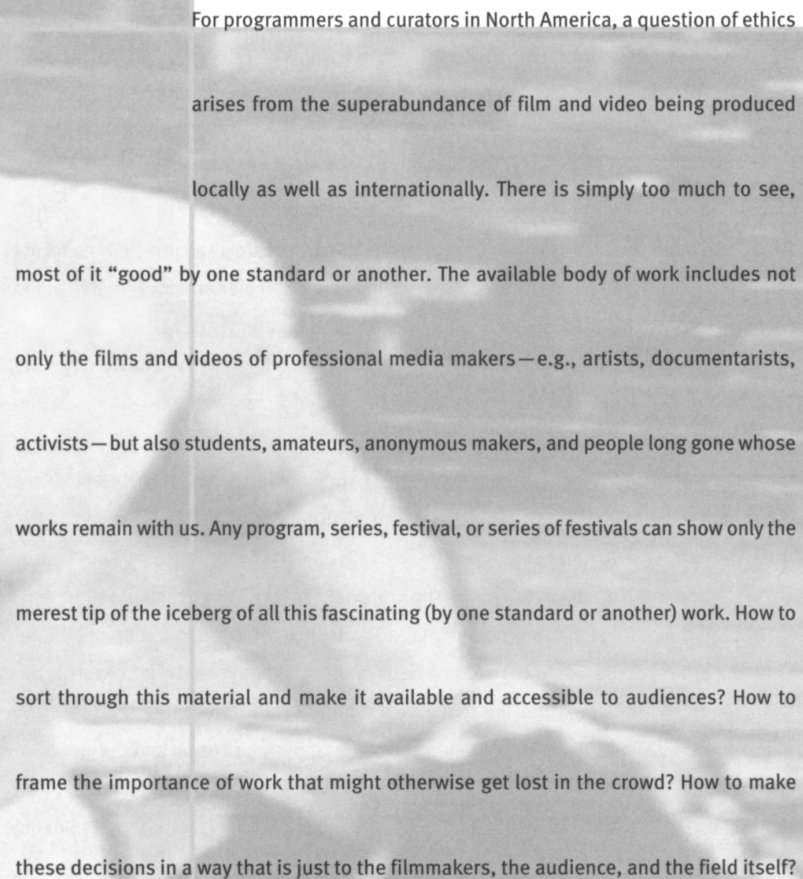


THE ETHICAL PRESENTER

LAURA U. MARKS

Or How to Have Good

Arguments over Dinner



For programmers and curators in North America, a question of ethics arises from the superabundance of film and video being produced locally as well as internationally. There is simply too much to see, most of it “good” by one standard or another. The available body of work includes not only the films and videos of professional media makers—e.g., artists, documentarists, activists—but also students, amateurs, anonymous makers, and people long gone whose works remain with us. Any program, series, festival, or series of festivals can show only the merest tip of the iceberg of all this fascinating (by one standard or another) work. How to sort through this material and make it available and accessible to audiences? How to frame the importance of work that might otherwise get lost in the crowd? How to make these decisions in a way that is just to the filmmakers, the audience, and the field itself?

My thesis is that the ethical presenter, whether for festivals, museums, non-profit arts organizations, or occasional audiences, is one who frames a program with an argument. This approach may seem uncomfortably academic. After some defining of terms, examples, and returning to the meaning of “argument,” I hope to show that it is not as Procrustean a model as it may first appear.

The “Terms of Address” conference posited that programming and curating are different activities. I define “programming” as ongoing exhibition, such as for festivals or regular series in galleries and other venues. Audiences rely on these venues as places where they can see what’s new in a particular medium, genre, or identity category, such as video (the New York Video Festival), documentary (Hot Docs in Toronto, the What’s Happening series at MoMA), experimental cinema (Media City, Windsor), Asian diaspora cinema (the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film and Video Festival), and queer cinema (many festivals). Individuals and committees at these venues preview work broadly, in principle exhaustively, in the given area and choose what to show. Although individual personalities determine festival programming to some extent (think of Kay Armatage and Cameron Bailey at the Toronto Film Festival), festival programming is supposed to be relatively objective. In short, programming is a reflection on the state of the field and thus has its own ethics of responsibility to artists and audiences.

I define “curating” as organizing thematic programs that are not necessarily linked to a regular venue. One-off events, curated programs are often driven by concepts rather than by the need to survey developments in a particular area of film and video practice. Whether the work of individuals or collectives, curating is driven by a subjective agenda. It is a reflection on the state of the world, in some kind of dialectic between the field of film and video and the curators’ ideas. Audiences are attracted by either the theme or the subjectivity of the curator.

The “objectivity” (of the programmer) and “subjectivity” (of the curator) are terms that remain obscure. Each can be clarified, and made available for questioning, through the device of argument.

What about ethics? My title, “The Ethical Presenter,” might sound rather puritanical, as though making, programming, and watching cinema is our common moral duty. But ethics, or the exhortation to justice, is nothing without beauty, for beauty is the invitation to the soul. In proposing that ethics is intertwined with aesthetics, I mean to follow some old minds, like the nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin and the eleventh-century philosopher Ibn Al Haytham (I’ll stop short at the neat equation of ethics and aesthetics attributed to the twentieth-century empire builder Vladimir Lenin). This thinking

might sound unsustainably classical to you (what is beauty, for example?). But it is a way briefly to suggest that the ethical relationships among artists, programmers, and audiences involve discourses of beauty, emotion, and love. Politics, broadly understood, is hollow without these.

Finally, for definitions, I use the words “artist,” filmmaker,” and “video maker” to refer to people who produce relatively independent, noncommercial cinema. I use the terms “film and video,” “cinema,” “media,” the fallback term “work,” and a gentler fallback term “films” to refer to the things they make. I trust you will understand the overlapping significances of these terms.

THREE TEACHERS AND THE DINNER PARTY MODEL OF CURATING

A premise of “Terms of Address” was that there is little theory of how to do curating and programming, as though it should just come naturally, like teaching or sex, from some mysterious internal source of inspiration. In my own thirteen years of programming, I’ve had a few teachers. I’ll mention three, all of whom are scholars and curators: Scott MacDonald, Patty Zimmermann, and Robin Curtis. Their approaches diverge interestingly. I could summarize them as: Scott, respect the work; Patty, respect the audience; Robin, use argument to respect work and audience.

Back in 1993, Scott MacDonald gently critiqued some of my early programming ventures for being too idea-driven. I was an occasional curator for a nonprofit arts

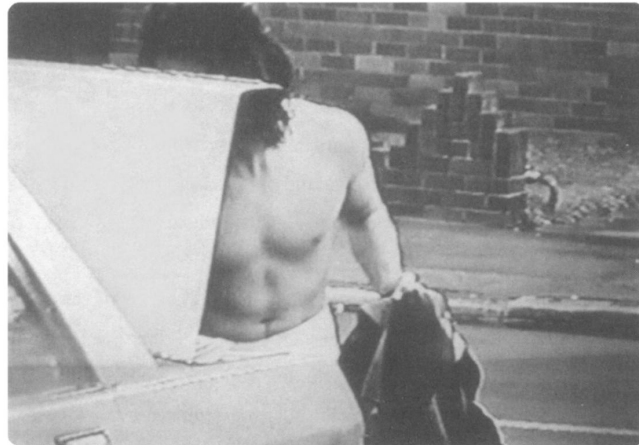


Figure 1. Still from *Heaven* (1998) by Tracey Moffat

organization in Rochester, New York, the Pyramid Arts Center. I blithely told Scott I had the titles for three programs (“Montage,” “Frottage,” and “Bricolage”) and was just looking for the works to fit them. Concealing his horror, Scott mildly suggested that ideas should arise from the films and videos themselves, rather than from imposing a concept that the work is required to match. Sometimes, he pointed out, the curator needs to do no more than make an accommodating frame for an astonishing film. Let the work breathe. Undertaken with sincerity, this approach defers to the works’ ability to speak in their own, largely nonverbal, languages.

Patty Zimmermann became my friend at the Robert Flaherty Seminar, that very special venue where artists and audience share screenings and conversations over a six-day period. The Flaherty is known for its lively, volatile, indeed knock-down-drag-out discussions that regularly have one filmmaker storming out and vowing never to return. But it is also a gathering unparalleled for the intellectually, aesthetically, and politically fruitful synthesis that emerges from this apparent chaos. According to Patty, and in turn Erik Barnouw whom she was lucky to have as a mentor, the role of the curator is to prepare the program carefully, then step back and allow the interaction between works and audience to unfold. Don’t cut short discussion when it gets heated: let it cook. (My mother taught me to sauté mushrooms on high heat; you think they’re going to burn, but suddenly they release their juices.) In the expanded venue of the Flaherty, participants shared each other’s company for several days. It modeled the emergence of democracy from anarchy, as participants’ initial reticence, politeness, and facility gave way to intensely felt and powerfully communicated responses.

A possible problem with this approach is that anarchy privileges the forceful. It may be, despite all the seminar’s carefully honed tools for enabling dialogue, that some people are still silenced or unable to communicate. However, its open-ended character invites individual audience members to take responsibility for each other and to behave in the interest of the group at large and of our common love of independent cinema. A good Flaherty seminar, in short, cultivates its audience as much as it curates a program of work.

These two approaches contributed to my own model of curating that began to emerge over these years, the dinner-party model. Prepare your series of courses with subtle attention to sequencing (including appetizers, hearty dishes, palate cleansers, bitter greens, and dessert); this is the curating. Invite your guests with some care to provide conversation partners for the works; this is the audience. Then let the party happen, don’t try to control it, and trust that something interesting and satisfying will happen in

the course of the evening. The dinner-party model is performative in that it depends on the unfolding of unforeseen events.¹

Two years ago Robin Curtis and I were invited to curate a special program at the Oberhausen Film Festival on the massive theme of time, “timely” in the reflective moment that followed the anticlimax of the millennium. Robin is a Canadian scholar who has lived her adult life in Berlin.

As we began our collaboration, I presented my dinner party approach: let’s just find some great work and put it together in stimulating ways. Robin, in contrast, believed that a solid curatorial *argument* was essential. A curated program is an argument, a well-defined, defensible, pertinent statement. An argument needs a thesis. And a thesis needs a verb. Without these, a curated program is meaningless.

Robin and I spent months researching ideas of time, timelessness, speed, acceleration, diachrony, the relationship between time and space, the end of time, and other abstractions in the light of contemporary global issues such as first world work acceleration, disjunctions between cultural notions of time, millennial anxiety, the commodification of leisure, and so on. At the same time that we were developing these conceptual understandings of time, we were getting to know all kinds of film and video works and movements, both contemporary and historical, in all genres and practices, that had something to do with the subject of time. There developed an uneasy relationship between the ideas and the works. Which should predominate? One approach identifies issues and looks for works dealing with them. Another identifies works and looks for the issues that emerge from them. Ideally there is a lively dialectic between the two. I remained dubious of the argument argument, but I flatter us that, through intense dialogue, Robin and I managed to develop a rich, intelligent, substantial program.

Four months before the festival we presented our proposed program of seventeen curated sections, including programs by guest curators, to the Oberhausen festival’s board of directors. They grilled us on the logic of our themes and our choice of works to fit the themes. I found this meeting more intellectually demanding than my doctoral thesis defense (though this may reflect a difference between North American and German intellectual cultures as much as it does the rigor of the festival board). Vividly I remember that one of my pet programs, “arguing” that digital editing translates time into space, was shot down by the board. Their quarrel was not with the choice of works but the

soundness of the argument. As I recall, all five of my counterarguments were witheringly dismissed, and finally I withdrew that program. It smarted at the time, yet it gave me a lasting respect for these people who took cinema, and programming, seriously enough to debate it at length.

WHAT GOOD IS AN ARGUMENT?

Curating is ideally a dialectic between ideas and films, as the above examples broadly illustrate. Another example is the call for work, in which a curator develops a hypothesis, which she sends out like a test balloon to the community of film- and video makers. Their response may confirm the hypothesis, shift its focus, or derail it. The quality of the exchange is a function not merely of volume of response, but of how interesting is the new synthesis that emerges.

For example, a fairly obscure program I curated for Toronto's "Subtle Technologies" symposium, on the non-Western origins of computer media, elicited few responses. However, two of them were wonderful films about the idea of zero, by Jason Harrington and Elida Schogt, and these, in combination with the other works, developed a richly provocative view of the mystical underpinnings of binary computing.

The call for work may be a rather forced way to make the dialectic happen. Another way is for the curator to immerse herself in independent film and video, see everything, and meanwhile read, think, and experience widely. If all goes well, the curator becomes the catalyst of a dialectic between media works and ideas, the zeitgeist sniffer.

Yet here the curator has to exercise caution because it may be not the zeitgeist but the smell of money that drifts in on these winds. Independent film and video are vigorously promoted by distributors and artists. Funding organizations take a fancy to particular topics. All of this creates a flood of press releases, which the unwary programmer may take for an objective reflection of the state of the field. Thus it is important to have criteria, if not a full-fledged argument, to help stay focused.

Does a good argument make for ethical presenting?

Let me test this question for both programming and curating. For each I'll ask, what is the ethical relationship to the artists/films, and what is the ethical relationship to the audience?

In programming, I'd suggest, there are two responsibilities to artists. (I focus on living artists here and leave aside the ethics of dealing with legacies and estates.)

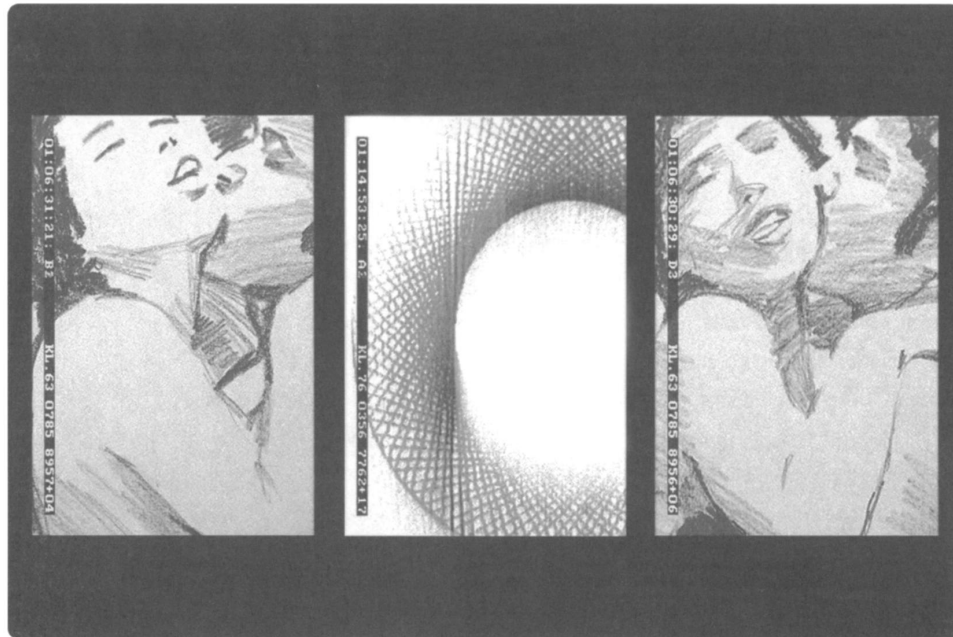


Figure 2. Frames from *Origin* (2000) by Jason Harrington, from the program “Immanence in the Pixel”

Think of an important venue like the Toronto International Film Festival or the Museum of Modern Art. At

such venues one of the programmers’ responsibilities to the artists—the filmmakers and video makers who submit their work—is to select from it by fair criteria. Another is to make their work accessible to an audience, particularly to powerful people like distributors, broadcasters, and newspaper columnists who can advance artists’ careers. In the case of a big museum program, the recognition leads to other rewards. In either case, recognition translates into money and other gigs.

Each of these responsibilities rests on an argument, though it might not be framed as such. It might be “This is the best work according to my criteria of . . .,” so that artists can rest assured that their work has been chosen fairly and that they are on a level playing field to compete for the attention of the career-making powers. However, I doubt that programmers often explicitly propose such arguments.

Scott MacDonald, as I described, advocates conceptual restraint in the presence of the work: “Let the work breathe.” Undertaken without sincerity, such restraint can obstruct critical thought and provide a cover for political agendas. This is B. Ruby Rich’s critique. She argues that, in certain influential festival programs, “the magical and utterly unsubstantiated notion of ‘quality’ protects a curatorial agenda from critique.”

Taste, Rich argues, the taste of the powerful festival programmer or museum curator, is immune from examination.²

Rich implicated the general anti-intellectualism of North American culture, which makes it uncool to demand justification for aesthetic decisions. Hence the usefulness of a touch of Teutonic rigor, the argument approach. One of the programmers' responsibilities to audiences is to reward their trust that they will see the "best" work in a given field. As Rich points out, "quality" is an empty term unless the scale on which a work is said to have quality is specified. An argument helps to establish the scale: "What you are seeing is the best new work available in this given area according to these criteria . . ." Audiences can respond accordingly, agree, or argue back. Another responsibility is to give them pleasure. The pleasure thesis, while more subtle, might be, "What is pleasing is . . . the unexpected. The familiar. The erotic. The sublime. The just," or whatever. As June Givanni points out,³ a program may be good because it is affirming or, by contrast, because it is challenging; it depends on how the programmer addresses the audience's needs. A program's argument, stated as such, enables a dialogue about what entails pleasure and what is the relationship between pleasure and "quality." Of course, it never happens in such a cut-and-dried way. But programmers and venues do make their criteria, and thus their arguments, clear to a greater or lesser extent.

The emerging point is that it is democratic to present an argument. We know many examples of people and institutions, from bullying philosophers to Colin Powell arguing at the UN for the invasion of Iraq, whose arguments can also conceal a lack of democracy. Nevertheless, in the gentler world of programming, a crisp thesis statement and some clearly defined criteria might dispel some of the flabby rhetoric about quality.

The ethics of curating are different because the stakes are different. Film/video curators are not power brokers to anything like the extent that film/video programmers and curators of visual art are. There is less to be gained financially for an artist whose work appears in a curated program because there is no claim that this work is the best in a given field, genre, and such.

Since curating has relatively little power, curators are under less obligation to be objective. Instead, they need to defend the legitimacy of their subjective choices; they (we) need to make arguments. Thus curating, although less influential than programming, is able to make a more aggressive intervention in the field. Here the responsibility to artists and that to audiences are almost the same.

A good curator needs to see as much work as a programmer does in order to absorb currents that are active among artists and in the world, analyze these, and give back a synthesis. Curating can assist artists by drawing out latent qualities in their work or showing new facets through combination with other works. Free of the requirement to represent a field, the curator is responsible for synthesizing meanings that emerge from the dialogue between the work and the world. Even better, rather than preconceiving a meaning that the audience must “get,” the curator stages a program as a performative event (the dinner party) in which unforeseen meanings emerge. But in all cases the audience must have reason to trust the curator. Charisma, intelligence, and even track record only go so far as evidence of trustworthiness. Hence the need for a clear argument.

Here are some “thesis statements” of programs I’ve curated, which I offer by no means as models to follow but as examples to consider: queer cinema offers a pleasurable new point of view for female viewers (“Men We Love,” for the Available Light Screening Collective in Ottawa, 1997); analog media become critical tools in the digital age (“Low Tech and Loving It,” for Available Light, 1999); emigrants and exiles express their emergent identities through sensuous experience (“I Am Becoming,” in “The World Seen through Nomadic I’s,” Argos Festival, Brussels, 2002); digital media have origins in Islamic art and mathematics (“Immanence in the Pixel: Islamic Roots of Digital Culture,” at Race in Digital Space 2.0, University of Southern California, 2002). At each of these modest events, artists and audiences were able to take up these arguments, see the work through their lens, and engage with both in fairly productive ways.

In short, I suggest that some kind of argument is necessary for both programmers and curators as their ethical responsibility to both artists and audiences. An argument makes clear the criteria for quality, the criteria for pleasure, and the criteria for broader significance. It invites agreement, qualification, or dissent.

INTERMEDIA ARGUMENTS

My discussion so far probably makes you a little uneasy. What about Scott MacDonald’s injunction to let the meaning arise from the work? The examples of argument I’ve mentioned make the curatorial agenda clear, but is this at the expense of stifling the films? If we understand argument as a verbal tool, it either favors verbal, intellectual works and forces cinema to speak in the imported language of criticism, or it condescends to work that is nonverbal. This would be a shame. As Stefanie Strathaus argues, “treating films like proofs deprives them of their cinematic quality.”⁴ Cinema has a wealth of meaning on its own terms; this includes “meaninglessness,” the exquisite, fleeting suspension of

meaning so crucial to the audiovisual media. If we agree that it might be a good thing to frame the decisions of curating and programming as arguments, we need an understanding of argument that is sympathetic, sensitive, and respectful to the films and videos it argues about.

It is necessary to understand, then, that argument need not be verbal. We do not have to force the audiovisual immensity of film and video to conform to the relative poverty of the verbal. We can understand audiovisual media as making statements, including arguments, with the qualities particular to them. These have their own rhetoric and their own intelligence. They include montage, of course, whose power of argument, both on and surpassing a verbal model, has been abundantly demonstrated since Eisenstein. They include sound, color, movement, rhythm, shot style, and other qualities that semiotics has never succeeded in translating into words. They include voices, and words, too: poetry, storytelling, straight-up rhetoric, and many asymptotic approaches to the verbal that still refuse to be pacified. These cinematic qualities speak to us sometimes clearly, other times as subtly as fragrance. And one important quality that remains difficult to describe, despite millennia of thinking about aesthetics, is emotional intelligence. Picasso's *Guernica* makes a compelling relation between visual form, the concept of justice (and injustice), and the emotions of love, sorrow, and anger about the suffering of civilians in wartime. This is why the UN's *Guernica* was concealed behind a blue cloth when Powell made his own, supposedly rational, argument about the need to make war on Iraq.

In short, art has intelligences and ways of arguing that comprise, but exceed, verbal intelligence.

Thus, the dialectic between ideas and films mentioned earlier ideally generates a synthesis of the relatively verbal argument of the curator and the relatively audiovisual argument of the films. In this hybrid argument, the curator's verbal framing interacts with the program's metamontage of films and videos with all their many forms of verbal and nonverbal, rational and affective intelligence. The curator need not reverse the hierarchy and play dumb in the face of works of art. She can use a model of multiple intelligence to create a truly intermedial argument, whose meaning cannot be entirely framed in words.⁵ This is why I am confident that an argument can draw the deepest importance from films and videos, can speak their language, rather than force them into a verbal mode.

Such programming, as well as many films and videos themselves, can be a model of intellectual work in the audiovisual age. Rather than impose verbal intelligence on art, we can learn a more inclusive kind of wisdom from art.

THE STAKES OF ARGUMENT: BEIRUT, FOR EXAMPLE

I'd like to give a final example of curating practice, in order once again to nuance the understanding of the role of argument in programming and curating. At the beginning of this essay I noted that argument helps clarify choices in an environment, like that in North America, where there is simply too much good work to see. By contrast, Beirut, where I lived for the past year, is a city that, like other postwar cities, has a small amount of art and a community eager to see it. Beirut raises the stakes of argument in programming and curating. There is a sense of urgency: first, to get work to audiences, and second and more subtly, to make good arguments—arguments about history, about how to remember the civil war, about citizenship, about individuality, about the relative worth of documentary, fiction, and experimental/personal work to deal with the ideological tangle with which Beirutis live.

This is a city rich in film festivals. The Beirut Cinema Days Arab Film Festival, held in October 2002, was organized by Beirut DC, an organization that produces and distributes independent media.⁶ Eliane Raheb and Hania Mroué, the festival directors, brought together ninety-five works by filmmakers and video makers from all over the Arab world, including its diaspora. They created not a dinner party but a wonderful, surfeiting banquet, as good festivals do. At a couple of points, however, I felt that an argument from the presenters' side would have facilitated better digestion among the artists and audience.

Arab audiences are understandably uneasy about what message cinema will give about the Arab world to the outside. As such they seem to spend as much time anticipating Western responses to a work as appreciating it on local terms. We saw Iraqi exile Saad Salman's *Baghdad On/Off* (2002), a fictionalized documentary about a filmmaker's (Salman's) attempt to visit his mother in Baghdad after thirty-five years of exile, only to have his journey derailed through Kurdish refugee camps, meetings with artists recovering from torture, and mysterious concrete bunkers. *Baghdad On/Off* is a stunning and disturbing film. But the audience became inflamed at what kind of tool the film would be in American hands "at a time like this." They attacked Salman and ignored the film's cinematic qualities in favor of its ideological portent. Could a curatorial argument have engaged the audience to see the film as made for them and speaking to them, as well as speaking to the West? Could an argument have encouraged a reception of the film as a work of art, not only as a potential ideological tool?

In a charged political context, a solid curatorial argument is crucial to encourage reflective synthesis and avoid clichés.

An exemplary case is the work of Ashkal Alwan, the Beirut arts organization directed by Christine Tohme, which has been organizing exquisitely crafted multimedia events for several years. In 2000, Ashkal Alwan's *Hamra Street Project* brought a specific argument to the circular logic and strategic amnesia around the Lebanese civil war. Rather than make yet more large statements about the war—statements that end up playing into an audience of outsiders—Tohme invited artists to reflect on the history of one street. Hamra Street was the energetic hub of the city before the civil war. Now, however, Muslim and Christian Beirutis have retreated to West and East Beirut, and Hamra Street has lost its integrating function in the city. Tohme asked artists a series of specific questions designed to elicit argument, such as, “Why is Hamra Street considered the Champs-Élysées of the East? Is it possible to work on why and how this association came about?” “Why would we be concerned with the life and death of that street?” “Why were the Israeli soldiers killed in Wimpy café?”⁷ “Is Hamra Street still able to invent its own image and, more broadly, that of Beirut?”⁸ Tohme's questioning allowed artists (video makers, writers, photographers, and installation artists) to perform an archaeology of Hamra Street. The curatorial argument extended to commissioning works specifically for the project.

The resulting event was a beautiful example of a rigorous curatorial argument that uses every intellectual tool: reason, poetry, memory, color, montage, humor, heart-break . . . and audiences flocked to it. I believe the *Hamra Street Project* was so successful precisely because its political stakes were so high. Indeed, the independent artists' scene in Beirut is one of the strongest critical voices in the contemporary Lebanese political scene. In a country where political crisis is relatively explicit, where artists and curators operate in an environment of evident social and political injustice, clear and compelling arguments are more obviously called for. In the North American context, where crisis and injustice are relatively veiled, the necessity of argument appears less pressing. In such a context curators and programmers must work to unfold our arguments from the bland normalcy of everyday life.

Yet the *Hamra Street Project* also understood that argument is hollow without feeling. Its finely wrought, deeply felt argument demonstrated that ethics and aesthetics, while not identical, are inextricable. The ethical presenter knows that a good argument passes through the heart.

NOTES

1. This model does not accommodate all world cuisines. It would be interesting to model a program on the simultaneous multiple dishes of mezze

and tapas or the single pot of stew central to meals around the globe, but it privileges an understanding of sensory sequence, so I retain it.

2. B. Ruby Rich, "Taste, Fashion, and Service: The Ideology of Film Curating," an abstract Rich submitted to the conference but was unable to present.

3. In "A Curator's Conundrum," in this issue of *The Moving Image*.

4. In "Showing Different Films Differently," in this issue of *The Moving Image*.

5. See Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

6. Beirut DC, beirutdc@inco.com.lb.

7. This shooting in 1980, on the liveliest corner of Hamra street, marked the beginning of Lebanese resistance to Israel's invasion during the civil war.

8. Christine Tohme and Ashkal Alwan, *Hamra Street Project* (Beirut: Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, 2000), n.p. Contact ashkalalwan@terra.net.lb.