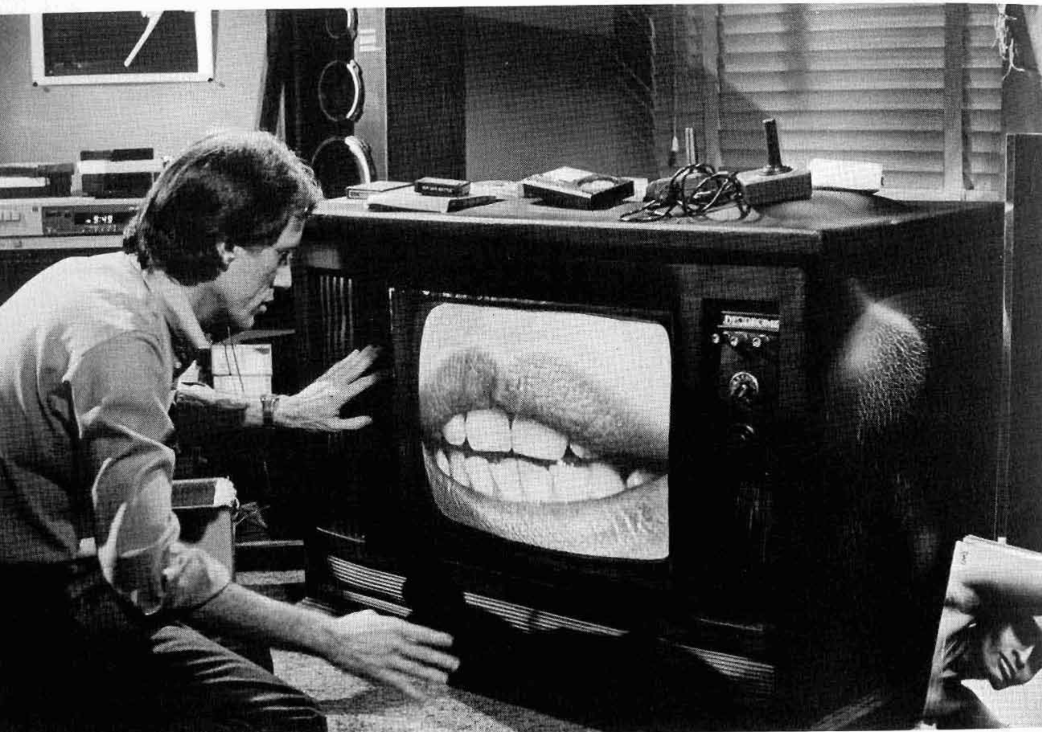


avid Cronenberg, *Videodrome*, 1983.

Television, Furniture, and Sculpture: The Room with the American View

VITO ACCONCI

from *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (1990)

Television space is fishbowl space. There's a world going on in there: that exclamation might be made by a child-person looking, from out of the large world he/she is in, into the small world behind either the aquarium glass or the TV screen. In the case of TV, the world is *on* something, on-screen, not (as in the case of the aquarium) *in* something, in the bowl; but, unlike movies, the TV screen isn't all, there's something behind it, something underneath it all—the TV tube lies behind the screen. We know that the screen is only the facade of the box; even now that the screen can be drastically reduced in size—as in the two-inch "watchman"—there still has to be room for the TV tube. The TV box still has to have depth, which remains the largest dimension of the box. The TV screen might be thought of as the window into the box—except that we probably can't, in 1990s be innocent enough to believe we're really looking through a window, really peering inside the box. Rather, the screen might be seen as some kind of distorting, inside-out mirror, which the power inside the box holds up to the world at large. Inside the box, the world—or the power-to-be-a-world—is condensed: it's the size of a conventional package, a gift, it's power made handleable. The viewer might be led to believe, then, that the world is in his or her hands.

The close-up literalizes television. The close-up face is the same size as the TV screen; the face on-screen, then, is a fact, just as the TV set is a fact in the living room. Whereas on a movie screen a close-up face is at least fifteen times the size of an actual face (so that the face on film is a landscape, like John Wayne's face, a face to walk around on—the face is distant, out-of-reach, like a landscape outside a train window, untouchable, like Greta Garbo's face; or the face is a monument or a monster—it comes up from the ground or the grave, it comes from another time), on a TV screen a close-up face is approximately the same size as an actual face: "his"/"her" face and "my" face are face-to-face—we're in the same world—this is here and now. The viewer and the face on-screen are comfortable with each other; the news from that face, then, is assumed, taken as fact. But then second thoughts might come up: if this is a face, where's the body? The face on-screen is a detached head: a head-without-a-body-without-organs. This is pure mind, without a body to ground it; this is a head that floats, and can't (won't) come down to earth. The news from that face is news from nowhere. (The world is nowhere: if the world were placed, then we might be able to handle it, control it.)

Watching television is like staring into a fireplace, or looking at a light bulb. The viewer is "heated," information has been passed. "I'm not myself," the viewer might justifiably say. Well, who are you then? You are what you see. There's no time to think; information has already been implanted in the brain. The viewer has television inside the self, like a cancer (the disease that has become the dominant disease of the time, the time in which television has become the dominant medium); the person is "replaced," "displaced" (as in the film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Television is a rehearsal for the time when human beings no longer need to have bodies. The way a movie projector shoots images onto a movie screen, the television set "shoots" images into the viewer: the viewer functions as the screen. With television, a person finally is enabled to become a "model person"—but what the person is a model of is nonself. The person functions as a "screen," a simulation, of self. Television confirms the diagnosis that the boundaries between inside and outside are blurred: the diagnosis that "self" is an out-dated concept. (Saying the word *myself* has been reassuring: it announces possession, claims something to grab onto; writing the word *I*, in English, is similar to writing the numeral *I/I*—it gives the illusion of placement in a hierarchy of importance.)

Television broadcasts the same program, all over a particular country, at the same time. One world is transported into different worlds: each different world (different household) is kept in place (in step, in line, in time) by the importation of the same ("universal") world. When a TV set, in a particular household, is turned off, that world is lying in wait, the world-within-the-TV-set ready to erupt, to flash on "in the middle of things" (the plot has already been going on without us). "It" is always there, though we might not be yet, we might not be watching. But people in some other house are already watching: "it" has plenty of time, plenty of viewers already—and, anyway, we'll probably come around to watch sooner or later. This wave of sameness, about to enter everywhere, could be seen either as "frightening" (as a loss of individuality: all those supposedly particular "I's" about to be entered by "it") or as "reassuring" (as a unification of people in community, or as something to fall back on: regularity in the midst of psychological and sociological variables). One way television, in its early days, was made to appear "reassuring" by means of its housing: the introduction of the TV console—the TV appeared in the home as furniture, like any other furniture. The nonphysicality of television was made physical; the air was grounded and brought down to earth. This was something we could "feel at home with." The sameness imported into the home did not have to be seen as anonymity; rather, it could be seen as the sameness of furniture, the sameness of clothing and fashion—a sign of comfort and equality.

Looked at from the viewpoint of art, furniture is analogous to sculpture. Just as furniture fits into a room and takes up floor space inside a house, sculp-

Television Programs Sent on Light Beams

Artist's drawing above illustrates system whereby television programs in future may be broadcast from a powerful arc light mounted atop a tower high above the city. These modulated light waves will be picked up in the homes by individual photo electric cells, or "electric eyes," instead of the present type of wire antenna.

Airport supervisor directs plane landing over voice-modulated beam of light. Photo-cells on plane pick up beam, which is transformed back into voice speaking directions.

TELEVISION transmitted on a light beam, opening the way to a new era in the art of broadcasting, has been successfully demonstrated at Schenectady, N. Y. by Dr. E. F. W. Alexanderson, noted radio engineer.

In the laboratory tests, instead of the electric impulses being fed into the radio transmitter as heretofore, they were modulated into high frequencies on a light beam from a high-intensity arc. This beam was projected the length of the laboratory into a photo-electric tube, which transformed the light waves back into electric impulses. These latter impulses reproduced the original image by means of an ordinary television receiver.

Light-transmitted television points the way to the development of a new method of communicating with planes whereby a fog penetrating light, modulated into voice waves, is projected to photo-electric cells on the wings of a plane, so that landing directions may be transmitted through fog for prevention of smash-ups.

"Television Programs Sent on Light Beams," illustration from *Wasn't the Future Wonderful*.

ture fits into and takes up space in an art-exhibition area. Take this "thing": it isn't as big as a room, so it's only furniture; it isn't as big as architecture, so it's only sculpture. In its early days, the TV set took, inside the house, the position of specialized furniture: the position of sculpture. It was like other furniture, but there were differences: it couldn't be sat in, like a chair; it couldn't be sat at, like a table; part of the console could, as a by-product, function like a cabinet, for storage, but not the TV part itself. Compared to other furniture, the television set couldn't be used, it could only be looked at; it had the uselessness that one associates with art. A person could walk around the TV set, the way a person could walk around a sculpture; but, in order to see what was being transmitted, the person would have to look at it frontally (the way a sculpture is looked at in photographs: photographs being the most convenient way a sculpture becomes known, since a sculpture is harder to move than a painting—the world of art distribution, the world of art books, is predicated on frontality and therefore on painting). But recently there's been a change in the shape of television: the mode of television is no longer the unmovable console but the portable. What was analogous to sculpture is now, at first glance, more analogous to painting: the TV set can be moved from corner to bed to kitchen counter, the way a painting can be moved from wall to wall. But the analogy doesn't hold: the TV set is too "thick," too deep, to be a painting (though soon-to-be-possible, probably, and maybe already existent in privileged cases, is the dream of the paper-thin TV). At the moment, anyway, the conventional TV set is neither painting nor sculpture: television evades the world of art—television is too much science to be art.

The connotation of television is: science and technology. In the 1950s, this spelled terror to the American home: science belonged to the Russians, the Russians had put the first person into space, outer space was the Russians' territory (cf. science-fiction movies of that time—like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Thing*—which equated the unknown with the "Red Menace," the Communist spy). In an atmosphere like that, bringing science into the home in the shape of a bare TV, space would have been like inviting to dinner a composite of Dr. Frankenstein and Kim Philby. So science had to be domesticated: turned into furniture, it was nothing to be afraid of, it was something to relax with. But then things changed; by 1969, the first person to step on the moon was an American, the American flag was implanted on the moon. Science wasn't frightening anymore, the heavens were brought down to (an American) earth, the future was now. More recently, therefore, there hasn't been the need to camouflage the science look of television inside the handcrafted-looking console; the handcrafted look could be seen as the Old World, the European world, dragging the American back, whereas the American now was allowed to be a cowboy again—and the cowboy traveled spare and lean, with tenuous connections to "home," the cowboy was the "Swinging Single." The new spareness and leanness could be exemplified in the sleekness of the television set; the new TV set has been allowed, encouraged, to announce its hi-tech background. Television, now, is science-fiction dropped into the middle of your home: television (as well as stereo equipment, etc.) is science turned into a pet. The viewer/consumer can have part of what NASA has, what Bell Telephone Labs have: science becomes democratized.

Assume that there are two kinds of power: economic power and sexual power. What new TV equipment does, now, is camouflage economic power: it gives the buyer the illusion that economic power is in his/her hands—after all, the buyer can prove it, the buyer can hold the state-of-the-art in a box (as if looking at himself/herself in a photograph, like other people, in other photographs, holding the state-of-the-art in a box). And holding it, and looking at it later in the privacy of his/her home, and making that home a showplace where equipment can be shown off to friends—all this is a way of draining sexual power. Because television is the absence of the body; television signifies the body-become-electronics, the body-without-sex. This sexlessness, then, is placed in the home, in exactly those spots where the body runs rampant: the woman watches the TV set in the kitchen, as she prepares food—the couple watches the TV set at the foot of their bed, right before sexual intercourse. The sexlessness of the television set functions as a sign, a reminder; it induces a nostalgia not so much for the past as for a fiction of the future: "If only we didn't need to eat," "If only we didn't desire to fuck . . ."

Since television represents an absence, a difference, it has to be seen as at least slightly out-of-place in the home. It has to look more "hi-tech" than anything else in the home. Science, though democratized, still flaunts its future (science, talking democracy, announces capitalism): the current TV set is being outdated at the very moment it's looked at—the fact that it's so advanced says only that "you ain't seen nothin' yet." The viewer, the buyer, owns only a piece of the future: the viewer, the buyer, has only a model, only a toy version, of technological development. Science maintains itself as ungraspable, while at the same time promising itself as "dreams money can buy." The toy version of science announces that matter is governable, with money; its secret message is: once matter is governed, then sex will be governed along with it. Having money, then, might be the opposite of the possibility of "buying sex"; having money might be a matter of "buying out" sex, getting rid of sex, the way the businessperson gets rid of the opposition. Toy science allows a person in the role of television viewer to practice other roles: practice for a role in the world of the rich, practice for a role in the world of nobody.

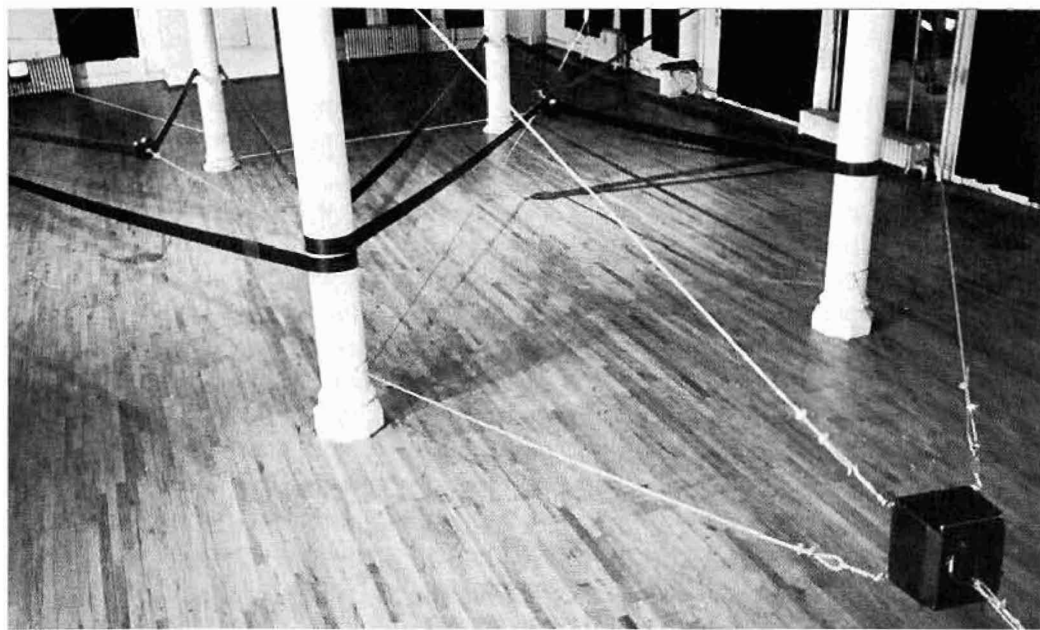
The TV consumer practices the role of the TV producer. The means is the field of home-made video. Theoretically, cable TV is public-access TV—anyone can have a program on cable television. The connotation of home-made video, put on cable television, is: this is television from one home to an-

other—television like a cookbook, like a recipe handed down from grandmother. The proof of this is: you can see the seams show—this is television with its pants down. Home-made television presents itself as evidence and prophecy: this is both the past and the future of television. On the one hand, this is television on-the-cheap, before corporations and advertising slicked it up (but this past is a simulated past: TV came into existence only by means of the money provided by corporations and advertising). On the other hand, this is television by the people and for the people (but this future is an abstract future, without real-time political determinants).

Art video might be placed as a subcategory of home-made video. Or it might be placed on a sliding scale somewhere between home-made video on the one side and regular broadcast television on the other side. Wherever it is located, theoretically, art video is grounded, practically, in America. The fact is: getting hold of video equipment at all, not to mention getting hold of more sophisticated video equipment, is easier for artists living in the United States. Making the choice to do video, then, is the privilege of someone who participates in a power culture. Video art might be considered as American art's last-ditch attempt to retain hegemony (a hegemony that, furthermore, could be retained by employing the style of an American tradition: a push toward more and more airiness, a push for purity, like chasing after Moby Dick), before Europe fought back with neo-expressionism. Neo-expressionism was, for one thing, a last desperate attempt to retain the body in an electronic world where the body was in the process of disappearing—in this sense, neo-expressionism is like jogging, or aerobic dancing. But jogging and aerobic dancing are also badges, proofs, of income and class: the signs of a rising young professional upper-middle class. So neo-expressionism, just as it brought back the body to a world at large that was becoming bodyless, brought back "body," substantiveness, to art at the time it was talked about as being objectless. Neo-expressionism courted collectors by giving them something they could, at the same time, put their minds to and put their hands on: neo-expressionism confirmed the body consciousness of a wealthy class and, at the same time, gave collectors something to do again, something to collect. The desperate American attempt at hegemony, then, advertising video art as the product, was still-born: it concentrated too much on production and not enough on accumulation—since video art was inherently multiple, it couldn't attract the collector, who needed to acquire something unique. The video artist, born in a situation of power, had no power of his/her own, that could go outside the self. Like a spoiled child, then, the video artist had the luxury of playing at power: the video artist could take on all the roles in a solitary world. On the one hand, video art could claim the advantage of the context of regular broadcast television (since this is the tool of big business, video art must have power and influence); on the other hand, at the same time, video art could claim the advantage of home-made video (since the video artist is not part of the commercial television system, the video artist must be the people's artist).

The sensibility drawn to regular broadcast television is willing to give up the name "artist" and slide off into the category of "TV producer." This type of sensibility shows self-sufficiency: it doesn't need the name "art" to justify one's own existence—art is seen as, on the one hand, a bag of tricks (skills, crafts) and, on the other hand, an attitude, a piloting device, that can be applied to any number of roles ("there's no art, we just try to do things the best way we can"). This type of sensibility is comfortable with the notions of "summary" and "condensation" and doesn't feel the need for "experience" (this sensibility would, probably, prefer driving to walking, choose the airplane over the railroad). In a world before video (or, more precisely, further back than that: in a world before mass media), this type of sensibility would have turned, probably—for lack of anything else—to painting: this type of sensibility feels comfortable with walls, and with standing in front of a wall—it feels no need for a floor to walk around on. At the same time, this sensibility feels uncomfortable with walls confined to one kind of place, like the walls of a museum; between the time of the dominance of painting and the time of the dominance of television, this sensibility would be drawn to posters on the sides of buildings—or to (miniature) walls that can be turned, like comic books.

The alternative sensibility—that of the video artist who turns toward home-made video—might leave the arena (of distribution) altogether, and withdraw into the gallery/museum. Video, there, is shown as an exhibit (like a wild animal exhibit): video is brought into the museum and displayed as an artifact of the twentieth century—the way period furniture, for example, is displayed elsewhere in the museum. The sensibility drawn to the gallery/museum is unsure of itself: it needs the terms *art* and *artist* to fall back on. This sensibility has to "gather in" rather than "spread out"; anything, from any field, can be used for art doing, but whatever is used has to be imported into the category of art (rather than allowing the category of art to dissipate itself into other fields). This type of sensibility, in a time before video (before mass media), would have turned, probably, toward sculpture: this sensibility needs a space to be in, needs something tangible to grab on to. This sculpture sensibility might begin by having a tendency to go outside, where it could have the space of town and country to work in—but, once outside, that sensibility is in danger of sliding into the category of "architecture." To stop that slide, and keep for itself the name "art," this sensibility has to resort to an architecture that already exists. This sensibility needs an enclosure into which something can be fit, like squeezing a figure into an alcove. Inside the gallery/museum, the video monitor is placed on a pedestal or base. The video situation is transformed into a theater situation: inside a room, the TV monitor is set up



Vito Acconci, *TV Lives/VD Must Die*, 1978.

in front of rows of seats—the lights are out (video shoots back into the past, into the world of movies). This situation might cause the sculpture sensibility to have nagging doubts: it has kept the name "artist" only to lose the name "sculptor"—"sculpture" slips into "performance art." To preserve the term *sculpture*, this type of sensibility might have to resort to the paradox of "video installation."

Video installation is the conjunction of opposites (or, to put it another way: video installation is like having your cake and eating it, too). On the one hand, "installation" places an artwork in a specific site, for a specific time (a specific duration and also, possibly, a specific historic time). On the other hand, "video" (with its consequences followed through: video broadcast on television) is placeless: at least, its place can't be determined—there's no way of knowing the particular look of all those millions of homes that receive the TV broadcast. Video installation, then, places placelessness; video installation is an attempt to stop time. The urge toward video installation might be nostalgic; it takes airplane travel, where all you can see is sky, and imposes onto it the landscape incidents of a railroad journey. Video installation returns the TV set to the domain of furniture; the TV set, in the gallery/museum, is surrounded by the sculptural apparatus of the installation, the way the TV set, in the home, is surrounded by the furnishings of the room. The difference is: in the home, the TV set is assumed as a home companion, almost unnoticed, a household pet that can be handled and kicked around; the viewer doesn't have to keep his/her eyes focused on the TV screen, the TV set remains on while the viewer (the home body) comes and goes, the viewer goes to get something in the kitchen and brings it back to the TV set. Once a TV set, however, is placed in a sculpture installation, the TV set tends to dominate; the TV set acts as a target—the rest of the installation functions as a display device, a support structure for the light on the screen (the viewer stares into the television set, as if staring into a fireplace). The rest of the installation is in danger of fading away; the rest of the installation is the past that upholds the future (as embodied in the TV set), but the future wins. Video installation starts out by dealing with a whole system, a whole space; but the field, the ground, disappears in favor of the "point," the TV set. The situation seems similar to wanting what you can't have; now that the TV set is camouflaged by the apparatus of an installation, an extra effort is made to find it, to "get the point." The reason for this might be that the conventional location for a television set is in the home; when it is come upon elsewhere, whether inside a gallery/museum or outside, in a store window or a supermarket, the viewer is stopped in his/her tracks: the situation is like that of a visitor from another planet happening upon a TV set—only in this case it is the "other planet (the home, the living-room) that comes upon the viewer, out of the privacy of his/her home and in public. The viewer, seeing the TV set, is brought back home—and here, abstractly, "home" reads the way it could never be allowed to read when surrounded by the customs of living-room furniture: "home" means "resting-place," "the final resting place," the land of the numb/the still/the dead.

If the electronics of TV makes it comparable to science fiction, then the sculpture part of a video installation brings the science fiction down to earth: there's a mix of genres—the genre of science-fiction is brought together with the genre of the *film noir*, the gangster flick. The way a viewer moves around a sculpture, the detective moves over the streetscape looking for clues, finding the body (and, after that, trying to find the agent that caused the body to be considered no longer a "person" but only a "body"). The detective story might drift off into another genre, that of the horror movie—the body becomes the body that couldn't, wouldn't, die. If television posits the body-that-disappears-into-thin-air, then sculpture counters that by positing the body-that-can't-die. Sculpture, while refusing the urge for the supernatural that painting reveals, betrays the urge for something even more unnatural: the urge for permanence, the urge to be the undead. Sculpture, placed under the cover of its father/mother architecture, yearns, finally, to be experienced; it can't always depend on being photographed and documented, because then it would lose its category—sculpture drifts off into painting or photography. This doesn't mean that the only way each person knows sculpture is by experiencing it; of course a person can know it through photographs—but that knowledge is sufficient only because it includes the knowledge that, somewhere, the sculpture is already being experienced by somebody else. (It's not enough to know that

somebody *already has* experienced it, in the past, now that the sculpture no longer exists: in that case, sculpture drifts off into the realm of archaeology.) Sculpture, in order to be experienced, has to be preserved; it has to exist the way a city exists, long enough to be taken for granted. The sculptor, then, whatever other intentions he/she might claim to have, is always engaged in an act of conservatism; though the means might be the apparent flaunting of traditions, the end is the most traditional, the most conservative, of all—making the being that refuses to die. The sculptor, then, who tries to thicken this plot, the sculptor who imports video into his/her object installation, might be a person who's afraid of being outdated, a person embarassed about clinging so hard to the past.

Performance, Video, and Trouble in the Home

KATHY O'DELL

A television producer recently said to me that he thought *The Honeymooners* was the first video art piece ever made. Initially, the comment struck me as glib. But every time I came back to the prescribed content of this essay—early seventies "performance-based video"[1] and its relations to sixties performance art—along came that silly comment, begging for attention. Images of Alice, Ralph, Trixie, and Norton flooded my mind: Ralph trying to protect his home from armed intruders by bombastically brandishing a water pistol; Norton teaching Ralph to dance so that Alice wouldn't be attracted to the young, single dance instructor who had just moved into the building; Ralph loudly admonishing Alice for never "standing behind him" on his harebrained schemes and Alice icily responding, "I'd love to, Ralph, but there's not much room back there."

While these memories were pleasurable, I was hardly convinced they constituted the ancestral roots of video art, and furthermore, my mission was not to enter into a genealogical hunt. Then something struck me about *The Honeymooners*—a certain sort of "trouble in the home," the sort that was of interest to me in the work I was exploring. The trouble in the Kramdens' home was that they rarely left it, and this was the paradoxical crux of the series—although they called themselves the "honeymooners," we never saw them on their honeymoon and whenever they tried to take a vacation (the equivalent of a second honeymoon), the car would break down, Ralph would get hooked into a shady real estate deal on a summer cabin, and so forth. Typical of fifties television agendas, we were meant to believe that the Kramdens were on an extended honeymoon in their marriage, stabilized in and by the home site, which doubled as a holiday site.[2] Atypical, however, was that this holiday was no picnic. With Ralph reverse-stereotyped as "female" hysteric and Alice as "male" rationalist, trouble was constantly brewing. Now, this reversed stereotyping, which could be so easily re-reversed, did not represent any great stride forward in the history of male-female social relations, but in the context of the 1950s, the fact that the notion of gender could be reconstructed at all was a small, significant step.

I am more interested, however, in the subtler psychohistorical implications of *The Honeymooners*. First, since the home was shown as the site of gender's *re*construction, it was suggested that the home is also the site of its *original* construction—a process shown to be problematic by the Kramdens' desire to reverse it. Second, since it was evident that this thing called television was mediating our own subjective positions in the home from which we watched