

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

lux

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

This collection copyright © 2000
by YYZ Books/Pleasure Dome
All rights reserved. No part of this publica-
tion may be reproduced in any form without
prior written permission from the publisher.

PUBLISHED BY

YYZ Books
401 Richmond Street West Suite 140
Toronto ON Canada
M5V 3A8

and

Pleasure Dome
6 Alcina Avenue
Toronto ON Canada
M6G 2E8

PRINTED IN CANADA BY

Kromar Printing Ltd.

CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN

PUBLICATION DATA

Main entry under title:

Lux: A Decade of Artists' Film and Video

Co-published by Pleasure Dome

ISBN 0-920397-26-3

1. Experimental films--Canada.
2. Experimental films--United States.
3. Video art--Canada. 4. Video art--
United States. I. Reinke, Steve, 1963-. II.
Taylor, Tom, 1957-. III. YYZ (Gallery).
IV. Pleasure Dome (Association).

N6545.5V53L89 2000 709.7109049
C99-932034-3

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

Jay Wilson @ WALNUT



YYZ DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS AND PUBLISHING

Melony Ward

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

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

YYZ Artists' Outlet and Pleasure Dome acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for our publishing program. The financial support of the Canada Council, Media Art Section for the *Lux* project is gratefully acknowledged.



THE CANADA COUNCIL | LE CONSEIL DES ARTS
FOR THE ARTS | POUR LES ARTS
SINCE 1957 | DEPUIS 1957

Cover Image: Donigan Cumming, *Cut the Parrot*, 1996 (Video still)
Back Cover Image: Pleasure Dome Open Screening, July 21, 1995. Photo: John Porter



9	INTRODUCTION Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor
11	EPHEMERA Tom Taylor
15	TEN YEARS OF DREAMS ABOUT ART Laura U. Marks
34	DRAWINGS Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby
39	IN MY ROOM: A RECREATIONAL MASTURBATION VIDEO Jubal Brown
45	FLAMING CREATURES: NEW TENDENCIES IN CANADIAN VIDEO Gary Kibbins
56	ALPHAGHETTI Montique Maumblow

- 58 **THE GHOST OF AN EXQUISITE CORPSE**
David Clark
- 77 **PERFORMATIVE IMPULSES**
Andrew James Paterson
- 85 **RENDEZ-VOUS**
Colin Campbell
- 88 **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: JOURNEYS OF THE SELF**
Catherine Russell
- 114 **TAPE DESCRIPTIONS**
George Kuchar
- 119 **AMERICAN PSYCHO(DRAMA): SIGMUND FREUD VS. HENRY FORD**
Nelson Hennicks
- 126 **ALL SMILES AND SADNESS**
Anne McGuire
- 135 **WOMEN, NATURE, AND CHEMISTRY:
HAND-PROCESSED FILMS FROM THE FILM FARM**
Janine Marchessault
- 143 **PASSING THROUGH: THE FILM CYCLE OF PHILIP HOFFMAN**
Mike Hoolboom
- 154 **AND...**
Barbara Sternberg
- 157 **THE ENTWINED FATES OF BRUCE LaBRUCE
AND PLEASURE DOME**
John McCullough
- 159 **EVERY FAGGOT LOVES A FASCIST**
Scott Treleaven
- 161 **INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE LaBRUCE AND G.B. JONES**
Cameron Bailey
- 166 **BEING A WITNESS: A POETIC MEDITATION ON B/SIDE**
Abigail Child
- 186 **TRASHING SHULIE: REMNANTS FROM
SOME ABANDONED FEMINIST HISTORY**
Elisabeth Subrin
- 191 **BLOW-UP: THE CATHERINE FILMS**
John Porter
- 197 **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CATHERINE FILMS**
Jonathan Pollard
- 199 **MENACE AND JEOPARDY: FIVE SAFETY FILMS
FROM THE PRELINGER ARCHIVE**
Rick Prelinger
- 206 **THE SHAPE OF A PARTICULAR DEATH:
MATTHIAS MÜLLER'S VACANCY**
Scott McLeod

210	LUX Robert Lee
217	STORYBOARDS Wrik Mead
227	INTERVIEW WITH MIKE HOOLBOOM Cameron Bailey
238	KIKA THORNE: BODIES AND DESIRE Mike Hoolboom
248	ACTION Kika Thorne
255	SHE Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak
272	MOURNING PICTURES Mike Hoolboom
286	BEYOND THE ABSURD, BEYOND CRUELTY: DONIGAN CUMMING'S STAGED REALITIES Sally Berger
293	INTERVIEW WITH JAMES BENNING Barbara Goslawski
306	WARHOL'S GRAVE Lia Gangitana
312	NOCTURNE Peggy Rhwesh
316	TWO PIECES Yudi Sewraj
318	WHY DO I KEEP REPEATING MYSELF? Kristin Lucas
324	MOVE THIS Jan Peacock
326	4/14/99 Paula Levine and Jan Peacock
331	END NOTES
338	APPENDIX: PLEASURE DOME'S FILM AND VIDEO EVENTS 1989–1999
354	1989–1999 PLEASURE DOME PROGRAMMING COLLECTIVE
365	CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES
371	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor

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

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

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

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

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

Steve Reinke

Tom Taylor

Toronto, 2000

EPHEMERA Tom Taylor

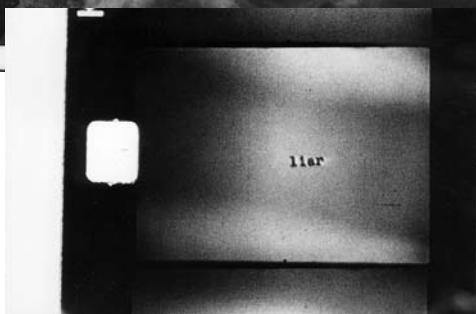
next >>>

The Physics of Love, DIANE BENDER





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





15

Top to Bottom:
Bullets For Breakfast, HOLLY FISHER,
Modern Love, COLIN CAMPBELL, *Playboy Voodoo*,
 TESSA HUGHES-FREELAND AND ELA TROVANO,
The Physics of Love, DIANE BENDER



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



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

Ten Years of Dreams About Art

Laura U. Marks

All dreams guaranteed dreamed by the author.

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

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

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

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

Best Musicians Are Three Bugs

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

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

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

Brains of Love

19

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

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

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

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

20

History of Cars and Boats

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

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

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

Dealing with Regeneration

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

21

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

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

The Immobilized Heads of Mass Culture

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

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

22

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

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

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

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

23

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

Consciousness Is No Different Than Reality

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

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

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

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

“The Pink”

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

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

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

25

A Glitch in the Performance

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

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

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

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

26

Don't Deconstruct the Snow

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

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

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

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

One Flavour at a Time

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

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

A Hard Day at the Arts Council

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

27

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

Equations For Your Eye

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

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

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

Sad Classified Ads

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

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

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

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

Seinfeld and the “Wilderness”

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

29

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

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

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

Deleuze Overcharges for Drinks

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

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

Woman Ejaculates on Prospective Canadian

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

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

31

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

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

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

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

Divorce Ritual

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

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

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

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

33

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

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

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

I Forget I Own Art

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

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

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

Aggressive House

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

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

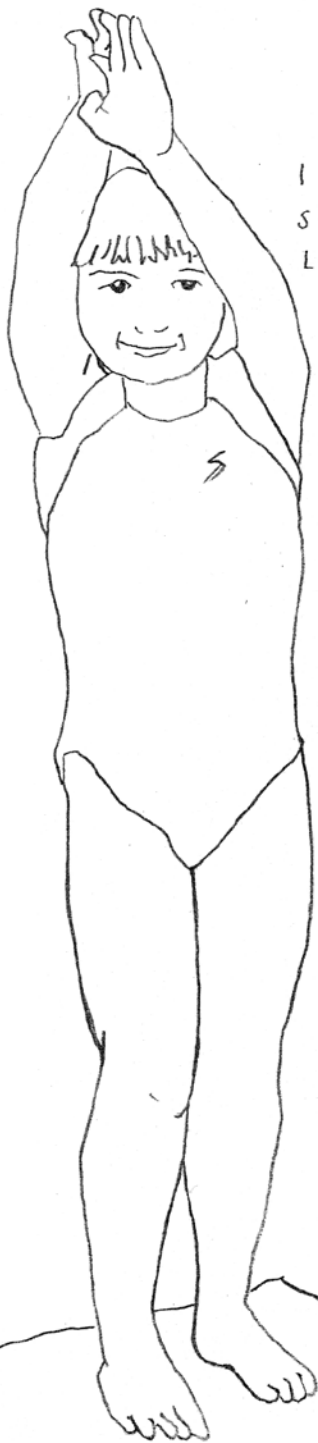
the camera's witness had a new urgency. Emily Vey Duke, Anne McGuire, and other artists exhibited pure affect for the camera, in performances whose virtue was in being as spontaneous as the single-take exhibitionism of their '70s forebears. Ironically, it was mostly thanks to digital editing that Hollywood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

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



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





I LOVE
SWIMMING
LESSONS!

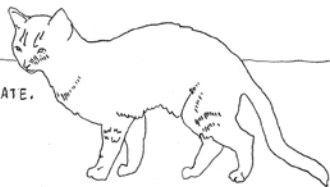


I HATE
THAT
LITTLE
BLONDE
PRINCESS.

NOTHING I SAY
IS GOING TO
MAKE YOU FEEL
BETTER ANYWAY



THAT'S
JUST
BECAUSE
YOU'RE
INARTICULATE.





IN MY ROOM: A RECREATIONAL MASTURBATION VIDEO Jubal Brown

next >>>

DRAWINGS Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby

<<< previous













Flaming Creatures, JACK SMITH



Flaming Creatures: New Tendencies in Canadian Video

Gary Kibbins

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

53

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

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

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

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

54

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

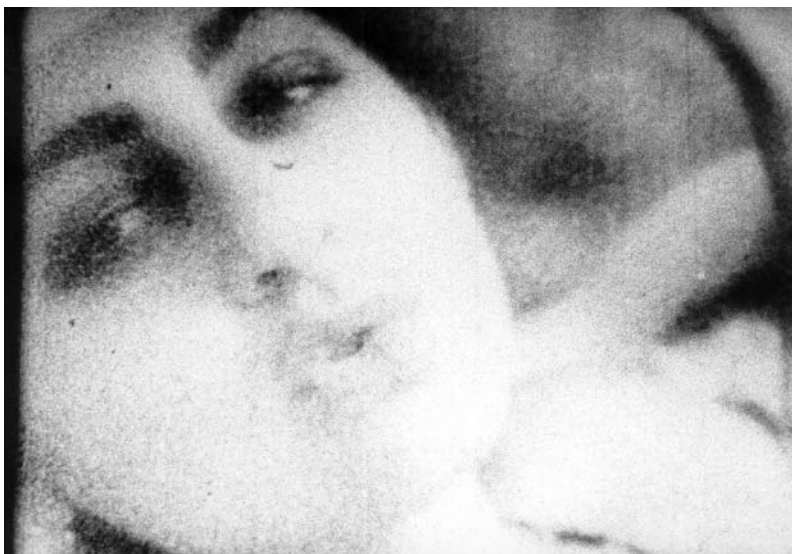
montage. There is nothing disjunctive in it; it is a fully realized, internally coherent world, populated by fabulously costumed "creatures." Ken Kelman describes the "prodigious transvestism" of Smith's creatures: "they are sexless, or of all sexes, like gods."¹¹ They are visionary, of course; pure,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

56

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



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



KEVIN

Alphagheiti

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MOTHER: It's open. I swear.

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

MOTHER: Stop playing games and come out.

BOY: Go to hell.

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

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

MOTHER: Sweetie, are you playing hide and seek?

BOY: No.

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

BOY: I hate toast.

MOTHER: There's cereal.

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

MOTHER: You're an only child.

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

MONIQUE MOUMBLOW alphaghetti

◀◀◀ previous



The Ghost of an Exquisite Corpse

David Clark

Theme Song, VITO ACCORCI

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

—JORGE LUIS BORGES, *The Library of Babel*

The Intimate Real

61

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

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

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

Krauss's essay were primarily works of unedited performances recorded on video. This early work of Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, Nancy Holt, Lynda Benglis, Peter Campus, and Joan Jonas contributed to the formal questions of how video was distinguished from other media such as painting, photography, and film. Video's ability to produce instantaneous images that the artist could both identify with and be at a distance from was a feature distinctly different from any other time-based image-making technology. This characteristic promoted a narcissistic fascination with the image and a splitting of the ego not dissimilar to Lacan's conception of the mirror stage, the primal identification that the infant has with its mirror image which sets the conditions for dependence on idealized images of ourselves. Lacan points out that our misrecognition of our own image, mirrored to us during our early cognitive development, plays the essential role in the formation of our ego. By being the medium par excellence of the transmittable present, video had become the tool of choice for investigating the issues of split subjectivity opened up by the theory of the mirror stage.³ Krauss's nomination of narcissism as video's primary psychological state could be considered a parallel to Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" which posited narrative cinema's predominant psychological condition as voyeurism.

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

The Aesthetics of Echo

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

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

63

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

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

Keep On Deconstructin’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shot through with Ghosts

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

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

66

Theme Song

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

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

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

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

67

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

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

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

Repetition is a Form of Change

68

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

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

Fresh Acconci

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

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

69

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

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

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

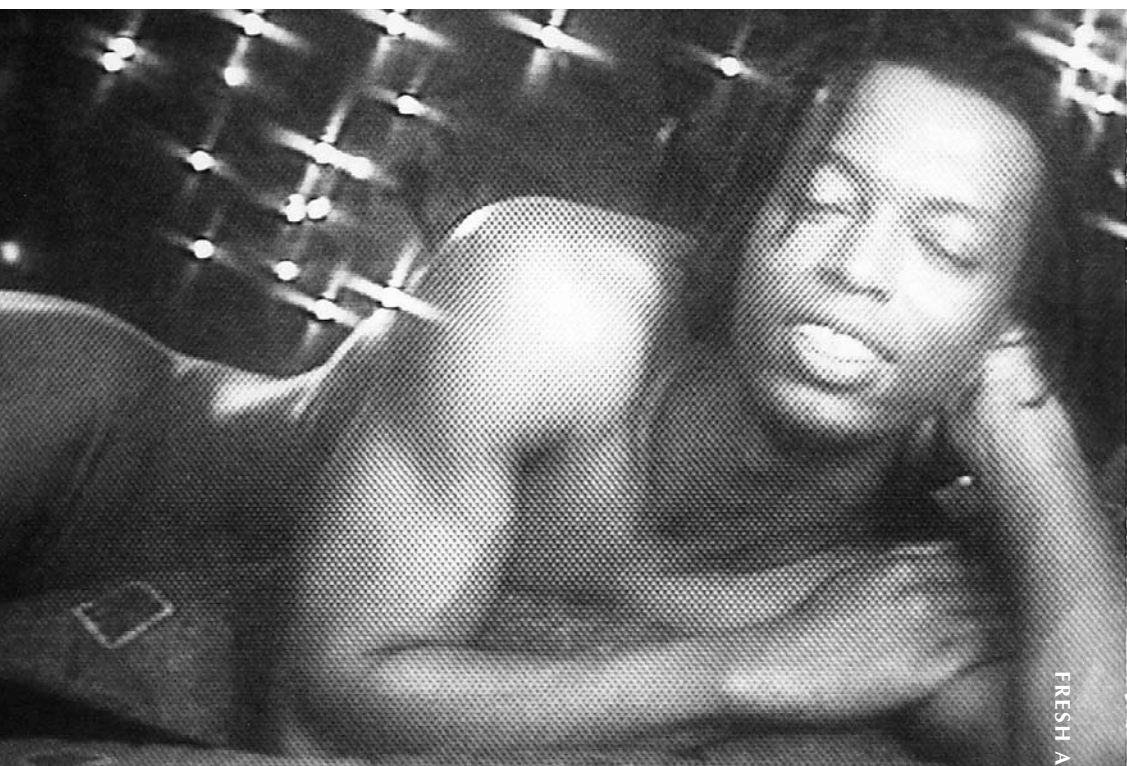
The camera marks the beginning and end of each section by moving in and out on each performance making us aware of the behind-the-scenes of the video. We knew that Acconci was shooting the video by himself. That increased our sense of intimacy knowing we were alone with him. But in *Fresh Acconci*, we're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

70

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

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

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



FRESH ACCONCI, MIKE KELLEY AND PAUL MCCARTHY



FRESH ACCONCI, MIKE KELLEY AND PAUL MCCARTHY



JOAN AND STEPHEN, MONIQUE MOLMÉLOU



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

73

LifeSwap

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

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

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

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

Joan and Stephen and Monique

74

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

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

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

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

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

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

Last Year at NSCAD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All the World's a Mirror Stage

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

77

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

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

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

78

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

Performative Impulses

Andrew James Paterson

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

81

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

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



ABERRANT MOTION #4, CATHY SISLER

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

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

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

In *Rendez-vous*, Colin Campbell references his innovative performance-rooted video works of the '70s and '80s⁵ by inventing a new persona related to earlier examples. Colleena is clearly the artist's or performer's feminine half or sister or whatever, but the persona is also a device to simultaneously self-reference his own body and practice as well as to comment on contemporary artistic and cultural landscapes. Campbell's personae and performance have always idiosyncratically blended conventions of theatrical camp and self-portraiture—Colleena, as well as her video ancestors, both is and is not Colin Campbell.

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

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

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

83

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

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

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

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

WHEN I WAS A MONSTER. JOE GIBBONS. JOE GIBBONS



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

85

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

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

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

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

86

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

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

