Mirror Machine
Video and Identity

Edited by Janine Marchessault

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Preface

In 1993 the Georges Pompidou Centre organized two simultaneous exhibitions of Canadian film and video. One programme was dedicated to the best of Québec's cinéma direct tradition and the other, to a selection of contemporary video art. Due to budgetary constraints, the two exhibitions were made to share an inaugural presentation, combining a selection of recent video work with a screening of Hubert Aquin's *A Saint-Henri le cinq septembre* (1964). Presented first, the videos were greeted with tacit hostility; a reaction warranted, in part, by lack of subtitles and poor projection. Yet there was more to the cool reception than technical impediments. For many cinéphiles, modernist chauvinisms die hard: video persists as a low budget, low resolution technology — the small screen culture for small minds.

Accidental juxtapositions are, however, often fortuitous. Seeing recent video work (including one of Stan Douglas' ironically understated *TV Monodramas* (1992) and John Greyson's audacious *You Taste American* (1986)) next to a landmark cinéma direct film about a poverty stricken Montréal neighborhood, was a reminder of how easily historical contiguities are lost. How often discursive intersections are ignored (or forgotten) to fortify the critical and institutional boundaries separating film and video. For the histories of cinéma direct and video in Canada are, in fact, deeply congruous. The ethnographic resonances of Aquin's film would be answered by the deployment of video as a communal 'mirror' in the late 1960s. As cultural practices in Canada, both cinéma direct and early video were driven by the same political purpose: to bring the reality of difference, of diverse experiences and voices into the public sphere of culture. In effect, the juxtaposition of *A Saint-Henri* with the videos (so clearly tied to identity construction, to opening a space for difference) worked to highlight the utopian strains underlying independent video practices.

Video art is the product of a distinct period in the history of avant-garde culture, the high point of the counter-cultural 'revolution' that generated and depended upon purposeful contradictions: television and the art gallery. Video's portable technology coincides with the rise of the radical identity politics of feminist, gay and race liberation struggles and the concomitant social transformations in the production of art. Video technology is also a product of the information order. Like television, then, it is entangled in the contradictions of technological modernity: simultaneously enabling democratic expression and the implementation of greater social controls.

On the level of production and distribution, video encompasses the fragmentary dispersal of postmodernity. It is specific and contextual. Its histories are spread across nations, regions and communities. The spaces of its exhibition (art galleries, some festivals, museums, community centres and cable television) along with the very dimensions of its technologies (designed for the atomized seeing that distinguishes contemporary consumer culture), have functioned to delimit a close relation to audience and social context. Video is not segregated from its environment but is meant to be seen in an illuminated space. The videotape recorder combines audio-visual communication as never before, conveying a directness and immediacy that, as so many have noted, make the mirror the operational metaphor.

To say anything unequivocal, however, about the nature of video art in Canada is to betray its heterogeneity. This is its greatest paradox: video's identity is difference, video's difference is in its relation to identity. And indeed, as this collection of essays sets out to explore, somewhere between a strategic essentialism and a political postmodernism lie the productive ambiguities of identity politics and video as art.

The dearth of publications dealing specifically with Canadian video in an historical or theoretical fashion continues to frustrate the critical context of its reception. Without pretense to comprehensiveness, the essays gathered here interrogate the way video has come to reconstitute the political and technical landscape of art. From a variety vantage points, the writers address video as a technology that has challenged and extended not only the parameters of cultural production but the very meanings of resistance in the era of global television.

This anthology takes as its central focus video's representational vocation. In Canada this vocation has been shaped both by institutional supports (various federal initiatives, the National Film Board, The Canada Council, Cable television, etc.) and by community needs for agency and voice. The contribution these essays make to our thinking about video resides in their nuanced and significantly different interpretations of the politics of identity and representation, of the relation between art and activism, the local and the institutional, theory and practice. It is hoped that the reader will derive a sense of the productive dialectic that is needed to think about video in the age of identity.

This project has been in the making for several years and I would like to thank all the writers who have been so patient and understanding throughout. Thanks go to Louise Dompierre at The Power Plant and Kathy Daymond for helping to initiate the anthology. I would also like to thank Jane Kidd and Christine Davis on the publications committee at YYZ Artists' Outlet for their intellectual support and friendship. Special thanks to Scott MacKenzie and Nicole Santilli for their painstaking copy editing and proof reading. I am also grateful to my colleagues Will Straw and Ron Burnett at McGill who were able to connect this project with the Centre for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions in Montréal. Lastly, my thanks to Dorothy Todd Hénault at the NFB for this book's title.

Janine Marchessault

I. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Amateur Video and the Challenge for Change

Janine Marchessault

Once the dispossessed and powerless have access to the means of information they can no longer be misled by Establishment bullshit. And that is in itself a revolution.

Patrick Watson, 1970[1]

1967 was an important year for Canada. As a centennial celebration of Confederation, Expo 67 (Montréal) saw the convergence of technology and nationalism as never before. Imax, the largest screen in the world, could, we were told, only have been invented in Canada. The spectacular five screen cinematic feat, devised by the National Film Board of Canada's (NFB) Unit B, epitomized the image of nationhood: technological mastery, natural abundance and an open multi-accented democratic participation. Its theme, in the Unit B tradition, was the wonder of Human Life. Cognitive and technological development were harmoniously synchronized in a symphony dedicated to McLuhan's favorite metaphor, the *Labyrinth*. The United Nations theme of the fair "*Terre des hommes*/Man and his World" announced official bilingualism and "the multicultural Canada in a multinational world" promoted by the Liberal government.[2]

1967 also saw the birth of a new programme at the NFB: Challenge for Change. Initiated with subsidies from seven government departments, the programme gained almost instant international recognition. Much like Imax, it reinforced the image of Canada as an advanced democratic nation. The project's aims were simple: give the disenfranchised and marginal communities of Canada a voice by giving them access to the media (film and later super 8, video and cable television). This was intended "to encourage dialogue and promote social change" mostly around issues of poverty.[3] By the time the programme began to lose momentum (i.e., to

lose government subsidies due to fiscal restraint) in the mid-1970s, it had produced hundreds of films and videos, and hundreds of hours of non-edited 'process' videos.

Although Challenge for Change defies simple evaluation (not only are there differences between the English and Québec — *Société nouvelle* — version of the programme but between the various projects within each programme[4]), I wish to draw attention to a particular teleology at its core. One that came to dictate the way video was used as a 'mirror machine' for the people: implementing non-hierarchical forms of authority and consolidating the identity of difference. I am especially interested in the way 'media for the people' exhibited a highly instrumental view of cultural development. D.B. Jones has pointed out that this view, and Challenge for Change on the whole reflected the Liberal's two-fold policy to democratize and regionalize culture, a strategy largely aimed at integrating the margins into the mainstream of Canadian life.[5]

Unit B director Colin Low, heavily involved in the Imax sensation, would pioneer the participatory techniques that gained Challenge for Change its reputation as one of the cornerstones of the alternative media movement. The participatory process was conceived as a means to counter both the objectification of earlier ethnographic approaches and the aestheticism of an emerging auteurist tendency at the NFB (mainly in Québec).

The Challenge for Change pilot film, Tanya Ballantyne's *The Things I Cannot Change* (1966) lacked an essential political imperative. The *cinéma-vérité* portrait of a poverty-stricken family in Montréal, while sensitive, only reinforced the hopelessness and futility of the family's situation. Moreover, the family's sense of powerlessness was heightened when, without their being notified, the film was aired on local television. They were subjected to ridicule by neighbors and eventually had to move — so the story goes.

In the aftermath of *The Things I Cannot Change*, an ethical dimension was incorporated into the documentary process. For Low and others, the Challenge for Change film would seek to "engage the people on the screen as partners in the filmmaking process."[6] Thus the aims of a project could no longer be subsumed to the self-expression of an individual director. Turning away from his earlier formal inclinations — *Corral* (1954), *Universe* (1960), *Circle of the Sun* (1961) — Low resolved to break "the illusion that

I can communicate through film — that *my* films can communicate, that *I* am effecting social change."[7] Rather than making films about disadvantaged groups, he sought to make films with them. This approach presented an alternative to the paternalistic and authoritarian mandate of Grierson's NFB: "to interpret Canada to Canadians and to the rest of the world and to make films in the national interest" (while diminishing sectionalism). Challenge for Change would confront the NFB's technocratic elitism, seeking to transform the government-sponsored film into a public platform for 'the people.'

Participant Observer

The first prototype films were produced in 1967 on Fogo Island, just off the northeast coast of Newfoundland. For long-time Challenge for Change worker Dorothy Hénaut, the principles informing what has since been called the "Fogo process" would be fundamental to the development of "a community process, media by the community."[8] Low's notion of subject participation paralleled the Liberal interpretation of cultural development (i.e., 'help them help themselves') and would play an essential role in the state promotion of community culture in Canada.

Unable to sustain their livelihoods due to the corporatization of the fishing industries, the five thousand islanders who made up the different communities on Fogo were about to be relocated by the government. Despite their geographical isolation from each other, they were intending to resist the relocation. To increase communication between the communities and not to impose his own interpretation on their views, needs and histories, Low opted to film interviews with different members from each community. The members not only chose the topics they discussed but they viewed the rushes afterward and could omit any material that did not properly reflect them. Often the interviews were screened to other island communities and Low would record their reactions, creating a series of meta-observational or 'feedback' documents.

Refusing to make an overall film about the Island,[9] Low produced what he calls "vertical" films. Somewhat akin to the home-movie archive, vertical films consisted of one community event *Jim Decker's party* (5 min.), an everyday occurrence *The Mercer Family* (10 min.) or an

interview discussing one issue *Tom Best on Cooperatives* (10 min.). Editing was kept to a minimum and inter-cutting between people on the basis of issues was eliminated altogether. This practice, according to Low, functioned to keep the filmmaker's interventions and value judgments to a minimum, facilitating a more self-directed community expression and democratic communication.[10]

While anthropology's nefarious 'participant observation' seeks to resolve power relations by positioning the observer inside the field to be investigated, the Fogo process side-stepped power altogether. It inscribed not a self-reflexive gaze, one that takes account of the observer's contradictory status of belonging, but a self-reflective observation that eliminated boundaries altogether. Using film, participants could observe their own behavior on the screen *a posteriori*. Low theorized that the media — film and, as we shall see, especially video — could be made to function as a collective "mirror," enabling communities "to view themselves, discover their strengths and bring their ideas to better order." Thus what came to matter was not so much the final product but the use of media "as a sparkplug for process."[11] Aimed at strengthening community communication, the process involved building consensus and advocacy around particular issues.

Historically, the participatory approach to documentary filmmaking is not a stylistic but an ethical engagement with the processes of representation. At the very least, it entails some involvement with and accountability to those lives that are being depicted. It is a mode of gathering information that can produce very different results and is certainly no guarantee of political acumen. As a methodology, it enabled the staged realities of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) to gain ethnographic currency, just as it was fundamental to the tenement dwellers' direct address in Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton's *Housing Problems* (1935). Yet subject participation in the Challenge for Change films became synonymous with an ethical rejection of style in favor of direct speech. The twenty-eight films produced on Fogo embodied a dominant aesthetic trope — or anti-aesthetic — that would come to characterize a majority of Challenge for Change films and videos: the talking head or the talking head viewing the talking head. D.B. Jones has commented on this:

> …as if, in the words of Guy Glover, "simple quotation were the only guarantee of veracity." Ironically, the self-expression that Grierson had abhorred,

and which he noticed in some of the Board's work when he visited Montréal in 1964, and which Challenge for Change had meant to counteract, was re-emerging. Only it wasn't the filmmakers who were expressing themselves, it was "the people." Challenge for Change, which sprang in part as a recoil from the aesthetics of self-expression, got rid of aesthetics, but not the self-expression.[12]

While subject participation was intended to counter the ethnographer's distant gaze, it was being delimited in terms of the filmmaker's detachment from the processes of representation.

Video

From 1969 onwards, video became the choice technology for the participatory practice. Not only was it cost-effective but it could, ostensibly, provide an automatic — instantaneous and simultaneous — record, a mirror machine that needed no operator. Hénaut recalls:

> ...an aspect of the process was bothering us. These people were dependent on our equipment and goodwill — in short, our own power — for access to the instruments of communication. As intermediaries, we were nevertheless cumbersome. If we really believed in people's right to express themselves directly, then we needed to eliminate ourselves from the process and find a way to put the media directly in the hands of citizens. Fortunately, a half-inch portable video called "portapak" was released onto the market in 1968.[13]

Video redefined the film director's role. No longer an authorial agent, the director became a social animator whose chief function was to provide technical training to select communities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, through the Challenge for Change project, several video access centres were set up across Canada (Vidéographe, Trinity Square, MetroMedia and Teled among others) to encourage community culture and communication of which video linked to cable television was a central feature. Indeed, many of these access centres — arguably some of the most productive initiatives of the entire project — continue to exist very constructively as artist-run organizations.

Over and again, video is reported to have been greeted with tremendous excitement by different communities. The VTR "brought the community together" and the television monitor (even if it was closed-circuit)

resonated with institutional authority, promising a new form of social communication.[14] Able to transcend the mediated facets of film production, video's technical accessibility enabled citizens "to express themselves directly." Shattering the traditional hierarchies of power implemented by the interview as a formal structure, community members could employ video to interview themselves. Group discussions were to become the dominant representational paradigm for the democratic communication enabled by video — the disembodied authority behind the camera seemingly absent from the process.

VTR Rosedale (1970), a film documenting the use of video and the Fogo process in the rural community of Rosedale, Alberta, echoes this enthusiasm. Challenge for Change animator Anton Karch trained the 'Rosedale Citizens Action Committee' to use video with the aim of assessing community needs. The film's soft-spoken female voice-over tells how the citizens interviewed by the committee were able to watch themselves immediately after on the playback monitor: "they were impressed by how clearly they had expressed themselves." Cut to: a town meeting where the edited version of the interviews, which include watching the playback, are presented to the community and videotaped once again. Here, the utilization of video to implement the Fogo process produces an astounding observational regress: a displacement of the apprehending gaze which screens and deflects relations of power. The modalities of power inherent in the process become less and less tangible as the frame appears to open forever outward. There is no outside, no semiotic interference to the mimetic process upon which identity construction depends. The refracted gaze makes the community — in true Foucauldian fashion — both the subject and the object of knowing. This observational paradigm at once mirrors and obliterates *VTR Rosedale*'s institutional framework: the state sponsored programme becomes a community initiative. Thus, the impression prevails that the communication technology is unregulated; it is merely a recording apparatus servicing the community.

While Imax sought to answer the 19th century quest to overcome the exclusion of the spectator from the image, the video portapak promised to overcome the viewer's exclusion from television. The same technological determinism pledged interactivity in the form of an immediate and empowering transport, from the mundane disconnected experience of the

everyday to the social nexus of the screen. Fostering processes of equivalency and unification, this engagement would multiply the order of meaning and, as McLuhan theorized, move the world (or at least Canada) towards universal harmony.

Yet the interactivity and participation that video delivered instituted access without agency. It instituted a particular form of self-surveillance rather than transforming the actual institutional relations of production and knowledge. If empowerment came from demythologizing the technological and social institutions of television by the very fact that anyone could be on television, that television could be used to make a difference, then it also served to reinforce the difference television makes. Video projected television's generalized fantasy of transparency, immediacy and extension through that contradictory bifurcation of *being on tv*. And most of the community experiments with video never went beyond this initial positivism, beyond this social reproduction.

Community videos produced through Challenge for Change, although emerging from a diversity of communities, tended to look the same. According to producer Boyce Richardson, the problem with the portapak was that its "easy to operate" facade did not encourage anyone to actually learn or experiment with its use. Instead, black and white "glitchy" images, unfocused and barely edited were glorified as "a manifestation of honesty and directness."[15] Videographic reality appeared to have an ontological edge over film; video, unlike the chemical processing needed for film, was a *tape recording* able to 'feedback', to mirror, the reality of difference directly.

In this way, the formal characteristics of community video were delineated in opposition to art and to the mediating subjectivity of the auteur. Video was an antidote to indeterminacy; the more ordinary and transparent, the more authentic. Community video and television were intended — were funded — to provide a document of community experience and need, increasing the internal coherence of the community. Though 'process' video was supposed to work against any finished product, ultimately its goal was "to bring ideas to better order." The 'authentic' expression of community was made to replicate the instrumental discourses of the state. More often than not, community video was synonymous with the transparency and certainty of public service information.

Processing Difference

Foucault has encapsulated the power/knowledge problematic in the following way: "we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth."[16] The equation of community video with public service information is not surprising since the very cohesion of those community identities — dispossessed, Black, Native, working mothers, the welfare class — was constituted by the state in the first place. The institutionalization of cultural difference defines the project of multiculturalism not only to manage and integrate difference, but to make it at once separate and identical. This construction creates a common otherness, the 'people', whose solidarity is made impossible under the burden of difference.

Here, the 'people' or the 'community' are defined negatively by exclusion, by the participation, wealth and access to power that they do not have. John Frow has argued that the reduction of difference to an "antagonistic duality" (people/state or community/society) cannot "break the cycle of power because it is never more than its mirror image." It will only produce "a repetition of the Same" as difference.[17] The category of the people, Frow maintains is a "fact of representation, rather than an external cause of representation." Similarly, he rejects the concept of "the popular" because it is theorized in relation to this "singular entity." The "strategic value" of these terms is found in the way they maintain dominant perceptions of how cultural space is organized and valued: "the point is to describe this normative function rather than accept it as given."[18]

Challenge for Change sought to enlarge the public sphere to include voices marginalized by and excluded from civic discourse. Certainly, this project was extremely important to the inception and growth of Canada's alternative video culture — both for art and community video production. Yet to what extent was the culture produced through the programme limited to fulfilling a binary conception of 'media by the people'? To what degree were established structures of authority recognized and challenged?

Infused with radical aspirations for the new media that characterized the late 1960s, Hans Magnus Enzensberger's landmark essay "Constituents of a theory of the media" (1970) proposed a socialist strategy — a cultural revolution — that would do away with "the contradiction between producers and consumers." The "emancipatory potential" of the

media were to be "released" from the grips of capitalist production. Correspondingly, "the masses" needed to "organize themselves" and use "the new productive forces" to "secure evidence of their daily experiences and draw effective lessons from them."[19] Although sympathetic to Enzensberger's political aims, John Hartley has criticized his proposal for maintaining an implicit distinction between the "vanguard intellectual" and the "masses":

> Enzensberger's notion of the 'masses' is contradictory, wanting them to be active and self-determining, but only if such action is organized along existing political lines, to support existing (socialist) strategies, and only if it is *mass*. Evidence that populations are not masses, and that the new media technologies suffuse popular culture in ways that challenge socialist orthodoxies, is dismissed as the result of corporate manipulation, leaving a view of the masses as, by default, passive depoliticized and in need of organization.[20]

Certainly far less radical in its scope than Enzensberger's proposal, Challenge for Change suffers from a similar contradiction: the voice of change must emanate from the community which is "in need of organization." The participatory process was intended to overcome this contradiction. Yet this process — the Fogo process, the process of enabling a community to come to voice, the process of putting the media directly in the hands of the community — could not challenge an authority that it worked to obscure. Instead, the Fogo process consolidated a version of community identity largely determined by the directives of Liberal reform.

One of the main criticisms of Challenge for Change has been that it worked to diffuse direct action, to contain and stabilize, as television can do, the potentially explosive effects of difference. It is easy to see how Challenge for Change is entangled in that web of coercion and consent, technologies of domination and technologies of the self, which define the functioning of power in the liberal democratic state. As Chantal Mouffe has remarked, liberalism must continuously deny its own limits in order to maintain political legitimacy, its foundation in civil society.[21] Discourses of access and participation often work to conceal the institutional conditions of access and the political limits of coming to voice.

Yet in times of 'crisis', limits do become apparent. At the height of Challenge for Change in 1970, the Liberal government imposed the War

Measures Act on Québec. Arresting citizens 'without due process' and censoring the media to protect the Québec population from the threats of FLQ (*Front de libération du Québec*) terrorism. The video portapak was used by the government for the monitoring and surveillance purposes that defined its habitual usage.

Video, Stuart Marshall has underlined, is a product of the information age. It is part of "a vast investment in commercial, military and managerial technology…in a process entirely committed to extending institutional control and efficiency."[22] Delimiting that concern for "effect rather than meaning" typical of McLuhan's "electric time," the globalizing processes of the telematic media convert history into information. New information technologies make it difficult to locate institutional assumptions and structures of power because the actual source of a transmission is blurred within the new economy of the user. Challenge for Change's emancipatory ambitions were circumscribed and contained by this complexity. It is just such a complexity (the thrill of access) that so often precludes us from taking into account the dialogic nature of access and participation: what are we being given access to and what are we participating in?

The People's Authority

While Challenge for Change served as a model for thinking about community television around the world, it was a model that failed in Canada. There are countless reasons for the individual failures in Thunder Bay, Vancouver, Roosevelt Park and Winnipeg. One impediment rested with Challenge for Change's neo-liberal interpretation of the media's role in community development as the following report summarizes:

> The emerging pattern, if one examines the generation of projects beginning with Fogo, is that of gradual withdrawal from active social intervention in specific communities to a policy of provision of service and information.[23]

This "emerging pattern" reflects the technological determinism at the very heart of the programme: the ahistorical conflation of new communication technologies with democratic participation. Thus, cable television was introduced to various communities as a service. The economic and institutional interests that fueled this service were overshadowed by the film board's euphoria of access and participation — a rhetoric supported by the

public service history of television in Canada. Though encouraged by the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) in the early seventies to open time slots for community programming, only one third of the cable companies in Canada actually did.[24] Moreover, cable managers and owners were free to impose restrictions on community productions. Except in Québec, where community television has enjoyed some success, no state funding has ever been made available for community access television. According to Marc Raboy, community broadcasting has remained marginal in Canada because it:

> …was not seen as a new sector to be fully developed so as to meet the needs that could not be filled by either national public broadcasting or commercial private broadcasting. The possibility of community-controlled cable *systems*, as opposed to community access channels within privately owned systems, was never seriously explored….”[25]

While not without problems, the model has been far more successful in the United States, perhaps because the market driven institutions of television are more readily apparent.[26] The foundation of an advocacy association for public access and community programming on cable television, The National Federation of Local Cable Programmers, has sustained a strong cablecast network. No such organization was ever deemed necessary in Canada.

The 'people' harbored a new empiricism for the NFB: an amateur culture whose seeing was without intentionality, a neutral ground of everyday truth, totally transparent and uninformed. Video was the amateur technology *par excellence*. This might explain why many of the 'people' (and the NFB in general) lost interest in making videos, getting involved, instead, in authoring film. This is why also, until recently, art video and community video have been mutually exclusive terms. Video artists have had to distinguish their work as Art — video art — by linking it with the non-utilitarian concerns and institutions of high art in order to procure funding. Video activism, especially around AIDS, is changing and challenging this historical distinction. Funding for the arts and subsidies for community culture, traditionally separate bodies in Canada, are also being redefined. Agencies are being made to re-think the ideologies which have defined "art" in modernist terminology and "community" in terms of development and preservation (i.e., craft).

The lessons that can be learned from Challenge for Change are tied to the contradictory impulses of liberalism, to the incompatibility of its dominant aims: to guarantee pluralism (individual freedom) while implementing a notion of the common good. The political avant-garde, and videomakers perhaps especially, have long been suspicious of those liberal claims which have served to mask the institutional structures of television. In effect, if alternative video production has worked to produce social change (increasing reciprocal understandings, actively producing rather than reflecting meaning), it is not through any notion of the 'good life' but through a sense of justice — which is precisely where a radical concept of community materializes.

Notes

1. Patrick Watson, "Challenge for Change," *artscanada* (April 1970): p. 20.

2. Cf. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991): pp. 162-168.

3. Dorothy Hénaut, "The Challenge for Change/*Société nouvelle* experience," *Video the Changing World*, eds. Nancy Thede and Alain Ambrosi (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1991): p. 49.

4. *Société nouvelle*, the Québécois counter-part to the project was set up in 1969. Growing out of the *Le groupe de recherches sociales* (1966-1969, whose members included Robert Forget, Claude Jutra and Fernand Dansereau), *Société nouvelle* placed far less emphasis on process film and video.

5. D.B. Jones, *Movies and Memoranda: The National Film Board of Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1981): pp. 171-172.

6. Dorothy Hénaut, "Asking the right questions: Video in the hands of citizens," *Access* (Montréal: National Film Board of Canada, 1975).

7. Cited in: Sandra Gwyn, "Film, videotape and social change," *A report on the seminar organized by the extension service, 13-14th March* (St. John's Newfoundland: Memorial University, 1972): p. 12.

8. Cited in: Peter K. Wiesner, "Media for the People: The Canadian Experiments with Film and Video in Community Development," *American Review of Canadian Studies* (Spring 1992): p. 69.

9. *Children of Fogo* (1967); *The Winds of Fogo* (1969); and the follow-up film *A Memo From Fogo* (1972) are circulated as general interest films for the public.

10. Gwyn, "Film, videotape and social change," op. cit., p. 5.

11. Colin Low, "Media as Mirror," *Access* (1973).

12. Jones, *Movies and Memoranda*, op. cit., p. 168.

13. Hénaut, "The 'Challenge for Change/*Société nouvelle*' Experience," *Video the Changing World*, op. cit., p. 49.

14. Anton Karch, "VTR in Drumheller, Alberta," *Access* (1971-72).

15. *Report on the Current Status of the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle programme*, March 31, 1980, p. 19. (National Film Board of Canada Archive).

16. Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980): p. 93.

17. John Frow, "The Concept of the Popular," *New Formations* no.18 (Winter 1992): p. 30.

18. Ibid., pp. 32-33.

19. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a theory of the media," *New Left Review*, no. 64 (1970): pp. 14-23.

20. John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): p. 24.

21. Chantal Mouffe, "The Limits of Liberalism," talk given at Institute for Social Research, Essex University (March 1993).

22. Stuart Marshall, "Video: From Art to Independence," *Screen* vol. 26, no. 2 (March-April 1985): p. 66.

23. Elizabeth Van Every-Taylor and James Taylor, *Using Video Technology for Social Change: A Framework for the Generation, Selection, operationalization, and evaluation of CC/SN video projects. A Report Submitted to the Interdepartmental Committee for Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle*. (Montréal: University of Montréal, 1973): p. 68.

24. Frances Berrigan, *Access: Some Western Models of Community Media* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977): p. 87.

25. Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990): p. 203.

Cultural Democracy and Institutionalized Difference
Intermedia, Metro Media

Nancy Shaw

"Just watch me."

Pierre Trudeau (1970).

Pierre Trudeau's imposition of the War Measures Act in the fall of 1970 signalled a crisis in Canadian liberal democracy which, until then, was sustained by promises of progress and prosperity. Although this erosion of civil liberties was greeted ambivalently outside of Québec, its underlying implications would be manifested a few years later in the ideology of fiscal restraint. Prior to 1970, liberal optimism was grandly expressed in the Canadian Centennial celebrations and Expo '67. It was actively disseminated through Trudeau's twofold policy of democratization and decentralization. Designed to facilitate a cohesive cultural expression, this policy aimed to forge a strong national identity, projecting an image of Canada as a model nation in the "Global Village." The imposition of the War Measures Act, the military force and the political brinksmanship that accompanied it, proved that reason and administration were no longer effectively suppressing differences — especially those differences most dynamically expressed in culturally marginalized practices.

In Vancouver, the War Measures Act had a direct effect on video artist Michael Goldberg. Goldberg, who was a member of the Intermedia collective, documented rallies and interviewed Canadians enroute to Montréal — capturing a sense of foreboding, and warning of the potential for police-state violence. For his subsequent exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), the newsprint poster supposedly advertising the show, failed to actually mention it. One side of the ad depicted the grainy image of two men — one admitting to the other that he was a cop — while the flip side presented a hand-written account of Goldberg's

experiences and impressions of officially sanctioned surveillance during the October crisis.

Although he evoked the celebratory tone associated with previous innovative and experimental work shown at the VAG, Goldberg's installation "Room on its Side" played out a potential dystopia by engaging his audience in vertiginous normality. Disbelief was, quite literally, suspended. Participants took their place on a couch — backs to the floor, legs up a wall — as they watched a television mounted on the ceiling. This seemed innocent, even playful, until they witnessed their behaviour repeated uncannily on a delayed feedback monitor in an outside chamber. One reviewer wrote, "Goldberg's version of 'Big Brother is Watching You' is direct and unequivocal. Everything happened, you were videotaped and observed and manipulated without protest."[1]

In response to Big Brother and the looming threats to civil liberties, video emerged as the medium of resistance for socially concerned artists. Goldberg and Trish Hardman organized *Matrix* (1973), a conference that brought together video producers from Canada, Japan, Europe, and the U.S.A., enlarging the already impressive network which Goldberg had initiated a year earlier with the *Video Exchange Directory*. These alternative channels of communication were designed to protect threatened rights such as the free flow of information and freedom of expression. They were meant to unsettle the hegemonic communications systems — especially broadcast television — and to include voices otherwise marginalized. As Goldberg wrote:

> The need for a free, wide choice of information need hardly be argued...[i]n times or areas of information restriction, whether self-imposed by the mass media or regulated politically or economically, access to alternative information becomes crucial. The War Measures Act in Québec thrust this reality on an unsuspecting and truly innocent population. It is crucial to maintain an open flow...now, while there is a liberal attitude toward freedom of speech and the right to pursue knowledge.... If we wait until urgency determines expediency, it may be too late to be effective.[2]

In response to the ossifying liberal ideology that was attempting to contain dissenting voices, the strategies embodied in the *Video Exchange Directory* and *Matrix* offered an alternative. Goldberg's VAG installation, *Matrix* and the *Video Exchange Directory* were at once celebratory of new

video technology and critical of it. But the successes and limitations of that era's alternative strategies were most fully illuminated at Intermedia, Vancouver's proto artist-run centre, and Metro Media, the city's first video production centre.

In the late 1940s, the Massey Commission had recognized the need for a state-subsidized culture that would offset the encroachment of American popular culture and economic domination. Before the creation of The Canada Council, support for the arts had been left largely in the hands of volunteers and a few patrons. The Massey Commission advocated promoting the arts as a means of asserting national identity and unity in the face of regional, linguistic, cultural and ethnic differences. The Canada Council was modelled on the British Arts Council and made possible by the endowments of the death dues of two wealthy Canadian industrialists. Unfortunately, while paying lip service to diversity, this form of state-sanctioned culture was centripetal in its emphasis on the beaux-arts and its adherence to British style administrative structures.

In 1963, the year that cultural agencies were consolidated under the Secretary of State, the Canadian government established new social welfare programmes (i.e., health care, the Canada Pension Plan, and improved UIC benefits). By 1965 The Canada Council was receiving parliamentary appropriations, and its status continued to improve because 'culture' was seen as the expression of a progressive, affluent nation. The ability of such a nation to support eclectic and even oppositional elements served also to signal its benevolent tolerance of dissent. Communication technologies and notions of nationhood were recurrent themes in the public discussion of culture at that time. While today Canada is internationally renowned for its advanced social contract, it is a contract that still struggles to offset the detrimental effects of an underdeveloped ecomony dependant on communication networks and resource extraction. Arthur Kroker has summarized our condition:

> Canada is and always has been the most modern of the new world societies because of the character of its colonialism; of its domination of the land by technologies of communication; and of its imposition of an abstract nation upon a divergent population by a fully technical polity; this has made it a leading expression of technological liberalism in North America.[3]

Intermedia represented an extraordinary moment in Canadian cultural

history. It was an ideal candidate for Canada Council support: an umbrella organization interested in multimedia, multidisciplinary artistic practice, and technological experimentation; it was also a complex expression of liberal cultural initiatives. Its goal was to collapse the boundaries between art and everyday life — a utopian plan to improve the quality of life for everyone. It fashioned itself as an alternative to the status quo, and some of its members' artistic practices and lifestyles were radical. Furthermore, coincidental to Intermedia's establishment in 1967, The Canada Council was celebrating the end of the first decade of state-subsidized culture. Buoyed by affluence and sixties optimism, the federal government had temporarily managed to gloss over potentially explosive cultural differences.

While the federal attempt to instrumentalize culture projected the image of advanced democracy clasping the invisible hand of multinational capital — which was transcending nation states and forming insidious, ever encroaching global hegemonies — Intermedia's avant-garde strategies were seen as a marginal but alternative expression of technocratic liberalism. To The Canada Council, Intermedia seemed a sort of cultural lab, an eclectic conglomeration of individuals envisioning cultural democracy as harmony. The collective's name seemed to suggest inter-relation, concern with totality, and the Council funded the fledgling organization with an unprecedented forty thousand dollar grant.

After a few years of activity, however, limited resources and competing interests undermined Intermedia's effort. Gradually the collective devolved into smaller groups with more focused interests. The parameters of Intermedia's utopian attempt to liberate life through art are evident in the collective's use of video. One early grant had provided it with a video portapak, which seemed most useful when it captured ephemeral and fleeting moments. Technological experimentation was simple, in most cases employing video as an immediate way to embody an artful life. Nevertheless, video production was new and experimental, pushing the limits of perception and acceptable art practice.

Although one of Intermedia's originally stated aims was to intervene in the hegemonic communications systems, by the end of 1969 some members were meeting with community groups to discuss starting a more consciously political media centre to support community action by making

video production accessible. By 1971, it was clear that Intermedia itself did not have the resources to facilitate such a centre. Moreover, the objectives of this new project were too politically specific. So in the spring of 1971, Intermedia members Werner Aellen, Michael Goldberg, and Bill Nemtin joined with other Vancouver artists to start Metro Media.

In theory, Metro Media advanced itself as a political and technopopulist alternative. In actuality it functioned in relation to the federal government's policy of democratization and decentralization. The government had continued to envision 'culture' as a means to mediate the effect of technical progress — employing it to integrate the country in the name of access and democracy, and to deflect any real analysis of competing social, political, and economic interests. For Trudeau, culture (especially after his imposition of the War Measures Act) served the dual purpose of presenting Canada internationally as an enlightened, socially advanced nation covering for the internal management of dissent — particularly his personal sore point, Québec separatism.

Culture could no longer serve the nation simply as decoration and entertainment. On the recommendation of The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, bilingualism and multiculturalism were offically instituted as policy. It was an attempt to recognize the two so-called 'founding nations' of Canada, while acknowledging that there was a plurality of ethnicities deserving recognition and accomodation; and in a stroke, the concept of Canada as a cultural 'mosaic' was initiated. New programmes were created to disseminate culture beyond the urban centres of eastern Canada, including: the National Museums Corporation, and such Canada Council programmes as Publishing Assistance, the Touring Programme, the Art Bank, and the Explorations Programme. However, regardless of the rhetoric, the 'mosaic' and 'participatory democracy' functioned politically as lip-service mediation, facilitating endo-colonization and the assimilation of difference.

Two of the new programmes directly affected Metro Media: the Local Initiatives Programme (LIP), and Challenge for Change. LIP provided short-term support for community initiated projects, and Challenge for Change was a National Film Board (NFB) programme that donated equipment and provided some financial assistance. The NFB programme had the most enduring influence on Metro Media's ideological development,

despite the fact that it offered only short-term technical assistance and no long term operating support.

Challenge for Change had started in 1967 as a form of community outreach: "to improve communications between individuals and groups in all segments of society concerned and affected by poverty."[4] It advocated video portapak production because it was cheaper and easier to use than 16 mm film, better serving the programme's mandate to encourage self-representation and community consensus building. Participants were integrated into every aspect of production and distribution, and their finished tapes were employed as lobbying tools and to inform the general public, as well as for communication with peer communities. Its success impressed many government agencies, and departments such as Indian Affairs, Northern Development, Manpower and Immigration, National Health and Welfare, the Secretary of State, and Labour and Agriculture all pledged financial support.

Vidéographe in Montréal was Metro Media's eastern counterpart. It had started a few years earlier and was supported by Québec's equivalent of Challenge for Change, *Société nouvelle*. Vidéographe was better funded, and may have been more successful in realizing the potential for community video production. For optimum access, its centre was open twenty-four hours a day. It had a video theatre, relatively sophisticated equipment and technicians. Selecto-TV was one of its most successful ventures: during ten-day periods in several Québec communities, viewers could phone participating cable stations and request particular Vidéographe tapes. The tapes requested most frequently were screened during designated time slots.

One indication of Metro Media's deep relationship with the federal government came when it and Vidéographe were designated to represent Canadian video production at *Trajectories 73*, a large exhibition of Canadian work curated by the *Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris*. The Canada Council involved itself heavily, funding and promoting the exhibition. They sent official representatives to the opening, and mounted, as a complimentary exhibition, the first showing of the Art Bank collection at the *Centre Culturel Canadien*. Although *Trajectories 73* included painting, sculpture, film, and ceramics, the video component sparked the most controversy. Besides engaging in such unconventional activites as providing a

tape library and screenings with question periods, Canadian videographers held mini-portapak workshops to train locals to produce their own tapes, which were generally found to address political issues. This of course shocked the Parisian art establishment, which (still reeling from the aftershock of May 1968) had difficulty accepting that democratic participation, the political, or the mundane had anything to do with "art." Parisian critics displayed a condescending paternalism, dismissing the Canadian work because they saw it as sociological, young and naive, and overwhelmingly concerned with asserting identity in the face of American domination. Among the most telling comments were those from a young Jacques Michel, who wrote:

> The Canadian government…even runs the risk of literally subsidizing artistic "research" without being sure of what will be found or whether it will actually agree with its views. You will be surprised to discover an atmosphere of social challenge throughout the works. Everywhere questions are raised, not all reassuring. It is institutionalized creative challenge … at public expense.[5]

Michel's criticism could have applied to all of the work showcased as Canadian, but was specifically aimed at the video component, which directly engaged social and political issues. As official Canadian culture, it was awkwardly positioned, critical yet complimentary, serving as state-sanctioned contestation, allowing testimony to all who were excluded from the mainstream.

Although it unwittingly outraged Parisian sensibilities, Metro Media's collective attempts to advance participatory democracy through video were ambitious. Unfortunately, its overall strategy proved impossible to implement. The centre was overused and underfunded. There was not enough equipment and, what there was, continually broke down. Besides these logistical complications, Metro Media tended to work almost exclusively with established social services, and with citizens' organizations that were not really interested in learning the technical aspects of video production. Ironically, although Metro Media made a policy of giving priority to the economically disadvantaged, in working with established groups there was an avoidance of the truly disaffected and disenfranchised. Moreover, Metro Media resource workers tended to have their own preferences and agendas, which they impressed upon the very groups they were supposed to empower.

Its attempts to lobby for community television access were sincere, but one of the more troubling aspects of the centre's programming was its unquestioning embrace of multiculturalism. In its attempt to attend to unheard voices, the centre concentrated on ethnic communities, conjuring up essentializing, exotic, and cliché images of otherness. At the time such strategies were considered politically progressive, but because that approach to racism and colonialism is mostly concerned with assimilation and lacks a systemic and analytic component, in retrospect it is easy to see Metro Media's liberal stance as obviously patronizing and implicitly racist.

Metro Media eventually claimed success in consciousness raising, and in concentrating attention on important local, national, and international issues. But, despite its best intentions, the centre's multiculturalism was co-opted by the homogenizing and exclusionary tendencies of the official viewpoint. Political resistance was naively seen as concretely manifest in rough, immediate, 'amateur' production values. In continually adopting the NFB documentary style, with its use of authoritative voice-over, lay testimony, and emotional hooks to build a narrative resolution based on faithful objectivity, the centre's artistic strategy was as neutralized and transparent as its use of technology. Through its technopopulist mandate, Metro Media attempted to include the excluded, but failed to address its own ideological and representational parameters. It could not situate itself in a larger context, which hampered its awareness of and response to co-optation and complicity.

In the mid 1970s, quietist and cynical strategies were beginning to emerge. Some artists began to assess the ideological underpinnings of signification and technology, while others became nihilistic by attempting to articulate the limits of employing art to renovate life.[6] In Canada, the worldwide economic crisis, most clearly represented by the oil crisis, took a particular form. Inflation and the imposition of wage and price controls were symptoms that the structurally-dependent resource based economy was entering a period of diminishing returns. Though the federal government continued to pay tribute to democracy and decentralization, its policy took on a new meaning. Trudeau's political persona had shifted from populist to autocrat, and his approach to democracy moved from rationality and debate to skillful media manipulation. Ensuing shifts occurred with regard to cultural policy, and the government demonstrated the true

limits of its liberalism by withdrawing funding from community-based projects. It became glaringly obvious that socially committed, grass-roots Canadian technopopulism was supported from the top down.

Notes

1. Richard Simmons, "The Manipulator Proves the Lie is Reality," *The Province* (Vancouver January 21, 1971). Simmons also noted, "It is a fact that the main agency that rents VTR cameras draws its clientele from two main groups, the police and artists."

2. Taki Bluesinger, Gerry Gilbert, "Videofreerainforest August 73: a survey of video arts in Vancouver," *artscanada* (October 1973): p. 14.

3. Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind* (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1984): p. 83.

4. Linda Johnson, (*Metro Media and Hourglass CBC*): p. 125.

5. Joan Lowndes, "The Canadian Presence in Paris," *artscanada* (October 1973): pp. 73-81.

6. For a discussion of Vancouver video and approaches to documentary see Sara Diamond, "Daring Documents: The Practical Aesthetics of Early Vancouver Video," *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1991).

Interstitial Aesthetics and the
Politics of Video at the Canada Council

Kevin Dowler

If artists' video began as a utopian practice, it was not long into its early history that it became enmeshed in the cultural policy and funding apparatus in Canada. To the extent that public funding provided the resources necessary to either acquire or gain access to its technologies, video quickly became a creature of the Canadian state. Although much has been written on both the aesthetics and social conditions of different regions and centres within which video practices have taken shape, little attention has been paid overall to the institutional and political contexts which made such practices possible.[1] In order to address these issues, I want to chart a portion of the development of state policy with regard to the emergence of video as an art form in Canada, by tracing out in brief the role played by The Canada Council for the Arts in the development of video art in this country. My main concern will be with an examination of the formulation of a policy toward video at the Council, ending with the establishment of the Video Programme.

The first section of this paper seeks to describe how an 'interstitial' aesthetic of video was constructed by the Canada Council to obtain funding for this new area and to reduce inter-agency conflict. The second section looks at the development of a legitimating discourse of video employed by staff to convince the Council itself of the need for a new programme.

1. The Beaux-Arts Model: Placing Video Art

The video programme at the Canada Council was not officially established until 1975, although it effectively began in 1967 with a forty thousand dollar grant awarded by the Visual Arts Section to the Vancouver group, Intermedia.[2] After operating successfully for a number of years,

Intermedia collapsed under the weight of its own utopian aspirations.[3] The collapse provoked a policy crisis of sorts at the Council that would persist throughout the mid-1970s and beyond in relation to federal government cultural and economic initiatives, particularly around the uses of video. This was encapsulated in a 1971 Council memorandum assessing Intermedia's attempt to restructure: "an important difficulty concerns the gradual development of Intermedia in two conflicting directions." These two directions were "artistic research" and "social and educational development."[4] The idea of intervention into social and educational development was problematic for the Council, according to the memo, "because it questions not only our financial possibilities but our policies and even terms of reference." It was the reassessment of these three areas — finance, policy and terms of reference — that the Council would be forced to undertake in relation to federal policies of the 1970s, and in relation to the emergence of new electronic technologies, video in particular.

The relationship between social action and video has been less a problem for videomakers than for the Canada Council. The convergence of radical social movements and new technologies in the late 1960s, resulted in a serious rethinking of both aesthetic practices and the relationship between artist and society. This in turn affected the way in which cultural agencies such as the Canada Council operated. Since its inception, the Council's Arts Division has insisted that its only criterion is "artistic excellence." Yet once artists themselves began to question traditional definitions of art, what constituted 'excellence' became even less easy to define. As Intermedia itself split apart over these issues, so too did the Council have to struggle to determine its relationship to the increasingly fragmented ideas of what was properly to be called art. This dilemma was of crucial significance, since it determined to a large degree the definition of the Canada Council itself as an agency.

Regarding its terms of reference, the Council was established "for the encouragement of the arts, humanities and social sciences."[5] To consider funding an organization interested in "social and educational development" would be, in the first instance, to effectively violate its mandate to encourage the arts, and secondly, to infringe on the jurisdictions (such as education) which are those of other governments and agencies. Increased

pressure was brought to bear on the Council in this period to conform with national goals set by the federal government. At this time, "the Council found it necessary, in order to conform to the government's objectives, to launch new forms of support for the arts which, in its own judgment, were less urgent than other needs for which funds were lacking."[6] This was to create tension between the Council and the federal government, since the Council rightly felt that appropriations to the Council earmarked for certain initiatives eroded their autonomy and threatened the 'arm's length' principle:

> The immediate effects of this development caused a certain distress to the Council, creating as it did an implicit division of its program and budget between those elements that represented its own judgment of what was most needed for scholarship and the arts, and those elements that reflected judgments taken by the government on quite other grounds.[7]

Although this was particularly true of the latter half of the 1970s, the attempt to steer the Council was already at issue in 1970. In notes from a meeting with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Council director Peter Dwyer remarks that "The Prime Minister said that he could see no reason why the Canada Council should be exempted from the current general government requirement that expenditures of public funds should be directed to the present needs of our society."[8] For Dwyer, "this was a direction [that] seemed to represent a significant shift in the Government's relations with the Council and an erosion of its autonomy...."[9]

The Council was also under considerable pressure during this period as a result of various federal government cultural and economic initiatives, as well as attempts by the Secretary of State to gain increased control over Canada Council expenditures. Programmes such as Opportunities for Youth (OFY), the Local Initiatives Program (LIP), the Local Employment Assistance Program (LEAP), along with Challenge for Change/*Société nouvelle* at the National Film Board (NFB) had provided a substantial amount of seed money for the creation of cultural organizations. Once the various programmes were terminated or cut back (most by the mid 1970s), these organizations turned to the Council for assistance.[10] Unfortunately, as a Council report indicates, "*les subventions du programme d'Initiatives locales ont été d'une générosité qui dépassait de beaucoup les niveaux de subventions du Conseil des Arts...pour des activités comparables....*"[11] Although budget

constraints prevented the Council from adopting all eligible projects *holus-bolus*, the report nevertheless considered the *"solution aux problèmes de chômage ou sous-emploi chez les artistes ou de disparités culturelles,"* to be related to the pursuit of artistic excellence.[12] What is notable here is the Council's implicit adoption of the goals developed by the federal government, indicated by the language of the report itself. The extent to which the government was also attempting to steer the Council is suggested by a letter to Secretary of State Hugh Faulkner attached to the report, which refers to a list of projects that the department "suggests be reviewed for possible continuation by the Canada Council."[13]

It was in this climate that in 1971 the Explorations programme was developed at the Canada Council to address the problem of regional disparity and to promote national unity — in part a response to federal government initiatives in these areas. Explorations attempted to accommodate projects that did not fit within the traditional programmes and divisions of the Council, and provided the opportunity for individuals and groups to obtain funding for work emerging out of experimentation with new technologies such as video. However, Explorations only provided funding on a project basis, and there was no place within the Council's programmes to offer sustaining funding similar to that provided by various federal government programmes. Those organizations created with LIP or OFY funding devoted to video production required on-going support from Council in order to continue to operate.

Establishing a fund for video production required, however, a co-ordination of policy with other sectors of government and with other cultural agencies. The distinction between the practice of video "art" and the "industrial" organization of television production constituted in the federal government's film and video policy had to be clearly established. Although the notion of "cultural industries" does not emerge fully until the tenure of Francis Fox as Communications Minister in the late 1970s, the government had nevertheless developed an industrial model of production for television and feature film production.[14] It was in constrast to this industrial model that the Council would begin to define a 'beaux-arts' model of video production. This would allow the Council to provide grants to both individuals and organizations on the basis of the stimulation of cultural excellence, without running into conflict with the objectives of

other federal agencies such as the NFB or the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC).

What began as a minor initiative in 1967 — the funding of a multi-media "laboratory" (Intermedia) — led eventually to the development of an entirely new set of policies and programmes at the Council. The impetus for this development was not so much a result of Council initiatives as a demand created through the stimuli of OFY and LIP, programmes which "created great momentum in this area in the early 1970s, and the results were astonishing — Canada became — and remains — one of the most dynamic and internationally raved-about video producing countries."[15] As a result of the decline of OFY and LIP funds, "there [was] no longer any substantial support a the federal level for video artists and groups," and the demand on the Council became overwhelming.[16] Thus, the Council, whether it wanted to or not, was pressured into the development of a video policy as the result of both requests coming from the Secretary of State and demand from videomakers and organizations which had developed under federal grant programmes.

The process of delineating a distinct mode of production was prompted by the Treasury Board, which insisted that in order to have "special film funds" released to the Council in 1973, the Council needed to "present a clearly defined, well structured and more detailed film program."[17] The Council was already funding film and video related activities at this time, but in order to avoid conflict with other agencies was careful to indicate that it was concerned only with "professional development of film-makers":

> The Council does not assist the production of films, and so its services do not duplicate those provided by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Canadian Film Development Corporation, and the National Film Board. Generally our grants are for the professional development of film-makers and script-writers and for organizations which offer support services for non-commercial or experimental films.[18]

In 1973, a "task force" of film and video specialists was convened in order to further define the Council's role in these areas and its relations with other government agencies. In the view of the task force panel,

> The kind of film and video people who should be supported by the Council are those people who are not going to find support in any other form from any other agency; the kinds of films it should support are those films — be

they artistic, social, political, or experimental — that confront and conflict with any other kind of film-making being produced anywhere else in this country. All kinds of film should be supported by the Council, provided they do not suggest in any way that they could have been made by the NFB, CBC, or CFDC, with priority to films of artistic, experimental, socio-cultural nature.[19]

Although vague in its terms, this statement nonetheless attempts to carve out an aesthetic of film and video distinct from that supported by other agencies. This interstitial aesthetic space of film and video would come to be supported by the Canada Council. In addition to legitimizing a set of distinct aesthetic practices, identifying a portion of the spectrum of film and video production that fell outside the mandates of existing agencies also had the dual benefit of releasing funds to support areas of need and reducing potential conflicts with other agencies and funding bodies.

The first task force memorandum did not make any aesthetic or onto-logical distinctions between film and video. A follow-up memorandum to the Arts Advisory Panel, however, warned that "we should not relate to video as an extension of film or television as we now know it."[20] Thus began the effort by the Council to give video a specificity formally distinct from other media and practically different from television. The Council began to construct a discourse that would situate video within an aesthet-ic context, and further situate Canada at the centre of artistic develop-ments in the use of the medium:

> Introduced in 1966 as a consumer item, video has rapidly become one of the most wide-spread and powerful mediums [sic] for contemporary cultur-al and artistic expression in Canada. In fact, Canada has gained an interna-tional reputation for its creative exploration and application of video.[21]

It was on this basis that the Council argued for a role that would "encour-age the growth and development of creative Canadian expression with small format processes...[and] support the innovative and experimental thrust in this field." As the text suggests, video appears to be more than simply a form of artistic expression. While video was "a new canvas for expressive imagery and expanded perceptions," it also conveniently reflected goals embedded within the federal programmes which had fund-ed the initial phase of the development of Canadian video:

> Small format video is by nature a decentralized medium: it is inexpensive, portable, simple to operate and is capable of reaching a large audience. It is

characterized by instantaneous feedback at all phases of production. This
has led to an ethic of self-evaluation and individual responsibility. With ade-
quate funding, video will be instrumental in promoting individual and
group expression on a wide spectrum.[22]

We can easily identify the degree to which the Council situated video with-
in the rhetoric of the social goals promoted by the Liberal government.[23]
Indeed, three of the terms from then Secretary of State Gerard Pelletier's
cultural development formula appear here: decentralization, democratiza-
tion and pluralism.

Situating video within this rhetoric was not, however, a real constraint.
The very pluralism represented by the widening of the scope of what con-
stituted aesthetic practice is reflected in this discourse. The proposed pro-
gramme attempts to capture the wide range of practices that were to be
included under the sign of video:

> The Council therefore proposes a program of grants to video artists wishing
> to produce tapes for a variety of subjects and experiences: real-time and
> closed-circuit explorations, image manipulation and visual experimenta-
> tion, performances and showings, tape exchange, documenting of disap-
> pearing or temporary cultural manifestations, facilitating the growth of
> video as a tool for expression, developing participatory processes for group
> and individuals, etc....

The plurality of forms of expression available through the video medium
indicates the degree to which the rhetoric adapted from the federal pro-
grammes was actually enabling, allowing the Council to design a pro-
gramme with considerable scope.

The scope of activities also provided the Council with a substantive
claim to establish a video programme. In a follow-up memorandum to the
Secretary of State in 1974, the Council argued that the diversity of
approaches to video penalizes artists when they attempt to obtain funding
from most cultural agencies:

> Most departments are inclined to shy away from video due to its highly
> innovative and experimental aspects. We have human resources, both in
> and outside the Council, which for a number of years have been instru-
> mental in expanding the possibilities of this medium.[24]

As the sole source of funding in this area, the Council maintained that it was
the only agency with the resources and experience able to accommodate the

different types of video activity: "The role of the Canada Council in this field cannot be over-emphasized — the potential of the medium extends, in fact, beyond its artistic possibilities."

It was however, the question of what was strictly beyond the realm of "artistic possibilities" that presented a problem for the Council. While the Council pleaded that "for once, we ought to seize the opportunity, now before us, of artists working directly within different strata of social milieux," the forward-looking aspects of the previous year's proposals gave way to the realities of budgetary constraints, and the Council began to foreclose on certain practices. The possibility of funding "social expression" moved into the background. In outlining its objectives, the following was emphasized:

a) support of video artists
b) support of resource and production centres
c) subsidization of distribution
d) subsidization of documentation and interpretive video related to other art forms
e) support of experimentation and research in other related audio-visual field[s][25]

The rhetoric of empowerment is missing here. The idea that "video will be instrumental in promoting individual and group expression on a wide spectrum" was replaced with a set of objectives clearly oriented toward the support of work that is either the product of an artist or related to other art activities. The question of the relation between artistic and social activities — which emerged as a serious problem with Intermedia's 1971 project application — continued to pose serious difficulty for the Council. Within a year of proposing a video programme with considerable scope, the Council was already setting limits on what it would fund. This resulted in a contradiction between a rhetoric of inclusion and plurality, and a programme whose design seemed to exclude all activities except those that were artistic or aesthetic in nature — which remained, nevertheless, undefined.

The Council was still intent upon staking out a terrain of the properly artistic, which was contrasted with that of the "educational" and "social." Since the funding of artistic expression is the mandate of the Council, this limit suggests that Council was only willing to fund activities defined as

artistic (however determined), or it may have been that the Council was deploying certain signs in semiotic warfare with the Secretary of State of Treasury Board.[26] It might be argued that rather than attempting to move onto terrain that would place the Council in conflict with other agencies, the scope of what constituted art could simply be widened.

2. The Video Programme: A Politics of Indeterminacy

The Council signaled that it was intent on pursuing an independent course with regard to video when Michael Goldberg was hired as the first video officer of the newly created Video Programme in October of 1975. It was video's potential for critique that underlay Michael Goldberg's policy approach. As he stated in an early memorandum: "A media programme should, I believe, reflect a larger reality than that channeled by established media...."[27] The explicit critique of the mass media became the starting point for the video programme policy and, in the first major document created by Goldberg, "The Canada Council Video Programme," he stressed the perennial Canadian dilemma: the "proliferation of telecommunications hardware does not of itself reflect strong cultural expression."[28] The problem was that the structure appeared to be devoted to carrying American products, in part as a result of the centralized, one-way nature of broadcasting systems. However, the combination of recent Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) policy and the development of small-format video provided the opportunity for those who "had rejected the vision of reality (and fantasy) which they had imbibed on a TV diet...to talk back to the TV set and contribute another vision to Society." As a result, community access television was offering a "wide range of contents which could not have emerged from mass-audience television."[29]

While acknowledging the crucial role of government programmes in subsidizing and stimulating video activity in Canada, Goldberg was also critical of those programmes (as earlier Council documents had been). He suggested that "despite the aspirations of the best groups to persevere... groups which were determined to survive found themselves subject to the whim of changing government policies."[30] Implying that the policies of the various government programmes operated to inhibit video development, he argued that: "Only the Canada Council has consistently allowed the

groups to determine their own needs and priorities, within its guidelines of quality of expression and creative use of the medium." Of course, this failed to acknowledge the ways in which the Council guidelines in turn work to inhibit certain forms of expression, particularly those with educational or social goals. Nevertheless, this boast was clearly intended to underline the Council's relative autonomy from federal cultural initiatives, and its presumed ability to offer greater autonomy to video groups. Implicit in this claim was the assumption that the Council could provide the conditions for video to develop outside the constraints of homogeneity inscribed in both television practices and the unity aims of the federal government.

The programme description also introduced a discussion of videotape technology. Like earlier critical discourses of television, this discussion favored an ontological approach that attempted, in formalist terms, to define the distinctiveness of the video medium:

> Video is a young medium, so it is common to compare it to other, similar media. But it should be seen on its own terms. Acrylic paint was thought at first to be a quick-drying, plastic imitation of oil paint. The printing press was suspect because it secularized "the word," widened the scope of recorded knowledge, and changed reading from a group experience to one of individual exclusion.[31]

Two important points are condensed in this passage. The first has to do, as suggested, with the idea that video has to be seen on "its own terms." This is consistent with a modernist conception of formal essence of media (as in the arguments put forward for the ontological specificity of painting by Greenberg in the 1950s). It is also similar to ideas expounded by television critics in the 1950s, who sought to distinguish television from film and theatre; here the strategy is to define video in opposition to television.[32] The importance of work being specific to the video medium is also emphasized in a section offering potential candidates information on what juries would look for during the adjudication process. In addition to seeking evidence that the candidate "demonstrate a solid understanding of the medium," juries also "tend to show an interest in tapes and projects which make a succinct use of the medium, where the product and process could not be achieved with other media."[33]

The second point is made through the printing press analogy, underscoring the potential controversy arising as the result of the dissemina-

tion, not so much of knowledge, but of the means of production — in this case, small-format video. Video is not only distinct as a practice, but as a low-cost, readily available technology, it potentially undermines the image monopoly of the broadcasting institutions. At a Colloquium held at Stanley House earlier in the summer of 1976, video would be framed in precisely these terms:

> In allowing people to express themselves and artists to experiment with the very fabric and technology of modern communications, video is reaching far beyond its present applications. It is this thrust which the Council has made possible through its support: attempts to tame the hardware to human and creative ends, and exploration of forms of expression which are still unknown.[34]

The Council's role would be to encourage the humanization of media and the development of alternative practices and structures beyond existing mass media institutions. Thus, amongst the objectives formulated at the meeting were those which aimed to "promote research into new modes of communication aimed at the needs and social objectives of individuals and community groups; …to develop awareness of the uses of media and to demystify media in the public eye; …[and] to influence traditional communications structures, and favor the birth and development of creative media alternatives…."[35]

The colloquium statement was presented to the members of the Canada Council in December of 1976. Also submitted was a text by Goldberg which returned to the opposition between community media and commercial television production. Commercial media "are designed to deliver audiences to commercial sponsors, not creators to an audience."[36] Goldberg compares video practices to the "parallel" system of production and distribution of art works:

> Artists' use of video and audio does not lie in a finite, closed sphere within community media. It is intrinsic part of community use. It is also an attempt to reach a community of people outside the present art context (e.g., public museums). This reflects a parallel structure and vision which Council has recognized in its gallery programme.[37]

The support of video was thus placed within the context of overall changes in aesthetic dispositions and modes of production to which the Council had to respond during this period. Video is described as reflecting

changes in approach to the production of art consistent with transforma-
tions occurring in other spheres of visual art. The 'parallel' nature of video
practices in relation to commercial broadcasting, however, assumes sin-
gular importance. Video not only signals a new form of art, but also offers
itself as a salve to counteract the negative influences of television:

> One cannot but ignore the pervasiveness of television in Canada, nor the
> negative contribution it has made to our culture and our society. Of
> course, we must be concerned with increasing the presence of the arts on
> TV compared to percentages of the soaps, news, quiz show, and vicarious
> violence and sex. We aspire to a higher profile for the arts, an attempt to
> feed the passive TV consumer a taste of ballet, opera…. It is essential that
> Council recognize too that growing numbers of active creators are work-
> ing with the medium itself, in new ways that attempt to change some of its
> basic parameters.[38]

Not only was the Council being asked to support a new art form, it was
being asked to underwrite a community highly critical of, and interested
in constructing an alternative to, the existing broadcast system. Thus, to
agree to support video practices was to implicitly agree to support an agen-
da concerned with social critique. The Council was therefore faced not only
with a new medium that might share its already inadequate resources, but
also a medium whose practitioners were highly politicized and using video
as a tool that served aesthetic and social goals simultaneously.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Council staff moved cautiously
toward implementing the video programme. In his memorandum prefac-
ing this document, Timothy Porteous begins by underlining the difficulty
in assessing "new forms of expression": "In a field that is new and techni-
cally complex," writes Porteous, "there is a problem of intellectual diges-
tion." The extent to which this was the case with video is indicated by a
change from the customary practice at the Council: "a number of ques-
tions [have been raised] regarding the future developments of this pro-
gramme to which even preliminary answers have not yet been worked out
by Council staff. Our normal procedure is for the staff to submit recom-
mendations for Council's approval. We are not yet ready to do so."[39]

Development proceeded slowly in this area because of the need for
Goldberg to "educate his fellow Council staffers, Advisory Panel members
and Council members." In a recent interview, Porteous maintained that the

Video Programme also developed slowly due to the difficulty in establishing the aesthetic credibility of video as an art form.[40] As Council minutes note: "A demonstration of video and discussion with two of the artists had taken place the previous evening. Asked to comment on what they had seen, some members found the medium self-indulgent, in need of improvement, lacking discipline and rigor and serving a very limited audience."[41]

The distinctiveness of video practices from those of film required a process of education in order to convince both staff and Council of the significance of video, especially since it would be competing for already limited resources. Porteous defined three areas of difference: in terms of technical matters; video artists' 'lifestyles,' aesthetic attitudes and practices; and in terms of the subject matter of video. Technically, not only was the video process distinct from film, but costs were significantly lower, and required a different set of criteria for assessing budgets. As well, technical differences demanded different juries equipped with the requisite expertise to judge the merits of video projects. The video artists themselves emerged from different communities and circumstances than those of filmmakers, and thus had constructed a set of aesthetic attitudes and practices that were quite distinct from contemporary film practices and aesthetics. This was reflected in the types of subject matter chosen by video artists, particularly with regard to political and social topics, and the emergence of 'social action' video that appeared to situate itself in terms that were substantially removed from traditional aesthetic concerns.

It was this "mix of different values" that, according to Porteous, led to the conclusion that a separate video programme needed to be established. In turn, these different values also required that the Council be educated. Rather than forcing the Council to confront a new and potentially alienating practice up-front and risking a failure to obtain permission to implement the programme, the terrain of video was left, in the end, relatively ill-defined. The possible consequences of funding various activities could be dealt with in an *a posteriori* fashion on a case-by-case basis.

The question of the aesthetic — and political — values could be sidestepped precisely through the creation of a new programme: jury selection could be made (as is traditional at the Council) from amongst a community of peers, and thus from a cross-section of individuals familiar with, and presumably sympathetic to, the aesthetics and politics of this new medi-

um. The Council was thus able to accommodate the 'utopian moment' of video, and develop a funding mechanism to encourage work in this medium, despite resistance from both within and without the Council.

This did not, however, mark the end of debate at the Council over the politics of video art. Indeed, what is described here is only the beginning of a process that, since 1975, has continued to challenge the Council up to, and likely beyond, the present time. For example, recent fault lines have appeared with regard to the questions of race and appropriation — the latter particularly problematic for video's persistent use of strategies that recontextualize existing images. The emergence of issues of community and identity have served to further complicate the process of negotiation within the Council and between the Council and its clientele. Shifts in aesthetic practices and social formations have continued to affect the definition of the work of art and have made it incumbent upon the Council to continually reassess the video programme and conceptions of those whom the programme is meant to serve. All of these have insured — for the Council as well as the community at large — that the definition of the work of video art remains open, subject to the rhetorical and material exigencies of both the Council and videomakers at given moments, posing a challenge to the Council's capacity to support work that represents the aesthetic and social commitments of a particular moment in the history of Canadian art.

Notes

1. Recent exceptions are *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991) and *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*, ed. Keith Wallace (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993).

2. "A Policy for the Arts: New Directions," Document no. 666, *Arts Agenda* 54 (20 February 1967): p. 2. This document recommends "the establishment in a place to be determined (possibly Vancouver) of a multi-media laboratory with adequate equipment to allow experimentation in new forms now made possible by technical innovation."

3. Cf. Nancy Shaw's "Cultural Democracy and Institutionalized Difference" in this volume; also Keith Wallace, "A Particular History: Artist-Run Centres in Vancouver," *Vancouver Anthology*, pp. 23-45.

4. "Intermedia Project Grant Application," *Arts Agenda* 118 (27-28 Sept. 1971): p. 166.

5. Canada Council Act 1957,c.3,s.1 (Ottawa: Queen's Printer for Canada, 1970): p. 727.

6. Frank Milligan, "The Canada Council as a Public Body," *Canadian Public Administration* 22 (Summer 1979): p. 277.

7. Ibid., pp. 277-278.

8. Peter Dwyer, "Note on a conversation with the Prime Minister on February 24, 1970," File 1348, Record Group 63, National Archives, Ottawa.

9. Ibid.

10. Laurent Maichot and Benoît Melançon, *Le conseil des arts du Canada, 1957-1982* (Ottawa: Les éditions Leméac, 1982): p. 11.

11. André Fortier, "Etude sur les subventions du programme d'Initiatives locales dans le domaine des arts," *Policy Agenda* Vol. 185 (3-4 December 1973): p. 73.

12. Ibid., p. 73.

13. André Fortier, Letter to the Honourable Hugh Faulkner, October 17, 1973, p. 62.

14. See Michael Dorland, "The Discursive Economy of the Emergence of the Canadian Feature Film: Discourses of Dependency and the Governmentalization of a Displaced National Cinema, 1957-1968" (Ph.D. dis., Concordia University, 1991).

15. Canada Council, "Position Paper on Film and Video; Additional Submission to the Secretary of State with Respect to the Role of the Canada Council in film and Video," November 1974 in *Policy Agenda* Vol. 216 (9-11 December 1974): p. 126.

16. "Role of the Canada Council in Film," Memorandum to the Arts Advisory Panel, *Policy Agenda* Vol. 185 (3-4 December 1973): p. 98.

17. "Film Program," Memorandum to Council, *Policy Agenda* Vol. 182 (10-11 September 1973).

18. Canada Council, *14th Annual Report 1970-71*, p. 30.

19. "Film Program," p. 2.

20. "Role of the Canada Council in Film," p. 98.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Cf. Janine Marchessault's "Amateur Video and the Challenge for Change," in this volume.

24. Canada Council, "Position Paper on Film and Video," p. 10.

25. Ibid.

26. Milligan, pp. 276-278. Schafer and Fortier point out that the Canada Council "was not inclined to accept responsibility for…new program[s], because of the inevitable political implications…it must be emphasized that the Canada Council refused to par-

ticipate in these special programs." D. Paul Schafer and André Fortier, *Review of Federal Policies For the Arts in Canada (1944-1988)* (Ottawa: The Canadian Conference of the Arts, 1989): pp. 32-33, 47.

27. Michael Goldberg, Memorandum to Timothy Porteous, 6 January, 1976, "Video Policy" file 489-1-1, Canada Council Central Registry.

28. Canada Council, "Position Paper on Film and Video," p. 10.

29. Ibid., pp. 1-2.

30. Ibid., p. 3.

31. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

32. For an analysis of the discussion of the ontological essence of television, see Kevin Dowler, "An Historical Inquiry into the Political and Cultural Context for the Emergence of a Television Aesthetic in the Nineteen-Fifties" (Ph.D. diss., Concordia University, 1993).

33. Michael Godlberg, "Canada Council Video Programme," p. 7.

34. "Stanley House: Colloquium of Video and Radio Groups," July 1976.

35. Ibid., p. 3.

36. As far as can be determined only Goldberg's introduction to the document survives. Michael Goldberg, "Introduction," (*Arts Agenda* 282): p. 13.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Timothy Porteous, "Video-Audio-Media," Memorandum to Council, 13-15 December, 1976, *Arts Agenda* 282.

40. Interview with the Author, July, 1994.

41. *Minutes*, 102nd Meeting, 13-15 December, 1976, p. 8.

2. DISCURSIVE HISTORIES

A History in Four Moments

Peggy Gale

Over a quarter century of small-format video production by artists and independents in Canada has generated unique works in the medium and a vocabulary unlike any other. This essay focuses on four characteristic moments in the history of Canadian video art as seen from the vantage point of the 1990s. While numerous other roads cross the same terrain,[1] perhaps a map as *simple* as this one can offer clarity.

Central issues for video artists working in English Canada have in turn been *conceptual, narrative, dramatic,* and *social.* A history of francophone work is characterized by similar concerns but in altered order and to different ends, of which more later.

<p align="center">✳ 1 ✳</p>

Artists' use of small-format video appeared alongside, and under the influence of the Conceptual Art of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is a period during which the visual arts turned away from the commercial gallery/museum/dealer/collector systems that had been so central to the post-war art market of Europe and America. Sol Lewitt, writing in *Artforum* in 1967, outlined the term, affirming that:

> In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless.... Conceptual art is made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions.[2]

In practice, much of this work took the form of written or drawn statements,

proposals and photographic documentation. Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth in America, or Daniel Buren, Yves Klein or Piero Manzoni in Europe, established important bodies of work linked with this "conceptual art," drawing in elements of theory, confrontation and play. Such ideas led in turn directly to performance and body art, as evidenced in works by Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim in the United States or Amsterdam-based Marina Abramovic and Ulay, whose concerns were grounded in the idea but informed by physical limits and psychological parameters. Many artists, working first with sculpture or painting, moved to investigate more ephemeral and time-based issues through video and film at this period; others, younger, especially in Germany, Britain and North America, began at once with performance and media work. Shifting away from the marketplace and production of a 'precious' object, the avant-garde sought to revalue intellectual engagement, to put process over product. Simultaneously, the role of the audience was redefined, to play a part in the completion of the work through their response and feedback: the video model of simultaneous record and presentation, objectification and immediacy, was in effect reiterated.

With Canadian video of the early 1970s, especially in Toronto and Halifax, the *idea* generated and informed the work, and remained its most important aspect, very much in keeping with Lewitt's definition of Conceptual Art. The artist's intention (i.e., the idea) was central, so the video monitor tended to function as a mere channel for conveying the image/experience. In that situation artists virtually never prepared a script, or used a set or crew; most often, the artist him/herself was responsible for every aspect of the piece, even to the point of being the single figure on-screen. Editing was seldom considered for these black and white recordings on half-inch open reels. It was generally assumed that videotape had a physical life of less than a decade. Permanence seemed inadmissible; video was as ephemeral and emphatic as speech, its temporary capturing on monitor or tape, a mere wisp of memory.

Video had no obvious public, certainly no purchaser. In those first years, the fact that video was "not television" was crucial for artists; TV invariably suggested the gross commercialism, the predictability of subject matter, format and faces, that were intellectual anathema at the time. Video was taken up by individuals for what-could-be-discovered, what-could-be-

experienced. It found its audience in other like-minded individuals rather than any 'general public,' often other artists and usually the young intellectually inclined. For many, it was simply 'boring.'

Fill (1970) by David Askevold and Colin Campbell's *Sackville, I'm Yours* and *True/False* (both 1972) or such process/demonstrations as *Insertion (My Mouth)* by Eric Cameron (1973) are all quintessential for the period. As Askevold has described his 12-minute b/w piece:

> *Fill* is my earliest video work; besides the obvious filling of the screen with sheets of aluminum foil over a microphone on a stand, connoting an additive formal sculpture reading, the title also refers to filling time or a 'filler' on TV shows. The audio implodes during the wrapping of the foil and is more time consuming than the unwrapping, during which, the audio explodes as the sheets are pulled away from the microphone.[3]

The stationary camera was fixed to a tripod, its view centered on a microphone being covered then revealed. As Lewitt noted, the planning was done beforehand, the process intuitive and purposeless. An experiment.

In a similar manner, Colin Campbell's *True/False* is recorded in a single 15-minute take. We first see the artist's head in profile as he makes a series of sixteen statements:

> I like Sackville. True. False.
>
> I have false teeth. True. False.
>
> I have smoked grass. True. False.
>
> I still masturbate. True. False.
>
> I am part Jewish. True. False.
>
> I am seeing a psychiatrist. True. False.
>
> I have had crabs. True. False.
>
> I snort coke. True. False.
>
> I collect pornography. True. False.
>
> I recently attempted suicide. True. False.
>
> I am heterosexual. True. False.
>
> I am part Indian. True. False.
>
> I want to be a star. True. False.
>
> I have committed bestiality. True. False.
>
> I am an exhibitionist. True. False.
>
> Colin is my real name. True. False.[4]

Then he turns to us directly, and repeats the same list. This time, however,

he establishes eye contact with the camera lens, and thus, apparently, strikingly, with the viewer. The tone of the statements is matter-of-fact, as are the affirmations and denials, but the information itself seems potentially volatile; the statements — either true or false — could be understood only too readily as confession or self-portrait. Campbell is *performing* his lines, yet the starkness of his presentation as he faces the camera alone, and the nature of the information itself, lead the viewer to a position approaching that of a voyeur — or confidant. What are the viewer's motives or responses, afterall? The ambiguity of that position is to be evoked often in the years to follow.

For the thirty minute duration of Eric Cameron's *Insertion*, the camera lens is rhythmically and repeatedly engulfed by Cameron's mouth, with attendant synch sound recorded in-camera. The viewer, identified with the camera lens, takes a 'personal' part in this violation, being in effect swallowed up — implicated in the artist's test of will or endurance, his intellectual curiosity, or possibly his desire. The tape functions as a sculpture in time, the enactment and repetition of a single idea, playing on oral satisfaction and the penile presence of the searching lens. It is a sexual metaphor without erotic connotation, yet filled with (viewer/voyeur and applied/implied) guilt.

<center>* 2 *</center>

The use of narrative grew from Conceptual concerns; here the script was foregrounded as central to a video work's construction. Experiments with narrative included performance-based pieces as different as Vincent Trasov's *My Five Years in a Nutshell* (1975), and General Idea's (G.I.) *Pilot* (1977) — tapes having little in common with Eric Cameron's performative gesture shortly before. *Pilot* was commissioned by TV Ontario (TVO), the local educational network, and General Idea, tongue-in-cheek, presented their programme as a "pilot" for a long-running TV series (never intended by anyone to materialize):

> This is the story of General Idea, and the story of what we wanted. We wanted to be famous; we wanted to be glamorous; we wanted to be rich....
>
> General Idea is basically this: a framing device within which we inhabit the role of the artist as we see the living legend. We can be expected to do

what is expected within these bounds.[5]

Pilot used a full inventory of recognizable and appropriate TV tricks, playing on-screen hosts themselves — or anchormen — to a panoramic collection of slides, photos, film clips, interviews, voice-over text and glib background music. G.I. used this air-time opportunity to quote their own earlier work, but more importantly they were quoting the formal and conceptual vocabulary of television itself, their understanding sophisticated and tone polished. It might be noted that TVO was delighted with *Pilot*, and programmed it regularly for some months.

John Watt's *Two-Way Mirror* (1980) is a further example of the centrality of narrative construction, and another reminder that the formats and audiences of the commercial media had begun to intrigue certain artists. This is not to assume, however, that these artists at this time wished to make commercial television with its (automatic, necessary) attendant demands on both form and content: the ability to sell products. These quasi-TV works were more playful and mischievous in their commentary.

In *Two-Way Mirror*, a man sits in his living-room. He recounts, without prompting or hesitation, a seven-year history of *The Young and the Restless*, the popular daytime soap-opera which had been his daily companion. The mirror behind him reflects portions of his apartment, at times taken over by scenes from the soap, the two realities converging as thought bubbles or flashback memories. Watt had made the work for local cable broadcast in the *Television by Artists* series for which he was an originator and producer (through A Space, Toronto, and the artist-generated Fine Arts Broadcast Service). The series was an important recognition of the new desirability, in artists' eyes, of an expanded audience and open context for video.

Vera Frenkel's work considered rather different aspects of popular culture and audience. By the late 1970s her performances and installations were interrogating the "whodunit" tradition of fiction. A new group of works centered on the mysterious disappearance of (fictional?) expatriate Canadian novelist Cornelia Lumsden for *Her Room in Paris*[6] of 1979. Frenkel plays four stereotypical roles in turn as she appears as Lumsden's Friend, her Rival, the Expert on her life and work, and the CBC Commentator. With...*And Now, The Truth (A Parenthesis)* the following year, the story took an unexpected turn as Frenkel is confronted

on-screen by a young woman from the audience claiming to be Lumsden herself. Frenkel relishes the storytelling mode with its twists of plot and character; her productions all play ironically with literary conventions, period phrasing and manners. But her work carries additional agendas enmeshed in the narrative: the artist as exemplary exile;[7] the intrusiveness of watchdog government ministries; the oddities and sly effectiveness of consumerism and capitalism-as-religion; the invisible persuaders everywhere present in daily life. Stories are her form, and narrative is her means.

There is *another* narrative mode most unique at this juncture to the video medium. A genre less text-based, less concerned with broader consumer and culture-bound issues, and more dependent on visual intuition and a sense of subjective interiority. This form emerged first in Toronto, perhaps most notably in the poetic language and intimate subject matter in works like *Facing South* (1975) and *Waiting for Lancelot* (1977) by Lisa Steele, or tapes by Colin Campbell after 1974 (including *The Woman From Malibu* series 1976-1978). Steele and Campbell were the first to define a new place for a visual and personal (intimate) narrative material — usually with open and non-linear, inconclusive storylines — that suffused the whole field, though their influence did not lead to imitation by others. Somewhat related, perhaps, is *Delicate Issue* (1979) by Kate Craig, where the artist's camera roamed over her own nude body in extreme close-up, while her quiet voice-over mused:

> The closer the subject the clearer the intent.
> The closer the image the clearer the idea.
> Or does intimacy breed obscurity?

In this work she combines consciousness of a media context, as seen in Watt or Frenkel, with the intimacy and private revelation of Steele. In the larger picture of Canadian video history, these narrative pieces have offered unusually individualized works, the most singular voices and specific characterizations.

* 3 *

Drama evolved naturally from these experiments with narrative, grafted onto a further valuation of television modes. In this way, the first identified

'dramatic' works may be seen to have evolved out of such text-based pieces as G.I.'s *Pilot* or, more closely, through Frenkel's unusual enactments. Theatrical or cinematic traditions at this time became more consciously utilized or applied, and scripts became more elaborate with complicated plots and linear storylines. *Crime Time Comix Presents Steel and Flesh* (1980) by Eric Metcalfe is an early quirky example of the developing dramatic mode, as is Noel Harding's ironic *Out of Control* (1981), or *Hygiene* (1985) by Jorge Lozano and Andrew James Paterson. Colin Campbell, perhaps in preparation for his move to film production, expanded his concerns with scripting, cast and dialogue in *No Voice Over* (1986) and his hour-long *Black and Light* (1987).

Dialogue and *plot* are the most characteristic elements of this period, further elaborated with pointed quotation of cinematic genres and themes. Metcalfe, for example, comments that:

> *Steel* combines the format of the comic strip and the likeness of a "B" movie from the 50s, but discards the narrative and adopts the TV commercial's fast editing technique — packing it full of visual information of well known classic images that can be understood universally.
>
> ...Film references are to early Kenneth Anger films and the staircase sequence is almost a direct quote from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.[8]

Similarly, Noel Harding's tape is described as:

> A fast-paced, hard-boiled tale of sex, power and intrigue in high places, as inspired by G. Gordon Liddy.[9]

and in the Lozano/Paterson work:

> *Hygiene* is visualized in terms of both prime-time soap operas and the Sirkian/Fassbinderian melodrama. But the melodramatic formula is deconstructed by the juxtaposition of the heroine and provocative external information.[10]

Though this fascination with film history and the elaborated stereotypes flourished over several years, the central position given to the visual quote and knowing reference gives a family resemblance to the genre, and a certain clever superficiality. When the individual works were first released, the complexity of the plots, the highly developed dialogue combined with the new attention to *mise-en-scène*, seemed to bring together several loose threads developing in the fabric as a whole, and these works were met with pleasure and general congratulation. The results however are often overly

self-conscious, a search for something new that remained incomplete.

<center>*4*</center>

By the end of the 1980s performance, narrative and dramatic genres had prepared the way for a new concern for social imperatives and public conscience; a political awareness that spread into many levels and areas of the arts as a whole.

The issues to be addressed varied widely. As early as 1984, Robert Morin and Lorraine Dufour (Montréal) filmed *Tristesse modèle réduit* (a dramatization of growth towards independence for a mentally handicapped young man), and in 1986 Norman Cohn completed *Quartet for Deafblind*. Both were impressive feature-length works that had developed out of an ambitious rethinking of their makers' ongoing concerns and artistic means. In Vancouver, Lorna Boschman made *Scars* (1987), a tape about self-mutilation, and *Doing Time* (1990), a study of women in prison. Also on the west coast, Sara Diamond completed *Ten Dollars or Nothing* (1989) which utilized voice-over interviews, archival footage and photographs to discuss the lives of native women in coastal fish canneries of the 1930s. Diamond's *The Lull Before the Storm* (1990) explores the histories of working-class women and the changing definitions of femininity since World War II. Political issues, obviously, are central to all these works.

But these investigations of social change are not necessarily presented as dogmatic, distanced or objective 'truth.' In a notable departure from his earlier work, Paul Wong's *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* (1987) is a study of his own cultural and family origins, recorded on location in China, as is Richard Fung's *The Way to My Father's Village* (1988). *Chinese Characters* (1986) also by Fung, examines the ambiguous relationship between gay Asian men and white gay porn. Michael Balser, Andy Fabo and John Greyson (all Toronto-based) have made several tapes around the spread of AIDS and its effects, or produced works concerned, in more general terms, with sexual identity.

The tapes include every variety of form and content, and continue to grow in ambition and scale. In 1991 Zacharias Kunuk of Igloolik completed the hour-long *Nunaqpa (Going Inland)*, second in a series recreat-

ing traditional Inuit life in the eastern Arctic over the cycle of a full year. The same year, Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak premiered their feature-length *Legal Memory*, a dramatization of events leading to the last death by hanging carried out in British Columbia (1959), capping an era of concerted persecution of homosexuals in the Canadian navy of which this story formed a part.

To a significant extent, these are elaborate fictions based on fact. They mark an important coming-of-age for many longtime workers with video. The issues are big ones: sexuality, race, the law, the family. The tapes continue to reveal two constants characteristic of Canadian video production: the presence of people and the importance of verbal exchange. In the productions of the 1980s and 1990s, the "aesthetic" is a category whose significance is often downplayed in favor of issues though, as always, the finest works retain allegiance to form, flow, content and beauty.

*4*1*2/4*5*

The history of video in Québec is radically different from that of the rest of Canada, with language by no means the only distinguishing feature. Where artists in other parts of Canada (centered principally in the urban areas near Vancouver, Toronto and Halifax) have approached video as individuals, interested in experimenting with imagery and the construction of ideas, artists in Montréal and Québec City have used video principally as a means to investigate cultural issues and analyze national identity. Access to video tools emerged first through the Groupe de recherche sociale and the National Film Board's Challenge for Change/*Société nouvelle* and, from 1971, through Vidéographe (Montréal) which enabled production, exhibition, distribution. The use of the new medium coincided closely with the October Crisis of 1970 and the growing separatist movement; into the mid-1980s a socially-conscious agenda was paramount in québécois production.

Especially noted works from Montréal include *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au bon Dieu* (1971) by Yves Chaput, a documentary on the official inquiry into the War Measures Act, and its querying of "the so-called October Crisis," Pierre Falardeau's *Continuons le combat* (1971) which brings a sociological or semiological analysis to the world of professional wrestling particular to

Québec, and *Le temps d'une prière* (1972) by Jacques Benoît and Jean-Claude Germain, which presents a critical study of the Catholic Church and its place in Québec families and education. In 1978 Pierre Falardeau and Julien Poulin completed their 90-minute *Pea-Soup*, five years in production: a study of what they saw as national oppression, a dying culture complacently accepted in Québec, "cultural hegemony at work." In 1979, Jean-Pierre Boyer's hour-long *Mémoire d'octobre* was a militant re-reading of the events surrounding and following the invocation of the War Measures Act in 1970, and preparatory, no doubt, to the referendum in 1980 for Québec independence. Produced by the *Comité d'information des prisonniers politiques*, it was intended as a "tool for analysis and struggle in the process of transformation for Québec society."

Not all early video in Québec, however, was based in cultural politics so allied with national identity. Frank Vitale's *Hitch-Hiking* (1972) is recognized as one of the most important early works in Canada, the result of a trip across the American border with a portapak under his arm. His use of video as unobtrusive eye and ear, his secret recording of conversations with others, including highway patrol and customs officials, mark it as a classic in the 'underground' tradition. More characteristic of independent work from the 1970s in Québec, however, are such socially concerned works as *L'amiantose tue* (1973) by Claude Bélanger and others, an indictment of health and safety practices at such mines as Atlas Asbestos. At the end of the decade came landmarks such as *Chaperons rouges* (1979) by Hélène Bourgault and Helen Doyle, a dramatization of violence against women, and Norman Thibault's *Joe* (1982), a docu-drama on alcoholism in the workplace.

But, as might also be expected, other threads have appeared. The seldom-seen *Réaction 26* (1971) by Claude Binamé, was an early black and white experiment with electronic feedback, in line with other technical research around editing and sound recording being carried out at Vidéographe. Jean-Pierre Boyer's more typical early work in the early 1970s experiments with computers, feedback and manipulation of the screen raster, coinciding with his teaching in Toronto at the Ontario College of Art and in Buffalo at suny Buffalo where he was working with Steina and Woody Vasulka. Boyer remained virtually unique in Canada with his studies in such medium-specific areas. Interests in image manip-

ulation were to resurface much later in such experiments as *Distance* (1984) by Luc Bourdon and François Girard, a study in slow-motion movement; or Girard's *Tango Tango* (1988), a dance work recorded in elegant black and white, with social implications. We find a compendium of all four of our categories in such works as *Le train* (1985), also by Girard, an allegory of memory and imagination, where "the life of a railwayman has come to a halt at just the same place as his locomotive," or the languorous *Reminiscences carnivore* (1989), by Marc Paradis, a poetic recollection of sexual pleasures and personal memories.

At this point the categories collapse in Québec. By the late 1980s, video works seem to coalesce around production groups in Québec City (Vidéo Femmes) and Montréal (Vidéographe, PRIM, Coop Vidéo, Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Agent Orange), each with access to different equipment, and each with their own look and agenda. To a visible extent, each group seems to deal cautiously with the others. There is a lot of new work, with video enjoying a notable resurgence. But generalizations are applicable only to individual careers, and no longer relate to community identity. Indeed, with widely varying aspirations for audience and production values, new video coming out of Québec may be considered a whole only insofar as French forms a common language. Even at that, several artists have moved away from dialogue of any sort, preferring the versatility and portability of images-on-their-own.

Early Québec video was marked by social conscience and a desire to investigate national identity. This has turned to narrative and a striking mix of dramatic imagery with social awareness. The continuing interrelation of these concerns is producing a new and unpredictable moment not only in Québec but in the rich and varied terrain of Canada.

Notes

1. Previously published histories include my own early essays, "A New Medium," *Videoscape* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1974) and "Video Art in Canada: Four Worlds," *Studio International* vol. 191, no. 981 (May/June 1976): pp. 224-229.

See also Andrée Duchaine, "Historique de la vidéo au Québec" and Renée Baert, "Video in Canada: A Context of Production," both in *OKanada* (Berlin: Akademie der Kunste, 1982), and Renee Baert, "Video in Canada: In Search of Authority," *Vidéo*, ed. René

Payant (Montréal: Artextes, 1986). See also Sara Diamond, "Daring Documents: The Practical Aesthetics of Early Vancouver Video," *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1991). For much of this activity, artist-run production/exhibition facilities, usually with government support, have provided an important backdrop. Major related events are listed/discussed in *From Sea to Shining Sea* , ed. A.A. Bronson (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987).

2. Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* vol. 5 (Summer 1967): pp. 80-81.

3. *Art Metropole Video Archive Catalogue 1991* (Toronto), p. 4.

4. All quotations from artists' tapes are transcribed by myself from the video, unless otherwise noted.

5. General Idea's statements reappear in numerous works and publications, as noted in their retrospective catalogue *General Idea 1968-1984* , eds. General Idea and Jan Debbaut (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1984).

6. *Her Room in Paris* (1979) exists as a single-channel videotape but also as one element in the larger installation work of the same year, where the tape plays on a monitor sitting on Lumsden's partially-painted bureau, and surrounded by evidence of interrupted habitation.

7. A text-and-photo work including references to several of these themes, mixed with elements from Frenkel's videotape *Stories From The Front (& Back): A True Blue Romance* (1981) appears in Vera Frenkel, "Stranger in a Strange Land," *Impressions* 28-29 (Winter 1982): pp. 13-19.

8. Eric Metcalfe, *Catalogue Western Front Video* (Vancouver).

9. *Art Metropole Video Archive Catalogue 1991* (Toronto), p. 20.

10. *The 1991 Catalogue of Catalogues*, V-Tape (Toronto), p. 40.

The Body-That-Disappears-Into-Thin-Air
Vera Frenkel's Video Art

Kay Armatage

> *I can't stand video but when Alan left he gave me all his video equipment and said, "This'll put you right to sleep." I like to watch it at night, especially the snow.... I guess the thing I really can't stand about video is that it's furniture and when you're rocking in a rocker and watching TV, the image keeps going in and out of whack. So I discovered that if you put the monitor on another rocker, you can get into synch with the image and it will get you into a good rhythm for yodeling or whatever it is you do when you watch TV.*
>
> Laurie Anderson, *Stories from the Nerve Bible* (1994)

Video and Television

Laurie Anderson is not alone in equating monitors with television sets, or in conflating video with watching TV. Much of the early (i.e., mid-eighties) critical discourse on video art is framed in terms of broadcast television, specifically North American commercial television. Given the early utopian movement around video art and cable access, this conflation is justified to a degree.

In *Resolutions: A Critique of Video Art* (1986), an anthology which takes as its project the production of a critical discourse on video art, Jean Baudrillard, in customary apocalyptic style, unravels his confusion of the two dimensional with the three dimensional, or the Image and the Real, to use his terms. Defending his position as ecstatic amateur, he argues that twentieth-century images (what he calls the "technical" images of photography, cinema and television) are more "figurative" and "realistic" than images of past cultures (painting and sculpture). He characterizes them

as "diabolical, immoral and perverse": while they pretend to resemble the Real, they are in fact diabolical doubles, contaminating and deforming the Real, anticipating the Real so that it has no time to reproduce itself, imposing their own immoral logic of extermination on the referent.[1] Despite his eventual epiphany that the secret of the Image is no longer to be found in its distinction from the Real (in other words, that a technologically produced two-dimensional often black-and-white image operates on its own distinct register), he manages not only to implode the two-dimensional and three-dimensional once again, but to slip solipsistically from the electronic (video) to the mechanical and photochemical (photography and cinema) right back to those images from past cultures, handmade objects of cloth, wood, botanical pigment and fossilized residues. In the "collusion of Image and Life," the "equality of pleasures" pertains in the American landscape which is "cinematographical" — just like in western movies — and in Dutch or Italian cities, which are just like paintings. And in the potentially infinite proliferation of Images which paradoxically enact the equal impossibility of the Real and the Imaginary, in the exponential folding of the medium on itself (or media on themselves?), Baudrillard thunders on about the lack of limits/controls, the confusions of modern life, the ubiquity of pornography, and the destruction of time-honored values like sex and death.[2]

In the same publication, Beverle Houston begins her lucid essay at exactly the point at which Baudrillard's becomes most confused: the relation between cinema, television and video.[3] She systematically analyzes the differences between commercial (Hollywood narrative) cinema and television in terms of their enunciative and spectatorial regimes. The classic Hollywood text is based on a rigid discursive structure whose goal is to efface the source of address; its chief formal strategy, suture, is designed to smooth over the play of absence/presence, to construct positions for spectatorial identification. The resultant sense of unified personal identification is the position of imaginary knowledge and control for the spectator, which is both the reward of cinema and the ideological foundation of bourgeois life. In contrast, she argues, TV structures a different relation between the Imaginary (unconscious longing) and the Symbolic (the realm of culture), and the dream of wholeness and lack that drives it. TV refuses to fulfill the dream of wholeness, endlessly repeating the reopening of the gap

between desire and satisfaction. TV's goal is to teach an endless consumption of itself in hopes of satisfaction, maintaining a constant level of dissatisfaction, and thus creating a new spectator who finds pleasure in "the terror of desire itself." Thus, "we have learned to love the phantasmagoric hope of improvement and control on which obsession is based; we have come to depend on the endless play of the signifier, the constant reopening of the gap of desire."[4] In its endless, rhythmic, obsessive, sourceless flow of text, it is reminiscent of the first flow of milk from the mother's body, but the flow is repeatedly blocked and interrupted.

Nevertheless, Houston cautions, the ontological claims about television as the "bad object" are politically dangerous in that they construct a theoretical monolith which allows no space for intervention or alternative reading practices. She cites hopefully the power of the reader to refuse and transform televisual codings, and the power of the avant-garde (the video text) to refuse and to reformulate.[5] As resistant textual possibilities, Houston is concerned with enunciative codes, especially those of the densely worked avant-garde surface; the cultural impact of narrative codes, which may return the will to power of the signified to the spectator; and textual refusals to inscribe a passive spectator. However, she also cautions the video critic that the dense working of the textual surface through technology, which is often seen as the necessary and definitive distinction between "TV" and "video art," tends to stabilize the technologically dense surface as a set of modernist forms, or "language," which is incompatible with the task of the analytical reformulation of historical subjectivity or spectatorship. The use of "premodernist," "realist" or mainstream forms, as well as the satire of fictional conventions, can also be understood as part of a refusal of the televisual enunciative regime.[6]

Like Houston, Jon Wagner sees the televisual dialectic of desire incessantly driven by the gestural, grasping, gutted nature of the imaginary supertext towards an increasingly pleasurable solution it knows is never going to work.[7] However, Wagner doesn't have even Houston's limited optimism for video art as intervention. He backhands bitterly: "If this 'solution' were to become co-extensive with an aesthetic practice whereby pleasure is resolved in a depiction of post-spectatorial positioning as aesthetic, then we might begin to describe the anti-erotic of avant-garde video." In the contemplative position of avant-garde video as art, Wagner sees a

modernist presentation of failure. For avant-garde video to be watched at all presumes that classic or metaphoric sexualization of the image through identification is made metonymic: spectatorship reflecting its own intent as text. But if spectatorship is already beyond the pleasure of unpleasure (as in sublime or postmodern or televisual spectatorship), beyond the traditional erotic challenge of avant-garde or "terminal cinema," beyond the subjectivity produced by TV in the face of its own subjectivity, then perhaps art video eroticizes only gratuitousness.[8] Exhibited as unwatchable but watching, Wagner argues, video art is an art of co-optation and resubjugation, a high modernist re-presentation of a post-spectatorial sublime, an art of formal abstraction which nostalgically (i.e., in the sense of camp) assumes its spectator as a function of its delivery. "Its information of its spectator must vertiginously deconstruct its spectator in a double negative of sublimating the sublime": Wagner's requiem for video art.[9]

David James takes an equally tough line on the relation of video art to broadcast television.[10] As the voice of capital and itself a capitalist industry whose function is the reproduction of capital and its ideological preconditions, television completes the dissolution of popular art into industrial consumer culture and completes the industrialization of the mind through the integration of art and industry. More directly than previous art forms, video is confronted by the industrial usage of the same medium, as well as by the political process as a whole, which is indistinguishable from the operation of the medium:

> Video's allegiance to the principles of art formulated in the bourgeois peri-
> od, the principles which constitute it as art, require it to construct itself in
> opposition to the political order, while the conditions of its production
> ensure that it is simultaneously constructed *by* that order.[11]

This contradiction is at the centre of the notion of video art and resides in all registers of its operation. Because it depends on advanced technology and on technological systems integrated at the corporate level, it is always possessed by the corporation and besieged by corporate values. This is not only a logistical dependence (required to maintain access to the technology) but also a formal dependence, as the pressure to internalize technology in terms of high production values leads to the fetishization of operations: "The soft erotic sheen of that display becomes a pure defamiliarization, in which content as such is transcended and all that can be

narrated is love for the apparatus."[12] Such pre-occupation of the message by the system then defines the context of what has been understood as video's formal project: the critique of the codes of broadcast TV as an intervention in TV's ideological functioning. Early video signified its virtue — its aesthetic and political promise — through recontextualization in alternative social formations, (alternative systems of production, distribution and exhibition), through the use of stylistic strategies of avant-garde cinema, and through glitches and technical crudity. While at first resistance to optical consumption seemed compatible with notions of ethical resistance, James argues that the power of the unassimilated residue of the non-aesthetic was undermined by museumization, such that the resistant or non-aesthetic underwent a secondary aestheticization, becoming a collection of "beautiful" textual properties.[13] The critique of broadcast TV is now a distant horizon.

Furthermore, he argues, the parallel with an oppositional avant-garde cinema is precarious, because no single constellation of codes constitutes TV in the way that the narrative feature exemplifies industrial film. Instead, TV consists of a plurality of message forms, a "supertext" organized not by narrative or formal principles, but semiologically unstable clusters, in fact manifesting the textual qualities of Barthes' writerly rather than readerly text: "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; ... the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable."[14] Though socially denigrated as the "bad object," formally TV is the "ideal text" — always a parody of itself, more avant-garde than the avant-garde.[15]

Amy Taubin, on the other hand, celebrates the commonalties between video art and broadcast television. Taubin rejects a modernist history for video because modernism is concerned with defining the essence of materials. Video is a postmodern development and the difference between media, as well as the difference between high art and popular culture, is subsumed by their intersection: "What matters for postmodernism is that video 'art' shares the technology of television."[16] Duchamp's project to blur the boundaries between art and life is linked to Nam June Paik's desire to blur the boundaries between art and TV as well as Jean-Luc Godard's meditations on the problems of making art in a world where TV has transformed daily life.[17] Postmodernism aspires to the

condition of TV, and Taubin asserts that Paik and Godard are most striking when read from a postmodern position. As well as their meditations on the relations between art and television, she cites their explorations of relations between different media, discussions of politics and telecommunications, their aesthetics, and the breadth of their cultural and historical references. Locating a "video-specific critical framework" as the last outpost of high modernist essentialism, she abjures such a "closed-circuit, ahistorical analysis." "If there is any use in conceptualizing 'video art' as a field," she argues, "it is only to circumscribe the problems of production and exhibition characteristic of the medium." Taubin concludes that the primary problem for video, as a medium, is exhibition — the limitations of the monitor.[18]

These arguments are unconvincing to me for a number of reasons. Despite repudiations from some quarters of the museumization and therefore art-market commodification of video, despite the claims for deconstruction, auto-critique and oppositional discourse of video in relation to broadcast TV, despite Nam June Paik and Godard *à la* Taubin, despite Baudrillard in all his hellfire and brimstone, despite postmodernism, despite the limited material commonalties of the technologies themselves, video art and broadcast television seem to me to have very little in common.

Let us begin with the specific viewing situations: video art is most often exhibited in public spaces while television tends to be consumed at home or in quasi-private spaces like hotel rooms. Video art tends to be neither a communal experience like cinema, nor a convivial social occasion like TV. As for the vehicle, many contemporary homes are better equipped than our woefully underfunded institutions, which tend not to have state of the art monitors. Amy Taubin points out that because of the poor resolution of the monitors which define the conditions of video exhibition, a semi-private status is enforced on video art.[19] Rather than semi-private, in my experience watching video art is often just plain lonely.

Consider as well the image itself. Not only is video technology deployed differently on TV, with multiple cameras and on-line effects, but many of the images broadcast on television are generated on film (most commercials, rock videos, adult dramas): thus the lighting is different, the information load is denser.

Nevertheless, from the inception of public broadcasting in the 1960s, and substantial financial seeding from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations[20] through the efforts of Michael Shamberg and Guerrilla Television, TVTV and Videofreex (around 1969),[21] the question of the conditions of broadcast television has marked a significant historical moment in the development of video art and its critical discourse. It seems that the field remains to this day cross-hatched by the scratchings and clawings that continue the dialogue around these alluring and vexed relations. The scholarly work which carries through critical challenges to the history of these relations is still among the most engaging and complex branches of the critical discourse around video art. Moreover, these issues significantly mark Vera Frenkel's early work in video.

Feminism

When I began this paper, my abstract went something like this:

This paper proposes to ruminate somewhat skeptically on the current state of feminist critical discourse, using the video work of Vera Frenkel as exemplary object. Seventies and eighties feminist film criticism, which articulated themes of absence, invisibility, and the construction of identity in the interrogation of formal issues of representation and narrative, operated generally through the analysis of specific texts as sites for the development of theory. The principal objects of analysis were the realist narrative films of classic Hollywood. The concentration on classic texts thus produced a vast literature on the work of canonical male authors, while women's texts remained comparatively obscure. Of course I am aware of the feminist work in cinema on a few canonized women filmmakers (eg.: Potter, Akerman, Duras, Rainer, Moffat, Dash), but I am sketching the over-arching trajectory of the field here. Contemporary feminist scholarly work, moreover, tends to de-centre the text in favor of a more widely cast net of theoretical and historiographical contextualization — "we're bored with text-rubbing." The unfortunate result is the continued evacuation of the woman cultural producer from feminist scholarship.

Despite the claims of that proposal, I hoped to find that the discourse on video honored women practitioners, situated them in its history, examined their texts. The specific history of video art is different from that of cinema:

video began in a utopia of universal access to a technology that was as friendly as a piece of furniture, conceived its project as liberatingly oppositional to an already hegemonic broadcast culture, and included women artists and women critics in significant numbers. Perhaps even more significant are the differences between the topographies of the critical discourses of cinema and video. Video criticism was a relatively late entry into the field,[22] and thus the pioneering work had already been done. Video criticism and theory had no need to work through the laborious revisions of the scholarly field, the developing definitions of the classic text, the operations of the apparatus, the conceptual production of spectatorial subjectivity. Moreover, video scholarship was born in the lap of the substantial contributions of fifteen years of feminist film scholarship to contemporary epistemology: sexual difference and representation, female spectatorship and pleasure, the modalities of socio-historical subjectivity and their relations to social formations, history and power. Many of the writers of video history and criticism came to the field from cinema, and women such as Beverle Houston, Maureen Turim, Mimi White, Patricia Mellencamp and Tania Modleski are now located amongst video's most prominent theoreticians.

The critical discourse on video art features women writers in abundance. In Canada, video art is universally acknowledged as having been put on the cultural agenda principally by three women,[23] who have not only curated the exhibitions, written the catalogues, documented the history, and edited the critical anthologies, but two of whom have been its most prominent artists since the late 1970s.

In the most comprehensive critical anthology to date, *Illuminating Video Art: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (1990), sixteen out of twenty-five critical articles are by women. We note that in addition, the anthology includes twelve statements by video artists, set off by bold type and by their poetic titles. Disappointingly, however, of the twelve artists given space, only three of them are women. Among the critical articles, only four signify by their titles that their concern is either feminism, women's video or women's cultural concerns. Two of the historical articles note that women have been largely written out of the video histories, and one of them devotes two paragraphs to the history of women community video activists, noting that as the "technology became *heavier* [my emphasis],

more established, and costlier...video increasingly became a man's domain."[25] And indeed, in the ninety pages examining the history of video art, pages peppered with names of artists, curators, producers, and visionaries, only twelve of those are the names of women artists.

Given the utopian origins of video art, the presence of women writers in significant numbers, the keepsakes of feminist film scholarship among the epistemological treasures of its critical discourse, why do we still find in the field of video such a paucity of writing on women cultural producers, women's cultural concerns and the history of women's activity?

One answer may lie in the historical conjuncture into which video criticism made its entry. In the 1980s, cinema studies was in full flight from the issues of the classic text, the debates about authorship, the dilations on gender and sexual difference, the limitations of the psychoanalytical method for understanding broader socio-historical constructions of identity. Cinema studies was beginning to turn to cultural studies, and the universalized Eurocentrism of issues such as sexual difference and gendered subjectivity came under severe critique as the pressing questions of ethnic and other differences, along with culturally-specific identity formations took hold. At that moment, two new factors began to emerge. One, a direct outgrowth of the theoretical project of cultural studies, was the formation of revised conceptualizations of the construction of identity emphasizing subaltern groups and the potentialities of resistant and oppositional readings of hegemonic cultural texts. The other was a renewed interest in popular culture, which had been the original project of the Anglo-French revolution in cinema studies of the early 1970s. Contemporary commercial cinema (rather than the classic Hollywood text) and commercial broadcast television became the principal objects of study not only for diasporic, subaltern, and ethnic groups, but for gays and women as well.

Let us not forget what was happening in the socio-political regime of the academy: this was the moment of a significant backlash against feminism, tarred, as it was from the right, with the brush of political correctness. Feminism became the F-word. For those women scholars who persisted in feminist work, attention was turned now to the new objects, with television as a hegemonic culture principal among them. Feminist scholars such as E. Ann Kaplan, Tania Modleski, Patricia Mellencamp, Constance Penley, Mimi White, and Meaghan Morris took on rock videos,

TV soaps, therapeutically confessional talk shows, sitcoms, *Star Trek*, *Dallas*, TV newsmagazines and political campaigns. They utilized the methodologies of feminist film theory and cultural studies to re-examine the narrative strategies and enunciative regimes, the postmodern operations of parody and pastiche, the erasure of history and memory, and the affective economy of viewing and consuming in the construction of spectatorial subjects. They offered critical, resistant or interventionist readings for the potential of simultaneous pleasure, recognition, and awareness of women's position within the structures of patriarchy.

This work is substantial, exciting and even fun. Yet, as long as the objects of study remain popular culture — commercial cinema and broadcast television — and the methodologies of analysis emphasize reception and readership, the woman cultural producer remains obscure. The plain truth is women do not play a prominent role in the production of popular culture. They are present, as always, as "luminous vehicles" (Mellencamp); there are a few movie directors, such as Martha Coolidge, Fran Kuzui, Kathryn Bigelow, and Penelope Spheeris, who have made it onto Variety top-grossers' list; there are some powerful sitcom writers, such as Diane English. But women flourish, in popular culture, primarily as "bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning," to resurrect Laura Mulvey's ancient phrase.

Moreover, consumption of popular criticism by the mass spectator must be taken into account here. Reviewers of commercial cinema and broadcast television, with few exceptions, have not kept up with the semiotic, post-structuralist, postmodernist revolution. Authorship is still the order of the day in the popular press, and it is men's names — too numerous to mention — that we know in these positions. And so we see the cycle continue. Heroic histories are constructed around the visions, interventions and achievements of men; the texts analyzed are those which produce women as luminous objects or construct women as abject or sublime spectatorial subjects. Even the most widely-read reception-based theories of television denounce the feminization/emasculation, or celebrate the macho postmodernity of the television subject.[26] The woman artist continues to be evacuated.

And so now to my subject, a small intervention with which I hope to begin to challenge this continued invisibility and erasure.

Vera Frenkel: The Body-That-Disappears-into-Thin-Air

Vera Frenkel has been producing video art for two decades, using a low-tech, artisanal approach such that the video technology is rendered as a household appliance, like a toaster or vacuum cleaner. The videos are usually produced in conjunction with installations which often figure character environments (bedrooms, work spaces), contextualizing the narratives which the videos produce, deconstruct, and undermine. Although the nature of the installations is that they are time- and site-specific works which are never seen again in the same way, the videos live independently both in gallery collections and in group projections, producing a visible body of work that speaks to the absences, losses, and invisibilities of the three-dimensional material worlds of the dismantled installations.

As independent works, both thematically and formally, the videos speak also to absence, loss and invisibility through their interrogation of the relation of women to culture. Writing the cursive script which appears regularly as text or chapter headings, scripting and speaking the variety of conflicting discourses which operate as conventional voice-overs or through treatment of the tapes become soundscapes and serial musical compositions, Frenkel claims the role of author/enunciator in these complex works. Her videos deploy multiple narratives, shifting contexts, and genre conventions up-ended and evacuated. She also plays all the parts, transforming her body, voice, persona and sartorial semiosis in the representations of a variety of characters. Thus as author/enunciator and as role-player/representation, Frenkel situates herself visibly and aurally in the centre of these works which dwell on invisibility, mutism, erasure (eg., through state censorship and totalitarianism) and the loss of identity, culture and history.

Frenkel's first single channel tape, *Introduction to Some of the Players* (1977), is a curious 22-minute piece, consisting entirely of still photographs melded together by soft dissolves. The stills feature tranquil still-lifes: a beautiful turn-of-the-century wicker chair on a lawn, a modern garden bench in a field of wildflowers, the porch of a sumptuous summer residence, a pretty china tea-pot with a photograph on a table, a man lying on the grass, calm waters at the shore of a large lake, architectural details of a grand old gothic-revival hotel in the mountains. There are also faces, some of them in color, others in black-and-white, and close-ups of casual gestures

(a man lighting a pipe, a hand holding a knitted shawl). Some of the photographs have the air of carefully composed art photography; others are warmly personal portraits. Although there are recurring characters, objects and locations, the images are held together largely by the contemplative rhythm of their juxtaposition, rather than by diegetic or narrative specificity. Fragments and traces of an idyllic moment in the past, they are the only visible clues in the hermeneutic quest which is alluded to in the voice-over narration which dominates the piece: "This is a public investigation. Clues are the easy part. What value to attach to them is the question."

The tape is framed as Part 4 of a larger continuing work called *No Solution — A Suspense Thriller*. The voice-over narration sketches the elements: the discovery of a murder, or perhaps simply a disappearance, for there is no body. An attractive young man — "a good/bad boy" — has gone missing. A reporter, therapist, filmmaker, clairvoyant, and glamorous woman are introduced as the players but their parts are unspecified; a few bit players make brief appearances later on. Alluding abstractly to the conventional elements and stereotypical characters of the mystery thriller, the tape gestures towards issues of genre, narrativity, spectatorial address, discursive authority, the reliability of visual data and the limits of the two-dimensional frame. In these concerns, as well as in the use of still-photos and voice-over narration, Frenkel anticipates the theoretical concerns and formal strategies of Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979), although Frenkel's discourse is more evocative than analytical, more fragmented than discursive.

Both *Thriller* and *Introduction to Some of the Players* speak centrally to the absence of woman. Potter's film begins with the female protagonist already dead: she speaks to us from the beyond as she attempts to unravel the forces which conspired in her assassination. The absent invisible woman in Frenkel's tape also speaks from the 'beyond' of the diegesis (i.e., from elsewhere) but she enacts a multiplicity of identities, personas, and voices. Addressing the spectator directly in the first person, Frenkel casts herself first as a commentator or storyteller. "This is a true story about some people you know. Welcome... I will tell you a story. You know it well." She enunciates each phrase of the written text precisely, using a rather severe school-marmish voice as she cites titles and headings: "No solution — a suspense thriller. Part 1." Later she introduces herself as the author/narrator: "My name is Vera Frenkel.... As a narrator,

I am imperfect. I know too much. The best narrators take orders from God and don't need to think for themselves.... To prevent such routines, I write my own lines, editing as I go."

In foregrounding the processes of narrativity and narration, Frenkel participates in what Margaret Morse describes as a widespread movement in video art:

> While structuralist film was largely engaged in a modernist exploration of the unique properties of the medium, [the inevitably more narrative 'single-channel' video] has long been engaged in exploring what it means to narrate stories, how stories are told, what cultural function narrative serves, and so on, so that the plane of presentation is represented over stories in a 'messier' multi-leveled form.[27]

In the asynchronous deployment of the narrational voice, Frenkel also shares in a practice which Kaja Silverman ascribed to the feminist film project of subverting theories of subjectivity constructed by vision,[28] and which Christine Tamblyn traces in the work of video artists such as Cecilia Condit, Sherry Millner, and Nancy Buchanan. In the tapes of Frenkel, Condit, Millner and Buchanan, as well as in the films of Yvonne Rainer and Bette Gordon which Silverman writes about, we find not only a separation of the soundtrack from the image track, but the voices are also multiplied, temporally distanced or otherwise displaced from the site of the diegesis. The speaker, heard but not seen, represents the sublime power to contextualize images from an indeterminate location, thereby not only disrupting the specular regime propped onto synchronous sound,[29] but further concatenating the contradictory visual and auditory regimes of mutism/speech, visibility/invisibility, and presence/absence.

In part three, the voice and persona undergo a remarkable change. The voices becomes nasal and high, as a new character is introduced. She speaks of extreme physical, psychical and philosophical states:

> I became ugly. For about two years, my appearance changed. I could see this reflected in the faces of my friends and the critical looks of acquaintances. I had on them the extraordinary impact of the mirror that reflects to others the speed at which we rush to die. Later, when I was once more as you see me now, it became evident, even to me, that I had done this for effect. When I finally became average again, others were relieved.

Then, abruptly, another shift in the voice and persona. A warm, personal

voice intervenes, recounting in conversational rhythms the continuation of the previous character's story, inserting "she said" into quotations of dialogue which might come from a Jane Bowles story. Such vocative performance significantly marks Frenkel's work, for she delights in impersonation, often playing all the female parts in the tapes, and always speaking the voice-overs, which consistently provide the hermeneutic traces which operate the complex diegetical ordering of the images. Here, however, the multiplicity of auditory characters enunciates another regime, a second regime of invisible data, perhaps another story altogether. Who are these women? What is their relation to each other and to the "public investigation" of the visual text? "The visible clues are easy. Far more important is the evidence that is invisible," the school-marm has warned us earlier.

Finally, in Part 4, the school-marm returns to pronounce the "moral": "Pay careful attention to what you see. Consider every possibility. If you do not, others will consider them for you. Shall we begin?"

In the tradition of the open text, the invitation to begin marks the end of the narration, though the last image lingers. Two leather club chairs flanking a large dark painting recall the many empty chairs which have appeared throughout. We now recognize them as figuring the absent audience, the invisible auditor, the erased addressee. As the tape ends, the phantasmagoria of loss and invisibility retrospectively unfolds anew, beginning again, now retroactively implicating the audience in its operations and effects. If television posits "the body-that-disappears-into-thin-air," as Vito Acconci claims,[30] then *Introduction to Some of the Players* also posits the spectator who disappears into thin air. This may remind us of Beverle Houston's description of television as "auditory wallpaper," TV images and sounds flowing into an empty room.[31] However, Frenkel's complex economy of enunciation and denial, figuration and evacuation, repeatedly resituates the spectatorial subject not only as the dispersed, sublime, indeterminate subject of postmodernism, but also in a *mise-en-abîme* of erasure and invisibility which infinitely rebounds on the spectator's recognition and comprehension of textual relations.

I have described this tape at some length not only because it is extremely mysterious in its import and affect, but because it marks in Frenkel's work the beginning of a trajectory of concerns with issues of loss, erasure,

mutism, invisibility, alienation, and exile. This matrix of thematic issues is played out through a stunning variety of formal strategies and epistemological complexities in subsequent tapes.

Her Room in Paris (1979), framed, like *Introduction to Some of the Players*, as a segment of a larger continuing work titled *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story*, was a tape made for a site-specific installation. Margaret Morse calls video installation "undoubtedly the most complex art form in contemporary culture."[32] Vito Acconci's remarks on video installation resonate provocatively with *Her Room in Paris*:

> Video installation is the conjunction of opposites.... On the one hand, "installation" places an artwork in a specific site, for a specific time.... On the other hand, "video" (with its consequences followed through: video broadcast on television) is placeless: at least, its place can't be determined — there's no way of knowing the particular look of all those millions of homes that receive the TV broadcast. Video installation, then, places place-lessness: video installation is an attempt to stop time.[33]

The installation and tape are material reconstructions of the fiction of Cornelia Lumsden, "a little known Canadian writer who lived in Paris between the wars and has since disappeared." Searching for the lost woman artist and her exiled relation to Canadian culture, seeking precisely to stop time, or to retrieve the past into the present, Frenkel creates an installation of Lumsden's room in Paris where she wrote her 1934 novel. Deploying the "specificity of place to intertwine memory and presence, to reconstruct from fiction a tangible body of evidence,"[34] the installation includes a bed, a lamp, an easy chair with footstool, a vanity-dresser, coat hooks on the wall and a throw-rug on the floor. Although the furniture is real, the installation makes no efforts towards the hyper-reality of many contemporary installations, in which every detail is minutely accounted for. Instead, the installation merely suggests a room and its objects, while allowing wide avenues for the viewer to trace a variety of trajectories through the space. Acconci again:

> ...Video installation returns the TV set to the domain of furniture.... The difference is: in the home, the TV set is assumed as a home companion, almost unnoticed.... Once a TV set, however, is placed in a sculpture instal-lation, the TV set tends to dominate.... The rest of the installation is in

danger of fading away; the rest of the installation is the past that upholds the future (as embodied in the TV set), but the future wins.[35]

In Frenkel's tape, however, the installation itself is figured as the future, for increasingly long fragments of the preparation of the room (painting the vanity, arranging the props) interject repeatedly, particularly in the final movements of the tape.

Contradictorily, one of the characters (the broadcaster) claims to be speaking from the completed room in the *Centre culturel de Canada* in Paris. This is typical of the concatenation of temporalities that the tape formally embraces in a variety of modes, including the discourses of the characters speaking at different removes from the past; the voice-overs which alternatively echo, anticipate, or double snatches of dialogue; scenes which are begun again or repeated; black-and-white photos which seem to have the status of treasured traces of the past but then turn out to be polaroids carelessly crumpled in the hand; episodes which end mid-tape and then return; and the multiple endings of the credit sequence which revisits characters, previous shots, out-takes, and empty settings in a dizzying vortex of simultaneity.[36] One may find here what Maureen Turim ascribes to the material properties of video, as an apparatus and a medium: the ability "to spatialize time and temporalize space."[37]

The play with tenses is echoed visually in the hybrid structure of the piece, which casts itself variously as historical drama, TV documentary, home-movie, and simulation of the random images found while channel-surfing. The references to CBC television as well as the simulated channel-switching at the level of the tape's diegetical and formal strategies confirm Acconci's equation of the video monitor with the TV in the home; the installation itself uses a domestic TV set rather than an institutional monitor. Thus, traces of the past are wrapped around the future, the future is confirmed as the present, and the present reconstructs the past. None of the elements has a greater claim either to materiality, evidentiality, or reliability. All are constructed and deconstructed. "Video's ability to spatialize time and temporalize space [can be seen] as potentially a means to continue the dissection of the apprehension and meaning of an event.... If it can virtually deconstruct spatio-temporal order, it can also reconstruct it. Video has the potential to participate in the delegitimation of the functionality of actions and narratives of causality."[38]

As noted earlier, Acconci's reading of the abstracted material properties of video installation corresponds startlingly with the subject of *Her Room in Paris*:

> Video installation starts out by dealing with a whole system, a whole space; but the field, the ground, disappears in favor of the "point," the TV set.... The viewer, seeing the TV set, is brought back home — and here, abstractly, "home" reads the way it could never be allowed to read when surrounded by the customs of living-room furniture; "home" means "resting-place," "the final resting-place," the land of the numb/the still/the dead.[39]

Or, as Dot Tuer writes:

> Conjuring Lumsden as a ghost from an unmarked grave through conflicting videotaped testimonies of her rival, an expert, a confidant, a broadcaster (all played by Frenkel), her lover and friend (played by Tim White), [*Her Room in Paris*] circles around memory as absence, as incomplete.... Her whereabouts unknown, her cause of death untraced, her journals misplaced, [the woman artist] becomes emblematic of a modernism in which memory was at once unfettered and repressed, where exile permitted the dissolution and reinvention of self.[40]

As in *Introduction to Some of the Players*, however, it is not only the eponymous subject who is dissolved and reinvented, but the spectator also undergoes the same uncanny *mise-en-abîme* of doubled erasure and representation. In *Her Room in Paris*, the tape is played repeatedly on a monitor which takes the place of the mirror on a vanity table. A vanity bench is provided for close-range viewing, positioning the spectator spatially in a narcissistic relation to the electronic mirror of video, although not as literally as Krauss has suggested (i.e., as before a closed-circuit camera).[41] The configuration also enforces a solitary viewing (for there is only room for one on the vanity bench) which reflects back on the spectator, the trope of the mirror doubling the spectator who is present before the monitor but absent from the tape's visual regime. The paradoxical simultaneity of presence and embodiment, absence and invisibility of the spectator, whose image is not reflected on the surface of the mirror/screen, is ironically underscored in the diegesis, specifically through the trope of the invisible but vocal audience which becomes increasingly unruly in its demands for reliable evidence.

At the vanity-dresser (conventionally women's furniture, corresponding to the man's high-boy dresser), the spectator is placed both literally and

semiologically (through echoes of western iconography of narcissism, the image of the woman at the mirror — one thinks immediately of *The Smiling Mme. Beudet*) in the place of the woman. In video installation, notes Margaret Morse, the visitor rather than the artist performs the piece: "Indeed, she or he is *in* the piece as its experiential subject, not by identification, but in body."[42] Here the spectator is not just any woman, but the material embodiment of the lost body specifically of Cornelia Lumsden, the diegetical subject of the tape, the exiled and forgotten body-that-has-disappeared-into-thin-air. In the installation which evokes but cannot reconstruct Cornelia Lumsden's dwelling, which seeks to stop time but which produces a vortex of simultaneity, and in the tape which searches for her identity and artworks but finds only contradictions and miscognitions, the spectator also wanders nomadically, exiled to placelessness, homelessness and invisibility. "Frenkel's work points towards the distance that lies between the subject and its mediation;"[43] in its formal hybridity, televisual allusions and location in the installation, the tape also simultaneously invokes the spectator and consigns us to "the-body-that-disappears-into-thin-air."

...*And Now, the Truth (A Parenthesis)* (1980), Part 2 of *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story*, addresses unanswered questions raised in *Her Room in Paris*. Continuing the structural strategies of pastiche and genre hybridity, the tape employs multiple and contradictory voices, inscription of textual intertitles, repetitions and other apparently chance operations, and the tropes of the lost body of evidence as well as the invisible audience. One of the many voices (all Frenkel's) on the soundtrack intermittently interjects commentary on the work of Dr. Vladimir Nogovsky, a Russian doctor who brings dying people back to life. In his Moscow Laboratory of Reanimatology, he experiments with ways of prolonging clinical death so that the patient may be revived. The doctor claims that patients experience intense visions during periods of clinical death, which, he says, happen not during death but while dying or coming back to life. More common than the visions, however, are the sensations of restful sleep. When asked what was seen in the other world, the patient often replies, "I slept through my death."

The obvious correspondence to the diegesis of this apparently tangential, intermittent and fragmented commentary is the possibility of

reanimating the deceased artist Cornelia Lumsden. Alternatively, it may suggest an explanation for the presence in the tape of the woman from the audience who claims to be the daughter of Cornelia Lumsden, bearing the artist's name and wearing her clothes: perhaps she has now come back to life. It is tempting for us to see the story of Dr. Nogovsky as a figuring of hope for the lost spectator as well, the revival of the dead as Frenkel's vocation.

Having begun with Laurie Anderson's video narcolepsy, I am delighted to end with video art's reanimation: Vera Frenkel's complex and important video works, of which only a few have been discussed here. If the viewing of her tapes simulates Dr. Nogovsky's visions of the afterlife of video, TV, feminist criticism, and the spectator, we surely have not slept through our death.

Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, "Beyond Right and Wrong or the Mischievous Genius of the Image," *Resolutions: A Critique of Video Art* (Los Angeles: Lace, 1986): pp. 8-15.

2. Ibid., p. 11.

3. Berverle Houston, "Television and Video Text: A Crisis of Desire," *Resolutions*, op. cit., pp. 111-122.

4. Ibid., p. 114.

5. Ibid., pp. 112-113.

6. Ibid., p. 116.

7. Jon Wagner, "The Post-Spectatorial Sublime," *Resolutions*, op. cit., pp. 73-76.

8. Ibid., p. 73.

9. Ibid., p. 75.

10. David James, "inTerVention: the contexts of negation for video and its criticism," *Resolutions*, op. cit., pp. 86-93.

11. Ibid., p. 86.

12. Ibid., p. 87.

13. Ibid., p. 88.

14. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974): pp. 5-6.

15. David James, op. cit., p. 89.

16. Amy Taubin, *Resolutions*, op. cit., p. 99.

17. Ibid., pp. 100-101. For another view see Martha Rosler, "Video Shedding the

Utopian Moment," *Illuminating Video: an Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (San Francisco: Aperture, 1990): pp. 44-46. In a witty parody of the Nam June Paik myth, she cites his many attempts to mutilate, defile, belittle, interfere with and symbolically defecate on television.

18. Ibid., pp. 101-103.

19. Ibid.

20. For the history of the participation of public television in the development of video art, see Kathy Rae Huffman, "Video Art: What's TV got to do with it?," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit., pp. 81-90.

21. Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit., pp. 101-121.

22. *Resolutions*, the text which articulated as its project the beginnings of a critical discourse on video, was published as recently as 1986. *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Handhardt (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press and Peregrine Smith Books) was also published in 1986. Peggy Gale's history of video in Canada, completed in 1988, is still awaiting publication, and her anthology of critical writings on video, co-edited with Lisa Steele, is still in progress. *Illuminating Video* (1990) calls itself an "essential guide," a designation often adopted by path-finding texts.

23. Peggy Gale, Lisa Steele and Sara Diamond.

24. Lisa Steele and Sara Diamond.

25. Dierdre Boyle, "A Brief History of American Documentary Video," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit., p. 63.

26. Cf. Lynne Joyrich, "Going through the E/Motions: Gender, Postmodernism and the Affect in Television Studies," *Discourse* vol 14. no. 1 (Winter 1991-92) for a splendid analysis of the gendered discourses of TV criticism.

27. Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit., p. 158.

28. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988): p. 189.

29. Christine Tamblyn, "Significant Others: Social Documentary as Personal Portraiture in Women's Video of the 1980s," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit., p. 413.

30. Vito Acconci, "Television, Furniture and Sculpture: The Room with the American View," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit., pp. 132-133.

31. Berverle Houston, op. cit., p. 113.

32. Margaret Morse, op. cit., p. 154.

33. Vito Acconci, op. cit., pp. 132-133.

34. Dot Tuer, "Worlds Between: An Examination of the Thematics of Exile and Memory in the Work of Vera Frenkel," *Vera Frenkel: Raincoats Suitcase Palms* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1993): p. 23.

35. Vito Acconci, op. cit., p. 133.

36. This sense of endless simultaneity is further complicated by the status of the tape in relation to the installation and the condition of viewing. Since the tape replays repeatedly, and since the spectator arrives at no appointed time, the tape may begin, or for that matter end, for the spectator at any point in its unfolding. The final sequences (including the revisiting of favorite shots, Frenkel signaling "cut" in various characters, the setting up of the installation) then may become a preview of what is to come or a frame of artifice/deconstruction which specifically positions the spectator in relation to the hermeneutic, the issues of reliability and evidentiality, and the complexities of diegetic temporality. The structure of the tape acknowledges such a temporal illogic not only by the formal strategies already noted, but also by the lag and scatter of the title and credit sequences, which are not only dispersed over an unconventional duration in the tape, but which actually arrive neither at the beginning nor the end.

37. Maureen Turim, "The Cultural Logic of Video," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit., p. 339. This superb essay exploring the perceptual and philosophical impact of video offers many directions for further exploration.

38. Ibid.

39. Vito Acconci, op. cit., p. 133.

40. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *New Artists Video*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978). Krauss argues that because video technology enables the image to be simultaneously recorded and displayed, the performer can use the video monitor as a mirror. The video camera and monitor form a "parenthesis" that surrounds the body of the performer, who is thereby "self-encapsulated" in a continually renewed feed-back loop. For a repudiation of this thesis see Maureen Turim's "The Cultural Logic of Video," *Illuminating Video*, op. cit. According to Turim, Krauss' argument: "…rests on equating the mirror property of video with narcissism as such, using a definition of narcissism vaguely derived from Jacques Lacan. Granted, the mirror is part of the allegory for narcissism; however, that is not the only role the mirror has played metaphorically in psychoanalysis (consider its complex role in the mirror stage), nor can the mirror function as a literal symbol of narcissism. Further,…the artist and spectator do not necessarily occupy the same position. Even if the artist is narcissistically performing for the video-mirror, the spectator is not. Conversely, if the spectator is

performing for the mirror in a video installation, then the artist is not himself or herself seeking narcissistic gratification nor is the nature of the spectator's interaction with the installation necessarily narcissistic" (p. 337).

42. Margaret Morse, op. cit., p. 155.

43. Dot Tuer, op. cit., p. 23.

How to Search for Signs of (East) Asian Life in the Video World

Monika Kin Gagnon

> Histories are unruly things.
> Richard Hill[1]

> *Cultural Difference is not a totemic object. It does not always announce*
> *itself to the onlooker; sometimes it stands out conspicuously, most of the*
> *time it tends to escape the commodifying eye. Its visibility depends on*
> *how much one is willing to inquire into the anomalous character of the*
> *familiar, and how engaged one remains to the politics of the continuous*
> *doubling, reversing, and displacing in marginality as well as to the neces-*
> *sity of changing oneself-as-other and other-as-oneself.*
> Trinh T. Minh-ha[2]

There are multiple sites at which culture produces and legitimates itself:
with the production, organization and dissemination of cultural products,
through the writing of cultural history and with the practice of critical and
theoretical writing. This essay struggles at these various sites.

In attempting to distinguish the presence of East Asian Canadian
video artists' production, a project I commenced for this book in 1991, I
soon found myself mired in questions which research progressively
complicated.[3] What initially seemed a straightforward task became
intercepted by my own assumptions. My politics began occluding my
ability to analyze certain contradictions, and my ability to contend with
certain works. In other words, my reception of this category — East
Asian Canadian video — obviously held certain assumptions which were
primarily operative on a biology and heritage, but implicitly, also
demanded video works that engaged a politics reflecting this identity
and culture in some way. This essay reflects on the implications of this

categorizing, and exposes the processes of constructing and undoing this category.

It is broadly divided into two sections which touch on history, politics, theory and practice, all of which inevitably overlap. The opening *Making Noise in the Silences of History* briefly considers the written history of Canadian video production to contextualize my own research. I proceed by looking at two specific essays by established feminist video artists/writers, Sara Diamond and Martha Rosler in order to foreground both the possibilities and difficulties of moving from a cultural gender politics to one informed and engaged with the exigencies of race politics. Both Diamond and Rosler undertake writing video histories in reflexive modes, and thus provide opportune examples of the potential of critical history-writing. *Some Signs of Early Life: What Questions to Pose* continues where I might have begun by engaging the range of videos and writing on video which I encountered while researching this essay. It is most affected by the three-year writing span of this essay in addressing a video practice, theory and criticism which has been rapidly and radically evolving. There has been an explosion of production by artists of color and First Nations artists in the last few years. Identity politics and its theorizing in the arena of cultural production has changed significantly, as has my own engagement with this area. I have retained the original conceptual parameters of this section which asserts the empowerment of identification and its positive effect on access and representation, but also considers the strategic limitations of identity politics in relation to theory and history.

In many ways, my title reveals all: it reflects my own critical process of identifying, researching and then questioning the very usefulness of East Asian Canadian identity as a category with regards to cultural production and politics; *How to Search for Signs...*, then, should be read rhetorically. More deliberately, my title intends to suggest how the impingements of race (as those of gender and sexuality) undo and challenge traditional categories and methods of history-writing, theorizing and criticism; *How to -Search...*, then, as the issuing of a political imperative and an attendant critical process. This is much of this essay's momentum: exercising critical self-reflection while maintaining the desirous optimism inherent in any subversive action, a celebration of the disintegration of my object of examination, and an explosion of its potential.

Making Noise in the Silences of History

It is commonplace to address the fictional and subjective nature of history even in art history. In 1976, A.A. Bronson wrote in "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," "History is never made — it is written."[4] Griselda Pollock's interventions as a feminist art historian engaged the political meaning of art history with such imperatives as this:

> What we need to deal with is the interplay of multiple histories — of the codes of art, of ideologies of the art world, of institutions of art, of forms of production, of social classes, of the family, of forms of sexual domination whose mutual determinations and interdependences have to be mapped together in precise and heterogeneous configurations.[5]

No small challenge for feminist art historians. I would highlight my own tortured two pages of qualification about the subjective process of historical selection in "Work in Progress: Canadian Women in the Visual Arts 1975-1985."[6] The ways in which a history is written is contingent on the demands of one's subject matter and the questions that one poses while compiling and sifting and then privileging information. But it can also be dangerously contingent on the answers one wants as result. A.A. Bronson added quite cynically in this regard, "More recently, and particularly in art circles, history has become a means of anticipating the future in order to plan one's own work as the next logical step in art history. In other words, history has become a *marketing device*."[7]

Video art is a chameleon form to contend with. In its practical usage it has been used to document performance art in an emphasis on video's most basic function over any formal concerns. Video as a new technology has been explored by artists working in other media in a manner that characterizes the early history of experimental film. While an experimental, formalist emphasis has been subverted to emphasize video's potential in effectively conveying information, developing the medium's potential as an oppositional practice capable of intervening in the hegemony of mass communications. And these broad categorizations contain many more.

Examining the documentation of major Canadian video conferences such as Matrix in 1973, or the Fifth Network Conference in 1978 illustrates the variety of issues that have faced video since its early use.[8] What is consistently striking is that from the late 1960s, the development of video in Canada is attended by an almost obsessive quest for self-definition.[9]

Practically speaking, broadcast television and film (with their similar physical and technical properties), were impinging presences video could literally not afford to ignore. The exercise of legitimation, though often characterized by debate and disagreement about video's nature and its usage, was a significant process in the forging of a space that cultivated access to a financial economy within the cultural funding apparatuses, whose categories of eligible media could not yet accommodate video as a new and initially experimental, cultural technology.

The emergence of artist-run centres (arcs) as a parallel structure of production, exhibition and distribution of cultural practices throughout the 1970s, developed as an alternative to the hegemony of commercial galleries and mainstream public institutions, challenging their powerful ability to determine and effectively reproduce aesthetic notions of high art imported from Europe and the United States. Performance, installation and video were merely nascent forms, as of yet, unacknowledged and dismissed by mainstream art and its institutions. That these forms defied the commodification and salability of art was their precise point, inevitably resulting in their initial exclusion from exhibition in commercial, market driven venues. It was predominantly through the arcs that these new media were able to flourish. Tracing video's development in its various forms and its various sites of reception situates Canadian video practices within a number of parallel structures: parallel to other established art forms, parallel to mass culture and in many ways, parallel to official culture in its venues of exhibition.

In defining its identity numerous histories were written characterizing the simultaneous, but different developments of video in the Canadian quadrant of Vancouver, Toronto, Montréal and Halifax.[10] This occurred even more extensively as video production facilities increased, exhibition venues expanded and the eventual and gradual entry of video into mainstream public art institutions meant larger audiences that required initiation into viewing and introduction into the meanings produced by this blossoming new technological form. One consequence of this institutional embrace was the continual (re)discovery of video and restating of video's history, as Lisa Steele has remarked, "video was continually returned to its birth, maintained in a constant state of infancy."[11]

Martha Rosler, in her essay "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment"

concludes that "video's past is the ground not so much of history as of myth."[12] Rosler's analysis is particular to American video but is useful to a Canadian analysis insofar as it defines the dubious potential of separate art and social trajectories for video history. Rosler underlines the possible trajectories of a video history, to be written, through a logic that considers the existing "myths" that ground video history, suggesting, in virtual resignation, that "Video history is not to be a *social* history but an *art* history, one related to, but separate from, that of the other forms of art. Video, in addition, wants to be a major, not a minor art."[13] She adds in a more particular but similar sentiment to A.A. Bronson's statement, that "Video histories are not now produced by or for scholars but for potential funders, for the museum-going public, and for others professionally involved in the field, as well as for the basis for collections and shows."[14]

Rosler proceeds to isolate "the figure" of Nam June Paik and traces how his presence in video's mythic histories combines "the now familiar antinomies, magic, and science, that help reinforce and perpetuate rather than effectively challenge the dominant social discourse."[15] Nam June Paik, Korean-born, brought-up in Tokyo, an avant-garde musician and composer with a university degree in aesthetics (thesis: Arnold Schoenberg) and student of German modernist composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, becomes firmly entrenched as the grandfather of video. And attributed to him, is the importation to New York in 1965 of the first 1/2" video Sony Portapak. Rosler writes:

> The elements of the myth thus include an Eastern visitor from a country ravaged by war (our war) who was inoculated by the leading U.S. avant-garde master while in technology heaven (Germany), who, once in the States repeatedly violated the central shrine, TV, and then goes to face the representative of God on earth [the Pope], capturing his image to bring to the avant-garde.... And — oh yes! — he is a man. The hero stands up for masculine mastery and bows to patriarchy, if only in representation. The thread of his work includes the fetishization of a female body as an instrument that plays itself, and the complementary thread of homage to other famous male artist-magicians or seers (quintessentially, Cage).[16]

Rosler undertakes a persuasive analysis of the nature of the avant-garde and its historical relationship to mainstream culture. She situates and stresses Nam June Paik's cultural origins and then unravels his mythic presence as

grandfather of video. She elaborates Paik's affiliations with musician and composer John Cage, and further underlines Cage's interest in Eastern-derived mysticism, "the antirational, anti-causative Zen Buddhism, which relied on sudden epiphany to provide instantaneous transcendence...."[17] But the analytical potential I waited for from Rosler was not to manifest itself. One which might have understood the "shock tactics" of the avant-garde work of Cage and of Paik , their impact on Western high art, in terms of the derivations from Oriental philosophies, conceptually and symbolically situated as the complete other of Western culture.

John Cage remains a mentor to Paik in Rosler's text, but in some ways, he could be seen as essentially legitimizing Paik's presence by operating as Paik's cipher into the Western avant-garde world. This begs undertaking a more in-depth consideration of Paik's presence as an Asian male (as Rosler highlights) that both entices and threatens. While a relationship between East and West that I am hinting at is admittedly far more complex than my expectations of Rosler's text might suggest, my own orientation in research had me reading with bated breath for her to elaborate the cultural meaning of video's literal importation and video's sustenance as an avant-garde practice by and through a figure such as Paik. But I was left wondering, instead, how Paik's configuration within a complex legacy of orientalism could, firstly, be left unarticulated more explicitly (characterized by Rosler merely as "science and magic"). And also left pondering the more provocative implications of how Paik might be situated in an alternate (social/art) history that might engage his Asian identity in a framework of identity politics. To offer Paik, in other words, historical access to a discursive project that encountered and engaged race and racialization in a direct way.

In "Daring Documents: The Practical Aesthetics of Early Vancouver Video," Sara Diamond clearly distinguishes a more specific arena of investigation than Rosler's expansive one, that of documentary video production in Vancouver. Though dealing with different contexts of video production, it is interesting to consider Diamond's essay alongside Rosler's as methodologically exemplary, feminist critical histories, projects with which we could consider a relationship of coalition with a cultural politics of race.

Diamond explores Vancouver's "identifiable subculture within the

West Coast artistic community," in which "early tapes subordinated the formalist emphasis in the aesthetic dimension of video to the medium's use value...."[18] She situates a specific history of video production whose cultural contribution is maintained as one of social affect, therein mapping a social history as an aesthetic subculture, and therefore as one contained *within* an aesthetic discourse.

Reference to Paul Wong's work, in particular, the cancellation of his exhibition *Confused: Sexual Views* at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) in 1984, frames Diamond's analysis of definitions of 'art' and 'not-art' as it pertains to video.[19] But this would, like his work throughout the 1970s and early 1980s which dealt predominantly with representation and glamor, give no explicit evidence of a racially conscious self-positioning, other than the signifier of his Chinese surname, or his appearance in videos and stills which made apparent his particular racial background.

Later in her essay, Diamond writes that: "Perhaps the most significant *new* developments in film and video have come in community productions by aboriginal artists and artists of color."[20] Notable is that this observation is made only once producers and their self-determination with the tools of video production, have forcefully made their appearance on the video stage in their own voice, and further, that the content of these artists' work reflects their overt political identification. Diamond cites Loretta Todd, a Métis videomaker and writer who, according to her:

> ...traces the role of the white cultural missionaries who introduced video to native communities, believing that natives would choose to join the global village, ignoring the traditional forms of preservation that native communities had maintained. Todd decries the ongoing colonizing practices of white video producers who have built their careers on the exotica of native culture and history.[21]

Diamond affirms the production of work by artists of color and First Nations artists, and acknowledges a discourse which is engaged with issues of race. However she only cautiously gives voice to cultural difference within a designated space of discussion rather than allowing herself to discover its tropes as intrinsic to the very history she writes. Thus the absence of working artists of color and Native artists throughout the 1970s and 1980s history which she writes, remains explicitly unaddressed. This allows individuals such as Paul Wong and Taki Bluesinger

to partake in the more general history of which they are a part without in any way being identified as 'different' or distinct from the rest of the (seemingly) white pack.

While heeding to Todd's position in describing the outrage of appropriation and patronizing of Native cultures — note that "*Todd* decries," not Diamond — she remains curiously selective in her representation of Michael Goldberg, who she describes as "a paternal figure at the [Video] Inn." Goldberg emerged again and again in my own research through magazine and catalogue archives as a significant facilitator and supporter of Japanese video artists and exchange events, and was also notable for his production of videos examining Japanese culture. Yet in Diamond's essay, he is mentioned only for his video, *Orgasm*, with a hilarious quotation from an awkward interview sequence on female orgasm between himself and an uncomfortable female subject, Elke Hayden. His curatorial work and his own videos engaging Japanese culture remain completely absent. For Diamond to have articulated Goldberg's work engaging Japanese culture might have begged an elaboration she was unwilling to undertake since it reeks a sticky quagmire of orientalism that is a virtual Pandora's Box. The issue of the cultural representation of other cultures, that which precisely underpins cultural appropriation of Native cultures, is referred to only as it pertains to the specificity of Native cultures, and further, with a caution whose articulation is that of a Métis woman, Loretta Todd.

My subtextual readings should not deter from the fact that both Rosler's and Diamond's essays are insightful. My reasons for citing them together has an ulterior motive, however: to draw out what I sense remains unspoken within them. For I would suggest that both Rosler's and Diamond's articles demonstrate a political *politesse*, a restraint which stops them from making explicit the subtexts of racial and cultural difference within the histories they map. This observation is not to suggest that either writer is obliged to speak overtly to such concerns, but rather merely to explore the ways in which cultural difference and race erupt only as repressed lacunae in works whose political logic and social analyses (fundamentally and significantly grounded in a feminist politic) would seem to lead toward certain other strategic critiques and coalitions. In other words, despite being informed by feminist sensibilities, the arena of cultural difference appears to pose certain (unexplored) difficulties. What we

can garner from Diamond's cautious political strategy is the fundamental importance for oppressed and marginalized voices to speak, organize themselves and claim their own subjecthood. For even in well-meaning contexts, such spaces may not be forged at all.

A number of questions arise: How and why are certain voices 'allowed' to be heard at particular moments? Why race now? And under what conditions will its exigencies be accommodated? What role and effect does the overt politicization of identity (or consequently, the lack thereof), have on the ways we reflect on and even write cultural histories? How does it affect what artists and works will even be disseminated?

I will suspend these questions to assert a far more simple observation. Namely, that what becomes evident in examining the body of writing on culture in Canada are the radically shifting terms of discourse around issues of race and cultural politics of difference. This is significant. For what might be understood to be haunting Diamond's and Rosler's texts (and this haunting is both productive and revealing), are the consequences of the absence of a vocabulary for white feminists to speak critically to the operations of race, racism and cultural difference. And further to commentate in a critically engaged way on a cultural production that engages these very issues. The absence of this cultural vocabulary clearly hinges on a much larger historical silence.

Some Signs of Early Life

"I have defined 'Asian' by the color of our skin and the geographic region it implies," wrote Paul Wong in his catalogue introduction for the group exhibition *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*.[22] Wong's definition recalls how I began my research, by simply asserting a category, East Asian Canadian video production. But was this category merely self-explanatory? What was I was looking for? Asian-sounding names? Asian-looking faces? All in spite of the content of artists' work? Anything with Asian content? Or work exclusively on identity and culture by Asian-looking or Asian-sounding artists?

In wanting to contextualize these video practices in a wider history, the dangerous essentialism of this categorization became increasingly apparent and its limitations for any historical project, also evident. Videos

by East Asian Canadian artists prior to 1985 could in no way be predominantly characterized by any overt references to Asian identity or culture. In other words, traces of "Asian-ness" are detectable only in the heritage/biology of the authors, whether by appearance or by name. Since 1985, however, I would observe that videos by Asian artists such as Richard Fung or Ruby Truly, as well as by artists such as Paul Wong and Fumiko Kiyooka (who now works in film rather than video) who were producing works prior to 1985, are dominantly characterized by politicized identifications, and also, by explorations of East Asian culture and Asian-ness. Representations of East Asian identity existed during this pre-1985 period, but were most often undertaken by white video artists. Susan Britton's *Me$$age to China* serves as one extreme example wherein, among other scenes, there are shots of "Teng Hsiao-Ping looking mildly disgusted while a punk band [is] tuning up...," and another, which caricatures Chinese women in a manner virtually unthinkable today, in which Britton is "made-up traditional Chinese-like, toying with a fan, and a sound track of her voice stumbl[es] through a contemporary Chinese political slogan."[23]

The parameters of my criterion were rapidly becoming increasingly tenuous and the constructedness of this East Asian category and consequently of my own project, more evident. Inclusion based on the heritage of the producer was, in some instances, to politicize a context and identities which did not themselves articulate their own racialization. While not problematic in itself (in fact precisely what I was pondering doing to Nam June Paik), a consequence of projecting a racialized reading might be to overlook examining the social character of the absence of self-conscious racializing. In my desire to politicize a context, then, I might not examine the specificity of this context where a politicization of identity did not occur, also where a cultural analysis of race, and of racism were not socially accessible discourses. On the other hand, to focus selection based solely on a producers' East Asian self-identification and cultural reflection as context, would impose a structure of value that validated certain practices as authentically East Asian despite the highly relative and artificial state of such cultural categorizing.

The politically explosive potential of my seemingly straightforward project had established itself. In even asserting post-1985 video produc-

tion as "dominantly characterized by politicized identifications and also, by explorations of East Asian and East Asian Canadian culture and Asianness," as I did above, I would have to consider the current demands of curatorial projects and distribution apparatuses that perhaps necessitated politicized works to be disseminated, over and above, non-politicized ones. In other words, the distinct articulation of difference as a conditional requirement for containment within and entry into a broader, white-dominated cultural context.

Politically racialized representations expand the project of earlier identity politics in cultural practice defined by feminisms, gay/lesbian or class identifications. While the exploration of masculinity by straight male artists might be considered as a relatively recent development, these gendered or racialized subjectivities are distinct from the individualized, narcissistic exploration of the self, always a temptation in video because of the technology's accessibility and mobility. In fact, the articulation of politicized identifications as engaged in 'public' relations of power, strongly counterpoints the highly 'privatized' space of the individual and its confluence with a universal 'I,' straight, male and white.

Politicizing an identification which has created oppression — in this case, celebrating 'color,' that visual signifier of difference which results in racist experiences within white-dominated culture — is to simultaneously distinguish that difference, but within a framework which may continue to respect the terms which have allowed for the predominance of patriarchal and racist ideologies to dominate. Color, in other words, only needs definition in relation to an ideology of white racism that privileges whiteness. As Richard Fung writes:

> Given that the form of racism we encounter in North America is that of white superiority, it isn't surprising that the struggle for Asians to reclaim our subjecthood (or to shed our otherness) has been phrased as a tug of war between yellow and white. But something is wrong with this binary opposition of white oppressor and yellow oppressed. Whereas racism privileges whiteness and targets a somewhat shifting body of 'others,' anyone, no matter their status or color, can engage its discourses."[24]

While there are risks in homogenizing 'people of color' in the demand for overt significations of difference, there are also risks involved in forging *any* differences within the already precarious space of difference in

mainstream culture; that is, in appearing fragmentary and inconsistent on already precarious terrain.

Richard Fung has written, almost apologetically, with regards to his videotape *Fighting Chance*:

> The tape does not directly address the issues of Asian PWHIV's who are isolated, confused, illegal, closeted, or those who don't speak English. Yet, because all the men in the tape are Asian, they can be seen to speak for all Asian PWHIV's. And with the standard practice of tokenism at the level of funding a whole range of concerns may never be addressed because there is already one video on gay Asian men with HIV.[25]

What Fung's comments suggest is what Kobena Mercer has described as the "burden of representation."[26] That is, as artists or writers addressing issues of difference, the responsibility and expectation to "get it right," or to "say it all," because this may be the only definitive opportunity to speak, is both enormous and overwhelming. As Fung also confesses, "Whenever I detect this expectation — and it is often — I feel like an impostor."[27] Which might lead us to ask what it is about the current state of discourses on cultural and racial difference that have made the stakes of speaking so complex. For the imperative to speak to one's visible difference and be 'representative' is, in some ways, to adhere to a structural logic of marginality.

To politicize an oppressed identity is to representationally shift from a subjective place of invisibility or inferiority to one claiming powerful identification. The imperative to remain within a marginalized, oppositional, but distinctly identifiable subculture understandably responds to the oppressive ideological domination of white culture. To move beyond a celebratory accommodation toward a structural analysis that identifies the multiple ways in which such domination persists is the significant next step. And this may involve recognizing the extent to which political positioning within celebratory, marginalized economies may inhibit consideration of all the sites and manners in which cultural exclusions and dominations occur.

One direct manner of exclusion involves the cultural absence of any articulations of race, which in no way means that issues of race and racism did not exist. In relation to specific historical works and commentary, these absences permeate in implied egalities whose consequence means that race leaves no trace except in appearance and nomination.

Without the confirmation of Asian-ness in Paul Wong and Taki Bluesinger's surnames, Sara Diamond's mention of *New Era Marathon* (1974), with the vivid description of two men running down Vancouver streets that she illustrates, might have gone unnoticed by me for this research.

> Taki Bluesinger ran from Vancouver to the Burnaby Art Gallery to open the exhibition he and Gilbert had curated, while Gilbert and Paul Wong encouraged and videotaped Bluesinger from the back of an accompanying pick-up truck. Taki marks each new kilometre with a change into a fresh T-shirt....[28]

A 1979 review in *Centrefold* by John Greyson, pointed me to Lily Eng's *Defending the Motherland* :

> A documentation of a performance: she exercised for eighteen minutes: she was eight and a half months pregnant.... Defending the motherland by challenging the clichés of motherhood — every movement a denial of the traditional passive role of pregnant women waiting nine months for deliverance."[29]

While I was able to locate a video still in the 1979 *Living Art* catalogue which confirmed her Asian heritage, it was her surname that first offered the possibility for consideration in my essay.

Neither *New Era Marathon* or *Defending the Motherland* focus on Asian identity, nor do they express any particular aspects of Asian-ness. And there are many works that I could cite in this regard, such as Tomiyo Sasaki's *Spawning Sockeyes* (1982), or Ken Lum's video-performance, *Air* (1979), Fumiko Kiyooka's *Akuma* (1984), or Ken Kuramoto's *The Blue Mule Tapes* (1985). But for historical purposes, would these works be less valid for discussion because an East Asian identity and Asian-ness did not overtly predominate and define their content? Would the absence of direct articulation about race and culture hinder their ability to contribute to discussions of race and culture?

Within a wider context of emergent other voices in mainstream culture, the state of affairs at this particular historical moment (1992: Quincentennial of the "Discovery of America" by Christopher Columbus) is overwhelmingly characterized by the emergence of histories that were always there for half a millennium: histories parallel, submerged, subsumed. In the counter-Quincentennial activities that claimed an historical and contemporary presence for indigenous cultures already here when the

conquest occurred, the recuperating of these lost histories profoundly speaks of the violent ways in which conquest, colonialism and more insidiously, a neo-colonialism, not merely effaces, but also engages those cultures it wills to dominate. The multiple requirements of cultural critiques encompass expressions of the experience of the oppressed in the writing of anOther history, but also a condemnation of colonial mentalities which perpetuate the circulation of power and legitimate the production of representations on the basis of (unspoken) racialized ideologies.

In conclusion, there are two points that should be explicitly drawn out. The first pertains to how the social exigencies of sexism, homophobia and heterosexism, and racism manifest themselves across silences within our culture, thus demanding overt significations with strategic politicizations of identity. As identity politics have become increasingly complex, it is evident that identities shift as affiliations intersect contextually. What is implied in this formulation is that categorizations of racial identity are ideologically constructed ones, which may, like their real social effects, be deployed toward strategically political ends.

The second point is to consider how such politicizations become contained. How do such identifications impinge on practical strategies of cultural production? In other words, to initially empower certain identities does not require that these identities merely integrate into structures of dominantly existent (white) identifications. Neither must interceptions occur in a manner organized around these identifications. In this regard, Trinh Minh-ha has written:

> Certainly, the reality of the humiliated can never be exhausted, but as a strategy, its ends become limited. The corrective stance adopted to rehabilitate the image of the other through a critique mainly focused on stereotyping in the media has become too self-sufficient, and therefore, too predictable to offer a productive place for analysis…the indictment of the master's monologism and of the forms of power he circulates runs the risk of wearing thin as the words of resistance around certain themes on the oppressed become too familiar to the oppressor. There is, indeed, no small, worn-out subject, but only narrow, predictable representation.[30]

In addressing representation as one site for interruption, Trinh suggests the manner in which the maintenance of a marginalized subjectivity becomes accommodated in dominant culture. But she also underlines the

extent to which the arena of representation needs to be continually addressed. So should the arena of practical access. As my reading of Sara Diamond's self-constraints in addressing questions of race would indicate for us, without the self-determination of artists of color and First Nations artists, cultural domination by (white) structures of production, criticism, histories would not be ruptured. And this presence depends on politicized identifications of race because of the persistence of the otherwise unspoken ideology of whiteness.

Are the larger aims for a cultural politics of difference to simply forge a space for a handful of video artists and filmmakers who are East and South Asian, Native, Black, to enable increased access to the tools of production, exhibition and distribution? This is of course the significant first step. Strategies for inclusion might further undertake rectifying a history already written, to redress the exclusion of artists of color. But it is also important within a cultural context to disentangle and distinguish these goals of increased accessibility, rectifying racist or absent representations, from engaging how and analyzing why such absences and exclusions were and continue to be present.

Remaining comfortably celebratory and empowered in self-defined, marginalized subjectivities with regards to a writing, or reconsideration of history, then, may be to adhere to a marketing strategy of history-writing — or to employ a more palatable term, to simply hope for inclusion, accommodation and a slight modification of an already-existent history. My point here is to polemically underscore some of the implications of conflating strategies for inclusion in the practical arenas of access and representation, with what we might gain from an historical and critical discourse that recognizes and dismantles silences around race and racism. To defy, then, Martha Rosler's fatalistic predictions, and force a convergence between art and social histories.

Diamond and Rosler productively demonstrate the exigencies of race in their textual blindspots and unconscious repressions, which at best, contain, at worst, refuse the presence of racial difference in their own critical constructions of histories. At what cost? That dominant paradigms of unracialized historical, visual and other discursive representations persist and continue to be legitimated in purportedly critical contexts.

The implications for and examination of history engaged and

informed by race and cultural difference, is that excavations cannot effectively occur with the direct search for one's subject, for as a subject, she exists in complex and circuitous ways. This subject must be constructed at the very site and precise sign of cultural repression and representational absence — within a symbolic social economy in which paternalistic orientalist images proliferate without political analysis. And the pressures for the writing of an alternate history, is that such a project cannot productively occur in the formations or the structures already written, not without a reading for meaning in the absences, erasures, elisions and conspicuous silences of race.

Notes

1. Richard Hill, "One Part per Million, White Appropriation and Native Voices," *Fuse* vol. 15, no. 3 (Winter 1992): p. 15.

2. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Bold Omissions and Minute Depictions," *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, 1991): p. 85.

3. Some clarification of terminology with regards to East Asian Canadian. I concur with Richard Fung's discussions of the different specificities, East, Southeast and South Asian that have come under "Asian." See footnote 24. My text refers to East Asian Canadian which in places I use interchangeably with Asian Canadian.

4. A.A. Bronson, "Pablum for the Pablum Eaters," *Video by Artists*, ed. Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1976): p. 196.

5. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988): p. 30.

6. Monika Kin Gagnon, "Work in Progress: Canadian Women in the Visual Arts:

1975-1987," *Work in Progress: Building Feminist Culture*, ed. Rhea Tregebov (Toronto: Women's Press, 1987).

7. A.A. Bronson, op. cit., p. 196.

8. Cf. Sara Diamond, "Daring Documents: the Practical Aesthetics of Early Vancouver Video," *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991): pp. 56-57, for a discussion of Matrix Conference in 1973. For an example of the different concerns facing video artists in 1978, see, for instance, Andrée Duchaine, "Fifth Network, Cinquième Réseau," reporting on the Fifth Network, followed by regional takes on the conference by Lisa Steele, René Blouin, Terry McGlade, Pierre Falardeau, Brian McNevin and Claude Gilbert, *Parachute* 13 (Winter/Hiver 1978). A seminar workbook was published and is available through Art Metropole, reviewed by Clive Robertson in *Centrefold* vol. 2, no. 6 (Sept. 1978).

9. As the title of Renée Baert's "In Search of Authority," suggests. "Video in Canada: In Search of Authority," *Vidéo*, ed. René Payant (Montréal: Artextes, 1986): pp. 42-55

10. See, for instance, Peggy Gale, "Video Art in Canada: Four Worlds," *Studio International* (May/June 1976).

11. In conversation with Lisa Steele, April 1992.

12. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," *Illuminating Video*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture and Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990): p. 42.

13. Ibid., pp. 42-43.

14. Ibid., p. 44.

15. Ibid., p. 46.

16. Ibid., p. 45.

17. Ibid., p. 46.

18. Sara Diamond, op. cit., p. 47. A sub-title in Diamond's essay is "Martha Rosler's Utopian Moment."

19. Ibid., p. 47

20. Ibid., p. 76 (emphasis added).

21. Ibid., p. 77.

22. Paul Wong, "Introduction," *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (Vancouver: On Edge, 1990): p. 2.

23. Karl Beveridge, "Colonialist Chic or Radical Cheek?" *Centrefold* 14 (June/July 1979): p. 271.

24. Richard Fung, "Seeing Yellow: Asian Identities in Film and Video," *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karen Aguilar-San Juan (Boston: South End Press, 1994): p. 164.

25. Richard Fung, unpublished paper, 1992.

26. See Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third Text* 10 (Spring 1990): p. 63-78. Mercer writes: "Because our access to [institutional] spaces is limited, each event has to carry the burden of being representative; and in this way, because there is no continuity of context, we seem to be constantly re-inventing the wheel when it comes to criticism." (p. 63)

27. Fung, unpublished paper.

28. Sara Diamond, op. cit., p. 54.

29. John Greyson, "Initial Response," *Centrefold* 15 (June/July 1979): p. 272.

30. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The World as Foreign Land," *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991): p. 190.

Mirroring Identities
Two Decades of Video Art in English-Canada

Dot Tuer

During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.

<div align="right">

Marshall McLuhan
Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1965)[1]

</div>

In *Family Viewing* (1987) by Atom Egoyan, the video camera assumes a prominent, almost autonomous space within the narrative of the film. Mediating relationships between members of a disparate family, the video image becomes an instrument of memory, of silencing, of surveillance, of sexuality: constructing a tightly woven web of voyeuristic intrigue between the father, the absent mother, the stepmother, the grandmother, and the son. The characters in Egoyan's eerie drama, framed by the cinematic screen and reframed by the video monitor, reenact processes of cinematic identification as manifestations of their own interior projections. The viewer, in turn, becomes a distant witness to the complexities of self-interrogation/self-recognition that unfold under the all seeing electronic eye of the video playback machine.

Family Viewing, of course, is not unique in its use of the video apparatus to problematize the narrative structures of cinema. All of Atom Egoyan's films depend, to a lesser or greater degree, on video as pivotal to the indexing of a technologically inspired alienation. David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982) Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard the Mermaid's Singing* (1987) or David MacGillivray's *Life Classes* (1987) also join Egoyan's works as other classics of Canadian cinema that intercut video with film in order to chart the layers of mediation that permeate contemporary life and a con-

temporary imagination. In so doing, Canadian cinema of the 1980s not only references the burgeoning mass-market of a home video revolution, but incorporates into a populist art the pioneering experiments of Canadian video art, reflecting upon a complex history of negotiation around issues of technology and representation undertaken by video producers since the early 1970s.

"Vintage video," a term coined by Canadian critic Renee Baert to describe video art produced in Canada before 1974, embraced a crude portapak technology as both a self-reflexive tool and a collective form of representation.[2] Bulky and awkward to use, with primitive editing facilities and lowgrade image production, the video medium nevertheless offered artists the potential to insert themselves as an electronic presence within an increasingly media saturated universe. Instantaneous images of the body were refracted and monitored through real-time feedback. Everyday events and art happenings were recorded as real time memories. Linked to the idealism of a guerrilla TV, video held out the lure of a future intervention into the broadcast stratosphere. A freeform electronic signal, it appeared posed to simultaneously subvert and reconstruct the hierarchies of art and communication. Promising to brush away the dusty cobwebs of a museum art tradition and reach into the living rooms of the nation, it was central to the development of alternative art practices in the urban centres across English Canada.[3]

Collaborative groups such as Intermedia, a loose interdisciplinary collective of writers and artists based in Vancouver from 1967-72, incorporated the new technology into a larger process of blurring the boundaries between art and life, the private and the public. In their obsessive documentation of everyday events, sculpture served as an aesthetic referent, while sex, births, and counterculture lifestyles provided the thematic focus. A surviving example from this period, *Happy Birthday* (1972) by Gerry Gilbert and Carole Itter, is a mediation upon birth that documents the artists bathing each other at several stages during Itter's pregnancy. The soundtrack features readings taken from their poems and journals describing impressions of the nine month process. The third and final portion of the tape reveals them bathing their new born baby, and then turning to pose as a triptych for the camera. Privileging surface textures over depth perceptions, and ritual over narrative, their video portrait is

strangely claustrophobic and strangely tactile: capturing a materiality of the medium that would resurface as an aesthetic and structural device in Canadian cinema a decade later.

By 1972, the all-encompassing utopian project of Intermedia to turn life into art had collapsed. A number of splinter collectives concerned with the production and distribution of video in Vancouver, however, emerged from the ashes. These included Metro Media, associated with community activism, Video Inn (Satellite Video Exchange Society), Western Front, committed to artistic experimentation, and Women in Focus, a gender specific collective. This institutionalized split between video practices privileging information dissemination and more conceptual approaches to the medium signaled the beginnings of fundamental tensions between form and content that would be central to the shifts and developments in Canadian video as a whole. In this light, it is interesting to note that while Video In, Western Front, and Women in Focus have survived in one form or another until the 1990s, Metro Media's demise in 1983 marked the end of a twelve year effort to construct a context for the production and reception of community video at a local broadcast level.

Metro Media was founded in 1971 by artists such as Michael Goldberg, who also created an International Video Exchange Directory in 1972 aimed at "decentralizing media processes away from any elite."[4] Producing hundreds of hours of material for community groups through cable television (an infrastructure whereby private companies provide community access to production facilities and local broadcast in return for monopoly rights over services to viewers in a defined area), Metro Media encountered a number of obstacles. Difficulties arose over the censorship of sexually explicit educational material, lack of copyright for production, and lack of payment for work produced. Attempts over the years to broadcast radicalized content (or for that matter radicalized form) inevitably led to repeat experiences: the most recent example being a *Living With AIDS* cable show, produced by different community constituencies in Toronto and coordinated by video artist Michael Balser, that was yanked from the air by the cable company owners in response to explicit images of gay safe sex.

Yet despite the contradictions implicit in attempts to showcase a mixture of political and artistic work through privately owned cable stations,

the history of Vancouver video was punctuated by efforts of artists to construct a dialectic, albeit a limited one, between art and television. In the early 1970s, battles were fought and lost by Metro Media and Video Inn to secure support from the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) for an independent broadcast channel. A second bid for air time in 1975 by sixty community groups to obtain a license from the CRTC to operate a private station also ended in failure. Nevertheless, the cable system remained a key component of Vancouver's local video practice. Long after video artists in other parts of English Canada had abandoned any illusions around cable access as a parallel site of resistance to mainstream television, Vancouver groups such as Amelia Productions, a feminist production collective, used the cable infrastructure to produce and distribute documentaries such as *Concerned Aboriginal Women* (1981) while visual artists produced a highly anarchic and culturally wacky magazine format programme for cable television, *The Gina Show*, in 1979.[5]

By comparison, early Toronto video appears positively hermetic in its orientation: offering overtly personal and highly introverted responses to the medium. Like Vancouver video, sex, births, and counterculture lifestyles were the focus of the camera's gaze. Similar divisions between community documentary and conceptual experimentation were reflected in the organization of alternative production and distribution spaces for video such as Trinity Square Video, Art Metropole and A-Space. Unlike Vancouver, however, it was individual vision rather than collective process that emerged as historically unique to Toronto work of this period. In particular, the videotapes of Lisa Steele and Colin Campbell stand out as complex webs of transference and mediation: proto-simulations that blend the confessional with the conceptual, self-conscious narcissism with narrative fiction.

In *Janus* (1973), by Colin Campbell, the camera traces the artist making love to himself reproduced as a life-size nude photograph. Caressing an object that is also the subject, the artists's embrace becomes an embrace of mediation: the act of lovemaking mirrored by its re-presentation as an image on television. Confusing the boundaries of inside/outside, of the real and not so real, visual pleasure is constructed as internal to the frame. Identification of the spectator is displaced: replaced by a doubling of presence, a mirrored sexuality, a homoerotic image. By contrast, whatever

pleasure to be gleaned in Lisa Steele's *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974), does not reside with the body as a mediated object, but with a pathological attention projected onto an imperfect subject. Displacing the female body of classical cinema, who undresses by taking off her glasses and thereby transfixing the spectator symbolically through her gaze, Lisa Steele offers herself, her naked body, her scars, and her defects to an almost painful level of scrutiny.[6]

A voitive offering to a technological gaze, Lisa Steele's play upon the entrapment/mediation of the camera finds an echo in videotapes produced by David Askevold, a conceptual artist who taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NASCAD) from 1968-73. Paradigmatic of much of the video being produced in Halifax during the height of NASCAD's reputation as "the" cutting edge school of conceptual art in North America, Askevold's work suggests a fascination with mystery, storytelling, and the blurred lines between truth and fiction. In *My Recall of an Imprint from a Hypothetical Jungle* (1973), for example, an image of a body rolling around in tangled foliage is accompanied by a voice-over recounting an escape from a swamp, transforming the act of recounting into an allegory upon the relationship of perception to memory. The body, functioning as an abstract metaphor and as a literal embodiment of self in the work, once again proves central to the frame and to the process of recoding information: providing a site of intervention within a tightly woven mat of encoded meanings.

Embraced by artists for its conceptual intimacy and its potential to alter the parameters of the consciousness industry, early video art in Canada also functioned as a reflection of a national culture whose "technological imperative is the deepest memory trace in the Canadian social heritage."[7] From the historical beginnings of the fur trade that penetrated a vast interior to the epic construction of a national railroad to cross-country phone-in radio shows, Canada as a nation was forged from and mediated by a confluence of technology and ideology. Seeking to override the geopolitical realities of an enormous land-mass, linguistic and regional differences, and a natural communication corridor running north-south and not east-west, Canada was thrust into the vanguard of the information revolution with the launch of the telecommunications satellite, Alouette I in 1972, and the completion of the world's first domestic

telecommunications system based upon geo-stationary satellites a decade later. With this technological expansion mirrored by the prophetic visions of Marshall McLuhan's electronic global village, Canada itself as a concept offered artists an overarching context from which to imagine a utopian merger of life and art, communication and perception.

Marshall McLuhan, Canada's media mystic gone corporate guru, provided the metaphors to describe a brave new world of mediation. His famous adage, "the medium is the message," dovetailed perfectly with a generation of Canadian artists seeking to map form onto content and a radical imaginary upon technological innovation. The convergence of his media mysticism with the specificity of Canada's technological imperative found its most salient expression in videoworks such as *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video* (1974) by Toronto based installation/ video artist Vera Frenkel. Using Northern Telecom's fledging technology of instantaneous image transmission, Frenkel orchestrated live conversations between two groups of people facing cameras in two different cities across Canada. Touching upon the complex frontiers of simulation, the participants became embodied echoes bouncing back and forth through a satellite studded space. Reaching earnestly toward the telematic image of their counterparts, they appeared to be asking, like disbelievers witnessing an apparition: Are you really there? Can you exist?[8]

As if responding to these questions, the work of artist Tom Sherman plays out Frenkel's prototype explorations as a logical endgame between technology and existence. Reorienting Frenkel's outward gestures toward a closed-circuit reception, Sherman replaces her fragile embrace of telecommunication with a confrontation between the machine and artist. Whether staging interactions between the audience and himself as a video mutation in *Envisioner* (1978), or staging a monologue between himself and a computer-robot entity in *Exclusive Memory (EM 7/1112, EM 5/8/16, EM 4/9/19)* (1987), Sherman's video practice maintains a consistent fascination with the future perfect of cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and information circuits. In chorus with videoworks such as Ian Murray's *Come on Touch It* (1983), an examination of television's mechanisms of social control, John Watt's video studies of surveillance systems, or Ardele Lister's visual layering of an information retrieval overload in *Hell* (1985), Sherman inverts McLuhan's heralded transition from industrialization to automation.

Diagnosing the breadth and depth of simulation's wounds, his work becomes a response to McLuhan's call for art to function as an "early warning system" in an age of digital fallout and mutating consciousness.

Echoing Sherman's fascination with technological saturation but focusing upon the spectacle rather than the mechanisms of mediation, General Idea, a collaborative group of three Toronto-based artists, have used video to provide a self-scripted construction of their own mythology as artists. "We wanted to be famous, glamorous and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamorous we could say we were artists and we would be,"[9] they announced in the autumn of 1975 and proceeded to produce witty and self-referential videos such as *Pilot* (1977), *Test Tube* (1979) and *Shut the Fuck Up* (1985) that chart the inextricable relationship of the artist to mass media and media hype. Performance artists Randy & Berenicci also emphasize the role of spectacle and technology, with videotapes such as *Rune* (1986) and *The Fourth Corner of the World* (1992) featuring their wanderings through elaborate sets, walls of video monitors, and competing systems of cultural representation. The Hummer Sisters, performance artists who cross-pollinate theatre and activist politics, use video to satirize the media and to document their cabarets as media spectacles, with *ART vs. ART* (1983) documenting their 1982 mayoral challenge in Toronto that netted them second place with twelve thousand votes.

For a number of Canadian video artists, however, McLuhan's vision of the global village did not lead toward a virtual reality pastiche or media parody, but provoked a critique of mass culture's homogeneity. The first infatuation with technology fading by the late 1970s, Canadian artists settled into long-term relationships with the medium that pivoted upon the documentation of absences within dominant culture and an exposure of media manipulation. Ironically, this shift in emphasis from conceptual exploration to ideological interrogation also occurred at an historical moment when the opportunities for video's distribution on television had all but vanished. A catalogue accompanying the Venice Bienniale exhibition of Canadian videos in 1980 listed over thirty-five alternative spaces and museum sites in Canada that produced and/or programmed video. However, not one broadcast venue was mentioned.[10] Thus, nurtured by a state infrastructure of provincial and national arts funding, yet simultaneously

denied a context for reception through a state-run broadcast system and/or commercial venues, video of the 1980s began to occupy what Elke Town, an art critic, has named "a territory of limits tainted by the legacy of its own technological heritage (where) to be of television but not on it was tantamount to a cultural schizoprenia."[11]

Echoing the struggles of Canadian cinema against the omnipresence of a Hollywood film model and the omnipotence of an American distribution system that controls ninety percent of all domestic outlets, the uneven development of Canadian video also confronted a vertical broadcast network flooded by American programming. *White Dawn* (1988), a videotape by Toronto-based artists Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak, directly addresses this paradoxical relationship of video to television, and of cultural autonomy to corporate interests. Inverting the power relations of mass culture to imagine a media landscape in which Canadian rather than American products fill the airwaves and bookstores, *White Dawn* presents a fantasy projection where *Vogue* and *Time* magazines are only available at specialty stores, American pop songs have been displaced by Canadian folk singers and American television is overwhelmed by Canadian content. Constructing from video's marginal position a two-way mirror of dominant culture, Steele and Tomczak suggest the degree to which a mainstream Canadian imagination is shaped by its powerful neighbor south of the 49th parallel, and the degree to which this colonial structure has stripped video art of its interventionist aspirations and mass audience appeal.

Working collaboratively since 1983, Steele and Tomczak have produced a number of tapes in addition to *White Dawn* that seek a simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction of a political imaginary. *Working The Double Shift* (1984), for example, blends media critique with a utopian vision of artistic intervention: on-screen images paralleling their off-screen activism including the founding of V-Tape, a vast distribution centre/depository for Canadian video works, and the organization of an Independent Artists Union. Divided into three sections, the first part of *Working The Double Shift* features a semiotic cross-examination of the family as an idealized representation of television. Following upon this deconstructive exercise, appropriated footage of a session of the Canadian parliament is used to project a future revolution in which pressure from grassroots organizations has forced the government to decentralize itself and

hand over state media resources to community and interest groups. The third and final section features a series of interactions between the artists and their child in a domestic space: seeking to question gender roles through examples of household chores and through the insistent questions of a child who asks "Whose turn is it to get up in the morning?"[12]

Paradigmatic of the strategies of appropriation and alternative imaging employed by video artists during the 1980s, *Working The Double Shift*'s examination of gender construction and gender stereotyping points to the profound influence that feminism exerted upon the development of 1980s video art. As a cultural critique that questioned mechanisms of objectification and structures of representation itself, feminism's collision with alternative video practices brought into sharp relief issues of spectatorship, presence/absence binaries, and sexual difference. *Delicate Issue* (1979) by Vancouver artist Kate Craig, for instance, locates in the body an index of presence, simultaneously decentred through sexuality, and divided as a gendered object/subject. In *Delicate Issue*, the macroscopic lens of a camera scans over sweating skin, delicate hair, strange beauty marks, the folds and creases of the body's indeterminate contours: so close to its object of scrutiny that identification fragments and the boundaries of representation blur.

This literal inscription of the body as a site of socialized gender and constructed desire in *Delicate Issue* finds a metaphoric echo in a number of other video works in the 1980s seeking to destabilize structures of identity and identification. Eschewing realist or essentialist strategies of political intervention, although there are examples of socially programmatic work such Marusia Bociurkiw's document of a retail sector strike in *No Small Change* (1985) or Nancy Nicol's epic history of the pro-abortion movement *Struggle For Choice* (1986), video artists of the 1980s embraced strategies of displacement, masquerade and slippage in their efforts to explore issues of sexual difference and social conditioning. *The Gloria Tapes* (1980) by Lisa Steele, for example, constructs a composite character from Toronto's welfare class whose struggles with issues of pregnancy, abuse, social control, and anti-social behavior are played out within a mock soap-opera structure. Rather than acting a role in a drama, Steele appears to impersonate the 'other' woman: her body a host that displaces woman as victim with black humor and highly-staged confessional monologues;

her narrative replacing the codes of cinéma verité to offer the traditionally silenced an opportunity to speak with impunity.

Similarly, Colin Campbell uses a device of cross-dressing in a number of his late 1970s and early 1980s videotapes to overturn traditional subject/object spectator identifications. Assuming the female personas of a recently widowed death and detail obsessed matron in the *The Woman From Malibu* series (1976-77) and of an ingenuine office girl turned art world hip as Robyn in *Modern Love* (1979) and *Bad Girls* (1980), Campbell's alter-egos displace both masculine and feminine codes, reversing viewer expectations by shifting gender and spoofing mass culture mores. In a later work, *No Voice Over* (1986) Campbell constructs the feminine by banishing the masculine altogether, intertwining the stories of three M&M women, Mocha, Miranda, and Marcella, and their off-screen patron, Dix-Ten, who becomes the absent father and in effect the voice-over. Through postcards and tapes sent through the mail, the three women weave a narrative bonding of adventure, intrigue, glamor, desire and premonitions. Dix-Ten's links to the women, on the other hand, are economic and benevolent, not emotional. He becomes a stand-in for the video medium, trapped by conventions of narrative and media signification: seeking disruption through the confusion of the feminine and the masculine points of view.[13]

Hygiene (1985) by Toronto video artists Andrew Patterson and Jorge Lozano, also seeks to deflect sexual stereotypes through a play upon narrative conventions and narrative displacements. Framed by the formal codes of high melodrama, the characters of *Hygiene* oscillate between gender reversals and gendered parodies. Rachel, as the heroine of the story, projects her unrequited love upon a villainous pastishe of masculinity, shifting between the position of the hysteric feminine roaming her apartment in despair, and drunken masculinity, drowning her sorrows at the bar. Rescued from a self-destructive disintegration by a handsome hero who is not a man at all but a lesbian, Rachel's desire collides against a plot that unfolds in a mock-up fashion where heterosexuality is not only an assumption, but compulsory. Reading *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich on the beach, Rachel is interrupted by an obligatory male who walks into the frame, and usurps the narrative by making her "happy," sexually frustrated and very bored. Living with this bland nice guy hero, Rachel hears

on the news that her lesbian friend has been killed in a fire-bombing of the Women's Book Store. Rushing, not to the scene of the accident, but to a women's bar, Rachel's realization that true love always comes too late, ends the tape.

Confronted with a parade of gendered clichés and overdetermined desires, a lesbian who declines to offer the viewer a voyeuristic construction of the Other, and a heroine whose Prince Charming is a convenience, the heterosexual assumptions of the spectator position in *Hygiene* fall to pieces. By way of contrast, Toronto-based video artist Rodney Werden chooses to accentuate rather than displace the relationship of looking to gendered constructions of male voyeurism to female objectification. Werden's tapes reveal a long-standing fascination with the exchange value of sexuality, employing strategies of transgression to play out the commodification of difference. Banal in tone and confessional in structure, the tapes range from documentary interviews to highly stylized fictional vignettes. *Call Roger* (1974) features a male model posing for a still camera while a voice-over recites responses to his newspaper advertisement. In *Pauli Schell* (1975), Werden interviews a woman about her interest in sado-masochism. *Baby Dolls* (1978) features a young male talking about his upcoming sex-change. *Story of Red* (1984) and *Blue Moon* (1983) are dramatized encounters between a prostitute and a john that expose the relationship of sexual exchange to repressed desire.

Inverse constructions of media sensationalism, Werden's highly mundane approach to a highly volatile subject culminates in his positioning of the camera as pornographer/pimp, the artist as john, and the subjects as 'real' life prostitutes. In *Money Talks, Bullshit Walks* (1986), Werden hired prostitutes off the street in order to interview them about their work and the ways in which men relate to them as objects of exchange. The women, naked and framed by a map of the world, are exposed to the camera's scrutiny while Werden, as the absent interrogator, functions as a disembodied voice, prying information. Simultaneously signifying a failed masculinity (as the one who talks instead of fucks), and a sexual mastery (as the one who controls the position of the camera and the direction of the questions), Werden constructs a visual allegory of sexual and cultural hierarchies.[14]

Paul Wong, a Vancouver artist whose involvement with video dates back to Intermedia's fusion of art and life in the 1970s, chooses to parody

rather than interrogate cultural transgressions, seeking to reveal the flamboyant and the perverse in sexuality and its media representations. Using the video medium as a documentary device, Wong's emphasis upon counter-culture and gay perspectives forms part of a larger group of video artists in the 1980s including Michael Balser, Andy Fabo, Richard Fung, John Greyson, and Margaret Moores that have made video an important site of homosexual and lesbian image explorations. Wong's *Prime Cuts* (1981), *Body Fluid* (1987) and *Confused Views* (1984) employ strategies of pastiche, spectacle and the confessional to construct a skewered sociological overview of diverse desires and sexual fantasies. In the case of *Confused Views*, a video installation commissioned by the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), the combination of sexual confessions and alternative sexualities proved so controversial that the curator cancelled the exhibition only days before its scheduled opening. An example of the confrontation that can arise over the relationship of cultural content to cultural reception, *Confused Views* served as a barometer of the intolerance of the museum/gallery institution for video art that engaged directly with issues of sexual identity.

While focusing upon issues of sexuality and representation for much of his video career, Paul Wong's recent work, *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* (1987) took as its theme cultural rather than sexual displacement. Exploring the Chinese communities of Canada and China, and by extension his own cultural background, Wong's shift in emphasis points to the potential of video to continually reinvent itself as a site of critical intervention: providing artists with the tools to represent the marginalized of mainstream society. Following in the steps of a feminist analysis around spectatorship, codification, and objectification that influenced the content and form of the medium in the early 1980s, the emergence of 'identity politics' in the late 1980s privileges the video medium as a site of media advocacy as well as media intervention. Video artists such as Richard Fung, interested in juxtaposing media analysis with images denied access in mainstream culture, explores facets of gay identity from the point of view of a Chinese-Canadian. *Chinese Characters* (1986) investigates the relationship of gay Asian men to white gay pornography while *My Mother's Place* (1990) presents a complex layering of the relationships of colonialism, race, and sexuality to immigrant identity.

John Greyson, a contemporary of Richard Fung, and a feature film-maker as well as prolific video artist, juxtaposes forbidden images of gay pornography with an investigative structure of cultural and media references. In *Kipling Meets the Cowboys* (1985), and *The Jungle Boy* (1985), for example, Greyson plays off Rudyard Kipling's closet homosexuality and overt imperialism to juxtapose sexual fantasies with dominant social mores. *You Taste American* (1986) takes its cues from the contemporary media: issues of washroom sex, video surveillance, and social control addressed through a hybrid montage of performance, documentary reenactment and newspaper reports. Most recently, Greyson's hybrid references to history, media, and homosexuality have been adapted to cinema in *Urinal* (1988), *The Making of Monsters* (1991) and *Zero Patience* (1994) while his videowork has become a site of political intervention focusing upon AIDS-related issues. Whether offering a rock-video pastiche of safe sex in *The ADS Epidemic* (1987) or sending up mainstream coverage of International Conferences on AIDS in *The World is Sic* (1989), Greyson's videos are significant for both their radical content and originality of form.

Toronto artists Michael Balser and Andy Fabo also adopt video as a tool by which to address issues of AIDS and gay representation. *Survival of the Delirious* (1988), appropriates the Native Cree legend of Windigo, a spirit demon: inducing a surrealist delirium of images and texts that traces a coming to terms with an HIV-positive condition. On the flip side of gay representation, *Frankly Shirley* (1987) by Margaret Moores uses none of the hybrid devices and historical plundering that distinguish both Greyson's and Balser/Fabo's work. A gentle fairytale romp through a lesbian love affair, *Frankly Shirley* brings video full circle to its first conceptual attempts to fuse sex, counter-culture and the everyday life into a celebration of the body and its mediated presence.

In turn, the return of the repressed extends from images and issues rendered invisible by dominant culture to a reclaiming of history and identity by First Nations artists and Canadians of African descent. Ranging in form from an Inuit portrayal of everyday customs in Zacharias Kunuk's *Nunaqpa (Going Inland)* (1991) and Donna James' portrait of everyday domesticity to Zachery Longboy's reclamation of First Nations' traditions in *From Another Time Comes One...* (1990) and Ruby Truly's semiotic dirge for a people's memories destroyed by cultural genocide

And The Word Was God (1987), video in the hands of these artists is used as a tool of self-determination and of cultural preservation.

In *And The Word Was God*, Truly rereads portions of a 1950s missionary textbook used in teaching Cree-speaking Native children English to create a concrete sound poem. Deconstructing language in order to reconstruct a eulogy to the alienation and suffering endured by Native children in Canadian history, Truly references the forcible removal of the children from their families during the 1950s and their placement in harsh and abusive Residential boarding schools where speaking Native languages was forbidden, and physically punished. Zachery Longboy's *From Another Time Comes One...*, juxtaposes images of commercial 'Indian' souvenirs with a ceremonial ritual to point to the poetry and healing qualities of First Nations traditions suppressed by dominant culture. In a parallel vein, Donna James, a Halifax-based artist of African descent, searches through language for oral traditions that encapsulate the cultural memory of her Jamaican hertitage. With the domestic space of a kitchen serving as back-drop for issues of language and cultural difference, *Maigre Dog* (1990), features the voices of two women from different generations in which the older woman explains to the younger the meanings encoded in idiomatic expressions that embody the lived histories of her ancestors. By way of contrast, Zacharias Kunuk's *Nunaqpa (Going Inland)*, uses the video camera as a tool of documentation to create a portrait of Inuit customs that extends the boundaries of space and time in its embrace of 'real time' life in the Arctic.

Taken up by Ruby Truly, Zachery Longboy and Donna James as a site of redress and intervention, these themes of history, language and loss, re-emerge in the 1980s video works of Vera Frenkel as a lament for a body politic atomized and reformatted by a technological conflation of surveillance and memory. Constructing a projection of the future where art is no longer necessary, to remember is dangerous, and rumor is forbidden, *The Last Screening Room: A Valentine* (1984) tells the story of a Privacy Guarantor who listens to the confessions of prisoners in jail on the condition that she forgets what she has heard the moment it is said. Much like the work of Toronto-based artist Gary Kibbins, whose visually poetic and conceptually complex video *Canadian Diamonds* (1987) goes backwards rather than forwards in time to investigate the relationship of history and amnesia,

Frenkel poses the fundamental instability of memory within a media saturated environment.

In contrast, Vancouver-based artist Sara Diamond privileges the role of storytelling and oral remembrance as a means of accessing and recovering history buried or suppressed by dominant culture. From *Influences of My Mother* (1982), a personal and experimental investigation of memory and representation, to *Lull Before the Storm* (1990), a four hour, four part series examining the role of women in labor issues, utilizing archival footage, documentary interviews and staged dramatic sequences, Diamond's work asserts the potential of mediation to reflect social consciousness. Combining a conceptual and practical interrogation of history to construct an investigation of the role of working class women in Post World War II Canada, *Lull Before The Storm*, contrasts the struggles of a fictional heroine, Dorothy Sanderson, to negotiate a bewildering array of conflicting ideological information with the oral histories of women working in the lumber camps and fisheries of rural British Columbia.[15]

This perceptible shift in video, from a proclamation of the body's presence in the 1970s to an investigation of its traces as a cultural memory in the 1980s, is reflected as a narrative search for identity in the work of Toronto-based performance artist Paulette Phillips. In her video *It Depends* (1982) and her 1986 performance *Cadence of Insanity (A Reaction) Part II*, her women characters weave stories of disjunctive fantasies and discontinuous memories: their psychological projections mirrored by bodily gestures and interrupted by chance encounters. Similarly, Joyan Saunder's *Here in the Southwest* (1984) and b.h. Yael's *My Mother is a Dangerous Woman* (1987) present female characters whose recollections of social conditioning, behavior modification, and gender stereotyping create storytelling vignettes that are at once fragmented in content and highly controlled in deliverance. Halifax-based Jan Peacock, in her technologically overloaded investigation of reporting and retelling, *Whitewash* (1990) and Vancouver-based Liz Vander Zaag's digitalized and computer animated works *Baby Eyes* (1983) and *Hot Chicks on TV* (1986), also address themes of identity and fragmentation, suggesting that the role of memory as a subversive, sometimes unconscious act of rebellion, can also function as an act of cognitive perception and visual reception.

The works of Rhonda Abrams, Susan Rynard, Tess Payne, Dennis Day,

Steve Reinke and Robert Lee, a younger generation of video artists based in Toronto, are linked less by a concern for cultural memory than by surface representations of an ecologically troubled and alienating media-wasteland. Rhonda Abram's *The Lament of the Bushman* (1987) for example, features a live camera performance of a fiddler and his friend who sings a down-home ode "to bring back his trees" in the midst of a slashed clearing and the after-effects of acid rain. Susan Rynard's *Within Dialogue (Silence)* (1987) reduces consciousness to an industrial emptiness, with the formal precision of every image reverberating in a hollow echo chamber of table settings, gray apartment walls, and freeways. In Dennis Day's *Oh Nothing* (1989) and *Excultate Jubilate* (1989), this angst gives way to a spectacular mish-mash of computerized special effects and a hot comic frenzy of slap-shot images. Tess Payne's combination of urban and rural settings, special effects and fragmented characters in works such as *The Flow of Appearances* (1986) and *Pursuing Nature* (1991), retrieves a social context to trace a nature/culture dichotomy within structures of technological alienation. Steve Reinke, with his numerous short videos constructing pastiches of biology and bodies, and Robert Lee, with his claustrophobic reconfiguration of space and surveillance in *Incidence of Storage Space* (1990), take the structures of technological alienation to their logical conclusion, using video as a platform to explore the mutations in contemporary society of both the subject and its objective reality.

The themes of media saturation and individual alienation addressed by these younger video artists can be seen to reflect an encroaching globalization of space: symptoms of a brave New World Order where the future fantasies of virtual reality and cybernetic simulation edge closer to a technological present. Simultaneously, the concern by other artists and communities to utilize video as a place from which silenced voices speak, points to the role of video art as an index of resistance to dominant culture. In a new age of technique, it is this multiplicity, this potential to encompass a vast terrain of differences and experimentations, that positions video as an important facet of an ongoing negotiation of mediation in the 1990s. Far more than the sum of its individual parts, video functions as a vast informal archive: a collective memory of images that reshapes the fragments of dominant culture into a self-reflexive art practice, a utopian Other, a tool of self-determination.

Understood as an act of individual mediation and as a document of collective expression, the history of video in Canada becomes a history shaped by issues of access and activism, participation and dialogue. It is a history where images and consciousness interact, where consciousness and mediation overlap. It is a two-way mirror framing the world and the viewer: a history where the producers and the receivers join hands in the making of an image and an intervention. It is a history whose traces can be found in the archives of community groups, on the screens of Canadian cinemas, in the museums of high culture, in the living rooms of grass-root activists. And as a history, video art also becomes a future blueprint: a dialectical process that records and alters a social fabric, a medium of expression that can both soothe and challenge the ever-increasing technological anxieties of the global village.

Notes

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1965): p. 3.

2. Renée Baert, *Vintage Video: Early Canadian Video Art to 1974* (Toronto: Artculture Resource Centre, 1986). For other overviews of video in the early 1970s see Peggy Gale, "Video Art in Canada: Four Worlds," *Studio International*, vol. 191, no. 981 (May-June 1976) and the special theme issue of *Artscanada* (October 1973).

3. This article only refers to a history of English language video produced outside of Québec. It should be noted that a number of important English language video artists have produced work in Québec, including Norman Cohn, Anne Ramsden, and Julien Samuel.

4. Cited in: Sara Diamond, "Daring Documents: The Practical Aesthetics of Early Vancouver Video," *Vancouver Anthology: The institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991): p. 56.

5. For an overview of the history of community access television in Canada, see Dot Tuer, "All in the Family: An examination of Community Access Cable Television in Canada," *Fuse Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Spring 1994).

6. For an exapanded analysis of these works and others, see Dot Tuer, "Perspectives of the Body in Canadian Video Art", *C Magazine* (Winter 1993).

7. Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1984): p. 94

8. An overview Vera Frenkel's work can be found in the catalogue, *Vera Frenkel: Raincoats, Suitcases, Palms*, (Toronto: Art Gallery at York University, 1993).

9. General Idea, "Glamour," *FILE Retrospective*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1984): p. 76.

10. The Canadian entry for the XXXIX International Bienniale Exhibition of Art, Venice, 1980, featured works by Colin Campbell, Pierre Falardeau & Julien Poulin, General Idea, and Lisa Steele. An accompanying catalogue was published by the National Gallery of Canada.

11. Elke Town, "Video: The Limits of Territory," *Vidéo*, ed. René Payant (Montréal: Artextes, 1986): p. 178.

12. An overview of Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak's work can be found in the catalogue *4 Hours and 38 Minutes: Videotapes by Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989).

13. An overview of Colin Campbell's work can be found in the catalogue, *Colin Campbell: Media Works 1972-1990* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1991).

14. An expanded analysis of these works by Colin Campbell, Andrew Paterson and Rodney Werden can by found in Dot Tuer, "Video in Drag: Trans-sexing the Feminine," *Sightlines: Reading Contemporary Art*, eds. Jesscia Bradley and Lesley Johnstone (Montréal: Artextes Editions, 1994).

15. An overview of Sara Diamond's work can be found in the catalogue, *Sara Diamond: Memories Revisited, Histories Retold* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992).

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3. ONTOLOGY

The Lamented Moments / Desired Objects of Video Art
Towards an Aesthetics of Discrepancy

Christine Ross

It is the opening scene of Juan Downey's The Looking Glass: *a tour of the effects of the mirror and the gaze in art and culture; (a fragment of) a self-portrait* en abîme *in which the image of the person who sets the scene in motion flows with the mass of signs that returns him to himself. Le Balzar, in Paris... is the occasion of a doubling of the mirror-image, between the real body and its reflection, but dislocated, and projected, glowing with an intense light, supported by a dialogue re-constructed from a passage of* A Lover's Discourse: *"But I never look like that.... As for your own body you are condemned to the repertoire of its images."... Finally, the epilogue: Narcissus falls into the water and drowns...as if his gaze of fascination withdraws into itself to translate the impossibility of seeing, of seeing oneself.*

<div align="right">Raymond Bellour, Autoportraits[1]</div>

1. The image, the effect: what is depth afterall?

What does one say about an image that presents itself as nothing more than the effect of reflections, glances, bodies? If one holds to the description offered by Raymond Bellour in his reading of Juan Downey's *The Looking Glass* (1988), one cannot but notice that such an image displaces the effect from its cause. Which means *that there is an effect*, that is, an impression and a play of images but also an image in play. Understanding the image as effect implies that the referential and the reflexive no longer have as their function to mobilize the gaze in the service of a penetrating interpretation, they no longer constitute the gaze in its capacity for perception, in its access to meaning beneath the surface of the image. As long as the image is conceived of as effect, meaning lies on the surface. The

image, then, tells us: the competence of the gaze is elsewhere, like the meaning, like the scene and even the body.

Such at least is what would constitute the video image: an activity that disturbs the representational function such that it does nothing more than produce mirror effects (of bodies, glances) and mirrors in effect. Representation, in this case, is no longer so much the site of a complete and total recognition of the world, as it is an image that *impresses* and acts upon the spectator, an impression that takes on the value of meaning.

Petit Robert defines the effect as: "a kind of rotation that one transmits" to a ball or a billiard ball "in hitting it in such a way as to modify its usual movement." This is a particularly apt description of the videographic field that concerns me here. The image still partakes of a kind of *mimesis*, yet it hijacks and diverts this long-standing promise of representation: the reproduction of an origin through a transhistorical vision. In this way, the image disrupts the direct passage from point a to point b (points that are all the more significant because they constitute the video image), for the image destabilizes meaning, undermines the identity and interpretation of the work in which I can no longer recognize myself.

As a mirror effect and no longer a mirror proper, the video image is a site that throws into question the gaze (and perceptualism). To be more precise: the image invites the gaze to slide across it. The latter can linger upon iconic relations, but it will be doomed immediately to a slippage that blocks its access to all that presents itself as an origin, as its own origin. But the description of *The Looking Glass* offers several clues regarding a second action that comes to join the initial action of blockage: that of the *vibrant* and *luminous discrepancy* between the real body and its reflection.

It is the notion of *the surface* that best allows us to account for video as a process of slippage and dislocation. I am using it as much for its descriptive value (what happens when the gaze slips) as for its heuristic dimension (for there would be a 'superficial' break at the heart of the slippage). To speak of the surface in video is in fact to underline how it blocks and hinders the activity of interpretation but also how it dupes this obstacle.

Several general remarks are necessary to clarify the approach that suggests itself here. Although the notion of the surface is an ambiguous one (one must use this ambiguity to advantage), although it has never been, writes Georges Didi-Huberman, "a clear and distinct concept," this

equivocation is traversed by two main threads upon which I will insist.[2] First, the surface concerns the exteriority of things, which means that its existence follows, before anything else, from the inscription of a limit whose essential function is to separate the interior from the exterior. Furthermore, when the term arises in the discourse of *mimesis*, it is perceived as menacing, within representational activity, the surface is a component, as unavoidable as it is undesirable, that has to be ultimately negated by the spectator, for at any moment it risks blocking the emergence of depth.

As it is currently understood, then, the surface refers to the exterior part of a body. It appeals, for the most part, to the senses of sight and touch insofar as it concerns the visible, manifest and external side of things. A video image (which could only be) of the surface is one which invites the gaze to slip; the visible surface of video hampers perceptual access. Not only does this work against depth but depth itself is absorbed. Endowed with such materiality, the video image frustrates the reflexive function of representation through a total exclusion of the spectator.

In its metaphorical sense, a sense strengthened by metaphysics, the surface is an appearance; as such, it circumscribes and has to produce depth through a play of the negative–positive. To stop oneself at the surface of things, events and phenomena, is to skim without dipping below the surface, to be caught by sight, to give up the effort to penetrate and interpret, it is to linger on that which is neither profound nor essential, to end up in a certain way in the workings of consciousness. Given that the surface is a question of visibility, it deceives: reigning, it becomes an appearance that risks no longer producing that which it should produce at the outset, that is, depth (of meaning, of being, of the unconscious, of the authentic).

The image as surface would have therefore as its cause and its effect the suspension, the negation, the opacification of that which has depth. It engulfs that which is deep and becomes, by a kind of dichotomous inversion, depth as such. It constitutes itself as a subject, a subject all the more narcissistic for its exclusion and disposession of everything that presents itself as much in essence as in difference. And this is why the viewer will no longer have the *narcissistic pleasure* of adhering to the image and of falling into the illusion of its reality.

The surface, therefore, defines itself in these terms: it is the image, the

site of transformation of every object into a bewitching image, productive of an effect of materiality that compromises the re-presentation of the real. Its reality is all the more problematic because it feins mimesis, presents itself as a spectacular scene and simulates (tele) communication — even though we are excluded from it, beyond the connection. The surface throws off the spectator in order to constitute itself as Subject; it aborts the subject. It thus implies a particular response: an illusory materiality — or, a materialized illusion. The surface, as Fredric Jameson understands it, is the phenomenon by which the object no longer exists except as an appearance. More precisely, the object is contaminated by the appearance to which it no longer stands in opposition; in this way it looses its intrinsic value and its semiotic, as much as its historical, depth.[3]

What is it, then, about the video image as surface, about the video image face to face with the notion of the surface? It brings into play fragment, absence of distinction, levelling, scattering, expansion, auto-inversion, opacity. Consider Daniel Reeves' *Mosaic for the Kali Yuga* (1986) in which the screen is covered with thematically disconnected rectangles, transformed by a quasi-instantaneous dynamic of appearance and disappearance by which they empty themselves out at the same time as they fill themselves up with another image, juxtaposing themselves to one another in order to level the disparate and make uniform the diverse. Each image is nothing more than a fragment, an electronic jolt, a sensation, a machine gun shot across the surface, a productive destruction of the screen surface. Let's think also of General Idea's *Shut The Fuck Up* (1985) which mimics and takes to the limit the mass media with which video is confused, in this way aggravating the qualities of extension, flatness, and the visibility of the surface — bewitching and capitalizing upon objects that are transformed immediately into images of consumption.

In both cases, the image functions as a surface insofar as it carries out the fragmentation and levelling of the real, but it does not only stage these operations, it also mimics and shifts the very disturbance of the surface. In turmoil, the video image is therefore the site of a renewal of the surface's relation with itself, the site of a struggle that comes about not by a suspension (a denial) of the surface, but by the addition, piling up, and extension of surfaces. From this point on, it is in the gaps between surfaces that one must conceptualize what can no longer be designated as profundity (what

has become the surface). Such at least are the operations at play in the videotape that I intend to examine in some detail. Vern Hume's *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects* (1988)[4] practices the discrepancy in such a way as to connect the *je–de–surface* with the *monde–de–surface* that surrounds it, relaying memory, what was formerly called depth of time, in terms of reminiscence, instability, transience — indeed, forgetting.

2. *Lamentio, or the lapse of a cry*

In *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects*, the narrator searches for her past in filmic images of her childhood. The drama of a frustrated recognition unfolds; it is framed by a past conveyed through representation, by her inability to link the present with a filmic memory that is not her own. Even if the video sequences that weave their way between the filmic images bring her back to a present, this present establishes itself only tenuously: not only does the narrator never refer to it but the present produced by the video images is an abstract present, an unstable, errant present. Everything seems to tend toward an impossible relation to memory.

The lament makes manifest a temporal and autobiographical disjunction. On the one hand, in filmic terms, the images no longer allow an interpretative glance. It is in fact the images that do the looking because they have become that which exceeds the gaze, opacity, the wall which *I* run up against. In terms of video, the images no longer know how to look, they are the site of lack. Between the two is the *I* in search of recognition, an identity which has gone missing, torn apart by different moments, a self-less past and an incoherent present.

The commentary never stops refering to filmic images, speaking the impossibility of remembering oneself through them, of reliving past emotion or of (re)experiencing an original sensation. Memory exists but as a filmic representation it is understood as independent, indifferent, fragmented, and disjointed in relation to the present. Filmic images are the site of the recording of an *I* that is an *other* taken over and fashioned by the 'perpetual sameness' of the stereotypes and the repeated filmed themes. The past in flight, or rather, the filmic annihilation of the event: it is there, the heart of the disjunctive drama. Childhood fiction stands in for childhood as lived experience.

There is, here, a critique of cinematographic consciousness. For the filmic process of recording memories, i.e., the originary desire for a delimitation of the past in the interests of a future-oriented vision (in short, the entire family scenario determined by the frame and composition), petrifies the event and distances it from the flux of life; all of these images are aimed at producing an *a posteriori* memory, taking flight by way of the very project that has brought them into being, throwing the *I* outside that which consitutes it *hic et nunc* in the moment of the filmic act. The drama therefore is not so much that the narrator does not remember, but that an external memory is recollected in its place, that her personal memory is constituted not by events but, before anything else, by representations that are no longer meaningful.

But the images are not uniquely filmic, they are also videographic, visual manifestations of a present that seeks to link itself to the past. This videographic present does not, however, operate without uncertainty, without faltering, for it does not manage to actualize itself. It fails, more by a lack than by the excess attributed to film, to produce factual history. This can be seen and heard as much on the level of the lament of the narrator — who does not see the video images (or seems, by her silence in relation to them, not to see them) — as on the level of the images themselves. A stairway, a house, a street, a lake, mountains, snow banks, a road: all of these elements, videographically rendered, belong to a much sought after present which fails to materialize. Framing objects in close–up, displacing them from their context, the camera is in constant disequilibrium (it hesitates, rocks, swings; in the night sequences, it is practically blind); the images it produces relate endless movement: images of a train taken as it slows down, whose point of departure and point of arrival are unknown; images of a row boat that does nothing but move forward on the water, of a car travelling on a dead end road, of stairs that lead nowhere in particular. The I of the video artist is nothing more than a 'tourist,' not only of the past but also of the present, desire floating in the transience of the moment. It is also an other, that is, not the narrator, but Vern Hume, this man, this artist who is *unfaithful* to the autobiographical dimension of the narrative recounted by a woman (in this case, Linda Earl).

Does a world of surfaces not characterize itself precisely by the negation of memory? In this regard, Mario Perniola speaks of a mass media

society that privileges the experience of the moment and its emptying of the present. The mass media are productive not of new things but of scraps brought back to life by an artificial and fictive facade; the marketing of images demands their immediate, simultaneous and undifferentiated consumption.[5] Such is the Jamesonian resonance: the mass media world is that of appearance versus the thing, of the ephemeral versus the available, of consumption versus conservation, of assimilation versus differentiation, of the actual versus the present, of the moment versus memory.

Lamented Moments/Desired Objects reveals this mass media experiment of time which cuts the present from the past and produces an actuality severed from memory. To be more precise, it produces a divided I which is split between the filmic and the videographic. That is, between a surface inscribed with events represented in the form of lasting traces and the actual surface of video reception, a surface of non-factual moments. What divides things up here, and what hollows out the surface is, in fact, the psychic apparatus as it has been defined by Freud. We are familiar with the attraction held by the mystic writing pad for the psychoanalyst; used as a metaphor for the psychic apparatus, it allows the representation of the two functions, related yet distinct, of the apparatus. Its unlimited capacity for receiving new perceptions and its retention of lasting traces of perceptions produced in this manner:

> If we lift the entire covering-sheet — both the celluloid and the waxed paper — off the wax slab, the writing vanishes and, as I have already remarked, does not re-appear again. The surface of the Mystic Pad is clear of writing and once more capable of receiving impressions. But it is easy to discover that the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable lights. Thus the Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad: it solves the problem of combining the *two functions by dividing them between two separate but interrelated component parts or systems*. But this is precisely the way in which...our mental apparatus performs its perceptual function. The layer which receives the stimuli — the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* — forms no permanent traces; the foundations of memory come about in other, adjoining, systems.[6]

On one hand, then, the cover of the mystic writing pad whose sheet of celluloid is identified with the external layer of the system of conscious

perception that protects the internal layer from the "external phenomena likely to cause it pain," its waxed sheet is a representation of the surface that receives stimuli (known as the Pcpt.-Cs. system). On the other hand, the wax is a metaphor for the memory system of the unconscious, where the stimuli are conserved in a state of lasting traces, that is, where events are inscribed in memory.[7] For Freud, these two sites are distinct but connected as are the two functions of the psychic apparatus, its capacities for "receiving ever new perceptions" and to furnish with lasting memory traces, the conscious and the unconscious, the Pcpt.-Cs. system and the Pcs. and Ucs. systems.[8]

In *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects*, these two functions are, on the contrary, disconnected by the use of two media, film and video, exposing a chasm between the conscious and the unconscious, the present and the past. Here video is more a surface receptive to external stimuli than a recording of events in the form of permanent traces (its magnetic composition, afterall, constitutes a very fragile memory[9]); it records images but, much like the mental images described by neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, these images are illusive, fleeting, transitory, non-factual, without anchorage in a precise environment. As for film, it presents itself as a permanent picture of lasting traces in the unconscious, but what it preserves are representations, fictions distanced from the reality of childhood, constructed by others. In fact, if the present does not *take*, it is that it needs a memory in order to exist. As Hume maintains in relation to the collective Canadian memory:

> The current plains community has developed…no collective memory to keep alive the knowledge and experience, thus connecting the present to the past. A fracture, a loss of memory and history, has occurred. The current community is separated and isolated from what came before…. A lost history, a lost memory…. To exist and continue, a community must be able to recognize itself, thus constructing its identity, rather than accepting the identity imposed from the outside (through satellite, through mass communications, through centralized Canadian culture which displaces all the regions). Without history there will only be isolated occurrences.[10]

In the absence of a collective memory, identity is nothing but exteriority. The one Vern Hume speaks of is defined by a central power, a Canadian-American giant, that propagates and structures values and interests. This

language imposes an identity that has nothing to do with the historical I and we. It takes charge of memory and dissolves it with its ever new immediacy: "distanced from the mechanisms of representation which create and disseminate culture," Hume writes, "those who inhabit the marginal are in a position of *perpetual reception*.... The marginal position is therefore, colonized by the continual onslaught of images, ideas and representations created by and for the interests of the group(s) which dominate the centre."[11] The exteriorization of the subject is just that: the actuality of its subjectivity and the dissolution of its memory insofar as these are constituted in relation to the mass media that (perpetually) s(t)imulate the receptive surface of the psychic apparatus to the detriment of the surface inscription of permanent traces. This is the source of the disjunction. In response to this disjunction, Hume proposes the following: a 'decentring' of the constitutive and constituant ideological representations of the ruling political classes.[12]

In the final analysis, and it is here that the strategy of decentring lies, *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects* dislocates, in a project to decentralize power, foregrounding the dislocation of the past and present we are currently experiencing. More precisely, it repeats (reproduces) the disjunction in order to reveal its major effect, that is, the loss not only of the past but of the present... film and video, excess and lack, permanent external traces and the ephemeral reception of stimuli, the duration and the moment.[13] If for Freud psychoanalytic interpretation was perceived in terms of archaeological excavation, as an act of resurrection (i.e., the appearance of impressions buried in the unconscious), then the lament defines interpretation as an act which exerts itself only upon permanent, fictive and foreign traces, able to produce the I only as other. We move from Freud to Lacan, or still, we leave the *Aufklärung* for the consolidation of memory as a memory-screen.

As Jean-Baptiste Pontalis notes of childhood, what remains are not memories but traces that are "secondary figurations," re-translated in formal and visual terms; not that the image serves as a support for a secondary figuration or that it renders visible the invisible but rather, "as if the trace were already the product of a translation," of a change of state and space.[14] In fact, Pontalis says, it is only later that we create memories on our childhood; originally, it is the memories of childhood that are constituted.

Lamented Moments/Desired Objects proposes precisely the memory constructed on childhood, that is, a memory-surface that acts as a screen, that hides and distances the memories of childhood. Let us keep in mind these characteristics: the opacity of the filmic memory screen which "I" bumps up against, the incapacity to see and to recognize oneself in it, and videographic errance. *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects* is the psychic apparatus divided, the disjunction of the present from the past, of surfaces of reception and inscription, of the coversheet and the wax board. It is the wandering as much of the moment as of memory, that results from the frustrated quest for a temporal connection. The image as surface. But it is important not to lose sight that Hume repeats the disjunction and that this repetition (re)traces a gap, a blank (a memory blank) between excess and lack. One ought to pause here, over what happens or does not happen in the gap.

Let us insist upon this: memory reinforces itself as a memory-screen. It is not a question here of adding the fragments and the ruins of memory in order to reconstruct a whole object, it is more a question of holding oneself in a state of mourning, in the gap of the disjunction, for to agree with Pontalis:

> It is in this gap, this blank, that the analyst stands, mobile, there where discourse falters, there where the figure disappears.... In order to hear, in order to speak, it is necessary both that the image, in its obscuring presence, fade and that, in its absence, it remain. The invisible is not the negation of the visible: it is within it, it inhabits it, it is its horizon and its beginning.
> When the loss is in sight, mourning stops being an endless process.[15]

It is precisely in this space, in this gap that divides the filmic memory external to the subject and the actuality of the videographic recording incapable of capturing it, in the mourning that speaks the impossibility of the I recognizing itself, that the narrator seeks to recollect herself. Or, to be more precise and here we paraphrase William Olander: the narrator seeks rather to remember how to remember in the face of a loss of history.[16] How? By the lapse (the blank) of filmic memory. In light of these remarks, the inscription of the title *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects* insists upon the gap that subtends the unity of the video. Displaced into the very midst of the narrative, some time after the beginning of the tape, the arrangement of the title divides the lamented moments from the desired objects, the conscious from the unconscious. In *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects*

is there not, in the division (/) between the transfixed parental gaze of filmic memory and the errant gaze of video, a displacement of the centre and of the frame, a decentring, as Hume would put it.

Let us remember that the lament at the heart of *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects* is specific in that it simultaneously manifests the failure of parental desire to produce a memory that would belong to it (for I experience a loss) and the desire to compensate for the loss (for I am in search of myself): it is a desire on trial and in process. Mourning produces an I that stands on the side of the past (the side of filmic excess) and beyond the actual (the side of videographic lack), in the blank holes of memory. For among the descriptions and the lamentations is there not a sentence that shifts imperceptibly, a sentence relegated to oblivion by a loss of sight/scene?:

> We arrived before eight o'clock. We unpacked...I went back to sleep. When
> I got up, the sun still hadn't come up over the roof of the house. *There are no*
> *shots of this.*

The disjunction of the past and the present viewed, commented upon and lamented in this way is not repeated except insofar as it produces forgetting as memory, produces a gap between two surfaces (the surface of reception and the surface of the preservation of events). Such a gap brings about the re-emergence of the unrepresented of representation, creating a kind of future anterior of history, of personal history. A forgetting whose origins are not exactly known, a connection inseparable from disconnection, a moment of vision next to a loss of vision.

Videographic discrepancy is to be thought in these terms, as an inheritance but also as an opacification of modernity, the interstice to which Gilles Deleuze appeals, in so far as it is *superficial.*[17] Disrupting the surface, an interval of time is produced in which the real and the imaginary, the subject and the object, the interior and the exterior get confused. But contrary to modern cinema, which sets forth the depth of binaries (real-imaginary, subject-object, etc.), video produces an interplay of two surfaces, of two visibilities, of two appearances. An indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, in so far as they are at the surface; not so much, then, the point of indissociability at which I is another, but the point of indissociability at which an I of the surface mimes the surface that it is. It becomes imperative that before and after this 'superficial' point, I competes with the

other, that it plays a *pour-soi* of the surface, a discrepancy, a double action, given that the surface is that which does not cease to engross me, to eat away at me, to fragment me. For the I of *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects* runs up against the surface-image that s/he is (an image in which I is absorbed by the other), until the moment that the narrator constructs, that I construct, a subjective memory by the forgetting of this surface that I do not cease to be, but that I have at least managed to trouble, in discrepancy.

Translated by Lianne Moyes

Notes

1. Raymond Bellour, "Autoportraits," *Vidéo, Communication*, eds. R. Bellour and Anne-Marie Duguet (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1988): p. 353.

2. Georges Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1985): p. 39.

3. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): pp. 53-92.

4. This video has also been presented as part of an installation of the same title. Cf. Nancy Tousley, "Intallation reflects upon memory and its fiction," *Calgary Herald* (May 7, 1988): E5.

5. Mario Perniola, "Virtualité et perfection," *Machines virtuelles, Traverses* (Paris: Edition du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1988): pp. 29-31.

6. Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" (1924), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Pyschological Works of Sigmund Freu,.* vol. 19, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press): p. 230.

7. Ibid., p. 230.

8. Ibid., p. 228 and pp. 230-231: "... I do not think it is too far-fetched to compare ... the appearance and disappearance of the writing with the flickering up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception."

9. On the precariousness of the video image, see the video work of Madelon Hooykass and Elsa Stansfield.

10. Vern Hume, "Re:Placing the Sattelite — Media Culture on the Plains," *Video Guide* vol. 9, no. 1 (October 1987): p. 6.

11. Vern Hume, conference paper presented February 5th, 1987 at A.K.A. Gallery, Saskatechewan.

12. Hume writes: "But in order to create a greater diversity of expression in our culture which can accomodate the representation of difference, the process of representation must become decentred. In this project, distance becomes an advantage..." (Ibid.).

13. Cf. Philippe Dubois, "Palimpsestes," *Anamnese*, ed. Michel Gaboury (Montréal: Dazibao, 1989): p. 19.

14. Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *Perdre de vue* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1988): pp. 288-291. On screen memories, see Freud's essay "Screen Memories" (1899), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3, pp. 303-322.

15. Ibid., p. 296 and 298.

16. Cf. William Ollander, "Fragments," *The Art of Memory/The Loss of History* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985-86): pp. 7-12.

17. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Video Space / Video Time

The Electronic Image and Portable Video

Ron Burnett

1.

In the last twenty years many claims have been made with respect to video technology and its effects on the cultural and political landscape of Western countries. The last decade in particular has seen hundreds of pieces in the media on the importance and impact of video. From the vcr to the Camcorder, from the role of video recorders in the home to the impact of video stores on everyday life, there has been an endless flow of prognostications and evaluations, compounded by poll taking and symptomatic readings of video as a signpost for changes in the social fabric of advanced as well as developing countries.

All of these assessments (not limited to the popular press but also suffusing a variety of journals, television shows and public policy reports) have concerned themselves with the impact of video on the public at large. They have been guided by a set of presumptions about viewing, images and truth, the role of video as a window onto the world, its special qualities and potential as an artistic and political device and, most importantly, as an innovative technology. The concept of innovation is crucial to the way in which the medium has been understood and the way in which it has been historicized — with a modern and postmodern emphasis on the new. (The phenomena of evaluation of new technologies by the media themselves — reached its peak when *Nightline* featured an extended documentary entitled *Revolution in a Box* (1992). Ted Koppel narrated the changes which both television and portable video have generated. The apparent self-reflexivity of the show was bracketed, if not undermined, by its reproduction of manipulation theories of the media.)

When new technologies appear they are accompanied by written, verbal and media texts which help create public and private contexts within

which various types of discourse are exchanged and debated. The articulation of change, the evaluation of shifts in norms, the assessment of impact, are for the most part situated in a complex environment of discursive exposition and a struggle with interpretation and understanding. These processes contribute to the formation of communities of people inside and outside of the institutions which sustain and creatively engage with the new technologies themselves.

Often, the metaphors which underlie this process promote the idea that machines are somehow able to *outstrip* their progenitors and their users. The negotiation of change circles around this paradox. Subjects, agents, the people who use new technologies are placed into the position of respondents, as if their discourse will *inevitably* be transcended by the technology. A rear guard struggle is then fought with the technology. An effort is made to humanize the machine, although its history is, of course, the result of human intervention and creativity. What is at stake here is the degree to which the machine can be conceptualized as being in the control of humans. The *idea* that the machine is more powerful than the people who created it confers an even greater sense of strength onto the technology. This conferral has had an impact on the institutions designed to respond to and solidify the usefulness of technological innovation.

The shaping of this paradox has influenced the way in which video technologies have been used and understood since the invention of the portapak in the 1960s. Many of the claims for the portapak, including its ability to create new venues for communications and creativity, suggest at one and the same time that the machine sees what the eye cannot, or is able to observe what people themselves tend to leave out. This foreground-background problem, the relative play of surfaces and the relativistic assumptions which follow, are synthesized in Marshall McLuhan's proposal that electronic images are not like the more photographically oriented images which preceded them. And while this argument has some strength to it (photography and television are not the same, though they share similar concerns) any suggestion that the electronic image shows what the eye cannot see, leaves out the question of who is doing the seeing. It also transforms the technology into an autonomous vehicle with a set of formal concerns which are not derived from the pragmatic context into which the technology is placed. The early idealization of the portapak as a

vehicle for change is in part situated in this elevation of the formal into an ontological category.[1]

The Sony Corporation came out with the first low-priced portable video-tape recorder in 1966, the cv-2000. It cost $800, used a one-half inch reel-to-reel tape and recorded in black and white. Many claims have been made for this moment and it would be unfair not to characterize it as revolutionary. Clearly, the criteria used to evaluate the shifts depend on the historiographic model in place, on the presumptions about what came before and what came after. If the portapak initiated an era of community video and helped propel the *idea* of individuals taking the medium into their own hands onto centre stage, it also suggested that the instrument was somehow responsible for opening up channels of communication which had not existed beforehand. This tied into notions of consumer culture, of the relationship between low or mass culture and high culture. Portable video was part of mass culture but also allowed for if not encouraged experimentation at an artistic level. The presumed aggressor was broadcast television which was seen as a vehicle for passivity and exclusivity. In large measure then, the idea that portable video was part of a major change was set against the backdrop of broadcast media. "As early as 1958 Wolf Vostell created an environment containing a television screen surrounded by barbed wire. In 1963 he exhibited a group of damaged, dirty television sets — *in a symbolic act of aggression against the mass media* — while Nam June Paik concentrated on deviations intrinsic to the media, displaying thirteen malfunctionings of the electronic image, simultaneously."[2]

This emphasis on the difference between portable video technology and broadcast media has continued until the present day. For my purposes, what is important here is how we situate the discussion around innovation and historical change. If the 'other,' so to speak, was television, then the history to be written must take into account the rather complex set of attitudes which characterized the way in which television became a fundamental part of North American culture from the early 1950s until the mid-1960s. The particular form, then, of portapak television and its potential use for alternative modes of production needs to be evaluated in the light of broadcast and mainstream media.

At the same time care must be taken in discussing the *effects* of portable technologies upon users and viewers. The evaluative tools which we have

for examining how these technologies have been appropriated cannot simply be reduced to an instance of the technology itself and while it is true that hundreds of groups started to use video in the late 1960s and early 1970s that, in itself, does not suggest very much. Nor should too many radical conclusions be drawn from the widespread use of camcorders today. The point here is to encourage as much latitude as possible in examining the evaluative strategies best suited to a medium like video.

2.

Culturally, the sense one gets is that the ongoing creation of new technologies is inevitable and desirable. Each innovation has its own problems and successes, but each fits into the broader and more generalized notion of progress through the creation of capital and employment and the generation of profit and more leisure time. The circularity of this argument is not dissimilar to the way in which machines themselves operate. The key here is the notion of inevitability — the predictable result of the mechanics of repetition. An efficient machine will repeat itself *ad infinitum*. It has been created to do specific things. But what if this specificity is an illusion? The machine no longer represents its own activities — outstripped, as it were, by the unpredictable agents who make use of it. In video, the reaction to this contradiction has been to make the cameras more and more automatic, as well as smaller. Consequently, the machine effaces itself only to remain in control at a more sophisticated and less accessible level. For example the technology of automatic focus cannot be altered unless the user turns to an override and makes the focus manual. Even the terms here suggest a greater accuracy to the automatic eye than to the human one. This, despite the fact that the electronics have been created in response to a particular *concept* of sight. By extension, watching television is not the same as looking through the eyepiece of a camera, but in both cases a paradigm is at work. The difficulty is discerning whether the model in question has been produced through the technology or as a result of the complex and often ambiguous activities which constitute the subjective process of seeing.

I am concerned with the relationship between the history of a technology and popular and academic assumptions about how that technology

can be used. I am also concerned with presumptions of impact and various hypotheses about change as they are refracted through the shifting parameters of technological growth and innovation. To what degree, for example, does the appearance of video coincide with the desire to enlarge the market for electronic goods? Does this explain the rapid acceptance of the medium by many different sectors of our society? Do the camcorder and the palmcorder presage an historical shift in the way in which electronic images will be watched and understood? If we go back to Sony's invention of the half-inch black and white portapak, will we be able to delineate the social, cultural and economic factors which contextualised the appearance of this new technology? In retrospect, it now seems clear that Sony was setting the stage for the VCR, having made the judgment that spectators would eventually want to control their own viewing patterns and also place their faith in the electronic image in much the same way as they had with still photographs.[3]

Why was the Sony Corporation able to anticipate this? Why did an American firm, the Ampex Corporation, which had invented video recorders in 1955, ten years before Sony introduced the portapak, not grab the opportunity in the same way? Why did the JVC Company in Japan choose the VHS format over Betamax (a superior technology) and thus quickly marginalize Sony's role in the first years of VCR development, even though Sony had been in the forefront some years earlier? These are questions which this article will not necessarily be able to answer but they are part of a history which needs to be developed in any discussion of video.

<p style="text-align:center">3.</p>

There is a 'history' which can perhaps account for the new circuits of communication which have been put in place by the advent of video. In particular one would have to develop an analysis of the democratization process, as more and more people become comfortable with video as a device in the home. The link then, between the technology as a structure of possibilities and its location within a postmodern context in which new kinds of histories are being created in rather unlinear ways, and the discourse which can explain these developments, is in need of revision. At first blush it appears as if video permits a massive set of variables to be introduced into a world

of endless disjunctures where there is no clear or level playing field for the construction and maintenance of specific meanings. Yet it may be the case that as more and more electronic images are created for very specific contexts, that the fragmentation will allow for an interchangeable flux of meanings to be sustained by hitherto undescribed modes of linkage. The discursive crisis being put in place can be thought of this way. If John Wayne can be digitally reconstituted using old film footage in order to play a new role in a video-fiction, then there is nothing to prevent the development of a home system designed to save, in digital form, images of dead relatives. Enough variables can be introduced into these digital reconstructions to allow families to 'talk' to their relatives as if the 'dead' have something new to say. This is a system which need not be governed by conventional notions of predictability. It may not even evolve into a system. But the point must be made that to imagine such a possibility itself introduces variables to the processes of exchange between communication and the imaginary, to the relationship between language and thought. It also alters the very nature of fiction and may suggest radically new ways of thinking about representation. (Filmmaker Atom Egoyan has dealt with the paradoxes of video cemeteries in his film *Speaking Parts (1987)*).

4.

Stephen Hill, in his book *The Tragedy of Technology*,[4] makes the argument that there is a certain opaqueness to the historical process which leads from the invention of a new technology to its acceptance by society at large. The opaqueness tends to elide context and makes it appear as if innovation and inspiration are one and the same:

> ...technological artifacts presented a message, a text to be read, to both the producers and the users. But neither group could read the message for it was opaque in its subsequent social connotations. The text was opaque because neither group could see anything but the meaning of the technologies for their immediate life-world. Neither group could see beyond this life-world to the wider 'system' of technology-social relations that produced both the technologies themselves and the life-world consequences that the system implied.[5]

The difficulty here is that Hill talks about social, cultural and economic

forces with precisely the kind of determinism which he criticizes other historians of in his book. The process of invention, use and understanding cannot be *located*, as it were, in the technology or in the human subjects who make use of that technology. There is no convenient dyad to begin with which specifies or lays out the *plan* for a new invention. Subjectivity is involved at all stages — and there are no peripheral moments when the technology takes on a life of its own. The implication of what I am saying is that innovation should not be read backwards as an example of change. The continual process of renewal means that no society is ever in stasis long enough to bracket out the shifts it creates. The social is an ever-expanding movement along a distinctly non-linear path and this results in reciprocal exchanges between tradition and innovation, a production of boundaries and historical markers, all of which can be dissolved and recreated. The parameters of this dialectical process are forever changing.

Technology does not *reveal* subjectivity — neither would it be possible without it. There are few moments in history when technology has not played a role in the development of human society. The more important question is how human agents from varying backgrounds, of different genders, with dramatically different ethnic and family histories are able to negotiate meaningful relationships with the technologies they are inextricably bound to.

Let us suppose for a moment that two visually based machines address each other. How could this process be visualized? Two computers in contact through modems? Two video monitors in opposing ends of a boxing ring, volumes at high, yelling at each other? (A recent Nike advertisement has televisions talking to each other.) At which point is subjectivity disengaged? Machines are so fragile that an electrical blackout removes them from the scene. In this sense, to what degree does a new technology establish the parameters of cultural activity or the boundaries of human speech? These are not equations subject to the movement of one process through another, because technology *per se* has no identity, no space within which 'it' can play out a role without the process of interpretation attached to the exchange. This is not even an exchange because machines cannot be abstracted from the social context within which they are anthropomorphized. It might be better put to say that specific human beings create hypothetical systems of communication which depend on the juxtaposition

of machine and speech. The latter simply overwhelms the former (as with the telephone and the computer — both metonymically based on the verbal — neither capable of constraining or reconfiguring the verbal) and preserves, if not consolidates, the control which humans exercise over their own inventions. If it appears as if I am simply negating the more controversial tenets of McLuhanism here, let me counter this by saying that McLuhan put subjectivity and technology on opposite ends of an arrow pointed in both directions at once. The idea of reciprocity — the ontological status of the machine — already confers continuity to a situation which does not have to be framed by any sort of linkage.

There is a sense in which electronic media are indistinguishable, one from the other. It can be argued that the historical constraints operating on all electronic technologies are somewhat similar — this is of course at the root of the kind of universalist statement made by McLuhan, that the medium is the message. That is, any medium, irrespective of its history and its characteristics falls into a process which produces a conflation of technology and understanding. Presaging Jean Baudrillard, McLuhan's famous aphorism invokes a world of simulacra in which the distinction between subject and object collapses and in which authority is, so to speak, a function of technology.

What interests me is whether there is a link between the appearance of video and the presumption that there ever was a difference between the medium and the message. The difficulty for me is situated in the discourse which we have available for discussing the electronic media. How *can* we write or speak about electronic images?

The question of discourse and public and private forms of expression is crucial. Much has been made, for example, of the impact of video on less economically developed societies in Asia, the Pacific and Africa. Stephen Hill mentions the impact of video on Tongans where an economy which can barely sustain itself has nevertheless developed a burgeoning industry in VCR sales and video rentals: "So what the people are voraciously consuming is the worst x-rated movies, replete with sex and violence, that cannot be sold in many developed country outlets.... Thus, what the people, often still living in traditional village communities, are seeing, and modeling, is the worst of the excrescenses of advanced industrial life."[6]

Yet the problem here seems to be Hill's. For are we to imagine that

video happens on the scene in isolation from the cultural framework of the people themselves? To what degree can their interest in pornography be attributed to video? Why does electronic sex occupy some of their time? These are not questions which this piece can attempt to answer. Suffice it to say that there is no simple analytic step ladder which can be applied to this process. If the public sphere is to be of any interest, then one must be able to account for these activities without overvaluing either their content or their presence. For example, why would electronic sex be of interest to begin with? Why is it possible to be aroused by an electronic image? Technology does not exist outside of history, does not create history, is not simply a response to historical change. The separateness of machine and human is a human construction. It is the response of subjectivity to its own creative endeavors. There is no direct sequential movement here, no primal point of origin where machine and human find a point in space and time outside of the social. These are divisions which cannot be proven, though they can be imagined. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* notwithstanding, it is the limitations of human speech and response which characterize the overvaluation of technology. No picture should be drawn here which does not take account of the eruptions of the verbal — even a robot camera programmed to watch over a bank cannot override its own basic coding. The camera cannot write the scenario of the robbery which may or may not happen. Events as such, cannot be digitized — the virtual remains a human concept dependent on the semiotics of images as imagined by subjects. This, despite the fact that we can watch Humphrey Bogart reincarnated as a character on *Home Improvement* or smiling in a night club for a Coca-Cola advertisement.

It is not without interest that assembly-line robots need cameras in order to 'see' and that their version of sight cannot function without human intervention. The idea — a mythic one — that cameras can operate without humans to direct them, transforms the physics of optics into the metaphysics of vision. The wonder of this process, the excitement of the power which accompanies it is the basis for the pleasure we gain from using machines. It might be useful to think then of the extraordinary power of watching a television. The excitement comes from giving free reign to the imaginary in a sanctioned environment — to see anew, again and again — to explore the parameters of knowledge — to go where no

human has gone before. Lest this be seen as a duplication of television's own concept of itself, it seems clear that the arguments presently in place for the activity of viewing are strung out along a very thin border between conflicting conceptions of passivity and non-passivity. This dichotomy cannot account for televisual viewing, so we need an entirely different model.

<center>5.</center>

The deliberate structuring of a narrative for the electronic media is as much of a response to this set of unknowns (to this potential anarchy of the visual and the mental) as it is a pointer towards the endlessly inventive fictions which accompany the activity of storytelling. For no sooner has the story been told than it is retold again. And it is in this highly concentrated version of the real that the machine intervenes as a purveyor of yet another level of invention. In this 'Ocean of Stories'[7] the anti-story, as Salman Rushdie has so cleverly pointed out also has a story, a shadow-self into which the machine fits as a prop. Yet as Haroun listens to the tale of stories and anti-stories wiping each other out, this negation of a negation is at the heart of yet another narrative. There is no way in which the shadow can be released from its master, no possible way in which a story can exist without a double.

Bill Viola's tape *The Reflecting Pool* (1980) is about this paradox. A male character approaches a pool set in a forest. He stands at the edge and stares at his reflection. Then he jumps up and is suspended in mid-air above the water. He is frozen but the pool continues to reflect changes of color, and the movement of other characters. Slowly and imperceptibly he disappears from the foreground of the scene. The reflections in the pool seem to have little to do with what surrounds the water. There is a clear disjuncture between the story and the storytelling which is compounded when the male character suddenly climbs out of the pool, naked, and walks off into the forest. This breakdown of narrative causality, the inherent quality of disjuncture, the arbitrary juxtaposition of elements, is located in the doubling of image and character. The character cannot discover his identity just as the pool cannot reflect what surrounds it, and though he might, like Narcissus, wish to become what he sees, the pool will only permit him to be reborn on its own terms. Thus the reflection is neither what he expects

nor can it be manipulated. The shadow hangs on and what it needs is light. However, in order for the pool to be reflective it must be dark. Neither the story nor the anti-story can exist in a separate universe and this interdependence is both what marks and then constrains the electronic image. He is a witness to his own inability to control his image and yet he knows there would be no image were he not part of the scene. The pool becomes a metaphor of his struggle to control what he himself has created. In the final analysis his identity cannot be judged from the outside. Reflections cannot be generated in a vacuum.

This inseparability of picture and self, the idea that neither can exist without the other provides a framework for, but not the content of, the electronic image. It is as if the pool could evolve in any direction and as if nature itself has become a construct. It is a fascinating gesture towards a primitive utopia or, should I say, a quintessential melding of image and reality. Thus, the electronic image is the site of a new Garden of Eden in which the natural is as much a concept as it is a representation. Concepts and representations do not have to be linked — the competence to understand each of these reversals lies with the interpretive power of the viewer who has learned to reconstruct meaning from a set of sometimes disparate if not contradictory elements. The electronic image is attached to an ongoing process of interpretation and this is perhaps why the division between the passive and the non-passive is unworkable.

6.

In most of the literature about video, practitioners have provided the voice of analysis about the history of the medium. The level of theorization is for the most part personal and reflective. Twenty-five years after its appearance in the form of the Sony black and white portapak, there are edited compilations of essays available but little of an extended analysis into the medium and its characteristics. This may be the result of the conflation of video and television. (The latter has seen an explosion of literature over the last ten years. A recent bibliography which I prepared came to seventy pages.)

Television often stands for all electronic media with a resulting emphasis on the image and its effects with little concern for the specific historical development of image-based technologies. Yet video does need to be dis-

tinguished from television even though both media are intimately linked. A productive way of understanding this difference is that television has always been a broadcast medium, while video has tended to be lowcast. A lowcast medium is one which is community based and unlikely to generate images which can be used in the more universal sense of broadcast. (Though it can be argued that *America's Funniest Home Videos* breaks that assumption, I am not sure to what degree.)

Cross-overs now do occur with greater frequency than in the past. The most recent example of this is the footage of police beating Rodney King in Los Angeles. A camcorder was used by a man living nearby who captured an event which would otherwise not have been seen. It was then broadcast world-wide over the main news networks. It is of interest, however, that defense arguments for the police describe the tape as an 'optical illusion.' As Seth Adams points out: "...lawyers for the defendants say that what they call an optical illusion is involved because the videotape does not show the circumstances that surrounded the beating."[8]

To what degree can the tale of this beating be told? The camcorder was in the hands of a local resident. He witnessed the beating. Yet it was the image that upset everyone. Video allows the cameraperson the conceit of being the storyteller. However, the story would not have existed without being shown. The question, therefore, following on from Jean Baudrillard, would be whether the beating was staged for the camera? The policemen were not actors. King was hurt and bruised. Baudrillard wants us to jump to another level, however. He is asking us to look into the way in which the policemen see their own role, how they have become who they are. He is suggesting that in fitting King into a preordained part, as villain, the police are staging their own performance, are aligning themselves with a concept of their own roles and a concept of the other which has little to do, in the final analysis, with the situation itself. Reality as such, the optical illusion of the tape, does not matter. It is more important for the scenario of anger and frustration to be played out than for the police to examine the roles which they have adopted. In that sense they are staging the event. The fact that a camcorder happened to videotape their brutality brings the artifice into the foreground. The event itself is neither dispelled nor diluted because of this. Rather, we are witnesses to many sides of an event which takes on a symbolic and real meaning at the same time.

Stories and narratives are created with an end in mind. This is why the tape of Rodney King being beaten needed to be rounded out with the story of Los Angeles itself, completed in part, with the drama of what do to with the police department and its police chief. The beating could not stand on its own. Taking this as an example of lowcast video, the witness to an event needs to have his or her perceptions confirmed by others. This eruption of the public sphere can only be hinted at in the realm of broadcasting which is constrained by a set of normative procedures which limits the possibility of a shared exchange at the public level. In this instance, however, the two spheres came together and this may in fact be a harbinger of the future. The first *Wayne's World* (1992) can be seen as an examination of the contrast between lowcast and broadcast. A TV show shot in the basement of a suburban home with a limited audience through cable access, suddenly jumps into the big time and of course loses out, but not before the lowcasters teach the broadcasters a morality lesson about communication. The film provides three possible endings as a way of talking about the arbitrary nature of the medium, but also the richness inherent to any fiction — all doubles now have their onlookers, the viewer, who is also the creator. This is a film about that world of eclectic meanings which are the *raison d'être* for lowcast. It is about the construction and deconstruction of communities of people now bound by a set of values linked to their activities with images. It is a world in which all of the references are television shows, the electronic reruns of old films, video stores, neon signs, and coffee houses with employees and customers playing and replaying lives already lived through the media which they watch. But this is not an unproductive world of passivity and loss. Rather, it is a world of intense creativity in which the electronic image is being confronted on a daily basis by its own possibilities. Lowcast offers viewers more than the chance to create stories — it is about the chance to *live* the stories they create and this turns *Wayne's World* into satire, albeit one in which kitsch is king.

7.

Paradoxically, radio and video are more linked than video and television. But I do not want to make it appear as if these distinctions are hard and fast. Video, now in its extended form as camcorder, is framed by a more

decentralized model of communication. The discourse which results from its use tends towards the needs of localized, even personalized contexts. The use and value of a new technology can be evaluated within the parameters of specific situations not necessarily designed to respond to the presence of the technology. The assertion that video is a community-based technology (the source of much of its use in the art world, as well as by political groups) would have to be examined not only as a phenomenon, but as part of a reconfiguration of the electronic media in general.

Now, this opens up a fascinating terrain of research. It is possible to talk about video as a medium with an intimacy heretofore more associated with theatre, the poetry reading, the community art show. This has implications for how we can think about the medium and for the ways in which we can discuss its supposed impact. We can begin to hypothesize that there is more of a continuum between the use of the medium and other forms of community and individual expression. This continuum stretches into the relationship between the home photograph and the camcorder, the photo album and the personal letter. It means that we need to reconsider the approach we take to technological change and more closely examine continuities which are best expressed and can be most clearly understood by the pragmatic applications which people make of the technologies they are surrounded by. It would suggest that the notion of change (and even my use of it) needs careful rethinking.

There may be ways of narrating the appropriation of a medium like video through a history of subjectivity. For example, does the palmcorder (the smallest and lightest and most automatic of the camcorders) become like a pen? Can it be used to write letters and to provide a narrative structure for personal experiences? If the answer is yes, how so? And what conceptual tools do we have available to analyze what is produced? What kind of analysis suits this process best? (It is important to note that the imminent availability of video servers will, as with computer servers, recreate the distribution systems for video images. This will make it possible to create heretofore unimagined networks for the transmission of video from any number of increasingly local contexts.)

Of course, most letters are never published. Taken as a whole they are evidence of intense activity. But, letters remain indelibly associated with all that is private — all that is unique to human relationships. Were video to

become like letters, a medium of sharing and record keeping it would be necessary for the images to deliver an unusual kind of specificity. They would have to transcend the limitations of their own 'objectness' and herein lies the paradox of the electronic. It is a pixilation of the body and a rechanneling of the voice. A story is being told from the outset — in this sea of stories the difficulties are clear. Which one should be picked out? How can all of the stories be disentangled? What did that letter say? To the electronic image must be added the human voice if not another written text. It will be necessary to write letters about the image, just as it is necessary to write scripts for television. Both spoken and written language will always play a role, unless androids replace humans and the robot evolves into its own master. This would suggest that the image cannot replace the eye unless the camera replaces the mind. And lest this be seen as an absurd line of thought, the very notion of the virtual transforms the metaphor of the mind as camera into the camera as mind. The presumption that space and time can be transformed into arbitrary elements within the constructs of the electronic has the potential to be the story of all stories, until that is, the machine is removed from the eye of the participant. After all, although the brain is packed with electricity, it ceases all activity if too many volts are pumped into it.

<div align="center">8.</div>

Let me return for a moment to television. The values which television uses as a guide for its own professionalism (the idea, for example, that there is a professionally driven concept of broadcast quality video) do not have to apply to the camcorder or the portapak. This lack of norms is at the heart of some of the most creative tendencies in video practice. It is also an element in the anti-theoretical stance of many practitioners who fear the introduction of normative discourses which may recast their activities and whose definition of theory is located in opposition to practical considerations. Broadcast and lowcast both meet and differ here, but the terrain is a shared one. The worry is that theory will somehow interfere with the creative process and that there is something intuitive if not mystical about creativity. This attitude allows for, if not encourages, an ahistorical approach to the development and use of the technology. It prioritizes the

role of the instrument as a source of change and is quite paradoxically a devaluation of the role which subjectivity can play in producing shifts of emphasis if not practice with regard to video.

The professional, which I would define as that repertoire of experiences which lends itself to codification through institutionalization, takes on an autonomous character, as if its rule-based system has become sovereign. There is a transcendent quality to this approach which leads to the idea that the rules have their origin in a naturally based system and that the codifications which result are not unlike human language. Then the manufacturers of the technology build in the assumptions derived from this process (automatic focus and an electronic eye which responds to shifts in light are good examples). Camcorders imitate their professional cousins and very few users of these instruments question the strategy. Even the idea of somehow capturing a 'good' image would need to be historicized and a more hermeneutic process introduced to explain why one image is better than another. The point here is that no technology is simply the reflection of its creators or users, but with image-based instruments there seems to be a willingness to confer a great deal of power on the technology. The paradox is that automatic focus, for example, presumes a need for focal clarity on the part of the videomaker. Inevitably, over time, the idea of a clear image becomes naturalized.

The opposition between professional and amateur has been described by Gene Youngblood as being at the heart of what distinguishes the lowcast activity from other forms of expression using electronic images. He describes a tape by Phil Morton entitled *General Motors*:

> *General Motors* was presented as a personal correspondence to a Chevrolet dealership where Morton had purchased a van. On the most literal level, the tape documented his frustrated attempts to have the defective vehicle repaired. On a metaphoric level, however, it addressed five themes.... First was the theme of the amateur versus the professional: the amateur as populist-hero, the professional as mercenary who disavows ethical responsibility ("We are the people and we are producing and maintaining our thing," is a chorus repeated throughout the tape). This pointed to the second theme, that of autonomy and how it is technologically determined. The amateur is empowered in as much as he or she controls personal tools for the construction of audio-visual reality. The idea that television is the environment

in which we live, that we are constantly swimming in the electronic soup is the third issue; realizing this fact is the necessary first step toward liberation. Morton proposed a fourth metaphor, that of the amateur as electronic nomad or migrant who leaves the material world for the electronic world by living with and through computer video simulations. For those who live in a world of electronic simulations — and that means everyone today — freedom is the ability to construct personal reality. Hence the fifth and all-encompassing metaphor, electronic visualization as a technology of the self. By creating the world in which we live we create ourselves; in *General Motors*, as in all subsequent tapes, Morton simulates the self he wishes to become.[9]

Youngblood's notion here of the continuity between life and image transforms the idea of the professional into one entirely dependent on outmoded values with regard to communication. Morton has a specific idea of audience and includes his addressee in the video. It is close to a letter but there is still the desire to communicate beyond the boundaries of the personal. One creates oneself as both public and private, both realms are invaded and the result is the integration of video into many possible fields of communication through images. By not privileging the professional Morton also unmasks an ethical stance which sees itself as foundational. In contrast, what is at stake in both Morton and Youngblood is a universe in which concept and image combine into a representation of the imaginary — though this is as fleeting as the movement of electronic images themselves.

"On the most fundamental level electronic visualization refers to the video signal itself as a plastic medium, as the 'material' of electronic practice.... This isn't visual art or picture-making; it is the thing itself, the visible presence of the electronic substance."[10] The idea that the electronic process becomes the content, that the "... wand of electrons spraying and throwing ... become[s] the complete content that engulfs everything that's going on,"[11] is not taken by Youngblood to be either an end in itself or a repetition of McLuhan's 'medium is the message.' Rather, the more synthetic the electronic image becomes, the more closely linked it is to the imaginary of the user, the more control and intelligence has gone into its creation. In that sense the creator sees his/her own movement between perception and the imaginary — the scattered pulsations of the brain now

visualized and organized. (Wim Wenders tried to deal with this in his film *Until the End of the World*, a dismal failure only highlighted by the attempts of a scientist to visually render memory through a television hook-up with the cortex of the brain.) This 'closed loop' turns into what Youngblood describes as a technology of the self in which the technology aids and encourages more accelerated forms of learning and produces the equivalent of a 'neuroelectronic drug' in which you become what you visualize.

It is just not possible to think of the broadcast medium in the same way. Although I am somewhat skeptical of the idealism here, I believe that Youngblood has understood something crucial in lowcast media. The community which legitimizes the activity of experimentation does not have to look for validation outside of its own work and outside of its own collective activities. This should not be seen as a descent into relativism but as a precedent setting reorganization of communications systems.

"So on another level they're [the videotapes he has shot] imaginary models of us electronically visualizing ourselves so much more powerfully, a more powerful spell. What one does is to create pictures that one would like to see oneself in more frequently.... It's the conscious election to put ourselves in different worlds — perceptual, conceptual, physical — and process those worlds electronically."[12] Youngblood theorizes that this kind of artistic practice integrates life and technology, creating a pattern of living in which image and experience undergo the kind of mutual exchange which raises the process from simulation to a conversation with meaning. The dialogue which results has no end, does not have to categorize itself as either fictional or real and through its intimacy transforms the act of seeing the self into a moment of sharing — precisely the opposite of the narcissism which pervades broadcasting. The medium becomes a place of work in which the self is created and recreated — life as art. In this sense, the socially constructed self gains the ability to rebuild, and this can be done privately or publicly. The domains become interchangeable with consequences for most forms of human activity. As the camcorder records yet another birth or an interview with a dying relative, potential spaces for critical thinking can be projected into contexts where none may have existed beforehand, and where there was no prior possibility of reaching out to others. At the same time, this kind of practice resists institutional-

ization and cannot be so easily co-opted into conventional patterns of meaning and comprehension.

9.

Other forms of lowcast practice make different assumptions about their impact and about the meanings which they try to create. The following example may explain this more fully. In the early period of half-inch black and white reel-to-reel video (1966-1974), it was common practice to use video as a tool in community organizing. This was perhaps highlighted to its fullest degree by the *Challenge for Change* programme at the National Film Board. But it was by no means the only effort to use video for political consciousness raising. The idea was to make a video about a particular problem, for example working conditions in a factory, and then to use the tape as a pedagogical tool in meetings. Presumably, the video would provide a structure within which various ideas could be exchanged. In other words, it encouraged the use of images as a fulcrum for public forms of discourse. The expectation was that the electronic image would generate a context of debate and interaction. Yet it was as difficult for audiences to talk about their own experiences as it was for them to talk about the *image* of their own experiences (assuming, as the videomakers often did, there was some similarity between the two). This difficulty does not carry with it any easy solutions because we are dealing with public forms of exchange which are not assimilated into the image, nor does the image necessarily open up discourses which might otherwise not have a chance to express themselves. The question here, of a public sphere, where personal points of view can be expressed and within which there can be some negotiation about meaning and exchange may not be helped by the presence of video. The very notion of a *public* to whom these videos were addressed brings up other and far more complex questions and they are related to the eclecticism which I discussed above.

Was the electronic image in this form really a fulcrum for political change? Presumably, if a worker involved in a strike saw himself or herself on the picket line, demonstrating, arguing with a scab, talking in an organizational meeting about the strike and its prospects, this would create a new and more self-aware public. Spectators would be informed about the

truth in opposition to the way in which mainstream media might characterize the events. The benefits of this kind of taping were that strikers could see the relationship between their own lives and images, could perhaps probe the gaps, consistencies and inconsistencies between their self-image and public personae. But to suggest that this configuration of discursive practices could become the basis for political change presupposes that video creates a transparent relationship between human activity and motivation. It is as if the image can reveal subjectivity like no other medium or that the image of a strike has the power to reconstruct the viewer. Of course, this proved not to be the case,[13] for the same reason that public demagoguery does not lead to a simple acceptance of a speaker's discourse. The complexity of communication in the public sphere cannot be reduced to one medium, one instance or one rather limited point of view about the ability of the public to either change or resist the invocations to understanding. This is an issue profoundly intertwined with questions of pedagogy and the context within which people — the public — are able to communicate their deepest concerns. Early community video tried to construct a pre-symbolic public which would react in a visceral and emotional manner to the didactic content which it was shown.

In an early experiment with video the French 'vidéaste' Fred Forest used video at a retirement home in France describing as his theme, the stimulation of the creativity of senior citizens *"par une action vidéo non-directive."* He lists the following basic goals:

- – to dynamise human relations in the community through the use of video.
- – to study how the seniors (who were all former construction workers) react to video and in general to the arrival of new instruments of communication.
- – to allow the community to learn from its perceptions of its own activities.
- – to modify the relationship between the seniors and their institution.
- – to stimulate exchanges between individuals and the group.
- – to liberate the creativity and imagination of the seniors.
- – to allow them to give expression to their latent, unrealized needs.[14]

In some respects these seven aims represented the core of the cultural and community based expectations of videomakers during the 1970s. In all instances the expectation was that the image would somehow open up discourses and relationships hitherto repressed by the political and cultural

situation in which the public found themselves. The personal, interpersonal and public sphere would interact and productively reengage participants in an evaluation of their subjectivity and identity.

There is a sense in which the notion of document as video, video as document leads to a conceptual link between the electronic image and presumptions about truth, but truth in this instance as a literalization not only of the way in which individuals in a community see themselves, but the strategic attitude they take to the representations which they create. Forest works on the assumption that certain kinds of truth values held by people in the senior's home will be altered by the arrival of the video and by its sensitive use. But what base is he starting from? In other words, to what degree are the seniors aware of their own identities and to what degree have they articulated this to each other? The expectation of change becomes the guiding principle here and the premise upon which the entire process depends. There is a presumption of continuity between representations of the self prior to the arrival of the technology and what is to be learned after the technology has been introduced. This slides into a pedagogical model in which the dispossessed take control of their voice, articulate a voice, a point of view in need of expression. But why does the creation and projection of images redefine identity and world-view in such a dramatic fashion? The central hypothesis here seems to be dependent on the act of viewing, the attraction of the visual as a foundation upon which certain kinds of *revisualization* can take place.

It is, of course, possible to argue that the video image merely acts as a catalyst for change, foregrounding contradictions which might otherwise remain latent and inaccessible. Ironically there need not be a transparent relationship between the images and the use to which they are put. Nor can we assume that the use made of them necessarily links back to the content of what has been said. In fact the image as such, like the technology, becomes a found object which can be named and renamed to suit the exigencies of the moment. This loss of specificity creates a laboratory context in which experiments are held to see if communication and comprehension either collide or work together. It comes down to whether or not the image serves a utilitarian purpose, whether a viewer or a community of viewers can engage in the movement from image to discourse and see some usefulness to the exchange.

There are hundreds of similar examples to the one which Forest has provided us with, examples of video facilities made available to local cultures in the South and in the North. Communities are engaged in taking the instrument in hand and making it work — the public use and then display of the results — even the transmission of the final product through informal videocassette networks. This community-based activity is at a fever pitch in some parts of Asia where informal video networks now account for the majority of what is viewed in any medium.

In an astute argument Göran Hedebro, a Swedish researcher and writer, talks about the proliferation of media technologies in developing countries. He discusses the role of radio and then television in countries devoid of most media aside from radio:

> We know particularly little about the role of information via mass media in national development. Our knowledge is somewhat better for communication and changes in the village, but here too, it is difficult to use findings from research to make definite assessments as to the outcomes. Now, why this lack of evaluative studies? There are several reasons. First of all, there is no real tradition of allocating resources to this aspect of planned communication activities. It is still more common to use input figures as indicators of the effects of a campaign. Second, evaluations of interventions may be very risky. It is easier to *talk* about the advantageous outcomes than to run the risk of facing figures that show the real results are far from what was desired and expected.[15]

Hedebro goes on to talk about a media campaign aimed at improving local peoples' understanding of nutrition questions. The campaign was empirical and concrete. It used the media to convey what it felt was a direct message. Yet the evaluative tools which were available to assess the project were minimal. Worse, the campaign seemed to have served its own purposes, but was unable to account for the complexity of the environment which it was trying to change. This problem of assessment *should not* be at the margins of the project but falls prey to all of the complexities and contradictions of any type of intervention, whether or not it is media-based. Hedebro adds to his argument by saying: "As in many industrialized countries, information has been used in the developing countries as a panacea for problems of the most varying kinds. Some of the problems attacked have been of an informational nature, while in just as many other

instances the problem at hand has been of another character, and information activities, no matter how cleverly designed and carried out, have had little to do with the solution of the problem."[16]

The question is what kind of research could have been done with regard to the introduction of media technologies? It is far easier to introduce the technology than it is to anticipate or simultaneously organize the assessment procedures which will be needed to examine the impact. There are a number of strategies which could be used in relation to video for example:

- oral history of the community involved using individuals who have a broad based understanding of the history of the community.
- direct interviews with people who have witnessed or been involved with the production of the video.
- group discussions of the video.
- analysis of the content of the video with the aim of testing the impact and then arriving at certain conclusions from the results.
- indirect poll taking (as was the custom with *Challenge for Change* projects).
- active audience participation in programme planning and production — handing the tools over to the people and moving to assessment from hands-on experience.

Yet I am to some degree puzzled by my feeling of reticence with regards to all of the above. I find myself wondering whether and to what degree all of this work translates into an ethnographic paradigm in which the problems associated with the representation of the self are elided. Let me return for a moment to Fred Forest and the experiment which I described earlier on. Recall that Forest wanted to dynamize human relations in the home for seniors. He wanted them to learn from their perceptions of their own experiences and in particular he wanted to liberate them from the constraints of daily life in the home. He anticipated that the video would give expression to a set of latent, unrealised needs.

His aims are not dissimilar to Manfred Oepen who works for the *German Foundation for International Development* as a consultant in communications and who says:

The three key concepts of community communication — access, participation and self-management — are aimed at minimizing possibilities of

oppression and abuse of power. Access means the individual's right to communication, interaction between receivers and producers of messages, and active participation during programme planning and production. Participation is the public right to contribute to the formulation and implementation of media plans, policies, objectives and programmes which directly affect certain communities. Self-management is the most advanced form of participation, in which the public would fully manage and produce community media.[17]

In both these instances, as well as in the above list, it seems clear that there is a democratic spirit at work which favors the role of the participants to discover for themselves not only why they have worked on a project but to evaluate the impact upon their daily lives. Yet there are a series of questions which remain unanswered. What makes the use of video so attractive? Why is the impulse so naturally attuned to presumptions about change and the usefulness of the electronic image as an arbiter in that process? Why do processes of this kind find the documentary form more attractive than any other genre? Why would the documentary seem to most fully express the desires, needs and aspirations of both the participants and the videomakers?

In a recent paper Joyce Hammond described the use of video among Tongan Polynesians living in Salt Lake City, Utah. There, the community has been practicing a kind of ethnographic communication in which tapes are made of traditional and everyday activities (and thus preserved for archival purposes) and for transportation to Tonga, so that relatives can exchange information with each other over great distances. When Tongans go home they travel with camcorders and bring back material for the community in Utah.

A skillful group of part-time professional videographers now videotape virtually all of the major events in the community. Hammond writes:

Despite certain disadvantages the videographers may encounter as members of the community which call upon their services, they are in a unique position to communicate their own and other Tongans' interpretations and presentations of themselves and their way of life. Although Tongans admire videographers' skills in operating equipment associated with creating videos, they especially value the videographers' abilities to create visualizations that represent their self-images.[18]

Thus I am describing the tip of an iceberg — a massive growth in the use of a new technology which would seem to suggest profound changes in the ways in which people see themselves, or as Hammond puts it, the way they visualize their self-images. The problem is that however powerful the images may be and however effectively they may be used, they must be transformed into either verbal or written texts, into discourse and discursive practices. This is a shifting ground upon which it is very difficult to build a solid foundation for analysis. There is a continual movement of information and meaning. Once again the perspective we can take on all of these changes places us outside of a process which we may make the effort to translate, but which may not communicate in the manner suggested by the properties of the technology. While video may be effective as a pedagogical tool for those who make use of it, our ability to reconstruct that practice and understand its implications is at best limited to the cultural model of communication which we ascribe to the image and model of communication in place in the community.

It is thus crucial that the Tongans in Utah evaluated the significance of their videotapes most particularly with regard to their possible insertion into an archive. Video creates what I will describe as a logic of the present while simultaneously producing an image-event in the past. This generates a somewhat different temporal context — a mixture of present and past that is both and neither simultaneously. The disjuncture which results is part of the attraction but also part of what makes the electronic image so puzzling. It suggests that history has already been made while continuing to make it. It is this suppleness which allowed broadcasters to repeat the beating of Rodney King over and over again as if each showing would somehow reconstitute the event, as if to prove that this was not a dramatization, not a fiction. In order to gain control over the disjuncture, repetition was used. But this only validates the contradictions, proposing that the disjunctures in time and place can be controlled, that there is some way of gaining authority over the impact of the event *as* image.

For the Tongans to believe it is the image they are saving they must so to speak recast the activity of videomaking. They will structure their daily lives upon the fulcrum of possible images which the videographers will shoot. In other words, if we are to believe Joyce Hammond's description, the Tongans have moved beyond interpretation into truth — their images

have become the community. I visualize my self-image, therefore I am. The problem as Marshall Sahlins has so acutely characterized it, "... comes down to the relation of cultural concepts to human experience, or the problem of symbolic reference: of how cultural concepts are actively used to engage the world. Ultimately at issue is the being of structure *in* history and *as* history."[19]

What does it mean to visualize your self-image? In Hammond's terms it means that one begins to see oneself, one's daily activities, *as* image. This presumably objectifies the self in order that a new understanding can be gained, but this is also at the heart of another and more complex contradiction. The activity of symbolization, self as image, can only be achieved through the interplay of givens which are at the heart of any cultural configuration. Those givens do not disappear because the video process has, so to speak, come on the scene. In fact the dialogue between the given and the new, between potential change and the hindrances to understanding change depends on the manner in which the video is spoken about, the context of its performance, in other words, the relationship between performance and speech. Video inserts itself into a highly inventive process in which, to some degree, the cultural assumptions that went into its production are challenged. Unlike an extremely ritualized activity where the parameters for exchange and action are set up to produce a specific result, the electronic image borrows and plays with a wide variety of givens and reconstitutes and recontextualizes them. But this is not just bricolage nor pastiche. Sets of relations are created which far outstrip the original limitations which were in place. In other words, one can begin to talk about an unstable situation in which the video plays a far less important role as image than is often presumed.

10.

If we are to examine the difference and the specificity of video in relation to other media, questions of truth are far more significant than the debate, so crucial to film theory, about whether the image as representation is real or not. In fact, what puzzles me is why so much weight is given to questions of referentiality in film theory and why that has been transposed lock, stock and barrel into discussions about electronic images. All of the fallacies of

naturalism in language come with this approach. If an electronic image has an already fixed referential base then, *grosso modo*, it has meaning before it even appears. This then marginalizes the context of performance so crucial to the production of spectacle. Notions of referentiality are caught in a game of predictability. The performance of a video, and by this I mean not only its transmission, but the interrelation of contexts which become apparent when electronic images are displayed and watched, cannot be so easily constrained by a predictive formula. As a result, it will always remain unclear whether or not initial assumptions about reference have been successfully generated. Of course, I do not mean to dispense with the notion of reference altogether, but at the same time the fundamental guidelines for establishing referentiality should never be construed as given, in particular when we are talking about electronic images. The configuration of meanings, the symbolic sign systems which guide the performance of electronic images bring into play a variety of possible relations. *A priori* assumptions about reference are merely projections generated by the creators of the image. Once a programme is put into a particular context, many different, often oppositional, values can be applied to what has been created and to what is then experienced.

This is a crucial argument because it is clear that video images have been used to promote the validity of referential meaning as part of a presumption about the ontology of meaning itself. The result has been a predominant use of video as *document*. This is especially the case in anthropology and ethnography but also, as we have seen, in the political use of video in developed and developing countries. The resulting constraints on experimentation are not so much the consequence of the design of the technology, but of the way its use as a mode of address has been conceptualized. Generally speaking, that use is not seen to have a metaphorical or even fictional outcome. Document and truth mingle, fitting together into a pre-established scheme which reduces or attempts to limit the potential arbitrariness of meaning.

Richard Rorty has an elegant way of explaining this: "A metaphor is, so to speak, a voice from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling-up of a portion of that space, or a logical-philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. It is a call to change one's language and one's life, rather than a proposal about how to systematize either."[20] The point

about this is that there need not be a specific outcome to the construction of meaning in language and I would extrapolate this to electronic images with even greater force. I would push further and suggest that electronic images do not just expand on what we already know but can go beyond the limits of what we can imagine, and in so doing their usefulness as documents is at best *limited* to what we do with them both during and after the images have been viewed. This strikes me as a useful way of engaging with some of the comments which Gene Youngblood made with reference to Phil Morton. However complete the relationship with electronic images an important contradiction remains. What kind of language can be used to explain and describe the experience?

Video images put in place many kinds of discursive spaces — potential spheres of discourse in part related to the memory or memories of the viewing experience. Examples are the ongoing discussions which viewers can have with what they watch or the post-viewing evaluation and interpretation of what they have seen. These reconstructive processes produce a series of verbal configurations which clearly have some relationship to the medium and to what has been shown, but are also quite distinct from it. I am obviously choosing a non-causal approach here. I have found that attempts to describe the meaning of electronic images through cause and effect analyses quite unsatisfactory. The best example of that approach can be found in the efforts by videomakers to create a series of conventions for the production of meaning, a set of universal constraints, which could function like language-based grammars supposedly do, to control the unpredictability of speech. This desire to manufacture viewing in almost the same way as one manufactures an image is, I think, doomed to failure. The potential public sphere I am talking about can have the kind of autonomy which videomakers dread, because it creates a distance between their own role as creators and the effect or influence which they are trying to have. In fact, what is so interesting here is the way in which truth, as it is understood by the videomaker, may lead to a metaphoric discourse dramatically unrelated to the images they have created.

Now an argument could be made that I am saying nothing different here — that any image whether it be electronic or cinematic or photographic plays into a similar set of constraints and contradictions. But it may be useful to try and set some boundaries. Electronic imagery comes

to the viewer as an electrical source — the screen of a television is very different from a film screen, which is why video projection systems are such a severe compromise from the point of view of image quality. The notion of a *source*, the idea of broadcast, the link between electronics and instantaneous shifts in meaning and aesthetic is very different from film which, by virtue of chemistry, has a fixed set of physical qualities. In contrast to film, the video image just does not need the exact relations of color and light, the pinpoint concreteness of film. In fact the video image can survive vagueness, discoloration, out of focus shots, and the kind of loss of definition which the filmic image does everything to disavow. This suggests that electronic images produce ambiguities which marginalize referentiality or at least pose questions about meaning and its interpretation.

It may be the case that video provides us with a window into processes of meaning which we are not yet prepared to accept. But in saying this I part company with some futurologists whose utopian projections about technology tend to conflate newness with insight, or at least the expectation of insight is borne on the wings of what are presumed to be innovations.

A good example of this can be found in the claims which were made by the video innovators of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I am referring in particular here to the Raindance Corporation formed in 1969 in New York which published *Guerrilla Television* in 1971. *Guerrilla Television* was a production manual suffused with a mixture of technological utopianism and faith in the political capability of the electronic image as a vehicle of social and cultural transformation. Raindance, and groups like it, proliferated in the early days of the Sony black and white portapak. I do not want to underplay the significance of this nor belittle the extraordinary research of, among others, Naim Paik. But listen to the experimenters of that time: "There's a whole new story to be told, thanks to the new techniques. We must find out what we have to say because of our new technologies," said Scott Bartlett.[21]

Gene Youngblood talks about the development of a new consciousness based on metamorphosis:

> The new consciousness seeks the transformation of realities whereas the
> old consciousness ventures no further than a timid juxtaposition of 'objec-
> tive' realities that retain their traditional identity. The fact is that there exists
> no cinematic equivalent of video keying. Tearing a key in grays or colors

produces graphic designs of unique character, blending form and color in a manner virtually impossible in any other medium. Video keying is inherently synaesthetic; such a claim can be made for no other aesthetic medium.[22]

Youngblood had an uncanny ability to predict the future and in 1970 he suggested that portable video cameras would one day be as small as Super-8 and be capable of producing color images. His presumptions, however, about the arrival of a new consciousness, about different ways of knowing, while similar to many of the claims about video went much further than most analysts and practitioners of the early 1970s. His most interesting proposal was that electronic images produce a phenomenon known as synergy. This is a system which cannot be predicted by the behavior of any of its parts because, as he said, "...there is no *a priori* dependency between the conceptual and design information of the individual parts. The existence of one is not requisite on the presence of another."[23] Thus design and information, the relationship of aesthetics to meaning, becomes arbitrary. Youngblood is not simply adopting a linguistic notion here. He is talking about an epistemological break in the way electronic images function, but is also, perhaps unwittingly, linking electronic imagery in an ontological sense to artistic practices well-known to surrealists.

The arbitrariness he openly supports is at the heart of metaphoric operations which cannot be so easily described, let alone interpreted. Lest this be seen as a result of the innovations of the technology — the result of the way in which the technology itself is constructed — this is what André Breton said in 1936 about the surrealist enterprise: "...a total revolution of the object: acting to divert the object from its ends by coupling it to a new name and signing it.... Perturbation and deformation are in demand here for their own sake.... Objects thus reassembled have in common the fact that they derive from and yet succeed in differing from the objects which surround us, by a simple change of role."[24]

It can be argued that this link to the surrealist enterprise grows out of the many shared concerns of the avant-garde which is where Youngblood would in any case situate himself. But it also points towards the need to rethink the way in which new technologies are incorporated into existing patterns of thought and use. Moreover, without precisely that sense of continuity the difference between an oral argument made on video and one

made in person becomes insignificant. The presumably significant contrast between images on television and those on a film screen are relegated to the object, a transference which highlights the capabilities of the technology in a sphere devoid of subjectivity. In some senses, then, the notion that a new technology might be a found object is very attractive because it allows for and reveals the degree to which any number of assumptions can be made about that technology's relationship to viewing and subjectivity.

Throughout *Expanded Cinema* Youngblood assumes that technological change represents a change in viewing, in subjectivity. He follows Buckminster Fuller and Edmund Carpenter in this. Most importantly, for the purposes of this discussion, he presages the work of Jean Baudrillard in assuming that the image, "…bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum."[25] There is a continuity in thinking here between developments in electronic media and postmodern presumptions about change. The links are profound and they begin with claims for the impact of technological shifts. These have not been examined in any great depth. Methodological paradigms have been borrowed from the social sciences and linguistics without due reflection on their origins.

11.

Let me turn to some of the issues raised by a recent video produced in Latin America entitled *Video nas Aldeias* or *Video in the Villages* (1987). It was made by the *Centro de trabalho indigenista* (Centre for Indigenous Work) in Brazil. The tape is distributed in Canada and the United States by *Vidéo tiers-monde* which works as a clearing house and distribution unit for videotapes of this kind world-wide. The tape examines video use by Kayapo Indians in the Brazilian Amazon. It is an eight minute piece which brings together the political use which the Indians make of video both to inform their own populace and to take information from their community to the outside world. The Kayapo themselves, according to the tape, have become very involved in video making. They see video as an archival tool, as a way of preserving not only traditional ceremonies but as a pedagogical instrument. An elder speaks on the tape and talks about preserving traditions which are dying out. He talks about succeeding generations having

the chance the view the recordings and thus learn from his example. The tape opens with the voice-over commenting that for the "past two years the project *Video in the Villages* has worked to bring the Indians together with their own image." (There is a strong similarity between the discourse of this tape and Joyce Hammond's description of the Tongan community in Utah.) This is followed by an explanation of the aims of the project which include the provision of video tools to the Indians so that they can either improve on their use of the medium or introduce it in areas where it is not used. We see images of the Indians editing tape and then a series of cuts of different people play-acting for the camera. The voice-over then says that video has the power to unleash hitherto unrealized energies and we watch a series of images meant to reinforce that perspective. "The confrontation of the self-image with that of the image produced by video always leads to a reflection of one's own identity," says the narrator:

> After watching the recording of one of their celebrations the Indians were disappointed with the lack of ornaments and paint and the excess of cloth-ing. A second ritual was performed with all the formal austerity. We never imagined that the video would be the catalyst for nose piercing ceremonies which had not been done for twenty years.

Before I comment on this, let me once again quote Manfred Oepen whose concerns with respect to the use of communication models is in large measure derived from Paulo Freire and is thus centred on a model of liberation through innovative pedagogy.

> A communication model or intervention was considered 'appropriate' if it was a process of horizontal, social interaction through media produced, managed and controlled by people who share the same values and goals. As the people participate in this process as planners, producers, and perform-ers, the media become tools to inform, educate, and entertain. They focus on making people think for themselves and are not an exercise in persua-sion or power. In such a process, the entry points for communication are a community's learning methods, cultural expression and forms of media or communication.[26]

It is difficult to argue with Oepen or much of the voice-over narration of *Video in the Villages*. But with respect to the video I would ask the ques-tion: how do we come to know what the Indians know? This is a vexing question and one which is being debated in great depth by ethnographers

and anthropologists. How do we gain access to the self-image of the Indians, that self-image which the video process supposedly has changed? How can the movement from self to identity and then to image be traced and followed? As we watch the Kayapo engaging in ceremonies with tape recorders at the ready are we seeing anything more than the reflection of our expectations with regard to the influence of the medium? Does the act of using a camcorder and documenting important political activities produce the kind of effects suggested by the video?

The directors of the project could easily assert that the nose piercing ceremonies were evidence of a major impact. The elder who wanted to preserve his traditions on video could make a strong case for the usefulness of the archive which he was constructing. The Kayapo, who in effect created their own news broadcasts could argue that in Oepen's terms they had taken control of the media for their own purposes.

Can we narrativize the nose piercing ceremony? I ask this because we cannot position ourselves as Kayapo viewers although the tape would have us believe that this was possible. What vantage point can we take in relation to this material? Let us for a moment hypothesize that the tape is telling us a story for which it is trying to provide evidence, the story of a peoples ravaged by colonialism but reacting in a dignified manner to oppression by developing the tools to speak about it. To what degree can those tools have a genuine influence on the discourse of education, liberation and preservation which these people are engaged in?

I would like to suggest that what the video depicts is the adoption by the Indians of a cultural process for which we have only the barest of analytic strategies. The presentation of nose piercing can be seen as the site of an intense clash between a ritual of singular importance to the Kayapo and a felt need on the part of the videomakers to transport this act out of the jungle and into the minds of Westerners. This visualization once again confirms the position of the outsider as viewer and as voyeur. It confers a power on the electronic image which we have to question, if what is being suggested is that we are witnessing a pedagogically important acquisition of identity and control over self and culture.

In fact, the next question is to what degree this new technology merely unburdens the culture of the responsibility for its existence? Where are the boundaries between the forms of thought introduced by video and the

history of the culture which has been brought into the process? Why should we think that communication as defined by the North, by Western culture, serves any value for cultures other than our own? Is another form of technological dependence being created? A dependence not only on machines but on the symbolic language which we have constructed to make that technology plausible to ourselves?

The response to this criticism has come, in its most intense form, from Terence Turner who has worked with the Kayapo:

> A striking feature of this self-conscious use of telemedia was the presence of Kayapo videocamera persons at these events [political rallies and demonstrations to save the Amazon rainforest], not merely to make a video record of them for the Kayapo, but to be seen and recorded in the act of doing so by the national and international telemedia that followed these demonstrations in large numbers. The meta-point made by these Kayapo video camera persons was that Western media no longer held a monopoly of the image, with all the power to define the nature and meaning of events, and incidentally to reproduce the contrast between dominant society (those who control the technology and take the pictures) and subordinate primitives (those whose pictures are taken).... Turning video cameras back on the Western television and documentary film crews was in this sense the equivalent, for the Kayapo in the late twentieth century political context, of the Sioux' turning their Winchester rifles back on the U.S. cavalry in the late nineteenth century.[27]

As Turner later discovered, many new problems arose as a result of the presence of video. These included conflicts among different members of the tribe and power struggles for control of the equipment. This should not have surprised Turner, but it did. He discovered something which should have been a fundamental part of the project from the beginning. "The point is that the use of video, and the meaning of the videos produced, cannot be conceived or understood in abstraction from the social and political dynamics which inevitably accompany their making, showing and viewing."[28] Turner asks the question: will the present social organization of the Kayapo, which is largely based on a system of communal chiefs, be reinforced by video? Even more to the point: will younger men and women gain access to video? Will the politics of community be opened as a result of video's appearance and use? These questions highlight the fragility of

the process which has been introduced into this complex culture. For, to some degree, we cannot even answer these questions ourselves with regards to our own culture. Paradoxically, well before we have developed an understanding of the technology, we are transporting it elsewhere.

<div align="center">12.</div>

"Enough of *America's Funniest Home Videos*. Let's look at America's Phoniest Home Videos." The script for one of them was recently described in the syndicated newspaper column, Dear Abby. "It all started," writes *Retired* in San Diego, "when my son bought one of those video cameras. He's been driving everyone crazy sticking that camera in their faces." Now the son wants to videotape his divorced parents posing as a *lovey-dovey* couple, so that his daughter can see Grandma and Grandpa when they were *happy*. Grandma is willing. Her new husband does not mind. Grandpa's new wife does not. The holdout is Grandpa. "We were divorced fourteen years ago because of her infidelity," he writes, "and the thought of pretending to be civil with that woman is more than I can stomach."[29]

Numerous issues are raised by the above, not the least of which is why the *New York Times* decided to report on a letter to Dear Abby concerning camcorders. The sense one gets from the article is meta-discursive — clearly the complaint made to Dear Abby, in fact the entire column, differs from what is considered newsworthy by most reporters. But the choice is part of a pattern in which the media comment on each other's comments and increasingly examine the direction being taken by competitors and non-competitors, alike. It is also the result of an almost desperate attempt to clue into what the 'public' is feeling with regards to video. So much seems to be going on — the presumption of change has metamorphized into the conclusion that our society has been transformed — that the parameters within which change can be examined have almost been eliminated. Thus there seems to be a 'spontaneity' to the development of the public's use of video, one of the sources for which can be found in a column devoted to personal letters.

As described by the above quote, the son is attempting to rewrite history. It is not enough for his daughter to know that her grandparents were happily married, not enough, to be shown some photographs. The son

wants to use the medium of the moment to make real that which cannot be imaged otherwise. The only way reality can be reconstructed is through a fiction and presumably, for the grandfather, fiction and reality are inseparable. But that also happens to be a crucial characteristic of camcorders. The technology has lent itself to documentation. In other words, what could be more phony than an attempt to stage a relationship and introduce artifice where none in principle *should* be used?

But this element of the son's desire is really beyond the frame, beyond the parameters of the electronic image. The idea that fiction can work as record is central to video — the technology of *taping* — the concept of an instrument as a *recorder*, reinforces the presumption that the machine is linked to memory — human memory. This makes it appear as if the technology can be transcended or better yet it suggests that the technology is of less significance that the subject who controls it. The recorder is rooted in the idea of *bringing back to mind*. But there is also the sense that the VCR plays the role of the minstrel, an individual who relates a story and is able to remember enough stories to be able to perform a synthetic function in that regard. So, to some degree we are dealing with memory, repetition and storytelling and none of these functions are really separable, one from the other.

Culturally, however, they *are* kept separate. Thus the camcorder is meant to record the history of a family as it really happened, not as the cameraperson might have imagined it or as they might have transformed it through the use of a particular style. With nearly fifteen percent of American homes having camcorders, this particular cultural assumption is crucial to the way in which video is talked about. Yet the archives of home videotapes involve more than just a record of major life events. They are evidence of an almost constant process of surveillance in which family members willingly participate. This is not to say that the results are in question, nor to propose something sinister about seeing one's life represented as both electronic and symbolic. Rather, the omnipresence of the camcorder suggests that electronic images have somehow become more important than everyday life. This is the gist of the rest of Dullea's article and the people she quotes, including Neil Postman. If the electronic image is as forcefully transcendent as Dullea thinks, then the discourse of letters becomes a crucial venue for opening the question of what to say.

It would be my argument that the image cannot act as a substitute for subjectivity since to begin with the image is, as Barthes has mentioned with respect to photography, not animated, only the subject can be animated. This means that language is not suddenly eliminated because a new medium has come on the scene. Without language there would be no possibility of describing the presence or the absence of subjectivity, a conundrum not dissimilar to the one which we face in relation to dreams.

Jean Baudrillard has dealt with this notion of the emptying out of subjectivity with regard to the impact of electronic technologies, by asserting that: "…every factor of acceleration and concentration is like a factor bringing us closer to the point of inertia."[30] He uses the language of the media to assert that subjectivity has become a site of emptiness in which contradiction has been eliminated and worse, humans have "…entered a universe of noncontradiction alive, of blind rapture, of ecstasy, of amazement about the irreversible processes that nevertheless have no direction at all."[31]

The contradiction here is between a technology of electronic images which produces the possibility of new subjective positions and assumptions about change. Dullea and Baudrillard share a similar fascination with the shifts in direction which they feel the media have brought upon the public at large. Moreover, to them, the electronic image is at the heart of the transformation. However, in Baudrillard's terms, we are in any case disconnected from the life which we lead — no more, no less — we function through the information which we gather, albeit that we gain little by doing so. The existential premise of Baudrillard's argument is steeped in the circularity of Albert Camus and not Jean-Paul Sartre's efforts to link an awareness of the existential with notions of praxis and engagement.

Now, if the electronic image is at one and the same time source and non-source, then the fears of the grandfather are legitimate because his image will rob him not only of his dignity but of the power to do anything about the son's re-enactment. He will neither be the author nor the viewer but simply the object of somebody else's desires. At a discursive level he will be unable to speak back, to tell his granddaughter about the real events which led to his separation from his wife. What interests me is the way the grandfather feels about getting together with his former wife. The image is not the clue here and I suspect that it never was. The grandfather has already got a narrative in place, has already written the history and as a

result, the contradiction for him is not in what the son wants to do, but in the idea that he might have to be near his former wife. In other words, the video may have been the catalyst but it is not at the center of the decision taken by the grandfather.

What of the son's obsession with the pretty picture? How different is this from staging any photograph? What distinguishes video from other media which have been used since the advent of the twentieth century to record the home life of culturally diverse families in many different locations? Are the subjective impulses involved here so radically different? I ask this because if we have, as Baudrillard suggests, devolved into beings who consume information, disembodied, soulless, timeless, then why would it matter so much to the grandfather whether what he was showing had an element of truth or not? In fact, it is the impulse towards fiction (and its symbiotic relationship to the document) which is at the heart of the resistance to precisely what Baudrillard is suggesting. It is the recognition that artifice is possible which redefines the role of the electronic image and makes possible an explosion of the imaginary. It is a dream world which the son wants to construct and why not? At another time he might have written a poem to his daughter or merely talked to her about times past and she might have listened with the same intensity as she now watches home videotapes. (It is of interest to note that the quantity of children's books has grown at many times the rate expected when television and video were first introduced to North America. In fact, in a time of 'great illiteracy,' more children are reading than ever before, if we go by what has now become a billion-dollar business. I would in no way directly link this to television except to say that in much the same way as subjectivity and history have not died, neither has language or literature.)

The question here is not so much to what degree have things changed, but from which vantage point can change be observed and analyzed? If there is no port of entry or exit, vantage point becomes irrelevant, which is what Baudrillard is suggesting. But if the vantage points are actually numerous and varied, if the heterogeneity of electronic images and apparatuses extend the possibilities of understanding, in a move toward more complex forms of discourse (which may be oral and written at the same time), then the electronic and the literary, are inextricably linked, if not interdependent.

The question of vantage point is crucial, since one of the presumptions about the *difference* of the electronic image, which has been taken up by practitioners, is that it provides a radically new entry point for analysis and reflection on the constituent social and cultural processes of the (post)modern period.

An extension of this presumption is that the knowledge gained will somehow translate into some form of action. This is a claim, mediated by the relationship between the video image and viewer, which emphasizes the potential truth value which can be drawn from the communication. It has been a central feature in the lowcast use of the medium, and I have discussed this at length, above. It is a feature which Baudrillard never discusses in his generalizations about the media as a whole. But truth, as such, is at the heart of the medium's effectiveness. For even as the grandfather argues with the son, it is on the basis of the capacity of video to *reproduce* his image, not with respect to the representation itself. This is as much a gap in interpretation as it is a problem of the discourse which is used with respect to the medium. There is a sense that what the grandfather is saying is not possible anyway — why would anyone believe that he had gotten together with his former wife? Why would his granddaughter believe it either? The conceit here lies with the videomaker, the practitioner, who thinks that the jump between document and fiction can be made as long as the image uses real actors — that is the real people of this family drama.

The son aspires to truth through his own lies and, paradoxically, this is an attempt to fit the experience of viewing into a pre-established schema. He fully expects his daughter to believe the construction — a hidden didacticism rules here that sees the electronic image as a tool of change with much of the same intensity as is applied to the medium as a whole. The suggestion is that video opens more than a window or a mirror onto experience, more than just one vantage point among many, it programmatically sets up the parameters within which experience as such can be judged. The basis for this argument is that the technology replaces the subjects who use it. Increasingly, then, the technology becomes the subject and also to the delight of McLuhan followers, the message. These presumptions are paralleled by an overinvestment in the *recovery* of human subjectivity through the medium. Without at this point developing the

argument further, there would be some value in recasting the activities of the Kayapo in light of the above assertions.

13.

By way of conclusion let me return for a moment to an examination of the term, video which relates not only to sight but to emptiness *(vide)* — visibility, visionary — visualization, as well as to invisible, prevision, review, clairvoyance. All of these words are of course interrelated, and they are connected to the notion of being able to see again and again *(revidere)* — to forsee *(praevidere)* and crucially to gain not only knowledge, but sacred knowledge. Thus to some degree the image comes through an emptiness which is filled with the eye. But memories are generated by the technology because the medium operates on a register which is separate from viewing — it is independent of the eye and is thus sacred — yet it could not have generated the images without the intervention of a subject. This fundamental contradiction must be the site of a new approach to the study of the medium. It may be that the technology permits a paradoxical game to be played with meaning in which absence becomes a site of creativity and *not* loss.

Discussions of video often forget that in order to shoot the electronic image the cameraperson must also act as a viewer. The question is what can be brought back to mind when the electronic image is readied for presentation? In the same way, memories are absent until they are spoken or written, until, that is, discourse transports them from one mind to another. I would suggest, that with video as an example, we are entering a cultural phase in which spoken and written language will become more and more important rather than less. The need to articulate the relationships which electronic images hint at may only be discovered and then interpreted within precisely that world of language and discourse which the medium supposedly undermines.[32]

Notes

1. See *Medium Media* no. 1 (Autumn 1971). This journal came out of Montréal and was edited by Pierre Desrosiers. Its first issue is devoted to the history and potential of

community media, with a specific emphasis on the portapack and on cable access.

2. Anne-Marie Duguet, "The Luminous Image: Video Installation," *Camera Obscura* no. 13-14 (Spring-Summer, 1985): p. 29.

3. Akio Morita, the founder and head of Sony said of the VCR: "[It] will revolutionize television. It will change the concept of prime time so that *any* time can be prime time. Before the development of video recording, television was too fleeting. While it has been outstanding for conveying information, providing entertainment, and improving our culture, the sad fact exists that once a program is off the air it is gone forever for the TV viewer. Newspapers, magazines, and books can be read and kept for future reference. But this had not been so with TV programs seen in the home." Quoted in Nick Lyons, "The Age of Betamax," *The Sony Vision* (Crown: New York, 1976): p. 211.

4. Stephen Hill, *The Tragedy of Technology* (London: Pluto Press, 1988).

5. Hill, p. 33.

6. Hill, p. 85.

7. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: Granta, 1991).

8. Seth Adams, "Trial on Videotaped Beating of Black Motorist to Begin," *New York Times*, Monday, February 3, 1992, p. A10.

9. Gene Youngblood, "Art and Ontology: Electronic Visualization in Chicago," *The Event Horizon*, eds. Lorne Falk and Barbara Fischer (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1987): p. 328

10. Gene Youngblood, "Art and Ontology: Electronic Visualization in Chicago," pp. 334-335.

11. Gene Youngblood, "Art and Ontology: Electronic Visualization in Chicago," p. 335.

12. Gene Youngblood, "Art and Ontology: Electronic Visualization in Chicago," p. 341, quoting Phil Morton.

13. See a previous piece of mine, "Video/Film: From Communication to Community," *Video: The Changing World*, eds. Nancy Thede and Alain Ambrosi, (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1991): pp. 54-60.

14. Fred Forest, *Art Sociologique: Vidéo* (Paris: Union Génerale D'Édition, 1977): p. 75.

15. Göran Hedebro, *Communication and Social Change in Developing Nations: A Critical View* (Iowa State University Press: Iowa, 1982): p. 43.

16. Ibid., p. 50.

17. Manfred Oepen, "Communicating with the grassroots: a practice-oriented seminar series," *Group Media Journal*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1990): p. 4.

18. Joyce Hammond, "Visualizing Themselves: Tongan Videography in Utah,"

Visual Anthropology, vol. 1, no. 4 (1988): p. 385.

19. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History*, (University of Chicago: Chicago, 1987): p. 145.

20. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, Metaphor, Politics," *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991): p. 13.

21. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970): p. 264.

22. Ibid, p. 273.

23. Ibid, p. 109.

24. André Breton, "Crisis of the Object," *Surrealists on Art*, ed. Lucy Lippard, (Spectrum: New York, 1970): p. 106.

25. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Standford: Standford University Press, 1988): p. 170.

26. Manfred Oepen, "Appropriate Communication for Community Development," *Group Media Journal*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1990): p. 12.

27. Terence Turner, "The Social Dynamics of Video Media in an Indigenous Society: The Cultural Meaning and the Personal Politics of Video-making in Kayapo Communities," *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Fall 1991): p. 70.

28. Turner, p. 74.

29. Georgia Dullea, "Camcorder! Action! Lives Become Roles," *New York Times*, August 15, 1991, p. A1.

30. Jean Baudrillard, "The Anorexic Ruins," *Looking Back on the End of the World* (New York: Semiotexte, 1989): p. 31.

31. Baudrillard, p. 32.

32. Fanzines are the clearest manifestation of this process at work. I would refer the reader to Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (University of Pennslvannia Press, 1992).

4. COMMUNITY, COMMUNICATION

Subjects on the Threshold

Problems with the Pronouns

Renee Baert

In the classic tale of the quest, the hero overcomes trials and surmounts adversity to win the prize, the throne, the wisdom, the woman. This autonomous hero of myth, legend, folk tale and *Bildungsroman*, moving from ignorance to knowledge, from youth to maturity, in his troubled quest for identity, is a decidedly masculine figure. The repressed term within this narrative is, of course, the woman: our hero is the subject of humanity, of civilization itself, while his trophy occupies a more inchoate space on the other side of a great divide.

There is, however, a feminine counterpart to the hero, though her story holds a certain dissymmetry. It is one characterized by Rachel Blau Duplessis as typically "plots of seduction, courtship, the energies of quest deflected into sexual downfall, the choice of a marriage partner, the melodramas of beginning, middle, and end, the trajectories of sexual arousal and release."[1] In Nancy Miller's dry summation across the past three centuries: "female *Bildung* tends to get stuck in the bedroom."[2]

The most popular contemporary variant of the feminine *Bildung* is the Harlequin romance and its various spinoffs. The narrative line is well-known: it recounts the passage through which the heroine achieves sexual awakening and fulfillment of her feminine place in the masculine order. The story classically concludes with the heroine left 'on the threshold' of marriage.

In the two decades that have proceeded from the second wave of the feminist movement, however, women have been working through another story, with its own, further dissymmetry: that of the awakening to the politic of sexual difference and the search for a female subject position within (or without!) patriarchal culture. This project has been two-fold: that of interrogating established forms of knowledge — a "reading of the

sacred texts against the passionate urging of a different question, a different practice and a different desire"[3] — and that of writing, newly, new stories.

Yet any narrative requires its position of enunciation. Hence the challenge that has pressed with a certain urgency in feminist work, for there has been no readily available subject, or authorial, position for women to occupy. The feminist subject is also 'on the threshold.'

Feminist work acknowledges the legacy of received discourse: it has been the ground of language itself. It simultaneously projects a marked differentiation from that discourse, predicated on other constructions of meaning, value, perception. It is this movement back and forth between the culturally dominant representation of gender and "what that representation leaves out, or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable" that characterizes what Teresa de Lauretis terms "the subject of feminism."[4] De Lauretis distinguishes the "subject of feminism" from Woman (the gendered construct of patriarchal discourse) and from women as historical subjects. The "subject of feminism" is a theoretical construct, one itself in process.

The strategies by which women have negotiated their difference from Woman are multiple. But, as de Lauretis points out, "women continue to become Woman, continue to be caught in gender…."[5] Thus this text also constructs a narrative of the quest, an account, necessarily abbreviated, of the feminist search for a 'voice of one's own.' The trajectory, seemingly linear, is one that veers and loops, while the generations it traces are more discursive than chronological.

This narrative, marking particular moments within nearly twenty years of feminist video production in Canada, points to links between feminist theory and artistic practices. Yet the videotapes discussed — freighted with their burden as emblems — exceed the theoretical framework in which they are here contained, as theoretical paradigms in turn exceed the specificities of particular artistic practices. The productive interrelation between the domains of theory and practice, however, has helped feminism to constitute a new social being: women as subjects rather than objects, speakers rather than spoken.

Women's position in patriarchy is that of the territory of difference against which men may define themselves, the Other that enables the

constitution of masculine subjectivity. Insofar as women are not constituted culturally or linguistically as subjects, with what pronoun can women, let alone "the subject of feminism," speak? There are problems with the pronouns.

The Difficulty of Saying 'I'

In the first wave of feminist work in the early 1970s, a predominant tendency was centred on the particulars of female experience, the specificity of which was guaranteed in the first instance in the sexed body and grounded in the valorization of the social sites of the feminine. Many artists used their own bodies as medium and material in performance and video art, in a transformation of the historical subordination of the female body to a masculine sexual and linguistic economy.

Writing about women's body art of the 1970s, Lucy Lippard observed: "When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*: a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject."[6] This self is a subject of speech and, in much of this work, speaks from the position of the first person pronoun.

Emblematic of work of this period is Lisa Steele's 1974 production, *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* . The video begins with a shot of Steele naked, framed from above the top of her pubic hair to her knees. She turns and walks away from the camera to the end of the room, then turns again to face the camera in a full shot. "September 22, 1947 to September 22, 1974," she announces. "In honor of my birthday, I'm going to show you my birthday suit, with its scars and defects."

Steele slowly turns a full circle, pausing at frontal view, left side, back view, right side. She advances toward the camera to her original position, then kneels to adjust her body so as to place in macro close-up a scar on the nape of her neck. She circles the scar with her finger: "1947. Surgery at birth to remove goiter." Again she adjusts her body, bringing her foot into the camera frame, and moves her finger back and forth across a scar: "1947. Transfusion because of serious illness, 3 months old." The tape proceeds through a succession of these close-ups, with the artist circling each scar with her index finger and recounting, in chronological order, the narrative of its origin. At the conclusion, she moves back from the camera to

a full shot, puts her clothes on, sings a full chorus of "Happy Birthday to me," then leaves the frame of vision; we hear her footsteps, then the screen goes blank as she turns the equipment off.

Birthday Suit is an announcement of the artist as woman, exploding the ideology of art as universal or gender-free. Steele's favoring of her "scars and defects" flaunts the imperative of beauty as the governing standard for women's social measure and refuses the cultural framing of women's lives in primarily sexual terms. The production overhauls conventions of the nude while Steele's valorization of her 'flawed' female body links this production to others of this period that ritualized processes of personal healing.

In *Birthday Suit*, the scars are the narrative index of a life, the material evidence of memory and existence, the mark of the passage of the self through the world and through time. They also mark the residue of the body's passage through a gendered socialization: "1960. Knife dropped on foot while making eggs goldenrod in Home Economics class, 13 years old"! The body is the ground of experience, the evidence of action: it is the guarantor of the self, the 'I.'

But as Elaine Showalter has argued, "there can be no expression of the body which is unmediated by linguistic, social and literary structures."[7] And, to be sure, no expression of an uninscribed self. If works of this optimistic period valorized a female self, it is an Other whose reference is located within the existentialist terms of Simone de Beauvoir, with an emphasis on the historical and social, not (yet) the Lacanian concept of the Other, with its renditions of unconscious processes active within the social field. The feminist emphasis on the body had not factored in psyche, the radical critique of artistic production had not dismantled the authority of the 'I,' issues of gender had not traversed the restraining conduits of language, and sexual politics had not tested the deep resistances of entrenched relations of power. As work from this period revealed, the female 'I' cannot be simply or transparently spoken: it is a marked term, and in the first instance by gender.

Chaperons rouges (1979) by Hélène Bourgault and Helen Doyle signals a different sense of the body and of the subject. The topic of the tape is likewise centered on the female body in that it deals with rape, the violation together of body and being. But as one woman in the tape testifies, "I've

been raped twice in my body, but millions of times in my heart and in my head."[8] The body is no longer a guarantee of the subject and the scars of existence are not visible ones.

Chaperons rouges foregrounds issues of ideology and representation. The tape is an interrogation of the processes by which women are culturally solicited into positions of victimization and passivity. It examines the social codes which sponsor such experiences. The self as 'I' remains intact but is besieged and denied. Here the subject experience is not only individual: it is collective. The female body is a social body and the subject position is 'we.'

Chaperons rouges shares many of the features of other documentary works of collective self-representation. It is issue oriented, it advances the authority of individual experience over the testimony of experts, there is a close collaboration with those whose lives are depicted, and a stance of advocacy. Moreover, its textuality privileges women as spectators, refiguring who is looking along with who can speak, proposing a new sense of audience and use.

The tape proceeds through a series of moves. The undercurrent of sexual threat in the everyday lives of women is underscored in various scenes, conveyed in a range of styles from dramatization to documentation to testimonial. Counterposed to these are animated scenes of friendship and solidarity. The producers nominate the circle of dialogue and exchange within a community of women as a location in which it is possible to refuse the order of victimization and develop alternative ways of being.

To an abundant degree, feminist productions have framed the manifold violences of patriarchal relations in binary terms of 'he'/'they,' powerful male perpetrators, and 'I'/'she'/'we,' powerless female victims. As Michele Barrett has noted, "An analysis of gender ideology in which women are always innocent, always passive victims of patriarchal power, is patently not satisfactory."[9] *Chaperons rouges* marks a shift from earlier — and, for that matter, later — feminist documentary, not only in its more thoroughgoing analysis but also in positioning women as agents in a field of transformative action.

Such works of collective self-representation (a 'we' often achieved wholly or in part through the orchestration of individual voices speaking

in the first person pronoun) serve to stage the feminist motto 'the personal is political' as an *applied* effectivity within the public sphere. Yet there are problems with this pronoun.

As Adrienne Rich puts it: "Who is *we?*"[10] For while collaborative works have allowed the analysis and articulation of certain shared experiences, other voices have intervened to speak of imposed readings, of racist, classist, or homophobic presumptions of universal commonalties, of the conflation — indeed, the evacuation — of subjectivies. Nor can this collectivity-within-subjectivity account for the dispersed reality, the complex network, of identity.

"The difficulty of saying I — a phrase from the East German novelist Christa Wolf. But once having said it, as we realize the necessity to go further, isn't there a difficulty of saying 'we'?," Rich asks. "You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us. Two thoughts: there is no liberation that only knows how to say 'I'; there is no collective moment that speaks for each of all the way through. And so even ordinary pronouns become a political problem."[11]

The Subject Spoken

The female body and voice as a self-representation invested in questions of female identity is virtually evacuated in another generation of work in favor of a critical practice aimed at interrogating how gender is produced and constructed through systems of signification. The position is neither one of individual nor collective self-representation: it is rather that of undoing spokeness, unfixing the feminine sign. The emphasis shifts from changing the content of representation to examining the language of representation: its form, apparatuses, and 'technologies.' From the positivity of representing a female subject of speech we arrive at an oppositional stance of negation, marked by the deconstruction of dominant codes and the destabilization of their processes of subject solicitation. The aim is to engender an active and critical spectatorial relation to the processes by which meaning is produced.

Working the Double Shift (1984) by Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele is an appropriation of, and intervention within, images culled from mass media. While the work is, like *Chaperons rouges*, tendentious, the intent is

no longer one of producing 'positive' or realistic images of women but rather one of examining the ideology, and effectivity, of these representations. Thus the question is less "Is this [representation] true or false?" than "What does this do?" or the Brechtian "Who does this serve?"

The tape is divided into three sections. The opening sequence offers three consecutive advertising images; these are labeled: "man," "woman," "the family." Following a voice-over intervention, the photos are repeated, but labeled anew: "this is a construction of masculinity," "this is a construction of femininity," "this is an idealized image of a family." These and other representations are further situated within their relationship to ideology, economics and society through the use of verbal, written and visual interventions. The middle portion of the tape consists of a fiercely droll fantasy sequence, in which television footage from a parliamentary vote and from a set of TV ads are re-scripted in voice-over CBC-mimicked commentary, to construct a political, and utopian, alternative. The third section opens with a medium close-up of a young child inquiring: "Whose turn is it to get up in the morning?"; the production proceeds to interrogate the effects on children, and adults, of the discrepancies between their own lived experiences and mass media representations of gender roles and family life.

Working the Double Shift links together issues of class, race and gender, emphasizing the working of ideology across intersecting domains of representation and institution. Further, in this collaborative work by a man and a woman, feminism is situated along an axis of positionality rather than of gender. The on-camera 'performers,' however, are no longer women (or men) as speaking subjects but gender as a representation, no longer an 'I' or 'we' (or 'he' or 'they') but a depersonalized and disembodied entity, perhaps an 'it': media, discourse, ideology.

If a generation of feminist work produced a new definition of women as speaking subjects, the strategy of negation — of producing an erruption in the flow of ideology, of refusing the representation of an 'identity' that can only be recuperated anew — is a refusal of this embodiment. But while feminist deconstructive works refuse to define or speak 'for' women, deconstruction is necessarily parasitic on existing representations. Deconstructive works can destabilize pre-coded identities, but they cannot articulate new subjectivities. And the effacement of an

embodied position of enunciation — the subject of narration as the already-spoken — begs the question, "Who is speaking?"

The problem of female identity and voice is problematized yet more radically in works that underscore the dereliction of the position of women within a masculine symbolic economy — the divide on the side of desire. In the influential writings of Jacques Lacan, taken up with critical rigor within feminist theory, the early works of Freud are re-read across the knowledge systems that proceed from structural linguistics. With its entry into the symbolic order, the subject is structured by language, a signifying chain in which there are no positive terms but only relations of sameness and difference. Thus in the patriarchal ordering of language and culture, the masculine subject stands in privileged (if illusory) relation to the phallus — signifier of desire, plenitude, potency. Within the differential logic of this binary, the feminine counterpole is defined as lack, absence and non-being. While psychoanalysis demonstrates that gender is symbolic rather than biological, psychoanalytic theory also constructs women around the phallic sign, the not-man. Woman, as the Other through whom male subjectivity is constituted, serves as the guarantor of the masculine subject only; there is no guarantor for the female. At the site of desire and identity, the woman encounters absence. The position of 'I' is foreclosed. The subject position is one of an unrepresentability, a '(   )'.

The problem is succinctly put in Elizabeth Schroder's *I Can't Get Over What I Saw* (1985). The visual image throughout is that of a cityscape, as shot through the windshield of a moving vehicle. A female character in voice-over recounts an unhappy romantic episode. Finally she asks, in a voice at once plaintive and exhortative: "How many artists do you have to fuck before you become one?"

Su Rynard's *Absence* (1986) is a work that suggests the state of an unspeakable loss. The tape begins with a close-up on a woman's mouth, painted with black lipstick. The mouth opens in speech, but no sound is heard; across her lips appears the word of the title: absence. The protagonist moves alone and unspeaking through empty rooms and desolate streets. She waits, she lingers. The spaces are devoid of other people, of connection and relation. Is something, someone, missing? In a sense, it is the woman herself: in a telling scene, she looks at her face in the mirror. In psychoanalytic theory, the mirror stage is a turning point in the formation

of identity, a reflection which subtends the sense of self through external images. But when the protagonist looks in the mirror, there is no reflection.

The Other (as) Subject

The deeply motivated efforts to destabilize, disclaim and dismantle patriarchal value systems and their institutional supports bespeaks the paucity of these social and symbolic arrangements as representative of women, their needs or their desires. The setting in crisis of the feminine position signals the difficulty in occupying the site of legitimated speech, the silences and silencings of women underscoring the function of gender as a structure *constitutive*, rather than simply an effect, of social relations. But women's occupation of the position of narration does not in itself presage a restitution. As the marginalized space for women's activities, whether 'feminine' or 'feminist,' attests, it is not only a question of speaking, but of being heard.

Yet there are problems with the feminist embrace of an incommensurability marked as negation, absence and unrepresentability. It occludes the social reality of spaces and presences that women, over two decades of intervention, have installed within culture – sites of voice, agency, knowledge and effective political will. Thus another configuration arises, wherein the task at hand "is no longer that of destroying or disrupting man-centered vision" but rather determining "how to effect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject."[12]

If one generation proposed a celebration of the female sign and the other the dismantling of it, if one focused on an experiential female self and the other on the demystification and radical critique of unified subjectivity, neither of these seemingly incompatible positions displaces the other, for the questions raised by each are far from resolved. Indeed, they are taken up anew in subsequent work exploring the question of female subjectivity as an unfixed construct that is also an *embodied* positioning, embedded in social relations. And the bi-part feminist project, seeking the conditions of possibility for a re-reading and re-writing of the patriarchal text, conjoins in reconstituting spectatorial relations in diverse forms that privilege the woman as spectator.

But as Gayatri Spivak has declared, "I see no way to avoid insisting that there has to be a simultaneous other focus: not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?"[13] Such a focus is a clear movement away from what Trinh T. Minh-ha names as a "yearning for universality" in the use of the term "woman" as generic, and invites the "exploration of difference *within* duality itself."[14] The articulation of "the subject of feminism" as a site of multiple, even contradictory, differences opens the conception of the female subject as constituted not only in sexual difference — from man, from Woman — but also in differences of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, age and other cultural relations.

As Linda Gordon observes, the shift from a view of women defined by sexual difference (from man) to one that situates the woman as a site of multiple, even contradictory, differences, has firm implications: "once it is understood...that these differences not only constitute each woman's consciousness and subjective limits but all together define *the female subject of feminism* in its very specificity, its inherent and at least for now irreconcilable contradiction...these differences, then, cannot be again collapsed into a fixed identity, a sameness of all women as Woman, or a representation of Feminism as a coherent and available image."[15] (my emphasis)

In *Heroics* (1984), Sara Diamond constructs a collective social subject in a documentary work linking personal and social histories. In this production, however, the collective 'we' is a plurality, multiple and dispersed, the circulation of singular voices that speak across borders of age, race, class to their personal experiences and definitions of heroism. *Heroics* is not the masculine story of the search for 'origins,' mastery or completion but rather privileges an understanding of heroism in the smaller gestures of personal bravery: the stories recounted by the women documented in the work speak of taking a stand or a physical risk, of leaving an abusive situation, of acquiring a difficult understanding. Differences in the constituents of identity create different configurations and definitions of what has constituted the danger encountered, yet the work also produces a cohesive portrait of the terms of existence of women's lives.

Leila Sujir's *India Hearts Beat* (1989) is a visual and poetic evocation of memories of India by three women of different races, generations and cul-

tural backgrounds. Sujir's mother, a white woman, speaks of her marriage in India to an Indian man; an Indian friend recalls childhood memories of Ceylon and of English colonialism, while Sujir recounts tales from incidents in India and at home. The stories are conveyed through texts and in performances by the narrators. Sensual and emotional resonances are accentuated through the predominant motif of a sari which has been electronically transformed into a river of memory, visually and temporally linking the narrators and their stories of cultural disjuncture. The subject of narration that Sujir constructs is threefold, 'I,' 'she,' 'we,' a triangulation of voice in which three women, each reciting a narrative of the self, are brought together, their differences maintained through a polyvocal articulation of specificity. In this production – giving voice to the mother as subject of her own desire — the other is a woman, a collaborator enabled to speak her voice and history, a figure negotiating her identity from within a complex matrix of social, cultural, historical and personal relations.

In Janine Marchessault's *The Act of Seeing with Another Eye* (1990), a fracturing is present at the heart of subjectivity itself and this rupture and divide is echoed in the textual strategies of the tape. The narrative is constructed across a doubled set of stories, past and present, of violence and desire. The anchoring narrative recounts a turn of the century triangulation, in which one woman, Christine Brown, left by her fiancé for the actress Andreas Solomon-Riez, follows the gaze of her ex-lover into an obsession of her own with the other woman. Christine is later convicted for the murder of Andreas, though the courtroom itself is a theatre of pre-scripted roles.

This story is told in part by a present day narrator, but his account, which both advances and disclaims evidence of a shared passion between the two women and the jealous discomfiture of the man, is contradictory, unreliable: a prompted staging. In the contemporary narrative, another jilted Christine becomes obsessed with another Andreas, but the active gaze of women as subjects of desire is refracted through an iconography in which they are irremediably objects. The title of the tape references Stan Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), a film in which the eye/I is an imperial shaper of vision. But in Marchessault's rendering, the violence of the image as rhetoric — women as objects of surveillance and its technologies, of porn, of fashion, of cosmetic surgery, etc. — sets

under siege the possibility of "seeing with another eye." The tape concludes with a multiplication of images of Marchessault, author and object, her image overlaid with the crossed sighting of a camera viewfinder, the soundtrack voicing the words of Christine Brown, "It's not really a question of your redemption, nor of his guilt, nor of my innocence, nor of finding the truth, nor of raising the dead.... The question is...how to saw through the iron without even a knife."

A less cautionary view of the difficulties of surmounting the cultural determinations of vision is presented in works that insist on the possibilities of pleasures and desires outside of prevailing phallic codes. In these works, female desire is unleashed from the demand that the psychic 'fit' the social. Chris Martin's *Laws and Skin* (1990), with its images of body-builders, dykes on bikes, transvestites and the street theatre of Brazil's annual carnival, privileges transgressive bodies and pleasures that cross borders of gender and of public space. Lorna Boschman's *True Inversions* (1992) highlights the difference when the woman, as subject of desire, desires another woman as object of desire, rerouting the gaze away altogether from the patriarchal fantasmatic. This raunchy and ironic video, flaunting residual feminist proscriptions on the imaging of the female body, is a fictional behind-the-scenes narration of the making of a lesbian porno film. Stasie Friedrich's *My Body Is A Metaphor* (1991) likewise insists on the necessity for women to make images of their desires and fantasies. Here, desire is a wild card, and the voice-over narrator proclaims: "I'm a 'bad' girl: I want, I want, I want."

Subjects on the Threshold

The feminist movement that began in the 1970s follows by some fifty years the feminist emancipation movement — the latter a massive movement itself subject to an erasure from history of astonishing proportion. This Second Wave movement has been instrumental in constituting a feminist nexus with diverse strategies and a multitude of sites in which women have been able to reclaim a lost heritage, challenge the structures of every domain, and articulate different forms of social and personal desire. The other woman as witness, interlocutor and legitimator provides a metaphorical 'third term' breaking the binary dyad of speaking man/spoken woman.

Yet as Susan Rubin Suleiman has observed, "What seemed, at first, an unproblematic desideratum — let woman speak her own body, assume her own subjecthood — has become problematized, complicated by increasingly difficult questions: what exactly do we mean when we speak of woman as subject, whether of speech or writing or of her own body? Is there such a thing as a — (or *the*) — subject? Is there such a thing as woman, or, for that matter, man?"[16] With the dismantling of the authority of the unified 'I' and the fragmentation of the collective 'we,' in what collectivity, or even ontology, can 'women,' or "the subject of feminism," be grounded? As Rosi Braidotti presses these questions:

> How can 'we feminists' reconcile the recognition of the problematic nature and the process of construction of the subject with the political necessity to posit woman as the subject of another history?... How can 'we feminists' uphold both the need to assert the sexual-specificity of the female subject and the deconstruction of traditional notions of the subject, which are based on phallocentric premises?... And above all, what political stand can we develop that would respect the theoretical complexity of the view of the subject that we share with contemporary philosophy, while maintaining our commitment to the women's struggle? What are the politics of the female split-subject?[17]

And what also are the politics of new subjectivities as they are engineered by new technologies, new biologies? What are the tropes of the technologized body? Catherine Richards' *Spectral Bodies* (1991) examines scientific metaphor as a playground for science (as) fiction, a blending of the imaginary and the material across the artifact of the human body. In eight brief citations from science, medicine, and other fields, the video traces the instability and permeability of the sense of physical boundaries and of the senses themselves: the loss of access to the body, to the map of the self. The virtual body is a body emptied out and reoccupied as the receptor of a new illusory, technological sensorium. In this production, the privileging of vision and the distancing effect of the objectifying gaze, revert to the spectator, but only through the mediation of video as an antiquated representational technology substituting sight for sensation.

Richards writes elsewhere:

> When *I* investigate the boundary between bio and apparatus I'm forced into the first person, a first person experience. I write as if speaking to myself in the dark. At first impression *I* (bio) and certainly *it* (apparatus) meet each

other in full materiality, physicality. Where we meet our edges seem solid, determined, and yet easily deceived – a membrane through which traffic ebbs and flows like osmosis.[18]

What is the boundary of the self, where are the boundaries between self and other, in the neuro-network? What is the relation between simulation and subjectivity? The virtual body, the reproductive body, the cyborg: where is the imaginary frontier of this narrative of the quest? Who writes the signposts of pleasure and danger? Who maps the territory? Who is the subject on this threshold?

In the Harlequin romance, the romantic heroine is left on the threshold of marriage. There is no need to follow her over the threshold because her story is at an end.[19] With marriage comes completion, and narrative closure. In the feminist narrative, the subject is likewise left on the threshold. We follow a story that brings "the subject of feminism" to a particular point. But for this new subject of history, there is no implied closure. For when the subject of feminism crosses one threshold, she encounters another.

To the question, "With what pronoun can the subject of feminism speak?," the multiple configurations of subject positions discussed herein point to the pronoun as verb, to pronouns-in-process. The problem with the pronoun does not offer a solution, but a series of strategic interventions into an unfolding cultural narrative.

The subject of feminism remains on the threshold, a subject in process. This threshold, however, might be compared to a horizon. The horizon — equidistant from any point of reference — is that which ever recedes as it is approached. Like the object of desire, it can never be apprehended. But in moving toward it....

Notes

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1. Rachel Blau Duplessis, "Beyond the Hard Invisible Horizon," *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): p. 151.

2. Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980): p. 157.

3. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): p. 107.

4. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987): p. 9.

5. Ibid., p. 10.

6. Lucy Lippard, *From the Center* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976): p. 124.

7. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. E. Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985): p. 252. For an instance of a gender-inflected critical reading, Joe Bodolai, writing in the 1973 *artscanada* video issue about the work of Steele and that of her contemporary, Marien Lewis, says of Lewis, "I think she may actually have succeeded in domesticating the media, sort of turning television into a kitchen utensil," and of Steele, "Video can be a tool to 'domesticate' other things too. I got into looking at things like this from Lisa Steele's work."

8. Citation translated by René Blouin in his review "*Chaperons rouges*," *Fuse* vol. 4, no. 2 (1980): p. 4.

9. Michele Barrett quoted in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985): p. 157.

10. Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1979): p. 231.

11. Rich, op. cit., p. 224. Reference to Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970): p. 174. While Rich cites Wolf on "the difficulty of saying 'I,'" in "Subjective Authenticity," Wolf writes: "It becomes more and more difficult to say 'I,' and yet at the same time often imperative to do so." See *The Fourth Dimension: Interviews with Christa Wolf*, trans. Hilary Pilkington (London: Verso, 1987): p. 22.

12. Teresa de Lauretis, "Rethinking Women's Cinema, Aesthetics and Feminist Theory," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): pp. 295-6.

13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds, Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988): p. 150.

14. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989): p. 97, p. 105.

15. Linda Gordon, "What's New in Women's History," *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): pp. 14-15.

16. Susan Rubin Suleiman, "(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism," *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. S. Suleiman (Cambridge:

Harvard University Press, 1985): pp. 7-8.

17. Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological Difference," *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (New York: Routledge, 1989): pp. 91-92.

18. Catherine Richards, "The Bioapparatus Membrane," *Bioapparatus*, eds. Nell Tenhaaf and Catherine Richards, published proceedings of the Virtual Seminar on the Bioapparatus (Banff: The Banff Centre, 1991): p. 58.

19. For a discussion of how romance fiction readers interpret the text in a more expanded narrative, see Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

Process Video
Self Reference and Social Change

Jennifer Kawaja

It is 12 o'clock on St. Christopher, better known as St. Kitts, a former British colony in the Leeward Islands, Eastern Caribbean. At lunchtime everything is closed down. It is too hot. Besides, the BBC news punctuates that part of the day, it tells us where we are. Or aren't.

The image of people with their heads pressed up against portable radios, or crouched down by stationary ones is marked in my memory. Where I grew up we were taught that the things that were important happened somewhere else. There were cricket match scores and calypso king finals. But nothing else really — except of course for the day the *Christina* sank and 250 people were killed. The sharks had a feast on the frenzied drowning people, leaving dismembered bodies to float around the channel. I remember my grandmother running from her store to the wharf . with blankets to cover the dead bodies brought to shore by local fishing boats. We made the world news that day. "We are in the news," she said. That is what made the event real, valid.

It wasn't long after the sinking of the *Christina* that a friend asked me over to her house after school. When I arrived other friends were there. The living room had been rearranged, the chairs facing one direction. It was 4 o'clock and Sally's mother was sitting down to watch *Another World* on their new television. As a treat we had been invited to come and see what it was like. When the program began everyone stopped talking. It seemed an eternity till it ended. I think I was ten. Slowly, over the next several years, other families had televisions delivered, the general order they arrived in related to existing racial hierarchies — white, coloured, black.

The introduction of television served to cement the effects of the educational system, which, within the social realities of a segregated colonial and post-colonial society, had already made it its business to deposit alien

knowledge and information in us on a daily basis. The production and dissemination of information about ourselves was owned and controlled by those outside the country — a cultural imperialism many countries in the South face today.

As a member of the 'middle category' of people in that society, television changed my social relations with others. It transformed personal and collective identities. 'Here' became transitory — the goal was always to go somewhere real, somewhere important. That is, somewhere you could buy the things advertised on television. The role of all the media with which we came into contact, or should I say which came into contact with us — print, television, film and radio — contributed to locating 'the centre' outside of our experiences, outside of ourselves and our communities. And television, in particular, complemented the social and political construction of colonized desire.

The practice of 'participatory' or 'process' video that I have been involved in, attempts to name and deconstruct this desire, to redress this balance between the viewer/consumer and the world s/he lives in.[1] It tries to relocate the centre of experience and power within the individual and his/her community by allowing participants to investigate their own lives, and to describe and represent this experience in a manner authentic to the context of production. My aim here is to raise a series of questions around the politics and possibilities offered by process video. In order to do this, the process itself needs to be specified.

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From the outset, it is essential to recognize that each process video is an intimate, transient social relationship. Each project has its own set of historical and cultural circumstances, and therefore results. Each requires a new openness, flexibility in planning and facilitation. As the term implies, this type of production is part of a continuum that does not have an easily defined beginning, middle and end. If there is a conclusion or resolution, it is fleeting and occurs in the intersection between individual life experiences and the life of the group, and not in the final product. Meaning resides in the social and political context of each individual, the social and political reality that is created or constructed from a collectivity, and

finally, the relationship between the viewer, the material product and the presenters/participants.

Process video takes into account the complex context in which oppositional media are produced. Increasing access or representation of oppressed and disadvantaged groups within the mainstream media does not challenge cultural hegemonies but disguises them with a cosmetic pluralism. Ideas about representation and freedom of speech have perhaps obscured the essential structural questions of how power manifests itself in the way we are 'allowed' or 'not allowed' to take part in communicating about our lives and experiences to one another.

Process video attempts to resist the effects of regulation and mainstreaming by the communications hierarchy and its partner, corporate culture — effects which serve to oppress by denying the real life experiences of people, the naming of their relative lack of power, or their real political power, their experiences of racism, sexism and so on. It does this by using communications technology to discover similarity, difference and relevance within *local* realities. It suggests an alternative to the structural inflexibility inherent in the ideology of centralized communication. As praxis, it seeks to reveal to its participants the marketed illusion of a mass culture that is founded on anything but the uniting of different constituencies in their desire for similar products. For a period of time during a process video the individual participant is no longer a single consumer upon which a seemingly monolithic society can impress its agenda.

Primary influences on my own practice of process video in Canada are the popular education and popular theatre movements of the South, and particularly in the resistance-based media efforts of many African and Latin American educators. South America, in particular, has a long tradition of a popular education practice that has manifested itself in programmes to teach people to read for instance. Their work has been adapted for use in many contexts here in Canada, though mostly in the area of community-based theatre and not in process video.

In the last decade many countries in the South have been preoccupied with challenging the prevailing order of communications. In general, they are now working with video in three ways: the development of popularly-produced video (process video), education for critical reception, and reclaiming the mainstream airwaves for more populist representations. To

this end, they have adapted production and distribution methods that provide alternative visions for communications.[2] My process video practice draws on the work of these Southern partners.

1. The Community Context

Over the last five years, I have worked on a variety of community-based collaborative video projects. During that same period, I facilitated three process videos. The Immigrant Women's Video Workshop Presents, *Beneath the Mosaic* involved women discussing their lives in Canada as immigrant women; *Video Stories* entailed immigrant and refugee teenagers telling stories about leaving their homes and coming to Canada; and most recently *Through Our Eyes* brought together teenage women who shared their experiences of growing up in homes where there was alcoholism and substance abuse.

The point of initiation for a process video usually comes from a particular community. Although the original idea for *Beneath the Mosaic* was personal, a community-based immigrant service organization became involved in the project while we were still in the fundraising stage. They, in turn, worked with us to reorganize and redefine the project. *Video Stories* and *Through Our Eyes*, as well as other projects presently under discussion, were initiated by the relevant community organizations.

A group or organization identifies programming or service needs within its constituency and tries to develop programs accordingly. The participatory paradigm creates a possibility for social workers, for example, not only to reach an underserved segment of people but to put them in a position where they define their own needs around programming, point out the existing inadequacies in the systems meant to serve them. This, in turn, allows them to participate in creating messages that are more responsive to their communities needs. Most importantly, the participants develop the skills required to negotiate with the services and systems with which they come into contact.

Once a community-based organization commits itself to the process and the funding is in place (not an easy or quick task in the development of this type of project), there is often a strong sense of involvement and political empowerment. The community perceives that some action is being

taken around a particular issue. The fact that the tool being used is video does not go without inference to its potential 'power.' The process creates a new historical point of departure or experience. It becomes a visible milestone in the history of the community.[3]

2. Media Analysis

Once participants are selected the process proceeds in a layered way: with media deconstruction, self-investigation, group building and media construction or production taking place simultaneously. The first part of the process is designed to encourage analysis of the media as it pertains to the production of particular realities. This is done through popular theatre exercises, analyzing television programs watched at home along with viewing habits.

Although the media literacy exercises are carried out differently in each context, in my experience there are similarities in the dynamics that occur within groups. The workshops often provide a forum for participants to express feelings of isolation and alienation from both personal and collective histories. These feelings of alienation serve, somewhat paradoxically, as a commonality for the group — a shared experience of oppression: the experience of being marginalized. With the immigrant women's group and the refugee youth group this paradox was even more pronounced. There existed an illusory sense that each member knew the other precisely because the experience of otherness, which seemed so familiar, was one constructed in and through television. And the participants in these groups knew television. In both groups, the fallacy of sameness was exposed while the experience of otherness was at once validated and problematized.

3. Script Development

The next phase of the process is to develop a video that allows individuals in the group to reflect their major concerns, experiences, beliefs, or imperatives around a particular issue. This is accomplished through a variety of popular education methods, such as brainstorming from words, building group stories and scenes in addition to writing poems, short stories and

plays. An on-going series of informal discussions and small and large group storytelling also serves as the basis for script development.

It is important to note that each group brings together individuals across class, race and cultural boundaries who have at least one significant common experience. The process then uses this commonality to build a sense of community and collectivity that tries to unify without homogenizing. The goal is to acknowledge sameness while educating one another to difference. The divide and conquer politics of the mainstream is directly opposed to this type of heterogeneity. As such, the process tries to challenge social and political agendas that segregate and separate.

The process of developing a script builds on the earlier exploration of the media by acknowledging personal/collective history as a point of identification or, more specifically, as different points of identification for different individuals and groups of people. The emphasis here is on memory, on the importance of memory within the shared context of the group's reality. Through the process, histories are named, and another is created — the history of the group. It results in a combined history which is composed of a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives on different issues — immigration, racism, abuse and so on.

Groups often go through a difficult period deciding whether they will make individual videos or one video together. The makers of *Video Stories* decided to weave together individual stories to reveal the diverse experiences of refugees in this country. At the same time, commonality was expressed by selecting single icons and stylized settings to use as backdrops for the different stories. The women behind *Beneath the Mosaic* began by deciding which messages they wanted to convey and which stories could be adapted to this end. In contrast, the women who created *Through Our Eyes* shared an overriding desire to portray the emotions that children of alcoholics suffer by developing a short drama with a single narrative line. Their collective imagination led to a linear drama presented through the eyes of one composite character.

While all process videos set out with a primary focus, the process is always subject to a complex set of social forces. For example, in mixed groups where white people are involved, the facilitator has to ensure that difference is not treated as a deviation from the norm, the norm being the 'white wash' of mainstream television. Related to this problem is

inequality and silencing based on race — the fact that even in a suppos-
edly 'egalitarian' setting, racism is often 'managed' by the dominant
group. In other words, there are no 'neutral' spaces and the process does
not try to pretend that the context of a process video provides that space.
Another example of this is the degree to which women are denied access
to communication and must work to overcome those barriers within the
context of the process. The *Video Stories* project involved both men and
women dealing primarily with their experiences as refugees. Much com-
monality was discussed, yet exchanges were initially dominated by the
male participants. Naming this problem, and changing the balance of
expression became an underlying preoccupation during our work
together. In effect, women's communication talents and capabilities can
be 'discovered' and 'recovered' by participatory methods. Participatory
communication techniques provide ways "to break women's self-mar-
ginalization from the public world, reinforce women's communicative
functions in the private world and integrate women's forms of commu-
nication (emotive, personal, familiar) in public communication."[4]

The challenge of process video is to create a space in which multiple
perspectives can co-exist; a space which does not marginalize and frag-
ment experience, which encourages different ways of seeing within the
context of individual and collective empowerment. In this context, the on-
going task is to explore notions of otherness as expressed in the re-telling
and discovery of our own stories, and, as constructed by the mainstream
media — a key site in the production and constitution of otherness.

4. Production

The third stage of the process is to create a production that tries to go
beyond the conventions of representation found in mainstream media
production. Production training often shatters some hard held myths
about the media and reveals the fact that the invisibility of its form is the
result of calculated manipulation by a series of 'professionals.'

Production training is based on the assumption that we learn best by
doing, especially when the reason to learn is relevant and empowering.
There is usually a movement back and forth between personal and more
generalized projects, but within this, is a linear movement from short,

simple productions to longer, more complicated ones. The different kinds of struggles that each individual goes through in this process are acknowledged and discussed on an on-going basis.

The production stage often challenges and balances notions of the supremacy of the individual over the collective as we move back and forth between individual, small group and large group work. If there is cohesion, the collective takes on an identity and the final product(s) is the result of the collective will. Voluntary teams are created to complete the pre-production work of location scouting, sets and props, costumes if necessary, and casting. Participants have to go into the community at large to find and/or purchase what is needed for the production. In *Beneath The Mosaic* and *Video Stories*, all of the roles and responsibilities during production were done on a rotating basis, while the logging was done by everyone and the final editing completed by one team. In *Through Our Eyes*, a production team was chosen and each member was responsible for one aspect of the production throughout shooting. In all stages of post-production there was a system of rotating pairs put into place to complete the production. In all three groups these kinds of decisions were negotiated after lengthy discussions about what individual preferences were, how to balance opportunities and so on.

5. Distribution

As social intervention, process video is very much biased towards reflexivity rather than direct political action. However, by taking control of the distribution of their videos, participants become active producers, determining not only the context in which their images are received but some of the overall political effects of their work.

At the end of production, agreement is always reached within the group as to how the tape will be distributed and who will do it. With all three projects, participants have generally presented their tapes and led discussions afterwards. The groups that produced *Video Stories* and *Through Our Eyes* agreed they wanted their tape distributed to schools and groups beyond their city. In both cases text material was written to accompany the videos in a manner which situated the program within the context in which it was created.

As with each stage of a process video, distribution denies the notion of a mainstream or mass audience. Instead, it targets small groups with both similar and vastly differing realities. By concentrating on narrowcasting and targeting specific presentations to the needs of particular groups, process video distribution implies different unifying points of identification for each specific community of viewers.

One of the most important aspects of these tapes is that they play a role in a process rather than standing on their own as 'products.' In this way they present a resistance to commodity culture. The end product in and of itself does not confer meaning, rather it is the end product in the context of reception — the process of viewing and the collective authority this engenders — which produces a dynamic source of communication.

In each project, my socio-political assumptions about the process, and my knowledge about the medium in which I work are called into question and challenged. These projects permit continued inquiry into the possibilities of: breaking down the boundaries and barriers between subject and observer; eliminating the power and privilege of the observer (film/videomaker); and collapsing the subject, producer and viewer into an integrated continuum that empowers people in their interactions with other people, the media and mainstream institutions. This provides a place to experience and investigate the complex relationship between 'context' and form.

In the realm of mainstream image production, the deconstruction and dislocation of the centre, the subsequent self-investigation, reconstruction, and finally creation of images becomes an important social and political act. The final video may be of 'broadcast' quality but it is not important to receive recognition from the mainstream, nor does the final product need to be integrated into structures of mainstream communication. The intent is to provide new narrative threads that will weave themselves throughout and underneath dominant representations presently in place. With this comes the challenge to accepted relations of communication.

If the feedback to date is in any way accurate, the process enables participants to realize that they have the capacity, and not just the right, to express themselves in personal, artistic, social and political realms. Marginalization often negates this capacity. As Sara Stuart of Martha Stuart Communications suggests, the power of this type of video practice

rests with its capacity to extend people's responsibility over their own lives by giving them direct access to the experiences of others like themselves.[5] This in turn can facilitate political mobilization.

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My practice and investigation into the nature and function of process video relates to my desire to reclaim and use the technology to name certain realities. It relates to my own questions about the constitution of the other represented and reflected both in mainstream media and in the process of uncovering or accessing my own his/herstory.

Finally, I wish to offer a series of questions that need serious consideration: What potential does process video hold for concrete social change in Canada? Does it act as a catharsis in the community and prevent action toward more lasting social change? What, if any, is the impact of process video on the institutions of mainstream media? Are alternative production experiences transferable from one context to another? What are the problems and ironies inherent in using a 'mainstream' technology to empower and validate people's experiences and realities on the margins? How do you measure intervention, since no participatory experience is pure?

What you determine those answers to be depends on what you are trying to achieve with the process in the first place. Alternative media practitioners and theorists are beginning to look at these questions more carefully. In 1990 Vidéazimut, a coalition of people working in independent and alternative video and television from every continent, was founded specifically to address the political potential of communications technologies. In addition to annual meetings, its members act to promote the democratization of communication in their respective countries on all levels of production and dissemination, using a variety of strategies and practices — one of which is 'process' or 'participatory' video.

In the context of the New World Order, where bodies continue to float ashore and the so-called 'new communications media' promise access to only the privileged few, alternative or 'alterative' practices which open up the possibility of delegitimizing and contaminating the mainstream have an important albeit knotty role to play.

Notes

1. The word 'participatory' to describe this video practice is used so often and so loosely that it has become a vague and meaningless reference. Participation is the catch word of the day. It has been co-opted into the bureaucratic and corporate agenda. Instead, I prefer the term 'process' video used by some alternative media practitioners in the South, particularly in Peru and Bolivia.

2. Cf. *Video the Changing World*, eds. Alain Ambrosi and Nancy Thede (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1990).

3. For an interesting discussion of the way the use of this technology can transform a community both negatively and positively see Terence Turner, "Visual Media, Cultural Politics, and Anthropological Practice: Recent Uses of Film and Video Among the Kayapo of Brazil," *The Independent* (January-February 1991).

4. Pilar Riano, *Empowering Through Communication: The Role of Participatory Communication in Development Programs with Women* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1990).

5. Sara Stuart, "Access to Media: Placing Video in the Hands of the People," *Media Development* 4 (1989).

Aboriginal Voices
Entitlement Through Storytelling

Marjorie Beaucage

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarity, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The idea of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life.

Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1967)

We are all related but we are not the same. It is the variety of meanings and interpretations that make life truthful. There isn't an 'only,' just as there isn't a beginning as such. Stories go on and on like the wind moving through everything. Storytellers create and re-create the cosmos, giving form and meaning to the moment. Stories are medicine, they are our connection to the sacred power that is in all things.

The making of images is a way of expressing this complex reality, of recognizing and participating in it. It is an exploration of the sacredness of place and the reality of the present. To discover the present in this space and time is the first principle of existence. Space and time are not finite objective realities.

A sense of place is an emotional investment. It is part of Belonging, being part of a community that determines self and identity. Identity and memory are a way of interpreting reality and relationship. How we name ourselves and remember ourselves in different times and places is a way of making history. Displacement has been a cultural reality for aboriginal peoples on this land. Identifying the dominant codes and ethics/values that put us in this place is the journey of re-covery, re-memory, re-naming our history.

A sense of being in time includes the self with all the expectations, feelings, ideas we carry within us. Moving from one place to another is changing one's psychic space as much as changing one's physical place. So too, the boundaries between this world and the spirit world are not sharp lines. In stories, one weaves back and forth between the worlds without explanation. Cultural knowing takes place on the spiritual plane. This is not the rational knowledge of static facts and linear information. The narrative mode honors the knowledge gained by just being born, cared for, being in a group. Storytelling comes from being in the world, from experiencing life rather than measuring or controlling it.

The tyrannies that we have been made to swallow day by day, that fragment and divide and silence, condemn us to repeat the same old exchanges on their terms. We have all been programmed to institutionalized norms. Our identification as different becomes a distortion when we can only see ourselves as Other, the outsider whose experience and culture are not known. It is a temporary measure to play the game, to use their system to tell our version. But this will not create genuine change. Audre Lorde's words say it best: *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*

We are survivors. We are still here. It is time for self-revelation without fear of contempt, judgement, censure, annihilation. We have suffered the systemic disorientation and loss of identity; we have been assimilated yet are still excluded. We will not deconstruct history and culture according to patriarchal models. We can dispel the lies through stories that are circular and organic. The principles and values of connectedness are in our ancestral memory. The stories we remember and dream and tell each other are testimonies of our cultural memory. The healing we share through the affirmation of our beings in the circle of life is the strength and beauty that is ours. Making images is to make manifest what originates within the spiritual world in the physical world. 'Unite and nurture' could be the text, the script to replace 'divide and conquer.'

What came with me when I was born into this time I will discover. What I lack I will build anew. I will not be sent back to search for those things I have not experienced. I will not waste my energies searching to explain to you who I am not. The knowledge of where I came from is in my bones and in my blood. The result of this knowing is, often times, pain. It

is out of this place that I create and become a vehicle of healing. It is in this time that I make my own medicine, listening to my own heartbeat that is centuries old.

They say that we are the carriers of history; that storytellers and artists must express their visions for the people to see. Then we will make history, not be history. So how will we create our history together, now, in this time and space? How can we access the resources to make it visible? What are the cultural attitudes that we need to re-cover?

The first step in the process of transforming our vision is recognizing the dominant ways of ordering Reality and Relationship and breaking away from the fatalistic view of the world in which systems are given and fixed. It is not enough to refuse, to protest against what is. We must also be willing to change, to woo new combinations, to present a new option whose power of attraction is so strong that it creates desire and image-in-nation. To develop new forms for what we see, what we embody. The challenge is to formalize the creative power of a new way of seeing in structures that do not overpower. There are principles that exist without being the 'final word.' Values from the circle of life which contain creative interdependence and diversity, can be our guides. Wholeness and balance can direct our choices for the next seven generations.

How can we use modern technology to share our wisdom without using its formula? The resources are only beginning to be in our hands. TVNC (Television Northern Canada), the first Arctic TV network, was created to carry programming in eleven different aboriginal languages and dialects, along with English, to 100,000 people in ninety-four communities spread across five time zones over an area of 1.3 million square miles. It is an opportunity to experiment, yet this institution has not yet received programming dollars. There has been no training or development of artists to use these new technologies. So Innu children get to view music videos from Much North for their inspiration...and absorb a mode of creation that does not address who they are as creators. If ritual is the point of entry into the universe of power that contains thousands of years of experiential knowledge, than we need to practice new forms of ritual-making using images that move us deeper into the Mystery rather than separating us from it. If film and video are indeed forms of writing with light, then the Grandmothers of Light must be invited to teach their songs and move-

ments so that new works can dance across the screen with this Power. For generations who have been assimilated and deprived of this heritage, it will take time.

The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation has a decade of Inuit language broadcasting experience in the Eastern and Central Arctic. Each of its production centres has developed its own programming specialty: Baker Lake and Rankin Inlet for cultural and entertainment programming; Igloolik for historical features; and Iqualuit for current affairs, drama and children's programming. While there is innovative work by artists like Zacharias Kanuk and Takuginai, puppeteers teaching cultural values, most of TVNC's programming reproduces mainstream southern formats. In most communities, the reception is very poor so the option is technically not there. TVNC airwaves hardly make it out of Yellowknife. A community across the lake (ten miles on the ice road) has difficulty receiving the transmissions. Both the NWT and Canadian governments must commit to developing this system if it is to be more than another token offering to lure Northerners into consumer TV.

South of the sixtieth parallel, there are still very few channels open for producing work with new vision. The National Film Board (NFB) and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) have had control over which stories get told, who gets to tell them and how they are told. Other networks like Global TV are now getting into the act because it is a good marketing strategy. Aboriginal rights, the environment and native spirituality are current issues that can sell products. Monolithic corporations like the NFB and CBC funded with public monies have made the rules about Canadian image-making for a long time. Alanis Obomsawin is one of the few directors who has managed to create work from the inside out rather than from the outside perspective that traditional documentary form dictates. She is proud that her work is so often characterized as 'biased'. Different values and measures have been a barrier to accessing the means of production for most other native producers. While both the NFB and CBC have run training programs for 'minorities,' few participants have ever been hired or allowed to produce and direct their own work.

Storytelling has always been a way of remembering who we are as peoples. In the past, songs, dances, drawings, crafts were art forms used to transmit and record events as well as celebrate and affirm life. In the last

few decades, painters and carvers became known for their unique vision and theatre emerged as a popular form of creation for many communities. The works of Norval Morrisseau changed the rules for visual art and became a way of teaching traditional spiritual values to a whole generation who had lost touch with these teachings.

Later, theatre schools and the development of native theatre companies across the land encouraged more young people to develop their talents as storytellers and performers to feel proud of who they are. Youth and elders gathered together and recreated history in order to shape the future. Theatre became a tool for our recovery and healing across the diversity of cultures, backgrounds and styles that the diversity of North American Tribes represent. There is not only one voice on this Turtle Island.

Native theatre has now attracted the attention of the mainstream culture, yet at the same time artists are experiencing a need to transcend the position of creating work solely in reaction to the dominant culture. The possibility of offering an alternative world view where many worlds co-exist is here. Artists like Tomson Highway are taking the risk of discovery with plays about life on the 'res.' It is precisely this risk-taking that gives one a voice and a sense of self. And so the circle continues. Another round. We continue to sing and cry out the incredible beauty, the incredible pain, the incredible humor that comes from looking more deeply into the waters and fires of our own experience, sensation and memory.

This gathering around for tea, visiting, laughing, teasing, settles into a gentle sense of connection as a story is shared. There are no critics here saying that's not drama. There is respect for the vulnerability of release and awe for the mysteries of dreams unraveled. It is a time to listen with your entire being; to go into the lodge of your Self and listen for your ancestors are speaking. It is a time for gratitude. It is a time for remembering who you are. The Circle has room.

Stories change, and the teller, the audience, the occasion, the time all combine to create a new version. There is not just one way to tell a story. Each person creates their own story as they listen. What we choose to remember shapes who we become.

Stories are also gifts. As Maria Campbell, a Métis storyteller from Saskatchewan, explains: "No one ever told a story that was not his/her own and if they did, it was only if the story had been given to them or if the story

was traded. Even then, the storyteller would begin the story by telling how he/she came by it and the name of the original creator would be given." Some stories are sacred and can only be told at certain times by the people who have been chosen and trained to carry them for the people.

That is why the whole debate around cultural theft has never been understood. Different traditions have different rules, and that is what must be respected. It is not a question of restricting or censoring the imagination but of acknowledging the gift of a people and their right to express it according to different cultural norms. This dialogue has yet to begin.

Humor is a basic ingredient of survival. For three decades *Spiderwoman Theatre* has been combining the sacred and the amusing, contemplating our existence and our relations with the grain of laughter. They have called their work, *Storyweaving*, creating designs and weaving stories with words and movement, based on their life experiences: "We translate our personal stories, dreams and images into movement, and refine them into the essential threads of human experience. In seeking out, exploring and weaving our own patterns, we reflect the human tapestry, the web of our common humanity. Finding, loving and transcending our own flaws, as in the flaw in the goddess' tapestry (Spiderwoman, the goddess of creation, always wove a flaw into her designs to allow her spirit a way out), provides the means for our spirits to find their way out, and be free...."

The recovering of the grandmothers' voices within us is a process that Maria Campbell calls creative documentary. It is in finding expression for our ancestors' voices that we know ourselves as strong and powerful. Thus history is alive in us as we shape the stories. Art and everyday life are intertwined and transform both the storymaker and the ones to whom the stories are given, with a power that is enacted each time the story is shared.

Ideas and concepts cannot be contained by rigid boundaries. Gloria Anzaldua speaks of juggling cultures, sustaining contradictions, and turning ambivalence into something else in that place where worlds collide inside us. Otherwise, that place becomes a prison and we are prisoners of what we contain, frozen in a history that does not change:

> I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet.... We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the

knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the centre holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward. We will survive the crossroads....

Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (1987)

Just what is our true ancestral heritage and how much European baggage have we incorporated? There isn't one answer to this question, but we must put history through a sieve and winnow out the lies and name the oppressions that we have suffered. That is what is truly remarkable in *Itam Hakim Hopiit* (1991), a video by Victor Masayesva, which documents the oral tradition from one of the sacred storytellers and combines this with present day images that counterpoint the struggles and survival of the Hopi. The Hopi and Navajo traditions of the Southwest have remained the most intact and the retelling of ancient prophecies which guide present-day actions are the blood memory of survival. We were not discovered by Columbus; the people knew he would come. The stories of origins and the guidance for how to live in right relation have always been there. In Masayesva's tape the images of the natural world juxtaposed with the ancient story contain the layers of time and space in a way never before seen. The use of negative metallic images to represent the introduction of the Spaniards to this land is in sharp contrast to the elemental images used in the other stories. And the fast forwarding of the pow wow dancing encapsulates how the natural rhythm of time has been accelerated.

We have integrated many different cultural influences on this continent yet for many of us our own cultural identity and expression remains largely hidden. Métis film and video maker Loretta Todd explores this question by examining the role of church and state in education. *The Learning Path* (YEAR) is more than a documentary about three women who survived residential schools. She weaves her questions of identity into the fabric of the work with each round of the story, blending images of the past into the texture of the unspoken lines carved on the women's faces and cutting deep into their memory. The journey is inward and outward spiraling down and up at the same time without any definite conclusions being made, allowing the viewer to pursue their own journey in the process. It is a tribute to the women and to their anger, transformed.

The search for one's voice is grounded in the issue of entitlement. To believe that I have a right to express my views, my emotions, my values in

an ongoing struggle. The right to one's rage and anger at the generations that have been lost is not acknowledged. Anger is often the creative energy behind the stories. *The Learning Path* becomes the vehicle for expression, both personal and universal. The desire to be seen and heard, to shift time and space and find one's place is growing stronger. I put myself in the story. We are all part of the story.

When Todd envisioned *The Learning Path*, she saw it as a story told by a fourth person, a young woman of the present time looking for a future view. However, because of time and budget constraints, this was not possible. Nevertheless, through the use of archival footage and dramatic recreations, Loretta brought the "black angels" to life in the corridors and used the voices of children reciting Hail Mary's in the dormitory sequence to convey the oppression of the Church and the alienation from their cultural heritage. One of the women recreated her memories as she walked through the now empty building. Each round of exploration revealed another layer. And the viewer is invited to go back again with another thread to weave into the fabric of the story which never really ends because the oppression continues. The storytellers in the film share their experiences, opening doors for the viewer to reflect on the impact of institutions on several generations of children.

Film and video are the mediators of Voice. By remembering history, by turning to our original teachers, the trees, the animals, the four directions, the truths that were given for life on this land are uncovered. And the pain of the past becomes our guidance for the future. That is "the learning path" we walk.

And there are many new voices emerging, drawing from the riches of the storytelling tradition, reshaping the present and changing the future. The search for voice has led to peoples gathering together to address the forces that have excluded us in the past. In April 1991, the First Nations Filmmakers Alliance was formed. As a result, Dreamspeakers 1992, a film and video festival, was hosted by indigenous peoples. In the southern territory of the continent (once only the oceans were our borders), there are numerous festivals and gatherings that celebrate and nurture film and video production: "Two Rivers Festival" in Minnesota, "Native American Film and Video Festival" in New York, and the American Cultural Institute in Sante Fe which provides hands-on training. In

Ontario, events like "Race to the Screen" and "Reel Aboriginal" (both held in 1992) have presented forums for discussion about race and representation. The creation of *Full Screen*, a network for people of color and First Nations, that emerged from the "Shooting the System" conference held in Toronto, has enabled artists to better access resources for training and production. In western Canada, similar forces are gathering so that alternative visions can be explored.

More and more voices are being heard on arts juries and in board-rooms lobbying for anti-racist policies in the arts in order to have access to the tools of production. Sometimes we are heard and boundaries are changed. At the same time, a lot of creative energy is being spent to educate those who have the power, with still few returns for the energy invested. We have yet to see a Canadian feature or television series that is totally controlled by aboriginal people. Our stories must still be judged according to mainstream norms and forms in order to be seen.

Why must stories have a beginning, middle and end? Opening possibility rather than closing the mind in a sequential self-contained system where all the variables are known, is still hard to image. We are more familiar with a win-lose scenario, with the simple conflict between good and evil rather than one that allows differences to co-exist. The myth of happy-ever-after is more desirable than change or growth.

But to remember is to shift time and space; to reflect, to re-arrange the past in new ways, today. The frontier of vision is more than flashbacks and dreams. To create in non-adversarial ways is to touch the Source of transformation. It means to know the many realities that Reality can be made into all at once. The principle of creation is relationship, not conflict-resolution. To meet chaos or enter into the darkness does not necessarily mean to order it but to embrace it and allow it to contain its own truths.

I am a creator of images, using film and video to make my own medicine. It is the place where I seek to know who I am, to explore my own questions, desires, hopes, which have remained largely unexpressed. I have lived most of my life on the margins, between worlds, I have always been searching for my place. The form of expression that emerged for me was one of serving others. My work for social change and transformation of oppressive structures for women, youth, First Nations, francophones, was grounded in my personal search for identity and belonging. The place

where I have been dispossessed is the space where creation can occur if I am willing to be undone and cross into the unknown world of in-between. The place where walls become windows, where I can see myself as part of the picture is the place where I begin.

I no longer believe in a 'truth of art' advancing us to higher levels. Art does not abstract us from life. The act of creating must allow for the force of life to be felt, experienced, in all its terror and all its beauty. It is a mixture of shade and light, contour and shadow. Idea and fact transgress each other's borders when images are created out of inner and outer realities. The image we create of ourselves has a life of its own and cannot be reduced to one meaning or message. Questions do not always have answers. Events are always at hand, but the coherence of these events is our construction.

Offering other ways of seeing what is at hand is a way of acknowledging myself, it an opening to what I do not yet see. Image-making is a way of attesting that what I see and experience does indeed exist. The images I create are not a 'copy' of reality but an emanation of reality. They possess an evidential force that gives testimony of time and space. They are the power of authentication, not representation. The image is complete in itself and gives itself with its own fullness and flux, drawing us into relation with it. Yet it has edges, a frame that contains reality. A reality that I compose and arrange for you to come into and to see beyond. To see is to enter, to be visited. To cross the threshold. And to be transformed....

> Once upon a time to come...
> there were peoples
> who knew what they knew
>
> they knew that their heritage
> on this land
> was their power
> and they knew how to honor
> their spiritual connections with their ancestors.
>
> This happened because the women
> recovered their powers of creation

in their bodies, their spirits, their dreams
and this original power of Woman is
of the earth and the moon and the stars.

and the people remembered that Woman is the medicine
that the power to make life is the source of all power
that the waters of life are sacred
and the transforming rituals that come from this place
are healing and bring harmony.
And through the remembering, they saw what they might become.

And the distant pasts
became one with the near futures
as stories were shaped from that ancient place
deep within where the Mother lives.

To go to that place of remembering Her
is to be remembered

Sometimes it meant starting
with what is
darkest
and wild
and dangerous
uncovering stones
and paying homage
to the sacred buried there.

Sometimes it meant
communion
with solitude
in order to find
right relation
and affirmation of the unloved
self

And sometimes
a song on the wind
stirred the hearts of many people
and they recognized its beauty
in each other
and the dream
of the child's heart
became alive
with the grace of inner light

Fires were rekindled
as the special gift
the Creator gave each one
each race
each nation
was allowed to accomplish its purpose
of maintaining the whole

The fire
the water
the wind
the earth
once again
became the elements
of renewal
and re-vision

The people could see
and they opened their hearts
to find ways to act
together
in a good mind
because they knew
we are all relatives
on this earth

And they found
the balm of forgiveness
to recognize wisdom
and the compassion
that turns aside fear and anger
and the generosity of heart
that recognizes beauty

This is how
the peoples became
strong again
because in that circle
there was remembrance
that we are a human race
and
they could understand
and respect
the unfolding of life
in all its different
forms

And so it continues…

All my relations.

Deregulating Identity
Video and AIDS Activism

Tom Folland

Video art's history — if one can say there is such a thing — extends across a diversity of discursive spaces: from museums, galleries and festivals to occasional forays on MTV, PBS and community access channels. Since its very beginnings, video's practitioners were divided. As Dierdre Boyle observes there were:

> ...two camps divided: the video artists and the video documentarists. The reasons for this fissure were complex, involving the competition for funding and exhibition, a changing political and cultural climate, and a certain disdain for nonfiction work as less creative than 'art' — an attitude also found in the worlds of film, photography and literature.[1]

Stuart Marshall has similarly described the division between: "recorded performance, installation, community/political, and video art proper."[2] "Video art proper" refers to artists of the early to mid 1970s like Vito Acconci, Lisa Steele, Dan Graham, Colin Campbell, David Askevolde, Eric Cameron, Joan Jonas or Lynda Benglis whose works revolved around some of the crucial terms of aesthetic modernism: the material apparatuses of image making.

While aesthetic conventions were shared between Canadian and American artists (i.e., the employment of one's body to explore this new technology), the history takes a somewhat different form with "community/political" uses of video. While running their coaxial cables through public streets, American cable companies in the early 1970s were required by federal law to provide community access for local programming on a first come first serve and uncensored basis. Video collectives like TVTV (Top Value Television) took advantage of this service to produce alternative media coverage of political events such as the 1972 U.S. Democratic convention — its latter day genesis are collectives like Paper Tiger Television

and Deep Dish TV. The Canadian experience has been significantly different. In 1967 the National Film Board (NFB) initiated a programme called Challenge for Change/*Société nouvelle*. Using film and later video, it attempted to put media technology directly in the hands of rural communities and minority groups for the purposes of self-education, empowerment and social change. Despite the fact that this highly innovative programme inaugurated important experiments with community television across Canada, its efforts were short-lived, in part because videos produced for community access channels have always been subject to review and control by privately owned cable companies.

All this suggests of course the irreducibility of any coherent art history of video although, as Martha Rosler has argued, "aestheticism has been busily at work trying to reclaim video from 'information' ever since."[3] Video practitioners in the early days of rough edits and instant playback, shared a sense of video as inherently oppositional, not only to mass media culture, but museum and high art culture as well. Everywhere in video there was an attempt to wrestle away from dominant discourses the language of self-determination. While grass roots video collectives were producing alternative media networks divested of corporate and state interests, artists were attempting to develop a new language of the self, one guided by emerging post-structuralist theories of language and representation.

Yet the seemingly opposed agencies of video art and video activism appear to be united when it comes to one political issue: putting an end to the AIDS crisis. While continually less money is being allotted for the research and development of hundreds of promising drugs, gay and AIDS communities have been utilizing video to counsel and promote safer sex, educate, empower and mobilize people. Fueled by some of the critical directives of aesthetic postmodernism, "Angry Initiatives: Defiant Strategies" organized by John Greyson for Deep Dish TV, the videotapes of Testing the Limits Collective, DIVA TV (Damned Interference Video Activism), the *Toronto: Living with AIDS* cable project, independent videotapes by artists such as Andy Fabo, Greyson, Richard Fung or tapes by artists/activists such as Greg Bordowitz screened in bars and community centres are but a few examples of work enabled and inspired by alternative community networks. Indeed, Douglas Crimp

has remarked on the renewal of *agitprop* forms as an integral aspect of AIDS activism:

> Assault on authorship had lead to the practice of anonymous and collective production. Assaults on originality has given rise to dictums such as 'If it works, use it' or 'If it's not yours, steal it.' Assaults on the institutional confinement of art has resulted in efforts to reach affected and marginalized communities more directly.[4]

The development of a discourse on AIDS in a wide variety of recent video work seeks to counter misinformation and bourgeois morality. This is done not only by devising sophisticated dissemination strategies (i.e., targeting audiences and developing alternative exhibition sites), but also through a critical understanding of representation and its relation to subjectivity.

Video art has always maintained some type of relationship to the problem of the self and its representations. In 1976, Rosalind Krauss would characterize video as an "Aesthetics of Narcissism" in an essay of the same title. Krauss pitted the Greenbergian imperative (i.e., the purist aesthetic exhorting art forms to solely address their materiality) against a medium that could only parody this requisite notion of reflexivity. For video's "material construct" was the technological image — in most cases of the artist's self. Thus the self, assumed by the discourses of conceptualism and minimalism to be a transparent phenomenology independent of gender, race, class and sexuality, was being reconfigured through video. If the essence of video was the artist's body, Krauss argued, the body could not be separated from the technology but rather had to be understood as an effect of narrative signification. To extrapolate a bit, the structuring effects of image-making, representation, could not be separated from the very construction of subjectivity.

I raise Krauss' essay here not only because of the centrality it occupies within progressive art world discourse of the period but also because it situates video art somewhere in the realm of an emerging political theory of the subject. For within much of the video art of the early and mid 1970s (as well as body art, dance and performance) are the pressures and strains of a burgeoning political postmodernism that evolves around crucial issues of self-representation and identity politics. Krauss' theory of a self in narcissistic narrative flux was, as noted above, in dire contrast to a universalizing conception of the self extolled by minimalist sculpture and abstract

expressionism. Thus she would write of Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1971) in which artist Nancy Holt has her words fed back to her less than a second after she has uttered them: "The prison Holt both describes and enacts could be called the prison of a collapsed present, that is, a present time which is completely severed from a sense of its own past.... Self-encapsulization — the body or psyche as its own surround — is everywhere to be found in the corpus of video art."[5] Krauss has video artists involved not only in dismantling the categorical imperative of the modernist obsession with form, but also the coherency of subjectivity itself.

As much as it appeared to summarize the concerns of video art, Krauss' essay neglected the social resonance of video technology. It lacked the concreteness of a specific social analysis, the kind that was, for example, so important in Laura Mulvey's 1974 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in its attempt to map the formal and psychoanalytic specificities of the male gaze. Without a social space to unravel this self-as-representation, Krauss' argument simply mirrored the phenomenological concerns it appeared to be at odds with, thereby becoming merely a formal problem for the same old perceived addressees of art. As such, at a time when women artists like Ilene Segalove and Eleanor Antin were employing the non-traditional forms of photography and video to question the acute absence of historical and cultural representations of women (apart, of course, from objects of fetishistic desire), Krauss could not see the irony, indeed complicity, of an essay on subjective representations of the self that has Serra's "narcissism" enacted upon the body of a woman. In much the same way that Krauss would see video art independent of any relation to mass media culture, she would also view the question of self-representation as separate from the structures of power and domination.

Discussing another type of artwork concerned with the self — Body Art — feminist artist and critic Mary Kelly wrote in her 1981 essay "Reviewing Modernist Criticism": "...the body is decentred and it is radically split, positioned; not simply my body, but his body, her body. Here no third term emerges to salvage a transcendental sameness for aesthetic reflection."[6] But of course a third, a fourth, a fifth term do emerge from this implicit understanding of gender as absolute alterity, not to salvage a transcendental self however, but to further problematize it: her lesbian body, his gay body, his black gay body, her Asian straight body, my working class gay white body....

These identities cannot be theorized through the kind of narcissistic aesthetic navel gazing Krauss described as integral to early video art. Rather, they are constituted only through their multiple relations to legal, social, cultural, political discourses and representations. Perhaps this was what Stuart Marshall was thinking when in his 1976 essay, "Video Art, The Imaginary and the *Parole Vide*," he wrote:

> ...if the elementary artist/video equipment confrontation results in the medium acting as its own subject, the most obvious redeployment takes the form of the medium acting as a feedback system enabling the artist to become an object of his/her own consciousness. Here the artist confronts both equipment and image of self, and it is at this point that the curiosity of the artist about the medium becomes subverted into a curiosity about the relationship of the subject to its representations.[7]

AIDS has, however, ruptured and destabilized this space to the extent that the politics of self-representation are increasingly a tenuous and conflicted terrain — much more than a curiosity. Mass media in the age of AIDS introduces the term "heterosexual community," maintaining that AIDS is a disease of identity in tandem with the assertion that some people by dint of their heterosexuality or serial monogamy are magically immune from a blood and bodily borne virus. Any delineation of identity must take into account its public dimension, that fragile, mobile and historically contingent space of the social realm.

Where it concerns AIDS, who you are and how you identify will determine your culpability on the rigid polar axis of innocence and guilt, an axis that contains at its core an image of the white nuclear family with its doors bolted closed against what Simon Watney has called "teeming deviant millions." Consider the often cited but always exemplary case of Kimberly Bergalis, the Florida woman who allegedly contracted AIDS from her dentist. Bergalis, when testifying before the U.S. senate in favor of mandatory testing for health care professionals shortly before her death, did not identify herself as belonging to an AIDS community but, rather as a member of a public who had "innocently" contracted the virus, who had done nothing to "deserve this." Framed by her family and repeatedly lashing out at "those who gave this to me" (indeed a criminal investigation has ensued), Bergalis became a media fixation, like Ryan White and basketball star Magic Johnson, because she symbolized and

reinforced the good/evil polarity of virtually all dominant representations of AIDS.

In this light, the recent debates over identity politics — queer identity in particular — are beginning to sound politically disengaged. Arguments that vacillate between, and ultimately enforce, the binary opposites of social constructionist, historically formed identities and transhistorical essentialism, tend to shun the social and political actualities of community and identity. Judith Butler, for example, in response to her own rhetorical question, "…isn't it quite crucial to insist on lesbian and gay identities precisely because they are being threatened with erasure and obliteration from homophobic quarters?," makes this point: "…ought such threats of obliteration to dictate the terms of the political resistance to them…?"[8] Similarly, Ed Cohen has argued that Steven Epstein's article, "The Limits of Social Constructivism," "…assumes the monovocalizing authority of 'socially imposed categorization' and thus defines resistance primarily as negative, as fighting back."[9] Butler and Cohen maintain, following Foucault's analysis of sexuality in western political discourse, that identities are imposed by dominant ideological discourses for purposes of control and containment. For them, political resistance might take the epistemological and to some extent, I would argue, de-politicized form of refusing that singular interpellation in the first place.

One needs to pause and wonder how political resistance can be mobilized, or even exist, if not precisely in response to the oppressive terms it seeks to counter, to think through how such an epistemological project might also have the effect of obliterating cultures and communities already founded upon such conflicted identities. One need not be locked permanently into the semiotics of identity simply by claiming it. And by claiming identity one also lays claim to its definitions which are formed and changed through a number of over-lapping discursive practices: textual, cultural, political, sexual, geographic. Any argument *vis-à-vis* identity needs to be grounded within the existing social context in which it will be deployed. As Cindy Patton has argued in her book *Inventing AIDS*: "Identity politics are a resistance to and at the same time a reinstatement of the underground side of a public politics grounded in the threat of sheer coercion."[10] What Patton foregrounds as inextricably bound up within any delineation of identity, and what Butler and Cohen tend to obfuscate, or

view as something hoisted upon an otherwise happy family of mobile signifiers, is its public dimension, the practical space of *realpolitik*.

Nowhere have the questions of identity and representation, the problematics of circulation and audience, and the gulf between image and reality been more pressing than within the AIDS movement. Mainstream media churn out images of people with AIDS that corral both the significance and the extent of its ravages to the morbid fantasy of death-bed victims whose sexuality has finally paid the price of its immorality. Any other representation is vigorously contested.

The *AIDS Cable Project/Toronto: Living With AIDS*, organized by video artists Michael Balser and John Greyson, began airing on local Roger's and MacLean Hunter cable networks in the fall of 1990. The tapes were diverse both thematically and formally: *Another Love Story: Women and AIDS* by Gabrielle Micallef and Debbie Douglas; *Nipo 'Apinewin* by Anishabie Health Toronto; *The Cause of AIDS — Fact and Speculation* by Coleman Jones; *Bolo! Bolo!* by Gita Saxina and Ian Rashid in cooperation with the South Asian AIDS Coalition; *Person Livid with AIDS* by Michael Smith; *The Colour of Immunity* by Grace W. Lawrence and the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention (Black CAP); *Fighting Chance: Gay Asians and AIDS* by Richard Fung; *The Medicine Show* by Gregory White and James McSwain; *AIDS: A Family Affair* by Marc Berube and Steve Walker; *The Great AZT Debate* by John Greyson and Michael Balser. The tapes have a lot to say about how different cultures and communities negotiate AIDS. *Another Love Story: Women with AIDS* weaves a fictional tale in which one partner of a lesbian couple contracts HIV, the resulting stress upon their relationship, and their dawning awareness that lesbians get AIDS. *Nipo'Apinewin* addresses how AIDS has affected the Native communities as well as how homosexuality figures within Native cultures. *Fighting Chance: Gay Asians and AIDS* portrays a series of Asian men discussing their sexuality and the epidemic while *Bolo! Bolo!* focuses on AIDS in the South Asian community. The programme sought to affirm the specificity of community and identity, to provide a vernacular of safer-sex behavior. Like numerous similar projects, *Toronto: Living With AIDS* was significant in that it brought together community activists, artists, and people living with AIDS in response to an urgent need for locally specific information and theories of AIDS by and for communities directly affected. That this

gesture of a community speaking to and of itself flies in the face of conventional doxa as far as broadcast television goes, was a fact that did not go unnoticed. Near the end of the programme, which saw half of its funding not reinstated by Health and Welfare Canada in January 1991, Ed Nasello, programme manager for Roger's Cable 10, canceled the series over the airing of *Bolo! Bolo!*. Having watched a series of videos not produced under his station's technical and philosophical aegis, Nasello explained the cancellation in a letter to Michael Balser:

> The programmes telecast on Tuesday February 12 and Tuesday February 19
> showed men french kissing and the caressing of thighs...I found the scene
> to be offensive. It is unfortunate that we must suspend the programme
> because of this error in judging the public's taste.

Nasello's letter is remarkable inasmuch as it is consistent with the Canadian cable network's patronizing attitude toward community programming. Administered programming by cable managers with no real input by community groups, allows his invocation of public taste to determine what he sees as appropriate for community interests. For anyone involved in the AIDS struggle around adequate and non-homophobic education, treatment, research and civil rights, Nasello's statement surely sounds an alarm. It highlights what has been at the heart of the political, social and representational crisis of AIDS from the very beginning. One that has had devastating effects upon educational efforts: the pitting of a public agenda against a community one. This fictional projection of a public is meant to represent all audiences. But of course it does not. Occluded from Nasello's 'public' are AIDS affected communities *to whom the programme was addressed*. Yet people with AIDS and HIV are never interpellated as subjects of address by dominant media. *Toronto: Living With Aids* violated the unwritten rules of broadcast television by addressing itself to specific communities at risk and by not utilizing the dominant paradigm for representation of AIDS: innocent victims and guilty perpetrators. Given the 'public' record on AIDS — indifferent, actively sexist, heterosexist, racist and homophobic — *Toronto: Living With AIDS* wanted nothing to do with 'public taste.' Indeed, the very genesis of the programme was in reaction to the aversion, ignorance and indifference to AIDS that is carried out in the very name of the Public.

How this policing of public space and its empathetic definitions is

systematically enforced is much more complex than Nasello's actions might suggest. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cautions against the deconstructive impulse to revel in the mutually canceling or self-effacing terms of binary opposition — "the now chronic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition [that] has affected our culture through its ineffable marking," in this case Nasello's invocation of public/community.[11] Sedgwick suggests instead that "contests for discursive power be specified as competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition."[12] One must shift analysis away from the incoherent terms in which such operations of power are carried out, however retroactively, and look toward the practical as well as theoretical arsenal that facilitates such moves. Although Nasello's action was, for all practical purposes, insignificant since the programme was at its end and continued to air successfully on Maclean Hunter cable, it is the ideological charge of his statement that suggests some of the many subtle and none too subtle ways in which power can be yoked to silence those who might challenge the very terms of communication: who speaks and to whom?

The meanings of AIDS as they are constantly produced and changing, constitute as much a site for struggle for AIDS activists as the daily battle around access to treatment and civil liberties. Dominant media's representations and reports of AIDS, however intermittent, have generally been collusive with its broader homophobic context. The construction of an AIDS identity, defined in terms of the groups deemed unfit for public membership, is fueled by the powerful representational apparatus of a culture that seeks to immunize itself against the disease and justify the state's profound social and political irresponsibility. *Toronto: Living With Aids* attempted to foreground this elision, this simultaneous manufacturing and erasure of the public, by speaking directly to and empowering affected communities — that is, by de-regulating the state-sanctioned identity accorded to AIDS. This is an important example of the way video work has functioned within the AIDS movement to challenge and change the identification of AIDS and to forge political coalitions across a diversity of sites. Circulating within alternative information networks and community spaces, honed by the critical theories of representation and iden-

tity, video art-activism develops not an aesthetics of narcissism but an aesthetics of engagement.

Notes

1. Dierdre Boyle, "Guerrilla Television," *Transmission: Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics*, ed. Peter D'Agnostino (New York: Tandem Press, 1985): p. 203.

2. Stuart Marshall, "Video Art: The Imaginary and The Parole Vide," *New Artists' Video: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978): p. 105.

3. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (Aperture in Association with Bay Area Video Collective, 1990): p. 43.

4. Douglas Crimp, "The Boys in my Bedroom," *Art in America* (February 1990): p. 48.

5. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): p. 53.

6. Mary Kelly, "Reviewing Modernist Criticism," *Screen* vol. 22, no. 3 (1981): p. 55.

7. Stuart Marshall, op. cit., p. 105.

8. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge Press, 1991): p. 19.

9. Ed Cohen, "Who are 'We'? Gay Identity as Political E(motion)," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, p. 73.

10. Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990): p. 124. See her discussion of Rock Hudson and the ways in which our sexuality is literally written upon our bodies (pp. 126-131). See also Stuart Marshall's 1984 videotape *Bright Eyes* for an historical consideration of how homosexuality has been constructed in medical terms as inherently pathological. Women — whose bodies have been associated with disease ever since Hippocrates' infamous statement "What is Woman? Disease." — are relieved of the burden of origin, coming to function in the always contradictory picture of AIDS as vectors or carriers, only transporting the virus to men, and to babies. Interestingly enough, Magic Johnson at one point declared that he 'got' HIV from a prostitute, a stock stereotype of infection. For more on representations of women and AIDS see Paula Triechler, "AIDS, Gender, and Biomedical Discourse: Current Contests for Meaning," *AIDS: The Burden of*

History, eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988): pp. 215-233.

11. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987): p. 11.

12. Ibid.

Contributors

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YYZ Books is an alternative Canadian press dedicated to publishing critical writings on art and culture. Established in 1988, YYZ Books is associated with YYZ Artists' Outlet, a Toronto-based artist-run centre. Since 1979, YYZ has presented a challenging program of visual arts, film, video, performance, lecture series, panel discussions and publications. Both YYZ Books and its affiliate, YYZ Artists' Outlet, seek to provide strong, innovative programming that combines theory and practice, encouraging a dialogue between diverse communities and audiences.

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The contradictory status of a technology used both to trouble identity and to give it voice has nowhere been more pronounced than in Canada. This book explores the complex relation between video culture and identity politics in the context of a technocratic nation espousing plurality and searching for unity. From different vantage points the contributors carve out a central problematic: video as a technology that has challenged and extended not only the parameters of modern art but the very possibility of cultural resistance in the age of global television. The essays collected here explore video's representational vocation shaped both by institutional supports (NFB, Canada Council, Cable, etc.) and by community needs for agency and voice. The contribution these writers make to our thinking about video lies in their nuanced and significantly different interpretations of the politics of identity and representation, of the relation between art and activism, the local and the institutional, theory and practice.