

# On Dennis Oppenheim's marionette theatre

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Figure 1 Dennis Oppenheim, *Attempt to Raise Hell*, 1974. Seated motorized figure in the image of the artist, cloth and felt suit, wood and steel base, spotlight. Timing device triggers cast head in the image of the artist to lunge forward striking the suspended silver plated bell every sixty seconds. 78.4 x 121 x 91.1 cm. Collection Radchovsky House, Dallas. Photo: Ace Contemporary, Los Angeles. Courtesy Dennis Oppenheim Estate.

Dennis Oppenheim's *Attempt to Raise Hell* (Figure 1), a motorized effigy of the artist set upon a white plinth that violently bangs its aluminium head upon a large brass bell every three minutes, portrays, in a most striking manner, the romantic theme of artistic creation through bodily and mental suffering. The violent clang of metal on metal produced by the piece resonates loudly and long after the jerky mechanical collision, sounding something like an alarm in the gallery in which the work is exhibited. The work's sonic resonance imparts its ambition to draw attention to itself and to produce effects beyond its material limits, not only in the space but in the minds and bodies of beholders. The masochistic gesture portrayed by the mechanical figure is capable of engendering powerful feelings in its viewers. One might say that *Attempt to Raise Hell* dramatizes a foundational conceit of expressionism, in which a sensory experience of a work of art's creator is vividly conveyed to a beholder through affective means. The use of an inanimate and mechanical surrogate ironizes this dynamic, suggesting how the techniques of such experiential transference are typically more technical than natural. Nonetheless the work's representation of 'the body in pain' imparts a degree of corporeal affect and

material immanence that seems to transcend cultural conventions, thus evoking an experience grounded in the barest human terms that thus seems to a large degree universal. As one critic noted, the work serves as 'a jolting reminder that each of us has a skull and a nervous system, facts that most of us can't dwell on for very long without a sickening sense of our own mortality.'<sup>1</sup> A sculptural Turing Test of sorts, *Attempt to Raise Hell* invites viewers to question the validity of a mechanically-abetted aesthetic experience while also interrogating, as the artist stated in an interview, 'how far is the reach of art and how powerful is it.'<sup>2</sup> One might say that the work's magic – its 'attempt to raise hell' – resides in its quixotic invocation of a universal humanist experience in a world sceptical of such transcendental gestures.

In its sonically expansive effects, *Attempt to Raise Hell* is – most literally – a resonant object. Yet beyond its sonorous effects, the work's resonance certainly also includes its engagement with the space of its exhibition, its affective capacities on the beholder, and perhaps least visibly, the way it engages with the tradition of humanistic art history that understood the work of art as a vessel of cultural intelligence whose lessons could be preserved across the ages and throughout the world. One might say that this humanistic tradition, perhaps most famously articulated in Erwin Panofsky's 1940 essay 'Art History as a Humanistic Discipline', itself positions the production and study of art (as well as its display in museums) as a resonant project, one that celebrates the art object's capacity to convey its message across space and time, thus playing an essential role in the perpetuation of certain values that have traditionally been considered, if not universal and timeless, certainly worthy of preservation. For Panofsky, as for countless art historians since, the disciplinary coherence of art history entails the necessary translation if not management of art's sensuous, subjective, and even irrational effects into something resembling scientific objectivity and evidentiary repeatability.<sup>3</sup>

Works like Oppenheim's represent an early and foundational instance of what would come to be known as installation art. Drawing upon a legacy of minimalism and conceptual art which complicated longstanding notions of the uniqueness and permanence of the art object and questioned the accepted boundaries of what constitutes a valid aesthetic experience, such works eluded the sort of repeatable and objective aesthetic criteria valued not only by humanists like Panofsky but modernists like Clement Greenberg. In terms of media, *Attempt to Raise Hell* resides somewhere between performance and sculpture. Resonating into the actual space in which it is exhibited and making the embodied time of the beholder a significant facet of its structure, the work arguably produces a distinctive

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Barker, 'Dennis Oppenheim: An art with nothing to lose', *Arts*, 49, April 1975, 74.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Parent, 'An Interview with Dennis Oppenheim', Audiotape recorded November 9, 1977. Courtesy the Media Centre of Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

<sup>3</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'Art History as a Humanistic Discipline', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 1-25. In the essay, Panofsky asks, 'How, then, is it possible to built up art history as a respectable scholarly discipline, if its very objects come into being by an irrational and subjective process?'

aesthetic experience each time it is installed, making questions of its timeless semblance and aesthetic autonomy, let alone its significance, problematic.

By highlighting both its institutional and affective resonances, I hope to show how *Attempt to Raise Hell* reveals the ways that the two art histories that Charles W. Haxthausen explored in his influential conference at the Clark continues to inform critical issues in the production and reception of art. In particular, I would like to think about how the material and theoretical divide that characterizes the two art histories can be understood in terms of the way that *Attempt to Raise Hell* materializes the translation of sensuous and affective – and notably durational – phenomena into a punctual and arguably transmissible event. Such conjunctures of the diachronic and the synchronic have been a recurrent theme in the scholarship and teaching of Haxthausen, oftentimes as a means of focusing on how 'language interacts with visual sensation in framing our perception and experience of the world' (as he put it in his review of a retrospective of the work of one of Oppenheim's closest peers, Bruce Nauman, in 1994).<sup>4</sup> This relationship between language and imagery, and with it the translation of sensuous visual experience into rational – and thus transmissible and preservable – modes of communication, whether scholarly or museological, lies at the heart of any humanistic or for that matter modernist approach to art, both in terms of its production and its historical analysis. Yet like many works of art understood as emblematic of a post-modern and anti-humanist critique of aesthetic autonomy and conventional ideals of universalism, *Attempt to Raise Hell* makes the question of translation of sensuous experience, from one body to another and from bodies across time and space problematic even as it makes them explicit. In this regard it encapsulates the challenges of humanistic art at a moment when its tenets were beginning to be questioned by a number of artists and intellectuals.

Perhaps there is no more exemplary – or for that matter notorious – expression of what can be called the anti-humanist turn of the 1960s than Michel Foucault's declaration on the final pages of *Les Mots et les Choses* that 'man is an invention of a recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.' As any careful reader of Foucault knows, this bold assertion, like the vision of man's erasure 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of sea', presented in the following and final paragraph of the book, is as fundamentally metaphorical as it is wilfully polemical.<sup>5</sup> Man, for Foucault, is not so much the biological *homo sapiens* produced by millennia of genetic selection and mutation as the product of discursive and institutional structures that at a certain historical moment made human life the simultaneous object and subject of its knowledge. And, as Kristen Ross notes in her trenchant analysis of the anti-humanist turn in French theory of the 1960s, 'man' serves as the

<sup>4</sup> Charles W. Haxthausen, review of Bruce Nauman Retrospective, *Burlington Magazine*, September 1994, 646.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York: Pantheon, 1970, 387.

definitive bad object within the post-structuralist paradigm 'because it is nothing but an image that masks the conditions of bourgeois domination.'<sup>6</sup> Thus the end of man for a writer like Foucault can be understood as a figure for the end of bourgeois ideology and more generally the manifold discourses and institutions associated with a Eurocentric, patriarchal tradition that had sustained it at least since the eighteenth century by presenting its values as normative, universal, and natural.

Yet as Ross argues, such prognoses of the end of man appeared around the same moment when various 'colonized people' began to 'demand and appropriate to themselves the status of men', suggesting an awkward complicity between the theoretical paradigms associated with the anti-humanist principles of post-structuralism and the historical milieu in which they emerged.<sup>7</sup> Which is to say, in the somewhat abstract language of post-structural theory, that the techniques of the self that certain thinkers were beginning to see as primarily oppressive and disciplinary were being invoked by others as a crucial means of political liberation and empowerment within the civil rights and postcolonial movements. This nonsynchronous development of the critique of humanism and the individual subject and the assertion of the humanity of historically subjugated peoples suggests that a much more nuanced account of the anti-humanist turn of the 1960s and beyond is required, particularly as it relates to matters of identity.

This is especially the case for art historical accounts of the anti-humanist turn. Even within what are typically regarded as paradigmatically anti-humanist artistic practices like minimalism it is possible to discern these broader political dynamics. For instance a work like Tony Smith's *Die*, a six-foot steel cube, might be understood to indicate the total evacuation of self-expression through its striking suppression of conventional signs of compositional intentionality, doing away with what Alain Robbe-Grillet described in an 1968 interview published in *Studio International* as an 'analogical vocabulary' that sustained 'traditional humanism.'<sup>8</sup> Yet, at the same time, the way the work seems to invite a multitude of equally valid aesthetic encounters has prompted numerous critics to emphasize its phenomenological mode of address, activating the contingencies of the surrounding space and more crucially the embodied experience of the viewer, and consequently disrupting the universalist presuppositions undergirding modernist aesthetics. Which is to say that while such works certainly rebuked a humanist understanding of art that espoused self-expression and metaphor as a means of universalizing notions of subjectivity, it could be argued that they nonetheless allowed for the articulation of new models of being in the world, new forms of subjectivity, ones that by emphasizing bodily experience over rational judgment might be unencumbered from the oppressive legacies of the past. Indeed it was precisely the way such works invited a wholly subjective experience that made them anathema to

<sup>6</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, 163.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, *Fast Cars*, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Anti-humanism in art', *Studio International*, 175, April 1968, 169.

certain critics like Michael Fried, who identified within them a latent anthropomorphism.<sup>9</sup> In Smith's *Die*, these anthropomorphic allusions are perhaps most clearly evident in the work's imposing dimensions – it is a six foot cube, which the artist noted corresponds to the height of a human body – and it is intimated in its title, which oscillates between suggesting chance, death, and a mode of metallurgy. As Smith stated about the work's dimensions, 'Six feet has a suggestion of being cooked. Six foot box. Six foot under.'<sup>10</sup>

One could say that *Die* exemplifies the motif of mortality, if not a morbid streak, that ran through a great deal of minimalist sculpture. Lucy Lippard recognized this aspect of the works in her 1966 essay 'Eccentric Abstraction,' claiming that the 'self-sufficient' and 'intentionally inactive' forms of the 'primary structurists' introduced 'a new kind of funeral monument.'<sup>11</sup> Other critics would bring similar associations to Donald Judd's sculptures. Elizabeth Baker would describe a Plexiglass and steel box from 1966 as 'a silver coffin imbedded in a warm, wet volume of honey'<sup>12</sup> while John Perrault called Judd's works 'last-minute tombstones' for the 'American space', and 'the American dream', a dream, he notes, 'that is on the brink of becoming a nightmare.'<sup>13</sup> While Perrault does not explicate just what sort of American space and dream Judd's sculpture memorialize, a work like Dan Flavin's *monument 4 for those who have been killed in ambush (to P. K. who reminded me about death)* which was shown in the important Primary Structures exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1966 insinuates one possible understanding of the political significance of what Robert Smithson would describe as 'the new monuments' of minimalism.<sup>14</sup>

To a certain extent these allusions to graves and tombstones reflect the deep-seated tradition of monumental statuary that continued to inform the categorically sculptural discourse of minimalism, so that the relation between sculpture and box seemed to summon the tomb's or cenotaph's respective functions of corporeal containment or absence. These mortuary resonances – and one should also cite Oldenburg's *Placid Civic Monument* (1967), a six-foot-deep grave dug and

<sup>9</sup> See, Michael Fried, 'Art and objecthood', *Artforum*, 5, June 1967, reprinted in Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 157. 'I am suggesting, then, that a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice.'

<sup>10</sup> *Tony Smith: Two Exhibitions of Sculpture*, Hartford: Wadsworth Athenaeum, 1966, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Eccentric abstraction', *Art International*, November 1966, 28. Besides Smithson's 'Entropy and the new monuments', other essays addressing the new monumentality of sixties sculpture include Dan Graham, 'Models and monuments', *Arts*, 41, March 1967; and Claes Oldenburg, 'Some program notes about monuments, mainly', *Chelsea*, June 1968, 87-92.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth C. Baker, 'Judd the obscure', *ArtNews*, 67, April 1968, 45.

<sup>13</sup> John Perreault, 'Plastic ambiguities', *Village Voice*, 7 March 1968, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and the new monuments', in *Collected Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 10-23.

subsequently refilled in Central Park, as a crucial and notably overt instance in which minimalist monumentality was aligned with signs of mortality – reveal what could be seen as a double dynamic of emergence and disappearance operating in such works in which two models of subjectivity are activated: one deemed on the verge of disappearance and another coming into being.

Too often within accounts of the artistic production of the 1960s and 1970s this dynamic of emergence and disappearance, and more generally the nonsynchronous development of anti-humanism, is not taken into account. Instead the triumph of an anti-humanist art, typically aligned with movements like minimalism and conceptualism, is taken as a *fait accompli*, so that certain artists like Smithson and Judd are seen as exemplars of anti-humanist attitudes and a wide array of artistic practices that seem to engage with the contested legacy of humanism are demeaned if not wholly ignored.<sup>15</sup> Of course matters are more complex. One could argue that even the most ardently anti-humanist works of art still sustain certain humanist principles in their very identity as art – a category of objects whose conventional status marks it as essentially a humanist endeavour – thus suggesting that anti-humanism is fundamentally a heuristic device, a way of thinking through the decentring of man by man. Even among the work of artists who are most closely aligned with the anti-humanist turn there often remained lingering remnants of humanist ideals or certain anxieties and misgivings about the ultimate implications of a pure anti-humanist position. For instance, the avowed monumentality of minimalism – and here we can consider the word both in its allusions to memorial structures and to its activation of the surrounding space, what Robert Morris described as its monumental publicness – points to the ways that these works still engaged in the construction – and notable deconstruction – of models of selfhood.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one might argue a truly anti-humanist perspective, exemplified in a work like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1969), which projects a world both before and after human occupation of the Earth, still depended on a human concept of art as well as a human audience, in order to function and signify. As such one must ask not if a work is sufficiently anti-humanist or humanist but what is its attitude to the question of the status of human. These questions seem particularly important in relation to Foucault's image of the vestigial humanism on the beach, about to be washed away by the waves. How was man – which is to say the human figure but also the concept of human nature – represented at this seemingly transitional moment? In short, how does man represent the end of man. And how did the nonsynchronous development of anti-humanist thought inform such representations?

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, New York: Viking, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> 'The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself. ... Things on the monumental scale, then, include more terms necessary for their apprehension than objects smaller than the body.' Robert Morris, 'Notes on sculpture, part 2,' *Artforum*, 5, October 1966; reprinted in Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, 11–13.



Figure 2 Dennis Oppenheim, *Search for Clues*, 1976. Figure in the image of the artist, cloth suit, knife, elevated Oriental carpet, monitor with colour, sound videotape, lighting. Excerpt from soundtrack: 'Dennis, you were pacing back and forth in my mind before I could talk...' Room installation. M.L. d'Arc Gallery, 1976. Photo: Harry Shunk. Courtesy Dennis Oppenheim Estate.

These questions find a possible and provisional response in a series of works that Dennis Oppenheim produced between 1974 and 1977 in which less-than-life-sized puppet and marionette versions of the artist, what he described as surrogates, were presented in dramatically lit and oftentimes disturbing tableaux engaged in acts that would be impossible for actual human bodies to perform. Oppenheim's first work to use these surrogates was *Theme for A Major Hit* in which a group of marionettes controlled by motorized levels above them jerkily danced to a cacophonous rock soundtrack in which the single lyric 'It ain't what you do, it's what makes You do it' was repeated for over 20 minutes. Oppenheim then created *Attempt to Raise Hell* in 1974, and followed it with *Search for Clues* (Figure 2) in 1976, the artist would present a surrogate face down, lying on a Persian carpet that appeared to float a few inches above the gallery floor, with a knife stuck in its back. A nearby video monitor displayed a similar knife spinning around its axis on its way to plunging into an unidentified mass while the voice of a young female, who at one point identifies herself as the artist's daughter, recounts a vision of the very same knife and her father's body 'floating on a carpet in darkness... a carpet that is still... going nowhere', ending with a 'vision if the spinning knife becoming solid... and plunged into your body.' In *Lecture #1* from 1977 (Figure 3), which was shown at the Whitney Biennial that year, a surrogate stands behind a podium delivering a 30-minute account of 'a conspiracy' to cause 'the slow and complete annihilation of the American avant-garde' to rows of empty chairs sized for the mannequins that

are all empty save for a single black puppet that sits in the back row.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 3 Dennis Oppenheim, *Lecture #1*, 1976. Figure in the image of the artist with lip sync control, wooden chairs, carpet, lighting. Excerpt from soundtrack: 'I would like to welcome you here tonight. Many years have passed since we have seen each other...'. Room installation. Framartstudio, Naples. 1976. Photo: Courtesy Dennis Oppenheim Estate.



Figure 4 Dennis Oppenheim, *Monuments*, 1967, Plexiglass, lighting. 91.44 x 365.76 x 365.76. Installation Hansen Gallery, San Francisco. 1967. Courtesy Dennis Oppenheim Estate.

Perhaps it goes without saying that there is a discernible strand of morbidity in these works as if the latent allusions to death in minimalism are literally dramatized by the surrogates. And it seems worth noting that Oppenheim himself, early in his career produced his own quite literal examples of the strand of morbid, monumental minimalism with a series of plastic, illuminated tombstones in 1967 (Figure 4). As one of the central figures associated with the rise of conceptualism in the second half of the 1960s, Oppenheim occupied a privileged position to consider the possibilities of a radically reconceived – if not specifically anti-humanist – art, producing what have become canonical examples in both land and

<sup>17</sup> Soundtrack to 'Lecture Piece #1', reprinted in *Dennis Oppenheim: Retrospective de l'oeuvre 1967-1977*, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 1978, 79.

body works, exploring new modes of production such as video, photo-conceptualism, and performance. A friend and close observer of Robert Smithson, Oppenheim was certainly aware of the critique of established humanist values. While many of Oppenheim's early conceptualist works made from 1966 to 1972 often entailed the presence of a human body, and the artist's own body at that, like a great deal of the advanced art of the period, the body was typically presented more as vessel of energetic matter than as expressive self, typically interacting with decidedly non-human processes and materials like gravity, spiders, ferns, and soil. For instance, in *Material Interchange* (1970) a two and a half minute video documents the artist's nail being wedged into the gallery floor and a splinter from the floor inserted underneath the artist's epidermis. Jonathan Crary would describe Oppenheim's conceptualist output in explicitly anti-humanist terms, writing that these works 'aim at dissolving divisions between the self and other objects or systems, so that the concept of man as an isolable entity becomes unworkable.'<sup>18</sup> In the film *Disappear* (1972) these anti-humanist gestures towards a decentred self take on a decidedly sinister tone as they are literally performed by the artist who shakes his hand on front of the camera so quickly that it appears as a translucent blur while the soundtrack plays his voice repeatedly declaring that 'I don't want to be able to see myself anymore,' 'I really want to leave myself,' and 'I really want to die.'

If the conventional paradigm of artistic expression and communication entailed the investment of human energy into objects like paintings and sculptures, Oppenheim sought to short circuit this system by making his body both the medium and material substrate of the energy, albeit typically registering these signs of corporeal immanence by means of some form of technological mediation such as a photograph or video, so that the affective power of the bodily energy was conveyed through some sort of externalization and documentation. As he told Willoughby Sharp in an interview from 1971, in these sorts of works he sought to create 'a system that allows the artist to become the material, to consider himself the sole vehicle of the art, the distributor, initiator, and receiver simultaneously'. According to the artist 'Understanding the body as both subject and object permits one to think in terms of an entirely different surface' allowing the creator to as he put it 'oscillate from the position of instigator to victim'.<sup>19</sup> The prevalence of masochistic themes in Oppenheim's work from this period suggests how the redirection of creative energy back towards the artist's body rather than what he called 'the objectification of energy through exterior material' could produce distinctly affective results often through the depiction of the body in pain.

Many of Oppenheim's body-based works from this period entailed a crucial degree of affective power through their portrayals of corporeal stress and pronouncements of self-abnegation. These characteristics align his oeuvre with a

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Crary, 'Dennis Oppenheim's delirious operations', *Art Journal*, 20, November 1978, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Willoughby Sharp, 'Interview with Dennis Oppenheim', *Studio International*, 182, November 1971, 186-192.

large corpus of works from the late 1960s and early 1970s that presented the body – and typically the white, male body – as site of masochistic violence. Indeed it seems perhaps somewhat surprising considering the rhetoric of anti-humanism that has come to be attached to the art of the period, to notice how often the human body figured into the artistic practices of this period (and it should be noted that many female artists like Eleanor Antin, Martha Rosler, and Adrian Piper to name just a few, used the body as means of asserting questions of identity.) Various scholars such as Frazer Ward, Amelia Jones, and Kathy O'Dell have recognized the 'repeated instances of self-abjection' and 'prevalence of... masochistic strategies in male body art.'<sup>20</sup> While for Jones such works attempt to transcend aesthetic mediation in the name of affective immanence, Ward offers a more social historical reading seeing this body of art as responding to the 'the violence underlying both the public and community' in the USA during an era of war and civil upheaval.<sup>21</sup>

Expanding on these interpretations, I would like to consider these depictions of masochistic self-abjection as constitutive to a fundamental paradox that confronted a number of artists whose art questioned the legitimacy of a variety of humanist presuppositions and yet whose identities occupied the very subject position that was the fundamental object of anti-humanist critique. In their overt theatricalization of violence on the male body Oppenheim's surrogate works represent a sustained and complex expression of this paradoxical situation: what could be described as agonistic humanism in which the figure of man is marshalled to critique the concept of man.

The artist described his turn towards these surrogate works in numerous interviews as a means of extending the investigating the underlying motives that lead artists to create art, both in their dramatization of the creative process but more explicitly in the way that they seem to extend his body-based work and even more particularly the series of works he produced in the early 1970s in which his children became crucial participants. If, as he noted, the prior body works became too dangerous and emotionally taxing, the use of a surrogate allowed for a degree of distance and self reflection, thus making himself at once the subject and object of perception.

<sup>20</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 128. See also, Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystander: Performance Art and Audience*, Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2012, 9. With the rise of video, performance, and body art, images of man – and women, although still to a lesser degree – account for some of the most well-known and celebrated works of the decade. And it seems possible to begin to discern certain tendencies. If certain female artists used the human form to visualize and critique oppressive conventions, thus complicated conventional humanist notions of universal subjectivity while sustaining the central place of the human within cultural practices, many male artists to the period treated the body as material to be violated, damaged, and tested.

Understood as extensions and allegories of the unconscious motives behind human creativity Oppenheim's surrogate works can be seen to draw upon a longstanding romantic tradition including Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* and the automatons portrayed in E. T. A. Hoffman's stories in which questions of human nature and its perfectibility are dramatized by animated figures whose uncanny mimesis of human bodies suggests the darker side of human creativity and imagination. Indeed like Dr. Frankenstein, Oppenheim seemed to consider these surrogates as failures, noting in various interviews that he was never entirely happy with their results, that their attempts to mechanically translate the affective powers of his previous body works always seemed a little preposterous.<sup>22</sup> This sense of failure seems essential to these works' engagement with the paradox of agonistic humanism. In these works, one could say, the self – notably white, male self – which is to say, 'man', appears physically diminished, endangered, often damaged, sometimes dead. These works present the end of man in a most literal and notably ambivalent manner, in which man is vividly dramatized as a corpse or at best battered and embattled survivor.

This motif of the survivor is central to *Lecture #1*, which may represent the culmination and most comprehensive expression of the paradoxical post-humanism motivating the surrogate works. In it, in fact, the artist seems to provide a rationale for his turn toward the surrogate works. The motorized puppet's account of the slow and systematic murder of some of the most prominent practitioners of conceptualism begins with the death of Robert Smithson in 1973. While he notes most artists 'had no reason to believe the circumstances [surrounding Smithson's death from a helicopter crash] were anything but accidental', the surrogate claims that Oppenheim was prompted to begin using 'a stand in' at this time because of 'a mounting paranoia that shortly, if I remained surfaced, I too would become a victim of assassination.' Speaking from an imagined future date in 1995 – at one point he recalls 'speculating on the art of the 1980s' twenty-five years earlier in 1970 – the surrogate provides an alarming litany of deaths following Smithson's: the suicide of Walter De Maria on 12 July 1977, Michael Heizer being 'trampled to death outside his trailer east of Reno' on 11 September 1977, and large scale attacks like the 'Chicago style' machine gunning of 'an entire room full of panellists and the audience' and a bomb that exploded on a plane traveling to Copenhagen in 1979 that carried seven prominent American artists: Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry, and William Wegman. The fact that the artist provides specific names, locations, and dates for these deaths and that the dates would take place soon after the work would have been exhibited at the Whitney Biennial must have been especially disarming to the work's original audiences. Oppenheim's slow and deliberate delivery of the recitation of the dead

<sup>22</sup> The artist acknowledged this aspect of the works in various interviews, stating in 1977 that he was 'very uncomfortable with them... because they involved a return to what looked like figurative art...' Dennis Oppenheim, interview with Allan Schwartzman, in *Early Work by Five Contemporary Artists*, New York: New Museum, 1977, n.p.

artists takes on the feeling of a magical incantation, as if speaking the names might make his prediction-presented-as-history come true. Oppenheim's surrogate concludes his lecture by describing the desolation of the 1980s art world in the wake of these murders, when the SoHo neighbourhood became 'a ghost town' and 'artists became investigators' trying to 'shed light on what seemed to be an untranslatable aesthetic masterplan set in motion by presumably an artist'. Noting that an attempt was made on his life on 16 November 1987, Oppenheim's surrogate declares that 'The 80s bred "the art of survival".'

This figure of the survivor was in fact a common theme of the decade.<sup>23</sup> Assessing the deaths of rock stars in the seventies and the rise in the word survivor in rock band names and song titles of the decade, the music critic Greil Marcus noted that the 'term "survivor" had become the cant word of the seventies.' Whereas the word was once used to describe someone who has 'suffered real adversity and surmounted it,' now, Marcus notes, 'The term is applied to virtually any white, middle class person, regardless of lack of achievement, or lack of hardship.'<sup>24</sup> Marcus's recognition of the underlying racial connotations of this terms suggests the nexus of anti-humanist theory and the apparent threat to white hegemony posed by decolonization and civil rights movements identified by Ross. With this in mind it seems significant how frequently signs of colour and race appear in Oppenheim's surrogate works. Besides the presence of a single black puppet in the back row of *Lecture*, in another surrogate work, *Broken Record Blues* from 1976 one surrogate appears face down, while a series of white chalk lines lead to another surrogate standing in the corner. In this case the racial overtones are summoned by the sound of an early twentieth-century blues record stuck on a groove over which one hears Oppenheim talking about the frustration of repeating oneself in a voice whose slurred drawl and use of words like 'man' seems to imitate the sort of African-American dialect one might have heard in such Blaxploitation films of the period like *Shaft* (1971). In *Table Piece* (1975) two surrogates, one black and the other white, sit across from one another on a 60-foot-long table. The black mannequin again using the jive lingo that the artist claimed he learned growing up among African-Americans in California in the 1950s, explains that he is trying to enter the white figure's mind by having him repeat his words and ultimately to

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, one critic described the speaker as 'an isolated survivor of a plot to annihilate the avant-garde.' Michael Brenson, 'Off the Beaten Paths At City Treasure Houses', *New York Times*, 13 January 1984, C1.

<sup>24</sup> Greil Marcus, 'Rock Death in the 1970s: A Sweepstakes', *Village Voice*, 17 December 1979, reprinted in *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music 1977-92*, New York: Anchor Books, 1994, 57. That may have latently colored the epic informed such rock songs as the Rolling Stones' 'Soul Survivor' to Gloria Gaynor's Disco Hit 'I Will Survive' to Neil Young's 'obsession' with rock death on his *Rust Never Sleeps* album from 1978. Kim Levin, in 'Dennis Oppenheim: Post-performance works', *Arts*, 53, September 1978, 122, notes that the surrogate works have a certain punkish amateurism and she cites an interview with the artist in which he states 'If I were a younger man, I'd be getting into Punk.' (123)

induce him to kill himself. In *Back to the Mountains*, a surrogate dressed like a Native American lies face down and half covered on animal hides while a disco-infused soundtrack featuring a Jim Morrison-like singer belts out lyrics about 'getting red, getting redder, getting ready to be red inside.'

Works like *Table* and *Back to the Mountains* with their explicit references to the racialized Other and their engagement with the respectively problematic traditions of minstrelsy and 'playing Indian,' are in many ways the most difficult and strange of what is incontestably a rather difficult and strange body of work. Strange and problematic and sometimes little bit embarrassing. To his credit Oppenheim repeatedly acknowledged the problematic and paradoxical aspects of these works. Their scathing and self-deprecating portrayal of artistic ambition arguably allegorizes a vexing, if largely unconscious, predicament facing many of the artists associated with the conceptualist vanguard in the 1970s who – as white males – at once recognized the necessary and just critique of their hegemonic status and yet continued to create art in the face of their presumed – and predominantly theoretical – diminished status and threatened obsolescence, getting ready, as Oppenheim's surrogate in *Back to the Mountains* would put it, 'to be dead inside.' Of course such obsolescence was always more proposed than actual and as Eric Lott has recently argued, this tradition of cultural appropriation of the racialized Other has frequently been marshalled as a means to assuage social unrest and sustain hegemonic power structures even as it has motivated some of the most profound examples of artistic production in modern U.S. culture from Mark Twain to Bob Dylan.<sup>25</sup>

The contradictions and difficulty of the surrogate works – and in certain cases what might be seen as their ultimate lack of success as aesthetic statements, the fact that they continue to be difficult works, difficult to exhibit and reproduce because of their still quite unconventional format, residing somewhere halfway between installation, theatre, and music – is likely due to their ambition to forge some kind of new expressive terrain and their willingness to explore realms of experience that were unseemly if not sinister. This terrain, one might call it agonistic humanism, informed a great deal of art of the 1970s and arguably beyond. One where guilt, embarrassment, and violence seem more appropriate criteria to understand a work's significance than such factors as beauty, innovation, or criticality. Within this post-humanist landscape, artists, as Oppenheim stated became simultaneously 'instigator' and 'victim.' Like Oedipus, one might argue, many of them were searching for clues that would ultimately indict them.

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<sup>25</sup> Eric Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2017.

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On Dennis Oppenheim's marionette theatre

*New Monuments and the End of Man: U.S. Sculpture Between War and Peace, 1945-1975*  
(Princeton University Press, 2019).

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