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Shulie, ELISABETH SUBRIN

Trashing Shulie: Remnants from Some Hoandoned 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 '8os, 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.

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...

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 '6os 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.

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 Sedgewick 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.

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.

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.





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.

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 Pollard

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 Satety 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 Dur 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 films 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 Geographics* 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 invulnerablility; 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-ofway 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

I

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 voiceover, 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 **Vасалсу,** мяттнія müller

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 rovings and meaningless activities. The city is empty, its inhabitants gone, and yet we continue to prop up its corpse.

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.



11

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.

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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.

R. AT W

Starríng

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

ітсез ткяпэсатео ву кеітн зяпвокп)

Can Dialectics Break Bricks?, _{Renéviéner}

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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.

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.

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.







- F I like mechanics magazines. 1.
- T I think I would like the work of a librarian. $\int_{0}^{\infty} \varepsilon U_{i}$ F 2.
- I think I would like the be tipped off who knowld when I take a new job, I like to be tipped off who knowld should be the set to a set to \mathbf{T} F 3.
- I would like to be a singer. T F 4.
- Т 13 5. I feel that it is certainly best to keep my mouth shut when I am in trouble.
- Т When someone does me a wrong I feel that I should pay him back F 6. When someone does me a wrong it is can, just for the principle of the thing.

in See

1.5

Ч

- т Б 7. I am very strongly attracted by members of mylo
- Т F 8. I used to like drop-the-handkerchief.
- Т F 9. (Or if you are a girl), I PARS.C.R.S.
- т Т 10.
- Т F 11. I like postry.
- Т W feelings are not easily hurt. Е 12.
- Т F 13. I sometimes tease animals
- CRENEN I think I would like the kind of work a forest ranger does. T 14. 1
- I would like to be a florist T F 15.
- ISIONS OF It takes a lot of argument to convince most people of the trut Т Э 16. OTECTION

OI

- I would like to be a nurse. Т F 17.
- Т 18. 5 I like to go to parties and other affairs where there is lots of loud fun. CLASS
- I frequently findsit pecessary to stand up for what I think is Т F 19. right.
- T I believe in a life hereafter. R 20.
- r F 21. I enjoy a race or game better when I bet on it.
- r F 22. Most pe
- onle are honest chiefly through fear of being caught.
- and are not quite as good at home as when I am out ľ F 23. My table mann in company. 1.5
- 24. I like dremetice












556 P Cell 35 a wichness to wider pull out lons ingle 45 ot You apposch them beckground will move they wont * - cirole eround fio distance then 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.

LUX A Decade of Artists' Film + Video

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?

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.

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.

> 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

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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.

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 emblematized 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. Hangover rhetoric that has all been proven irrelevant in the face of the steamroller 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 235 one would have to go somewhere, to travel, to see an image.

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.

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 Kontact. 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.

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 avantgarde? 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.



Kika Thorne: Bodies and Desire

Mike Hoolboom

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.

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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.

The film's first image shows two legs rising from the frame's bottom edge, 240 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 windinspired 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."

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 rewound—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.

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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? The 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) 243

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 engimatic epithet, "I knew what he was thinking." Hurled 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

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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.

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 grassroots, 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.

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

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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 Fisçh 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.

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.

ACTION Kika Thorne

next >>>

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 Ronda Bean, Simeron Heath, Nancy von Keerbergen, Louise Liliefeldt, Sheldon Ramsay Deverell. Shot by Daniel Borins in 24 hours, DnThe 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. B 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 Televison.









Kathy Acker In School by Kika Thorne. 1997. School [1995] starring Miss Barbrafisch as The Headmistress, shot by Slave Frantic Yip Hai, with the director as humiliated schoolgiri. The interview with Kathy Acker was videotoped by Kathleen Pirrie 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 Rcker 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.

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:



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 1998

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 cruple 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 est with their masks on. I liked the bus ride. It looks like Cleveland or some place like that although I we never been to Cleveland. She looks like the give yvonne who lived on Taylor Street, short brown hair and her socks were always dusty. A bit like Sadie Benning:

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.



SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1989

Intelligence leaks prompt crisis talks

British 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 fontary - and people will watch it. Just give them & reason and they're there. We didn't have any storms - not like those. Not with big skies and su the fireworks that offend. Just a lot of rain. sometimes for days. Kuchar's video shows it off beautifully. He's a strange one, so personal and confinitional, even showing his shirt 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 slways 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 will 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:



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 to it 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 some length, and then lash them together with string mostly, with bits of rope and some wire. Not very solid but if would flost. And we would set sail. They were doomed voyages. Never got move than 100 yards from shore. But it was scrup 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 plaked 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.



QUOTE OF THE DAY

• Trespect 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-ofinterest legislation...A6

When I'm there, I just don't think about a term like "surt". 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 ready look, they look like sculptures of thighs. That's a very different experience from say, pornography which makes me feel noted and a bit anxions (atthough 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 sufflying. 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 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 attening 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 falsifacation 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 Friday, April 15, 1994 First column

Hydro-Quebec, Inuit sign deal

MONTREAL— T he Inuit of northern Quebec could receive more than \$1-billion dollars in compensation 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

LISA STEELE and KIM TOMCZAK She

there then. She was so open with her finend. 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 intrinación - not just to read them.

263 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.

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.



pste now. It's one o'clock and I'm still very much

ollive to the night. I don't know when I will sleep. Henricks' ghosts got to me. About how places hold memovies. 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 evergo much further than we did.

I'm not getting any closer to this guy. His notebook is so random, so unfocussed. 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.



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 notion 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.

LISA STEELE and KIM TOMCZAK She

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, out love I mean.

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.



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 18year 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 griess it could have been animals but I'm pretty sure it was the grips up the road. I have never thought that signals came back out of the cable television connectim - 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.



FRIDAY, APRIL 18, 1997

Stocks incomplete

B ecause of production problems, some editions of today's paper do not contain complete 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 writ for min 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 b 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 comment since I was a teenager. I just don't thist 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.



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. Professional 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 it times but the overlaps and layers are so loxurious. I wish I could steep in this movie. I don't mean here in this seat, I mean right in the texture of the projection, in the light. I could sleep very much at all now. It's another sympton, I guess. I like how he calls it Panic Bodies. I hope I don't panic. I did once. But I can't think shout 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 notion vs into the bothroom. 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 no there and we stayed until after midnight. I gness one of the patrons who used the bathroom told him and he came and got us and we went home. He was nice enough otherwize. He had a son who was about 13 years of age and the two of them looked so much alike that you would have though they were twins. But I always found that a said thing for the son because it meant that he looked ald 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.

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.

"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.

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."





Mourning Pictures

Mike Hoolboom

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ad Recards, ызя этеесе япо кім томсанк

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.

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, selftranscendence 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 sanitorium 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 sanitorium 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 sanitorium, 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 sanitorium 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 sanitorium 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