

The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

Soho Weekly News Dec 30 1976

A Question of Values

Madeline Burnside

A Bit of Matter and a Little Bit More
Lawrence Weiner
The Kitchen

In an orgasmic *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, a clothed woman (Susan Davis) wanders among six nude or partially clothed people who are engaged in various sexual acts. She answers questions posed by Lawrence Weiner (who is off camera) on the validity of sex as a subject for art. She moves through the copulating pairs answering vaguely, her attention to the questions slightly distracted by the activity around her, her attention to her surroundings almost lost to the problematical questions.

This is an intimate tape. A woman describes the reasons for and the effect of shaving off her pubic hair. Through the camera we inspect the smooth surface: an innocent, pre-pubertal mound.

This is an objective tape. A man has lain down on his back, a woman has lain on top of him on her back. In the cropped vision of the monitor we see segments of human torso obscuring one another. A cock hardens and plunges into a vagina and then an anus. The hips and abdomen writhe like a study for a Mannerist statue. There are awkward angles of touch whose sensual and visual excitement rely on as twisting a motion as that of Giovanni Bologna's Sabine eluding a Roman.

In the capitalist industry of movie porn you cannot get by with filming sexual acts and having someone walk around and discuss their merit as subject matter; there has to be some attempt at redeeming social value. The various disguises under which pornography appears are: (a) sensual romance (ranging from *Sweet Away* to *The Story of O*, these weave eroticism into structures that support conservative social values such as sexism and the nuclear family); (b) non-romantic stories (from Jim Cassidy and Dakota

movies to *Behind the Green Door*), and (c) pseudo-documentaries (a pretext for showing some of the more bizarre forms of sexuality). By not conforming to any of these categories Weiner's tape explores other value systems, some of which are usual to art (the nude as a visual image) and some of which must be developed by the tape itself.

From the beginning, the people involved are designated in bold videofont letters as players rather than actors. It is important that they are not performing actions that do not take place in their "real" lives; rather they are invited collaborators and the action is "really" happening. That they make love in couples rather than as a group underlines the implication that they are physically involved with one another in their off-camera lives and that their sensuality exists on more than one level.

But this is not a tape about relationships as a whole, but about sex and art. Unlike another recent video exploration of sexuality, Kathy Acker and Alan Sondheim's tape shown last month at the Whitney Museum, the players do not attempt to relate to the audience, nor do they expose their trepidation or physical feelings in words. Weiner shows a sculptural sexual act without pathos or trauma and with only physical beauty. There are no confessional overtones.

The audience's experience is similar to that of the clothed woman — at the end of the tape she says that she does not feel empathy for the other players although she could imagine herself in their places. Is this art? The question, pushing at the borders of what is acceptable, nags us. The players performed their actions on the basis that the tape would only be seen in an art context: does the context make it art and not pornography?

In this tape and in his more recent tape, *Do You Believe in Water?*, Weiner has attempted to investigate the possibilities of sexual play as a visual action and an intellectual pursuit. *A Bit of Matter* is explained, held together and reflected by a continuous overlaid monologue in which Alice Weiner, in a deadpan voice, lists all the forms of titillation she can think of, from the ordinary to the perverse. It is a quality of Weiner's work that he is able to use humor to introduce his own self-consciousness.

Complete seriousness fails as a representation of experience. Humor brings the exploration of artistic and cultural values down to earth, and to a successful, non-threatening, intellectual sensuality. ●