



*Disappear, 1972. Film still.*

## **Tooth and Nail**

### **Film and Video 1970-74 by Dennis Oppenheim**

**"It's going somewhere else now..."**  
**The Disappearing Body of Dennis Oppenheim**  
*By Aaron Levy*

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*By Willoughby Sharp*

**Edited by Amy Plumb**



**FABIAN & CLAUDE WALTER GALERIE**

**"It's going somewhere else now..."**

## **The Disappearing Body of Dennis Oppenheim**

Aaron Levy

I don't want to be able to see myself;  
I don't want to be able to see myself anymore;  
I want this part of me to leave, I want this part of me to leave me;  
I want this part of me to go now;  
My eyes can't see see this part of me anymore;  
My eyes won't be able to see this part of me. [...]

-- Dennis Oppenheim, *Disappear*, 1970

In the early 1970s, Dennis Oppenheim was in the vanguard of artists using film and video to investigate themes relating to body and performance. This portfolio features a selection of works from the Aspen Projects, produced between 1970 and 1974, in which Oppenheim uses his own body as a site of experimentation on the personal. In these works the artist enters into an intimate and dynamic dialogue with his body as he explores the boundaries of personal risk, bodily transformation, and interpersonal communication. With the publication of this portfolio in collaboration with the artist's studio, this seminal series of quasi-anthropological performances is now available to the public for the first time on DVD.

We have decided to disseminate the films and videos featured in this portfolio for reasons that may not be entirely self-evident to the viewing public. These works were made at a time when artists were less aware of documentary practices than they are today, and to a certain degree Oppenheim's ambivalence concerning archival preservation continues to the present day. The newly restored prints featured in this portfolio are thus an attempt to stabilize the material condition of the works, so that they may be more actively and widely distributed to viewing publics, and in particular publics not yet reached by the cultural institutions and publications which have presented his work in the past.

Oppenheim conceived the works in this portfolio at a time in the late 1960s and early 1970s when many artists were interested in creating artworks in a public setting with a clearly defined social function. This work diverges from Oppenheim's earlier earthworks, where carved patterns in the landscape integrated the public into his work. In his early film works, however, Oppenheim engages in a series of private experiments on and around his own body. These intimate and perceptive investigations have arbitrary starting points and are of varying duration. In the manner of the historic avant-garde, Oppenheim also avoids easy distinctions in these works between art and life, as well as between practice and performance,

and these films thus resist the status of more formally delineated works of art. In consequence, there may very well be “no distinction,” as Oppenheim suggests in the interview which follows with Willoughby Sharp, “between when a person might be actively engaged in a project and when he might not. You have to ask sometimes; are you doing a piece?”

Oppenheim’s lack of concern for lighting and for the camera accounts for the rough look and feel of the videos and films, as well as the way in which these works have been preserved. These works also illustrate how for Oppenheim the fixed apparatus of the camera was a “passing vehicle” and a nuisance hindering bodily performance and conceptual play. “I have begun,” Oppenheim acknowledged at the time, “to feel that the camera was excess baggage, that it wouldn’t be too difficult to throw it away. For instance, I would consider doing something with my fingers or fingernails, even begin to do it, and then I would have to think about where to put the lights, the camera, all that baggage.” Oppenheim’s disregard for traditional methods of articulating ideas also extended beyond the camera to encompass the medium of film as well, which he viewed as irrelevant to the works themselves. “The fact that one of my pieces was presented as film was a very incidental aspect of it,” Oppenheim states. “It had nothing to do with the idea of the piece. [...] Film placed me back within a traditional spectrum which I would have preferred to avoid.”

*Disappear* (1972), one of the featured works in this portfolio, illustrates Oppenheim’s hesitancy towards recording technologies as well as his interest in testing the traditional limits of video and film in new and unusual ways. As with many of the works featured in the Aspen Projects, *Disappear* was shot by the artist’s own hands and in his own studio, from a single and unedited perspective and an intimate vantage point. In this short black and white film, the artist attempts to make his hand disappear before the camera by shaking it convulsively. From a technological standpoint, Oppenheim attempts to move his hand more rapidly than the medium can record in a given frame. The blurred image of his hand that results, at times an abstraction or vestige of a hand, a mere skeletal structure, thus attests to a certain limit or insufficiency inherent in the medium itself.

Similarly, the monologue mirrors the artist’s attempts to evade the visual and the confines of the self. There are in fact two monologues playing here, both read by the same artist and at the same time. The result is an experience of disorientation that is analogous to the aforementioned visual disorientation and which challenges our capacity to hear everything at once. The artist speaks obsessively of wanting to “leave himself” and of going somewhere else where his hand will “no longer be accessible to sight anymore” and he will not “be able to see” himself. At other times, though, his “eyes can’t see this part of me anymore” as his hand is in fact “going somewhere else now.” This temporal and spatial confusion attests to the fact that

his hand has literally gone “somewhere else,” in that it has become divorced from its image. The perpetual state of motion and meditation that the artist has induced cannot be adequately recorded by the visual and auditory fields, and the relationship between his hand and the image of his hand is revealed as ephemeral and out of phase.

*Disappear* is more than just a film about Oppenheim’s compulsive desires and ritualistic or meditative attempts to get beyond himself. *Disappear* attests to the prevalence of discourses about risk and exhaustion in the historic and contemporary avant-garde, as well as related discourses about escaping finitude and mortality altogether in the affirmation of life. The works can also be understood as an analytical investigation of the artist’s own body in the manner of Günter Brus’s *Zerreisprobe* (1970) or Descartes’ *Meditations*. In these works, the protagonist experiments on his own limbs in exploring the limits and possibilities of the self. Likewise, Oppenheim supersedes his own identity and iconography in his work with such elementary tools of investigation as the body, a camera, and a dramatic orientation. In so doing, he introduces, as Osvaldo Romberg suggests in relation to work by Günter Brus, consciously or unconsciously, an art of simple and yet new means for generations of artists to come.

That the works included in this portfolio may appear to some viewers as distressed and aged attests not just to the artist’s disregard for the camera and the medium of film as “all that baggage.” It also attests to the ways in which Oppenheim deliberately resists a “professional” sensibility and commercial look both of which have become hallmarks of much contemporary art. The distressed quality of the films also reminds us of the many analog transfers and reproductions through which this work has survived to the present day. Throughout this process, over the course of more than thirty-five years, profound changes have taken place that have altered the color, clarity, and even duration of the works themselves. Rather than obscuring our relationship to the original works in question, these material transformations and developments are themselves part of the work and caution us against being overly nostalgic for an unblemished “original” state. The continuous distribution and consumption of the tapes through exhibitions and other manners of presentation accounts for much of their distressed quality, and is part of the life and genealogy of the works themselves.

In an essay accompanying Oppenheim’s 1992 retrospective at PS1, Thomas McEvilley calls attention to the many “discontinuities and ruptures” that mark Oppenheim’s oeuvre in general. By creating works that evade the expectation of developmental sequence or traceable progression, Oppenheim has given rise to an altogether different relationship to history that more accurately reflects the changing and volatile socio-political era in which he participates. The discontinuities

that mark his work also call into question the “trademark” practices and identities that are a defining characteristic of the work of many artists today. In his curatorial essay accompanying an exhibition of these videos at Slought Foundation, Romberg similarly highlights the artist’s inventiveness in working outside the boundaries of so-called “signature style.”

Oppenheim created the Aspen Projects, after all, to question the fixed position and authority of the gallery or museum, as well as the reliance of certain artists on traditional methods of articulating ideas. “One has to alienate oneself to consider the gallery as a neutral place,” Oppenheim argued at the time, “and thoughts aren’t neutral, they’re dynamic.” Just as Oppenheim felt that the static position of the gallery was not conducive to the dynamic processes by which cultural practices are made and understood, so too the design and distribution of this portfolio has been motivated by a general interest in evading typical patterns of cultural circulation.

This publication has also been organized out of a general concern that access to important conceptual works, such as those featured herein, have too long been dependent on the vagaries of curatorial selection or institutional exhibition policy. Museums and collecting institutions, perhaps more than ever before in the history of art, are unable to exhibit today even a small selection of the works that reside in their collections. In publishing this portfolio, we cast an ironic gaze on an institutional logic whereby the acquisition of cultural product deliberately exceeds the institutional capacity to exhibit. Institutions, rather than the artists or the publics which they represent and serve, are too often primary arbiters of visibility and value.

Oppenheim’s oeuvre has always explored and challenged the ways in which knowledge is conventionally produced and disseminated, and this is perhaps most evident in the artist’s conviction that his work gives rise to “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.” By using his own body as his medium, he becomes both the subject and object of his work, the sender as well as receiver.

Just as Oppenheim’s work explores new and unusual forms of communication and address, we hope that this portfolio contributes to an existing discourse about alternative possibilities for cultural production and reception. In Oppenheim’s *Transfer Drawings* and *Identity Transfers*, for instance, the artist deposits and retrieves information from his daughter Kristin and his son Erik. In so doing, Oppenheim presents the act of communicating with others as a physical and biological extension of the self. Likewise, we encourage you to experiment by viewing the works featured in this collection outside the confines of a gallery or museum, and in your own home, community, and places of work, alone or in dialogue with your children and parents, colleagues and friends, neighbors and strangers.

## Dennis Oppenheim Interviewed by Willoughby Sharp

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Willoughby Sharp: From the summer of 1967 to 1969, you were concerned with increasingly large-scale earth-oriented projects, ranging from the pieces in the snow at Fort Kent, Maine, to the *Cancelled Crop* project at Finsterwolde, Holland. Can you pinpoint a time when you made the shift in focus towards your own body which has been a pivotal feature of your work for the last two years?

Dennis Oppenheim: Yes, I had begun to think in those terms during my one-man exhibition at the Yvon Lambert Gallery, Milan, in early summer 1969. One of the most important pieces I did there was *Sound Enclosed Land Area*, which consisted of a sound tape of my footsteps while I walked around a selected area of the city for a specific time following a map. At this particular time, I made a major re-evaluation concerning my physical interaction with a material. It implied a re-acceptance of the manual, physical aspect of art making which had been totally relinquished when I based my land projects within a conceptual framework.

When you compare a piece of sculpture, an object on a pedestal, to walking outdoors for ten minutes and still being on top of your work, you find an incredible difference in the degree of physicality and sensory immersion. The idea of the artist literally being *in* the material, after spending decades manipulating it, appealed to me.

WS: Was it about this time that you made your first film, *Backtrack*?

DO: Yes, that was executed on Jones Beach in September 1969. I had always conceived of the piece in terms of filmic documentation. The project acted as a release: it had been years since I had consciously focused on a physical activity. My aim there was to fuse the spanning of the land with the act of making. The body had turned tool, its maneuvers, weight, and gestures being recorded on beach sand. I wanted this film to consolidate my changed aesthetic position. I was trying to get as close as possible to the material that was supporting me, to interact directly with it instead of vicariously activating an ego-system, to become the sole stimulus operating on a primitive physical level.

WS: What other films did you make in the Fall of '69?

DO: *Wrist, Arm and Asphalt*. The use of film was very difficult for me to accept. Throughout 1968/69, I had the sense of trying to get further away from any traditional usage of material. I felt a great incongruity between my position and almost everything that was a product of the art system. I think this was also sensed by a

lot of artists involved in this radical break, in terms of how their work related to what was developing contemporaneously.

WS: What are you referring to?

DO: Painting and other sculptural concerns. I've always thought that the aims of the earth-oriented work were far more ambitious on most levels than the process-oriented work, which reeked of associations with a past aesthetic that we understood only too well.

The fact that one of my pieces was presented as a film was a very incidental aspect of it. It had nothing to do with the *idea* of the piece. I felt my past interests were far more expensive in terms of methods of articulating ideas. Film placed me back within a traditional spectrum which I would have preferred to avoid.

WS: Did that relate to the fact that films had to be shown in a gallery context?

DO: I thought the large-scale work should be outside this range of accessibility. After the radical move had been made, filming the work tended to demythify it on a negative level. The work made different demands upon the spectator. It suggested becoming part of it, flying out to see it. All these aspects of the experience could still be generated. Whereas the static position of the gallery is the first thing I confront with every show. I must immediately condition my thoughts to a particular place and time. In other words, one has to alienate oneself to consider the gallery as a neutral place, and thoughts aren't neutral, they're dynamic.

Looking back at these early pieces, I see them stemming from interests in certain phenomena, in specific perceptual frameworks for which film was a passive vehicle. Recently I have begun to feel that the camera was excess baggage, that it wouldn't be too difficult to throw it away.

WS: What do you mean?

DO: For instance, I would consider doing something with my fingers or fingernails, even begin to do it, and then I would have to think about where to put the lights, the camera, all that baggage. Which usually ends up distorting the project so badly you can't recognize it. These are all retrograde factors.

WS: Yes, but doesn't an idea *become* a work through being subjected to the camera? I think we haven't reached the point where we can accept some activity as art unless it is presented through the media, and is thus capable of being verified by others. Otherwise art remains private and doesn't exist in a social situation which, after all,

is a necessary feature of its being communicated.

DO: Well, let's take a situation not unknown to the dancer, akin to the procedural exercises a dancer would go through—practice. Training, developing skills in order eventually to make a presentation. Consider that in a sculptural context, with the artists practicing eight hours a day six days a week for one year to be able to develop a particular position or genre. Then one could say that behind his movement lay the vestiges of ten thousand hours of practice. He could then demonstrate this position at will, any time. To me something like that makes an opposition to the rigor of film. In some cases, there is really no distinction between when a person might be actively engaged in a project and when he might not. You have to ask sometimes; are you doing a piece?

*Arm and Wire* incorporates a very close shot of my arm rolling across electrical cording, receiving the impression on the skin. Basically I make no distinction between the material and the tool. The impressions produced by the expenditure of downward pressure are returned to their source and registered on the material that expends the energy. It was this economy that I found interesting. *Arm and Wire* was an attempt to make *what* you are making and *how* you are making it one and the same thing. It consolidated output and compressed it into a single act.

At the same time I made *Wrist*, which involved the slow flexing of my wrist constantly fading on to land bearing a morphological resemblance to my wrist. Shortly afterwards, I did the *Wound* series, which began by using a scar on my leg as a historic catalyst. Again, the focus is upon direct contact, similar on these grounds to *Backtrack* but engaging a past event. The aim of the *Wound* series was to correlate a specific body surface to an exterior location. When my body met the land, the scar which was formed became a permanent record of the transaction. It was also a testimony of the downward pressure exerted by a ten-year-old body. What also occurred was a displacement; the body falls to the ground, the leg makes contact with a sharp rock. The rock is not changed—the external material does not register the transaction. The leg, the tool, does. It's like pounding a nail, not to merge it into wood, but to make an impression on the hammer. The scar is a potent recapitulation of a point in past history. For me activity on land is *charged*, not passive like processed steel. Land holds traces of a dynamic past, which the artist may allow to enter his work if he so wishes.

WS: What are some of the broader repercussions of these insights?

DO: In a sense, I am creating 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. And these are insights which pulled me away from my previous

concerns. Most of the new projects reinforce my interest in precluding the objectification of energy through exterior material. Understanding the body as both subject and object permits one to think in terms of an entirely different surface. It creates a shift in direction from the creation of solid matter to the pursuit of internal or surface change. With this economy of output one can oscillate from the position of instigator to victim. Take the phenomenon of grabbing: instead of grabbing clay, you grab your stomach. For the first time, instead of imposing form manually, you are feeling what it is like to be made. You might have felt your hands picking up a piece of wood and staking it, but you have never felt what the wood felt.

WS: What other works expressed these concerns?

DO: The fingernail project was prior to these. There was an installation of my detached nail wedged between some gallery floorboards and viewed under a stereomicroscope. Our bodies are constantly generating material, building surfaces, changing physiognomy. The fingernail project was a method of tapping into the body's productive cycle. My first approach to this was intuitive and dealt with a sense of scale—the fact that this minute part of me would constitute an exhibition. Looking at the nail through the stereomicroscope made it appear intensely structural, a brutal protuberance, emanating from a sea of lacquered flooring. Also included in the installation was a sound track of the nail tapping on the floor, vestiges of a sound made impossible to duplicate due to the severance. The fact that this material, once part of the artist, had been introduced into this vast space and existed as an installation excited me. It also incorporated a transaction, since a splinter from the floorboard was inserted into the same finger, so the act, as it were, cancelled itself out.

WS: I saw your body becoming the place in that piece. Was that also true of *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn*?

DO: That was a kind of inversion or reversal of energy expenditure. The body was placed in the position of recipient, exposed plane, a captive surface. The piece has its roots in the notion of color change. Painters have always artificially instigated color activity. I allowed myself to be painted, my skin became pigment. I could regulate its intensity through control of the exposure time. Not only would my skin tones change, but its change registered on a sensory level as well—I could feel the act of becoming red. I was tattooed by the sun. You simply lie down and something takes over. It's like plugging into the solar system, communicating with an element.

WS: What about *Deformity* and the nail sharpening?

DO: *Deformity* was done in Aspen in summer 1970. Again, my interests centered

around the proximity of material to the force that changes it, the material being part of the same system that initiates change. This is especially true of *Nail Sharpening*. The accidental dropping of the brick on my big toe ten years ago resulted in a permanent deformation of the keratin tissue. [...] It provoked a certain amount of discussion about the role which the artist was assuming with respect to his material.

WS: What do you mean?

DO: Potentially, it suggested an inward action resulting in permanent physical derangement.

WS: Do you see this as comparable in any way to Acconci's work?

DO: No; this piece is different in terms of longevity. This is a permanent recapitulation of a particular time in history. The same is true of *Wound*. It's a mark you always carry around with you. If I were interested in directly precipitating an act of downward force, I would consider carefully the elements of impact, response of tissue under various kinds of pressure, the effect of stress and shock to the nervous center. I would really want to form that nail, and decode what was happening to it.

WS: What other things are you thinking about now?

DO: *Color Application for Chandra* was also conceived along these lines, although there I was also dealing with language structure, the idea of throwing my voice, getting information inside my daughter and then transferring it to the parrot—teaching the parrot to talk by means of her voice.

WS: What is the connection between that idea and the *Identity Transfers*?

DO: The first of those pieces show my daughter Kristin transferring the papillary ridges of her thumb on to my thumb. I then transfer this print to my father's thumb and he terminates the process by transferring it on to the ground. It's a linear regression, going back through the members of a family until an impasse is reached.

WS: How about the mosquito piece?

DO: That was *Material Interchange for Joe Stranard*, done in Aspen last summer. I captured a female mosquito, placed it inside a glass jar and laid it over the forearm of Joe Stranard, an old friend. It eventually bit him. Think what's happening here. The mosquito is filling its body with a material lying below the surface on which it's standing, and then becoming airborne. This involves an incredible material displacement. This foreign body is now carrying your blood around. Your blood now

conforms to the interior configuration of an insect; it places part of you in a state of aerial suspension. Imagine that mosquito entering a small opening with that material, your suddenly existing on that microcosmic level.

WS: You are also exercising a certain amount of control in that situation because you are forcing the mosquito to do something it would do naturally.

DO: Certainly, that's enough. Another project called *Indirect Energy Distribution* poses the same problems. I asked my ten-year-old daughter Kristin to bend a small sapling to the ground. As far as I was concerned, I was bending that tree. The interesting thing about using your offspring is that they are biological extensions of yourself—you can consider them as part of you. So it's as if I am bending the tree by passing information to my daughter. It's like being in two places as one. I become both sender and receiver. It gets close to magic. [...] The relationships between your offspring and yourself are not something you can easily account for... they have an essential mystery.

WS: When did you do the *Gingerbread Man* film?

DO: In February 1971. It's a ten-minute performance in which I eat three gingerbread men. Originally I was going to eat them and try to reclaim them, to conjure them up through my digestive tract.

WS: Vomit?

DO: Yes, and remake the figures.

WS: How did the film work out?

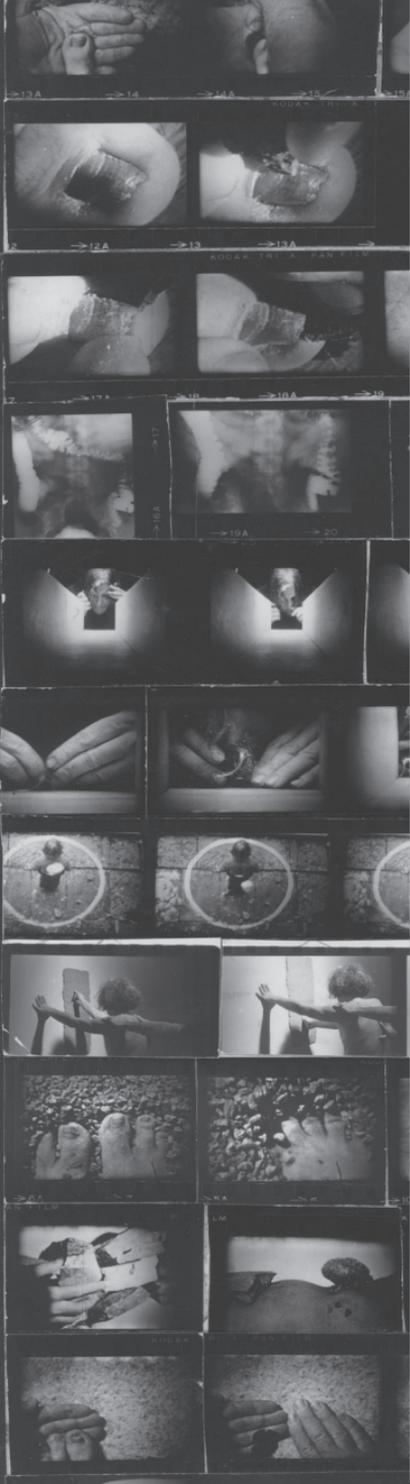
DO: Well, it doesn't show the convulsions. I was interested in the fact that this edible material, in symbolic human form, was being subjected to and shaped by the linearity of the intestinal tract. I would eat one, and then another, and then the other, suggesting some process for stacking one on top of the other.

WS: Maybe we could end with some of your latest projects.

DO: One is an electron microscope with an attached video projector which will show a live specimen that I will produce internally.

WS: You are getting deeper and deeper into your body.

DO: Well, these concerns sort of overlap and I tend to go back to things and revive ideas that push one ahead.



*Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964-1977*, an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 2001, attests to Oppenheim being among the first artists to introduce the projected image into the gallery space. His early installations consisted of film projects projected side by side on a single wall, simulating a split screen effect. When large video projectors were not available, two identical monitors were placed side by side, usually on the floor. The two separate but simultaneous images call into question the screen as a seamless view of reality.

It is important to note that the projects featured in this portfolio were originally recorded on either film or video. Although the film material still exists in the artist's personal archives, all of these projects have been converted to video over the years for ease of viewing.

Many of these projects were filmed during the summer months of 1970 and 1971 in Aspen, Colorado, when Oppenheim lectured and taught at the Aspen School for the Arts. These works have been catalogued in different ways, beginning with their conception by the artist as the *Aspen Projects* in two parts for a retrospective at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montreal, Canada in 1979. Later, they were conceived of as six separate programs distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix. Subsequently, the artist's studio incorporated additional works and re-mastered the VHS tapes for a new total of eight programs. The works have been re-mastered and recompiled again by Slought Foundation and the artist's studio for this new DVD edition.

Whether this is your first time viewing the work of Dennis Oppenheim or you have viewed his work in the past, we hope that you experience it with the immediacy and duration that is the premise of this portfolio.