

## SKIM FLICK

Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer on Lawrence Weiner's *Water in Milk Exists*

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Lawrence Weiner, *Water In Milk Exists*, 2008, color digital video, 22 minutes 52 seconds. Production still.

**LAWRENCE WEINER WAS** apparently pulled out of adult-filmmaking retirement to make the new skin flick *Water in Milk Exists*. I can't imagine he would have needed all that much coaxing from Swiss Institute director Gianni Jetzer and photographer Noritoshi Hirakawa (the movie's producer), who both instigated the project. After all, this nonnarrative porn is full of twenty-somethings fucking, sucking, playing, and masturbating in the Swiss Institute's SoHo loft and a Chinatown photo studio. Scenes alternate between often-thrilling hardcore porn and contrived and tedious philosophical musings about "personal definitions of reality" and "string theory." Like a switch flicked too soon, stimulation teasingly turns on and off.

The materiality of conjoined bodies begets the materiality of language—or maybe it's the other way around. Either way, the stress is on materials from which one can build structures. Flesh and sex make up the landscape in which Weiner presents text and graphics from the 2006 children's book he made for his grandson, *Henry the Navigator in a Sea of Sand*, which presents his hopes for the child to build a structure to protect him from the elements. But when the book's central rhyme—"Patty cake, patty cake, builders plan, build us a structure as best as you can"—is repeated as a chant egging on sex, Weiner seems to ask what constitutes a structure at all, whether physical or psychological, and implies that an orgasm can be seen as a material and an erection as a structure. At its best, *Water in Milk Exists* builds hardness and wetness in the viewer, structures of desire and pleasure that embody, contra *Henry the Navigator*, vulnerability, disclosure, entry, intimacy, and exposure.

The title may suggest liquidity and wetness as a body's primary motivation and aspiration. There are certainly enough blow jobs in the twenty-two-minute film to suggest that water may be spit and milk could be cum, one mixed up with the other. The idea of getting the juices flowing and moving bodies into one another circulates, as undulating red arrows superimposed over scenes of sex describe the directional movement of blood flow, action, energy, stimulation, and visual interest. We see the gleam and hear the sounds of bodies getting wet. Combining the pornographic and the discursive, wetness serves as a metaphor for being turned on (physically and intellectually engaged).

*Water in Milk Exists* wants to offer discourse as a turn-on of its own. Structurally, the film sets up dialectical exchanges between wet and dry, liquidity and solidity, hot and cold, turn-ons and turnoffs. Unfortunately, the mannered dialogue inserted amid scenes of fucking left me dry. But a deeper, richer structural tension is at play on the level of language between literalness and metaphor. Surely the literal is at work when actors question each other midcoitus (“Is this specific or general reality?”), but its more compelling function here is to emphasize Weiner’s proposition that the sexually explicit and the linguistically explicit are flip sides of a political act of exposure. Despite Weiner’s professed antipathy for metaphor, which he has characterized as a politically regressive mode that takes for granted dominant value structures in order to be understood, I consistently access his work on the level of the metaphoric, the poetic, the imagistic, the enigmatic, and the suggestive. Like riddles, his language thrives on its metaphoric possibilities. The movie’s closing voice-over, layered in repetitions of Weiner’s baritone voice, ends on a distinctly melancholic note of poetry: “There’s a woman in the window with a candle shaped like her . . . such is the sadness of life.”

*A number of 1970s-era film posters selected by Lawrence Weiner are on view at the [Swiss Institute](#), New York, until July 19. A DVD of *Water In Milk Exists* is available for purchase from the gallery.*