a few with them, and when I recreated them in digital. But you cannot do color with digital. The thing with video is, the more sophisticated it becomes, the less things you can do with it, because it becomes packaged. Video is for Sony to introduce the idea, and then to make it more simple and more packaged. And they also want to sell you new systems all the time. Digital has made things much less versatile. I am friends with the group Sonic Youth. They hate everything digital. They record analogue, and they put all their music out on records. Most people don't like CDs. Digital makes everything more simple, but at the same time you have less freedom.

We artists like to use new, simple things. And then we get bored with them. I think Bruce Nauman and I both got bored with these feedback loops, although he got bored with a lot of things. He now likes to ride horses. (laughs)

?: Rock music

Graham: I was mostly influenced by my friend Glen Branca, who in turn influenced Sonic Youth. But I think it was really the Velvet Underground how started all that stuff with feedback. Then again, anybody who had a guitar discovered feedback sooner or later. But of course, I also liked noise. That ties with up cybernetics. I was not a big fan of Jimi Hendrix, I was more into the person who discovered Jimi Hendrix: Arthur Lee. But then again, I am a Rock'nRoll connoisseur. I do know that before techno there was Kraftwerk and Neu...