

As an artist writing about video, I can only continue to ask: whither goes Video Art? And, as usual, there are two sides to the question. Both are implicitly raised by the latest grass-roots, artists' endeavour in Toronto: the simultaneous premiere of videotapes by four local producers, at 698515 Inc.

The first aspect of the question concerns artistic motives. To what extent is human communication attempted or achieved? How relevant are the issues which are raised for the artist and subsequently, for the audience? (Art which is meant to 'instruct' puts this in the inverse order, asking questions and exploring issues for the audience's edification rather than the artist's, with the unfortunate result of propaganda or didacticism.) And, are these issues of the week, or issues of the century?

These four tapes raise this question (without necessarily answering it) by their mere juxtaposition. The tapes are, variously, of the head, heart, soul and senses. They indicate a range of ambitions aspired to by video artists.

Su Rynard's **Within Dialogue (Silence)** is a cool, thoughtful depiction of the weight of the world as it bears down on one individual. Absolutely *everything* in it is imbued with meaning. Gestures, words, environments, settings, occurrences, all create an impression of being fully connotative – without concretely identifying what it is that is being referred to. The pressure of the dense incomprehensibility seems to drive the female character to an act of desperation. This act has an equally screwy denotative/commutative relationship – by simply

taking off her shoes at the side of the road she evokes despair. The craftful handling of the images and sounds reinforces the sense of a skewered meaning-full (-less)ness and reassures us of the extreme intentionality of Rynard's work.

Rhonda Abram's **Lament of the Sugar Bushmen** is a soulful ballad about the demise of the sugar maple trees in Ontario. Although technically modest (there are a mere handful of camera angles in the 12-minute tape) it is completely engaging and creates a sense that the wanton destruction of trees, through sap-pumping and poison rain, is a metaphor for an ecocide of a much broader nature. Her significant choice of performers, a singer and a fiddler, remind us of the culture-cide perpetuated by mass (electronic) media, and the actual sorrow in the **Lament** reminds us of the emotion-cide inherent in *po-mo* art today. The broader relevancy of some of these themes is reflected in the funding credits – the Ministry of Natural Resources appearing where we would have expected to see the Canada Council.

Tess Payne's **Life on Our Planet** is an extended analogy between animals and human beings as they/we exist in domesticated and 'natural' conditions. While three women watch nature documentaries about farming and coercive feeding (He: "They're not force-fed"; She:

"What else is there for them to do but eat?") they consistently munch on potato chips and gorge themselves on breast-shaped desserts. In this tape milking machines are juxtaposed against Full Metal Brassieres; and a captured lion against a black male dancer. The self-inflicted, voluntary nature of this human condition is highlighted in a fitness class, as the vainglory girls grapple with their sense of the elusive 'image,' and more or less decide that "it must be like being discovered."

Dennis Day's well-titled **Oh Nothing** is a piece of eye-candy. And he obviously knows it. While his past work has always had a highly stylized, pleasing aesthetic, it has also had a refreshingly personal component. The fact that this piece is devoid of any of that (that which was ultimately most rewarding) leads us to believe that he is in some kind of artistic crisis. He may be becoming jaded about the efficacy of being personal in a product-oriented art world, or he has been reduced by the process to a state of having nothing to say. In the latter case, perhaps he *is* being true to his earlier principles of honesty and making the tape that one ought to make when one has nothing to say – after all it is better than borrowing someone else's thesis, or conjuring up old dilemmas and emotions (both common enough practices in an industry that

insists that one produce *regularly*). Let's hope that the distribution success that this tape is likely to achieve does not further convince Day of the pointlessness of sincerity in art. I hope he can disengage himself from the stifling effect of too much exposure to art rhetoric and I look forward with great expectation to his next projects.

Both Dennis Day and Su Rynard are part of the collective which is sponsoring this event, 698515 Inc. The second half of the question "Whither goes Video Art?" deals with venues, outlets and distribution. For years there has been a stilted feeling at most video screenings in galleries. Video is difficult to watch as part of a large group, as in theatres, and it is awkward to show in an ongoing manner, as in galleries. So 698515 Inc. have stated their own terms for showing these tapes – they will use the fourth floor of a warehouse, a late-evening showtime, a large-screen projector, "refreshments" and then let the event evolve into a party afterwards. A few critics may not be able to find the place and a few curators may have gone to bed, but what the hell, the artists and their community will have been able to celebrate the completion of these four new tapes.

Until a flexible, sensitive, video-dedicated context can be established, this sort of self-initiated screening is the best bet for artists and dedicated audiences.

Notes:

For more information contact: 698515 Inc.
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Toronto. M5V 2P4

VIDEO TALES

by Geoffrey Shea

LETTERS

The Word is

I am a screenwriter, working hard to learn my craft. The work is paramount, but the rewards I look forward to in the future are important. They are money, of course, and recognition.

Imagine, then, my disappointment when reading your 1986 Production Guide: Title/Production Company/Producer/Director – but no screenwriting credits. Can the industry really do without the writers? Would you even have a 1986 Production Guide without the writers?

Give us a break, fellas!

Moira Hoogeveen •
Screenwriter

Inaccuracies

I read the article by Louis Goyette "Jutra's English Films" in your June '87 issue.

I was amazed by the inaccuracies in the article on the subject of the film **By Design**, inaccuracies originating in Goyette's ignorance which, however,

should not have escaped the eyes of a sharp editor.

For your information I would like to set the record straight:

– The concept of **By Design** was developed by myself.

– I engaged Joe Wiesefeld to write the first two drafts of the screenplay.

– I contacted Claude Jutra to direct the film. He agreed, but asked for a rewrite with his participation. Joe Wiesefeld and Claude worked on the third draft to my satisfaction.

This took place prior to Jutra's involvement in **Surfacing**. Shortly thereafter, Claude was engaged to direct **Surfacing** and because of the two-picture deal with Beryl Fox, she then joined with me to produce **By Design**.

Beryl Fox brought David Eames in to prepare the final rewrite.

– I disagree with the writer of the article that the film was about lesbianism. The theme of **By Design** was about motherhood: the biological urge of childless women in their late thirties to have a child, regardless of the risks.

– The other aspect of the film was that, certainly at that time, single women finding themselves in such a situation, did not necessarily want to live with the father of the desired child.

– These two significant points were clearly delineated in Wiesefeld's screenplays.

Much will be written about Claude

Jutra and I suggest that we owe him sound reporting, unflawed by inaccuracies.

Werner Aellen •

No Porn

I read with interest your coverage of industry response to the Federal government's proposed amendments to the Criminal Code regarding pornography (*Cinema Canada News Update* No. 5).

The Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society (OFAVAS) is rightly concerned about the proposed legislation, as certainly it will affect their members, indeed the entire production industry. But I respectfully suggest OFAVAS, and other opposed to the intended amendments, take another look at their positions.

Pornography, in any medium, is the antithesis of freedom. The distribution and ubiquitous acceptance of pornography continues to undermine efforts of women to become equal participants in their own destiny. Men, especially adolescent boys who are avid consumers of pornographic magazines, suffer the imposition of prescribed sexual behaviour, sometimes violent, always dominant, instead of discovering their own feelings of sexuality, and how to express them. Op-

position to legislation that endeavors to constrain the prevalence of pornography in our society on the grounds that it is a violation of freedom of speech is, I feel, shortsighted, and selfish.

These changes to the Criminal Code will affect the Canadian film, and to a lesser extent, the television production community, make no mistake about it. But when it comes down to a choice between a potential loss of our artistic freedom, and the inestimable loss of individual freedoms dictated by pornography, I am willing to support the amendments.

To those who cry "censorship", I am with you. The law is a blunt instrument at the best of times, and when it attempts to define how we as citizens in a free democracy can and cannot express ourselves, we all must remain vigilant.

Obviously this proposed law has its shortcomings. It also has provisions for artistic expression. Ultimately we, the artistic community, and not the government, will define what is erotica and what is pornography. And hopefully, that definition will be based on compassion for all people, and their very personal feelings about sexual intimacy. Until then, I see this proposed legislation as a small, first step in laying the groundwork for positive social change.

Doug Ekeland •

Producer, Sanwest Communications