

This is a transcription of a lecture that was given at Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, an artists' residency program in Skowhegan, Maine (skowheganart.org). It is part of an Archive of lectures recorded from 1952 to the present, which are available in audio form at this institution. It is important to note that most of these lectures incorporated visuals, which are not available. However, Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture does have a limited number of slides from a selection of lectures in the Archive. You may contact Skowhegan to find out if they exist for a specific lecture.

*These lectures are not edited. Please be advised that there may be typos, misspellings, and occasional "breaks" in the audio. It would be prudent to listen to the audio to help determine the lecturer's intent. **You must obtain permission from the artist or their representative to publish any material contained herein.** The contact information is available from this institution.*

SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Skowhegan, Maine

Transcript of lecture: Charles Atlas
July 12, 2013

Transcriber: Judith Stoodley

Introductory remarks (Carmen Winant, Dean): Welcome to the Barbara Lee Artists' Lecture Series here at Skowhegan, summer of 2013. I am pleased to welcome Charles Atlas, who will be our visiting artist speaker tonight, introduced by resident faculty artist Matthew Brannon. Before I do that I just want to remind you to turn off or silence your cellphones. And if you need to use the restroom, the closest one is down the path this way to the library. The restrooms are to the left of the library, which is the first building that you will hit. And with that I welcome Matthew Brannon. (applause, cheers)

MB: Thank you. I've very excited and honored to be able to introduce to you tonight Charles Atlas. I've been thinking a lot about what I could say and what it is I want to say. If I was to present a list of Charles' accomplishments, collaborators and whereabouts, I could melt your fucking mind. (laughter) But I think that information is only information; and what's so great about Charles Atlas is more than just the information. So what I'd like to do—something a little radical here—since we all just watched "Hail the New Puritan,"—Did I say that right? Yes—the other night, I'm just going to pick a few of you to just say what it

is that you appreciate about that film. Just a sentence or two. Um... (pause) Let's start with Sondra (phonetic). (laughter) (laughs) Do we have the microphone? (pause)

Comment: Wow, what a surprise! (laughs) (laughter) Well I think what I appreciate as a queer person is having these documents and narratives of queer life to see. You know, it's really quite fabulous, um... of this group of really creative, marginalized people, a lot of whom aren't here anymore. Um.... Yeah. Yeah, I think a great part of kind of our heritage. And... it's lovely. (whistles, applause)

MB: Thank you. Someone in the back... or.... Why not Joy? (laughter) (laughs)

Comment: (unintelligible) Um.... (pause) (laughter) I think that... um... my experience watching that film was very immersive, through the way that he uses documentation of his performative act. Um... like I'm no longer like a viewer from a distance, but I'm like very immersed in the experience. And, uh... so it kind of like blurs those lines between uh... viewer and performer, and also between like narrative-- like fiction and reality in a way, if that's... (unintelligible)

MB: Great compliment. (laughs)(laughter) Um... just a couple more. Gordon, would you like to say something? (laughter) (laughs)

Comment: Mm... I walked away from that feeling like I could think more expansively about what.... what is dance, to like allow.... It somehow made some space for me to think about different kinds of events or body situations as dance, and really a little bit like breaking down what is often a very clear distinction between pedestrian bodies and dancing bodies, I think.

MB: Great. We'll just have one more. Um... uh.... Eduardo. (laughter) (laughs)

Comment: Hey. Um... (pause) What was really remarkable for me, especially in “Hail the New Puritan,” was how Charles or the camera became a performer as well, with the performers in the image, and how the camera basically dances along, um... and by default implicates me as a viewer in dancing. Um.... And just the fact that I wanted to just like get up and dance the whole time, and I did at the end. (laughter) Um.... Yeah, that’s....But you were there too, so I’m really curious... (laughter, applause)

MB: I thought about how to answer this question, and I thought of a couple of things. But the... I mean I have the sensation that I really wanted to be in that film; and so I’m very much looking forward to Charles speaking about what it was—whether he’s talking about that film or others that he’s made. But... I think that often when I see like a—I don’t know how else to say it, but like a great work of art, the effect it has on me is that I just want to go back and stop making art. You know, I really feel like, “What could I do that could be as good as that?” Or, “I’m just a fucking joke.” (laughter) Or, “I’ll never have a command of that medium as well as that person has.” But that was not the case after I saw “Hall the New Puritan.” I um... actually wanted to go out and make a lot of art. And the next day it sort of uncorked my little writer’s block I was going through, and I’ve been on a high ever since. So I introduce to you Charles Atlas. (applause, cheers)

CA: Well, thank you, everybody. I’m really pleased to be here. And what I’m going to talk about tonight is mainly the work I’ve done in the last ten years. Um... not really--- I mean which is a bit discontinuous with some of the things that you’ve seen. But... anyway, I’m going to talk about that, and then afterwards we can talk about anything you want. Um... In 2008, like about five years ago, I was about to have a show in a gallery in London; and I had been having shows where people wanted to show—screen—old films and, you know, things

I've done. And I always want to do something new and not really.... I mean a condition usually of showing old things is that I can also do something new. So... But this time—And I had been going through my archive, so this time I really wanted to try to make something that really didn't look like anything else I'd ever done, if I could. And... um... that looked like maybe someone else had done it. So I set myself some rules, which I don't usually do; I usually just think of something to do. And I made a two-room video installation with the overall title "Tornado Warning." And one—The idea was that it was two dialectically opposite rooms with as much difference as I could think of. One room was called "The Institute for Turbulence Research." And that was a room with four-channel video—synched video projection, with a mirrored... programmed mirror to throw images all over the place. And the whole room I wanted to be sort of upsetting and spinning and turbulent, both emotionally and visually. And would have sound and color. And then the other room would be the most inhuman abstract thing I could think of, which was "Numberedness"—which I called "Numberedness." I didn't really want to use numbers, but in the end I did use numerals. Um... And so it was black and white, and the rule was that I could only use straight lines and numbers. So—And it was silent. And the two of them together really... you know, for me.... I grew up in the Midwest, and we used to have tornado warnings all the time, when we were sent home from school and had to go down to the basement. And I never actually experiences a tornado, but there was always the sort of tension and fear whether it was—how close it was going to come. So that I was thinking about that and about—and the abstract room really being like an ideal place that I would go to in my head, you know, and the other one being more like the real world. So I'm going to show you first a virtual representation; it was really hard to document the Turbulence Research room, but

this is a.... And it's not really completely accurate, but it gives you an idea about what was in it.

VIDEO (11:08-14:07)

(speaking while video runs, hard to hear) (unintelligible) in the corner, and the ghost images is [sic] reflections on the walls. And so-- And it would move—As you moved the reflection would move. (long pause) (unintelligible) another—I used all the corners of the room. This is another corner, but there's an entrance right there. (long pause to end of video) And here's two clips from the other room, which was called "Plato's Alley." And this doesn't have the numbers in it, but.... Well, you'll see.

VIDEO (14:24-16:55)

(speaking while video runs) And eventually when the numbers came I just used the numerals 1 through 6, but you don't see that here. (long pause) And that's the projection extending to the side walls and the ceiling and the floor. (long pause to end of video) (clears throat) Well besides.... I also—As I said, I had been going through my archive and looking at things, and I was getting ready to do a book. And I thought of perhaps (clears throat) publishing some notes or ephemera; and I realized that, when I looked for my notes, that my notes really consisted of pages and pages of numbers. That's it. You know, from time code editing sheets of many, many edits and many pieces. So I really felt that that was an—And besides the idea that numberedness exists of humans. I mean there would always be—There might be two of something even if we didn't exist. I don't know what you would call it, but.... (coughs) So I made... Later, a couple of years later, like last year I had an installation show in Brooklyn, and I made—I had two more number pieces that I did. One of them was a three-channel piece called "Painting by Numbers," in which I

kind of—Instead of being so rigid, I really kind of had more freedom with the numbers, and kind of like an action painter in a way. And then the other one is called “143652,” which is a big, huge.... [It] was the first chance I had to work at a scale I’ve always wanted to work at. It was a projection that was fifteen feet high by forty-five feet wide. And it was very slow moving, and there was a wipe that went continuously across the numbers, changing numbers; and there were vertical lines that... inflected—were inflected—and there were things behind. But anyway, I’ll show you a couple of—an excerpt from each of those.

(pause)

VIDEO (18:48-20:39)

(speaking while video runs) Oh, wait. (long pause) So I used the same cast of characters in numbers 1 through 6 in this piece; it was sort like a repertory company. (pause) But in this piece I also added zero. It was the birth of zero. (pause) (first video ends)

VIDEO (20:38-21:40?)

(speaking while video runs) Then this is the big piece—the tall piece. The thermometer at the bottom starts at the left-hand side, and through the course of the piece goes all the way to the right, so you know where you are in the piece, which is like twelve minutes long.

(pause) Also, when the bar—the moving bar changes color, and when it’s white it’s also on the floor in front, as an extension. (long pause) So I think—This was a piece I showed in New York, and I think people were—who know my work were—I was pleased that they were kind of surprised at what I was showing. So I’ve been wanting to continue to work in large scale. I had a commission from Bloomberg in London to do a piece for their space there, the Bloomberg Space, which is a gallery. And decided to do a four-channel, 360 degree installation. Again, the height was about fourteen/fifteen feet high; and it went on

the window side, which we covered, and then three walls with a little bit of a bend in them. And it was quite complex, figuring out how to hang the projectors, and how many pixels went per projector, um.... But I'm going to show you—Well, I'll show you the space. This is the space.

IMAGES? VIDEO?

(pause) So you see that the four is the window side. Um.... And we had to figure out a way to hang the projectors so they didn't throw shadows on each other, and it was technically very complicated. (long pause) So you see there's that little half a wall there, which I also used, and there's also a doorway, which I was going to use in a different way, but I ended up cutting that out. And the material... I don't know why but wanted to use really neutral kind of material. I mean I used all stock footage. Things from the Bloomberg Archive that I was allowed to use, from their business television. And also things that I got from the Internet which were free, that I've been collecting for a while. There's a site where you can get a free clip every week; so I've been doing that for a couple of years. And they're pretty bad, most of them; but I really wanted some—I don't—Still I don't know the reason, to have really non-emotional, non-suggestive in a certain images. And I was really—Again, 'cause I wanted it to look like—not like something I would normally do. So... I remember saying to people that I--when I working; I was really in [a] bad mood. I said, "I think I'm—I think I'm making a really bad piece, but I can't help it." (laughter) So I went ahead and did it, and I'm still not sure about it, but... So what you're going to see here is—The first clip is... On the top is the window side, and at the bottom is the three walls. And then there's a part in the middle where you just see an actual installation, and you see part of the three walls; you

don't see the window side. And then at the end something different happens and you'll see that from also both sides.

VIDEO (25:02?- 30:18?)

(speaking while video runs?) And it's called "Glacier." (pause) The top is the window side, and the bottom is the three walls. (pause) And there were finials in the window which I had to deal with and project around, but... I used that as a way, as part of the piece. (long pause) So this is the actual installation shot. You see part of three walls. And the letters and colors are really remnants from the structure of the piece, which I had to use—It's the only way I could figure out the piece is by having color coded areas and letter on them. And (unintelligible) The other thing is you'll see there's a white bar over on the left. That was controlling—It's like the bar in "143652;" it's slowly moving and widening. And it starts on the right-hand side and goes all the way around the room and onto the windows, and through the virtual space to the beginning, and that determines the length of the piece. (long pause) (video ends?) So that's the view out the window, if the window wasn't covered, which I built just before they covered the windows. So you're all of a sudden surrounded by the outside. So, as many of my recent pieces, [is] really custom-made for the first space that it's shown in. And then it sort of has—if it's shown elsewhere it still has an imprint. I mean I sometimes alter them slightly, but not radically, to fit another space. But this one will be installed in a space with just four walls. So—But it'll still have the imprint from the first space it was shown in. Um... My—then—just—In March I was asked to do.... I did a project in the The Tanks at the Tate Modern in London, which is a big downstairs concrete round room with four pillars in it, (clears throat) that they've been using for performances. Now it's closed; it won't be open again until 2016, because they're finishing

the building. But they had a little interim period when they could use it. So again I made something very custom-made for that space. And the deal was I would make an installation, and then I would use the [same]—which could run without me. And then I would use that same setup, the same position; rewire it, and then do live performances in it with live video. So the piece that I made for that is called “MC to the 9th Power,” which is about Merce Cunningham, and (unintelligible) includes clips from a lot of the pieces I did over forty years, arranged in a nine-channel synched video. There were like seven projectors, two plasma monitors and four cube monitors. So it was sort of spread irregularly among all these projection sources. And so what you have here is three different points of view of—The piece was like eighteen minutes long, but this is just a short excerpt of three different points of view. (pause)

VIDEO (32:33-35:51)

(unintelligible) So in that same setup, with a lot of rewiring and three live cameras, I tried for the first time to do.... I mean I’ve been doing--which I’ll talk about in a minute—a lot of live video projects with live cameras or real-time performance with real-time mixing; but this was the first time that I really tried to have active dancing. I’ve done something with walking and performance, but I’d never done—‘cause it’s quite challenging to do anyway, with people standing still. But.... So it wasn’t a total success, but I did one with dancing and then I did one with a performer that I’ve been working with for a long time called Johanna Constantine, and a noise musician from London called Helm. But I just have a clip from the collaboration I did with these two French dancers, Cecilia Bengolea and François Chaignaud. So this is the same setup, but different. (laughs)

VIDEO (36:55?-32:41)

So that was for four dancers, two DJs, three cameras and me. The dancer there was Cecilia Bengolea, and the other dancers are inside the black vinyl bags—pillows—and they get sucked down and then they come out and dance. Um... But I really had to—I would like a chance to work on something like that again, because I didn't really have enough time to do my work on it, so I wasn't that thrilled, but.... Um.... So I'm going to talk, then, a little bit about the live video, which is another big strand in the work I've been doing lately. Again, in 2003 Douglas Dunn asked me to collaborate with him on a dance piece, and he asked me to do the video and costumes. So I said I didn't want to do a video landscape that he would dance in front of; I thought that would be horrible. But if he was performing live I wanted to perform live too. And the software was just on the verge of being possible to perform off a laptop with a mixer. So anyway, we did a piece called "Muscle Shoals," and that was the first time that I used a live—I had three live cameras and a laptop and a hardware mixer. Then the next project I did was called "Instant Fame," which was an installation in a gallery, where I invited people to come and I would do live video portraits of them in the gallery. So I was in the gallery like for five hours a day, and people could make appointments or just come in. And there were two spaces, an upstairs and a downstairs. And the downstairs I used as a small studio with two cameras, one operator, and me. And then upstairs was a screening area where you could see what we were doing downstairs. But you really couldn't see both at once; you had to sort of make a choice, 'cause I really didn't want it to be about the comparison—"Oh, it looks like that and it looks like that." So.... And then I did the same project.... So in the course of three weeks I did about sixty portraits, you know, ranging in length from about six minutes to forty-five minutes. And this was all live mixing, and I thought that eventually I would refine these and take the original material and re-edit

it. But it was so overwhelming, and I realized how long it would take me to do sixty portraits; so I decided I would just live with what I had done live. And so that's what—You'll see some short—very brief clips from some of the New York ones. And then I did the same thing at a gallery in London, with London people; and it was two years later and the technology had improved somewhat, but IMAGE?

(speaking over video?) So that's the upstairs and the downstairs.

IMAGE

That's the downstairs.

IMAGE

And that's the upstairs.

VIDEO (43:25-52:48)

So in London I did about thirty of them. People are not as outgoing there as they are in New York. And... then another strain of this live video work that I've done is these live performances where I improvise off a laptop with clips—movie clips and all sorts of video clips, which—and then I collaborate with a composer/musician, and we flank a screen, and I work with two computers and a few DVD players and a hardware mixer. And the one I've worked with the most is Christian Fennesz; he was a Viennese composer/musician whose work I love. So I'll show you a bit of that kind of work. This is something we did—I'm not sure when.

VIDEO (53:42-58:32)

The other thing that I've done with live video is these live performance installations with—collaborating with Mika Tajima and New Humans, which is her and Howie Chen and usually a couple of guests. We did our first one at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for

three days; and it was called “Today is Not a Dress Rehearsal.” And the theme of it was really speech and the Narcissus and Echo myth. And so we—Mika made the sculpture environment, and I set up the camera setup with three cameras and my mixing setup and all that. And then we invited people to come in and work in it—performers, really. But we worked with a group called the Toastmasters, which is a group—an international group-- that has chapters all over the world where they practice public speaking, and they’re given topics, and they have to just speak, you know, extemporaneously, and don’t stop, and they buzz if you say “um.” (laughs) So um... they came and we gave them some things and they worked during a day. And then we had Judith Butler come, and she gave parts of three lectures as a performance; and we stopped her and rearranged the set between each part. And I was quite restrained on my video mixing. (laughter) (laughs) Not—Um... But—And then we did a performance with the New Humans, as a music performance in the same space. And again, we did another one a year later, in London, at that South London Gallery, for ten days; and this one the theme was walking, and it was called “The Pedestrians.” And so again it was a really big space. In San Francisco it was like instant fame. There was one space for the performance and all the live work, and then next door there was a theater where—which piped in my mix. So you could go look and see what I was doing or come watch the performance, the live performance, and walk back and forth but not watch both at the same time. And in South London we really—they didn’t have a separate space; it was just one really big space, so it kind of—I didn’t know how it was going to work out. It was kind of a multimedia type thing, which I was trying to avoid. But anyway, it turned out quite interesting. We did it for ten days and invited different people to perform again. I invited a friend of mine to make a walking dance; we did a parade; we had two people give

lectures about walking. One gave a lecture about protest—walking in protest—and one gave a lecture about cruising. And then—the thing that I’m going to show a clip of is New Humans performance with a guest artist, John Smith, who’s a video artist from London.

(long pause) (unintelligible) wrong.

VIDEO (1:02:12-1:08:54)

(speaking while video runs) These are excerpts from the live mix that was also projected in some place. *(video clip ends)* So again the set was movable, and we’d rearrange it every day with.... The performers were sometimes in the middle and the audience around; sometimes the audience was in the middle and the performers were around; but we changed it every day. And we left video—sort of video ghosts—of it for three weeks after. I added some video and we had it going without anyone in it. Um.... I just want to talk about two more things. One is.... You know, this last ten years also represents the end of my work with Merce Cunningham, who I worked with for many years. And I just want to show one clip from the last collaboration we did which [is] probably my favorite shot that we ever made. Um... and just because it’s so... so simple, and so free. And it’s something that you can only get to if you’ve really worked together for a long time. So this is from “Views on Camera.” (pause)

VIDEO (1:08:12-1:10:15)

Um... yeah. And the last thing I want to show is something older, something from the Eighties. Susan Dowling, who was my producer at WGBH, who produced many of the videos I did for television at that time, is here in the audience tonight; and I just want to show a clip from “Ex-Romance,” which is a piece we made against all the odds, with very

little money, in Providence, Rhode Island. So I'll just show a bit of that, and that'll be the end and I'll take questions or discussion after.

VIDEO (1:11:01-1:15:36)

That's it. That's (unintelligible) (applause, cheers) Um... any questions or things to discuss? (laughs) (pause)

Question: Hi. Thanks for the lecture. It was amazing. I was just wondering if you could speak a little bit to this idea of choreography and social performance, or performing the self in society. Also in relation to—

CA: Pardon?

Question: I was wondering if you could speak to choreography and performance—dance, maybe—in relationship to performing the self in society. And maybe, as you mentioned, Judith Butler, this idea of queering (1:16:35) or queerness. Um... and if you saw a relationship and how you saw a relationship to choreography. It's (laughs) kind of hard—I don't know.

CA: I'm not quite sure I know what the question is. Um....

Question: I wondered if you could speak to choreography—

CA: Well, I mean I've worked a bunch of different choreographers over the years. I started out with Merce Cunningham, which is really like starting at the top, so I really spoiled. And he was a great collaborator, and really anxious to experiment and learn. And so we made a lot of—We started—We both—I—He wanted to make videos because it was John Cage's idea that if he made videos he could stop touring and send the videos out, and then he could stay at home. (laughter) So that didn't work out. But... So he asked me to collaborate with him and I had never made videos before; I'd made films. So I learned

video from a book and then I taught it to him. And so that was the beginning of my work with.... I was already working for the dance company as an assistant stage manager, but that was the beginning of my work with dance. And so over the years I worked with a bunch of different choreographers. And each one the collaboration is kind of different. None of them are like starting over at the beginning (unintelligible) I did with Merce, but I more or less brought what I knew and... tried to work with what the people knew. But.... And choreographing, you know, often the video setup or the film setup comes before the dancing, because that determines the space; so the choreographers have to deal with a space—a moving space or a fixed space or several fixed spaces. So it's a challenge that they either enjoy or don't. (laughs) I don't know what else to say about choreography. I've worked with very good choreographers, I've been very lucky. And it's always people that I've known for awhile and chose to work with, so it's.... You know, it's--- You really have to—I really want to show what they do because I respect them and I love their work. And I want to add something too, but I don't want to overtake them; and it's very easy to overtake dancing with the camera. So I didn't want to do that.

Question: Hi. Um... I had a question for you about.... Because I'm curious about what you think about who gets to see your work. And I guess this obviously changes from piece to piece, but—

CA: (unintelligible) I'm not hearing—

Question: Should I speak louder?

CA: Yeah.

Question: Okay. I'm just curious about what you think about who gets to see your work.

CA: Who gets to see it?

Question: Yeah, and I know that it changes, what you think about who gets to see— (unintelligible) specificity of the people who get to see it. Um... and I understand that it changes from piece to piece. But I guess it's more specific in that I have friends that are not artists, and that I know would be highly empowered by your work, especially the earlier work, and the work that sort of commenced this time and that talks about gender fluidity and divergent sexualities. And for me as I was being really sad that I get to see them because of my position in society and the things that I have access to, but... I know that a lot of people who would just be highly empowered by it and that would be just very affected that don't.

CA: Okay, I'm not quite sure I understand, but... You know, for a while a lot of the work—almost all the work I did was on television. “Hail the New Puritan” was on television, “Ex-Romance”—all of those pieces. And they were made with television money, so I had no choice. And so they were seen by millions of people who I don't know, and who just happened upon it, I'm sure. You know, not.... You know, that was a long time ago, so.... And then increasingly my work got to be less and less appropriate for television; or television got to be less and less appropriate for my work.... (laughter) And so eventually I transitioned to making work for galleries and museum spaces. And all of my—Except for the limited edition work, all of the work that I have is available at EAI. And I'm hoping that I will have more shows; and you know, I—Because of.... I can't really release “Hail the New Puritan” because of rights issues, the music rights. If I had to clear the music rights I would—I couldn't afford it. So I sort of like.... Just the [way]--It's really distributed kind of illegally, because—Don't tell anyone—(laughter) (laughs) because, you know, they—it's under the radar. You know, it's just to art spaces and stuff like that. But.... People have

wanted to distribute it, but it would cost like over a hundred thousand dollars to clear the music rights, so.... I don't have it. And then you won't make it back. So a lot of pieces are tied up with rights issues, and then I-- but I still distribute them anyway, in an art—even though I don't really, you know—haven't crossed all of the t's and dotted the i's in contract. So... Um.... And I really care about how-- You know, I try to get my work shown in the best possible way; I don't really like people seeing crummy copies of it, I mean although.... You know, a lot of—I understand that “Hail the New Puritan” is complete up on the Internet somewhere—in pieces—and people have seen it, tell me they've seen it that way. Um... the company that just—There are two—I think I only have.... Well, I have about four videos that are available commercially. Um.... But I don't—I don't know what else to say about that.

Question: (unintelligible) available?

CA: “Legend of Leigh Bowery.” This film—this long documentary I made about Merce Cunningham called “A Lifetime of Dance.” There's two Merce Cunningham... Or maybe there's more than that. There's a few Merce Cunningham documentation pieces on Artpix. I made a gay porn; that's available. (laughter) (laughs) “Staten Island Sex Cult.”

Question: (*barely audible*) Can you tell us about your gay porn? (laughter)

CA: (laughs) Yeah. I was sitting in someone's office—a film producer I know—and someone was there and said, “Wouldn't it be a great idea if artists made porn? You know, we got a—We did a series of artists making porn.” And I was like... (laughter) (laughs) “Okay, I'm—Sign me up.” (laughter) ‘Cause I—It was—It was great. You know, in your career you don't have many chances to do something completely different. And that was completely different. And I always thought I wanted to make a second one, after all the

things I learned on the first one. But it didn't happen. And I spent—I used it as an exercise when I just got home video editing and a computer; and I used it as a project to do completely on my computers; so to learn everything—how you can make a film, just by yourself. And so I... you know. We did—I had a producer; we did it for practically no money; and we did it—You know, [I'm] probably the only one who never made money off a porn movie. (laughter)

Question: Hi. Can you talk a little bit more about your relationship to noise music, or what some people would call “anti-music?”

CA: Um... You know, I started out, you know, in 1970 with Cunningham Company; so I've always... And the musicians were John Cage, David Tudor and Gordon Mumma. So it was always—From the early Seventies I've always been exposed to live electronics, you know, of—And all the best people came through that situation. And it's just something I.... I like Lynch music and ambient noise and... I think—I respond to it, you know. I don't like the softer version too much, but for my work I like.... And mostly.... I mean the “Glacier” piece I got—That music is—I asked Bruce Gilbert from Wire for some music that he had already made, and so he gave me permission for that. The one for the installation I made myself. Um.... Um... And then—I like working with—I've worked with a lot of different musicians, you know, on the improvisations. I worked-- Christian Fennesz is really great, and I love the—He's someone that he does very different kind of music every time; it's always improvised, he doesn't like to rehearse. And... But I always—I feel about him that anything he does is right for my work. And so that's a great feeling to have about someone. And I've worked with William Basinski. I just worked with this young guy from London, a noise musician. And I like that kind of music. I go to, you know, performances of that.

Question: What do you think of the term “anti-music?” Have you heard that before?

CA: What?

Question: The term “anti-music.” Have you heard that before?

CA: Anti--?

Question: Anti-music. It’s just (unintelligible, speaker overrides) noise.

CA: You mean like non-music?

Question: Never mind. (laughter)

CA: Oh, I don’t—I don’t—

Question: I’ve heard it before.

CA: It’s been music to me for so long I don’t even (unintelligible)

Question: That’s--that’s kind of how I feel. And I had one more question. There was the dance piece with the skin leotard, and I was wondering....

CA: With the what? The skin leotard.

Question: Yeah, it was like the helmet and the skin leotard, and... why—What was that decision about, to use the skin leotard?

CA: No, this is—I worked with these two people whose work—We’ve been trying to work together for several years, and we never found an opportunity. When I got the opportunity to work at the Tate, I asked them to work with me. And... um—‘cause I really liked their work. And it’s.... Their work is—You know, it’s.... It’s not—It’s modern dance—I wouldn’t—you know, it’s “ish.” Uh, they’re-- yeah, they’re trained—they’re really good dancers, they’re trained dancers. But their influences are fetish, club dancing, vogue,... um... and... um.... And so we had very—I had like five days to make a piece with them; so we had to use material that they already had. And they wanted to use these two DJs that

they work with, who kind of plays [sic] music they know and music they don't know. So we just threw something together, and that was one of their—of the pieces that was Cecilia's piece that she knew.

Question: Hi, Charlie. It's Sheila. Um...

CA: What?

Question: So the last piece that you showed us, can you tell us the date again for that, for the GBH--?

CA: Which one?

Question: The last piece, the GBH piece.

CA: "Ex-Romance?" You mean the one in the airport?

Question: Yeah.

CA: Yeah.

Question: Can you tell us the date again for that?

CA: The date?

Question: Yes.

CA: '87?

Question: Okay. So—

Comment from audience: (unintelligible)

Question: Well, we shot it and then we didn't have the money to edit it. But it was done.... It was done after "Hail the New Puritan." Or no—Was it before or after? I can't remember.

It's right around there, because we got Michael Clark to come for one day. He came for two days, from London, and learned all his parts, and we had to shoot around him. And he did it

as a favor to me, so.... I don't think--- Either I'd just done "Hail the New Puritan" or I was just going to; but you know, that's how we got Michael. (laughs)

Question: Thank you. I wanted to ask that because of some of the movies we've seen, some of the videos. It's probably—maybe--one of the least transgressive, in a way, and made for television. And I—Can you tell us some of the kind of groundbreaking opportunities.... Or you said, "We've got this—" (unintelligible)

CA: Well I mean I think, you know, those pieces that I did around that time.... If there—I don't think I would have done, even had the courage to have the ideas if it wasn't possible, if there wasn't money out there somewhere, even though we didn't get it, you know. But it seems like there's none of those.... I wouldn't dare to think of a piece like that now. It was really impractical. It's like fools rush in. I mean we—we really.... It was a.... We started out, it was a piece was called "Romance." And we were going to shoot it in Italy, in the hills outside of Rome; and it was going to be very romantic. (laughter) Anyway, when we came back down to earth we had enough money to shoot it in Providence, Rhode Island. (laughs) (laughter) And there was an airport there that was not getting any business and wanted publicity; so they thought getting on PBS would be great publicity for them. So they let us shoot in the airport, which no other airport would let us do. And so we made a sotry around this situation; and then we never got it—We didn't have enough money to really (laughs) finish shooting it, so there was a lot of holes [sic] in the story. So when I edited it I put it in the context of this really bad TV show with the two commentators making comments on the material. And also by that time the choreographer and I weren't speaking anymore, (laughter) so I called it "Ex-Romance." (laughs) (laughter) I don't know what else I can tell you.

Question: Thank you. No, I just-- It's great, because it's a little bit—

CA: But it was—You know, it was very ambitious for the amount of time and money that we had.

Question: Yeah.

CA: And there were two documentary crews making documentaries about us making the film, and they both had bigger budgets than we did. (laughter)

Question: Thank you.

Question: Hi. (pause) Hi. So about the light editing. (unintelligible) the light performing. You start remixing. Can you expand a little bit more about like what means at this point of your career. Like (unintelligible) switching for editing, but also I wanted to ask in relationship with the work you did with John Smith (phonetically Jonas Meade)—these things—

CA: With who?

Question: With John Smith, the....

CA: Oh, John Smith. Yeah.

Question: And it seems both have like completely different approach to like directing. Uh... Now—

CA: Well, I mean two things. First of all the live work. I came to it.... My work up until that point, I'm.... You know, you could say [it was] very, very controlled, and very meticulous and precise. And I remember I was doing a piece called "Rainer Variations," about Yvonne Rainer. And I was sitting in the editing room, and I was really.... It was like frame by frame, practically. It was like.... I felt like I was doing needlepoint. And I was like, "I know if I spend enough hours with this I can make a good piece, but it's so tiresome." So I thought

doing live work really opened things up for me. I mean there was so much that I couldn't control, and that the attempt to control or not control the uncontrollable was very livening. And, you know, all of those things that I did— You know, you saw bits of all the live mixes. I mean if I had to do that as a thing that I shot and then edited, it would have—you know—taken.... You know, I mean I do that in the amount of time that it takes on the screen; but you know all of that would be like, you know, ten times as long to do, to work it out that way. So I kind of accept that, and all the years that I worked with John Cage I was never really into chance. I tried it with my work and I didn't think it worked for me. And so I wasn't really a chance person at all. And so now in my later life I'm completely at a Cageian, which is funny. Um....

Question: (inaudible)

CA: Well—Oh, well John Smith, the way that happened was we wanted someone to perform with us in London; and we were aware of the kind of thing that he—the kind of net—you know. We asked him to come not as a filmmaker but as someone who wrote texts, the texts that he writes for his videos. So that's what he did. He said, "Well, I can do that," And we said, "That'd be great." So he figured out a way to do some text that he had written videos in the context of our work. So he was a guest. And it was something different for him, but he was great. (unintelligible) agreed to do it.

Question: Hi. Thank you for your talk. I'm wondering... It seems like over the years you have been able to—You've seen the ever-shifting relationship between the art world and the dance world. And I wonder if you would share some of your reflections about that relationship, culminating in the current sort of art world love affair with dance.

CA: Yeah, the current art world craze with dance. Hm.... It's really a trend. I don't know—What else can I say? Um... that... this idea of putting performance in a museum, I think it's a way of getting audience. (laughs) Um... Uh... and I don't think—I don't really think that the art world.... I mean I think that the dance world—the people who write about dance don't really have the language to write about it in the context of art; and I think the art people certainly don't have the context to write about it—write about dance—in a way that I think is revelatory or interesting. Um...I mean I'm sure it will develop over time; it's just it's a new thing. And... you know, everyone wants a dancer now in a museum. So lucky for the dancers. (laughs) (laughter) More work. But they're not prepared in any way; they don't know what kind of—how to—There's no dressing rooms. They want you to perform on concrete floors. So they have to learn. I just did—You know, I did a bunch of stuff at the Tate. I mean I worked with Michael Clark there for two summers. And... you know, they got a huge dance floor for the Turbine Hall and we worked on that. And we had—you know—big, huge lighting setup rigged; it was great to work in that kind of a space. But there aren't that many spaces like that. I mean The Tanks is a weird space because of all the columns. So the fact that they've made a performance space with columns in it.... I mean the columns need to be there, 'cause it's holding up the building, but.... Anyway, that's-- that will be a challenge forever.

Question: Does it feel important to you to maintain a separation between dance and performance art?

CA: Pardon?

Question: Is it important to you that there's a separation or a distinction between dance and performance art?

CA: No.

Question: No.

CA: I mean, I work with—You know, one of my favorite people to work with—I mean they don't exist anymore, but two women called Dance Noise who had—did a lot of work in the Eighties who were my really close friends, who I worked with a lot. And they're sort of dance and performance, and I really prefer that; but there's not many people who have that energy. But I—You know, I like movement based performance; I like dance—the theatrical. You know I like all sorts of—I've worked with all—[a] wide variety of people, so.... I've worked with Marian Abramovic a lot, you know, in the earlier days. I made several performances with her—you know, solo performances. (pause) So.... (pause)

Question: Ah. Over here. Uh... I.... I just wanted to ask you about numbers in your recent work. And I guess it's as general as that.

CA: What about it?

Question: Well, why—

CA: (unintelligible) Why am I doing it?

Question: Yeah, like what's—How did you--?

CA: Well, I sort of explained. I mean I really.... Again, I had this point at which I really wanted to really change the kind of work I did. You know, I like to do something different, and I like to have a challenge and some.... And really an extreme challenge. I mean it made me.... The things that really make me incredibly anxious to do something so outside of what I do. But that's.... You know, that's—It's kind of risky, and I was like, "Is this really stupid?" I always think that. But... Maybe it is, but I just decided that I would do it. And it really has a relationship to me to this abstract thing. And.... And then I just worked with the qualities

that numbers suggest to me, And you know, I'll probably do more number pieces. And I included it in-- you know, in some way now in a lot of the work. You know, I put the numbers in the Merce piece with countdowns, and color fields. Um... But, yeah, it was just a way of having a different look and seeing if I could still come back to the feeling that I normally have about my work. And with the number pieces that I did at that show in Brooklyn I really felt—When I was in the space I felt, “This feels like me.” So even though I went outside of my comfort zone I was happy with how it came out.

Question: Why do you only use numbers one through six?

CA: ‘Cause I didn’t want—I didn’t want it to be about numerals as a subject, so I didn’t want to use all of them and then that would be about numerals. So I decided just to use six. I think the first—I decided on six because there was something I read about how you could keep six numbers in your head at a time, and that’s the maximum. Something like that, or.... And then I also thought, um.... When I was first making the piece I thought, “Oh, then I can have ‘sex’ in the title.” (laughs) (laughter) But... I didn’t use that. (laughs) (laughter)

Question: Hi. Thank you, Charles. Quick—Having seen (unintelligible) “Superhoney,” and then also (unintelligible) seeing this work as well, I’m really curious how does symbolism and narrative play into your work, and how has it changed over time?

CA: Well, when I first um... You know, when I worked with Merce Cunningham in the Seventies and early Eighties, you know, there was a rule. I mean that was the thing: no story, no narrative, even though there really was, often, something narrative going on in Merce’s mind. And so when I worked outside of the Cunningham situation, with Douglas Dunn and with Karole Armitage, I started going back to one of the things which I’ve always loved, which was Hollywood musicals and, you know, sort of... um.... And introducing more

and more story elements—I mean like in “Ex-Romance” there’s a story. Every—All those pieces—“Hail the New Puritan,” “Ex-Romance,” “Superhoney”—they all have stories. And so that’s really like, you know, going against the taboo of non-narrative dance. So I was just exploring that. And so that’s where the narrative really came from. And I’ve... interested in—in—you know, I’ve written a feature film script that’s purely a narrative, no dancing or anything. So I’m interested in the whole problem of narrative, but I haven’t--- I’ve only used it in some pieces. And when you make a narrative piece—I mean it usually implies a cast, and you know, it gets to be an expensive proposition, so I haven’t done it that often.

Question: Question here. For the work that you made... the window—the window work—Why... your.... Why use appropriated video?

CA: Why did I appropriate--?

Question: Yeah, why did you use appropriated video instead of shooting footage?

CA: Oh... um... Well, uh, I guess it was just this idea I had; it was a challenge, really, to use completely non-personal footage and try to make something out of it. I mean one of my inspirations for that piece was Bob Rauschenberg, who’s, you know, [a] big inspiration in all my work. And.... And he made a piece for Tricia Brown, a dance called “Glacial Decoy,” in which four images—still images—move across the back of the stage. You know, it goes—The image is one, then it moves here, and then it moves here, and keeps going. And so I kind of used that as an idea for how to change images. And I for some reason wanted to use... non [personal]—You know, see what I could do without spending any money. It was also a business plan, I have to say. I got a fixed fee, and anything that I didn’t spend I could keep. So I didn’t spend anything. (laughter) (laughs)

Question: And um... What’s your fascination with the color orange?

CA: Um.... (pause) Well, I used to hate orange. And then.... (laughter) So I was—I forget what year it was. 1980-something. Early. And you know, orange used to be a very unpopular color. Not anymore, but it used to be. And I really didn't like it. And so I was asked to design a ballet, and I thought, "I'm going to do it all orange." Um... And... the dancers all hated it. They hated (laughing) orange too. So I decided I had to start wearing orange in solidarity... in solidarity with my choice. And after I started wearing orange I started thinking that red was very unsophisticated. (laughter) (laughs) So... that's continued. (laughs) I really prefer—you know—complementary colors.

Question: Hi, Charlie. Over here. It's Carrie.

CA: (affirmative sound) Hi.

Question: Um... I just... question. Maybe you could talk about your early... like before 1970. Were you performing? What was your engagement in the art world? Like when did you arrive in New York?

CA: Uh... 1969.

Question: So you were—

CA: And then I started working with Merce in 1970. And... I did—I knew artists. I mean I—As a performer—I barely performed. I mean I performed... You know, because all my friends were performers and dancers but I really wasn't. And I—I made a.... I made some theater pieces early, you know, at—one in a series at Red Grooms's loft. I made imagistic, sort of anti-Yvonne Rainer pieces that was [sic] very emotional. And I made a long theater piece which I actually performed in. And I did, you know, very little actual performing; I don't think of myself as a—I'm a bad performer, I would have to say. I did a dance on this program called "Soup and Tart" in 1972; it was a lot of short performances. I did a comedy

dance with a friend of mine. We rehearsed it over and over and over and over again, and we had it all down; and the minute we did it I completely forgot everything. (laughs) (laughter) I always get terrible stage fright. Anyway, I just walked through it. But it's on tape somewhere. (laughs) And then I worked.... You know, I worked with, you know, dancers ever since I started working with Merce. And then knew (1:47:51) a lot of the people around that scene. So....

Question: Hi.

CA: Hi.

Question: So I'm curious about this in between space between making, um... your previous work, and then numbers pieces, and how... wanting to make something completely different and then actually making something completely different. That in between space. How did you actually--? Do you know how you got there? (unintelligible) making?

CA: Well, I mean all of—You know, my pieces come either from situations or spaces or.... And they all really have to do with my life. And my life has changed over the years. You know, I used to go out, you know, four nights a week, five nights a week, you know, for years and years, and didn't stop that until my mid-fifties. So I was a different kind of person and my friends were different, and so I made pieces with—in that kind of situation. And now I'm more or less a recluse, so you can see the result. (laughs) So I don't know—You know, I don't—I never start with an idea; I really start either with a situation or a feeling or a deadline. Often a deadline. (coughs)

Question: Hi. I wanted to see if you can, um... talk about how you use space and sort of confront the viewer in these all-encompassing environments, like um... how you use the walls, and the reflection of the floor, and...yeah.

CA: Well, I like.... Again, I'm not... um.... I prefer experiential work, something that I respond to bodily and emotionally and in all ways. And you know, intellectually as well. But I'm not a conceptual artist; I've never started with a concept. And I don't really have a conceptual overlay, really. I mean I'm sure they—It could exist in someone's mind, but not particularly in mine. (pause)

Question: And also I wanted to see—ask you about the multiple, and... 'Cause I noticed in the piece you did with Merce Cunningham, like every another dancer appear[s] there's a sort of like “ting” sound or some sort of—

CA: I'm sorry. I'm not getting it.

Question: (unintelligible) Okay. I just wanted to ask you about um... like the multiple, and like diptychs, and um... like every time another dancer was sort of presented in that last piece with Merce, there was a sort of sound that accompanied that every time. Does that make any sense?

CA: The sound you mean of their feet? Or-?

Question: No, there's like sort of like a “ting” sound (unintelligible)—

CA: Oh, that. You know, that's chance; that's total chance.

Question: Okay.

CA: That's John Cage music. I put it on at the beginning of the piece; it just ran through the piece. And it came whenever it came in the dance. So whatever coordination there is is chance. And the way that that (unintelligible) worked, the way I—I just like it. I don't know why I like it, but it just.... To achieve that kind of looseness took a long, long time. Um... And I.... It's something that is—you know, I mean it was choreographed, and yet it also has this really.... Like water. I don't know. And the [dancers]—You can only do that—

The dancers are very, very good. They know where to go, the specific spaces; and they can change easily if you need to between takes. And so it's a pleasure to work in a situation like that.

Question: Hi. Sorry, it's me again. Um.... Maybe this is silly, but do you have any advice to us, as makers? Or....

CA: Advice about--?

Question: Like if there's one thing that you wish that someone had told you when you were, you know, twenty-five years old....

CA: Oh.... (laughs) (laughter) Um.... (coughs) (laughs) I don't know. I mean one of the things I've learned, you know, when people ask me about, you know, collaborating: It really only works when you love the people that you're working with, and you can really share and exchange and not... and want them to do—you know, not be competitive or.... I mean it's rare to have really that ease. But I've been really lucky. And not every—I mean I've worked with some really difficult people. I did learn at one point that just because you like someone's work you don't have to work with them, if they're that difficult. I mean I did learn that—That's a lesson I really learned. Um.... But... I'm.... I don't have that much (laughs) advice. (pause)

Question: I have another question to ask you. Over the trajectory of your career you've worked with these kind of extreme sort of aesthetic positions....

CA: (affirmative sound)

Question: You know, from Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer to like Leigh Bowery.

CA: (affirmative sound)

Question: And they're all these different ways of being gay artists.... What did—I'm just curious about what the reaction to the sort of campy work that you started doing later was in the—I mean like Yvonne Rainer always seems like very straight-laced to me, and very uptight. (laughs)

CA: Yeah. But I mean she was—When I first worked with her, like in the Seventies, she wasn't out as a lesbian. And I kind of thought she was slightly homophobic, actually, at that time. But um.... And now, (laughs) you know, (laughter) she carries the flag. (laughter) So.... And I never really thought— You know, of course, most of my friends are queer and I work in a queer kind of situation; but I don't think about it as being exclusive. I work with straight people as well. (laughs)

Question: No, I guess I just meant the sort of generational shift that you were part of. You know, this work that is based in sort of minimalism and... um....

CA: Yeah, I mean I was-- you know, I was more in synch with the generation that's a little bit younger than me, the Eighties entertainment-as-art generation. I really more identified that with—than with minimalism and conceptual art. But... And I've—You know, I like to work with young people too. I mean young—way younger—people. I mean I love working with Mika, and her aesthetic is very different from—from mine; but I just love them. (long pause) Anyone? (applause, cheers) Thank you.

END OF RECORDING