Between Surveillance and Self-Surveillance: Feminist (Re)Visions of the Closed Circuit*

Rossana Galimi
(University of Milan / University of Warwick)
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3639-220X

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Abstract

This chapter proposes a feminist media-ar(t)chaeological investigation of contemporary telepresence in its facet of surveillance and control. It traces how the home—traditionally conceived as a private, feminine, and protective space—has long operated as a surveillant dispositif anticipating the current mediatization of domestic life. Excavating feminist video practices from the 1970s to the 1990s, it examines how artists used the electronic circuit of video to expose the circuital logic of discipline. The chapter argues that, by reappropriating horror's audiovisual conventions, these works revealed the domestic sphere as a site of gendered aggression, prefiguring the contemporary logics of tracking, monitoring, and (self-)governance.

Keywords: Surveillance; Feminist Media Studies; Feminist Media Archaeology; Second-Wave Feminism; Closed Circuit; Feminist Video Art; Horror

Abstract

Il capitolo propone un'indagine media-ar(t)cheologica e femminista sulla sorveglianza che permea le forme della telepresenza contemporanea, ripercorrendo il modo in cui la casa—tradizionalmente concepita come spazio privato, femminile e protettivo—ha operato come dispositivo di sorveglianza ben prima dell'attuale mediatizzazione della

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vita domestica. Riscoprendo alcune pratiche video femministe dagli anni '70 agli anni '90, esamina come le artiste hanno utilizzato il circuito elettronico del video per esporre la logica circuitale della disciplina. Il capitolo sostiene che, attraverso la riappropriazione dei codici audiovisivi dell'horror, queste opere hanno rivelato la sfera domestica come luogo di aggressione del femminile, prefigurando le logiche contemporanee di tracciamento, monitoraggio e (auto)governance.

Parole chiave: Sorveglianza; Studi femministi dei media; Archeologia femminista dei media; Femminismo della seconda ondata; Circuito chiuso; Videoarte femminista; Horror

1. Telepresence and the Domestication of (Self-) Surveillance

In 1980, co-founder of the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory Marvin Minsky coined the term telepresence "to designate remote manipulation of robots by means of 'high-quality sensory feedback'" (Minsky 1980 in Paulsen 2017, 7). If this definition of telepresence as remote control remains today one of the most profitable cornerstones of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), evident in warfare or space exploration (see Paulsen, *infra*), for ordinary people to be telepresent—now understood more broadly as "the feeling of being present at a remote location by means of real-time telecommunications devices" (Paulsen 2017, 2)—increasingly means not to control but rather to be controlled, tracked, and surveilled. Sociologist David Lyon, founder and director of the Surveillance Studies Centre at Queen's University at Kingston, defines surveillance as "the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction" that "occurs as a 'normal' part of everyday life in all societies" (2007, 14) and therefore is also part of our telepresent lives—as Paul Virilio aptly foresaw when reflecting on the shift from infrastructures of transportation to infrastructures of transmission that enable remote control and continuous observation ([1995] 1997). Tracking and surveillance indeed characterize contemporary forms of telepresence such as social media networks, extended reality devices, and videoconference interfaces. Furthermore, what becomes increasingly evident in this media landscape is that the telepresent subject is not only a monitored subject—whose desires are recorded, predicted, and, above all, dictated (Bodini 2020)—but, more significantly, a subject who monitors themselves: one who adjusts their own image within the small rectangle at the bottom-right of the computer display during a video call (Dalmasso and Grespi, *infra*), or who, when wearing a virtual reality headset, must regulate their bodily movements within the grid's perimeter—tellingly called "Guardian" in the Meta devices—beyond which the 360° image disappears (Grespi and Malavasi 2022).

Even in those cases where surveillance, and therefore the power to monitor the other, is rhetorically promoted as a means of safety, it actually proves

ineffective in preventing the very supposed threats it is meant to avert, thus turning instead into a device for spectacularization. Considering, for instance, that CCTV (closed-circuit television) footage is typically overwritten within a short span (often 24 hours) without being watched by anyone, its function is less one of protection than of retrospective display: as in the case of the attack of July 28, 2025 at 345 Park Avenue in Midtown Manhattan (the deadliest shooting in New York City since 2000, Mascarenhas et al. 2025), where the twenty-seven-year-old Shane Tamura was recorded entering a building with an assault-style rifle before committing a massacre (Fig. 1), yet no one was alerted in real time and no one was watching those images as the event unfolded. Surveillance thus transforms the very people it purports to "protect"—those who inhabit the controlled spaces in everyday life—into monitored subjects themselves. This spectacularization of a "synthetic banality, fabricated within a closed circuit and under a controlled screen" (Baudrillard [2001] 2011, 5) extends beyond public spaces and also infiltrates domestic settings. A telling example is the American tabloid television program *Inside Edition* (distributed by CBS Media Ventures), whose reports often rely on home surveillance footage, collected under a dedicated tag on the program's website that provides access to all segments built around surveillance recordings, which often feature footage from both indoor and doorbell cameras capturing the inhabitants of those homes (Inside Edition, n.d.). The growing presence of home security devices in the Western world, often fueled by the fear of intrusion (George et al. 2021), paradoxically renders the domestic sphere transparent, its inhabitants illuminated rather than secured.

Figure 1. CCTV footage still of the 345 Park Avenue shooter, New York City, July 28, 2025. CCTV still. Public Domain.

The disciplinary society conceptualized by Michel Foucault ([1975] 1977), later reconsidered and further developed by Gilles Deleuze into the notion of control society ([1990] 1995), did not anticipate the role of the home as the confluence of intersecting regimes of visibility, surveillance, and self-surveillance. This convergence now materializes through a constant transmission of one's own image across multiple technological environments that characterize specific domestic spaces, such as those mentioned earlier of videoconferencing platforms, social media spaces, and extended realities. Such configurations of telepresence signal an extension of control into a space once conceived as private, inhabited perhaps by disciplinary institutions such as the nuclear family (Taylor 2012), yet not disciplinary in itself.

The evolution of this condition of pervasive surveillance has been accompanied, and in some respects anticipated, by an intense cinematic and televisual production. From the 1990s onward (Zimmer 2015), and even more prominently after 9/11 (Cesaro 2022), the imaginary of surveillance has progressively entered film and television narratives, shaping both aesthetics and storytelling. As such studies attest, these include visions of state security and global intelligence (*Enemy of the State*, Tony Scott, 1998), fantasies of predictive policing and temporal omniscience (*Minority Report*, Steven Spielberg, 2002), and the bureaucratic voyeurism of authoritarian regimes (*The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006). More recent works expose the convergence of corporate and governmental monitoring (*The Circle*, James Ponsoldt, 2017) and the architectural dimension of confinement (*Orange Is the New Black*, Jenji Kohan, 2013-19). Yet it is within a specific genre, the horror film, that the essential traits of this surveillance logic had long been foreshadowed, well before the domestic sphere became saturated with smart technologies: horror has long imagined the home as a surveillance device in itself, a space where the act of watching precedes and enables the act of violence (Clover 1992)—typical in many slasher films since their inception with *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974) and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). This asymmetrical structure of looking—an extreme version of that typical of classical cinema identified by Laura Mulvey (1975)—where the male aggressor's gaze transforms the domestic environment from a safe haven into a threatening enclosure, and the woman becomes both the object and the victim of that gaze, has shaped an imaginary that horror has repeatedly thematized since its post-classical transformations. Typically, this female victim is not a self-surveilled or disciplined subject but rather embodies an emancipated form of femininity that emerged in the wake of second-wave feminism, one that resists the internalization of patriarchal control and domestic surveillance. Her refusal or inability to internalize these mechanisms of control renders her visible, exposed, and therefore punishable within the film's moral economy. It is this very imaginary, often discussed in relation to the genre's misogynistic undercurrents, that horror rearticulates within the post-media

landscape (Eugeni 2022) of works such as *The Invisible Man* (Leigh Whannell, 2020) and *The Beast* (*La Bête*, Bertrand Bonello, 2023).

This chapter approaches the violent and misogynistic imaginaries of domestic surveillance that recur in the horror genre as part of a broader media constellation. To examine how these imaginaries emerged and how they anticipated the contemporary mediatization of the home, the chapter proposes a feminist media-ar(t)chaeological excavation. Through this lens, it traces the path of video art practices informed by second-wave feminism and its early recognition of the domestic environment as a fully political space (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Federici 1975; Delphy [1970] 1980) and a site of surveillance long before it became saturated with technological devices. Then, it explores how such video practices increasingly re-appropriated horror's emerging imaginary of the home as a threatening site of gendered aggression in order to expose and reconfigure the circuit of visibility itself. Turning to feminist art practices thus serves a double purpose: first, in line with feminist surveillance studies, it allows us to understand how surveillance, broadly conceived to include techniques and technologies of monitoring and documentation, "mask[s] and reinforce[s] the gendered, sexed, raced, and classed exercise of power" (Dubrovsky and Magnet 2015, xi); second, it makes it possible to analyze how feminist theories and video practices anticipated, well in advance, phenomena related to our relationship with circuit-based media—media that are not simply means of communication but operate according to the circuit as a technologically mediated governing principle that totalizes and organizes the circulation of subjects, objects, data, and bodies; media that rely on "the application of screening technologies that modulate the flow of information (including bodies) through space and across time" (Packer et al. 2023, 7-8). From this perspective, horror's visualization of domestic surveillance operates as a popular, symptomatic reactivation of the feminist strategies that unveiled the domestic sphere as a site of patriarchal control. Through a deep dive into the feminist practices that revolved around the medium of video between the 1970s and the 1980s, this chapter argues that what horror dramatizes in its catastrophic and spectacular dimensions, feminist media practices had already exposed as the very logic of the circuit that now structures contemporary subjectivities and regulates the dominant forms of telepresence.

2. Toward a Feminist Artchaeology of Domestic Surveillance

The media-archaeological excavation proposed in this chapter is both feminist and artchaeological. First, it is *media-archaeological* because it investigates how the domestic sphere—culturally conceived as a private and protective space (Bachelard [1958] 1964; Williams 1985a, 1985b)—has been reconfigured by telecommunication media (Virilio [1988] 1994) into a site of surveillance. The investigation will be conducted by revealing that this transformation did not originate with new media but rather that it extends a pre-existing condition, in which the home has long operated as a surveillance circuit or even dispositif (especially for women). This will be illustrated by looking into early practices with video, a medium that enabled an unprecedented number of people to experiment with telepresence. Second, it is *artchaeological* because it focuses on artistic explorations that, in many cases, preceded and informed theoretical reflection. By examining how feminist artists of the 1970s and 1980s engaged with the emergent medium of video, this approach highlights their attempts to "open" its circuital logic; to produce self-reflexive works (Spielmann 2005) on the closed-circuit nature of video and the surveillant effects it produces on the female body; to expose the domestic space as a site of surveillance and discipline; and to reappropriate horror's forms and tropes to interrogate the interconnections among surveillance, closed circuit technologies, and the home. As will be seen in the analyses that follow, such concerns are made tangible in specific works that critically engage with the domestic space and video and their closed-circuit structure. Finally, this excavation is *feminist* in that it seeks to recover feminist artistic practices in order to recognize their relevance for understanding the present, an era in which biotechnologically mediated relations have become essential to subject formation (Braidotti 2013), and in which contemporary forms of power and control have grown into practices of "domestic" (Virilio [1998] 2005, 13) as well as "panoptical (and permanent) tele-surveillance" (121).

To conduct this excavation, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by "closed circuit." In its strict, technical sense, it refers to a video transmission system linking one or more video cameras to one or more control monitors, where images are transmitted, and visualized in real time in a non-open flow and sometimes recorded. Today, this system has been remediated in technologies that enable remote interaction without the need of being physically present: telecommunication media, or tele media, including those used for surveillance. Yet, the notion of the closed circuit can be extended beyond its technical dimension, as a lens to understand power relations and the ways power organizes flows of information, bodies, and media (Packer et al. 2023), producing surveillance and discipline. In this sense, the circuit is not only metaphorical, but first and foremost physical, conceptual, and logical (Packer et al. 2023): an *assemblage*

(Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987) that also shapes the domestic space, where surveillance and specific disciplines materialize, producing the subjectivities of its inhabitants. Understood in this expanded sense, the circuit also functions as a *technology of the self*, a means by which subjects act upon their own bodies and identities (Foucault 1988) through disciplinary practices of self-production that intersect with technologies of power (Foucault [2004] 2007, [2004] 2008). The home, thus, can be conceived as a surveillance dispositif long before the advent of the telepresence media—a fact that, as the following sections will show, feminist artists had already intuited and thematized in early video works. This wider conception of the circuit informed in fact early feminist video practices that employed the closed-circuit technology both as a tool and as a conceptual model: a site where the individual is observed and produces their subjectivity as a form of disciplined self-perception. In this framework, feminist artists linked the circuit to the home—a space culturally coded as feminine—as a privileged site for the internalization and practice of patriarchal norms, a space where the staging of the feminine and self-surveillance converge in the production of female subjectivity.

Feminist philosophers drawing on Foucault have argued that the panoptical model of surveillance, while presenting itself as an ungendered and universal paradigm of subject formation, actually refers to a male model of subjectivity. When extended to the formation of female subjectivity, it reveals that disciplinary mechanisms produce bodies according to specific gender practices and norms.[1] From this perspective, women learn to regulate their own bodies not because they are constantly being watched, but because the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975), understood as a disciplining patriarchal gaze internalized within the Self, has become an integral component of their self-perception. In this way, public forms of discipline find their counterpart in the private sphere: the home becomes the site in which patriarchal norms are incorporated into the Self, regulating the female body and its modes of visibility. Such theoretical reflections have been in many instances anticipated by feminist artistic practices born in the historical conjunction that, between the late 1960s and the 1970s, saw the rise of both portable video devices and second-wave feminism.[2] Many feminist artists approached the nascent medium of video, in line with its artistic appropriation in opposition to television as a mass medium (Churner et al. 2024) and to the persistent invisibilization of women in media and arts in general (Nochlin 1971; Couey 2003) and in electronic arts in particular (Soldani 2025). With the introduction of portable video recorders, which became available on the market in 1968 (Ryan 1988), independent video was seen as an alternative to broadcast television and its one-way production and delivery system

1 See for example Bartky 1988, 1990 and Bordo 1993. For an overview of such theories see Galimi and Grespi 2024.

2 For an overview of second-wave feminism see Thornham 2001.

(High et al. 2014). Similarly, feminist experimentations attempted to "open" the circuit of one-way communication with initiatives such as the International Videoletters Network (Fig. 2), a project active from 1975 to 1977 consisting in a network of video exchange between feminist collectives, with the aim of building an independent media system handled by women and able to contrast the patriarchal imaginary of broadcast television. Every two months, the participating feminist groups produced a thirty-minute unedited video "letter" and sent it to sister groups in other cities, where the video letter was screened, the reaction of the audience recorded and included in the following video letter. These community projects employed the possibility of transmission to foster feminist consciousness-raising, "the move to transform what is experienced as personal into analysis in political terms, with the accompanying recognition that 'the personal is political', that male power is exercised and reinforced through 'personal' institutions such as marriage, child-rearing and sexual practices" (Thornham 2001, 26). Albeit not based on real time transmission, this network attempted to "open" the circuit by transforming the spectators into participants (in line with the practices described by Soldani in this volume), building a non-hierarchical system based on collaboration and circulation, and moving women from the domestic environment, where broadcast television aimed to confine them after the temporary freedom afforded by the context of World War II (Mulvey 1986; Spigel 1992), into a collective and feminist public space. The videos, which featured women discussing several subjects such as work, sexuality, the body, politics, and arts, enabled geographically distant women to become acquainted with one another's life contexts, fostering a shared space of communication across large distances and offering an alternative informational infrastructure to the centralized logic of broadcast television (Davis 2023). For instance, the *Feminist Studio Workshop Videoletter* (1975) recorded by feminist video pioneer Susan Mogul offered a tour of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles—a center for artistic activities that offered classes and meeting spaces (Pinkel 2003, 35)—, with the idea of establishing a video exchange for cultural purposes with the Women's Interart Center in New York City and other feminist collectives in Washington, D.C. and Chicago. The video, shot with a black and white portapack, sweeps the spaces of the building while another Workshop member holds the microphone and conducts interviews with other members of the collective to gather detailed descriptions of its spaces and activities. With the explicit intention of creating an alternative information program for cultural exchange among communities of women, in the interviews attention is also devoted on how to apply for state funding in order to purchase technical equipment to develop artistic projects. The idea was to assist the fundraising of other collectives involved in the network and to create alternative means of production, which for them meant appropriating and disrupting the dominant circuit of information. This experience is an example of the fundamental role

video had in the development of second-wave feminism, not just because it facilitated exchange among geographically distant feminist communities, but also because it was perceived as a liberating tool in itself, as it allowed women to work without a film crew (Shemilt and Cubitt 2019), record their point of view, and target institutions such as marriage and unpaid care and domestic labor, as well as media industries where they were marginalized.

Prominent artists at that time were aware that the history of portable video and that of the feminist movement were intertwined (Milano 1973) and used their influence to give visibility to other, less-known artists. This is the case of the Women's Video Festival, conceived by electronic arts pioneer Steina Vasulka in 1972 to address the glaring absence of female artists' works in the burgeoning video festivals of those years, despite their significant contributions to the video movement—at that time, between a third and a half of video makers were women (Vasulka 1995). Vasulka thus involved video maker Susan Milano and entrusted her with the direction of the festival, which was held at The Kitchen Center for Video and Music in New York City (a non-profit art institution founded by Vasulka with her husband Woody in 1971, Soldani 2025) and saw the collaboration of The Kitchen program director Shridhar Bapat and Laura Kassos (Electronic Arts Intermix, n.d.). Until coming to an end in 1980, the festival functioned as the main showcase for American female video artists who, despite being acknowledged for their artistic and professional expertise, were almost never employed in directorial positions within broadcast television programs (Milano 1976). Although having been largely ignored (Barlow 2003 still remains its only academic account), this experience represented a site of collective feminist consciousness-raising, where taking control of a portable camera meant gaining the possibility of self-representation and video functioned as a tool for analysis and reflection. The Women's Video Festival and the International Videoletters Network can be read as symptomatic formations within the 1970s cultural climate. Both initiatives emerged at a conjuncture in which gender politics intersected with an experimental rethinking of television, where video became the tool for opening the otherwise closed circuits of media production and distribution and disrupting its flow of information—in line with the activities of so-called "guerrilla television" (Shamberg 1971), to which the Videoletters Network can be broadly ascribed and which the Women's Video Festival welcomed in several occasions. At the same time, many artists who took part in or were shaped by these contexts turned video critically back upon itself. Rather than reaffirming its emancipatory potential, they interrogated its circuital logic and its complicity with power structures. The following sections consider a group of feminist video works that engage with the concept of the circuit in different ways. The first one examines how early videos, including *Representational Painting* (Eleanor Antin, 1971), *Instructions No. 1* (Sanja Iveković, 1976), *Jumps* (Rita Myers, 1973), *Slow Squeeze* (Rita Myers, 1973),

Gestures (Hannah Wilke, 1974), and *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (Martha Rosler, 1977), foreground the surveillant logic embedded in the closed circuit. The second section investigates works produced in the same years that reframe the domestic space as a site of (self-)surveillance, such as *Facing a Family* (VALIE EXPORT, 1971), *Enclosure* (Lynda Benglis, 1973), *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (Martha Rosler, 1975), and *Sleep Performance* (Rita Myers, 1974). The third section turns to works like *Doppelgänger* (Elaine Shemilt, 1979–81), *Syntagma* (VALIE EXPORT, 1983), and *Possibly in Michigan* (Cecelia Condit, 1983), which reappropriate horror's audiovisual conventions to probe the entanglement of surveillance, the closed circuit, and the home. Finally, the analysis of a more recent work, *The Amateurist* (Miranda July, 1998), will allow us to conclude and return to the present day, reconnecting feminist video art's concerns to contemporary forms of domestic surveillance.

Figure 2. International Videoletters logo used in New York City, by Carol Clement, 1975. With permission of Carol Clement and Ariel Dougherty.

3. Performing Under Surveillance: Feminist Exposure in/of the Closed Circuit

At this early stage, several artists used video to reveal the causal relationship between the exposure to an external gaze and the normalization of the self, focusing on female disciplines such as makeup and cosmetic surgery (*Representational Painting*; *Instructions No. 1*), limitations in posture (*Jumps*; *Slow Squeeze*), medicalization (*Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*) or prescription of movements (*Gestures*). In many of these videos, artists grounded the performances in the interaction with their own image as transmitted on the monitor, reflecting on the disciplining effect of the closed circuit while simultaneously exposing the circuital nature of female surveillance itself. *Representational Painting*, Eleanor Antin's first experiment with video, is a thirty-eight-minute, mute, black-and-white tape that portrays the California-based artist seated on a chair, dressed in jeans and a white bra, slowly and repetitively applying skincare and makeup. The video alternates, through crossfades, between two three-quarter shots: a medium close-up of Antin's right side and a close-up of her left. As she repeatedly and tediously applies products to her face, her gaze is directed off-screen, toward the monitor where she observes her recorded image. Her gestures unfold in a kind of loop: opening makeup containers, spreading product on her face while observing herself on the monitor, tucking her hair, running her hands over her face, taking a drag on her cigarette, and reaching for another product. By highlighting the obsessive repetition of gestures that have become automatic for most women, Antin exposes their disciplinary nature and the role of reiteration as a tool for normalization. Indeed, Antin staged this performance before a monitor connected to two cameras positioned on either side that transmitted her image in real time, producing a split-screen image. This setup allowed her to observe herself from two distinct external perspectives and to adjust her makeup accordingly—a visualization of how femininity is performed under the disciplining pressure of multiple external gazes.[3] A similar logic structures *Instructions No. 1*, a six-minute black-and-white video by Croatian artist Sanja Iveković in which she is framed frontally in close-up while tracing arrows on her face with an eyeliner, emulating the lines drawn by surgeons before cosmetic procedures—literal "instructions" for normalizing women's appearance and preventing wrinkles, crow's feet, or looseness. With these gestures, the artist reveals the implicit instructions that guide disciplined femininity, including a constant attention to one's appearance. After drawing the arrows, she blends them into her skin as if she were applying a cream or a foundation, linking surgery and makeup as two facets of the same disciplining process. Here too, Iveković does not look at her reflection into the camera lens but most likely at

3 Set photographs confirm this setup. See Lonidier 1972.

her image transmitted in real time in a monitor, responding to the mediated version of herself produced by the electronic circuit. Rather than functioning as a mirror, the closed circuit becomes a space where the gaze of the camera (and, by extension, the patriarchal gaze) intervenes in the constitution of subjectivity. Far from showing that the monitor functions as a mirror, these works expose how, within the gendered relation to the mirror (De Beauvoir [1949] 1953), the latter operates as a site of convergence for multiple disciplining gazes that are ultimately internalized.[4] These works suggest that a woman's perception of herself in the mirror is not a direct or autonomous self-image, but one constructed under the pressure of external norms and ideals that delineate the boundaries of socially acceptable femininity. Within this framework, the circuit operates both as an enhancer of this condition of perpetual surveillance and as a means for revealing its operations. A complementary investigation is found in *Jumps* by New York-based artist Rita Myers, who before dedicating herself to multimedia installations experimented with the video camera and closed-circuit monitoring, creating what she called "mediated encounters with her own body" while attending courses at Hunter College by video artist Robert Morris and feminist art historian Linda Nochlin (Myers, n.d.a). In this three-and-a-half-minute black-and-white video, Myers attempts to escape the closed circuit by jumping out of frame. Initially, the camera captures only her feet, then gradually widens to include her lower body, forcing her to leap higher and higher. Myers' eventual failure to elude the surveilling gaze of the camera underscores the inescapability of the closed circuit and its power to structure the relationship with oneself. Myers further explored this dynamic in *Slow Squeeze*, an eleven-minute video depicting her lying on the floor with her arms extended upward to fill the frame. The camera, initially capturing her entire body, gradually zooms in, narrowing the frame around her figure. Checking her image on an off-screen monitor, Myers then constricts her body accordingly in order to fit the increasingly smaller frame. Notably, the artist takes on a progressively disquieted facial expression as the high-angle zoom approaches her, making her look almost helpless on the floor, evoking the aforementioned connections between being watched and being attacked as well as suggesting that there is no space for subjectivity outside the closed circuit. Another work that explicitly connects the closed circuit to the formation of female subjectivity as performance is *Gestures* by Hannah Wilke. Frontally framed in close-up and extreme close-up, Wilke enacts exaggerated and reiterated facial poses and gestures such as massaging her face, smiling forcibly, or sticking out her tongue, first while observing herself on a monitor and then performing it directly for the camera. This oscillation between two positions makes visible the disciplining process by which women learn to regulate their own image.

4 De Beauvoir underlined that the mirror is a gendered object that has a role in producing femininity. For a recent take, see Ruggerone and Strauss 2022.

Beyond these experimental inquiries into the effects CCTV monitoring, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* stands out for its formal difference and conceptual depth. The thirty-nine-minute video reflects on female surveillance in terms of medicalization. In the first part of the video, Martha Rosler stages an examination scene where her voiceover overlaps with dialogue. She is instructed to stand against a wall as a doctor dressed in a white gown traces her body contours with a marker, asking her to move her arms in order to draw the outline of a Vitruvius man, while the other one assesses her proportions with a measuring tape, recording each detail. Three female assistants in identical white coats observe as Rosler is asked to undress and submit to the measurement ritual. The voiceover narrates the internalization of a disciplinary, pathologizing, and objectifying gaze that fragments the female body into measurable parts—a logic reinforced by technologies of medical imaging and scientific visualization (Cartwright 1995). As the doctors complete their examination, Rosler dresses again before a mirror, while different versions of herself, each with altered attire and demeanor, appear in succession on the screen, performing disciplined versions of femininity. The voiceover simultaneously lists a series of actions that converge into female discipline—for instance, "to see one's features up close" or "to accept that there's meaning in measurement". The final part of the video juxtaposes photographs of women and children being measured with Rosler's recitation of what she calls "crimes against women", among which she enumerates madness (along with femicide, rape, and infibulation), historically weaponized to enforce female discipline in Western countries (Foucault [1963] 1973; Ussher 2017). Throughout the piece, references to television advertising highlight the role of media in producing both women's social isolation and self-surveillance. Using video to reflect on its own complicity, Rosler stages in front of the camera a dual process: patriarchal surveillance, represented by the doctors, and women's complicity in the perpetuation of the system, embodied by the assistants. Collectively, these works demonstrate how feminist artists employed the closed-circuit technologies as both a material and conceptual tool to expose, inhabit, and contest the mechanisms of surveillance, normalization and discipline inscribed on the female body, while also acknowledging that the same device could perpetuate the very systems it sought to critique.

4. Domesticity Under Watch: Feminist Politics of Space

Other clusters of early videos turn explicitly to the domestic sphere, in line with women artists' reclamation of domestic experience (Pinkel 2003), as well as with feminist interrogations of the political nature of "private" institutions such as marriage and the family, and with the broader "fear of being seen by television" (Spigel 1988) that accompanied the arrival of the TV set in postwar homes. Rather than serving as a "window on the world" (Hutchinson 1946 in

Spigel 1992), television often operated as an eye turned toward the interior that disciplined family relations, especially women's roles. As Lynn Spigel argues, broadcasting not only circulated reactionary images of femininity (a theme partly addressed in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*), it also reconfigured the workload of the housewife, who had to redesign domestic space to accommodate the "ideal" viewing position for others while remaining the perfect cook, homemaker, wife, and mother, able to perform chores and family time in the gravitational field of the living-room set (Spigel 1988).[5] In 1971, Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT realized *Facing a Family*, a five-minute black-and-white video commissioned by the Austrian national television and broadcast on February 28. The work presents, frontally and without commentary, an Austrian middle-class nuclear family—father, mother, son, daughter—eating at the table while watching a television placed just below the recording camera, effectively aligning their gaze with that of the "real" audience at home. Viewers, despite being accustomed to experimental programming, reportedly assumed a transmission malfunction (EXPORT and Cavoulacos 2021): they did not expect to be "watched back" by the TV window turned into an eye, that is, by the family on screen. Initially conceived as a two-way communication performance (see Soldani, *infra*), the piece stages the incursion of an external gaze entering the private space of the home and, with it, the disciplining role of TV within the household.[6] Lynda Benglis explores a comparable incorporation of the spectator in *Enclosure*, a seven-and-a-half-minute unedited tape that scans a domestic setting where a man on a sofa pets a cat before a television monitor. After a moment of "no signal", the TV suddenly displays a delayed close-up of the same man. The effect is a makeshift closed circuit that incorporates its viewer. Benglis extends the "enclosure" to the room's architecture (sofa, walls, thresholds) and broadcast culture itself, framing yet another monitor that transmits a live hockey game. Broadcast television is again central in Rosler's classic *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Dressed as a housewife, the artist performs an alphabet of kitchen tools, parodying Julia Child-style cooking shows of the 1960s–70s. As the performance progresses, Rosler's gestures sharpen: knives and rolling pins are wielded like weapons, their use verging on violent. Alluding to the kitchen's feminization and to utensils as extensions of the female body—culturally underscored by persistent links between procreation, gestation, and kitchen technologies (Olivier

5 As highlighted by Alison Harvey, the new imaginary conveyed by television allowed only middle- and upper-class heterosexual (and often white) women to identify or reject identification with this disciplined version of femininity. Women in low-income families, women of color, and non-heterosexual women, for instance, were completely excluded from the dominant discourse on femininity and mostly invisibilized within the feminist debate. See Harvey 2019, 15-16. On the invisibilization of female domestic labor addressed by contemporary feminist artistic practices, especially from a racialized point of view, see Strauven (*infra*).

6 There are existing preparatory drawings of the experiment (EXPORT and Cavoulacos 2021; Medien Kunst Netz, n.d.).

2020)—Rosler simultaneously demonstrates and subverts the broadcast image of the docile, domestically absorbed woman. Everyday domestic life appears as a site of repression, and therefore of potential violent revolt, for female subjectivity. Additionally, the critique to how telecommunication media reinforce the ideal of the disciplined housewife engaged in unpaid domestic labor anticipates recent accounts that now view domestic labor as the key to comprehend the forms of unpaid work associated with digital media industries (such as the management of community forums or the uploading of public domain information) that have been condensed into the concept of "the Digital Housewife" (Jarrett 2016). If these two works attempt in a way to subvert gendered dynamics of surveillance, either by overturning the position of the beholder of the gaze into that of the surveilled (*Enclosure*) or by hinting at a potential rebellion (*Semiotics of the Kitchen*), Myers instead stages their persistence. In 1974, the artist performed a six-hour piece called *Sleep Performance* in the studio of the Synapse Cable Communications Network, Syracuse University's cable television and experimental media program, which provided monitors in dormitories and other locations, and offered services such as broadcasting and post-production for students, faculty, staff, and the community (Syracuse University Libraries, n.d.).

Myers slept overnight on a bed in the studio, surrounded by monitors receiving transmissions from elsewhere on the network where other participants were invited to make "contact" with her (i.e. to be telepresent in her space) and observe the performance taking place. Surviving documentation includes photos (Fig. 3–4) and a twenty-four-minute video with a voiceover recorded several weeks after the performance by Myers and another man, titled *Second Thoughts* (Kitchen Center for Video, Music, Dance, Performance, Film, Literature 1974), based on recollections of dreams Myers had following the performance (Myers, n.d.b). The tape opens with a horizontal split screen: an upper band of text explaining the setup of the performance is placed above the close-up shot of Myers's asleep face. The explanation, directed at the other participants, insists on the effects of the remote interaction on the sleeping artist, using expressions such as "your message may penetrate her sleep" or "when she awakes, she will probably be preoccupied by your suggestions," hinting at some kind of aggressiveness embedded in this operation. As Myers reports, while participants were interacting, a view of her space including the monitors was transmitted, enabling them to see themselves virtually present beside her (Myers, n.d.b). The following part of the video shows a static shot of Myers asleep on the bed, surrounded by two monitors transmitting live signals from elsewhere: a man on the monitors touches the camera that records him, thereby "virtually" touching the artist's hand as it rests beside the studio monitor, creating a circuit that involves his and the artist's body. The male voiceover calls her name and repeats "I can almost touch you; my image surrounds you," making explicit that this circuit is not neutral but produces a form of gendered vulnerability: a sleeping woman

exposed to insistent men that gaze at her and aggressively try to make contact with her. Significantly, the performance took place the same year Marina Abramović presented *RHYTHM 0* at Studio Morra in Naples, where for six hours she was radically available to the audience and revealed the speed with which docility converts into aggression. Allowed to perform any kind of action on her body with the available objects, after a few hesitating hours, the audience realized her complete vulnerability and started provoking and injuring her. Unlike Abramović, Myers was *protected* (Casetti 2023) by the mediation of the screen; yet it is precisely closed-circuit technology that enabled this predatory proximity in the first place, albeit mediated—a fact on which the artist reflects in the voiceover, saying that the participants' actions "imply[ed] a distance where there was none." Two further moments equate telepresence with surveillance and threat. The signals transmitted by the participants on the monitors are in fact repeatedly interrupted by other signals: one shows a window from which a silhouette appears to peek into the studio, overturning the idea of TV as a window *onto* the world to reveal it as a window *into* private space; another frames Myers in close-up, and the frame is staged in order to convey a voyeuristic act, as a curtain partially conceals the artist's body from view. The camera operator pulls it to gain a better view of the woman before pressing a fingertip to the camera lens, in order for it overlap with the artist's body on the monitor, virtually touching her. In these works, the domestic setting becomes a laboratory for the disciplining power of media technologies.

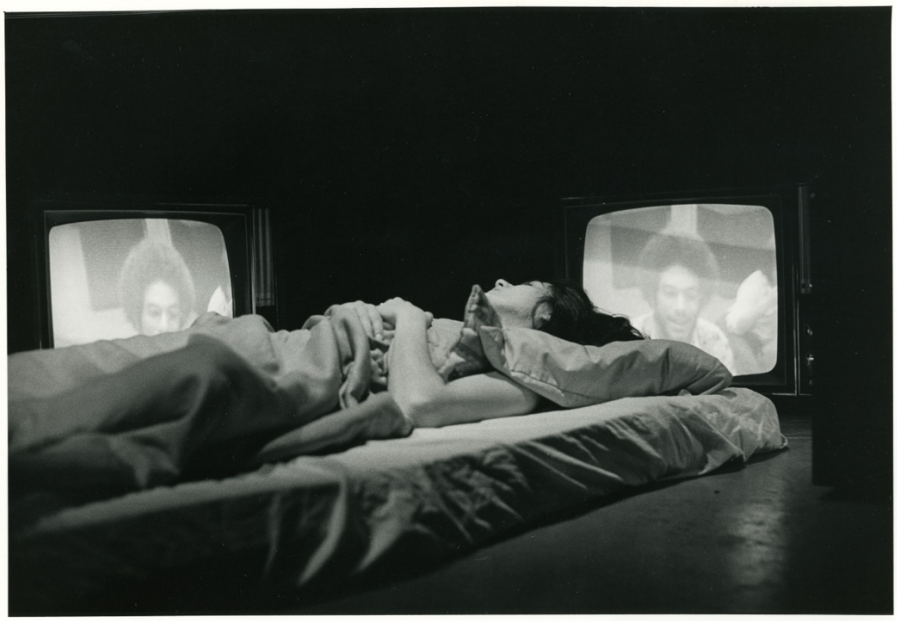

Figure 3–4. *Sleep Performance* (Rita Myers, 1974, 6 hours, b&w, sound). Synapse Cable Network, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. With permission of Rita Myers.

5. Fragmented Bodies: Feminist Appropriations of Horror

While all these works probe the nexus of closed circuits and female surveillance, a subsequent group of videos reappropriates the horror genre's emerging tropes to interrogate the entanglement of surveillance, the closed circuit, and the home. Elaine Shemilt's *Doppelgänger* provides a salient example. The setup recalls *Representational Painting* and *Instructions No. 1*:[7] after an opening close-up

7 The resemblance between Shemilt's and Iveković's works is even more striking considering that they were not aware of each other's existence, due to the overall isolation experienced by women artists at that time (Shemilt, e-mail to author, January 10, 2026).

of the artist's eyes, Shemilt is shot in three-quarters from behind, her reflection caught in a mirror in front of her. The familiar routine of applying a thick, pale foundation is repeatedly interrupted by static shots of her face overlaid with a projected skull, while a clinical, impersonal voiceover (apparently from a psychiatric session) speaks of schizophrenia and split personality. Domestic rituals of feminine self-fashioning are thus shadowed by disturbing images and voices. At a key moment, Shemilt picks up a dark marker and begins to trace the contours of her face directly onto the mirror. Crucially, she averts her eyes from her reflection in the mirror and turns her gaze to the closed-circuit monitor, aligning her drawing with the video image on the monitor, reconstructing her features according to the external point of view fed back by the circuit.[8] The self-portrait thus becomes a technical reconstruction, a drawing that follows an external gaze. The voiceover invokes prison and marriage—respectively a paradigmatic disciplinary institution and a social discipline central to the construction of female subjectivity. When the drawing is complete, Shemilt exists the frame, leaving behind her ghostly double. The camera proceeds to isolate Shemilt's body parts, displayed one after the other—head, breast, profile, an x-ray of a hand—turning the camera into a site of visual dissection. Finally, the drawing itself disappears. Shemilt thus stages the insanity induced by a monitoring gaze: the split between self-perception and the Self as represented by someone else. Horror's imagery of the fragmented, abject body (Kristeva [1980] 1982; Arya 2016) becomes a language for surveillance's analytic violence on women's bodies.[9] A few years later, VALIE EXPORT's *Syntagma* similarly renders fragmentation in a multimedia key: captured by surveillance cameras and laid out as if on an operating table, the female body becomes "the epitome of objectification, an itemization of the goods: arms, legs, shoulders, breasts, faces" (Mueller 1994, 184). Both horror and feminist practices engage with the ways the female body is surveilled and fragmented: horror turns this into the spectacle, feminism into critique. This critical examination is even more compelling considering that it anticipates the way the subject is today apprehended and assessed by self-monitoring technologies: instead of being divided into discrete body parts, the self is now a "dividual" (Deleuze [1990] 1995), endlessly subdividable into body data (Schüll 2016) that can be mapped and controlled.

8 For a description of the so-called "Venus effect" in this video art work, see Dalmasso and Grespi (*infra*).

9 In October 2016, the artist performed a live reenactment of the video performance, titled *Doppelgänger Redux*, curated by Laura Leuzzi and Adam Lockhart in the context of their project *EWVA | European Women's Video Art in the 70s and 80s*. As well as allowing the audience to understand how Shemilt utilized the technical features of analog video equipment (Leuzzi 2019), the 2016 performance shed new light on the possibility of resisting the patriarchal regimes of visibility that structure female (self-)representation (Galimi 2025).

Figure 5. *Possibly in Michigan* (Cecelia Condit, 1983, 11:40 min, color, sound). Video still. Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

If *Doppelgänger* and *Syntagma* expose the female body as fragmented under the surveillance gaze, Cecelia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan* reclaims that same apparatus through irony and excess. This twelve-minute narrative video stages and then disrupts the gendered logic of the closed circuit so far articulated, transforming horror's tropes into a grotesque and subversive performance. At the same time a horror video and a musical, its dissonance also emerges from the coexistence of three overlapping vocal registers, a female chorus, a sung dialogue between the two female characters, and Condit's own detached voiceover. The work is set in an American shopping mall, where the two female protagonists, Sharon and Janice, are both consumers and commodities, as they are stalked by a masked man while shopping for perfume. The camera repeatedly frames them from above, imitating a surveillance camera, or through apertures that mimic keyholes, reproducing voyeuristic and surveilling points of view. Significantly, as the stalker approaches their home, the women appear on a surveillance monitor representing his gaze (Fig. 5): once again, their bodies are fragmented, captured, and analyzed. The domestic space thus becomes a

continuation of the mall's visual economy, both governed by circuits of surveillance and consumerism. In the climatic sequence, Sharon and Janice kill their pursuer, and then dismember, cook, and eat his body. The gesture collapses the relationship between gaze and consumption: the man, once the active subject of the gaze, becomes the edible, fragmented object, and this reversal is visually sanctioned by the disappearance of surveillance itself. Once the man is dead, the women are no longer captured by any monitor, and their image gradually dissolves into smoke. The closed circuit is momentarily broken, and with it, the visual order that makes female subjectivity perpetually visible.

6. Conclusions: Feminist Afterlives and the Global Circuit

A final and more recent example allows us to conclude this feminist excavation into one of the roots of the critical thought on surveillance, in which generalized algorithmic surveillance is complemented by a postfeminist discourse that enhances the normalization of a high level of self-surveillance behind the rhetoric of choice and freedom, equating women's power with the cultivation of an attractive body (Harvey 2019). Miranda July's *The Amateurist* is a video that simultaneously thematizes female surveillance and self-surveillance. In this unsettling work, a woman identified as a "Professional Woman" observes another woman, the "Amateur", through a surveillance monitor. The Professional issues commands to the Amateur via the monitor, in the form of letters and numbers that the latter must reproduce adapting the posture of her body into the shape of the letter or number required (Fig. 6–8). Both characters are played by July herself, underscoring the internalization of surveillance and the doubling of subjectivity it entails. The Professional explains that she watches these images every day, all day long, and has done so for the last few years. The camera occasionally widens to include the surveillance feed itself, revealing that the Amateur is almost naked, in a visual gesture that implicates us, too, as voyeurs and participants in the act of watching. July thus performs an unsettling collapse of subject positions: the surveillant and the surveilled are one and the same, and the viewer becomes complicit in the disciplinary loop. Throughout the video, the Professional attempts to control and measure what ultimately is her own image on the screen, translating the body into a quantifiable and programmable form, anticipating the link between power, control, and quantification that characterize today's "metric culture" (Beer 2016; Ajana 2018). The woman assigns a number and a spatial coordinate, then instructs, "move," prompting the Amateur to trace the number with her body. "She has no idea what she's doing," the Professional says, "but I can help her." In the concluding line, the Professional remarks that the Amateur wakes up each day asking, "What should I do today?," but if she were a Professional, she would know that this decision has already been made for her. Through this ending, *The Amateurist* reflects

on the disciplining of femininity while also anticipating the logics of tracking, monitoring, and algorithmic governance that define contemporary telepresence, where monitoring takes place constantly, in real-time, corresponding to the entire life span (Toschi 2024), and the line between control and self-control is blurred as individuals voluntarily choose to quantify themselves, "actively turning themselves into projects of (self-)governance and surveillance" (Ajana 2018, 3). July's performance collapses the temporal distance between 1990s video art and today's media infrastructures, suggesting that returning to the paths traced by feminist video practices can help us better understand the conditions of our present mediatized subjectivity.

Figure 6–8. *The Amateurist* (Miranda July, 1998, 14:00 min, color, sound). Video stills in linear succession. Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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