

Culture for sale



V Recent Toronto Works

by Kass Banning

The news that Sony bid for the Dome Stadium's scoreboard was hardly surprising. Toronto – centre of the technological dynamo, 'deserves' the most recent digital delights, the latest top-of-the-line equipment. Likewise, it 'deserves' a fifth annual *Video Culture*. It is but a short reach from the Dome's excavation site to the self-styled hipdom of Queen St. This line is but one arm of the overarching grasp of the technological imperative – the new information order. Regardless of the stakes, whether the multinational backing of the Dome or the relative smallscale exhibition of recent video tapes at Queen St.'s Rivoli, the presence of the market economy is evident. From such heights, no market is glossed over, or to employ the word which pops up continuously in the *Video Culture* catalogue – every 'potential' should be realized.

No one is innocent in this game, all players are implicated: there is no centre and there are no margins – there is no outside. Neither the computer pyro-technician or the 'politically correct' video artist is exempt. In general, most producers have traded in their community guerrilla context, have taken up the technological imperative, and have opted for more outreach. All producers desire more exposure, be it festivals, art gallery retrospectives or archive acquisitions. All are aware that the corporate sponsors of the event – Sony or City TV's Much Music or the state-run TVOntario – offer future 'potential'. This apparent co-optation on the part of video artists is certainly unav-

oidable: exposure means more grants, which also increasing each tape's visual appeal – attempting to 'catch up' to broadcast quality.

Likewise, events such as *Video Culture* provide potential new markets for manufacturers. Such venues can showcase the inherent potential of video and thus convince the filmmaker that the new technologies are aesthetically and economically an essential and vital element of film production. This fact is demonstrated through 'found' illustration: showcasing through new software; book launching the letters of our patron saint of technology, McLuhan; bringing in panels of 'experts' who engage in hybrid practices and program films and videos that prove this new age has indeed begun.

From what is 'out-there', it is obvious from the past 10 years that both video and film have benefitted from a crossover of sorts. And thus, the event grew out of this commonplace – it provided its central goal, "we want to alert film-going audiences to the tremendous activity, growth and *potential* of the video medium" Read: 'come on down filmmakers and see what we've got.'

This year's exhibitions offered three categories of video production: **Recent Toronto Video**, **The Dance in Video**, and **New Dimensions in Motion Picture Media**. Additional "special presentations" included a presentation of how "video acts as a vehicle for transformation and perceptual modification", a Video Goes to the Movies panel and a book-launching of *The Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. That the spectre of Marshall McLuhan should hang over this event, and inform the back (unauthored) pages of the catalogue with

what now reads like nonsense further attests to the unthinking abandon with which this 'event' was obviously conceived. Consider, for example the claim: "TV and video talk to the body, while film and books talk to the mind and the emotions. While the spectator watches the movie, and the reader reads the book, it is the video of the television program which probes the viewer." (What, no more 'pleasure of the text'?) That is, the organizer's naive (bordering on mouthpiece), attitude towards technology approaches that of McLuhan's. The main hitch in McLuhan's utopian 'vision' was that it did not, could not, envision the complex overlap of technology and the corporate vortex.

I do not wish to engage in that sterile and outworn debate (a debate which is often fused with resentment for the Other's imagined esteem within the art world) propagated by film and video producers alike that each medium has its individual properties and should be considered with different criteria. Agreed. Nor do I wish to impose one medium's set of issues onto another, albeit, younger one. But certain constants apply to both and should remain immediate. That is, a select number of the 15 New Toronto tapes exhibit what Arthur Kroker has called the "ethics gap", the gap between ethics and technology.

In the '60s we developed a language to talk about ethics and film which now perhaps reads as an outdated liberal concern for the subject's authenticity. This concern has recently evolved into the challenge of coming up with formal strategies around how to represent 'marginals' without using the language of co-optation, without collapsing the representation of 'others' back into outworn and prescriptive positions that we have come to 'naturally' place them in. Unfortunately very few "Recent Toronto Videos" rose to this challenge. In particular, Rodney Werden's *Money Talks Bullshit Walks* and *Aboo*, suggest that this New Age digital technology has delegated such outworn issues to the same garbage heap as electronics.

Watching these two tapes back allowed their profound, unthinking bias to emerge. Werden gives himself away. *Money* reaches an unethical apotheosis in its treatment of its subject, the street prostitute. Hiding off-camera, Werden enjoins his subjects to undress: he asks questions about their johns and occasionally zooms into various 'erotic' body parts. During one 'interview' Wer-

den perks up once he learns that the subject's boyfriend/pimp is from Guyana and black. He becomes increasingly agitated, and even walks into the frame to point to where Guyana is on a map. Here Werden encourages the woman to utter commonplace suppositions about black male sexuality. This obsession with blackness carries over into his next tape, *Aboo*, where an African salesman makes rote entreaties to unsuspecting tourists to vacation in the original site of the Garden of Eden. The simplicity of its images matches its conception. This offensive tape gives evidence to the fact that the pluralism of the '70s encouraged an uncritical tolerance – it allowed a lot of crap to fall through the cracks.

The categories supplied by the exhibition organizers, narrative and non-narrative were not sufficient to measure the extent to which the video artist had utilized or handled the medium. Given the time-based nature of video, the element of d-u-r-a-t-i-o-n, it is essential to have mastered narrative – in other words, good writing is mandatory, even when critiquing the dominant ideology. When there is nothing special to look at, there had better be something else happening. On the other hand, many non-narrative tapes looked exquisite, were interesting formally, often seductively approaching the apocalyptically post-modern (broadcast quality), but were simply empty signifiers – no content. Often images are strung together so promiscuously that one sometimes suspects that the apparently banal is in fact banal.

In spite of these problems, many tapes utilized effective strategies for handling short narratives. Colin Campbell's *No Voice Over* adopts the oldest form of women's writing, the epistle (second only to the diary form) which elegantly cements the disparate voices of his subjects. With Vera Frankel's *Censored – The Business of Frightened Desires (or The Making of a Pornographer)* the artist and the engineer meet. Frankel's mastery of form and narrative technique propels her efforts into another category. Frankel understands irony. Avoiding the pitfalls of the often prolific, but less nuanced Toronto videomaker – evinced in the camp, the arch, and the proliferation of the one-trick-pony (a genre that was indeed present), Frankel walks around her subject a few times and lets the effect set in gradually.

Lisa Steele's and Kim Tomczak's *Private Eyes*, Tess Payne's *Life on Our Planet*, and Paulette Phillips and Geof-

frey Shea's **Work** all cleverly come up with ways to utilize the media to frame or structure their tapes. Direct address, through broadcast television, in **Private Eyes** and **Life**, and the modalities of voice are explored through radio in **Work**. In all cases these formal strategies do not simply structure, but

they are additionally integral to each tape's particular interpretation of the social.

Recent Toronto Video – where different conceptions of the social meet. Where media social work meets nihilism meets wank voyeurism meets self-expression. Video – where the en-

gineer and the artist should meet – but rarely do.

As a final note I must mention that I watched most of these tapes at three o'clock in the afternoon in the back room of a Queen Street eatery – alone. I ask: who is this for? Is this just bad marketing or just plain lack of interest?

they screened the relatively bright, crisp films immediately afterwards. Some local producers insisted on having their tapes shown on monitors, but as soon as no one was looking, the image always slipped back onto that large, dark, disappointing screen. And several tapes, like Bill Viola's **I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like** were quiet, meditative pieces, which demand a direct, personal kind of viewing situation – a situation which aesthetically defies the festival context and for which the intimacy of the video monitor is ideal.

However, I don't think these curatorial gaffs can explain the incredibly dismal turnout for most of the screenings. If the nature and size of the audience is the final measure of the effectiveness of the work and the validity of the context, then both video art and this festival are dead in the water. The most successful video events are those which appeal to a general audience as well as to the *cognoscenti*. This festival did neither. Bad advertising may have been part of the problem, but I imagine there exists a public perception of video art as exceedingly esoteric and practically arrogant – and this may have had more to do with the lack of general interest in this event (and, truth be known, in most Toronto video screening events). And what else but arrogance could explain the absence of practically the entire video-art-producing community from this opportunity to view a selection of international tapes?

The differences, similarities and hybridizing between film and video may continue to hold interest in festival trade forums, but it is a poor excuse for a principal festival theme. A comparison of video art to painting, or of film to literature, could prove more meaningful, even if it lacks the implicit gadget promotion which entices manufacturers to sponsor these events. But the next time Sony wants to pitch video by getting behind a festival, they should at least make sure that their products serve to complement the work being shown. That would save everyone the embarrassment of watching video get compared unfavourably and unfairly to film.

V Film / Video Interface

by Geoffrey Shea

Fisher-Price has hit the nail on the head this past fall. With their release (just in time for Christmas) of a real live video camera/recorder designed for yuppie kids and costing less than \$ 300 they may have just articulated the true nature of the medium and its relationship to equipment manufacturers. The fact is video means gadgets, gadgets mean toys, toys mean turnover, and turnover means profit.

Beta Hi-Fi, Super-Beta, Betacam, Betacam SP, U-matic SP, and Video-8 are only six new (more or less incompatible) formats introduced by one video manufacturer, Sony, in the last few years. Stereo, digital video and High-Definition TV almost guarantee that every household from Japan to Germany will have to invest in a new television set within the next few years. So it is with unwitting irony that Fisher-Price has in-

troduced its own new format and identified video as a plaything of the consumer class.

It is with that same sense of play, the same sense of having nothing better to do, that some video aficionados debate the differences and similarities between celluloid and the tube. As though film, video's older and more mature sibling, represents a role model to be embraced or rejected. As though there were no more pressing issues being explored in video art production. As though the development of some new set of gizmos will give video the moral, intellectual, emotional, or humane imperative which film has achieved in certain circumstances.

New Dimensions in Motion Picture Media, the film/video component of the Video Culture International Festival, read half like an aficionado's apology and half like a braggartly swagger. And one couldn't help but notice the reverence displayed towards film and film-

makers at the festival. The posters read: "Featuring: Peter Wollen, Peter Greenaway, Jean-Luc Godard, Atom Egoyan, Bill Viola and special guests." The special guests were: Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg (a last-minute cancellation), Kathy Huffman (curator), and Juan Downey (video/television producer).

Egoyan (and presumably Cronenberg) was invited to stimulate discussion about the possible contexts in which film and video can operate. But it was difficult for Egoyan and the audience to get beyond the success of **Family Viewing**, his recent film; and there was not much room for fruitful comparisons between his work and the rest of the festival program.

Tapes like Godard's **Soft and Hard** and Greenaway's **A TV Dante** were screened to demonstrate what accomplished filmmakers can do when they decide to dabble in video (well, television actually). Meanwhile, Jean Gagnon's **Puzzle** and Dara Birnbaum's **The Damnation of Faust: Charming Landscape** were included because they were good videotapes and had a little bit of film footage in them. Tapes like Gary Kibbon's **Canadian Diamonds** and the Yonemotos' **Kappa** were included in this film/video component for no apparent reason.

A desperate attempt to show films and tapes *on the same screen*, as though to prove that video has finally grown up, failed pathetically for technical and aesthetic reasons. The organizers seemed unable to face the fact that the projected video image was simply far too dark. This shortcoming was aggravated when

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V Dance on Tape

by Maggie Helwig

There is an inherent contradiction in the idea of a dance video. The language of dance is bodily, direct, immediate; the language of video is based on the mediation of the image. Even a good dance video, then, ultimately speaks in the language of video, and perhaps cannot have a lot to do with dance. It is like trying to speak Italian in German. The best you can manage is a translation, and it's just not the same.

The "Dance in Video" section of Videoculture International, therefore, was really a study of video techniques in which dance is, at most, the raw material. And it is material which presents special problems for a video artist – how can something so intensely physical, so much a matter of communication between the bodies of the dancer and the spectator, be captured in this almost 'dematerialized' medium?

The least effective approach is the attempt to evoke some sort of mood through blurry shots, dissolves, close-ups and intercutting, a sort of woozy impressionism that is, it seems, all too popular – Ko Nakajima's *Dolmen*, Jean-Louis Letaçon's *Waterproof*, and Mary Lucier's *In the Blink of an Eye...* were particularly excessive examples.

Those video artists who chose something much closer to 'straight' filming produced, in the end, more powerful results. All three Canadian videos shown fell into that category. I especially enjoyed Bernard Hébert's six-minute video of a duet by two members of La La La Human Steps though this has a lot to do with the excellence of the company – the video itself was nothing unusual. Yves 'Langlois' OMO succeeds where *Waterproof* failed in making an effective video of underwater choreography, a dance form that is viable *only* through video on film. I did not greatly like François Girard's *Montréal Danse* – again, though, this is a comment mainly on the company being filmed. Girard's rather stark production is, in fact, quite impressive.

The two 'fictional documentaries' by British director Charles Atlas, for all their innovations in storytelling strategy, also used relatively untouched dance footage; and I think that Atlas' decision to do this was right. Essentially, dance transfers to video best with the least interference.

And, having said that, I will immediately contradict myself. The best videos shown were unquestionably those by John Sanborn and Mary Perillo, a New York-based team who blast through their work deploying the full range of effects – computer animation, ultimate, image overlays, paintbox animation, slow-motion, digital editing. The difference is that Sanborn and Perillo use these techniques to emphasize the physical punch of the dance – they also favour harsh, swift, percussive scores, as opposed to the stringy synths most of the other directors chose. It is worth noting that Perillo began her career as a sports programmer.

This attention to the *body* of dance is most interestingly used in *Metabolism*. The score for this piece was created by David Van Tieghem on a Macintosh home computer, using the sounds of the dancers' breathing, footfalls, and collisions with each other.

Van Tieghem himself is the subject of two Sanborn/Perillo videos, *Ear-Responsibility* and *Galaxy*. These are not really dance videos at all, but they are perfectly delightful; especially *Galaxy*, which is what rock videos would be like if rock videos were brilliant (incidentally, do the visual echoes of *Stop Making Sense* owe anything to one Dot Demme, listed in the credits as "snow sweetener"?).

The Sanborn/Perillo collaborations with choreographer Charles Moulton – *Visual Shuffle* and *Fractured Variations* – have the same fine, mad intensity. In the hands of the right people, people with a strong enough intuition of what dance is all about, video can evoke very closely the medium that is most nearly its opposite; the impossible language barrier can almost be broken. ●

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– J. Scott, *The Globe and Mail*

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– *Playback*

"...DISARMING, MOVING AND FUNNY"

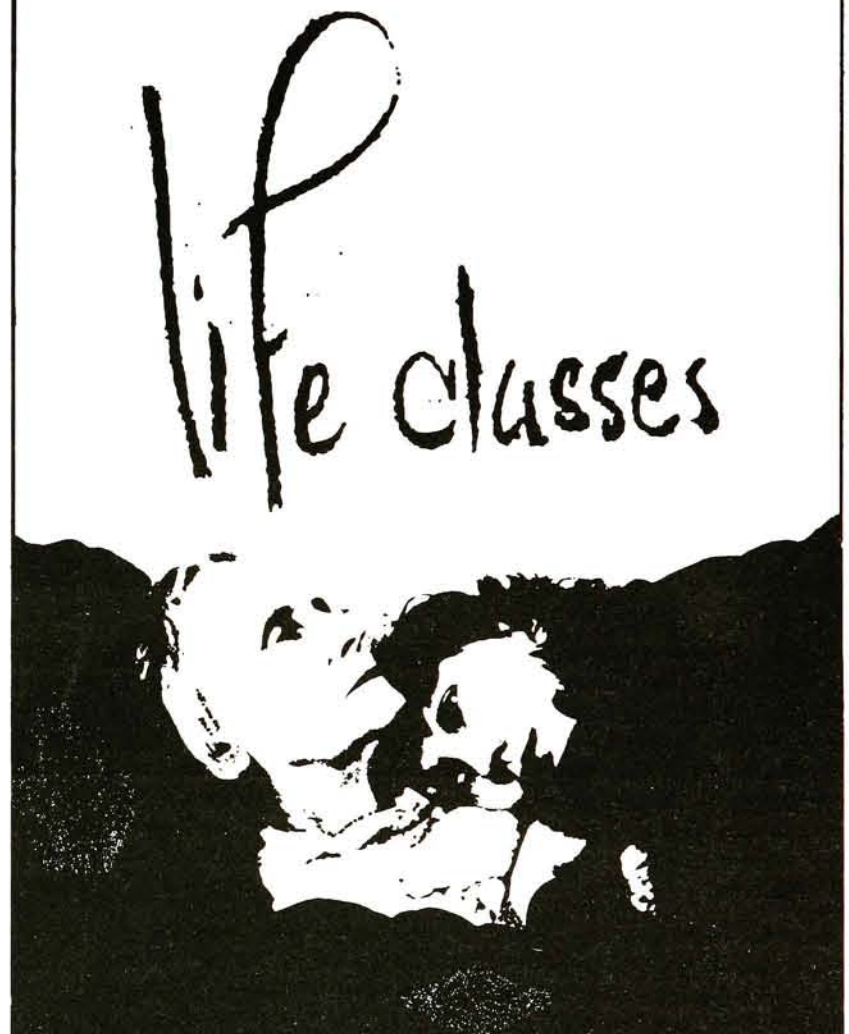
– *Variety*

"...STRANGE, HILARIOUS"

– D. Edelstein, *The Village Voice*

"...UNFORGETTABLE"

– G. Pevere, *The Toronto Star*



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