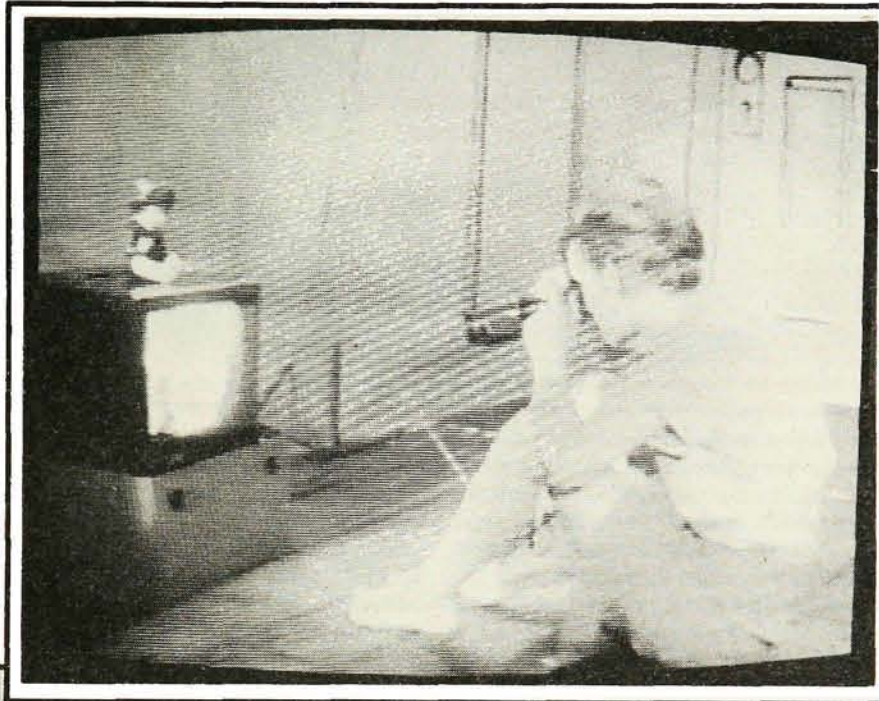


The 1986 New Work Show



Curiosity by Yvonne Dignard

A showcase of recent Toronto-based video art and independent production

by Geoffrey Shea

I don't know if Toronto's independent video producers should ever be called a 'scene,' but whatever it is, it was out in full force for the 1986 New Works Show, Sept. 22 to 25. This mini-festival of 45 tapes by 55 local producers demonstrated the wide range of conceptual and aesthetic approaches to video production that co-exist in Toronto; it demonstrated a continuity of concerns which were evident in the first New Work Show two years ago; and more than anything, it demonstrated a sense of community which transcended ideological differences – for this 20-hour extravaganza was initiated and organized by the artists and producers who all felt the need for an opportunity to present their work in public. With the assistance of the local production co-op, Trinity Square Video, and V/Tape, the distribution centre, the artists themselves programmed, publicized, posterred, administered and staffed the event.

The prospect of public video screening in Toronto is never an easy one. There exists no venue dedicated to regularly programming artists' tapes; the Censor Board skulks around the few well-publicized events which do get organized; and no one has yet figured out how to show that little 25" picture comfortably to more than a handful of people. But this New Work Show came as close as possible to creating an infor-

mal environment in Theatre Passe Muraille's main space. The balcony bar was kept open during the program, several monitors were available for the small-screen aficionados, and a large, if somewhat temperamental, projection screen was the centre-stage attraction. Since each evening's program ran for over four hours, viewers were encouraged to change vantage points to suit their particular viewing tastes and stamina, and there was always a lively critical debate going on around that balcony bar.

Anyone who did muster the stamina to sit through the four evenings and the one afternoon program was sure to find something that suited their fancy, whether it was in documentary, art, performance, or social analysis. And you didn't have to be conversant in some special language designed to be understood only by other video producers. Many of these tapes indicated that producers are very concerned with making their message clear and accessible, even if that message itself is subtle or abstract. After all, communication is the name of the game. Some went so far as to adopt standard television formats – for example Tony Chan's **Chinese Cafes** looked every bit like a special feature on CBC's **The Journal**.

A growing sophistication was also manifest in the high technical quality producers are achieving. Most of these tapes looked and sounded better than most of what one can see on television. The camera work, lighting and audio were innovative and effective; high-tech special effects are used – but sparingly; and best of all, crisp clear images

were presented in a straightforward and meaningful way.

Almost all of the artists who participated in the 1984 New Work Show were back again this year, but there was at least one area of activity which was more apparent in this Show than in the last one; that is, the social commentaries or documentaries. Their subjects ranged from South Africa to Ontario's Censor Board to my own tape about Truth and the U.S.S.R. Methods of address ranged from music video to a four-hour compilation of short statements by 102 women artists (**I Am an Artist, My Name Is...** by Elizabeth Mackenzie and Judith Schwarz).

No Small Change, by the collective – EMMA Productions, is one of the best examples of the social-issue tapes. The particular issue is the Eaton's strike and boycott, a traumatic and eye-opening experience for a group of otherwise dedicated employees of that giant retail institution. The strikers, mostly women, are presented as intelligent and articulate, a far cry from the militant rabble-rousers who comprise the usual media representation of union activists. Instead, the issue is presented in the context of the strikers' personal lives. They describe the strains and hardships at home, the disillusionment about having to face their own social history, consisting sometimes of 15 or 20 years of underprivileged labour, and the greater disillusionment of feeling alienated from their own union and having to finally accept a lousy first contract.

But at the same time the tape re-strengthens for us the importance of their struggle. It is uplifting with its

scenes of solidarity and picket-line celebrations and we are heartened by the optimism and dedication we witness in those women.

Another very positive, socially-oriented tape is Clive Robertson and Craig Condy's music video, **Up To Scratch**. Robertson is the low-key, issue-oriented type of singer-songwriter who popularizes attention to social injustice and whose own popularity depends as much on his message as his music. The tape does not actually address specific issues – it really just mentions them. Images of unions, nationalism, natives, minorities, women, artists and the unemployed combine to create the impression that something is essentially wrong on the socio-political front. As consciousness expands, the scale of injustice becomes more evident. Robertson/Condy seem to be insisting that action on any front must be informed by the over-all perspective and the context of that action. They are also suggesting that such action need not be joyless. By adopting the format of music video, they may also be allowing for the possibility of television distribution, for in music video the criteria for programming seems to depend much more on form and image than content. Since the tape looks and sounds great they might just slip this in.

Michael Connolly and Malcolm Harris have presented the issue of South African apartheid as pressing and relevant to Canadians. In **South Africa is Not Far Away** interviews with black Canadians protesting apartheid on the occasion of Bishop Tutu's recent Toronto visit reveal a strong local sense of sol-

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identity with South African blacks. This honest, frank display of concern brings forth little new information or predictions about the situation there, but it does warm the spirit of already concerned viewers and should kindle a reaction in those who have managed to not yet join the growing support movement in Canada. White practitioners of political rhetoric could disseminate the messages in tapes like this; preferring instead to rationalize a too-little-too-late approach to social conscience, they may be forced to act by the sizeable community movement fostered by rallies, events, publications and videotapes like this one.

Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak's *See Evil* is a valuable document, depicting firsthand testimonials about unfair applications of existing censorship legislation in Ontario. However, although it is informed by a presumably well conceived theoretical analysis, it chooses to formulate the censorship/pornography debate as simply an exploitation of judicial and police authority. The strongest arguments in divisive social issues such as censorship, abortion, free trade, etc., are those which recognize and understand the opposition and yet remain convinced of their own position. *See Evil* sometimes reads like a commercial for the anti-censorship lobby, and employs some of the tactics of rhetorical argument that one expects from self-serving lobbies like the Ontario doctors during their strike or the so-called Canadian Coalition for Civil Liberties (an association of pro-corporate interests). These tactics include the authoritative statement: "Remember, state censorship is **always** a political act," and denigrating the personalities of the opposition - eg. the cops are made out to be thick-headed, insensitive power-mongers. Unfortunately there is little visible analysis of the general political structure which allows these things to happen, there are no revelations of specific abuses of political power or conscious attempts at repression, and no acknowledgment of the legitimate social concerns which originally motivated and now maintain anti-pornography campaigns.

As a documentary of a different sort, Rodney Werden presented *Money Talks, Bullshit Walks*, a point-blank stare at several prostitutes he invited back to his studio to discuss the aspects of their trade. We presume these discussions are part of a hooker/client relationship which Werden has initiated - he is buying an hour of their time and then requesting that they chat while he takes their (video) picture. This is inferred from their offers to perform - some of the women offer to undress and a young male prostitute engages in an auto-sexual display. Werden's unusual request sometimes has the effect of relieving and relaxing his subjects and results in frank discussions. We should not be surprised though that there is little actually exchanged in these discussions. Werden seems to want to know the physical details of their activities while they would rather stick to generalities. He refers to pimps; they refer to boyfriends. He only comes out from behind the camera once, to point out something on a map behind the woman and even then he uses a pointer so as not to have to enter all the way into the picture. In the end we feel we



• *School of Thought* by Christian Morrisson

have been indiscreet, staring at these people from a safe distance, revealing nothing of ourselves, and learning little more about an alien way of life than we already know from existing film and television representations.

1/4 Moon by David Askevold is considered by most who see it to be a 'moody' piece. Whether a condemnation or a praise, that mood is invoked by Askevold's surety and finesse in selecting subjects, shots and styles and the way he pulls material together in an impressionistic study which actually does leave an impression on the viewer. In the first of the two parts a Maritime musician serenades his barnyard, first with an accordion, then with a melancholy violin. The camera focuses on the violin itself as the source of the music, an instrument easily identified with Nova Scotia. The music becomes of **this place**, a timeless, faceless tradition. And as the camera drifts to the animals, half-lulled by the music just as we are, we can imagine it carrying the history of the area, from the hammer hanging on a rail by the musician's elbow, past the white mare in the paddock, to the woods, to the shore and eventually out to sea.



• *Lady Killer* by Elizabeth Schroder

Absence by Su Rynard and *Love Roller Coaster* by Chris Martin are certainly among the most visually arresting of the tapes in the Show. The use of colours, the movement, the framing, the special effects all demonstrate a concentrated and effective understanding of the video medium. The images themselves are actually more engaging than the best rock videos or beer commercials - and thankfully have enough thought and personal concern behind them to keep them well free of the vapidity which usually accompanies such attention to technique. In *Absence* Rynard conjures up a momentary sensation; in the stillness after the party time seems to slow down and a crystal clarity descends over the scene. In the moment of disorientation you can't be sure if you feel a loss or a gain. *Absence* takes on a presence of its own.

Martin's tape *Love Roller Coaster* is answering the question it sets for itself at the start: What is the Promise of Leisure? The character, looking like an atypically well-adjusted sitcom personality is falling in and out of love and living her life in the bastions of leisure: Niagara Falls, a bowling alley, an amusement park, etc. These pay-as-you-play

answers to how to fill your leisure time seem to indicate a need for subversion of the traditional economic conscripts of work and leisure. However, Martin's tape seems more celebratory than subversive.

Both of these finely crafted works end much sooner than one might like. When the theme is absence, one could hypothesize that this just provides another level of intent; when it is leisure and love, one wishes it could go on forever.

Andrew Paterson and Jorge Lozano's *Hygiene* was one of the most enjoyable tapes of the series. It was also one of the longest at 42 minutes and it played last on an already long evening. But hardly a soul stirred as this melodramatic tale about life, love and loss unfolded. Shot in a very convincing film noir style (who said you couldn't light video like that?) and making no bones about its references to Sirk and Fassbinder, it traces one woman's unavoidable departure from her straight relationship and her cheating boyfriend, through feminism and the dreaded lesbianism, back to the idyllic relationship and finally to a sense of self and unselfish love. Ronald Jones' enactment of this character ranges from good to great and Johanna Householder portrays 'the other woman' with all the venomous intent that the genre demands - except with more substance. Paterson's musical score and his brief appearance as a drunk spewing out fire and brimstone double entendres make good use of the skills he has acquired over the years as a performance artist, actor, writer and musician. He and Lozano have infused the tape with a stylized realism that is only self-conscious where and when they want it to be.

Rhonda Abrams' *Myth of the Fishes* is a very smart tape, designed to address the viewer on several planes. It is an opera employing the full theatrical scale of the operatic voice, except it is precariously set on a tiny rowboat in the middle of a lake. The female protagonist is badgered by her two companions to gut a fish which they have caught, even though she is convinced that it is still alive. The musical treatment of this mundane interchange elevates it to the level of a universal situational archetype, encompassing many of the issues of life: democratic tyranny, social contract, ethical compromise, control of one's labour and the means of production, beauty and art. It is well shot, well performed and well written - everything an art videotape should be.

b.h. Yael's (Barbour) *Jain Walks The Line* is about creating a workaday code of ethics. In one single five-minute-long delivery Jain reenacts an experience from childhood, seeing just how far she could push her father to do something. Would he run down the driveway stark naked, check the neighbour's mailbox, spin around and run back for \$300? for \$500? Jain also portrays her father's reactions, neck bulging, brow sweating, increasingly irritated at having to make up his mind about just how far he is willing to let himself be bought. But the tension of this situation is extended into everyone's lives - would you work for a large firm? for a multinational? The simplicity of the presentation and the universal relevance of temptation and compromise make this tape entirely successful. One would just like to see

photos: VTAPE

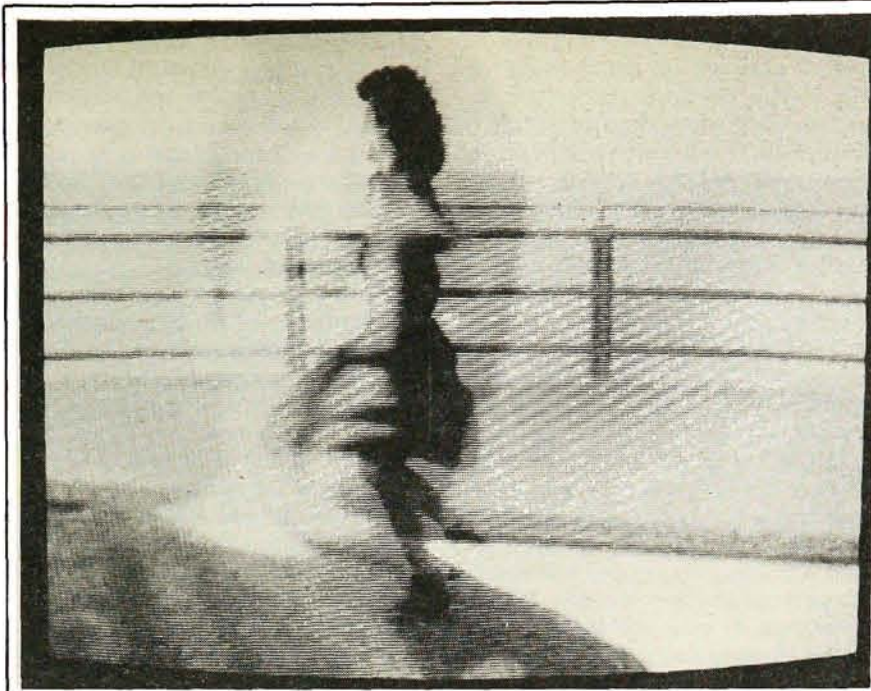
more and hopes that all Yael's tapes are as effective.

Amanda Hale and Donna Golan, Vera Frankel, and Michael Balsler each deal with myth and constructed fiction, rejecting the pretense of suspended disbelief, and then creating stories as allegories of human existence. Both Balsler and Hale/Golan are specifically concerned with sexual initiation and taboos as observed in other cultures. Balsler's *Jerungdu* refers to the belief by a South American tribe that there is a finite amount of male sperm in the world and homosexual practice maintains it while sexual contact with women depletes it. If a supply is exhausted the man will die. This belief naturally taints male/female relations, to the point where men will only interact with women who are wrapped in bark. Balsler then brings this confusion about sexual identity closer to home with excerpts from *Leave It To Beaver*, and with a narration from *Mildred Pearce* about career opportunities which switches from the first person female to the first person male.

In *That Other Animal*, Hale and Golan construct a character who is an expert on the sexual and social position of Middle Eastern women. She is also combatting an inclination towards madness, manifested as talking to herself about wartime memories, fears about being buried alive and issues of sex and socialization: "Don't talk to strange men," "All men are strange." Moving back and forth between her university lectures and her personal paranoid obsessions creates two extremely remote views of the woman and alleviates the need for well-rounded or naturalistic character development. The result is that she is completely believable, but not overbearing. Instead she allows your attention to fix on the comparison of social cultures.

Several tapes were presented as interpretations of previously live performances. Paulette Phillips and the team of Randy and Berenicci relied on footage recorded during actual performances, while Tanya Mars, John Greyson and Christian Morrison restaged and revamped their performances specifically for video.

Paulette Phillips' *Cadence of Insanity (Part II) A Reaction* featured a single character (Caroline Azar) who was a kind of shifting personification of the sad, strict social parameters which govern the role of the woman today. Phillips' writing and Azar's performance combine as a calm, grim determination, an almost mute struggle for a self-determined identity. The film image of Sengali transfixing and dominating his female victim is used and repeated in the figure of a patronizing doctor who tells tales of prostitution and violence, and again in the thug Billy who "gave me all those drugs because you and your friends just wanted to fuck a dead corpse, didn't ya?" Likewise the oppression of architecture is revealed when she takes up a vigil outside of the building where she worked for 25 years, before the "boss big-shots" laid her off; and when she takes on the role of the distressed suburban housewife being tormented by her teenage son. When, in an act of desperation she wills herself to become pregnant she finds she has just become another spectacle, once again



• One Man's Illusion is Another Man's Truth by Christa Schadt

merely "a bearer of meaning."

Randy and Berenicci's performance was a clever description of the process of Making History. The videotape, *History*, was a 10-minute documentation of the Historic Event, complete with Mission Control-style radio communications, protective body suits, a four-wheel, all-terrain vehicle and telephoto video views for the audience who were relaxing in a downtown Vancouver penthouse as the duo set off across Vancouver Harbour to execute the Event. Everyone knew it would be bigger and more meaningful than they could have ever imagined.

Christian Morrison's *School of Thought* was just what the name implies, a philosophical pursuit of identity and meaning. A male character attempts to define himself, first by speaking through another, female character's voice. Whether "I Am a Man," "I Am a Woman," or "I Am a Frog," waiting for a princess to release me from my enchanted state, seems impossible to determine. Trying to find identity through the lack of identity in death also proves to be futile. As the character becomes attracted to a film projection of a body-builder's torso, it becomes apparent

that identity can only be discovered in relation to the unattainable, in this case the mediated ideal.

In Tanya Mars' *Pure Virtue* Queen Elizabeth I gives the modern audience advice on such important subjects as how to seem a virgin when you're not one (leeches on the labia is one effective, although delicate method), how to feed your lord, your love, your saviour, your leige, and your man when they all show up for lunch, and basically how to consolidate and exploit what little power is available to women. At the same time she carries on a matronly affair with a young stud, whom she quickly wraps around her finger (until he strays and requires having his head removed). Her approach to power may seem irrelevant to a society where such discussions remain theoretical too long, but Mars is aware of that contradiction - as one of her intertitles states: "I see all and much is missing."

Later, *Marie Antoinette*, as played by Sky Gilbert, also describes her relation to power, politics and her gritty little peasants. Gilbert is great as he blows kisses to the starving masses and bites the head off Nancy Reagan (she is merely bad, while Marie Antoinette is

The Worst!). Byron Ayanoglu's writing is rambling and topical but it is really Gilbert's outrageously queenly performance that makes this tape delightfully funny.

There were a group of tapes within this Show which were particularly ill-served by the setting and the ambiance. They were those which attempted a kind of poetic symbolism. Interpreting intuitive meaning usually requires calm concentration, and after hours of viewing analysing and deciphering, these often short, visual tapes are treated by the audience as an opportunity to relax their concentration, let their minds wander and create a kind of private intermission. It is possible that such a reception may have been ideal for Steev Morgan (*A Bird Flew in My Window, I Had to Do Something*) and Robin Len (*2 Speak*), who seem to be content creating visual and aural textures, but it probably lessened the appreciation of Christa Schadt's *One Man's Illusion is Another Man's Truth*. Lana Danielson and Nancy Reid's *Conundrum*, and Ric Amis' *Encounter - Through Glass*. Although the latter two were visually ambiguous, they were conceptually quite literal. In *Conundrum* an artist experiences a creative block which she resolves by taking a bath. In *Encounter - Through Glass* people are watching gorillas in a zoo. Period.

The symbolism in Schadt's tape, *One Man's Illusion is Another Man's Truth*, fortunately transcends that found in symbolist films like those of Bruce Elder. She partially manages to integrate the meaning of the images with the sense of the images. A montage of Beethoven, a globe, lightning and a cross seems to make sense, but we still have difficulty recognizing a link between a TV image of classical dance and an ethnic ceremonial rite. Upward motion, downward motion, time, violence, televisions, water, a turtle, a fairground, wheels, flying and a mathematics professor combine together somewhere between montage and barrage and leave a feeling of wanting to see the tape again...a little later.

The three artists known as General Idea on the other hand, who are acknowledged masters of double entendre and facetious poodle art, have selected one of their favorite targets, the propensity of media to turn everything and everyone into news or entertainment. Using a handful of witty examples and some very acrid commentary they completely expose and disarm their victim. General Idea's advice to the media - What do you do when you have nothing left to say? Concisely stated: *Shut The Fuck Up!*

Geoffrey Shea •



• Chinese Characters by Richard Fung

NOTES

1. The catalogue for this event was published in the October issue of *Cinema Canada* No. 154.
2. Reviews of *Henry Kissinger Won The Nobel Peace Prize* - Gary Kibbins; *No Voice Over* - Colin Campbell; and *Chinese Characters* - Richard Fung were reviewed in the July/August issue of *Cinema Canada* No. 132.
3. Further information about any of the videotapes or artists can be obtained through V/Tape, 489 College Street, 5th floor, Toronto, ON. M6G 1A5 (416) 925-1961.