



KARAOKE CARRION

Few people can honestly claim they have never stood in front of a mirror pretending to be a pop star -- gyrating to overloud music, striking cartoonishly dramatic poses, acknowledging phantom cheers, even becoming genuinely lost in the throes of rapture. This and other rituals of dramatization -- such as "air guitar," lip-synching, and karaoke/sing-along bars--pose a number of interesting questions regarding the audience/performer dialectic and the power (and perversion) of self-expression in the context of the entertainment state and its attendant scourge--consumerism.

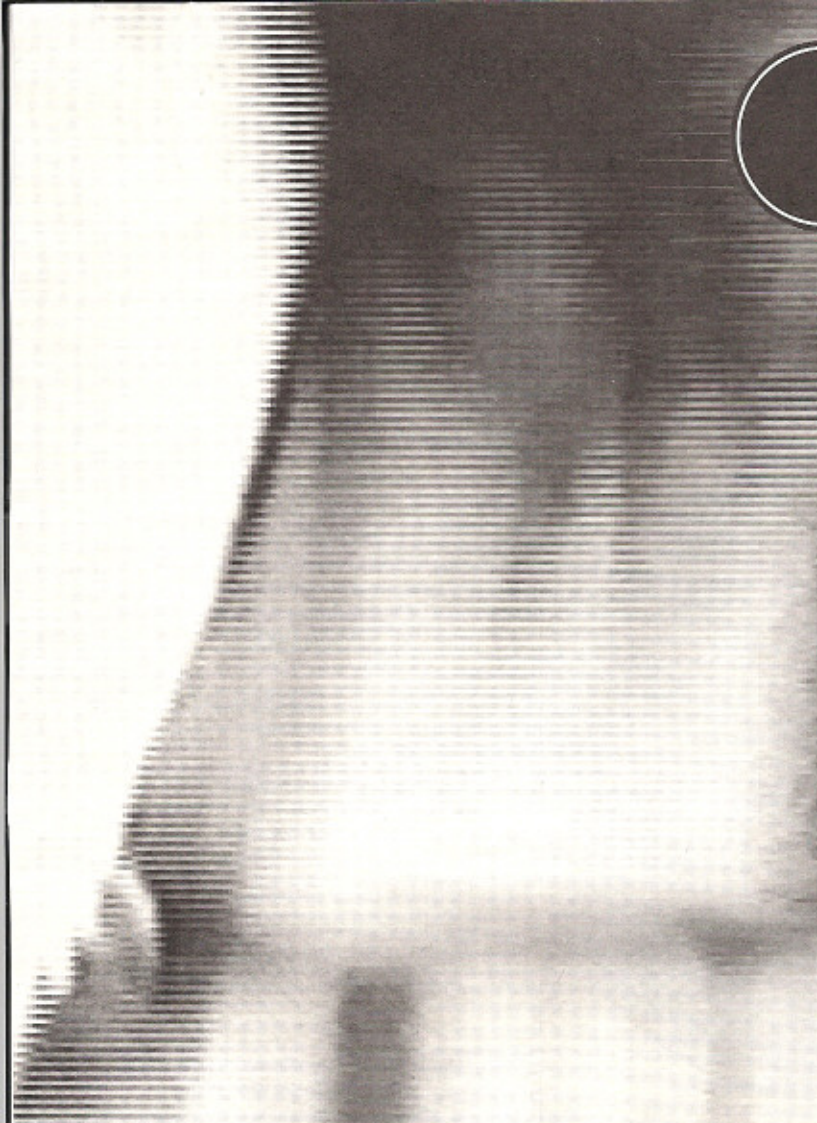
Artist Julia Scher's video series *Karaoke Carrion* is an index of poses enacted in these rituals as well as an ironic sendup of the overwrought, worshipful character of what is -- often simultaneously -- a cathartic experience and a banal expression of adolescent fantasy. Ultimately *Karaoke Carrion* is an investigation of how these seemingly trite activities are, at heart, attempts to locate the ancient, overwhelming urge to gather and sing and celebrate life.

Scher is best known for creating installations in which she uses the paraphernalia of security systems -- guards, equip-

ment, terminology, architecture, codes, sounds, visuals and spaces, as well as bodies under surveillance -- to highlight the environment of relentless surveillance; her installations saturate new technologies in a social setting and open it up as critical space.

Scher's work revolves around the premise that the only way to effectively challenge or counteract the alienating effects of the disciplinary administration of society is to literally re-take some degree of control over those very instruments and techniques to which we have become unwittingly subjected. Her installations look at what it means to police and patrol space by engaging viewers with experiential simulations of watching and being watched.

Surprisingly, Scher's installations of simulated surveillance sites foster highly playful experiences for the audience, who are given a unique opportunity to interact with the apparatuses of control and instantly switch between the roles of watcher and watched. *Karaoke Carrion* is an extension of her video surveillance installations and represents a more internalized perspective on exhibitionism and video mediated consciousness.



forms it into a participatory medium is not just the singing, but the appearance of the song lyrics on a monitor that the entire "audience" can view. In a sense, everyone is really "singing along," even if only one person is actually performing. The familiarity of the song, the often newly discovered lyrics, and the celebratory context in which most karaoke occurs, fundamentally -- if only temporarily -- alters consciousness.

In the prelude to becoming one with the pop cosmos, where the familiar becomes intimate and thoroughly internalized, the karaoke space -- be it in the service of a function like a wedding or bachelor party, or karaoke night at the local bar -- is basted in performance anxiety. The patrons scan the song titles and confer with friends, lovers, and new found acquaintances -- all stand-ins for the arena throngs they probably imagine themselves about to entertain.

Immediately it becomes evident that the rituals of dramatization described above (karaoke, etc.), while driven by an impulse to resist passivity and consumerism, produce artifacts and forums that draw directly from these same constraining forces. These rituals might be the ultimate form of celebrity worship as well as an utter perversion of the communal jam, mainly because they simulate (however ineptly) the very star system responsible for devaluing participation. To parrot the words of a prepackaged teen idol or mimic the calculated postures of a corporation-spawned chanteuse is really to function as the ultimate consumer -- one who is actually possessed by the product. A pessimistic reading might reveal these rituals to be not dramatizations of the communal urge, but rather manifestations of passivity and spectacle that enforce the scarcity of participatory outlets in the present cultural climate.

Karaoke Carrion is an attempt to subsume these arguments through the medium of video and address these rituals literally head on. By appropriating the typical processes of icon worship, Scher is able to both critique and transcend key rituals of dramatization that revolve around popular music. In these pieces, she is a one-woman barrage of everything you ever did in front of a mirror in the throes of pop infatuation but didn't want anyone to see. Hers is a manic, deliberately gawky series of "performances;" inept caricatures --when she lipsynchs she doesn't even pretend to be in synch -- of what is essentially caricatured emotion (she

favors the mannered passion and extreme bombast of such bands as U-2, Live, The Alarm, etc.).

Exaggerated body language and pseudo-gravity are Scher's main "riffs" in these pieces. Her backdrop is decidedly random -- a shelf of unrelated videotapes. The whole look of the performances is similarly stark; it's truly unspectacular, especially in contrast to the grandiose music. She bounces around in a sleeveless shirt and rarely transcends hokeyness. During U2's "In the Name of Love," when the singer hums, she purses her lips as if humming; during a rapturous part ("free at last/free at last"), she tilts her head back as if consumed by passion. She is shot in a static close-up throughout the piece.

But *Karaoke Carrion* is not parody, at least not merely parody. The camera captures real emotion, even though it is mediated through someone else's song, someone else's emotion. The crude camera work and even cruder performance mutates the context of bombastic arena rock -- with its star trappings and effortless technological perfection--and creates a new interpretation (*vis à vis* a simulation) that reveals an authenticity not present in the song itself. This interpretation is basically a synthesis of a readymade artifact and a distanced perspective.

These pieces, despite their seemingly irreverent tone, tap(e) something very personal that is powerful enough to penetrate irony; the distancing actually moves the viewer closer. In other words, the farther away the performer moves from worship and slavish imitation, the closer the viewer gets to glimpsing the song's emotional impact on her, and real self-expression becomes evident. Also, the actual songs in each piece are given a new context and may actually be seen in an entirely new way; they function not as commodities generated by an aloof star machine, but as accompaniment or another instrument in a duet.

The camera and the monitor stimulate performance and provide an immediate opportunity for interaction. This type of motivation is crucial -- especially with karaoke. In this case, media technology, in the guise of leisure equipment, facilitates the creation of a process that provides respite from consuming the charisma of others, and allows us to express and share our own powerful emotions. In other words, because of cheap technology and widespread access to public centers where we can duet with the stars, video has ironically become the ideal means of fulfilling our primal urge to sing a song.

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ADAM QUEST

Preindustrial societies make little distinction between spectator and performer. Communal celebrations, especially those involving music, are geared to full participation and are meant to solidify a communal bond; they must, necessarily, involve everyone in some capacity. In the communal jam everybody actually participates in creating the music and there is no star system. The shaman or master musician is more facilitator than demiurge. His/her function is to bring the crowd together, not stand above it. The social context of the music is inextricable from the music itself; many elements of tribal music, such as polyrhythms and call-and-response, underscore the communal nature of the music and are designed to fulfill its purpose.

Advanced industrial societies have generally dispensed with sanctioned communal rituals and obliterated substantial opportunities for participatory group activity. With significant exceptions, the reflex of the marketplace is to rein in the communal urge and package it through means of performer/spectator separation. This separation has become so entrenched and accepted that its

boundaries have become monolithic. As a result, everyone from the nonchalant couch potato to the art-film devotee to the manic arena-rock supplicant constitutes a vast rabble that, at least in America, is THE dominant class -- the Spectator Class. The Spectator Class is partly defined by its atrophied sense of play.

Still, the communal urge, the need to participate, while effectively buried, has not been exterminated. The primordial dynamics of racial memory -- instinctive thoughts passed down genetically -- have kept intact some semblance of the will to convene. People of all stripes continually demonstrate the existence of a powerful resistance to completely passive modes of consumption. This is the dynamic at work behind the wide variety of forums for personal interpretations of popular music. Pop music is a natural focus for this resistance because its forcefulness and ubiquity often causes it to dissolve the spectator/performer boundary and compel a response. It is a response to passivity and a manifestation of the participatory urge.

The element in karaoke that trans-