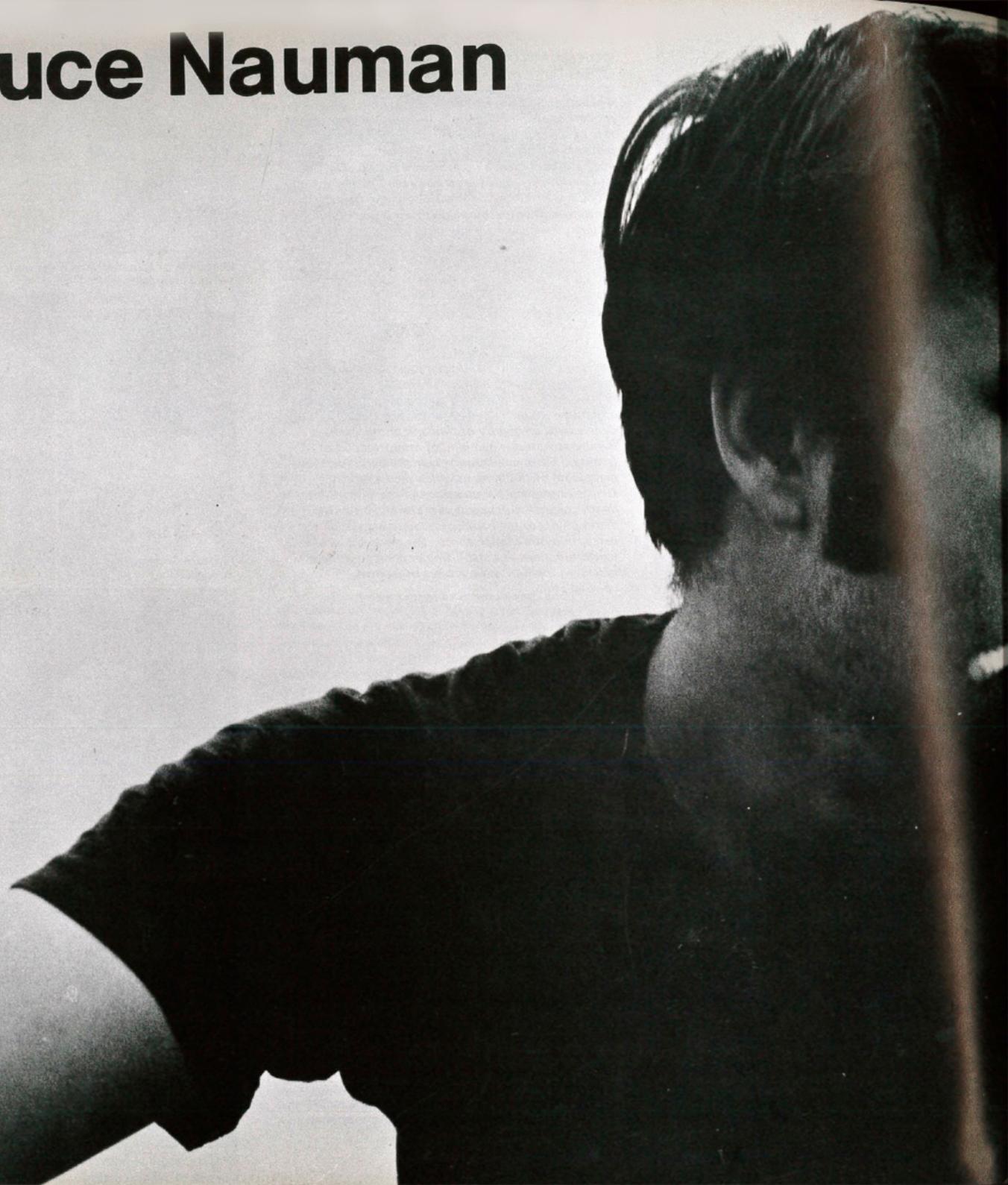


Bruce Nauman





During the first week of May 1970, Nauman made a V-shaped corridor piece at San Jose State College, California. The photographs document the execution of this work, and the following discussion was videotaped in the College's studio on May 7 and later edited in collaboration with the artist.

How did you arrive at the San Jose piece, did it grow out of your Performance Corridor?

Yes,

because the first pieces that were at all like it were just corridors that ended at a wall and then made into a V. Then I put in another V and finally I put in the mirror.

Why did you

decide to use it that way?

The mirror?

No, the

change in the interior, the second V.

When the

corridors had to do with sound damping, the wall relied on soundproofing material which altered the sound in the corridor and also caused pressure on your ears, which is what I was really interested in: pressure changes that occurred while you were passing by the material. And then one thing to do was to make a V. When you are at the open end of the V there's not too much effect, but as you walk into the V the pressure increases quite a bit, it's very claustrophobic . . .

Pressure is also felt on the spectator's own body. Does that come from your ears?

It has a lot to do with just your ears.

So space is felt with one's ears?

Yeah,

that's right.

The light inside had a particularly soft quality which really got to my body. How did you control the light that way?

Because the piece goes to the ceiling, all of the light is reflected into the two entrances, so it's very indirect light.

Photographs
Gianfranco Gorgoni

Well, I noticed that the exterior wall started just the other side of one of the light fixtures recessed in the ceiling. Was the piece carefully planned to block off that light?

No, I built it so that there wouldn't be any lights in the space. The light in there is more or less accidental.

When I walked inside, the mirror cut off my head and the shock of seeing myself headless was a strong part of the piece. But if a shorter person is standing close to the mirror, he can see his face. Are these differences important?

Yes. When I put the mirror in the first time, it was six feet tall, which was half as high as the ceiling. That was too high—you couldn't feel the space behind the mirror at the apex of the V. So I cut it off to a little less than five and a half feet, which is just below my eye level.

Then you adjusted the piece after experiencing it. Do you also make that kind of adjustment while you're constructing the piece?

Yeah, I first made that piece in my studio.

So you knew what you were dealing with in terms of space.

Yes, but it was much more crude in the studio.

It's really hard to know what I felt in there, but somehow it brought me closer to myself. From your own experience of being in there, how would you say it affects you?

Well, the corridors that you walk down are two feet wide at the beginning and they narrow down to about sixteen inches. So going into it is easy, because there is enough space around you for you not to be aware of the walls too much until you start to walk down the corridor. Then the walls are closer and force you to be aware of your body. It can be a very self-conscious kind of experience.

So you find yourself in a situation where you are really put up against yourself.

Yes, and still the interest—since you are looking into the mirror and seeing out of the other corridor—the visual interest is pretty strong and it's centered somewhere else; it's either in the mirror or looking beyond the mirror into the end of the V.

Some people don't see over the top of the mirror into the end of the V.

Well, if you are shorter than I am and you see your whole self in the mirror, then you probably wouldn't look over the mirror, so that's really difficult to . . . If the mirror is too short, it doesn't work either because you look over the mirror; you just see your feet in the mirror, and the bottom of the corridor. So the piece is effectively limited to people who are built somewhat like I am.

Then the size of the spectator plays a role in the success of the piece.

A big person couldn't go in at all.

Right, I didn't get a chance to see your last Wilder show. How does the San Jose corridor piece compare with the ones at Wilder?

Well, there were parts of the Wilder piece that you could experience immediately, but the thing was so large and complicated that I think it took much longer to grasp.

Do you think this piece is more successful?

No, just more immediate.

What relation do these corridor pieces have to your recent videotape works like *Come*?

It's really like the corridor pieces only without the corridors. I tried to do something similar, but using television cameras and monitors, and masking parts of the lenses on the cameras . . . If one camera is at one end of the room and the monitor is at the other, then the camera lens can be masked so that an image appears maybe on a third or a quarter of the screen. The camera is sometimes turned on

its side, sometimes upside down, and that creates a corridor between the camera and the monitor. You can walk in it and see yourself from the back, but it's hard to stay in the picture because you can't line anything up, especially if the camera is not pointing at the monitor. Then you have to watch the monitor to stay in the picture and at the same time stay in the line of the camera.

How did you decide on the title, *Come*?

I don't remember.

Have you finished those slow motion films of gauze in your mouth and painting your body?

Yeah.

Could you talk about some of them?

*There were four films in which the frame speed varied between a thousand frames a second and four thousand frames a second, depending on how large an area I was trying to photograph and what light I could get. In one I was making a face, in another I had about four or five yards of gauze in my mouth which I pulled out very slowly. There were two others, one of which was called *Black Balls*. I put black makeup on my testicles. The other was called *Bouncing Balls* and it was just bouncing testicles.*

How long are they?

Four hundred feet of film, that runs for about ten minutes. They take from six to twelve seconds to shoot, depending on the frame speed. The action is really slowed down a lot. Sometimes it is so slow that you don't really see any motion but you sort of notice the thing is different from time to time.



Do they have color in the system?
You can shoot color, but the film speed is not so fast. I suppose you could push it. I just shot black and white.

And there is a fourth one?

That's four.

Do these films stimulate you to work further in that direction with the same equipment?

Not yet. It was pretty much something I wanted to do and just did.

I know

it often happens that you do certain things in one medium, then you do something similar in another medium. How does that come about? Is it because you cannot take a project further at a particular moment?

Originally a lot of the things that turned into videotapes and films were performances. At the time no one was really interested in presenting them, so I made them into films. No one was interested in that either, so the film is really a record of the performance. After I had made a few films I changed to videotape, just because it was easier for me to get at the time. The camera work became a bit more important, although the camera was stationary in the first ones. . . .

Were these the films of bouncing balls?

Yeah.

The videotapes I did after those films were related, but the camera was often turned on its side or upside down, or a wide angle lens was used for distortion. . . . As I became more aware of what happens in the recording medium I would make little alterations. Then I went back and did the performance, and after that. . . .

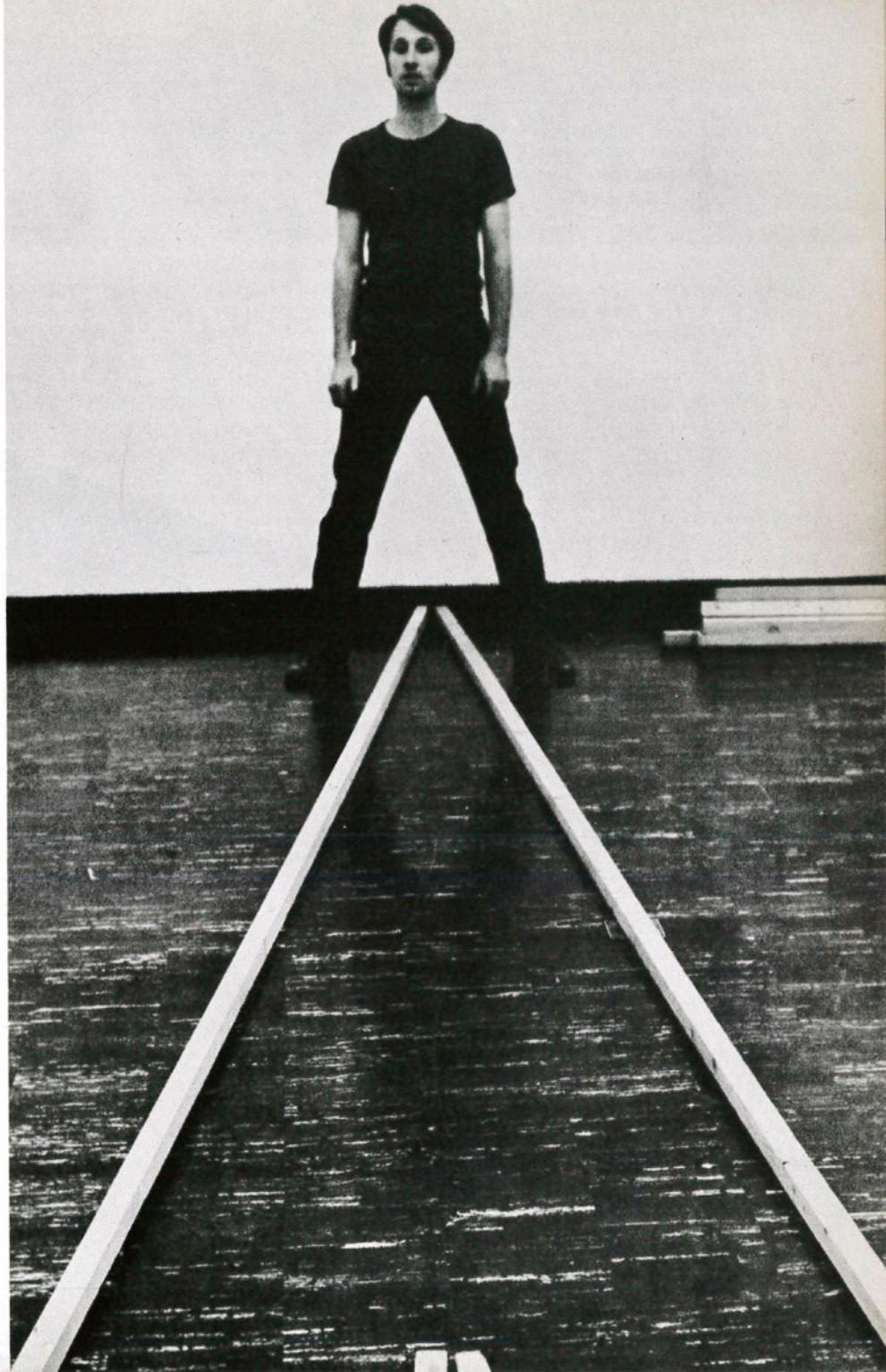
Which performance?

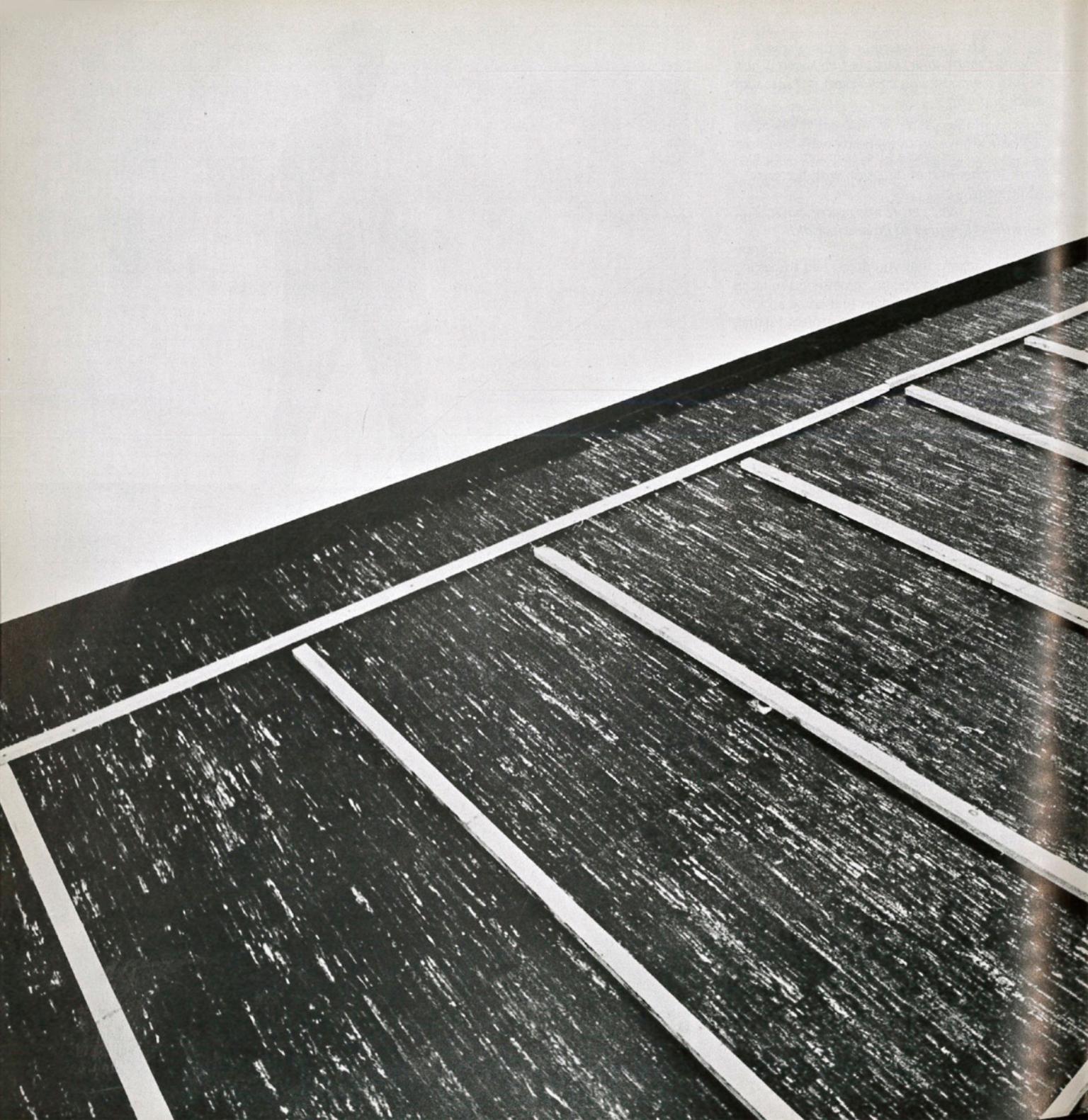
The one at the Whitney during the Anti-Illusion show in '69. I had already made a videotape of it, bouncing in the corner for an hour. At the Whitney the performance was by three people, instead of just myself, and after that I tried to make pieces where other people could be involved in the performance situation, individuals.

Why

did you find that desirable?

It makes it possible for me to make a more. . . . it's difficult for me to perform, and it takes a long time for me to need to perform. And doing it once is enough. I wouldn't want to do it the next day or for a week, or even do the same performance again. So if I can make a situation where someone else has to do what I would do, that is







satisfactory. Quite a lot of these pieces have to do with creating a very strict kind of environment or situation so that even if the performer doesn't know anything about me or the work that goes into the piece, he will still be able to do something similar to what I would do.

Some of the works must be stimulated by a desire to experience particular kinds of situations. Just to see how they feel. Are you doing the work basically for yourself?

Yes. It is going into the studio and doing whatever I'm interested in doing, and then trying to find a way to present it so that other people could do it too without having too much explanation. The concern for the body seems stronger now than when we did the Arts Magazine interview. Well, the first time I really talked to anybody about body awareness was in the summer of 1968. Meredith Monk was in San Francisco. She had thought about or seen some of my work and recognized it. An awareness of yourself comes from a certain amount of activity and you can't get it from just thinking about yourself. You do exercises, you have certain kinds of awarenesses that you don't have if you read books. So the films and some of the pieces that I did after that for videotapes were specifically about doing exercises in balance. I thought of them as dance problems without being a dancer, being interested in the

kinds of tension that arise when you try to balance and can't. Or do something for a long time and get tired. In one of those first films, the violin film, I played the violin as long as I could. I don't know how to play the violin, so it was hard, playing on all four strings as fast as I could for as long as I could. I had ten minutes of film and ran about seven minutes of it before I got tired and had to stop and rest a little bit and then finish it.

But you could have gone on longer than the ten minutes?

I would have had to stop and rest more often. My fingers got very tired and I couldn't hold the violin any more.

What you are saying in effect is that in 1968 the idea of working with calisthenics and body movements seemed far removed from sculptural concerns. Would you say that those boundaries and the distance between them has dissolved to a certain extent?

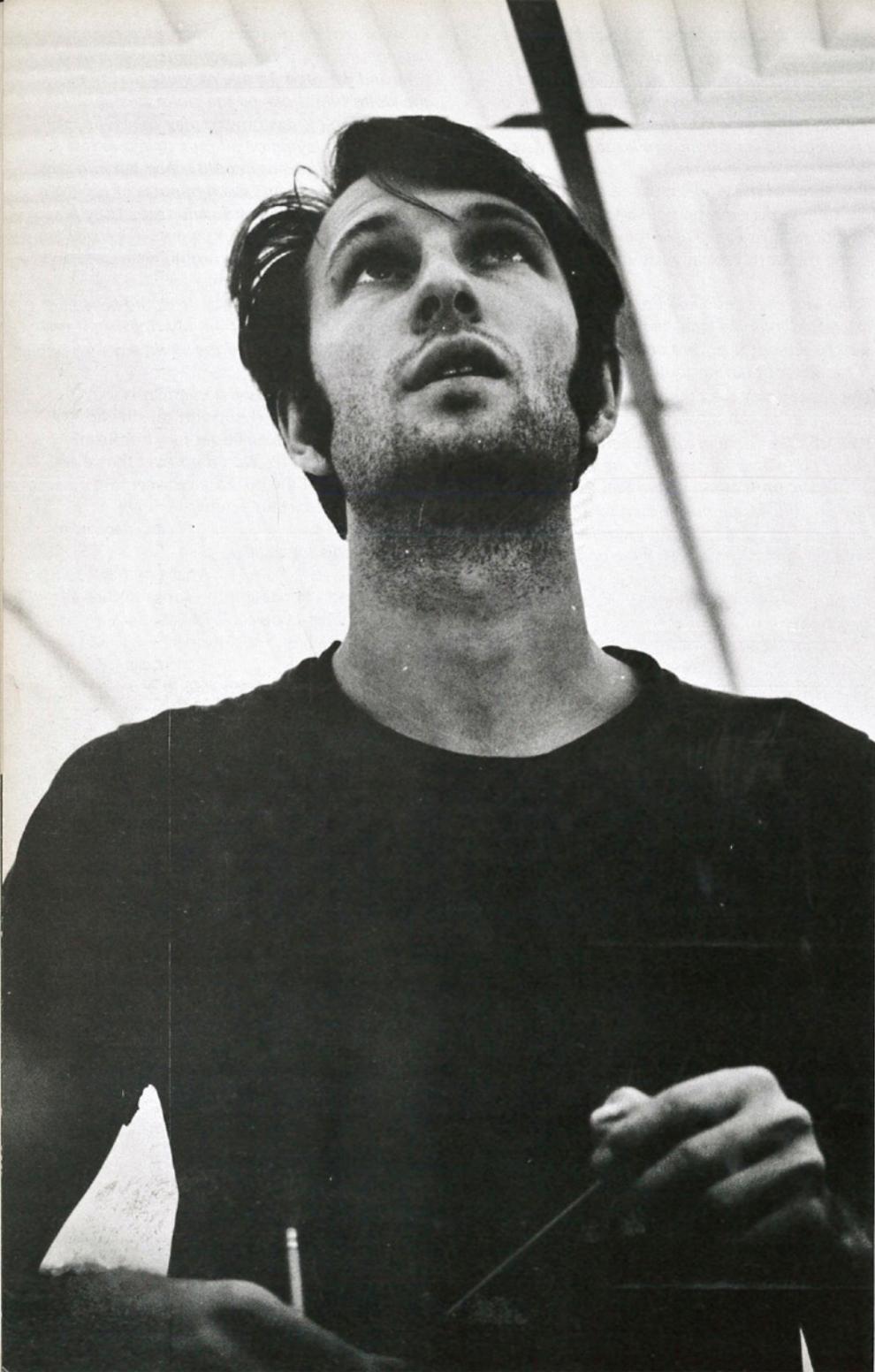
Yes, it seems to have gotten a lot smaller.

What you have done has widened the possibilities for sculpture to the point where you can't isolate video works and say, they aren't sculpture.

It is only in the last year that I have been able to bring them together.

How do you mean?





Well, even last

year it seemed pretty clear that some of the things I did were either performance or recorded performance activities, and others were sculptural—and it is only recently that I have been able to make the two cross or meet in some way.

In which works have they met? The ones we have been talking about. The first one was really the corridor, the piece with two walls that was originally a prop in my studio for a videotape in which I walked up and down the corridor in a stylized way for an hour. At the Whitney Anti-Illusion show I presented the prop as a piece, called Performance Corridor. It was twenty inches wide and twenty feet long, so a lot of strange things happened to anybody who walked into it . . . just like walking in a very narrow hallway.

You had been doing a lot of walking around in the studio. When did you start thinking about using corridors?

Well, I

don't really remember the choice that led me to . . . I had made a tape of walking, of pacing, and another tape called Rhythmic Stamping in the Studio which was basically a sound problem, but videotaped . . . I was just walking around the studio stamping in various rhythms.

Did you want the sound to be in sync?

The

sound was in sync on that one. In the first violin film the sound is out of sync, but you really don't know it until the end of the film. I don't remember whether the sound or the picture stops first.

I think you stop playing the violin but the sound goes on.

The sound is fast and distorted and loud, and you can't tell until all at once . . . it is a strange kind of feeling.

Is

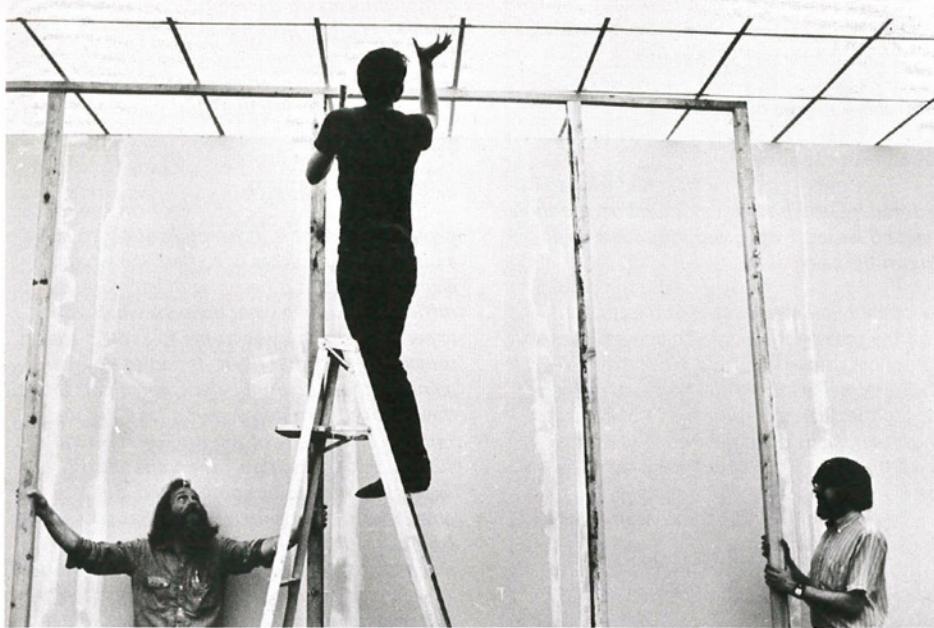
the film of the two bouncing balls in the square out of sync? Did you play with the sync on that?

No. I started out in sync but there again, it is a wild track, so as the tape stretches and tightens it goes in and out of sync. I more or less wanted it to be in sync but I just didn't have the equipment and the patience to do it.

What did you think of it?

It was alright.

There's one thing that I can't remember—I think I cut it out of some of the prints and left it in others. At a certain point I had two balls going and I was running around all the time trying to catch them. Sometimes they would



hit something on the floor or the ceiling and go off into the corner and hit together. Finally I lost track of them both. I picked up one of the balls and just threw it against the wall. I was really mad.

Why?

Because I was losing control of the game. I was trying to keep the rhythm going, to have the balls bounce once on the floor and once on the ceiling and then catch them, or twice on the floor and once on the ceiling. There was a rhythm going and when I lost it that ended the film. My idea at the time was that the film should have no beginning or end: one should be able to come in at any time and nothing would change. All the films were supposed to be like that, because they all dealt with ongoing activities. So did almost all of the videotapes, only they were longer, they went on for an hour or so. There is much more a feeling of being able to come in or leave at any time.

So you didn't want the film to come to an end.

I would prefer that it went on forever.

What kind of practice did you have for those films? Did you play the violin to see what sound you were going to get?

I probably had the violin around for a month or two before I made the film.

Did you get it because you were going to use it, or did it just come into your life?

I think I bought it for about fifteen dollars. It just seemed like a thing to have. I play other instruments, but I never played the violin and during the period of time that I had it before the film I started diddling around with it.

When did you decide that it might be nice to use it?

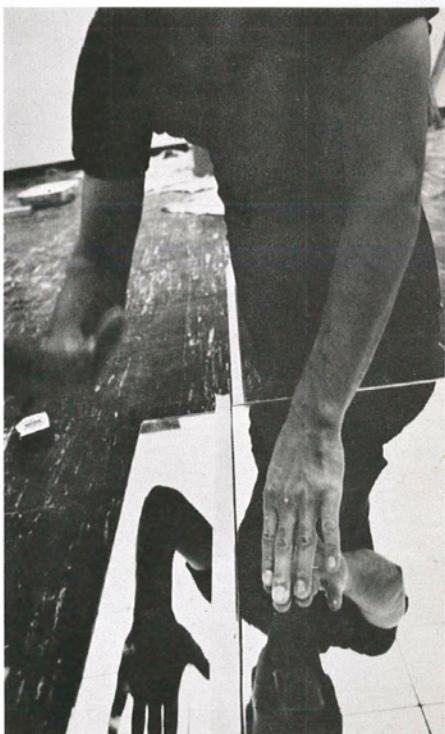
Well, I started to think about it once I had the violin and I tried one or two things. One thing I was interested in was playing . . . I wanted to set up a problem where it wouldn't matter whether I knew how to play the violin or not. What I did was to play as fast as I could on all four strings with the violin tuned D.E.A.D. I thought it would just be a lot of noise, but it turned out to be musically very interesting. It is a very tense piece. The other idea I had was to play two notes very close together so that you could hear the beats in the harmonics. I did some tapes of that but I never filmed it. Or maybe I did film it while I was walking around the studio playing. The film was called Walking around the Studio Playing a Note on the Violin. The camera was set up near the center of the studio facing one wall, but I walked all around the studio, so often there was no one in the picture, just the studio wall and the sound of the footsteps and the violin.

I saw most of these four films about a week ago at the School of Visual Arts—I liked them even better the second time I saw them. You made a simple, repetitive activity seem very important. *I guess we talked about this before, about being an amateur and being able to do anything. If you really believe in what you're doing and do it as well as you can, then there will be a certain amount of tension—if you are honestly getting tired, or if you are honestly trying to balance on one foot for a long time, there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension. But many things that you could do would be really boring, so it depends a lot on what you choose, how you set up the problem in the first place. Somehow you have to program it to be interesting.*

So you reject many ideas on aesthetic grounds.

Besides you make mistakes, so it doesn't all come out.

Do you ever see one of your films and then decide that you don't want to show it to anyone?



Oh yeah. I have thrown a lot of things away.

What percentage do you destroy?

Gee, I don't know.

Does it happen frequently?

Oh, pretty often. Maybe half the time.

On what grounds? Could you explain a piece that you finally rejected? /

couldn't remember. I can't remember any of the other film problems.

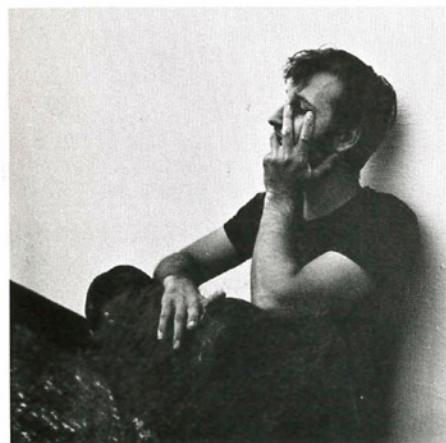
You did mention that you threw one film away, or you weren't sure. Which one was that?

I think we mentioned one, but it wasn't necessarily a film. For the videotapes it is harder to say, because I had the equipment in the studio. With the films I would work over an idea until there was something that I wanted to do, then I would rent the equipment for a day or two. So I was more likely to have a specific idea of what I wanted to do. With the videotapes I had the equipment in the studio for almost a year; I could make test tapes and look at them, watch myself on the monitor or have somebody else there to help. Lots of times I would do a whole performance or tape a whole hour and then change it.

Edit?

I don't think I would ever edit but I would redo the whole thing if I didn't like it. Often I would do the same performance but change the camera placement and so on.

In the



film of the bouncing balls, it looks as if the camera was just placed there. How carefully did you set up the camera in that film?

It was set up to show an area of the studio.

With a certain definite cut off point.

Yeah. It had a lot to do with the lenses I had—I was limited to the three standard lenses. I was using the widest angle lens on the camera.

But take the film in which you do a dance step around two squares of masking tape on the floor. The near side of the outermost square is cut off. Now that was obviously deliberate. You knew you weren't getting the nearest line on the film and that your feet wouldn't be seen when you came along that line. Do you remember why you made that decision?

No, I don't remember. It was just better that way.

Did you try it out so that both squares were completely visible?

I don't remember. It's been a long time.

How much time did you spend setting up the camera?

I don't know. Sometimes it really takes a long time, and other times it's just obvious how it must be done.

Did you consider using a video system in the San Jose piece? Well, in this piece the mirror takes the place of any video element. In most of the pieces with closed circuit video, the closed circuit functions as a kind of electronic mirror.

So you are really throwing the spectator back on himself. That's interesting. I hadn't realized the similarity between the mirror and the video image before. Is there a natural extension into video from a certain situation, such as this piece? Or didn't you even consider that?

I didn't consider it. The mirror allows you to see some place that you didn't think you could see. In other words you are seeing around the corner. Some of the video pieces have to do with seeing yourself go around a corner, or seeing a room that you know you can't get into like one where the television camera is set on an oscillating mount in a sealed room.

That was at the Wilder show, wasn't it?

Yes. The camera looks at the whole

room; you can see the monitor picture of it, but you can't go into the room and there is a strange kind of removal. You are denied access to that room—you can see exactly what is going on and when you are there but you can never get to that place.

People felt they were being deprived of something.

It is very strange to explain what that is. It becomes easier to make a picture of the pieces or to describe what the elements are, but it becomes much more difficult to explain what happens when you experience them. I was trying to explain that to somebody the other night. It had to do with going up the stairs in the dark, when you think there is one more step and you take the step, but you are already at the top and have the funny . . . or going down the stairs and expecting there to be another step, but you are already at the bottom. It seems that you always have that jolt and it really throws you off. I think that when these pieces work they do that too. Something happens that you didn't expect and it happens every time. You know why, and what's going on but you just keep doing the same thing. It is very curious.

The Wilder piece was quite complicated.

It is hard to understand. The easiest part of the piece to get into was a corridor thirty-four feet long and twenty-five inches wide. There was a television camera at the outside entrance, and the picture was at the other end. There was another picture inside too but that's irrelevant to this part of it. When you walked into the corridor, you had to go in about ten feet before you appeared on the television screen that was still twenty feet away from you. I used a wide angle lens, which disturbed the distance even more. The camera was ten feet up, so that when you did see yourself on the screen, it was from the back, from above and behind, which was quite different from the way you normally saw yourself or the way you experienced the corridor around yourself. When you realized that you were on the screen, being in the corridor was like stepping off a cliff or down into a hole. It was like the bottom step thing—it was really a very strong experience. You knew what had happened because you could see all of the equipment and what was going on, yet you had the same experience every time you walked in. There was no way to avoid having it.

Would you like to do something for network TV?

I'd like CBS to give me an hour on my terms. I'd like to do color work which I haven't done yet because of the expense involved. I haven't been strongly motivated to either. I suppose if I really wanted to I could hustle it somehow. But if it became available to me I would like to use color. Some people in Europe have been able to use it. I forget who. A Dutch artist did something called the Television as a Fireplace. Apparently a fire was broadcast on the screen for fifteen minutes or so. All you saw was the fire.

Right. Jan Dibbets did that last New Year's Eve.

In Holland all the stations are government-owned. The European television setup is much lower-keyed than the American, so time is not as valuable as it is here. It is a little easier to do things like that, but it's still difficult.

Do you see that as a goal? It seems to me that one of the reasons for working with videotape is that the work can get out to far more people so that obviously CBS....

I would... I'm not interested in making compromises in order to do that, although I still want to do it. I would like to have an hour or half an hour to present some boring material. Do you feel that you could subvert television, change it?

I'm not really interested in actively spending my time trying to get those people to let me use their time. If time was offered to me I would use it, and I would want to do things my way. But to take the trouble to do whatever one has to do....

What I meant specifically was that if the new art is going to be significant for a larger segment of the culture, working with videotape gives you the means to help bring that about.

Oh, I think it is not... although there would be a wider audience. But I would still want to have my time available and have only four people watching the piece, just because of what I could do with equipment that I wouldn't have access to otherwise.

So there really isn't a strong desire to change the existing level of communication.

No.

Then we come back to where we ended the last time: who is your art for?

To keep me busy. ■

