

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

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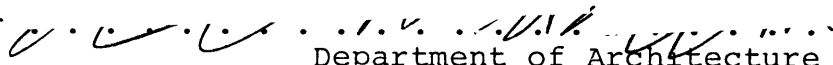
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an organization of my thoughts on autobiography as it concerns my own life and my work as an artist. It incorporates the study I have made of traditional elements of autobiography. It includes a discussion of my understanding of the process of self-definition and discusses how my work in the media of performance and video have united my ideas concerning contemporary and conventional forms of autobiography.

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INTRODUCTION

Autobiography is a primal art form that is subject to widely varying definitions by the large numbers of individuals who attempt it. I have come to recognize that the process of self-definition brings me not only in touch with events of my past, but forces me to reconstruct those events in such a way that they address my present state of mind.

The activity of reconstructing one's life is inherently inventive. The attempt to resurrect past memories often generates newly constructed ideas. Autobiography is not only the formal comprehension of past memories and past actions, but also a present action which the artist presents, with its own consequences for the viewer's or reader's future interpretation of self.

Autobiography is the juxtaposition of past and present memory, i.e., recollection and re-creation, fact and fantasy. While previous autobiographers have spent large amounts of time and energy determining the truth of their own efforts, the visual artist is more concerned with the collage of experience and feelings that surround the reconstruction of memory. Autobiography therefore changes perspective as the interrelationship of the parts jockey for positions of importance or fall into obscurity. It deals not so much with

truth, but perception: dynamic perception.

It seems that the making of an autobiography in the artistic sense is really an artist's attempt to translate his life into a work of art. It is the artist's attempt to make his life (as an artist) real. His actions, movement, and speech become the art itself. The artist is at once the creator and the created.

This became particularly evident in the use of performance as an autobiographical vehicle, as will be discussed below.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A SELF DEFINITION

The process of creating one's autobiography is the condensing and sorting out of one's memory. It is the mental viewing and interpretation of a sequence of events. These memories are continually being moved from one part of the mind to another. Writing an autobiography is the attempt to isolate these memories to form a current philosophy of the "self." This current philosophy of "self" is a way to deal with present and future realities of the "self," using a structure that is the result of an isolation and interpretation of "self." Since one is always coming in contact with new information, the writing or performing of an autobiography is the interpretation and isolation of a particular period in one's life.

So, I see autobiographies as period pieces of mental evolution that have no real starting point and no real finishing point in the mind. The writing or performing of an autobiographical work is an event with an invented beginning and an invented ending. The beginning and the ending of autobiographies are personal choices--unconscious or conscious--so the beginning and ending are really isolations on a continuum in time.

The process of creating an autobiography actually becomes a present action with its own consequences for the writer's future spiritual condition and eventual liberation. The retracing of factual events in one's life in order to give the reader an idea of the types of experiences encountered which have shaped that life is one of the oldest ways of presenting an autobiography. The historical autobiography reconciles the autobiographer's past life with what he or she takes to be the absolute truth by showing how particular events actually participated in influencing their life's plans; how each event affected the decisions that were to follow and how this series of events and decisions came to form a philosophy of life. It is the historical autobiography that much of the time used the scriptures to give the writer's life a certain credibility. The scriptures were used to judge a life lived. The Confessions of St. Augustine are a perfect example of this type of autobiography. St. Augustine used the scriptures to judge his own life, as well as to preach his messages of Christianity. William C. Spengemann describes in The Forms of Autobiography the three different forms which St. Augustine devised and which parallel the considerations expressed in my thesis performance Autobiographical Constructions.

St. Augustine becomes aware that his memory is not static and purely reflective, but active and creative. As he realized this he feels that he must analyze the memory in

its relation to time and eternity in order to discover in it some evident connection with the absolutes. By moving inquisitively through his own memories and ideas to some conclusion about them, or by performing a sequence of symbolic actions through which ineffable self can be realized. For these three methods of self-knowledge, St. Augustine devised the three autobiographical forms historical self-recollection, philosophical self-exploration, and poetic self-expression.

These three forms provide the basis for nearly all the autobiographies written since St. Augustine, though some autobiographers may use only one or two of them in a single work.

It is apparent from my investigation that autobiographical performance artists are constantly using very similar structures in the presentation of their work. My performance Autobiographical Constructions utilized these three areas of consideration both in the analysis of the autobiographical material and in the actual acting out of the piece itself. The intellectual framework of Autobiographical Constructions focused on historical self-recollections as one of the prime areas of concern.

Historical self-recollection can be defined as the retrieving and ordering of personal material to form a set of ideas that when presented convey the intellectual process experienced while growing up. Each important event in my life affected the way I saw and thought about the world around me.

The attempt to re-create these memories in a performance setting was a primary focus of Autobiographical Constructions.

The performance showed personal processes and personal actions that carry very specific meaning in my life. It is the accentuation of these processes and actions which leads the spectator to reflect on their own history while observing my performance. The presentation of this historical material in the form of processes and actions sets the stage for the dynamic process of spectator experience. Spectator experience utilizes these newly experienced processes and actions as a foundation for future thought and the investigation of personal philosophies.

Autobiographical Constructions presented my philosophical self-explorations in the form of taped narration which played throughout the performance while accompanying actions occurred. The taped narration was a reflection on childhood memories and how these memories are affecting my day-to-day existence. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in his Confessions: "My life is the sum of my own peculiar experiences and can be explained only in terms of these experiences." Rousseau's autobiography does not so much refer to the life he lives, but refers more directly to the life he lives through and throughout the writing of his autobiography. It is a presentation of the process of defining one's life while at the same time reflecting on how this definition affects the life one is leading. Rousseau believed that one understands the world and life through one's own experiences and feelings. These experiences

and feelings create a pool of symbolic information with which to draw from for deeper insight and understanding. C.G. Jung states in his autobiography Memories, Dreams, Reflections:

The years when I was pursuing my inner images were the most important in my life. In them everything essential was decided . . . It was the prima material for a lifetime's work.

Rousseau's Confessions were not designed purely to give the reader information about the author's life but to change the reader's orientation toward experiencing his own personal history. William C. Spengemann writes in Forms of Autobiography,

The reader comes to share the autobiography as a collectively achieved state of being, the autobiography becomes not a history or a philosophical analysis of a life lived elsewhere, but a series of actions performed in the composition of it, a record of these actions, and an interpretation of them all at once.

Recent autobiographers have created a structure which gives the reader a chance to encounter the autobiography from his own personal history. It is this continual moving back and forth between historical, philosophical, and poetic modes that begins to set the stage for the poetic autobiography or the "reader's autobiography," as I would label it.

The reader's autobiography/poetic autobiography is an autobiography that sets up the reader's mind so that it can overlap with a portion of the writer's in an attempt to create a blend of ideas. The reading of this type of auto-

biography is the working through of one's own intellectual make-up; it engages the reader in viewing the autobiography as a mutual work in progress and not as a final closed text or absolute. Barret J. Mendel states in Full of Life Now:

My knowing that autobiography however true is at some level false and that the novel or play, however make-believe, is at some level true, I allow for the shift to occur every time my need for satisfaction requires it. . . . I as a reader am empowered to give them each room enough to change into what they are to become so that I can experience satisfaction with each. I can create the autobiography as true or false. It requires my presence in order to reflect reality.

This poetic mode of autobiography pushes the genre into an area that relies on the interaction of both historical and philosophical autobiographies. The poetic autobiography relies on the interpretation and exploration of the text by the reader; it becomes a series of personal journeys through the "self" as designed by the writer and carried out by the reader. The reader comes to share the autobiography as a collectively achieved state of being; the autobiography becomes not a history or a philosophical analysis of a life lived elsewhere, but a record of these actions and interpretations as a poetic encounter.

THE DESIGN OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

The design of Autobiographical Constructions was created to embrace my interests in personal history, technology, and environmental installations. The set was divided into a number of different parts. The front of the set was a series of 4" x 4" x 7' fir timbers that formed a series of four arches, seven feet high. The entire length of the four arches stretched thirty feet and was covered with a seven foot high white transparent scrim. The front of the set was designed to receive film and video projections. The scrim was positioned so that a separation was created between me and the audience. The audience was able to see me through the scrim; however, I was not able to see them because of the film projections coming from the front. This made it possible for my visual concentration to be centered primarily behind the scrim and not on the audience.

The next area of design was the film projections. The two outside openings displayed the films being projected. These two home movies were projected in very slow motion, eight frames per second. It was these home movies that set the entire performance in the correct historical time period. I was able to keep these movies running during the performance

and still maintain the transparency of the scrim. The movies did not obscure simultaneous activities behind the scrim. This gave me many possibilities for overlapping personal actions with the films.

The video portion of the set was a large Advent projection on the scrim next to the home movie on the left side. The video projection contained a series of still photographs from a family album. Each photograph was projected for fifteen seconds.

The next section of the set was a series of tables located behind each archway. These tables contained a series of objects that were used throughout the performance. The objects were specifically arranged and carried a great deal of symbolic meaning. Each table was illuminated by a light source located nearby. Each light could be turned on or off from different positions behind the scrim to illuminate or darken each table. This gave me a great deal of control over which areas were lighted and created a number of different possibilities. The control of lighting played an important part in the types of mood changes I used throughout the performances. The colored lights used were red, blue, green, and white.

Mood changes were also controlled by a series of smells that were used at different times throughout the piece. Incense, perfume, burning wax and burning wires were some of

the smells used. In response to each smell there were a series of very explicit live sounds I carried out.

These sounds were created out of view of the spectators so that the sounds had no real attachment to me specifically. This left these live sounds more open to interpretation by the audience. The live sounds were mixed with prerecorded material such as spoken text and other environmental sounds. This created a certain difficulty in separating live sounds and those which were prerecorded.

There were a number of different electronic devices behind the tables which were difficult for the audience to see because of poor lighting. These devices included a radio which was a complete set of hanging wires, video modulator, video tape recorder, video camera, C.M.A. camera adaptor, typewriter, and a number of other devices (see list of materials). These devices were used either for sound effects, or to create environmental settings.

In the left rear corner of the environment, I arranged a set of white steps and a 5'x5'x15' white tower to create specific references to building constructions. The white tower supported two windows that were shot out during the performance. The steps were used to support objects as well as a location for gestures to be performed. The area right in front of the steps contained a twelve foot stepladder. The stepladder served as a lookout from which to view the

audience as well as another area to carry out actions. A chair and various electronic devices were located under the stepladder. The chair was a primary location for creating live sounds throughout the performance. The electronic devices which surrounded the chair were used in generating these sounds.

Located fifteen feet away from the chair along the back wall was a table and high stool where my assistant, Arlene Shechet, sat, dressed in black. The table contained a number of objects with which she produced sounds. They were a typewriter, audio cassette player, stereo record player, radio, microphone, and a candle. Arlene left the table only once to light a series of candles in front of the scrim. Throughout the rest of the piece, she was located in front of the table. She was a "constant" or "stable center" throughout the performance, since she remained in the same position. Next to the table was a video monitor and playback deck which were covered in black felt. The monitor was turned on for the entire performance without sound. It produced a slight glow. Suspended above the performance area with monofilament lines were four inflatable ducks. The lines could be pulled to make the ducks move.

SCRIPT AND WORKING NOTES FOR
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTIONS
A PERFORMANCE

TIME: 0:00-1:00

1. Environmental: The set is in total darkness with breathing in the background.
2. Recorded text: None.
3. Sound: Breathing.
4. Actions: Random flashes from different areas of the set with a strobe at the audience.

TIME: 1:00-2:00

1. Environmental: The set is in total darkness with the sound of a respirator going.
2. Recorded Text: "It's been a long time since he set foot in this part of his memory. He remembered the incidents. The time he was ill. How he felt physically. What he thought about while he laid in bed sick. The people who cared for him. He was so confused about it. The fucking medical profession. Miracle drugs for miracle rats. So his teeth turned grey and his hair fell out. He may live a little longer. He will keep trying.

It is very possible to talk about medicine, illness, health in a very rational way. To try to understand the needs of our society and work towards a better life. A life

where everyone who needs medical attention can get it. A life which utilizes drugs that are well tested and have more to do with health than dollar bills and so on and so forth. Birth/illness as childhood frustration."

3. Sound: Breathing 15 sec. Heartbeat 35 sec. Silence 10 sec. Baby cries 35 sec. Throughout the performance, if the sounds for each section end before the actions and gestures are completed, Arlene will pause the tape and type.

4. Actions: I am lying down wrapped in plastic and use the flashbulb on myself or bounce it off the wall twice. After the heartbeat, I unwrap and very slowly take three polaroids of the audience with the flashbulb.

TIME: 2:00-3:00

1. Environmental: The set is in total darkness.

2. Text: None.

3. Sound: Baby cries continue, softer.

4. Actions: I begin to move behind the scrim, from one area of the set to another, pinpointing, with a flashlight, different objects. I continue to make contact with the audience.

TIME: 3:00-5:00

1. Environmental: The set is in total darkness, the candles are lit, the incense is burning, the projection begins.

2. Recorded Text: "Catholicism ran his life for years. Wanting to receive all the blessings. Those important moments which were to keep him alive spiritually and clear of sin during those days of questioning, of not knowing. The smells that hung in the air during Sunday mass were wonderful. Incense and women's perfumes. He used to inhale those smells throughout the mass and keep them with him for the rest of the day. The rest of life as a Catholic was filled with fear and frustration. He remembers it so well. Those long-winded stories about how the world was created. The descriptions of God. The power God had over him. The idea of heaven and hell. The idea of burning forever. These are the first images he was given to think about. He was convinced he wanted to be a monk.

3. Sound: Gregorian chants.

4. Actions: While Arlene walks out from behind the scrim to light the candles in the front of the scrim, I start to set up the fan and burn incense. The film projections begin: Scrim 1-filmA-wedding. Scrim 4-filmB-childhood. I walk over to scrim 2, sit in the white kitchen chair, and use a flashlight to light icons. While I walk over to scrim 3, I pinpoint objects with flashlight. Once at scrim 3, I crouch and peel an orange.

TIME: 5:00-6:00

1. Environmental: Red light comes on.
2. Recorded text: None.
3. Sound: Birds and a children's party.
4. Actions: Perfume is sprayed into the audience. In the back of scrim 4 I smash a lightbulb. I then walk over to the pedestal, pick up a watering can and begin climbing the ladder.

TIME: 6:00-8:00

1. Environmental: Red light is still on.
2. Text: "Sex was the most frightening thing in the world to him. There was no real way to learn about it. Sex was a series of rumors that scared him to death. His family refused to explain what and how it all fit together. The only thing that was explained was that sex was a sin and therefore he could end up in hell if his thoughts were actualized. It was during this time that he was given intensive religious instructions. These instructions were theoretically to replace his desire for sexual knowledge and experience. All in all he believed he would go to hell for his sexual exploits. To burn forever in hell because of his sexual sins . . ."
3. Sound: Sexual sounds--a mixture of tortoise calls with animal imitations, then heartbeats.

4. Actions: I continue to go up the ladder, and at the same time talk into the watering can which amplifies the sound. While I am pouring the can's contents into a bucket at the foot of the ladder, Arlene projects sexual slides on me and on the wall behind me. I come down the ladder and sit in the chair which is underneath it. I turn on the radio which is hanging from the ladder in front on the chair, and I swing it back and forth.

TIME: 8:00-9:15

1. Environmental: Blue light replaces red light.
2. Text: None.
3. Sound: Unrecognizable nature sounds.
4. Actions: Arlene changes the lightbulbs, and smashes the red one on the floor, then steps on the pieces with her heel. I walk over to scrim 4 from under the ladder. Films A and B go off.

TIME: 9:15-11:45

1. Environmental: Blue light is on.
2. Recorded Text: "As an adolescent he was continually carrying out acts of aggression on people, places, and objects. There was considerable amounts of energy directed toward destroying objects that were in different ways attached indirectly to people. He was given other things to replace

his suppressed sexuality or suppressed sexual aggression. One such thing was a pellet gun which he could use at will for whatever he wanted. So, if he wanted to destroy something all he had to do was do it quietly and everything was fine. Avoid sexual aggression and redirect that energy to other areas of the world.

These childhood experiences can now be seen as important in his general development as related to his concern for people. There seems to have developed a concern for illness and suffering as well as helplessness. They seem to also reflect a paranoia concerning destruction and related aggression. Other concerns for medicine and health. He seems to be preoccupied with unknowns, unpredictables, etc. He was fearless as a child from not really understanding the dangers. Now there is an understanding of the dangers which has created a fearfulness in him. Transition from being fearless to being fearful."

3. Sound: Dog barking and gun shots. Typing sounds.

4. Actions: I proceed to find a package containing the wrapped gun. I pick up the suitcase display window. I then set it up. I position myself behind the window, sit in a chair facing the window that I opened up, and slowly shoot twice, breaking two different windowpanes.

TIME: 11:45-13:45

1. Environmental: Blue light is turned off. Films A and B come on.

2. Recorded Text: "I came out of Connolly's store holding my mother's hand. We turned right and advanced in silence southward along the highway. After a hundred feet we turned right and headed inland and advanced slowly up a long steep hill. We gained ground in silence hand in hand through the warm still summer air. It was late afternoon and after another hundred feet the sun appeared above the crest of the rise. Looking up at the blue sky and then at my mother's face, I broke the silence asking her if the sky is not in reality much more distant than it appears. Receiving no answer I mentally reframed the question. Some hundred feet later I looked up at her face and again asked her the same question. For some reason, I could never fathom why this question angered her so much. She shook off my little hand and made a cutting retort I have never forgotten."

--Samuel Beckett

3. Sound: Duck sounds. One shot. Then ambient.

4. Actions: I locate the ducks hanging from the ceiling by pulling a fishing line to move them. I shoot at a duck. Arlene continues typing.

TIME: 13:45-15:00

1. Environmental: Movies end at 15:00.
2. Sound: Frank Sinatra singing Come Back to Sorrento.
3. Recorded Text: None.
4. Actions: I am standing behind screen 1 getting dressed.

TIME: 15:00

Set goes to total black/silence.

END OF PERFORMANCE

LIST OF MATERIALS FOR PERFORMANCE

4" x 4" timbers	watering can with water
30 ft. white scrim	electric fan
Advent projector	incense
2 16mm projectors	perfume
slide projector	religious paintings
monitor and VTR	matches
spotlights: red, blue, green	candles
record player	cat transport case
desk and chair	cassette player
B.B. gun	12 ft. step ladder
copies of 1965-68 <u>New York Times</u> articles on <u>Vietnam</u>	female puppet
microfilm	plastic wrapping
inflatable ducks	window sample--window in a suitcase
suitcase	2 glass windows
female mannequin's head	charcoal
black book	water bucket
necktie	fire extinguisher
flashlight	RF modulator
strobe light	polarized glass
typewriter	gloves
AM-FM radio	batteries
Polaroid camera and flash	pencils

THE EVOLUTION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

My performance Autobiographical Constructions was a reaction to my frustrations with video and its related technologies. The attempt to translate childhood memories into a videotape became a set of very difficult problems. First, there were the general technological problems that came along with making a videotape, such as how to keep electronic "drop-outs" from occurring. These are electronic interferences that are a result of voltage drop to the recording deck or imperfections in the actual videotape from the factory. I experienced difficulty with old editing machines which continually damaged my tapes. So in general there was a constant struggle with the video technology.

There was also the general problem of trying to recreate a childhood experience for video while simultaneously transporting the viewer to the simulated time of the actual childhood experience. I tried to create detailed sets with perfect lighting using color filters to give the right atmosphere to the scenes. Attempts were made to costume actors in garments of my childhood but this did not really work. I used many different props, but the scenes they were used for would not translate into video. Furthermore, the tapes themselves

seemed removed from what I felt as a child. They were not infused with my childhood feelings or a real personal presence. There was a futuristic feeling about the tapes which felt as though I was looking into someone else's life, and not my own. Even for the most exact recreations of powerful events in my life as a child, the event somehow lost its impact on the video monitor. My frustrations mounted concerning the difficulty of the project. I kept trying to force each scene into the 24" x 24" monitor, and the monitor could not encompass all of my considerations. I wanted the environments to be precise, but the camera lens was too narrow to record the entire environment. The monitor and camera reduced reality, but what I wanted was to expand reality. I was amazed that it took so long for me to realize what was happening. As I kept expanding my thought and expectations about the project, the reality of working with video was forcing me to reduce the actual environmental part of the work. The reduction of scale made the project even more difficult since the environmental consideration was of such great importance to me.

I showed the unfinished videotape publicly at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies on November 12, 1981. It was at this screening that I realized that the tape was an exploration into the development of a working crew of actors and a director; it was not a portrait of my childhood. It was more

a group portrait of people creating fiction out of my childhood memories. This was fine for what it was, but it was not what I had intended. It was at this point that I decided to rethink the ideas I had been working with and try to figure out where my concerns for the project rested.

The very first area that came to mind was the physicality of the tapes and how they really had no direct physical impact on the people watching them. The monitor condensed everything I tried to accentuate. This problem forced me to look upon video as a restrictive tool when it came to presenting this work, since I wanted it most importantly to be a physical experience. I started to think about my original concerns as a sculptor and how the physicality of a work was so important to me. Since the camera and monitor forced me to miniaturize everything, I decided to bring everything up in scale, to make it human scale or larger. This transition led me to performance as a way of translating my ideas into a scale that could fulfill my desires for physical impact in the work. I started to focus on spaces that could be turned into an environment with potential for physical impact.

It was out of these frustrations and lack of foresight that Autobiographical Constructions was born. This evolution led me to an orientation toward the audience which became a primary concern of this thesis work. Through this piece I established a strong set of working ideas which were concerned

with the performer's physical relationship to the audience.

Autobiographical Constructions was a performance in real time and on a scale which was human.

DISCUSSION OF THREE RELEVANT AUTOBIOGRAPHERS

It is possible to locate several contemporary artists in the previous chapter, i.e., historical self-explanation, philosophical self-scrutiny, and poetic self-invention, as well as to focus on their use of these categories for the development of their work. One of these artists is Vito Acconci. Note this statement made during an interview on November 23, 1973:

My work seems mainly concerned with what I guess could be called "attention" or "concentration"; like if I am going to concentrate on my own body or a part of my body. This intense focus on it, this intense channeling towards it is going to lead to a kind of turning in on myself which is a kind of masochism.

Acconci's art is a very clear presentation and development of "self" in a truly autobiographical way. The parallels between the investigation of "self" historically and in Acconci's work are quite evident. Acconci states:

Video and performance as a determinant of value: I need an action that can coincide with the feedback capacity--I have to find something to redo--I can sit in front of the monitor, stay concentrated on myself, have eyes in the round--I can look on my body for something that needs correction.

This intense viewing of one's action via the video monitor is a self-imposed structure to confront and analyze the self.

St. Augustine used the scriptures and his faith in the Lord in a very similar way.

But you Lord were turning me around so
that I could see myself; you took me
from behind my own back, which was where
I had put myself, and you set me in front
of my own face so that I could see how
foul a sight I was . . .

Both autobiographers have set up a strict structure within which they must interact. It is this desire to understand the self, and to use the understood self via chosen exterior restrictions to develop one's vision that I find important in my work. These self-imposed conditions force the artist to view and question his or her present state of mind. These formed structures give artists a responsive mirror with which to view themselves. For Acconci, it's the monitored self yelling introspective words of analysis. For St. Augustine, it is his interpretation of the scriptures and his belief in the power of God to expand his vision of "self." The primary vehicle for change is an exterior source of information. In both cases it is a matter of each interacting with a never-ending flow of information, the mirrored self; man made in the image of God and man made in the image of the mirrored self. (See Rosalind Krauss, The Aesthetics of Narcissism.)

I have used a number of different self-imposed structures in order to increase my awareness of self, and to utilize this awareness directly in my performance work. The conditions/

structures exist primarily in two forms, one being the form of writings such as personal diaries and narrative writings by other writers. A second is the use of an environment which carries along with it very specific conditions for working in a chosen space. The writings can be utilized in a number of different ways. They can be understood in a similar way to St. Augustine's use of the scriptures, as a model or framework for looking at one's self and one's work. The differences between St. Augustine's use of the scriptures and my use of various writings is not that great. We are both interpreting text in an historical, philosophical, and poetic way and mapping these interpretations of the texts over our lives. This creates the structure in which to work. The use of the written word in Autobiographical Constructions is quite direct. I used a narrative piece of Samuel Beckett's to illustrate a very particular type of feeling I had experienced as a child (see script and working notes from Autobiographical Constructions). This particular text forces me to remember my experiences while creating a new framework outside of myself with which to view that experience while it is being presented to an audience. It is the utilization of a piece of writing to present interpretations of self which are better expressed indirectly through someone else's work in order to keep the work on a more impersonal level. The use of established writings in this manner is what I would call the

poetic utilization of writings: poetic autobiography.

In essence, poetic autobiography, an art form of inter-relation, association, creation, became the contemporary theme for a number of artists in the early 1960s.

The performances and films of Yvonne Rainer are so frequently autobiographical that it is very difficult to separate what is autobiographical fact and what is fiction. Rainer states in Work 1961-1973:

The closer the material is to my own life,
the more pains I usually take to have other
people represent it, or by other means
transform it into fiction . . .

Autobiographical fiction is created from material that is expressed or remembered, i.e., childhood memories, dreams, or day to day experiences. The material is restructured and reordered to convey an alternative idea or feeling that would not have been available had the material not been reworked into a fictional mode. This process frees the autobiographer to create new self-definitions, rearranging arbitrary events into meaningful developments. It turns autobiographical information into a work of art.

In her work, Rainer creates a series of autobiographical problems which are to be solved through the creative work process. Simultaneously, the viewer is asked to review his or her life in relation to the problems being presented. While continuously trying to figure out how these autobiographical problems are to be solved, multiple levels of

viewer participation and interaction are created.

Rainer's work attempts to avoid a total self-absorption, leaving it open for viewer involvement. Rainer says in Work 1961-1973:

I like to think that I have a careful screening process operating to exclude personal material that applies uniquely to my experience. What passes my screening must somehow be identifiable with probabilities of experience of you the audience.

From looking at Rainer's work closely, I have discovered at least four levels of concern which parallel my own. The first is the direct use of blatant autobiographical photographs of actions extracted from the artist's daily life: eating, crying, yelling. These photographs of actions show identifiable gestures that everyone has experienced and has very specific ideas about. These gestures are a relatively dependable area of common experience generally understood, and provide a continual flow of material that is very accessible to the spectator. These gestures are common experiences but carry very different meanings for each spectator. What putting on a tie signifies to one person will not necessarily signify the same for another. The gesture is common, the meaning is not. Thus the first level is the use of very common gestures to set a specific mood. (See performance autobiography.)

The second level comprises the purely visual and visceral

parts of the performance: the symbolic elements of the performance and its general environmental texture. On another level the settings serve as the vehicle for transporting the spectator to a more conceptual but specific idea. Yvonne Rainer notes in Work 1961-1973:

It finally dawned on me that I did not want intermittent movement, invention, but changes in static relationships of objects and people, which brought it into the realm of "tableau" and "task."

Objects and people form a tableau vivant much of the time in Rainer's work. These static objects and people convey much of the visual information necessary to build a detailed narrative.

Thirdly, individual life events may be viewed in larger, but not necessarily associative, historical contexts. The first of these contexts is the history that surrounds one during one's life: history that happens outside of one's personal life and does not directly affect one's day to day existence. Rainer's autobiographical work allows the two histories to run parallel, with potential for intersection. For example, in her work she establishes five different descriptions of reality simultaneously. These five sections convey a very complicated network of associations, which creates the possibility for multiple interpretations. This leads us to the fourth level of interpretation: semantic.

Webster's New World Dictionary defines semantics as the

"branch of linguistics concerned with the nature, structure, and especially the development and changes of the meanings of speech forms, or with contextual meaning. The relationship between signs and symbols and the concepts, feeling, etc., associated with them in the minds of their interpreters . . ."

The semantic level in a work of art, i.e., performance, video, etc. is that level which is structured to stimulate a number of different possibilities for interpreting information. It is this infra-information, this information inside information that is accentuated through multi-leveled work.

Jonas Mekas, Michael Snow, Robert Wilson, and Robert Frank are a few artists that utilize this category. Robert Frank's films and collages have employed this structure since 1971. Frank used black and white photographs in the book Lines of My Hand to create a visual autobiography. This visual autobiography was a set of signs and symbols which utilized a series of primarily old photographs rearranged in such a way as to present a complete sense of "self." Frank's photographs are rearranged to present a progression of time, a life lived. Philip Brookman states in the Long Beach Museum of Art catalogue 1979:

Lines of My Hand and the new collages are pieced together in a visual juxtaposition, symbolizing the discontinuity and repetitive nature of time and spatial sequence.

Text is added to convey a feeling that the actual environment has inspired the artist, resulting in a very personal reflec-

tion about what has been felt and recorded on film. The photographs do not necessarily need the text to inspire feeling but the text adds another dimension or interpretation to the work. Frank's collages, as well as his films, work with the layering of symbols. The films and collages are a private symbolic language and also an accurate arrangement of signs and symbols that utilize very easily understood images to convey a feeling, message and vision.

PERFORMANCE AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My work is primarily of a narrative autobiographical nature. The idea of telling an autobiographical story with different communicative media--film, video, audio, photography, written word, and gesture--has become a primary concern over the last year and has led me to performance.

The creating of an autobiographical performance is really an attempt to translate my previous life events into a present or living work of art; it is my attempt to make my life as an artist real. My actions, movement, and speech become the art itself. It no longer is the reflection on or about an art object which I have made.

Over the past year my work at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies has focused on a diary that my mother wrote about me while I was growing up between the ages of 1 and 11 years. She wrote the entire diary through my eyes, as if I were writing my own autobiography. This writing consisted of observations of my physical progression--crawling, walking, climbing--and ideas of fantasies my mother believed I was experiencing. In general, it is a fictional description of my emotional, intellectual, and physical make-up from 1 to 11 years old.

There are records of my encounters with various people and ways I reacted to them. It also covers my medical history and experiences related to being seriously ill. The diary describes different environments where I spent much of my time and offers information about my mother's notions of how each environment affected me.

The diary is, of course, my mother's voice and is in a certain way similar to Gertrude Stein's The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. Stein wrote this autobiography as a sound-board for her own ideas, not Ms. Toklas's. She wrote using Alice B. Toklas as the vehicle for her expression and refers little to the actual life of Ms. Toklas. It's not exactly that Camille Codella was interested in writing my autobiography, but she used my voice to express her vision of me. She was able to accentuate areas she was fond of and leave out areas she disliked. The diary also contains a series of photographs of me which were taken by my father and mother. These photographs were pasted into the diary after the written parts were completed, and they illustrate the writings.

The photographs, however, put the writings into an entirely new light. Without them there would be much more room for speculation and interpretation. These photographs truly baffle me because I cannot recall so many of the moments photographed. I have a tendency to mistrust them as inter-

pretations of the way I was actually feeling. They seem to be photographs that present an idea of happiness throughout the years. There are only a few photographs that convey illness or unhappiness, which is a sizable portion of my memory of those years. It is obvious that these areas of my life were difficult to document for my parents. They appear in my mind very vividly and are the central focus of that time of my childhood as well as the central focus of my thesis performance.

It was very close reading of the diary that enabled me to illuminate areas that were forgotten memories. These memories were lost until the reading of this diary and have become an important part of my work over the last year. I have attempted to recreate childhood memories through the use of video and performance. On one level, the performance Autobiographical Constructions, resulting from this past year of work, is a record of selected historical events in my life. It attempts to present these childhood events in a very matter-of-fact way to best give the spectator a shared view of my childhood experience.

In the performance I was interested in pointing out particularly important moments in each experience in such a fashion that the spectator's attention is focused on a part of each event which I consider the most important. This directing of the spectators' attention to very specific

actions attempts to lead the spectator through a thought process or a sequence of developments which recreates the kind of thought processes that were taking place during my experience as a child. It was my intention for the spectator to feel unnoticed. The attempt to create this feeling of unnoticed observer is to increase the spectator's association of similar events in his or her own life. The location of each spectator in the audience and their individual viewing position on the set became an important consideration in Autobiographical Constructions. I was interested in the different interpretations that could be generated by supplying specialized pieces of visual information to only certain parts of the audience. The audience is then confronted with interpreting the performance based on very different pieces of visual information.

I created a structure that presents five areas of concentration: spoken dialogue, video and film imagery from my childhood, precise environmental settings, precise gesture, and environmental sounds.

The audio text consisted of my reflections on each childhood memory and was used to clarify ambiguous meanings and messages that could not be communicated through visual means. The text was to either anchor the meaning being conveyed visually, or convey ideas independent of the visual information being given at that time. The text was also used

to give the spectator a very specific orientation to each sequence, as well as to introduce each actor or object to the spectators. This initial interchange between the actor or object and his/its environment lets the spectators know what the general feeling and structure of the scene is. Both the text and the initial interactions of the actor to his environment are of the utmost importance for the positioning of the spectator to receive the soon-to-follow "point" of the scene.

The environment was constructed carefully and methodically to provide specialized information through the objects themselves. The performance set was divided up into four areas. Each area contained a table with very specific objects on them which related to each section of the performance. For example, one table contained religious statues and piles of incense. The statues were illuminated by a series of different light sources to direct the spectators' attention to them. The incense was burned and blown into the audience with a fan which was attached to the table. These overstated objects became the center of attention because of their physicality and because of the manner in which the spectators' attention was drawn to them with specific gestures. This orientation toward the statues and incense is important since the central part of that scene was structured around these two objects. The ambient sound which accompanies each scene is the audio

support which continues to focus the viewer's attention to the objects. I used the amplified sound of Gregorian Chants and the sound of a Benediction urn swinging in a church service to maintain the focus during this scene.

The gestures are easily the most important factor in the performance. The exactness of gesture, of a hand moving at the correct speed toward the statue will bring the spectator's eyes to the correct resting spot and the exact spot for the next gesture to begin. It is the gestures which create the rhythm of a progression of events. The gestures determine how long an event will last, how fast a sequence will move, or the way it will lead into a completely different sequence. A large portion of the performance was the translation of childhood gestures. Autobiographical Constructions was an attempt to convey childhood memories using gestures as the primary tool for communication. My performance was greatly concerned with personalized gesture and the use of gestures to deliver complicated narrative structures. The performance used gesture as a principal tool for non-verbal communication. Even though I used spoken material, there was an emphasis on the use of language to direct the spectators' attention to very specific gestures. It was the use of language to highlight gesture, not the use of gesture to highlight language, that I was concerned with. I wanted to break up the common synchronized presentation of language

and gesture, and use each part separately to locate specific ideas that are unique to gesture and language individually.

STATEMENTS IN RETROSPECT

Approaches to autobiography will most likely not change very much in the near future. People will continually write and perform their autobiographical works in a public manner because of their desire to communicate with other people. As this world gets more technological and people are exposed to less and less personal machines, the need to communicate to another human being will grow greatly. Autobiography will be a primary tool for communication.

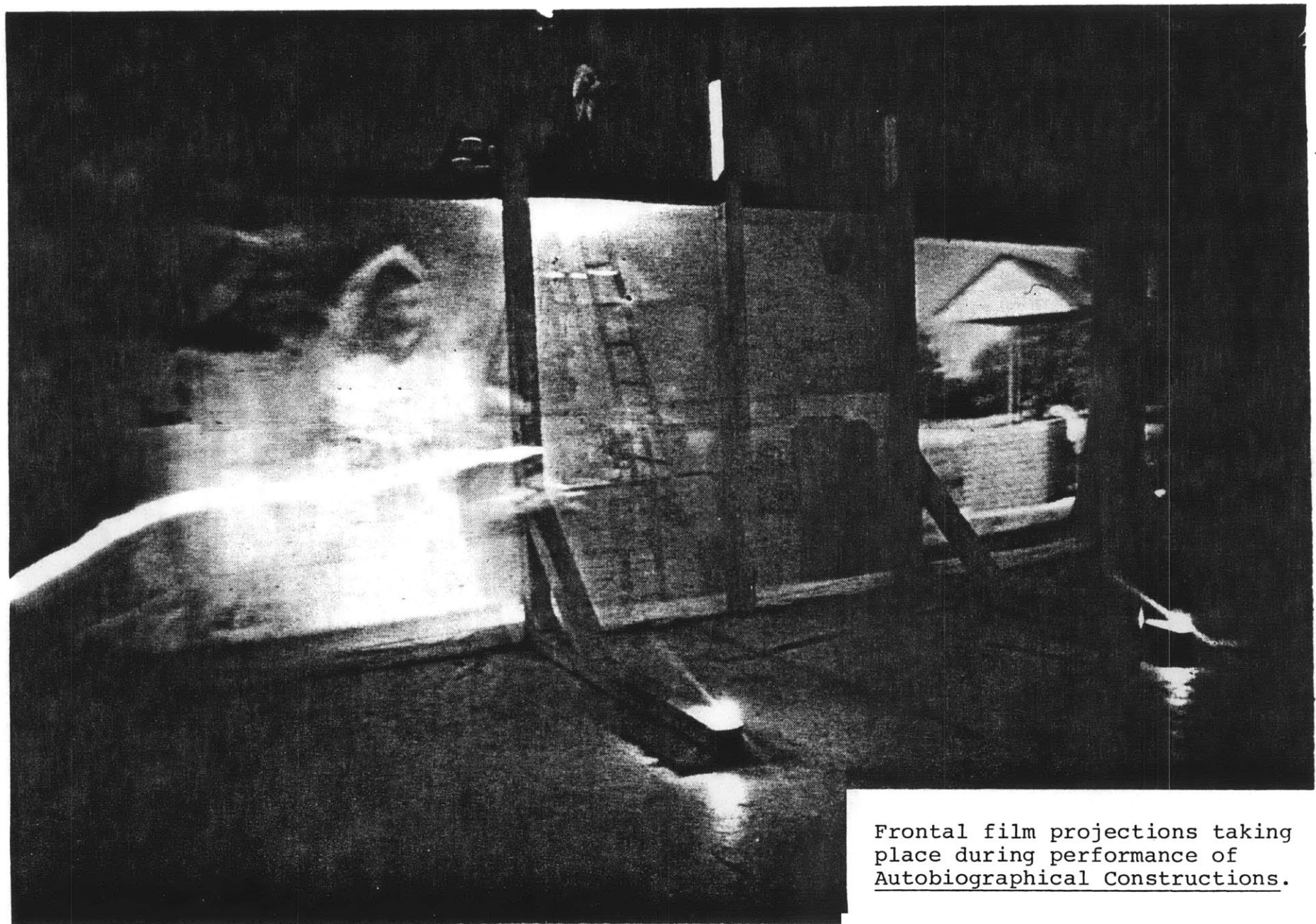
Our society is being faced with continual pressure to digest large amounts of visual information at a rate that is impossible. When you reflect on whether words or images remain in your mind, it is images that remain. Are we prepared to encounter visual images in a personal manner, or have the media numbed our senses? We are in constant conflict with commercial media and its advertising partners to bring refined visual information into this world that has more to do with a high quality of personal life than an orientation toward selling.

My form of visual autobiography was designed to present the public with my feelings concerning the world I had lived in and the technological world I am in now. I see my life as

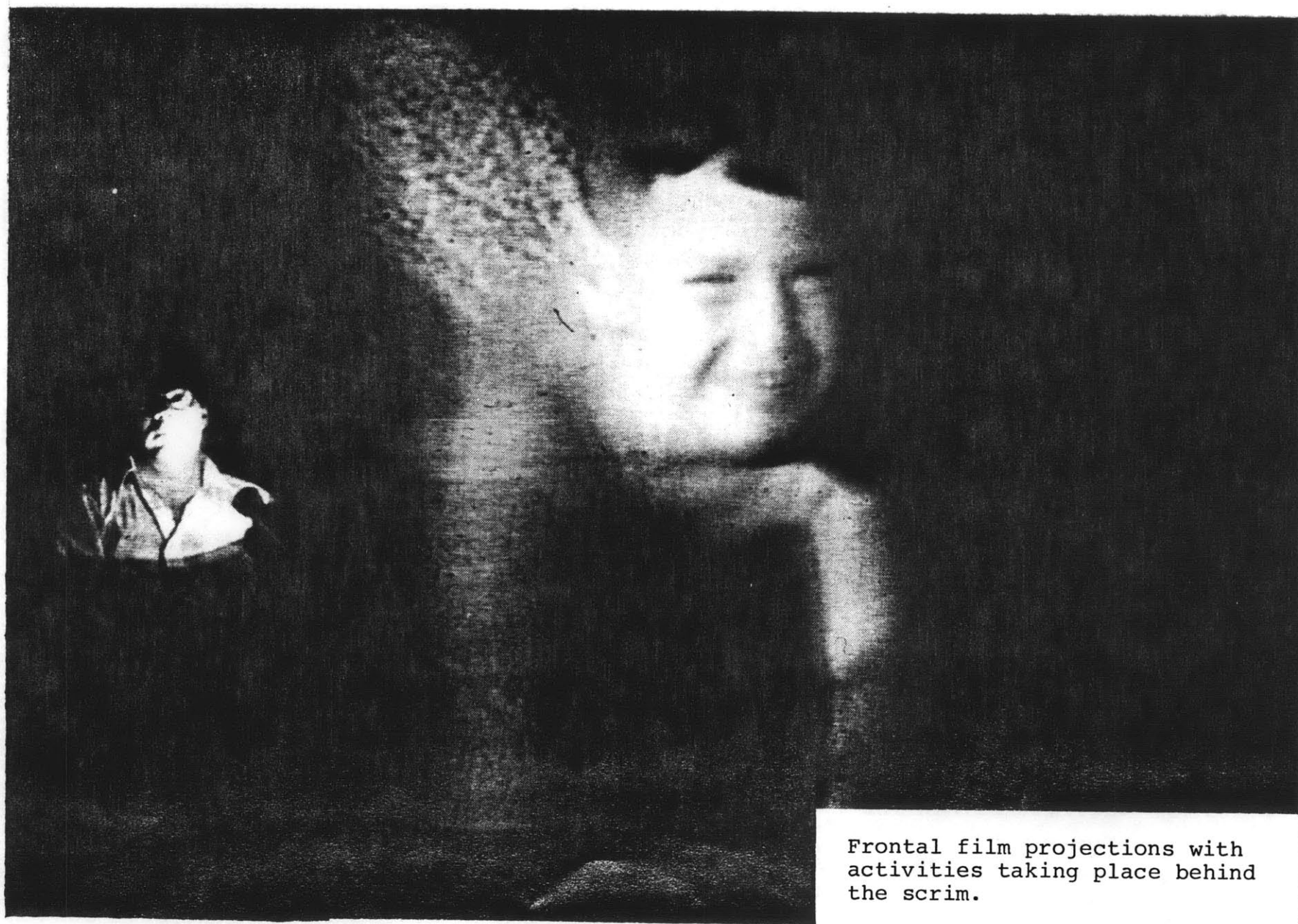
a reaction to new technologies, not an embracing of them. The specific uses of technology for war and potential destruction have created a frightened world. It is important that we are concerned with redirecting these new scientific advances into a more humanistic direction to enhance communication.

The autobiographical process will be enhanced by technology. New advances in communication systems, i.e., computers, video discs, and satellite communications, are a few of the areas that have potential to benefit the autobiographer and performer. Computers for storing and analyzing information, video discs for visual autobiographies, and global satellite communications to transmit one's autobiography around the world are now possible. All new developments will be incorporated either physically in performance, or more conceptually in the writings of autobiographers concerning the effects of these technological developments on their own lives.

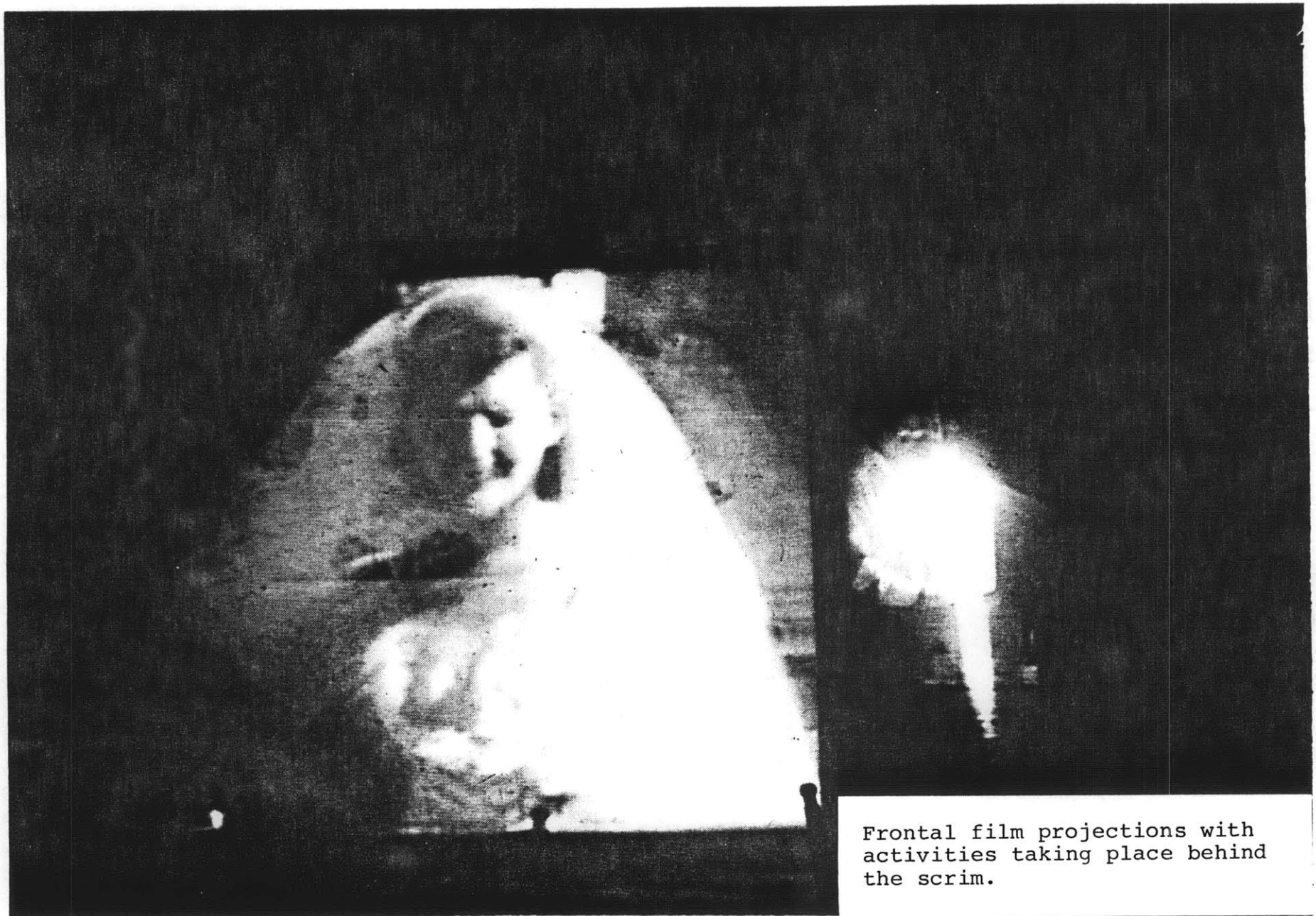
PHOTOGRAPHS OF
FRONTAL FILM PROJECTIONS
TAKING PLACE DURING PERFORMANCE OF
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTIONS



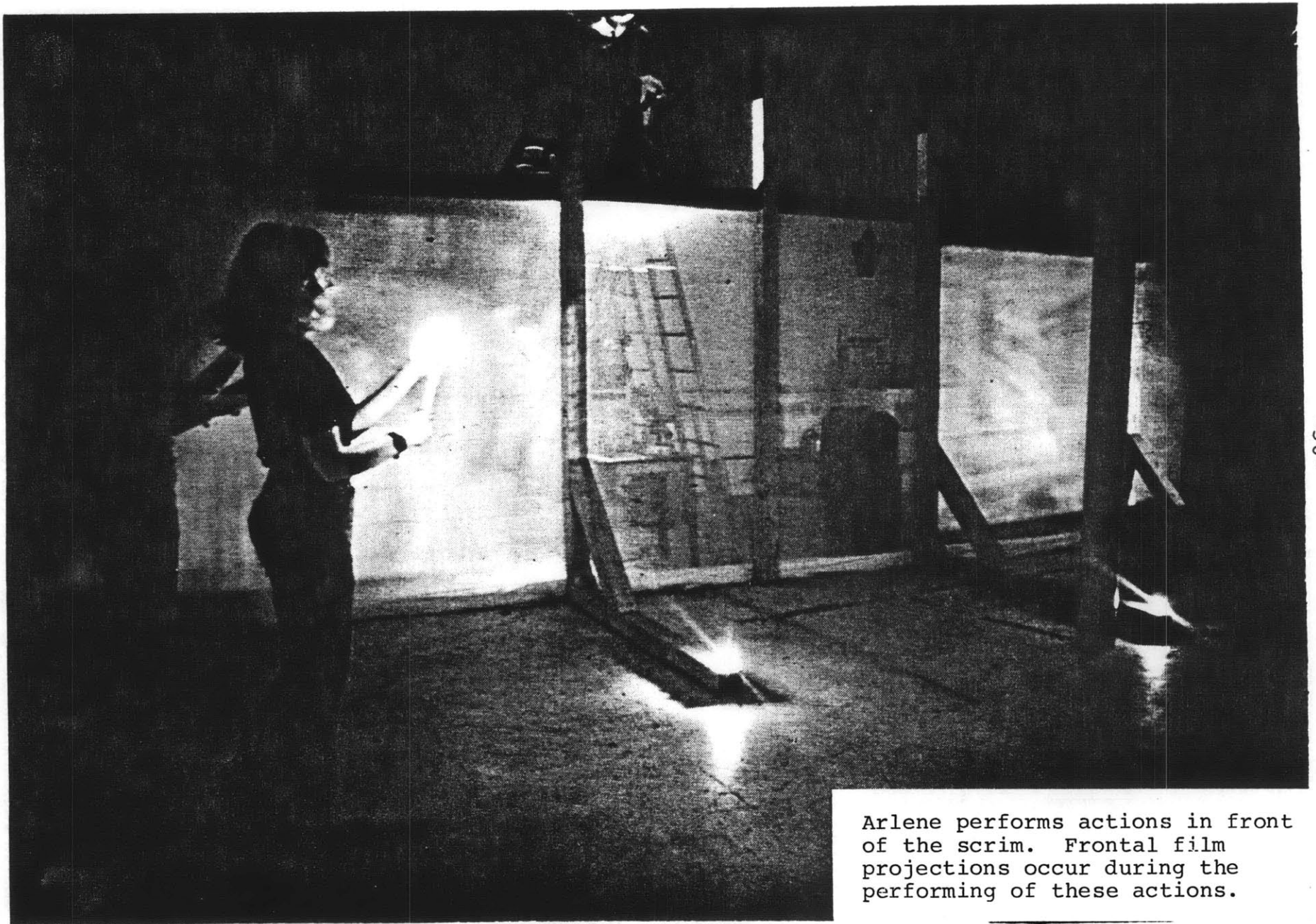
Frontal film projections taking place during performance of Autobiographical Constructions.



Frontal film projections with activities taking place behind the scrim.



Frontal film projections with activities taking place behind the scrim.



Arlene performs actions in front of the scrim. Frontal film projections occur during the performing of these actions.







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