

VIDEO GUIDE

VOLUME 10 NUMBER 5
ISSUE 49 NOVEMBER 1990

WORDS OF FIRE

PASSIONATE QUEER

PLAINS CANADA

GREAT DIVIDE

INVISIBLE SCREEN

LA FREEWAVES

VIDEO IN SPAIN

**WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AND YOUR
WORK GOING IN THE 1990's ?**

POLISH ARTIST,
WIESLAW LUCZAJ

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM
A premiere of a new feature length
dramatic videotape by Sara Diamond

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AND JOSE BEDIA

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VICTOR MASAYEVA JR.

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speaking for oneself...speaking for others
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SCREENING AND WORKSHOPS
WITH ALMERINDA TRAVASSOS & MARGARET MOORES

EDIT

VIDEO
GUIDE

Vancouver's Video Magazine
Volume 10 Number 5 Issue 49

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Believe it or not, Video Guide has been publishing since 1978 and this is the 49th issue, the 50th coming up. We have seriously evaluated our role as the only paper globally that continues to report on the development of independent video production. Plans are underway to restructure and revitalize this production.

We still believe that the publication should continue, but to do so, we must seriously consider the time and money that it takes to produce a quality magazine that addresses the issues that are relevant to you in this decade.

Like Video Guide, many artists are reaching middle age and mid-career. This is addressed in an interview with **John Sanborn**. It is an instructive interview that lays out the harsh realities of survival as practised by Mr. Sanborn. He is unapologetic and clear about his motives as an artist and as a capitalist. He has had a remarkable career that spans from productions produced at artist access facilities to commissions for broadcast television. In many ways, his personal history is also the history of the development of the medium.

We include three articles that are overviews of strategies to locate "the work" and the "audience". **Barbara Hammer** files a report on the International Experimental Film Congress that took place in Toronto in the summer of 1989; **Valerie Soe** reports on the expansive L.A. Freewaves Festival and **John Morgan** writes about the Plains Canada Film & Video Conference.

In separate articles, writers **John Greyson** and **Barbara Hammer** give us strategies from their point of view as lesbian and gay image makers. Although neither of these articles refer to the current censorship issue raging in the United States, they reaffirm the work that needs to be done in this arena.

The Great Divide, a two channel work by Montreal artist is reviewed by **Bryan Mulvihill**. The Great Divide is a spectacular work of videography produced at the Banff Centre For The Arts. The work premiered here in Vancouver as part of a Quebec Video Art series at Video In.

Karen Henry files a report on the III International Conference on Video in Getxo, Spain. Much activity has been and will be taking place in Spain leading up to the 1992 Expo in Seville and the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. Many curators and artists have been making treks. We hope to be able to provide more in-depth information in future issues.

Issues in production include a focus on Race and Representation, and a special issue that will be a retrospective of the past fifty issues of Video Guide. Expect exciting new changes as we challenge the expectations of this decade...

Paul Wong
for the Satellite Video Exchange Society

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Cover Photo of John Sanborn
by David Golden

WORDS OF FIRE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SANBORN AT ED VIDEO



Photos by Kevin Hogg, David Golden and Rick Leroux

interviewed and edited by Don Richardson and Nancy Hallas / Ed Video

INTRODUCTION:

During the month of June, 1990 the membership of Ed Video Media Arts Centre in Guelph, Ontario was treated to an extraordinary and intensive two week video production workshop conducted by visiting American video artist John Sanborn. Over forty participants collaborated on the production of two videos which are now in post-production in New York. Taking some time out from a rather hectic production schedule, Sanborn agreed to take part in an interview about his work and his ideas about video art and the future of video art. The resulting interview covered topics ranging from narrative structure and political content to the marketplace and audience for video art.

Several years ago in Video Guide Sanborn was referred to as "a fast talker, a video shaker and image mover," and little has changed since then. Sanborn is a fascinating and sometimes disturbing character. He is fascinating because he has managed to place his video art in contexts and places that few other video artists have been able to venture. He is disturbing because he espouses an entrepreneurial, marketplace philosophy that is often shunned or disdained by contemporary artists. Few video artists would refer to themselves as "capitalists," yet Sanborn accepts the tag unabashedly.

Love him or hate him, his work has been critically acclaimed and has been exhibited throughout the world at galleries, museums and exhibitions and he has been very successful in breaking through the barriers of mainstream broadcast institutions. One of his latest works, *Words on Fire*, was commissioned for the PBS series "Alive From Off Center", and a compilation video disc of his video art was released by Pioneer LaserDisc in 1986. He has done music videos for such groups as Sammy Hagar as well as for the avant garde group The Residents. He has been commissioned to produce works for MTV and Sony as well as for the Whitney Museum. In many ways Sanborn has achieved a degree of recognition and financial support that is unparalleled by most video artists.

Practising Canadian video artists may find John Sanborn's strategies and techniques for financing, producing and distributing work to be somewhat foreign, and of course they are foreign. Sanborn works out of New York, New York and is thus emersed in an economic system which venerates and rewards individuals who show creative entrepreneurial initiative and which elevates some of those individuals to stardom. This economic system is precisely what makes the phenomenon of John Sanborn of interest to Canadian video artists, for Canadian and American economic systems are, in today's context, necessarily intertwined. From Sanborn we can learn how to cope with the "realities of the marketplace" that may inevitably determine the future of video art in Canada, or perhaps we can recognize strategic differences that may allow Canadian video artists to choose an alternative future.

Reaganomics, Thatcherism and other neo-conservative ideologies have changed the way artists work and may have also changed the very substance of contemporary art. As traditional government funding sources feel the hot knife of "free market" economic mandates, artists are forced to seek alternative sources of funds for producing art and for providing food, clothing and shelter. Sanborn represents one example of the kind of entrepreneurial artist that "free market" economies kindle. As such, his words and his ideas deserve to be studied closely.

John Sanborn is, without a doubt, a dedicated, creative, talented, passionate and outspoken artist. His words and his work are compelling and provocative. Words can be very slippery and elusive signifiers, particularly when they are the words of a passionate and ardent artist. We hope that the words that follow ignite some interest.

INTERVIEW:

Ed Video: Where do you see yourself and your work going in the 1990's?

John Sanborn: I think of myself as a writer and director: that's where I want to go. I don't see work having value in the 1990's that is based on the same value systems that it was based on in the 1970's or even in the 1980's. I think that it takes a lot of skill to make an image, now, to compete with the rest of the image world. There was this big show at the Whitney recently that John Hanhardt and a number of people organized, called *Image World* that featured a lot of media and a lot of painting and sculpture about media and a lot of semi-reflexive work that dealt with the way we appropriate and examine a world of images that swirl around us, but the general feeling that I got after looking at the show, which included a lot of my work and a lot of mainstream work, was that people were jealous of the fact that media is the pre-dominant form of both communication and expression in the world we live in... it's just the truth.

Ed: There are people who believe that video isn't as exciting, or isn't as interesting, or is not as important as it was when the sculptors were all using it as part of installations, and they were exploring space and time...

Sanborn: It seemed new, and then everybody else caught up with it. You see video walls in malls. You can't walk through Tokyo without seeing that every store has a video installation — sometimes an artist commissioned work. You can't go anywhere without seeing an appropriated or distorted image on MTV that is making some kind of commentary, media commentary. The culture has gotten self-reflexive. So, sure it's not as exciting because everybody else is doing it. The newness has worn off, so now it's a matter of technique, and a matter of vision. What do you want to say, and how do you want to say it and who are you going to say it to.

Ed: Your work seems to be moving out of museums and into the venues of popular culture. Why are you moving in that direction?

Sanborn: You know, I'm 35, I can't make work for a gallery or a museum... I mean I could, but it's just... I'm runnin' out of time and there are things I'd like to say. I think I've got a different way of looking at the world. I want to tune the frequencies as best as I possibly can and be really clear. And the older I get the more interesting are the messages I think that I'm interested in delivering. It has to do with the way that people relate to one another, and the way that we relate to a society. More and more the same themes come back again and again... and they may have to do much more with fantastic things than political things, but I found myself recently making somewhat political work, yet finding poetic ways of dealing with the politics, and that's interesting to me, that's where I'd like the rest of my career to go: bringing poetry to things that are important to me. I've always thought of myself as a more poetic image maker than someone who

was meant to deliver a message of some kind. I was much more tuned to the way a musician writes something to make you move with the music, to get your emotions churned up in one way or another and to do it in a non-traditional sort of way, a non-linear sort of way.

Ed: Do you see your work as being critical in a political, social, cultural or media literate way?

Sanborn: What do you mean critical? I make entertainment. I want to make poetry.

Ed: Provocative?

Sanborn: It is provocative in some ways because it is a different way of enunciating or articulating things, but I don't make things to deliberately provoke or shock. I'm not making make things that are necessarily politically correct or incorrect. I'm making things that are very intensely, intensely personal, and I always have. It started with an obsession with images and image making and the image in the rest of society; very much taking a cue from the surrealists in trying to re-think the way we look at reality, and it has continued through things that involve text and performance that challenge different accepted norms.

Ed: So in a sense, formally, not so much in terms of content, but formally your work is hammering at some boundaries, hammering at some walls...

Sanborn: Mostly emotional things or ephemeral things, trying to articulate things that may not be in everyone's everyday lexicon of reactions or feelings, and in some cases they are tied to abstraction. A lot of abstraction, and trying to provoke things in a musical form to get people to react to things just for their own sake. It's very narcissistic, very ego ridden, and it's also sort of painterly in a certain way. However, the more narrative things that I've done recently have all been involved in subverting different kinds of genres, not by satirizing them or you know, taking 'noir' at face value, but in trying to inject them with a different kind of sensibility. A lot having to do with humour. A couple of projects that I have done, *The Adventures of Kitty Hoy* for example, is a kind of new age movie serial starring a very provocative heroine and some very odd bad guys all set in a kind of surreal absurdist situation. It was done in an offbeat manner, but played very straight. That was interesting for me because it told me that some of the values that I like in popular culture I can now absorb. I'm either old enough or I'm able enough to absorb those things and still give them my own kind of stamp and put them back out in the world; and amuse people and intrigue people and entice people.

Ed: You seem to be a very passionate person and your work evokes passion.

Sanborn: That's never died in me. It's odd, it's never died for me. Every time I'm thrown into a different situation, I want to be the best director I can be, first of all, in terms of communication. I want to be able to take a script that I've written or a script that a friend has written or that someone else has given to me, whether it's a sketch or an idea or something very, very ephemeral, I want to be able to design it, I want to be able to illuminate it, take all the elements and make them plastic all over again. I've found that constantly happening with video. It's never stopped. There are always ways of treating the image. You know I could sit and watch *Much Music* for hours and get furious at all these different things that other people have tried and I've thought about. I've made lists and sketches. Let's try this with the image, let's try this with the image. What does this mean? Let's frame it.



Let's blow it up. There's so much to do with the picture, and particularly a picture which moves over time. That has never gone away from me. I've just kept trying to add to it over the years. Add script, add performers, add a way of articulating things with camera and editing. I've ended up inventing things. I've tried most of the leading edge technologies a year or two years before anyone else has, and played around with them really hard, and tried to get them to be responsive to me. I want my hand in the technology. I think that that is very apparent in my work. The technology is very pervasive. It speaks to me. Sometimes it dictates what I do, but sometimes I can get the upper hand. Usually I can wrestle it to the ground, knock it around! I think it works in *Words on Fire*. We did that pretty effectively, and that's been important to me.

Ed: Would you call yourself a Post-Modern artist?

Sanborn: I wouldn't go that deep into it. I would say by circumstance I am, because I like to cut and paste, I like to mix and match. I think you can see in *Words on Fire* that I'm interested in that surge of connection between things and that is by definition what post-modernism means: conflict in terms of contact. But I wouldn't go that deep... I want to be the best director I can be, I want to be the best writer I can be, I want to be the best story teller I can be.

Ed: I get a sense that you are taking things back to some very traditional, established roots.

Sanborn: Yes. I think that they are good things. It's a matter of how much detail you want to throw on things. I'm unabashed about wanting to make work that is popular, that people can embrace. I don't want to piss people off. I don't want to have them stand away from me. You know, I'm a very lonely guy. I don't spend time with very many people. I have friends, I have acquaintances, but I'm always going places. You find that in many critical times in my life I am by myself, and I enjoy my own company. But, my work is just the opposite. I want to go out there and I want to touch them and I want them to grab hold of it.

Ed: Is that why you try to have your work exhibited in the wider marketplace?

Sanborn: What do people respect? People respect the movies. The movies have an impact on our culture and our thinking and economically that is pretty devastating. If I was a musician I would want to make pop records. I would want to make records that are part of the culture. That is the next thing for me, to be able to go into that different marketplace. I still would like to make a lot of things for TV. I have a lot of ideas about how to change sitcoms and things like that. I've been working with writers to try to develop things like that. I had a development deal with MTV to do a sitcom, which was a very brilliant one. It was half animated, half live action called *Surreal U.*, *Surreal University*, and the motto was "Knowledge is Fish". It's still a good series idea, but it is very expensive. Our two main characters are Dot and Fred and Fred is a big muscle He-man, a live action character, and Dot is a little stick figure, but she is very cute. The two of them are in love, and the two of them interacting is unbelievably cute. But it was too expensive for MTV, and all the networks that we've shown it to have said, oh, that's interesting, but we don't know who can watch it. But now that *The Simpsons* is a big hit, we don't know.

If you've got a good idea, what do you do with it? I didn't go to film school, I don't know where the contacts are. I've been slowly stumbling my way through, getting in touch with different writers and different producers and development people. I think I can survive in that marketplace... I don't know. I've got to make a product in the next six months or year, a feature product that will put me on the level where I can turn to somebody and say, "Here's my feature." It's ninety minutes or it's seventy minutes, its narrative, but it looks different than anything you've ever seen. It's shot different, it's got great characters, and the pacing is different and the intentions and the point of view are different. I think that there is a tremendous area for that because I still think that the way we look at the movies is changing constantly. The way that we look at the media is changing constantly. Who would have thought that *Twin Peaks* would have been a hit TV series?

Ed: Is there any artistic compromise involved in producing work for the entertainment marketplace? Video art doesn't have much of a tradition of trying to reach mass audiences, yet you are saying that it should?

Sanborn: Video for me in the late 1970's was interesting because it was the opportunity to make different kinds of images based on a different value system, and essentially creating a new language. I spent a lot of years, and I think my peers spent a lot of years, trying to make a new way of communicating. Artists, whose work I still have admiration for, really tried to re-define the way that you can communicate, whether it was more than one image on the screen, whether it was a kind of non-linear movement of images, a sort of a stream of consciousness, or whether it had to do with slowing the image down, or pinpointing the image.

You know, it's one thing to have an actor walk around and say very good lines, and if you've got a good enough actor and that actor can express something very clearly and communicate something that an audience can feel, "oh yes, I've had that feeling," or "oh, that puts its finger right on something that I really feel deeply," that's great, and that's something that I have grown in admiration for in the last few years. However, how you present that to an audience, the way you get that across to a particular audience, I still think is up for grabs. But to deny that that other element, that kind of emotive quality is still important, is to miss something.

A lesson that I think video learned or should have learned about five years ago which is that if you're not going to put humanity into your pictures, if you're not going to put everyday people into your images, everyday people aren't going to respond to it. There is no way that you can get an audience to look at work that just doesn't speak to them. No matter how much you drum into them that it is different, special, unique, exciting, if you then tell them that they have to have another set of tools with which to examine these pictures, or if you, in your own work are trying to examine image making in its purest form and get that across to a lay audience, it's going to be very hard because that audience is awash with MTV and movies and news. It is very satisfying, that you can be so choosy in a media world, and that you have so much choice and ability to dictate what you see and how you see it. It is fantastic. In a way the global village is open. In away, a lot of things that were talked about happened, they snuck in the back door, but they happened.

You can't get an audience to sit still for something that, going into it, you're telling them that they can't understand. So the idea that producing dreary work that just doesn't speak to a regular audience, that is so wrapped up in its own concerns and expecting an audience to either look for or celebrate that whether it is critically or commercially or whatever, is impossible. The world resists that... the world resists a painter who isn't articulate, and just because you are using alternative tools to speak in media doesn't mean that people are going to listen. I mean it may have meant that ten years ago, or fifteen years ago. I could list you the number of video artists who have disappeared... where are they? After all those grants, where are they? Where is that work and what does that mean nowadays... its nothing, its garbage, its just media trash, its as bad as the badest commercial that didn't sell its product.

Ed: There is video art and other media art that is very self-reflexive. Theoretically it is about video art or about artistic aesthetics. Are you involved in making that kind of self-reflexive art?

Sanborn: No... I think it is a fine thing, but we started off talking about artists who were nervous and worrying and worrying about recognition and a career and articulation and, hey, its a bitch, its an absolute bitch. You know, we've made our own audience, we've created our own venues, we've acquired our own skills. You know there were times when you couldn't broadcast a half-inch or 3/4 inch video on television... the engineers wouldn't let you do it, and now we've got a show called *America's Funniest Home Videos*. You're not going to call that "video art" but its what the Videofreex were doing twenty years ago, ten-fifteen years ago, they were making home movies. They weren't much more elaborate than that, they had some element of commentary but it wasn't much more than that... it was like, "hey, we can control the media." Well, now it's a reality. What do you do when that happens, how do you react to that, where does your work go?

It's as if an author was being published solely by the church and the church controlled everything and then suddenly the church says, "Well, heck, let's put out a couple of lay books at the same time." Do you still write about secular or church issues? Do you still write about things that are only for that narrowly defined audience? What happens when everybody can read what you write? And then who is that everybody? How do you choose an audience? How do you groom an audience? It's a very strange thing.

Ed: How does an orientation to an audience influence what you create?

Sanborn: All I'm interested in is articulation. Being precise about things. What do you feel, why do you feel it? You know, are you feeling good things or bad things, are you feeling an appropriate emotion, and then what influences that feeling? There's nothing greater than to identify an artist who has a clear vision, who speaks clearly about what that vision is, and then communicates. Too often video art is a description in a catalogue and a video that doesn't match that description at all. An intention and a lack of execution. It's really hard to make something that a million people can watch and appreciate. It is much harder than making something that a hundred people can... and it has to do with communication. Yes it has to do with appealing to or pandering to an audience. Yes it has to do with thinking about the audience. Yes it has to do with a lot of things like that, but you'd never accuse an author... Margaret Atwood, for instance, of pandering to an audience when her skill and her vision and her articulation is so precise and so deadly. You'd never do that. Are you going to call Nabokov a cheap sellout?

Ed: Is part of this based on an idea that the audience both desires and needs respect and that a lot of the media out there do not respect the audience?

Sanborn: We are the audience. I mean there is nothing worse than sitting down and watching somebody's work that is just appallingly bad. What are you going to say... that person is in the room next to you... if it was on television you would turn it off... you might watch for a little while but... it's all about context. In a gallery yes, its quiet and you're focused and its showing and occasionally there will be some insight from the maker that tells you something and maybe you'll go, "oh yes, I can see this is a ritual, or I can see this is something about men and women, or this is a satire about money." Yes, but shouldn't the work stand on its own? You pick up a book and you read it. And the dust jacket says, "A searing love tale about sex and bizarre birth habits in the frozen North-West," but if on page four, you're not gripped, you're going to put the book down.

How many videos have you sat there for two minutes and you've gone, "o.k... alright... let's go here..." It's writing skills, it's directing skills, it's producing skills, it's somebody saying, "God, that's a piece of shit. Start over. I mean you've got a good idea here, but let's work it a little bit." That's what the rest of the world does. It's hard to write a sitcom, it's hard to write funny dialogue. It's hard to write something meaningful that is not a cliché. It's hard to deal with clichés in a meaningful way.

There is so much out there that needs to be done. I still think that we can't sit still for mass culture. I love mass culture — you see me at *Robocop* and *Total Recall*, but it's not the end all be all, there's art. Art for me is always personified by music. There is other music besides hip hop. In the same breath that I'm interested in that, I'm also interested in John Adams, Phillip Glass, all my contemporaries from the Knitting Factory, *Miracle Room*, *The Jazz Passengers*: it is all important music to me because it all has a different point of view. And it is a different point of view filtered through skill. What does that saxophone sound like? Where is the bass player going? How does the drum tie into that? Music wraps emotion up in a package and hands it to you and says, "Here, dig this." We can do the same thing with images. I'm convinced of it.

It takes time, it takes skill, and I think it also takes an understanding of where you exist in the marketplace. Marketplace is the word, because marketplace is audience, appeal, support, progression, exposure, distribution of work. That involves a marketplace whether you like the word or not.

Ed: Some people would say you are a capitalist...

Sanborn: You bet. Absolutely. The only way to succeed is through success. Nobody likes failure. Nobody likes whining. Nobody likes complaining. The only way to advance something is by looking at the situation, evaluating it and dealing with it. Now, it would be really nice if we could do that in an idealistic situation with a tremendous amount of support.

There is not that much support. I can't tell you the last time I got a grant. It was a long, long time ago. And I thought, "my work is unpopular with my peers... what am I going to do. Should I stop working? Or, should I find another way to work?" There is something really nice about capitalism and that is, if you do something and you do it well, you get to do it again. People will want you to do it again because you have created something, and capitalism is based on creativity. It's going somewhere where there isn't something and making something that wasn't there before. Putting your finger on something.

Ed: Your work also evokes a sense of collaboration and co-operation. Most of the pieces I've seen have been collaborative efforts.

Sanborn: Almost all of it, yes, in some way or another.

Ed: Is that how a capitalist is supposed to work?

Sanborn: How do you think a company works? How do you think a corporation functions?

Ed: Usually it is by stepping on other people...

Sanborn: Well then you are very, very naive about how a company works. You go out and you head-hunt and you hire people, and you get a good research department. You work with people who are smart, sometimes smarter than you are, but you are the person who chose them. You're the boss, and that's what you do when you do what I do. You're the director, so you find a good writer. You don't want a shitty writer. You want a good writer. You want a writer who has a skill you don't have. What you have is an idea and what that idea is or what that vision is, you are helped to flesh out. My partner Mary Perillo helps me, or my art director or my cameraman, and my performers. Always in collaboration with my performers, because I know that I can translate things that are extremely difficult to articulate on a screen. I know I can get past certain things. I have invented techniques. I've come up with ways of visualizing things, and I know that if I go to them and I say, "Let's do this, let's work on something, let's get to the heart of something here," they'll meet me half-way. They will use their language to articulate something and then I will take it and I'll put it into a package and I'll present it. I will direct it.

Collaboration... that's actually the way capitalism works. Yes of course the boss has harnessed the power of the workers. My crew works really hard for me. I pay my crew, and without my crew I could not succeed. But, I'm the guy with the idea. I'm the guy in charge. I'm the boss. It's o.k. It gets a little tiring sometimes, but it's o.k. It's what I was born to do... oddly enough. But it all comes out of something that is very personal and something that's very intimate. Part of the skill, part of the game is to get that from something that is inside of you to something that is outside of you.

I'm envious of painters. I'm most envious of musicians. A musician can go into a studio with a stick and his or her mouth and create a tune. You know, Bobby McFarren is a great example. Somebody who just goes in with his body and his soul, and he makes music. God that would be incredible to do with images, but we're hampered by certain things. You have to take a picture of something. If you deny people a connection with an image they'll get lost, bored and they'll walk away. Yet, I still think you can communicate abstractly. The world of music videos proves that... look at the way the news has changed in the way it communicates things. Infotainment I think owes a great nod to video art because of the way it deals with information.

Ed: How does your production company fit into the context of your work?

Sanborn: You cannot play baseball alone. You have to have a team. You cannot make my kind of art, my kind of media, alone. Part of capitalism is also to understand what advances you in a market. What gets you out and in front of people? You know, you can't make product if people aren't going to want that product and if they don't know that product exists. I have a company and I want to make work continuously. If the mood strikes me, if someone comes to me and says, "let's do something," I want to be able to do it. Part of the idea of having a company and being a capitalist is that that is possible. It is an organization that works for me and for my partner Mary Perillo and for anyone else who wants to come in. Occasionally other artists come to us and we help them to produce their work, because I've got a company, I've got accounts at all these places, I have the insurance. You know I'm always lending out my insurance policy to different people because I pay the five grand a year it costs to keep it and then they pay the camera floater which is a hundred, two hundred bucks. It's just little things like that that have to do with getting out there.

Part of getting out there is just visibility. Is being seen, is having your name in the trade papers, is having your name in here or there. I've got to have some reviews of works, I've got to have some kind of visibility. You've got to be able to build yourself up so that you are something that someone else wants to invest in; a corporation coming to give you a commission, or something like that. Otherwise, you're going to be sitting waiting for that grant to come in once a year. I don't think media artists are that stunted in their need to speak.

Ed: Your work seems to pose some threats. It often bypasses the museum system and shoots itself onto television as the main objective and bypasses and short circuits the traditional validation systems. Do you sense that there is any resentment or fear about that?

Sanborn: I've always said that I am resentful of people who have jobs because artists have chosen not to have jobs. I'm always resentful of people who have a good salary position, curators, critics... It is all based on the fact that the artist is going to take the risk. The artist is going to be out on the limb, the artist is going to dangle, and then these people are going to say, "Oh well, it's really just... it's not this week's thing," and dismiss it. That pisses me off. I think that it is unfortunate sometimes that value judgements are made by who is sleeping with who. So much back slapping and peer acknowledgement is based on things that have nothing to do with the work. The marketplace determines, oftentimes, what value there is in the work. That can be stultifying, that can be refreshing. You know, it is a double-edge sword.

The museum scene. I think that when media sort of leapt up out of their hands, and when they couldn't stamp it, they couldn't understand it, and it joined the mainstream, it joined popular culture, that was a real blow.

Ed: Because they are out of control?

Sanborn: That was what the Image World show was all about; trying to re-establish some control by saying, "We have a critical agenda here, the critical agenda addresses these things. If you don't know how to read television, you're not watching television. You're not understanding it." So it is trying to apply the same level of "I see it and you don't" to something that doesn't bend to that criteria, isn't beholden to that criteria.

Ed: We've talked about the museums as not being the place where you are seeking recognition. Where do you seek that from at this point if you are beyond that?

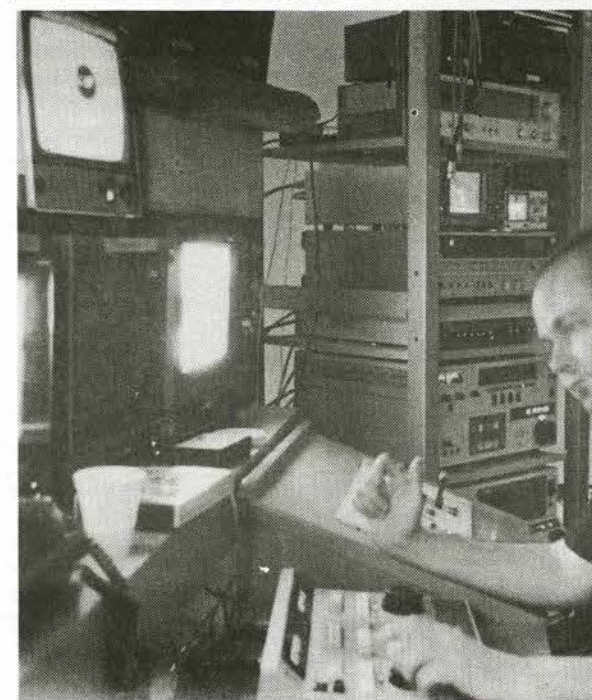
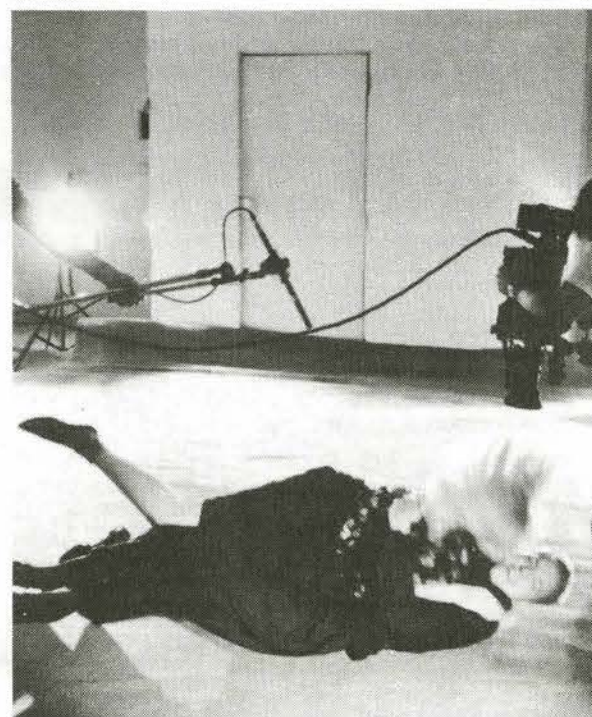
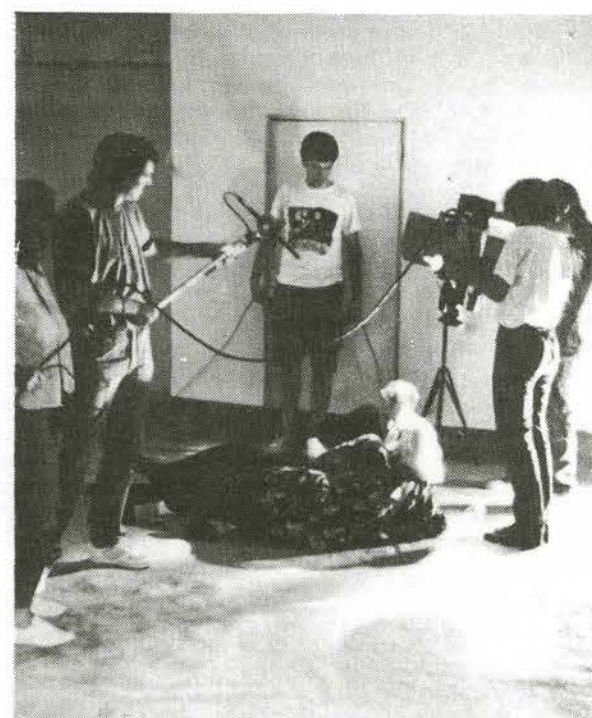
Sanborn: Well it's not beyond that really. It's just different. I've had a lot of museum shows, and I continue to have a lot of museum shows.

Ed: Is that recognition important to you?

Sanborn: Yes, it's a great thing. After a while though, it tends to lose its surface appeal. There are curators I respect and there are curators I don't respect, and each shows my work in different contexts. My work has been curated in a lot of different fashions in a lot of different festivals throughout the world. I'm most interested when I can go some place and present my work one on one. I can make up a show. I can put the pieces in a certain logical order. I like showing in museums and galleries. I love going to festivals. I'm going to a theatre festival in Belgrade in September. I'm going to the London Film Festival in November. All those are really nice venues for showing work because they are also going to be different kinds of things where I get to prepare a show. That is important, because although the work is seen by tens of millions of people when it is on TV, you don't get to meet those people.

Ed: The line between art and entertainment seems to be stretched in your work. Is that a problem you deal with?

Sanborn: I like the idea of making art. It took me a long time to call myself an artist. I didn't think of myself as an artist. I don't know what I thought of myself as, but it was only about five years ago that I realized that my approach was the approach of an artist. Yes, I'm a capitalist, yes I run a business, yes I want to make a lot of money, yes I want to make big movies, but my approach is one of an artist, which is too do it differently. I want it to be mine. I don't want it to be somebody else's. That is a constant threat. That is the biggest threat of all. Is for things to be absorbed. For things



to be absorbed by other parts of the society, other parts of the marketplace, other parts of the engine that drives entertainment and images and media forward. I want these things to be mine. It's all ego driven. I fall down sometimes. I get really depressed. Last week I thought, "That's it, its over, I'm going to become a plumber."

Ed: Canada has a long history of artist-run access centres, such as Ed Video, providing people with access to equipment. What is the situation in the States?

Sanborn: That has all but disappeared. What has happened, in New York State particularly, is that the media centres closed down, one by one. In New York City we have what is known as the standby program, where for a reduced amount of money, artists can go into a mainline facility, usually late at night, usually at off hours, and work with the state-of-the-art for a fraction of the price, which is another possibility. For instance, a production studio lets you work at "so and so" for \$50 an hour versus \$200 an hour. Things like that are possible.

Ed: How are the younger American artists breaking into it now.

Sanborn: Same way I am. They've got skills, they use their skills. Paul Garrin worked for Nam June Paik for a long time. He's not that much younger than I am, he's 27 or 28, but he goes out and he shoots fashion videos and he goes out and hustles for money, gets the occasional grant and gets shows. And then you know, you start to get commissions. He's been getting commissions for installations recently.

Ed: Are these younger artists people who are being trained through technical institutions that teach television production?

Sanborn: I don't think so. I don't think Paul had any of that kind of training. I think that there probably are, but the idea of the video artist is an endangered species. I think that there are a lot of people who are mixed-media artists in the States who are involved with installations and live performance, and you hustle, you hustle for work. You know, it's a big world out there that is really, really aggressive.

Maybe ten years ago it was o.k. to be different. You were the stone in the middle of the stream and the stream ran around you and you obstructed some of the stream and you caused some ripples. I don't think that's the case any more. I think the stream is bigger and it's just going to wash right over you. I think a lot of people are interested in trying to get involved in being taken seriously, in being taken professionally. I don't think that that is such a bad thing. That is a personal choice. The problem is that you can't politic about this sort of thing. It is very fashionable in a University to be "critical" because it's really easy. It's kind of simple to criticize something. It is really hard to make art.

Look at how much video work is so offensive, and so cryptic, and maybe so devoid of content. Devoid of content that actually communicates. You can say that something is content driven, but talking about sex is not the same as telling somebody something about sex that they never knew before. Talking about death and showing dead people is not the same as trying to get people to understand emotions connected with death. The subtlety of what media can do is something that the mainstream culture ignores a lot of the time. But then you can get wonderful things that just well up emotions in you, movies and TV things that can touch you in unexpected ways. I think that part of the artists role is to get into that unexplored territory, but also to get it across to an audience. To be articulate. You would reject a painter whose painting is too involved with colour and form and not involved with reaching out to you because then you would say it was masturbation, then you would say it was student work.

The same thing is true with media. You have to put your finger on things because the challenge of making images is really not just to make pretty pictures or processed images, or non-narrative collections of things. It is really to turn it around and give it to an audience. It is a Duchamp idea. I wanted to make videos that were just complete enough so that they could be handed to an audience and then an audience would take them somewhere else. I decided to go for that first two-thirds of completion. That is what Duchamp did in a lot of ways. He did work that was extremely valuable and charged with meanings that we read into them. He was amused by that. I was at the Modern a few weeks ago and cruised through the collection, and there were the Duchamps and my mind started working.

Ed: So the audience is always part of your work. It is always implicated?

Sanborn: Always. That is what media is all about. You're a live performer, you don't perform in your bedroom by yourself! If you are a media artist you make media! You don't make a radio program called "one way radio".

Ed: Why has narrative become important to you recently?

Sanborn: I tried for years to deny narrative. I just think that we live stories. If it doesn't seem like a story directly, we tend to work in a story form. I think as human beings we tend to turn things into stories. There is nothing as satisfying as a punch-line, or a revelation. We look at the times when something occurred to us for the first time, or we saw something from different perspective either out of anger or frustration or hate, or something like that. I still think you can tinker a great deal with narrative, and you can invest a

narrative with different things, different traits: how a character is; what the point of view is; how the narrative progresses; are their tricks in terms of uncovering the layers of the narrative? I think that there is a lot that can still be done, but I think the story form is eternal. I have to say that I was wrong in thinking you could abandon it.

I've even started to see stories in pieces of music. I now appreciate it as a story form. There are three acts. What the three acts are and how they build up is up for grabs. Everything I work on I say, "o.k., what's act one, what's act two, what's act three?" You don't have to state it overtly, but that is the way things work, and that is the way you can deal with an audience. Whether you do them temporally, or emotionally, or intellectually, or physically, you've got to satisfy certain things. One of the things is to give people something that they didn't have before. The easiest way, the most direct way, and the most sure fire way is in the story form. That's it.

Ed: There is a lot of video art that is theory driven. Driven by post-modernism, deconstructionism. A lot of it is dedicated to subverting narrative, or deconstructing narrative.

Sanborn: Those are fine things, but they still have to do with narrative. You can't get away from it. Again, it is easy to comment on something, it is easy to deconstruct something. God you know, it is not appropriation, it is just stealing. Let's be honest about this now. Someone took a long time to make those images and if you're going to record them or juxtapose them or something else, you should be sued. No question about it. It is stealing. Yes you can call it art and you can modify it, but it is hard to make an image. It is hard to make an image that says something that resonates within a society that is so image soaked. But even those people who are deconstructing narrative are having to deal with narrative. It is still a narrative. I think you can really trash something, but if you still hang onto some of the tenets of the way you tell a story an audience will go along with it. I don't think there is anything wrong with taking narrative at face value or going really deeply into what makes up a strong narrative. I think post-modern examination for its own sake isn't necessarily that interesting, and then there is the question of well, what do you want to watch? "Hey honey, what's on TV tonight? What's at the gallery tonight?"

Ed: Who is your audience?

Sanborn: We are. Everybody. If they don't get it or they turn it off, then they do that. I've got to take the chance that anybody who thinks and breathes and feels is my audience, because that's what I do. I don't want to be talked down to, I don't want to be talked up to, I don't want to be told that I can't understand something. Fuck you! Right!

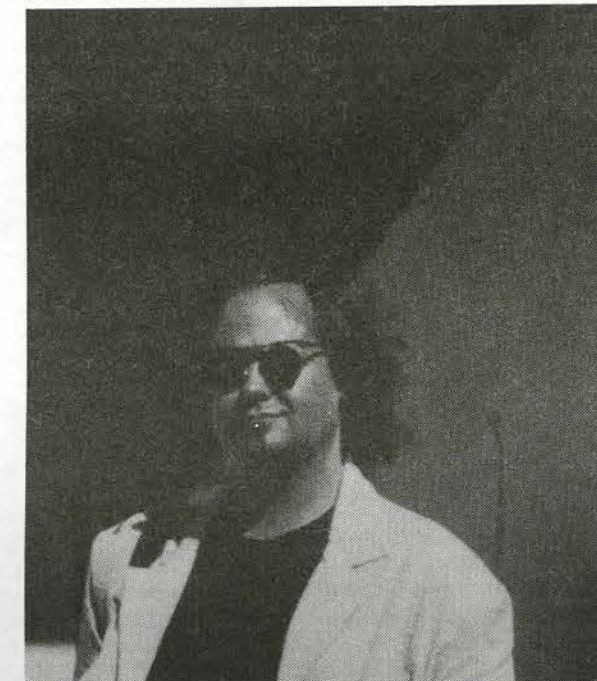
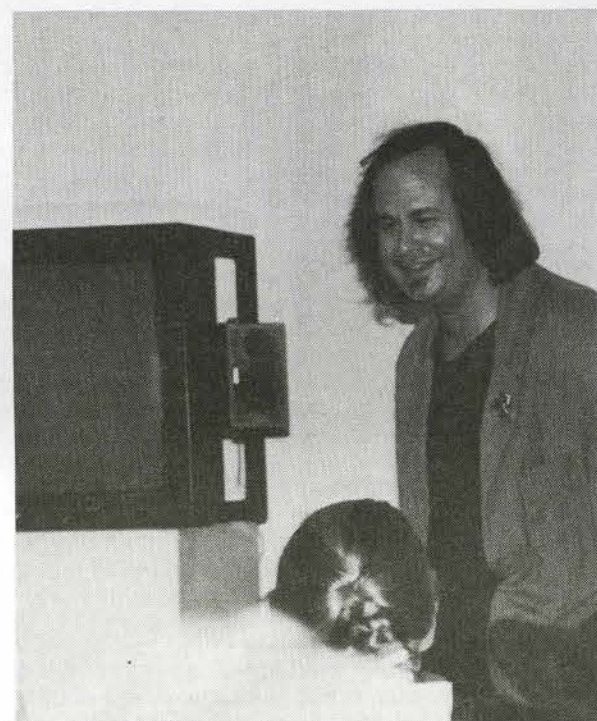
In the morning, what do you do? You turn the radio on, you don't turn on some video art work. What's part of your life? Let's deal with it. I mean, it's not an installation. An installation is a great thing because it is in a different kind of context, its in a museum. It's not a painting, even when you can own a painting or own a reproduction of a painting. It's something that is time base oriented. It's got a means of reaching tens of millions of people, or in a theatrical situation, a couple of thousand people at a time. It goes back to ancient ways of telling stories around a fireplace. A couple of people fell asleep, a couple of people walked away, a couple more people walked away, a couple of people built their own fire. That was up to the skill of the story teller.

Ed: So you are saying that audiences need something that video artists may have been neglecting?

Sanborn: To be entertained! To embrace something. To take yourself out of a world that is either too dry or too dull, or lacking in that articulation. It is hard for some people to understand what they feel and how they feel it, and what art helps people do is get closer to that, or shed some light on something that has been darkened. Or, take something that you already do appreciate and re-celebrate it. Nothing is more wonderful than going to see a ballet or a modern dance work in which the liberation and joy of pure movement articulates an inner feeling. Heck, why do we have to be tied to something deathly specific or highly critical when it comes to that? Yes, there are critical ballets, but for the most part, celebration in music or movement is something that is just that, something just as an appreciation.

I've got to say that one thing that video really needs is the virtuoso. I think that we've been ashamed of virtuosic (sic) things in video for a long time. I think we were only starting to recognize virtuosity in the middle eighties and I think that that is ridiculous. I think that since we have so many TV kids who are very familiar with the technology, there should no longer be a hidden disgrace in displaying that technology. The technology is so around us. Everything has a computer in it. Everything is driven by an eye towards the future. I think that the way that we make media now should also be driven by that same sensibility. The difference between a house painter and an illustrator and a really great artist is that artist can infuse that skill with something that is really highly charged, and really different than just representation or illustration. I think that in media there is a huge field that can be opened up.

NOTE: John Sanborn participated in the Ed Video Media Arts Centre's Visiting Artist Series in June, 1990 with the assistance of the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council.



THE PASSIONATE QUEER DOCUMENTARY

by John Greyson ©1989

"The Passionate Queer Documentary" was originally read by John Greyson at Video In's "Deluding Documentary" in March and April of 1989.

In rewriting my presentation for publication, I've divided it into two sections, the first being some general responses to the conference discussions, and the second being some notes on the formal and political strategies of "Urinal".

In 1980, Noel Burch (via Christian Metz' notion of the "Institution" of cinema) usefully defined the "institutional mode of representation" as "that set of (written or unwritten) directives which has been historically interiorized by directors and technicians as the irreducible base of 'film language' within the Institution and which has remained a constant over the past fifty years, independently of the vast stylistic changes which have taken place."¹ While he was referring primarily to theatrical features, his claim could just as easily be extended to the Institution of documentary. By documentary I mean any use of moving image media (film, video etc.) that seeks to inform, to document, to persuade — not just *The Fifth Estate*, but also *How to Play Golf* video disks; not just *Rosie the Riveter* but also trade show videos for pharmaceutical companies. Formal aspects of the institutional mode of representation (of documentary practice) could include: the objective interpretative narrator; the use of music to reinforce on-screen action; the establishing shot; the authoritative interview with "experts", conveying "perspective"; the experiential interview with "participants", conveying "truth"; the contrasting interview with a dissenting point of view, conveying "balance". Bill Nichols has exhaustively deconstructed the codes of documentary exposition in his *Ideology and the Image*, exploring how the minutiae of representation (fade to black, zoom, verité hand-held camera-work, jump cuts, etc.) actively produce the information we receive. In particular, his analysis of cinema moves easily back and forth between the dominant and the oppositional, and between narrative and documentary practices (though he manages to only briefly mention video). The usefulness of such a strategy is precisely this insistence on the interconnections between, say, an Alfred Hitchcock and a Frederick Wiseman.² Instead of concentrating on their differences, he notes their differing applications of various common strategies.

In a similar way, I'd like to contribute to *Deluding Documentary* by suggesting a parallel critical approach. Instead of making claims for the uniqueness of this field of "experimental documentary video", I'd prefer to go backwards, to start by assuming that such a field is inextricably contained within the larger historical continuum of film and video production. For example, let's debunk some of the oft-cherished myths of the "experimental video documentary's" uniqueness:

1. Docu-drama: Before 16mm synch-sound, dramatic reconstructions were the dominant convention in documentary production, getting the people to play themselves. Think of *Battleship Potemkin*. Think of Joris Iven's *Spanish Earth*, filmed in the very heart of the Spanish civil war as a propaganda tool for international solidarity with the Republican cause. Anti-Franco partisans are used throughout as actors dramatising their own day-to-day experience — it was filmed in the midst of the war-zone.

2. Jumpcuts: the sixties newsreel movement in the States embraced jumpcuts as a conscious representational strategy, signifying the roughness of "truth" and engagement;

3. Appropriation/deconstruction of dominant cinema: Joseph Cornell's late '30's masterpiece *Rose Hobart* deconstructed and recut together footage from the Hollywood B-pic *East of Borneo*, producing a devastating critique of the film industry.

4. Associative (non-illustrative) poetic images that disrupt dominant readings: While Maya Deren has been primarily historicized in formalist terms, her implicitly feminist surrealist psycho-dramas helped lay invaluable groundwork for feminist video practice in the seventies.

Which of course is not to say that there's nothing new under the sun. Instead, it's simply to insist that our work as video artists is situated within a convoluted history of "the institutional mode of representation", and that our innovations (like Eisensteins, Derens, et al) are in turn dependent on history, context and access.

Working backwards (again), I'd like to define the particular practice of the "gay/lesbian passionate documentary," or the "queer passionate documentary." I've defined documentary above as the all-encompassing "informational" use of media. Within that, there is a subset known as the "investigate documentary," a species particularly suited to television, (as seen of *The Journal* and *Sixty Minutes*), which

investigates events and issues from an "objective" perspective to produce an account/explanation for the "education" of a mythical general public. These documentaries aren't always deeply conservative, and may indeed critique government and big business, for instance. Despite the mass media's entrenchment within multi-national capital, there is always a bit of ideological space for it to seemingly bite the hand that feeds. Nevertheless, such programs inevitably buttress dominant ideologies; reproducing the power relations of the society they seek to explore.

In contrast, there is a small subset of the above called the "committed documentary," (to borrow Tom Waugh's phrase)³, which has also been called "oppositional cinema" or "radical media". Produced largely outside broadcast/commercial outlets, such a practice rejects the notion of objectivity in favour of representing a struggle or crisis from the point of view of those affected. The Communist *International's Workers Newsreels* of the 30's are an obvious example; *Harlan County USA* is another. Such projects give voice to the disenfranchised, and are often seen as direct propaganda for a movement or struggle.

Within this subset, another practice has flourished — the experimental social change documentary, or to borrow Stuart Marshall's term (I hope not inaccurately): the "passionate documentary", one which aims to disrupt and challenge the "institutional mode of representation". As Jim Hoberman has noted, Peter Woollen was only one of many critics/filmmakers on the (new, new) left in the mid-seventies who attempted to reclaim film history, to "reunite the aesthetic and political avant-gardes, divorced for the last time during the period between the wars."⁴ Wollen's theory of the two avant-gardes posited a formalist avantgarde (from Vertov's *A Man with a Movie Camera* and the "Cubist" cinema of the 20's through to Brakhage, Warhol, and the structuralists) against a socially engaged avant-garde (from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* through Brecht's *Kuhle Wampe* to Godard to new feminist cinema).⁵ While his theory was immensely simplified (no mention of New German, surrealist, or the militant Cuban cinema, to name only the most glaring exceptions), it (along with others) nevertheless succeeded in creating a space for a reinvigorated avantgarde (or perhaps more accurately, post-modernist) debate concerning media form and social Praxis.

Within this subset of the "passionate documentary", there are yet more subsets, organized around particular issues and communities; the "feminist passionate documentary" being only the most talked about. The "queer passionate documentary" (whew, we've finally arrived!), doesn't have a very long history. While homoerotic avant-garde predecessors abound (Genet, Anger, Jack Smith, etc.), and social-change dramas date back to the 1919 Magnus Hirschfeld polemic *Different From the Others*, and it would be redundant to claim that innovative form coincided with the social-change imperative before Stonewall. Instead, such a "passionate" project could most easily be dated from Rosa Von Praunheim's 1971 *Army of Lovers* or *Revolt of the Perverts*, a free-wheeling polemical account of the just-birthing gay liberation movement (built in turn on 100 years of sporadic and squashed attempts). Equally combining formal strategies from the social-change cinema of the time and the avant-garde, it found a formal documentary vocabulary suited to capturing this feisty movement from within.

While the film (especially from our vantage point two decades later) is riddled with "problems", it nevertheless threw down a gauntlet, imagining an impassioned and innovative sort of documentary practice that the lesbian/gay movement could build on. For complicated reason, this didn't happen. Instead, the work that emerged from movement media artists in the seventies and eighties can be divided into three distinct camps:

1. Realist committed film and video documentaries: Primarily talking heads accounts addressing myriad lesbian/gay issues e.g. *Word is Out*, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, *Choosing Children*, *Track Two*, *Before Stonewall*, *Pink Triangles*, *Just Because of Who We Are*, etc.

2. Realist (and semi-realist) dramatic films and tapes: *Taxi Zum Klo*, *The Curse of Fred Astaire*, *Dear Boys*, various pics of Fassbinder, Jan Oxnberg's films, *Desert Hearts*, etc.

3. Experimental tapes and films: the works of Barbara Hammer, Lothar Lambert, Derek Jarman, Ulrike Ottinger, Colin Campbell, Stuart Marshall, etc.

Caveat: these are the sketchiest of lists, inadequately suggesting the sketchiest of histories, meant only to demonstrate general tendencies. Instead, I want to make a simple point: that (despite Von Praunheim and a few others),

it has taken until now for a "passionate lesbian/gay documentary" practice to emerge. For a movement of people more invisible and more silenced than most in the mainstream media, it was inevitable that lesbian and gay artists first turned to the creation (for the first time) of realist documentary and dramatic images of our experiences. The vital political role of *Word is Out*, the 1975 talking heads feature, in allowing "the movement" in some of its diversity to speak to the camera cannot be underestimated. The vital empowering role of *Desert Hearts*, in allowing lesbian audiences to wallow in the pleasure of explicit lesbian narrative with a happy ending, cannot be denied. This is not to suspend a critique of the realist practices that made both projects so problematic. Rather, it is to acknowledge that any critique of realism must encompass the crucial role of "context" — the social and political space in which representations are constructed and experienced.

Similarly, the experimental lesbian/gay film and video work of the past two decades did not by and large re-engage with the documentary imperative until recently. This is not to deny the significant political importance of Barbara Hammer's work, for instance, in trying to invent a film language for lesbian eroticism, or the anti-authoritarian anti-narratives of bad-boy Lothar Lambert. Rather, it is to note that most artists addressed issues (personal experience, mass media deconstruction, the representation of sexuality in particular) that were not tied to a particular "documentary" time, place, event, or issue that was hot on the movements agenda. In 1982 I wrote an article surveying 20 experimental tapes by gay men: only two could be characterized as even approaching a passionate documentary impulse. (I'm not claiming a privileged role here for passionate documentary practice, but rather, simply noting how artists have until recently expressed their political and formal priorities).

As we approach the nineties, the field of lesbian and gay media production has greatly expanded, and within that, the passionate queer documentary is flourishing. I think there are several interconnected reasons for this, which can be crudely summed up by four words, AIDS, post-modernism, community and homophobia.

As Jan Grover has noted, "AIDS erupted into North America consciousness at roughly the same time that a generation of academically-trained artists were confronting willy-nilly the exhaustion of modernist art practices." A new generation of dyke and fag artists burst onto the scene, empowered by the victories of the previous gay decade, academically armed with the complicated critical strategies of pomo, and what did they find waiting for them? On the one hand, a lesbian and gay audience eager for new, more complicated images of ourselves. On the other, a social and scientific epidemic that was both decimating our ranks and unleashing unprecedented homophobia, demanding enraged response. Simple realist documentary strategies would not suffice, since we continue to be inundated with the hysterical lies that constitute mass media AIDS coverage. Hence a tape like *They are Lost to Vision Altogether* by Tom Kalin, which fondly refers to the surreal homoeroticism of Anger and Cocteau while deconstructing the shrill homophobia of the Helms Amendment, an unsuccessful bid to ban federal AIDS funding to any group that condoned homosexuality. Hence *Doctors, Liars and Women*, by Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti, which deconstructs in imaginative ways the success and failures of their collective's zap against *Cosmopolitan* magazine and its dangerous AIDS article. Hence *Survival of the Delirious* by Andy Fabb and Michael Balser, which uses potent metaphors to combat the personal experience of the AIDS "delirium".

Other examples of "passionate" practice can be witnessed on British Channel 4's *Out on Tuesday* program, a ground-breaking magazine series that rounded up some of England's most irreverent lesbian and gay artists to address pressing issues and celebrate our diversity. Isaac Julien's breathtaking *Looking for Langston*, a poetic reclaiming of black gay history, and Stuart Marshall subtle and moving *Desire*, an exploration of lesbian and gay culture in 1910-45 Germany, were only two of the many stunning offerings.

In short, the series (along with the other tapes mentioned above, and the many others too numerous to mention) demonstrates two things in particular: lesbian/gay video can be thrilling, "popular", politically tough and formally challenging; and video's biggest (perhaps only real) fundamental difference with film is in the post-production. The complicated highly-layered visual vocabulary of this new work is inseparable from how its meanings are produced.

In other words, the future of the passionate queer documentary (both film and video) looks good. Fuelled by the various theoretical debates that constitute a critique of representation on the one hand, and grounded by the daily

attacks we experience as lesbian and gays on the other, we find ourselves in a unique position. These dual factors, while they share some similarities with previous documentary debates carried on within previous social-change movements, are very much of this moment in this history. Just as the (new, new) left is being refashioned (almost in spite of itself) into a movement struggling against the intersecting hydra-heads of racism, sexism, homophobia and class oppression, so too is the passionate documentary project continuing to redefine the terms of what we call (and how we picture) oppression and liberation.

Hence *Urinal*.

Urinal really began in 1981 with the infamous Toronto bathhouse raids, where three hundred men were arrested in one night. The gay community fought back in outrage, demonstrating, picketing and forming a highly-organized defence group, The Right To Privacy Committee, which at its height had hundreds of active members. The same year, it transpired that over 500 men had been arrested in Ontario's public washrooms on indecency charges, yet there was no parallel community outrage. I became interested then in this seeming double-standard: how could one type of policing of anonymous gay sex inspire such outrage from the community, while another could produce nothing but silence?

Five years and many diversions later, the Right to Privacy Committee and Gay Courtwatch were both actively doing political work around washroom sex, and I commenced with research, casting the net wide. The project for a long time consisted of huge piles of texts: short stories and poems, police accounts, articles from 50's tabloids, architectural guides to bathroom design, photographic graffiti collections, sociological accounts, deviance studies, parliamentary transcripts, social histories, clippings from gay magazines and the mainstream media. An early version of the script attempted to weave these various voices into a coherent script, but the task proved impossible. There was no way to unproblematically weave together, for instance, a Foucauldian account of the construction of privacy, with a civil rights argument for decriminalization. Indeed, I finally realized, after struggling for a long time, that it was the very incompatibility of the various voices that made the subject so interesting. This irresolvable cacophony was replicated in the way I would describe the project to various friends. To some straights, I would stress the issue to policing; to some gays I would emphasize the joys of tea-room trade. To historians I would speak of the social construction of washroom sex; to activists I would speak of the civil rights agenda.

Out of the seeming hypocrisy of my own voices, I realized that my narrative strategy had to be similarly multi-vocal. Hence the need for six narrators. Since the construction of "believable fictive characters" has always been intensely problematic for me, I decided to raid the coffers (or coffins) of gay history instead. In particular, I wanted an impossibly global range, reflecting different cultures, languages and political contexts, avoiding in particular the obvious Brits and Yanks (Isherwood, Wilde, Whitman, Stein) that are too often trotted out. They had to all be eminently unsuitable as lesbian and gay "heroes", either bi-sexual or deeply closeted, reflecting the sex lives of many of the men caught in washroom busts. Frida Kahlo the Mexican painter and Yukio Mishima the Japanese novelist served as the former, while Langston Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance poet and Sergei Eisenstein the Soviet filmmaker worked well as the latter. Florence Wyle and Frances Loring, (the "girls") Toronto's long-term lesbian couple fit the bill because they almost never publicly declared themselves despite their 50 year cohabitation — they were also having a retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario the summer we were shooting, and the opportunity of them visiting their own retrospective was too good a chance to miss.

1937 became the year they would fictionally gather in the Girls garden, because the Spanish civil war and accelerating fascism of Hitler gave them their particular political agenda far different from that of the lesbian and gay communities 50 years later. These six, while certainly sympathetic

to the debates around sexual politics of their time, were certainly not involved — and giving them a time-travel Mission Impossible mandate they were purposefully unsuited for. One of the conscious ironies of the film is the dichotomy between their utter confusion in the dramatic scenes, and their polished authoritative documentary voice-overs in their respective "lectures", underlining both the refusal of character development that runs through the film, and also that assumption of the authoritative voice that dominates both documentary and academic practices.

Dorian Gray's story and character (schematically turned upside down) was chosen as the poetic master-narrative of *Urinal*, for several reasons. His is a story about the problems of portraiture: when we construct a picture of "washroom sex", do we see the men having sex, or do we instead shift our gaze to focus on the police practices which make the sex visible in the first place? As the film documents, because of the extensive rituals washroom queens perform to ensure that their privacy is maintained (that they don't get caught), it takes the crudest methods of police surveillance (undercover entrapment or hidden cameras) to make the "crime" visible. In Dorian's original story, his picture hid the secret of his "deviant" (gay) life. In *Urinal*, his portrait instead becomes a portrait of the police, and their deviant practices.

Secondly, ideas of portraiture (painted, photographic, filmic) run through the film, visually problematising both the fictive historical characters (is this an accurate portrait of Eisenstein, for instance? of course not!), and the interview subjects (hence the many hilarious costumes of the anonymous man who parodies the convention of the self-hating queer in shadow on television). Similarly, Eisenstein's atrocious parody of a Russian accent, Frida Kahlo's overdone single eyebrow, and Mishima's unrepentant randiness all conspire to undermine notions of historical portraiture. The fact that they are all artists working in various mediums and traditions is vital — making images of image makers, telling stories about story tellers. The scene when they read their biographies to one another, attempting to find references to their sexuality, has two purposes: on the one hand, it points to how biographers even today shy away from controversial disclosures of sexuality; on the other hand, it shows up our own problematic need to construct them as lesbian and gay "heroes". While celebrating our pleasure in reclaiming OUR history, it still points out the ahistorical lengths we often go to, doing a disservice to the very real people we are trying to reclaim.

Each of their six mini-documentary lectures parodies particular conventions both in the fields of social history and documentary production. France's slide-tape rendition of the history of the public washroom was modelled both on art history lectures and also on "the history of everyday life" movement. Yukio's reading of "washroom texts" was inspired by Jonathan Katz's *Gay American History*, a classic collection of letters, newspaper clippings, stories and court proceedings that are juxtaposed together with minimal narrative connection. Eisenstein's guided tour of Toronto's hottest tearooms is a parody of Laud Humphrey's sociological classic *Tea Room Trade*, while the intercut talking heads refers both to Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* and to Peter Adair's *Word is Out*. Langston's tour through southern Ontario is inspired by Michael Rubbo's classic personal portrait of Vietnam, *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, where his sometimes self-indulgent narration similarly acknowledges that he has failed to accomplish a documentary exposition of the war. Florence's "interviews" with various "activists" is modelled on various Nicaraguan documentaries which profile leaders speaking on behalf of their movements. The baseball game of dads and sons, filmed through layers of fencing was intended to be a metaphoric meditation on the socialization of boys into macho society (which washroom sex implicitly challenges), but in retrospect it's too vague an image. Finally, Frida's Foucauldian critique of the policing of sexuality was inspired by the didactic Marxist documentary *Wheat*. As the intellectual centre of the film, it was important to make her voice non-English and non-male — hence the subtitles, with the music and poetic visuals carrying viewers through. (For the

same reasons, Dorian had to be gorgeous, but not within a conventional paradigm of what usually constitutes gorgeousness — the white, western macho man.)

I chose to make *Urinal* a film (my second), for two pragmatic reasons: first, there is absolutely NO distribution for feature-length videos anywhere, whereas there is a growing circuit throughout North America and Europe for lesbian and gay features. Lesbian and gay audiences notoriously stay away from "high art" events, yet just as notoriously show up at legitimate festival theatres for queer content, even if the formal approach is a little weird. The seduction value of Dorian and his six cohorts (even though they are thrown together to explore an unsavoury subject) was of course part of this strategic play. Similarly, the humour hopefully meets audiences half-way, helping them ride with the formal innovations and the demanding politics. Above all, I wanted to leave enough space in the film for their own negotiation of the issues, realizing along with the characters that there are many voices and no ONE solution.

Secondly, making *Urinal* on film allowed the textural differences of video to be explored on the big screen. While the 16mm dramatic scenes are consciously shot and lighted as though they were on a theatrical stage (the painted backdrops reinforcing this), the six "documentaries" are all on crude video, emphasizing the "truth" of the raw image. By the half-way point, this dichotomy has broken down, with dramatic "truths" challenging documentary "fictions". Throughout, the use of computer effects is used to emphasize the surface of the screen, referring in particular to questions of photographic and painterly portraiture, with the computer's electronic "paintbox" replacing the conventional brush to paint Dorian's portrait.

A year since its release, it's possible to judge *Urinal*'s effectiveness as a passionate documentary. While it didn't prompt any legal reforms or court appeals, it was used in my hometown (London, Ontario) after a washroom bust this September to help organize the community. It has been shown widely in such diverse cities as Berlin, Melbourne, Moscow and San Francisco, getting much larger audiences, (and creating much more debate) than any of my previous tapes. Many of the audience members have not been "activist" types by any means, yet have felt safe to attend a large film theatre when they probably would never set foot into an artists space or community centre. Most of all, perhaps, it's audiences have been VERY diverse: straight, gay, lesbian, progressive, reactionary, closeted, out, activist, apolitical. From conversations after screenings, it's clear everyone gets something very different from it — but seems to contribute in some way to the many debates, and many dialogues, that the subject engenders.

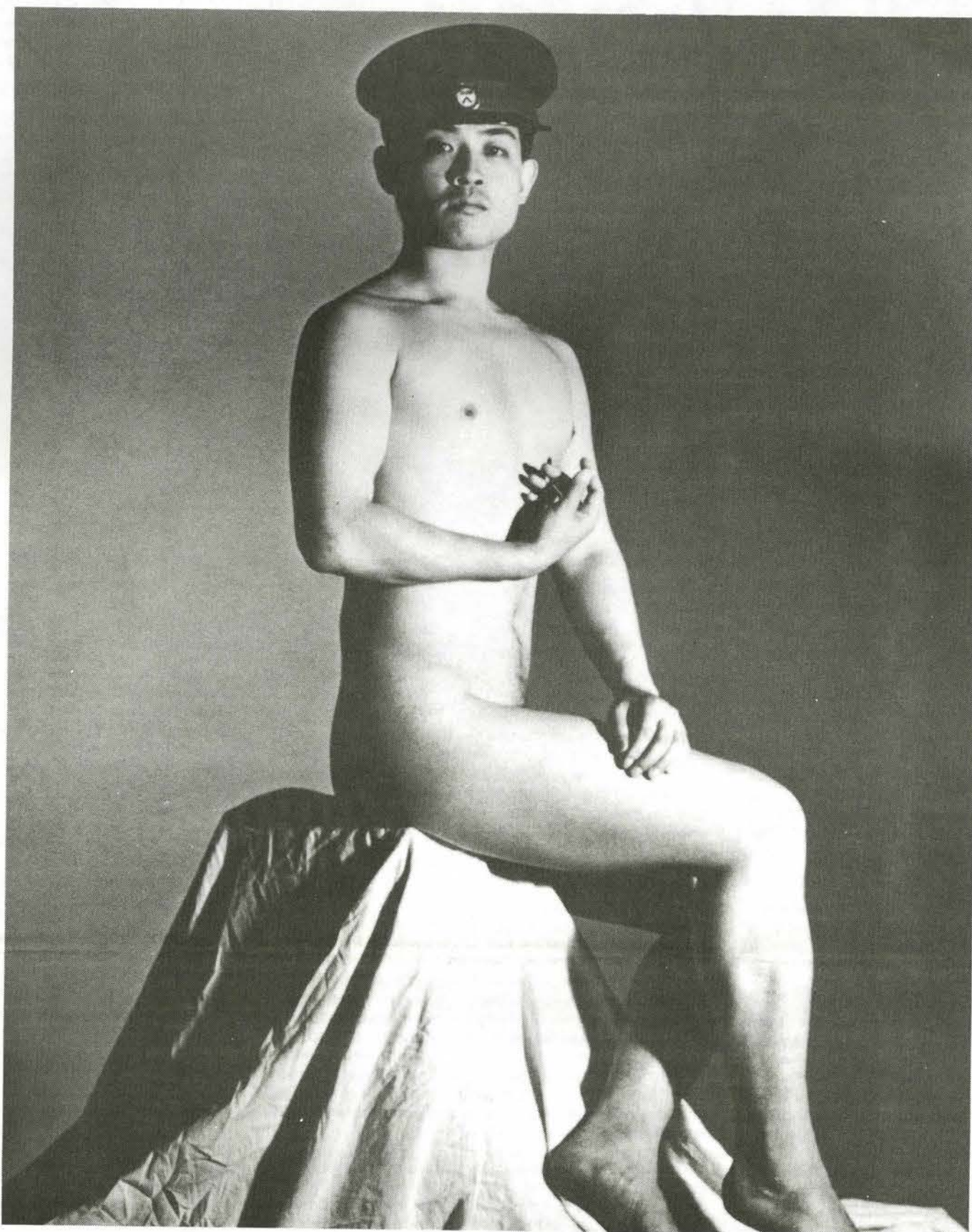
1. Noel Burch, *How We Got Into Pictures*, Afterimage, nos.8-9, (Winter 1980-81):24.
2. Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington US, 1981. See especially: Chapters 6,7 & 8.
3. Tom Waugh, ed., *Show Us Life*, Scarecrow Press (Teuchen: 1984), pg. xiv.
4. Jim Hoberman, *After Avant-Garde Film*, Art After Modernism, The New Museum (New York: 1984), pg. 67.
5. Peter Woolen, *The Two Avant-gardes*, Studio International, 190, no. 978, (November/December 1975): 171-175.
6. A history of the gay avant-garde has yet to be adequately written. At a recent Experimental film congress (June, 89 in Toronto), a predictable old-boys network once again succeeded in suppressing any discussion of sexuality in relation to "masters" like Anger.
7. Different from the Others, produced by Magnus Hirschfeld, directed by Richard Oswald and starring Conrad Veidt, is arguably the first gay rights film.
8. John Greyson, *Homo Video*, Jump Cut 1984.



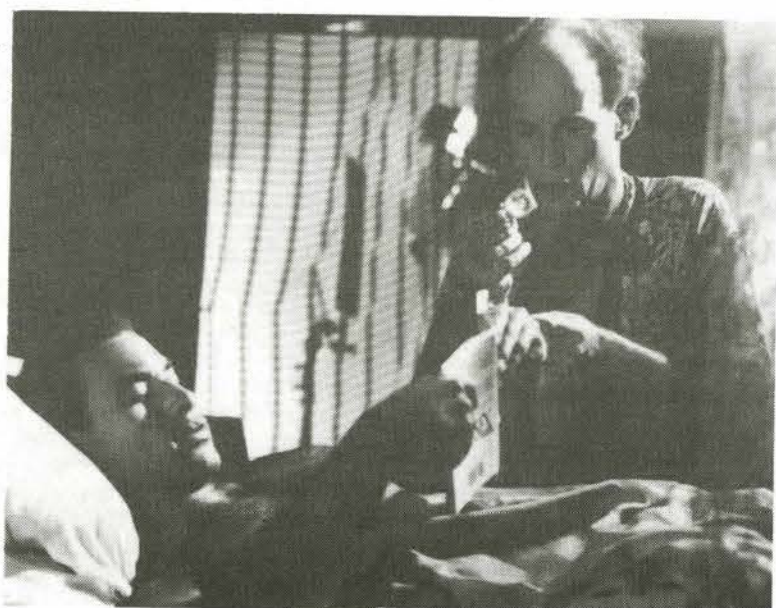
Dorian Gray (Lance Eng) checks out his portrait.



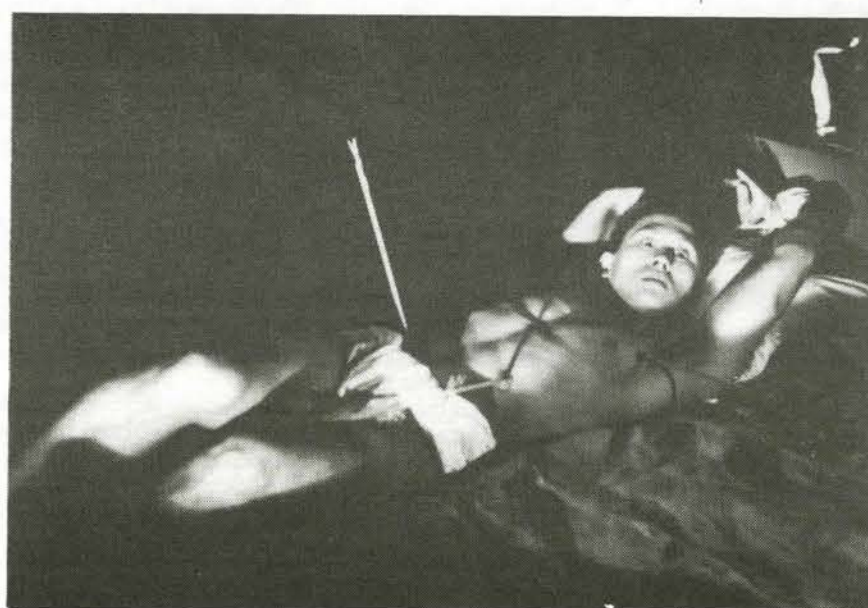
Sculptors Florence Wyle (Keltie Creed) and Frances Loring (Pauline Carey) discuss their strange group of guests.



Undercover 'gay' agent Dorian Gray (Lange Eng) in John Greyson's URINAL



Langston Hughes (George Spelvin) and Sergei Eisenstein (Paul Bettis) explore the intricacies of safer sex.



Yukio Mishima (David Gonzales) does his St. Sebastian pose.

1989 PLAINS FILM AND VIDEO CONFERENCE

by John Morgan



From the video "India Hearts Beat" by Leila Sujir



This year, the year of the third biennial, the conference was hosted by the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative and held an hour's drive outside of Regina at the Echo Valley Conference Centre or Fort San — a retired tuberculosis sanatorium complex in the Qu'Appelle Valley. Thematically, the conference was to address film and video aesthetic investigations; this strategy apparently arose from questioning why funding agencies have historically tied film and video together when usually the mediums seem to function within different hemispheres with only marginal overlap.

The proceeding began the evening of September 22 with R. Bruce Elder giving the keynote lecture, *Forms of Attention In Film and Video*, followed by two days of presentations by the regional production co-ops and access centres. Elder's inimitable "off the cuff" speech immediately generated controversy, some of which still continues although more abjectly as derision. The controversy was clever: an "essentialism argument" declaring that in the forms of attention in viewing art, film is superior to that of viewing TV or video. That is, the very means of transmission itself provides for a better or poorer art experience. And for Elder, that means the preferred light is reflected light. He finds the emitted electronic light of video less able to impart a high level of art experience. Furthermore, as a self confessed "art pig", he does not make this claim easily: he views video during a quality time period, sits in a hard chair and begins with focused, open and honest intentions. But, alas, he usually finds the monitor/TV set unable to hold his complete attention and hereby it most often fails to provide a complete and deeply satisfying encounter with art. All of this evenly delivered and dryly substantiated through an overview of aesthetic though — from antiquity up until that beacon of modernism, Immanuel Kant.

The controversy was also fuelled by the frustration of those most capable of a rebuttal but who were largely unable to do so after a long, gruelling day of driving. Also, at the end of his presentation or during the questions following, Elder reported on interesting, if less than convincing, brain wave research (alpha and beta, left and right hemisphere) which showed that watching television produced brain wave patterns similar to those of certain restive/sleeping states. The retort for this observation was quickly and simply made: watching broadcast television and watching video-art, at least as we understand them and in the context that we know them, are not synonymous activities.

What does Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) have to say to our more post-modern times? Perhaps quite a bit for the experimental film world but, as it turns out, precious little for video makers. As Elder (more) eruditely pointed out, the main tenets of Kant's aesthetic experience are: 1. The experience of engrossing; 2. Attention is disconnected from personal, etc., concerns; 3. An alertness that is non analytical — intellectual or conceptual recognition not important; 4. That practical concerns are suspended — a work occupies us; 5. That we are absorbed entirely in the aesthetic experience which is prolonged and repeated; 6. That there be an exhibit of unity, perceptively rather than conceptually, which is a complex unity... some relation to religious experience; 7. That the experience is perceived rather than just understood.

So, what is the relationship of film to society today? Elder positions it as a vehicle to provide a "classical" high art experience using the terms of reference of modernism. Elder, Stan Brakhage and, seemingly the moderator, Richard Kerr, subscribe to that canon with its historical lineage in Kant. The only work Elder screened (twice) was the silent *Murder Psalm*, a film by Brakhage (1981).

What appeared to excite Elder about video is "its ability to do fundamental damage to art". And, considering the above tenets one must agree. In fact, it should be reason enough for video's celebration rather than the usual cry for further institutional justification — where it is already largely accepted. Interestingly, the summary of Kant's aesthetic, at least as presented, provides a near antithesis for so much of what informs video art. At the social or later during the next two days (which he generously sat through) Elder freely admitted to having anticipated a rebuttal relishing video's antithetical position.

The group presentations and screenings began with the Saskatchewan Filmpool. Roy Cross spoke to working conditions in Saskatchewan, ("we don't feel bad about living there"), with references to Northrop Frye's garrison description of our cultural history. He screened work from Regina primarily concerned with the surrounding landscape and its psychological impacts: winter and isolation, distance and individual emptiness, and also, as in Brian Stockton's and Charles Gilhooly's *The Agoraphobic*, with humour. The work prompted Kerr to comment upon "the obligatory narrative" and Elder explained narrative as "an illusionary device, i.e. representation".

Video Pool's presentation was given by Susan Peterson and Tanis Kyle. They emphasized the group's interest in the experimental and in testing the high an low end production limits. They spoke on the growing interest in feature length video, large scale projection screenings, technically good work from women and of the numbers of first time producers. Painting, sculpture and theatre are considered as big an influence as film upon video and Women Artists In Video (W.A.I.V) continues to be a significant association. Various tapes were screened — including *Town Without Pity* (1989) by Gilles Hebert — with some general observations emerging during the discussion following: not enough writing and criticism from the plains on film and video, too much looking to film for video history, a wilful avoidance of education and that (Kerr) "respect does not equal canon".

MB Duggan, representing The Winnipeg Film Group, circulated an eight page hand-out entitled *Commonalities*. His paper was one of the better presentations in terms of addressing the conference theme: an analysis of how the group judges and talks about their work (the unspoken rules), the main characteristics of the films (technically accomplished, humorous, narrative but also de-politicized with little film history and meant to mesmerize), and what common but unconscious content the films have (obsessions). *The Milkman Cometh* by Guy Maddin (*Tales From the Gimli Hospital*) is certainly about an obsession! Incidentally, this screening was done through video transfer which Duggan called "a photocopy". The discussion revealed a charge that the Winnipeg Film Group is misogynic; an uncomfortable accusation echoed by other Winnipeggers about the co-op's current set of inhabitants.

Marcella Bienvenue gave the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers' presentation. She talked about their beginnings and subsequent directions including the 1983 CSIF Film/Video JOURNAL designed to "question the authority of print". A variety of work was shown including the 75th anniversary commissions from the provincial government, her own *Arrival* ('81), and *Desire* ('84) by Wendy Hill-Tout. *Arrival* is fascinating in that it's an exciting film to watch but as video it is questionable.¹ Why? Because the subject matter of a convincingly staged, fake media event of a political V.I.P. at the airport violates video-art's critique of TV which resides in its ability to create an important event (mediated significance and empowerment) out of the more human-scale,

democratic, stuff of life. Interestingly, the critique of the news media and powerful people so viable within the film is lost on tape as its truth to the medium of video is lessened. Bienvenue also mentioned the isolation and alienation (narratives) seen in CSIF productions and that personal and experimental are now bankrupt terms.

EM Media was the next up with Grant Poier leading their delegation. What great video is coming out of this surprisingly humble place — Calgary is more than lucky! Poier began with clips from their CAMERA OBSCURA project: a large program of that was cable-cast weekly in conjunction with Rogers Cable 10. Shown were quite recent tapes from an expanding litany: Colleen Kerr's *Tea bell(s) Tolls*, Nelson Henricks' *Legend*, Vern Hume's *Lamented Moments/Desired Objects*, Grant Poier's *Working Text — Field Action/Studio Action*, Brian Rusted's *Site Unseen* and Leila Sujir's beautiful but somewhat travelogue-like *India Hearts Beat*. Perhaps unfortunately, the Calgary presentation paid little overt attention to addressing the conference's theme.

Lastly, and regrettably the least too, was Edmonton's presentation. Although the Film and Video Artists was ably represented by Liz Stobbe and a board member, the work screened failed to convince that both film and video could be successfully produced in the same house. In fact, most memorable is their F.A.V.A. public relations film or tape that met with accusations of sexism as well as self-promotion. Also questioned was the claim that members saw no problem moving between film and video. In terms of structure, Bruce Duggan stated that co-ops were about "communal ownership rather than communal productions". Stobbe concluded on the note "applaud us, we're young", a why not, multi-disciplinary note rephrased by Al Rushton and Marcella Bienvenue.

Richard Kerr, in articulating his views wrapping-up what the conference had accomplished, simply asked if he should have stayed home and edited. Was anything lasting accomplished in understanding the similarities or difference in the aesthetics of film and video? Should we have asked Bruce Elder for a comparison of Kant to more contemporary references, say, the French structuralists? And, while Elder's work is appreciated in Regina from a weekend of film screenings and lectures given with Stan Brakhage in 1988, was he the right speaker to set the tone for this joint conference? And, how had all discussions completely overlooked the context of installation work? Or, what about the photographic authority of the cinematic and video image and its artistic implications on the plains? And lastly, how seriously had the presenters spoken to the theme — or were they more content to focus upon their group's successes, shortcomings, and needs?

Certainly the Saskatchewan Filmpool presentation had directly grappled with the problem at hand, but was that the hidden agenda? That is, the conference organizers seized the opportunity to raise the Regina filmmakers' level of discourse. A group, excepting the moderator and a couple of others, that may evidently be characterized as producing poignant, funny, often landscape related, narratives; skilful, but other than deliberately or openly intellectual in form. For example, there was little — if any — work about language and how images are "read" or even work which is self-reflective in the film medium itself: scratchings, optical printing, pronounced emulsions or vivid use of filters, etc. On the other hand, does anti-intellectual always equate with marginal? Well, perhaps the Saskatchewan Filmpool is already informed and likely to become more so with a dedicated core of producers and a new, greatly expanded space. For Regina, the timing was perfect.

¹ At the conference *Arrival* was presented as a film; it was previewed elsewhere on tape. 

'89 PLAINS CONFERENCE



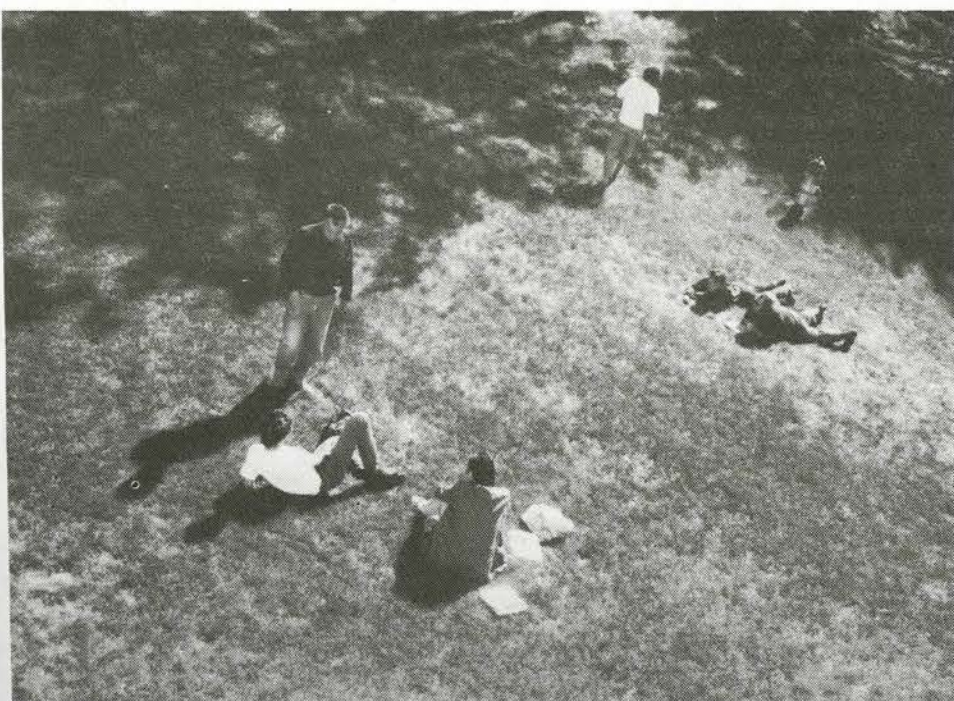
(L. to R.) Marcella Bienvenue, Susan Peterson, Grant Poier, Al Rushton, Bruce Elder and Mrs. Elder



(L. to R.) Grant Poier, Richard Kerr, Liz Stobbe



(Centre) Liz Stobbe / F.A.V.A.



Yellow Peril

RECONSIDERED



Taki Bluesinger
Melanie Boyle
Anthony Chan
Benjamin Chou
Richard Fung
Jay Hirabayashi
Roy Kiyooka
Nobuo Kubota
L'Amitie Chinoise

de Montreal/
Le Videographe
Laiwan
Daisy Lee
Helen Lee
Brenda Joy Lem
Liu/Samwald
Chi Chung Mak
Nhan Nguyen

Marlin Oliveros
Midi Onodera
Chick Rice
Ruby Truly
Henry Tsang
Tamio Wakayama
Jim Wong-Chu
Jin-me Yoon
Sharyn Yuen

WINNIPEG

Feb. 13 -
Mar. 6, 91

Plug-In Inc.

175 McDermot Ave., 2nd floor
Winnipeg, Manitoba

HALIFAX

March 19 -
April 13, 91

Eye Level

2182 Gottingen St., 2nd floor
Halifax, Nova Scotia

VANCOUVER

May 10 -
June 8, 91

Contemporary Art Gallery, Or, Artspeak

555 Hamilton St.,
110-314 W. Hastings St.,
3-311 W. Hastings St.,
Vancouver, British Columbia

OTTAWA

June 19 -
July 24, 91

Galerie Saw Vidéo

67 rue Nicholas,
Ottawa, Ontario

THE PUBLICATION

Yellow Peril: Reconsidered
Editor: Paul Wong

Innovative film, video and photographic work from twenty-five Asian Canadian artists featured in the national touring exhibit **Yellow Peril: Reconsidered** is highlighted in a 72-page publication, 7 by 7/8 x 10 by 9/16, perfect bound, with a 4-colour cover, b/w plates and 8 colour pages. ISBN 0-9694777-0-8

The lack of critical writing by Asian Canadians is offset by six commissioned essays ranging from theoretical analysis to anecdotal humour, including a chronicle of community media organizations, a dissection of umuticulturalism, and an examination of historical exclusion.

Insight into the artists and their work is relayed through accompanying statements, biographies and photo reproductions.

A unique publication available in an edition of 2000. Published by On Edge.

Essays by:

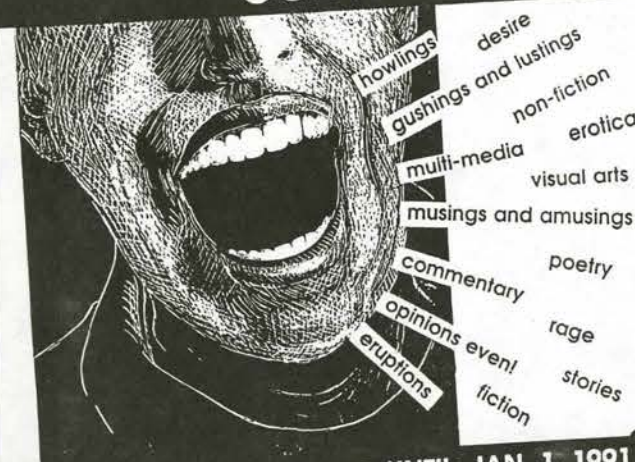
Anthony Chan
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VIDEO SCANNING SCANNING SCANNING

VAN EVENTS

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS



ACCEPTING CONTRIBUTIONS UNTIL: JAN. 1, 1991

All written work should be under 2,501 words and should be sent c/o Angles to:

Lesbian Literary Supplement
1170 Bute St.
Vancouver, B.C.
V6E 1Z6

Any women interested in being involved in the organization and production of the supplement are welcome to call Angles @ 688-0265

VANCOUVER NEW WORKS:

VIDEO RAMPAGE

@ VIDEO IN, 1102 HOMER ST.

Call for local videotapes
Deadline: January 30 1991

Programmed by Joe Sarahan, this two evening programme will be based on a call for new works and programmer's selection. This is an opportunity for younger and established artists to have a profile in the video community. The program will be shown in conjunction with videotapes by producers currently working on mini-grants. The Video In has acted as a co-producer for this group of emerging artists. This screening will highlight three new works by Jennifer Babcock, Nicole Thompson and Dennis Duffy/Sheila MacDonald.

If you are interested in having your work shown in this special programme contact Joe Sarahan at 688-4336.



WORKSHOPS

AT THE VIDEO IN, 1102 HOMER STREET

TEL: 688 4336

BETACAM PRODUCTION

Sunday January 13 1991
12:30 PM to 6:30 PM
\$30 members/\$40 non-members

PLANNING AND DEVELOPING GROUP PERFORMANCE FOR NATIVE PEOPLE

Sunday February 3 1991
12:30 PM to 6:30 PM
\$25 members/\$35 non-members

ISSUES OF FORM: NEW NATIVE MEDIA

Sunday February 10 1991
12:30 PM to 6:30 PM
\$20 members/\$25 non-members

POST-PRODUCTION IN THE ON-LINE EDIT SUITE

Friday March 15, Saturday March 16 and Sunday March 17 1991
12:30 PM to 6:30 PM
\$90 members/\$120 non-members

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Sunday April 7 1991
12:30 PM to 6:30 PM
\$30 members/\$40 non-members

GOETHE-INSTITUT
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Vancouver, British Columbia
Canada V5Z 1E5
Telephone 732-3966



The Goethe-Institut of Vancouver wishes to welcome Dr. Werner Wolf, currently posted in our Munich head office. He will be the new director of the Goethe-Institut Vancouver as of January 1st, 1991. The Goethe-Institut promotes German language study and international cultural co-operation through a variety of cultural programmes including exhibitions, films, lectures, seminars, music, video, dance and theatre.



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SARA DIAMOND: PATERNITY

January 19 - March 3

A new three-hour video installation by this well-known Canadian video artist and historian, focusses on representations of memory, generational and gender differences and the family, through the convergence of public/private histories.

NAT EVENTS

Communiqué

SUSAN DITTA TO HEAD CANADA COUNCIL'S MEDIA ARTS SECTION

Ottawa, 5 October 1990 -- Joyce Zemans, Director of the Canada Council, is pleased to announce the appointment of Susan Ditta to the position of Head of the Council's Media Arts Section.

Susan Ditta comes to the Council from the National Gallery of Canada, where she has been the Film and Video Curator for the past three years. A graduate of Trent University, Ditta began her career in 1979 with the Canadian Images Film and Video Festival, in Peterborough, of which she was executive director for five years. Since then, she has been managing director of Artspace, the multimedia parallel gallery in Peterborough, and assistant director and subsequently director of MAYWORKS Festival of Toronto.

Ditta has served as a consultant and jury member for a number of arts organizations, including the Ontario Arts Council, National Film Board, Independent Film and Video Alliance, Ontario Film Association, Festival of Festivals and the Canada Council. She has also been actively involved as a board member with various artists' centres in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Peterborough.

In announcing the appointment, Joyce Zemans said, "I am delighted that Susan Ditta is joining the Council. One of her greatest strengths is her knowledge of the independent film and video communities and their productions. She will be a wonderful asset to the Council and to the media arts community."

The Media Arts Section, one of the six disciplinary sections of the Canada Council, was headed until June 1990 by Glenn Lewis. Established in 1983, the Section is responsible for administering a variety of programs that provide assistance to nonprofit organizations, groups and individuals actively engaged in the creation, production, distribution and presentation of professional works in film, video, audio, holography and computer-integrated media. The Section also administers the Petro-Canada Award for Media Arts and the Bell Canada Award in Video Art.



NSI

"WE WANT TO PLAY SANTA CLAUS THIS YEAR. WE'RE GIVING CANADA \$30,000 TO REACH OUT... BUT WE NEED PROJECTS!"
Al Resko, General Manager
National Screen Institute - Canada

WANTED:

Independent Drama Short Projects
- Film Or Video

Deadline For Application:

4 pm • January 11, 1991, NSI-C Office

SUBMIT YOUR APPLICATION NOW!

THE COMPETITION: Production teams consisting of a writer, director and producer will submit a proposal (not to exceed 12 pages) for a three to five minute drama.

THE PROPOSALS MUST BE DIRECTED TO A TARGET AUDIENCE BETWEEN THE AGES OF 14 TO 18 AND CENTRED ON THE THEME "REACHING OUT"

Proposals will consist of an application, a three page story treatment, director's notes, preliminary budget, production plan, financing plan, project rationale and resumes of all principal team members.

DEADLINE: January 11, 1991, 4 pm at NSI-C office, Edmonton, Alberta

The competition is open to members of film and video cooperatives and emerging independent filmmakers. Professional filmmakers are not eligible. Further eligibility details are available with application form.

APPLICATION FORMS MAY BE OBTAINED BY PHONING OR WRITING THE NATIONAL SCREEN INSTITUTE OF CANADA, Suite 202, 8540 - 109 Street, Edmonton, AB, Canada, T6G 1E6 (403) 439-8461 OR BY CONTACTING YOUR LOCAL NATIONAL FILM BOARD OFFICE.

Please contact: Sarah Gaynor, Publicist
(403) 458-9229/439-8461

images

FESTIVAL OF INDEPENDENT FILM & VIDEO

Images 91 is on its way

This will be our fourth year. The festival is continuing its success within the independent community and garnering much praise from across Canada as the most important independent film and video festival.

Images' New Works programs are selected by jury from work submitted to the Festival. The deadline for submission is February 4, 1991.

The festival will take place from the 6th to the 11th of June at the Euclid Theatre in downtown Toronto. As well, a few satellite screenings in community spaces will be organized. SPEAKING NEW MEDIA, a separate Workshop/Technical forum component will be running concurrently.

The IMAGES festival is committed to the equal exhibition of video and film and will screen work of primarily Canadian content, though we do include an international component of 20% - 30%. We are committed to screening work which is innovative, challenging and on the leading edge of production in the independent sector. All forms of video and film are to be considered; we look for work that operates outside the confines of the dominant media programming. IMAGES is committed to the equal representation of genders and sexual orientations, and to programming that reflects the broad range of races and regions within all communities.

NOTE: ONE SUBMISSION PER ARTIST; ENTRIES MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY AN ENTRY FORM.

Entry forms for the New Works programs are available from Images Festival, 67A Portland Street, Suite #3, Toronto, M5V 2M9. If more information is required, please contact b.h. Yael, Co-ordinator of Programming, Images 91 Festival, (416) 971-8405.

GLOBAL EVENTS

merseyside's international video festival 91

some facts about

VIDEO POSITIVE '89

Britain's biennial international video art festival

- * The Bluecoat Gallery had its highest gallery attendances for almost 10 years. The Tate Gallery had near record attendances too.
- * Over 35,000 people attended or participated in the festival, many from Europe and overseas.
- * 58 artists from 11 different countries had work exhibited in the festival.
- * 11 new installations were commissioned by the festival including 5 pieces made for a specially constructed sculptural videowall.
- * As well as installations, the festival featured screenings, performances, interactive video, seminars, workshops and an extensive education programme involving hundreds of young people from throughout Merseyside.
- * It was the most successful video event ever staged in Britain.

Video Positive '91 will be taking place throughout Merseyside in May of next year. For further information about the festival, including commissions and exhibition opportunities, please contact Eddie Berg or Judith Glynn on 051 709 2663.

MOA Bluecoat Chambers School Lane Liverpool L1 3BX. 051 709 2663 Director: Eddie Berg
Video Positive is organised by Merseyside Moviola, a company limited by guarantee. Reg no: 2391543

SCANNING SCANNING SCANNING GUIDE



THE NINTH HIROSHIMA INTERNATIONAL AMATEUR FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVAL

REGULATIONS

1. Administration:

This festival will be administered by the Working Committee with the Honorable Takeshi Araki, mayor of the City of Hiroshima, as its president.

2. Qualifications for entries:

- All works must be by amateurs (individuals or groups).
- The content of each work must in some way manifest an "effort toward peace or reverence for life." This could include, for instance, a tribute to humanity or a study of relations between man and nature. There are no regulations regarding style or genre (documentary, fiction, animation, graphics, etc.).
- Films may be in 16mm or 8mm (super-eight or single-eight); black and white or colour. Video tapes must be on 1/2 VHS (including S-VHS) or 1/2 Betamax (including ED-Beta) on NTSC systems only or on 8mm Video (including HI-8) on NTSC systems only.
- The running time must not exceed 30 minutes.
- Both silent and sound are acceptable.
- Films reduced from 35mm will not be accepted.
- All works must have been produced in or after 1985.
- Only one work per entrant can be accepted.

3. Application procedures:

- Fully completed application forms, including a synopsis of the work and the work itself, should be sent to the Secretariat not later than January 31, 1991.
- Expenses for the mailing of entries to and from Hiroshima shall be borne by the entrants themselves. Postage for the return of the work should be sent together with the application form and work.
- Although the utmost care will be taken for the safety of all films and materials, the organizers cannot assume responsibility for fire, theft or any other damage which may occur. Entrants may therefore wish to insure their works themselves.

4. The Judges:

- Kaneto Shindo Cinema Director
Kazuo Yamada Cinema Critic
Tadao Sato Cinema Critic
- Other judges will be chosen from among a wide range of film experts, critics and scholars. In awarding the prizes, the judges will select among all entries, Japanese and Foreign. The decisions of the judges shall be final and no questions regarding those decisions will be considered.

5. Announcement of prize-winners:

April 1991

Media Matters

The 1991 International Women's Day Video Festival invites women from across the United States and around the world to submit videotapes that explore the theme: "Women and Change." This Festival provides women from a variety of cultures the opportunity to exchange news, perspectives and insights through videotapes produced by women that reflect personal, political, social, historical and community change. Women are welcome to submit videotapes in one or two of the following categories: Showcase Tapes or Interview Tapes. Submissions in languages other than English are encouraged (written translations are appreciated.) Tapes will be accepted in: 8mm, VHS, S-VHS and 1/4" NTSC; PAL and SECAM in 1/4" only. For entry forms and more information, write: International Women's Day Video Festival, P.O. Box 176, Boston, MA 02130, USA or call Abigail Norman, Somerville Community Access (617) 628-8826.

Deadline: January 1

13th Annual Houston International Film & Video Festival is accepting 16mm and 35mm films, video, and video dubs from film for entry in the categories of: Features, Shorts, Documentaries, TV Production, Experimental, and TV Commercials. Submit 1/4" U-Matic and 1/4" VHS formats for judging and send film print for festival screening. For application, entry fees, and additional information, contact: J. Hunter Todd, Chairman, Houston International Film & Video Festival, 1 Greenway Plaza East, Suite 118, Houston, Texas 77046; (713) 965-9955.

Deadline: March 1

The '90's, a 13-week television series, produced by the Center for New Television in Chicago, seeks short video tapes and films on videotape, including excerpts from long pieces and works-in-progress, for national broadcast. All genres and styles, with the accent on the nontraditional are

accepted. Producers will be paid \$50 per/minute for material used, with additional payments possible. No deadline, ongoing submissions. Send 1/4" tapes or Hi-8 with information about the material, via UPS to: The '90's, The Center for New Television, 400 N. Michigan Avenue, #1608, Chicago, IL 60611. For more information, contact: Tom Weinberg or Joel Cohen (312) 321-9321; FAX (312) 321-9323.

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THE INVISIBLE SCREEN: LESBIAN CINEMA

by Barbara Hammer

To be a lesbian is to be invisible unless one personally identifies herself by saying "I am a lesbian". As it is considered a detriment to professional work to be self-declared as a lesbian, as some people still consider it a disease or a psychological problem, and as sexual preference outside of the standard heterosexual norm is generally not condoned, it follows that many lesbians are invisible. To make a personal choice to self-declare can be a costly choice for a lifetime. Certainly one could not run for president as a self-declared lesbian. In fact, even within liberal circles the lesbian can be isolated and shunned due to her unique choice for a personally satisfying sexual practice. As it is much easier to live a life as a non-lesbian in this society, why then should we consider anyone would identify herself as a lesbian unless she were naive, political, or both? I know the choices I am setting up are not all inclusive. One could choose to declare her or his sexual preference for a variety of reasons, but the point is, unless spoken, written or imaged, the heterosexual assumption prevails.

Similarly, when an audience awaits the image on the screen it expects a heterosexual narrative to unfold and the problem I want to address is that the audience is not disappointed. Even if the characters are lesbian, the script dominates and projects lesbian characters within a heterosexual world of role-playing, love-making, and domestic and professional life. I say this because numerous recent films that suppose to be lesbian have failed to address me as a lesbian spectator. The romance, the on-screen gaze, the plot, the character development are all situated within a heterosexual lifestyle or a Hollywood imaginative lifestyle made for the cinema. Certainly the women I have seen on the screen; their issues, the story, the mise en scene do not relate to the personal experiences I live and have lived as a lesbian woman for the twenty eight years in the Western world. Lesbian cinema is on an invisible screen.

By "The Invisible Screen" do you mean pictures drawn in lemon juice backwards that when heated can be read through a mirror? asked a friend. It has been almost that

discourse solely because the discourse does not have a model that will yet include us. The lesbian as heterosexual, yes, the models exist; the lesbian as elsewhere, yes, she is off-screen and still invisible.

In an as yet unpublished lecture titled *The Social Contract* given at Columbia University in New York City in November of 1987, Monique Wittig analyzed the institution of heterosexuality as an unspoken assumption of Rousseau's contained within his theory of the social contract. Homosexuality, she said, is a dim, vague outline. As heterosexuality is always already there and as we cannot think without it, Wittig challenges us by asking how we can consent to a social construct that reduces us to invisibility. She suggests that we run away, that we break off the heterosexual contract. She ended her presentation with the outspoken and daring words that "if a new social order exists only in one I will find it in myself".

As another runaway from the political regime of heterosexuality, I and other lesbian filmmakers began to construct a lesbian cinema in the early seventies.⁴ Visibility was the central concern for lesbian women making cinema at this time for the simple and profoundly sad reason that there were few or no pictures, images, representations available. The screen space, on and off, was blank. Not just marginalized, but not there. There was no cinema to deconstruct. There was no gaze to analyze. Lesbian image-makers in the seventies were forced by critics into the "camp of essentialists" because of the extreme urgency of their need to make lesbian representation. A marginalized and oppressed group must make a mark first, define a form, make a statement that they exist. As we made films of lesbian representation, we were categorized by the emerging feminist semioticians and theorists, newly-emerged themselves from French studies with Christian Metz, as "essentialists". Because we had represented lesbian women, the assumption was falsely made that we inhabited these representations with biological, essential "meaningness" separate from ideology or social construction.

difference. The breast(s) wielded no power over me but the power of continuance; no economic strength, but necessity. I noted my mother's difference from, yet at the same time, sameness from/of me, and I think this was more profound than the distinct and original difference of my father with whom I found little congruity or similarity.

When I make love with a woman, the "genital definition of lesbian", I feel the sameness of body structure, the breasts, the mound, the genitalia, the clitoris, the buttocks, the slight body hair, the smoothness of skin.⁵ This reinforcement of presence through lesbian sexuality is quite different from a sense of "lack". I find it to be identity reaffirming, strengthening in self-sense — this lesbian-making, this love-making we women do with one another.

This is not a statement of essentialism although some may call it so. It is an eclectic stance I prefer to take. This re-identification of lesbian self through lesbian sexual experience is but one part of lesbian representation. There are many parts of practices of lesbian experience to be represented. In physics, light can be understood through wave and particle theories at the same time. So too, there can be multiple, co-existing and different theories and understandings of "lesbianisms" through a variety of readings.

One of these readings is experimental cinema. There is an on-screen space, a lesbian on-screen, but it is in the marginalized cinema of the avant-garde. The cinema made by and for the social order of one. The cinema that makes its own construct where form and content are inseparable. I don't think one can make a lesbian film using a patriarchal and heterosexist mode such as the narrative. Plot points are male points. We are radically-changing people and we cannot reproduce that radicality using conventional forms.

I conclude with a quote from Teresa De Lauretis writing of the contradictory spaces of theory and practice.



difficult to see lesbian representation in cinema. The lesbian imaginary is carried in a back pocket inscribed in invisible lines until heated...by the projector lamp. This lamp, having not been lit, the secret drawing, the mysterious code, the invisible sign are hip pocket-bound: they are offscreen.¹

In *Technologies of Gender* Teresa de Lauretis writes about off-screen space as "a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them."² Off the screen space implies that there is more to "screen reality" than the projected frame. Off-screen space is a cinematic term that can be used as a metaphor for lesbian representation in cinema, that is, lesbian invisibility. The things that happen behind the locked door; the double resume, the hidden, the unsigned. The lesbian constituted within the hegemony of a heterosexist ideology ISN'T.

How could this be, one asked in the age of *Desert Hearts*, *Lianna*, *Personal Best*, *She Must Be Seeing Things* — as the on-screen space is filled with seeming "lesbian representation". But these films posit the lesbian inside the heterosexual discourse. There is no "lesbian" to deconstruct as the discourse of the gendered subject is within a heterosexist authority system. The lesbians act out heterosexual gender roles and positions rather than claiming any difference; even the sexual practice is situated in heterosexuality.

Monique Wittig writes that "The discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms".³ It is the discourses of heterosexuality — whether they be Marxist, deconstructionist, Lacanian — that oppress us as lesbians situated within a discourse that doesn't speak our name. Similarly, in practice as well as theory, the lesbian actor in classical cinema enters into the heterosexual ideology and speaks a language, performs actions within heterosexual codes. Only the names are changed. The "innocent" are not protected. The innocent are those of us left outside the

I, for one, as a lesbian cineaste, take a more eclectic and, I hope, eccentric view of the lesbian representations I made in the seventies. The lesbian women I imaged in film were constructed by their society, the general and dominant society, as well as the marginal society of the lesbian community. As well, we discovered who we were as we stepped into the void, the invisible, the blank screen, and named ourselves "lesbian". That was the first step. There could be no semiotics if there was no sign. The lack we felt as we began this early naming process was not the lack of a phallus but the singular and significant lack of representation. The image did not exist, the picture was not made, the word scarcely heard in discourse nor seen in text.

Until recently, the dominant discourse of feminist criticism has not addressed this issue but has continued to ignore and by doing so, support the invisibility and therefore repression of lesbian cinema. To dismiss the early naming and identity films with the highly-charged and emotive term "essentialist" further removes the opportunity for discourse in a climate where deconstruction, Marxist, psychoanalytic and Lacanian theories prevail.

Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan in their important article *Lesbian Representation* close their historical tracing of naming, sexual difference and psychoanalytic theory by reiterating Monique Wittig's statement that "lesbians are not women".⁴ They are not women, Gever and Magnan state, when they are in struggle with the patriarchal institutions of heterosexuality, representation and ideology. They suggest that it is "lesbian experience" we must rely on for our theory-making outside the Lacanian model of sexual difference, masculine or feminine, as the social division.

It has been from my lesbian experiences that I have made my films. It was my mother's breasts I desired, not a phallus. I noticed a lack, but it was of my own undeveloped breasts. It was her breasts that fascinated me, for how well I had known them as an infant, how familiar yet unfamiliar. This presence, not this lack seems to be a centering sexual

"Thus, to inhabit both kinds of spaces at once is to live the contradiction which, I have suggested, is the condition of how feminism here and now: the tension of a two fold pull in contrary directions... the critical negativity of its theory, and the affirmative positivity of its politics... is both the historical condition of existence of feminism and its theoretical condition of possibility."

In writing this paper I have been compelled to write in two voices: the voice of "critical negative theory" and the voice of the affirmative, politic, the voice of the practicing artist. The tension that is unreconciled between these voices is the off-screen space De Lauretis notes. For me today, this is the space where things can happen. This tension, this contradiction, this unreconciliation is the space for the lesbian voice of difference in avant-garde film.

1. Noel Burch. "Theory of Film Practice" (Princeton University Press 1981).

2. Teresa de Lauretis. "The Technology of Gender"; *Technologies of Gender*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 1-26.

3. Monique Wittig. "The Straight Mind"; *Feminist Issues*, No. 1, Summer 1980, p.105.

4. Paula E. Langguth, "Breaking The Barrier: Lesbian Filmmakers Emerge", *Visibilities*, Vol. 1 No 2 Fall 1987, pp. 4-5; 16, 19.

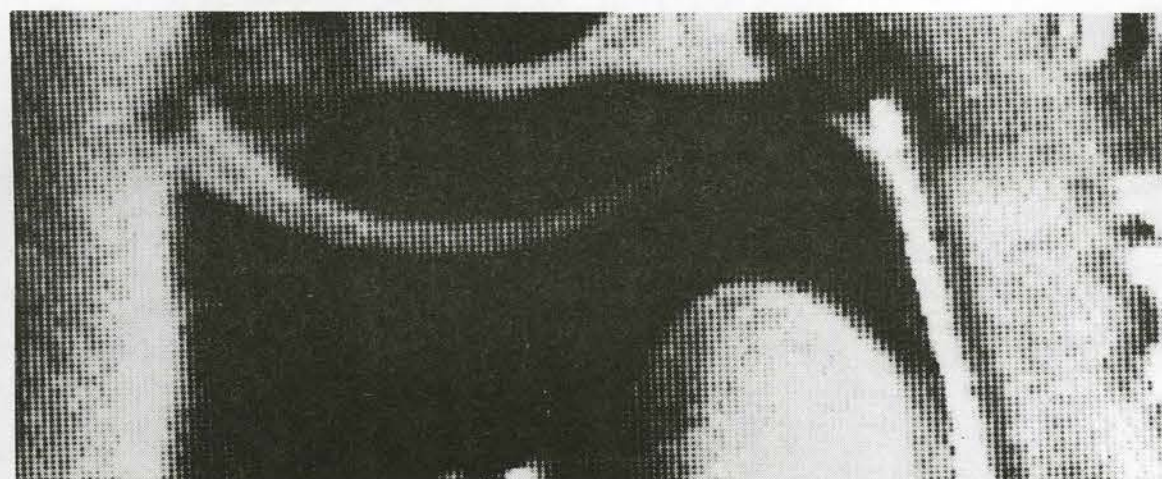
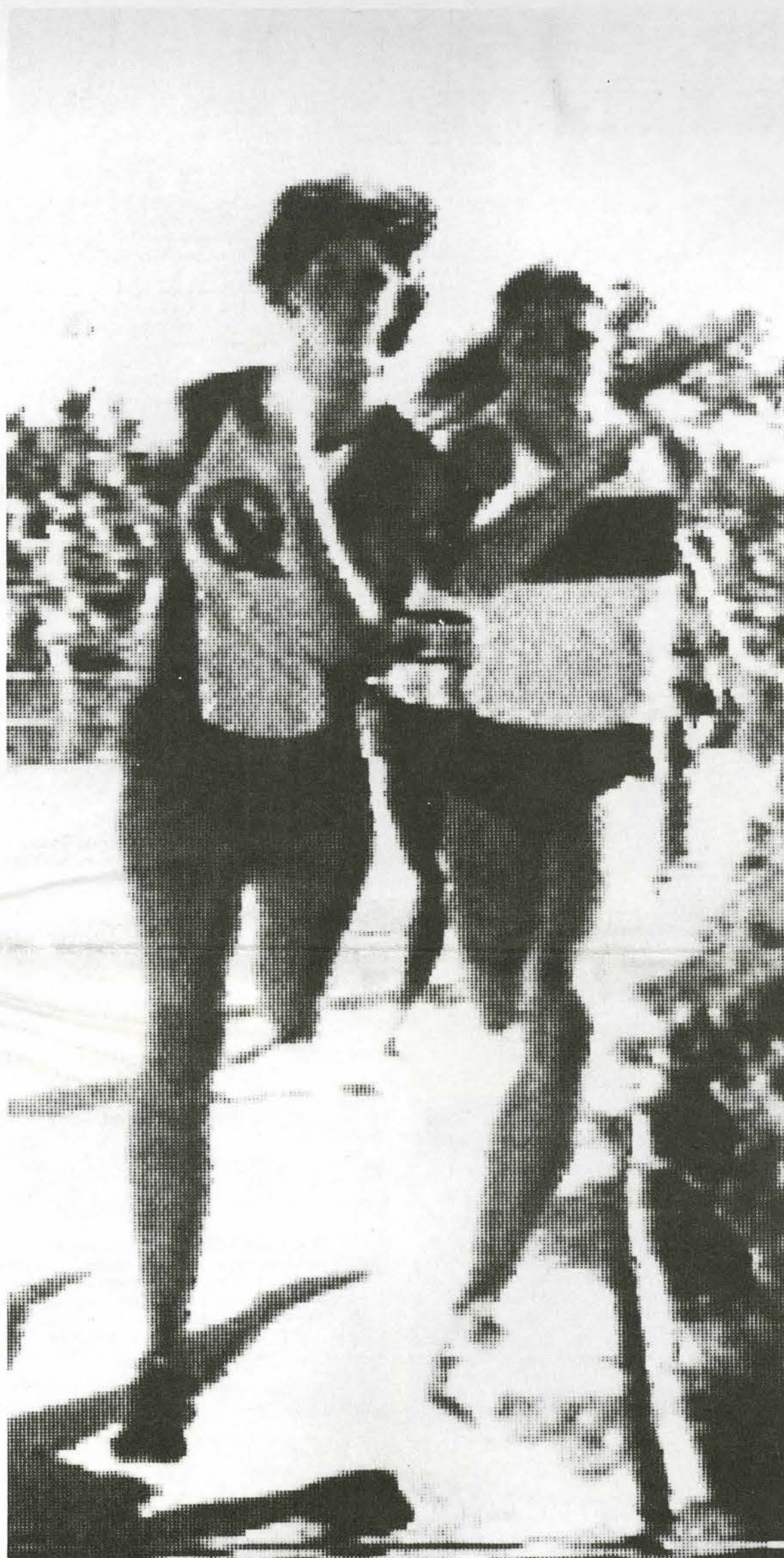
5. Martha Gever and Nathalie Magnan. "Lesbian Representation", *Exposure*, v.24 No. 2.

6. Conversation with Tee Corrine, June 1987. Sunny Valley, Oregon.

7. Teresa de Lauretis. *Technologies of Gender*. p.26. 

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIMENTAL FILM CONGRESS

by Barbara Hammer



The International Experimental Film Congress (May 28 - June 4, 1989) held at Innis College and the Ontario Art Gallery in Toronto was hardly international nor even representative of the vast new upsurge of avant-garde film practice in North America and Western Europe. Rather, it was a canonization of great men in the tradition of "History of the World According to the Great Men Theory". Women filmmakers and critics, although often adequate in number, were positioned within strategies that referred to the male authorial voice. The hyperbole and mythology of the suffering, romantic artist who suffered and then "found life through art" was perpetuated ad nauseam. As an example, at one informal dinner an American curator suggested that Stan Brakhage would "die for art" where I would "die for women". This statement was not only unnerving but irrelevant, yet I was caught up in the "drama" of the question for the rest of the evening and gave into the dramaturge within with an answer "I'd die for women, men and art". That left out the rain forest, Chinese democracy and flautas, but I wasn't thinking on my feet.

Criticisms and discussion followed the panels with open mike interventions. Chastising and critical introductions were made by two curators: Joao Luiz Vieira, Director of the Cinemateca of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, who showed a fascinating program of films of Artur Omar, and Nick Deocampo who presented recent films from the Philippines made in an experimental film workshop led by Christoph Janetzko and offered by the Goethe-Institute Manila. Both of these film programs stepped outside the narrow subscription to the individual artist's vision by incorporating either pluralities of subject matter, techniques, image sources within the films or through the films themselves which "benefited from a questioning not only of what the films could express but also how film could signify." (Deocampo, p.76, Congress Catalogue)

The conference format began with "Practicums" where distinguished filmmakers Pat O'Neil, Stan Brakhage, Joyce Wieland, David Rimmer, and Robert Breer spoke about optical printing, editing, projecting, video and animation. Panels followed with topics such as *The Interface Between the New Technology and Avant-garde Film* and *Cinema's Phoenix: Deaths and Resurrections of the Avant-garde* (Annette Michelson, Michael Dorland, Deke Dusinberre, Fred Camper, and Birgit Hein). The most intense public debates followed these presentations and were the only site for audience participation. Screenings of the practicum filmmakers took up the lunch hour and then we were off for a fifteen minute walk from the amphitheatre of Innis College to the beautiful projection facility in Jackman Hall within the Ontario Art Gallery. Two screenings of regional and thematically-grouped films followed. Emerging national work in the United States, West Germany, and Canada Saturday night ended the conference in conjunction with a nearly complete retrospective of the films of Hollis Frampton.

Days were intense, coffee-provoked, and exciting. Late evenings we retired to the Rivoli Bar where in a smoke-filled room optical soundtracks competed with popping beer cans. Perhaps the most strenuous criticisms can be aimed directly here: filmmakers attending the conference were afforded the least time and most unfavourable of circumstances in which to project their films. The second greatest criticism to my mind is that the conference was so under-represented by a plurality of avant-gardes that we spent most of our time stating who was left out, what politics were missing, what polemical viewpoint we adhered to. It was a one-sided conference that failed due to its inability to recognize gay and lesbian experimental film, pressing issues in avant-garde cinema (AIDS), cultural diversity of filmic expression. The bottom line was the great white male and we all know that line is hyphenated, broken, cursive, diverse and multiple. Let us hope that the next conference planners learn from the mistakes of the gargantuan and appreciated efforts of the International Experimental Film Congress. We can grow from our experience. 

GRANDE BARRAGE \ GREAT DIVIDE VIDEO WORK DE DANIEL DION

By Bryan Mulvihill

Great Divide is a two channel poem which explores the division of a vision and more often the coming together of a theme of opposites. The work was realized over a year of conversations in the late 1980's about Canada and her national preoccupation with division. It also speaks of the French-English dilemma and how the official networks presented different versions of the same story.

Daniel Dion has been one of Quebec's new generation of unofficial cultural ambassadors to the West Coast. Crossing the country (in as many ways as is possible in the late twentieth century), literally and metaphorically, the great barriers that are often little more than mole hill mountains fade into shared understandings, cultured friendships. These ring truer to our experience of delight rather than of supposed dualities which give rise to conflict and opposition, or the inevitable-alienation.

Great Divide opens with both eyes gliding, on two monitors, in a helicopter flying over the continental divides, the actual series of Rockies ridges that determine which way the waters will flow off the North American land mass. The tape was realized in and around the Banff Arts Centre, Canada's Mont Vert in the rough. From the majestic yet neutral roughed ground, pure almost virgin (if only we did not already know so much about the logging or mining industries), the divide begins to look more like the backbone holding the mountain ridge together. As Mr. Dion and his collaborator/friends began to explore the terrain and the myths of the divide, they came into contact with the First Nations' view of this chain of mountains that runs down the centre of the Americas, as a backbone holding the body straight between two great oceans.

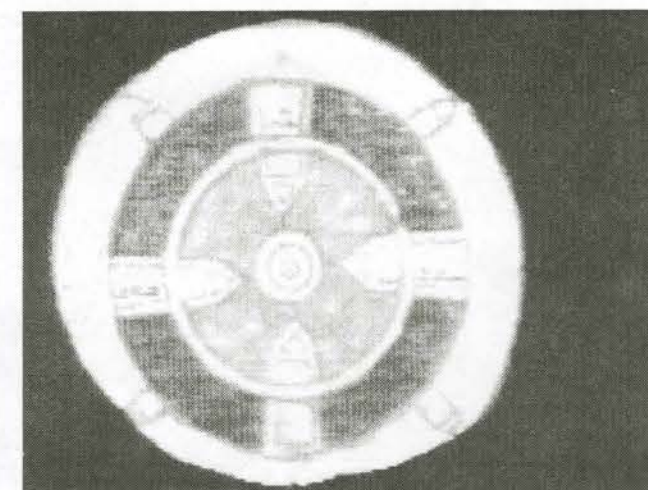
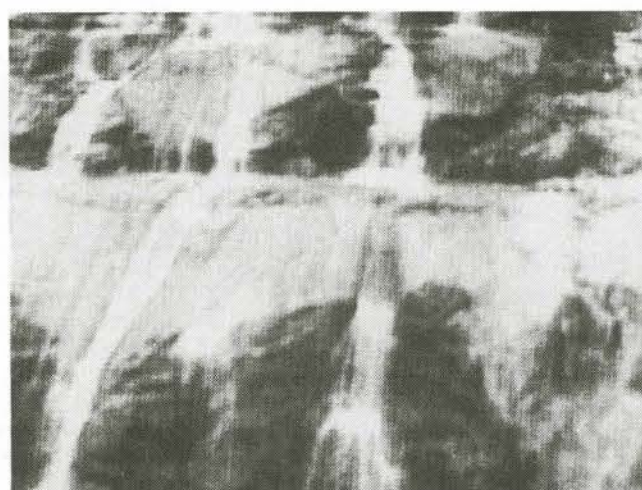
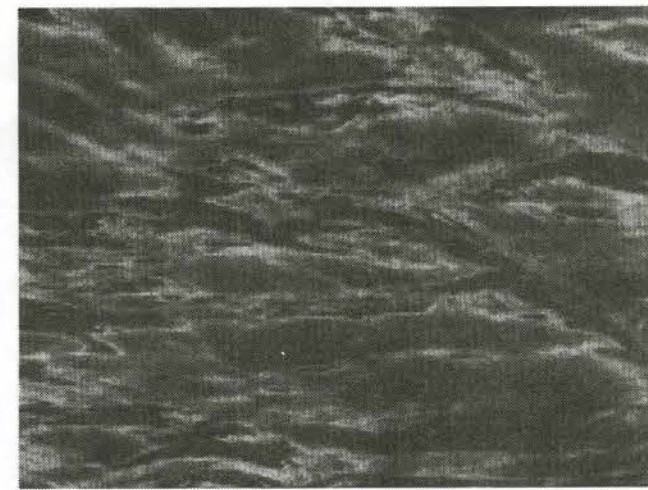
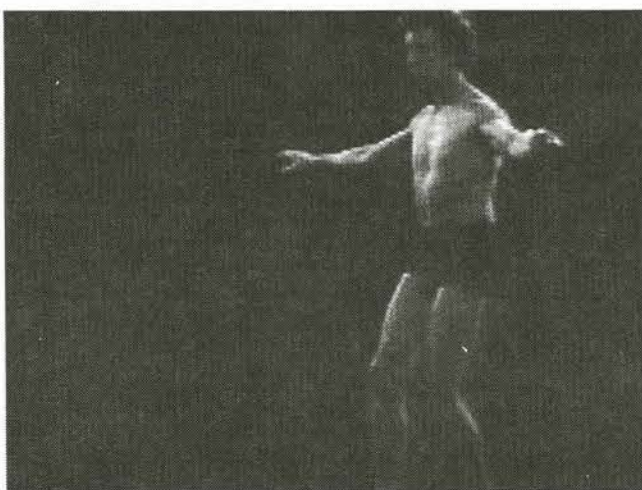
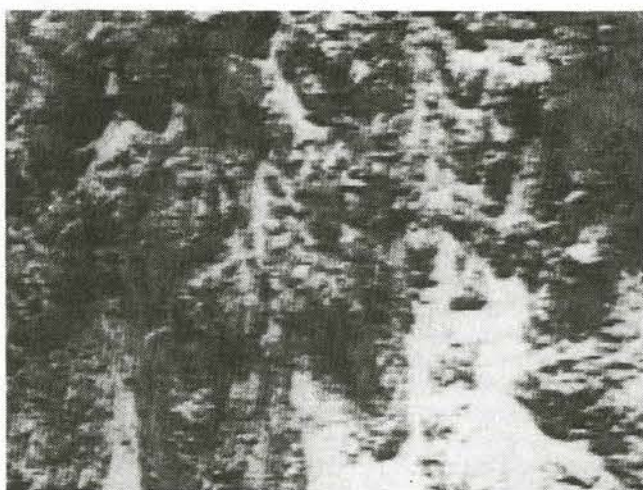
A transformation of attitude is visually achieved with the image flow of synchronized monitors, flying along the backs of mountain ridges or down two converging rivers. The experience is familiar, yet transformed in feeling, when the image flow direction is changed from diverging to converging.

The tape, which seems to begin with just another beautiful mountain landscape, starts to play with themes of opposites coming together, visually like the Taoist Yin-Yang mandalas. Through a series of tableaux, concepts of duality are explored. The human being appears as an eye, a set of two eyes moving through a landscape with a video camera. The time and space relationship is equally a visual variable with modern recording technology, where nothing is real time; it is speeded up, then reduced to 45%, in subtle undulations that only slowly become apparent as the tape progresses. Real time and 100% speed are different—as one comes closer to the process of recording, the understanding of how a video image creates our perception of reality is realized.

This tape explores the dimensions of both technological developments in the video process, the ability to alter speed, time, flow and the dimensions of how our own human minds respond to the rhythms of image merging.

From the Big Bang to zero entropy, **Great Divide** creates a relationship between the environment and the body, and from there, between nature and spirit. Through a series of nine tableaux, like an open encyclopedia, the observer is made aware of connections between systems which are specific to the ecology of the human thought and its universe of physical structures, in the continuum of movement. This tape has the continual feeling of discovery, as though one was along with the artist in the process of exploring opposites and finding constantly the place in which they fit together.

In looking for that which divides the country, Mr. Dion and friends (for it would be impossible to realize a sophisticated high tech, high conceptual content tape like this alone), have found that which holds us together—in time, in a landscape, in a dance, in a shared visual experience which has a lot more under the surface image than Rocky Mountains and ritual hand gestures. **Great Divide** succeeds in uniting meaning and beauty in a way that is seldom managed or imagined in current Canadian video/visual art. 



LA FREEWAVES

by Valerie Soe

Questions of audience, context and content held sway at the L.A. Freewaves festival held in the greater Los Angeles area this past fall. Freewaves, a huge project linking a multitude of exhibition spaces, media organizations and independent video producers in screenings and related programs across the city, was notable first off for the sheer bulk of programming, not to mention square mileage covered. The task of understanding the calendar alone was daunting enough, but suffice to say that over thirty-five different organizations participated, programming exhibitions in a number of different venues — for example, the Asian Pacific media organization Visual Communications curated a show that played at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Centre; the Foundation for Art Resources and UCLA sponsored a panel discussion entitled *Women in Media: Beyond Baroque* included an installation by Cheri Gaulke.

During this three-week window a selection of works drawn from each exhibition played at different times and different venues during the festival, bringing a taste of the broader program to several different audiences. Dubbed "Road Shows", these screenings consisted of four two-hour programs, thematically grouped under the headings *Bytes and Pieces*, *Other Angles*, *Art Actions*, and *Inter/National*. As an observer whose only exposure to the festival was through watching dubs of these "Road Shows", it was difficult for me to gauge the impact, if any, Freewaves' large-scale programming had on LA's cultural climate. However, judging from these selected works, the festival at least dealt with the relationship between audience and aesthetics and its significance in independent video production and exhibition.

Looking at the schedule one came away with the distinct impression that some of the programs included from the larger arts institutions were there simply because they occurred during the three-week time frame, such as the rock videos produced by Robert Longo shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the video installation show *American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove* at the Newport Harbor Art Museum and the AFI Video Festival. How these events benefitted from being included under the Freewaves banner was difficult to discern, but Freewaves no doubt appreciated their accepting the invitation to join the party. More interesting and to the point was the participation of numerous media arts organizations throughout the Los Angeles area — it was significant to see community groups such as Visual Communications and Watts Tower Arts Festival mentioned in the same breath as world regulars, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, not only bringing the efforts of VC and WTAF to the attention of the dominant culture but also connecting MOCA and LACE's intellectual discourse to real-life concerns. The main question remained, however; if Freewaves was successful in bringing in audiences from diverse communities and cultures to see video art and expression. Only attending the programs could have truly revealed if this were the case, or if it was just the same old people preaching to the converted. Nonetheless, Freewaves at least succeeded in lining up a massive number of programs on the same calendar of events — whether it had the unity of theme and intent which would make it a coherent festival is impossible for this armchair observer to judge.

Freewave's novel structural concept, attempting to take the mountain to Mohammed by bringing independent video to all corners of the metropolitan area rather than attempting to draw audiences to one central location, added zest to a potentially elephantine event. As a result of this collective effort, programming appeared to be a bit more earnest than at more traditionally organized festivals. Each group was responsible for only a small portion of a much larger event and was thus more easily able to come up with a strong program — on the whole, there appeared to be less filler.

Yet judging by the evidence of the travelling Road Shows, despite positive energy and good intentions, things tended to sink to the middle, as is often true with such large-scale undertakings. The quality of most of the work in the Road Shows hovered somewhere around okay, with some outstanding pieces and a few particularly odious ones, and with styles ranging from straightforward community access programming to eclectic art pieces. There were very few surprises, but it was heartening to see that so many different organizations actually had decent product to submit.

Interestingly enough, work selected by most of the more mainstream arts organizations as a whole proved to be less interesting than the programming from community-based groups. With participation from such a variety of sources someone had to be the status quo and it was interesting to note that in this case the status quo was alternative artists' spaces. A case in point was a group of work by students from CalArts. These tapes proved that even with hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of equipment, art students still tend to create the same self-conscious, derivative work, and showed clearly that technology doesn't necessarily beget creative sophistication. By and large, form won out over substance in these slickly made pieces, many of which were fascinated with simplistic formal repetition: one piece was composed entirely of repeated edits of shoes crossing a hardwood floor (*Feets*); another was made up of closeups of annoying personal habits played over and over (*Habits*). John Baldassari, who is on faculty at CalArts, made these type of tapes in the early seventies, using repetition and banal concepts to illustrate more complex concerns. Unlike Baldassari's witty vignettes, however, these student tapes were merely simplistic and terribly clever.

These student tapes were indicative of a greater malaise found in the pieces selected by general art exhibition spaces. Apparently video art has already become codified — exhibition spaces such as Highways performance Space, Beyond Baroque, the Foundation for Art Resources, EZTV, and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, all of which can be described as "alternative", submitted work which was the same old avant garde song and dance by the same established hip artists.

Highway's tape was especially poor, a promotional piece including dark, out-of-focus performance documentation interspersed with commentary by Highways directors Tim Miller and Linda Frye Burnham. LACE's Road Show contribution was its exhibition by filmmaker Raul Ruiz, another seemingly incidental inclusion which wasn't particularly significant to the overall gestalt of the festival and which once again prompted speculation whether Freewaves truly sought to

spread the gospel of independent video, or if it was just a hyper extended public relations ploy.

FAR selected two tapes by well-known artists Mike Kelley and Erica Beckman (*Blind Country*), and Jeffrey Vallance and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto (*Blinky*) which were amusing but self-indulgent. EZTV checked in with *Theatre of Dreams (I Thought This Was What You Wanted)* by Vertical Blanking, examining the media's role in shaping women's self images while using the punky, fast-paced, hysterical style familiar to viewers from countless performance art pieces. The self-interested myopia of these tapes really brought into question the validity of work whose greatest appeal was to its own makers and underscored the need for artists to look beyond their own circle of theoreticians and intellectuals for a viewing constituency.

If Freewaves truly meant to bring independent video to a broad spectrum of viewers, the programs submitted by community-based organizations on the whole better fulfilled that notion. Although issues of formalism and aesthetic were secondary to the concepts of audience and constituency, often making for less visually sophisticated work, these tapes spoke to a group of viewers besides the maker and his or her clique, unlike too many of the straightforward experimental pieces. One of the most interesting pieces was a tape selected by Los Angeles Educational Partnership (LEAP), *Huminatas*, a documentary on Richard Berry, the man who wrote the garage rock classic *Louie Louie*. This tape's appeal lay not in its style or format, but in the fact that it was produced in a video class by students of the Jefferson High School, where Berry attended in the late 1950s. It was a case of a particular subject having great relevance and meaning to its particular constituency. When shown out of this context the tape would probably possess less significance, but context and constituency added an extra element that made the piece memorable. In the same way, pieces submitted by LEAP, made by students from Chatsworth High School concerning animal rights also take on added implications when viewed in the context of its core audience.

Most successfully combining artistic expertise and concern for audience were two tapes selected by the Gay and Lesbian Media Coalition. Not surprisingly, these two pieces were among the most memorable of the extensive Road Show program, combining technical chops, art smarts, and theory with a distinct point of view. *Out Takes* by John Goss utilized manipulated clips of *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, a Rex Reed television review of a Pee Wee Herman film, and a Japanese teen sitcom to illustrate the different ways in which sexuality appears or, in Reed's case, is repressed in mainstream media. Jane Cottis' *This Is Not A Very Blank Tape Dear* skilfully combined a multitude of layers to humorously examine a mother/daughter relationship and its impact on lesbian identity. Both pieces, while at home in the gallery or the screening room, originate from a particular perspective and so avoid the stultifyingly generic feel of some of the other tapes presented by Freewaves. By creatively investigating the concerns of their core audience, these tapes bridge the gap between narrow casting to a distinct constituency and speaking more broadly to a general audience. They represent Freewaves at its most successful, effectively presenting a specific message to a large and diverse audience. 



From the video "Out Takes" by John C. Goss

III MUESTRA DE VIDEO IN GETXO VISCAYA, SPAIN

Photos courtesy of Karen Henry

By Karen Henry



It is Sante Semana (Holy Week) in the Basque country of Spain and everyone is on holiday. The children play with hula hoops and soccer balls in the well-ordered city parks and shout their enthusiasm at being out of school. Young mothers push their babies along the promenade in perambulators, and well-dressed matrons and their husbands stroll the narrow streets along with the swifter moving younger set. Everyone stops occasionally in the little bars to sample "pinchos" — small sandwiches and hors d'oeuvres of sardines or calamares or peppers — and sip a couple of ounces of beer in a glass before they move on. Some bars are for men only, as well as the cooking clubs which have a reputation for fantastic local cuisine.

Sante Semana began with the "Procession de los burritos" where the pious walk with their faces covered by long ghoulis pointed hoods, sometimes barefoot and bearing laurel branches and dried palms, leading a statue of Jesus entering the city on a donkey. The museum in Bilbao has an exhibition of the torture instruments from the Spanish Inquisition. I passed what looked to be a bullet hole in a store window in San Sebastian, where two people were killed a few days earlier by a radical faction of the ETA (the Basque nationalist party). One other person was similarly killed earlier in the week. There have been several demonstrations — one against a proposed highway project and one against a garbage dump — both involved violence against the demonstrators by the Guardia Civil. Every issue seems potentially volatile in the crossfire of political interests. At the same time, the more conservative elected Basque representatives in the federal government of Spain are giving a vote of confidence to the current president who is, at least, perceived to be better than past and present alternatives.

At mid afternoon, all the shops close for several hours as everyone adjourns to their homes or a local restaurant for lunch. Wandering the quiet streets, the dense old stone walls seem to hide the secrets of Euskadi (the Basque country),

where the family unit remains strong, and many clandestine plans have historically and currently been nurtured. The Basque psyche is formed by the gusto and passion of the north sea coastal region and centuries of domination by invaders and the most recent repression of over 40 years under the Franco dictatorship. The roots of nationalist activity have of necessity remained hidden, and this historical tension still operates on current anxieties. It would take a long time to understand the complexities of the Basque Country. The last ten years have been dubbed the period of "post-disenchantment," but caution and intrigue still pervade the politics.

This is the context for the III International Conference on Video in Getxo organized by the Taller de Imagen and inspired by the ideas of Juan Uriagereka and Antoni Muntadas. The concept was "Vision/Tele/Vision: A Decade of (Mis)Information." The idea refers to the overriding hegemony of commercial television as a universal style of visual and verbal information and the meta-economic interests which this network represents, and, alternatively, the diverse activities of local, independent video and television. The conference worked from a critique of the tendency of media to present a seamless and multinational reality into a few examples where independent work achieved broad exposure through community channels. This discussion is particularly relevant in the Basque country with its historical fight for self-representation, and the relatively new, post-Franco control of their own radio and television broadcasts which are only on the verge of becoming subject to commercial interests and the resulting effects on programming. The conference organizers wanted to present a creative alternative in television broadcasting, one which might be conceptualized to include difference and begin to represent the multiplicity of factions and local cultures in the Basque.

The original idea was to televise the entire conference to encourage broad public discussion of the analysis of

television and how it does or does not represent local interests. In actuality, however, the conference got an hour every evening in which the competent young TV crew edited interviews and tapes into what the international TV audience expects — a seamless, authoritarian presentation by experts on the issues. This was in high relief to what was actually often rambling, sometimes chaotic, hours of presentation and interaction. The audience, except for a few producers, seemed new to the idea of independent production and to considering the issues involved with television, which they had come to associate with broad scale entertainment rather than representative activity. The years of pirate radio broadcasts to the people during the Franco regime seem far away in this era of relative political freedom. Or perhaps, the confusion of sometimes dangerous factions within the Basque Nationalist Party have made the seductions of media and the illusion of solidarity preferable.

My view is that of an outsider, a tourist with very little of the language. I was invited to the conference as an observer. It was planned that the sessions would be translated into English, but in the final hour it was decided that it would be more politically correct to translate the presentations into Castilian and Euskadi, the Basque language; even though only a small percentage of the working population, raised under the dictates of Franco who outlawed the language, actually speak it. In fact, I was told, Euskadi as it is spoken today is a composite of numerous local dialects, and encouraged to create political unity. The decision to translate only into Castilian and Euskadi was understandable once I realized how very local the "international" conference actually was. It did, however, disregard communication problems among the invited guests — Jean-Paul Trefois, a French speaking Belgian, Dee Dee Halleck, who speaks English and Spanish with an American accent, and Arlindo Machado, a Portuguese speaking Brazilian, as well as a local collective of artists and organizers, the Bosgarren Kolektiboa, and myself, a woefully unilingual English Canadian.

Arlindo Machado is a professor of Photography, Cinema and Television at the University of Sao Paulo. The first day was dedicated to his analysis of Brazilian TV and examples of independent production. In Brazil, a number of independent collectives produce programs which sometimes find their way onto commercial television due to the highly competitive number of stations looking for programming. For the most part, these videos maintained an independent, open style while really engaging with the Brazilian community and experience. These were some of the best community videos I've seen in years, dealing with orphans and street people, gold miners, and relentless daily routines. The most inspiring phenomenon were tapes from the indigenous Aldeas tribes, who have no written language, but have adopted video as their means of intertribal communication, taping their rituals and political causes for broadcast to their own communities. The richness of the Brazilian material made me realize how far Canadian video has come from its interactive roots into a more formal arts based structure.

Jean-Paul Trefois is the director of one of the original and certainly the longest lasting program of video art on television, which is broadcast regularly on the French channel in Belgium. The tapes represented the audio and visual artistry of the medium in contrast to the standard television rhythms and concerns. Trefois has worked long and hard to maintain a space for art in commercial television and the issues for him were becoming tiresome. The Spanish public was noticeably sympathetic to this aesthetic presentation and to the romance of "art." The point of this presentation was that visual culture can also be radical.

In comparison, most of the audience was sceptical of Dee Dee Halleck's American cable program, "Paper Tiger" and the "Deep Dish" satellite community TV technique, asking "Where is the art?" Paper Tiger's mandate is the deconstruction of television news and entertainment programming — intellectual, sometimes witty, information presented in a Sesame Street style hand-drawn set. Their low budget antics are refreshingly raw in the context of smooth costly mainstream media. Both are successful interventions into the dominant industry. The preference for the abstraction of aesthetics was one of the paradoxes of this highly political environment. For most of the audience "the people's TV" was a new idea — that they could actually effect and be involved in what was presented to them through the abstraction of television.

This situation was put into perspective by the Bosgarren Kolectiboa, a group of people who do media presentations and festivals. They published an essay which amounted to a manifesto of the people, caught within a confusing and highly charged political climate in which they feel ultimately powerless to respond spontaneously and must always be vigilant of themselves in relation to a number of opposing powers. Despite the political rhetoric, the work which they chose to exhibit was highly aestheticized. A catalogue from their 1989 exhibition states, "...the Basque 'problem' or 'problems' often become the air which he or she breathes, but which he or she cannot see, or does not care to see. Present-day Basque art steers clear of militant commitment, and is weary of outdated pamphlets, preferring rather to concentrate on personal matters. Some time will have to elapse before matters concerning Basque social affairs can be tackled from an artistic point of view. Right now it is time for writing a story appropriate to video art.....it won't be video that saves TV, because video is Narcissus; it is only a mirror that speaks of itself, reflecting but a portion of the place where it is hanging. — Josu Rekalde." The phenomenon of independent video as a political, documentary tool has not been explored in the Basque, but by the end of the conference, an animated discussion seemed to inspire possibilities.

One of the major paradoxes of video is its ongoing critique of television while remaining outside, supported primarily by a fine arts audience. The intent of "Vision/Tele/Vision" was the analysis of media and the presentation of alternatives. It was directed at the Basque people in order to consider their own newly developing television programming. Unfortunately, plans to broadcast the discussions were foiled. Consequently, the broader media audience did not hear the pertinent exchange between audience and presenters. The conference suffered the same narcissistic fate of being limited to the reflection of its own community. The involvement of organized media was peripheral when it should have been integral, not just in recording the proceedings, but in presenting concerns and problems of the existing system in relation to the ideals of a freely representative structure. Only then could the conference have had some effect on the real situation in the Basque TV today — a young developing network concerned about representation and faced with the pressure to produce conventional and profitable programs. A policy which supports independent production and does not serve commercial interests has to come from within the television system.

The Basque, situated as it is within the political and aesthetic forces of Europe, aspires to a continuing cultural identity of its own. As in Quebec, the language has become a symbol of the culture. Great care is taken to ensure that the radio and television stations are in Euskadi — the result is that "Cheers" is dubbed into the local language. The international media environment of entertainment and corporate interests is still the message. The Basque TV just signed its first advertising contract. I just received a letter from a young producer who wants to set up a local TV station in Getxo. Viva arte. Viva la alternativa.



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SONGOLOLO: VOICES OF CHANGE

SONGOLOLO is a just completed documentary film that celebrates black resistance culture in a changing South Africa. Mzwakhe Mbuli and Gcina Mhlophe are cultural activists and popular performers. In their own words - through their poetry, music and dynamic live performances, they show us the powerful role popular culture plays in survival and the drama of South Africa in transition.

Songololo was shot on location in Johannesburg, Soweto and Natal in late 1989, an exciting and turbulent time in South African history.

Produced and directed by Video In member, South African-born filmmaker Marianne Kaplan, and co-produced by Cari Green, Songololo had its world premiere at the Weekly Mail Film Festival in South Africa, followed by its Canadian premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival.

Benefit screenings took place in Canada in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal. Gcina Mhlophe, one of the key artists featured in the film, travelled from South Africa especially to perform her praise poetry live at the screenings. Director Marianne Kaplan was also present. All proceeds from these events went to aid the victims of current violence in South Africa and to continuing anti-apartheid work in Canada.

Thanks to **VIDEO IN** for the use of their editing facilities during the production of our promotional video.

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