

## How we sit and just watch it all

In an article entitled "Art Isn't Easy", in *Art & Text* #17, 1985, RoseLee Goldberg discusses what might appear to be the movement of performance art into the realm of popular culture in view of the successes of Laurie Anderson and the presentation of performance works such as Glass and Wilson, *Einstein On The Beach* in commercial venues. She concluded, however, that Broadway is not being taken by storm, and that "... art isn't easy. Nor for that matter is commerce. What is decidedly easier is the possibility for art to take on commercial proportions. It is now an acceptable virtue to be able to transcend the underground of the artworld, to mix 'art and life' (which in the American context means melding media and pop references of all sorts) so that in the end, it is an art in itself to create the sublime mixture of cerebral and popular."

Reading this reminded me of conversations about a year and a half ago with Richard Kerr about the possibilities for experimental films to "reach a broader audience" (his film *On Land Over Water: 6 Stories* was an hour long, had crisp, clean, steady images, had narrative references - even had Hemingway!). We wondered what the chances were for TV broadcast of experimental films. Now Richard has a new film: *The Last Days Of Contrition* (16mm bl. & w. 35min.) and I wondered whether he had set out with this film to land that big audience?

It doesn't seem that this concern was foremost in his mind. The imagery in *The Last Days Of Contrition* is more "public" and the motivation more political as compared to the more "personal and very dark, suicidal" imagery of *6 Stories*. *Contrition* uses American pop imagery or images that stock the public culture image bank such as missiles, billboards, baseball stadium and the American flag. Although Richard is Canadian, these images were very much part of his childhood - "the way we were brought up to look at the States: a place of wonder (Disneyland vacations) and then as our own and their history changed, a place of terror as well (missiles, Vietnam, Watergate, Nicaragua and the road movie mentality of just moving on through it)." Although it has been criticized as such, Richard says that the film is not anti-American; it is anti-American/military/technology. It is a one-movement, one-feeling film: fear and "disappointment in my big brother that he resorted, in the end, to might".

The images filmed refer simultaneously to the past (broken-down buildings reminiscent of the Depression and Walker Evans photographs) and the future (jets, helicopters pass over unpeopled land). The apocalyptic landscape is penetrated only by a woman - "the last person on earth, makes sense it would be a woman who could carry on". She penetrates it, however, only from a protected position inside her vehicle - "in the 'moving fort' fearful of what is 'out there' (ref: Gail McGregor's *The Wacousta Syndrome: The Canadian Landscape*)". She is driving in circles, turning nowhere in the overexposed footage, not a part of the place superimposed behind/over her. Polaroids, which featured prominently in *On Land Over Water*, are used in this film. Richard refers to them as metaphors for "containment and a way of organizing the world - if I can get all this in the frame then I can make it all work". A surface of polaroid photographs (the flag, the atomic bomb, the slogan "Welcome to the Eternal") are peeled away in an unsuccessful attempt to clear the way. There is hope in the film as depicted in its construction: the repetitions and circularity speak of continuity and in the final sequence the forms close but not entirely - there is left just the slightest opening to the sky.

Richard says that he is optimistic about life and about filmmaking. A year and a half after our discussion about television and a broader public, Richard is enthusiastic about developing new audiences. He is taking great pleasure in showing his work to audiences not only in Toronto but in many smaller centres across Canada where discussion with informed, small audiences is exciting.

Annette Mangaard is an artist who works in film and who, in her association with the band *The Palace At 4 a. m.* and her screenings at cafe/bars such as The Rivoli on Toronto's Queen St. West, moves amidst the popular culture. She was also thought, at the time of her filming *Northbound Cairo*, to be making that Move to narrative film. The film has not "taken Broadway (or in this case Cineplex) by storm", nor does it seem that it was her test run for a career in feature filmmaking. She did feel that with *Northbound Cairo* she was trying to forge some bridges for audiences to enter into her work. She had screened previous short films and had "got too many questions; they (audience) would feel something but were not sure." Annette had also wanted to work more in this film with people - people as objects - and to use synchronous sound (previously she has employed only voice-over) - to use language between people as a way of communicating, to give dialogue a physical presence. The sync sound, however, was not used for its capacity to ground the film in real time/space, nor for easy audience identification with the characters. Quite the opposite, in fact. Annette speaks of *Northbound Cairo* as a parody of lifestyles in which she has constructed a series of layers or walls through which the audience sees the characters but is not able to relate to them. The background (travel footage of exotic places, not where the story tells us the characters are) is just that, a backdrop

with only a tenuous connection to the characters. This also mirrors the lack of connection we (urban, 20th century, Western, audience) have with the natural environment and how we sit and just watch it all pass by - we don't travel enough! This film, explains Annette, is meant to be like TV in its effect on the viewer; that is, it is difficult to become intimate with. As opposed to the effect of large-screen, darkened-theatre viewing where the filmmaker wants the audience to experience an emotion, with this film, one sits back and watches analytically. "We're analytical in our daily lives - emotional responses are not acceptable. We all know the psychology!" The bedroom scene of super-saturated colours and fantastic costuming is to speak of escapism, while the black and white footage encodes itself as reality. Only in these scenes did the filmmaker allow for intimacy - the characters speak of their desire for connection. The rest of the film, like the box of the TV screen, has talking but no communication. Annette concludes that she wouldn't make this film again. "It almost works too well. I wanted to alienate the audience... and it worked!"

Annette is now working on a more personal, human, warm film that will have elements of both drama and documentary, *Living In The Shadow Of Anna*. It is about creativity and the problems of creativity - art/life, creation/fertility; it is about her dissatisfaction with film - how much money you need to make film art.

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