

# Lux

Edited by Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor A Decade of Artists' Film and Video

lux

Edited by Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor **A Decade of Artists' Film and Video**

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YYZ Books is an alternative Canadian press dedicated to publishing critical writings on art and culture. YYZ Books is associated with YYZ Artists' Outlet, an artist-run centre that presents challenging programs of visual art, film, video, performance, lectures and publications.

Pleasure Dome is a year-round film and video exhibition group dedicated to the presentation of experimental film and video by independent artists. Pleasure Dome has been committed to exhibiting local, national and international film and video since 1989. Programs often feature works of shorter length and smaller format. Pleasure Dome also publishes critical texts on media artists and their work.

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Cover Image: Donigan Cumming, *Cut the Parrot*, 1996 (Video still)

Back Cover Image: Pleasure Dome Open Screening, July 21, 1995. Photo: John

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# Introduction

*Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor*

Often introductions are cast as apologies. The authors or editors let us know that they have not treated their subject with sufficient breadth or depth, that despite years of rigorous research so much was left uncovered, more questions raised than answered, and so on. All that is good and solid and profound within the book in question is credited to colleagues and mentors, while these editors—who by now appear more smarmy than humble—will only take credit for the mistakes, distortions, and flaws.

Well, no apologies here. (We may have some regrets, but we'll keep those to ourselves.) *Lux* gathers together the most vital and exciting articles, commentaries, interviews, scripts, and artist projects relating to the last ten years of artists' film and video that we could find or commission. Not the most important, seminal, or representative documents, but rather the ones we find most exciting and vital.

In this way, *Lux* is a print analogue to the exhibition activities of Pleasure Dome. Since 1989 Pleasure Dome has been bringing together some of the best fringe film and video from around the block and around the world and finding a home for work that might otherwise not be shown. Although the programming collective that has shaped the 150 programs presented throughout the 1990s has changed frequently, Pleasure Dome's *raison d'être* has not: to seek out the most exciting and vital film and video work and show it to people.

We've used the activities of Pleasure Dome as a lens with which to focus this book. These activities constitute a community—not only of people, but also of ideas and discourses. This anthology isn't concerned with Pleasure Dome itself, but with the ideas and discourses which have rhizomatically come together around the organization/community. Despite the inclusion of a number of academic essays, we would like to minimize the distinction between primary and secondary texts, between an artist's work and a critic's commentary on that work. We want to keep the line between artist and critic as blurry as we think it is in contemporary practice. We want to think of these traditionally separated activities as being collegial and parallel.

Okay, maybe we will reveal some regrets: we regret that this anthology isn't even longer. While it was never our goal to be comprehensive, we wish that more artists and ideas could have found representation here. More ideas, more art, more video, more film, more thinking, more writing, more audience members. But for now, *Lux*.

Steve Reinke

Tom Taylor

Toronto, 2000

EPHEMERA Tom Taylor

next >>>

*The Physics of Love, DIME BONDER*





Top to Bottom: a private patch of Blue, Tracy  
GERMAN, ReEntry, CARL BROWN, Sister, KIKI THORNE



liar



**Top to Bottom:**  
*Bullets For Breakfast*, HOLLY FISHER,  
*Modern Love*, COLIN CAMPBELL, *Playboy Voodoo*,  
TESSA HUGHES, FREELINDO RIND ELIA TROVANO,  
*The Physics of Love*, DINE BONDOR



*In The Form of The Letter "X", MIKE CARTMELL*



The author has internalized experimental film and video to the degree that her unconscious accurately charts developments in the scene over the past decade. Dreams recorded over the last ten years uncannily reflect shifts in independent media cultures: the shift from a linguistic to a phenomenological bent; the seemingly opposed move from a visual to an information culture; changing debates in the politics of identity; the shifting interest in sexual representation. Her dreams also reflect the position of Canadian film and video in relation to an international and U.S.-dominated art world. Above all, they celebrate the myriad of small, quirky, rebellious, anarchic—yet easily overlooked, indeed repressed—image-worlds that comprise ten years of programming at Pleasure Dome and

# Ten Years of Dreams About Art

*Laura J. Marks*

All dreams guaranteed dreamed by the author.

This marginal excursion into Peircean semiotics is intended to help us understand aesthetic developments in experimental film and video of the 1990s in terms of the dynamic of emergence, struggle, resolution, and re-emergence. C.S. Peirce's semiotic theory, unlike the better-known Saussurean theory, allows us to think of signs as existing at different removes from the world as we experience it, some almost identical to raw experience, some quite abstract. For Peirce the real appears to us in three modes, each at a more symbolic remove from phenomena, like layers of an onion: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Firstness, for Peirce, is a "mere quality," such as "the color of magenta, the odor of attar, the sound of a railway whistle, the taste of quinine, the quality of the emotion upon contemplating a fine mathematical demonstration, the quality of feeling of love, etc."<sup>1</sup> Firstness is something so emergent that it is not yet quite a sign: we can't see red itself, only something that is red. Secondness is for Peirce where these virtual qualities are actualized, and this is always a struggle. In the actual world, everything exists through opposition: this and not that, action-reaction, etc. Secondness is the world of brute facts. Thirdness is where signs take part in mental operations that

make general statements about qualities and events: it is the realm of interpretation and symbolization. The attitudes toward the world of the three kinds of sign are perceptive, active, reflective. Gilles Deleuze beautifully explicates the relationship among Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness by observing them among the Marx Brothers:

The three brothers are distributed in such a way that Harpo and Chico are most often grouped together, Groucho for his part looming up in order to enter into a kind of alliance with the two others. Caught in the indissoluble group of three, Harpo is the 1, the representative of celestial affects, but also already of infernal impulses, voraciousness, sexuality, destruction. Chico is 2: it is he who takes on action, the initiative, the duel with the milieu, the strategy of effort and resistance.... Finally, Groucho is the 3, the man of interpretations, of symbolic acts and abstract relations.... He is the master of reasoning, of arguments and syllogisms which find a pure expression in nonsense: "Either this man is dead, or my watch has stopped" (he says, feeling Harpo's pulse in *A Day at the Races*).<sup>2</sup>

Dreams, of course, are highly condensed mental images, and thus chock-full of Thirdness. But in dreams we are immobilized and cannot physically react to the provocative signs they give us: dreams concentrate affect, or the feelings of Firstness in our bodies.

## Best Musicians Are Three Bugs

**AUGUST 29, 1989** I dream that the best jazz musicians in the world are three bugs. One is a spider who plays clarinet and is like Charlie Parker, one is named Habermas. They float into a huge pool, on a raft, and begin playing and the audience goes wild. They are very wise and give us to think how advanced bugs can be. I knew one of them and was a little bit in love with it, and I was crying and crying, maybe because I knew the bug would be killed, maybe because of the passing of all things.

There is a handful of small programming venues worldwide, including Toronto's Pleasure Dome, that devote themselves to the most marginal and evanescent of moving-image media. Why is this kind of programming valuable from the point of view of the larger culture? Some of the works and artists will eventually be taken up by the broader art world. More important, experimental film and video is a microcosmic laboratory of the most important developments in culture—experimental makers get to all the issues years, or decades, before mainstream media get hold of them. But finally this work is important because it is not valuable from the point of view of culture at large. While it's common to say that reproducible media do not have "aura," that sense that the art object is a living being, single-print and low-circulation films and videos have an aura denied to mass-circulation media. Experimental programming venues nourish short films and videos, works in low-budget and obsolete media, filmic detritus

rescued from landfills—in short, works that have aura in inverse proportion to their commercial value. Pleasure Dome revives works that are ephemeral or forgotten, films that have been censored, banned and burned. Like bugs on a raft, they are precious because they are imperiled.

## Brains of Love

**DECEMBER 4, 1989** I dream that I am in a crowd of people, Japanese and foreigners, at the station by the My City department store in Tokyo. There's a stall where for a 9000-yen piece we can buy a new brain. There are only two of them, it's a kind of last-chance deal. A tall young clean-cut guy with glasses buys one immediately to go to the vending machine. I am trying to decide whether to take this rare opportunity to get this new brain. If I don't take it, my own brain would be reduced by 50 percent. I am trying to decide how important my intelligence is to me, since after all I would still have love, and love of beauty, and be more simple: I have a mental image of living in a cottage. Also I don't feel I need the extra years of life the new brain would give me.

The choice between brains and love was a central struggle for filmmakers in the early 1990s. Some insisted on using their media as intellectual tools on the model of written intelligence. This is why so many works from this end of the decade are characterized by scrolling text and quotations from important scholars: purchased brains. At this period art schools, film funders, and art magazines were telling young artists that being a "dumb artist" was no longer a viable choice. Artists were now expected to issue their own considered statements and locate themselves within a verbal intellectual milieu. Work suffered as a result. A few brave others accepted the apparent deterioration of their brains as a consequence of love. For example, John Porter and George Kuchar, two Pleasure Dome regulars throughout the decade, generated huge numbers of films and videos that seemed to be produced from pure passion for the media, rather than from particular ideological or aesthetic agendas. Yet both these filmmakers have internalized the logic of filmmaking so profoundly that it informs even their most seemingly artless work. As a result Porter's and Kuchar's films and videos, and those of others who followed this route, are fertile with ideas, even if the artists themselves are not extremely articulate in interviews.

The verbal-art phenomenon is a case of Thirdness preceding Secondness: judgments and symbolic pronouncements, such as "Film should not/should offer visual pleasure," generate a course of action. This top-heavy semiotic configuration is dangerous for artists because it tends to backfire, since Thirdness is not a stable

state but generates new and unforeseen states of Secondness and Firstness. For example, numerous feminist works from the late '80s and early '90s, in a double reaction to the pronouncement above, made "unpleasurable" works that caused audiences to howl in amusement or "pleasurable" works that made us feel we were being bullied. In contrast, work that luxuriates in Secondness, in the realm of simple action — like Porter's time-lapse films, *Toy Catalogue* versions, and *CINEFUGE* versions, and Kuchar's weather diaries and innuendo-laden video visits with artists — generates all kinds of conceptual responses in the minds of audiences.

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## History of Cars and Boats

**JUNE 9, 1990** I dream of an artist's book where each page is a thin wooden slab with a wood-burned picture. There are pictures of cars from five-year intervals, beginning in 1920, and pictures of boats in five year intervals. If you flip the pages like a flip book you can see a little animation of the evolution of car and boat design.

Postmodernism malingered into the 1990s, and with it the disempowering notion that it was impossible for artists to produce their own new images. Many filmmakers looked to found and archival images as sources of fresh meaning. While any image they produced themselves seemed to arrive already encoded in the sign systems of the dominant culture, archival images had a kind of strangeness and excessiveness that resulted from their codes having been forgotten. Archival images had a way of deconstructing themselves, because their codes, once implicit, were now humorously obvious. Scavengers/archivists Jack Stevenson (in 1993) and Rick Prelinger (in 1996 and 1997) visited Pleasure Dome to uncarton their precious collections of 1930s stag movies, 1950s sex-ed films, and home movies to be rediscovered. Craig Baldwin took advantage of '50s B science fiction movies for their connotations of the homogeneous nation facing invasion by aliens, in *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991). In *Escape in Canada* (1993) Mike Hoolboom served up archival U.S. propaganda about Canada with a solarized parsley garnish.

The postmodern dilemma mentioned here is that the entire Real seems to exist in the realm of Thirdness, the general idea that engulfs all particulars. According to the Baudrillardian logic by which many people were seized in this period, the meaning of everything that we perceive has already been encoded, indeed dictated in the form of what Peirce calls a legisign. If, as Peirce writes, the recipe for apple pie exists in the realm of Thirdness, but the particular apples used are Second, then postmodernism told us that there were no apples anymore, only recipes.<sup>3</sup> Thirdness can be paralyzing, but, as when these artists treat the over-symbolized old recipes as raw material, it can generate new signs, such as the arousal and nausea that are sure indicators of Firstness.

## Dealing with Regeneration

**APRIL 13, 1991** My dream is set on the wooded grounds of a college campus. A cultivated flowerbed has been burnt, and an Asian student is complaining to my husband about it. But there are iris shoots growing up through the charred surface, and my husband says no, it's good, it's something to pray about. He starts saying a beautiful Aboriginal prayer, and hundreds of students are listening. I'm standing ankle-deep in a pool, and I notice there are lots of speckled brown tadpoles becoming both little fish and long-legged speckled brown birds. I bend over and say to them, "You guys are so *tiny!*" An "Amish" guy says sternly, "Shh!"

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Art movements, including movements in film and video, tend to become reified almost as soon as they are born. From the scorched earth of an idea that appears to have been collectively done to death rises a tender new idea—and in turn that evolves into its own order and comes to dominate the field. Programmers face the challenge both to chart new movements as they appear and pay attention to the even more marginal work, which may be the sign of something new, of unexpected evolutions. One way to do this was to host open screenings and "new works" events without premeditated themes: there was no agenda but an interest in what people are up to. Another was to act as a *salon des refusés* from the big-name festivals. Pleasure Dome also encouraged artists to indulge their most impressionable states in frequent screenings of low-end punk work by art gangs like J.D.s (in 1990) and Abbatoir (in 1992) and in the "Puberty Film Show," featuring the don't-wanna-grow-up medium of super 8, in fall 1995.

Before even Firstness there is a degree zero, a point where everything is possible, where anything can evolve into anything else. Peirce wrote, "The present pure zero is prior to every first.... It is the germinal nothing, in which the whole universe is involved and foreshadowed."<sup>4</sup> It is only when perception seizes upon something that it enters the cycle of signs. Firstness lasts for only a flash before it is seized upon by perception, and in turn by action, and before we can say "hey!" it is taken up symbolically in Thirdness. In art movements this process is accelerated by the market-driven anxiety to produce something new.

## The Immobilized Heads of Mass Culture

**APRIL 16, 1992** I dream that a friend and I are walking near a long reflecting pool, and a female reporter is speaking to the cameras from the edge of the pool, only her face visible. As we walk by I see that her face is mounted in a shoe, a gold sandal, and in fact it was all of her there is. I am intrigued by the gimmick but also shocked. Later my friend and I pass a dumpster and two anteaters walking at the edge of the road.

**AUGUST 13, 1992** I dream about a craft project in a women's magazine: a stiff nosegay of plastic flowers with an eyeball built into the base looking at them, lit from below by a lightbulb.

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Mass culture, or what the Frankfurt School theorists called "affirmative culture," is a fixed eyeball or a mounted head that can gaze in only one direction. Marginal culture is free to wander and swivel. Film and video, as industrial media, have a particular relationship to mass-produced media. Because their techniques are shared with movies and television, artists in these media are more pressured (than painters, for example) at every step of the production process to consider their relationship to mass culture. The same relationship characterizes new-media art. Film and video in the '90s continued their head-swiveling relationship with popular culture. A January 1992 program offered belated (as it can only be) counter-propaganda to the Gulf War, from pirated tv clips and a Paper Tiger teach-in tape to more reflexive, ruminative, (Canadian) works by Fumiko Kiyooka, Susan Oxtoby, Stephen Butson and Heather Cook. In 1994 the spokes-Barbie of Igor Vamos's *Barbie Liberation Organization* coolly outlined the patriarchy-toppling intentions behind the BLO's terroristic voice-box switching between herself and GI Joe. The same year Brian Springer's Spin tore open the media doctoring of the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Screened in 1996, AdBusters' "Uncommercials" alerted couch potatoes to the military-industrial intentions of benign-sounding sponsors such as Kraft and General Electric (wait a minute, doesn't Kraft own General Electric?).

In the early '90s artists referred to themselves as "cultural workers" or "cultural producers" more than artists do now. This was supposed to mean that artists, as producers of culture, were responsible members of their communities, as well as to shy away from the high-art connotations of the word "artist." The terms evoked an image of efficient artist collectives cranking out silk-screened posters, shot from below in '30s social-realist style, heads swathed in kerchiefs. More work was overtly activist in the late '80s and early '90s. What happened?

Certainly part of what happened is that less money was available for artists who wanted to make "unmarketable," i.e., truly political, work. (By contrast, "critical" art, as Gary Kibbins points out, always has a relatively ready market.<sup>5</sup>) But another way to understand the shift away from overtly political work that occurred in this decade is to acknowledge different ways of being political. A work that critiques popular culture reinforces its dependent relationship with popular culture. Its goal is political change

at the level of language, which is collective but not deeply embodied. A work that is only about itself and the passion of creation offers a model of freedom from popular culture. Its goal is political change at the level of individual action—which is embodied but not collective. And of course in between these poles lay art that politicized personal, embodied experience. In short, the shift away from activist art to personal art during the '90s can be seen as not a depoliticization but a shift in political strategies.

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Cultural critique tends to take place in the mode of Secondness, or reaction. It is thus doomed to a somewhat parasitic relationship with the mass media that goad it along. The best such works, however, are rich enough in their Secondness that they generate the mental connections that are the realm of Thirdness, or, more rarely, the perceptual surprises of Firstness. Identity politics, for example, when it worked, mobilized felt qualities of life into struggle (for identity, by existing in opposition to something other, is Second) and into new forms of communication, or Thirdness.

## Consciousness Is No Different Than Reality

**FEBRUARY 8, 1990** I dream that a bunch of us are having a political demonstration at the bottom of the stairwell in the college administration building. A tall, thin white-haired lady from the registrar's office comes out and tells us, "For Marx, his consciousness of himself was no different from his reality." This is an absolutely huge revelation to us: the demonstration breaks up and we are all laughing with the craziness of the enlightened. Then we go to the student lounge and, to people's mixed delight and dismay, a woman lights a papery thing in her hand and throws it into the room, where it bursts in flowery ashes.

The relationship between reality and representation was a typically '80s concern in art. Many works critiqued popular culture. Video artists in the '80s, in particular, eschewed the structuralist experiments of the preceding decade as being politically reactionary, and instead looked to critique the social and economic foundation of the medium, television. Hence the videos that looked like tv shows, but with something amiss. The critique of representation, more generally, became the air artists breathed, and with it the idea that representation reflects reality (vulgar Marxism), or the idea that representation negotiates with reality (Gramsci, Stuart Hall), or the idea that representation is reality (Baudrillard). All these varieties of the critique of representation were based, in some way, on Marxist theory. Saussurean semiotic theory, in turn, gave us ways to understand the world as a compendium of signs, all of which have been effectively pre-perceived for us. This gave film- and videomakers plenty of grist to grind in the subversion of existing images.

But some people were uneasy with the idea that we cannot know reality directly. If their consciousness was their reality, then surely they did have direct access to some sort of reality? Less pressured to evolve with their art form than videomakers, filmmakers were somewhat freer to represent their own experience in the act of experiencing it. Politically suspect though it may have been, they gave the gift of their own perception to viewers and listeners. Ellie Epp, in *notes in origin* (1987), allowed the camera to be moved by the beating of her own heart. In *All Flesh Is Grass* (1988) Susan Oxtoby allowed luminous textures and slanting shadows to express the catharsis that comes from abandoning oneself to mourning. Short puppet animations by the Brothers Quay took the viewer into a world where the slightest movement, a screw rolling on the dusty floor, takes on an anthropomorphic pathos. And a master of the art of gradual revelation, Barbara Sternberg retained a rich, impressionistic audiovisual texture in her work throughout the decade. By the time of *midst* (1998), she eschewed her earlier conflict-driven experiments in favour of an extreme openness, using optical printing to impose just enough structure on its mild imagery for perception to lead neither to action nor to boredom, but to contemplation. These and other filmmakers remained convinced that the world is still enchanted and need only be properly recorded to enchant the viewer.

In other words, they used the medium of film as an entranced Perceiver of the world, an agent of Firstness. One might define art as a practice that cannot be subsumed in a symbolic mode. As Floyd Merrell suggests, wine-tasters, jazz musicians, and others with a nonverbal grasp of their art “know more than they can explicitly tell. A portion of their knowledge will always remain at the level of Firstness and Secondness, unmediated and unmediable by Thirdness.”<sup>6</sup>

## “The Pink”

**APRIL 20, 1991** I dream I am masturbating to this commercial-looking montage of lots of women talking about “the pink,” which meant masturbation, and how their men left them alone to do it.

In the '90s a second generation of feminist film- and videomakers came of age. While their predecessors had been into subverting patriarchal culture, the critical stance lost favour with younger artists. Constant vigilance is exhausting and not much fun. Instead, more artists, especially women queer and straight (but later in the decade gay and then straight men as well), began making work that focused on their own sexual pleasure. Again, this work may have looked apolitical or self-indulgent, but as with the general shift from activist to personal work, it was rather a move to a politics of action rather than critique. A work like *Annie Sprinkle* and

Maria Beatty's *Sluts and Goddesses Transformation Salon* (1992) considered women's self-pleasure and bodily self-knowledge to be inherently political, and used lush, campy production values and Sprinkle's honeyed voice to present its pedagogy in a pleasurable way. Queer punk movies indulged in a pleasure that was harder-edged but just as sweet, in Greta Snider's hand-processed *Hard-Core Home Movie* (1991), Bruce LaBruce's *I Know What It's Like to Be Dead*, and G.B. Jones' *Trouble Makers*. Kika Thorne luxuriated in female sexuality in work that had a characteristic flow or unwillingness to be bound by structure—although other kinds of bondage were fair game. In Thorne's *Sister* (1996), heat-seeking infra-red film makes a woman's pussy (the artist's own?) glow in the throes of self-pleasure.

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## A Glitch in the Performance

**JANUARY 17, 1992** I dream I am at a performance in a finished-basement type place, full of metre-high slabs of crumbling grey asphalt. There are lots of male-female couples. We are scared that the performance is going to involve the wolves and dog we can hear snarling behind a door. But the artists tells each couple to put on bathing suits—we're glad it's going to be a participatory performance—and do something with water and then jump down the room. My partner is Susan Patten, and so as two women we are a glitch in the performance. But the artist says that the glitch is the point of the performance.

One area in which the critique of representation continued to be important was in queer and other identity-based media. Feminist film and video gave way, or opened the way (depending on your view) to queer work and the interrogation of masculinity. "Queering" Hollywood and commercial cinema was all the rage. Gender indeterminacy was hot: queer artists struggled against the imposition of definitions of gender and sexuality, as in the "Bearded Ladies" show at Pleasure Dome in spring 1993. Queer artists interrogated the bonds of language. Nelson Henricks' precisely structured *Emission* (1994) poised bodily desire against the drag of the symbolic in a quite literal way, the frustrated lover's voice-over insisting "Turn off the tv, turn down the radio, let me take you in my arms." In *Put Your Lips Around Yes* (1994) John Lindell set the titles of gay pulp novels ("REST STOP SLUT") to a driving beat, daring viewers to physically enjoy gay-sex clichés even as it critiqued them.

In the early part of the decade queer media was powered by struggle against the symbolic order. Secondness is the realm of "not-that," and queer work vigorously reacted to the Thirdness of received languages in

both dominant culture and subcultures for what it is to be gay or lesbian. Sometimes this work remained at the level of reaction or generated its own new set of limiting languages, as in the safe-sex shorts that many activist artists produced in the early '90s. Activism around sexual activity is extremely difficult to pull off. Education is a question of the immediate perception of Firstness and the received knowledge of Thirdness converging on Secondness, or immediate response to brute facts. It is almost impossible to educate sexuality, unless a stronger motivation than desire can act like "the firm hand of the sheriff on your shoulder," as Peirce characterizes Secondness.

26

## Don't Deconstruct the Snow

**MARCH 12, 1992** I dream I'm hiking up a snowy mountain with a bunch of artists at Banff; this hike is also a collective writing project. My brother Matt says don't deconstruct this pristine, white hill, because we want it to be smooth when we slide back down it.

Verbality had its place in artists' film and video, not least to show that film and video are just as capable of making intellectual arguments as written language is. But early in the decade artists and audiences were beginning to feel beaten down by the pressure to be "smart" and desiring more immediate experiences. Paralleling the new popularity of body piercing and tattooing, the 1991 "Raunch Bouquet" porn show and the Fall 1991 "Industrial Primitive" show (of rediscovered '80s work), a 1994 screening of films by M.M. Serra, and many other such sallies into the world of s/m presented films meant to be experienced viscerally. By communicating the feelings of pain, arousal, etc. to the audience, they emphasize the body as experienced, rather than a body of signs. "The body" continued to be an important subject for experimental film and video, but the focus shifted from how the body is constructed in culture to how the body is experienced.

The interest in experiencing the snow unmediatedly motivated a 1993 screening by the Tariagsuk Video Centre, the women's video collective in Igloodik. This work responded to ethnographic "readings" of Inuit culture by presenting Inuit experience from the inside.

When the body is considered to be a (Saussurean) symbolic object, "deconstruction" renders it no more than a heap of broken signs. The Peircean symbolic body does not deconstruct but opens up from Thirdness to Firstness, from the cultural understanding of the body to how the body feels from the inside.

## One Flavour at a Time

**DECEMBER 9, 1993** I wake up crying from a dream about little goats with sort of mechanical jaws who are each allowed to taste one flavour, like pineapple or bubble gum.

In programs of short works no film is expected to make the grand statement. Each film opens into the others like courses in a strange meal, and it is the audience that puts together all the flavours.

## A Hard Day at the Arts Council

**MARCH 6, 1994** I dream that I had to go to an arts council jury, and it is in a building, maybe in Paris, one of those buildings that's supposed to be rationally designed, but it's a huge box divided internally into three parts with undulating inner walls. I'm trying to find Floor N, and a lady in a tiny stairwell office tells me I can't get into that room, but then she gives me a key. I have to try the key in doors on about twenty floors, but doing this I'm actually pricking my arm with a needle, all the way up the inside. I have this row of twenty neat red pricks up my arm; I put antibiotic ointment on them.

27

Honestly, arts council juries have provided some of the most democratic, well-informed and passionate discussions about art I've ever taken part in, and this has been at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. The jurors' investments and expertise are different, and it's hard to make rational decisions about what kind of art deserves funding, but somehow we always reach consensus about which projects should get the money. Then we find out there's not enough money to fund even half of them, because of funding cuts during this decade in Ontario (the Ontario Arts Council was cut by 40 percent during the first term of Premier Mike Harris) and nationwide (the Canada Council lost funding and then had it restored to less than the previous level). That's where the self-mutilation comes in.

## Equations For Your Eye

**APRIL 4, 1997** I have one of those dreams where I have to take a math exam, and I am all confident, then I get into the exam and do terribly. I'm trying to recall trigonometry, remembering nothing. This bright-eyed young woman explains to me: "Sine and cosine are the equations for two waves that cancel each other out. Between them they produce the equation for the shape of the lens in your eye."

Structural film and video returned to the scene in the 1990s. This was partly because the concern with representation diminished and artists were newly interested in medium specificity. In addition, the development of new media made it timely to re-examine the intrinsic properties of older media. Structuralism respected the internal coherence of a film or video as

a physical body, with all its implied mortality. Many of John Porter's films were structured by the three-minute length of a roll of 8mm, and this internal logic was as pleasurable to audiences as finding that the shape of one's own eye describes an equation. A rash of tapes was produced on the Pixar 2000 in the mid-'90s, and part of the pleasure of watching Pixelvision was knowing that these videos were recorded on audiotape and that the jagged black scar on the frame was the actual image of an in-camera edit. Hard-core experimental filmmakers imposed rigid structures on the most vulnerable material. Mike Cartmell used a "chiasmic" structure to explore identity and paternity in *In the Form of The Letter "X"* (1986). James Benning (celebrated in 1998 with "Structural Film Is Dead, Long Live James Benning!"), the duration of whose shots in *Deseret* (1995) was dictated by the length of newspaper articles about Utah, was by virtue of such strictures able to make films whose content ranged over everything. This kind of structuralism has the same effect as lacing a corset around a pliant torso: it allows the stuff inside to remain soft and formless.

## Sad Classified Ads

**SEPTEMBER 30, 1997** I dream I am in a room full of people who are all lying on sofas and reading newspapers. People are getting all weepy reading, and the mood is very mournful, but another woman and I are catching each other's glance and grinning. It turns out everybody had placed "Sad Classified Ads": it was kind of a performance.

Like the caress of a stingray, grief immobilizes the body as it traverses it. As the AIDS epidemic continued, people succumbed to melancholy paralysis. Although the urgency of AIDS activism abated—it's hard to remain in a state of crisis indefinitely—some artists returned feeling to our numbed bodies with blazing offerings of rage and love. Sadoomasochism had a profound place in this process, as in the work of Tom Chomont, for whom s/m was a way to take control of the disease in his body. During this decade Mike Hoolboom built a flaming body of work around AIDS, whose melting saturated colors and glistening high-contrast skins, as much as the bitter poetry of their words, impelled us to cling to life even while we flailed against it.

In its power to immobilize, grief imposes a state of perpetual Firstness. According to Peirce it is impossible to exist sempiternally in a world of Firstness, a world that "consists in nothing at all but a violet color or a stink of rotten cabbage" — or in a pure feeling, be it love or pain.<sup>7</sup> A changeless state of mourning, or of any emotion, is unbearable. The most powerful AIDS work of this decade transmuted the Firstness of grief into the contemplative and active states of mourning and action. In its most transformative state, Thirdness

— ideas that are preconceived, verbalized, yea, published in the newspaper — still has the power to move us to emotional states that far precede discourse.

## Seinfeld and the “Wilderness”

**OCTOBER 9, 1997** I dream I am in a crowded New York apartment where some show is being filmed, Jerry Seinfeld is the MC. It is very New York and we non-New Yorkers are disdained. For some reason they need another minor celebrity to interview someone, and my mother suggests me, and Seinfeld looks at me with suspicion. I say, “Yes, I’m Laura Marks” as though he should have heard of me, and he’s in a bind so he has no choice. But my lipstick has worn off. Seinfeld seems to recognize the importance of this because he offhandedly gives me some money to get some. Then I’m in the bathroom down the hall, ready to put it on. But the light switch doesn’t work. The automatic sensor doesn’t work, and when I press the button on the rickety old fixture the light only shines dimly for a second!

29

This dream is set in a big city of vast cold buildings with broad grounds. It’s dark and I’m looking for free parking on the snowy streets, but I take a turn onto the highway by mistake, and Peter Harcourt’s voice says, “It’s okay, it’s just what they call the wilderness,” and soon enough I am amused to find that this circumscribed bit of land that I’m driving through is what New Yorkers call the wilderness.

For many Canadian artists it is a political choice to remain in Toronto, the centre of the Canadian art scene, even though New York, the centre of the world art scene, deems us quaint and parochial. Pleasure Dome showed many works by New York artists—it’s the last stop on the Central New York Programmers’ Group tour—including Alex Bag, catapulted to stardom in 1997, whose work was all about having to move to New York to become an artist. Many Canadian artists have moved to New York permanently in search of glamour and recognition. In Toronto’s small media community, artists live in the light but have no lipstick: in New York we have the lipstick, but we can’t get the light to shine on us. A very few Canadian experimental filmmakers and videomakers, such as Donigan Cumming and Steve Reinke, do break onto the parochial New York scene. There is a myth that funding is easier to come by for filmmakers in Canada, and therefore the work is not as strong because it does not have to compete as viciously as American art, and perhaps this is another reason that Canadians ourselves diminish Canadian work. But mostly it is because we internalize the intensely self-absorbed consciousness of the U.S. art world, according to which we do not exist. The colonized always has to know what the colonizer is doing, but the

reverse is not so: Canadian artists, programmers and writers have to be aware of the New York/U.S./world film scene, but the reverse is not so. To them we are the wilderness.

## Deleuze Overcharges for Drinks

30 **FEBRUARY 8, 1998** I dream that there is a lecture by my hero Gilles Deleuze and afterward people are going to his house for a reception. We have to get there on little red handtrucks. I take the smallest one because I can see it is really high-tech and expandable. I take off on it separately from the others, who are “wankers,” and go careening down these very steep streets, a town like San Francisco but tropical with slanting light and lush purple flowers. The cart turns into these speedy old-fashioned rollerskates, and I am careening down this steep street, grabbing at trees and signposts as I go and feeling exhilarated because I am on my own. Deleuze has this big empty house, like an expensive windowless concrete bunker, with nothing inside except a lot of Far Side cartoons, a pool, and a jacuzzi. He’s sitting at a counter where you come in, selling drinks. An orange juice and rum is very delicious but costs \$28. I get depressed because his new book is not very good.

Pleasure Dome screened many historical works over this decade, but notably absent was the Canadian avant-garde of Michael Snow, Bruce Elder, and the other great fathers who had, for the eyes of this generation, repressed as much as they had allowed to flourish. Even Joyce Wieland didn’t get a show at Pleasure Dome in the ’90s. For marginal filmmakers in the ’90s, watching Wavelength again was like crashing your speedy go-kart into a pretentious soirée. Instead of this canonized tradition, which everybody had seen in school anyway, Pleasure Dome looked to historical films from the New York and San Francisco undergrounds. Curt McDowell’s *Thundercrack* (1975), Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1962), Chick Strand’s *Kristallnacht* (1979, in a program of women’s carnivalesque films), and other works were preceded by word of mouth not about their formal qualities but their bodily functions. These works helped nourish a new interest in performance and the body—not just any body, but a raw, uncomfortable body; not a polished performance but an unabashedly amateur performance.

## Woman Ejaculates on Prospective Canadian

**MARCH 18, 1998** I dream I am watching a video, or maybe a commercial for McDonald’s, where a sensual pregnant woman is saying she loves eating hamburgers so much she makes them last for three hours. Then there is a

performance in a gallery in L.A., where this same pregnant woman is in a shallow pool, masturbating while watching another woman. Then she ejaculates into the face of a man standing in the pool—she shoots a good six feet! It's from my point of view, as though I were ejaculating. I am offended at the performance though; I think it's cheap-shot (!) feminism. This poor man turns out to be a performance artist himself, probably teaches at Cal Arts. He is doing work on orgasm too: he said that in orgasm he is cultivating his plant nature. Something to do with *SISAL*. I promise to mail him a Canadian magazine with a review of his work, a Canadian road map, and something else. He tries to give me money for it, but I have the impression that it's all the money he has, so I refuse.

31

Experimental cinema has almost always rejected acting as implicated in the illusionist aesthetics of commercial cinema. Plus, acting is expensive to shoot. But performance, confronting the viewer with a real body enduring experience in real time, has none of the illusionism of acting. Part of the return to phenomenal experience that characterized the '90s was the return of performance. Often this was inspired by unabashedly enthusiastic performances from decades past. However, few contemporary filmmakers had not been infected in some way by the poststructuralist disease that would have us believe our own bodies are just textual objects and don't even really exist. For a while in the '90s it was uncool to believe that a person could ever reveal the essence of himself or herself, or even that there was an essence. But in performance you find the meaning of the body through physical, not mental acts; the body has to be right there, not a construct. Performers sacrificed their own bodies so that the rest of us could have ours back. In her series "Aberrant Motion" Cathy Sisler spun in the streets as a proxy for our collective disequilibrium. In *Super 8 1/2* (1994) and *Hustler White* (1996) Bruce LaBruce stripped all the way down to the layer of plastic wrap covering his heart, so that we didn't have to, or we could if we wanted to. Donigan Cumming convinced non-actors to pray for a Nettie they had never met, sacrificing their authenticity to an audience that in turn suddenly became responsible for both them and her.

Another way—a canny, '90s way—to exploit the rawness of performance while acknowledging the artifice involved was to fake it. Monique Moublow created fake personas, as did Alex Bag. In *Fresh Acconci* (1995) Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley hired San Fernando Valley porn actors to restage Vito Acconci's 1970s performance scripts. In *Shulie* (1997) Elisabeth Subrin meticulously recrafted a 1970 documentary about feminist writer Shulamith Firestone, then a young painter, right down to the cat's-eye glasses and ignorant, sexist professors. Playing her fictional suicidal sister Gretchen, Jennifer Reeves cut her own arms and shed real blood for the fish-eye lens.

In 1967 Godard famously responded to criticism of his gory film *Weekend*, "It's not blood, it's red," meaning that his film was meant to be taken as a sign that was already at some remove from the real world it signified. But for performers in the '90s it was red and it was blood.

32 In performance the perceiving and acting body is a Peircean sign machine, quivering like a tethered string between the poles of experience and communication. Whenever one presents one's body and actions for public consumption—i.e., presents oneself consciously as a sign—the same accelerated oscillation between the three modes takes place, for one is required to act, or make relations, an operation of Secondness, and to be genuine, or to operate in the mode of Firstness, at the same time that one manages oneself as a mental image. Ejaculating or shedding blood before an audience is only one way to do this.

## Divorce Ritual

**APRIL 29, 1998** I dream I am in Los Angeles. I exit the freeway on a ramp that is made of wood and undulates like a little rollercoaster, into a hilly neighbourhood that is part Chicano, part Asian, and all the houses are close together and kind of doll-like with thatched roofs. Lots of people are in the toylike park, old Mexican men and little boys playing chess. I am going to a museum where my husband and I are supposed to have a post-divorce ritual. It looks like one of those hands-on museums that were cool in the '70s, with lots of winding passages and purple and black walls. We get there and there are several couples, presumably also divorcing, gathered around the table. I've forgotten to bring some document, and also photographs, that we're supposed to burn as part of this ritual. I'm picturing an old photograph in my head and thinking I don't want to burn it!

Later I walk by the village again and see that the little houses with thatch roofs have been burned for acres. The whole landscape is smoking and grey. It's awful. I am embarrassed when the people from the town see me staring at the misfortune.

One of the most painfully visceral experiences you can have at the movies is when the film catches in the projector gate and burns, especially if it is a precious lone print. We have seen that in the '90s many artists turned to archival film for a source of images. While the images could be deftly recontextualized and critiqued, filmmakers were also sometimes struck by the material of the film itself. In this decaying surface, archival filmmaking witnessed a death, a divorce of the original meaning from the image. Rather than recontextualize the images, filmmakers held funerals for their charred remains. The unholy of these officiants was SchmelzDahin, the German collective that tortured super 8's emulsion with bleach and hydro-

chloric acid, buried it, and hung it from trees to fade. Carl Brown's oeuvre throughout this decade continued to be a body of self-immolating cinema, whose recorded images dissolved in the chemical conflagration on the surface of the film. Peggy Ahwesh saw the spirit of death in the 8mm amateur porn film she found in the trash, which she memorialized with colour processing and a tango sound track in *The Color of Love* (1994). In Jennifer Reeves' *The Girl's Nerve* (1996) pictures cracked and peeled off their support. Corinne and Arthur Cantrill, those indefatigable Australian supporters of super 8 film, passed through Pleasure Dome several times during the decade with curated programs. In 1994, they returned not to celebrate but as celebrants in a mass for the "end of the photo-chemical film era," in the performance "Projected Light: On the Beginning and End of Cinema."

33

In the '90s filmmakers returned to touch the material body of film at a time when the medium has been pronounced obsolete. Of course, the idea of obsolescence is meaningless to non-industrial filmmakers: when a medium has been superseded by the industry, that's when artists can finally afford it. But the industry calls the shots, as the Cantrills pointed out in mourning Kodachrome. What precipitated the divorce of the images from their medium was perhaps the institution of digital filmmaking; the medium of analogue video had not been the same threat to film, because the two media looked and functioned so differently. Over in the world of commercial cinema, and increasingly among independent filmmakers as well, films were edited and processed not on a Steenbeck or at a lab but in the virtual space of the Media 100. Where now was the film's body? Celluloid became just an output medium for the virtual body of the film encoded in software.

As well as these moving reflections on film's body, the end of the decade saw a surprising nostalgia for analog video. Videomakers who moved to non-linear editing swore they would never go back—yet tapes were being turned out that simulated analog interference, dropout, and generational loss!

A Peircean would note that these works of materialist cinema liberate the medium to be meaningful as a body in itself, rather than the medium for another message. While plumbing archival films for their images is an operation of Thirdness, the mourning of film's material death is First in its reaction to the film as to another body.

## I Forget I Own Art

**FEBRUARY 2, 1999** I dream I own a work of art I'd forgotten about, even though it's very expensive, because it's thin like a pamphlet and it's just sitting in a letter rack like the Purloined Letter.

Steve Reinke's *The Hundred Videos* appear to sum up the various concerns of the decade. They began with a linguistic understanding of meaning, and the use of psychoanalysis, a linguistic form of interpretation, to unravel it. They moved to interests in sexuality, desire, the body, and AIDS. Following the anti-visual turn in the arts mid-decade, they questioned documentary's relation to the truth. But throughout the decade Reinke maintained a conceptual rigour that made these slight works linger in the memory of the viewer. *The Hundred Videos* enter the mind through a tiny aperture of attention and then expand to fill all the available space. The sad ashtay, the sincere inventor of potato flakes, Neil Armstrong's tribute to his dead dog—they went by in one to three minutes but stayed with me for years. By the end of the decade, in a final rejection of linguistic signification, Reinke and his video camera were chasing dust balls under the bed.

These are theorematic videos, examples of the most fertile mode of Thirdness. By creating relations among other signs, they are mental images. Reinke brought things together: foreign films and porn films, a love letter and a yearbook photo, an over-the-top pornographic performance and a list of self-doubts. In so doing he generated enabling new concepts and new models for thinking, such as, use hand puppets to role-play your fondest desires. Reinke's work showed the generosity of Thirdness, giving audiences material (not about which, but) with which to think.

## Aggressive House

**MARCH 18, 1999** I dream I am in the house of these radical and rich art-world people who have two young children. It is a radical house, very dark inside, claustrophobic with rough concrete walls. They all go out, while I stay. I crawl under the heavy, ancient wood furniture. The floors have escalator-like treads moving through them constantly, with the angles facing up like teeth, making it fairly impossible to walk. There is something even more menacing in the floor, concealed by long shreds of carpet, but I forget what it was. I think, how irresponsible to raise children in such a dangerous house. I go into the little girl's (like three years old) room and see that she's programmed her computer to organize her stuff while she is out; things are going through the air as though on an invisible conveyor belt. I am impressed and think maybe I'm the only one who's intimidated by a house like this!

At the end of the decade we were confronted with the Peircean extremes of performance, work so obsessed with action that it could barely think, and information media, work so highly encoded in symbolic form that it was incapable of affect. Now that digital editing could alter voice and gesture to simulacral perfection, the apparent naïveté of appearing live before

the camera's witness had a new urgency. Emily Vey Duke, Anne McGuire, and other artists exhibited pure affect for the camera, in performances whose virtue was in being as spontaneous as the single-take exhibitionism of their '70s forebears. Ironically, it was mostly thanks to digital editing that Hollywood movies, as always belatedly stealing ideas from independent artists, found new ways to produce affective responses in the audience. At the extreme of Thirdness, artists moved to the small screen and concentrated information with such density that it could no longer be processed as information, but only affect. This time, however, the body experiencing hot flashes was not human but silicon-based. Attacked by hell.com, jodi.org, Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon* website, and other online artworks, computers jittered with illegible information, sprouted rashes of windows on their faces, and crashed. Their human caretakers felt this affective rush, at most, sympathetically.

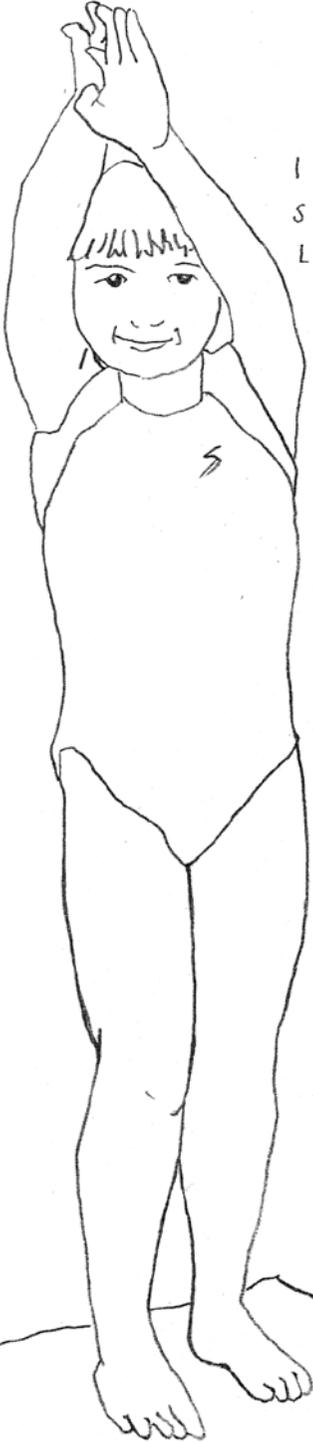
35

At the end of the decade, everybody was saying we had moved decisively from a visual culture to an information culture. What, then, would become the role of the audiovisual media that artists had been coddling and pummeling throughout the decade, indeed the century? Now that we had machines to see, hear, and act for us, raw experience was a more precious commodity than ever before. The processing of information and the debased notion of interactivity were behaviorist, Secondness-based modes, which besides our computers could do without us. Throughout the decade, experimental film and video artists had been pulling their media from the Secondness-based modes of narrative and critique to a Firstness that was felt only in the body, and a hyper-symbolic Thirdness that was experienced as First by the proxy bodies of our machines. We hoped that new connections, new mental images, some Third thing as yet unimagined, would come to animate our minds again. ★



WE SHOULD STAND BACK HERE —  
I THINK SHE'S GOT  
"LOW SELF ESTEEM".





I LOVE  
SWIMMING  
LESSONS!

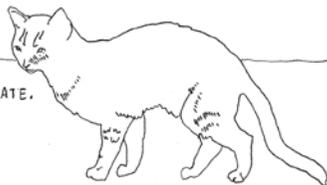


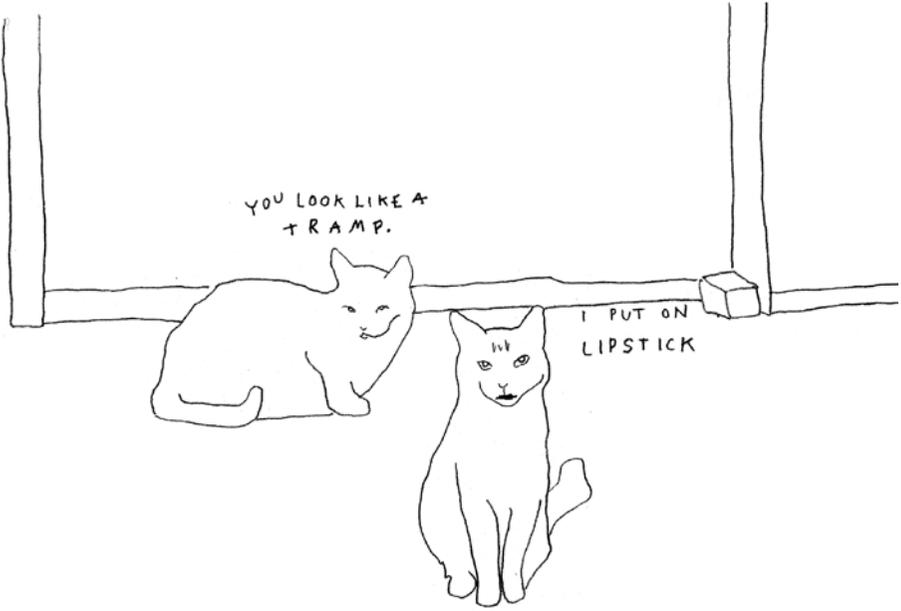
I HATE  
THAT  
LITTLE  
BLONDE  
PRINCESS.

NOTHING I SAY  
IS GOING TO  
MAKE YOU FEEL  
BETTER ANYWAY



THAT'S  
JUST  
BECAUSE  
YOU'RE  
INARTICULATE.





YOU LOOK LIKE A  
TRAMP.

I PUT ON  
LIPSTICK

IN MY ROOM: A RECREATIONAL MASTURBATION VIDEO Jubal Brown

next >>>

DRAWINGS Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby

<<< previous













*Flaming Creatures, JACK SMITH*



# Flaming Creatures: New Tendencies in Canadian Video

*Gary Kibbins*

Joining an impressive assortment of other major categories of human endeavour—modernism, painting, art itself, and even history—what we have come to know as “video art” has been declared dead.<sup>1</sup> While this declaration is doubtless a bit theatrical, it is also based on concrete observations: the slow attrition of funding sources and venues is becoming critical; the neglect by art writers continues apace; the more institutionally powerful arms of the art market-museum structure nexus remain, as before, largely unconcerned by its existence; and rapid developments in imaging and information technologies are subsuming the relatively stable technologies of video. Yet despite the worries, video, as this compilation of works amply shows, is doing quite well.

The difficulties in sorting out the question of video’s relative health are in large part a consequence of the difficulties in defining it. The technological perspective feels the most confidence in forecasting its demise, for from that point of

view video is busily converting its energies into a larger hybrid called multimedia. Those who see video deriving its identity from its relations to the institutions of art also see cause for worry, for video installations have replaced what little favour "single-channel" videos ever found there. But if there is anything like a definition to be found, it lies in that which makes definition futile in the first place: its heterogeneity. Even more emphatically than film, the brief and half-hearted search for video's ontological essence has been a bust, revealing its affiliations to be complex, changing, uncertain, and marked definitively by its encounters with other disciplines and properties. In no particular order: video's television counterpart; its industrial counterpart; its consumer counterpart; its associations with theatre, film, performance art, installation art, real-time representation; its surveillance capabilities; its "cheapness"; its "slickness"; its illusory qualities; its lack of depth, and so on—these are the frequently contradictory characteristics which define it, and this suggests that if one must have a definition, it should be sought through an understanding of how video is being used. From this point of view, there is no reason to fear its demise, for it is being used well.

In addition to spanning the last third of a century notable for its brutality, there are several historical tendencies marking video as a practice which need mentioning for the purpose of the discussions which follow. Most conspicuously, opposition to aesthetic modernism during this period quickly became *de rigueur*. And while the early practitioners of video divided somewhat between those who seized on it as an alternative to programmatic modernism and those who used it to extend their modernist investigations, the former easily carried the day.<sup>2</sup>

In its more explicitly political manifestations, video has helped carry forward another major tendency: the shift from an oppositional model based on mass movements to one favouring "micro-politics," whose principal form is that of identity politics. Arguably the strongest and most consistent contributions to video have come from feminist, gay/lesbian, and postcolonial concerns, with very little representing more traditional oppositional interests with allegedly universalizing ambitions, such as labour. The relations between this video production and the institutions of art are complex, for although video trades on its "alternative" status, this is also the period which witnessed a veritable stampede of artists, critics, and curators into schools, and then into whatever institutions would accept them. Art became professionalized, in detail, and the *avant-garde* now found itself under contract with the very institutions its forebears had earlier sought to destroy. Video artists, however, having had only limited success with the upper ranks of high culture and sometimes requiring costly equipment, were faced with the task of forging their own institutions, usually in the form of artist-run operations and co-ops. Unlike the conditions that greeted their earlier counterparts in *avant-garde* and underground film, however, the emergence of government funding possibilities centralized these efforts and, for a time, made them somewhat easier.

The alternative or sometimes oppositional status of video, so important to its early growth, drew much of its legitimacy from its domestic and artisanal character. Despite sharing a technology with commercial interests, video artists could demonstrate a consummate level of aesthetic and intellectual independence, where the demands of the marketplace—art or commercial—were remote, and where one could exercise what might be called a non-capitalist imagination. This alternative “mode-of-production” theme, however, has lost much of its allure in the latter third of video’s brief history. In order to understand this important change, it is useful to recall the significant socio-economic transformations running parallel to “postmodernism,” usually summarized as the emergence of a worldwide, multi-national capitalism. The importance of this change lies in the destabilizing effect it had on the entire range of assumptions which had earlier sustained “alternative” work as a practice. By the early ‘80s, the idea that the increasingly flexible and accommodating system of globalized capital could be a clearly defined object of attack began to seem quaint. Its apparent ability to encompass and absorb all actions, all politics, and all mores, and its spectacular gift for integrating the terms of protest into its own marketing language gave it an inviolable aura, and the idea of working critically within it slowly replaced the idea of opposing it. As Victor Burgin pointed out, an older avant-gardist debate regarding the relative merits of working within the system or outside it is obsolete, for there is no possibility of positioning oneself outside the system.<sup>3</sup> The criticism lodged against some forms of identity politics—that its militancy was focused on integrating the elites of minority groups into the system rather than changing the system itself—reinforced this analysis. Whatever the merits of this complex debate, what was subsequently lost to the understanding of video (and film) was an appreciation of its aesthetic and political importance as an alternative mode of production. Video cannot be properly understood without it. And while the relationship between alternative and dominant modes of production is considerably more complex than previously thought, the potential to use video to develop a non-commercial culture remains at the heart of what a critical video practice is.

Just as the familiar classifications of video work typical of the ‘70s—performance and body-art related works, television and media critiques, and so on—proved inadequate for the ‘80s, so the categories of the ‘80s—identity, sexuality, and gender themes, media- and technology-related works, and “theory tapes”—do not adequately reflect the concerns of the present. Everyone grumbles about the constraints that genres and labels place on the artwork, even those who place them, and in the sprawling, often reckless expanses of video this is clearly a proper concern. What follows, then, is an effort to avoid the two reductive errors of the zealous over-classifier: viewing an artwork only as a codification of a subject matter or theme, or using it as a convenient illustration of a prior theoretical view. Instead, I will identify certain major but seriously underappreciated

tendencies, none of which is, strictly speaking, a critical category: new designs in propaganda; not-necessarily-funny humour; phantom metaphors; achieving an “irreducible” experience, in which interpretation is temporarily stymied; and perhaps most importantly, an attitude to life and art beyond a prevailing condition of cynicism. These tendencies are, admittedly, generalities, widely covering aesthetic, social, and political themes by no means limited to video, and there is a certain unavoidable nonchalance in the terminology used. The risks of presenting works in light of such generalities are perhaps obvious. But rather than codes for interpretation, they should be used as co-efficients, as forces used—or not—to motivate thought, as the works’ fellow-travellers. It will be clear that not all the works embody all the tendencies, and due to the often spirited nature of the works’ montage, one might spot a tendency at work in one segment of a video, only to find it completely lacking in the other segments—such is the fragmented landscape of contemporary video, where often the parts of a work can carry more weight than the whole.

The curatorial logic of “Flaming Creatures” stresses the poetics of the video works—that is, the techniques they use and the qualities they have—rather than strictly theoretical or historical issues, which are equally valid but represent approaches already relatively well developed. The poetics of video work are changing, and there is no sign that the current experimental period is hardening into recognizable paradigms or programs. What makes the assessment of contemporary work difficult at this stage is that both the character and the significance of what is “experimental” is itself changing. Gone is the relative stability of the more programmatic forms of modernist experimentation; our experiments are at once pluralistic (we allow a proliferation of discrete forms) and heterogenous (these forms ceaselessly interpenetrate and transform each other); our appraisals of their results are different.

By “tendencies,” I do not intend “devices” or “strategies” in the usual, more identifiable sense, but nascent forms, or forms which are not, for various reasons, always fully or consciously articulated in the work. To identify them at all is to engage the tangled process of experimentation from somewhere in the middle (a somewhat nerve-racking project from a curatorial point of view). Thus I am noticeably omitting a description of the various tendencies as they are manifest in the individual artworks. One reason is the impossible task of discussing seventeen complex artworks in a restricted space; but the other reason stems from the nature of tendencies themselves, which I offer as viewing tools rather than as ready-made interpretations of the works. I hope the experimental nature of the curatorial concept honours the great energy of the works themselves from a respectful distance.

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In a fine essay reviewing the work of the Park Place Group artists, Robert

Smithson observed that certain sculpturally achieved geometric shapes have counterparts in the ethereal world of humour.<sup>4</sup> Chuckles are triangles, giggles are hexagons, guffaws are asymmetric, and so on. Smithson's casual observations remind us how enterprising humour can be, penetrating even the sanctuaries of abstraction. Many of today's video practitioners are humorists in a similar sense. But like the Park Place Group, where one can easily imagine that the sculptors' rhomboids were not primarily conceived to provoke laughter, much of this work is similarly engaged in what one might call *not-necessarily-funny* humour. This is not failed humour in the sense of a joke which the joker has failed to carry off (although admittedly the distinction is not always easy to draw), but humour with a strategically built-in "flaw." This is certainly a peculiar phenomenon, for humour is a well-known and highly prized antidote for a kind of sombre or overly earnest quality which many if not most art viewers fear above all else. One can see how a well-placed chortle can advance a work's appreciation; to not allow humour to play itself out is then a curious risk to take.

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But in a culture so immersed in entertainment, one can see more clearly the potential shortcomings that lurk within the pleasurable and audience-enlarging attractions of humour. In his book on jokes, Freud exposed them with admirable clarity: the joking structure, he wrote, "bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them."<sup>5</sup> That is, if we like the humour, we'll be more inclined to accept uncritically the thought; and conversely, if we support the thought, we'll forgive any dubious humour used to promote it. In addition, we'll be tempted to overlook the "propagandistic" nature of the humour, attributing to the work aesthetic qualities it doesn't have. At a time when artists everywhere can be heard denouncing "didactic" qualities as authoritarian from the point of view of the spectator, the propagandistic aspects of humour, which are almost always left out of this equation, can be cited as its most egregious example. Humour often provides the mask of "open-endedness" for artworks that themselves aren't.

Not-necessarily-funny humour, on the other hand, keeping humour within view but just out of reach, induces competing feelings of sympathy and doubt for the idea in the work. While this may sometimes goad the viewer, it is designed to keep the work's critical dimension operative. It seems that there are three general types of this not-quite humour: indeterminate humour, when there is confusion about whether or not this is, or is supposed to be, funny; incomplete humour, when it was almost funny, but for the omission of a part or the proper development of a technique; or the most common and visible form, hybrid humour, when humorous forms fraternize with generally unhumorous topics (black humour). In any case, the failure to see this device at work for what it is has often hindered the reception of video as well as an appreciation of its sometimes eccentric contribution to cultural forms. It is a failure that has all too often been perpetuated by video artists themselves.

"All art is to some extent propaganda." "Art has nothing to do with propaganda." The first statement is George Orwell's; the second is Adolf Hitler's. Despite the difficulty of agreeing on the definition of either term, one must, I think, concede the point to Orwell. The stale, shabby aura surrounding the term "propaganda" is only a prejudicial gloss; like anything else, to maintain its effectiveness the techniques of propaganda must be continually dusted off and freshened up, and video work has contributed importantly to this field of experimental propaganda. The distractions of certain prominent theoretical currents, however, have made it difficult to recognize these forms as they develop and emerge. The rejection of the "univocal" text which permits only fixed or singular interpretations is one of postmodernism's official clichés, but even so, this characteristic would not prevent that same text from embodying, in its condition of plurality, recognizable concepts capable of being seen in the light of propaganda. It is not only possible but common for contemporary video works to destabilize received ideas regarding, for example, sexual mores and meanings, and then to promote others in their place.

Is this propaganda? A closer look at the generally agreed upon elements of propaganda make efforts to avoid the charge only as convincing as indignant denials by the State Department. Without invoking the breadth of issues raised in the literature, there is really one component that offends, and that is "manipulation," with the accompanying expectation that the propagandist shows only disrespect for reason and truth. (No one of course questions the right to advocate, even if the methods used to do so are at times questionable. Propagandists with whom we agree are not typically perceived as propagandists.) But even if one accepted this most unflattering view of propaganda, what artists would actually feel maligned by the charge that they are manipulative, or that they don't respect the truth? One doesn't have to argue the part of cultural relativism to know that artworks, unlike journalism for example, are only beholden to these values if they are in some way invoked by the artworks themselves and included in the works' program.

The ubiquity of a kind of fluid, smarmy propaganda in contemporary society is a common theme. What distinguishes experimental propaganda from the more orthodox forms is a kind of staged ambiguity. It is as self-confident as it is insouciant. The older forms were clearly part of the age of ideology; the newer forms belong to a world of committed experimentalism. They are too invested in the ideals of research and development to promote a fixed program. It is not even clear that the viewer is being compelled to agree with the work's alleged beliefs or practices—they can believe it or not. Jacques Ellul's well-known distinction between "oppositional" and "integrative" propaganda is of no use here, for the new tendencies are neither.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is understandably hard to recognize such work as propaganda without perceiving the "cause" for which the work is propagandizing. That cause, generally held, is the right to multiply sexualities, practices, and ways of living; thus, its propagandistic ambitions point

beyond the specific representations of any particular work, and serve to link it with other works and other politics. It is useful to cite Foucault on this important point: "And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships."<sup>7</sup> The propagandistic dimension of the work lies not in the "text" of the work itself, but in its relations to other works, its affiliations or alliances, which make it an element in a larger, amorphous, politicized montage. In that, experimental propaganda helps sustain what remains of the utopian dimension of video.

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No one thinks shock value has any meaningful role left to play in aesthetic response. Even the historical avant-garde is now thought to have over-played its hand in this regard. The inheritors of this tradition are accordingly more circumspect, Darwinianized, well-adapted, and much less theatrical. They wish only to obstruct momentarily the continuous flow of the viewer's response, to bring them up short, as it were. The more successful versions even manage to pull the rug out from under the process of interpretation. This is always only temporary of course; the inexorable processes of cognition get right back up, and carry on.

Yet this effort to cultivate *irreducible* moments or sections remains central to experimental works in general. It draws, I think, on an important correspondence with human experience; childbirth, sex, "inexpressible" grief, the list is indefinite—all are celebrated instances of the inadequacy of representation to convey the depth of experience. Paradoxically, artists like to push representation—their stock-in-trade—to the point of failure, a position endorsed by contemporary theory, which habitually reminds us that it is the very nature of representations to "fail." While all this may sound favourable for the critical acceptance of irreducible components in artworks, their visibility remains low. Contemporary art criticism, oddly enough, works against what is arguably the most interesting aspect of the critique of representation by managing not to notice the more radical examples which momentarily suspend the process of interpretation (the critic's stock-in-trade). This situation is made worse by the unfortunate likeness which exists between irreducible components and "bad" artworks, for both have the appearance of being vulnerable to charges of "incoherence," "formal weakness," and so on, and this similarity is too readily seized upon.<sup>8</sup>

There are many ways to invoke the irreducible. One strategy occurs when the viewer, lured into expecting interpretability, encounters instead a bottleneck, where information is too complex or intricate or uncontextualized to disentangle. This is the least incisive form perhaps, for there is always a sense that disentangling it remains a possibility, even if the form of the work makes it impractical. A second prominent technique is to place an excessive semantic burden on the image, which it can't really be expected to carry. The effect is intensified if the

image has previously in the work been propped up by language, and is then suddenly cut off, leaving it appearing alone and mute.

54 Finally, the structure of a work can suggest that we are in the presence of metaphor, that there is a symbolic meaning beyond what is immediately there—how else to understand this oddly uncontextualized or perplexing work, or this oddly detached section of the work?—from which, however, no metaphorical meaning seems to emerge. These are phantom metaphors, metaphors without any obvious or manifest metaphorical meaning. It is the Brechtian device of the '90s. Of all the techniques which seek to withdraw the guarantee of interpretability (thereby risking the viewer's annoyance), this, oddly enough, seems to be the most agreeable. There is reason to call this perverse metaphor a *catachresis*, which is a strained or forced figure of speech, also revealingly called an *abusio*.

The most difficult aspect of the irreducible is judging what is gained through its use. There are, it seems, two related effects. The first is familiar, having motivated work throughout much of the century; it is a kind of alienation effect, drawing critical attention to the work, its techniques, its epistemological devices, and so on. The second is more interesting, linking the experimental qualities of the work itself to experimental states of mind. There is an increasing recognition that this cannot be done through the process of making metaphors, for, contrary to one's intuitions on the matter, metaphors can be just as easily used to narrow the interpretations of events or representations as to expand them. Artists know that metaphors are not enough, and that the emergent metaphor itself should be subjected to the same critical operations as the events and representations.

Whenever irony is not being overused, a kind of "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" attitude can be seen inhabiting video works. As for the pessimism, the reasons are clear enough: political disillusionment is everywhere. Market forces are ascendant, and nominally liberal politicians are now systematically doing things that only a decade ago even the most conservative politicians wouldn't have dreamed of getting away with. Political alternatives seem in short supply, and cynics, priding themselves on their sharply honed critical skills, can always spot the fatal weaknesses in those alternatives struggling to emerge, helping to scuttle them in the process. Fuelled by a doctrinaire scepticism, cynicism is adept at fashioning silk purses out of sows' ears. It's the final insult to dialectical thinking which tries to find the contrary tendencies in things, for when placed in the service of cynicism, such thinking can conveniently be used to make anything seem like Anything. Cynicism is nothing if not pragmatic; its primary motivation is to survive threatening or confusing times. If necessary, it will abruptly change sides, claiming that the very idea of "sides" was just an illusion. Called by Peter Sloterdijk the "modernized, unhappy consciousness, well-off

and miserable at the same time," cynicism is marked by a melancholy resignation which feels forced by circumstances to act contrary to what it knows.<sup>9</sup> Astute at adopting positions that are personally advantageous but to which the cynic has no real commitment, it's a defence against the fear that one is being had, that the values about which one is sincere could be exposed as a fraud.

A kind of "optimism of the will" prevents the pessimism of the intellect from sliding into cynicism, and perhaps the one thing the videos in this exhibition share is such a *counter-cynicism*. To not be cynical is not easy. Lubricated by historical and art-world pressures, cynicism is very appealing—all the more so as they promise to help conceal its identity. Artists already walking the delicate line between a commitment to experimental form and a commitment to progressive political values (never an easy match) have also the caveats of glib irony and dogmatic scepticism to contend with. There is even reason to think that, due to its speculative nature and its longing for legitimation, experimental art-making is particularly vulnerable to cynicism's seductions. What is remarkable about contemporary art practice is the almost harmonious proximity of cynical and counter-cynical forms. They are both moving targets, and the task of distinguishing them is made more difficult by the endless mutation of forms of expression, like propaganda that isn't really propaganda, humour that isn't really humour, metaphors that aren't really metaphors.

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Jack Smith knew something about titling. In an interview published in *Semiotext(e)*, he denounced that journal's dry name, suggesting it be replaced by the rather brusque *Hatred of Capitalism*.<sup>10</sup> Smith was typically happy to mince words, to garble sexual identities long before it became commonplace, and to flaunt a precarious mode of being through both his films and his performances. But he was straightforward on the nature of his political opposition—it was systemic: against capitalism, and for socialism; against cultural ghettoization of any kind, and for "sharing."

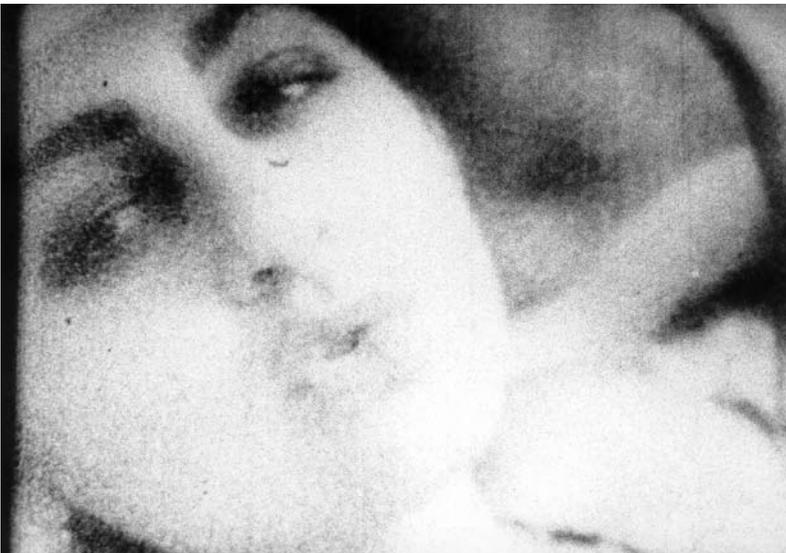
A filmmaker, performance artist, and writer, Smith loved movies from an early age. His parents bought him an 8mm movie camera as a high school graduation present. Before he had a chance to use it, a burglar removed it from their Columbus, Ohio, apartment. (We can already see the first shadings of difference between his life and, for example, that of Steven Spielberg, whose first camera was not stolen.) He moved to New York, and became an extravagant personality in other underground filmmakers' projects before making his own.

Smith's best-known film was entitled *Flaming Creatures*, from 1963. Beautifully constructed, it is notable for, among other things, its absence of the use of

montage. There is nothing disjunctive in it; it is a fully realized, internally coherent world, populated by fabulously costumed "creatures." Ken Kelman describes the "prodigious transvestism" of Smith's creatures: "they are sexless, or of all sexes, like gods."<sup>11</sup> They are visionary, of course; pure, flawless, irreducible, but very much connected to this world, or one of the billion ways it could be.

56 Flaming creatures are not isolated poetic trifles; the filmmaker Gregory Markopoulos rightly calls the elusive phrase *flaming creatures* a "meaningful unit."<sup>12</sup> To borrow this meaningful unit for this essay's title is both an homage and an effort to prevent important sources of contemporary critical art practices from disappearing from view. But, more importantly, we can also follow the fabulous logic of Smith's work and thought, and take the flaming creature to be the cipher of a committed experimentalism. Smith's commitment to experimentation and pleasure is equally a vision of political and social change. Smith is of course not the only artist to demand that his work and life embody both tendencies. But he was particularly, and possibly uniquely, gifted, and his contribution is always in danger of being eclipsed by experimental work that is not committed, committed work that is not experimental, and a veritable tidal wave of work that is neither. All of the works in the "Flaming Creatures" exhibition, in their extremely varied ways, continue to seek new forms of expression in order to carry on this dual task. We need to recognize their contributions, perhaps in equally experimental ways. ★

This essay was originally written to accompany the exhibition "Flaming Creatures: New Tendencies in Canadian Video" at the Agnes Etherington Arts Centre in Kingston, Ontario.



KEVIN

## Alphagetti

He's six years old. A little precocious. He taught himself to read at the age of three. Having read most of the great works of literature before the age of five, he has a greater sense of loss than other children his age.

He doesn't imagine what he wants to be when he grows up. He thinks about burying his hamster, the break-up of his first relationship, and the death of his mother...

Actually, he wishes that his mother would die right now. She's holding him prisoner in a small house on the outskirts of a big city. Every day she feeds him alphagetti for lunch. He has to decide between eating, and saving up all the letters so he can write "help" on the ledge of his bedroom window.

He's very thin. Most days he just saves the letters. Sometimes, when his mother isn't looking, he leaves messages in the cracks of the sidewalk in front of their house.

Every night at eight o'clock she locks him in his room.

BOY: Let me out, stupid bitch. I'm six years old, and you can't hold me prisoner here much longer. Pretty soon I'll be stronger than you, and I'll kick down this door.

MOTHER: I haven't locked you in your room. You're agoraphobic. If you'd come out of the closet you'd realize that the door is open.

BOY: You're trying to make me think that I'm crazy.

MOTHER: It's open. I swear.

BOY: Fuck off... I tried to open the door a few minutes ago, and it was locked.

MOTHER: .... Stop playing games and come out.

BOY: Go to hell.

The boy takes his pillow and blanket and crawls under his bed. He lies on his back looking up at the box-spring and the wooden bed frame. When he turns to the right he can see the light in the hallway shining through the crack at the bottom of his bedroom door.

He falls asleep. He wakes up the next morning when he hears his mother coming upstairs to use the bathroom. The toilet flushes and a few minutes later the door opens. His mother gets down on her hands and knees and looks at him.

MOTHER: Sweetie, are you playing hide and seek?

BOY: No.

MOTHER: Come downstairs and I'll make you some toast.

BOY: I hate toast.

MOTHER: There's cereal.

BOY: Fuck you.....Let my sister eat breakfast with us.

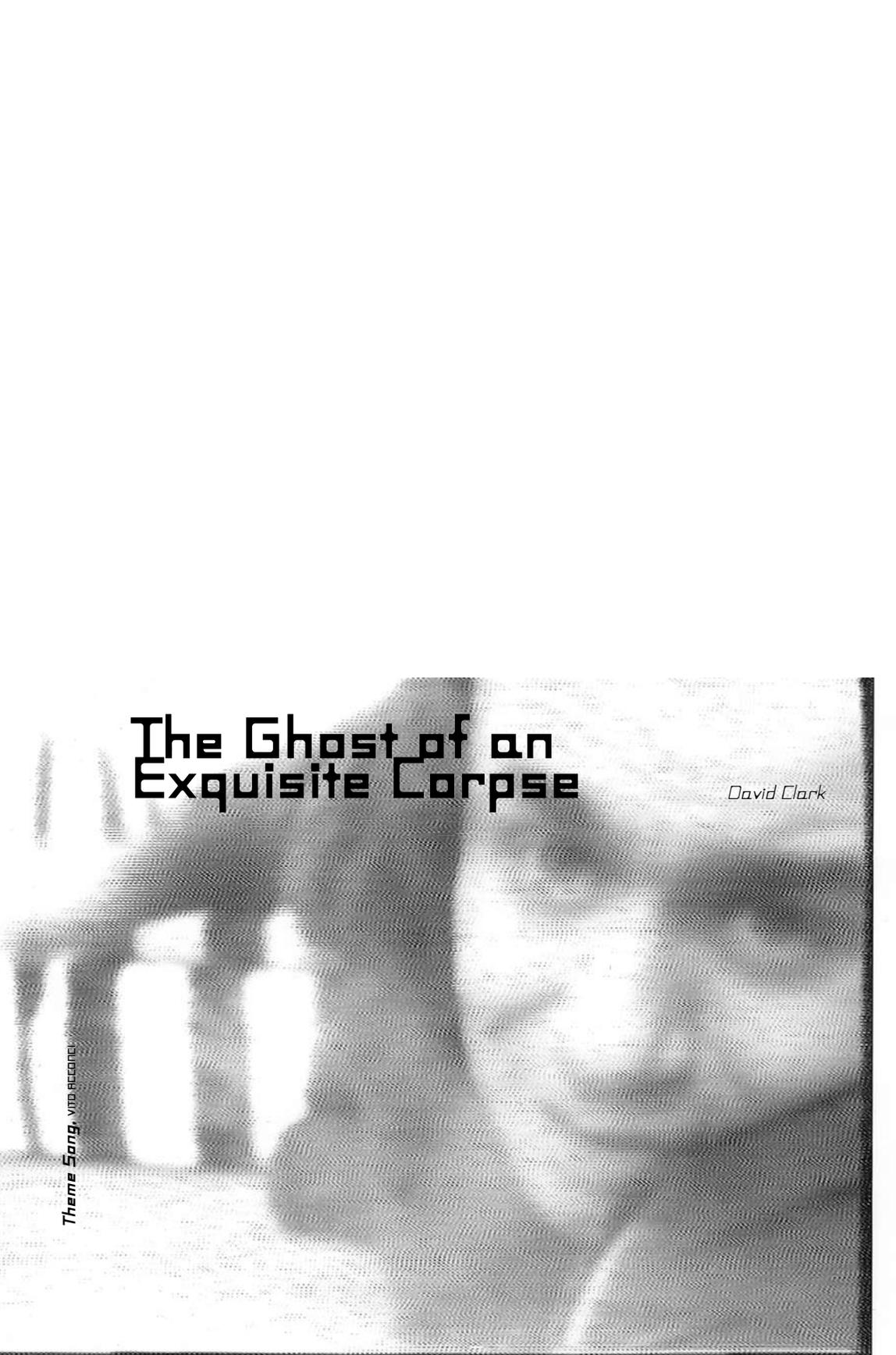
MOTHER: You're an only child.

BOY: Then who the hell is that girl in the basement?

MONIQUE MOUMBLOW alphaghetti

◀◀◀ previous

THERE IS A CERTAIN GLANCE YOU EXCHANGE WITH SOMEONE EXITING A TOILET STALL THAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO ENTER.



# The Ghost of an Exquisite Corpse

*David Clark*

*Theme Song*, VITO ACCONE

*But the certainty that everything has been already written nullifies or makes phantoms of us all.*

—JORGE LUIS BORGES, *The Library of Babel*

## The Intimate Real

The terms “intimacy” and “real time” were peppered throughout early 1970s video art criticism. The restricted size of the television monitor compared with the cinematic screen or the limitless scale of the art object, the familiarity of the tv as a favourite piece of furniture in the home, and photographic optics which made the compressed space of the macro close-up shot possible contributed to the sense of intimacy in the video image. “Real time” was the term used to describe the unedited experiments in duration made by early video artists. They were often the result of limited access to editing. These duration experiments helped to define the art form and also speak about the experience of time in general. As Marita Sturken points out, “for many, real time was a defiant reaction to the fragmented, incomplete view of events offered by television.”<sup>1</sup> That the crude low-resolution new video technology could capture the paradoxical idea of “real” time points out just how unreal lived experience had become in the image-saturated world of cinema and television.

Thirty years later, we can see that intimacy and real time have become less dominant features in the video art landscape. Today we often see video art on the same scale as the cinematic image through video projection systems unavailable in the early 1970s. As well, access to editing systems has allowed artists to explore a range of approaches to duration. Artists now often co-opt and reinvent languages of image construction from cinema and television. Video as a technology, however, still retains the vestigial codes of its past. As John Belton puts it, “The video ‘look’ has come to signify greater realism, immediacy, and presence. But it does so largely within a system of signification that includes the comparative ‘looks’ of photography and the cinema as well.”<sup>2</sup> The terms “real time” and “intimacy” still need to be explored. Video art criticism today has had to take account of both the techniques and the psychological issues of alternative practice as it has developed historically.

In her 1976 essay “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” Rosalind Krauss makes the argument that video art should not be defined by its material techniques but by the psychological condition of narcissism that inflects so much of the early work done in the medium. The works considered in

Krauss's essay were primarily works of unedited performances recorded on video. This early work of Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, Nancy Holt, Lynda Benglis, Peter Campus, and Joan Jonas contributed to the formal questions of how video was distinguished from other media such as painting, photography, and film. Video's ability to produce instantaneous images that the artist could both identify with and be at a distance from was a feature distinctly different from any other time-based image-making technology.

62 This characteristic promoted a narcissistic fascination with the image and a splitting of the ego not dissimilar to Lacan's conception of the mirror stage, the primal identification that the infant has with its mirror image which sets the conditions for dependence on idealized images of ourselves. Lacan points out that our misrecognition of our own image, mirrored to us during our early cognitive development, plays the essential role in the formation of our ego. By being the medium par excellence of the transmittable present, video had become the tool of choice for investigating the issues of split subjectivity opened up by the theory of the mirror stage.<sup>3</sup> Krauss's nomination of narcissism as video's primary psychological state could be considered a parallel to Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" which posited narrative cinema's predominant psychological condition as voyeurism.

Krauss also asks us to contemplate an expanded definition of the word "medium" used in her dematerialized definition of video art. In the "Aesthetics of Narcissism" she points out how the term "medium" can mean both the singular of the word "media" and also conversationally indicate an agent through which we communicate with the absent or displaced presences, a usage commonly associated with telepathy, extrasensory perception, and communication with the afterlife. Like video, the psychic medium also works in real time and with dedicated intimacy in translating messages from the other world. Video, in its uncanny ability to represent the present, also unleashes what is not present. Television, after all, brings the distant, the tele, to the present. Video and television open up new registers of technological presence. The splitting of the subject, like the splitting of the atom, releases new energies that reverberate through the history of video art.

## The Aesthetics of Echo

As we consider video art at the end of the 1990s, we can see that the "aesthetics of narcissism" have waned. The predominant impulse to examine the narcissistic fascination with the video image has given way to a more complex and widely varied involvement with the medium. Video has passed from a concentration on the ontological questioning of its existence

to a broader conversation about a range of psychological issues including identity, community, and subjectivity. The strength of festivals, distributors, and co-operatives dedicated to specific identity issues is an indication of how central psychological conditions are still in defining video art practices today. These psychological conditions have shifted and diversified as new practices evolve. The psychological space that I am interested in investigating could be described (in deference to Krauss) as an “Aesthetics of Echo.” The figure of Echo, Narcissus’ forlorn companion cursed into invisibility, only able to repeat what is said to her, is for me a figure of the repetition of those early gestures of video art in contemporary works. Echo is the dedicated lover of Narcissus just as strains of today’s video art look longingly to the innocence and directness of early video art’s inauguration. The resounding gesture of this aesthetics of echo is the repetition, the remake, the postmodern pastiche.

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An aesthetics of echo also should consider, as a defining condition, the psychology of transference, the intersubjective play of desire between subjects that invariably occurs on the unconscious level in the psychoanalytic encounter and which also plays itself out in the dynamics of performance. In this essay I will analyze how cinematic, philosophical, and artistic views of performance have created pockets of transference to carry forward invisible figures of influence in cultural work. These figures are often pinned to the idea of persona, identity and desire where the phenomena of the split ego (Freud’s *ichspaltung*) plays an important role.

My project is a ghost hunt that demonstrates the power of the video image to fragment and recombine identities. This power stems from the distinctive relation the video image has to the self-present representation of time. The works I am discussing unfold historically like an exquisite corpse in which partial information is passed along through the subterranean channels of influence that have grown up around the video art world. The postmodern strategy of the remake is a particularly virulent form of this promiscuous influence, and one of the places particularly haunted by ghosts. My selection of works to discuss is by no means comprehensive or objective. My position in relation to these works has everything to do with luck and I think that it is only from my position that the work I am discussing could be linked. I don’t think criticism could possibly work without admitting this.

## Keep On Deconstructin’

The ghost hunt starts with a photograph. Appropriate—if we remember those early photographers who captured auras, phantoms, and dead spirits

through dubious double-exposed portraits. The double exposure is perhaps the first technological gesture that makes claims for the multiple truths or decentred identities that I am exorcising in this essay.

54 The photograph I am thinking about is of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. It is a photograph I remember from New York, a joke gift to the director of the theory program at which I was studying. In it, the debonair philosopher sits smoking in a restaurant booth. The photograph is conspicuously tilted, giving the impression that it is falling out of the frame. The hand-written inscription in the bottom right hand corner reads, "Keep on Deconstructin', Love Jacques." It was a gesture that Derrida may well have ironically appreciated. The gag revealed the potential slippage of Derrida's persona into that of a philosophical star—a potential that had allegedly made him reluctant to have his photograph taken and circulated throughout his early career. It might be argued that his persona has already overtaken him, that his figure produced a plethora of effects beyond his name.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps he knows more than others that the circulation of images stirs up ghosts.

It is the troubled space of the image that Derrida has attempted to deconstruct numerous times in his work that is increasingly a dominant force in our mediated culture. The rise of the Hollywood star has demonstrated the profound potential for transference through the image and the persona. As Susan Buck-Morss points out, the cinematic screen provides an illusion of unity to the spectacular mass image and a focus for mass identification with the idealized persona. "The star was an article of mass consumption, whose multiplying image guaranteed the infinite reproduction of the same."<sup>5</sup> This force that works to sustain the institutions of celebrity, that so overwhelmingly engulfs us today in popular culture, is related to the forces of transference that bind us to the images of ourselves through the primordial process of the mirror stage.

It is through Derrida's image in that photograph, inauthentic as it is, and through his phantom presence as a philosopher, that I want to Keep on Deconstructin' the irony of the self-present image. Derrida is a figure—albeit a ghostly one—for my investigation, because he is a philosopher who attempts to read images and texts beyond their obvious boundaries. In his tangles with Western metaphysics, Derrida has stirred up the ghosts of Western logocentrism by questioning the polarized construction of philosophical concepts within the history of Western thought. Derrida's surgical textual analysis has sought to tarry with the indefinable other, an other that defines its presence through noticeable absences or gaps in the texts of Western thought. The other has found its image in Derrida's writing in the ghost, the phantom, the spectre.

Derrida's work has evolved from philosophical objections to the metaphysics of presence. Derrida stresses that the founding concepts of philosophy—truth and presence—are self-contradictory. A deconstruction of these basic concepts examines how truth relies on untruth and presence is always a double-game with what is not present or what is always already present. A deconstructive reading of video through the term “real time” would have to take account of the generative power of what is left out in the opposition of real and unreal time. That is, if it is posited that the real is captured in the present, and the unreal is that which is present through the remove of memory or fantasy, we would have to try to take account of what is real in the not-present or what is not recognized as real in the present. The ghost could be seen as a term that bridges this opposition, being both real as an experience, and unreal in its materiality.

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Deconstruction demonstrates the paradoxical nature of all metaphysical speculation. For example, because consciousness is actually “self-consciousness,” (i.e., a self and a consciousness) consciousness is always already divided, never simply present to itself. It is through the image and our self-consciousness of the image that we become entangled in the effects of the other. It is the technologies of the image, particularly the self-present mirroring effects of the technology of video, that acts as a leverage to a deconstruction of identity, so central to the psychological concerns of so much video art.

## Shot through with Ghosts

The photograph of Derrida—I discovered a few years later—turned out to be a still from a 1984 British film by Ken McMullen entitled *Ghost Dances*. A few years ago I met Ken McMullen and he talked about Derrida's appearance in the film. McMullen had asked Derrida not just to appear in the film but to actually play himself. Perhaps this was because McMullen wanted to underline the irony of the self-identical fictional image and to put the limits of identity and character into question. It was an irony Derrida understood very well. In one scene McMullen asked Derrida and a young French actress named Pascale Ogier to improvise a scene in Derrida's office where Ogier, playing a young student, comes to talk to the famous philosopher. McMullen said that in the shooting of this scene Derrida and Ogier fell in love. Derrida, recognizing the powerful effect of transference operating between the two subjects, improvised the line: “but you too are already shot through with ghosts of me.” Was he referring to the narrative within the frame—the student in awe of a famous philosopher/teacher—or was he referring to the relationship between a

nervous actress and the real Derrida? (If there could be a real Derrida in that situation already inflected by so much fiction.) Derrida understood the metanarrative of the work of the unconscious and was able to identify the paradoxical space created in a parallel world in which transference relationships could form. This ghost dance—this unconscious intersubjective intertextuality—captures the indescribable dimensions of the relationship between subjects through the ghosts of transference.

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## Theme Song

The cinematic frame is crowded with presences other than the performative event. The soundtrack, with foley sound and music, is one of the most emphatic and influential of these supplemental presences. In the soundtrack, the theme song is a special case. It has to try to capture a general topic or mood of the film and also serve to extend the presence of the film into the media through popular music. The theme song is very much like a slogan or advertising sound bite. It is usually an opportunity for the film to brand its theme through the celebrity endorsement of the musician/star who performs the song. This slippery artistic form, driven by the dynamics of the celebrity persona, both part of the text of the film and a publicity supplement, is the motif deconstructed by Vito Acconci in his seminal 1973 video *Theme Song*. This tape is a prototypical example of tendencies in early video art and also touches on some of the major themes of Acconci's early career. It is a single take, black and white video of a performance Acconci created for the video. The theme is of romance, an impossible romance between the performer Acconci and his audience.

In *Theme Song*, Acconci lies on his side, head towards the camera on the floor of a shabby domestic interior in a pose suggesting an intimate romantic encounter that has made its way from the couch to the floor. We have Acconci, his voice and the accompaniment of popular songs that he plays on a tape deck off-screen. He talks to you, the audience, pleading with you to join him. He is trying to seduce you into doing the impossible: entering his world. All the while he is chain smoking and pleading. His relentless monologue is improvised by riffing on the lyrics of the recognizable pop songs. He picks out lines and modifies them into personal pleas. He filters the empty romanticism of these pop songs as he translates the lyrics into an impossible seduction. He is trying to invest the empty speech of the pop song—a kind of speech that acknowledges a place of pure exchange empty of content, a pure gesture of recognition and branding in a marketplace—with as much sincere intimacy as he can achieve with his anonymous audience. His improvised monologue acknowledges the impossibility of

the real relationship even as it looks for loopholes in the barriers between him and you. He tries to occupy the space of the theme song, a transitional motif in the Hollywood film, through a self-consciously futile disruption of the desire of the audience to identify with a greater theme.

In his early performance and video work Vito Acconci explored a range of imaginary relationships with his audience. Often his work involved the dynamics of conversations, attacks, or seductions that were mediated through the video camera. Acconci's work addressed the tension between intimacy and autonomy involved in the television address by unhinging the process of the viewer's identification with the image. The technology of video, in Acconci's hand, is like a hall of mirrors; there are so many Acconcis that are reflected back to us. *Theme Song* is a part of a body of work in which Acconci shifts the status of his character in relation to the audience as a way of examining dynamics of power between himself and the viewer. In his notes to *Undertone* (1973) he states, "Build myself up: Viewer as believer." In *Air Time* (1973) its "Tear myself away: Viewer as witness." *Command Performance* (1974): "Give myself over: Viewer as surrogate." His tapes are psychological studies of the interpersonal dynamics channeled through the video medium. Acconci's early video experiments that revolve around his powerful persona open up a Pandora's box of possibilities within the video art canon.

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In his 1976 "10-Point Plan for Video," Acconci states: "In order to keep up my image, I should give up my person. I could be dead—and therefore have no recourse but this ghost of myself." Acconci exploits the split between the image and the persona in his video work. From tape to tape, as he shifts his status in relation to his audience, he is gauging how this split is reconciled by the audience's reaction. Acconci vows to keep up his image against his person. He is staking the fate of his ego in the video image as a way to leverage the problem of identity and bridge the impossible gap of the real. In *Theme Song* it is a masochistic commitment. The masochism sustains the dilemma of Acconci the performer who is both voyeur and exhibitionist to his audience. The fate of his ego in this process is to be both accentuated and distanced as it fluctuates between the private and public spheres. This tension plays out the paradox of the formation of identity that is always set in relation to a desire for an other.

Acconci's provocation—seducing the audience—unleashes the play of fantasies and ghosts. Acconci, who often wishes to provoke a strong transference reaction from his audience, succeeds magnificently in *Theme Song*. The tape tugs you into its convoluted logic. You find yourself interpellated into the romance of the piece, split between reality and fantasy.

It has been an influential work and there are a number of artists who have taken up Acconci's mode of address. It has even inspired the compliment of a remake.

## Repetition is a Form of Change

68 The paradox of the remake is examined by Jorge Luis Borges in his short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." As Borges describes in his metanarrative, the great and incomplete work of the fictional author Pierre Menard was his attempt to try to write "line for line and word for word" not a mechanical copy of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, but "the *Don Quixote*," a work created by Pierre Menard that would be in every way equivalent to the original. The fictional author's great achievement was to write (not transcribe) *Don Quixote* as a twentieth-century writer. Borges, speaking as a self-consciously fictional critic, says that in reading Cervantes' original work we take it at face value, but to read the very same lines by Pierre Menard brings completely new meaning to the words, of course considering that the historical context in which Menard wrote was as a contemporary of James Joyce and Henry James.

The remake is a rarefied form of popular culture's general inclination to reproduce already existing cultural forms. The point of Borges's story is that every reproduction, no matter how exact, always has a different meaning. The remake is measured by its relation to the already made, the always already present. The remake, therefore, becomes a gauge for measuring the historical shifts of meaning that have taken place. The post-modern critique of originality and the role of the author parallels the rise of the remake as an avant-garde strategy.<sup>6</sup> The remake allows us to bracket out the content of the art work and look at its distinguishing formal characteristics, in a way that is similar to phenomenology's project of bracketing out the subjective aspects of experience, leaving only the phenomena that exist outside the subjective. The remake removes the subjective aspects of the work and leaves the non-subjective, the phenomenological, as a gauge of the residues of history.

## Fresh Acconci

In their 1995 collaborative videotape *Fresh Acconci*, Californian artists Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy undertook the quixotic task of remaking the classic Vito Acconci videotapes: *Claim Excerpts* (1971), *Contacts* (1971), *Focal Points* (1971), *Pryings* (1971), and *Theme Song* (1973). This gesture, fully fortified by postmodern irony, maps a historical shift spanning practically the entire short history of video art. The 1970s of

Acconci's early work was a time of scarce access to even crude video recorders (first widely available in 1968). The 1990s of *Fresh Acconci* is the world of the ubiquitous home video camera and VCR. Video has increasingly become a space of private investigation, not, as it would have been in Acconci's time, purely a site of public broadcasting. Acconci's stake in taking up video and the force of the intimacy of his work has to be read historically to take account of the stridency of his confrontation. Kelley and McCarthy's remounting has a lot to say about how the relationship of desire and technology has evolved in that historical period.

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McCarthy and Kelley have radically recoded Acconci's performance gestures. Although the performances in *Fresh Acconci* are delivered pretty much as "line for line and word for word" copies of Acconci's texts, they no longer have the quality of being improvised. This gesture has a twist. Acconci was, as part of his improvisation in *Theme Song*, incorporating lines from popular songs playing in the background. In *Fresh Acconci*, Acconci's appropriation of those lines have now ironically been transformed into a canonical text. *Fresh Acconci* has not been created through a repetition of Acconci's methods—the "freshness" of improvisation—but by straight-faced pastiche of Acconci's words. This gesture brackets out Acconci's persona and neutralizes the compelling presence of Acconci. It is a remaking that reduces Acconci to his texts at the expense of the added dimensions of the performance act. This accounts for the deadness of these performances.

The geographic shift is also provocative. Kelley and McCarthy have transplanted the downtown New York art scene of the '70s into the Hollywood Hills, site of the pornography industry. The work is infused with the iconography of pornography that has developed concurrently with the rise of cheap video and home video distribution. The tatty couch of Acconci's domestic interior has been replaced by the cool, ubiquitous pornographic decor of a Californian mansion. Codes of wealth and sexual decadence intermingle in this capitalist vernacular of desire. Replacing the compelling persona of Acconci are the vacant recanting of his improvisations by male and female models, whose naked bodies play out the clichéd roles of available desire and polymorphous perversity signified by the porn actor. The charismatic Acconci has no recourse but as a ghost in *Fresh Acconci*, as the blank, anonymous Hollywood nymphs go through the motions with a strangely obsessive, but not compulsive, conviction.

Gone are the close-ups. We are no longer "in the face" of Acconci. The intimacy of the close-up has been replaced by the distanced voyeurism of the medium shot. The cinematography is stylized in the manner of pornography.

The camera marks the beginning and end of each section by moving in and out on each performance making us aware of the behind-the-scenes of the video. We knew that Acconci was shooting the video by himself. That increased our sense of intimacy knowing we were alone with him. But in *Fresh Acconci*, we're aware of the invisible mechanisms of the production machine. Part of our identification has to be with the camera person and crew, with the whole mechanism of video production.

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The length of Acconci's original tapes was simply determined by the length of a video tape itself. The artist's intentions for the structure of the tape was not a major concern and the end of the work was more or less arbitrary. But in *Fresh Acconci* we become aware of sequencing. The performances are long but they have a beginning, a middle and an end. We can perhaps even narrativize the juxtapositions of these performative gestures and the meaning of their repetition. For instance, it seems that the performances largely revolve around seeing and blindness. In *Pryings* one performer tries to pry open the eyelids of another. In *Contact* a blindfolded performer tries to divine what part of their body is being covered but not touched by another performer's hand. In *Claim Excerpts* a blindfolded performer tries to defend a part of the house by wildly swinging an iron pipe and threatening anyone within earshot. Even in *Theme Song*, the performer is trying to seduce someone they can't see. Blindness seems to be the link between these performances. This blindness, perhaps an allegory of the impossibility of real intersubjectivity through technology, is ironic in the context of the conscious use of the codes of visual display from pornography.

In a way *Fresh Acconci* shows how fresh the original Acconci was. The characteristics of "real time" and "intimacy" are hollow platitudes in this remake. *Fresh Acconci* also demonstrates just how codified the gestures of desire and seduction have become in the marginal world of pornography. The compulsive narcissism of Acconci has been reduced to a faint but loaded echo in Kelley and McCarthy's remake.

Acconci opens the suture of our attachment to the cinematic image. *Theme Song* is a provocation to the desiring audience and a demonstration of the impossibility of desire; it perfectly describes the dilemma of desire that is captured in the cinematic form. Acconci holds open a promise that we will be able to completely enter into the picture, to follow our hearts, to join Vito Acconci who promises a perfect kind of love. In *Fresh Acconci*, this same gesture of perfect fulfillment is played out in the vernacular of soft-core porn, this being the embodiment of the curdled promise of desire, codified by accessibility and denial. The gestures of porn—setting, models, and mode of display—conflate Acconci's gestures with the



FRESH ACCONCI, MIKE KELLEY AND PAUL McCRETHY



FRESH ACCONCI, MIKE KELLEY AND PAUL MCCARTHY



JOAN AND STEPHEN, MONIQUE MOUNBLOW



world of pornography, measuring out the place of desire and transference through video's history. Acconci was working at a moment when video art was very fresh. Acconci did much to defamiliarize us with the solidified codes of television through the filter of performance and conceptual art. *Fresh Acconci* marks a moment in time when home video distribution has created new symbolic spaces for the recoding of the performance of desire. The gesture of identification has been played out against a wider palette of meaning from our contemporary historical viewpoint.

## LifeSwap

Among the more interesting aspects that have distinguished performance art from the theatrical tradition are the practices that blur the distinction between life and art. There was a strong vein of British performance artists, such as Gilbert and George, Stuart Brisley, and Jo Spence, who concentrated on these problems in the 1960s and 1970s. Stuart Brisley, who also made an appearance in *Ghost Dances*, was the head of the Studio Four program for Expanded and Media Art at Slade College in London in the 1980s when a student named William Easton was studying and formulating questions about life, art, and identity. In a work done at the Slade in his undergraduate career called *LifeSwap*, William exchanged lives with his friend Andrew for a month. The work was prepared through a careful study of the other's personality, lifestyle, movement, handwriting, etc. In this undocumented performance they undertook to live the life of the other person to the best of their abilities. The experiment had some very disorienting effects for both subjects. At the end of the month when they had agreed to meet again for the first time since the performance began, William remembers having the spontaneous thought: "I wonder how William has been." They discovered that identity is a fragile thing.

In a piece done a few years later in graduate school called *3 x 3*, William Easton examined his own identity and defined three distinctive personalities in himself. These distinctions became the basis for three fictional personas, all of whom pursued creative work. One was a performance artist, one was a filmmaker, and one was a feminist art critic. Two were women and one was a man. Under the guise of their fictional characters, each pursued careers and started taking up public roles for their work. The piece, which lasted for several years, allowed William to use the mask of the character to pursue work that he would have never done of his own accord.

In 1992 I invited William Easton to lecture about his work at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. His work struck a chord with

Monique Moumblow, a student of mine. Her work evolved from that encounter, taking permission from the British School of life art performance opened up by William Easton as well as through revisiting the early performative and video work by artists like Acconci.

## Joan and Stephen and Monique

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*Ghost Dances* reminds us of Freud's statement that when two people sleep together there are already (at least) six people in the bed. In Montreal artist Monique Moumblow's work, the imaginary aspects of sexual relationships and the lingering family romance appear both in the conscious fictions she creates and under the surface in her biographical sources.

In her 1996 video tape *Joan and Stephen*, the imaginary dimension of sexual relationships is activated by the invention of Moumblow's imaginary boyfriend. In previous performance and video work Moumblow had developed a number of fictional personalities. She developed a complex love/hate relationship with a fictional alter ego named Anne Russell through works such as the video *Liabilities*. *Liabilities* is structured as a series of letters between Anne Russell and Monique. Anne was the name her mother had wanted to give Monique when she was born. Her father prevailed in naming her after a character in a French film. In *Joan and Stephen* she self-consciously invents her imaginary lover Stephen in a gesture that, like Acconci in *Theme Song*, both acknowledges and denies the impossibility of the action.

*Joan and Stephen* is set in two locations. The framing story that appears at the beginning and the end of the tape shows a vignette of a family in a small suburban house. A child, sleeping upstairs, gets out of bed to spy through the open ducts on her parents making out in the kitchen below. The mother notices the girl and smiles at her as if inviting her into the sensuality of the family romance. This section, shot on black and white film, uses the conventions of filmic narrative and could be read as a flashback sequence, although there isn't a direct narrative tie-in to the next section. This section is called "Joan." Is she the mother or the daughter? Is this fictional or is this a re-creation of a real moment in Moumblow's life? These questions are left open.

The middle section switches to video. Suddenly we feel the effects of the intimacy of the video look in contrast to the distanced third-person point of view offered us in the film section. Using a hand-held camera to record herself, Monique rolls around and flops on a bed talking into the camera,

addressing her imaginary boyfriend Stephen. In a series of diary entries or video letters that seem to have been shot over a period of time, Monique describes Stephen to him as if she were conjuring him: he's tall but not too tall, he has pubic hair, etc. She creates this portrait to convince him of his existence but also creates an image of him for us, the audience. Strangely, we are in the position of the audience and of Stephen. The means of address is personal and yet like Acconci, we—the anonymous audience—are implicated. Monique seems both convinced of Stephen's existence and in the process of creating him at the same time. If this tape can be seen as a remake of Acconci, it is a remaking of his process rather than the text. Moumblow confronts the camera with the same freshness as Acconci in *Theme Song*. The intimacy of the video equipment becomes a convincing medium to talk to her fictional characters.

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*Joan and Stephen* is a work that hybridizes film and video art conventions but leaves the gaps for us to grapple with. Are we to suppose that Monique's inability to grasp the reality of her situation is caused by the incestuous home she might have grown up in? Does one story necessarily have to tell something of the other? Could it be that the film is a fictional memory, conjured up in fantasy in the same way that Monique's fictional boyfriend was? Is Monique's fantasy life a result of her former omnipotent point of view sanctified by her mother's acknowledgment of the child's position as a privileged viewer? The unresolved questions of the tape don't privilege one reading over another as no discernible frame of what is real is drawn.

## Last Year at NSCAD

A character in the film *Ghost Dances* describes a ghost as a fragment of another person's unconscious that you have incorporated into your own unconscious. Your experience of the ghost as "other," as exterior, has to do with its position in your unconscious as unassimilated thought. Like the psychotic who can't distinguish between the register of the fantasy and the real, the ghost returns as a disturbing or haunting presence.

In the summer of 1999 I taught a class called Video Hybrids at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design—where Vito Acconci once taught and where Monique Moumblow first did her work with fictional personalities. After I showed *Joan and Stephen*, two students each embarked on reinventing it. It was a curious feeling to watch these videotapes evolve—especially since Monique Moumblow had also been a student of mine a few years before. It was like watching an exquisite corpse unfold; a series of provocations passed

on from generation to generation; a promiscuous orgy of ghosts left roaming the school. The institution of learning seems to act as a repository for these, the fragments of the unconscious, before they are filtered and used again.

76 Thomas Doucette decided that he could become Stephen, Monique's imaginary boyfriend. With a video camera he carefully created plausible countershots of himself as Stephen in a set resembling Monique's bedroom. He then was able to seamlessly insert these shots into Monique's video creating the impression that he is in her bedroom reacting to her monologue. As Stephen he struggles to express the disappointment of his limited being as described by Monique. Doucette, by inserting himself as the abused fictional Stephen, seems to be trying to claim the audience's sympathies. Doucette exploits the shot/countershot convention (combining fragmentary shots to create the realistic continuity of cinematic space) as a way of bringing closure to the impossible fantasy of the fictional persona in Monique's tape. Doucette sacrifices the intimacy of Monique's mode of address to move the audience's point of view into the third person and to occupy for himself what had formerly been, in Monique's tape, a more ambiguous point of view.

Goody B. Wiseman took up Monique's persona in the tapes *Dear Emily* and *Paul & Paulette: Episode One & Two*. A recurring theme in Goody's work is the insecurity of identity. Monique has become Goody B.'s fictional character, like a mask that she can put on. It's as if she has taken up Acconci's provocation from *Theme Song* and found a way to enter into Monique's world. In *Dear Emily*, Goody B. appropriates the motif of the video correspondence from *Joan and Stephen*. But instead of being an imaginary correspondence with a fictional character, she is masquerading as Monique to correspond with another artist and friend, Emily Vey Duke, in a collaborative video letter project. The reference now becomes an in-joke, a point of contact using video art as a vernacular language, but also perhaps an evocation of the idea that all relationships are tinged by the fictional and we need these masks to communicate intimately.

In *Paul & Paulette*, Goody B. is again exploiting a correspondence between her and a friend in a style borrowed from *Joan and Stephen*. In the tapes she pussyfoots around the responsibility of disclosing private stories that have entered the public sphere through Goody B.'s work. Here, instead of the purely speculative nature of Monique Moublow's explorations, this work treads the edge of life as Goody B. struggles with negotiating an intimate relationship that has been exposed to the fictions of her art.

It was curious that neither of these students had seen or were directly

influenced by Vito Acconci's work and yet I could feel the ghost of his presence as it had been filtered through video art's history.

## All the World's a Mirror Stage

Real time and intimacy are still terms at play in contemporary video art although they have been reinscribed by contemporary practices. The texture of video is still coded as the immediate and real. The large-scale disinvestment that has overtaken the authority of the photographic image in the digital age has not yet, it seems, consumed our belief in the sincerity of the video image. In fact the widespread use of video camcorder footage in legal and entertainment contexts suggests an entrenchment of video's role as witness to the real. The position of video technology as pop culture's wonder child has been succeeded by digital technologies that are homogenizing the many different technical approaches to image making, often incorporating distinctive features of previous technologies in curious combinations (such as the "cinelook" filters that can now give video the feel of film grain). The internet radically challenges the broadcast models of mass media image culture and has introduced new nuance to the terms "real time" and "intimacy." It seems that video artists who work within the parameters of those terms today do not do it to define a psychology but as a loaded historical gesture.

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The question of intimacy is, of course, not just a formal aspect of the technology of video but part of a whole set of psychological and social conditions that arise from what technologies use. Video art, having defined itself as a particular set of artistic practices, has created a sense of intimacy between members who situate themselves in that history. Video art is no longer an innocent play-thing of conceptual art. It has struggled to wean itself from the gallery and museum scene and developed its own community of co-operatives, festivals, academic programs, and independent production venues. It has also increasingly become the centre of a concerted discourse discussed under the name video art. The dynamics of influence, as I have tried to show in this essay, are perpetuated by these social networks. With the technically distinct relation to real time feedback in video, the effects of transference are perpetuated slightly differently than other art forms. That is to say, video ghosts are different from cinema ghosts or painting ghosts.

As media art expands into a multitude of new genres and technologies, provocative sites for distinct new media forms are also developing. Although these art forms haven't yet emerged into discourse with the same

clarity that video art did in the early 1970s, we can expect that new distinctive features such as “agency” and “immersion” will need to be thought of in terms of their psychological dynamics which will bring about new theoretical developments around the role and function of art in general.

7B As the internet embraces the type of personal experiments undertaken under the name of video art—although who knows if either the term “video” or “art” will continue to be operative in the future—and questions of on-line identity continue to stress the instability of identity formation, it seems that Narcissism and Echo will continue to figure the psychodynamics of this media art and all the world will be a mirror stage and all its players mere reflections of a lost originality. ★

# Performative Impulses

*Andrew James Paterson*

Performance (and performers) were crucial catalysts at the inception of both film and video technologies. What made the pictures moving was, after all, movement itself. Thus, many early movies depicted trains and boats and cars and horses and people. And video art developed as a performative and/or testimonial usurpation of that “contaminated media-tool,” the camcorder.<sup>1</sup> Formative video artists inverted the camcorder’s intended military surveillance function in order to perform and document their personal body politics.

However, the rapid development of production and postproduction possibilities for media arts problematized the roles of relatively non-mediated performance within the production technologies. Simply recording or documenting performance was failing to seriously explore the medium’s formal, aesthetic, and political potentials. Theories of montage, polemicized by Russian artists such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov and themselves influenced by the American narrator D.W. Griffith, shifted the process of filming well

beyond staged adaptations of what were originally vaudevillian routines. Video art, by turn, has often been characterized (or marred) by tendencies toward using the medium's technical possibilities or idiosyncrasies for their own formal logistics. Bodies were often secondary to the filming or recording apparatus and editing technologies or else completely non-existent. Also, experimental film and video has frequently been suspicious of drama—considering actors and synchronized sound to be vestiges of mainstream commercial cinema and television. Montage, at its most intense, occupies framed spaces by collapsing time rather than either dramatizing or replicating it. In contrast, many performance pieces and realizations intentionally deploy “real” time, which tends to either invigorate or repel its many audiences.

Indeed, the position of the audience in relation to the performer or “the entertainment” is problematized in a good deal of performance-oriented film and video. “What I wanted...was a way that my presence could affect a space into and out of which people passed.”<sup>2</sup> Vito Acconci is here referring to his performance and body-art work. The addition of the camcorder apparatus invokes both television coverage and the peep show—television is meant to be viewed in the private space of the home while dirty pictures require their own booths and arcades in addition to the lucrative home porn markets. Video camcorders and super 8 cameras have also been the primary recorders of “the home movie” and often the spectator is watching a documented ritual that seems to be a very private matter indeed. The ritual speaks private languages, or refers to “public languages” only to violently break away from them. Many viewers (and self-appointed custodians or representatives of the viewing public) like to make sharp demarcations between what is worth displaying for the public and what should remain a home movie, for friends and families only.

Acconci's *THEME SONG* is a prototypical example of performative self-portraiture that negotiates a precarious balance between private ritual and public expectations of gratification—the videotape simultaneously reaches out to and threatens its audiences. Acconci as performer begs that the viewer permit him to wrap his arms around her (or him). However, his tone borders on being imperative. This performer wants not only to seduce but also corral the audience; he simultaneously refuses to reach out beyond himself to the assumed audience. He flirts with public language only to retreat into his intensely private realm; he demands intercourse only to reaffirm masturbation. There is more than a slight element of sado-masochistic play in Acconci's video-performance piece. And the performer/audience relationship is and is not consensual. The bottom (audience) has entered the performer's, or top's, space and doesn't have access to any safety

commands or code-words. In a live performance situation, audiences have a power to affect performances that the mediation of a screen or video monitor (in a public screening situation) eliminates.

Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's *Fresh Acconci* references and then transports *THEME SONG* into an opulent heterosexual Californian setting—extending the voyeur's duplicity. In contrast to *Theme Song*, *Fresh Acconci* reeks of money, transporting the indulgence from artists' bohemia to Hollywood (or straight porn) fantasia. Acconci's alternating pleas and commands are shifted from a direct performer/audience relationship to a not unconventional straight porn narrative. Acconci's original aggressively predatory advances have here become the language of an industry in which individualism has long been typecast and where impulses are nothing more than mechanisms of "the plot."

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Performance in independent film and video as well as in much of performance art tends to be relatively non-matrixed. Character embellishments, accents, obvious costumes tend to be either entirely absent or else downplayed in direct address rather than dramatic mise-en-scène performance works. Audiences are intended to feel an uncomfortable sense that the individual on monitor is not "acting,"<sup>3</sup> but rather speaking one-on-one.

Cathy Sisler's *Aberrant Motion #4* inserts the performer into its impersonally urban environment—the performer literally attempts to occupy impersonal public spaces in a manner contrasting to Acconci's aggressive interventions. The performer spins—she's literally a spinner rather than a walker or driver or consumer. Sisler has indeed named her own "characters" throughout her body of live performance and performance-based tapes;<sup>4</sup> yet she is not acting in the sense of pretending to be someone other than herself. The Spinning Woman and the Almost Falling Woman are not theatrical personae. They are individuals who do not mesh with the crowds that the artist or performer contrasts herself with. Sisler is simultaneously asserting her right to exist within public spaces—the city of Montreal and the video frame—while positioning her body in mise-en-scènes which make it visually apparent that she cannot blend in and become anonymous. She believes in her rights while carrying an awareness of the absurdity of moving and static uniformities.



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*Denial*, by Anne Whitehurst and Mike Stubbs, reverses the performer/audience positioning of monologue or direct performance. The camera and an interrogator's voice-over demands stock answers to formula questions addressed to a silent disabled person. The interrogator attempts to obtain truths and, in the unsuccessful process, cross-examines the patient about statements and actions that may or may not be rhetorical or performative rather than meant to be taken literally. The viewer is more than implicated as the disabled body is in fact out of control and very angry. *Locomotion*, by Anne Charlotte Robertson, re-enacts the performer's confinement to a padded cell in a psychiatric institution. Robertson's action may be a re-staging but its intensity transfers past tense into the present. Boundaries of entertainment, therapy, and performance practice are demolished. Robertson's action allows little, if any, space for viewers to reassure themselves that what they are watching is either fiction or "art."

Monique Moublow's *Liabilities (The First Ten Minutes)* plays with the theatrical performative tradition of an artist's persona; but the lines between self-portrait and self-fantasy are disturbingly blurred. Monique, who may or may not be the artist herself, and her alter ego, Anne Russell, live out a symbiosis that is strange because it can't easily be dismissed as obvious role-playing. Both Monique and Anne are far too old to still be talking to themselves and/or playing with imaginary playmates.

Performative video and film has always encouraged personae, which often contrast with the non-matrixed performing styles of self-documented performance that intentionally trades on its own ambiguity about performance. Personae permit the performer to insist that the self-image is not his or her "self"; yet the extravagance of the persona itself draws attention to its own posturing. The boundaries between Brechtian alienation techniques and camp excess have always been fuzzy, and why not?

In *Rendez-vous*, Colin Campbell references his innovative performance-rooted video works of the '70s and '80s<sup>5</sup> by inventing a new persona related to earlier examples. Colleena is clearly the artist's or performer's feminine half or sister or whatever, but the persona is also a device to simultaneously self-reference his own body and practice as well as to comment on contemporary artistic and cultural landscapes. Campbell's personae and performance have always idiosyncratically blended conventions of theatrical camp and self-portraiture—Colleena, as well as her video ancestors, both is and is not Colin Campbell.

New York's Alex Bag could easily be one of Campbell's students. Her slacker eternal art student character has a similar off-handedness—Bag knows damn

well that throwaway lines often ring true. By portraying a student who might well never graduate, Bag affectionately yet humorously skewers the big terrifying art world that girls like her have to make their marks in. Her material is less literary than Campbell's—it may or may not seem scripted. But what seems unnervingly casual about Bag's presentation is deceptive—the girl is a highly skilled performer and an acerbically clever writer and cultural observer.

George Kuchar's video diaries have ingenuously yet artlessly walked that fine line between documentation or documentary and performance involving personae. Kuchar is the voyeur who is delightfully unable to hide behind the camera, which is thus truly the candid model. Watching Kuchar's portraits and excursions, one is introduced to subjects who immediately switch on along with the camera and those who don't make any switch. People interface with Kuchar's animate and inanimate obsessions—thunderstorms and tornadoes, pussy-cats, wieners, and turds. Spectacle is simultaneously glamorized and trivialized. Kuchar's stars are delightfully ordinary and intriguingly perverse.

□□

Some performative cinema doesn't even pretend to reference notions of documentation or "the self." Jack Smith's notorious *Flaming Creatures* is a prototype for a queer underground cinema that aggressively defies formalist aversions to theatricality and blows camp homosexual fixations on high melodrama galaxies beyond their Hollywood limits. Smith mixes appropriated "mainstream" stocks (viva Maria Montez!) with dramatic mise-en-scènes that are simultaneously acting (with their extreme disdain for naturalism) and not acting (because of their utter disdain for verité or believability). Smith was an influence on, as well as a contemporary of, Warhol's cinematic world—where the truism that everybody could be a star was frequently inverted to the truism that a star could in fact be just anybody. Bruce LaBruce, in *Super 8 1/2* and *Hustler White*, homages both Smith and Warhol while cannibalizing barely contained Hollywood hysterics and gay male pornography. Early '70s California was a home for therapy masquerading as fiction and camp appropriations such as LaBruce's humorously yet mercilessly lay waste to posturings of sincerity and "self." Peggy Ahwesh and Margie Stroesser's *Strange Weather* and Leslie Singer's *Taking Back the Dolls* also live up to their titles—*The Valley of the Dolls* is flamboyantly reclaimed and then injected. The chemical cocktails that queers and other camp-enthusiasts knew were on the sets, but still not within the frames of Hollywood psycho-dramas and melodramas, are now deliriously highlighted and fetishized.

Television also has been notorious for the chaos obviously present immediately behind or underneath its slickly formulaic product. Anne McGuire in *I'm Crazy and You're Not Wrong* captures those magical moments idiosyncratic

to early '60s live television when the Garland-like entertainer “slips” in a public space and cannot easily have her “mistakes” edited out of the product. If television is implied by Vito Acconci’s and Bruce Naumann’s self-documentations, then live television represented an awkward meeting point of theatre verging on therapy—the home viewer can enjoy the forbidden in the comfort of his or her own home.

84 Joe Gibbons’ *Multiple Barbie* and McGuire’s *When I Was a Monster* serve notice to those all too willing to routinely play doctor. Assuming that Barbie has a single personality let alone multiples is itself a performative conceit and Gibbons portrays a psychiatrist far more cruel than the concerned dogooder in *Denial*. This shrink is so smug and arrogant that it is truly cathartic when Barbie rebels—when the inanimate puts the pseudo-animate in his rightful place. Tops who do not realize that they are bottoms are always good for a sadistic chuckle. McGuire dares her visitors and viewers to deny her space in *When I Was A Monster*. Using a wonderfully delayed recording of the B-52s’ song *Dance This Mess Around*, the bedridden performer holds her paralyzed left arm out on display and then mimes the act of delirious driving. Gibbons sets himself up for his patient’s eventual rebellion while McGuire rebels against her doctors and the doctor-figures in her audience as she defiantly delights in her close-up. Gibbons’ doctor becomes a victim while McGuire’s patient refuses to act like one. The performer dares the viewer to hold her gloriously injured hand.

WHEN I WAS A MONSTER... JOE GIBBONS, BRUCE NAUMANN, VITO ACCONCI, AND BRUCE NAUMANN



Steve Hawley and Tony Steyger's *Language Lessons* mock-documents the scholars and enthusiasts for avant-languages such as Volapuk, Esperanto, and Sol Re Sol (a musically based language). These invented languages reference concrete or sound poetry and the beauty of sonics unintended for literal and representational communication but rather intended to be heard and then joyfully responded to. The relationship between verbal language and image within experimental film and video art has usually contrasted with its rather literal pre-eminence within narrative or dramatic traditions. Cause and effect so often having been thrown to the wind, it follows that sentences and even words should not need to be sequential.

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Functional language has been relegated to the realm of elemental shopping and mindless appraisal. Jinhan Ko's *Excerpt 7 (from Jin's Banana House)* presents the performer against an almost non-existent backdrop reciting a litany of responses such as "so good, so great, so excellent." The artist sends up the tendency of audiences to respond strictly in qualitative vocabularies while philosophizing on the inevitable parallels between appreciation of the irrational and the banality of advertising's adjectives.

John Mariott and Ed Sinclair's *Art That Says Hello* and Karma Clarke-Davis's *Master F—There Are People Who* transfer Acconci's explorations of how a performer's presence might affect space through which people pass—from the relatively inaccessible galleries to the public realms of 7-11 grocery stores and street vending. Clarke-Davis marks herself as an already marked woman—is she a lady of the evening? Exactly what kind of consumer is she? The grocer's and the customers' attempts to assign labels strike out miserably. Clarke-Davis's walking woman, unlike Sisler's, knows that she's a star because she is ultimately unnamable. Mariott's Courtesy Service Man is so unpretentiously genial, so eager to provide courtesy services that are routinely bypassed by big and small businesses alike, that there must be something ulterior about him. The yellow of his character's shirts and caps is not unlike the generic yellow of '80s supermarket generic merchandise.

Surrealists and Dadaists were among the first to realize the montage and mise-en-scène possibilities of the cinematic frame; performative work tends to either critique or snub predictable psychologies and sociologies endemic to mainstream dramas of film and television. Those industries are dependent upon seamlessness—image and sound must be easily explicable and superficially harmonious. In much of the video and film work by artists such as Nelson Henricks, Nikki Forrest, Monique Moumblow, Steve Reinke, Jinhan Ko, Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, pictures and sounds are encouraged to be observed in often apparent isolation from one another. In tapes such as Henricks' *Emission*, Forrest's *Static*, Vey Duke and Battersby's

video booklet of singing voice-overs, computer drawings, and monologues *Rapt and Happy*, seeing and listening again become performances or performative acts.

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The word “performance” can also be used to refer to visual and audio phenomena. How do framed spaces become occupied and/or abandoned? In a large percentage of avowedly experimental cinema the camera is an extension of the filmmaker’s body and the recorded images are performed upon at least as much as they themselves are performers. The act of filming or taping and transcending the temporal and technical limitations of relatively low-end mediums is itself performative—whether turning the camera upon one’s actual body or using the camera as a bodily extension. Anne-Charlotte Robertson’s *Apologies* practically inverts the codes of stand-up comedy and the rehabilitated celebrity circuit—the performer and subject and object and filmmaker is in front of her audience for as long as she wants to be, even though her film stock keeps running out and her lights keep shutting off. Robertson skillfully manipulates audiences’ expectations and limitations as shrewdly as Acconci does.

Pleasure Dome as an organization has consistently throughout its ten years been characterized by a variety of nomadism. It certainly has not shunned institutions but has generally dealt with them quite successfully on its own terms. This blend of anarchic impulses with strategic occupation of institutions and structures has been reflected in an overwhelming majority of the performative films and videos presented by Pleasure Dome. The most successful individual works and programmes have demanded that viewers take their own initiatives and come to the artists and their aesthetics, unless the individual work or programme is about consent and surrender. Passive viewing has seldom been encouraged throughout Pleasure Dome’s history. Active viewing (seeing as itself performance) has been demanded and active viewing has more often than not been rewarded. Performance, referring to modes and manners of how frames can be occupied and utilized by bodies, images, and sounds, has been a touchstone of Pleasure Dome’s history and existence.



# Rendez-vous

My name is Colleena, and we have a rendez-vous. I'm a performance artist living in the south of France thanks to the generous support of my patron, the Italian Count Dix-Ten. There are rumours Dix-Ten may have bought his title. I don't recall my cousin Miranda calling Dix-Ten a count when he was her benefactor. All I know is I'm most grateful for his support, and that I can bear what he demands in return. Things that are free are probably worthless.



*Colin Campbell*





You already know something about me, though you probably think you don't.

I never did like Mildred. As sisters, we were as different as night and day. "But we're so similar!" she used to say. "I live in Southern California and you live in the south of France!" As if there were any similarity. I'd go visit her in California, since she'd never come here. She'd drag me around shopping malls. Century City, Culver City, Fox Hills Shopping Mall.

And she was always critical of how I looked and dressed. "Gawd, Colleena," she'd say, "do you have to look so butch?" Moi?

Frankly, (and I've never told anyone this) I always thought she looked like she was in drag. That tacky bleached blonde hairdo with those fake Ray-Ban sunglasses. The worst!

I have to confess, I always liked my younger sister, Robin, more. At least when Robin was trying to better herself and the world at the same time.

She started off as a Xerox operator, and was really top-notch, as I understand it.

She had an artistic bent as well. I like to think I was an influence. She started up her own rock band in the '80s. And became quite successful. Talk shows, even a nude spread in *Penthouse*. She had all the looks in our family, I must say. A real glamour puss at heart, but she just walked away from it, all

that fame and fortune and joined CUSO. She trained at the Betty Ford Center. Met Liz Taylor, Liza Minelli. She worked with the best. Of course, she wasn't a multimedia artist like me, but Robin understood my artistic spirit, my profound need to express myself.

I maintain a little pied à terre in Toulouse. It's very close to St. Sernin Basilica. Every morning the swallows dart and circle the tower outside my window.

After watching the swallows one morning, I created this little dance performance piece called "The Swallows of St. Sernin." I imagined my dear friend and fellow expatriate Suzanne in the role of "Queen of the Swallows."

We're such kindred spirits, given that she's a linguist. I call her the "word witch." Well, not to her face, actually.

I think Mildred was jealous of my success as an artist in Europe. After her husband fell off that mountain in the Himalayas, her personality took a strange turn. When I was notified that she'd disappeared in the Mojave, it didn't surprise me. I don't know what it was. The translation, my inadequate French, the bad connection, an incompetent travel agent... whatever. In any case, I ended up in Utah, wrong state, wrong desert, darling. And that's where I began my search for Mildred. I didn't find Mildred. But I found something very unexpected. But that's another story. Another rendez-vous with Colleena! Au revoir!



Rendez-vous



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*WEATHER WATCH*, GEORGE KUCHAR



# Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self

*Catherine Russell*

*In those early years I got to know the "town" only as the theatre of purchases, on which occasions it first became apparent how my father's money could cut a path for us between the shop counters and assistants and mirrors, and the appraising eyes of our mother, whose muff lay on the counter.*

— **WALTER BENJAMIN**, *A Berlin Chronicle*

In Benjamin's chronicle of his Berlin childhood, he places the problem of memory centrally. "For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life."<sup>1</sup> The fragmentary recollections that he offers are rich in detail, and, like the passage quoted above, situate him as a child within a complex network of social relations. A class analysis is projected onto fleeting memories, along with a recognition of gender roles, and even an analysis of the gaze. The materialism of Benjamin's autobiographical account of Berlin is made even more explicit in his Moscow diary, which he described as a text in which "factuality is already theory."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his various autobiographical writings, a sense of the self emerges that is thoroughly grounded in experience and observation. Walter Benjamin develops as a socially constructed identity, one who finds himself in a shifting series of others, in the topography of city streets, and in the detail of daily life. Theory, philosophy, and intellectual life were inseparable from his own experience of modernity, and his identity as a German Jew pervades his writing in the form of experience rather than essence. Susan Buck-Morss suggests that "Benjamin perceived his own life emblematically, as an allegory for social reality, and sensed keenly that no individual could live a resolved or affirmative existence in a social world that was neither."<sup>3</sup>

As literary genres, autobiography and ethnography share "a commitment to the actual," and Michael Fischer has argued that "ethnic autobiography" should be recognized as a model of postmodern ethnography.<sup>4</sup> Autobiography is a technique of self-representation that is not a fixed form, but is in constant flux. He describes "contemporary autobiography" as an exploration of the fragmented and dispersed identities of late twentieth-century pluralist society. In this context, ethnic autobiography is an "art of memory" that serves as protection against the homogenizing tendencies of modern industrial culture. Moreover, autobiography has become a powerful tool of cultural criticism, paralleling postmodern theories of textuality and knowledge. Fischer describes the "writing tactics" of autoethnography as follows: "Contemporary ethnic autobiographies partake of the mood of metadiscourse, of drawing attention to their linguistic and fictive nature, of using the narrator as an inscribed figure within the text whose manipulation calls attention to authority structures."

This ethnographic mode of self-representation is pervasive in what has become widely recognized as a "new autobiography" in film and video.<sup>5</sup> Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a "staging of subjectivity"—a representation of the self as a performance. In the politicization of the personal, identities are frequently played out among

several cultural discourses, be they ethnic, national, sexual, racial, and/or class based. The subject "in history" is rendered destabilized and incoherent, a site of discursive pressures and articulations.

The fragmented and hybrid identities produced in the multitude of "personal" films and videos have been celebrated by critics and theorists as forms of "embodied knowledge" and "politics of location."<sup>6</sup> Their tactics are similar to those of the literary form described by Fischer, and yet they also destabilize the very notion of ethnicity. One's body and one's historical moment may be the joint site of experience and identity, and yet they don't necessarily add up to ethnicity as an anthropological category. Autoethnography is a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity, and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities.

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Mary Louise Pratt introduced the term "autoethnography" as an oppositional term: "If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations."<sup>7</sup> Although she denies that autoethnographic texts are "authentic" texts, her attribution of this genre to marginalized subjects is characteristic of writing on this genre. Whereas Pratt's usage reaffirms the duality of centre and margin, I would argue that autoethnography can also be a form of what James Clifford calls "self-fashioning," in which the ethnographer comes to represent himself as a fiction, inscribing a doubleness within the ethnographic text: "Though it portrays other selves as culturally constituted, it also fashions an identity authorized to represent, to interpret, even to believe—but always with some irony—the truths of discrepant worlds."<sup>8</sup> Once ethnography is reframed as a self-representation in which any and all subjects are able to enter discourse in textual form, the distinctions between textual authority and pro-filmic reality begin to break down. The imperial eye looking back on itself is also a subject in history.

The oxymoronic label "autoethnography" announces a total breakdown of the colonialist precepts of ethnography, and indeed the critical enthusiasm for its various forms situates it as a kind of ideal form of anti-documentary. Diary filmmaking, autobiographical filmmaking and personal videos can all be subsumed within what Michael Renov has described as the "essayistic" impulse in recent film and video. The essay is a useful category because it incorporates the "I" of the writer into a commentary on the world that makes no grand scientific or totalizing claims but is uncertain, tentative, and speculative.<sup>9</sup>

A common feature of autoethnography is the first-person voice-over that is intently and unambiguously subjective. This is, however, only one of three levels on which a film- or videomaker can inscribe themselves, the other two being at

the origin of the gaze, and as body-image. The multiple possible permutations of these three "voices"—speaker, seer, and seen—are what generate the richness and diversity of autobiographical filmmaking. In addition to the discursive possibilities of these three voices is another form of identity which is that of the avant-garde filmmaker as collagist and editor. This is perhaps the surrealist heritage of the form, the role of juxtaposition, irony, and *retrouvé*, through which the film- or videomaker "writes" an identity in temporal structures. By inscribing themselves on the level of "metadiscourse," film- and videomakers also identify with their technologies of representation, and a culture of independent filmmaking, alongside their other discursive identities.

Much of the new autobiography emanates from queer culture, from film- and videomakers whose personal histories unfold within a specifically public sphere.<sup>10</sup> It is also produced by many for whom ethnicity or race casts their own history as an allegory for a community or culture that cannot be essentialized. Themes of displacement, immigration, exile, and transnationality are prominent in this mode of filmmaking.<sup>11</sup> Some of the film- and videomakers associated with the "new autobiography" include Richard Fung, Marlon Riggs, Su Friedrich, Rea Tajiri, Deborah Hoffman, Vanylyn Green, Margaret Stratton, Lynn Hershmann, Mark Massi, Hara Kazuo, Tony Buba, Mona Hatoum, and many others. Marilu Mallet's *Journal Inachévé*, Hara Kazuo's *Extremely Personal Eros* (1974), Akerman's *News From Home* (1976), and Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978) are all important examples of the form as it developed in the 1970s. Family histories and political histories unfold as difficult processes of remembering and struggle. Specific, resonant images echo across distances of time and space. Documentary truth is freely mixed with storytelling and performances. The many film- and videomakers who have made and continue to make autoethnographies find "themselves" in diverse image cultures, images, and discourses. Many are concerned to transform image culture through the production of new voices and new subjectivities.

A prominent theme in contemporary personal cinema is the staging of an encounter with the filmmaker's parent(s) or grandparent(s), who often embody a particular cultural history of displacement or tradition. The difference between generations is written across the filmmaker's own inscription in technology, and thus it is precisely an ethnographic distance between the modern and the premodern that is dramatized in the encounter—through interview or archival memory or both. One often gets the sense that the filmmaker has no memory, and is salvaging their own past through the recording of their family's memory.

The testimonial, confessional character of autoethnography often assumes a site of authenticity and veracity, originating in the filmmaker's experience. And yet fake diaries and autobiographies by Orson Welles (*F is for Fake*, 1975), Michelle

Citron (*Daughter Rite*), Jim McBride (*David Holzman's Diary*) and Joe Gibbons and Tony Oursler's *Onourown* (1990) demonstrate the unreliability of the form. The confessional mode is a testimonial discourse with no necessary validity beyond the viewer's faith in the text's authority. Autobiographical film and video is often couched within a testimonial mode, as the authorial subjects offer themselves up for inspection, as anthropological specimens. But they do so ironically, mediating their own image and identifying also, always, with the technologies of representation, identifying themselves as film- and videomakers. Because autoethnography invokes an imbrication of history and memory, the authenticity of experience functions as a receding horizon of truth in which memory and testimony are often articulated as modes of salvage.

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The film- and videomakers whom I will discuss in what follows are Jonas Mekas, George Kuchar, Sadie Benning, and Kidlat Tahimik, artists whose films and videos foreground many of the contradictions and tendencies of the diary film. As a genre of "personal cinema," the diary film is not, in itself, necessarily a form of experimental ethnography, and yet these examples are suggestive of the role of the diary film and video in the rethinking of ethnographic knowledge. The role of identity in these films and tapes demands an expanded notion of "ethnicity" as a cultural formation of the subject. Indeed, what unites these diverse texts is the articulation of identities that are split, insecure, and plural. Memory and travel are means of exploring fragmented selves and placing ethnicity at one remove, as something to remember, to see, but not quite to experience.

The journeys undertaken by these filmmakers are both temporal and geographic, often tending toward epic proportions. The diary form also involves a journey between the times of shooting and editing; travelling becomes a form of temporal experience through which the film- or videomaker confronts themselves as tourist, ethnographer, exile, or immigrant. These film- and videomakers may not be representative of the extraordinary diversity of personal, autoethnographic film forms, but they do cover a range of techniques and strategies that merge self-representation with cultural critique. They suggest that the subjective form of ethnography distinguishes itself above all from the passive scientism of conventional ethnographic forms by destabilizing "ethnicity" and its constraints on subjectivity.

When P. Adams Sitney first discussed autobiography as an avant-garde film form, he concluded that "it is the autobiographical cinema per se that confronts fully the rupture between the time of cinema and the time of experience and invents forms to contain what it finds there."<sup>12</sup> Subjectivity cannot be denoted as simply in film as with the written "I," but finds itself split in time. The image of the filmmaker him- or herself, when it appears in a diary film, refers to another cameraperson, or to a tripod that denotes an empty, technologized gaze. As

Janine Marchessault points out, "The image of someone behind the camera encompasses its own impossibility as a representation unable to access its origin, to invert its own process."<sup>13</sup> Subjectivity is split again between the seeing and the filmed body. If for Sitney, the "self" of autobiographical filmmaking is united in the notion of authorship, an ethnographic subjectivity, a self that understands itself as culturally constituted, is more fundamentally split in the autobiographical mode. Even when the subject in history is constructed as a point of origin for memories, geographic and spatial distance comes to evoke a distance in time that separates different moments of the self.

The autoethnographic subject blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other by travelling, becoming her- or himself a stranger in a strange land, even if that land is a fictional space existing only in representation. As a diary of a journey, the travelogue produces an otherness in the interstices of the fragmented "I" of the filmic, textual self. As the memory of the trip becomes enmeshed with historical processes and cultural differences, the filmic image becomes the site of a complex relationship between "I was there" and "this is how it is." Travel films are collections of images made for other spectators in distant cultures and therefore constitute a kind of traffic in images with the traveller-filmmaker as their unreliable referent and point of origin. Needless to say, the utopian impulse of autoethnography relies on a certain mobility of the filmmaker and remains in many ways couched in modernist, imperialist, and romantic discourses.

If filmic autobiography exploits the temporal lag between filming and editing, video diaries tend to have a slightly different temporal effect. One of the things I want to indicate by my choice of films and tapes is how the history of autoethnography intersects with the slow fade in independent filmmaking from film to video. If autobiography is about time and history, as Benjamin suggests, these two mediums produce very different effects of temporality that has some bearing on the historical subjectivities and identities produced within their technological spheres. Video offers an economics of "coverage" that is impossible to match with 16mm film production costs, and so the diaristic mode is in many ways being renewed as filmmakers take advantage of the economies of the new medium. (This is not to say that avant-garde film is "dead," just that it is becoming increasingly difficult to finance.)<sup>14</sup> Autoethnography in film and video is always mediated by technology and so, unlike its written forms, identity will be an effect not only of history and culture, but also of the history and culture of technologies of representation.

Trinh Minh-ha has written about the Inappropriate Other as the subject whose intervention "is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider."<sup>15</sup> She implies that such a figure actually lurks within every "I," and if one of the goals of a postcolonial ethnography is to become aware of how

subjectivity is implicated in the production of meaning, the Inappropriate Other is the figure to be developed. By exploring autoethnography as an inter-cultural, cross-cultural method, I hope to suggest how the Inappropriate Other functions as a time traveller who journeys in memory and history.

## Jonas Mekas and the Loss of Experience

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Jonas Mekas's diary films are perhaps the prototypical autoethnographies, at the same time as they mark a kind of penultimate romanticism that has long been eclipsed in postmodernism. Although a great deal has been written about his project, it needs to be situated within an ethnographic frame to fully appreciate the way that the film medium mediates between individual and social histories, and between memory and historical time.<sup>16</sup> Mekas's role in the development of the American avant-garde involved the promotion of both personal filmmaking, and a film culture that would form itself around the "truth" and "freedom" of a non-commercial, independent cinema. His diary project, which comprises about thirteen hours of edited footage, is testimony to his commitment to these twin goals.<sup>17</sup>

Memorialization and loss are the defining characteristics of Mekas's diary films, and he renders them as features of the medium itself, enhanced by his poetic, melancholy narration. The temporal gap between the collection of images and the editing of them into films many years later renders every image a memory, a trace or fragment of a time in a trajectory that reaches back to what David James has described as "the absent center of the entire project, the footage of his childhood in Lithuania." James points out that not only was this footage never shot, "it is, historically and logically, inconceivable," because the lost past is a pre-industrial, pastoral ideal.<sup>18</sup> James also suggests that Mekas "lived modernism's master narrative, the history of the displacement of the organic and the rural by the industrial and the urban."

Mekas was very explicitly attempting to "salvage an identity" from his practice of filming. At the same time, that identity is precisely that of a displaced person. If homelessness is Mekas's self-image, it is also his filmic technique, his refusal to stop on any image, to synchronize any sound and image, or to narrate any image. Mekas's diary films assume a structure similar to that of found-footage filmmaking: the image track is highly fragmented and belongs to the past, while the sound track provides a narrational continuity that belongs to the present. It is as if, editing his own material, Mekas "finds" the images and retrieves them, re-enacting the structure of memory in found-footage filmmaking, the difference being the inherently subjective status of the found images. It is a highly redemptive project insofar as he brings together the fragments of his memory and integrates

them in an avant-garde film, which immediately assumes all the trappings of a "work of art" in the cultural politics of Mekas's milieu.

96 Mekas's project has been described as an exemplary instance of "secondary revision," the process by which, in psychoanalysis, the patient recounts the dream, revising it and substituting a verbal narration for what was originally "experienced" as dream.<sup>19</sup> As Renov explains, "We are all of us lost in the chasm between our desire to recapture the past and the impossibility of a pristine return, no one more than Mekas himself."<sup>20</sup> In the revisionary process, Mekas casts himself as both anthropologist and native informant. When, near the beginning of *Lost Lost Lost*, Mekas says "and I was there with my camera," he reveals his mission as the self-appointed documentarian of the Lithuanian community in New York.

Over shots of a man in a dark kitchen, he says "You never know what a DP [Displaced Person] feels like in the evening, in New York," indicating the epistemological limits of his silent film footage. And yet, the wholesale melancholia of his narration ascribes feelings to many of the people in his films. His extensive use of classical music and folksongs provides the films with an emotional register that is lacking from the relatively neutral image track. While the poetics of the soundtrack make the diary Mekas's own, the central, unresolved contradiction of his films is that they are of other people. The people he films—the Lithuanian community in exile in New York, his friends in the world of avant-garde film, his family in Lithuania, and the many people he films on the streets of New York—become the bystanders of his life.

Mekas's diary films provide a heuristic model for all subsequent autobiographical filmmaking because they illustrate how the conceit of displacement masks a control over images. In the split between sound and image tracks, Mekas inscribes himself as a journey, as a survivor of his own past. Having spent time in a German labour camp, he has earned the right to such an identity, one which he then maps onto a specific set of social spheres and communities. *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, made in 1972 from footage shot in 1971 and the 1950s, is the film in which Mekas confronts himself as ethnographer. It is a role that he refuses to assume, and he takes refuge in the avant-garde community where the weight of history and identity can be transcended through art.

Mekas's voice-over begins the American section of the film by designating a moment "when I forgot about my home." He's walking in the woods with friends, but edits in some snow scenes as he says this, so that the "moment" cannot be pinned down. If his voice-over constitutes a form of secondary revision, it is consistently inadequate. The forgetting is as pervasive as the remembering, and the voice-over seems to follow its own trajectory through the film, registering

a present-tense that is inspired by the re-viewing of images of the past, but is extremely distanced from it. From the 1950s in the U.S., the film moves to "100 Glimpses of Lithuania" and a final section shot in Vienna, both sections filmed during a trip in 1971.

The Lithuanian footage in *Reminiscences* is far more brightly lit than any other imagery in the film, and it is virtually all shot outside, in fields, on roads, by rivers and forests, and in front of homes. Mekas takes full advantage of the Bolex camera's light weight and shutter control. The camera is in constant motion, cutting up and cutting into the field of vision. Faces last only marginally longer than other body parts, as Mekas breaks down everything he sees into partial views. Each of the one hundred glimpses seems to be edited in-camera, including pixilated sequences as well as some longer takes of landscape. Many of the people are seen only in long-shot and it is not easy to identify the members of Mekas's large family, despite occasional intertitles introducing them. Mekas himself appears fairly often in family groups and he seems to fit right in. In fact many people beside Jonas wield cameras in this film, as the whole family appears intent on the celebratory memorialization of Mekas's project. The fragmentary nature of these glimpses seems destined to eradicate a present tense and to see everything as if it were already memory.

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Lithuania in 1971 may not be the Edenic return to childhood for which Mekas longs, but it is a pre-industrial rural culture that his family represents. In a catalogue entry Mekas describes the film: "You don't see how Lithuania is today; you see it only through the memories of a displaced person back home for the first time in twenty-five years."<sup>21</sup> Maureen Turim has pointed out how Mekas's mother in the Lithuanian section of *Reminiscences* constitutes "the fantasy of a center"; the memories, like the mother, cannot be possessed.<sup>22</sup> She also comments on Mekas's failure to refer to contemporary Lithuanian politics, returning again and again to the history of his own anti-Nazi activities that led to his exile.<sup>23</sup> Time appears to stand still in Lithuania, and Mekas tries hard to make it represent his past: "those were beautiful days." He wonders where all his childhood friends have gone to, listing the various horrors of wartime Europe: graveyards, torture rooms, prisons, and labour camps. "Your faces remain the same in my memory. They have not changed. It is me who is getting older." We see people entering a barn, doing farm chores as he says this, standing in for those lost friends.

Mekas introduces his friends Peter Kubelka and Annette Michelson as "saints." He worships their ability to be "at home" in culture, and this is in fact the way that Mekas finds his "home" in the New York avant-garde. As Jeffrey Ruoff has described, Mekas's films constitute the "home movies" of the avant-garde, at once assuming and creating a network of familiarity with the various members of his community.<sup>24</sup> But Mekas's place in the art world he documents is still

behind the camera, still split between the two selves filming and speaking, still displaced, at home only when he is not at home.

98 The longing for the past that Mekas expresses constructs memory as a means of splitting oneself across a number of different axes: child and adult, old world and new, pastoral and metropolitan, natural and cultural. Filmmaking is inscribed in a film such as *Reminiscences* as the means of transcending this splitting. Represented as a process and a practice, filmmaking is a craft that is not necessarily antithetical to the pre-industrial ideal of Mekas's Lithuanian childhood. The idea of a film diary, according to Mekas, "is to react (with your camera) immediately, now, this instant."<sup>25</sup> Like the verité filmmakers, Mekas's film practice was motivated by a notion of phenomenological and emotional truth. The authenticity of the footage is completely bound up in the honesty and humility of the filmmaker. And yet the diary film, as a product, overlays this raw experience with a complex textuality of sound and image.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike home movies, Mekas's films betray a deeply poetic sensibility that is alienated not only from the past, but from the very immediacy of experience that informs the diary imagery. The ethnographic discourse of Mekas's films is at once a lost innocence and a pursuit of "freedom" modelled on his escape from European tyranny. Many scenes shot in Lithuania, and in Austria with Kubelka, feature people "playing" like children, running about, hands held high. In a sense, Mekas performs his childhood, constructing a complex world upon a fantasy of loss. Childhood was a privileged theme in the avant-garde of the 1960s as the site of a spontaneity and uncorrupted vision that was sought as an ideal of visionary cinema.<sup>27</sup> For Mekas, the spontaneity of direct cinema, like childhood, is always located in an inaccessible past.

If autobiographical cinema constitutes a journey of the self, Jonas Mekas mapped that dislocation onto the historical and geographical dislocation with which so many contemporary filmmakers have become preoccupied. Mekas tells us that there is something inherent within cinematic representation that dislocates the self. The fantasy of identity is produced by the techniques of film practice, and if his diaries indulge this fantasy, they also reveal its limits as ethnography. Mekas's films are all ultimately about himself, and by subsuming history within his own memory, the Others become fictional products of his memory, their own histories evacuated by the melancholia of his loss. Superimposing himself, his desires, his memories, his ego, onto everyone and everything, Mekas's romanticism is a form of possession. For example, in *Reminiscences*, to some children playing, he says, "Run, children, run. I hope you never have to run for your lives."

Mekas is perhaps the exemplary figure of modernist exile, adapting to film what Caren Kaplan has described as a literary genre that tends to generate "aesthetic categories and ahistorical values" by recoding issues of "political conflict,

commerce, labour, nationalist realignments, imperialist expansion, structures of gender, and sexuality." Mekas's nostalgia and melancholia are indicative of the way that displacement functions as a modernist value: "The formation of modernist exile seems to have best served those who would voluntarily experience estrangement and separation in order to produce the experimental cultures of modernism."<sup>28</sup> Mekas's alienation is ultimately registered as an unbridgeable gap between himself and others, those whose images he possesses as memories of moments that he imagines to be harmonious social encounters, forgetting that he was, even then, behind the camera.

## Video Diaries

Representing an opposite pole of cynical anti-romanticism, George Kuchar's video diaries are extensive, voluminous, sometimes tedious, and often amusing. More so than any other videomaker, Kuchar uses the camera as a tool of social interaction.<sup>29</sup> He creates the impression that he carries a camera with him everywhere, and that it mediates his relation with the world at large. His use of the video medium creates a sense of infinite coverage, potentially breaking down the difference between experience and representation. Like Mekas, Kuchar documents a community of artists and filmmakers, with whom he is "at home." For Kuchar this world is centred at the San Francisco Art Institute where he teaches filmmaking. He often includes glimpses of class projects in his diaries, which are always schlock horror films in the style of Kuchar's own films of the '60s. Kuchar identifies himself sexually, rather than ethnically, but his sexuality is bound up with a host of insecurities that his video practice seems only to aggravate.

From 1986 to 1990 Kuchar released forty-five tapes that fall into two main series: "Weather Diaries" and "Video Diaries." The first document his annual trips to "Tornado Alley," in the central and southern United States, where he goes to view tornadoes. The second includes trips to visit friends in different states as well as diaries made of his activities closer to home; these tapes feature his friends, colleagues, and students. A constant overlap between the diaries, and an internal referentiality, link them as an ongoing record of Kuchar's life. At the end of *Weather Diary 3*, for example, he says, "*Weather Diary 4* will take place in Milwaukee, so see you then," borrowing the conventions and ephemerality of a television series.

Where this diary project differs most profoundly from Mekas's is in Kuchar's use of video without a process of secondary revision. He always shoots with synchronized sound, and offers an ongoing commentary on what he is seeing, often talking to people in front of the camera. Most of his music, including snippets of "movie music" indicating suspense, is recorded from live sources,

and the soundtrack is full of ambient noise, including dogs and cats, traffic, weather, tv, and radio. He also claims that the tapes are entirely edited in-camera, including sequences that are taped over previous ones, enabling him to construct non-chronological editing patterns. The effect is one of randomness and improvisation, enhanced by his off-the-cuff synch-sound narration.<sup>30</sup> Whether this is true or not is less important than the effect of immediacy this creates, the way in which experience is rendered textual, without historical depth or distance.<sup>31</sup>

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Kuchar often intercuts close-ups of himself, employing principles of continuity editing in order to inscribe his point of view into the tapes. This narrative technique endows the texts with a certain hermeticism, accentuating the sense of infinite coverage by creating a seamless diegesis despite the ad-hoc, improvised style of narration and shooting. Memory is invoked by Kuchar only through the proferring of still photos to the video gaze, and not as a structure of loss and salvage. Compared to Mekas's tragic sadness, Kuchar's video and weather diaries are ironically cynical, and his self-analysis is often self-deprecating. Although Kuchar also "finds" himself through the practice of filming, his project is not one of redemption.

Kuchar represents his life as a tedious banality emblematised in the annual tornado-viewing trip. The catastrophe of the storms themselves is dispersed into the monotony of waiting in motel rooms, where the tornadoes are finally viewed on television. In Kuchar's "Weather Diaries" series he is most explicitly identified as a tourist, travelling to different parts of the country, staying in motels ostensibly to document weather phenomena, but inevitably finding people in the process. He never travels outside the United States, and yet his mode of production has the effect of inscribing a threatening "otherness" in everything and everyone he shoots. A discourse of "horror" is extracted from the banality of rural America.

*Weather Diary 1*, Kuchar's pilgrimage to rural Oklahoma in the height of its tornado season, is most basically an extended analogy between "severe storms and gastric distress." In *Weather Diary 3* he returns to the Reno motel and this time he obsesses about his unfulfilled sex life. He tapes some boys at the motel pool through a crack in a fence, and lustily boils hot-dogs in his room. Kuchar's scatological humour is at times juvenile, but while many avant-garde filmmakers have masturbated for the camera, when George does it, he understands the pathetic irony of the act. He forces the viewer to watch him as we would a horror movie. In *Weather Diary 3* he meets another storm chaser, whom he takes out on dates to the local shopping mall. "Mike" goes along with the constant video-taping, performing "himself" with restrained good humour. The fact that he is probably straight and possibly oblivious to Kuchar's desire adds a dimension of sexual tension that the viewer shares with George at Mike's expense. After he leaves, Kuchar consoles himself with physique magazines, comparing his own shirtless pose to those of the models.

By privileging his own bodily processes, desires, and appearance, Kuchar crucially subverts the valorization of consciousness in avant-garde film. Compared to Mekas, his suffering is biological, not existential. The camera is explicitly situated as an extension of Kuchar's vision, but also of his body. In close-ups of food or of himself, the proximity of the profilmic to the lens is defined by the length of his reach. His practice of speaking while filming inscribes a highly personalized, and therefore possessive, voice-over commentary onto the imagery. As in all of Kuchar's videos, a profound sense of solitude is established, not only through his self-deprecating humour, but through the restricted field of vision and the mediated relation to the world. One effect of his physical identification with the camera is that every shot of another person becomes an encounter.

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In almost all his video diaries Kuchar spies on people, whispering to the spectator as he points his camera at strangers outside his window. Within the tape's larger structure of comparative internal and external natural phenomena, the people in Oklahoma are aligned with the weather as "outside." In representing himself as a body rather than a subject, Kuchar's encounters with others, and with the larger cultural and physical environment, are consistently physical. His fellow Americans all become different than himself, but it is above all a difference of space and distance, relationships defined by motel architecture. Sometimes those differences are perceived as ideological, and when he decides his neighbours are Christians or hippies, Kuchar retreats further into the privatized space of the motel room.

Kuchar's journeys to rural American towns are modeled on ethnographic fieldwork, but he casually violates all the conventions of humanist anthropology. The Other becomes exotic and often threatening, but Kuchar himself becomes equally strange in the eyes of the Other. Kuchar's documentary subjects are his own first audience, as he makes himself, both on- and off-frame, a spectacle of equal magnitude. A circuit of looks, in which the viewer takes on the role of voyeur, is thereby completed. Like the hyperreality of the televised tornado, Kuchar's encounters with others are always exaggerated. His friendships are also presentations of those people to future audiences. It is by way of his own body and subjectivity that Kuchar presents one culture (rural Oklahoman) to another (urban artists and intellectuals). A couple of mainstream documentaries, *Sherman's March* (McElwee, 1987) and *Roger and Me* (Michael Moore, 1989), involve similar conceits of self-representation, but Kuchar's tapes differ in their spontaneity and banality. The extremely low production values of these diaries exaggerate their experiential quality, while thoroughly mediating it.

Comparing Kuchar's aesthetics to Mekas's, the video is ugly, with garish colours that emphasize the tackiness of everyday America. His use of video does not aestheticize, which enables us to understand Mekas's project as a process of redemption. Mekas transcends the alienating loss of experience by transforming

the experienced world into images; Kuchar inhabits a world of images, with no indication of a referential reality outside that sphere. He represents himself as an alien in his own country, someone who is always alone in a crowd. However, this alienation is inseparable from the fact that he always has a camera between himself and others. There is nothing "prior" to the making of the tape. As a postmodern form of autoethnography, it renders society as an image, or a televisual discourse, and poses the problem of identity through a location of "self" within image-culture.

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Another filmmaker who has used video to inscribe herself within a world of images is Sadie Benning.

In the late 1980s, Fisher Price put a children's video camera on the market that produced such a low definition image that it came to be known as Pixelvision. Except for extreme close-ups, the pixels of the digital image are readily visible, providing a highly mediated form of representation. The black and white image is framed by a thick black border when it is transferred onto half-inch video tape. Because Pixelvision is restricted to a level of close-up detail, it is an inherently reflexive

medium, and is especially appropriate to experimental ethnography. The “big picture” is always out of reach, as the filmmaker is necessarily drawn to the specificity of everyday life. (A number of film- and videomakers have used Pixelvision, most notably Peggy Ahwesh and Margie Strosser in their tape *Strange Weather* [1993], a documentary about crack-addicted teenagers in Florida.)<sup>32</sup>



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Photo triptych of Sadie Benning

Benning's tapes suggest once again that identity is inscribed not only in history but in technologies of representation. Benning shoots most of her tapes in her bedroom, incorporating found footage, newspaper and magazine fragments, and written notes that pass in front of the camera like secret messages to the viewer. Each tape is scored by a selection of pop music, contextualizing the very personal stories within a cultural sphere. As a young lesbian, Benning's persona is constructed against the trappings of youth culture, media culture, and feminism. She performs herself by dressing up, wearing different wigs and makeup, and offering lingering close-ups of different parts of her face and body. Her first-person voice-over narration is confessional and poetic, rhetorical and playful, occasionally synchronized with her moving lips.

Benning uses Pixelvision as the language of youth, of a small voice. *A Place Called Lovely* (1991) is the tape that is most explicitly about childhood, and opens with some children's drawings, suggesting that Pixelvision is the technological equivalent of a primitivist style of representation. Made when she was eighteen, Benning assumes the voice of childhood, identifying with American children in general. She tells us about a seven-year-old classmate who grabbed her hair and chased her into an alley. She fights back at him, taking shots at the camera, but a scrawled note says she was still scared, and she cuts to a clip from *Psycho*. This memory is brought into close proximity with the present, collapsing the distance of the past. She tells a story about a man who tried to abduct her and she offers photos of schoolchildren over the sound of a music box. Then she talks about twenty-seven children who were found murdered in southwest Atlanta in 1979, showing pictures of black children, and concluding that "when these children died, every child died a little." While we should be somewhat sceptical of a white girl playing with a children's video camera in her bedroom "identifying" with these victims, Benning's perspective is a hybrid construction of innocence and cultural critique.

Benning's own image is in constant flux, appearing at times with her hair long and at others with it short and cropped. In the tape's longest sequence, she stands in front of an American flag while "America" plays, mimicking the emotional trajectory of the music with her face and hands, forcing a smile throughout the song. She follows this performance with a message saying, "That scared me too." If in other tapes she works with the contradictions of growing up gay, in this one she confronts the contradictions of being an American child. Benning is too media-savvy, and her imagery is too highly developed aesthetically for her naiveté to be believable, and so she creates a kind of constructed primitivism.<sup>33</sup> Her confessional first-person narration may or may not refer to "the truth" but she nevertheless uses autobiography as a domain of referentiality that works with and against the signs of American culture.

Benning's construction of her lesbian identity intersects with her youthfulness in an ongoing "coming out" diary that links the various videotapes.<sup>34</sup> *It Wasn't Love* is a tape dedicated to "bad girls everywhere." She poses with a girlfriend for the camera, dresses up like a boy, and tells a story about meeting a woman in Beverly Hills. She says, "We didn't need Hollywood, we were Hollywood," and indeed the tape is very much about playing adult games, 'putting on' a sexuality that is insinuated in pop music and blues songs. As autoethnography, Benning's tapes produce a subjectivity that evades authenticity. In this she shares something with a videomaker such as Richard Fung, about whom Jose Muñoz writes: "To perform queerness is to constantly disidentify; to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly 'line up.' This is equally true of hybridity, another modality where meaning or identifications do not properly line up. The postcolonial hybrid is a subject who occupies a

space between the West and the rest."<sup>35</sup> Benning's position between childhood and adulthood shifts easily into a queer discourse that one critic has described as a "license." "It's a tape that refuses victimhood, sees desire as having its own integrity, and uses sex to carve out a sphere of freedom."<sup>36</sup> Benning's "party on the margins" uses collage in conjunction with the diary format to construct a hybrid identity that refuses to be pinned down. It is, moreover, flaunted as something she dreams up in her bedroom, drawn from the minimal resources of her body, her camera, and her collection of props, images, and music.

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The notion of hybridity is key to the diary film and video because it suggests how the multiple subject-effects of voice, vision, and body can produce new forms of subjectivity. Postcolonial subjects as well as other identities can potentially escape the limits of nation and gender. This implies a very different notion of "freedom" than the aesthetic of spontaneity advocated by Jonas Mekas and the *verité* diarists. In 1968 Jim McBride made a diary film that was also mainly shot in a bedroom, but *David Holzman's Diary* was a fake documentary, satirizing many of the tropes of cinema *verité's* discourses of honesty, confession, and truth. It circulated around a character/filmmaker named David Holzman whose self-indulgence was in fact a non-identity. His voyeurism masked a void of referentiality and a receding discourse of desires to know, possess, and see.

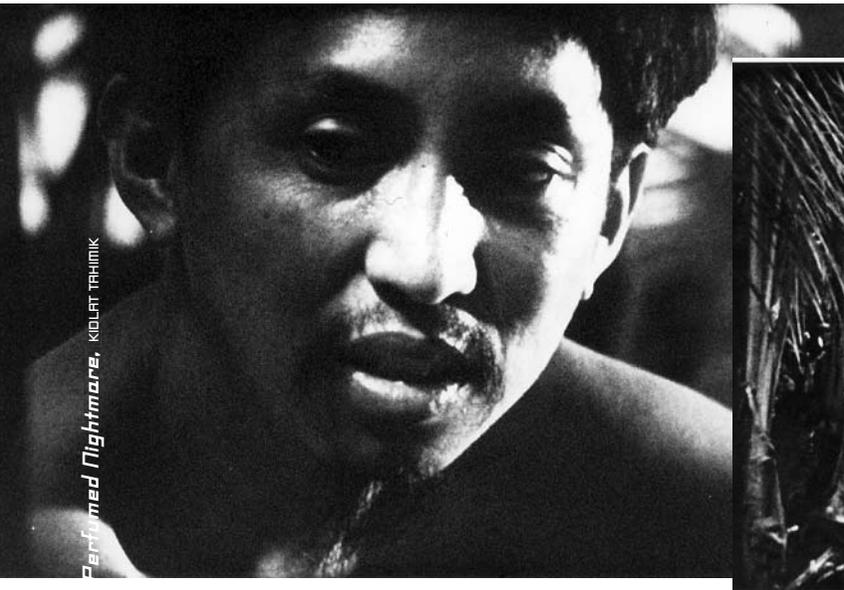
If diary filmmaking can no longer take the identity of the filmmaker for granted, identity becomes a site of contestation and negotiation. For a videomaker like Sadie Benning, the diary mode becomes a space of cultural transgression and critique, a site where she can become anyone she wants and is thus able to transcend any assigned roles of gender and age. Both Benning and Kuchar embrace video as a medium of consumer culture, working within the codes of home video as well as those of the *avant-garde*. Through an appropriation of television as a discourse of the quotidian, their diaries are means of constructing identities from the techniques of image-culture.<sup>37</sup>

The journeys undertaken by Sadie Benning in her bedroom-studio-laboratory are propelled through the fragmentary discourses of popular culture. Her use of found footage refers only to herself as an ethnographic referent, a body whose sexuality, youth, and appearance are not fixed, but in transit among a plethora of intertexts. By fragmenting her body into the image-sphere of Pixelvision, she becomes completely textual, a constellation of effects that are quite removed from the verbally narrated "I," and from the name of the videomaker. In this way, she cannot be figured, herself, as a representative lesbian or a representative child. Although few other people appear in Benning's tapes, images of people—in magazines, in her stories, in her dressing-up, and in photographs—abound. As in Kuchar's tapes, people are perceived only through the mediating effects of the medium. The video camera is not an instrument or metaphor for

consciousness for either Kuchar or Benning, but a public sphere in which they represent themselves as effects of discourse.

Homi Bhabha has theorized postcolonial identity as a process of doubling, a "spatialization of the subject" in place of the "the symbolic consciousness" of Barthes, and, I would add, *Visionary Cinema*.<sup>38</sup> In their video diaries, Kuchar and Benning represent themselves as bodies in space. The camera as an instrument of vision serves as a means of making them visible, a vehicle for the performance of their identities. Bhabha argues that it is through this splitting of the self that the Other is understood as a part of oneself: "That disturbance of your voyeuristic look enacts the complexity and contradictions of your desire to see, to fix cultural difference in a containable, *visible* object. The desire for the Other is doubled by the desire in language, which splits the difference between Self and Other so that both positions are partial; neither is sufficient unto itself."<sup>39</sup> He goes on to suggest that "by understanding the ambivalence and the antagonism of the Other," by deconstructing the homogenization of the Other, "a celebratory, oppositional politics of the margins" will be possible.<sup>40</sup> I would argue that this is true not only of postcolonial identities, but also of queer and hybrid subjectivities that seek to represent themselves through an articulation of the gaze. Video provides a degree of proximity and intimacy that enables this spatialization of the body. Instead of a transcendental subject of vision, these videos enact the details of a particularized, partialized subjectivity.

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## Kidlat Tahimik: Diary of a Third-World Filmmaker

Kidlat Tahimik is the filmmaker who has developed the diary film most extensively within a discourse of postcolonial cultural critique. His distinctive filmmaking technique pries apart the various levels of self-representation so that the primitive, the native, and the premodern are ironically constructed within a discursive bricolage centred around his own subjectivity. Although all his filmmaking, including his most well-known film, *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), is autobiographical, the three-hour diary project *Why Is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (1981–93) is most explicitly so. The history in which the diary evolves is at once that of the Philippines, Tahimik's own family, and global processes of colonialism and neocolonialism. Incorporating found footage, newspaper headlines, tv broadcasts, home movies, travel footage, and documentation of public events and political demonstrations, the film is extraordinarily far-flung—to Germany and Monument Valley, to Magellan and Ferdinand Marcos—while consistently localized in Baguio, Tahimik's home town in the Philippines.

The episodic structure of *Why Is Yellow* is much like that of *Perfumed Nightmare*, which Fredric Jameson has described as a co-optation of “travelogue language.” Tahimik's films are made for the Western film-festival market, but he is very conscious of his role as native informant, playing with it so as to foreground “the inauthenticity of the Western spectator.”<sup>41</sup> Documentary footage is mixed with scripted performances, and he continually reverses expectations of First- and Third-World cultural scenes. His movement between cultures casts him as an exemplary Inappropriate Other.



As we have seen in the previous instances of diary filmmaking, the format tends to have three levels of self-representation, and Tahimik exploits each somewhat differently. His voice-over is written as a dialogue with his son Kidlat, who actually opens the work with a first-person account of accompanying his father to Germany and America at the age of about eight. Although Tahimik himself takes over most of the narration, this conceit allows Tahimik to frame his voice-over as words of wisdom to the next generation. The text delivers an unambiguous message about the spiritual superiority of native peoples, the dangers of industrialized modernity, and the economics of cultural imperialism.<sup>42</sup> Tahimik's verbal message is, however, qualified by his vocation as an independent filmmaker and intellectual, married to a German woman and father of three children, two of whom are blonde. His speech, in other words, originates in a body that is fully part of industrialized modernity. His politicization of everyday life in what he refers to as the Third World is anything but a primitivist fantasy of identity, even while he champions the cause of native peoples.

Tahimik also inscribes himself on a second level, at the source of the documentary gaze, although his is always a fleeting look. He rarely looks very long at anyone, except his own children, at which point he assumes the role of the father in a domesticated mode of film production. The kaleidoscope of imagery also includes the work of other Philippine artists, his own installation works, performance pieces, and indigenous music. Because he cuts back and forth in time, incorporating so many fragments, and because he never shoots in synch, the film, like so many diary projects, is made in the editing room. Shots of him at the steenbeck are often used to link sections of the film so that the phenomenology of seeing is sublimated in an aesthetic of collecting.

Filmmaking, for Tahimik, is above all a craft, through which he can be aligned with pre-industrial modes of production. In his video *Takadera mon amour* (1989) he constructs a bamboo camera, and in *Why Is Yellow* he and his son build a "Third-World projector" out of rusted junk scavenged in Monument Valley. Its blurry, unstable image introduced at the opening of the diary film is the one that Tahimik embraces as his own vision, significantly aligned not with the subjective eye of the camera, but the public one of the projector.

Artistic process is represented very explicitly in *Why Is Yellow* as a Third-World model of recycling, low-tech bricolage. Tahimik carries out, perhaps more than any other filmmaker, Benjamin's theorization of the artist as producer, adopting the very techniques of the medium to a politicized content.<sup>43</sup> This extends even to his role as a performer, the third level of self-inscription: "The only way I can explain things is through my personal experiences, I'm confessing my own contradictions, so I have to throw myself in. It's also because I'm the only person available and willing to be filmed this way! The actor who is always on call!

And cheap too!"<sup>44</sup> *Why Is Yellow* includes a clip of Tahimik's first film experience, playing the "last savage Indian specimen" in Werner Herzog's *Kaspar Houser*, as well as clips from Tahimik's on-going work-in-progress, about Magellan's slave. By playing the role of the slave, Tahimik is able to offset his own postmodern mobility with a discourse of forcible travel and historical displacement, even if it is one that he manages to romanticize as a fiction of revenge and return.<sup>45</sup>

Tahimik's performances throughout the diary place the authenticity of his experience in question, although his body remains a site of historical indexicality. Over the thirteen years the diary covers, Tahimik's physical appearance gradually changes from the pixieish *naif* of *Perfumed Nightmare* to a long-haired bohemian. As his image becomes doubled as both father and slave, its aging is intimately bound to the deepening understanding of this doubleness and its epistemological possibilities.

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In Jameson's analysis, Tahimik's critique of Western progress produces "something like cultural nationalism,"<sup>46</sup> and yet Tahimik's "Third-World energy" is not limited to the Philippines. Moreover, the story of Philippine political history that is told over the course of the film is not a solution to the problem of cultural imperialism. The euphoria of Cory Aquino's victory in 1986 gives way to the subsequent struggle for democracy in the post-Marcos years and the ongoing role of American mass culture in Tahimik's children's lives. Far from a "nationalism" though, he situates himself within the circuits of global capitalism through which First and Third worlds are inextricably linked.<sup>47</sup>

John Ford's Point in Monument Valley is a site to which Tahimik frequently returns in *Why Is Yellow*. The footage he shot on his first trip in 1983 with his son becomes a memory, over which his return trips constitute layers of gradual degradation. In 1988 he finds his Navaho friends posing for tourists and keeping a generator in their hogan to watch westerns on tv. The desert is littered with junk, which Tahimik recycles as props. "John Ford's point," says Tahimik over a hollow tv set in the desert, "is that the only good Indian is a dead Indian." His role as the redeemer of native peoples is overtly romantic, and yet it is assumed as a search for something within postmodernity, not as a practice of salvage. Linking the Igorots in the Philippines with the Navaho is perhaps an essentialist ploy, and yet it is also a function of his assumed identity as Magellan's slave. His own name, Kidlat Tahimik, is an Igorot name that he originally gave to his character in *Perfumed Nightmare*, but later assumed for himself instead of his given Spanish name.<sup>48</sup>

At one point in *Why Is Yellow* Tahimik visits a native community in the interior of the Philippine Cordillera, providing the film's most "ethnographic" footage of men building a dam by hand. His segue into this scene from political

demonstrations in Manila is an explanation to young Kidlat: "Native peoples join us in our call for justice for Ninoy [Aquino] but they are more concerned with the loss of their ancestral lands, just like the Native Americans. Kidlat, we have a lot to learn from our Igorot brothers." In the film's only talking head interview, Lopes Na-uyac explains that because the government in Manila treats them only as tourist attractions, the Igorot have to build bridges without government engineering. Bridges made out of vines and scrap metal Coke signs are supplemented by dams to provide water deep enough for saving lives. This passage is indicative of Tahimik's admiration for native ingenuity and efficient management of resources. In his transformation of the salvage paradigm, ethnography remains linked to memory, but not to vanishing cultures. It is his own memory that structures his ethnography, as his family grows up and he can edit his own experiences in the form of flashbacks. Memory in this diary is not a discourse of loss, but of a layering of cultural forms.

The colonization of the Philippines first by the Spanish, and then by the Americans, situates Igorot culture as a repressed identity that Tahimik attempts to recover not as an authentic indigenous culture, but as a constituency in post-modernism. The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo becomes a metaphor for the cultural layering and smothering that the film documents, and an earthquake in Baguio finally isolates the filmmaker from his son now away in university. Towards the end of the diary, young Kidlat is behind the video camera, so if the film spends an inordinate amount of time with Tahimik's children, it also finally allows the son to make the transition from ethnographic subject to ethnographer. The primitivism of children is thus a temporary condition, subject, like native peoples, to the transience of history.

Tahimik's collage is above all an aesthetics of ruins, recycling the surplus waste of commodity culture. The discourse of ethnography in his filmmaking is a form of memory that encompasses the "radical forgetting" of found footage, but also embodies it as a form of experience. The autoethnographic self is a performance of the primitive, through which Tahimik mobilizes the avant-garde as a mode of allegorical ethnography. One technique that Tahimik shares with Sadie Benning and several other American avant-garde filmmakers such as Su Friedrich and Peggy Ahwesh is the use of toys and models. The little cars and trucks that Tahimik borrows from his kids serve as another form of "acting out" and "playing primitive."

Children's toys are in some respects the emblematic waste of consumer culture, made of non-biodegradable materials for temporary use. Recycling toys as props in films is a means of recalling childhood in a strictly allegorical form, a form in which the signifier itself has a material history. Tahimik's use of toys is like his use of found images and headlines. They are allegorical in their doubleness,

to which he gives an economic rationale: don't let anything go to waste. The excess of the First World is the condition of life in the Third, and he aims for a Third-World aesthetic that would recast the ethnographic as an allegory of the subject. He produces a subjectivity which is consistently double, inappropriate and hybrid, signified by the body of the Other, a body which is inauthentic, textual, ironic, transnational. Appropriation is an economics, an aesthetic, and an identity.

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Echoing Mekas's role in New York, Tahimik is very active in the art-world of the Philippines, having established a film collective in Baguio, and his identity as a filmmaker is as important as his ethnicity. If this is a subtext of the diary film in general, Tahimik transforms it into a global, intercultural identity. On the way to Monument Valley in 1983, he meets Dennis Hopper and goes to a film conference run by Francis Ford Coppola where *Perfumed Nightmare* is playing. Cinema, for Tahimik, is not a means of freedom from cultural imperialism, but provides a language in which he can inscribe himself as a dispersed and multiple subject. Instead of Mekas's nostalgia, Tahimik's cinema represents history as a text in which his own experience is one discourse among many. Neither history nor identity are fixed entities, but are under continual revision. About his Magellan project, unfinished for lack of a galleon in which to shoot it, he says, "History is not the monopoly of cultures who have books and computers, who can store it in their archives. So I imagine a lot of the material from the slave's point of view..."<sup>49</sup> Like Magellan's Igorot slave, the "first man to circumnavigate the globe," Tahimik is himself a construct of multiple languages, cultures, memories, and desires made possible by the techniques of cinematic bricolage.

In the 1993 Yamagita Film Festival catalogue, Tahimik lists subsequent installments of the diary up to the year 2001. However, in 1994 he said the film would stop at the earthquake because "I got insecure about my wife's criticism of the film as my ego-trip,"<sup>50</sup> a statement that says much about the family dynamics behind Tahimik's home-movie practice. The contradictions of a globe-trotting father are implicit in Katrin de Guia's relative absence from the film. Her performance at the end of *Perfumed Nightmare* of giving birth in the back of a jeepney (a Philippine taxi made out of recycled U.S. army vehicles) to the "first Kidlat born on the other side of the planet" (Germany) suggests the limits of Tahimik's global perspective. His historical passages from slave to master and from father to son remain inscribed within a gendered discourse that writes women out of the picture. Within Tahimik's postmodern, postcolonial voyage, there lurk many remnants of a modernist exilic discourse, and yet he does not yearn for a lost authenticity or a vanishing reality. He constructs a subjectivity within a material history of colonial history. As a collage of identities "embodied" in the Filipino filmmaker, ethnicity is thoroughly deconstructed into a plethora of fantasies, memories, and histories.

## Film, Video, Memory and the Millennium

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These examples of personal filmmaking suggest some of the contradictions implicit in the notion of autoethnography. The subject "in history" will always be a destabilized self, one for whom memory and experience are always separate. Even a diaristic project like George Kuchar's, in which there is no apparent break between experience and representation, inscribes subjectivity as a form of writing, a performance of the self. The journeys undertaken by these film- and videomakers suggest the possible ethnographic effects of placing oneself under scrutiny. Autoethnography produces a subjective space that combines anthropologist and informant, subject and object of the gaze, under the sign of one identity.

Sadie Benning's use of Pixelvision and Kidlat Tahimik's epic home-movies are means by which they perform not only themselves, but a visual style that signals their difference. Moreover, the ironic tone of all the narrators signals a distance from the authenticity of images, and from the authenticity of the self. Jonas Mekas plays out the fundamentally allegorical structure of autoethnography, transforming all images into memories, traces of experience, signs of the past to be salvaged in cinematic form. Through irony, each of the other filmmakers are able to inscribe themselves in the future as another moment in time, and to understand the fiction of the past as a "cosmic innocence." Each of these filmmakers comes to understand how they themselves can exist in "a world of appearances," as Chris Marker puts it in *Sans Soleil*, another diary/travelogue/ethnographic and autobiographical film. Their identities as film- and videomakers enable them to reach back to a material reality that precedes images, a domain of agency and history.

Autoethnography in film and video exemplifies Fischer's recognition of the autobiographical model of ethnography, but also suggests an expanded sense of the term "ethnic." The full scope of identities that are articulated in the new autobiographies include sexual orientation, class, generation, and nation. As personal cinema becomes the foundation of cultural critique, "ethnicity" becomes something forged from experience and is reconfigured as a vital form of knowledge. And as Fischer argues in the context of literary autoethnography, diary filmmaking serves as an important model of ethnographic representation appropriate to a pluralist social formation. These films and videos suggest how the audio-visual medium of the cinema functions as a means of splitting and fragmenting identity, not only into the parallel tracks of sound and image, but within the status of the image itself. If "ethnicity" refers to an inherited identity, a fixed history of the self, autoethnography in film and video destabilizes and disperses that history across a range of discursive selves.

When autoethnography becomes an archival practice, as it does in these works, memory is fragmented into a nonlinear collage. The pieces that are assembled into the shape of a diary forsake the authenticity of documentary realism for a fiction of forgetting. The filmed memory situates the filmmaker-subject within a culture of mediation in which the past is endemically fictional. To recall that past by way of memory is to render it "another culture" in an ever receding palimpsest of overlapping cultures, of which past, present, and future are merely points of perspective. Subjectivity subsists within image culture as an "other reality," a utopian space where hierarchies of vision, knowledge, and desire are diffused and collapsed. The journey to this parallel universe is linear neither in time nor in space, moving across histories and geographies to produce a dialectics of cultural representation. Benjamin suggested the urgency of such a practice in the early 1930s: "The remembered world breaks up more quickly, the mythic in it surfaces more quickly and crudely, [so] a completely remembered world must be set up even faster to oppose it. That is how the accelerated pace of technology looks in the light of today's pre-history."<sup>51</sup>

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The video-film dialogue that informs so much contemporary filmmaking inscribes the "accelerated pace of technology" into the text itself, setting up allegories of cultural conflict, tension, and transition within the sphere of memory and its representation. In the cinema, self-representation always involves a splitting of the self, a production of another self, another camera, another time, another place. Video threatens to collapse the temporal difference of filmic memory, not only because it can eliminate the structure of secondary revision, but because of its "coverage," its capacity as an instrument of surveillance. The economics of videography transform the collecting process into one of recording. Video lacks the death drive of film, unable to exploit the dialectic of still and motion photography. But neither can video "forget" film and its auratic fantasy of transparency, its memory of the (celluloid) body in the machine.

In its immediacy, without that intermediary "liminal" phase of the photographic negative, video threatens the structures of memory on which autobiographical conventions are founded. The video image shifts the terms of realism from lost aura to an eclipse of auratic memory, or at least it holds out the possibility of such a transformation. Self-representation likewise shifts into something much more fluid and open, discursive and intertextual, even fictional and fantastic. ★

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TAPE DESCRIPTIONS [George Kuchar](#)

[next >>>](#)

Sherman Acres 1991  
about 85 minutes.

The complete series is in 6 episodes and is a drama which entails psychological breakdowns, marital showdowns and messy obsessions. The characters include a wayward priest, a promiscuous school-teacher and her proctologist husband, teen-age thrill killers and an obsession driven psychotherapist with an enema bag. There's lots of special effects and it moves pretty fast from one major crisis to another.

# Gastronomical Get-away... 1991

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16 minutes

Mono Lake and Yosemite Valley in California highlight this excursion into the ~~congested~~ constipated crevices of once highly active fumaroles that splattered magma and chunks of hot rock onto the Western landscape.

Now the vents are blocked by eating disorders that rob our nation of its free flowing and fertilizing heritage.

We follow a woman as she sinks into a dark, inland sea of great natural beauty... unable to deposit her own organic pile onto the rich mineral build-up that reaches skyward toward the creator ~~that~~ <sup>she</sup> dreamt up this exquisite landscape.

Winter Hostilities... 1991  
about 15 minutes

The ground is frozen and the whiteness hides the carcass of a ~~thing~~ <sup>thing</sup> that once ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> happy... but now maybe ~~it~~ had gotten gassed by things undigested. The bones of once mighty, and blubbery beings stand erect among nidgets or dangle around the necks of dormant cannibals destined for a like-wise extinction and yet, there is hope: as long as there is still a little meat on those bones our appetite for living goes on.

Weather Watch...1991  
about 15 minutes

A window or two on the outside world is not enough especially when you have such a lousy view of things as I had in this Oklahoma, residential care home. The majesty of the console model TV gave a new dimension to the concept of time and space and shrunk it all down to a 21 inch lump of nature; a 21 incher that didn't smell and permeate the ~~atmosphere~~ atmosphere with discomfort. A meditation on the elsewhere and wanting to be there.



Ashley, ANIMAL CHARM

**B**eing surrounded by mass-produced objects induces a kind of panic. How can I fix my relationship to an object when it is not one, but many? The object is schizophrenic and polygamous. This is not my lover's favourite cup/ashtray/lamp, though it is identical to it in every way. Significance bleeds from one object to another: impostor objects evoke authentic memories. My alarm clock, with which I have developed a complex set of relations involving memory, sentiment, and identification ("This is MY alarm clock") is the replica of an alarm clock which many thousands of people the world over possess. What is the relationship that all of us share? Our possessions are interchangeable and commit infidelities.<sup>1</sup>

## American Psycho(Drama): Sigmund Freud vs. Henry Ford

*Nelson Henricks*

A selection of American performance-based video works at the end of the 1990s describes a trajectory between consumer society and the psycho-analytic confessional. Emphatically low-tech and comedic, the works of HalfLifers, Emily Breer and Joe Gibbons, Anne McGuire, and Animal Charm use mass-produced phenomena as a springboard for social critique. HalfLifers (Torsten Z. Burns and Anthony Discenza) act out panicked rescue missions using everyday objects. Breer and Gibbons' *The Phony Trilogy* (and Gibbons' solo "Barbie" series) target pop culture icons through delusional monologues. Anne McGuire mimics popular television genres, interrupting the comfortable flow of power within them.

Unlike the other artists, Animal Charm (Richard Earl Bott Jr. and James Whitney Fetterly) use found footage instead of performance to reveal the

madness in mass culture. By re-editing images derived from a wide variety of sources, they scramble media codes, creating a kind of tic-ridden, convulsive babble. Animal Charm's strategy is, however, consistent with the other works, and even sums up the overriding ethos of these productions: the disruptive gestures can reinvest conventional forms with subversive meanings. The work of these artists can be set into orbit around three points: performance, television, and madness. In doing so, we can perhaps shed some light on the state of the American video at the end of the '90s.

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Ashley, ANIMAL CHARM

## Performance, Television, and Madness

Like their young British counterparts, these recent American productions recall the low-tech, performance-based works of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> They distinguish themselves from their historic predecessors through the deployment of specific types of humour. Comedy, of course, played an important role in early video work.<sup>3</sup> In the '90s, however, humour can be defined more pointedly as either stand-up comedy or slapstick. Physical comedy focuses on the body under duress; the gap between Chris Burden and Buster Keaton is perhaps not as broad as some would like to imagine.<sup>4</sup> Stand-up comedy, on the other hand, is a first-person narrative employing humour to disseminate didactic information. Lenny Bruce and Laurie Anderson are two performers who blur the boundary between comedy and art, and whose work contains political or social commentary.

Not coincidentally, stand-up and slapstick are the two types of humour most commonly used in television, which brings us to the second feature that distinguishes these videos from those of the 1970s. Instead of long duration and slow pacing, these videos freely adopt the pacing and syntax of tv. Television syntax is used as a kind of *lingua franca*, a shared literacy which each of these artists exploit to communicate their ideas. What is important to stress here is that television is not the primary subject of these works, nor is it treated in a critical manner.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it is viewed as a cultural fact, an inevitability, a backdrop against which all activities take place.

It is probably unnecessary to state that television, both the material object and its videotaped content, is a product of mass culture.<sup>6</sup> Mass-produced phenomena all figure into the work of these artists, whether it is junk and junk food (HalfLifers), pop icons (Breer/Gibbons), television genres (McGuire)

or information on videotape (*Animal Charm*). What I feel is significant is that each of the artists performs a kind of madness for the video camera, a madness catalyzed through an encounter with mass-produced/multiple objects. In an informal conversation I had recently with Joan Braderman, she remarked that fear was the primary factor which distinguished contemporary performance-based works from those of the '70s.<sup>7</sup> Bearing this in mind, perhaps what we are witnessing in these works is neither fear nor madness, but instead anxiety. What do we have to be anxious about at the end of the '90s? The eradication of nature? The failure of the body? Global economic collapse? The millennium? Or is it just the simple fear of losing our individuality? This is not just the fear of becoming a fashion victim, of being forced to conform to the will of society. It is the fear of becoming isolated from political agency, the fear of being powerless as an individual in a society where the only viable mode of expression left is to consume.

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When we watch the president of the United States announce on television that bombing has started in Africa, in the Middle East, or in Europe, we feel far from the truth. Behind the television screen, truth is being constructed for mass consumption; disparate information is made to harmonize into seamless waves of soothing discourse. If recent independent video work describes a complex interweaving of fear, madness, and anxiety, we should perhaps identify madness as a viable response to anxiety, an act of disruptive resistance, a refusal to be serenitized.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most appropriate response to mass culture is multiple personality. Not necessarily a disorder, but instead, a disruptive gesture.<sup>9</sup> Many of these artist/performers seem to be caught in delusional states where they become someone else. This is not the same as acting. In theatre, the persona is free of fissures. Here the spectacle is disrupted by the artist whom we see performing as themselves (a self-reflexive trait which owes much to the tradition of performance art). We can talk about this in terms of "low-tech," but we can also see it as a kind of self-reflexivity—a Brechtian distantiation technique which renders the performance visible even as it is being performed. As was the case for Brecht's theatre works, these videotaped performances function as a kind of experimental agitation-propaganda that uses humour to make difficult ideas easier to swallow.<sup>10</sup>

Control Corridor, HALLIFERS



## HalfLifers

alfLifers is a collaborative project of Torsten Z. Burns and Anthony Discenza. In their work, they perform rescue missions. One such

work, *Actions in Action* (1997), is packaged like an adventure show. For ten minutes, the HalfLifers' attempt to "rescue" one another (à la *Kipper Kids*) by applying yogurt, junk food, syrup, processed cheese, and baloney slices to each other's bodies.<sup>11</sup> The footage, based on hours of improvisation, is then accelerated so that all the actions are performed at high speed. The performers squeak out dramatic exclamations in hysterical cartoon voices: "Do you feel anything? Is this working?" The scene is like something out of "*ER on acid*"—as one technique begins to rescue the subject, it quickly fails, and another cure is needed to supplant it.<sup>12</sup>

If *Actions in Action* evokes the failure of the body, medicine, and memory, *Control Corridor* (1997) focuses on communication failure. Here the HalfLifers act out something resembling a space shuttle docking procedure using a number of disparate objects (toys, a telephone, motorcycle helmets, and other junk) as surrogates for high-end communications technology. Ironically, what HalfLifers communicate is never more substantial than the panicked fact of communicating for its own sake: "I'm in! Are you in? I'm in. All right, I can hear you...I can also see you...." While mobile phones, fax machines, voice-mail, and e-mail offer the promise of immediate communication and increased productivity, what they create is anxiety. Like kids role-playing for future disasters in the safety of their parents' rumpus room, HalfLifers reduce the chaos of daily life to a smaller, more ordered, scale.<sup>13</sup>



## Joe Gibbons and Emily Breer

Role-playing as performed by the HalfLifers takes the backseat to outright delusion in Joe Gibbons and Emily Breer's *The Phony Trilogy* (1997). Combining digital animation with real-time performance, this series of shorts recounts Gibbons' fictional influence on Brian Wilson (*Pool Boy*), Iggy Pop (*Caddy*), and Francis Ford Coppola (*The Horror*). Though at first Gibbons' monologues read as conventional stand-up routines, their undercurrent is aggressive and grandiose, verging on paranoid: Wilson and Coppola are "stealing" his ideas, while Iggy is offering to trade places with him. These fantasies, depicted in Breer's disorienting and hallucinatory animations, stand in sharp contrast to the characters' actual social position: pool boy, caddy, and shell-shocked Vietnam vet. Gibbons is not just working class, but serving class. Illusions of class mobility are propagated through tantalizing fantasies of fame, yet in reality, they remain nothing more than this.

In his solo *Multiple Barbie* (1998), Gibbons plays a smooth-talking psychoanalyst, gently attempting to unite a mute doll's multiple personalities. Part of a series of tapes on Barbie™ shot in Pixelvision™, *Multiple Barbie* presents the audience with the double bind of Gibbons-as-psychiatrist versus Gibbons-as-madman. Are we witnessing a droll narrative, as some suspension of disbelief would permit us to assume? Or are we instead watching a lunatic act out his own multiple personality, provoked by and channelled through the plastic husk of a Barbie doll? Gibbons' performance—relentless in its intensity—allows us to flip-flop from one extreme to the other, leaving us with no sense of stability. *Multiple Barbie* and *The Phony Trilogy* speak in a very charged manner of the relationships we forge with the multiple, yet not ideologically neutral, cultural icons that surround us.

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## Anne McGuire

In the work of Anne McGuire, the mass-produced “object” is not a physical entity, but instead a series of genre conventions derived from television (the variety show, the talk show, and the rock video). McGuire's screen presence amplifies the sense of the uncanny that lies at the heart of familiar forms, creating a vertigo that is (like Gibbons') both humorous and disquieting.

In *I'm Crazy and You're Not Wrong* (1997) McGuire portrays a Kennedy-era singer performing cabaret songs that careen from pathetic to pathological. Recalling the concert performances of Judy Garland, McGuire uses her beautiful voice to “improvise” a series of songs over a slurring, distorted orchestral accompaniment. In the video, McGuire evokes a vertiginous double bind: is she figuratively crazy like Patsy Cline or stark raving-mad like Charles Manson? The madwoman as a stereotype in popular music (most recently personified by Björk) comfortably conflates power and instability. What McGuire does is undo the sutures that bind these discontinuous notions together.

*The Telling* (1994/98) shows McGuire telling two acquaintances a secret about her past using a three camera set-up in the Desi Arnez style. That intimacy is commodified in the form of a talk show isn't the strangest thing about this work. The fractured editing, silences, and lapses in continuity suggest vast narratives far more evocative than anything revealed

on screen. McGuire uses television vernacular to open up ambiguity and discomfort, two things that television strives to elude at all costs.

In the six-minute one-take video *When I Was a Monster* (1996) McGuire is seen recuperating from an accident. She is naked, seated before the camera. A series of metal pins (for setting broken bones) emerges from her left forearm. As the video progresses, she mimes a series of "monsters" to a relentlessly slow version of the B-52s' "Dance This Mess Around." Functioning like a home-made music video, McGuire presents the female body as simultaneously erotic and monstrous. Or is it erotic precisely because it is monstrous? McGuire explores the complicity of voyeurism and exhibitionism, elaborating upon similar body-centred works of the '70s.<sup>14</sup>

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## Animal Charm

Animal Charm (a collaborative project of Richard Earl Bott Jr. and James Whitney Fetterly), participates in video's rich legacy of media deconstruction. Their interventions—distillations of music videos, commercials, and info-mercials sampled from a reservoir of neglected or useless images—offer moments of resistance.

If you took this text and scrambled the word order, you would still have a sense of what it was about. But if you took a magazine article on physics, a chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, or instructions on how to apply cosmetics and merged them together, what would happen? This is precisely what Animal Charm do with television footage.<sup>15</sup> By composting tv and reducing it to a kind of babble, they force television to not make sense. While this disruption is playful, it also reveals an overall "essence" of mass culture that would not be apprehended otherwise. Works such as *Stuffing*, *Ashley*, and *Lightfoot Fever* upset the hypnotic spectacle of tv viewing, in turn revealing how advertising creates anxiety, how culture constructs "nature," how conventional morality is dictated through seemingly neutral images, and so on. By forcing television to babble like a raving lunatic, we might finally hear what it is actually saying.



Ashley, ANIMAL CHARM

NELSON HENRICKS Psycho[Drama]

## Psycho[Drama]

It is commonly assumed that Rosalind Krauss's "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" tells us that video is a self-centred, egotistical medium.<sup>16</sup> I think the most intriguing idea to be gleaned from Krauss's text is this: that video's most significant essential characteristic is its ability to explore psychological states. Narcissism, sure, but what about voyeurism, sadism, and masochism? What about fear, anxiety, paranoia, madness? If madness here is taken as a disruptive gesture which sets out to unbalance North American society's will towards homogeneity and control through consumption, these works testify to the power of individual gestures to create brief, and sometimes hilarious, moments of transcendence. ★

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# All Smiles and Sadness

*Anne McGuire*

I am lonely, oh so lonely, I am all alone today  
no one waiting, though I'm praying,  
some one waits for me today, as though floating

— I'm only my heart today.  
I imagine she imagines that I love her  
every day. Is that really it, baby?

I'm sorry, but butlers are so often alone  
in the house, and where is the love?  
Where is the love? Oh where is the love?





Tell me where to look. Below? Above.  
I search for this impossible love, I look up  
when it's down, below, it's above.

it grows like these flowers, and yet again, not at all.  
I look in the spring when love's waiting for fall.  
—so stop looking.

She's in there doing god knows what. I wish  
she'd get the hell out of there, she's driving me  
crazy crazy crazy. So how are you?

How is Millie and Jimmy  
and Sally and Sue? Well, Millie's gone away  
each year she goes to the same place

but doesn't tell us where or why. She's up and gone.  
And when will she be back? I don't know.  
I'm not allowed to know where she's been. Oh,

there she is now. Hello, how are you?  
The rains are here, the rains are here.  
They've come yet again, there's nothing to fear.

Sleep, sleep, that's why the rains are here  
To lull you to sleep, to calm your fear.  
The rains are here, lay down your head





Excuse us. Please madam, let me take your cloak.  
I'm sorry I've been so distressed.

I'm just a lowly butler, you know you can tell me. Is

madam all right? Sitting here wishing we're  
and we're not. Killing time, it's dead at nine  
and we're not. The king of stop

On his walk. Can smoke. And still talk. Winking  
on top. What's going on? A little less  
sad a little more mad, this is how I saw

the thing I thought we had. On a cool eve  
in a far away place a girl sits in an old stone house  
on an old green couch with gold threads running



through the upholstery. She's covered by an afghan  
of multicolors. She hears caws and dogs and is afraid  
of the house itself and its scary cold basement,

not much more than a root-cellar.

I thought she was mine, her and her damn house.  
There, the dead end, I have come to it,

reddened, my blood rushing to my face, and you see it.  
My emotions can't be deadened, not even by time.  
Distance wouldn't idle me either.



Lookin' for you my love, lookin' for you, that's all I do  
the whole day through is go lookin' for you, my love.  
Sadness they say is true as love that inspires us to

walk blind through the light and go searchin' all night  
for something so painful it's blue.

How is it done? Love found and won to last for long

and cause a song, what is happy and sweet?

When shall I meet a man who inspires this in me?

Have you ever experienced sadness and shame

at the meaningless and unimportance of a name?

The way it rings no bells when spoken?

The way you seem to read on the wall







Because it goes too high the bird it goes too high  
to hear you callin' out, scream out your name!  
Just a pebble swallowin' that's all I do

is swallow pebbles and I want to digest them  
but it sticks in my throat—it's like chokin' me.  
It's just a small pebble. I'm just a small bird too.

And I'm lost and I'm lonely and yes, you do know  
that feeling:

You gonna make fun of me? ★



REPOST, GERRIMORTON

# Women, Nature, and Chemistry: Hand-Processed Films from the Film Farm

*Janine Marchessault*

The representation of nature has been a central and longstanding aesthetic preoccupation in Canadian art and iconography. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in a series of films that have emerged from Philip Hoffman's hand-processing film workshop located on a forty-acre farm in southern Ontario. Since 1994, the films coming out of this summer retreat have been remarkable in terms of the consistency of their themes and innovative aesthetic approaches. One finds here a new generation of women experimental filmmakers exploring the boundaries between identity, film, chemistry, and nature.

The creative context for these films is no doubt shaped by the experimental films and critical concerns of Hoffman and his late partner, Marian McMahon. Since the late '80s, both Hoffman and McMahon were interested in autobiography, film (as) memory, and pedagogy. Hoffman, weary of overseeing large classes and high-end technologies at film school, conceived of a different pedagogical model for teaching film production. Instead of the urban, male dominated and technology heavy atmosphere, the Independent Imaging Workshop would be geared towards women and would feature hand-processing techniques in a low-tech nature setting. The process encouraged filmmakers to explore the environment through film, and to explore film through different chemical processes. The result is a number of beautiful short films that are highly personal, deeply phenomenological and often surreal. *Dandelions* (Dawn Wilkinson, 1995), *Swell* (Carolynne Hew, 1998), *Froglight* (Sarah Abbott, 1997), *Fall and Scratch* (Deirdre Logue, 1998), *Across* (Cara Morton, 1997), and *We Are Going Home* (Jennifer Reeves, 1998) are among the most striking, recalling some of Joyce Wieland's most artisanal works and the psychic intensity of Maya Deren's "trance" films.

By artisanal I do not mean the aesthetic effect of "home made" movies produced by the uneven colouration of hand processing and tinting techniques. I am referring to the process of making films that is embedded in the final effect; that is, the work of film. Joyce Wieland's work was often characterized as artisanal, a term that in the '60s and '70s was the opposite of great art. Famously, she made films on her kitchen table, bringing a history of women's work to bear on her productions. In a video document of the Film Farm three women sit at a kitchen table in a barn discussing the varying and unpredictable results of processing recipes: the thickness of the emulsion, the strength of the solutions, the degree of agitation, not to mention air temperature and humidity. Out of the lab and into the kitchen (or barn), film production moves into the realm of the artisan and the amateur which, as Roland Barthes once observed, is the realm of love. This is the home of the experimental in its originary meaning, of finding what is not being sought, of being open to living processes and to chance.

Like Wieland, this new generation of filmmakers is exploring the relationship between bodies, the materiality of film stocks and the artifacts of the world around them. The simple images of nature (daisies, fields, frogs, trees, rivers, clouds, and so on) and rural architectures (bridges, barns, roads, etc.) are exquisite in their different cinematic manifestations. This is not idealized or essentialist nature, rather the landscapes are grounded in an experience of place. In Dawn Wilkinson's *Dandelions* for example, the filmmaker speaks of her relation to her birthplace and to home: "I am Canadian." As the only black child growing up in a rural town in Ontario, she was frequently asked, "Where are you from?" As she tells us about her experiences of being connected to nature while not being

included in the history of a nation, we see her with dandelions in her hair; she films her various African keepsakes in the landscape; we follow her bare feet on a road and later, she does cartwheels across fields. The montage of images is delicately rhythmic, and is accompanied by a monologue directed at an imaginary audience: "Where are YOU from?...I was born here." Like so many of the films produced at the workshop, the film explores the relation between the natural landscape and social identity.

Several of the films display quite literally a desire to inscribe personal identity and history onto or, in the case of Carolynne Hew's *Swell*, into the landscape. In *Swell*, Hew, lying on a pile of rocks, begins to place the stones over her body. The film is structured by a movement from the city into the country, but the simple opposition is undone by both the filmmaker's body and film processes. The quick montage of black and white city images (Chinatown, bodies moving on the street, smoke, cars), accompanied on the soundtrack by a cement drill, is replaced by feet on rocks, strips of film blowing in the wind and beautifully tinted shots of yarrow blooms. There is no attempt here at a pristine nature, at representing a nature untouched by culture. Rather, the film is about the artist's love of nature, her sensual desire to be in nature. Shots of her face over the city are replaced with images of nature over her body; yarrow casts detailed shadows on her thigh, a symphony of colours abounds—orange, blue and fuschia. Strands of film hang on a line and Hew plays them with her scissors as one would a musical instrument. The sounds of nature—crickets, bees, water—are strongly grounded in the sound of her own body, breathing and finally a heartbeat. There are no words in this film but everything is mediated through language and through the density of the filmmaker's perception and imagination. The film is laid to rest on a beautiful rock as she scratches the emulsion with scissors; the relation between film and nature is dialectical. Nature here is both imagined (hand processed) and experienced. It is impossible to separate the two.

Deirdre Logue's two short and deceptively simple films, *Fall* (1997) and *Scratch* (1998), also convey the filmmaker's physical insertion into nature. This time the experience is not sensual release, but rather a sadomasochistic and painful journey. In *Fall*, Logue falls (faints?) over and over again from different angles and in different natural locations to become one, in a humorous and bruised way, with the land. In *Scratch*, she is more explicit about the nature of her images as we read: "My path is deliberately difficult." Facing the camera, she puts thistles down her underpants, and pulls them out again. The sounds of breaking glass as well as the crackle of film splices are almost the only sounds heard in this mostly silent film. Intercut are found footage images from an instructional film; we see a bed being automatically made and unmade, glass breaking and plates smashed. This film is sharp and painful. Logue, beautifully butch in her appearance, is anything but "natural"; it is clear that the nature she is self-inflicting

is the nature of sex. Her body is treated like a piece of emulsion—processed, manipulated, scratched, cut to fit. What is left ambiguous is whether the source of self-inflicted pain results from going against a socially prescribed nature or embracing a socially deviant one.

138 Sarah Abbott's *Froglight* (1997) is even more ambiguous than either *Swell* or *Scratch* in terms of the nature of nature. The film opens with the artist's voice over black leader: "I am walking down the road with my camera but I can't see anything." A tree comes into focus as she tells us, "But I know I am walking straight towards something, we always are." For Abbott there is something that exceeds the image, that exceeds her thinking about nature. She experiences a moment standing in a field, a moment that cannot be reduced to an image or words; she "experiences something that is not taught," she does not want to doubt this experience because "life would be smaller." Abbott touches the earth, we hear the sound of her footsteps, we see a road, we hear frogs, and later we come upon a frog at night. In the narration, which is accompanied by the sound of frogs, Abbott attempts to put into words the idea of an experience that is beyond language, the idea that the world is much more than film, than the artist's own imaginings. Like the soundtrack, the film's black and white images are sparse. A magnifying glass over grass makes the grass less clear and is the film's central phenomenological drive: surfaces reveal nothing of what lies beneath. Towards the end of the film, a long held shot of wild flowers blowing in the wind is accompanied by Abbott's voice-over: "A woman gave me a sunflower before I came to make this film, and someone asked if it was my husband as I held it in my arm." The ambiguity of this statement foregrounds the randomness of signs (flower, husband) and language. *Froglight* affirms a nature that is mysterious and unknowable, a world of spiritual depth and creative possibility.

What first struck me about so many of the films coming out of the workshop is the tension between the female self/body and nature; each film is in some way an exploration of the filmmaker's relation to the land as place by cartwheeling, walking, or falling on it, and in the last two films that I want to comment on, swimming and dreaming through it. Women's bodies in Jenn Reeves' *We Are Going Home* and Cara Morton's *Across* are not only placed in nature but in time. Temporality exists on two planes in all of the hand-processed films I have been discussing, not only in terms of the images of a nature that is always changing but also in terms of film stocks and chemicals that continue to work on the film through time. Where workprints serve to protect the original negative from the processes of post-production, the films produced at the workshop use reversal stock and thus include the physical traces of processing and editing, an intense tactility that will comprise the final print of the film. This is what gives these films their temporal materiality and sensuality. In *We Are Going Home* and *Across* this temporality is narrativized and it is perhaps fitting that both films experiment



Froglight. SPERM REPORT.



*We Are Going Home, JENNIFFER REEVES*



more extensively with advanced film techniques such as time-lapse cinematography, solarization, single-frame pixelation, split toning and tinting, superimpositions, optical printing and so on. Here is where these two filmmakers would part company with Wieland whose cinematic sensibility is, in the first instance, shaped by a non-narrative tradition. Both films are steeped in a narrativity that can be more easily situated in relation to the psychodramas of another founding mother of the avant-garde, Maya Deren.

In the films of Deren, nature and the search for self are always an erotic and deeply psychological enterprise. Dreams allow passage to a human nature and a mysterious self that cannot be accessed through conscious states. Her films have been characterized as "trance" films for the way they foster this movement into the deepest recesses of the self, a movement that is less about social transgression as it was for the Surrealists, than about the journey through desire. *We Are Going Home* is a gorgeous surrealistic film that has all the characteristics of the trance film and more. It is structured around a dream sequence that has no real beginning or end. The first image we see is of a vending machine dispensing "Live Bait" in the form of a film canister. A woman opens the canister to find fish roe (eggs). The equation of fish roe and film, no doubt a nod to the Surrealists, opens up those ontological quandaries around mediation and truth that *Froglight* refers us to. It is this promise of direct contact along with the return "Home" in the film's title, that give some sign that the highly processed landscapes belong to the unconscious.

The film is structured around a network of desire between three women. One woman dives into a lake and ends up feet first in the sand. Another woman happens by and sucks her toes erotically at which point everything turns upside-down and backwards. Characters move through natural spaces (the beach, fields, water) disconnected from the physical landscapes and from each other. Superimposed figures over the ground move like ghosts, affecting and affected by nothing. Storm clouds, trees in the wind, a thistle, cows are all processed and pixelated to look supernatural. Toe sucking complete, the second woman lies down under an apple tree and falls asleep; the wind gently blows her shirt open. A third woman, a dream figure, emerges from a barn; skipping through fields she happens upon the sleeping figure and cannot resist the exposed breast, she bends over and sucks the nipple. The film ends with a sunset and romantic accordion music that is eerily off-key.

*We Are Going Home* is an erotic film whose sensuality derives both from the sublime image processing and from the disunity between all the elements in the film: the landscapes, the colours, the people. The sounds of birds cackling, water and wind that make up the soundtrack further intensify the film's discordance. It is precisely this disunity that charges the sexual encounters which are themselves

premised on an objectification. Home remains a mysterious place that exceeds logic and rationality; it is a puzzle whose pieces are connected in a seemingly linear manner but which will always remain mysterious.

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In contrast, the psychic space in Morton's *Across* is shaped through unity rather than disunity; the film is about crossing a bridge. The central tension in this lovely film, which accomplishes so much in a little over two minutes, is built upon a desire to connect with an image from the filmmaker's past. The metaphoric journey forward to see the past is conveyed through a hand-held camera travelling at a great speed across a dirt road, through fields, along fences and through woods. Different colour stocks combine with high-contrast black and white images of the bridge while on the soundtrack we hear a river. As we travel with the filmmaker through these landscapes, we encounter a high-angle solarized image of a woman sleeping in a field, a negative image of a woman swimming in the river below the bridge, a static shot of Morton staring into the camera, and home-movie images of Morton as a young girl running towards the camera. An intensity and anticipation is created in the movement and in the juxtaposition of the different elements. These are quietly resolved at the end of the film: the young girl smiles into the camera to mirror the close-up of Morton's inquisitive gaze, the swimmer completes her stroke, stands up, brushes the water from her eyes and seems to take a deep breath.

The workshop films that I have written about reveal a renewal of avant-garde concerns and experimental techniques—they are unabashedly beautiful and filled with a frenetic immediacy. To some degree their aesthetic approach grows directly out of the workshop structure: location shooting and hand-processing. Participants (which now include equal numbers of men) are invited to shoot surrounding locations and to collect images randomly rather than to preconceive them through scripting. The aim of the workshop is not to leave with a finished product but rather to experiment with shooting immediate surroundings using a Bolex and with hand-processing techniques. Many of the films produced at the workshop are never completed as final works but stand as film experiments, the equivalent of a sketchbook. This is the workshop's most important contribution to keeping film culture alive in Canada. The emphasis on process over product, on the artisanal over professional, on the small and the personal over the big and universal which has been so beneficial for a new generation of women filmmakers, also poses a resistance to an instrumental culture which bestows love, fame, and fortune on the makers of big feature narratives.



# Passing Through: The Film Cycle of Philip Hoffman

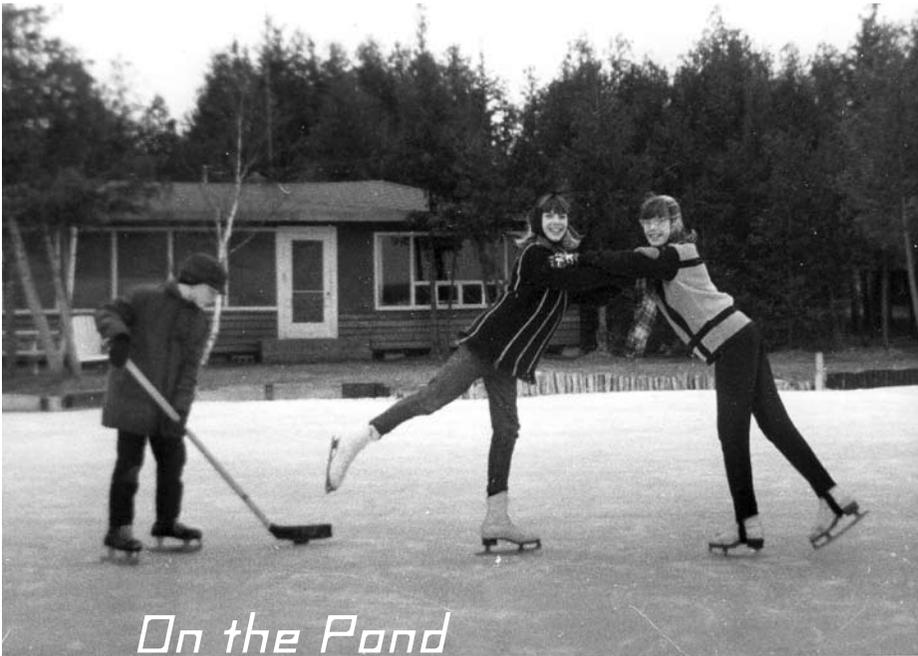
Mike Hooboom

The films of Philip Hoffman have revived the travelogue, long the preserve of tourism officials anxious to convert geography into currency. Hoffman's passages are too deeply felt, too troubled in their remembrance, and too radical in their rethinking of the Canadian documentary tradition to quicken the pulse of an audience given to starlight. He has moved from his first college-produced short, *On the Pond* (1978)—set between the filmmaker's familial home and his newfound residence at college—to a trek across Canada in *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983). In Mexico he made the haiku-inspired short *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984). The next year he was invited to Amsterdam to observe the set of Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts*, and made *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986). Trips to Europe to unearth the roots of his family formed the basis for *passing through/torn formations'* (1988) pan-continental dialogue of madness and memory. *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990) takes up this

immigrant connection from his father's side of the family. And the last work in what was only afterwards named a cycle, is *river* (1978–92), which is both a return home and an acknowledgement of the restless flux that lies at the heart of this project.

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For all of their circumnavigations, this cycle is primarily concerned with pictures of home and family, gathered with a keen diarist's eye that has revamped its vision at every turn, shifting styles with every work, as if in answer to its subject. Denoting the family as source and stage of inspiration, Hoffman's gracious archeology mines a concession of tragic encounters, powerfully refashioning his intersection with the limits of representation. His restless navigations are invariably followed by months of tortuous editing as history is strained through its own image, recalling Derrida's dictum that everything begins with reproduction. Hoffman's delicately enacted shaping of his own past is at once poetry, pastiche, and proclamation, a resounding affirmation of all that is well with independent cinema today.



## *On the Pond*

is an elaboration of the family slide show, its intimate portraits greeted with squeals of recognition and a generational shudder of light and shadow. The slides show the filmmaker as a child, his unguarded expression an ensign for innocence. In winter he is dwarfed by the furry excess of his parka; summertime finds him casting flies on the Saugeen River (subject of the final film in the cycle), trekking through forest, or lounging by the family

cottage. Reviewing the photographs with family, the filmmaker asks, “What do I look like?” in a gesture that underlines the reliance of identity on the family’s complex of role play, fantasy, and projection, on its investment in shared secrets, and its dramatic restagings of generational loss and symmetrical neglects. As the author of the film, Hoffman assumes a distinctly paternal guise, but within its confines he is very much the son, waiting on his elders for the signs of assent that will take shape as his own desire.

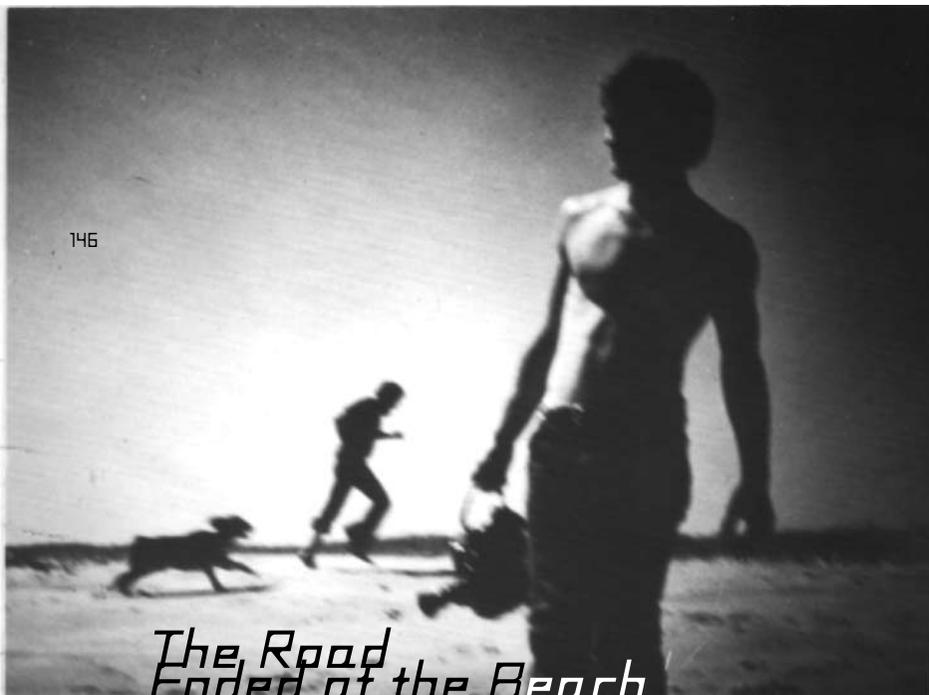
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Hoffman offers up these photographs as evidence, insistently returning to moments whose nostalgic impress provides a blank for the interchange of codes and riddles. These are hieroglyphs from the dead world, resurrected in order to reconstruct the memory of a time alien even to its inhabitants, because the measure of this familial solidarity must rely on a willful disavowal of experience, casting aside the ghosts of illness and psychosis, turning away from all that fails to conform to the familial ideal. What lies unspoken here, though hinted at in Hoffman’s careful editing, are stories of a darker nature, his mother’s illness, the death of relatives and the traumas of dislocation.

These photographs are drawn in a dialectic with dramatic re-enactments of Hoffman’s boyhood. These centre on a boy of seven skating “on the pond,” his only company a German shepherd. As he diligently hones his puck-handling skills, his easy skate over the big ice is interrupted by intrusive voice-overs—the exhortations of a coach and the scream of hockey parents. As Hoffman pans over a well-stocked trophy case and the young boy falls to the ice in a paroxysm of push-ups, the public stakes of this private practice become clear. He is leaving the family. His play has already become a kind of work, the means by which he will move from the pond to the city, though the cost is the incessant clamour for achievement. Everywhere the superego beckons.

No sooner has the dream been conjured than it ends. In a long pan over a projector run out of film and a record player at the end of its disk, the filmmaker rises from his bedside vigil over the past to close the apparatus of memory. Confronted with the escalating tensions of his trade, and a growing distance from his cherished solitude on the pond, Hoffman quits hockey, turning instead to a diaristic filmmaking which will stage the self in its various incarnations. All this is suggested in the film’s closing shot, which shows Hoffman joining his young double, confidently calling for the puck before slipping on the icy sheen, no longer the player he once was. Brilliantly photographed in black and white, with a spare piano score and a sure use of accompanying sound, *On the Pond* marked an auspicious debut from Canada’s premier diarist.

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*The Road  
Ended at the Beach*

is a shaggy road flick whose waystations of memory allow past adventures to meld into present ones, though its true aim is neither adventure nor destination, but an examination of male myth. Setting off for Canada's east coast, Hoffman joins two friends, fellow filmmaker Richard Kerr, enlisted as sound recordist, and Jim McMurry, driver of the van. *Road's* opening sequence finds them bent over the van, painting over its psychedelic glyphs with a fluorescent orange. Each of the "characters" is introduced through flashback—McMurry as the manic, fast-talking, blues-singing driver of past trips, Kerr as a fishing pal and filmmaking companion. In Ottawa they meet up with Mark, a friend who used to play jazz trumpet but now blows in a military band. "There's things you do for love and there's things you do for money," he flatly intones as the travellers move on, meeting Conrad Dubé, a cyclist since 1953, who has crossed the globe eight times, barely able to speak due to infantile paralysis. In Sable River they find Dan, a friend from film school now working in the east coast fisheries, trapped in a dead-end job in order to support his family. They push on to Cape Breton where they find Robert Frank, avatar of Beat romance and adventure, the irascible photographer whose book *The Americans* undraped a mythic travelogue of naked encounters. But he appears before them on a distinctly human scale, and they stand together as four strangers feebly attempting to speak, their visit inspired by nostalgia over a time they never had. Frank's

visit marks the end of *Road's* first movement, an eastward passage whose outlook rested squarely in the rearview mirror, as if the burden of memory lay so heavy on the roadside that this was a journey of time instead of topography, the van's speed unable to outrace the velocity of the past.

*Road's* second movement opens with the remark, "Now I look inside the van." Once again each of the three characters is introduced—the filmmaker lost in a reverie of Kerouac adventures, McMurry obsessed with the wretched condition of the van, and Kerr feeling imprisoned. Hoffman notes, "I expected adventure, but somehow the road had died since the first trip west," a summary assessment of old ties which have vanished even before the trip has begun. Now their cross-country dash serves only as a reminder of their differences, the passing of youth, and the end of an exclusively male fraternity. The third movement, entitled "The Road Ended at the Beach," features a reprise of the film's encounters and Frank's weary responses to questions about his Beat relations of two decades before. "Maybe it was freer because you knew less. I never kept in close contact with them. Sometimes I see Allen..." These offerings mark an eerie prophecy for the three travellers, whose time of abandoned locomotion is past. The din of the road can no longer disguise the fact that they never learned to speak with one another. The film ends with the promise of its title: children and dogs moving back and forth across the beach as a massive rocky outcropping peers out of the waters in the distance. These planes of play, passage, and foreboding are a metaphor for the film's journey. *Road* is a passage from innocence to experience, cast beneath the paternal backdrop of a Beat mythos, its romantic notions of flight decomposed here in the cold frame of the van.

*Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (6 min 1984) is a hand-held travelogue of North America, presented in the unbroken twenty-eight-second shots of a spring-wind camera and the intertitles of a Mexican journey. Hoffman's pictures show moments of the everyday, drawn from public circumstances and viewed from a discreet distance. It opens with a pair of dirt roads marking an intersection, and beyond them a massive rouged advert for Coca-Cola. As diesel trucks storm past, we wait with the burro, tethered to an adjacent telephone post, as if waiting for the passing dream of technology to dissolve again into the Mexican roadside. Two shots frame street musicians while, on the track, a horn squalls plaintively, the lone aural counterpart to this requisition of the everyday. These pictures form part of an alternating passage of image and text that occupies the body of the film. Homely, hand-lettered haikus relate the story of a Mexican boy lying dead, his passage of mourning and reclamation charged in Hoffman's blank verse. The filmmaker pointedly refuses to make an image of this stranger, and this refusal is the real subject of this

travelogue. Each of his images are suffused with this death, as the words struggle to suggest all that lies beyond representation.

148 *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (23 min 1986) was occasioned by an invitation from British filmmaker Peter Greenaway to observe the shoot of *A Zed and Two Noughts*. Hoffman's diary excerpts are rife with a Greenaway-esque fiction that pits two English fathers as competing heirs to the originary mantle of Canadian documentary practice. The first is Greenaway himself, lynchpin of the structuralist mockumentary. His employment of BBC baritone Colin Canticle and serial musician Michael Nyman lent his early work an authentic documentary feel, although his voice-over texts are patently fabricated—speculative fictions which often catalogue an inexorable progression towards death. This willful play of documentary forms is set against the second father in *Zoo's* lineage—John Grierson. Grierson was the British cultural czar who founded the National Film Board (NFB), a federal institution whose documentary praxis was designed “to show Canada to Canadians.” His sternly realist conventions undermined Canadian dramatic aspirations; the NFB's colonialist perspectives would remain the most public expression of Canadian film for decades. For many years a documentary seminar bearing Grierson's name gathered makers from around the world, and it was there that Hoffman and Greenaway met, and where the invitation to observe Greenaway's shoot was extended, as Hoffman explains in his film.

Hoffman's rendering of the Greenaway production focuses on its apparatus of shaping, on the efforts of an elephantine crew to produce light where there is none, hang invisible cords, lay track, and gather some of the dissembling flocks that crowd Greenaway's zoo allegory. Interposed with fables of construction are a number of diary interludes which are captioned in a hilariously understated voice-over read by an actor. Alongside an image of a large wooden apple overlooking an empty park, Hoffman spins a tale of lovers who look to its girth for privacy, the approach of a voyeuristic teenager who is eventually joined by his romantically troubled companion, and finally a group of boys who arrive, pitching sticks for their dog in an effort to disturb the couple. The narrator recites, “I crossed the river and this is what I filmed after they all left.” This narrative construct of extra-filmic events, of all that lies outside the frame, points to the meek rectangle of the apparatus, its soft enclosures pregnant with syntax. By framing his diaristic intentions within a tradition of Canadian documentary practice, Hoffman underlines the radical contingency of the image—its status as truth and guarantor of experience lost in the runes of a text that may shape it to any end whatsoever. The truth of an image lies outside its frame, in the restless constellation of discourse and ideology that sur-

rounds any image and its reception. This observation is especially pointed in a Canadian setting, where the bulk of early Film Board productions was comprised entirely of newsreel footage culled from abroad. The act of documentary lay in their ordering, and in composing the inevitable voice-over text that would grant these pictures coherence. Adopting the Greenaway strategy of fictional ruses applied to documentary settings, Hoffman decomposes the Grierson legacy, unmasking its alliance with state control, class hierarchies, and mythologies of the noble poor. He insists that documentary practice is a fiction after all, a construction of fragments aligned to the ends of its maker.

Nowhere is the reliance of cinema on a metanarrative more pronounced than in the film's mid-section. The narrator recounts a visit to the zoo where one of the elephants suffers a heart attack. He agonizes over whether to film the scene, and finally does, but after the animal's death he exits ashamed, leaving the footage in the freezer, untouched and unprocessed. This is all declaimed over black—the blank passage representing the footage never developed. But after the credits seal the film, a final image appears—it shows the elephant falling and flailing, and then being helped to its feet by an attendant. So the filmmaker has processed the film, after all. And the elephant did not die, but merely fell. By displacing the film's centre and leaving it to protrude past the film's close, Hoffman invites the viewer to fold it back into the film, to join the blank recital of the heart attack with the silent pictures of its recovery, and so to retake the film's journey, and sceptically overturn its assertions and statements of fact. At once an essay on the Canadian documentary tradition and a long fraternal riddle, *?O, Zoo!* scans a flock of red herrings with a luminous photography and rare, reflexive wit.

Hoffman's sixth film in ten years,



torn r formations.

passing through/

is a generational saga, laid over three picture rolls, that rejoins in its symphonic montage the broken remnants of a family separated by war, disease, madness, and migration. An extract from Christopher Dewdney's *Predators of the Adoration* begins the film in darkness. The poet narrates the story of "you"—a child who explores an abandoned limestone quarry. Oblivious to the children who play around him, it is the dead that fascinate, pressed together to form limestones that part slowly between prying fingers before lifting into a lost horizon. After this textual prelude in darkness, the following scene is painfully silent. It shows a woman feeding her enfeebled mother in a quiet reversal of her own infancy. The older woman is clearly nearing death here, and Hoffman's portrayal of his mother and grandmother is tender and intimate, the camera caressing the two of them slowly, in a communion of touch.

Each figure in the film has a European double, as if the entry into the New World carried with it not only the inevitable burdens of translation, but also the burden of all that could not be said or carried, all that needed to be left behind. There are two grandmothers in the film—Babji, dying in a Canadian old age home, and Hanna, whose Czech tales are translated by the filmmaker's mother. There are likewise two grandfathers—Driououx, married to the dying Babji in Canada, and Jancyk, shot by his own son after refusing to cede him land rights. This son is returned to the scene of the shooting by Czech authorities and asked to recreate the event for a police film three months later. Unable to comply he breaks down instead, poised between death and its representation. The murderer's Canadian double is Wally, the homeless outcast whose wanderings are at the heart of the film. It is Wally who builds the film's central image—"the corner mirror"—two mirrored rectangles stacked at right angles. This looking glass offers a "true reflection," not the reversed image of the usual mirror, but the objectified stare of the Other. His accordion playing provides inspiration for the accordion heard on the track, and produces another image of unity within division, the left and right hands operating independently.

The darkroom, a ceremony of mixing potions, gathering up the shimmering images, the silvery magic beneath dream's surface. In the morning Babji would tell us what our dreams meant, and then stories of the old country would surface, stories I can't remember... Now that she's quiet, we can't hear about where it all came from, so it's my turn to go back, knowing at the start the failure of this indulgence, but only to play out these experiments already in motion. (*passing through/torn formations*)

This connection between things made in the dark—doesn't it lie at the heart of every motion picture? We can say for certain that this darkness has occupied the centre of Hoffman's film work since *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*. While *Somewhere Between* moves around his real life encounter with a boy lying dead on the Mexican roadside, the boy is nowhere to be seen; Hoffman relates the death in a series of printed

intertitles that punctuate the film. Similarly, midway through *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*, an elephant's heart attack is related in voice-over while the screen remains dark, and the voice explains, somewhat abashedly, that showing the animal's death could only exploit the subject.

In each instance the missing centre turns around death, and this trope of absence is further complicated by the "missing" centre of passing through. While the film performs a series of balletic turns around the filmmaker's uncle—showing as many as three images simultaneously, in a counterpoint usually reserved for music—he is usually present only in Hoffman's narration. Because he is the family's outsider, homeless, unable to "make himself presentable," lensing him would show only his infirmities, his inabilities. So Hoffman makes a radical move and removes his image, while at the same time making him the central character in this familial drama. He represents, for this family, the unspeakable, the unwatchable, the dark heart at the centre of this migration to the new world. The cost of travelling, and of forgetting. In a series of fragmented anecdotes, recollections, images, and voice-over, we learn of his homeless vagrancy, his affinity for pool and the accordion, his building of the corner mirror, and his abandoned daughter. Hoffman searches out the reasons for his uncle's homeless wandering in the Czechoslovakia he left behind, the place of his conception ravaged by plague and occupation. That he should bear the stamp of this history, this sickness, without a glimpse of the death camps which would claim his ancestors, recalls for us the movement of the film around a figure hardly seen. The filmmaker moves in his place, drawing his camera over the places "he" could never go, looking for reasons "he" could never guess in his restless quest for shelter and food, for the perfect pool game, and the delirium of the accordion.

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He stares out. Fingers pound the keyboard. Magically. Melodies repeat. Again and again. Fingers dissolve into fingers. He was past the point of practice. The music was a vacant place to return to. Over and over. His playing gave him passage. (*passing through/torn formations*)

*Kitchener-Berlin* (33 min 1990) is a tale of two cities divided by history, language and geography. Their alliance stems in part from a German migration that would settle on the small Canadian town of Kitchener as the locus for dreams of a new world. Before its re-naming after the catastrophes of WWI, Kitchener was called Berlin, so the film's title re-asserts this historical relation, in an uncovering typical of Hoffman's oeuvre.

*Kitchener-Berlin* is a movement into the city's Germanic traditions, and its rituals of memory, bereavement, and technology. It is a voyage at once personal and political, begun with movies of home, of children unwrapping war toys with unbridled delight as rockets flare over Germany, reducing its domestic

interiors to a shatter of rubble and blood. Hoffman introduces archival photographs of old Kitchener, showing men on the hunt and the building of the main street, while inside the cathedral, candle-lit processions prepare a child for baptism. The only accompanying sound is a church bell inexorably tolling. It is a call to witness, a plaintive demand for gathering, asking that we stand once more before the wounds of the past.

152 Hoffman enters present-day Germany armed with a Steadicam—a gyroscopic device that permits the camera to float smoothly through space. He guides its disembodied presence over the cobblestones of Berlin, their mortared rectangles forming the foundation of centuries. It floats past tourists lying in wait, cameras at the ready, caught in a slow-motion stare of anticipation in locales previewed in travel guides and brochures. They wait before a massive church front as if for history to materialize, all the better to turn it into souvenirs, proofs of travel and of identity. As these sites have been photographed so often, these pictures serve only to identify their makers. They state: I was there. Or more simply: I exist. Hoffman's meta-tourism collects these moments in multiphonic exchange, two and three images appearing simultaneously, as the camera floats past, ghost-like, through those remains of the past we call the present.

Kitchener-Berlin is interrupted midway by a Canadian film made in the twenties entitled *The Highway of Tomorrow or How One Makes Two*. It shows a dirigible leaving England for Canada, its airborne phallus promising the technological fruits of empire. After landing, the filmmaker/pilot steps into the editing room with his double—a twin manufactured through trick photography—and together they pore over images of the trip. They thread a projector and turn its historical spotlight into the waiting lens of the camera, marking the beginning of *Kitchener-Berlin's* second movement, entitled *A Veiled Flight*. This movement is marked by discontinuity and an apparent random succession of events. It is begun by miners working underground, who unearth bridesmaids and horses, family rituals of touch, an Imax film-shoot staging native rituals, and the filmmaker himself, crouched over his desk in contemplation. It closes with a cave ceremony lit by candles; the furtive rock etchings a reminder of private manufactures where the division of signs and the events they depict seem less inevitable than today. *A Veiled Flight* is also comprised of marks like these, expressionistic outpourings that represent an unconscious flow. It is an expiration of memories redolent with mythology and association, a rite of purification that looks to begin again beneath the earth's surface, in the shadowy enclosures of histories that may be shared without being understood. This film asks that its two halves be brought together like the two names of its title—the haunting historical stalk of its opening movement joined with the unconscious lure of the second,

both combining to frame a portrait of ruin and restoration.

*river* (15 min 1978–92) is a geographical portrait. Photographed over the course of a decade in three distinct styles, it is a meditation on the way technology mediates encounters with the natural. It marks, above all, a return to a childhood pastoral retreat; its slow-moving rhythms bear its observer in a contemplative embrace of overhanging wood and summery intentions. *river*'s first movement reveals a fishing excursion, the lush hues of a sun-inspired afternoon drifting easily in the glassy mirror of the river's flow, its restful solitude untroubled by the ravages of an industrialized south. Humanity is glimpsed in edges and peripheries; a paddle drips concentric rows along the water's surface, a hand lowers anchor; a fly is cast against a soaring treeline. These passages are silent, meditative, and idyllic—a chained series of lap dissolves easing the passage of an afternoon's watchful rest. The second scene is markedly different. Photographed in black and white video, it continually treks downstream, its overexposure granting an unearthly quality to the surroundings. But because the boat is rudderless, left to follow the river's current while Hoffman stands filming on the prow, it soon encounters a variety of natural obstacles—trunks and rocks arise from the river's surface to impede passage. The microphone rests on the boat's bottom, so each obstacle occasions a loud and often hilarious track of scraping and bumping. This sound contrasts with the sublime pictorial record of the scene. Together, image and sound produce a kind of pastoral slapstick, the journey's romantic inclinations betrayed by the physical evidence of the voyage itself. *river*'s third movement draws its opening sections together, refilming the lyric impressions of the opening off a rear screen projection, employing the same crude black and white video camera used to photograph the flotational trek of the second movement. The final movement runs inside the river itself, diving below water to glimpse the sunstroked grounds of its descent, aqueous fronds waving in the light of afternoon. Sharp movements abound here, in contrast to the stoic solidity of the first passage or the slow-moving drift of the second. The camera darts beneath the waves in a gestural cadence finally extinguished by a blinding white light, then seeks its source of illumination in a blank passage that signifies beginning and end, the addition of colour, the simultaneous occurrence of all experience, the filmic equivalent of the sublime.

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Taken together these seven films constitute a remarkable journey of first-person cinema. This cycle marks a life from its beginnings to middle age, from photographs which hide as much as they declare, toward a showdown with imaging technologies. Throughout, Hoffman's impulse is to unearth and lay bare, to share secrets which separate past and present. To re-animate the dead world in order to mourn it more perfectly. To re-member. ★

# And...

*Barbara Sternberg*

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This is a collaboration (interactive). Together we're making this piece (I almost said film). I'm putting forward some thoughts, images, sensations, and, off to one side, influences that form a larger context. You might decide to stop here. Flip forward. Inject some commentary. *How will I know?*

I read a book (well, parts of a book) called *The Hero: Myth, Image, Symbol*. It was a period when I was having a hard time getting out of bed. Afraid, I just wanted to sleep. I realized then that the real heroes are you and I, Everyman, who get up and live each day, who face the uncertainties and struggles of life, the paradoxes...life *and* death, living with the knowledge of death, knowing that we can't know.

The mystery that is in the everyday. No, the mystery that *is* the everyday. The awesome/awfulness of life.

Filming the daily, what's around. Observing the play of life, its rhythms, patterns. *Feel the wind*. Noticing the similarities in seeming differences. Everything is related. The multitudinous—manyness and



*All of your past, is it more than a dream to you right now?* —Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

*Possum, ergo sum. (I can, therefore I am.)*  
—Simone Weil

*Reason's last step is that there are a number of things beyond it.* —Pascal

relatedness. Where are the boundaries between you and me?

Earth Air Fire Water Light Energy transmutes.

Repetition is a principle in life. The sun rises every day. Habit, ritual, identity. And yet, there is no repetition possible! The third tap differs from the first by virtue of being third not first. (Gertrude Stein's insistence versus repetition.) You can't step into the same stream twice.

Repetition as a principle in film. And time. And motion. In other words, film is like life. Is inherently involved with the same basic principles. Is fleeting, ephemeral—just as you and I are. Needs repetition (but with slight differences) for meaning and for structure to be apparent. Has past (memory) and future (anticipation). Can I or a film be solely in the present? Film is in time and of light. Exists in a tension between what is real and what is illusion. (There is no motion in a motion picture.) *Is change the reality and permanence the illusion or vice versa?*

Film's emulsion is analogous to the "stuff" of life. Images appear and disappear; we have our time upon the stage. The movement of construction and destruction, form and formlessness, shadow and light. Layers of images accumulating meaning over time. *And time cannot be held.*

*Your life is like a candle burning. Whether you are aware of it or not, it is burning.*

—Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

*The more real a thing is, the more mysterious it becomes.*

—Jack Chambers



Picture: leaves fluttering, flames flickering, water splashing a child's face shocking him, waves hitting the shore, a hand groping blindly forward...

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I work with images bodily, suggestively between representation and abstraction, between blurred and distinct. Beyond naming is being.

Film is a medium of endless play—discrete bits of time/space set next to each other; the orange of tungsten (inner), the blue of daylight (outer); sound as foil, context, content—and the silence of stillness (being). Creating an experience in film. Wow! *How was it for you?*

*I find that raising my eyes slightly above what I am regarding so that the thing is a little out of focus seems to bring the spiritual into clearer vision...*  
—Emily Carr



*How many colours are there in a field of grass to a crawling baby unaware of the word "green"...*  
—Stan Brakhage

*Our movies are extensions of our own pulse, of our heartbeat, of our eyes, our fingertips...*  
—Jonas Mekas

*Art is to embrace others—whether to convey something difficult or to talk about light.*  
—Joyce Wieland

*What is meant by reality?...now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying...But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates.*  
—Virginia Woolf

*It was enough to exist, preferably still and silent, in order to feel its mark...the mark of existence.*  
—Clarice Lispector

# The Entwined Fates of Bruce LaBruce and Pleasure Dome

*John McCullough*

The ascendancy of Bruce LaBruce to the status of international art/porn star is a complex story of transgression, art, and sex in the marketplace. His story is also about the contradictions of avant-gardism, political activism, and modernity. Since the mid-1980s LaBruce has moved from publishing underground gay and punk zines to writing for mainstream papers and authoring a book—*The Reluctant Pornographer* (Toronto: Gutter Press, 1998)—while being the subject of another, *Ride, Queer, Ride* (Winnipeg: Plug In Gallery, 1996). Being once a student and critic of film as well as an underground super 8 filmmaker, LaBruce now often works in the midst of mass culture making music videos and porn. And he continues to make feature-length 16mm films, which are much-anticipated events at both mainstream and queer film festivals around the globe.

Pleasure Dome has had a significant and extensive relationship with LaBruce, exhibiting his early super 8 shorts and all of his features. In fact it seems that LaBruce's persona—transgressive wit-about-town—is one which Pleasure Dome, in its own way, has incorporated into its reputation as a successful publicly funded exhibitor of avant-garde time-based art. Within the institution's nucleus—one might say in its unconscious—there resides a core element of market savvy which understands its reputation is linked to the marketability of sex and porn as transgressive art.

But reflecting on a century of avant-garde and popular culture, LaBruce's work (as well as much of the work exhibited by Pleasure Dome) has to be seen not as innovative or revolutionary but as merely symptomatic of the time and the market. Now that every commercial impression merges art and sex (and sometimes violence) into a message of transgression being beautiful and cynicism being freedom (and all of these as being interrelated with each other unconditionally) it is clear that both art and sex have been colonized by commercial imperatives. As much as LaBruce's aesthetic owes a debt to marginal and radical political movements (punk and anarchism) it is worth remembering that what most people now "know" and recognize about such movements is their semiotics, not their politics. Consequently, much of LaBruce's reputation as a radical artist rests on a simulated politics indebted more to Warhol and pop culture than Duchamp or Act-Up.

Similarly, Pleasure Dome's tendency to avoid traditional political art in favour of promoting that which is naughty, conceptual, and "cutting edge" reflects the hegemony of ad agency discourse and the diminishing space for activist art. The legitimacy granted any artwork today hinges largely on its perceived ability to be easily promoted and this suggests a generalized compliance with market demands (the ability of a product to "cut through the clutter" or to "sell itself"). This sets in motion a furious battle as each piece of art and each artist is in competition for "shelf life" and this perpetuates the radical bifurcation which has historically characterized the avant-garde project (activism or formalism?). It remains to be seen what, if any, transgression can manifest itself as liberation in our time.





Skin Flick, BRUCE LABRUCE

## Every Faggot Loves a Fascist

*Scott Treleaven*

Everyone knows about the legendary enmity between skins and punks. It's the difference between order and chaos, fascism and anarchism, repression and gratification. So in 1991 when Bruce LaBruce unleashed *No Skin Off My Ass* on an unsuspecting world, it was hardly surprising that, in the hands of a (post)queer (post)punk filmmaker, this rift between punk and skin would get turned into total Stockholm Syndrome fetishism. The punk hairdresser falls in love with his oppressor. The skin falls for the punk. The skinhead ditches Nazism and grows a mohawk. A fine romance.

Since then Bruce has been basking in his international cult status, laying waste to '80s alternative culture in *Super 8 1/2* (1993), and reveling in the glamorous decay of the Los Angeles strip in *Hustler White* (1996). In addition to co-authoring two books Bruce has been busy photographing and writing for a number of gay porn rags, music mags, and local papers. But no matter how far he has progressed from

the early days of *No Skin...*, Bruce was bound to return to the simple, incisive premise that launched his career: every faggot loves a man in uniform.

160 Eight years hence, in his new foray into skinhead subculture, *Skin Flick*, LaBruce hikes the stakes accordingly. Instead of one skin, there's now a gang of them (LaBruce nearly titled the film *Gang of 4 Skins*), and instead of being pursued by a queeny punk hairdresser, the skins are getting it on by cottaging with "respectable" bourgeois fags through break-and-enter escapades, or with each other. Originally commissioned as a full-fledged porno flick, replete with real porn stars (Tom International) and high-fashion model/actress Nikki Uberti, and shot on seedy straight-to-video super 8, *Skin Flick* was shot entirely on location in London, England, with a German crew and backed by Berlin's Cazzo Films. If the film's parentage seems a little odd, it's also worth noting that Bruce decided to produce two versions of the film—a hardcore version, and one suitable for more, uh, "artistic" establishments.

Like all of LaBruce's work, *Skin Flick* goes—like a pitbull—straight for the throat of white, privileged homoculture. An apathetic, sushi-munching, bourgeois, mixed-race gay couple are the irritating counterpoint for LaBruce's equally repellent Nazi skins. The skins read erotic poetry, *seig heil* around town, jerk off to *Mein Kampf* and screw each other in a cemetery (after thoroughly bashing LaBruce). Of course, the veneer of respectability and liberalism that the gay couple represents goes out the window the moment the rich white homo has a chance to get fucked by a bootboy in a public bathroom. LaBruce has never been squeamish when it comes to leveling criticism at queer fetishism of race, class, and control. So is it repugnant? Satirical? If it weren't for LaBruce's trademark slapstick scenes, caustic commentary, and over-the-top porno flick stylings, it could even be dangerous.



# Interview with Bruce LaBruce and G.B. Jones

*Cameron Bailey*

**BAILEY:** In the mid-'80s you were responsible for the seminal zine *J.D.s.* Tell me about its distribution.

**JONES:** Well, we took five copies to Glad Day [Toronto's gay bookstore]. And they took them.

**LaBRUCE:** Reluctantly. And they said, "Well, it isn't very goooood. But we'll take five." And I went back two days later and they were off the shelf already. And he said, "Well, we've decided we just can't move them." After two days. He said it's just not the sort of product that we can get rid of here. They were totally unsupportive, they didn't even seem to be interested in looking at it. But then we found out that they had given them to their friends or something, and they were circulating in a gay bar.

It wasn't commercial enough for them, slick enough for them, and also the content—we're very critical of the gay community.

**BAILEY:** What's the bourgeois gay and straight punk reaction to queer-core?

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**LaBRUCE:** It's very divisive now and it depends entirely on what city you're in. I got beat up once when I showed a gay film at the Quoc Te. I got punched in the face and spit on by a skinhead, and punched in the face by a mohawk, so they certainly weren't very hospitable. If you go in looking gay and acting gay they'll be a lot less hospitable than if you go in looking like you belong. But we're a lot more tuned in to the punk mentality than the way the gay community has developed.

**JONES:** I try not to.

**LaBRUCE:** A lot of the gay video I've seen in this city seems stuck in a '70s rut. It seems to be somewhat apolitical, or invariably it excludes women, or it's focussed on a passé gay image, like a clone image or something. The stuff I've seen could have been done ten years ago.

There's this whole thing being still fixated on coming out, for example, which I think is a totally overrated concept. It's for people who feel they have to prove themselves and be accepted by an establishment or by their family. And they want their family to recognize them as being legitimate or being exactly like them, you know, come out and be accepted as good monogamous fags. It's like the Oprah Winfrey fags. They're assimilationists. There's nothing politically subversive about it whatsoever. Or if they do get into more subversive politics, it's still based on, let's say, bar life. And Toronto gay bar life is stagnant. And they're fixated on really antiquated drag, and drag that's insulting to women, and they have like competitions for leather men, or the grand empress or whatever.

**JONES:** A friend and I worked at Togethers, which was supposedly a dyke bar but it was run by two gay men, and we both ended up getting fired because they said we were turning it into a mohawk palace, even though it was busier than it had ever been in its history. I think they wanted a tax write-off.

**BAILEY:** So what are your bars?

**LaBRUCE:** Well, I don't go out.

**JONES:** Maybe to see bands.

**BAILEY:** Gay and lesbian?

**JONES:** We thought it was odd that every time we went out it was like, you're going there, I can't go. I'm going here, you can't go. It just seemed ridiculous.

**LaBRUCE:** We have all these favourite films from the early '70s, like *Some of My Best Friends Are...* or *Boys In the Band*, or *The Killing of Sister George*, where you have really exciting acting and looking gay people and lesbians. The bar in *Some of My Best Friends Are...* has lots of women in it and they're accepted. They're not only tolerated, but seen as something very vital to the bar.

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There's always been exciting gay work in film, like Warhol or Kenneth Anger or Jack Smith, so it just seems natural. Also I go to tons of films. And super 8 seems to be very consistent with what we do with *J.D.s.* It's cheap and you can do it at home and slap it together and you don't have to worry about production values.

I think it's more the process. With Warhol's early films, his screen tests, he'd just turn on the camera and let it run. He was just documenting what was going on. I think that's where the similarity lies. My new film is a seventy-five minute super 8 film called *No Skin Off My Ass*. It's a remake of Robert Altman's *That Cold Day in the Park*, which Altman shot in Canada in '69. I shot one scene which was consciously a take-off of *Chelsea Girls*.

Gloria, I mean G.B., has this great technique of out-of-focus shots, which might be construed as stylistic transgression, but it might also be because she doesn't wear her glasses when she shoots.

**JONES:** No, I do consciously try to do everything badly. I shook the camera, I shook the camera tripod.

**BAILEY:** Why?

**JONES:** Because it has to be done.

**LaBRUCE:** Because she's a jay dee.

[They have a small argument about Warhol's camera style, the wandering camera in *Chelsea Girls*.]

**LaBRUCE:** Sometimes it's just nice to piss people off and not give them what

they want. I think film has started to come to the point where it's so homogeneous, where style is one bland given that you're not supposed to stray from if you're going to be commercially viable. So we like to fuck with that.

We have shown our films in art galleries, and those are the audiences you can annoy the most. It's different from a bar, where it's casual.

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JONES: And they cheer the shoplifting scenes.

LaBRUCE: And the naked shots.

BAILEY: Are you moving in any particular direction?

JONES: I want my films to have more gratuitous sex and violence. My next film is all about a girl gang, and there's lots of fights.

LaBRUCE: I'm moving more towards pornography. In this new film for the first time I have unsimulated blow jobs, hard-ons, lots of nudity, bum licking, toe licking. It's just going beyond the pale. I think it's a natural progression, where I started making films with some nudity, and simulated blow jobs and always lots of gay content. But they are getting more explicit for sure. One thing that pornography really needs is humour, because it takes itself far too seriously.

JONES: *J.D.s* has lots of humour in it.

BAILEY: Is it important to distinguish between the sort of porn you're interested in producing and commercial porn?

LaBRUCE: I'd like to see commercial porn become more interesting.

JONES: Especially heterosexual pornography. I don't see why pornography has to leave victims in its wake. Dead people, people with ruined lives, drug problems. It should be fun. People should want to do pornography 'cause it's fun.

LaBRUCE: Yeah, you should have willing participants.

JONES: We just have our friends in our films. We don't pay them. Why does the porn industry have to pay people so much to get them to take off their clothes?

LaBRUCE: We're absolutely against censoring any porn, but at the same time we recognize that 95 percent of the porn that exists is garbage, and boring.

**BAILEY:** What about pop culture?

LaBRUCE: Well, there's nothing worse than people in the underground who have a really superior attitude to pop culture. And they think that what they're producing is art, or important, or transcendent or something and pop culture is something to be dismissed. Like that incredibly stupid society for the eradication of television. Television is like anything else, it's like pornography. If it's done in an interesting way, it can be incredibly effective. And Kristy McNichol is a good example—her lesbian exploits are legend.

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[In my new film] I play a gay punk hairdresser who picks up a young skinhead in the park and takes him home and gives him a bath, like Sandy Dennis did, and locks him in the spare room. He escapes and goes and visits his dyke underground filmmaker sister, played by G.B. Jones.

Altman is a good example of someone who was doing outrageous things in the context of pop culture. I remember my parents went to see *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* in the one cinema in the small town near where I grew up. And they came home and my mother was like, oh, it's a dirty movie.

**BAILEY:** What about politics?

LaBRUCE: I think it's dumb to situate yourself along a political spectrum, because it's so artificial. And then you have to end up slotting all your actions and beliefs. Anarchy isn't something we consciously subscribe to.

One specific example is female nudity. It's a touchy thing but we feel that only women should be able to deal with that kind of imagery. A bunch of boys or men putting out images of women invariably objectifies or misrepresents them, because they're not representing themselves, they're representing the Other.

Whereas male nudes are fair game for everyone. And they should be exploited to no end. In *Slam!* we tried to make the pit into a really sexualized, erotic thing because that's something that's starting to be repressed in the punk community. It started out being very sexually ambiguous, and sexually dangerous, and it's becoming much more safe. So we're trying to re-radicalize punk and sex at the same time.



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B/side, REIGRIL CHILD



# Being a Witness: A Poetic Meditation on *B/side*

*Abigail Child*

And on the intellectual or emotional level, she must contribute evidence to the trial of our present system of values.<sup>1</sup>

## Context

When the police descended into Thompkins Square Park in Lower Manhattan in June 1991, there were 150 homeless in the park. The park, a creation of the renowned landscape architect Frederick Olmsted (who also designed Central Park) had housed hippies and Ukrainians for years in an uneasy truce aggravated by the increasing poverty and lack of city services through the 1970s and early 1980s. The park had been the scene of police riots in the two years preceding, riots involving punks and suburban teens who had

come and camped in the park that summer (1989). That riot was broadcast on television through the medium of artist videos recorded in the heat of the action. But in this case, two years later, it was a different scene. The police, in the interim, had refined crowd control, and brought in black helicopters that broadcast to us on roofs to "come down." Over 200 helmeted riot cops descended in an organized mass against the bedrolls and the people inside them. The Dominican church on the corner of Avenue B and 8th Street rang its bells through the night in sympathy with the dispossessed.

By morning fifty of the homeless had dispersed, another fifty moved further down the block and the remaining fifty were across the street, between avenues B and C, settled into an abandoned lot that had served the previous spring for a Michael J. Fox and James Woods movie *mise-en-scène*. I live on the block, across the street, and had been videotaping the successive urban displacements of my neighbourhood during that year, now waking up to a world where life copied art in perverse and tragic design.

For the first few weeks it was blue tents with children and occupants interacting with downtown photographers. Within a month, there were no children, and drugs and alcohol began to predominate. The encampment was quiet by 11 pm, waking up early to the sun, routinizing cleanup and resources. An American displacement camp less than two miles from Wall Street. Soweto in Manhattan.

The video material that opens *B/side* establishes you in this realm, as spectator, apart from, outside the homeless, who live without privacy of walls or windows. This is the beginning of acknowledged separation. The distance and position suggest a surveillance machine. The public as witness, the public as separate. The distance we will have to unravel, if we hope to approach an other.

Shoshana Felman in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* speaks of the appointment to bear witness. This is "paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for the other and to others."<sup>2</sup>

## Autobiography

This is my front yard, graffiti. The morning glories have mounted where previously there was dog shit and human piss. Someone has taken special time to carve out a home in the garden: microcosmos. Belonging to a neighbourhood.

On the ground are a doll house against a tent, a beer, stuffed bear stabbed in tree trunk, knots of broken rope, twist of bits that relay an entire class of marginalized Americans. Pallets, milk cartons, and bread trays are housing materials.

Autobiography itself thus turns out to be, paradoxically, an impersonal witness to a history of which it cannot talk but to which it nonetheless bears witness in a theory of translation, which is, at the same time, its new historical creation.<sup>3</sup>

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What gets between us is sometimes language and sometimes shyness and sometimes the realities of economics. We witness the colonization of peoples both internally and externally when we ignore the beggar, walk by the shapeless sleeping figure on the sidewalk, note, but do not linger as the police nudge, not so gently, a body out of sleep. In these moments, we collaborate in social forgetfulness. The margins are evoked and ignored. Perversion of vital interests estranged from life, money ruinously at centre.

On a number of levels, New York, that is, my neighbourhood, is the most local town in which I have lived. The scale is that of the human body, the streets are human sized. It is a city designed for the foot walker, the jay walker, the cross walker and the onlooker. It is a city of neighbourhoods that define themselves building by building, block by block or by street: Ludlow, Canal, Orchard, Saint Marks. Without the encapsulation and segregation of (need for) cars which bring worlds with them, within them (protective air supply), New York exists *in the flesh*. There is no (lasting) retreat from the streets. Neither the city nor its people have Defense. Its urban disturbances and absences surround the poor, invade the rich.

*This begins right where her back leaves off*

The individual must commit herself to walking on a floor, whether this be ground or made. Typically she will be close to walls of some kind. Walls, ceiling, and floor establish outside limits, establish inside and outside.<sup>4</sup>

The landscape (language) of my identification. The street is the habit of focus. The darkness, the shadows, demand increased attention. Our energies address this public space, complete with blind spots and strategies. The fact is proximity, flesh, intensity, necessity, intention. YOU CAN'T ESCAPE. Infect your presence under pressure in the (opposed) mill of homogeneous social structures.

Taking sides. It's a question of angle.

An older woman, dark haired, dressed in rags, haggard, comes on the car where we, all 5 o'clock commuters, sit gratefully. Ragged, loud, and shrill, she sings before she begs. Before she is finished, the transit official comes on to hustle her off. We, who are left, don't look at each other.

## 170 Reflection

Someone is thinking/speaking to herself. Analyzing beat of energies, of digression, remembering. Memory and this question: *What is the relation between narrative and history, between art and memory?* Articulate the relation between witnessing/events and speculation/fiction.

An attempt to see how issues of biography and history are neither represented nor reflected, but are translated, reinscribed, radically rethought. History as a translation, through which are created new articulations of perspective. Acknowledge the conceptual and social prisms through which we attempt to apprehend.

DISTANCE intervenes. Borders the process in which the eye joins mind to gather, investigatory witness. The first "speech" is gestures, at a distance. This without sound.

It is in the fabrics and inventive reconstructions of parts—refrigerator gratings used for porches, clothes as roofs, the fire hydrant as a shower—that we witness the creative adaptability of the human spirit in the homeless encampment.

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge or assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.<sup>5</sup>

What the testimony does not offer is a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events.

Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice as opposed to pure fact or pure theory. To testify is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement. Or in this case, a visual act, a depiction of the real that asks us to be contemporaneous with its various parts, that demands the kind of shifting reality and fragmentary evidence that is experienced by the displaced themselves.

## A Crisis of Representation

A crisis of representation happens in several directions when artists turn to social issues. On the one hand, there is the invisibility of the homeless themselves, silent on multiple counts: abandoned to the margins of our so-called civilized conscious; without home, displaced, nomadic; feared and despised by both fellow citizens and city hall. What language meets this silence? What language could do more than news sound bites to bring this plight into social awareness? Broadcast news provides predictable decontextualized information, tugs on heartstrings of public morality, usually seasonal, recurring at Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter. What the nightly news avoids is analyzing the political, social, and economic forces that have created the situation. The sound bites themselves are theatricalized in the context of "breaking news" to reconstruct an artificial melodrama. The homeless become an iconic portrait that is naturalized in the urban situation, a fixture of late Capital. Insoluble, endemic.

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Independent film has historically attempted to break up the sentimentality of mainstream melodrama, both in fiction and in the documentary. The evolving of a subversive documentary tradition has attempted to erase the authoritative voice of the narrator, who more often than not leads the viewer through the subject, preventing a more complex imaginative response. In broadcast television, ideas are summarized, discourse and contradiction are regarded as problematic and fitting the subject into its time slot is a prime goal.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, issues of the responsibility of the maker began to be discussed in the 1960s. The filmmaker starts to theorize her or his intersection in the conjunction of the personal, the formal, and the sociological. Several artists in the 1970s emphasized the complex position of the maker by reflexively recreating the maker in the work, drawing distinctions from social documentary traditions of objectivity and analysis. Such is the case with Jean-Luc Godard, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Yvonne Rainer. In the 1980s, innovative video activism adopted social realist and agit prop strategies to expose the political dimension of urban and cultural politics.<sup>7</sup>

In *B/side*, I choose differently, borrowing from literary theory and poetic construction. Searching for a language to meet this torn reality, I move to include plural aspects of self and history, self and public, to combine a heteroglossic dialogue, experimenting with social, discursive, and narrative asymmetries. To create an unfinished language, "a living mix of varied and opposing voices."<sup>8</sup>

One might ask, how does this differ from news sound bites? The editing strategies of the avant-garde have on occasion been attacked as sharing

the speed and superficiality of our commercial culture. The arguments have ranged from a critique of speed to an alignment of the long take with radical viewing.<sup>9</sup> I would argue that the answers are not so simple: that context and intent are essential to any analyzing of the *effect* of a work of art. That, in essence, the work of art activates a number of levels in the viewer and that a simple dichotomous good/bad, corrupted/pure judgment misses the complex node where perceptions and feelings are activated. The long shot in the classic Hollywood *mise-en-scène* can be radical (as with the moving camera of an Orson Welles film) or unnoticeable (in any number of dialogue-driven movies of the 1930s and current era). Fast cutting can be a meaningless attention-getter or attention-flattener (as with tv advertisements, or in, for example, the flatulent Oliver Stone film, *The Doors*). On the other hand, editing can be historical, and aesthetically subversive (as in Eisenstein, Gance or Vertov), or spectacularly and cognitively disassociative (as in Stone's more successful *Natural Born Killers*). In choosing a heteroglossic vocabulary of styles, visual sources, and perspectives in *B/side*, I am consciously challenging a homogeneous position, the classic one-point Renaissance perspective, if you will. Instead, film facilitates an array of perspectives, a motility in which breakage is both trope and material of the real. The essence of the scheme is to make the events and the victims of the event visible, *unnaturalizing* homelessness as an inevitable part of the urban landscape.

## Film Methodology

To accomplish this aim of *unnaturalizing* homelessness, the film places us in multiple positions in regard to its narrative. At one point, the audience is the homeless, at another, the bystander, and at still another point, the perpetrator. The film operates as a movement between heterogeneous points of view, and as an exploration of these differences. You, as audience, are moved between spaces of the witness who sees and hears, to images of the victim's past, between exteriorities and interiorities. In cinema, both realms are present, and at the same moment. It might be argued that the document and fiction combine in *all* film representation. Roland Barthes, in discussing the photograph, speaks of "the stubbornness of the referent" and also its transformation into an "image."<sup>10</sup> With moving images, this sliding between history and fiction, this exchange of referent and representation, radically undermines and complicates or interrogates the possibility of the authentic.

For instance, the Hollywood fictions of the 1930s provide lively tableaux for historical and cultural analysis, while documentaries regularly involve some kind of re-enactment, and in all cases there is the intervention of the

camera and more powerfully, perhaps, the hand of the editor. If we examine the early ethnographic documentaries, such as those by Edward Curtis, *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1914) and Robert Flaherty, *Nanook* (1922), we find the subjects of these films are asked to re-create traditions that are no longer contemporaneous. Note, as well, the overwhelming tone of these films, which overlay a white nineteenth-century image of the sublime onto First American traditions. By late mid-century, film consciousness had grown more sophisticated and in *The Axe Fight* by Tim Asch (1968), a study of the Yanomamo peoples of South America, we find a critique and analysis of the realist traditions of the cinema-verité documentary. First we see uncut dailies: a camera roll with the voice of the cameraman interpreting the events as the film runs out. The second time we see the film, there is a discussion of kinship relations of the lead characters and a report of events that happened off-camera, thereby changing and clarifying the meaning of the events we have just witnessed. The third time, we see an edited version in standard film style that reveals to an audience nothing of the complexity of what we now understand. The conclusion is inescapable: cinema is a subjective force in its interrelation with reality. What is real or authentic in film is a construction.

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*B/side* draws from and critiques assumptions of both fiction and documentary film genres. It utilizes variant modalities of information sources to suggest a portrait of a neighbourhood that could emerge from an interweaving of the public and the private. It suggests a neighbourhood might be constructed not from a set of realist conventions such as we see on the six o'clock news, or in documentary "specials," but rather from a tapestry of personal and historical displacement, most poignantly represented in the space of memory.

If *B/side* multiplies its subject/object positions, it also reconstructs sound and continuity in strategic ways. The track is intended to creatively resonate with the street. Silence is used for energy. There are abrupt alternations of sound and voices, noise and music. The structures are recursive and incomplete, like a song heard in passing. Both song and story are seen/heard as fragments, interrupted to disarm causality and closure. Destruction and decomposition of the linear narrative are here perceived as a construction in action, incomplete, democratic. Aristotelian unities of space and time are foregone for a more complicated relativity that allows the viewer contemplation of the densities of an urban neighbourhood marked by radical construction and change.

**History...is not, as it is commonly understood to be, a mode of continuity that defines itself in opposition to the mode of fiction, but a mode of interruption in which the unpredictability and uncontrollability of fiction, acts itself out into reality...<sup>11</sup>**

## Melodrama and Narrative

*Then fiction is the privileged position?*

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The melodrama of Hollywood film and daytime tv offer banal solutions to complex problems. Their plot-oriented and goal-directed scenarios satisfy the expectant wishes of the audience. We feel its power. Is the power of expectation an autonomic process (we salivate) or a visceral consciousness (we chew)? Now, how to interrupt the motor on which we as audiences have been led?

*I'm bored as a hostage.*

Through fables of identity and empathy scale is humanized; this process exhausts even as it extends humanity.

Peter Brooks speaks, in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, of the rise of melodrama as a signifying aesthetic to a world after the French Revolution, to a world no longer ruled by given sanctities, or ethical fixities. Starting with theatre history at the beginning of the nineteenth century and moving through Balzac and Henry James, Brooks' study takes us to the present and argues that at the heart of the modern lies the melodramatic imagination.<sup>12</sup> He arrives at this conclusion by linking melodrama to the dream and to psychoanalysis and argues that melodrama "exteriorized a world within." For Brooks, melodrama is the secularized form for our era, its growth a response to "the dissipation of the mythic orders that made true tragedy possible."<sup>13</sup> For Brooks, melodrama is the form of our modern politics, as well as the daytime dramas on our television screens. One might maintain, as well, that melodrama is the basis of narrative cinema altogether.

Both originate in the nineteenth century and both are built on visual gestures. Both traffic in the demonstration of the latent, or silent, meanings in the world. The terms of melodrama have been absorbed into the vocabulary of cinema's cultural coding: the chase, the shoot-out, excessive and coincidental romance, good and evil, the villain and the hero. One only needs to think of innumerable cowboy movies, even so-called spaghetti westerns with the archetypal hero of Clint Eastwood, to recognize the force of the melodramatic tropes: villainy as motor, plot twists and amazing coincidences, a succession of unmaskings, good and evil literalized in clothing, carriage, and character.

For the independent filmmaker late in this century, these codes of melodrama can be dismantled, a series of known assumptive narrative responses that can be reconfigured and yet wield latent emotional power. They are signs

that can be re-ordered productively.

The character wants to leave her part.

Dissection of takes. Invent.

In *B/side*, another kind of complicated melodrama plays itself out daily. The characters are the homeless themselves, the police are the villains who harass them, and the bystanders are extras who walk on. The conflict is exteriorized in the public nature of the encampment. By definition, the homeless body is an exteriorized body that signifies social disorder, even as the classical tropes of the melodrama (virtue, heroes, maidens) are inverted or thwarted and the cathartic closure of a satisfying solution (virtue rewarded, villainy punished, etc.) is frustrated. We are in a realm where histories are lost, secrets remain covert, intentions are falsified and there is no justice. What is left is the iconic drama of the human figure.

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How the face registers what the body forgets. The spectator and the camera are part of the embarrassment. The fragments have their own structure and story time. The characters of conventional melodrama stand in for us. We want to go closer and know their dirty secrets. Paradoxically, in the melodrama, because the characters are not fathomed, have no depth, they are also more real. They offer us a level of abstraction that creates available platforms for our imaginations. To touch that melodramatic icon is to vibrate with the iconic power of human gesture.

In *B/side*, the story is mangled but the characters have something of the power of the golem. The ephemeral moments from the street imbue them with depth and continuity. Spending time deepens them. It is not conventional. The power is from reiteration, not progression. This is actually deeper. There are no clues to climb onto their personal necrorealism. We begin with hints and surfaces. In the end, you suffer an abyss about New York, about homelessness, about revelation. What cannot make sense.

*vibration of design icon.*

This dramatization works from multiple polarization, possibilities, competing systems. All the voices with no seal at both ends.

## Fragmentation and Motive

The fragmentation in the film, then, is not simply a modern “decentering” of consciousness, a lack of a central plenitude, but rather a series of provisional centres through which an alternative organization can occur. Plot

and action are de-dramatized, the coherence of subjectivity is stripped of its significant status, there is evidence of a variegated materialism: calling attention to distance from the camera, to film stocks (whether colour, or black and white), to disparate film eras (the found material intercut with the East Village of the early 1990s). Yet we are not in the realm of the pure play of the signifier, not in the realm of pure surface, nor pure fiction. Reality and fantasy are not separated and in their interweaving, move-able centres and new definitions of community are temporarily created and imagined.

We find hard evidence that decomposition and distortion indicate a changing harmonic system. Flames organize the delirium. Syntax of film falls against mental illness. In this context, the match cut becomes unreasonable.<sup>14</sup> The homeless are suspended in the world. Intensify their suspension.

*Refuse to set foot  
on the double security of Harmony  
Intervene in the conflict  
of points that contend  
in the most rutty of jousts<sup>15</sup>*

What is there? Layers of refuse, falling below the world market, sadness, the blank, off the map. The lower depths. Industrial waste. Not comparable to something else. What can contain it? What is its emotive strength? That is enough.

*Enough*

Bring to the surface the viscera of being homeless. A fractured narrative of world peoples living in the First World. You identify with character. You become on the street. You have no ground. In the latest version, the landscape takes over. You live on this street: fire bombs, rubble lots, a realization of bodies under the sun in overdetermined neglect.

*Pull back.*

Language is the codification of narrative. Images perform the codification. The audience wants a higher degree of system devices.

*We want a story.*

I am unconvinced. First I see the world and then the world sees me. The way a mind circles back, wants information. "Our memory repeats to us what we

haven't understood. Repetition is addressed to incomprehension."<sup>16</sup>

*I want you horrified, despite separation.*

The story here is the denied past of unfulfilled wishes. The story is fantasy and seductive for just that reason. The story has the seduction of inevitability. The voyeurism of acculturation.

*We all get to watch.*

The whole thing a pretext at the heart of reason, which is why it's so opaque. That excavates the possibility of a sideways motion. Occluded silence. What is it in the broken I'm holding onto?

*As if history is accountable.*

People try to appear in these scenes. They jump in to be seen. An anti-naturalization matrix: incompatible absolutely, untimely. You work by subtraction, draw all opposing forces.

*Immigration umbrella with no capstan.*



## Endocolonialism

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In describing this project in its early stages, I used the term “endocolonialism.” By which I meant, internal colonialism, colonialism at home. Indeed, endo comes from *in house* (*en dom*). What could be more appropriate to describe a hybrid colonialism born of urban migration, situated at the centre of Metropolis, two miles from Wall Street? The United States has a history of ignoring its own colonialism and imperialism, to not testify to it. Yet, our century has been marked by wars and covert actions of clear imperialist goals.

To reverse Kadiatu Kanneh’s formulation: What I wish to argue is that the preoccupations of the migrant in the city are not so neatly removed from “native” spaces of the (previously) colonized world. “The historical conditions that created both and the discourses that created the identities and the self-consciousness of both remain interlinked.”<sup>17</sup>

What does it mean if we view homelessness as an incident of internal colonialism? How does it change our view? Does it not clarify the place of the dispossessed in a state of economic and cultural oppression? Indeed, the encampment’s members were overwhelmingly of Caribbean origin, including Haitian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Jamaican.

The Lower East Side, historically liberal, has been a site of waves of immigration in the twentieth century. By mid-century, after World War II, the area experienced increased immigration from the Caribbean. Currently, the newest citizens are Dominican. The divergent groups mark out their territories and economic sites. You will see in the film marks of nationhood, the Puerto Rican flag which serves as an identifying iconography, whether floating from windows, painted on walls, or marking out garden plots.

Central to the film is the image of the Lower East Side as a space that exists between the highly developed First World, represented by the footage of New York City and the underdeveloped Third World, shown in the archival footage. The homeless are largely migrants who have been doubly displaced: once from their homelands and again from their homes. The archival footage I incorporate in *B/side* is used to reference this aspect. Kanneh again, in writing about the African migrant: “Separated from or returned to a homeland (*remembered or dreamed*) her or his position as translator, interlocutor and interpreter through learned languages and politics makes the migrant the inhabitant of a complicated space, both indigenous and foreign, both of the West and alien to it.”<sup>18</sup>

This is what we see and experience in Dinkinsville, the name the inhabitants

gave the encampment, referring to Mayor Dinkins, the first black mayor in New York City, who called in the police that June 1991.

The homeless assume the dangerous position of speaking for and representing a native population within the metropolis. Their plight underlines issues of institutional racism, corruption of housing policies and politics, and the permanence of an urban underclass.

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## Homelessness and Women

Within the encampment and as homeless, women have a special relation. They are often subject to violence and fear. The film in its video sections evidences this. Repeatedly we see women hit, shoved, and provoked. They are also at times collaborators in their victimization, one of the aspects hardest to watch. The woman who raises her blouse to the men taunting her is the most lurid example. The man attacks from behind, feeling her ass in a casual and insulting manner, even as she presents herself as object.

The bodies are public. There are no roofs, no privacy. The women undress behind improvised walls of blankets; toilets are in the overgrowth in the corners of the lots, returning, if you will, to nature and geography. The state is displaced into its prior shape. People sleep under plastic, nap at all hours. The bedroom is in the front yard. Territory and home are redefined.

In the film, I create an imaginative intimacy with this world, through the character of a fictional homeless woman, Sheila Dabney, whose story is interwoven throughout the documentary stories. The film is structured as a fugue, moving from the inquiring gaze that documents the encampment at a distance, to the fictional space in which characters move through the neighbourhood and their memory. Lovemaking is enacted both to foreground and problematize the issues of the body and privacy. Cleansing of the private body becomes a public act. The city's hydrants become the shower. Towards the end of the encampment's history, cleaning of the public spaces, or territory adjacent to individual tents, became obsessive. People swept the dirt, folded clothes, rebuilt roofs of cloth and porches that reference Caribbean structures. Even as the encampments became marred by drugs, alcohol, and violence, the perseverance and organization of its population was sustained.

The destruction, when it came, was announced in advance. The encampment members themselves set fire to their tents in the early hours of the morning before the bulldozers and riot cops were scheduled to enter. The ensuing destruction paralleled earlier destruction of homelands.

The displacement in history reiterates important memories of forgotten worlds. Later that morning, it was women who gathered their belongings in garment baskets or shopping carts to wheel away the remnants of home. Women remain tied to the domestic, to sex and children, even without a home. Men “fix” junk on the streets, threaten and react with anger. The film shows a neighbourhood teeming with life, quotidian summer.

180 The figure of Sheila Dabney operates as the observer of this world, as well as one who is in it. She participated actively in the film, setting up shots on occasion. Her figure gives us a critical position or entry into the film. She appears as if watching herself, which forces us, perhaps, to view ourselves through her, so that empathy is reconfigured critically, involving as well a repositioning of identity. This repositioning occurs, especially, I would like to argue, for women viewers.

## Politics

The film is political, personal, and aesthetic. The zone of the poetic is exercised to become a social critique. A radical fragmentation to enact the breakage of a world.

*you have no ground  
you are sleeping in the gutter  
contained whispers between genres*

This one subjective (inside the door). Energy meeting energy, coming to ripeness and settling in darkness. People fall out of the world.

*Any Idea of filmmaking must go.*

The blanks in the film become the silence of what is not said, of what cannot be said, of the distance between parts of the film, of slippage.

*Give up to delirium. Give up distance.  
Increase in social conscience and revolutionary  
syntax, without abuse.*

Imagination doesn't work through identification, but rather through difference. What interests you in the unequal portions, irregular fragments, fascination with parts?

*their silences  
their resistances*

The story runs beside itself, until the moment of its arrival which neglects you. So I create something unstable and digressive, until the original pictures design new names you think in. The increasing horror is of representation, hopelessly fixed in simulacra of waking, or that which is un-representable, outside representation, or threatening to collapse representation, showing representation's limitations.

Carnal desperation: *We're in bodies*  
and not some mediocre narrative flyby

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Below the grid of industrial waste  
below the waste of industrial grit  
mental illness comes up.

Homelessness in the 1980s in the urban centres of the United States could be mapped by looking at social legislation and housing development in the inner cities. Throughout the 1980s, mental hospitals were shut down, with avowedly reformist goals. Nonetheless there was no systematic development of services for the released. This historic legislation, in combination with urban gentrification which in Manhattan targeted the SROs (single room occupancies) of the Upper West Side and the inexpensive tenements of the Lower East, resulted in increased numbers of people living on the city streets, people particularly unprepared to meet the challenges of the explosive inflationary housing market at that time. The mayors, Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani, each contributed to dehistoricize events by wagging police batons at the homeless. What was denied or left undiscussed were the pressures, both economic and cultural, that fed into and created the crises.

*the delirium of the situation:*  
impoverished black men  
under trees, dirt cops  
returning to a theme

Destruction of homeland parallels destruction of Dinkinsville. The displacement in history reiterates important memories of forgotten worlds.

*I don't watch tv and I know everything*

Feel gravity of body and that means a sensuous response to details, skin and bodies, bodies and faces.

When cut works, experience becomes language, making switches synapse in mind parallels.

LUX R Decode of Artists' Film • Video

Not a film about something.

Let memory be the documentary horror—a more terroristic rather than sentimental motor.

Not a/b/a/b/a/b/a but a/b/a/a/c/d/a, not simple alternation, but a torque

182 to attend disposition of sentient things.

Twists rubble into black  
selfless in delirium

Language here cannot be descriptive: a sustained hole without event chapters.

Complete integration between street and narrative

out of heel-to-toe relations  
BACK WALL FALLS OUT

More orchestrated, more interlocked—a mosaic

sunlight echoes  
additional muscle (homeless intercut)  
wheel comes out of the bicycle

A selection of instants, mysterious, ungratified, unfixed in audio and rhythm.

At one point, the dollies are in suspension (are homeless). At end, they become the main fabric. The figure ground reverses. The slippage by vehicle becomes a vehicle of slippage. Inverted to signal a new kind of language—perform a lateral slide to find her on bench.

Muscles unlocked  
Sound growing  
Possible cities  
In front of you  
Open cities  
Night over day  
Number skin  
Outer space  
Not anything resembling paradise

One would like to say

*the understory becomes the overstory.*

One says

*you are there on the street.*

A local participant, a member of the neighbourhood, a witness with a camera. Not subsuming the other in a totalizing gesture, but interrogating the frame and perspective. Eschewing language, *B/side* creates a "kaleidoscopic sensorium of the urban body."<sup>19</sup> But still, is the production of art here merely a consumption of this experience? This question lurks inside and outside the film.

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In crisis, there is no scaffolding of person; only a species, of which you are a member destroying a species, of which you are a member

*You have no ground.*

We are all object

Limbs at this distance define you as difference

which is what I recognize (deflected)(twice). This is the break in identity across which difference approaches—inviting, enticing (You)

Seen Unspoken  
Defined Unchanged  
The act of Them eludes us  
The act of Us eludes them.

not apart we are, but that part we are.

Film is a medium that expands the capacity for witnessing. It potentially creates multiple positionalities, and in doing so interrogates its own authenticity. The camera invades a world, and in its representation of that world inevitably leaves gaps, splices. The process measures distance even as it offers evidence, and suggests, at its most generous, new forms of vision and new demands for the audience. The combination of narrative speculation, factual report and silence in *B/side* creates a historical document that reads as translation, open to new ways of meeting the neighbourhood, its interactions and its marginal communities. The film exemplifies cinema's potential to render social issues complexly, even as it helps us imagine new potentials of community and agency in the midst of great economic imbalance.



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*B/side*, ABIGAIL CHILD

◀◀◀ previous





next >>>



# Trashing *Shulie*: Remnants from Some Abandoned Feminist History

*Elisabeth Subrin*

*Shulie* uses conventions of '60s direct cinema to explore the residual impact of the 1960s, and to question what constitutes historical evidence or material. The project was initiated upon seeing an obscure, "badly made" 16mm documentary portrait of a young Chicago art student, shot in 1967 by four male graduate film students. Their subject was a young Shulamith Firestone, months before she moved to New York and tried to start a revolution. Other than a few screenings in 1968, the film has sat on a shelf for thirty years.

My *Shulie* is a shot-by-shot recreation of the original *Shulie*, reproduced with actors in many of the original Chicago locations. In it, a twenty-two-year-old woman, looking strangely contemporary, argues confidently and

cynically for a life on the margins. She willingly performs for the young directors, allowing them to film her waiting for the train, photographing trash and workers at a dump yard, painting a young man's portrait in her studio, working at the U.S. Post Office, and enduring an excruciating painting critique with her professors at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In shadowy medium shots, she discusses her views on religion, language, art, relationships with men, institutional power structures, and motherhood. Because the original filmmakers had a mandate to document the so-called Now generation, questions about time, generations and what constitutes the "now" recur throughout the text. Watching it and subsequently remaking it, I was amazed by the shocking sense of prescience and longing the film evoked for me. The process of re-contextualizing the work in 1997 was nothing short of time travel, an attempt to force viewers to scrutinize, shot by shot, what constitutes now and then, across cultural, economic, racial, generational, and formal terms. The eerie bending of time and place—the sense that I in the '80s, or my students in the '90s, might articulate Shulie's same concerns—becomes a troubling and cynical commentary on the state of (some) feminisms today.

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I was two years old when the original film was shot. Resurrecting it thirty years later has triggered complex questions about how one generation inherits and processes the residual representations of its predecessors, particularly of a generation whose legacy is so critical and mythic. Both the production and reception of *Shulie* (#2) has been shaped by these issues of legibility and value, in turn creating other questions about translation, biographical practices and the representation of history and heroes.

Before I say any more I want to describe a scene from the film. The tedious critique panel Shulie endures is the most often cited example, so I've decided to address a different excerpt, one we might call the scene that wouldn't go away. In this scene, Shulie is filmed waiting for the subway on her way to work at the U.S. Post Office. She discusses how even though the pay is decent, getting up so early in the morning and waiting alone on the tracks makes her feel like some kind of derelict. There follows a sequence of shots inside the post office, where we see Shulie sorting mail, surrounded by white male supervisor types and her co-workers. The scene ends with Shulie taking a coffee break with two black female co-workers. I'll quote the voice-over in its entirety:

People all around are just waiting to take out their hostility on somebody, it's really frightening. Like at the post office the supervisors are just little guys who have been there thirty years, they started in the Depression or something, and... Some of them are really nice, I have to give them credit, but some of them are petty little bastards and they're standing there waiting to nab you to show their power, you know, and

it's really annoying because you know these are just the kind of little men who got into power in Nazi Germany and you know just what they can do when they have a position to back them up...it's frightening...

188 The percentage of Negroes there is very high which would automatically make you wonder about the kind of job; it is...uh, well, first of all Negroes can't get anything except for a federal job; that would account for the high rate of Negroes. If you meet a Negro and you want a subject of conversation the first thing you ask them is: How long have you worked at the post office?, and then you have something to talk about! You know it's like this giant fraternity of people who work at the post office at some time or another and once you've worked with them it's like having gone to jail with them, you know, it's a kind of a brotherhood.

Sitting in audiences I can always sense this scene is a turning point. Up to this scene, Shulie is perceived as a benign, alternately interesting, precocious, naive but passionate postadolescent droning on about her life. There is empathy for her self-reflexive and gendered discussion of language...viewers are still just trying to determine if this is past or present. But suddenly we get very specifically dated racial and ethnic signifiers. A viewing tension is relieved and then re-stressed: relief because we can supposedly now locate the scene clearly as the "past," and then stress first on a simple level because Shulie no longer is an uncomplicated subject, and then stress again for educated viewers because of its allusion to the problem of exclusion within white feminism. Frankly, it's embarrassing. And whether her voice-over was originally taken out of a larger context that would actually render a different meaning, or not—whether it's "true" or not—doesn't eliminate the hauntingly familiar representation we witness. It's similarly ironic and symptomatic that I initially planned to cut this scene from the project because it felt so problematic, yet ultimately speaks most powerfully of the bind in this film, in both formal terms (how the scene is edited, how her voice-over is edited, how we can't really date it), and discursive terms, as her well-intentioned efforts at an analysis of race will reek of racial privilege to some viewers. To others it will painfully evoke the pre-consciousness of the early '60s etc., and then to others it will simply be another example of a kind of boring scene, where time moves slowly, her observations aren't ground-breaking, and nothing really happens. By placing this scene in the present, even with the coded '60s discourse, I am forced to ask myself, what has really changed, besides discourse?

Throughout the shooting process, I found myself constantly negotiating all sorts of historical and biographically specific signifiers as the most subtle deviation from the "original" text triggered self-reflexive shifts in meaning, reflecting back on the thirty years of history that have passed, whether

due to a subtly placed Starbucks cup, an historically implausible notice on sexual harassment, or, later in the film, the substitution of a Beatnik gathering with a post-grunge scene of counter-convention activists during the 1996 Democratic Convention. In the '90s version, 1960s politics endure mostly through style. More painfully, the tedious and sometimes cruel critique panel Shulie endures with her (all-male) painting instructors, or the problematic analysis of race relations we just witnessed are moments that reverberate between past and present, refusing to lie still. And when Shulie repeatedly articulates her outsider status to her own generation, what becomes most apparent is how much a part of her own generation she is. Much of the generational slippage comes from Kim Soss's impossible task of rendering a *verité* '60s identity in a '90s body.

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As a text, *Shulie* communicates in strikingly different ways for different viewers. For some viewers, the film is completely opaque. For others, it seems to generate both vertical and lateral layers of meaning, depending on one's relationship to feminism, female subjectivity, concepts of difference, Firestone, and film form. I often forget that experimental form is as susceptible to conventions and canons as is dominant cinema. That people get fixated on the formal issues of *Shulie* is only interesting to me if its feminist purpose is considered: why this moment, this moment before the moment, this heroine before her heroics, certainly no Edie Sedgwick or Nico icon, certainly no prophecy. For some viewers, even within the banality of documentary form, the early seedlings of her conceptual work emerge. For other viewers, watching Shulie "drone on and on" about her life is frustrating. I've been accused of "ripping off" viewers by not giving them the "true" story. One feminist documentary filmmaker commented that she "couldn't understand why anyone would ever want to copy such a bad film with such an uninteresting portrayal." Another filmmaker dismissed it on the grounds that she "sees students like this every day." My sense from these viewers is that while the subject is to be celebrated, this is not the right representation. Firestone herself objects to this representation, saying she didn't like the original, and sees no critique in the remake. Due to this wide range of interpretive issues, exhibition of *Shulie* has required a certain presence and contextualization far beyond normal distribution practices.

This compulsion to repeat, to recreate what some may deem trash and others might claim as evidence, is certainly not ground-breaking. Yet I relate this impulse to an increased, perhaps even perverse, need within my generation to recreate struggles we didn't physically experience. Or did we? Why would one repeat trauma if there wasn't an intimate connection, if one was not somehow a product of that trauma? Nineteen sixty-seven can only exist as myth to me. I have no material access to its meaning, yet its meanings have created me.

Who and what merits historical preservation, and why we crave this history forms a central motivation of the project. If we are to create histories that recognize difference, they also need to be preserved in moments that don't look like history with a capital H: minor, awkward, multiply coded, and irreducible representations. *Shulie* is not a portrait, or a PBS documentary, but an experimental film masquerading as a case study submitting itself as evidence: of daily, unremarkable but excruciatingly familiar female negotiations with language, performativity, subjectivity, framing, and power relations. I would propose that *Shulie* (1997) is not necessarily even about the young Firestone, but about the conditions of a woman's cinematic representation with the privileged recognition that she, and many other women of her generation, survived, or even conquered that representation, often at enormous risk and sacrifice. My generation is utterly indebted to these women, even if we identify with them from radically different vantage points.

In that sense, *Shulie* is also about the present. The amateur, sexist and self-aggrandizing strategies of the original four male filmmakers and their positioning of her in the documentary; how she's treated by her painting teachers; how she articulates her subjectivity as a white, middle-class Jewish woman: these moments represent critical and problematic evidence of a time that hasn't necessarily passed. Resurrecting *Shulie* (1967) is a stubborn (while illusory) historiographical act, an attempt to insist that this trash (this minor, flawed, and non-heroic experience) be seen and heard, and to throw its identity as the past into question.



# Blow-up: *The Catherine Films*

*John Porter*

It was like a reunion of long-lost twins, except one of them was a ghost, seen by many.

Catherine, an only child, was re-united in 1999 with a beautiful, feature-length, 16mm, colour home movie of herself growing up in Toronto in the 1940s. It was carefully made by her father and included many scenes of her mother who died when Catherine was sixteen. It was then forgotten (and lost after her father died) for forty-five years. Some Toronto film artists discovered it and brought it to a packed, public screening, and in the process found the girl in the film.

Sometime in the 1980s or '90s, a collector (whom I shall call Mr. X) bought the film at a house contents sale, the location of which he later forgot. He gave the film to fellow collector Martin Heath, the proprietor of CineCycle (an "underground" cinema often used by Pleasure Dome). A few years later Heath

viewed the film with Jonathan Pollard, who is also involved with Cinecycle and Pleasure Dome. They were so impressed by it that they planned a public screening at CineCycle with Pleasure Dome.

192 The film lovingly and expertly documents Catherine's growth from her infancy to her teens, and includes spectacular scenes of the 1939 Royal Visit, steam trains, and famous Canadian landscapes and attractions. It is especially beautiful because although quite old, it is a pristine reversal or camera-stock film with no negative or copies. Like a fine painting, it is best seen projected in its original state, without copying. But to protect it, the original should be projected as little as possible, so this was publicized as a rare, once-only screening of the original *The Catherine Films*.

But whose film was it? Who was the family? Were any of them still living in Toronto, and could they be located before the public screening? Labels on the film can indicated only that they lived in Toronto in the 1940s and that the daughter was named Catherine. The film's content gave few other clues, but Catherine's street looked familiar and in one of Toronto's nicer neighbourhoods. Heath began by tracking down Mr. X who provided no new clues to the film's origin, but after hearing of the public screening angrily demanded that Heath return the film. Heath and Pollard feared that he might bury it again, or sell it to be cut up, so they not only kept the film but secured it from possible seizure by Mr. X.

A month before the screening, Pleasure Dome hired me to make some still photographs (frame blow-ups) from the film for publicity use. I had seen the Pleasure Dome poster, which did not say that Catherine was unknown to them. I assumed, as others did, that she was an associate of Pleasure Dome who had offered the film for public exhibition, which didn't excite me. When I saw the video copy of the film I too realized its importance, and when I heard about the mystery I became obsessed with finding Catherine's street, and Catherine.

I have lived in Toronto for fifty years, working as a photographer, filmmaker, letter-carrier and bicycle-courier, and I have made a study of Toronto's history and streets, so I know the city well. I once made a film for Pleasure Dome, which was shown at CineCycle, titled *On The Street Where She Lived*. It recalled my adolescent bicycle ride in search of a girl's distant street, uptown. So I was disappointed that my friends at CineCycle and Pleasure Dome never asked for my help in their search for Catherine, especially before they advertised the public screening, out of respect for Catherine who may still be living in Toronto and want some say in how (or if) the film is shown and advertised.

Pleasure Dome needed only a few frame blow-ups for publicity, but I shot sixty-four to document the entire film in case it was seized by Mr. X, and to

aid my search. The film contained only two shots of Catherine's house, and they were just of the front porch with no house number. Her street was densely treed so only one winter scene showed some of the surrounding houses clearly. In some shots there were street signs, but in the distance and out of focus. As I was carefully inspecting each frame of a scene of Catherine rollerskating, I was thrilled to discover a few frames with a Toronto Transit bus passing at the end of Catherine's street in the distance. It had been unnoticed by all of us who had viewed the film projected or on video, but now the bus's distinctive crimson and gold colours, used in those early years of my own childhood, leapt out at me.

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I now knew that Catherine's street ended perpendicularly to a bus route in the 1940s. From scenes showing the sun's shadows in different seasons, I determined in which direction the street ran. I also saw that the last block of the street was unusually short. At the Toronto Archives I got a copy of a 1940s bus route map which I re-drew onto a 1940s city street map from my own collection. By examining my custom map I determined that there were only two streets in all of Toronto that matched my clues, and those streets were close to my own childhood neighbourhood. As I rode my bicycle uptown, knowing I would be seeing Catherine's street, I felt *déjà vu*. I was replaying that adolescent bicycle trip (further uptown) in search of another girl's street, only this time I was heading toward my childhood neighbourhood. I was arriving full circle.

With my frame blow-ups in hand I recognized Catherine's street. I identified her house by matching the unique stones of the front porch. The man living there now was fascinated by my story and said that Catherine had visited four years earlier to see her childhood home. Fortunately she had sent him a thank-you note and he had kept it, because her last name was now different than the name listed at that house in the 1940s city directories. He called her and gave her my number. When she called me suddenly, three days later, I was overcome and almost speechless. I had found her in one week, with two weeks before the screening. She remembered the film but could only guess how it ended up in a house contents sale. Her father had remarried and moved to another house in Toronto. He was out-lived by his second wife, whose family sold the house when she died and may have missed the names scribbled in pencil on the film can.

Catherine viewed the video copy and permitted the screening to go ahead, although she felt uncomfortable about the public exposure. For that and unrelated reasons she chose not to attend. I felt that the *Pleasure Dome* poster and a short review in *NOW* weekly (using one of my frame blow-ups) made undue reference to class. They described Catherine's family as "wealthy," "privileged," "elite," and "WASP," but made little or no mention of her father's exceptional filmmaking.

*The Catherine Films*





At the screening, CineCycle asked me to guard the entrance against Mr. X. It was packed with more than a hundred people including one of Catherine's sons, as well as the man now living in the house and his three little daughters. The film was shown silent, and the audience was very respectful, with no walk-outs.

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But Mr. X snuck in after it started. When it ended he threatened to charge Heath with theft if he didn't get the film back. He called the police, who came and listened to both sides of the story, but nobody mentioned Catherine's rights to the film. When I tried to, the police told me I was out of line. They wouldn't intervene and told Mr. X and Heath to settle it themselves or in civil court. It was not a criminal matter. We haven't heard from Mr. X since, but believe that Catherine holds the copyright to the film.

Due to her business travels, we didn't meet Catherine in person until a month after the screening. She is determined to keep the film from Mr. X, and has agreed with CineCycle's plan to deposit the original with an archives and to provide her with good video copies. Later we organized a private screening at CineCycle for her and many of her family and friends, some of whom were in the film and whom she hadn't seen in years. She was re-united with them and with the original film, which they all watched for the first time in forty-five years.



Written with assistance from Jonathan Pollard, and permission from Catherine.

# An Introduction to *The Catherine Films*

*Jonathan Pallard*

*The Catherine Films* were originally shot as home movies by a lifelong amateur photographer and filmmaker, between approximately 1937 and 1952 while he and his family lived in the Forest Hill neighbourhood of Toronto. Just before the public screening of the films by Pleasure Dome in March 1999, John Porter managed to locate the main subject and namesake of *The Catherine Films*. Although at present Catherine wishes to remain anonymous, we have learned quite a lot about the films from her. They follow Catherine growing up between the ages of about one and fourteen, as well as family get-togethers, holiday trips, and public events (including the 1939 Royal Visit).

Catherine's father was a talented photographer and *The Catherine Films* stand out among home movies for their technical prowess; his shots are almost always reliably exposed, focussed, and steady. He also had a good eye and an interesting sense of narrative. Head and shoulder portrait shots of relatives are exceptionally

well composed and studied. A sequence showing the progress of a ship passing through the lock at Long Sault Rapids attests to the filmmaker's abilities as a documentarian. Things mechanical seem generally to have had a great curiosity for him; the films feature numerous steam trains, ships, and bridges. The attention of the camera, however, was overwhelmingly focused on his family. From the earliest age, Catherine is shown in athletic activities: playing ball, roller-skating, diving, and ice-skating. In fact, a painted portrait of Catherine in an ice-skating outfit, holding her skates, hangs above the mantle in several Christmas scenes and she is seen performing in a large ice carnival put on by the Toronto Skating Club.

Like all home movies, *The Catherine Films* provide a wealth of images towards a social history of the twentieth century. Not only are we given glimpses of what Canada looked like sixty years ago, but we have a window on the manners and mores of some of the people themselves. Ultimately what is most important about *The Catherine Films* is the very fact that they are a product of their time and place, that is an upper-class neighbourhood in Toronto at mid-century. ★

# Menace and Jeopardy: Five Safety Films from the Prelinger Archive

*Rick Prelinger*

## *Last Date*

Safety films are a durable genre, going back to the beginnings of film history. But in one very important way, they seem deeply flawed. Not only are their messages often dubious and slanted to reflect the viewpoints of corporate management, government, and insurance companies, but they probably don't even prevent accidents.

Most safety films are dramatized so as to hold an audience's attention and engage their emotions; all this is supposed to reinforce their sober message. But drama (and especially tragedy) creates its own expectations. As the film

progresses, all one can do is wait for the accident to happen, and that's what satisfies the audience. Naturally, this completely neutralizes the message.

The sponsors of *The Last Date* parked wrecked cars outside theatres in which it showed to further drive home the message. But it took mandatory seat belts, better-made cars, and a 55 m.p.h. speed limit to lower the traffic fatality rate. One of the producers' ideas was eerily on target: they apparently decided that teenagers' greatest fear wasn't to die, but rather to be disfigured, and that's what this film is all about.

Produced by Wilding Pictures Productions for Lumbermen's Mutual Casualty Company. 1949, 20 min. Directed by Lewis D. Collins. Story by Bruce Henry. With Richard (Dick) York (Nick); Joan Taylor (Jeanne Dawson); and Robert Stern (Larry Gray). Winner of the annual award of the National Committee on Films for Safety as 1949's best non-theatrical picture on prevention of traffic accidents; an "Oscar" in the safety film division from the Cleveland Film Council; and a "Silver Anvil" in the insurance division from the American Public Relations Association.

### *Safety Belt for Susie*

In a time when most American cars didn't yet have safety belts installed, UCLA's Institute of Traffic and Transportation Engineering heavily publicized its humanoid dummy research as a means of encouraging their use. This attention-grabbing film has an absurd plot (Nancy, a little girl and only child, is never seen without her lifesize doll Susie, who is "injured" in a traffic accident; Nancy's parents hear a lecture on how dolls have been used at UCLA to assess the effects of accident injuries on children; both Nancy and Susie wear seat belts thereafter), but its real attraction is the shocking footage of the crash tests conducted on an airstrip somewhere in Southern California. Menacing and portentous music accompanies the crash tests, which include dramatic crash footage and tragic shots of damaged dolls. Although the use of dolls allows the filmmakers to avoid unshowable violence against children, even this violence-by-proxy stimulates complex (and deeply repressed) emotions in the minds of the viewer.

The recent debate over film and television violence has focussed almost exclusively on what children see and hear in the mass media and whether it stimulates or legitimizes violent activity. But what have adults been thinking about all this time? In films like *Safety Belt for Susie*, *Why Take Chances?* and even *The Last Clear Chance* there's clear evidence, I think, of anti-child hostility hiding under an appearance of concern. The clue, I'd suggest, is when the intensity or excitement of the accident(s) adds an unintended dimension to the safety message.

The use of dolls (how else could they have done it?) brings a certain delicacy to the film, but it seems a little sick when their “names” are taped to their foreheads. Even though the dolls stand in for real human babies, they have the effect of “humanizing” the scientifically oriented message of the film.

We’re now required by law to wear seat belts in most states, and crash tests have been mainstreamed into popular culture. We see them in car commercials all the time and the “Crash Test Dummies” invented by the U.S. Department of Transportation to promote safety consciousness have become licensed characters on television. To a great extent, the images in *Safety Belt for Susie* still can shock because they’re old-fashioned and ecstatically violent, but those kinds of images have basically been resolved in our minds. What hasn’t been resolved, I think, is how we as a society feel about children and the violence our culture directs at them, and the answers to this problem won’t be found in old safety films.

Produced by Charles Cahill and Associates (Hollywood) in association with the Institute of Traffic and Transportation Engineering (ITTE) at the University of California, Los Angeles, 1962, 10 minutes, Eastmancolour, 16mm. Director: Pat Shields. Writer: Mac Mac-Pherson. Cameraman: J.D. Mickelson. With the cooperation and assistance of U.S. Public Health Service; J.H. Mathewson, Assistant Director, ITTE and D.M. Severy, Research Engineer, UCLA.

### *The Days of Our Years*

Producer Carl Dudley took to the streets and workplaces of Los Angeles to make this despairing trilogy of accidents and their devastating effects on railroad workers and families. *The Days of Our Years* shows a landscape full of risks and dangers, a world where something can happen every day to careless people, where those innocent of responsibility suffer the most—a world, in fact, remarkably similar to ours. The menaces that its characters face daily are not age-old quarrels between clans, ethnic groups or nations, but risks faced by working people on the job. The paradox of this film is that although it was made by a railroad company and expresses highly specific corporate interests, it’s also rooted in a working-class milieu and reflects this throughout every scene.

First things first. God is the ultimate authority. “It is written in the Old Testament: to each of this allotment of years. The days of our years are three score and ten.” The film opens with a choir, a church, a minister and a biblical quote.

In the age-old tradition of holding workers (rather than management or the

makers of machines) responsible for accidents, this film shows stories of people who are “the victims of themselves.” “I know the road does everything in its power to prevent accidents,” says the minister/narrator, and saddles these workingmen with complete responsibility for the risks they face. This is a common theme of safety films, which combine a healthy degree of corporate self-interest with an occasional concern for the well-being of workers and consumers.

If we're not to sell this film short, though, we should look beyond its sleazier side. When ephemeral films channel to us evidence of yesterday's everyday life and culture, evidence we'd be hard-pressed to find elsewhere, they're really at their best, and this is a great example. *The Days of Our Years* transcends its limited mandate to present a portrait of a white working-class Los Angeles, a culture which has now pretty much vanished. This L.A. is populated by working people who live near the railroad freight terminal and repair shops in places like Commerce, Vernon, and Bell. Joe Tindler, a road electrical foreman, is in love with Helen, a waitress at a local luncheonette; they're saving up to get married. Two buddies on a yard train crew (George Price and Fred Bellows) plan to retire together and travel the world. And Charlie O'Neill is excited beyond words at the imminence of a new baby. These are pretty basic aspirations: marriage, a new home, retirement “after forty-two years of good, honest work,” a new baby. In each case the wish is not granted because of an accident. This is not the California of *77 Sunset Strip* and the Cleavers; it's suburbs and beach cities of Southern California. Its people live more traditional lives and work at jobs that have been in existence for over a century, and the film shows this with skill and precision.

The strength of the film lies in the details. When we're introduced to Joe Tindler, he's shaving his neck in his bachelor room. Keep a eye on that neck. Helen looks into a polished toaster and fantasizes her future with Joe, including the purchase of that “Plan 5 Model Home.” The Prices and Bellows sit planning their retirement at a picnic table covered with *National Geographic*s opened to ads for Hawaiian vacations. Fred Bellows pulls down a windowshade as he changes clothes, and George Price sees this as a rejection and rebuke. Saddest of all, young welder Charlie O'Neill, newly blinded and wearing Roy Orbison shades, gropes around his baby son's crib in search of a toy locomotive.

We mentioned the biblical allusions. There is something almost scriptural in the rhythm and simplicity of the narration. “George tried to go to Fred Bellows' funeral, but the doctor said no. You don't walk around two days after a heart attack. But they couldn't keep him away from the window.”

The minister/narrator has almost complete control over the narration; everything is voice-over except for the screams of the victims.

A profound contradiction embraces most safety films, a mismatch between ends and means. Quite often the most effective accident reduction strategy for a filmmaker seems to be to present dramatized accidents. When audiences see carelessness, pain, and suffering and their devastating effects, it's thought they'll act more safely. But does it really work that way? Simply examine your feelings as you watch a film like *The Days of Our Years*. If you are a typical spectator, what you're doing is really waiting for the accident to happen. This is the payoff, the gratification, the closure. I'd argue that this process is distracting enough to weaken, maybe even crowd out, the intended message. In fact, *The Days of Our Years* builds up to the climactic accidents with great skill and drama, and it does this not once, but three times over.

Some safety films employ unorthodox measures to get the viewer's attention or focus on the risks and pitfalls of ordinary behaviour. There's nothing radical about *The Days of Our Years*; it's simply an extremely well-made film pitting the risk of life-disrupting accidents against closely held values of ritual, community, and family succession. "Let not man by his thoughtlessness diminish the blessings of the Lord." It's like a safety shoe you put on to protect your foot.

Produced by Dudley Pictures Corporations (New York and Beverly Hills, Calif.) for Union Pacific Railroad. 1955, 20 minutes, Kodachrome, 16mm. Directed by: Allen Miner. Written by: Herman Boxer and Joseph Ansen. Photographed by: Alan Stensvold. Edited by: Ernest Flook. Music by: Howard Jackson. Narrated by: Art Gilmore. With Florence Shaen, The Rev. C.S. Reynolds, Henry Rupp Jr., William E. Hill and Bennie R. Wadsworth.

### *Live and Learn*

Sid Davis—child actor, stand-in for John Wayne, mountain climber, and movie producer—made more than one hundred films about dangers that befall children and teenagers, including accidents, narcotics, sexual transgression, and psychological stress. Danger always lurks in the placid Southern California landscapes of his films, but as in many safety films, the fascination of danger and misbehaviour often tends to distract from the intended cautionary messages.

One doesn't always have to reject Davis' messages or doubt his sincerity in producing these films, but the films do tend to stimulate many different

readings. One not-so-obvious issue I think was on his mind was the effect of rapid urbanization and population growth in the Los Angeles area after World War II (Davis himself had first settled in Los Angeles circa 1926), when neighbourhoods with a small-town feeling became quickly amalgamated into an almost-endless big city. In such an ugly city, “dangerous strangers” lurked everywhere, waiting to turn good girls into bad girls, to corrupt and injure youth. The postwar landscape and composition of L.A.—new neighbourhoods, construction sites, backyards littered with obsolete prewar refrigerators—also formed a matrix of risks for children, a map of exposures to jeopardy and danger. Considering this, many of his films (including, certainly, *Live and Learn*) can be seen as protests against what the newer Los Angeles had become and as attempts to draw new boundaries for children.

Davis received many awards from criminal justice and youth organizations and distributed his own films from 1948 through the early 1980s with great success. He is an excellent example of the self-taught entrepreneur who entered the educational film business after the Second World War, set up a vertically integrated organization, and helped to define the nature of the audiovisual material that postwar kids saw in school. His first film (*The Dangerous Stranger*, 1948), a film warning kids against potential molesters, was made with funds supplied by John Wayne, cost a thousand dollars to make, and sold thousands of prints since at that time it filled a unique niche.

Produced by Sid Davis Productions (Los Angeles), 1951, 10 minutes.

### *The Last Clear Chance*

This engaging Kodachrome drama (formatted for television broadcast) from the Union Pacific ostensibly deals with safety at railroad grade crossings, but it's also about much more: youth's feeling of invulnerability; the highway patrolman as an authority figure; the look of the rural and urban West in the late 1950s; the urge to speed through a sparsely populated agricultural landscape; and the train's role as farmer's servant and potential killer. Is this overanalysis? Perhaps. But longer films aspire to higher goals, and one way to achieve these goals is to pack them with hints of meaning in many directions.

This film was made just five years after *The Days of Our Years* but belongs to a different world. This is not the close environment of urban railroad workers, but the wide-open spaces of the agricultural West. The visual evidence of the film implies that it was shot in Idaho, and the highway

patrolman who carries the film forward wears an Idaho State Patrol uniform. It's summertime and the kids are out of school. Although they are responsible for farm work, they are free to roam the countryside and do. Danger lurks in this mobile world, but not in dark, enclosed industrial spaces—it lurks in broad daylight along a sunny railroad track. The deaths that form the film's climax happen right after lunch on what looks like a Saturday afternoon, and death takes the young rather than the old.

It's hard not to think that the Union Pacific is here again trying to pass the buck on safety. It costs lots of money to protect railroad crossings with gates and even more to construct separations between railroad rights-of-way and highways. Construction projects of this type have always involved contention between railroads and local governments, and the differing interests of railroads and government fill our history books. Suffice it to say that there's a great deal of background that isn't practical to include in the movie. Interestingly enough, the victims drive through a crossing with gates, lights and bells, so no one can pin the responsibility for this accident on corporate greed.

The most quotable line: as two railroad crewmen stand by the wrecked automobile, one says: "Why don't they look, Frank?" Frank responds: "I don't know. Why don't they look?" This short dialogue fragment, and in fact the whole movie, has become a big hit on the tv show *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*.

Produced by Wondsel, Carlisle and Dunphy (New York City) for Union Pacific Railroad, 1959, 26 minutes, Kodachrome, 16mm. Director: Robert Carlisle. Script: Leland Baxter. Cinematography: Bert Spielvogel. Editor: Mort Fallick. Produced under the supervision of Francis B. Lewis, Director of Safety and Courtesy, U.P.R.R. With Bill Boyett (Patrolman Jackson); Mr. Harold Agee (Frank Dixon, Sr.); Mrs. Harold Agee (Mrs. Frank Dixon); Bill Agee (Frank Dixon, Jr.); Tim Bosworth (Alan Dixon); Christine Lynch (Betty Hutchins).



It plays on the surface of things and in the glitter of daylight, over all the workings of appearances, over the ambiguity of reality and illusion, over all that indeterminate web, ever rewoven and broken, which both unites and separates truth and appearance. It hides and manifests, it utters truth and falsehood, it is light and shadow. It shimmers, a central and indulgent figure, already precarious in this baroque age.

—Michel Foucault

# The Shape of a Particular Death: Matthias Müller's *Vacancy*

*Scott McLeod*

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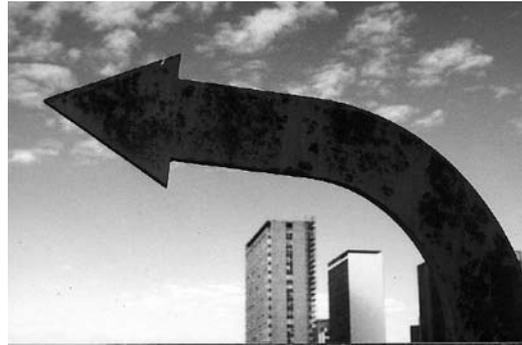
As Foucault has written of madness, so too might these words be written about death, the spectre which permeates the films of Matthias Müller. Müller is an experimental filmmaker from Germany who has made more than fifteen films in as many years. In 1989, he received international attention for his magnum opus *The Memo Book*, a visionary dreamscape created in response to the AIDS-related death of a close friend. Since then, his films have continued to garner many screenings and awards. Whether focussing on the joys and tragedies of childhood, the intense sexuality of youth, or the lost hopes and aspirations of a generation, his films are characterized by languid retrospection, a looking back on life lived. Throughout his oeuvre,

death is ever-present, pursuing and beckoning, eliciting fear and longing, desire and loss. His most recent film, *Vacancy*, is ostensibly a travelogue on the utopian city of Brasília—a product of the industry and repression of the post-World War II period, now a cultural heritage site—and implicitly a meditation on alienation and death.

Paradoxically, or perhaps inevitably, *Vacancy* is also a paean to life, a reflection on the realities of modern life through an exploration of the mythologies at work in the making of the modern city. The film opens with no image but a voice-over only, alternating between German and English: “Overshadowed by their histories, the old cities languish, disintegrate, and disappear.” With suitably slow pacing, the delayed first image—an aerial view of a city—fades in. The viewer’s eyes are now opened. Aligned with the subjectivity of the narrator, we slip into a contemplative state of consciousness and assume the vantage point of the all-knowing. The image fades, the title appears. Excavators break the earth—we’ve begun at the end, and we now turn to the beginning.

Having thus positioned the viewer, the film focusses on the building of the city. Archival footage of the inauguration of the new city of the ’50s and ’60s evokes the world into which the filmmaker was born. Novel, visionary, expansive, and monumental, this city, as imaged through home movies and feature films, bears traces of the optimism of that era. Subject to the vicissitudes of time and Müller’s re-presentation and intervention, these grainy, faded images, receding into darkness and accompanied by sparse sound and a solemn voice-over, speak of desire and loss. The monumental structures dehumanize; the expansive spaces are empty and barren. The airports, highways, overpasses, and intersections, and the vehicles which move on them, shed their promises of freedom and choice and become channels of control. In a homogeneous world, movement is meaningless. All destinations are the same.

Periodically throughout the film, isolated figures traverse open spaces. Near the end of the film, in an extreme aerial shot of an open field, a single figure walks along a path. Within this expanse of nothingness, the walker follows a well-trodden route, echoing the limits of his narrowly prescribed life. His



destination, beyond the bounds of the film frame, remains unknown.

In its relentless looking back on the past and its inability to envision a future, *Vacancy* is the quintessential millennial film. A shot of particularly long duration features more than a dozen labourers washing a concrete wall which supports a highway overpass. This image is punctuated by a quick archival shot of the wall in its original pristine state. Misguided notions of progress have given way to pointless roving and meaningless activities. The city is empty, its inhabitants gone, and yet we continue to prop up its corpse.

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*Vacancy*, MATTHIAS MÖLLER

The narrator's texts are attributed to Italo Calvino, Samuel Beckett, and David Wojnarowicz; the result of this unusual assemblage is that omniscience and conscience combine to create a portrait of disintegration. But the tone of the film does not share, for example, Wojnarowicz's passion or anger; the pervasive atmosphere is one of quiet resignation. This is an august film. The sheets have been spread, the pillows fluffed, and all that remains is to slip into the deathbed.

"I am a stranger." *Vacancy* is a film characterized by emptiness and despair.



||

I was surprised when I returned to the cemetery. The surface of the earth over my mother's grave had been covered in a carpet of fresh sod, the seams still visible, browning slightly at the edges. I could no longer discern the precise spot at which her body lay. This is the way of the future, my father said. Nothing must get in the way of the vast expanse of green, to enable easy passage of ride-on lawnmowers.

## III

So what is that feeling of emptiness?

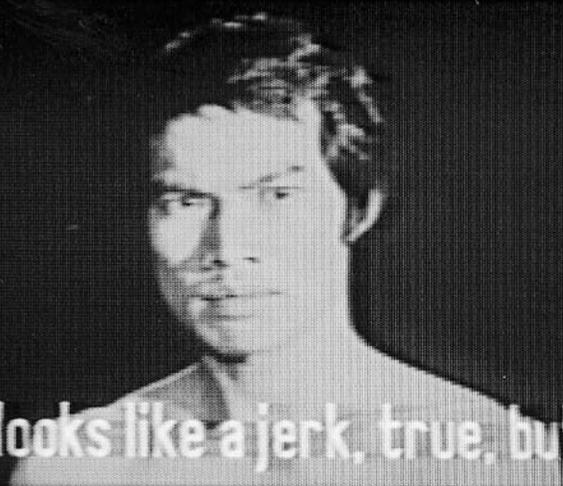
Maybe it's that the barren landscape becomes a pocket of death because of its emptiness. Maybe the enormity of the cloudless sky is a void reflecting the mirrorlike thought of myself. That to be confronted by space is to fill it like a vessel with whatever designs one carries—but it goes farther than these eyes having nothing to distract them as vision does its snake-thing and wiggles through space. There *is* something in all that emptiness—it's the shape of a particular death that got erected by tiny humans on the spare face of an enormous planet long before I ever arrived, and the continuance of it probably long after I have gone.



The epigraph is from Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965), 36.

Passages appearing in quotation marks are from Matthias Müller, *Vacancy* (16mm, colour, optical sound, 14:30 minutes, 1998).

Section III is a quotation from David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Random House, 1991), 41–42.



He looks like a jerk, true, but it's not his fault. It's the producer's.



Starring:

Let it be said: all films can be detoured: potboilers, Vardas, Pasolinis, Caillacs,

Fifteen apparitions I have seen.  
The worst, a coat on a coat-hanger.

W.B. Yeats

# Lux

*Robert Lee*

He woke from a blackout the last time he saw a movie in the Chinatown theatre, though he did not know it would be the last time, before it closed for renovations.

The first movie he saw there, entitled *The Flying Guillotine*, was about assassins who left a trail of headless bodies.

Or perhaps it was an account of a missionary who led orphans over the mountains to the Yellow River.

The price of admission provided refuge for many hours because no one bothered to clear the theatre after each screening.

Patrons often arrived early and sat through the ending before they would watch the beginning.

People were accustomed to re-arranging the past.

He could not remember when he stopped watching, could not stop what he was remembering to accommodate the demands of the story.

The parts he recalled stole more meaning than they offered.

212 A floor dotted with flattened gum. Walls posted with ominous BEWARE OF PICKPOCKET signs.

A movie in which whoever talked the loudest and the fastest turned out to be the star.

A character was pleading for his life and talked excitedly for ten minutes and his speech was read as a single word.

The words flashed on the screen so briefly, you experienced the act of reading without comprehending what was read.

At once an interpretation and something that needed to be interpreted.

He stopped listening to the almost consonantless voices coming from the screen.

He knew even silent films were never silent, someone was hired to narrate aloud for the people who could not read.

And to explain the scenes in which the pictures did not illustrate the words.

People stuck to their stories, were stuck to their stories. They held on to their beliefs like a script they didn't know they were reading.

He recognized the film, he had seen it before as a child but did not get to see the ending. Everyone in it died. One of the few moments he was spared an unhappy ending.

There was always the possibility of a stupid ending or being stupid to the end.

His story consisted of separate sentences surrounded by sentences about other things he did not want to put together in a story.

He could think of nothing worse than being seen resorting to his own life.

Ahead of him, another man was humming, not having understood that somebody

might be able to hear him, not having heard about the man recently killed in Manila for singing off-key.

It was easy for some people to forget where they were sitting.

The theatre had a smoking section, filled in the afternoon with waiters, waiting for their evening shifts to begin. Their white shirts as bright as bicycle lamps.

Big men who he imagined playing mahjong, the noise of the clacking tiles like exploding popcorn.

He remembered watching a news report where the waiters at a crime scene were questioned, the only time anyone not placing a food order would ask their opinion about anything.

A place where they pushed you out as soon as you were finished to make room for the next group, even if there wasn't a next group waiting.

They knew how to show off with cigarettes, pulling out their Zippo lighters every few minutes.

Reminding him of the cartoon with the eyes in the dark, circling the campfire.

His eyes were slow, arriving at where they were supposed to be looking after lots of errors.

Since he couldn't step out of his situation or context, it was improbable to ask others to step outside of theirs instantly. This was why most experiences took effect long after they were over, when things could be seen from a distance.

He stepped out of the theatre just as the street lights went on, as though they had waited just for him.

He walked out quietly, not that anybody would have heard his steps, but he didn't want to hear them himself.

Two digital bank signs disagreed slightly about what time it was.

He had the sensation of noticing a new building and being unable to remember what it replaced.

The street reminded him of real estate pictures of houses, photographs recorded for information.

Across the street, a twelve-unit condo had gone up faster than it took to read a book.

Though not many of the passing minutes had the measured exactness and clarity of a paragraph.

214 Every corner had a building where it was hard to tell whether it was being finished or undergoing a languid demolition.

He pictured a series of dissolves and trick shots in which he entered a revolving door and came out years older.

A day he wanted to do in pencil first. I cannot use pencils, it looks so ghostly, his neighbour once told him.

He could not decide if he had made one mistake after another or really the mistake which was divided up to last from day to day.

The letters of a pawn shop sign illuminated one by one, as if the people going there needed things to be spelled out.

Outside the theatre, a poster promised a story about an angry ghost. He had listened to a Chinese exorcist on the radio explain that just as most people did not see ghosts, most ghosts did not see people.

There were more people not to see.

On the corner was someone he had lived with, who forgot who he was as well as the five hundred dollars they owed him.

The kind who was always either coming into money or going through his things.

A train took so long to go by that you forgot about it by the time it passed.

In the depth of a reflected shop, though invisible in the mirror, he saw his jacket, a white space, made in the crowd by where he stood.

Not quite present, not as absent as some might have wished, he was a presence that perceived as a ghost might. It was a little like reading, the same sensation of knowing people, setting, and situations, without playing a part beyond that of a willing observer.

Headlights came around the corner, the street filled with light so that for two seconds you could have read a book.

At night the street was full of men looking.

Walking through the park at night, listening to hear if someone else was there.

Spaces that seemed to come from dreams, familiar to those who inhabited those places.

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A car circled the block because the guy inside had to get up the nerve.

A teenager wearing a Bugs Bunny t-shirt was being pursued by a Mobil service station attendant.

Young men with acne on their foreheads tossed their keys up in the air and looked around to see if anyone was watching.

They might have worked at gas stations and later held them up.

He had the empty feeling of a car ride home at night, the radio catching static.

He found ice cream-eating crowds and parked cars.

A car trying to get into a small space held up traffic. People cut people off in traffic, in conversation.

There was a delay, for those who had destinations, anyway.

A man passed him who smelled like buttered popcorn or rather a book that said a man whose forearms smelled like popcorn flashed in his memory.

Someone who could be recognized from the back.

A moment when you see someone in the distance and you don't know if they're going forward or backward.

In his pocket, one of those celebrity magazines consisting of unauthorized photographs of naked sun-tanning on the roof shot from a helicopter.

Thin, long in the back, unshaved, a sweet face beneath whatever cap he was wearing, a jacket with an L-shaped rip in the back.

A world where only the unadorned, unselfconscious gesture was considered real.

If you stared hard it was a way to start a fight in his neighbourhood.

Three blocks later the man accused him of following him around, called him a name and paused as if the name was not enough to build a sentence on.

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People kept leaving him details to remember himself by.

It felt warm like a darkened school auditorium during a dance.

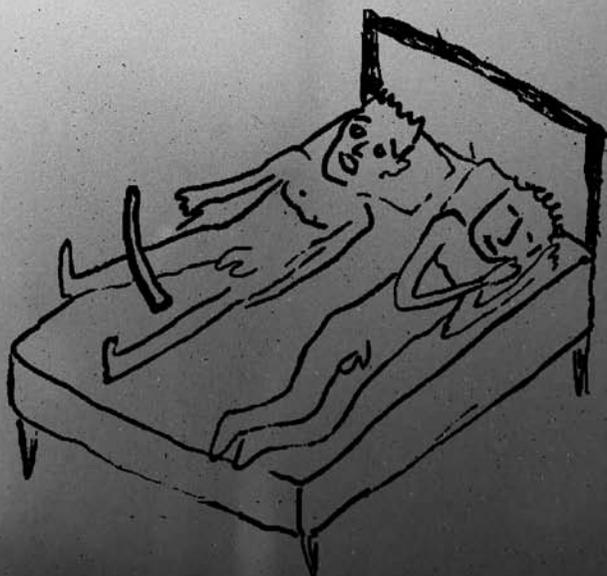
He was looking around like a grade school teacher, thinking of something educational to say.

At times it was best to be someone else, someone further away—like a character in a novel whose responses were more considered, less yours.

He had used “he” for “I” so often that even the third person was too close for him and he needed another person even farther away than the third person. But there was no other person.

The man already seemed distant though he was just a few sentences away. ★









Fruit Machine #1, WIKI MEAO

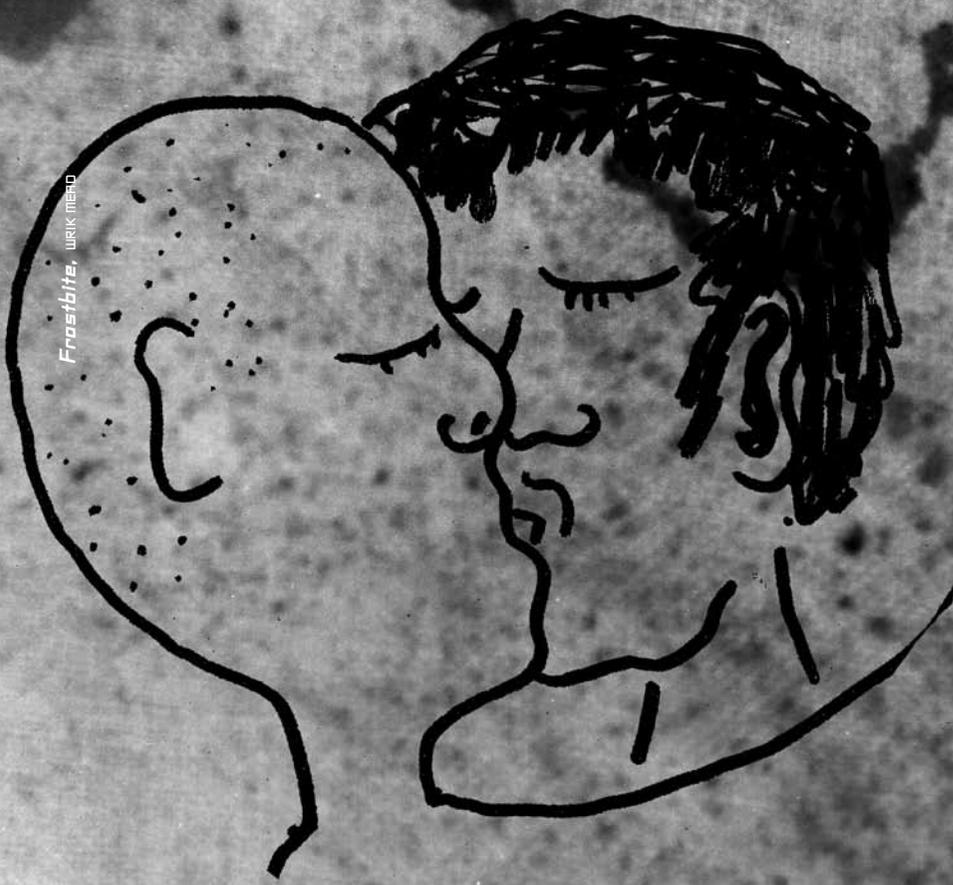




Hambelly, WIKI MEMO

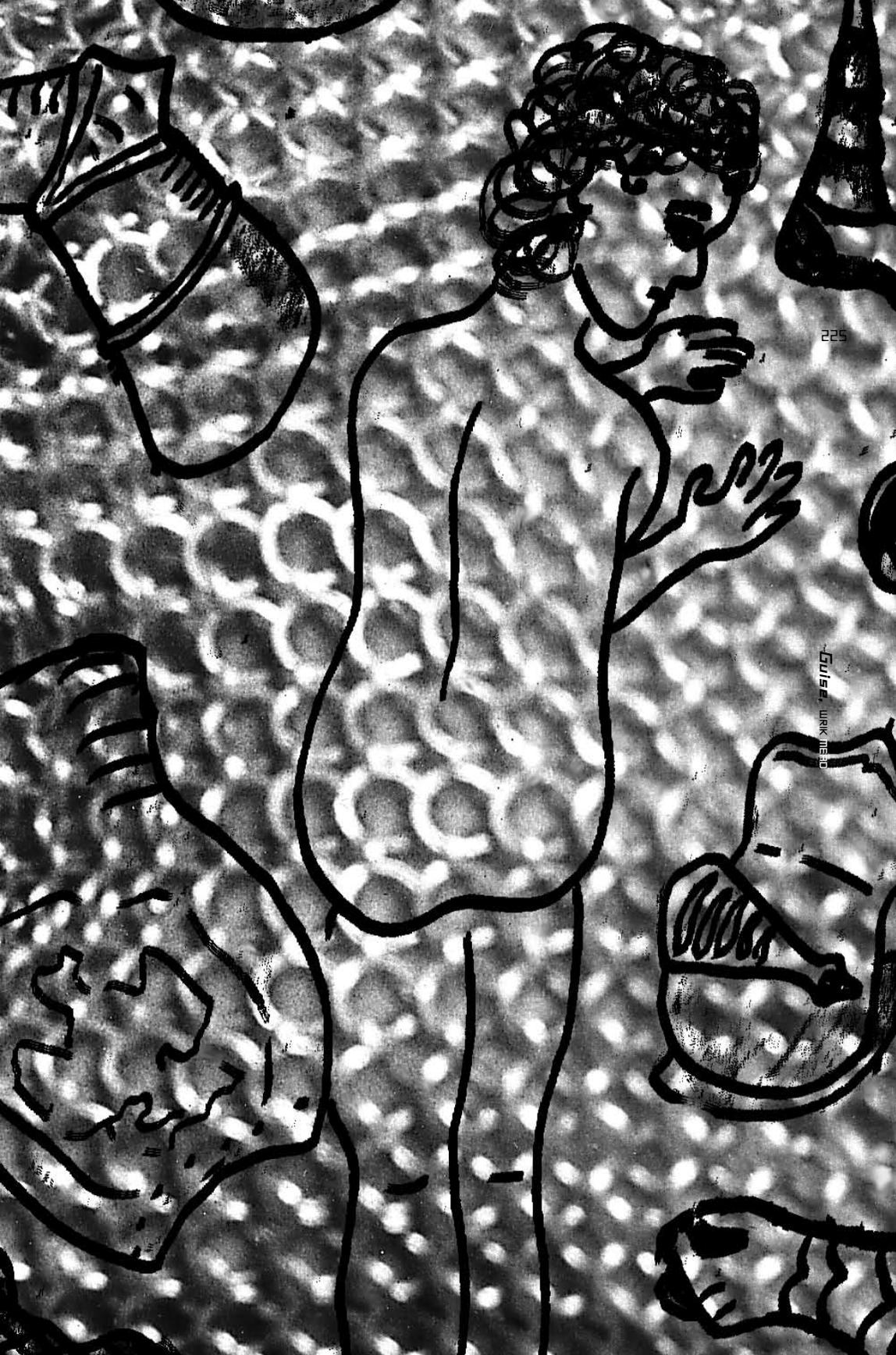
- cut out last couple of frames - cut as soon as rock hits ground

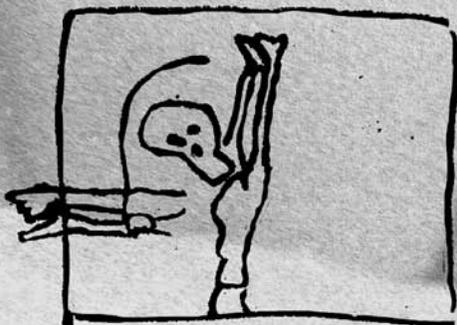
Frostbite, work in progress











- not getting up walking  
out of corner  
cut frame smash high  
back into corner



- move in w/camera
- pull out to wider angle of lens as you approach them
- background will move they won't
- \* - circle around from a distance then move in close

# Interview with Mike Hoolboom

*Cameron Bailey*

**BAILEY:** There's a quote in *Panic Bodies* that has stuck with me: "My body keeps getting in the way." It seems that your work now depends more and more on the body, and on your body in particular. It's like you've moved from films about ideas—*White Museum*, *Grid*, and others—to films that are more direct, more visceral.

**HOOLBOOM:** I think my early movies were like a long handshake with the medium, trying to figure out what it was about, what you could do with this room that's dark with light up front. But after becoming positive it became incumbent upon me to make work that tried specifically to deal with the things that came up, like mortality and this very odd new place that my body was in, that had been as I say in the film [*Panic Bodies*] a kind of unifying locus for my identity.

You look in the mirror and you're one person because you're one body. But all of a sudden, you're not one body anymore, because parts of your body are filled with this foreign thing. So maybe I'm more than one person. In the act of contagion where does one body end and another body begin?

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I had this dream over the weekend. I hardly ever remember my dreams. I'm in the basement of this huge place, underground. I'm putting together these two buffed metal pieces. One of them has a small stick shift on it. It's a very satisfying motion. They kind of snap together with a magnetic charge. And I do this over and over again on this long conveyor belt. And as I do I realize that all the things that I do in my life—like talk to people or be with my friends or fall in love or answer the phone—is all coming from this action. It all basically boils down to this.

And at that moment the camera zooms out and I see that there are millions of people around me and they're all doing exactly the same thing. We're all putting our little metal pieces together. I have this great feeling of communion, or solidarity. We're all one person!

And just at that moment the spotlight shines down on me and a white net comes down and scoops me up. And I look down and I'm replaced by a robot that's doing the same thing. It's putting together these metal pieces. And I'm screaming that no robot could ever do what I do! But of course it could.

Anyway, that was my dream.

**BAILEY:** Can you talk about how you first discovered your HIV status. You've said the problem was not how to die but how to live.

**HOOLBOOM:** I was told by a doctor who knew nothing about it. In fact he said, "Well, I picked up some pamphlets." That's how much he knew. He knew nothing about the doctors specializing in these matters, or about People With AIDS or support organizations or anything. So I was very much in the dark.

I wasn't certain how to proceed, but I imagined that the end was not far. In a way it fit in with how I was living anyway, kinda fast, thoughtlessly, drinking too much, not too...reflective.

So basically I repressed as much as I could and tried to fill my days

with stuff, activity. And I got an enormous amount of work done. But I was living in a hysterical state. It took leaving Toronto to finally get some distance.

I just kicked the accelerator into everything I was doing, so everything was faster. I made more films; I did more work. I was working at the Canadian Filmmakers then. I got involved in big arguments that I thought were important and principled at the time. I look back at them now and they seem so trivial and foolish and turf-oriented. But very much of that time.

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It meant going away and shaking off all these habits, and starting over again from nothing. So I moved to a city where I knew nobody, and was alone for a year, and stopped all the drinking and saw another doctor and tried to eat different foods.

**BAILEY:** What made you do that?

**HOOLBOOM:** Well, my counts were falling. I knew I had to do something. By that time I'd found a doctor who I liked very much, but in retrospect he was a bit *laissez-faire*. The fact that my counts were cut in half in a year didn't really seem to send off any warning signals to him. This was before there were all these drugs available.

And of course with an all-AIDS practice he's watching people that are a lot worse than I am. I'm still strolling in on my own steam, so I seem kind of okay.

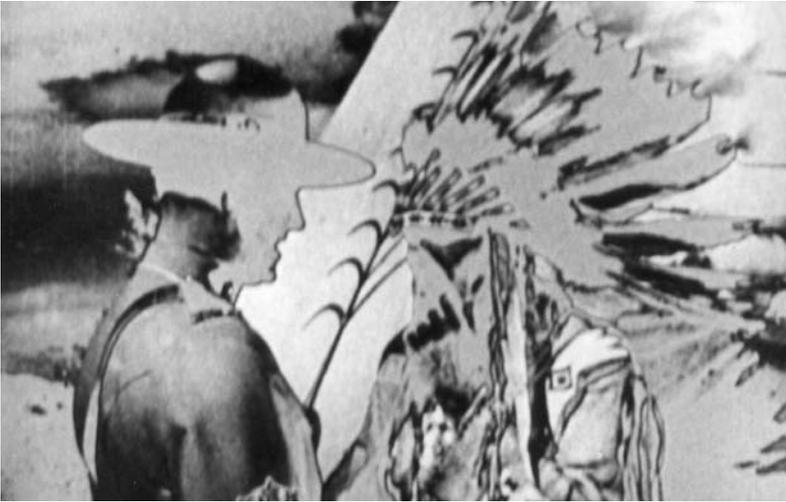
But for me, I'm not in that world, like he is.

**BAILEY:** What did you do when you got to Vancouver?

**HOOLBOOM:** I'd been working at Canadian Filmmakers, so I had unemployment insurance, which was okay to live on. And Vancouver has all of these really cheap sleazy hotels all over the place. I just got a room in one of those hotels. It's got a hotplate and a little fridge, and you live out of a knapsack. I bought a six-dollar transistor radio and started listening to the CBC a lot and wrote the *Kanada* script. I thought, okay, this is my life.

**BAILEY:** What made you come back to Toronto?

**HOOLBOOM:** I felt I'd done my penance. It was time to be near people I knew and



cared for. I'd had enough of wandering alone in the desert. I think I'd found a new place for my work.

**BAILEY:** You entered a period of accelerated work then, film after film. How does that work look to you now? Do you feel like you took a false step?

**HOOLBOOM:** Well, I always feel like I take false steps. So many people start out so well, in movies, especially. It's not that unusual that people arrive and make something fantastically perfect the first time out or the second time out. I was not one of those people. I made many many films before I made something that I thought was watchable.

**BAILEY:** What's the first thing you thought was watchable?

**HOOLBOOM:** Well the first film I made that I like? It's hard to know. I like ~~Mexico~~, kind of, although it's so slow and ponderous. *Kanada* is kind of in your face... I recut it, though. It's better. I don't know, I'm not that happy with anything. Even the new one I'm gonna show [*Panic Bodies*], I know what's wrong with it. I keep feeling like I'm gonna get there, but I never get there.

I was not born into the cinema, you know. I'm just one of those people that has to work extra hard and extra long and at some point it'll start coming together. I feel like my work is way better now, and there's some clarity I can bring to its making that always eluded me earlier.

**BAILEY:** That's surprising, because it always seemed to me that film was your medium, your language.

**HOOLBOOM:** I used to write a lot and then I decided I would do films. I've often wondered if that was one of those things you do because you see the good road and the hard road and you think yeah, the hard road, that's for you. Because that's what you deserve.

**BAILEY:** So you're punishing yourself by making films?

**HOOLBOOM:** [laughter]

**BAILEY:** I'm interested in your use of the term "fringe film" as opposed to "experimental" or "avant-garde." I'm especially interested in the economy of the avant-garde. Is money what makes a film fringe?

**HOOLBOOM:** To me "experimental" means people in white lab coats, people looking at something and asking, "What can it do?" And the only thing that's avant-garde is commercials. People with a lot of money seem to be in the avant-garde, because they know where we're going. It's the '90s and people are following money. And yet there are these eruptions of dissent, and that seems to belong to the fringe.

**BAILEY:** You worked at the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, you were a critic, an editor, a curator. How do you see your role now? Is it your job to produce stuff, or do you feel a responsibility to play a larger role?

**HOOLBOOM:** Yeah, I guess I do. I wish I didn't. I wish that it had been taken [by others].

Experimental film is so valueless now. Its ideals are really of another time. It's like a hangover of the '50s, beat, pseudo-anarchistic thing, coupled with the '60s social movement stuff.

These are obviously the last years of film, obviously the last years of 16mm film.

**BAILEY:** Really?

**HOOLBOOM:** Oh, it's so clear now. There's one lab left in town that will do colour 16mm film. There's one guy left who knows how to do opticals.

When he's gone you won't be able to get those done in Toronto anymore. I'd be shocked if 16mm lasted more than ten years. And then everyone will be using video or 35mm.

**BAILEY:** What does that mean for a filmmaker like you?

**HOOLBOOM:** You have to go on. So, yeah, we'll do stuff on video. It'll be different, and interesting, and hopefully on cheap, accessible tech.

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Capital is so weird. You see the time we're in. There is no middle class in movies. There are the movies everyone knows, and there's everything else. At least on the fringe, people are actually working on their lives and their images and their materials, instead of chasing a dream of making the big score.

It's so hard to make a good film, and there are so many things that can go wrong. And when you start accumulating big sums of money it's that much harder. Because money is conservative. Money always wants to do what's already been done before. And most of what's been done before is not that interesting.

I think of mainstream film like going to see a friend from high school. You can talk about "Oh, yeah, remember that night when we were fifteen." You get that little flash of, "Oh, that was funny." But then you return to your real life and that little flash has nothing to do with it.

So that's what fringe film is for. It's for when you wake up in the morning.

**BAILEY:** How does this affect your relationship with your audience—is there always a direct engagement with the people out there?

**HOOLBOOM:** For me at least there's way more opportunity to show than there was ten years ago. There are so many festivals. God knows how many festivals Hamburg has. So there are places for these small moments. It's been torturously helpful for me to sit with audiences and watch my films. Because they're strangers. They're not there to cut you any slack.

The context, the frame that they watch it in is big movies with stars. And in some sense that's the context that I'm making films in. It's a reminder in a way. I'm trying to make my work clear. I think there

is something in them even for people who've only seen Hollywood films their whole life. On the other hand the deeper parts are there for people who can mull them over a little bit more.

Also, as I get older I'm a lot more impatient. I can't sit and watch cameras turn for hours, or watch grain flicker on a screen and go wow. That time is definitely over. My movies now reflect some of that impatience, that wanting to get something across.

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I have something to say.

**BAILEY:** It's about communicating rather than just expressing, now.

**HOOLBOOM:** Right. So with *Panic Bodies* for instance I took it on a test run through Germany. I showed it in half a dozen spots, in a slightly different version. The first part wasn't done, so I stuck *Frank's Cock* on there instead. And the last part, *Passing On*, was different.

And in the last place that I saw it, I knew what was wrong with it.

**BAILEY:** From how the audience responded?

**HOOLBOOM:** Yeah, and you know how you can feel it. It's like you become them. You can feel a certain wavering of attention, or, "Oh, they thought that was funny." So I recut that section, a lot. I recut the music, which had just been one solid piece of music. I redid the sound effects and did more shooting. I recut the whole picture.

And then I showed it in Ottawa, and then I realized the second part was no good. It was too long. It just dragged. It took that long to see it. So I recut that. So it's a lot tighter now.

**BAILEY:** Some filmmakers would be aghast at the way you're talking—that's what the market does, not what you're supposed to do. You're an artist.

**HOOLBOOM:** Well, actually I read this book on Fellini and it was really common for him to do that. He'd finish a film and it would show around a couple of places, and then they'd sit down and recut it leisurely. And the recut version is the one that everyone knows.

It's expensive. I've spent most of the last three years recutting my films. *House of Pain* is down to fifty minutes from eighty. *Kanada* is

down to forty-five from sixty. *Valentine's Day* is going to become part of another film. It was cut from eighty minutes to eighteen, and it's got a new opening and video inserts. It's quite different.

**BAILEY:** So which is the real version?

**HOOLBOOM:** The new version is the real version.

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**BAILEY:** You're gonna fuck up scholars.

**HOOLBOOM:** My body of work is shrinking rapidly. Every year I make less films, cumulatively. It came partly out of interviewing filmmakers, and going back to their bodies of work, and seeing things that had thrilled me in 1982 or 1987 and thinking, "Wow, this really doesn't hold up." Or all you can look at are the people's sideburns. Films do not age gracefully.

You look at people's entire bodies of work, especially in fringe film, and you often think it doesn't amount to much.

So I thought, okay, I have to go back. I will go through my stuff. I will make it better.

**BAILEY:** Your recent films show a real engagement with pop culture.

**HOOLBOOM:** There was a time, which was perhaps emblemized by the period when I was working at Canadian Filmmakers, where I didn't talk to anyone who wasn't making, seeing, or writing about experimental film. That was fine for that time, but it's a very unreal, abstract place. And it was also founded on this odd us against them hierarchy. We're going to change the way people see, and there's a politics inherent in perception itself and blah blah blah. Hangover rhetoric that has all been proven irrelevant in the face of the steam-roller of multinational capital.

They're like, "Oh yes, we can make a Nike commercial out of that." Handprocessing? The National Football League uses that for its promos now.

I grew up with watching tv and being asocial and all of that. So I just started watching tv again. It's so peculiar after you've been away from it for a while.

I didn't know anything about Madonna. Nothing. But she made a film, so I went to see it. I just loved her film. She was such a worker. I really respected that and I still do. I think she's got an incredible work ethic. And I think she's very smart and I think she works with great people. Some of her videos are terrible but some of them are incredibly well done.

But it's the '90s. It's more and more difficult to imagine a time when one would have to go somewhere, to travel, to see an image.

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If all these people were so insistent that I and billions of others consume their images then it was fair—maybe even necessary—to be able to take their pictures and recycle them back. Do a kind of blue box cinema with it.

I'll bet I could walk from anywhere within Toronto, anywhere, and within a five-minute radius I could find an image of Leonardo DiCaprio. So if someone wants to take their picture and do something with it, isn't that what they want? Aren't they asking for that anyway?

And Madonna and Michael Jackson, for instance, are so...Madonna I felt was the precursor to the Lewinsky affair. She's someone who's always camera-ready. She's someone for whom intimacy on camera and intimacy off camera appear to be the same thing.

She's already crossed that line, but soon we'll all cross that line. And that's the real significance of the Lewinsky affair. It's not really about impeachment, and it's not about the presidency. What it will be remembered as is the event that made incredibly private things public. Things like "I'm not going to come in your mouth because that's too much of a commitment for me." I mean that's real intimacy there. This is, this is your president speaking.

I think we will watch our neighbours on tv, having arguments, having sex. It will be a completely visible, televised society. And Madonna is one of the great harbingers of that.

**BAILEY:** This is what also interested me about how you used stars—underlining their bodily transformation.

**HOOLBOOM:** Well, I was working with Steve Reinke on the book [*Plague Years*, 1998, YYZ Books, Toronto]. I don't know why this is, but Steve loves my little Madonna pieces. I don't know. Whatever. So that was like the heart of the book for him. "We gotta have those Madonna

pieces in there. They're really good." Working with Steve was very odd. He was like a Freudian analyst. He's mostly very spare with what he says. But then he'd say a couple of words, and I'd go off and do a whole new version of the book. Completely different. One of the things he said was I think it should be structured as if it's an autobiography. So in order for that to work I needed a setup story. So that's where it came from. I met Madonna in high school.

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**BAILEY:** Tell me about *Moucle's Island*. It's an interesting collaboration because it's so female.

**HOOLBOOM:** I met Moucle in Australia. She is very lucky to be living in Austria. It's the heaven of experimental film. They have a distribution place there called Six Pack. They do everything. They send your film to every festival. They send postcards all around the world announcing that your film is done. They sell it to tv. There's all kind of money. I've seen three books in the last three years on Austrian experimental film.

So they sent her off to Australia. So we met and talked there a bit. And she seemed a bit lost. There are a couple of reasons for that. Part of it had to do with this long marriage she's been in. And part of it had to do with her body. She felt like she was in the wrong body.

She'd made this film which I liked very much called *OK—Oberfleischen Kontakt*. It's projected on her hand.

**BAILEY:** Let's turn back to your films. I've noticed an evolution from a kind of transgressive heterosexuality toward a more ambisexual fluidity.

**HOOLBOOM:** The movies have become more documentaries of the imaginary. They're more faithful renderings of how I dream, or imagine the world to be, or imagine my place in it.

In my dreams it's very normal for myself to become a woman, and then become a man, and then to be with a woman who's a man who's a woman. Gender is not such a fixed thing. And that's reflected more in my work now.

I do remember thinking that even though many people have died terrible deaths in Martin Scorsese's films I never hear him asked whether he harbours fantasies about serial killing. After Atom's *Exotica* I don't remember anyone asking whether he's a peeping tom, or whether he enjoys spending weekends in strip clubs. But I think

it's always the assumption if you're making any kind of artwork on a certain budget level—below a certain threshold of visibility—it's always assumed that everything you do is pretty directly autobiographical.

Sometimes that's true.

I think that's especially confusing with someone like me, where there are obviously autobiographical things in it, and yet sometimes it's just used as material.

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I say this because the identity politic privileges a documentary expression—this is who I am so this is how I must represent. But in a more imaginary universe, which is where all of my movies are set—and I don't think of that as being less tangible, in fact I think the imaginary is where we really live—I think it's a lot harder to pinpoint.

**BAILEY:** So who shows your films now? The queer cinema circuit or experimental venues? Is your work being taken up in a way that is confusing to you?

**HOOLBOOM:** I'm not worried about that. Most of the places the films go I don't go to, because I don't really like leaving my apartment. They play in places I can't pronounce, but I'm grateful that they do.

I'm certainly not concerned about questions such as, am I avant-garde? Am I a queer filmmaker? Blah blah blah. Whatever. What I'm working on now is a movie about kids. It may be queer or not. I'm not really sure if sex is going to be a part of it. It's just a question of where your heart takes you.

**BAILEY:** People cry watching *Frank's Cock*. Does that connect you to people in a different way?

**HOOLBOOM:** Yeah, sure it did. I felt like I had to cry harder, and make better stuff. The feeling that I got in the theatre was unmistakable. It was a good feeling, and I wanted to have that happen again.

It was a reminder again that you can do three million formal headstands, and out-razzle dazzle the best that's ever been, and people may applaud politely. Or they may leave. But if you can connect and move people, that's film. That's the magic of sitting with all those people in the dark, and giving yourself over to that light.



Portions of this interview originally appeared in an article in *NOW* magazine, 18:6, October 8, 1998.

*You-Architectural/starring Karin Dayton (above), **Whatever** (below), KIKI THORNE*



# Kika Thorne: Bodies and Desire

*Mike Hooboom*

The films of Kika Thorne follow a trajectory from private sphere to public. All of her making carries a diary address, each film arising from personal encounters, or as Thorne describes it, just “hanging out.” These casual, low-tech documents of the underclass come armed with a barbed politic, whether the sexy feminism of her early work, or the address to urban homelessness in her more recent efforts. Delicately enacted and finely honed, these are political films which are never strident; their origin in the personal never lapses into solipsism.

While she has used a variety of low-fidelity methods, super 8 has been her most reliable companion, providing both portability and an accessibility of means. Whenever the need arises, the camera can be passed on to participants for their point of view, and its no-budget results serve as example to any hoping to commit their own dreams to emulsion.

*The Discovery of Canada* (4 min 1990) is an allegory which relates a personal dreamscape to nationhood. Photographed in a darkly drawn black and white, *Discovery's* fragmented glimpses are propelled by a first-person narration which describes a nighttime walk towards home, and then a recognition she is being followed.

240 The film's first image shows two legs rising from the frame's bottom edge, both resolutely underexposed, glimpsed in half light. They offer the view of legs opened in childbirth, a subjective view of maternity, limbs parted to unveil two bodies drawn from a single source. A brief hand-held shot of a dance follows, the camera and its subject joined in an expressive shake of meat. And then a title appears, painstakingly scratched onto the narrow arena of the super 8 frame. It spells "herself." This declaration of subjectivity, signed in the filmmaker's own scrawling script, literalizes a feminist écriture, a bonding of words and places beneath a name only she can utter. After the title a hand-held shot follows, aimed at an urban stretch of dirt filled with the remnants of a broken and discarded glass. As she walks the voice continues: "Suddenly his body came swinging through the doors on a rope and landed in front of me. He had giant shards of glass jutting out of his flesh, small puddles of blood gathering there." Breaking through her French doors, he arrives with glass lodged in his flesh. As the story progresses there is a suggestion that anyone joining "herself" in this place, the place of her home, would need to come bearing these scars, that any admission would have this toll exacted. These shards are the signs of company, the semiotics of union.

The voice-over continues: "I looked into my bag and pulled out some gold scouring pads and started to lather his cuts. I think he became numb from the pain." As the voice recites, the camera recounts a meeting of friends, two women glimpsed in a strong side light, the camera poring over moments of their expression with a gaze that is less observation than caress. Lensed in a series of extreme close-ups, Thorne finally closes in on the ear, organ of admission, allowing us to keep watch over the spiralling shape of mutuality. The voice continues,

I was still afraid of him even though he was completely helpless by this point, perhaps dead but I knew that he would push and find the strength to hurt me. I looked over and saw an X-acto blade. I thought about picking it up and trying to stab him with it but I knew in my mind's eye that the flimsy metal would only wobble against his flesh. But I thought if I strike over and over again I could dig away at his back and cut out his heart.

After a white crossbar divides the image into four equal quadrants, we see a dark chain attached to a buoy in icy water. It tugs at the buoy in a wind-inspired yearning, the water sparkling like the glassy shards of the filmer's

walk moments before. The round buoy, appearing like an eye cast adrift in an aqueous humour, is joined to the chain without being part of it—here is another couple attempting to reconcile differences, the line and the circle, the cock and cunt, hauling at cross purposes.

The voice concludes, “I knew this wasn’t the right thing, in fact, I looked down at him, and scooped him into my arms, one closing in on his head, the other his ass, and my finger came to rest where the warm hairs circle his asshole.”

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*Discovery's* narration rises in pitch as it proceeds, its thinning timbre imparting a little girl cadence. Even as the voice draws towards the end of the story, it suggests its own beginnings. At the film's close the narrator is both mother and child, receding into the body of the mother, the body of language. Her encounter with the intruder is emblematic of this double movement. The stranger is repelled, then accepted. It is this alternating current, between submission and domination, between admission and expulsion, that Thorne would take up in her ensuing personal works, which would more centrally place her own body at the nexus of identity.

*Fashion* (3 min 1992) and *Division* (3 min 1991) are complementary films that join Thorne and Stephen Butson in performative miniatures. Each film runs the length of a single black and white roll of super 8, each primed on isolated rites of contact that illuminate gender division and power. *Fashion* is photographed entirely on video and then rescanned off a television monitor. It shows Thorne lying inert, wearing a moiré gown which her companion cuts away with scissors. Using a variety of crude video techniques—the tape is freeze framed, fast forwarded, and rewind—these actions are subject to an electronic review, poring over gestures of female servitude. Thorne sets up a double standard here, appearing as an ultra-passive performer on the one hand, little more than a dressmaker's doll, but at the same time superimposing the marks of a maker's control.

In *Division*, clothes are no longer at issue, as both Thorne and Butson appear naked, making out in the bath. Their contact is interrupted only once, in an intertitle that lies between them: “liar.” As the only word in the film, “liar” unleashes a train of associations that folds the film back on itself, turning an innocent bathtub romp into the division of the film's title. The “lie” relates the filmer's conflation of power and intimacy. Despite *Division's* verité trappings—handheld camerawork, crude lighting, and unrehearsed gestures—these intimacies are patently staged, drawn towards the end of their own reproduction, finally borne away by one of its members to authorize and release as her own issue. This is not intimacy, but its staging, its appearance.

*YOU=Architectural* (11 min 1991) is a reflection on male desire cast in three parts. The first shows a man moving as Thorne's handheld camera glides alongside. His boxed inventory, storeroom of personality, becomes a metaphor for the displacement of desire, transferred by hand from one domicile to the next. The soundtrack is interrogative, a series of questions its moving image never stops to answer. It asks, "Why did we need your approval? Why did we think if we got it, it would make a difference? Why didn't we remember that difference was more than just a theory, that we could take advantage of all we learned? Why did we have to get so goddam earnest? Couldn't we put up a bit of a fight? Why, when you entered our bodies, did we lose our savvy, our style, our wit? Why didn't we leave you?" If his moving is figured as the result of actions never glimpsed, as the aftereffect of love, then her questions search out the reasons for this hasty parting.

A hand bearing a stamp marks the letter "O" on a scroll of paper, inaugurating the film's midsection. It shows a woman in close-up kissing and touching a blank wall. Because Thorne has flipped the original footage, the woman's small gestures towards the wall (kissing and touching) play backwards, just as her face appears upside down. While she peers intimately into its soft blank the voice-over recounts a story of violation.

We were at a party when we were introduced and they tell me you're Tony and I remark, "Oh yeah, your mother and mine were friends once." And he looks in recognition, laughs and says, "Kika," and I say, "And you raped me when I was eleven." Funny how the record stopped after I said that, all the voices stopped though few dared to look over where we stood. I stare straight into his crown, he's looking down, or is he looming into my eyes, hungry again for my eleven years? I can see he's remembering his illicit memory and he's enjoying it or is it guilt and his lover is standing next him shaking his arm asking, "What the hell is she saying? What the hell is she saying? What the hell is she saying?" And each repetition gets a little less calm because this is all making too much sense. Because this is just a bad dream for her, because a moment in her past is saying yes, yes, yes. I'm kicking him in his groin so he won't have kids to abuse. I took my elbow to his teeth, his face into the wall, the floor. I felt the cartilage snap off his bone, his aqualine nose cum hideous and now people are starting to turn on me. They don't care if he ever hurt me. Now I'm abusing him and they have to stop it.

This tale of female revenge relates her actions at a party, in a long-delayed reaction to events many years before. Meanwhile, in the image, a woman reclines against a wall, used here as a metaphor for recall. Even as her image is played backwards, she is likewise trying to go back, to return to the pain of her youth. Her image asks how she might touch this place, this memory, without destroying herself. How can she live with this knowledge, with a sex steeped in violation and abuse, without beginning it again now?

The text is recounted by a male voice, though the "I" in the story clearly

denotes a woman. Displacing the narrator's gender, Thorne distances her story, re-routing her desire in order to reclaim it, to take it back from the masculine dissent that first took it away from her.

They say the veil that hides the future from us was woven by an angel of mercy. But what blinds us to our unpredictable past? Why are we hooded as we search amongst its ruins, trapped in the intricate web of motive and action? Novelists of our own lives, making ourselves up from bits of other people, using the dead and living to tell our tale, we tell tales. (*Sin* by Josephine Hart)

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The solitary hand re-appears and impresses the letter "U" on a blank scroll, initialling the film's final sequence. Processed by hand as a black and white negative, we watch close-ups of a drafting table. Pencils follow the trued lines of geometrical imperatives, the body's mathematical extensions plotting new homes, new arenas of visibility. On the soundtrack, the filmmaker's voice recounts the story of herself and Neil, a London architect.

Except for Lloyd's and Battersea, London was architecturally famished, so we shifted our attention to each other's bodies, and eventually in the pale light of night, me with my underwear down around my ankles squatting on the window ledge, toes gripping the old wood, him with his tongue between my legs and his hand too and I was trying not to breathe so hard. It seemed with every exhale I'd lose my grip, and when I came I was flying and screaming. I was face up on the cement two stories below and knew I was going to die. But maybe I would just be physically broken. And I looked up at Neil's face, lit by that moon, and knew what he was thinking.

The film closes with this enigmatic epithet, "I knew what he was thinking." Hurling from an impoverished London architecture into the grip of sexual delirium, Thorne looks back at the stolid figure of her new lover, framed in old wood. But there is no structure, no place that can contain her desire. So when she relates, "I knew what he was thinking," she contrasts her own boundless flight with his carefully measured architectural plots, her explosive sexuality with the limits of a desire that seeks its image in the permanence of geometry, in the measured tiles of home.

Each of her three partners is presented in relation to architecture, the first swapping one house for another, the second erecting an architecture of denial and repetition and the third making plans for future domiciles. But while each is associated with and finally contained by the architectures they inhabit, she moves from one to the next, the final image of her flight evoking her escape from male constructions, even as her threat of bodily injury conjures the cost of her freedom.

In 1992, Thorne, along with thirty others, began a women's only cable tv collective called SHE/tv. Taking advantage of cable's mandate to provide

community access and programming, SHE/tv wanted to provide an entry point for first-time makers, as well as public space opportunities for artists. Much of Thorne's work over the next four years would be made at cable television, though it would bear little resemblance to other offerings on the tube, as it remained formally inventive and resolutely personal.

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*Whatever* (21 min 1994) takes up the thorny issues of race and identity in an elegant weave of experimental portrait, racial exposition, diary work, and "coming out" film. The effect is an inventory of personal experience framed within questions of colour and its attendant host of invisible ideologies. Rife with a lyrical exposition, *Whatever* takes its cue from the talking head tales of Courtnay McFarlane, a young black gay male who speaks of his lost patois, the importance of a black lover for him, and the invisibility of blacks in gay porn. Animated, funny, and reflective, McFarlane's insistence on the political motivations behind private conceits echo through the surrounding collage: a loosely knit portrait of white girls at play. We see Rashid brushing her hair while Prince blares on the box, a swinging woman shown in negative reciting the fifty states of the union, Janet in the bath, another playing solitaire with girlie cards until she herself becomes one of their number, two women making love in the forest.

Interleaved with McFarlane's racial expositions, it is impossible not to see these friends at play as "white," engaged in the reproduction of whiteness, even as their gestures appear intimate, everyday, commonplace. Thorne closes her tape with a pair of doll scenarios. In the first, McFarlane's poem scrolls past the black dolls he has collected to remind him of our racist heritage, while in the second a woman plays in fascinated identification with a hand-painted doll, kissing and then torturing it, seeking in it a model for her own experience. Thorne suggests that *Whatever*, and by extension, artist's film and video, is also a plaything, a doll offering models of possible experience and interaction.

*Suspicious*© (6 min video 1995), a collaboration with fellow SHE/tv member Kelly O'Brien, was made in response to the surge of identity-based politics that swept the Canadian art scene in the early '90s. While a grass-roots, artist-run movement had flourished in the previous two decades, providing a national web of specialized galleries, equipment access centres and screening venues, the notable absence of people of colour pointed to a systemic exclusion which challenged the traditional constituencies of DIY culture. In *Suspicious*© a rapidly edited collage of nine people pronounce their own identities (gay, dyke, South Asian, person-of-colour, Jewish), but then begin to unravel these easy namings. Scott Beveridge insists that the only thing he has in common with the Gay Republican

Party or those fighting for gays in the military is that he sucks dick. Laura Cowell would still consider herself a dyke even if she was dating a guy. Proceeding via sound bite and metaphorical cut-aways (dildo collage, rolling up a steel fence, gay rights march), *Suspicious*' kinetic vortex of intimacies lends fresh perspectives to the often polarized debates on race, gender, and identity. Young, cheeky, and articulate, the nine folks gathered here demonstrate that politics is a question of choices made every day, as they seek new words for experiences not yet dreamed of.

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*October 25 + 26th* (8 min 1997) documents an agit-prop protest against the provincial Tory government, whose rapid succession of hospital closures, welfare cuts and elimination of rent controls led to Canada's largest ever political rally, the Metro Days of Action. Architects and artists (including Thorne), naming themselves the October Group, built a 150-foot inflatable sculpture and raised it just outside city hall as part of the day's activities, and Thorne's tape documents the sculpture's manufacture and deployment. A long plastic tube given shape by a series of cold air vents bears the following message stencilled across its length: "Have mercy I cry for the city; to entrust the streets to the greed of developers and to give them alone the right to build is to reduce life to no more than solitary confinement." Photographed in a careening, off-the-cuff style in super 8, its accretion of detail is moving and exact, depicting the camaraderie of the group, and the sheer delight many took in walking within its temporary walls. At film's end it is razored apart, providing a climax both modest and exhilarating. In short order it is folded up and put away, as the October Group joined the crowds gathered in protest.

A year later, the group would gather again, responding in protest to the provincial government's continuing inaction over the crisis in affordable housing. Returning to city hall, they laid down sixty-six mattresses in a large grid, a public sculpture of roofless beds which stood in mute protest. As tv crews gathered, Thorne proceeded to document the event in her own inimitable fashion, passing the camera around to onlookers and friends, frolicking with the young and curious across the sea of soft fabrics. *Mattress City* (8 min 1998) begins with a pixelated romp over house exteriors before a travelling shot brings us into the city of Toronto. A series of superimposed titles names the six municipalities of Toronto, suggesting each has developed particular strategies to deal with the problem of housing. In 1998, the provincial government decided to amalgamate these six into a single "megacity." The day before the public plebescite the October Group laid down their public sculpture. "It was proposed as both warning of the homelessness and migration a megacity could create, and a utopian structure inviting citizens to occupy this public space." After these titles

the film shifts into black and white, showing mattresses being loaded onto cars, the communal work of laying them out, strangers jumping on the mattresses, and the group sleeping overnight (a tarp allowed its intrepid members to spend the night). Finally the mattresses are towed away, leading us to a series of titles which narrate the overwhelming vote (76%) against amalgamation. The megacity was created in spite of the vote on January 1, 1998.

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*Kathy Acker In School* (8 min 1997) features an interview with the post-punk iconoclast, an author renowned for her text grafts, her sexual frankness, and her unflinching ability to mine the abyss. Acker appears in an I-shaped matte, speaking in blue-toned close-up. She tells of her early interactions with American underground film, how Jack Smith hoped to build a great pleasure dome in North Africa, invite strangers to come and tell him what they wanted most, which he would then make into a film. Acker's image is keyed over a schoolgirl romp, Thorne's own *School* (3 min 1995). It features a grainy duet of schoolgirls (played by Headmistress Barbra Fişç and the filmmaker). The two are dominant and submissive, the student shines shoes before having one strapped to her face, waiting for punishment, she opens her hands for whipping, then bends over a chair to have her ass spanked.

Both images shuttle back and forth, there are no edits here, as the I-matte examines and re-writes Acker's face, searching for anecdotes, or re-cues the s/m punishments of the girl's behind. Laid over all of it Donna Summer croons, "Love to love you, baby." Acker concludes:

I reached the point in my life where I got sick of living in a black hole. It's finally time to do something else. To ascend. To make structure. So I became less interested in tearing everything apart and being angry. I started looking for ways to make that didn't reek of a world I disliked.

The title of *Intraduction* (3 min 1997) is a self-made word conjuring an in-between space of introduction and passage. Its very illegibility suggests a troubling of language's usual transparency, especially in this transfigured space of the tv talking head. Begun with a clear red screen we hear a voice reciting a German text, and then its translation. It concerns the reception of Freud's theories on childhood sexuality. Freud remarks on the difference between genital and sexual pleasure, insisting that sexuality begins immediately after birth. Like the transmission of Freud's original texts, one is forced to contend with a halting translation of its reception. The translator (clearly not a professional), slowly comes into focus. But this image, shot hand-held, in ever-changing hues and tones, leads us back to the subjectivity of expression, and the difference between the written word and its oral performance.

Her most recent video, *WORK* (11 min 1999) follows in episodic fashion the life of an underemployed twentysomething female (played by Shary Boyle). Following a structural conceit, each shot lasts exactly a minute, and is lensed from two distinct perspectives, which appear simultaneously on two adjacent screens within the frame. But while the structure is rigid the performances are unrehearsed and improvisatory, lending an easy naturalness to each vignette. *WORK* proceeds from the young woman's data entry job to news from her boss that she is fired. She lies motionless on a couch letting a thrash metal riff wash over her, hangs out with friends, goes to a party, meets a guy, and makes out with him. Contrasting the physical intimacy of her new boyfriend with the aural intimacies of her girlfriends, Thorne leaves the end deliberately unresolved. As in life, she suggests, there are no tidy endings here, no possibility of closure, only the ongoing struggle to live. To work.

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Thorne's double vision representation, often offering us simultaneous front and side views of the same action, keeps us keenly aware of the act of framing, of how this woman's friends, associates, and employment possibilities all work to place and define her. Context is content, Thorne suggests, in this frank merging of public and private spheres. Her protagonist's youth is clearly related to her job experiences, just as her previous romantic attachments form the basis for her new love. In trying to find her own image in this mosaic of identities, she finds a part of herself mirrored in each of her interactions, and so a self begins to emerge which is both refined and redefined in each of its interactions.

If Thorne's early work deconstructed the machinations of power and gender, insistently viewed in a personal setting, her work since the mid-1990s has taken on a broader political cast. Turning her low-tech documentary techniques towards an exploration of state power, race, and the bisexual kingdom, Thorne continues to draft one of the most intriguing and bravely personal oeuvres of the fringe.





*Sheet Sculpture by Kika Thorne + Adrian Blackwell, 1996. 8 minutes.  
Originally shown on SHE/tv, Public Access Television.*

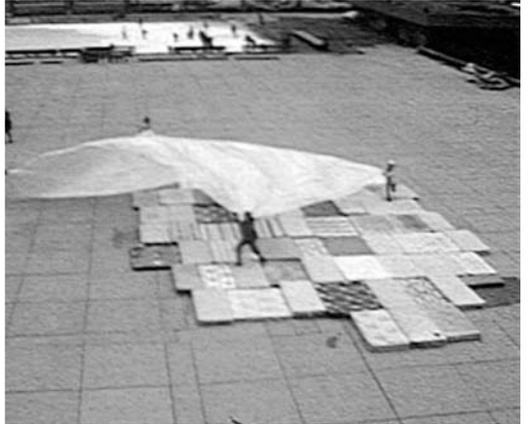




*WORK* by Kika Thorne. 1999. 11 minutes. Music by Peaches, starring Shary Boyle with Randa Bean, Simeron Heath, Nancy van Keerbergen, Louise Liliefeldt, Sheldon Ramsay Deverell. Shot by Daniel Barins in 24 hours, *OnThe Fly*.







*Mattress City by Kika Thorne + Adrian Blackwell. Project by the February Group 1998. 8 minutes. On March 1 + 2nd of 1997, a group of artists and architects placed 66 discarded mattresses in front of Toronto City Hall to protest the Ontario government's forced amalgamation of six separate cities into one Megacity. Originally shown on SHE/tv, Public Access Television.*





October 25th + 26th, 1996 by Kika Thorne. Project by the October Group. 1996. 8 minutes. During the 2 day general strike known as Metro Days of Action, a 150' long tunnel was inflated using the air vents in front of Toronto's Nathan Phillips Square. Originally shown on SHE/tv, Public Access Television.





*Kathy Acker In School by Kika Thorne, 1997. School [1995] starring Miss Barbrafish as The Headmistress, shot by Slave Frantic Yip Hai, with the director as humiliated schoolgirl. The interview with Kathy Acker was videotaped by Kathleen Pirie Adams on Halloween night, 1996; the tape was finished a week before her death in 1997. The original 45 minute interview is placed inside the 3 minute film School. Without cutting, in fast forward or rewind, Kathy Acker In School is 8 minutes.*

# She

*Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak*

December 3, 1998, a Pleasure Dome screening. I had just adjusted to the premise of a rather quirky storyline offered up by Sadie Benning's *Flat Is Beautiful* when I saw him and seeing him, I got a little dizzy, mouth dry, a bit light-headed. It had been a couple of months but I always anticipated him at these evenings. He'd missed the British tapes earlier in the fall. Maybe he was sick or out of town. Not that we'd ever spoken directly. I had heard his voice once, though, when he spilled a bit of beer on the woman sitting in the row in front of him as he was taking his seat. It was tight (as usual), full house. She was very chilly about it. But I'll never forget his voice, a rich, warm, not-deep-but-with-depth timbre marking his deferential "sorry." I replayed it over and over that night as I tried to sleep.

Tonight he was uncharacteristically late and ended up standing at the end of the row I was seated in. As usual, his notebook came out immediately and he began his automatic writing, his eyes never leaving the screen but his pen scratching

away. Over the last decade, I had had many fantasies about what exactly ended up in that little book. Not all of them repeatable. He had gotten to me.

The audience that night adored Sadie. She's grown up a bit now. I remember seeing her in New York when she was about seventeen, overalls, shy, well spoken. She's still got the gift of gab and the crowd had a hard time letting her say goodnight. At the end, after the applause died down, I realized that I was almost totally alone in the hall. And a small innocuous notebook lay on the floor at the end of my row. I had to keep my excitement under control for a few brief seconds as I casually made my way towards it, taking care not to look too anxious or direct, and turning to exit, I dipped—gracefully for a person of my size—and the prize was mine. Haste made my shoulder bag hard to open but I did and the booty was deposited safely. I made my departure, not so fast as to draw attention to myself, just as he was returning to his former standing spot, obviously looking for something he had lost.

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Home, I abandoned my usual spritzer for a single malt, neat, to steady my nerves, before I opened the door to my stranger's soul. His notebook, however, yielded no immediate thrill; instead, it seemed to be a kind of meditation exercise with codes and puzzles that denied me the guilty pleasure I had anticipated. Other than his name—Sam Allen—and his address—in Old Cabbagetown, a neighbourhood I was familiar with only by name—the notebook might just as well have been written in a foreign language, so mute did its pages look as I leafed through. Well, I thought, I'd better start where I know what's going on. So I turned to the final page of the notebook, written, as I had witnessed, just that evening:

  
**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 1998

**M**military enthusiasts celebrate the 700th anniversary of William Wallace's victory over the English in the Battle of Stirling

Bridge in 1297. On the same day, Scots voted in a referendum to have their own parliament.

*There are days when I can almost draw a floor plan of one of the places even though it's so many years ago. And this guy who would always be at the end of the bar, very quiet, named Emmett. How you had to be careful*

with what you said or else he would cry but only after a couple of hours of steady drinking on his part. So you could be pretty sure of not provoking anything if you were in and out before 10pm. Tonight I liked the part where the mom brings in the groceries and they have to eat with their masks on. I liked the bus ride. It looks like Cleveland or some place like that although I've never been to Cleveland. She looks like the girl Yvonne who lived on Taylor Street, short brown hair and her socks were always dusty. A bit like Sadie Benning:

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Closing the notebook, I come up for air. It's a different world under there, weightless with just a whiff of danger. Armed with another single malt I contemplate my prey. He's different than he appears, stranger and more elusive than at any time over the past ten years that I have been in pursuit. Physically, he's changed little. Behaviour too is unaltered: his stillness in the bright room before the projector comes to life; the intensity of his gaze once it's fully dark; his trance-like state, eyes locked on the screen; his pen moving, scratching like a trapped hedgehog. Whenever possible I have seated myself near him at screenings—especially over the past eight years when my stalking has intensified—craving the sound, the smell, and the feel of him. I enjoyed a bit of pressure on my thigh once and the excitement of disengaging conjoined umbrellas one fall night.

In a state of surrender, I sleep. Perhaps the weekend will yield a clearer picture of him. I have put the notebook away for the next twenty-four hours.

  
**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1989

## Intelligence leaks prompt crisis talks

DUBLIN

**B**ritish and Irish government ministers held crisis talks co-operation was staged in a tense atmosphere after Northern Ireland

yesterday after a string of intelligence leaks to Protestant gangs in Northern Ireland developed into a major security scandal.

The meeting to plot cross-border

police disclosed on Thursday that a list of suspected IRA members had been stolen from a top-security Belfast police station....

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I suspect that you can record anything, every thought, every idea, every fantasy - and people will watch it. Just give them a reason and they're there. We didn't have any storms - not like those. Not with big skies and all the fireworks that attend. Just a lot of rain. Sometimes for days. Kuchars's video shows it off beautifully. He's a strange one, so personal and confessional, even showing his shit and so enigmatic in the end. I couldn't do that, show my shit to anyone. It would not be a thing I would do. I had a favourite spot in the house, when I was in the basement room, where I could see into the next door house. There wasn't much to see but I always looked. Once the guy who lived there, I forget his name, took a lot of time to first clip his ear hairs and then to cut a piece of paper - or maybe several pieces of paper - into very small pieces and then flush it all down the toilet. It took about 4 flushes by my count.

Over coffee on Saturday, I open the notebook at the first page. I remember that date because it is my birthday. I was there with a couple of friends from work. It was Pleasure Dome's inaugural screening at the Euclid Theatre. The Euclid is gone now. I had a t-shirt for a long time that said LET'S NOT LOSE THE EUCLID but I recently cut it up for rags. Sometimes I walk by the condominium that has replaced the Euclid. It gives me a strange feeling, hard to explain.

I suspect now that he sits in the screenings and lets them release a lot of memories for him. Maybe he has trouble remembering any other way. I am conscious of how little I know about him. I turn the page:

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844

FRIDAY, JULY 18, 1990

## Rise feared in cost of dying GST a nightmare, committee told

by Kevin Cox  
Atlantic Bureau

HALIFAX—

**T**he proposed federal goods and services tax is going to unfairly increase the cost of dining, driving, doing business, dancing around a Christmas tree and even dying, a Senate committee was told yesterday.

To the obvious delight and encouragement of the Liberals

on the committee, groups ranging from the Funeral Service Association of Canada to the Nova Scotia Christmas Tree Growers Association condemned the proposed 7 per cent tax, saying it will be an administrative nightmare and will be hard on those who can least afford to pay it....

He's right. Tom Dean. Right in that architecture is not the answer. But what is the answer? The floating deal is good - up to a point. But it all can't float. Structures, that is. We would get a lot of branches, sort of the same length, and then lash them together with string mostly, little bits of rope and some wire. Not very solid but it would float. And we would set sail. They were doomed voyages. Never got more than 100 yards from shore. But it was scary nonetheless. Because from the moment that you reached that outer limit, you knew it could go either way. You might be smacked to pieces by the waves as they picked up or you might be driven back to the beach by those same waves just differently directed. And you weren't sure where the direction was coming from. That was the fun. Not knowing.

It's Sunday morning and I've got time on my hands. A dangerous state for a stalker. Armed with his address and a disguise (dark glasses, a loose-fitting trench coat and a miniature poodle with an Airedale cut) I take the Carlton streetcar to Parliament and disembark. I'll proceed the rest of the way on foot. I find his address without much problem. It's a kind of in-fill housing situation on a small street but my Perly's map serves me well. I am standing outside with a peeing dog just as he exits his domicile around noon.

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Lucky break that my pooch had to relieve herself. But I am struck with how strange my object of desire looks to me now. Not looks, but seems. He is completely different from the person I was attracted to ten years ago. Or so it would seem. His intensity is inward looking, self-absorbed. He's working out a lot of stuff but it's all very personal. No room for an other. And I'm definitely an other. But, I remind myself, that's the result of my reading his diary. On the surface, he hasn't changed.

  
**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844  
 WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1992

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

“It's up to you how much public respect you want. You get that respect by disclosure, not by conceiving ways to hide things.” Former

Ontario Supreme Court Chief Justice William Parker to a parliamentary committee studying conflict-of-interest legislation...A6

*When I'm there, I just don't think about a term like "slut". It's just not a term I'm comfortable with. It's not a term I attribute easily. When I see those long thighs, they look like pictures of thighs, and if I have the chance to really look, they look like sculptures of thighs. That's a very different experience from say, pornography which makes me feel rushed and a bit anxious (although relieved after; that's sort of a conflict). But when I am there - in flesh, as it were - with the attributes, the thighs, it's different. I am different. I feel a bit like an explorer. Not that I would touch or anything. But I would look as if I need to map for the future. That's what I would do. That's what I do.*

She was very sweet and he seemed very attentive. He seems to be a bit more in the here and now at this point but I can't swear to it. We all were, really. That's what she does.

I'm having a bit of difficulty at work these days. My direct supervisor is having a nervous breakdown (personal reasons) and I am having to take up the slack. But he is never far from my thoughts these days because of the notebook. I ration myself but I have to read some each day.

  
**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844

## Harding knew of attack Didn't tell, skater admits

Associated Press  
PORTLAND—

**H**er hands trembling and her voice strained, Tonya Harding admitted yesterday that

she failed to come forward with what she learned after the attack on Nancy Kerrigan, but pleaded not to be denied “my last chance” at an Olympic gold medal....

*It could be true that any one picture could be substituted for any other without substantially altering the meaning. Reinke could be right. Just put one picture with another sound track and see what happens. Indeed, if there is any meaning available from pictures at all— given what we know about the alteration and falsification possibilities inherent within any photographic or electronic image. We might be better off to trust the other senses when it comes to interpretability. I remember having a lot of similar feelings and thoughts as I entered university. But that was a long time ago and I thought I was over this doubting phase. Perhaps not. But doubting, in and of itself, is not a destructive thing. Sometimes it is very liberating.*

for the season. It was a great time if you consider trimming trees and pruning lilacs fun. I personally get a kick out of burning the bagworms. Brings out the commando in me, I guess. It was almost enough to keep me from my obsession. Not that I refer to it that way. But with friends, I have begun to talk about him. It is a relief, in a way. It gives me a chance to be with him in a social setting. In a way.

262 After dinner on the Saturday night, I bring out the notebook. I have had a bit to drink, I admit, and I have a feeling of exhilaration. I am flirting with danger here. He is emerging from the shadows. Becoming real for others. He is already real for me.

  
**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844

FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 1994

## First column

### Hydro-Quebec, Inuit sign deal

**T**he Inuit of northern Quebec could receive more than \$1-billion dollars in compensa-

tion from Hydro-Quebec under the terms of a tentative agreement with the Great Whale hydroelectric project.

*I have been quite transported by this story. I wish I had been in the room when she was actually telling the story, reciting it, letting the camera record her. Not visible, I wouldn't like to have been visible, just present.*

*I was in the situation a few years back where I overheard a conversation - it was a neighbor, not a close friend or anything, but a neighbor. She started talking to a friend, they were in the backyard and I was sitting there, it was evening, not yet dark and I was reading the paper and relaxing. She was, all of a sudden, talking to her friend - a woman by the way - about her feelings when someone touched her breasts. It was very intimate and I was trapped*

*there then. She was so open with her friend. I'm not happy with the fact I can never reveal what she said, but it has stayed with me since then. It's so different to hear those intimacies - not just to read them.*

There were some other things that happened which I am not willing to discuss at this point but they have, shall I say, passed. Anyway, I got a raise and a promotion and with this increase in status has come the responsibility of caring for a lot of other people. It sucks. But I am good at it and do it with some flair. That's why I got the promotion, I guess.

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But now, with my new executive status, I can invent reasons to get out of the office mid-day and I have begun to follow him—not obsessively yet, just once or twice a week. I found out, by a weird coincidence, where he eats lunch every day. My periodontist has an office in the same building as the little place where he eats. It's not hard to be unnoticed by him. He never looks up. Sometimes I slip into the back of the place and sit behind him; sometimes I don't even look at him, it's just the sensation of being close to him that gives me that buzz.

  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1995

## Gene offers clue to predicting length of life

Simple blood test could identify individuals at  
increased risk for Alzheimer's, brain hemorrhage

by Wallace Imman—  
MEDICAL REPORTER

**A** simple blood test could predict how long your body is programmed to live, a study has found.

Scientists at Rockefeller University in New York have suggested yesterday that the form of a gene you inherit to keep cells repaired is an indicator of how long you could survive if your life were not cut short by accidents....

*The things I knew or sensed before tonight seem pale now. It's one o'clock and I'm still very much*

alive to the night. I don't know when I will sleep. Henricks' ghosts got to me. About how places hold memories. I had a very small room for most of the time I was growing up. I think it was about 10' x 12', just slightly larger than the bed. It certainly was strange when I was there with her. She took up lots of room because she was a bit big. Not overweight, just big. All over. I liked the feel of her but I am not sure I could ever go much further than we did.

I'm not getting any closer to this guy. His notebook is so random, so unfocused. Random clippings and random memories, all mixed up. The fact that I was in the same place at the same time isn't much comfort either. It gives me the creeps to think that I was sitting there, dreaming away about Mr. Wonderful while he's mining his id for traces of weirdness. But he still holds that attraction for me. And I'm not getting any younger. Sooner or later I'll have to confront him. Maybe this weekend. As usual, I take heart in the idea that he has been close to a "she" that was a bit big. I like that.

  
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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1996

## Science

### South Pole moves to new site

LONDON—

**T**he South Pole is in the wrong place, or at least it was, U.S. scientists say.

Researchers working in Antarctica said they had been marking the wrong spot for years...

If motion is aberrant then the deviation can't be predicted. Like me. I'm spinning too, in a way, like that gyre that's off kilter. Maybe it's an inner ear problem. Maybe it's fixable. I just can't keep out of that path. It's open, a real clear channel for me.

After she was dead for awhile I could still go outside, at night, and just have little talks. I wonder if I was really talking, or just I mess.

I liked him when he got desperate. It reminded me of me. Not on the outside. I'm very cool on the outside, a real professional. But inside I'm another animal altogether. I've developed a whole set of disguises that I employ on the weekends when I want to be closer to him. Wigs, hats, glasses. And he's never caught on once. I even toyed with the idea of posing as a cable guy to see if I could get into his house. That was a very exciting couple of days for me; I had the clothes and I must say I could carry off the ruse pretty well. I've never done drag before; it was kind of exciting, in and of itself. I walked around my neighbourhood and I don't think anyone recognized me. But I ran into one snag. I had let my driver's license lapse a couple of years ago, so renting a van would not be possible.

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SATURDAY, JUNE 22, 1996

## Unabomber suspect to be moved

HELENA, Mont.—

**A** federal judge yesterday ordered Theodore Kaczynski moved to California to face charges that he is the Unabomber.

U.S. District Judge Charles Loveli signed the order after a 15-minute hearing where lesser charges against Mr. Kaczynski in Montana were dismissed.

Mr. Kaczynski, 54, appeared for

the hearing, his first time in public view in more than two months.

He was indicted Tuesday in Sacramento, Calif., on 10 counts of transporting, mailing and using bombs.

The indictment marked the first time Mr. Kaczynski has been charged in the Unabomber's 18-year campaign of terror aimed at smashing the modern industrial order.—AP

There was a place, in the back of the house, where I kept all the teeth. It wasn't something that I shared but people knew about it. I know they knew because of the fact that things were moved around every once in a while, not messed up, just slightly

altered. I guess it could have been animals out I'm pretty sure it was the guys up the road. I have never thought that signals came back out of the cable television connection—other than the television signal itself. But I've read about people who have heard voices and claimed to have gotten messages from their television. That's not my problem. But you would think that people in high places would be a bit more careful when they know there's a camera there.

It's crazy, really, how little I miss going out with friends and socializing in general. But the way things have gone now, it's not such a big deal. Most of the gals from work I used to hang around with a few years ago have moved on and the new ones are a lot younger than me so it doesn't come up very much. And if they do invite me out, I always say I've got a "date." Ha ha, that's a laugh. My "date" turns out to be a trip to the grocery store in full disguise for an encounter with my beloved. Lately I've taken to wearing a grey wig styled in a bowl cut that makes me look like Jane Jacobs, complete with owlish spectacles and a shapeless housedress. I've followed him around the Loblaws filling my cart with an array of products that I have personally never bought before. I usually go through the checkout line two or three lanes over. He usually gets out before me so it's over then. I have to get a cab back home but it's always fun to extend the fantasy as I put away "his" groceries. Sometimes he does surprise me though. For instance I would never have pegged him for someone who would get the toilet cleaner in Potpourri scent. I would have thought he was Fresh Pine. And I have to say that the non-alcoholic beer was a bit of a shock too. It's not half bad but I admit that I didn't finish my six-pack. It's been a long time now. But he's my social life—he just doesn't know it.

  
CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844

FRIDAY, APRIL 18, 1997

## Stocks incomplete

**B**ecause of production problems, some editions of today's paper do not contain com-

plete stock listings. We apologize to readers for the inconvenience.

I know she was alone most of the time because he was out of town so much. For months at a time they would only talk on the phone maybe once a week. He had to go where the work was and sometimes it was right across the country. Yet the only time she would come around was usually right before he came home. Like she couldn't wait for him so she would be with me but because he was coming right away it didn't leave us anymore time to get together again. It meant that I was only with her about 6 times in over 7 years. And we never were in a bed even though once we rented a motel room but we were up against the counter in the bathroom instead. It had an interior courtyard with a pool and I could smell the chlorine all the time. I think it was in her hair too. Tonight I'm thinking that it might have made an interesting film but I haven't owned a camera since I was a teenager. I just don't trust myself.

It was a slow day at work and I was dreaming away on company time—about him, of course. I decided that enough was enough. He hadn't been to any of the screenings since I'd found the notebook and he didn't seem to be getting out much lately. Or if he was, my timing was off. I hadn't seen him in over a week. Deception just seems to come naturally to me sometimes. Almost immediately I had the whole plan. I would be very casual; just go up to his house and ring the bell and return his notebook that he'd left at the Sadie Benning evening. "Sorry it took me so long," I'd go. "Just happened to be in the neighbourhood, going to that great pet store to get a new set of dog booties for my little pooch—salt on pavement hurts the poor little paws," I'll confide, and she'll look up with her big dark eyes; he won't be able to resist...on the other hand, her left eye has been a bit runny this week, better leave her at home...excuse still good. Then he'll invite me in for coffee and the rest will be history. Just one more day to finish the notebook.

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**  
CANADIAN NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1852

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1998

# What's a poor dominatrix to do?

## Judge refuses to clarify the rules

### Thornhill's Terri-Jean Bedford left frustrated after being found guilty

THOMAS CLARIDGE—  
COURTS REPORTER,  
Newmarket, Ont.

**P**rofessional dominatrix Terri-Jean Bedford is frustrated.

After being found guilty yesterday of running a common bawdy house at her bungalow in the Toronto suburb of Thornhill, Ms.

Bedford said: "The judge still hasn't said what I can or can't do."

In his ruling, Judge Roy Bogusky of the Ontario Court's Provincial Division sidestepped completely the initial issue between the Crown and defence—whether sadomasochistic acts constitute sexual activity...

*With the screen so split up like Hoolboom does it's quite difficult for me to follow at times but the overlaps and layers are so luxurious. I wish I could sleep in this movie. I don't mean here in this seat, I mean right in the texture of the projection, in the light. I can't sleep very much at all now. It's another symptom, I guess. I like how he calls it Panic Bodies. I hope I don't panic. I did once. But I can't think about that now, not tonight. There was a space at the back where we would play pool sometimes and when we did, you could still see the front door and see who was coming in and going out. The guy behind the bar didn't mind even though we were too young. But sometimes, he would motion us into the bathroom. I figure it was because a cop came in or something but I have no way of knowing that because I*

was in the bathroom. One night he forgot about us there and we stayed until after midnight. I guess one of the patrons who used the bathroom told him and he came and got us and we went home. He was nice enough otherwise. He had a son who was about 18 years of age and the two of them looked so much alike that you would have thought they were twins. But I always found that a sad thing for the son because it meant that he looked old even though he was just out of high school. He was losing his hair and everything. Just like his dad. They were both named Ken.

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As I rounded the corner, I was glad that I had worn my good coat. It was a rich green wool, quite stylish and a good match with my paisley scarf. The front door to his house was slightly ajar. I knew enough from my snooping that he lived alone and had no tenants so I naturally quickened my pace to get into his view before he closed the door. It would seem more casual. But given my somewhat graceless ways, I was soon skipping, which even I knew was ridiculous. So I again slowed, stopped in fact until I could recover myself. I covered my actions with an adjustment (unnecessary) to my short boots, tugging at the zipper of the left one. Finally I had composed myself again and I entered his front gate to see a woman about my age standing in the front door reading the mail that had obviously just been delivered. She looked up and I could see a hint of him in her eyes. Brazenly, I offered my hand, saying that I had come to return "Sam Allen's notebook. I found it the other evening at a film screening." Since she didn't say anything right away, I continued with both feet.

"Yes," I rambled, "sorry it took so long but I was just in the neighbourhood..." (It had his address in it, blah blah). I was getting a bit sweaty in the palms with this story. Especially since she wasn't saying a word. Just looking. I finally had the good sense to take a breath.

And she said thank you very much but she was sorry to report that Sam was dead. Committed suicide last week. She's his sister from Vancouver, here to sort out things, funeral etc. Sam didn't have many friends—how long had I known him?

"Ten years," I lied immediately. "Suicide? He didn't seem depressed last time I saw him," lie number forty-five of the conversation so far.

"No, he didn't seem depressed but he had been planning this for quite awhile," she replies.

"Planning? Why?" I gawp.

270 "He didn't want to go any further 'out there' as he called it. When he was diagnosed he decided to set up some milestones and when he crossed the last one he would know and he would take his own life rather than deteriorate. I guess he crossed it earlier this month."

"Diagnosed? Do you mean Sam was HIV positive?"

"Sam had Alzheimer's."

"Oh."

I start to hand over the notebook. But his sister says no I can keep it, there's plenty more where that came from. I can see inside the front door now and she's right. There must be over 100 small notebooks, most identical in size and cover colour, each labelled on the spine carefully, lining a bookcase just inside the front door.

Before I can ask, she answers. "Sam wrote crossword puzzles for a living. He was good, too. Very good. His stuff was bought by the English language daily papers all over the world, Bangkok, Buenos Aires, Tokyo. It took a special talent to do that because you couldn't be too local or regional in your word choice. It's a perfect job for a Canadian."

"What about the notebooks?" It's all I can think to fill the space between us.

"Oh, he kept notes on sets of things. That's how he would start a puzzle. With two seemingly random words. So each notebook is a set of references. This one, for instance, uses recipes from women's magazines over a three-year period juxtaposed with pages torn from pulp fiction paperbacks he bought in bulk." She opens up to two pages, "He could have used whip and heist. As his starting point. See what I mean?"

I did, sort of. But my head isn't good with words at the best of times.

I'm a bit hesitant, but I ask her what she thinks he was getting at with the notebook I have. After hearing my explanation of each entry (I did leave out the sex parts, didn't want to tarnish her brother's memory), she asked to see a couple of pages. Immediately she pointed out something that I had missed. Each entry was accompanied by a single word in the upper left hand corner of

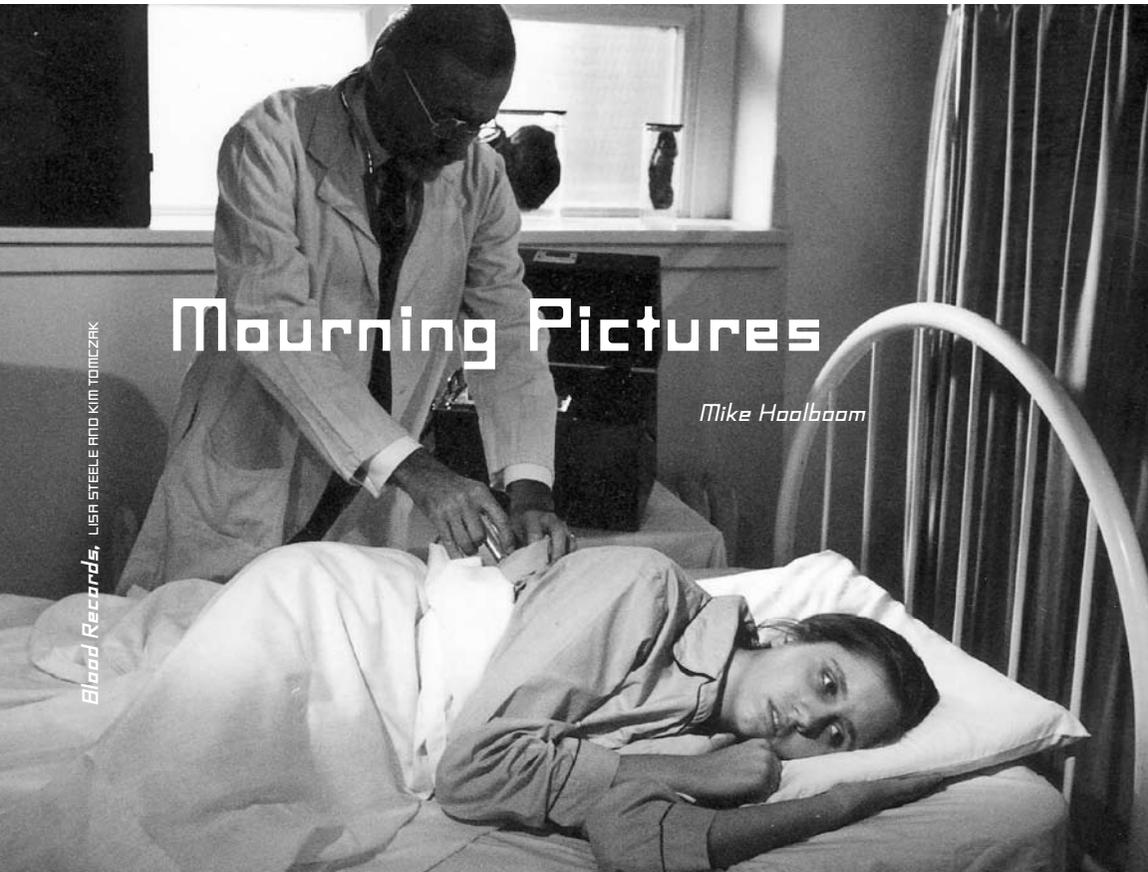
the newspaper clipping. In the case of the Sadie Benning evening, he had written in his tiny script "FLAT." Learning that this was the title of the video that evening, she concluded that he would most likely have used a word from a film title and a word from the random newspaper article he had included to start his puzzle. She suggested a very complicated way I might check it out. It involved going to back issues of foreign newspapers at the reference library and midway through her suggestion, I went kind of blank. She could see it and she allowed me to retreat after my offer of condolences for her loss.

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But it was me who had lost. All the way back to the streetcar stop, I mused about how this afternoon had painted a new portrait of Sam. I don't know if it made him any more interesting but it sure didn't make him any less. Oh, I forgot one thing that she said to me. I accepted her explanation of the main "code" of the notebook but I couldn't make any sense of the personal bits. This seemed to be a deviation from his pattern—at least with the notebooks she had shown me. "Oh, those writings are his automatic memory works. He's done that since he was a little kid. In school, on the bus, in the grocery store. He must have felt comfortable in those screenings. He could just let go."

★





Blood Records, LISA STEELE AND KIM TOMCZAK

# Mourning Pictures

*Mike Hoolboom*

## Ghost Stories

*The Blood Records*: written and annotated by Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele is a ghost story, a tale of love and legislation, whose spectres call from the other side of history with Hamlet's last words: Remember me. Like all ghost stories, this one offers passage back into an underworld of dark roots, where plagues and wars appear as convulsive echoes of the present, grown familiar despite our traditions of forgetting.

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Every ghost story is a history lesson. And if their ends are foretold—all histories end in death—the inexorable movement fascinates, each moment of a life granted meaning by this looking back, this hindsight of remembrance. In being able to answer at last the question that stalks each of us—how did he die? how did she die?—we are able to answer with greater conviction its counterpart: how did they live?

## Blood Relations

Every ghost story is a family story, arborescent, flourishing with uncles, great aunts, forefathers—generations of a name rooted in the land, and finally indistinguishable from it. *The Blood Records* is dedicated to the mothers of its makers: Mary Virginia Steele and Marie Collette Tomczak. While the circumstances of their lives are worlds apart, they are joined in one tragic purpose: both would contract tuberculosis, suffer detention in their adolescence, contemplate their mortality in state-sanctioned isolation. Both would eventually survive this plague, which would claim the lives of millions, grow old enough to marry, raise children who would one day meet and co-author a body of work dedicated to video art's eternal recurrence. Video art remains the road not taken by television, which insists that there is only the present, which offers flow in place of information, erasure in place of history. Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak are working underground, in the land of their mothers, below the threshold of an unbridled visibility, miners of the repressed, raising to light questions that trouble the relation between bodies and the body politic, citizenship and flesh. They are ghosts in the machine of state.

## Necropolis

In ancient Rome, the dead were buried and their final resting place marked with inscriptions, much like today. In the fifth century this practice fell out of favour, as care of the dead was assumed by the church. In the church, the

town's spiritual centre, grace could be measured by the distance between the deceased and the altar; nowhere could one find an individual marking or elegy. In the thirteenth century, notions of a collective fate gave way to the modern notion that the individual might find his or her own destiny, the peculiar truth which they alone embodied, reflected in their death. Cemeteries, long considered unnecessary, came back into fashion. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, in the twilight that separated the embrace of death and the will of the living, death was increasingly attached to the erotic, depicted in countless paintings and books. While death had long been considered part of a life cycle it was now understood as something outside, standing in opposition, as a rupture in the natural order. It became a place of madness and mystery, a final orgasmic shudder that would leave the world behind. In the Romantic period, this fixation with the erotic would be sublimated once more, to conjure new ideas of beauty, to join the ending of an individual with a rare refinement, purified somehow in this convulsive initiation. And death, which had long been a solemn commonplace, became the site of a radically new kind of grieving, an outpouring of emotion accompanied by bedside vigils, the intolerability of separation occasioning a new form of passion.

If private property had found its way back into the afterlife, the twentieth century would bring one more profound shift in the uneasy relation between the living and the dead, begun in the United States and soon spreading across Europe. It was the death granted us by the beginnings of modernity. Death as a secret. A death of whispers and denial. A death separated, as far as possible, from lives that must maintain their steady course towards the pursuit of happiness. In place of ritual: industries of death. Technologies of enlightenment. Hospitals and sanitoriums. Doctors and scientists. Death as a temporary failure of science.

## Tuberculosis

Named consumption in the fourteenth century, tuberculosis—from the Latin *tuberculum* (a small swelling)—became a plague in the last two centuries. Thought to be a disease exclusive to the lungs, its most typical symptoms included coughing and fever, and a langour that seemed to foreshadow death. It was a disease of artists and poets—of Keats and Shelley and Chopin—and became in the early turn of this century part of a new chic. It promoted a look of wan pallor denoting sensitivity and refinement, illness managing to unlock the tired habits of the everyday. Travellers of the underworld, these intrepid adventurers would wipe the doors of perception clean, bearing in their postures of exhaustion, the cost of liberation. The muse, it was felt, lay waiting

behind these bleached figures, who might step at last beyond the bounds of the known world, where only genius and madness belonged. Its symptoms of fever were held to be part of an inner fire which would cleanse the body, purify it through the crucible of this disease. If there was only one way to enter this world, there were infinite ways to leave it, but none conjured the beatific, self-transcendence of tuberculosis, which sweated away the dark corporeality of the body in order that it could be re-made into a ready portal for the divine.

## Transparency

Through the miracle of the x-ray our bodies appear to us for the first time, granted at last a vision of that metropolis of organs and tissues wherein lie the secrets of personality. Nudity is no longer naked. In travelling sideshows at the turn of the century, x-ray machines were an attraction that allowed that each might return home with a reminder of that foreign state we call the body.

Today we are preparing for a life of complete transparency, a place where notions of the individual and the unconscious will be scrubbed away, replaced by a tribal, digital consciousness. This revolution of consciousness, begun by medical science, has been impelled by the microchip visionaries of Tokyo and embraced by the new technology of video. Already we are witness to moments of unparalleled intimacy, broadcast nightly, as families and lovers undertake an international confession. The rapid dissemination of the camcorder has permitted, even demanded, a democracy of representation, as each of us busily converts the passing of our days into pictures. When this project is complete, when no moment of our life will pass without recording, the old self of depth and interiority will vanish, the dissolve between public and private accomplished.

If the effects of this paradigm shift, from a literary culture to a digital one, may be most easily tracked in the vomitorium of mainstream media, there remains another place, hidden from view, circulating through the road not taken. Video by artists has lent a critical edge to the project of representation, managing to preserve, in a society in recoil from notions of memory and history, the ability to grieve. And no tape has shouldered the burden of this representation with more grace than *The Blood Records: written and annotated* by Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele. Part TB documentary, part historical drama, it weaves together socialism's ideal of universal health care with medical technologies of surveillance in an impassioned work of mourning. The new necropolis, it suggests, is television.

X-rays are part of the surveillance arsenal *Blood Records* aims at its hospitalized subjects. Miming the medical gaze, the video camera pans slowly over these patients, poring over their flesh for signs of recovery or regression.

But not content to show only the outside of their charge, Marie, the young heroine of *The Blood Records*, appears often in the twilight of projection, hands opening to reveal knots of muscle and bone, her belly a tangle of intestines. Using slides to illuminate what flesh works to contain, her body is turned inside out, so that the gaze of science and the state may enter her completely, begin its procedures of regulation and discipline in a surveillance each of us would learn to extend to ourselves. If science were to succeed in ridding civilization of this plague, then its scrutiny must be one we would all carry out, on ourselves, at every moment. The ubiquity of today's video surveillance cameras—which record bank machines in Tokyo, traffic violations in Berlin, building entries in Vancouver—appear natural because they make manifest an eye we have already turned inward. The eyes of medical science would initiate a new period of self-consciousness, and a new body, marked by grammars of pathology and a new morality.

## Marie speaks of her possession by science

You saw the people coming back from the special surgery and they had a scar that was so long it looked like they'd been cut in two and stitched back together again and you were told over and over that it was nothing really. Nothing. Just a little bit of bone removed. Until the night before the operation when they wheeled you into the room where the movies were shown and you got a chance to see how much they actually took out. And you could see there wasn't going to be much left on that side and it made you feel funny, like you had a story in that part of you that was being told by someone else now, but from now on it would have a different ending. You couldn't even write it anymore even though you still lived there.

## The Cure

Tuberculosis was held to be a disease of dampness, inflicted by a wet city which had come to reside in the body itself, and so its cures came in the form of a pastoral retirement—to dry and isolated places where the lungs could regain their composure. Much of *The Blood Records* is set in Fort Sans, Saskatchewan, constructed in 1917, where patients could devote themselves to doing as little as possible. If popular mythology held that TB was an illness borne of an abundance of passion, its cure was designed to instill in the body an almost purgatorial state of recline. Steele and Tomczak revisit the sanatorium with actors and crew, restaging in their tape the small gestures that comprise a day waiting for its own end—the cycles of appetite and consumption carefully monitored by staff physicians. Children are raised from sleep, served meals, wait for moments of fever to be sponged away. Adults write alone in their beds, play checkers, drink milk—all with an overlaid text which appears like a prescription written over these prone bodies, each hour of the day assigned a

task and a place to perform it, so that the power to re-arrange the body could be inscribed directly onto time itself, organized now into profitable durations, and supervised with a total visibility. Here is Rousseau's old dream of the transparent society, where any hint of darkness has been banished, any zone of the unknown conquered, in order that its citizens may appear to one another with the irresistible force of consensus, the sanatorium a living ideal of the new democracy, and the new human being.

## The Church of Illness

Schools and poorhouses extended the life and regularity of the monastic communities to which they were often attached. Its three great methods—the establishment of rhythms, imposition of particular occupations, the regulation of the cycles of repetition—were soon to be found in schools, workhouses and hospitals. (*Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault, p. 149)

### Marie's Story

Marie is admitted to Fort Sans in 1944, suffering from tuberculosis. Her brother joins the army and dies shortly after arriving in Calais. Her family is French, but because English is the rule in the sanatorium, her language begins to erode; some children lose their origins altogether. She falls in love with a soldier, and with his smell of the outdoors, always busy writing what turns out to be a history of wartime press censorship in Canada. He has survived the disaster at Dieppe, and so knows better than any that the untold stories are the lives of friends, comrades, relatives. That history will decide who will be remembered. He writes so that memory will have a life outside his body.

At night, she discovers him having an affair with one of the nurses, already promised to someone at the front, someone like her brother perhaps. And while “he always seemed to be passing through...he just seemed to have a touch of the germ and it didn't seem as if he was going to have to stay long,” he dies, while she, who always looks frail, coughs blood in the night, manages to live.

### A Video by Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak

*The Blood Records: written and annotated* is a 55 minute videotape completed in 1997. Classically structured with a prologue and three acts, it narrativizes the first great plague of the twentieth century: tuberculosis. Begun in the fields that surround the sanatorium of Fort Sans, its tumbleweed rendered white through overexposure, the screen appears as the blank apron of the

past before stories enter to give it shape, underscored by blues maestro Leadbelly singing *TB Blues*. The first act features a montage culled from educational films which pit two spaces against each another: the intimate spaces of home (scrubbed to a Hardy Boys shine) and the cool interiors of the science lab. While home is figured as the site of contagion, doctors and scientists work to uncover the source of this mysterious ailment. The stentorian voice-over, familiar hang-over of the documentary form Grierson would popularize in Canada during the Second World War, offers a familiar mix of information and moralizing, warning its viewers about the perils of reception.

The educational films that comprise the first act have been deftly assembled to rehabilitate the mythologies that underlie the unintended camp kitsch of their original material—the origins of a public health in personal duty, the conflation of enemies abroad with microbes causing illness. Remarkably, this sequence ends with a doctor prophesying the end of tuberculosis, which vaccination has long since made routine, but it is impossible to listen to his studied optimism without hearing the word AIDS—that one day the AIDS crisis will be over—that science will deliver us from one more threat of contagion, keep us safe from one another.

The videomakers turn then to the capital of Saskatchewan, using aerial pans of the legislature and newsreels showing the swearing in of Canada's first socialist government under Tommy Douglas. It was Douglas's radical vision which demanded that health care be extended to all Canadians. Commissions were raised to study the population (over half the children in the province were found to be infected by TB), mass x-rays performed, resources pooled to provide treatment.

The second act is set in the sanatorium where patients are viewed taking their rest cures, these quietly observational moments underscored by a haunting violin measure and joined by white flashes, incendiary moments of white fever punctuating repose. Superimposed titles narrate the day's regimen, as doctors and nurses confer, check x-rays, prepare the morning's meal.

5 a.m. Patients wheeled back into room from balconies.

6 a.m. Milk pasteurization plant begins operation.

6:15 a.m. Kitchen staff prepare breakfast. Over 300 staff for 350 patients.

9 a.m. Morning rest cure begins. During rest cure, patients must not read, talk or listen to the radio.

11:15 a.m. Free time. Patients encouraged to work with their hands.

11:20 a.m. Patients encouraged not to worry.

11:25 a.m. Complete co-operation ensures recovery.

Midday meal

Weightless pans lend the viewer the eyes of a body gripped by fever, as if these re-enactments were being watched over by ghosts. Nurses pad silently in white uniforms delivering milk and meals, while the patients wait, read, play checkers, stare out windows, never far from the crisp white linen of their beds. The mood throughout is haunting and elegiac; despite the utopian curatives of a new science, it is difficult to shake the feeling that the end of the world is not far.

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The third act begins in darkness, with the voice of Marie, committed before adolescence to the sanatorium, recalling her experience from the far shore of the present. Family life appears in colour vignettes, posing for portraits, or gathered to eat before her brother sails off for war. Over her recollections the dominant formal trope is a virtuosic superimposition, moments of found footage erupting from prairie fields or the sanatorium; these places of waiting become a stage for reflection. Like the patients themselves, this is a landscape of ghosts longing for remembrance. For mourning.

## Marie's Last Line

This moderate feeling has become familiar to me. It is now all I allow myself to experience, even in moments of great joy.





*After Brenda, DONIGAN CUMMING*

# Beyond the Absurd, Beyond Cruelty: Donigan Cumming's Staged Realities

*Sally Berger*

Cruelty. Without an element of cruelty at the foundation of every spectacle, the theatre is not possible. In the state of degeneracy, in which we live, it is through the skin that metaphysics will be made to re-enter our minds.

—Antonin Artaud<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of Donigan Cumming's artistic impulse is the desire to unseat certainty by exploring what possibilities the unknown has to offer. He does this through a unique dramatic realism in his photographs, videotapes, and mixed media installations, at full tilt and some risk, choosing society's

marginalized, aging, and poor as his subjects rather than following our culture's penchant for the young and wealthy. Cumming arrives at this moment in his work by "fooling with the same nest of ideas for years," and by metamorphosing approaches across disciplines. Among these are the absurd and cruel theatres of Bertholt Brecht and Artaud; the writings and plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco; the reflexive and provoked cinéma vérité of Jean Rouch; the improvisational and extemporaneous films of John Cassavetes and Mike Leigh; the Dada constructivism of Kurt Schwitters; Duchampian surrealism; and the Fluxus movements of the 1960s.

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His challenge to documentary realism in photography began in the mid 1980s with a satirical critique of the medium's underlying relationship to reality in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986), an exhibition and a catalogue produced for the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. For this exhibition he shot a haunting series of photographs of poor and middle-class people in and around their homes. The work coalesced ideas taken from the history of photography and quoted the composition, manner and subject choices of the well-known social documentarians and modernist photographers from Walker Evans and Weegee to Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander.

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Since these early portraits he has continued to shoot dramatic, emblematic photographic tableaux and, beginning in 1993, to record vivid, anachronistic videotapes of the aging or ill, and socially assisted poor, in their most intimate surroundings without sanitizing or romanticizing these depictions. In conjunction with his photographs and videotapes, Cumming also creates installations that incorporate photography, video, and sound. In the 1980s he began to combine photographs with sound montages of fragmented and interlocking music and stories. In the 1990s he added videotaped performances to this mix of mediums. Using a variety of pictorial, narrative, and installation forms, Cumming elicits a hybrid form of reality, fiction, and theatre, willfully weaving irreverent combinations of actuality and invention; the role reversals between subjects and characters; and the juxtaposition and staging of people among the artifacts of their lifestyles. His work takes shape as a perverse dialectic on human nature, society, art and life.

Cumming's interest in combining narrative and non-fiction material is most fully articulated in his videotapes. The antecedents for this work in video can be traced to his earlier detailed photographic mise-en-scènes, the presentation of photographs in series, and the use of sound in installations such as those found in *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*. This formative and monumental project contained the seeds for his future work. It was created over a four-year period and consisted of working with

250 subjects, over one hundred photographs, six sound tapes, and five pages of letters written in long-hand. The work presented a visual critique of social realist and documentary conventions in photography to expose the epistemology of the field, focusing on the naiveté of artistic ambitions and the audience perception of photographic truth.

282 The first two sections of the exhibition consisted of photographs of people in boarding houses, institutional residences, and suburban homes around Montreal, although they could have been taken in many places. The subjects are grouped into familiar domestic units of family, friends, and lovers, but the portraits are oddly dispassionate and coolly uninhibited. As in impromptu snapshots, faces are expressionless, eyes are closed, and objects protrude awkwardly from behind and on top of figures. People stand exposed in their underwear and in absurdly exaggerated or ridiculously imitative positions. The disadvantaged and the privileged are treated as two distinct, but parallel, universes that cross over into each other. Paradoxically, some of the same models appear in both economic spheres.

Part three is an installation comprised of letters written by an anonymous woman to Elvis Presley (who she believed communicated with her through his songs played on KSSN, Little Rock); photographs and text supporting the "evidence" of her letters; and a sound montage of people reading and responding to the letters and singing Presley's songs. All three sections are presented as objective documentary reportage, but were deliberately staged, and satirical and/or allegorical in tone. The confusion caused by this, combined with disturbing images, simultaneously compelled and alarmed viewers. The exhibition was controversial, especially because it was not readily apparent that the subjects were in on the deception.

While taking the photographs that initiated the above project, Cumming met many of the individuals who came to be a feature of his future work. In 1982, an extraordinary 70-year-old woman, Nettie Harris, became his principle photographic model and collaborator. Together they created a series of lucid and playful photographs on the qualities of her life and aging that broke taboos on the representation of older women as well as on the representation of death. Out of this photographic record of Harris, Cumming created an installation, *Pretty Ribbons* (1993), that incorporated excerpts from a friend's diary and two soundtracks. A book by the same title followed in 1996.

Cumming turned his initial encounters with other subjects from *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* into collegial and intimate friendships

with lasting connections. The fictional community created for the exhibition began to take the shape of a committed working group of models and professional actors. Geoffrey Bates, Raymond Beaudoin, Nelson Coombs, Joyce Donnison, Gerald Harvey, Bea Johnson, Colin Kane, Albert Smith, and Susan Thomson are just some of the individuals in an ever-evolving cast in Cumming's photographs, videotapes, and installations.

Cumming adheres to the notion that "...an effective documentary montage must be as dense and disturbing as its subject reality."<sup>2</sup> In creating the photographic project *The Mirror, The Hammer, and The Stage* (1990), he began to work more intimately with a smaller group of people. In order to "show that photographic distillation is reductive and inadequate to the human situation," he scaled down the large roster of subjects from the hundreds in *Reality and Motive* and dropped the pretense or "act" of objectivity to engage with his subjects in a more outrageous and comedic exaggeration or "spectacle" of documentary realism.<sup>3</sup> For *The Stage*, Cumming delved into his photographic archives of people playing themselves in daily life and created a tightly arranged mosaic of 250 photographs of their antics. A soundtrack of Albert Smith doing a tour-de-force, improvised recitation of all the parts of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* accompanied the installation. It was at this time that Cumming began to narrow his focus

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to emphasize, "the imperfections and uncertainties of real engagements with another human being," by looking at a variety of psychological situations. An amalgam of these ideas is at the centre of Cumming's cinematic practice in which he explores cinema as neither documentary nor fiction, but as an organic functioning whole, where as Artaud proposed it was possible for cinema to "enter into contact with the real."<sup>4</sup>

A Prayer for Nettie, Donnison Cumming

Cumming's first videotape, *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995), was made as an elegy to his model and collaborator, Nettie Harris. It includes images recorded when Cumming first turned to video during the same year of her death in 1993. Since this work was produced, he has made at least one videotape per year and installations related to each. These videos—*Cut the Parrot* (1996); *After Brenda* (1997); *Karaoke* (1998); *Erratic Angel* (1998); and four short pieces from 1999, *Four Storeys*; *Trip*; *Petit Jésus*; and *Shelter*—build on and extend his narrative, theatrical, and documentary ideas. From videotape to videotape, Cumming exploits the qualities of a main actor to reveal his or her real-life story; he develops broader topics

around that specific character's issues; and he openly experiments with new cross-genre methodologies to most effectively portray the themes that surface.

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*A Prayer for Nettie* is Cumming's compelling signature videotape that grew out of the artist/mentor relationship between Cumming and Harris. Based on the candid nature of their previous work together, Cumming constructed a brutally honest and darkly ironic portrait on aging and death. By openly expressing his contradictory feelings about love and loss for the videotape, he established new grounds for greater trust with the subjects in his future projects. At first viewing, *A Prayer for Nettie* appears to disparage memory and poke fun at death. It is comprised of a contradictory web of testimonies by people who do not seem particularly close to Nettie, people who only knew her through other's recollections, or who did not know her at all. From the outset, Nettie's name is mispronounced as Nellie, and Cumming, situated behind the camera, can be heard prompting the characters what to say in their reminiscences and repeatedly asking them to practice their prayers for her. Whichever way you look at it, his construct is playfully cruel—or cruelly playful. He includes images of Nettie asleep, her breath emanating from her lips in silly popping sounds. An actor repeatedly calls out her name in



contrapuntal synch, as if to cajole her back to life, while lamenting her death. Or Cumming straddles her naked vulnerable body with his own as he videotapes her exposed pubis.

As the videotape unfolds, the viewers come to realize that we are witness to Cumming's hidden recollections and feelings toward Nettie, as they are enacted through others. Further, we observe the other characters' lives and hear about their specific philosophies of death even as it knocks on their door. In *A Prayer for Nettie*, a conversation between Cumming and the character played by Raymond (Beaudoin) is continuously interrupted by Raymond's hacking cough. Cumming interviews Joyce (Donnison), who lives, sleeps, and breathes with a long hose attached from an oxygen tank to her nose. He has absurdly wound two tiny black microphones onto the paraphernalia of her life-support system to record her as she rasps: "When you are remembered so well, then all is not lost." This type of dark humour and acknowledgement of death's evidence in life is found throughout Cumming's work. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes about how a photograph is always in some way about death, and the camera a clock for seeing.<sup>5</sup> Cumming uses the moving-image medium

of video to draw out the relationship between the image, time, and mortality.

*A Prayer for Nettie* conveys a palpable connection between the maker and his subjects and reverses the roles between them. Time slips forward and backward and stands still. One endearing character, Albert (Smith), becomes as central as Nettie in the videotape. The scenes shot with him on the day Cumming informs him of Nettie's death bracket the work. They create a rupture in time that drives the abstruse narrative from Nettie's death back to the living. In the first scene, Albert prays for "Nellie" and then angelically opens his eyes wide. In the final scene, Albert and Cumming weave in and out of a role play involving two hucksters, a real conversation between male friends, and a quasi truthful account of Nettie's death. Albert affectionately calls Cumming "Don" (just as all the characters refer to each other on a first-name basis). The exchange between the two leads up to a repeat of Albert's opening "prayer for Nettie" scene. This time he appears as an actor frozen in time at the end of his part.

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Unlike much documentary realism, Cumming's work ultimately leaves the inner privacy of the lives of the subjects intact. *A Prayer for Nettie* does not offer up a slice of Nettie's life, nor seek to reveal her hidden secrets. The work pulls from the roles that people play as characters in life, and the existential, metaphysical, and dramatic experienced in the everyday—simultaneously anguished, loving, and unpredictable. The installation for *A Prayer for Nettie* evokes the spiritual symbolism of the Pieta. It consists of seven monitors: one shows the entire tape in continuous loops, the others present the work in looped excerpts. Large formal black and white photographs of male mourners in beautiful poses surround the monitors marking Nettie's death.

The creation of a community that bridges art and life guides Cumming's work. For almost twenty years, his motivation has been in working with the disenfranchised—those who are often summarily disregarded and categorized as poor, sick, elderly, mentally impaired, alcoholic, drug-addicted, homeless, or uneducated. Cumming's theatrical community does live on the brink of survival. In his tapes they are revealed as tangible people with problems that anyone can relate to. Their concerns are ours too, and the issues they present us with do not fade away.

Cumming's second videotape, *Cut the Parrot* (1996), revolves around Albert (Smith's) death and male bonding. The title is an oblique reference to Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. Disarmingly comedic in tone and laden with multiple readings, as are all his titles, the work is a darker,

more self-referential account of loss in the director's own life and the pathos of life in general. Cumming appears frequently throughout this tape: his handsome face directly addresses the camera but is tightly framed in a similar fashion to the extreme wide-angle, distorted close-ups that capture the other characters. He assumes different roughly-hewn roles and only speaks in a natural tone in brief, off-camera moments. Cumming describes his feelings for Albert in a parallel roundabout manner, evoking their professional relationship rather than an infuriate one by saying, "I needed him, the little fucker." The final scene is a monologue in which Cumming describes what happened when as a nine-year-old boy, he and his family visited the institution where his non-communicative and retarded older brother Julien lived. A loquacious fellow resident grabbed his parents' attention, and fooled them into thinking he was "normal." If this stranger was not what he seemed to be, who then was his brother? This pivotal incident appears to shape Cumming's larger inquiry into personal alienation and the incongruity between appearances, human behaviour and societal prejudices.

In *Cut the Parrot*, as in *A Prayer for Nettie*, Cumming again sculpts time and image to fracture and to add a cyclical dimension to the narrative. An extreme close-up of a foot with grossly overgrown toenails over a calendar appears in the opening frame of the videotape. In slow motion, Cumming moves through a cluttered apartment to linger over a watch that no longer keeps time, and observes the depletion of meager savings in the pages of a bankbook. On the soundtrack, a man's voice dramatizes Winston Churchill speaking about the Second World War. The meaning of this opening sequence is made clear as the narrative evolves. First, Cumming describes his trip to the morgue to identify Albert's body four weeks after his death, when Albert's beard and nails have continued to grow, and his now yellowed tongue hangs limply out of his mouth. Later, the character Geoffrey (Bates), explains how everyone considered Albert a saint. His lips move silently as in prayer and Albert's voice impersonating Churchill fills the soundtrack. Albert is once again larger than life, even as we travel in memory and time back to the beginning of the story and the news of his death.

Side stories allude to homosexuality, the extreme poverty of the subjects, and their religiosity. Gerald (Harvey) relates how friends are expected to give sex to ("bugger off") a superintendent in lieu of rent and why he refuses to pay for his own mother's funeral. These tales are told as the camera focuses on the torso of a man fiddling with his genitals, and slowly encircles Gerald's naked body lying on a table as if laid out in a funeral parlor. At various interludes comforting religious songs are sung such as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Part of Cumming's strategy is to let things just happen. At the same time, he provokes, manipulates, and tweaks the action. One such moment occurs after Susan (Thomson)—a youngish woman with a rosy blush to her cheeks, a sparkle to her eyes, and a gap in her top front teeth—has an epileptic attack. Right after this frightening scene, she talks about her happy approach to life and strong attachment to her common-law husband, Jimmy. Provoked by Cumming, who asks her if she has ever come close to losing Jimmy, Susan becomes fearful. In turn, she asks about Cumming's relationship with his own wife in a manner that is as dogged as Cumming is mischievous. Their talk develops into a friendly, but loaded, flirtation. When this edgy banter reaches a pitch, Cumming slips in a cue, and Susan falls back into character singing "Qué sera sera" while Cumming reclaims his role as director.

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*After Brenda* (1998) is a romance based on the break-up of Pierre (Lamarque) and his girlfriend, Brenda. It is more specifically story-driven than the previous works and opens with a disarmingly catchy title song, "I Lost My Baby," by Jean Leloup. Pierre shows Donigan

where his belongings have been thrown out on the street and discloses that he was arrested after Brenda charged him with rape and for holding her against her will. Charges and countercharges of prostitution and jealousy ensue. Alcoholism and poverty are the key issues here; the constant concern is to avoid homelessness by seeking the lowest rents. Other characters in the story include Nelson (Coombs) and his new girlfriend, Mina (Putugu), who are the friends with whom Pierre shares temporary quarters. Colin (Kane), who has been on welfare for twenty years, plays a cameo role. Cumming enters his apartment, sweeps through to document the cluttered quarters, and leaves with not a word spoken between them. Colin faces a curtained window with his back to the camera, yammers on about satanic worship, and relates how he came to learn of another close friend's death after Cumming located him in a shelter. Cumming assumes the role of a detective cum voyeur in this work, entering and leaving apartments at will, reporting and musing on the activities of the participants' lives directly into the camera.



Cut the Parrot, DONIGAN CUMMING

*Erratic Angel* (1999) is Cumming's most documentary-like video to date. Colin is a recovering substance abuser and his obsessive nature and self-

absorption dominates the narrative. It is his story and Cumming gives Colin's running dialogue free rein. The time the two spend together illuminates Colin's battle with addiction. As cinéma vérité provocateur and friend, Cumming encourages Colin to cut his hair and beard in the hopes that a physical transformation will provoke an inner one. Colin is verbose and articulate, but cannot easily cope with people nor can he seem to conquer his demons. By the end of the video, he reveals a story about himself, when as a "strange" young paranoid student he is saved by a vision—the erratic angel of the title—from killing a priest he believed to be bad. Gerald (Harvey) hovers nakedly at the beginning and end of the tape like Clarence in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. Can Colin be saved?



The tape clearly indicates that there is no easy resolution to his dilemma. Cumming's installation *Barber's Music* (1999) evolved out of *Erratic Angel* and features both Colin and his "angel." The title refers to the discordant music produced by customers who wait their turn in a barbershop and play instruments provided to keep them occupied. The installation envelops the viewer in the cycles of transgression, recovery, and confusion of addiction.



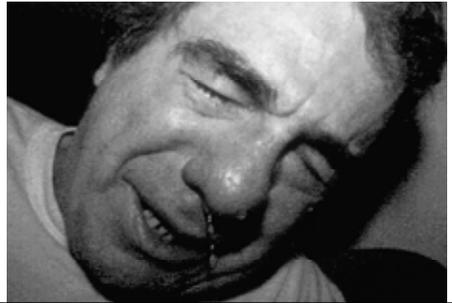
Cumming's most recent short works are simpler in form, but no less provocative than his more elaborate story constructions. With these, Cumming extrapolates discrete moments of personal isolation and tragedy to create moving stills. *Karaoke* was the first work made in this style. It features Nelson (Coombs) as he drifts in sleep and moves his foot

to recorded music accompanied by two off-camera singers. Nelson, who has worked with Cumming since the early 1980s, is now aged, sickly, and exceedingly thin. Nelson's foot moves jauntily to the beat while a death-like sleep flits across his sunken face. Following this work, Cumming made four additional short pieces. *Four Storeys* is about a woman who survived a suicide attempt made to escape her boyfriend's all-encompassing heroin addiction. *Trip* is an anonymous, melancholic stumble through an ice-laden wintry landscape. *Petit Jésus* is based on "Solitude," a poem written and weepingly recited by Pierre about unrequited love and religion's salvation; and *Shelter* is about a chance, brief encounter between Cumming and a man adrift at a bus shelter. Three of these works (*Four Storeys*, *Karaoke*, and *Petit Jésus*) are incorporated into the installation *Moving Stills* (1999). Each of the three tapes is projected onto one of three walls, and each

soundtrack comes up separately. As in the installation for *A Prayer for Nettie*, one woman is centrally featured, flanked by two men. This triptych evokes strong religious overtones that offers a transcendence from the despairing stories.

It is in his videotapes that Cumming renders his own theatre of the absurd, cruel and humane. Each videotape is shot in long takes, punctuated by slow motion and freeze frames, and based in theatrical reality. Artaud, who found dramatic and documentary cinemas to be either too intellectual and pat or too innocent and mechanical, would likely find Cumming's work close to the ideas expressed in his manifesto, *The Theater of Cruelty*, and in his writings on the cinema.<sup>6</sup>

Through artistic creation, Artaud sought to purge the alienation that tormented his own consciousness. He believed that the value of theatre "lies in its excruciating, magical connection with reality and with danger."<sup>7</sup> Cumming has distilled the influences of many creative voices into his own unique practice, and it is illuminating to look specifically at how he has used the intimate qualities of video to reinterpret Artaud's visionary theatre of the absurd for the present.



Like Artaud, Cumming flirts with danger to express hard-to-face or buried psychological truths. His chosen topics are not sexy, light, or entertaining. The improvised role-playing with a cast of non-professional actors produces unpredictable material that reaches coherence only through the processes of shooting and editing. The results of this methodology are non-generic, without any guarantees for a predictable or positive audience reception. It is an intentional part of Cumming's strategy to use images and methods that will stimulate a strong reaction from the audience. His real-life characters may be physically repellent and spiritually broken, and they represent what one does not want to face: sickness, aging, and mortality. These are not fairy tales with happily-ever-after endings, and yet at the same time they give us hope because they strive to confront reality at its strongest.

To Artaud, theatre should not rely on the text, but "rediscover the notion of a unique kind of language halfway between gesture and thought."<sup>8</sup> To him, language was not just sound, but also a visual panoply of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures that combine meaning and physiognomy into signs.

The possibilities presented by the physicality of expression in space, anarchic humour, imagistic and symbolic poetry, the chaos of creation, productions staged around subjects, events, or known works, and the qualities of persuasion of the actor are only some of Artaud's imaginings on how his *Theater of Cruelty* could exorcise the pain of existence.

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Cumming assumes the intonations of various roles as a kind of narrator on human frailty, in turns playing the parts of director, detective, friend, storyteller, and himself. The characters also take on the various intonations of their roles. Albert has great oratorical skills at reciting scenes from movies and recalling political speeches from memory. Pierre is a romantic poet consumed with the demons of alcohol and finding love. And Colin is ferociously angry and alive, self-absorbed as well as one who speaks out for other recovering addicts so that they can receive more thoughtful health care. Beyond the explicative power of language and music, it is the objects that clutter people's homes, and the characters' lack of teeth and craggy skin, that spell out their poverty and the realities of aging.

Confusion and chaos are devices used by Cumming to complicate the subjective/objective realities of his work. The narratology in his video-



tapes is erratic; the story goes backward and forward in time and conversations are not necessarily linked. We know characters only by their first names, if we know their names at all. Their speech may be garbled or they say contradictory things. Time is elliptical, and memory is fiction. Cumming can't remember exactly where Nettie was when she died and he recalls visiting his brother as if it was a dream in black and white. Susan

doesn't really know how long she has been with Jimmy: "thirty-six years," she states, "or twenty-five." Homes are cluttered with kitschy objects, dirty laundry, and the omnipresent pots of soup. Busts of Beethoven and the Madonna adorn Pierre's television set, candle wax drips over Colin's radio, and shoes and slippers lie randomly about Albert's and Nettie's apartments. These messy signs of daily life become emblems to larger universal truths about all people.

Cumming focuses on faces, lined and weathered by time and hardship like masks over the inner soul. He magnifies specific features—a fat stomach, the dirty creases of a mouth, a gap-toothed smile, or a nose drool—through fragmented close-ups and long takes. In *A Prayer for Nettie*, an actor's cotton underwear, sporting the insignia "Mr. Brief," become a darkly humorous symbol of death as Cumming and Albert talk about the last moments of Nettie's life.

Cumming's role as both artist and participating subject is aggressively foregrounded in his videotapes in ways that were not possible in his earlier photographs, and yet he seems to relish a certain anonymity. Cumming places himself in the videotapes physically and aurally, while the photographs only suggest his subjective presence, or ideas, through his choice of imaging and staging devices. In the videotapes, Cumming reveals elements of his personal relationship to the subjects, and at the same time, is frankly manipulative of the actors. Moments that take place in the margins of the process, sometimes in front of the camera, at other times only on the soundtrack, often are the most critical ones. These are enhanced by the fluidity of directing, acting, and communicating between the director and actors. The actors such as Colin and Susan as well as Cumming take turns at being in and out of control.

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The new freedoms and possibilities found through videotaping have liberated Cumming's work into a more total theatre of absurdist reality. In his videotapes, the camera looks at certain things, while the soundtrack provides meta levels of discourse using songs; fragments of soundtracks from classic



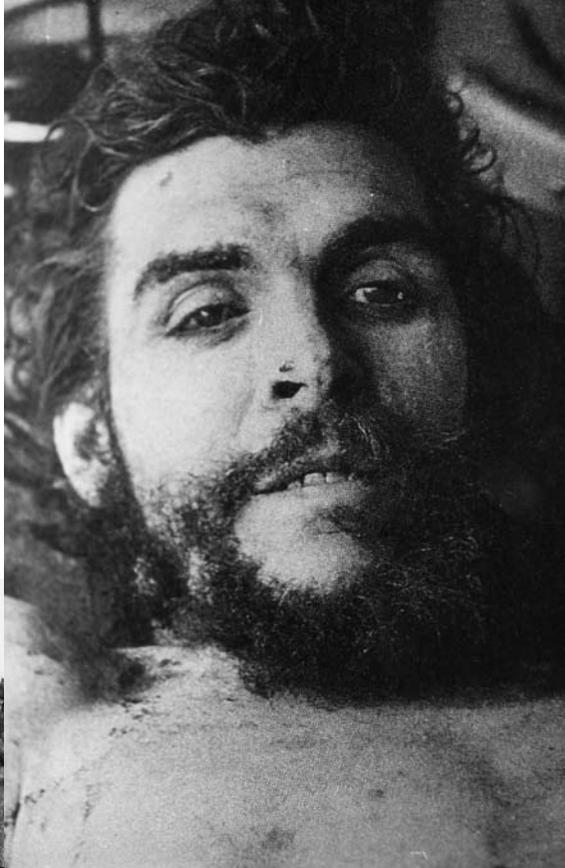
Hollywood movies; jokes, conversational patter; Cumming's off camera personal and directorial remarks; and the subject/character responses. All become part of the text of the narrative. This is non-fiction (neither fiction nor documentary) at its most extreme, a merger of fiction with reality. Cumming is intent on pushing beyond the boundaries of realism, at once compelling, repulsing, and changing the expectations of the viewer. His tapes are filled with the charms and



excesses of his subject/characters. They sing familiar religious songs and popular tunes, speak in "dirty" language, and tell unsavoury stories. They sport about in unflattering and provocative nude poses and live in cluttered houses. Does Cumming go too far? Does he push your buttons? His work compels us to ask: How involved is this community of actors really? What choices do they have in the videomaking process? Upon close examination, we can see that the subjects do comment upon the work, just as the subjects

in reflexive cinema are commonly called to do—and they also shape it intrinsically. In the opening scenes of *After Brenda*, Pierre asks Cumming if he can be the producer: “You want the whole thing? The pain too?” In the closing scenes, after we have followed the convoluted story line of love, jealousy, and harsh reality, he advises, “Show the human tragedy, but also show the human love.” ★





# Interview with James Benning

Barbara Goslawski

**GOSLAWSKI:** I wanted to start with *Used Innocence* (95 min 1990). Scott MacDonald, in an interview with you, pointed out that it was thematically connected with your previous film, *Landscape Suicide* (95 min 1986) because both focus on crime and criminals. I also find it interesting to think of the way you approach narrative in both films and the different ways you had tackled narrative up to that point. Your films often place a variety of subjects in an overriding structure. When you get to those two films, and very specifically *Used Innocence*, you focus on a single subject and tackle it from a number of angles.

**BENNING:** What you've said makes me think of two things. First, with my films generally, one film has grown out of the next. *11 x 14* (81 min 1976) led to *One Way Boogie Woogie* (60 min 1977). In fact, I used a

couple of the shots from *11 x 11* in *One Way Boogie Woogie*. In the film before that, *8 1/2 x 11* (33 min 1974), I used eleven shots from *11 x 11*. So my ideas transfer from one film to the next. After I finished *Landscape Suicide*, I wasn't sure what I was going to do and a friend sent me a newspaper article about Lawrenca Bembenek. I decided, well it's kind of what I've been doing now.

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But as I made it, it became more and more entangled in my own life and more personal than I wanted it to get. In fact I have a hard time showing the film at this point. I just showed it again in my retrospective in L.A. and it wasn't quite as painful to watch as it used to be because I have some distance from it—I'm no longer that pathetic person I present in the film (laughs).

As far as narrative goes, I found the case incomprehensible: that there was so much information—the more information you found the less you could understand her actual case. It just suggested so many other scenarios. When I built this film I wanted a structure in which the information would almost destroy the narrative, something that would take you in different directions and leave you as confused as I was at the end of making the film. You could never make any sense of what was going on, it's just too overwhelming. So that structure becomes very overwhelming or that positioning of narrative I felt very overwhelming.

**GOSLAWSKI:** It's perfect for your type of consideration, that kind of case.

**BENNING:** Yeah, because in my films, I think I've always been dealing with information: different ways of portraying information, ordering information so that an audience can then make up their own minds about it. That's what I, I guess, I was doing back then, ten or twelve years ago.

**GOSLAWSKI:** The personal has always been in your films, mixed with political, social, historical, and formalist concerns. The personal really seems to come out more in *Used Innocence*.

**BENNING:** Yeah, but mainly because when I was making the film, I was going through a break-up with my girlfriend and I was getting more and more in a very strange mood. The more I felt bad the more Lawrenca became a very normal person. She became a friend helping me through the break-up and I thought, oh, this is a very strange situation—a murderer seems more normal than me. That's why in the end I included the letters—I thought it was at least curious for

me to become friends with somebody in prison and find them to be like any other friend. Since I never knew really if she was a murderer or not I kind of concluded anybody could murder anybody, in a sense, and that was kind of frightening.

**GOSLAWSKI:** It must have also been frightening to reveal so much about yourself and to do it so directly this time. Correct me if I'm wrong, but this is the first film in which you read your own story. Your own story has always appeared throughout the previous films in various ways, but if anything was read it was always by someone else. Here you are finally reading your own words.

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**BENNING:** I got up the courage. I mean, there was no other way if I was going to include the letters. They had to be read by both her voice and my voice. So, I couldn't get out of it. In *Landscape Suicide* I probably should have used my own voice, but I still didn't have enough courage. Then I decided to have a woman's voice be my voice and that for some reason I can no longer recall—I guess I wanted to make one question the gender of the maker. If a woman was making *Landscape Suicide* would you perceive the film differently than if it was a male making it?

**GOSLAWSKI:** The film that follows *Used Innocence, North On Evers* (87 min 1992), continues this more personal focus. It's literally a personal journey.

**BENNING:** I didn't really know I was making the film when I started it. In 1989 I bought a motorcycle—I hadn't had one for twenty years—and I left California that summer. I was just trying to run away, again, from personal problems and I found myself riding toward desire and away from thunderstorms. I really didn't know where I was going and I ended up circling the country. Then the next winter I wrote a long letter to a friend in Paris and when I finished the letter describing the trip from the summer before I thought, well, it's kind of a curious trip I had because I saw it as driving back into my future, almost driving into my past to revisit certain political places that inform who I am today. I thought, well this could be a good film. So the next year I drove the same path and looked for the people that I'd met in 1989 and found most of them, some on the same barstool that they were on then.

**GOSLAWSKI:** When you made the trip a second time you did it with the film in mind...

**BENNING:** Yeah, in fact, I knew I was going to write a diary. I wrote it as if I was writing it in '89 but it actually was written in '90. But the film was made in '90 so it's a year off—if somebody says, "Oh, I'm trying to get pregnant," you see she has a baby in her arms. I like those kind of things, that the story itself is a year behind. When I positioned the story on the images I put the images after the story. It's always a bit out of synch so you read and see a different film in your head from the text and then hopefully it connects up with the images that follow later. In a few places in the film it synchs up again, then it will fall behind. I think it might even go ahead at one point. I was interested in that kind of play between text and image and how you might see one film from the reading and see another film from the images.

**GOSLAWSKI:** In the past when you've talked about that relationship between text and images you've pointed out that, when presented with both simultaneously, the viewer will tend to go for the text first at the expense of the images. I noticed that this film had a lot of movement, which is unusual for you—a lot of camera movement, and it's handheld, shaky. There are certain sequences that are quite glorious with all that movement. I was wondering if you were trying to shake up that relationship, get the image to be so shaky that it grabs attention away from the text?

**BENNING:** In a way I was but it wasn't fully conscious until I decided to make it black text on picture because I knew the text would disappear into image at times. I didn't know how much of it would disappear and depending on the projection you see about 80% of the text, sometimes a little more than that, sometimes less. But I like the idea that the image actually had a chance to fight against the text and it actually erases some and makes the viewer very conscious of how much they want to read narrative, how much they're caught up in the text itself. Not that I want to make a frustrating film, but it at first brings about a kind of frustration because you lose that narrative. Hopefully you find a way to look at the film, to look and read and let it happen and enjoy it when it happens. I worked on the text for about five months and I had a few people read it and give me suggestions and when they saw the film they said, "How could you let the picture erase so much of the text when you worked so hard?" I said, "Well, the text isn't the most important thing in the film and if it was there all the time you would miss a lot of the images." You miss a lot of them the way it is. It's an incredibly different experience watching it a second or third time because you can see much more.

**GOSLAWSKI:** You've been dealing with text and image relations in various ways throughout your career.

**BENNING:** One of the things I'm always very conscious about not wanting to do is to illustrate or describe the images. I'm very afraid of confining the image with text, over-describing or becoming way too literal.

**GOSLAWSKI:** Dave Douglas delivered a paper at the Film Studies Association of Canada conference this past June on *North On Evers* and he was arguing that it was a summary film, an artist going back over his life and career. You mentioned something like that earlier in this talk, that you found yourself going back into your past. He points out that in the film you go back to sites where you made films, people that you made films with, and he was talking about it in terms of the book *Travels With Charlie* in which Steinbeck takes a journey as a mature artist and takes an inventory of his life. Dave was arguing that that's what you were doing in this film.

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**BENNING:** Well, that's a big compliment—to talk about *North On Evers* and *Travels With Charlie* at the same time because I find that an extraordinary book. What's interesting about *Travels With Charlie* is it was written in 1960, right before the Vietnam War and during the Kennedy election time. There's a certain kind of hope and there's also...the country seems so much more naive. Another good road-film book is *Blue Highways* by...I'm not thinking of his name, he's an American Indian. It's a great book but it's written after the Vietnam War and it has a different edge because of that. And when I think of *North On Evers* I think of that and it has that feeling too, for me, anyway. Although maybe I'm just trying to give myself more of a compliment and I'm not as naive as I think I am. I'm not sure.

**GOSLAWSKI:** At what point did you decide to call it *North On Evers*, in reference to Medgar Evers?

**BENNING:** When I realized that the trip was about this kind of driving into my own memory and the shooting of Medgar Evers was kind of a wake-up call for me. I think I was about nineteen or twenty at the time and I realized something was going on in this country, that everything I had been taught seemed to be a lie at that point. It was a big influence on me and made me want to become a political activist. So, when I drove to Mississippi it was a big event. Then I started to run into other racism in the south and in the north

and then I thought, well, that's certainly a part of this film. Then I noticed that the street that was in Jackson, Mississippi, was called Evers after Medgar Evers, Medgar Evers Boulevard or something. I just thought it was phenomenal that Jackson, Mississippi, would have a Medgar Evers Boulevard after he was shot there, you know, and most of the people were happy he was shot except for the poor people that lived on the side of town that he lived on. So, it fits the film well, or at least how I look at the film.

**GOSLAWSKI:** It must have been such an incredible moment when you went there and you made that connection, seeing the street that was named after him...

**BENNING:** I went to his house and I felt completely out of place, that I wasn't supposed to be there. It just made me feel bad: here's something that made a huge change in my life and yet here's a kind of racism that still exists that wouldn't allow me to be there because I'm just in the wrong place. They don't see me as a part of that history, but they don't know me.

**GOSLAWSKI:** *North On Evers* on the one hand is such a personal film, but on the other, as we're discussing it and peeling away the layers of it, it becomes such a pinnacle for what you've always been doing in terms of mixing the political, social, historical, and personal. The personal is never by itself, it's always in context, but it always also informs the political, historical, and social.

**BENNING:** I'd feel uncomfortable if I made a personal film that didn't have either some kind of political or economic or social investigation also, because without that it just becomes one man's hard-luck story or something. I think if you deal with the personal it has to become a bit more universal so more people can enter into the story and question their own lives rather just say, oh, that poor guy.

**GOSLAWSKI:** Jonathan Rosenbaum made a point a number of years ago that has always both intrigued and disturbed me—he said that your films are “poised between narrative and non-narrative and that puts them at a political and existential impasse.” I get the sense that he's sort of frustrated that you don't go further, that you suggest political themes but don't elaborate.

**BENNING:** I used to say that I didn't make political films because I used to do political organizing and if I wanted to stay a political person I

should have stayed in that and worked with people at the grass-roots level and do organizing and civil disobedience and try to change things. Then when I started making films I was very much influenced by the structuralist movement which was very apolitical but, at the same time, I felt those structures were so radical that they were speaking very politically, to me, even though they weren't talking about politics. They were talking about radical, different ways of looking at things and if you don't have that you can't make any kind of change. So, in a way I saw those apolitical works as being very political. But then once I started making films like *11 x 14* that were basically structural films that dealt with formal issues of screen space and off-screen space, they still were always coded by some kind of social message. I realized, as I made more and more films, that that kind of social message got to be more in balance. And I don't think they took over the films because I think my films are still very much about structure and looking at things differently. I'm stuck with that. I don't want to make self-satisfying films because if they're self-satisfying people just go away and say, okay, that's over with. Then you don't have to think about it again.

**GOSLAWSKI:** I guess I was sort of reading what Rosenbaum was saying as a sort of frustration, that he was frustrated...

**BENNING:** I think he said that in the early or mid-'80s. Since then the films have become much more openly political.

**GOSLAWSKI:** I'd like to hear about how you got from *North On Evers* to the next film, *Deseret* (82 min 1995). There's a definite shift in approach but I find it particularly interesting in terms of the historical period you cover. You're moving away from recent history, from events that happened in your own lifetime.

**BENNING:** But it actually isn't. I mean, I'm not a Mormon but I'm a white male and I want to look at a white male power structure and how it works. The Mormons are a really good example of that. I also got to the film from *North On Evers* because I drove through Utah and found it to be an incredibly beautiful place. I thought about the Mormons crossing and saying, yeah, let's stop here. *North On Evers* also made me aware that from now on I'd make films for two reasons: one, to take me to places that I'd want to spend some time in and get to know and two, to understand my own life better. *North On Evers* seemed to be the beginning of that.

**GOSLAWSKI:** So, that's what inspired the sound/image relation in the film?

**BENNING:** I wanted to look at two white male institutions and how they work together and fight together: *The New York Times* and the Mormons. It's a very white male film, *Deseret* is.

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**GOSLAWSKI:** And what about the rigorous structure? It seems more streamlined as well.

**BENNING:** Well, again it was an idea of, how do I put text and image together? *North On Evers* is a text that relentlessly flows across the screen and in *Deseret* I have a voice-over and one shot for every sentence of text. Then there was also one shot between each article that doesn't have text on it. I don't know how I arrived at that; at some point I thought it would be a good way to work. The texts go from 1853 or '54 to the '90s. So the language changes—sentences become shorter. That makes the film accelerate. And because of that, the ninety-three shots between the paragraphs are a few frames shorter each time so the whole film speeds up. I like the way the language had a direct effect on the flow of the film.

**GOSLAWSKI:** It also seems a lot more open, you're leaving a lot more room for the audience.

**BENNING:** Yeah, well, how much can you believe what you read, so...In the first half of the film, most of the articles are designed to help limit Mormon power. In the second half—once Utah becomes a state and it becomes a right-wing model—*The Times*, being much more liberal, the articles then point out the kind of abuse that this right-wing state is putting on its people. It's a very curious film that way.

**GOSLAWSKI:** It's also very curious in the way the past comments on the present. *Deseret* seemed to start something new, a new project in terms of sound/image relations and in terms of the way you're tackling your own position, your own personal issues and your own views of politics and society now, from the perspective of, how did we get HERE? How did WE get here?

**BENNING:** Exactly. The other curious thing about using *The New York Times* as a text is that it writes the history from the present so it has the history of the time rather than the bias of who won the war. This wasn't written as history but it became history, though it still just presented eastern establishment bias in all the articles. I like that, that it's

using something that was written as the present to establish a feel of what was going on, but you have to understand who's writing and where they're writing from—they're writing about the West from 2000 miles away.

**GOSLAWSKI:** How did that film evolve into *Four Corners* (80 min 1997)?

**BENNING:** Well, Utah is one of the Four Corner states and again when I was making *Deseret* I got very interested in the southwestern part of Utah, the Anasazi culture. I realized I wanted to go to those places and go see Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde and all the other Navaho lands in that Four Corner area. I wanted to make a film there but I thought I didn't know anything about American Indians, about Anasazis, about Navahos. I mean, I can read about them and think I know something but even if I read their books they're translated into English, so if I read *The Book of Hopi* or *The Book of Navaho* I get a sense of what it is but I really don't know it. I didn't feel comfortable about making a film in the Four Corners unless I could make a film about how the Four Corners allows me to see my own prejudices. So, I decided to make Milwaukee one of the Four Corners. At one time it was the west—in the 1840s, Wisconsin was on the western end of civilization as Americans saw it. When I started looking at my own neighbourhood and the prejudices in a white/black neighbourhood, they were very similar to the prejudices that were in Farmington, New Mexico, between poor whites and Indians. Then I became more comfortable with filming there. I'm trying to look at my own prejudices, I'm not trying to say I know anything about the Four Corners. I'm just saying that when I observe the Four Corners it allows me to be myself better.

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**GOSLAWSKI:** So, what about your choices of the artists and the texts. How did all that come about, especially in relation to that?

**BENNING:** I knew I was going to write four stories and have them read. I was just going to do it over black and then I thought it would be asking too much from an audience, so I put each section over a single image, which had to be very complex, but simple at the same time—a painting. People don't look at a painting for more than fifteen seconds when they go to a museum so I thought this would be a place where I could make somebody look at a painting for ten minutes. Painting is kind of a social barometer. I ended up using a Monet, a painting by Moses Tolliver—a black folk artist who I really like—an Anasazi cliff painting, and a Jasper Johns. Mainly because

I like those four paintings but I also thought they represented kind of the Four Corners of painting for me.

**GOSLAWSKI:** In what way?

**BENNING:** Well, Johns is the quintessential contemporary artist and he deals with symbols that I like, like the American flag. I use his first sketch of the American flag, where he's trying to strip these symbols of meaning and I'm trying to put the meaning back, do the opposite of what he's trying to do. That's why I chose him. Monet, I chose because American history when I studied it started in Europe and I always thought that was very bizarre. I had very little history about our Native Americans, actually none really except for my own study. So, I start with Monet and he becomes kind of the villain of the film. And Moses Tolliver I used with the Milwaukee description because Tolliver's an elderly black man, he's from the south, and he's an incredible painter. And then, of course, I had to use an Anasazi one because most of the film is about that and it's one of my favourite places in the world. Barrier Canyon, Utah, where there's a horseshoe-shaped canyon about a hundred yards across filled with paintings. That was just one of them, and it was about eighty by fourteen feet. And then I wrote little biographies for each painter and, of course, I didn't know who painted the Anasazi one so I made up a fictitious one—so the only woman in that film was fictional.

**GOSLAWSKI:** In this film you do return to a much more mathematical structure and in some ways as rigorous as it is, as specific and structured as it is, it leaves a lot more room for the audience. The later films take up issues, themes, and approaches from the earlier ones, but deal with them differently. Your focus seems different.

**BENNING:** Well, like I said I think it comes from this interest in investigating myself more than I did in the past. I think that's why these films become more pointed. They certainly are mathematical (or arithmetic anyway)—more than ever. But I think *Four Corners* is very accessible if people are willing to give a little bit and I think if they can get through the first story and a half then they'll watch the whole film—and I'm talking about people that aren't used to my kind of films. I wish I could get more people to see it. I don't try but, in a way, I think they're good films, the last films I've been making. I'm very happy with my work in the last ten years. I guess I'd like to have a larger audience at this point and it's probably possible but I just don't have the energy to do that.

**GOSLAWSKI:** It's interesting that you say that when progressively you're asking more from the audience. It's clear with *Deseret* and *Four Corners* and by the time you get to *UTOPIA* we have to do a lot of work. Which for those of us who love experimental film is not a lot to ask; we're happy to do it and, in fact, it's very exciting, the way you ask us to participate.

**BENNING:** Last October, when I was in Vienna, I had one of the best compliments ever paid to me from a person in the audience and he simply stood up and said, "Thank you for taking your audience seriously."

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**GOSLAWSKI:** That's great.

**BENNING:** You know, it sent shivers up my back and I said, "Thank you, that's the best thing anybody could say to me." I don't want to water anything down, you know. I think you just have to live your life to watch my films—you don't have to have any special education to watch them. I think if you're interested in who you are my films will help you start asking questions of yourself. I'm hoping that's true.

**GOSLAWSKI:** Let's talk about how you went from *Four Corners* to *UTOPIA* (93 min 1998).

**BENNING:** I had been living in California for almost eleven years when I started filming this past year and hadn't really made a film in California. I decided that it was time. It was going to be a non-text film because I thought it was time to do something else. It occurred to me that I had never made a film with somebody else's soundtrack.

I was thinking of the desert as a utopian system that failed, about how Che Guevara had a kind of utopian politics which I admired. I thought I had to get him into the film. And also when I went down into the Imperial Valley where the desert changes because of irrigation, where you import the workers and take advantage of them that way rather than going there and stealing their wealth, you take what they can offer in labour. So, I thought, well, this a perfect example of what he was fighting against and here it exists right in Southern California.

**GOSLAWSKI:** With the sound/image relationship in this film, I feel like we have to work harder because the connection is not obvious.

**BENNING:** The images start in Death Valley and there's no real evidence of

people. I don't show any people in Death Valley and the brutal, beautiful landscape seems unspoiled until slowly you see industry and military things. Then it goes to the Imperial Valley and you see what irrigation does.

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**GOSLAWSKI:** In the earlier films, the landscape provided a certain context, people's stories were located in a certain setting and the landscape was often in a city, or just outside a city, or it was in a populated area so that there was always a suggestion of people and you grounded their stories in this landscape of city or town or a place like that. And then in the last three films, the landscape, often the desert, suggests such an absence. Why are our films becoming less visually connected to people?

**BENNING:** I think it's more my own self hiding away.

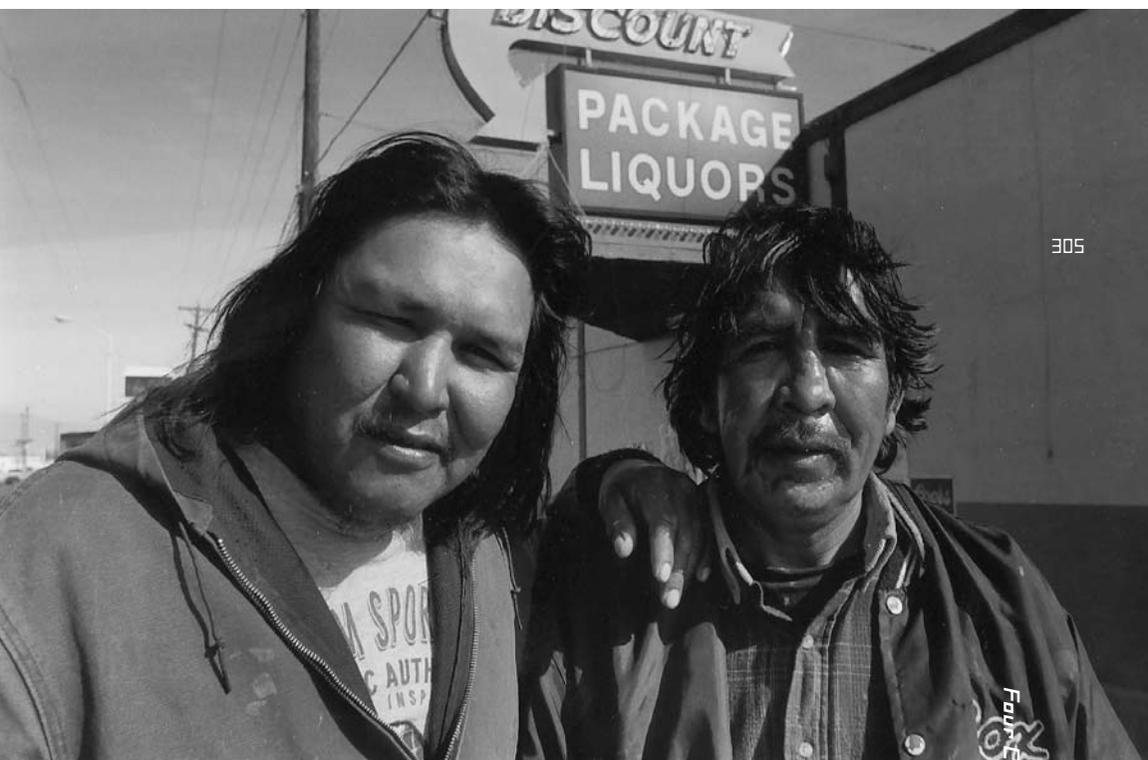
**GOSLAWSKI:** And that's why you're drawn to the desert. You want to hide and therefore you're searching out landscapes without people.

**BENNING:** It's a real romantic notion I would rather not describe.

**GOSLAWSKI:** Oh really, come on now, that sounds interesting.

**BENNING:** Well, you can imagine.

**GOSLAWSKI:** Maybe we should leave people with that image, that romantic notion that you won't describe but that we can imagine. ★



Four Corners (top), North on Evers (bottom), James Berning



old him that place had its own p

# Warhol's Grave

*Lia Gangitana*

Take out the flowers  
Throw away the dirty water  
Rinse out the vase  
Put it away

—Rene Ricard<sup>1</sup>

Warhol's grave scrupulously appears as one of many outtakes that comprise Peggy Ahwesh's *Fragments Project*. Its emblematic presence—as homage, as artistic/theoretical reference, as reminder of endings, of death—in the form of a scrap of comely footage, also presents a structural device that this compilation of notes on Ahwesh's body of work seeks to emulate.

When things start to fall apart, when the performers get bored or pissed and fall out of character, it's time to turn the camera on.<sup>2</sup>

We're not talking about the heroics of happy accidents here, but an unruly

practice of observation, outright provocation, that a camera, some friends, and an apartment can accommodate. Wayward, Ahwesh's interest in slips, jokes, laughs, fights, flirting, starts to add up to some portraits of people, groups of people, and a portrait of a particular time and place. The weight of ordinary activities—cleaning the apartment, playing a game, looking at pictures, reading in bed, talking—is unequivocally fashioned in her early super 8 films such as *The Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1983) and *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1987). This collusion continues in later works, as the ordinary is distinguished by its more eccentric manifestations: perversion, abjection, the subcultural and supernatural.

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Like the films of her historical counterparts—for example John Cassavetes, Andy Warhol—Ahwesh's directorial practice instigates films that could be viewed as indulgent, undisciplined, pointless. An insistence on non-technique as technique problematizes certain concepts regarding the vanguard of anti-art, to which none of them would ascribe. "The pure appropriation of the anaesthetic, the imagined completion of the gesture of passing over into anti-art, or non-art, is the act of internalization of society's indifference to the happiness and seriousness of art. It is also, therefore, an expression of the artist's own identification with baleful social forces."<sup>3</sup> The political ramifications of Ahwesh's work, as evidenced by her deliberate misreadings and misinterpretations of psychoanalytic theory, for example, assert an aggressive feminist aim that demands a form that does not comply with existing authoritative narrative structures.

Ahwesh may not aspire to such grand ideas as emotional truth, sought by Cassavetes, or Warhol's monotony of stars, but rather, she employs film's subversive potential. "I came of age when there was this great book called *Film as a Subversive Art*, a history of mostly alternative film to about 1975... That's a book I read and took literally: you know, film is a subversive art. You make things that have a formal integrity that relates to your content and it's supposed to blow people away. Not necessarily make you uncomfortable or crazy all the time, or drive people to kill or arrest you, but make you think."<sup>4</sup> Hence, Ahwesh's sampling of, yet non-adherence to, the codes of horror, science fiction, and documentary genres. As David Cronenberg has noted: "Subversion is essential to art...[and] if you are working within a genre, it's more simple to subvert. If you are not working within a genre, then it's a much more subtle thing...When you are inventing your own form...you don't have that possibility. The form itself is the subversive thing."<sup>5</sup>

## On Outlaws

*Poised at the door of the bar, playing with her despair...*<sup>6</sup>

Outlaws, such as Marie, the hero of *The Deadman*, know the difference between darkness and light. When death enters Marie's life, she just runs with it, as it won't affect the sun one bit. A creepy laugh track adds other lightness. The film, a study in extremes. Too much darkness got to Marie. The count dies—too much sun. They're both falling at a similar rate of speed. The corpse remains, still (cadaver, cadere, to fall).

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*For a moment the falling body disturbed the silence.*

"*The Deadman*, *The Color of Love* and *Nocturne* form a sort of trilogy about psychological violence and women in their relationship to the dominant cultural codes of behavior and power. All based on the writings of Georges Bataille, they express an excessive, over the top fantasy of feminine subjecthood and desire."<sup>7</sup> Oppositional, Ahwesh's outlaws embrace the abject, fondle dead things a lot, and constantly reside on the thresholds of meaning. Profound in their physical displays—piss, blood, vomit, some sex—her films riff on more tidy outlaw types, such as Gerard Malanga's character in Andy Warhol's *Vinyl* (1967), a remake of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. Unlike Ahwesh's heroes, "He [the pathological narcissist described by Žižek, here referring to Warhol] is a radical conformist who paradoxically experiences himself as an outlaw."<sup>8</sup> Ahwesh forgoes glamour in favour of visualizing "the jettisoned object," ultimately signified by a corpse.<sup>9</sup>

I always wished I had died, and I still wish that, because I could have gotten the whole thing over with....I never understood why when you died, you didn't just vanish....I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, and no name. Well, actually, I'd like it to say "figment." (Andy Warhol)<sup>10</sup>

In Ahwesh's films, death doesn't go away, it lingers, doubled as both ghost and decaying matter. Or, in the case of *The Color of Love* (1994), the rotting body is mirrored in the film's materiality. Two women have sex on the body of a dead man while decomposition is literalized by the deterioration of celluloid—found footage marred and coloured by its own decay. That physical decay is the source of its stunning visual effect is perverse and suggestive beyond the scope of its pornographic content. This fragment of found goth pornography is represented in resplendent, lurid detail of its imminent demise.

**Freud Joke no. 1: "Oh, I get it, it's like a penis, only smaller."**

Much like the bawdy joke-telling that punctuates Ahwesh's films, an instinctual irreverence is a critical strategy at play in Martina's *Playhouse* (1989). A naked kid and her mom goof around, describe pages from magazines, there's a pile of plush toys, not especially props for a film. Nothing

seems particularly prepared. Early on, Martina's whining, "I'm not ready." "The end...it's the end!" she's demanding. The camera, of course, stays on. Then she's reciting some of Lacan's greatest hits aloud. Ahwesh reads from "The Language of Flowers." Smart girls, reading. Martina mispronounces a word, lack, luck. Luck is better—effacing masculinity in one unintentional blunt utterance. Ahwesh uses "children's immediate mimicry of cultural and social norms to register a societal indigestion."<sup>11</sup> The incongruity of a child's voice attempting difficult, theoretical language suggests the historical constraints and cultural mutations of this discourse, as well as its uncertain usage within a future feminism represented by Martina's projected development. "This misreading of Lacan is really important since it's my homage to theory, at the same time saying that theory's not the end-all and be-all," says Ahwesh. "It is a jumping-off point for both understanding the world, and also messing with it."<sup>12</sup> This approach is not unlike the deadpan quandaries that preoccupy Cecilia Dougherty's videos: "What is seeing? What is being seen? Who made me? Do you like my shirt?"<sup>13</sup>

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In Martina's *Playhouse*, the footage of mother and daughter is interspersed with footage of a woman kind of coming on to Ahwesh. Exploiting the occasion of filmmaking as a confessional vehicle instigates a confrontation that is both induced and impeded by the presence of the camera. Although she's talking to it, flirting, yelling, it's delineating certain borders that the video seeks to provoke. A self-consciousness about the meaning of every recorded gesture, of the music that's playing (T Rex), of every little thing, heightens this fickle, anxious scene.

Non-performances, role reversals, redundancies, serve a significant function in the overturning of proscribed relations such as director/subject, observer/observed, by corrupting the clarity of authorship or discrete invisibility traditionally associated with the person behind the camera. It's not unusual for Ahwesh to gravitate towards discarded footage, opt for the imperfect delivery, interrupt, much like super 8 filmmaker Luther Price. His film *Mother* (1988) emerged unexpectedly from outtake reels from *Warm Broth and Green*, both films in which Price plays his mother. A portrait film, *Mother* strips away all pretenses of performance—amounting to a confrontation that simultaneously disunites and melds the identities of the filmmaker and his longtime subject. Price recalls that when his mother saved his journals from water damage with baking soda, she commented: "This isn't your life, if anything, it's mine." Such boundary confusion is welcome.

## Betsy's legs, or the camera daddy gave me

Ahwesh's strategic relocation of the camera/eye to other parts of the body,

or her use of the camera to achieve an all-over cruise, is more than a mischievous repositioning of apparatus. The camera's presence is neither static nor determinedly roving, but participatory, gregarious. In *The Vision Machine* (1997), the joke-teller fucks up the punchline. Ahwesh from behind the camera says, "You have to do the whole thing over, single take." The camera's pointing downwards. She recites the joke again. Sex jokes, word play, spinning records, in addition to the video's title, make reference to the "significant elision of opposing terms that characterizes Duchamp's art of the 1920s: his optical 'research.' For Duchamp's various optical machines...produce alternating illusions of convexity and concavity. These spinning spiral patterns produce an erotic, pulsatile imbrication of opposing volumes, created entirely by the eye."<sup>14</sup>

Girls tell raunchy jokes, feminist jokes, Freud jokes. Ahwesh records their body language as contentious research. She notes the influence of Ray Birdwhistell, "a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who produced the bizarre film *Microcultural Incidents in 10 Zoos* (1969), which studies family interactions in zoos around the world...Birdwhistell's research petered out to nothing, but it's such a great pseudo-science...I have total empathy for this person because he's trying to get at certain synchronicities, certain kinds of minute microbehaviors that are really telling."<sup>15</sup> Fundamental tenets of conceptual art, such as the positioning of scientific and theoretical models within artistic practice, apply to Ahwesh's unpedigreed approach to art making.

A scientific curiosity regarding vision, motion, and behaviour takes on a certain perversity when its motivation remains inscrutable. The experiment might not have a point. While Warhol's collections of celebrities, for example his *Screen Tests*, posit a voyeuristic precedent in art film, Ahwesh's interest in the history of documentary film and its relationship to ethnography, anthropology, reaches into other fields of science, however crackpot. Collecting and documenting people, observing friends as specimens of culture, establishes Ahwesh's errant approach to ethnography. Her work suggests an alternative anthropological practice, crossing boundaries of observer/participant as she literally instigates her subjects, making visible her impact on the cultures she is observing.<sup>16</sup>

At times, however, the nature of her influence on her subjects remains elusive. Peggy Ahwesh and Margie Strosser's *Strange Weather* (1993), a fake documentary about drugs, critiques the sensational perspectives offered by television. It's a film about crack house ennui. Surveillance aesthetics and static-shot personal testimonials present shoddy approximations of tv realism (cop shows, *The Real World*). The addicts' environment is portrayed in naturalistic, handheld chaos, punctuated by titillating vignettes of reckless

behaviour. Moralistic content (for example, scientific or medical fact, rote “outreach” to abusers) is replaced by ambivalence (maybe a passing comment like “You’re a loser”)—leaving this documentary absent of redemptive, punitive framing or clear purpose. A guy combs the cat litter for rocks. Redundant paranoid behaviours, cyclical rituals of preparing and smoking crack, are interspersed with the weather, news of a coming storm.

## Don't let the sun catch you crying

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Nocturne (1998) begins with another dead guy—a pixel view of an unwieldy body rolling toward a hole, singing birds. Then there are spiders, worms, uncanny backward stuff. Lots of mirroring, doubling, phantoms—it’s dark. Footage of bats, nocturnal friends of guileful women, makes reference to radar, flying, the night vision of witches. The main character is drawn mostly through shadows. Sacred principles of scary movies punctuate sleep, dream sequences. “Life must take life,” a sciency voice-over tells us. Allusions to genre films and scientific documentaries, artifice and hyperrealism, collide to throw certain limits into question. “Eerie night, electricity, weird swarming nature and the devious woman are all interconnected....The buzzing and the squeaking and the 60 cycle hum on the soundtrack yield friction and claustrophobia.”<sup>17</sup>

Ahwesh’s *The Scary Movie* (1993) is more about laughter. The misuse of horror signifiers to denote humour is achieved through appropriated soundtracks, miniaturization, shiny surfaces, tin foil. This home horror movie depicts two young girls goofing around with costumes, makeup, and some plastic hands. Girls, again, act as effortless deconstructors of genre convention, as the scale of their endeavour is clandestinely elevated.

Home movies, found footage, music that signifies generation, pathos, politics...Ahwesh’s *Fragments Project* (1984-94) is a collection of monologues, outtakes, performances, landscapes. It functions like a time travelogue. The route: uncertain. This compilation is intended to be re-edited each time it is screened, emphasizing its deliberately arbitrary sequencing of events. “Compiled in a meta-way,” a discontinuous series is strung together out of order, unevenly connected by changes in direction or the weather.

*The sun remained.*



Special thanks: Sadie Benning, Cecilia Dougherty, Johanna Fateman, Leah Gilliam, Kathleen Hanna, Saul Levine, Mark McElhatten, Gavin Smith, Elisabeth Subrin, Suara Welitoff.

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INTRO: Birds fly overhead. It's winter and the trees are reduced to skeletons. A fierce wind blows.

1. The woman struggles with the body of a dead man. She rolls it across the lawn and into a hole, then she covers it with dirt.

TITLE: **Nocturne**

*"The greatest human torment is the impossibility of offending Nature. She even receives murder with indifference."*

The earth is rich and radiant with the microscopic evidence of life.

*"Girls are like caterpillars while they live in the world, to be butterflies when the summer comes but in the meantime they are grubs and larvae. Don't you see — each with their peculiar propensities, necessities and structure."*

Flesh. The uncanny presence of the imagined. The eternal return. Cycles of life and death. Nature and culture. The lived and the imagined.

A spider spins her web.

2. The moon rises over the house.

The woman is haunted by the memory of the dead man.  
He visits her at night.

*"Whenever you tell me your story it will be made up of one great true romance."*

TITLE: **Desire**

Wilted flowers. Absence.  
Flickering lights. Nightmares.  
The need to be ruined.

She sings herself to sleep with a lullaby.

He watches her sleep.

Shadow and light flicker across the room.

Images and text from:

**Nocturne**, a film by  
**Peggy Ahwesh**.

(16mm, 1998, sound, B/W)

Performers:

**Bradley Eros, Anne Kugler,  
Karen Sullivan**.

Cinematographer:

**Robert Fenz**.

Quotations:

**Kathy Acker, Marquis de Sade,  
Sheridan Le Fanu, Steven Shaviro**  
and *The Helstrom Chronicle*.



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3. Curtains come alive with the breeze from an open window.

*"When I asked who the murderer might be, a voice told me that it wasn't you."*

**TITLE: The Sleepwalker**

At night, she wanders down a long, empty corridor. The lover suddenly appears and looms over her. They embrace. The whimpering and crying turn to moans of passion. She cannot escape her imagination.

*"I came to know that the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference, and the only true opposite of fantasy is pain."*

Night clouds gather. Birds cry. The wallpaper is old and discoloured.

**TITLE: Restless sleep**

She dreams the lover into her bed. She caresses his inert body and is comforted by his coldness.

Mechanical wind-up toys. Creaking door. Rotting fruit. Sobbing. Shapes shift in the dark.

4. The lover is indistinguishable from a shadow, a branch creaking against the side of the house, a candle snuffed out by the wind.

*"At this moment, because I'm perverse, I'm telling myself: without you I'm lost. And as soon as I need you, I imagine your absence."*

**TITLE: Transmission**

His shadow at the window is alert and knowing.

*"What goes from one person to another when we laugh or make love? Something lost in the instant, over as soon as it happens."*

*"In these mysterious moods I did not like my lover. I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust."*

**TITLE: The Double**

She holds a knife, poised and ready to strike.

Cracked mirror, yearning, ice forms on the surface of a pond, cruelty, the wound, electricity.

The lover's body lies bloody on the floor.

5. The neighbor comes by and reads outloud a passage from an old book while stroking her hair.

*"...Must the diviner part of mankind be kept in chains by the other? Ah, break those bonds; Nature will it. Have no other curb than your tastes, no other laws than those of your own desires, no more morality than that of Nature herself... Languish no more under those barbarous prejudices that wither your charms and imprison the divine impulses of your heart..."*

6. Weak voices off in the distance whimper and murmur.

**TITLE: Betrayal**

She embraces him, raises the knife and plunges it deep into the shadow.

*"I felt you most powerfully at the moment of your departure. The proof that you were real was that when the time came, you simply weren't there for me."*

*I secretly always knew that you would escape me in the end, so I tried to make your betrayal mine."*



My lovers are stacked  
on top of each other  
on the damp green lawn  
of my suburban house.

The first is on the bottom  
followed by the others,  
in chronological order,  
at the top, my wife.

They are piled  
like sacks of potatoes, face down.  
Their arms and legs are moving slowly,  
resembling a strange sea creature.

The ones closer to the bottom  
look uncomfortable.  
while those at the top  
are quiet, even peaceful.

I stand on my front porch  
and tell them to move on.  
The neighbours have gathered,  
and are whispering to each other.

I ask my wife  
to come back to the house,  
but she is smelling the hair,  
and stroking the neck  
of the woman beneath her.

I go and throw  
a blanket over  
their naked bodies.

The movement of their  
limbs looks ridiculous,  
poking out from underneath the cover,  
as I return to the house,  
and close the door.



The words of a great dictionary were being revised. Each year there were alternate spellings and meanings of the same words. Hundreds of scholars contributed to the book. After many years you could spell a word any way you wanted and each word could be substituted for another in a sentence. People began speaking the language of ambient noise and when they greeted each other they imitated what ever sound was close at hand.



# Why Do I Keep Repeating Myself?

*Kristin Lucas*

I wonder what the odds are for a cell phone or a fax to share the same frequency as a neurotransmitter in my brain. A pager goes off and I raise an eyebrow. Someone programs their microwave to thaw frozen peas and I wind up exiting the subway two stops too soon. I'm a giant radio-controllable buffoon.

I imagine technology's sphere of influence being played out on those whose lives are even further steeped in electronic co-dependency, from programmable security systems to automotive global positioning systems. With so many systems in place one must proceed in accordance with the commands and options of machines—even to accomplish the most rudimentary of chores. Rewards may seem small: the cash equivalent of the value submitted, a printed receipt, a potato baked evenly from the inside out. Nevertheless they are achievements and to some they are empowering.

There is a new Aaron Spelling primetime tv show called *Charmed* featuring Shannon Doherty, formerly of *Beverly Hills 90210*. Its stars are a sisterhood of witches who cast spells with their minds but use cell phones to communicate. Those conditions, generated by the collision of waveforms and forces, are commonly mistaken for the actions of the paranormal or a warp in the time-space continuum of a parallel universe. Maybe cell phones are capable of affecting the psychic and paranormal. Wo/man-machine interface.

I play video poker with the same degree of intensity that I enlist to make art. Casinos are easy environments to work in because they are controlled environments. You can expect the same light, temperature, and noise level regardless of the time of day. There are no competing noisemakers—video cameras, laptops, or walkmans—allowed in the room. I stare deep into the face of my machine—to the point that unidentified glands begin to secrete—causing my vision to blur. I employ my deepest psychic capabilities to free all energy blocks between myself and the machine. Machine karma.

Wo/man becomes to machine what peripheral is to computer—an extension for the facilitation of the “perfect” task-oriented machine. As a culture we have invested in this relationship. Chips and compression are central to '90s electronics design. Smaller often costs more. Miniaturization is fashionable. The shorter the life of these accessories the better; we'll just buy more and reprogram ourselves.

Canal Street, in lower Manhattan, is one of my favourite places to shop. It was once notorious for its thriving do-it-yourself electronics stores, owing its reputation to a project-oriented group of experimental artists and engineers. The last of these stores went out of business last fall and was replaced overnight by another cheap electronics store, selling Tamaguchi pets, pens, and watches that talk, car alarms at bargain prices.

Many components that were once used to solder onto PC board are no longer being made. Information in the form of data is more commonly compressed and transferred to programmable chips. Parts are miniaturized, stamped onto boards, and dipped in solder by robots and machines. The chip in effect reduces and seals information in such a way that prevents modification, as a security measure. Electronics enthusiasts have had to trade in their breadboards for computers and turn to software programs to work out schematics.

The computer industry keeps itself in business by using compression as a tool for “information hiding” which ultimately puts a broadening user group

in the the dark, securing the user's position as labourer of the machine. Language is turned into property. There is a market that assumes our ignorance. Perhaps this is why *Dummies* guide paperbacks are so popular among users. "I'd like to buy a vowel please" (*Wheel of Fortune*). Commercial propagandists lead us to believe that we are taking record-setting strides forward in the race for the twenty-first century, but are we really just being taken for a ride?

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Is "information hiding" in digital society being used as a form of social control? It is packaged and sold to the general public like insurance, as security. We operate within a self-censoring system, which surpasses those of generations before. Surveillance is so much a part of our lives that we don't need to see it to recognize its presence. A camera at a bank machine is a merely interior decoration. Objects and procedures are never what they appear to be, but we accept that information at face value. We live with the knowledge that our own image can be bought and sold and our identities and actions misconstrued. This affects our behaviour, the way we socialize on the street, in our workplace or home, on the internet. When subscribing to an on-line magazine, my private information is being sold to a sales analyst for product research purposes. When I wake up in the morning or when I come home for the day, my initial activity via telephone or modem sets off an onslaught of calls by telemarketers soliciting anything from phone service, credit card offers, and car insurance. It took me some time to witness this pattern among patterns.

Not only do we find ourselves mimicking this process of "information hiding" by censoring our thoughts and gestures in real time, but we facilitate the paradigm which enables others to construct our individual and collective identities. We contribute to the paradigm that systematically hides information from us.

There exists in a producer's mind the notion that the viewer/audience will receive information and process that information based on parts given. As a mediamaker you set up the shot. The audience looks through your lens. You provide the framework for their observation.

I have adopted a frame of vision, which is different than the cone of vision I learned about in junior high school science class. This frame serves as a filter through which I am able to identify and classify, weed out the odd and unnecessary bits of information that might otherwise cloud my judgment. Somewhere along the line I downloaded pattern recognition software for my brain. There are days that I forget what it feels like to invent my own thoughts. I spend more time organizing my desktop than I spend organizing my desktop.

As an artist one has to be able to remove the filter, and it is necessary to do so, in order to have a fresh look, to keep things in perspective, especially since post-production and effects-processing have moved further into computer-based design. As the cost of these tools has come down, not-for-profits are making the investment and artists are finding access. We are becoming more familiar with the images that are produced this way.

322 As video and computer animation become more prevalent, and we see our own images reproduced more often, we venture further into the illusion that the reproduction is the truer self. We become increasingly fascinated with self-improvement and super-human qualities. When contemplating our image in video, we witness an emptiness, a hollowness. Our instinct is to reach for the refresh button.

Because of the vast databases full of prerecorded material—sound, images, text—our audiences are less impressed by the perfect or live moment, and more so by the spectacle of the moment.

Take for example the popularity of television talk shows. The average viewer has a sophisticated awareness of the complexity of the information and actions being staged. The stage becomes the canvas for experience. The viewer already knows that the experience has been rehearsed. This makes the story that much easier to absorb. Its parts are familiar. It is not that the story itself is sad to listen to. It is that the producers have broken the story into sound and emotive bites which are easily reconstructed for the audience. The guest has come to the camera to have the experience, to measure the empathy passed down through audience participation. The story is made for the audience, and the attachment comes out of an appreciation for a well-told story. The story does not have the same kind of resonance without undergoing the reconstruction. The camera acts as the interface between the viewer and the guest.

We are living in the age of pre-recorded samples and behaviours. The digital age issues arguments over reproduction and multiplicity. Cracking DNA code and in vitro fertilization are intrinsically linked to this. The assumption that we can all have children is the same as the promise of the digital: we will be guaranteed a one-to-one transfer.

Digital media breeds multiplicity. The more dandelions you pull from the lawn, the greater the number that grow back in their place. In a few short years, television's Olson twins will be replaced by not-so-talented pre-teen quintuplets. Soon we'll be happy to sit back and digest hours of the same scenarios that *The Brady Bunch* and *Full House* casts played out. The difference

being character development and separation anxiety stepped up to the fifth power, quintuplets instead of twins. Multiplicity gone haywire.

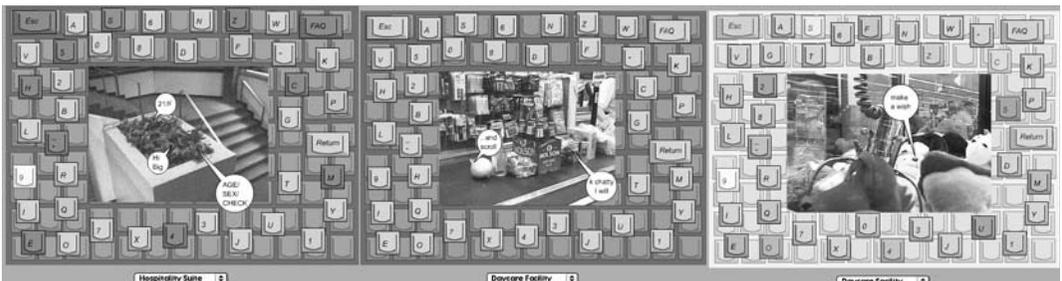
So how does one reconcile using digital technology as an art medium when they are intrinsically related to the facilitation of information as industry, language as property? How does one reclaim these tools? Why do I keep repeating myself? These are the questions which surface in my art-making practice.

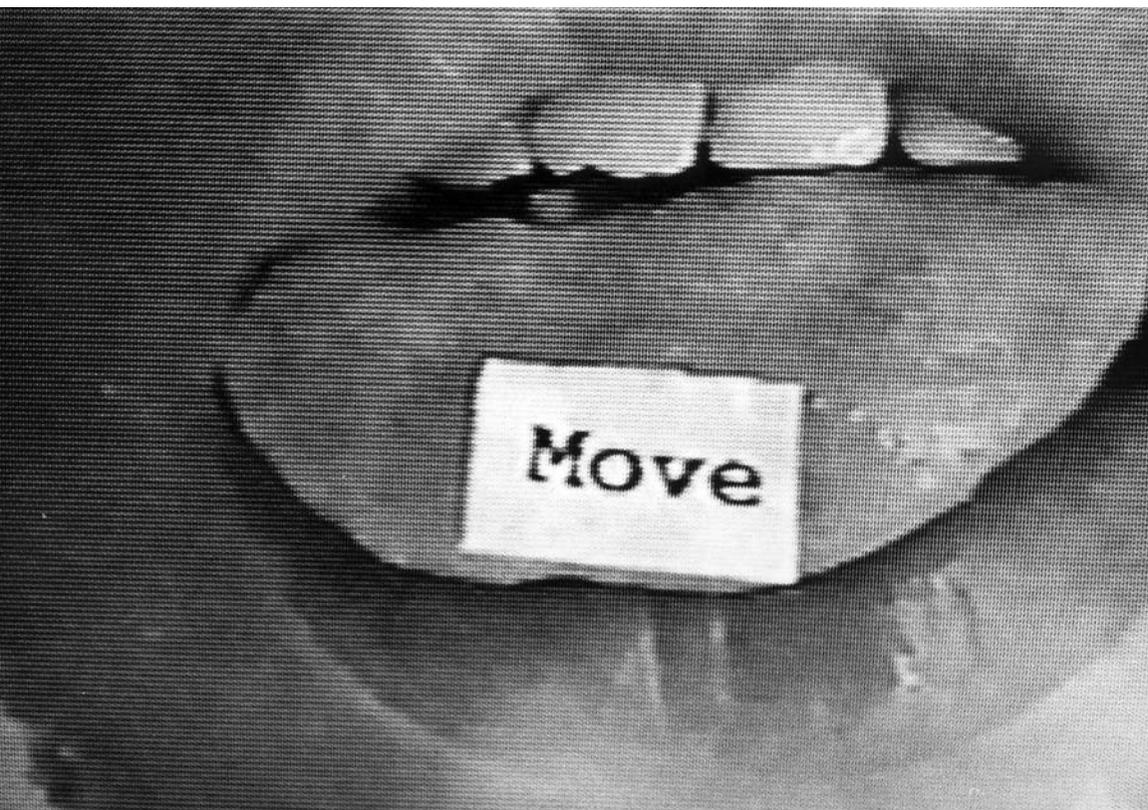
I make video as if I were conditioning myself for something major. Like nuclear fallout. Video and computers have an intrinsic relationship to mass media and military, as tools. Therein lies potential for the critique of these structures. Video is the medium within which I simulate possible relationships/maneuvers. It's borderline competitive for me, breaking free of the object that encapsulates me. I concentrate on the fields that I operate within, and those that surround me. Like a war zone, I am exposed to more fields than I care to acknowledge. I have chosen to make work about this, but this does not mean that others will or that my ideas are meaningful or truthful. I just simulate the environment, real and imagined, to get to the question.

Whether analogue or digital, many forms of information can merge in video. It can be captured or streamed for webpages and live webcasts. This is changing the way that one perceives video as a medium. Because video is so compatible with other tools, and so malleable at the same time, it is a tool that many are fascinated with. It has the ability to capture the qualities of layers of light and sound. This is stunning to me still. I am used to operating within fields and behind layers. It is important to me to imagine the big picture. I see walls around me and I know that there are other spaces. I see windows and I envision a number of options. Our reality has more depth than ever due to digital technology.



This article was written in response to a series of conversations with Joe McKay (artist) and Jan Zwicky (philosopher).







4/14/99

*Paula Levine and Jan Peacock*

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Outgoing Message Re:ahah?

Page 1 of 2

>I am trying to understand other ways to teach new technologies, in >relation to history, culture, and time. I am interested in knowing what >questions are being asked and what material is used to speak to these >questions?

>

>I want to know whether others are finding it a strange strange time to >be teaching art, a time when the learning tools of art coincide with >the desire of culture which converts technology, and technological >tools, into fast-paying commodity.

>

>Suddenly there is utility in the skills that are taught at art school. >Has this happened before, other than the Renaissance?

>

>Is there a greater link between corporate interests and education as >the result of increased technology? Will this affect what materials are >taught and how they are taught in classes? Who is the new technology >classroom serving?

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Hi P, here are my immediate thoughts.

Yes, it is a strange time to be an artist working with technology, and the danger is that it becomes harder to underwrite our own priorities as artists (and as students of art) when there is such a high premium placed on the technological tools we are using, which have such material currency/utility in the culture, and where that "currency" can so easily erase the rich, dialogic, interrogatory, and multivalent relationships that artists generally cultivate with material and materiality. It becomes very hard to open up a particular mode of materiality when, culturally, it is so ubiquitous. Baudrillard might even speak of its inarguable "presence"—its reification—as obscene, because we are incapable of negotiating its meaning; it is just "there." And speaking of the overriding utilitarian value of technology, a colleague of mine refers to the computer-focussed students as "the coal miners of the future."

Right now things seem very black and white, a kind of superstitious stone-age of computerdom: technology is dystopian (invasive, contaminating, hegemonic) or technology is utopian (universalizing, democratizing, transformative). But either belief simultaneously expresses its willingness to suppress and distort its opposite.

Re: the Renaissance, I actually heard a talk by one of those Siggraph utopians who said that she believed that "for the first time since the Renaissance, art and science have come together to forge a new humanity." When the speaker turned to ask Woody



Vasulka what he thought of this, he said, "Well, it all sounds too religious for me."

328 In teaching, I am trying to point to newer technologies as part of an available array that includes technologies that have been discarded. Perhaps enough has been said about the "abject" in art of the early '90s, but it hasn't percolated through the broader culture except in sentimental and nostalgic paradigms of loss and retrieval (*The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville*). Students are incredibly responsive to this idea of the broader technological array. I always get a couple of them who simply have to work with mechanical slide dissolve, even though they know a computer can do it "better."

Tom Sherman points out that art and artists are inherently "conservative"—art never throws any method, material, or technology away. Historically, it keeps (collects, holds onto, conserves) everything—from the most ancient tile-laying techniques to NASA-tested alloys. Sherman says, "By contrast, try walking into a biology lab and asking someone there if they are doing *anything* today the same way they did it twenty years ago—even five years ago."

For artists not to consider what has been discarded limits the questions they can ask about their own moment. In the scientific community, the press forward/onward is too forceful to allow for such ahistoric interplay.

Can the corporately sponsored technological classroom teach such things? I don't see why not. Depends who's teaching. Wallace Stevens wasn't limited as a poet by his job as an insurance salesman. Nothing's pure, or as Leonard Cohen put it, "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

Off to class now. Bon courage, ma fille.

grosses bises,  
jan







# End Notes

## Ten Years of Dreams About Art

Laura J. Marks

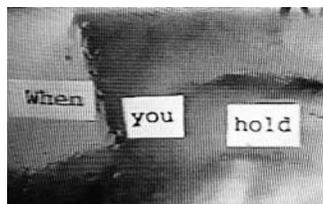
- 1 Charles S. Peirce, "The Categories in Detail," *Collected Papers*, vol. 6, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 150.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 199–200.
- 3 Peirce, "The Categories in Detail," 172–173.
- 4 Charles S. Peirce, "Objective Logic," in *Collected Papers*, vol. 6.
- 5 Gary Kibbins, "Bored Bedmates: Art and Criticism at the Decade's End," *Fuse* 22:2 (Spring 1999), 32–42.
- 6 Floyd Merrell, *Peirce's Semiotics Now: A Primer* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1995), 116.
- 7 Peirce, "The Categories in Detail," 150.

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## Flaming Creatures: New Tendencies in Canadian Video

Gary Kibbins

- 1 See Michael Nash, "Vision After Television: Technocultural Convergence, Hypermedia, and the New Media Arts Field," *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, eds. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Cynthia Chris, "Video Art: Dead or Alive?," *Afterimage* 24:3 (Nov./Dec. 1996).
- 2 See Jon Burris's fine article "Did the Portapak Cause Video Art?," *Millennium Film Journal* 29 (Fall 1996).
- 3 See Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 169.
- 4 Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the new monuments," *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 182.
- 5 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 182.
- 6 See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965). Agitation propaganda is directed against prevailing attitudes, and so is designed to be visible and rousing in nature. Integration propaganda is conformist, and is designed to promote cohesion and consensus with respect to prevailing attitudes. A well-known case study in this regard is Bertolt Brecht, whose earlier work was agitational, but after taking up residency in the German Democratic Republic in 1947, found himself obliged to create integrative forms, a transition he never successfully made.
- 7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 96.
- 8 This is not necessarily the same motivation cited by those who valorize the "ineffable" in contemporary theory however. One can see a fundamental gap between manifestations of the irreducible that typically appear in artworks and the highly abstract constructions of, for example, Jean-François Lyotard's "sublime," whose quasi-mystical grandiosity has little to do with the more modest, modernist, and Brechtian examples that populate video montage, and which are statistically and critically more decisive in contemporary art in general.
- 9 See Peter Sloterdijk's monumental *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), whose insights are central to this discussion. His operative term for cynicism is "enlightened false consciousness," which aptly captures the paradoxical co-existence of knowledge and self-deception. Sloterdijk's book importantly discusses alternatives, which he links to "Kynicism," and the satirical laughter of Diogenes.



- 10 Sylvère Lotringer, "Uncle Fishook and the Sacred Baby Poo Poo of Art: An Interview with Jack Smith," *Semiotext(e)* 111: 2 (1978), 192.
- 11 Ken Kelman, "Smith Myth," *Film Culture* 29 (Summer 1963), 5.
- 12 Gregory Markopoulos, "Innocent Revels," *Film Culture* 33 (Summer 1964), 41.

## The Ghost of an Exquisite Corpse

David Clark

- 1 Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of History," *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture, 1990), 118.
- 2 John Belton, "Looking Through Video: The Psychology of Video and Film," *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* eds. Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 67.
- 3 See Rosalind Krauss: "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" and Stuart Marshall: "Video Art, the Imaginary and the *Parole Vide*." Both articles appear in *New Artists' Video: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978).
- 4 To see how the effects of transference are strong around Derrida's presence, see Alan Bass's *The Double Game* which discusses the strong transference reaction Derrida's translator had to the figure of Derrida. See also Derrida's essay "Videor" in which he writes about his experience as a participant in Gary Hill's video *Disturbance (among the jars)*. "One could say that my uncertainty [about video art]...has been encouraged by the experience of the 'videor' simulacrum into which I have seen myself, modestly swept along for a little while now, ever since I had a chance to participate, or rather to figure, in *Disturbance* by Gary Hill" (Videor, 74).
- 5 Susan Buck-Morss, "The Cinema Screen as Prosthesis of Perception: A Historical Account," 52–53.
- 6 See Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 142, and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinov (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 107.

## Performative Impulses

Andrew James Paterson

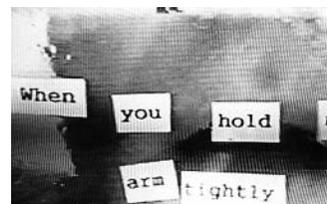
- 1 Dot Tuer, panel presentation, Trinity Square Video 20th Anniversary Retrospective Screening (Oct. 25, 1991), in the catalogue *Trinity Square Video, 1982–1991, Collection of Independent Video* (Toronto: Trinity Square Video, 1992), 7.
- 2 David Bourdon, "Vito Acconci: An Eccentric Body of Art," *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nicklas (New York: E.P. Dutton Inc., 1984), 191.
- 3 Michael Kirby, "On Acting and Non-Acting," *The Art of Performance*, 97–117.
- 4 *Lullaby for the Almost Falling Woman*, videotape by Cathy Sisler (1996).
- 5 Examples of self-personae throughout Campbell's media works include *The Woman From Malibu* (1976), "Robin" in *Bad Girls* and *Modern Love* (both 1979) and "Art Star" in *Sackville, I'm Yours* (1972). "Colleena" in *Rendez-vous* (1998) also references the three women of *No Voice Over* (1986). See *Colin Campbell: Media Works 1972–1990* (Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1991) for touring exhibition.

## Autoethnography: Journeys of the Self

Catherine Russell

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 28.
- 2 Quoted from Benjamin's letter to Martin Buber (February 23, 1927) by Gershom Sholem, Preface

- to *Moscow Diary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 6.
- 3 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 31–32.
  - 4 Michael M.J. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 194–233.
  - 5 Michael Renov has written about new modes of autobiography in "The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video," *Afterimage* 17:1, 4–7 and "New Subjectivities: Documentary and Self-Representation in the Post-Verité Age," *Documentary Box* 7 (1995), 1–8. See also Jim Lane, "Notes on Theory and the Autobiographical Documentary Film in America," *Wide Angle* 15:3 (July 19 93), 21–36; Ruth Behar, "Expanding the Boundaries of Anthropology: The Cultural Criticism of Gloria Anzaldúa and Marlon Riggs," *Visual Anthropology Review* 9:2, 83–91; José Muñoz, "The Autoethnographic Performance: Reading Richard Fung's Queer Hybridity," *Screen* 36:2 (Summer 1995), 83–99.
  - 6 These terms are both used by Bill Nichols in *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1–16.
  - 7 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.
  - 8 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 94.
  - 9 Renov, "The Subject in History," 4.
  - 10 Muñoz, "Autoethnographic Performance," 87.
  - 11 Françoise Lionnet has described autoethnography in literature as a form of *métissage* "which demystifies all essentialist glorifications of unitary origins, be they racial, sexual, geographical, or cultural." *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) 9.
  - 12 P. Adams Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 246.
  - 13 Janine Marchessault, "Sans Soleil," *CineAction!* (Spring 1986), 2–6.
  - 14 For a fuller discussion, see my book *Experimental Ethnography*, particularly the section on the transition from film to video and its parallels with the cultural transformations that are documented by ethnographers.
  - 15 Trinh Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 74.
  - 16 Renov situates Mekas as a crucial contributor to the development of the new autobiography in "The Subject in History" 5–6. See also the anthology *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
  - 17 From David James's filmography in *To Free the Cinema* (321–22), the diary films include *Walden* (1964–69, 3 hours); *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1971–72, 82 min); *Lost Lost Lost* (1949–1975, 2 hours 58 min); *In Between* (1964–78, 52 min) *Paradise Not Yet Lost* (1977–79, 96 min); *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of his Life* (1969–85, 2 hours).
  - 18 David James, "Film Diary/Diary Film: Practice and Product in *Walden*," in *To Free the Cinema*, 168.
  - 19 Maureen Turim, "Reminiscences, Subjectivities, and Truths," in *To Free the Cinema*, 210.
  - 20 Renov, "The Subject in History," 6.
  - 21 *Filmmakers Co-op Catalogue 1989*, 363; quoted in Turim, "Reminiscences," 207.
  - 22 Turim, "Reminiscences," 208.
  - 23 Turim, 206; James, "Film Diary/Diary Film," 160.
  - 24 Jeffrey K. Ruoff, "Home Movies of the Avant-garde: Jonas Mekas and the New York Art World," *To Free the Cinema*, 294–311.



- 25 Filmmakers Co-op Catalogue 1975, 178, quoted in Turim, "Reminiscences," 202.
- 26 David James points out that Mekas's editing and "revising" of his footage entails a community practice, a language and a kind of writing that is quite removed from the immediacy of the filming stage (James 161).
- 27 See Marjorie Keller, "The Theme of Childhood in the Films of Jean Cocteau, Joseph Cornell, and Stan Brakhage," (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1982).
- 28 Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 28.
- 29 Paul Arthur, "History and Crass Consciousness: George Kuchar's Fantasies of Un-Power," *Millennium Film Journal* 20/21 (Fall/Winter 1988–89), 156.
- 30 Christine Tamblyn, "Qualifying the Quotidian," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* eds. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 19.
- 31 Kuchar described his editing technique at a post-screening discussion at Millennium, New York, 1986. Tamblyn reports the same thing (19). Kuchar started using the hi-8 camera before it became a popular format, exploiting the feature of erasure/re-taping as a medium-specific possibility. With the growing availability of editing suites, he has no doubt moved towards more conventional editing techniques.
- 32 See my "Culture as Fiction: The Ethnographic Impulse in the Films of Peggy Ahwesh, Su Friedrich and Leslie Thornton," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 33 Sadie Benning is the daughter of James Benning, which may or may not account for her aesthetic sensibilities, but does suggest how she came to embrace the avant-garde at such an early age.
- 34 Chris Holmlund, "When Autobiography Meets Ethnography and Girl Meets Girl: The 'Dyke Docs' of Sadie Benning and Su Friedrich," in *Between the Sheets, In the Streets, Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 130.
- 35 Muñoz, "Autoethnographic Performance," 84.
- 36 Laura Kipnis, "Female Transgression," *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* eds. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 340–41.
- 37 Tamblyn, "Qualifying the Quotidian," 13–28.
- 38 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 50.
- 39 Ibid 52.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Indiana: Indiana University Press and British Film Institute, 1992), 192.
- 42 Fredric Jameson points out that the similar ideological lesson of *Perfumed Nightmare* (the title refers to the attraction to and dangers of modern technologies) is "of a type embarrassing if not inconceivable for First-World (realistic) filmmakers," 204.
- 43 Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections*, 220–238.
- 44 "Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow? An Interview with Kidlat Tahimik," Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, *Cantrills Filmnotes* 73,74 (May 1994), 55.
- 45 In the clips from the film-in-progress, it seems that Magellan's slave finally returns to the Philippines with his master, but the natives kill Magellan, thus freeing the slave. Tahimik's description of the slave is someone who learned the dress codes and the language of the colonial Other, as well as the law of supply and demand.
- 46 Jameson, "Geopolitical Aesthetic," 207.

- 47 In his critique of Jameson's theory of national allegory (which is the theory informing Jameson's discussion of *Perfumed Nightmare*) Aijaz Ahmad suggests that a global perspective of capitalist production is a more appropriate model for a theory that might encompass all Third-World literatures. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness," excerpted in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1995), 80.
- 48 Tahimik's given name is Eric de Guia, and he told the Cantrills that he grew up as a bourgeois kid who wished he were an Igorot (Cantrill/Cantrill, 47).
- 49 Ibid 55.
- 50 Ibid 59.
- 51 Walter Benjamin, "N [Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]," trans. of *Passequen Werk* by Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth. In *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

## American Psycho[Drama]

*Nelson Herricks*

- 1 I originally wrote this short introductory text to accompany "American Psycho(Drama): Sigmund Freud vs. Henry Ford," a touring video package distributed by the Video Data Bank, Chicago USA. All the tapes discussed in this text are available there.
- 2 The return to low-tech seems to indicate that the economy of "high-end technology = artistic sophistication"—has, at least in the realm of video art, finally (and thankfully) bottomed-out.
- 3 Artists such as Martha Rosler, Colin Campbell, John Baldessari, William Wegman, and Vito Acconci immediately spring to mind.
- 4 I would refer viewers to the video work of British artists Paul Harrison and John Wood, which is the finest elaboration of this idea that I have ever witnessed. Their work is available through Vidéographe (Montréal) and LUX (London).
- 5 For example, the Breer/Gibbons collaborations were made for tv, yet lack the site-specific criticality of, say, Stan Douglas' "Television Spots."
- 6 I find it useful here to make a distinction between mass culture (a culture of multiple mass-produced objects) and pop culture (a subset of these "objects" which enter into popular discourse).
- 7 I am not sure of the delicacies of quoting someone out of context, but I do feel this was an extremely pertinent observation, and I refuse to take credit for it.
- 8 I am quoting from the credits of Cathy Sisler's *Aberrant Motion #4 (Face Story/Stagger Stories)*. The disruptive power of non-conformity is an area she has explored magnificently in all her work. Gary Kibbins discusses this aspect of Sisler's work in the article "Bored Bedmates: Art & Criticism/Political vs. Critical," *Fuse* 22:2 (Spring 1999), 35–42.
- 9 In her book *The War of Technology and Desire at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), Allucqère Rosanne Stone sets forth an interesting web of ideas concerning new technology and multiple personality disorder.
- 10 For more on the link between video, humour, and propaganda, I would direct readers to Gary Kibbins' excellent article "Flaming Creatures," which is also featured in this book.
- 11 At one pivotal moment, the classic pie-in-the-face is applied as a superior "home-made" remedy.
- 12 One critic used this buzz phrase to describe Lars Von Trier's *The Kingdom*, but I find it infinitely more descriptive of the HalfLifers.
- 13 Or, as Steve Reinke says, "You are always everything you might become. (Rehearsing all future possibilities in the backyard.)" From the videotape *Everybody Loves Nothing (Empathic Exercises)* (1997).
- 14 I am thinking specifically of works such as Kate Craig's *Delicate Issue* (1979) or Lisa Steele's *Birthday Suit—with scars and defects* (1974), both



of which present the (naked) female body as a de-eroticized object.

15 This is also what composer John Oswald does with pop music. Animal

Charm's work resembles Oswald's in many ways, notably in their sense of composition and structure.

16 The most accessible source for this old standard is *Video Culture*, edited by John Handhardt (New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), 179–191. It was originally published in *New Artists' Video*, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978).

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## Being a Witness: A Poetic Meditation on B/side

*Fbigail Child*

- 1 Michel Leiris, *L'Age d'homme: precede de "De la litterature consideree comme une taumachie"* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946) trans. Richard Howard under the title *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility* (New York: Grossman, 1963), 162. Quoted in *Testimony, Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 145, with *be* instead of *sbe* as the subject pronoun.
- 2 Felman/Laub, 3.
- 3 *Ibid* 161.
- 4 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).
- 5 Felman/Laub, 5.
- 6 Exceptions to time slot rules are indeed exceptional. *Shoab*, at over five hours, exemplifies cinematic form expanding to meet new content.
- 7 My thanks to Jeffrey Skoller for discussion of the American context of this history, summarized in short form in his review of *B/side*, "Home Sweet Home," *Afterimage* (Nov-Dec 1998).
- 8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- 9 See Paul Virilio's discussion of speed in *Pure War*, trans. Mark Polizotti, *Semiotext(e)* 1983, and B. Ruby Rich's various reviews of films in *The Village Voice* of the early 1980s.
- 10 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
- 11 Felman/Laub, 148.
- 12 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- 13 *Ibid* 206.
- 14 *Match cut* is a technical term which means the unitary view of the camera is not broken. It is *matched*, in terms of movement, colour, and design to create an illusion of unitary sight and time.
- 15 Caesar Vallejo, *Poems*.
- 16 Paul Valery, "Commentaire de Charmes," in *Oeuvres*, vol I, 1510 (Paris: Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pleiade], 1957), 1510. Quoted in Felman/Laub, 276.
- 17 Kadiatu Kanneh, "History, 'Africa' and Modernity" in *Interventions*, 1:1 (October 1998). His original statement reads: "What I wish to argue is that the 'native' spaces of the (previously) colonized world are not so neatly removed from the preoccupations of the migrant in the city" (30).
- 18 *Ibid* 31. Italics mine.
- 19 Skoller, "Home Sweet Home," 16.

## Beyond the Absurd, Beyond Cruelty: Donigan Cumming's Staged Realities

*Sally Berger*

- 1 Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty" (First Manifesto, 1932), *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*

- ed. Susan Sontag, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 251.
- 2 Donigan Cumming, "Concerning La Répétition," (1995), artist's statement published by Frac Lorraine 2.
- 3 Cumming, "Concerning La Répétition," 2.
- 4 Antonin Artaud, "Cinema and Reality," ed. *Antonin Artaud*, 150–152.
- 5 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 15, 97.
- 6 Antonin Artaud, "The Premature Old Age of Cinema," *Selected Writings*, 311–314.
- 7 *Selected Writings*, 242.
- 8 *Ibid.*

## Warhol's Grave

### *Lia Gangitana*

- 1 Rene Ricard, "Take out the flowers," *Rene Ricard, 1979–1980* (New York: DIA, 1979), 47.
- 2 Peggy Ahwesh quoted in Tim Griffin, "Bury the Lead," *World Art* 16 (1998), 23–24.
- 3 Jeff Wall, "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," 1965–1975: *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, eds. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1995), 262.
- 4 Ahwesh quoted in Griffin, 23.
- 5 Atom Egoyan, "Atom Egoyan Interviews David Cronenberg," *Take One: Film In Canada*, 3 (Fall 1993), 11.
- 6 This and following italicized quotations: Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn, *The Deadman*, 1990, 40 minutes, 16mm.
- 7 From e-mail correspondence with Peggy Ahwesh, 1999.
- 8 Catherine Liu, "Diary of the Pop Body," *Flash Art*, 166 (October 1992), 76.
- 9 "The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses." Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1–2.
- 10 Trevor Fairbrother, "Skulls," in *The Work of Andy Warhol*, ed. Gary Garrels, Dia Art Foundation, *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* 3 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 104.
- 11 Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 212.
- 12 Ahwesh quoted in Griffin, 24.
- 13 Laurie Weeks, "Laboratory," *The Failure to Assimilate: The Video Works of Cecilia Dougherty* (New York: Thread Waxing Space, 1998), 12.
- 14 David Joselit, "The Self Readymade," *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910–1941* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 173.
- 15 Ahwesh quoted in Griffin, 24.
- 16 From e-mail correspondence with Elisabeth Subrin, 1999.
- 17 From e-mail correspondence with Peggy Ahwesh, 1999.



# Pleasure Dome's Film and Video Events 1989 - 1999

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## 1989/90

### The Sins of George Kuchar

September 22, The Euclid Theatre,  
394 Euclid Ave.

*I, An Actress, Hold Me While I'm Naked, Knocturme, Eclipse of the Sun Virgin, Weather Diary 5, Precious Products*, George Kuchar

### Is This What You Were Born For?

*Abigail Child & The Brothers Quay*

November 17, The Euclid Theatre

*Covert Action, Perils, Mayhem, Mercy*,  
Abigail Child  
*The Epic of Gilgamesh, Street of Crocodiles*,  
The Brothers Quay

### Postman with a Movie Camera

*John Porter Retrospective*

### December 1, The Euclid Theatre

*Sandbox, Porter's Condensed Rituals (1976-86), Santa Claus Parade, Mother and Child, Exams, Amusement Park, Camera Dances, Firefly, Angel Baby, Down on Me, Cinesfuge, Toy Catalogue, Calendar Girl, Where Are They Now?, Daily Double Dick Van Dykes, Hamilton Homes, Shootout with Rebecca, Animal in Motion, Picture Pitcher, Scanning*,  
John Porter

### Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversation

*& TG Psychic Rally in Heaven*

January 19, The Euclid Theatre

*Angelic Conversation, TG Psychic Rally in Heaven*,  
Derek Jarman

### Steve Sanguedolce's Rhythms of the Heart

*and films by Peggy Ahwesh & Josie Massarella*

February 2, The Euclid Theatre

*Rhythms of the Heart, Steve Sanguedolce From Romance to Ritual, Peggy Ahwesh No. 5 Reversal, Josie Massarella*

### Ellie Epp In Person

*Film & Performance*

February 23, The Euclid Theatre

Film and performance (using sections from  
*Notes in Origin*), Ellie Epp

### Carl Brown's Re:Entry

March 9, The Euclid Theatre

*Re:Entry*, Carl Brown

### The Super 8 Underground

*Closet Fantasies & Caustic Visions*

**April 4, The Euclid Theatre**

Guest curated by Steve Anker of the San

Francisco Cinematheque

*Body of Light, In the Rhythm of Falling,*

Peter Herwitz

*In the Month Crickets,* Lewis Klahr

*Remains to Be Seen,* Phil Solomon

*Fuck Face,* Julie Murray

*Notes After Long Silence,* Saul Levine

*Sodom,* Luther Price

**J.O.'s Film Night**

***Neo Punk Flicks***

**May 4, The Purple Institution,**

42 Gladstone Ave.

*Trouble Makers,* G.B. Jones

*Cross Your Heart,* Stevie Sinatra

*Desire Drives Her Car,* Kathleen Maitland-Carter

*Sexbombs,* Candyland Productions

*Slam, Boy/Girl, I Know What It's like to Be Dead,*

Trailer for *No Skin Off My Ass,* Bruce LaBruce

*Home Movies,* Bruce LaBruce and Pepper Wayne Gacy

**In This Life's Body**

*Autobiography From Australia*

**May 23, The Euclid Theatre**

*In This Life's Body,* Corrine Cantrill

**The Almanac Project**

*In person: Owen O'Toole*

**July 13, The Purple Institution**

*The Filmers' Almanac*

(super 8 films made for each day of the year,  
approx. 130 'film days' from around the world)

*Anti-Almanac,* anonymous

*Sermon of the Mouth,* Tucker Icatonah

**Moving Image Installation:**

**Pages Bookstore Window**

*By Phillip Barker*

**August 19 to September 2, Pages Bookstore,**

256 Queen St. W.

*Swimming Grasshopper Lake,* Phillip Barker

**1990/91**

**Alte Kinder**

*In Germany, Super B isn't a  
Dirty Word*

**Saturday, October 13, The Euclid Theatre**

In person: Matthias Müller

Presented in co-operation with the Goethe  
Institut, Toronto

*Take Courage,* M. Rettig

*Triptychon — Studie Fuer Selbstbild,* T. Mank

*Aus Der Ferne (The Memo Book),* M. Müller

*The Flamethrowers,* Alte Kinder, O. O'Toole

and Schmelz Dahin

*Stadt im Flammen (City in Flames),* Schmelz Dahin

*Epilog,* M. Müller and C. Heuwinkel

**The Symbolic Process**

*A talk and film showing with  
Sandra Davis*

*Women and Avant-Garde  
Filmmaking*

**Wednesday, October 24, The Euclid Theatre**

*The Seashell and the Clergyman,* Germaine Dulac

*Go Go Go,* Marie Menken

*Frameline,* Gunvor Nelson

*Kristallnacht,* Chick Strand

*A Knowledge We Cannot Lose,* Nina Fonoroff

*Peace O' Mind,* Mary Fillipo

*Tr'cheot'my P'sy,* Julie Murray

**Used Innocence**

*Toronto premiere: James  
Benning's newest film*

**Wednesday, November 14,**

**The Euclid Theatre**

*Used Innocence,* James Benning



**Films by Linda Feeseey & Peggy Ahwesh**

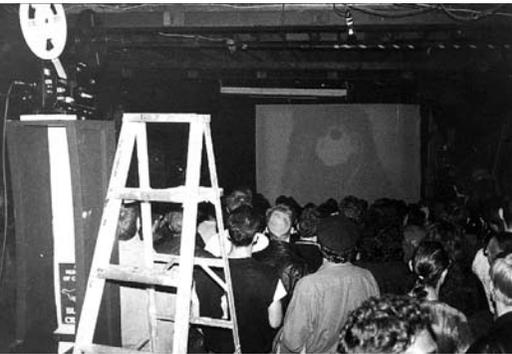
*Blood, Guns and Barbie Dolls*

Wednesday, December 5, The Rex Hotel,  
194 Queen Street W.

*Fuckhead Film Cycle*, Linda Feeseey

*Ode to the New Pre-History, I Ride a Pony Named  
Flame, Martina's Playhouse*, Peggy Ahwesh

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**Sweet Movie**

*Sugar and Shit*

Wednesday, February 6, The Euclid Theatre

*Sweet Movie*, Dusan Makavejev

**New Generation**

*Work by Two Young Local  
Filmmakers*

Monday, February 25, The Cabana Room,  
460 King St. W.

*Beachsplit, Dinner, E. Clips, Carol, Hit Me/Hitler,*

*Me/My Hitler Film, Memory Lane*, Marnie Parrell

*Picture Start, 8mm Notebook, 16mm Notebook, Spring,*

*Holiday Tattoo, Traces Fragments, Evil Twin,*

John Kneller

**Direct on Film**

*Films by Dirk de Bruyn*

Wednesday, March 6, The Euclid Theatre

In person: Dirk de Bruyn

*Feyers, Boerdery, 223, Knots, Light Play, Vision,*

Dirk de Bruyn

**Kebec Kultur**

*Films By Jean-Claude Bustros*

Wednesday, March 20, The Euclid Theatre

*What's That: Der Plan, La queue tigrée d'un chat  
comme pendentif de pare-brise, Zéro gravité,*

Jean-Claude Bustros

**Determinations**

*Resistance Strategies:*

*Documentary Form and  
the Vancouver 5*

Wednesday, April 17, The Euclid Theatre

*Determinations*, Oliver Hockenhuil

**Avant-Garde Animation:  
1921 to 1991**

*Tradition and Innovation*

Thursday, April 25, The Euclid Theatre

Guest curated by Stephanie Maxwell

In person: Stephanie Maxwell

*Lichtspiel Opus I*, Walter Ruttmann

*Rythmus 23*, Hans Richter

*Spiral Constructions*, Oskar Fischinger

*Night on Bald Mountain*, Alexander Alexeieff

and Claire Parker

*Kaleidoscope, Free Radicals*, Len Lye

*Abstronic*, Mary Ellen Bute

*Glen Falls Sequence*, Douglas Crockwell

*Gulls and Buoys*, Robert Breer

A, Jan Lenica

*Magic Explained*, Diana Barrie

*Dirt*, Michael Connor

*Ace of Light*, Dennis Pies

*GA, Please Don't Stop*, Stephanie Maxwell

*Music Room*, Steve Subotnick

*The Trap*, Amy Kravitz

**London Calling**

*Two Nights of Contemporary*

*Work from the U.K.*

Guest curated by Kathleen Maitland-Carter

Wednesday, May 29 and Friday, May 31,

The Euclid Theatre

**May 29 *New Historians/Cultural Renegades***

*Rootless Cosmopolitans*, Ruth Novaczek  
*Degrees of Blindness*, Cerith Wyn Evans  
*The Airwave Spectrum Has Some Defections*,  
 Alnoor Dewshi  
*Granny Is*, David Larcher

**May 31 *Personalities — Sexualities — Identities***

*A Cold Draft*, Lis Rhodes  
*K*, Jayne Parker  
*Moving Through the Mirror*, Alia Syed  
*One and the Other Time*, Sarah Turner  
*Stabat Mater*, Nina Danino  
*Promotion*, Lisa Hurley

**Raunch Bouquet**

*Film and performance by Gwendolyn A Cosy Porn and Variety Slut Show*

Thursday, June 20 and Friday, June 21,  
 CineCycle, 317 Spadina Ave. rear  
*Merchants of Love: Choice Boredom*, Katrinka,  
*Excerpts from Out of the Blue: Gwendolyn's Sequence*,  
*Morgana's Sequence*, *Dope Den Sequence*,  
*Pedagogy*, *Hardcore* (slides and performance),  
 Gwendolyn

**Antic Architecture Cinema**  
*Two Nights in the Nomad's Land between Film and Architecture*

Thursday, July 18, and Friday, July 19,  
 CineCycle

**July 18 *Night I: Peripheral Visions***

Guest curated by The Splinter  
*Brutalität im Stein* (Brutality in Stone),  
 Alexander Kluge and P. Schamoni  
*The Floating Staircase*, Tom Dean  
*Architecture Ego*, Alexander Pilis  
*Detroit, City of My Dreams*, Kevin Cook  
*Incidence of Storage Space*, Robert Lee  
**July 19 *Night II: Home Movies***

*by Big City Dwellers*

*Encadrement*, Clare Hodge  
*Heartland*, Bill Brown  
*Theseus and the Kinotaur*, John Moir  
*P.O.V.*, Barry Isenor  
*Without*, Greg Van Alstyne  
*Airdried Grain Elevator*, Stephanie White  
*Souvenir (To Toronto)*, Gary Thomas  
*You=Architecture*, Kika Thorne  
*Down/Up*, Rocco Matteo  
*"Big"*, Herwig Gayer  
*Destruction of a House by Fire*, Chris Gehman  
*Design Exchange*, Ken Hayes  
*Brick Layer*, Tom Taylor  
*1904*, Kathleen Maitland-Carter  
*Skin Flick*, Milada Kováčová  
*Scanning (Inside Out)*, John Porter

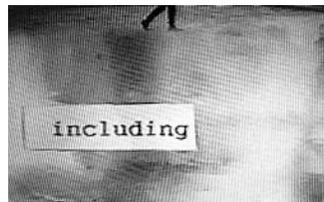
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**1991/92**

**Tortured Celluloid**

*The Cinema of Chemical Deconstruction*

In person from Germany: Jürgen Reble  
**Wednesday, October 16, CineCycle**  
 Presented in co-operation with the Goethe  
 Institut, Toronto  
*We Gather Around the Fire* (film loop and  
 chemical performance), *Schmelz Dabin*,  
*Passion*, Jürgen Reble



### Industrial Primitive

*Body Ritual, Film As Ritual*

Wednesday, October 30, 8 and 10 pm,

CineCycle

*Combination Head\**, *Skinned\**, *Shed 26*, *Test Pattern*,

*Pixel*, *Cathode Ray Dream*, *Skull\**, *C.O.C\**,

W.A. Davison

XXXX80, Monty Cazazza and T. Emmolo Smith

*Universal Hotel*, Peter Thompson

*Warm Broth*, Tom Rhoads

### War and Cinema

*One Year After the Gulf*

Friday, January 17, CineCycle

*The Mask of Nippon*, NFB

*Clouds*, Fumiko Kiyooka and Scott Haynes

*Desert Storm* newsclips from broadcasts,

*Challenging the Media Demonstration*, Paper Tiger

and Deep Dish Satellite Network (excerpted  
from *News World Order*)

*Gulf Bowl*, J. Katz and O. Trager (excerpted  
from *News World Order*)

*I Wish I Was Andy Warhol*, Julie Martin

*January 15, 1991: Gulf War Diary* (work-in-  
progress), Susan Oxtoby

*Gulf War Fantasies*, Mark Surman

*Technologic Ordering (installation work)*, Stephen  
Butson, Heather Cook, and Philip Hoffman



*Pierce*, Monty Cazazza and G.P. Orridge

*Catscan*, Monty Cazazza and

Michelle Handelman

\*film with performance

### Hart Attack

*Recent Work from Filmmakers  
of the Hart House Film Board*

Wednesday, November 13,

The Euclid Theatre

*All Flesh Is Grass*, Susan Oxtoby

*Anti-sleekness Was Always My Weakness*, Nadia  
Sistonen

*Naked Lunch*, Linda Feesey

*Rauch*, a film series, David Morris

### Drifting In From The Edge

*Films From Drift Distribution,  
NYC*

Wednesday, December 4,

The Euclid Theatre

*Belladonna*, Beth B. and Ida Applebroog

### Through and Through

*Premiere: Barbara Sternberg's  
Newest Film*

Friday, January 31, CineCycle

*Through and Through*, Barbara Sternberg

### Inside Annie Sprinkle

*Sex, Fun, and Film  
with Annie Sprinkle*

Wednesday, February 19, A Space,

183 Bathurst St.

A co-presentation with A Space

*Rainbow Showers*, 8mm Loop Film and Narration,

Annie Sprinkle

*The Sluts and Goddesses Transformation Salon*,

Maria Beatty and Annie Sprinkle

### Flaming Creatures

*The Toronto Premiere of Jack  
Smith's 1962 Classic*

*In person: J. Haberman*

Friday, March 20, Jackman Hall, AGO,

317 Dundas St. W.

A benefit screening sponsored by the CFMDC, AGO, Innis, Anthology Film Archives and Pleasure Dome  
*Scotch Tape*, *The Great Pasty Triumph*, a segment from *Normal Love*, *Flaming Creatures*, Jack Smith

## Tunnel Vision

*Films of Psychic Displacement*

Friday, April 3, The Euclid Theatre

*In the Form of the Letter "X"*, Mike Cartmell

*Louisiana Purchase*, *Modern Times*,

Mike Hoolboom

98.3 KHZ (*Bridge at Electrical Storm*), Al Razutis

*Feed the Fear*, M. Filippo

## The Singing Encyclopedia

*The Films of Sharon Cook*

Wednesday, April 15, The Red Head Gallery,

96 Spadina Ave. 8th Floor

A co-presentation with The Red Head Gallery

*Evinrude Outboard*, *Forever Yours*, *Vesuvian Vamp*

*II*, *Manganese*, *Computer Notes*, *The Encyclopedia of*

*Natural Defects*, Sharon Cook

## Queer Subversion

*Queers Take Over Hollywood,*

*Home Movies and More!*

Friday, May 8, CineCycle

A co-presentation with the Toronto Lesbian & Gay Film & Video Festival

*Thanksgiving Prayer*, Gus Van Sant

*Home Movie*, Jan Oxenberg

*Encounter of Two Queens*, Cecilia Barriga

*Remembrance*, Jerry Tartaglia

*The Match That Started My Fire*, Cathy Cook

*Meet Bradley Harrison Picklesimer*,

Heather McAdams

## Atrocity Exhibition

*Assassination and its*

*Fascinations*

Friday, June 12, 8 and 10 pm, CineCycle

*Report*, Bruce Conner

*The Eternal Frame*, Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco

*A Public Appearance and a Statement, Man with a Movie Camera (Blonde, He Appears to Be Young),*

Keith Sanborn

*Perfect Video*, Brian Goldberg and Jackie Goss

*Excerpts and Euphoria*, Ed Mowbray

## Exquisite Corpse

*The Body in Parts:*

*a collaborative film project*

Friday, June 26 and Saturday, June 27, 7:30

and 10 pm, CineCycle

*Iris*, Atom Egoyan

*Eyes, Head/Pant*, Chris Gehman

*Nose, Torso, Arms—>Hand, Feet*, Fred Spek

*A New Argentina*, Lara Johnston

*Lips*, Lisa Brown

*Adam's Apple*, Julie Martin

*Head/Feet*, Elizabeth Yake

*The Nape of the Neck*, Greg Van Alstyne

*(On Her) Back*, Clare and Barbara

*Pubic Hair, Extraction/Excavation*, Thane Shubaly

*The Secret of the Lost Tunnel*, John Porter

*Lips*, Clair Hodge

*Dismember*, Nadia Sistonen

*My Grandfather Shot Some Regular 8 Film in Rural*

*Nova Scotia*, Sherri Higgins

*All Artists Have Daisies up Their Ass,*

Wendy Hammacott and David Wilcox

*Clare's Knees*, Clare Hodge

*Cock*, Louise Lebeau

*Penis*, Leif Harmsen

*Happy Feet*, Beverly Taft

*Pubic Hair, Feet*, Thane Shubaly

*Shaving*, Martha Judge

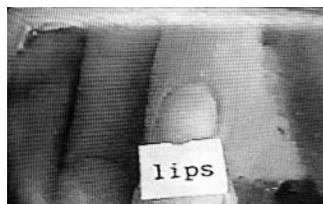
*PSA*, SheTV

*Untitled*, Marnie Parrell

*Navel*, Petra Chevrier

*Untitled*, Wayne Snell

*Untitled*, David Findlay



## High Tech/Low Tech:

### Bodies In Space

*An Open Forum on Film and Video Aesthetics*

Friday, July 17, CineCycle

Screening and discussion guest curated and hosted by Michael Balsler and Dot Tuer

*Why You, Why Anyone*, Ric Amis

*Aamuj* (Mornings), Marjatta Oja

*Dokumentti Työläisistä* (Documentary About the Workers), Tiina Reunanen

*Personal Effects*, Oliver Whitehead

*Pyhä Yksinkertaisuus* (Holy Simplicity),

Mikko Maasalo and Denise Ziegler

*Hotelli* (Hotel), Heli Rekula

*Hammu*, Sami van Ingen

*Vapautemme Hintaa* (The Price of Our Liberty),

Seppo Renvall

*Desh Rag* (Love in Loneliness), Juha van Ingen

*Kalvo* (Membrane), Marjatta Oja

*Alli*, Juha van Ingen and Sami Van Ingen

*Mitä Sinulla on Taskussasi* (The Things You Have in Your Pockets), Denise Ziegler

*(Dis)Integrator*, Juha Van Ingen

*The Blue Giraffe*, Mikko Maasalo

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*What Isabelle Wants*, Warm, Haven, Wrik Mead

*Apocalypse Poo*, Todd Graham

*Untitled*, Michelle Mclean

*Talking Tongues*, Lisa Steele

*Second Impressions*, Lorne Marin

*The Bird That Chirped on Bathurst Street*,

Midi Onodera

*Baby Eyes*, Liz Van Der Zaag

*Toto*, Anna Gronau

## Perfumed Nightmare

*Mababangong Bangungot by Kidlat Tahimik*

Wednesday, July 29, CineCycle

*Mababangong Bangungot* (Perfumed Nightmare),

Kidlat Tahimik

## Northern Thaw

*New Finnish Work*

Friday, August 14, CineCycle

In person: Sami Van Ingen

## 1992/93

### Abattoir presents Atraz!

*Films, Performance, Music*

Friday, October 2, The Drake,

1150 Queen St. West

*Armed*, *How to Live Rent Free in T. Town*,

*Fuck Them and Their Leaking Dishwashers*,

Wendy Hammacott

*If I Was a Little Girl*, *Bishop Porkey Sodomoney*,

*Autocannibal Dining Etiquette*, Mike Hasick

*It That Moves Moves*, *Beautiful Beast*,

Sharon Holmes

*'scribble'*, *500 Anos de Mickey Muerte*, *Obey Defy*,

Anonymous

*Untitled*, Rogar Stubenbeck

## Psychotronic Propaganda

*RocketKitKongoKit &*

*Tribulation 99*

Wednesday, October 21, The Euclid Theatre

*RocketKitKongoKit, Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies*

*Under America*, Craig Baldwin

## See No Evil

*Seized, Banned & Burned Films*

Friday, November 6, CineCycle

*Prowling by Night*, Gwendolyn

*Death Valley 69*, *Sonic Youth*, Richard Kern and  
Judith Barry

*Buying Passion, Spending Depression*, Krzysztof  
Wodiczko and Leslie Sharp

*Clips*, Nan Kinney and Deborah Sundahl

*Slam*, Bruce LaBruce

*Martina's Playhouse*, Peggy Ahwesh

## In Absentia:

### The Memorial Project

*Film & Video Screening*

Monday, November 30, The Euclid Theatre

A co-presentation with Clamorous Intentions

*Letter to Ray Navarro*, John Greyson

*Deviate*, Wrik Mead

*Untitled*, Scott Beveridge

*Catharsis* (performance), Courtney McFarlane

*Aus Der Ferne* (The Memo Book),

Matthias Müller

*My Own Projection*, Christy Garland

*This Sentence Has Six F's*, Clare Lawlor

*Untitled (for Arnie)*, John Sandborn, Mary Perillo  
and Bill T. Jones

## Bullets For Breakfast

*by Holly Fisher*

Wednesday, January 27, The Euclid Theatre

*Bullets for Breakfast*, Holly Fisher

## Film and Video by Art Jones

*The Visual Politics of Hip Hop*

Saturday, February 13, CineCycle

In person: Art Jones

*Knowledge Reigns Supreme*, *Framing Dr. Jeffries*, *The*

*Man Who Is a Phallic Symbol*, *The Nation Erupts*,

*My Generation X*, *Know Your Enemy*, *Warriors of the*

*Wasteland*, *WORD*, *Media Assassin*, Art Jones

## Beat The Dead

### When They Are Cold

*East Germany's Super 8  
Underground*

Wednesday, February 24, The Euclid  
Theatre

Presented in co-operation with  
the Goethe Institut, Toronto

In person: Fayd Jungnickel of Film  
& Foto Man Ray

*One Should Beat the Dead When They Are Cold*,  
*Document 89*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, *Blessed Are the  
Loving*, *Scombermix*, Fayd Jungnickel,  
Alexander Schubert, and Thomas Zickler

## Open Film Screening

*Calling All Filmmakers*

Friday, March 12, CineCycle

Films and videos by Maurizio Chen, Tom

Taylor, Chris Gehman, Giulio Buttino,

Nicholas Kovats, Alan Flett, Aaron Allan,

Yvonne Devins and D. Brown, Dave Bailey,

Clifford C. McIntyre, Armen and Fly, Anthony

Domingo, Nina Fonoroff, Neil Burns, W.A.

Davison, Anthony Pezzari, Kika Thorne,

Nadia Sistonen, Lara Johnston, Tim Leancy,

Martin Heath, Annie Sprinkle and John Porter

## Collaborative

### Transformations

*Animation, Performance  
& Photography*

Wednesday, March 31, The Euclid Theatre

In person: Paul & Menno de Nooijer

*Say Goodbye*, *Transformation by Holding Time*,

*The Third T(b)est*, *Lost In America* (in-progress),

Paul de Nooijer

*Creation III*, *Ruimte*, *Het Misverstand*,

Menno de Nooijer

*Touring Holland by Bicycle*, *Window Painting*,

*Black & White Bathroom*, Paul de Nooijer



and Jerry Musser

Plus Minus, Menno de Nooijer

and Katja Sobrino

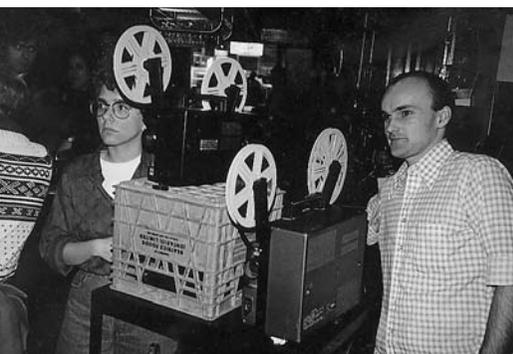
*Nobody Had Informed Me, At One View,*

*I Should See, A Fortified City, Stop the Greenhouse*

*Effect, Think, Stop Action AIDS,*

Paul and Menno de Nooijer

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## A Short History of Exploitation Films

*In Person: Jack Stevenson*

Wednesday, April 7, The Euclid Theatre

*Sinister Menace*, *Marijuana* trailer, *Manic* trailer, *Georgie Porgie*, *Babalo*, *Pin Down Girl* trailer, *Female Wrestling Match Film*, *Glenn or Glenda* trailer, *On-Stage Stripper Burlesque Act* (excerpt from *The Glamour Girls of Burlesque*), *The Foolish Hoods*, *Untitled Nude Screen Test*, *Candy Barr Screen Test*, *Two Amateur Screen Tests*, *Listerine TV Commercial*, *Camel Cigarette Commercial*, *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* trailer, *Attack of the Puppetpeople* trailer, *Curfew Breakers* trailer, *Sex Pot* trailer, *The Naked Venus*, *The Raw Ones*, *The Smut Peddlers*, *The Weird Lovemakers* trailer, *Orgy!*, *Annie Sprinkle* outtakes, *Rag Doll* trailer, *Behind the Green Door* outtake, *Man-Eating Hydra* outtake, *Blue Sunshine* outtake, *Mandingo* trailer, *Giant Spider Invasion* trailer, *Savage Seven* trailer, *The Hot Box* trailer, *Super Chick* trailer, *House of Whip Cord* trailer, *Woman Hunt* trailer

## Gender Bender

*Bearded Ladies and  
Other Queer Sights*

Saturday, May 15, CineCycle

*Can You Say Androgynous?*, Laura Cowell

*A Spy (Hester Reeves Does The Doors)*, Suzie Silver

*Juggling Gender*, Tami Gold

*Dance of a Totally Unified Person*, Andrew Ellis

*Lady*, Ira Sachs

## Survivors

*Moving Pictures,  
Resisting Confinement*

Friday, May 28, The Euclid Theatre

Guest curated by Andrew J. Paterson

*Knucklebones*, Caroline Koebel

*Locomotion*, Anne Charlotte Robertson

*Blow Brain Blow Brain*, Helen Posno

*Doorways*, Beverly Taft

*A Map*, Susan Lynch

*St. Francis of Assisi at Honest Ed's* (performance),

Kim Kutner

## Family

*There's No Life Like It*

Friday, July 9, CineCycle

*Pioneers of X-ray Technology* (a film about Grandpa),

Anne Marie Fleming

*Archaeology of Memory*, Gary Popovich

*Other Families*, William Jones

*West and East*, Thane Shubaly

*My Father Was an Englishman*, Peter Karuna

*passage a l'acte*, Martin Arnold

*The Widow Suffers a Hellspawn*, John McCullough

*Sisters*, Laura McGough

*Voices of the Morning*, Meena Nanji

## Thundercrack

*A Curt McDowell Film  
with George Kuchar*

Friday, July 23, CineCycle

*Thundercrack*, Curt McDowell

## Films by Sandra Meigs

Friday, August 6, CineCycle

*The Elephant Man, A Dense Fog, The Pale Omnipresent Persistence, Aphasia: Caught in the Act, The Western Gothic, Purgatorio, A Drinkingbout, Heaven, Sandra Meigs*

## 1993/94

### Recent Toronto Work

Friday, October 8, CineCycle

*For the Time Being, Lenni Workman*  
*Remembering the Fat Life, Swallowed,*  
 Jo-ann Dykstra  
*Myopia, Robert Lee*  
*Desert Veils, Louise Lebeau*  
*Daytona, Linda Feesey*  
*A Face, Keith Lemos*  
*Shell, Sebastian Henrickson*  
*Global Village Advertisement, Glenn Wilmott*

### Air Cries, 'Empty Water'

*A New Film by Carl Brown*  
*Sound by Kaiser Nietzsche*  
*& Diamanda Galas*

Friday, October 22, CineCycle

*Air Cries, 'Empty Water'*  
 Part I — *Misery Loves Company*  
 Part II — *The Red Thread, Carl Brown*

### Shred of Celluloid

*In Person: Greta Snider*

Friday, November 5, CineCycle

*Shred of Sex, Hard-Core Home Movie, NoZone,*  
*Futility, Mute, Blood Story, Our Gay Brothers,*  
 Greta Snider  
*Seven Lucky Charms, Lisa Mann*  
*Hajj (drinking from the stream),*  
 Claire Dannenbaum  
*Rapture, Sara Whiteley*  
*If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home by Now,*  
 Marina McDougall

## Opium Den

*Work from New York*

Friday, November 19, CineCycle

*In Person: Peggy Ahwesh, Jennifer Montgomery and Eve Heller*  
*Opium Smoking Movie, Anonymous*  
*The Pharoah's Belt (Cake Excerpt), British Knights*  
 Commercial, Lewis Klahr  
*A Fainting Woman's Lost Monkey, 1/2 Time Video,*  
 Eve Heller  
*The Scary Movie, Napoleon, The Color of Love,*  
 Peggy Ahwesh  
*Do You Think That a Candidate Should Live like*  
*This?, I, a Lamb, Jennifer Montgomery*  
*Super Hero, Emily Breer*  
*Derwish Machine, Bradley Eros and*  
 Jeannie Liotta  
*You and What Army, Buddy, Sadie Benning*

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## Squeezing Sorrow from an Ashtray

*Videos by Steve Reinke*

Friday, January 28, CineCycle

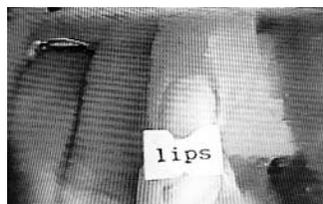
#8 *Why I Stopped Going to Foreign Films*, #10  
*Barely Human*, #13 *Joke (version 1)*, #16 *After Eve*,  
 #21 *Squeezing Sorrow from an Ashtray*, #25 *Pus Girl*,  
 #26 *Wish*, #28 *Testimonials*, #29 *Long Train Ride*,  
 #30 *Little Faggot*, #31 *Lonely Boy*, #32 *I Love*  
*You Too*, #33 *Charming Mutt*, #36 *Ice Cream*,  
 #37 *Request*, #38 *Jason*, #41 *Understanding*  
*Hetrosexuality*, #43 *My Personal Virus*, #44 *Vision*  
*(with Birds)*, #45 *My Erotic Double*, #47 *Sleep*,  
 Steve Reinke

## Ethnographies of the Disorient

*Works by Feingold, Blumenthal*  
*and Baldwin*

Friday, February 11, CineCycle

Guest curated by Rosemary Heather  
*Un chien délicieux, Ken Feingold*  
*Social Studies Part I, Lyn Blumenthal*  
*!O No Coronado,*  
 Craig Baldwin



## Open Screening

*To All Video & Film Makers*

Friday, February 25, CineCycle

Films and videos by Rob Butterworth, Armino Kink, Monty Cantsin, Garth Hagey, Shannon O'Connor, Derreck Roemer, Petra Chevrier, Linda Feesey, Dawn McLeod, Audra Williams, Adam Hyatt, Amanda Goble, Aaron Allan,

## Pleasure in the Confusion of Boundaries

*Tapes from the Tariagsuk Video Centre*

Friday, April 15, CineCycle

Guest curated by Laura McGough and Marie-Helene Cousineau (In person)

*Igloolik, January — February 1991, Video*

*Correspondence 1992, Igloolik—Montevideo — Montreal (excerpts), Marie-Helene Cousineau*

*Quillig, Ataguttaaluk Starvation, Arnaik*

*Ikkajurtigitt/The Women's Video Workshop*

*Home Video (excerpts), various*

## Larry Jordan's H.D.

Trilogy Film

*The Black Out —*

*The Grove — Star of Day*

Sunday, April 24, CineCycle

In person: Larry Jordan

*H.D. Trilogy Film (The Black Out — The Grove — Star of Day), Postcard from San Miguel,*

Larry Jordan

## Distinguishing Features

*15 Years of Artists' Video at Ed Video: 1976-1991*

Friday, May 13, CineCycle

*Keeping Marlene Out of the Picture, Eric Cameron*

*Above/Below, David Brown*

*A Serene Composition Suggestive of Pastoral Repose,*

Noel Harding

*Dominate/Subjugate, Marlene Hoff*

*Newsmakers, Anne Milne*

*Ada, Teri Chmilar*

*Vacation, Charlie Fox*

*Liebstraum, Elyakim Taussig*

*Distant Landscapes: Shadow Passage, Myrna*

Hanna

*Cry on Bathed, Pauline Sinclair*

*Dick and Jane: Spot and Puff, Nora Hutchinson*

*The Dance of Life...On Mars, Nancy Hallas*

and Rick Leroux



Jinhan Ko, Stacy Dickerson, Nicole Odeon, Tracy German, Suzanne Moul, Richard Penelly, Thomas McDermott, Matthew Grant, Joel Roft, Christina Yuan, Jeff Moore, Carl Elbrond, Michelle Groskopf, Polly Perverse, Julian Grey, Marc Roumy, Nicholas Kovats, Fred Spek, Alex Scivrevici, Phil Anderson, Rob Rowatt, Martin Heath and Runt

## There's No Place Like Home

*William Jones' Massillon*

Friday, March 4, CineCycle

*Massillon, William Jones*

## Cahiers du Sin

*Bruce LaBruce's Super 8 1/2*

Friday, April 1, 8 and 10 pm, Metro Theatre, 677 Bloor St. W.

*Super 8 1/2, Bruce LaBruce*

Tortured Celluloid: Cinecycle, Oct. 16, 1991, faces in the audience include Phil Hoffman, Gary Popovich, Jurgen Rebel, Nadia Sistonen, John McCullough, Kika Thorne and Jim Anderson, JOHN PORTER

**Projected Light: On the Beginning and End of Cinema**

*A film/performance for two 16mm projectors, one slide projector, audio tape, posters, artifacts, and two performers*

Monday, June 20, CineCycle

In person: Corinne and Arthur Cantrill

*Projected Light: On the Beginning and End of Cinema*, Corinne and Arthur Cantrill

**L'Amour Fou & Mary Magdalene**

Friday, July 8, CineCycle

In Person: M.M. Serra

*Turner, Stasis Series I & II, Mary Magdalene*,

*L'Amour Fou*, M.M. Serra

*A Lot of Fun for the Evil One*, Maria Beatty and M.M. Serra

**Voices From A Previous Life**

Friday, July 22, CineCycle

In Person: Zack Stiglicz

*Filial Seduction, Pompeii, Rose of the Night, An*

*Existential Trilogy, Nothing Nobody Nowhere*,

Zack Stiglicz

**1994/95**

**Soul Shadows: The Making of An Urban Warrior**

*Videos by Dawn Dedeaux*

Friday, October 7, CineCycle

*Urban Warrior Scrapbook, The Hardy Boys and*

*Nancy Drew, Dope Rope, Drive By Shooting: Inside-*

*Outside*, Dawn Dedeaux

**The Parasite of Parasites Artists & Advertising**

Friday, October 21, CineCycle

*Humanic commercials*, various

*Monodramas*, Stan Douglas

*Missing: The American Family*, Michael Klein

*Swallowed*, Joanne Dykstra

*Book of Lies*, Mike Hoolboom

*A Message from Our Sponsor*, Al Razutis

Videos from 60 Second Dissent series:

*The Muse is working overtime (again)*,

Janine Marchessault

*One word out of you*, Gwendolyn

*Work to live*, Donna James

*Double Shift*, Bruce LaBruce

*Making Fire*, Ruby Truly

**New Toronto Works**

Friday, November 11, CineCycle

Guest curated by Milada Kováčová,

Nicholas Kovats, Jeff Moore, and Fred Spek

*Fleshold*, Karen Young

*To Do Undone*, Nicoli Grut

*Desire*, Christina Zeilder

*Biznessmen don't take sbit*, Fitsum Wegaychu

*Watching*, Marcos Arreaga

*The List of Bicycle Messenger*, John Porter

*You Will Never Know It, Only Feel It*,

Christa Schadt

*Instinct*, Manfred Smollich

*I Have to Tell You Something*, Tanya Murdoch

*#47 Dream Work, #48 Artifact, #49 Monologue*

*(With Provocation), #50 Child, #51 Windy*

*Morning In April, #52 Love Letter To Doug*,

Steve Reinke

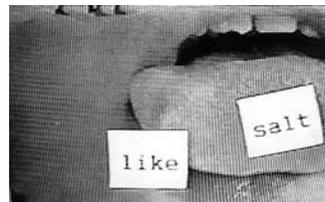
*In*, Linda Feesey

*Wake Up, Jack Off*, Daniel MacIvor

*Signal*, Su Rynard

*Homebelly*, Wrik Mead

*Controlled Environments*, Andrew J. Paterson



## Boys Will Be Boys

Friday, December 2, CineCycle

*The Smell of Burning Ants*, Jay Rosenblatt

*bui doi, life like dust*, Ahrin Mishan

and Nick Rothenburg

*Sleepy Haven*, Matthias Müller

## Kurtzfilme &

### Loading Ludwig

Films by Mara Mattuschka

Friday, February 24, CineCycle

*Kurtzfilme: Beauty and the Beast, Navel Fable, The*

*Sinking of Titania, Les Miserables, Pascal-Gödel,*

*Ceralox, Ball Head, Parasymphatica, Caesarean*

*Section, I Have Been Very Pleased (She Likes It), SOS*

*Extraterrestrial, Loading Ludwig*, Mara Mattuschka

## Philip Hoffman

*Recent Collaborations*

Friday, March 3, CineCycle

*Technilogic Ordering*, Philip Hoffman,

Stephen Butson, Heather and Marian

McMahon

*Opening Series 3*, Philip Hoffman

and Gary Shikatani

*Sweep*, Philip Hoffman and Sami van Ingen

## Beating

*A World Premiere*

by Barbara Sternberg

Friday, April 7, CineCycle

*Beating*, Barbara Sternberg

## Fred Frith on Film

*Step Across the Border*

[35 mm print!]

Friday, April 14, CineCycle

Presented in co-operation with the Goethe

Institut, Toronto

*Step Across the Border*, Nicolas Humbert

and Werner Penzel

## Snow White's Dream

Films & Videos by Abigail Child

Friday, April 21, CineCycle

In Person: Abigail Child

*Is This What You Were Born For?* (*Perils, Covert*

*Action, Mayhem, Mercy*), *Through the Looking Lass*

or *Snow White's Dream*, Abigail Child

& *Million*, Abigail Child and Ikue Mori

350



## Video for the End of the Millennium

*The Wooster Group  
& Charles Atlas*

Friday, January 27, CineCycle

Guest curated by Christopher Eamon

*Rhyme 'Em To Death*, The Wooster Group

*Flaubert Dreams of Travel but His Mother's Illness*

*Prevents It*, The Wooster Group and

Elizabeth Lecompte

*Son of Sam and Delilah*, *Super Honey*, Charles Atlas

## Animated Collage

*Works by Harry Smith*

*& Lewis Klahr*

Friday, February 10, CineCycle

*Heaven and Earth Magic*, Harry Smith

*The Pharaoh's Belt*, *Downs Are Feminine*,

Lewis Klahr

Beat the Dead When They Are Cold. Floyd Jungnickel at the Euclid,  
Feb. 24, 1993. JOHN PORTER

**Frank Moore's  
The Passion Cave**

*An Interactive Video  
Performance*

Friday, June 23, CineCycle,  
129 Spadina Ave. (rear)

Presented with the support of A Space  
*The Passion Cave* (an interactive, multi-media  
performance), Frank Moore and Chero  
Performance Troupe

**PixelVisionaries**

*Two Evenings of  
Fisher-Price Video*

Friday, July 7 and Saturday, July 8,  
CineCycle

*July 7 Fisher-Price Shorts*  
*Harnessing "Emoleash,"* Jeffrey Pratt Gordon  
*Living Inside, Jollies,* Sadie Benning  
*Smart Bomb,* Marnie Parrell  
*Orion Climbs,* Michael O'Reilly  
*Pretty Boy, His Master's Voice,* Joe Gibbons  
*Plastic Surgery,* D.S. Bakker

**July 8 Fisher-Price Epics**

*Strange Weather,* Peggy Ahwesh  
and Margie Strosser  
*Taking Back the Dolls,* Leslie Singer

**Open Screening  
Under the Stars**

*To All Film & Video Makers!*

Friday, July 21, Parking lot  
behind CineCycle

Films and videos by Warren Aberman, Steve  
Reinke, Jeff Baker, Michael Buckland, Jinhan  
Ko, Sarah Vernon and Matthew Palmer, Liz  
Czach, Chris Gehman, Linda Feese, John  
Porter, Allan White, Fred Spek and Tracy  
German

**1995/96**

**By the Skin of  
Their Tongues**

Friday, October 20, CineCycle

*Videobut,* Joanne Bristol  
*Emission, Shimmer,* Nelson Henricks  
*Sirensong, Whitewash,* Jan Peacock  
*Reading in Public, Grand Guignol,* Robert Lee

**Puberty Film Show**

*Toronto Super 8 Returns to  
Rock'n Roll Highschool*

Friday, November 3, CineCycle

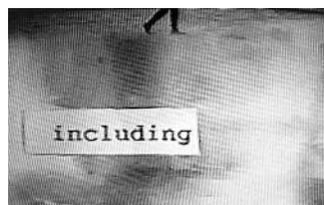
Guest curated by John McCullough  
*Lucky Lips,* Christina Yuan  
*A Moscow Night in Florence,* Michelle Groskopf  
*Mattress World,* Fred Spek and Lisa Smith  
*Dance,* Gerald Saul  
*Machoman,* Milada Kováčová  
*Spank,* Kika Thorne  
*Tonight Is a Wonderful Night to Fall in Love,*  
Marnie Parrell  
*Lady Marmalade,* Nadia Sistonen  
*Billion Dollar Babies,* Linda Feese  
*Backwash of the Pepsi Generation,* Stan McGillis  
*Passionate 13,* S. Lilova  
*On the Street Where She Lived,* John Porter

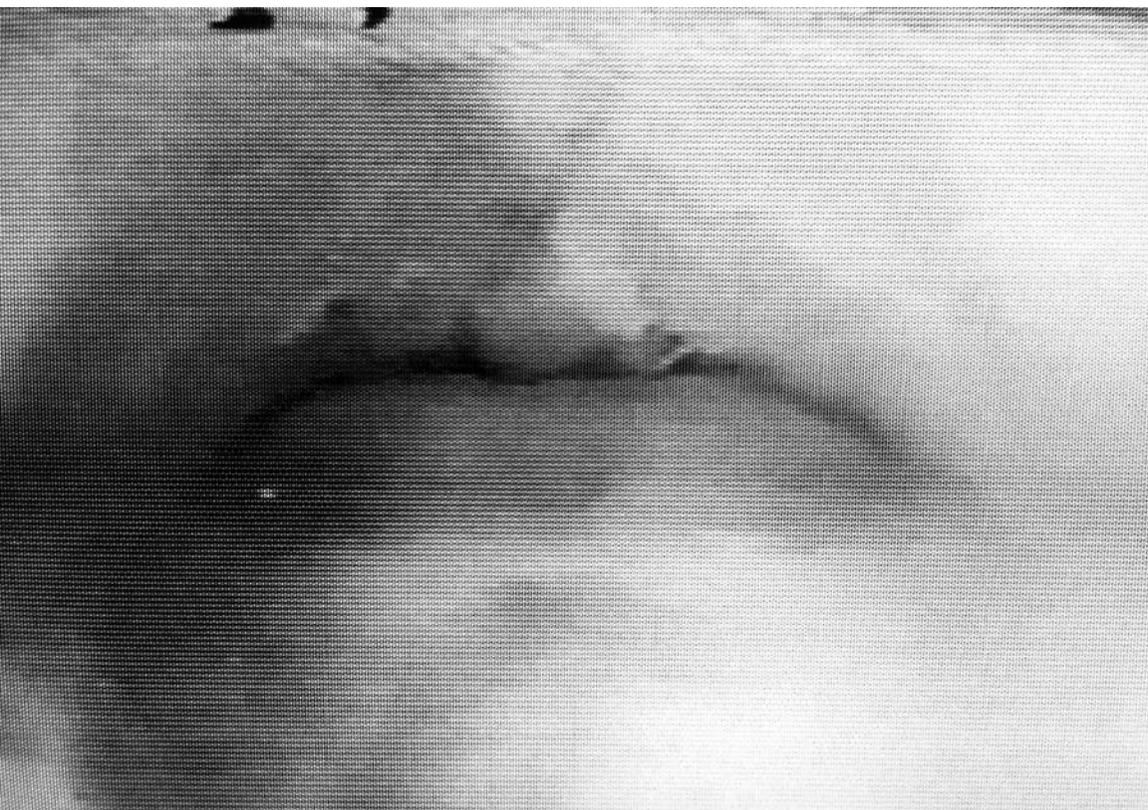
**Mother Hysteria**

*From Madness to the  
Motherland*

Friday, November 17, CineCycle

*Delirium,* Mindy Faber  
*Kiss the Boys and Make Them Die,* Margaret Stratton  
*Accursed Mazurka,* Nina Fonoroff  
*Searching for My Mother's Garden,* Milada Kováčová







## New Toronto Works Show

Friday, December 8, CineCycle

Curated by Tracy German, Barbara Goslawski  
and Death Waits

*The Internal World of Cherry Chan*, Karen Kew

*Jim's Banana House on the Road*, Jinhan Ko

*Ryland's True Story*, Jeff Sterne

*Boycott*, William Kehoe

Friday, February 9, CineCycle

*Silent Movie*, Freda Guttman

*Static*, Nikki Forrest

*Aberrant Motion #4*, Cathy Sisler

*Liabilities: The First Ten Minutes*, Monique

Moumblow and Anne Russell

*Hybrid Creatures*, Yudi Sewraj

*Au verso du monde (Outside Looking In)*, Serge

Murphy, Charles Guilbert and Michel Grou

## North on Evers

*The American Landscape*

by James Benning

Friday, February 23, CineCycle

*North on Evers*, James Benning

## How to Read a Film

*The ABC's of Queer Culture*

Friday, March 8, CineCycle

*Put Your Lips Around Yes*, John Lindell

*Alfalfa, The Ballad of Reading Gaol*,

Richard Kwietniowski

*East River Park*, Zoe Leonard

*Sink or Swim*, Sue Friedrich

## Obsessive Becoming

*Family Histories* by Matthias

Müller & Daniel Reeves

Friday, April 12, CineCycle

*Final Cut*, Matthias Müller

*Obsessive Becoming*, Daniel Reeves

## Films of Menace

and Jeopardy

or How I Learned to

Start Worrying and

Put On a Crash Helmet

Friday, April 5, CineCycle

In person: Rick Prelinger

*Safety Belt for Susie*, Charles Cahill and Associates

*Live and Learn*, Sid Davis Productions

*Last Date*, Wilding Pictures

*The Days of Our Years*, Dudley Pictures



*Swim After Dinner*, Anastacia Dickerson

*Le crista se venge*, Anna Gronau

*You Take the High Road*, John Kneller

*Yukiga Futte Imasu (Option C)*, Jason DeGroot

*Closet Case*, Wrik Mead

*What It Wasn't*, Danial MacIvor

*Borders*, Elio Gelmini

*Upon Waking*, Julie Wilson

## Remembrance of Things Fast

*The Virtual Worlds of Jim  
Anderson, Michael Curran  
& John Maybury*

Friday, January 26, CineCycle

*Trace Elements, Bliss Jag*, Jim Anderson

*Amami se vuoi, L'heure autosexuelle*, Michael Curran

*A Remembrance of Things Fast*, John Maybury

## It Came From Québec

*Recent Video Selected*

by Nelson Henricks

*The Last Clear Chance*, Wondsel, Carlisle and Dunphy

## Can Dialectics Break Bricks?

*René Viénet's Kung Fu Détournement*

Friday, April 26, CineCycle

In person: Keith Sanborn

*La dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?*

(Can Dialectics Break Bricks?), René Viénet

## Culture Jamming

*Anti-Propaganda From the Heart of the Beast*

Friday, June 21 and Saturday, June 22, CineCycle

June 21 *Do Not Adjust Your Set*

*Media Burn*, Ant Farm

*A Cathouse for Dogs*, *The Cockroach Cure*,

Joey Skaggs

*Psychoactive Drugs*, *We Will Rock You*, *Television*

*Works*, *Electronic Behaviour Control Systems*,

Emergency Broadcast Network

*BLO Nightly News*, *Barbie Liberation*

Organization

*Uncommercial* (Obsession Fetish, Buy Nothing

Day, TV Turnoff Week, The Product Is You),

Adbusters

June 22 *A Cure For Lies*

Presented with the support of A Space

*Spin*, Brian Springer

*The Iraq Campaign 1991 — A Television History*,

Phil Patiris

## The George Kuchar Experience

*A Selection of Video Diaries, Albums & Melodramas from 1986 to 1996*

A co-presentation with YYZ Artists' Outlet and Video Data Bank

Friday, June 28, CineCycle

In person: George Kuchar

*500 Millibars to Ecstasy*, *Snap 'n' Snatch*, *Foto*

*Spread*, *Evangelust*, *Homes for the Holiday*,

*Anniversary Shmaltz*, *The Crimes of Armand Tessler*,

George Kuchar

## Open Screening Under the Stars

Calling All Film & Video Makers!

Friday, July 5, Parking lot

behind CineCycle

Films and videos by David Phillips, Steve

Reinke, Petra Chevrier, Joann Maplesden,

Tom Taylor, Beth Nobes, Anako Mesaros,

Chris Gehman & Roberto Ariganello, Tim

Dallett, Brian Clark, Liz Czach, Linda Feesey,

Jeff Baker, Michael Buckland, Allan White,

John Porter, Richard Wyman, Jinhan Ko,

Tracy German, Fred Spek, Amy Bodman,

Ruda Grüp, Sarah Lightbody, Gordon Foster,

and Jeff Mann

## 1996/97

### Hustler White

*A Film by Bruce LaBruce & Rick Castro*

A co-presentation with Handsome Boy/Swell

Thursday, October 24 to Sunday, October

27, Metro Theatre

In person: Bruce LaBruce

*Hustler White*, Bruce LaBruce



**Fresh Acconci**  
*Videos by Vito Acconci,  
Monique Moublow,  
Mike Kelley & Paul McCarthy*

Friday, November 8, CineCycle

*Theme Song*, Vito Acconci

*Joan and Stephen*, Monique Moublow

*Fresh Acconci*, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy

and Sunday, December 8, Jackman Hall, AGO

*Institute Benjamenta (or This Dream People Call*

*Human Life)*, The Brothers Quay

**New Toronto Works Show**

Friday, January 17, CineCycle

Curated by Larrisa Fan and Hamansu Desai

*Frostbite*, Wrik Mead

*Movietone*, Robert Kennedy

*Postcard #2, The Soft Shoulders, Tell Me What*

*You Want to Hear*, Jinhan Ko

*Chimera*, Philip Hoffman

*Bangs*, Carolynne Hew

*What Do You Fear?*, Barbara Sternberg

*...yet blooming purple*, Julie Wilson

*Heaven or Montréal (the Unfinished Video)*,

Dennis Day and Ian Middleton

*October 25th + 26th, 1996*, Kika Thorne

**Gender Fluid**

Friday, January 24, Tallulah's Cabaret,

Buddies In Bad Times Theatre,

12 Alexander St.

*Go-Go Boy*, Susan Young

*I Have Something to Tell You*, Tanya Murdoch

*Men like Me*, Susan Long

*Lady*, Ira Sachs

**Local Heroes**

*Films by Jeffrey Paull  
& John Kneller*

Friday, February 7, 8 pm, CineCycle

*Mary's Table Cloth, Billowing Bedsread, Curtain:*

*Heather's Room Mid-day, Curtains: Heather's Room,*

*Jane on the Levee, Bug Death, Z Eats the Meaty Bone,*

*Oxford Spa, Kris Chews Spaghetti, Jane in the*

*Breeze,*

Jeffrey Paull

*Spring, Shimmer, Traces, Fragments, Picture, Start,*

*Tier,*

*Speck, Toronto Summit, We Are Experiencing*

*Technical Difficulties. Regular Programming Will*

*Resume Momentarily*, John Kneller

**They Are Lost  
To Vision Altogether**  
*Short Works by Tom Kalin &  
Tom Chomont*

Saturday, November 23, CineCycle

*Gesicht, Sight Unseen, That Poured Its Hot Breath,*

*Finally Destroy Us, Nation, Nomads, Darling Child,*

*I Hung Back, Held Fire, Danced and Lied,*

*Information Gladly Given but Safety Requires*

*Avoiding Unnecessary Conversation*, Tom Kalin

*A Confirmed Bachelor*, Tom Kalin

and Susan Strine

*Oblivion, Minor Revisions, Razor Head,*

*Slash Portrait for Clark*, Tom Chomont

*A Faustian Knot*, Tom Chomont

and Clark Coleman

**Institute Benjamenta  
or This Dream People  
Call Human Life**  
*A Film by The Brothers Quay*

Friday, December 6, Saturday, December 7



## Structural Film Is Dead

*Long Live James Benning!*

**Saturday, March 1, Jackman Hall, AGO**

A co-presentation with Cinematheque Ontario

In person: James Benning

*Chicago Loop, Deseret, a slide presentation of Oil Well*

*Projection Piece* (Artpark, Lewiston, N.Y.),

James Benning

## Wrik Mead

*Homo Eroticus*

**Friday, April 18, Factory Theatre,**

125 Bathurst St.

A co-presentation with Images Festival '97

In person: Wrik Mead

*Haven, What Isabelle Wants, Jesus Saves, Gravity,*

*Closet Case, Homebelly, Warm, (ab)Normal, Frostbite,*

Wrik Mead

Artist's Talk: Saturday, April 19

## B/side

*A Film by Abigail Child*

**Friday, April 25, CineCycle**

In person: Abigail Child

*B/side*, Abigail Child

## Alien Chicks

*It's not easy being green,*

*Darlene!*

**Friday, May 16, CineCycle**

*SOS Extraterrestrial*, Mara Mattuschka

*White Trash Girl: The Devil Inside, White Trash Girl:*

*Law of Desire*, Jennifer Reeder

*First Love, Second Planet*, David Munro

*Superhero*, Emily Breer

*Galaxy Girls*, Christina Zeidler

*VR: A Movie*, Al Razutis

## Scattering Stars

*The Films of Matthias Müller*

**Friday, June 6, 360 Legion Hall,**

326 Queen St. W.

Presented in co-operation with the Goethe

Institut, Berlin

In person: Matthias Müller

*Pensão Globo, Aus der Ferne (The Memo Book,)*

*Home Stories, Sleepy Haven, Scattering Stars, Alpsee,*

Matthias Müller

## Homoscope — so different, so appealing!

*Gay, Short, Experimental*  
*curated by Matthias Müller*

**Saturday, June 7, 360 Legion Hall**

In person: Matthias Müller

*The Lover Film*, Michael Bryntrup,

*Sad Sack*, Caspar Stracke

*Fontella's Box*, Stefan Hayn,

*Zitrusföchte 2*, Uli Versum,

*Mike's Neuer Kronleuchter*, Jörg Kronsbein

## Revisiting the Prelinger Film Archives

**Friday, June 20 and Saturday, June 21,**

**CineCycle**

In Person: Rick Prelinger

### June 20 *Busy Bodies*

*Perversion for Profit*, Citizens for Decent Literature

*Boys Beware, Girls Beware*, Sid Davis Productions

*How Much Affection*, Crawley Films Ltd.

*As Boys Grow, Molly Grows Up*, Medical Arts

Productions

### June 21 *Homemovies*

Excerpts from homemovies ca. 1931-1956:

*Introducing the Levys, Polar Rituals, At Home With*

*Bill, Farm Fun, Peg's Easter Party for Kids, Minnesota,*

*Louisiana and Florida, Donnola Home Movies, Ivan*

*Besse Films, St. Paul Police Detectives and Their Work*



### **Eroticize Intelligent**

*Films & Videos by Kika Thorne*

Friday, July 18, Tallulah's Cabaret,

Buddies In Bad Times Theatre

*The Discovery of Canada, Fashion, School,*

*You=Architecture, Sister, Whatever,*

*October 25th + 26th, 1996, Kika Thorne*

*Suspicious, Kika Thorne and Kelly O'Brien*  
*two, Kika Thorne and Mike Hoolboom*

### **The Artist's Mind**

*Videos by Alex Bag*

Co-sponsored by Vtape

Friday, November 21, CineCycle

In person: Alex and Damien Bag

*The Artist's Mind, Untitled (Spring '94),*

*Untitled (Fall '95), Alex Bag*

### **Super Super 8 Film Festival**

*on North American Tour*  
*from San Diego*

Sunday, December 14, 360 Legion Hall

In person: Milinda Stone

*Magazine Mouth, Anne Charlotte Robertson*

*Haunt, Lisa McElroy*

*Lactose Intolerant, Audrey Chung*

*What's On?, Martha Colburn*

*Free Willy Three, Matt Hulse*

*Boobs in Toyland, Jeff Rappaport*

*Queen for a Day, Kris DeForest*

*and Elisabeth Sykes*

*Phantasmagoria of Progress, Tammy Maloney*

*and Kaveh Askari*

*Anodyne, Dave Vamos*

*Le Pont, Charlie Rojo*

*Two Minute Warning, Norwood Cheek*

*Mr & Mrs. F. Come Home, Luke Savisky*

*Secert Shame: Spanking the Wookiee, Todd Cobb*

*and Pati Shampton*

*Skippy, R.F. Godot*

#### **Recent Toronto Super 8:**

*Untitled, Shary Boyle and Nancy Van*

*Keerburgen*

*Shovelling Snow, John Porter*

*Wind in the Trees or Untitled, Sarah Abbott*

*London Scenes, Joe Behar*

*Striket, Stacey Case*

*Swing Slice Flip, Beverly Taft*

*Reading Canada Backwards, Steve Topping*

*Awake, Barbara Sternberg*

*Yearbook, Kika Thorne*

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### **1997/98**

#### **Carl Brown's Mind-in-Motion**

*Air Cries, 'Empty Water', The*

*Trilogy Part Three*

*La Mistral, beautiful but terrible*

Friday, October 3, Jackman Hall, AGO

In person: Carl Brown and John Kamevaar

*Air Cries, 'Empty Water', The Trilogy Part Three,*

*La Mistral, beautiful but terrible, Carl Brown*

#### **Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men**

*featuring DVB Physical Theatre*

Saturday, October 11, Jackman Hall, AGO

A co-presentation with the Moving Pictures

Festival of Dance on Film and Video

*Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men, David Hinton*

*Air Cries, 'Empty Water': Carl Brown and John Kamevaar at CineCycle, Oct. 22, 1993, JOHN PORTER*

**Barbara Sternberg's midst**  
*Swept into the REM of Vision*

Friday, February 6, CineCycle

In Person: Barbara Sternberg

*C'est la vie, midst*, Barbara Sternberg

**Videos by Donigan Cumming**

*A Prayer for Nettie, Cut The Parrot, After Brenda*

Friday, February 20, CineCycle

In person: Donigan Cumming

*A Prayer for Nettie, Cut the Parrot, After Brenda,*

Donigan Cumming

**God, Guns &  
The Weather Channel**

*Cause everyone's  
out to get you, motherfucker!*

Friday, March 6, 8 pm, CineCycle

Video Loops:

*Moth*, Taras Polataiko

*Smoking Projects #1, Smoking Projects #2,*

Laura Baird

Films and Videos:

*Exotic 101, Artists of the Moment Series: Eastern*

*Winds*, Michael Shaowanasai

*Colourbar Nocturne*, Wago Kreider

and Josh Draper

*Rainbow Man*, Sam Green

*Pantyhead, Bloody Mess*, Alison Murray

*We Are Dying, An Old Song*, Bob Paris

**Fame Whore  
by Jon Moritsugu**

Friday, March 6, 11 pm, CineCycle

*Fame Whore*, Jon Moritsugu

**Annual New Toronto  
Works Show**

Sunday, March 15, 360 Legion Hall

Guest curated by Sarah Abbott

and Linda Feesey

*Salzwasser*, Ed Sinclair

*Feast I & II*, Curtis MacDonald

*Epopée*, Willy Le Maitre

*Jawa Program III: Freewilly 3, High Priced Spread,*

Jubal Brown; *Untitled #4*, Leslie Peters; *Scratch,*

Tasman Richardson; *Freewilly 4, Ad Death,*

Jubal Brown and Tasman Richardson

*ABC— Story B (B as in Bullshit)*, Kinga Araya

*Rendez-vous*, Colin Campbell

*Don't Bug Me*, Allyson Mitchell

*Calyпсо*, Andrew Hull

*I Love It When a Girl's Head Goes Down,*

Tamara Faith Berger

*Electrophase*, Mark Bain

*Grace Eternal*, Neil Burns

*Across*, Cara Morton

*Museum*, Chris Walsh

**Video Con Carne**

*Swiss Delights from Basel*

Sunday, June 7, CineCycle

In person: Stella Händler, Thomas

Kneubühler and Philipp Schmid

*Expose*, René Pulfer

*01 Digital Research*, Simone Fuchs

*Fragment*, Sibylle Roter

*Baby Blue Eyes*, Ester Hunziker

*Video japonaise*, Renatus Zürcher

*(Exonerations) Pipilotti's Mistakes, I'm Not The Girl*

*Who Misses Much*, Pipilotti Rist

*Knife in the Rhubarb Stew*, Muda Mathis

*Combo*, Philipp Schmid and Stella Haendler

*Two Strings*, Enrique Fontanilles

*YA*, Sonia Carioni

*PT*, Christop Oertli

*In the End*, Dominik Keller



## John Porter's Open Screening & All-Request Film Show

June 13 to June 20, 12 to 7 pm, Latvian House, 491 College St.

In person: John Porter

Select your own program from John Porter's 200+ super 8 and 16mm film collection.

360



## the-toronto-postpunk-anarcho-industrial-later 80s-early 90s-super 8-thing

Friday, June 19, Ted's Wrecking Yard, 549 College St.

A co-presentation with Splice This! Toronto's First Annual Super 8 Film Festival  
Guest curated by Jonathan Pollard

Skull (loop), W.A. Davison

SexBombs, Candyland Productions

Slam, Bruce LaBruce

Target Practice on Organ Meat, Apocalypse Now,

*Drowning* from Fuckhead Film Cycle of Films,

Linda Feeseey

Young Boys in the Spring, Tab Twain

Anti-sleekness Was Always My Weakness,

*The Crux of the Gist of the Biscuit*, Nadia Sistonen

Troublemakers, G.B. Jones

Inside Annie Sprinkle, Rhonda Goldman, Petra Chevrier, Marnie Parrell, Annie Sprinkle, Kika Thorne, Stasia Friedrich, Gwendolyn, Shannon Bell and Nadia Sistonen at A Space, Feb. 19, 1992, JOHN PORTER

## Porter In the Nineties

Sunday, June 21, Ted's Wrecking Yard

A co-presentation with Splice This! Toronto  
First Annual Super 8 Film Festival

*Pleading Art* (with performance), *The Secret of the Lost Tunnel*, *Shovelling Snow*, *CineCycle* (with performance), *3 Speed Gear*, *Vac/All*, *The List of Bicycle Messenger*, *Jewison Superstar* (with performance), *On the Street Where She Lived*, *Toy Catalogue 3* (excerpt), *Scanning 6* (performance & projection), John Porter

## Annual Open Screening Under the Stars

Friday, July 10, Parking lot

behind CineCycle

Live music by Urban Refuse Group

Films and videos by Vipin, Scworm, Marty Bennett, John Marriot, Sarah Abbott, Charles Kay, Curtis MacDonald, Rudi Jelin, Gledhill, Carlos Marchon, John Porter and Fred Spek

## Jennifer Reeves Showcase

I'll pluck yer figs  
till the pig fuckers come!

Friday, July 24, CineCycle

In person: Jennifer Reeves

*The girl's nervy*, *Configuration 20*, *Girls Daydream*  
*About Hollywood*, *Elations in Negative*, *We are going home*, *Chronic*, Jennifer Reeves

## 1998/99

### Mike Hoolboom's

### *Panic Bodies*

*A Blueprint for Love and Death in the 21st Century*

Saturday, October 10 and Sunday, October 11, Jackman Hall, AGO

In person: Mike Hoolboom

*Panic Bodies* (in six parts: *Positiv*, *A Boy's Life*,

*Eternity*, *1 + 1 + 1*, *Mouclé's Island*, *Passing On*),

Mike Hoolboom

## Frame by Frame

*German Experimental Animation from Laboratorium*

Friday, October 23, CineCycle

In person: Deborah Phillips

*Miles, So What, Gerd Gockell*

*Jenny, Borrmann, Ragoot, Thomas Bartels*

and Martin Hansen

*Santoor, Purim, Bread, A Printed Film,*

Deborah Phillips

*Zwischenlandung, Bartels and Jelinek*

## Two Evenings of International Performance Video Art

Thursday, November 5 and Friday November 6, CineCycle

A co-presentation with 7a\*11d International Festival of Performance Art and Cinematheque Ontario

*November 5 Performance to Camera: Recent British Video, Part II*

In person: Catherine Elwes

*Mouth to Mouth, Stephanie Smith*

and Edward Stewart

*Remember Me, Michael Maziere*

*L'Heure autosexuelle, Michael Curran*

*Language Lessons (excerpt), Steve Hawley*

and Tony Steyger

*Touche, Angela Derby*

*Metamorphosis, Marty St. James*

*Go West Young Man, Keith Piper*

*Intro to Summer, Catherine Elwes*

*Withdrawal, George Barber*

*Embodied, Susan Derges*

*Denial, Mike Stubbs and Anne Whitehurst*

*Gargantuan, John Smith*

*November 6 North American Performance Video*

*7 pm American Psycho[drama]: Sigmund Freud vs. Henry Ford*

Guest curated by Nelson Henricks

In person: Nelson Henricks

*Stuffing, Ashley, Lightfoot Fever, Animal Charm*

*Control Corridor, Actions in Action, HalfLifers*

*The Phony Trilogy: Caddy, Pool Boy, The Horror,*

Emily Breer

*I'm Crazy and You're Not Wrong, The Telling,*

*When I Was a Monster, Anne McGuire*

*Multiple Barbie, Joe Gibbons*

*Cardoso Flea Circus, Maria Cardoso*

and Ross Harley

*9 pm Smells Like Bonbons: Canadian Performance Video*

*Master F, Karma Clark-Davis*

*Excerpt #7, Jinhan Ko*

*One Minute of My Time, Micah Lexier*

*Bon bon bijoux, Sylvie Laliberté*

*Art That Says Hello, John Marriott*

*Three Waltzes, Monique Mounblow*

*Rut, Yudi Sewraj*

*Rapt and Happy, Emily Vey Duke*

and Cooper Battersby

*Smells like TV, Barb Webb*

Audio project by Kim Dawn

## Pixelvisionary Priestess

*Recent Video by Sadie Benning*

Thursday, December 3, Latvian House,

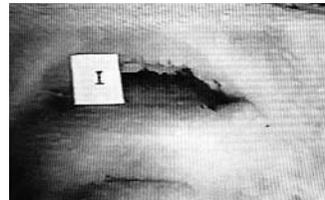
491 College St.

A co-presentation with YYZ Artists' Outlet

In person: Sadie Benning

*German Song, The Judy Spots, Flat Is Beautiful,*

Sadie Benning



## «Aus dem Pleasure Dome»

*Zeitgenössische  
Experimentalfilme und  
Videokünste von Toronto*

(From the Pleasure Dome: Recent  
Experimental Film and Video Art  
from Toronto)

## Arousing Transgressions

*Dangerous Voodoo Women*

Friday, February 12, CineCycle

In person: Diane Bonder

*Playboy Voodoo, Dirty, Nymphomania,*

*Tessa Hughes-Freeland*

*The Physics of Love, Parolé, Stick Figures, Dangerous*

*When Wet, Diane Bonder*

## Recent Video

by Elisabeth Subrin

*Swallow & Shulie*

Friday, February 26, CineCycle

In person: Elisabeth Subrin

*Swallow, Shulie, Elisabeth Subrin*

## Home Made Movies

Saturday, March 13, CineCycle

7 pm *The Catherine Films*

Guest curated by Jonathan Pollard

*The Catherine Films, James A. Dauphinee*

9 pm *Show Your*

*Own Home Movies*

Home movies by Dave Anderson, Linda

Feesey, Peter Birkemoe, Istvan Kantor, the

collection of Ian Phillips, Sherri Higgins, John

Porter, Tom Taylor and Arthur Conway

## New Toronto Works Show

Sunday, March 21, Latvian House

Guest curated by Jan Bird, Libby Hague and

Jason St. Laurent

*Rays, Michael Dossev*

*Chemical Warfare & The Cult of Materialism,*

*Linda Feesey*

*Kathy Acker In School, Kika Thorne*

*Faultlines, Gary Popovich*

*Sureshot 22, Jane Farrow*

*Black Flag, Istvan Kantor*

*O Huge Vault of Vaseline, The Star Wars, Jubal Brown*

*400 Series: 401:01, 400:Series: DVP:01,*

*Leslie Peters*



December 8, NeuesKino Theatre,

Basel, Switzerland

*Black Flag, Istvan Kantor*

*Yipp Lands on Earth and Sends Slides Home,*

*Eileen Yaghoobian*

*Cornered, Michael Downing*

*Closet Case, Wrik Mead*

*October 25th + 26th, 1996, Kika Thorne*

*Watch (excerpt), David Rokeby*

*Across, Cara Morton*

*Separation Anxieties, John Kneller*

*Reading Canada Backwards, Steve Topping*

*a private patch of Blue, Tracy German*

*Echo Valley, Steve Reinke*

*Why I Hate Bees, Sarah Abbott*

*Delta Don, Roy Mitchell*

*Grand Grignon, Robert Lee*

*Calyпсо, Andrew Hull*

*Slam, Bruce LaBruce*

*You're Dead at Recess, Nanochrist, Scworm  
Chain Circle, Manfred Smollich  
Herr, John Greyson and Joe Laughlin  
Self-Portrait, Martin Spellerberg  
Fall, Scratch, Deirdre Logue  
a private patch of Blue, Tracy German  
Stand By Your Man, Minnie St. Laurent  
Super, Karma Clark-Davis*

## James Benning X 2

Friday, May 7, Jackman Hall, AGO  
A co-presentation with  
Cinematheque Ontario  
*Four Corners, UTOPIA, James Benning*

## Pain, Fear & Paranoia

Friday, April 9, CineCycle  
*Fever Symptomatic, Michael Caines  
the last split second, Judith Doyle  
Fall, Scratch, Deirdre Logue  
Numerology of Fear, Janine Marchessault  
Fruit Machine, Wrik Mead  
Platform, Cariné Torossian  
The Shanghaied Text, Ken Kobland  
Extender, Beat Brogle and Philipp Schmid*

## Power Tripping

*70s Super 8 to 90s Video  
by Beth B.*

Saturday, June 19, Ted's Wrecking Yard  
A co-presentation with Splice This! Toronto's  
Second Annual Super 8 Film Festival  
In person : Beth B.  
*Letters to Dad, Belladonna, Out of Sight/Out of Mind,  
Voices Unheard, Beth B.*

## From Romance to Ritual

*Peggy Ahwesh's Super 8 Retro*  
Sunday, June 20, Ted's Wrecking Yard  
In person: Peggy Ahwesh  
*Martina's Playhouse, Scary Movie, The Fragments  
Project, The Colour of Love, Peggy Ahwesh*

## Dragged out...

*a studied glance  
at current radical drag*

Friday, July 9, CineCycle

*guise, Wrik Mead  
Erotic Exotic, Atif Siddiqi  
Transmission, Ivan E. Coyote  
la différence, Rita Küng  
No Sunshine, Blue Moon, Björn Melhus  
Stand By Your Man, Minnie St-Laurent  
School Fag, Richard Fung and Tim McCaskell  
The Draglinquent, Charles Atlas  
Cowboy, Diana, Texas, Pierre-Yves Clouin  
The White to Be Angry, Vaginal Davis  
Confirmed Bachelor, Tom Kalin  
Carmelo, Christoph Oertli  
Sasquatch, Stefan St-Laurent*

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## Building Heaven, Remembering Earth

*Confessions of a Fallen  
Architect by Oliver Hockenhull*

Friday, July 16, CineCycle

*Building Heaven, Remembering Earth: Confessions of a  
Fallen Architect, Oliver Hockenhull*

## Open Screening Under the Stars!

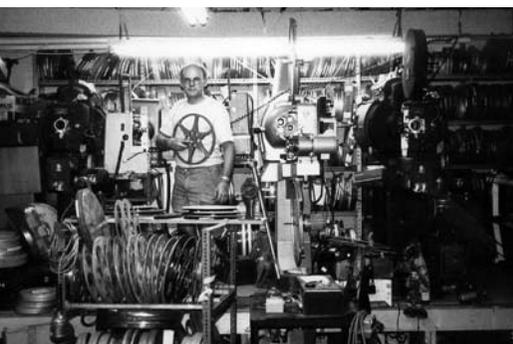
Saturday, July 24, 401 Richmond St. W.  
in the courtyard

Films and videos by Matthew Kiskis, Andrew  
J. Paterson, Pam Gawn, Giulio Michelino,  
Fred Pelon, Tom Taylor, Linda Feesey, Peggy  
Anne Berton, Pavel Erohin, Felix Heeb,  
Sarah Lightbody, Will La Rochelle, Tracy  
German, Shawn McPherson, Mark Piccinato,  
Petra Chevrier, Jinhan Ko, Zev Asher, Paul  
Lamo, Daniel Borins and Kika Thorne, Scott  
McGovern and Jubal Brown



# 1989 – 1999 Pleasure Dome Programming Collective

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**1989/99** Philip Hoffman,  
Mike Hoolboom, Jonathan Pollard,  
Gary Popovich, and Barbara Sternberg

**1990/91** Liz Czach, Philip Hoffman,  
Robert Kennedy, Jonathan Pollard and  
Barbara Sternberg

**1991/92** Liz Czach, Philip Hoffman,  
Robert Kennedy, Marnie Parrell,  
Jonathan Pollard and Kika Thorne

**1992/93** Liz Czach, Philip Hoffman,  
Robert Kennedy, Marnie Parrell,  
Jonathan Pollard, John Porter  
and Kika Thorne

**1993/94** Liz Czach, Chris Gehman,  
Philip Hoffman, Robert Kennedy,  
Marnie Parrell, John Porter and Kika Thorne

**1994/95** Liz Czach, Chris Gehman,  
Robert Kennedy, Marnie Parrell,  
Milinda Sato, Beverly Taft and Kika Thorne

**1995/96** Liz Czach, Chris Gehman,  
Robert Kennedy, Jeff Moore, Milinda Sato,  
Beverly Taft and Steve Reinke

**1996/97** Tracy German, Mike Hoolboom,  
Scott McLeod, Sarah Lightbody,  
John McCollough, Jeff Moore  
and Steve Reinke

**1997/98** Larissa Fan, Tracy German,  
Carolynne Hew, John McCollough,  
Scott McLeod, Sarah Lightbody,  
Steve Reinke and Ger Zielinski

**1998/99** Sarah Abbott, Larissa Fan,  
Tracy German, Carolynne Hew, Sarah  
Lightbody, Steve Reinke and Ger Zielinski

# Contributors' Notes

**PEGGY AHWESH** has made films and videos for fifteen years, recently screening in the 20th Century Show at the Whitney Museum and lecturing on her work at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. She is a member of the book publishing collective Ediciones la Calavera. Ahwesh teaches media-related courses at Bard College.

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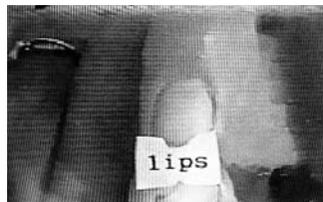
**CAMERON BAILEY** reviews film for *NOW* magazine and CBC radio. He has written on cinema, Black culture and new technology for journals and anthologies in Canada and abroad. He is the founder and former programmer of the Toronto International Film Festival's Planet Africa section, and past head of the festival's Perspective Canada series. Inevitably, he is currently writing a screenplay.

**SALLY BERGER** is Assistant Curator in the Department of Film and Video at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She has worked at the museum since 1986, organizing experimental and documentary video, film, and new media exhibitions and lecture series. From 1989 through 1994 she was Executive Director of International Film Seminars, home of the Robert Flaherty Seminars.

**JUBAL BROWN** is a videomaker based in Toronto. He does live video mixing, performance, and event arts, currently working with the Society for the Marginal Arts: PO-PO. Interests include the abject affirmation of existence, the violent deconstruction of institutional cowardice, spectacular stimulation to the point of damage, i.e., participation. All this for the express purpose of creating positive open dialogue among living creatures.

**COLIN CAMPBELL** was born in Reston, Manitoba, in 1942. Based in Toronto since 1973, Campbell is one of Canada's pioneer video artists; he has produced over forty-five tapes. He currently teaches at the University of Toronto. His work has been exhibited internationally since the mid-'70s, including at the 1980 Venice Biennale. His first film, *Skin*, premiered at the Festival of Festivals, Toronto, in 1991. He is currently completing his second novel.

**ABIGAIL CHILD** studied History and Literature at Radcliffe College and graduated with a Master of Fine Arts in 1970 from Yale. For her film work Child has received support from various foundations and councils in the U.S., and has been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony twice. Her films have been seen across the United States and Europe, and are in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She continues to make both film and video art.



**DAVID CLARK** Born in 1963, David Clark grew up in England and Calgary. He studied art in Halifax and Chicago and at the Whitney Program in New York. He currently teaches media art and film at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. His work includes the feature film *Maxwell's Demon* (1998) and the interactive digital media installations *Chemical Vision* (2000), *The Bones of Napier* (1997), and *GaGe* (1997).

366 **EMILY VEY DUKE** and **COOPER BATTERSBY** have been working collaboratively to produce videos and printed matter works for six years. They currently live in Vancouver, BC. Their tapes have been shown in Canada, the US and Europe.

**LIA GANGITANO** is a film and video curator currently working at the Thread Waxing Space in New York. Formerly she was the Associate Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Lia has edited a number of recent catalogues and publications including *The Failure to Assimilate: The Video Works of Cecilia Dougherty*, *Barbara Pollack: The Family of Men*, *Luther Price: Imitation of Life and Message to Pretty*.

**BARBARA GOSLAWSKI** is the Experimental Film Officer at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. She is also co-host/producer of CKLN radio's *Frameline* and writes for *Take One* magazine.

**NELSON HENRICKS** was born in Bow Island, Alberta, in 1963. A graduate of the Alberta College of Art, Henricks has worked in a variety of media, but is best known for his videotapes, which have been exhibited worldwide. Henricks received a BFA from Concordia University (1994). He continues to live and work in Montréal, Québec, where he teaches at Concordia, the Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM), and McGill. His works have won various awards worldwide.

**MIKE HOOLBOOM** was born in 1959 in Toronto. In 1989 he helped form *Pleasure Dome*. He has published more than eighty articles on fringe film which have appeared in magazines and catalogues around the world. In 1997 he published *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada*, a book of interviews with fringe filmmakers. His latest book *Plague Years: a life in underground movies* was published in 1998 by YYY Books. Hoolboom has made twenty-five fringe films which have appeared in over two hundred festivals around the world, garnering thirty awards.

**GARY KIBBINS** is a video and film producer whose work has been widely exhibited in Canada and abroad, including at the Fukui International Video Biennale, Japan, and the American Film Institute Video Festival. In addition to numerous guest lectures, Kibbins has taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and at the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. He currently divides his time between Kingston and Los Angeles.

**GEORGE KUCHAR** was born in New York City in 1942. Having been introduced to the avant-garde film scene in the early 1960s, he acquired an audience for his low-budget dramas and was hired by the San Francisco Art Institute to teach filmmaking. In 1985 he began making 8mm video diaries. He currently lives and teaches in San Francisco. In 1992, Kuchar received the prestigious Maya Deren Award from the American Film Institute.

**ROBERT LEE** is a Toronto-based writer and videomaker who is interested in architecture.

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**PAULA LEVINE** works in video, installation, and the web, investigating such areas as narrativity, gender, space, and new technology. She teaches Conceptual/Information Arts in the Art Department at San Francisco State University. Her recent works include *Blotto*, an interactive web-based work bringing together the work of Hermann Rorschach, religion and projection. She has published *C-Theory* through Concordia University and *Radio Retbink: On Sound, Art, Transmission* through the Banff Centre for the Arts.

**KRISTIN LUCAS** graduated from The Cooper Union School of Art in 1994. She has participated in festivals and exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad since 1996, including *Young and Restless* at the Museum of Modern Art, the 1997 Whitney Biennial, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and at Dunedin Public Gallery, New Zealand. In August 1998 Lucas launched her first web project, *Between a Rock and a Hard Drive* with Dia Center for the Arts at <http://www.diacenter.org/lucas/>. She lives in New York.

**LAURA U. MARKS**, a writer and programmer of experimental film, video, and new media, has written for many publications worldwide. Her book, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, is published by Duke University Press. She lives in Ottawa, where she teaches at Carleton University and dreams vividly.

**JANINE MARCHESSAULT** has published widely on film and video in such journals as *CineAction*, *Public*, *New Formations*, and *Screen*. She is the editor of *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity*, published in 1995 by YYZ Books, as well as co-editor of *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women's Cinema* (1999). She is currently the Director of the Graduate Program in Film and Video at York University.

**JOHN McCULLOUGH** lives and works in Toronto. He is currently a contract teacher at York University's Department of Film and Video and at Ryerson University.

**ANNE MCGUIRE** makes videotapes, many of them performance based. Her works have shown at museums and festivals



internationally and are distributed by Video Databank in Chicago and LUX Distribution in London. She lives in San Francisco.

**SCOTT McLEOD** is an artist, writer, and curator based in Toronto. His work has been presented across Canada and in New York; his visuals and writings have appeared in *Public*, *semiotext(e)*, *Fuse*, *Gallery 44*, and *VU*, among other publications. Upcoming projects include an artist's project for *Money, Value, Art*, forthcoming from YYY Books, and a group exhibition in AREA exhibition space.

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**WRIK MEAD** is part of a younger generation of avant-garde filmmakers causing a stir in the international arts scene. In the spring of 1997, his films were featured in a retrospective at the Images Festival of Independent Film & Video. Recently, he travelled to Bologna as part of a delegation of Canadian filmmakers at a major Canadian experimental film retrospective that travelled to three cities in Italy. Mead's films have screened internationally in Paris, Berlin, New York, Melbourne, and Hong Kong.

**MONIQUE MOUMBLOW** was born in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1971, and received a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1992. Her videos and performances have been presented in various exhibitions and festivals. Since 1991, she has been collaborating with Anne Russell. She lives in Montreal.

**ANDREW JAMES PATERSON** is an interdisciplinary artist working with performance, video and film, musical composition, and critical and fictional writing. His video and performance work has been exhibited and performed nationally and internationally since the early '80s. He is currently co-editing, with Sally McKay, an anthology of essays and artists' pieces concerning state and public funding for the arts titled *Money, Value, and Art* for YYY Books.

**JAN PEACOCK** is a Canadian artist who lives in Halifax. She teaches video and intermedia at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

**JONATHAN POLLARD** is a Toronto-based film programmer and a founding member of Pleasure Dome.

**JOHN PORTER** has been a super 8 filmmaker in Toronto for 30 years. Recently his work has been documented in Scott MacDonald's *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (1998), Pleasure Dome's *The John Porter Film Activity Book* (1998), and in his self-published *CineZine*.

**RICK PRELINGER** has collected advertising, educational, and industrial films since 1982 and has an enduring fascination with ephemeral culture. He has produced *Our Secret Century*, a twelve-volume CD-ROM anthology tracing the history and

meaning of these films, and is currently working on two feature film projects. He now lives in San Francisco, where he is working with the Internet Archive to develop an online archival moving image collection.

**STEVE REINKE** is an artist and writer best known for his work in video. Currently, he is Visiting Assistant Professor at CalArts. His work has been exhibited widely and is in many collections including the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Pompidou (Paris) and the National Gallery (Ottawa).

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**CATHERINE RUSSELL** is Associate Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. She is the author of *Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure and New Wave Cinemas*, published in 1995 by the University of Minnesota Press, and *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, published by Duke University Press in 1999. She is presently working on a book on Japanese cinema.

**YUDI SEWRAJ** was born in Georgetown, Guyana in 1968. In 1975 his parents immigrated to the Toronto/Hamilton area. Art school was a happy accident for him; he had applied to become a live-in housekeeper in the South of France, but was turned down. He completed his B.F.A. at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and currently lives and works in Montreal. His videotapes are beginning to garner awards worldwide.

**LISA STEELE** was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1947, and immigrated to Canada in 1968. Steele's videotapes have been extensively exhibited nationally and internationally including at the Venice Biennale (1980), the Kunsthalle (Basel), the Museum of Modern Art (New York City), the National Gallery of Canada, and the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston). She is a founding director of V Tape. Since 1983, Steele has worked exclusively in collaboration with Kim Tomczak.

**BARBARA STERNBERG** has been making (experimental) films since the mid-1970s after graduating from Ryerson Polytechnic University. Her films have been screened widely at such venues as the Museum of Modern Art (New York), and Georges Pompidou Centre (Paris), and are in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada. She is co-founder of Struts gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, a founding member of Pleasure Dome, and has taught at York University.

**ELISABETH SUBRIN** is a media artist and writer. Her experimental videos examine intersections of history and subjectivity within female biography. Her work has broadcast and screened widely in the United States and abroad, including at the 1998 Rotterdam International Film Festival. In 1998 she was given the Los Angeles Film Critics' Award for Best Experimental Film for *Shulie*.



**KIKA THORPE** makes art, experimental tv and urban interventions. A co-founder of SHE/tv (1991-1998), her films and videos have screened in Sao Paulo, Tokyo, New York, Berlin and points in between. She counts as her collaborators from 1990 to 2000 in chronological order: Karin Dayton, Mike Hoolboom, Shauna Powers, Carolyn Langhelt, Lise Batcheller, Courtney MacFarlane, Mike Steventon, Miss Barbrafişçh, Francis Yip Hoi, Kelly O'Brien, the SHE/tv collective, Pleasure Dome, Kathleen Pirrie Adams, Paula Gignac, the October, December, February and April Groups, Adrian Blackwell, Cecilia Chen, Ken Hayes, Barry Isenor, Luis Jacob, Marie-Paule MacDonald, Christie Pearson, the Open Party (OCAD), Daniel Borins, Shary Boyle, Peaches, Jubal Brown and the Anarchist Free School.

**KIM TOMCZAK** is a multidisciplinary artist primarily known for his work in performance, photography, and video. His work has been shown extensively both nationally and internationally. In 1982, he became a founding director of V Tape. Since 1983, Tomczak has worked exclusively in collaboration with Lisa Steele. Their work was the subject of a major survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario from 1989 to 1990. In 1993, Steele and Tomczak were recognized with two prestigious awards: the Bell Canada Award for excellence in video, and a Toronto Arts Award.

**SCOTT TRELEAVEN** is a Toronto-based writer and (im)media(te) artist. He has produced numerous published articles, essays, zines, plays, and internationally screened videos, including the award winning punk doc *Queercore*. Scott is currently a freelance writer for The Disinformation Company Ltd., focusing his attentions on punk radicalism, paganism, and queer sex magick. He can be contacted via: [mongrel\\_priest@disinfo.net](mailto:mongrel_priest@disinfo.net)

# Acknowledgements

The assemblage of *Lux*, like most of the films and videos revisited in this artists' anthology, has been a collaborative effort by many individuals dedicated to film and video. We thank all the contributors for their time, efforts, and ideas in helping shape this collection of writings and artists' projects. A considerable thanks must go to Melony Ward and the publication committee of YYY Books, and to the many board members of Pleasure Dome, for their support and guidance of this project and for their patience in waiting for its completion.

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We are grateful also to have worked with a host of talented colleagues: Jay Wilson, whose extraordinary design has captured the inspiration and diversity of the films and videos discussed within; Sarah Lightbody, who helped bring together this project at a time when it seemed an impossible task; Lorissa Sengara at YYY Books, who helped keep things on track through to the end and for her painstaking proofing of the final text; Nicole Langlois for her sensitive copy editing; Jonathan Pollard and Natalia Moskwa, who were so patient and dedicated in their efforts in completing the final listing of Pleasure Dome's exhibition history; Barbara Goslawski at the CFMDC and the staff of V Tape, particularly Geffery Dalhouse, who helped locate and select many of the published images; John Porter, who let us pore over his photographic archives and publish a wide selection; and Video Data Bank for letting us publish the hand-written notes by George Kuchar. But most especially, many thanks to all the film- and videomakers whose creative efforts have been a resource and inspiration in the making of this book.

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# Image Credits

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Diane Bonder: 11, 13 (Bonder).

Colin Campbell: 13 (Campbell).

Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre: 12 (Brown, Thorne), 14, 45, 54, 106-7, 135, 139, 144, 146, 149, 230, 252, 305.

Donigan Cumming: 280, 283, 284, 287, 288, 289, 290, 291, 292.

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York: 69, 70 (Kelley/McCarthy).

The Film-Makers' Cooperative: 140, 166, 177, 184.

Holly Fisher: 13 (Fisher).

Tracy German: 12 (German).

Tessa Hughes-Freeland and Ela Troyano: 13 (Hughes-Freeland/Troyano).

Bruce LaBruce: 159.

Kristin Lucas: 318, 323 (*Between a Rock and a Hard Drive* commissioned by Dia Center for the Arts, New York. [www.diacenter.org/lucas](http://www.diacenter.org/lucas)).

Monique Moumbow: 70.

Matthias Müller: 207, 208.

John Porter: 158, 194-5, 338, 340, 342, 344, 346, 348, 350, 354, 356, 358, 360, 362, 364.

Keith Sanborn: 270.

Kika Thorne: 238, 249, 250, 251, 252, 254.

Video Data Bank: 58, 82, 88-9, 102-3, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126-34.

V Tape: 79, 272.

Many thanks to the above groups and individuals.

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