JONATHAN HOROWITZ / MATRIX 151
SILENT MOVIE
October 25, 2003 ~ January 25, 2004

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Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
Hartford, Connecticut
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For the past eighteen years, New York-based artist Jonathan Horowitz has chosen imagery and sound from American popular culture to create video works and thematic installations that examine the pervasive impact of mass media on our lives. Like many early innovators of video art, including Nam June Paik and Vito Acconci, Horowitz challenges the conventions and influence of mass media while using its predominant forms—television and film—as the material of his critique. By manipulating the linear compositional structure of popular television programs and films, Horowitz creates insightful juxtapositions that bring new meaning to issues as disparate as AIDS, animal cruelty, and celebrity culture. Horowitz's work, however, does not take the form of an ethical inquiry. Rather, his videos and installations provide a space for creative thought and heightened awareness, inviting audiences to consider iconic images of mass culture in a new light.
Over the years both television and movies have trained audiences to expect representations of life in condensed narratives that conform to certain social and cultural norms. Sensitive social and political issues, including gender, race, and homosexuality, are simplified and sanitized to fit the narrow mold of public perception. Similarly, Hollywood often turns to formulas and stereotypes in the depiction of persons with disabilities. For *MATRIX 151* Jonathan Horowitz has created a compelling new video installation that examines the complex characterization of deaf individuals on the silver screen.

*Silent Movie* brings together excerpts from four American movie classics, *Johnny Belinda* (1948), *The Story of Esther Costello* (1957), *The Miracle Worker* (1962), and *The Who’s rock opera, Tommy* (1975). Chosen for their parallel narratives, the films each feature a central character who is labeled “deaf and dumb” and is ostensibly liberated from his/her physical condition through the acquisition of language. However, rather than focusing on the literal narratives of these films, Horowitz has arranged a selection of specific scenes that expose underlying themes of violence, power, sex, and silence.

*The Miracle Worker*, which recounts the true story of Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan, is perhaps the most widely recognized film involving a blind, deaf, and mute protagonist. Patty Duke’s award-winning performance as the frustrated and violent Helen Keller remains today an archetypical representation of deafness. In the film, Helen Keller is depicted as a wild animal, lacking not only the ability to communicate, but also any evidence of civility or self-control. By learning sign language, Keller is transformed from a wild child into a sweet young woman who fits comfortably into Hollywood’s alternative and most enduring deaf characterization: the sweet innocent, or innocent victim. In *Silent Movie* Horowitz examines this popular cinematic conception (stereotype) of deafness and the unsettling plot twists it engenders.

In the 1948 film *Johnny Belinda*, Jane Wyman plays the quintessential innocent victim, a young deaf and speech-impaired girl who is raped and subsequently murders her attacker. Forced to stand trial, Belinda uses sign language to speak in her own defense. On the surface this simple melodrama presents an inspirational tale of conquering physical, emotional, and even legal obstacles. However, its simplicity belies a far more complex and insidious story of victimization and dependency through the conflation of physical impairment with sexual abuse. It is this that first fascinated Horowitz and led him to focus on the subtexts of sexual exploitation in *Tommy* and *The Story of Esther Costello*.

The fictional stories of Tommy and Esther Costello provide the central narrative action in *Silent Movie*. Rendered blind, deaf, and mute following a childhood trauma, both characters come of age in an environment of confusion and abuse adminis-
tered by their guardians. Despite these similarities, Tommy and Esther Costello present two dramatically different stories of liberation from disability. Each character experiences a full recovery of his or her senses. Where Esther Costello's recovery of sight and hearing comes after being raped, however, Tommy is miraculously cured through his devotion to and mastery of pinball. Horowitz interprets these events as liberation through sex and liberation through libidinal repression. In Silent Movie Horowitz stages a thematic reversal of these sources and their subtexts, whereby both films take on new meaning.

By juxtaposing and displacing scenes from The Story of Esther Costello and Tommy with moments from The Miracle Worker and Johnny Belinda, Horowitz forces these films into a new relationship. The accompanying audio further divorces each scene from its original context and meaning and contributes to the possibility of alternate narratives. One such adaptation is the conceptual link that Horowitz creates between Tommy's miraculous recuperation and sexual liberation. Horowitz achieves this thematic transposition by altering Tommy's original structure and musical accompaniment, pairing Roger Daltrey's recovery sequence with Ann Margaret's overtly sexual “Champagne” scene and setting both to The Who's song, "I'm Free." In its revised context, Ann Margaret's performance (originally portrayed as a degenerate orgy) becomes a celebration of physical freedom analogous to Tommy's renewed hearing and sight. Similarly, Horowitz celebrates Patty Duke's pre-linguistic outbursts in The Miracle Worker by again setting these scenes to "I'm Free."

Silent Movie also introduces a reconsideration of Esther Costello's recovery from disability. In the original film, Esther Costello regains her sight and hearing after being raped. Although initially stricken with shame and guilt, Esther overcomes this trauma and goes on to help others see, literally and figuratively. However, in Silent Movie, Esther Costello's "cure" from disability becomes a vehicle for further impairment. As Silent Movie closes Horowitz returns to the video's opening sequence, replaying Esther Costello's original trauma. Here, once again, the little girl is deprived of sight and hearing and left, like the audience, in utter darkness.

The musical component of Silent Movie adds yet another thematic layer to Horowitz's installation, creating a literal and figurative connection to the silent film era. As in the golden age of cinema, the video is accompanied by a player piano performing a selection of songs from Tommy. This musical accompaniment generates a unique viewing experience for visitors and evokes the sensation of watching a silent movie. Due to the technical limitations of player pianos and phonographs in the early 1900s, film music typically consisted of popular tunes and song-length selections. Then as now, it was expected that the audience would recognize the instrumental versions of these well-publicized songs and therefore connect to the film's storyline more easily. Like the brief lines of descriptive or exclamatory text in silent films, the musical score of Silent Movie establishes mood and provides the audience with interpretive cues. Thus, the score of Silent Movie, although devoid of lyrics,
can be seen as a metaphor for language, conveying the words and emotions of characters unable to be heard.

Jonathan Horowitz's interests in language, silence, and self-expression are reinforced in a series of digitally rendered prints created for MATRIX 151, illustrating actors, celebrities, and well-known cultural figures. These works explicate the themes in Silent Movie but also function independently. Each piece consists of a celebrity portrait and a brief quotation by the person depicted. Horowitz refers to these quotes as “distilled forms of expression,” setting them in stark contrast to the images of thwarted speech in Silent Movie. 

According to Horowitz, the prints also serve to “politicize the idea of silence,” depicting individuals for whom self-expression is intimately related to silence. Two such figures are Charlie Chaplin and Helen Keller, both the subject of a print piece.

Charlie Chaplin built a career out of silence. Through the guise of the Tramp, he was able to communicate the muteness of poverty and persistence of hope in Depression-era America without ever saying a word. Ironically, Chaplin and the Tramp were permanently silenced in 1953 when the American government accused the actor of being a communist and forced him out of the country.

In contrast, Helen Keller's political views were not censored by the government but were sterilized by the mass media. Depicted in film and television as a benign and optimistic role model,
Keller’s strong socialist views generally go unmentioned. Horowitz’s piece about Helen Keller draws attention to this disjunction between one's public image and real persona. By juxtaposing an image of Patty Duke with a political statement by Keller herself, Horowitz makes an evocative statement about the impact of mass media on the formation of public consciousness and self-identity.

The influence of popular television and film is an ongoing concern in Jonathan Horowitz’s work. In recent years his projects have explored everything from television sitcoms to film documentaries, examining the role these media play in the construction of personal and collective identity. Using simple editing techniques, Horowitz makes subtle interventions that transform the material of popular culture and the way we view it. In his new installation for MATRIX 151, Horowitz not only reveals stereotypes fostered and perpetuated by the film industry but also contemplates the very notion of acting, both on and off-screen. In an increasingly image-conscious world, the roles we play publicly are often indistinguishable from our private selves.

Joanna Marsh
Acting Curator of Contemporary Art

ii Horowitz considers this enduring and pervasive narrative convention in his 2001 video installation *The Soul of Tammi Terrell*
iii Conversation with the artist, September 2003.
iv Ibid.
2002
Just Love Me: Post/Feminist Positions of the 1990s from the Goetz Collection, Staatlich Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden; Sammlung Goetz, Munich; Bergen Kunstmuseum, Bergen*
The Object Sculpture, The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, England*
Tableaux Vivants, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria*
Dark Spring, Ursulas Blickle Stiftung, Kraichtal-Unterwisheim, Germany*
Zusammenhoehen Herstellen, Kunstverein Hamburg, Germany

2001
The Americans, Barbican Art Gallery, London, England*
Casino 2001, S.M.A.K Museum of Contemporary Art, Ghent, Belgium*
Televisions, Kunsthalle Wien, Austria
Video Mania, Migros Museum, Zurich, Switzerland

2000
Over the Edges, S.M.A.K. Museum of Contemporary Art, Ghent, Belgium*
Greater New York: New Art in New York Now, P.S. 1, New York City
Making Time, Considering Time as a Material in Contemporary Film & Video, Palm Beach Institute for Contemporary Art, Palm Beach, Florida; UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California*
Two Friends and So On, curatorial project with Rob Pruitt, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York City and Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles, California

1999
Zeitwenden - The Outlook, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Wien, Austria*
Persuasion: Tales of Commerce and the Avant-Garde, University of Buffalo Art Gallery/Research Center in Art + Culture, New York

1998
Invited Exhibition of Visual Art 1998, Limerick City Gallery of Art, Limerick, Ireland
Cambio, Museo Universitario del Chapo, Mexico City, Mexico

1996
The Strange Power of Cheap Sentiment, White Columns, New York City
Facing the Millennium, The Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, Texas

1995
Gang Warfare, Independent Art Space, London, England; McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, Texas; The Consortium, Dijon, France

1994
Looky Loo, Sculpture Center, New York City

1992
Morality Cafe, Postmasters Gallery, New York City

1989
Document and Dream, Artists Space, New York City

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2003

2002

2001

2000

1999

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION
Silent Movie, 2003
Audio-video installation with single channel video projection and electronic player piano

Silent Movie Poster (Charlie Chaplin/Robert Downey, Jr.), 2003
Ink jet print on paper, 40 x 27 inches

Silent Movie Poster (Jodie Foster), 2003
Ink jet print on paper, 40 x 27 inches

Anti-war Helen, 2003
Ink jet print on vinyl, 60 x 48 inches

Punk Helen, 2003
Ink jet print on vinyl, 60 x 60 inches

Revolution Helen, 2003
Ink jet print on vinyl, 60 x 80 inches

Portrait of Pete Townsend as a Pillow, 2003
Dye sublimation print on satin, 19 x 100 x 19 inches

MATRIX LECTURE
2 p.m., Saturday, October 25, 2003
Jonathan Horowitz will give an informal talk on his work in the Aetna Theater at the Wadsworth Atheneum.

GALLERY TALK
Noon, Tuesday, October 28, 2003
“Underscoring Narrative and Memory in the Art of Jonathan Horowitz”
Joanna Marsh, Acting Curator of Contemporary Art

MATRIX 151 has been made possible by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., and members of the Matrix Coalition: Janice and Mickey Carin, Howard and Sandra Fromson, Robinson and Nancy Grover, Carol and Sol LeWitt, The Ritter Foundation, Robin and Philip Schonberger, and Walter Wick and Linda Cheverton Wick.

Special support for this exhibition was provided by Falcetti Music and Yamaha Corporation of America. We thank pianist Ken Clark for recording the score to Silent Movie; George Garber and the staff of Falcetti Music; and Dane Madsen of Yamaha Technical Support.