

LUX

Edited by Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor A Decade of Artists' Film and Video



In The Form of The Letter "X", MIKE GARDINELL

The author has internalized experimental film and video to the degree that her unconscious accurately charts developments in the scene over the past decade. Dreams recorded over the last ten years uncannily reflect shifts in independent media cultures: the shift from a linguistic to a phenomenological bent; the seemingly opposed move from a visual to an information culture; changing debates in the politics of identity; the shifting interest in sexual representation. Her dreams also reflect the position of Canadian film and video in relation to an international and U.S.-dominated art world. Above all, they celebrate the myriad of small, quirky, rebellious, anarchic—yet easily overlooked, indeed repressed—image-worlds that comprise ten years of programming at Pleasure Dome and

Ten Years of Dreams About Art

Laura U. Marks

All dreams guaranteed dreamed by the author.

This marginal excursion into Peircean semiotics is intended to help us understand aesthetic developments in experimental film and video of the 1990s in terms of the dynamic of emergence, struggle, resolution, and re-emergence. C.S. Peirce's semiotic theory, unlike the better-known Saussurean theory, allows us to think of signs as existing at different removes from the world as we experience it, some almost identical to raw experience, some quite abstract. For Peirce the real appears to us in three modes, each at a more symbolic remove from phenomena, like layers of an onion: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Firstness, for Peirce, is a "mere quality," such as "the color of magenta, the odor of attar, the sound of a railway whistle, the taste of quinine, the quality of the emotion upon contemplating a fine mathematical demonstration, the quality of feeling of love, etc." Firstness is something so emergent that it is not yet quite a sign: we can't see red itself, only something that is red. Secondness is for Peirce where these virtual qualities are actualized, and this is always a struggle. In the actual world, everything exists through opposition: this and not that, action-reaction, etc. Secondness is the world of brute facts. Thirdness is where signs take part in mental operations that make

general statements about qualities and events: it is the realm of interpretation and symbolization. The attitudes toward the world of the three kinds of sign are perceptive, active, reflective. Gilles Deleuze beautifully explicates the relationship among Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness by observing them among the Marx Brothers:

The three brothers are distributed in such a way that Harpo and Chico are most often grouped together, Groucho for his part looming up in order to enter into a kind of alliance with the two others. Caught in the indissoluble group of three, Harpo is the 1, the representative of celestial affects, but also already of infernal impulses, voraciousness, sexuality, destruction. Chico is 2: it is he who takes on action, the initiative, the duel with the milieu, the strategy of effort and resistance.... Finally, Groucho is the 3, the man of interpretations, of symbolic acts and abstract relations.... He is the master of reasoning, of arguments and syllogisms which find a pure expression in nonsense: "Either this man is dead, or my watch has stopped" (he says, feeling Harpo's pulse in *A Day at the Races*).²

Dreams, of course, are highly condensed mental images, and thus chock-full of Thirdness. But in dreams we are immobilized and cannot physically react to the provocative signs they give us: dreams concentrate affect, or the feelings of Firstness in our bodies.

Best Musicians Are Three Bugs

AUGUST 29, 1989 I dream that the best jazz musicians in the world are three bugs. One is a spider who plays clarinet and is like Charlie Parker, one is named Habermas. They float into a huge pool, on a raft, and begin playing and the audience goes wild. They are very wise and give us to think how advanced bugs can be. I knew one of them and was a little bit in love with it, and I was crying and crying, maybe because I knew the bug would be killed, maybe because of the passing of all things.

There is a handful of small programming venues worldwide, including Toronto's Pleasure Dome, that devote themselves to the most marginal and evanescent of moving-image media. Why is this kind of programming valuable from the point of view of the larger culture? Some of the works and artists will eventually be taken up by the broader art world. More important, experimental film and video is a microcosmic laboratory of the most important developments in culture—experimental makers get to all the issues years, or decades, before mainstream media get hold of them. But finally this work is important because it is *not* valuable from the point of view of culture at large. While it's common to say that reproducible media do not have "aura," that sense that the art object is a living being, single-print and low-circulation films and videos have an aura denied to mass-circulation media. Experimental programming venues nourish short films and videos, works in low-budget and obsolete media, filmic detritus

rescued from landfills—in short, works that have aura in inverse proportion to their commercial value. Pleasure Dome revives works that are ephemeral or forgotten, films that have been censored, banned and burned. Like bugs on a raft, they are precious because they are imperiled.

Brains of Love

DECEMBER 4, 1989 I dream that I am in a crowd of people, Japanese and foreigners, at the station by the My City department store in Tokyo. There's a stall where for a 9000-yen piece we can buy a new brain. There are only two of them, it's a kind of last-chance deal. A tall young clean-cut guy with glasses buys one immediately to go to the vending machine. I am trying to decide whether to take this rare opportunity to get this new brain. If I don't take it, my own brain would be reduced by 50 percent. I am trying to decide how important my intelligence is to me, since after all I would still have love, and love of beauty, and be more simple: I have a mental image of living in a cottage. Also I don't feel I need the extra years of life the new brain would give me.

The choice between brains and love was a central struggle for filmmakers in the early 1990s. Some insisted on using their media as intellectual tools on the model of written intelligence. This is why so many works from this end of the decade are characterized by scrolling text and quotations from important scholars: purchased brains. At this period art schools, film funders, and art magazines were telling young artists that being a "dumb artist" was no longer a viable choice. Artists were now expected to issue their own considered statements and locate themselves within a verbal intellectual milieu. Work suffered as a result. A few brave others accepted the apparent deterioration of their brains as a consequence of love. For example, John Porter and George Kuchar, two Pleasure Dome regulars throughout the decade, generated huge numbers of films and videos that seemed to be produced from pure passion for the media, rather than from particular ideological or aesthetic agendas. Yet both these filmmakers have internalized the logic of filmmaking so profoundly that it informs even their most seemingly artless work. As a result Porter's and Kuchar's films and videos, and those of others who followed this route, are fertile with ideas, even if the artists themselves are not extremely articulate in interviews.

The verbal-art phenomenon is a case of Thirdness preceding Secondness: judgments and symbolic pronouncements, such as "Film should not/should offer visual pleasure," generate a course of action. This top-heavy semiotic configuration is dangerous for artists because it tends to backfire, since Thirdness is not a stable

state but generates new and unforeseen states of Secondness and Firstness. For example, numerous feminist works from the late '80s and early '90s, in a double reaction to the pronouncement above, made "unpleasurable" works that caused audiences to howl in amusement or "pleasurable" works that made us feel we were being bullied. In contrast, work that luxuriates in Secondness, in the realm of simple action — like Porter's time-lapse films, *Toy Catalogue* versions, and *Cinefuge* versions, and Kuchar's weather diaries and innuendo-laden video visits with artists — generates all kinds of conceptual responses in the minds of audiences.

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History of Cars and Boats

JUNE 9, 1990 I dream of an artist's book where each page is a thin wooden slab with a wood-burned picture. There are pictures of cars from five-year intervals, beginning in 1920, and pictures of boats in five year intervals. If you flip the pages like a flip book you can see a little animation of the evolution of car and boat design.

Postmodernism malingered into the 1990s, and with it the disempowering notion that it was impossible for artists to produce their own new images. Many filmmakers looked to found and archival images as sources of fresh meaning. While any image they produced themselves seemed to arrive already encoded in the sign systems of the dominant culture, archival images had a kind of strangeness and excessiveness that resulted from their codes having been forgotten. Archival images had a way of deconstructing themselves, because their codes, once implicit, were now humorously obvious. Scavengers/archivists Jack Stevenson (in 1993) and Rick Prelinger (in 1996 and 1997) visited Pleasure Dome to uncarton their precious collections of 1930s stag movies, 1950s sex-ed films, and home movies to be rediscovered. Craig Baldwin took advantage of '50s B science fiction movies for their connotations of the homogeneous nation facing invasion by aliens, in *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991). In *Escape in Canada* (1993) Mike Hoolboom served up archival U.S. propaganda about Canada with a solarized parsley garnish.

The postmodern dilemma mentioned here is that the entire Real seems to exist in the realm of Thirdness, the general idea that engulfs all particulars. According to the Baudrillardian logic by which many people were seized in this period, the meaning of everything that we perceive has already been encoded, indeed dictated in the form of what Peirce calls a legisign. If, as Peirce writes, the recipe for apple pie exists in the realm of Thirdness, but the particular apples used are Second, then postmodernism told us that there were no apples anymore, only recipes.³ Thirdness can be paralyzing, but, as when these artists treat the over-symbolized old recipes as raw material, it can generate new signs, such as the arousal and nausea that are sure indicators of Firstness.

Dealing with Regeneration

APRIL 13, 1991 My dream is set on the wooded grounds of a college campus. A cultivated flowerbed has been burnt, and an Asian student is complaining to my husband about it. But there are iris shoots growing up through the charred surface, and my husband says no, it's good, it's something to pray about. He starts saying a beautiful Aboriginal prayer, and hundreds of students are listening. I'm standing ankle-deep in a pool, and I notice there are lots of speckled brown tadpoles becoming both little fish and long-legged speckled brown birds. I bend over and say to them, "You guys are so *tiny!*" An "Amish" guy says sternly, "Shh!"

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Art movements, including movements in film and video, tend to become reified almost as soon as they are born. From the scorched earth of an idea that appears to have been collectively done to death rises a tender new idea—and in turn that evolves into its own order and comes to dominate the field. Programmers face the challenge both to chart new movements as they appear and pay attention to the even more marginal work, which may be the sign of something new, of unexpected evolutions. One way to do this was to host open screenings and "new works" events without premeditated themes: there was no agenda but an interest in what people are up to. Another was to act as a *salon des refusés* from the big-name festivals. Pleasure Dome also encouraged artists to indulge their most impressionable states in frequent screenings of low-end punk work by art gangs like J.D.s (in 1990) and Abbatoir (in 1992) and in the "Puberty Film Show," featuring the don't-wanna-grow-up medium of super 8, in fall 1995.

Before even Firstness there is a degree zero, a point where everything is possible, where anything can evolve into anything else. Peirce wrote, "The present pure zero is prior to every first.... It is the germinal nothing, in which the whole universe is involved and foreshadowed." ⁴ It is only when perception seizes upon something that it enters the cycle of signs. Firstness lasts for only a flash before it is seized upon by perception, and in turn by action, and before we can say "hey!" it is taken up symbolically in Thirdness. In art movements this process is accelerated by the market-driven anxiety to produce something new.

The Immobilized Heads of Mass Culture

APRIL 16, 1992 I dream that a friend and I are walking near a long reflecting pool, and a female reporter is speaking to the cameras from the edge of the pool, only her face visible. As we walk by I see that her face is mounted in a shoe, a gold sandal, and in fact it was all of her there is. I am intrigued by the gimmick but also shocked. Later my friend and I pass a dumpster and two anteaters walking at the edge of the road.

AUGUST 13, 1992 I dream about a craft project in a women's magazine: a stiff nosegay of plastic flowers with an eyeball built into the base looking at them, lit from below by a lightbulb.

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Mass culture, or what the Frankfurt School theorists called "affirmative culture," is a fixed eyeball or a mounted head that can gaze in only one direction. Marginal culture is free to wander and swivel. Film and video, as industrial media, have a particular relationship to mass-produced media. Because their techniques are shared with movies and television, artists in these media are more pressured (than painters, for example) at every step of the production process to consider their relationship to mass culture. The same relationship characterizes new-media art. Film and video in the '90s continued their head-swiveling relationship with popular culture. A January 1992 program offered belated (as it can only be) counter-propaganda to the Gulf War, from pirated tv clips and a Paper Tiger teach-in tape to more reflexive, ruminative, (Canadian) works by Fumiko Kiyooka, Susan Oxtoby, Stephen Butson and Heather Cook. In 1994 the spokes-Barbie of Igor Vamos's *Barbie Liberation Organization* coolly outlined the patriarchy-toppling intentions behind the BLO's terroristic voice-box switching between herself and GI Joe. The same year Brian Springer's *Spin* tore open the media doctoring of the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Screened in 1996, AdBusters' "Uncommercials" alerted couch potatoes to the military-industrial intentions of benign-sounding sponsors such as Kraft and General Electric (wait a minute, doesn't Kraft own General Electric?).

In the early '90s artists referred to themselves as "cultural workers" or "cultural producers" more than artists do now. This was supposed to mean that artists, as producers of culture, were responsible members of their communities, as well as to shy away from the high-art connotations of the word "artist." The terms evoked an image of efficient artist collectives cranking out silk-screened posters, shot from below in '30s social-realist style, heads swathed in kerchiefs. More work was overtly activist in the late '80s and early '90s. What happened?

Certainly part of what happened is that less money was available for artists who wanted to make "unmarketable," i.e., truly political, work. (By contrast, "critical" art, as Gary Kibbins points out, always has a relatively ready market.)³ But another way to understand the shift away from overtly political work that occurred in this decade is to acknowledge different ways of being political. A work that critiques popular culture reinforces its dependent relationship with popular culture. Its goal is political change at

the level of language, which is collective but not deeply embodied. A work that is only about itself and the passion of creation offers a model of freedom from popular culture. Its goal is political change at the level of individual action—which is embodied but not collective. And of course in between these poles lay art that politicized personal, embodied experience. In short, the shift away from activist art to personal art during the '90s can be seen as not a depoliticization but a shift in political strategies.

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Cultural critique tends to take place in the mode of Secondness, or reaction. It is thus doomed to a somewhat parasitic relationship with the mass media that goad it along. The best such works, however, are rich enough in their Secondness that they generate the mental connections that are the realm of Thirdness, or, more rarely, the perceptual surprises of Firstness. Identity politics, for example, when it worked, mobilized felt qualities of life into struggle (for identity, by existing in opposition to something other, is Second) and into new forms of communication, or Thirdness.

Consciousness Is No Different Than Reality

FEBRUARY 8, 1990 I dream that a bunch of us are having a political demonstration at the bottom of the stairwell in the college administration building. A tall, thin white-haired lady from the registrar's office comes out and tells us, "For Marx, his consciousness of himself was no different from his reality." This is an absolutely huge revelation to us: the demonstration breaks up and we are all laughing with the craziness of the enlightened. Then we go to the student lounge and, to people's mixed delight and dismay, a woman lights a papery thing in her hand and throws it into the room, where it bursts in flowery ashes.

The relationship between reality and representation was a typically '80s concern in art. Many works critiqued popular culture. Video artists in the '80s, in particular, eschewed the structuralist experiments of the preceding decade as being politically reactionary, and instead looked to critique the social and economic foundation of the medium, television. Hence the videos that looked like tv shows, but with something amiss. The critique of representation, more generally, became the air artists breathed, and with it the idea that representation reflects reality (vulgar Marxism), or the idea that representation negotiates with reality (Gramsci, Stuart Hall), or the idea that representation is reality (Baudrillard). All these varieties of the critique of representation were based, in some way, on Marxist theory. Saussurean semiotic theory, in turn, gave us ways to understand the world as a compendium of signs, all of which have been effectively pre-perceived for us. This gave film- and videomakers plenty of grist to grind in the subversion of existing images.

22 But some people were uneasy with the idea that we cannot know reality directly. If their consciousness was their reality, then surely they did have direct access to some sort of reality? Less pressured to evolve with their art form than videomakers, filmmakers were somewhat freer to represent their own experience in the act of experiencing it. Politically suspect though it may have been, they gave the gift of their own perception to viewers and listeners. Ellie Epp, in *notes in origin* (1987), allowed the camera to be moved by the beating of her own heart. In *All Flesh Is Grass* (1988) Susan Oxtoby allowed luminous textures and slanting shadows to express the catharsis that comes from abandoning oneself to mourning. Short puppet animations by the Brothers Quay took the viewer into a world where the slightest movement, a screw rolling on the dusty floor, takes on an anthropomorphic pathos. And a master of the art of gradual revelation, Barbara Sternberg retained a rich, impressionistic audiovisual texture in her work throughout the decade. By the time of *midst* (1998), she eschewed her earlier conflict-driven experiments in favour of an extreme openness, using optical printing to impose just enough structure on its mild imagery for perception to lead neither to action nor to boredom, but to contemplation. These and other filmmakers remained convinced that the world is still enchanted and need only be properly recorded to enchant the viewer.

In other words, they used the medium of film as an entranced Perceiver of the world, an agent of Firstness. One might define art as a practice that cannot be subsumed in a symbolic mode. As Floyd Merrell suggests, wine-tasters, jazz musicians, and others with a nonverbal grasp of their art "know more than they can explicitly tell. A portion of their knowledge will always remain at the level of Firstness and Secondness, unmediated and unmediated by Thirdness."⁶

"The Pink"

APRIL 20, 1991 I dream I am masturbating to this commercial-looking montage of lots of women talking about "the pink," which meant masturbation, and how their men left them alone to do it.

In the '90s a second generation of feminist film- and videomakers came of age. While their predecessors had been into subverting patriarchal culture, the critical stance lost favour with younger artists. Constant vigilance is exhausting and not much fun. Instead, more artists, especially women queer and straight (but later in the decade gay and then straight men as well), began making work that focused on their own sexual pleasure. Again, this work may have looked apolitical or self-indulgent, but as with the general shift from activist to personal work, it was rather a move to a politics of action rather than critique. A work like Annie Sprinkle and

Maria Beatty's *Sluts and Goddesses Transformation Salon* (1992) considered women's self-pleasure and bodily self-knowledge to be inherently political, and used lush, campy production values and Sprinkle's honeyed voice to present its pedagogy in a pleasurable way. Queer punk movies indulged in a pleasure that was harder-edged but just as sweet, in Greta Snider's hand-processed *Hard-Core Home Movie* (1991), Bruce LaBruce's *I Know What It's Like to Be Dead*, and G.B. Jones' *Trouble Makers*. Kika Thorne luxuriated in female sexuality in work that had a characteristic flow or unwillingness to be bound by structure—although other kinds of bondage were fair game. In Thorne's *Sister* (1996), heat-seeking infrared film makes a woman's pussy (the artist's own?) glow in the throes of self-pleasure.

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A Glitch in the Performance

JANUARY 17, 1992 I dream I am at a performance in a finished-basement type place, full of metre-high slabs of crumbling grey asphalt. There are lots of male-female couples. We are scared that the performance is going to involve the wolves and dog we can hear snarling behind a door. But the artists tells each couple to put on bathing suits—we're glad it's going to be a participatory performance—and do something with water and then jump down the room. My partner is Susan Patten, and so as two women we are a glitch in the performance. But the artist says that the glitch is the point of the performance.

One area in which the critique of representation continued to be important was in queer and other identity-based media. Feminist film and video gave way, or opened the way (depending on your view) to queer work and the interrogation of masculinity. "Queering" Hollywood and commercial cinema was all the rage. Gender indeterminacy was hot: queer artists struggled against the imposition of definitions of gender and sexuality, as in the "Bearded Ladies" show at Pleasure Dome in spring 1993. Queer artists interrogated the bonds of language. Nelson Henricks' precisely structured *Emission* (1994) poised bodily desire against the drag of the symbolic in a quite literal way, the frustrated lover's voice-over insisting "Turn off the tv, turn down the radio, let me take you in my arms." In *Put Your Lips Around Yes* (1994) John Lindell set the titles of gay pulp novels ("REST STOP SLUT") to a driving beat, daring viewers to physically enjoy gay-sex clichés even as it critiqued them.

In the early part of the decade queer media was powered by struggle against the symbolic order. Secondness is the realm of "not-that," and queer work vigorously reacted to the Thirdness of received languages in both dominant

culture and subcultures for what it is to be gay or lesbian. Sometimes this work remained at the level of reaction or generated its own new set of limiting languages, as in the safe-sex shorts that many activist artists produced in the early '90s. Activism around sexual activity is extremely difficult to pull off. Education is a question of the immediate perception of Firstness and the received knowledge of Thirdness converging on Secondness, or immediate response to brute facts. It is almost impossible to educate sexuality, unless a stronger motivation than desire can act like "the firm hand of the sheriff on your shoulder," as Peirce characterizes Secondness.

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Don't Deconstruct the Snow

MARCH 12, 1992 I dream I'm hiking up a snowy mountain with a bunch of artists at Banff; this hike is also a collective writing project. My brother Matt says don't deconstruct this pristine, white hill, because we want it to be smooth when we slide back down it.

Verbality had its place in artists' film and video, not least to show that film and video are just as capable of making intellectual arguments as written language is. But early in the decade artists and audiences were beginning to feel beaten down by the pressure to be "smart" and desiring more immediate experiences. Paralleling the new popularity of body piercing and tattooing, the 1991 "Raunch Bouquet" porn show and the Fall 1991 "Industrial Primitive" show (of rediscovered '80s work), a 1994 screening of films by M.M. Serra, and many other such sallies into the world of s/m presented films meant to be experienced viscerally. By communicating the feelings of pain, arousal, etc. to the audience, they emphasize the body as experienced, rather than a body of signs. "The body" continued to be an important subject for experimental film and video, but the focus shifted from how the body is constructed in culture to how the body is experienced.

The interest in experiencing the snow unmediatedly motivated a 1993 screening by the Tariagsuk Video Centre, the women's video collective in Igloolik. This work responded to ethnographic "readings" of Inuit culture by presenting Inuit experience from the inside.

When the body is considered to be a (Saussurean) symbolic object, "deconstruction" renders it no more than a heap of broken signs. The Peircean symbolic body does not deconstruct but opens up from Thirdness to Firstness, from the cultural understanding of the body to how the body feels from the inside.

One Flavour at a Time

DECEMBER 9, 1993 I wake up crying from a dream about little goats with sort of mechanical jaws who are each allowed to taste one flavour, like pineapple or bubble gum.

In programs of short works no film is expected to make the grand statement. Each film opens into the others like courses in a strange meal, and it is the audience that puts together all the flavours.

A Hard Day at the Arts Council

MARCH 6, 1994 I dream that I had to go to an arts council jury, and it is in a building, maybe in Paris, one of those buildings that's supposed to be rationally designed, but it's a huge box divided internally into three parts with undulating inner walls. I'm trying to find Floor N, and a lady in a tiny stairwell office tells me I can't get into that room, but then she gives me a key. I have to try the key in doors on about twenty floors, but doing this I'm actually pricking my arm with a needle, all the way up the inside. I have this row of twenty neat red pricks up my arm; I put antibiotic ointment on them.

Honestly, arts council juries have provided some of the most democratic, well-informed and passionate discussions about art I've ever taken part in, and this has been at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. The jurors' investments and expertise are different, and it's hard to make rational decisions about what kind of art deserves funding, but somehow we always reach consensus about which projects should get the money. Then we find out there's not enough money to fund even half of them, because of funding cuts during this decade in Ontario (the Ontario Arts Council was cut by 40 percent during the first term of Premier Mike Harris) and nationwide (the Canada Council lost funding and then had it restored to less than the previous level). That's where the self-mutilation comes in.

Equations For Your Eye

APRIL 4, 1997 I have one of those dreams where I have to take a math exam, and I am all confident, then I get into the exam and do terribly. I'm trying to recall trigonometry, remembering nothing. This bright-eyed young woman explains to me: "Sine and cosine are the equations for two waves that cancel each other out. Between them they produce the equation for the shape of the lens in your eye."

Structural film and video returned to the scene in the 1990s. This was partly because the concern with representation diminished and artists were newly interested in medium specificity. In addition, the development of new media made it timely to re-examine the intrinsic properties of older media. Structuralism respected the internal coherence of a film or video

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as a physical body, with all its implied mortality. Many of John Porter's films were structured by the three-minute length of a roll of 8mm, and this internal logic was as pleasurable to audiences as finding that the shape of one's own eye describes an equation. A rash of tapes was produced on the Pixar 2000 in the mid-'90s, and part of the pleasure of watching Pixelvision was knowing that these videos were recorded on audiotape and that the jagged black scar on the frame was the actual image of an in-camera edit. Hard-core experimental filmmakers imposed rigid structures on the most vulnerable material. Mike Cartmell used a "chiasmic" structure to explore identity and paternity in *In the Form of The Letter "X"* (1986). James Benning (celebrated in 1998 with "Structural Film Is Dead, Long Live James Benning!"), the duration of whose shots in *Deseret* (1995) was dictated by the length of newspaper articles about Utah, was by virtue of such strictures able to make films whose content ranged over everything. This kind of structuralism has the same effect as lacing a corset around a pliant torso: it allows the stuff inside to remain soft and formless.

Sad Classified Ads

SEPTEMBER 30, 1997 I dream I am in a room full of people who are all lying on sofas and reading newspapers. People are getting all weepy reading, and the mood is very mournful, but another woman and I are catching each other's glance and grinning. It turns out everybody had placed "Sad Classified Ads": it was kind of a performance.

Like the caress of a stingray, grief immobilizes the body as it traverses it. As the AIDS epidemic continued, people succumbed to melancholy paralysis. Although the urgency of AIDS activism abated—it's hard to remain in a state of crisis indefinitely—some artists returned feeling to our numbed bodies with blazing offerings of rage and love. Sadomasochism had a profound place in this process, as in the work of Tom Chomont, for whom s/m was a way to take control of the disease in his body. During this decade Mike Hoolboom built a flaming body of work around AIDS, whose melting saturated colors and glistening high-contrast skins, as much as the bitter poetry of their words, impelled us to cling to life even while we flailed against it.

In its power to immobilize, grief imposes a state of perpetual Firstness. According to Peirce it is impossible to exist sempiternally in a world of Firstness, a world that "consists in nothing at all but a violet color or a stink of rotten cabbage" — or in a pure feeling, be it love or pain.⁷ A changeless state of mourning, or of any emotion, is unbearable. The most powerful AIDS work of this decade transmuted the Firstness of grief into the contemplative and active states of mourning and action. In its most transformative state, Thirdness —

ideas that are preconceived, verbalized, yea, published in the newspaper — still has the power to move us to emotional states that far precede discourse.

Seinfeld and the "Wilderness"

OCTOBER 9, 1997 I dream I am in a crowded New York apartment where some show is being filmed, Jerry Seinfeld is the MC. It is very New York and we non-New Yorkers are disdained. For some reason they need another minor celebrity to interview someone, and my mother suggests me, and Seinfeld looks at me with suspicion. I say, "Yes, I'm Laura Marks" as though he should have heard of me, and he's in a bind so he has no choice. But my lipstick has worn off. Seinfeld seems to recognize the importance of this because he offhandedly gives me some money to get some. Then I'm in the bathroom down the hall, ready to put it on. But the light switch doesn't work. The automatic sensor doesn't work, and when I press the button on the rickety old fixture the light only shines dimly for a second!

This dream is set in a big city of vast cold buildings with broad grounds. It's dark and I'm looking for free parking on the snowy streets, but I take a turn onto the highway by mistake, and Peter Harcourt's voice says, "It's okay, it's just what they call the wilderness," and soon enough I am amused to find that this circumscribed bit of land that I'm driving through is what New Yorkers call the wilderness.

For many Canadian artists it is a political choice to remain in Toronto, the centre of the Canadian art scene, even though New York, the centre of the world art scene, deems us quaint and parochial. Pleasure Dome showed many works by New York artists—it's the last stop on the Central New York Programmers' Group tour—including Alex Bag, catapulted to stardom in 1997, whose work was all about having to move to New York to become an artist. Many Canadian artists have moved to New York permanently in search of glamour and recognition. In Toronto's small media community, artists live in the light but have no lipstick: in New York we have the lipstick, but we can't get the light to shine on us. A very few Canadian experimental filmmakers and videomakers, such as Donigan Cumming and Steve Reinke, do break onto the parochial New York scene. There is a myth that funding is easier to come by for filmmakers in Canada, and therefore the work is not as strong because it does not have to compete as viciously as American art, and perhaps this is another reason that Canadians ourselves diminish Canadian work. But mostly it is because we internalize the intensely self-absorbed consciousness of the U.S. art world, according to which we do not exist. The colonized always has to know what the colonizer

is doing, but the reverse is not so: Canadian artists, programmers and writers have to be aware of the New York/U.S./world film scene, but the reverse is not so. To them we are the wilderness.

Deleuze Overcharges for Drinks

28 **FEBRUARY 8, 1998** I dream that there is a lecture by my hero Gilles Deleuze and afterward people are going to his house for a reception. We have to get there on little red handtrucks. I take the smallest one because I can see it is really high-tech and expandable. I take off on it separately from the others, who are "wankers," and go careening down these very steep streets, a town like San Francisco but tropical with slanting light and lush purple flowers. The cart turns into these speedy old-fashioned rollerskates, and I am careening down this steep street, grabbing at trees and signposts as I go and feeling exhilarated because I am on my own. Deleuze has this big empty house, like an expensive windowless concrete bunker, with nothing inside except a lot of Far Side cartoons, a pool, and a jacuzzi. He's sitting at a counter where you come in, selling drinks. An orange juice and rum is very delicious but costs \$28. I get depressed because his new book is not very good.

Pleasure Dome screened many historical works over this decade, but notably absent was the Canadian avant-garde of Michael Snow, Bruce Elder, and the other great fathers who had, for the eyes of this generation, repressed as much as they had allowed to flourish. Even Joyce Wieland didn't get a show at Pleasure Dome in the '90s. For marginal filmmakers in the '90s, watching *Wavelength* again was like crashing your speedy go-kart into a pretentious soirée. Instead of this canonized tradition, which everybody had seen in school anyway, Pleasure Dome looked to historical films from the New York and San Francisco undergrounds. Curt McDowell's *Thundercrack* (1975), Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1962), Chick Strand's *Kristallnacht* (1979, in a program of women's carnivalesque films), and other works were preceded by word of mouth not about their formal qualities but their bodily functions. These works helped nourish a new interest in performance and the body—not just any body, but a raw, uncomfortable body; not a polished performance but an unabashedly amateur performance.

Woman Ejaculates on Prospective Canadian

MARCH 18, 1998 I dream I am watching a video, or maybe a commercial for McDonald's, where a sensual pregnant woman is saying she loves eating hamburgers so much she makes them last for three hours. Then there is a

performance in a gallery in L.A., where this same pregnant woman is in a shallow pool, masturbating while watching another woman. Then she ejaculates into the face of a man standing in the pool—she shoots a good six feet! It's from my point of view, as though I were ejaculating. I am offended at the performance though; I think it's cheap-shot (!) feminism. This poor man turns out to be a performance artist himself, probably teaches at Cal Arts. He is doing work on orgasm too: he said that in orgasm he is cultivating his plant nature. Something to do with *sisal*. I promise to mail him a Canadian magazine with a review of his work, a Canadian road map, and something else. He tries to give me money for it, but I have the impression that it's all the money he has, so I refuse.

Experimental cinema has almost always rejected acting as implicated in the illusionist aesthetics of commercial cinema. Plus, acting is expensive to shoot. But performance, confronting the viewer with a real body enduring experience in real time, has none of the illusionism of acting. Part of the return to phenomenal experience that characterized the '90s was the return of performance. Often this was inspired by unabashedly enthusiastic performances from decades past. However, few contemporary filmmakers had not been infected in some way by the poststructuralist disease that would have us believe our own bodies are just textual objects and don't even really exist. For a while in the '90s it was uncool to believe that a person could ever reveal the essence of himself or herself, or even that there was an essence. But in performance you find the meaning of the body through physical, not mental acts; the body has to be right there, not a construct. Performers sacrificed their own bodies so that the rest of us could have ours back. In her series "Aberrant Motion" Cathy Sisler spun in the streets as a proxy for our collective disequilibrium. In *Super 8 1/2* (1994) and *Hustler White* (1996) Bruce LaBruce stripped all the way down to the layer of plastic wrap covering his heart, so that we didn't have to, or we could if we wanted to. Donigan Cumming convinced non-actors to pray for a Nettie they had never met, sacrificing their authenticity to an audience that in turn suddenly became responsible for both them and her.

Another way—a canny, '90s way—to exploit the rawness of performance while acknowledging the artifice involved was to fake it. Monique Moumblow created fake personas, as did Alex Bag. In *Fresh Acconci* (1995) Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley hired San Fernando Valley porn actors to restage Vito Acconci's 1970s performance scripts. In *Shulie* (1997) Elisabeth Subrin meticulously recreated a 1970 documentary about feminist writer Shulamith Firestone, then a young painter, right down to the cat's-eye glasses and ignorant, sexist professors. Playing her fictional suicidal sister Gretchen, Jennifer Reeves cut her own arms and shed real blood for the fish-eye lens.

In 1967 Godard famously responded to criticism of his gory film *Weekend*, "It's not blood, it's red," meaning that his film was meant to be taken as a sign that was already at some remove from the real world it signified. But for performers in the '90s it was red and it was blood.

In performance the perceiving and acting body is a Peircean sign machine, quivering like a tethered string between the poles of experience and communication. Whenever one presents one's body and actions for public consumption—i.e., presents oneself consciously as a sign—the same accelerated oscillation between the three modes takes place, for one is required to act, or make relations, an operation of Secondness, and to be genuine, or to operate in the mode of Firstness, at the same time that one manages oneself as a mental image. Ejaculating or shedding blood before an audience is only one way to do this.

Divorce Ritual

APRIL 29, 1998 I dream I am in Los Angeles. I exit the freeway on a ramp that is made of wood and undulates like a little rollercoaster, into a hilly neighbourhood that is part Chicano, part Asian, and all the houses are close together and kind of doll-like with thatched roofs. Lots of people are in the toylike park, old Mexican men and little boys playing chess. I am going to a museum where my husband and I are supposed to have a post-divorce ritual. It looks like one of those hands-on museums that were cool in the '70s, with lots of winding passages and purple and black walls. We get there and there are several couples, presumably also divorcing, gathered around the table. I've forgotten to bring some document, and also photographs, that we're supposed to burn as part of this ritual. I'm picturing an old photograph in my head and thinking I don't want to burn it!

Later I walk by the village again and see that the little houses with thatch roofs have been burned for acres. The whole landscape is smoking and grey. It's awful. I am embarrassed when the people from the town see me staring at the misfortune.

One of the most painfully visceral experiences you can have at the movies is when the film catches in the projector gate and burns, especially if it is a precious lone print. We have seen that in the '90s many artists turned to archival film for a source of images. While the images could be deftly recontextualized and critiqued, filmmakers were also sometimes struck by the material of the film itself. In this decaying surface, archival filmmaking witnessed a death, a divorce of the original meaning from the image. Rather than recontextualize the images, filmmakers held funerals for their charred remains. The unholyest of these officiants was SchmelzDahin, the German collective that tortured super 8's emulsion with bleach and

hydrochloric acid, buried it, and hung it from trees to fade. Carl Brown's oeuvre throughout this decade continued to be a body of self-immolating cinema, whose recorded images dissolved in the chemical conflagration on the surface of the film. Peggy Ahwesh saw the spirit of death in the 8mm amateur porn film she found in the trash, which she memorialized with colour processing and a tango sound track in *The Color of Love* (1994). In Jennifer Reeves' *The Girl's Nerve* (1996) pictures cracked and peeled off their support. Corinne and Arthur Cantrill, those indefatigable Australian supporters of super 8 film, passed through Pleasure Dome several times during the decade with curated programs. In 1994, they returned not to celebrate but as celebrants in a mass for the "end of the photo-chemical film era," in the performance "Projected Light: On the Beginning and End of Cinema."

In the '90s filmmakers returned to touch the material body of film at a time when the medium has been pronounced obsolete. Of course, the idea of obsolescence is meaningless to non-industrial filmmakers: when a medium has been superseded by the industry, that's when artists can finally afford it. But the industry calls the shots, as the Cantrills pointed out in mourning Kodachrome. What precipitated the divorce of the images from their medium was perhaps the institution of digital filmmaking; the medium of analogue video had not been the same threat to film, because the two media looked and functioned so differently. Over in the world of commercial cinema, and increasingly among independent filmmakers as well, films were edited and processed not on a Steenbeck or at a lab but in the virtual space of the Media 100. Where now was the film's body? Celluloid became just an output medium for the virtual body of the film encoded in software.

As well as these moving reflections on film's body, the end of the decade saw a surprising nostalgia for analog video. Videomakers who moved to non-linear editing swore they would never go back—yet tapes were being turned out that simulated analog interference, dropout, and generational loss!

A Peircean would note that these works of materialist cinema liberate the medium to be meaningful as a body in itself, rather than the medium for another message. While plumbing archival films for their images is an operation of Thirdness, the mourning of film's material death is First in its reaction to the film as to another body.

I Forget I Own Art

FEBRUARY 2, 1999 I dream I own a work of art I'd forgotten about, even though it's very expensive, because it's thin like a pamphlet and it's just sitting in a letter rack like the Purloined Letter.

Steve Reinke's *The Hundred Videos* appear to sum up the various concerns of the decade. They began with a linguistic understanding of meaning, and the use of psychoanalysis, a linguistic form of interpretation, to unravel it. They moved to interests in sexuality, desire, the body, and AIDS. Following the anti-visual turn in the arts mid-decade, they questioned documentary's relation to the truth. But throughout the decade Reinke maintained a conceptual rigour that made these slight works linger in the memory of the viewer. *The Hundred Videos* enter the mind through a tiny aperture of attention and then expand to fill all the available space. The sad ashtray, the sincere inventor of potato flakes, Neil Armstrong's tribute to his dead dog—they went by in one to three minutes but stayed with me for years. By the end of the decade, in a final rejection of linguistic signification, Reinke and his video camera were chasing dust balls under the bed.

These are theorematic videos, examples of the most fertile mode of Thirdness. By creating relations among other signs, they are mental images. Reinke brought things together: foreign films and porn films, a love letter and a yearbook photo, an over-the-top pornographic performance and a list of self-doubts. In so doing he generated enabling new concepts and new models for thinking, such as, use hand puppets to role-play your fondest desires. Reinke's work showed the generosity of Thirdness, giving audiences material (not about which, but) with which to think.

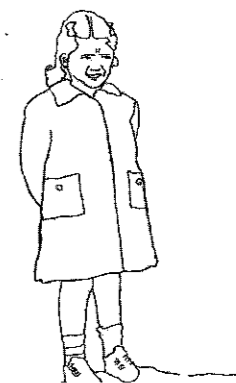
Aggressive House

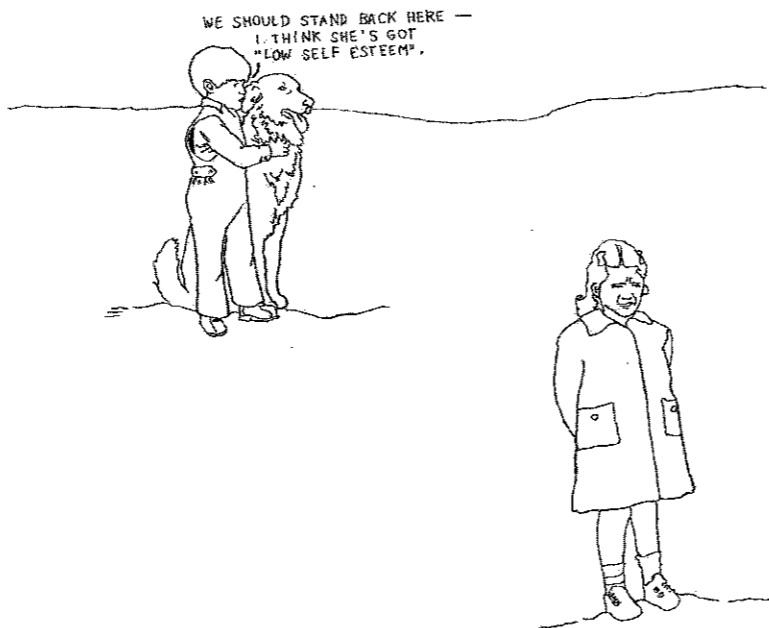
MARCH 18, 1999 I dream I am in the house of these radical and rich art-world people who have two young children. It is a radical house, very dark inside, claustrophobic with rough concrete walls. They all go out, while I stay. I crawl under the heavy, ancient wood furniture. The floors have escalator-like treads moving through them constantly, with the angles facing up like teeth, making it fairly impossible to walk. There is something even more menacing in the floor, concealed by long shreds of carpet, but I forget what it was. I think, how irresponsible to raise children in such a dangerous house. I go into the little girl's (like three years old) room and see that she's programmed her computer to organize her stuff while she is out; things are going through the air as though on an invisible conveyor belt. I am impressed and think maybe I'm the only one who's intimidated by a house like this!

At the end of the decade we were confronted with the Peircean extremes of performance, work so obsessed with action that it could barely think, and information media, work so highly encoded in symbolic form that it was incapable of affect. Now that digital editing could alter voice and gesture to simulacral perfection, the apparent naïveté of appearing live before

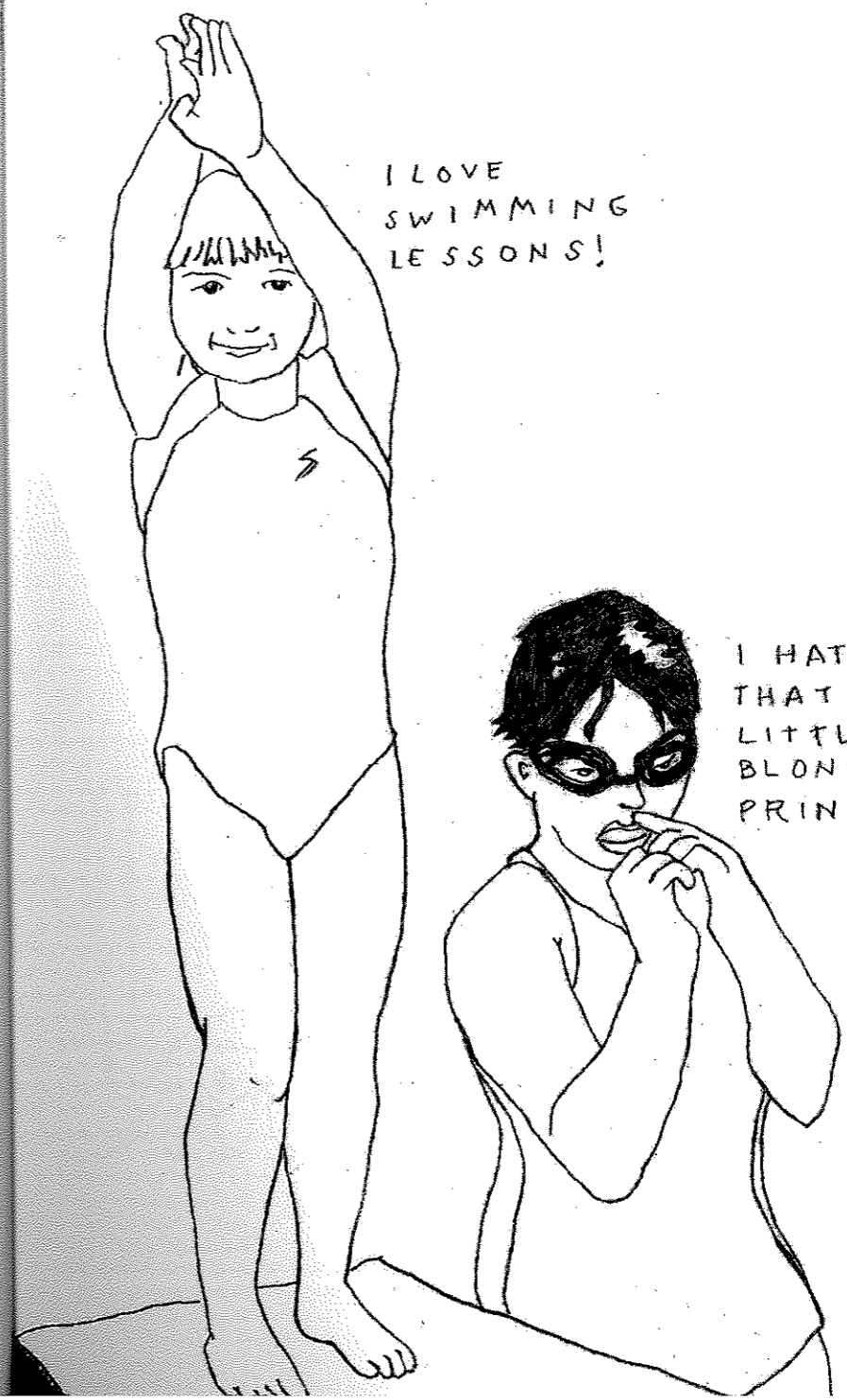
the camera's witness had a new urgency. Emily Vey Duke, Anne McGuire, and other artists exhibited pure affect for the camera, in performances whose virtue was in being as spontaneous as the single-take exhibitionism of their '70s forebears. Ironically, it was mostly thanks to digital editing that Hollywood movies, as always belatedly stealing ideas from independent artists, found new ways to produce affective responses in the audience. At the extreme of Thirdness, artists moved to the small screen and concentrated information with such density that it could no longer be processed as information, but only affect. This time, however, the body experiencing hot flashes was not human but silicon-based. Attacked by hell.com, jodi.org, Shu Lea Cheang's *Brandon* website, and other online artworks, computers jittered with illegible information, sprouted rashes of windows on their faces, and crashed. Their human caretakers felt this affective rush, at most, sympathetically.

At the end of the decade, everybody was saying we had moved decisively from a visual culture to an information culture. What, then, would become the role of the audiovisual media that artists had been coddling and pummeling throughout the decade, indeed the century? Now that we had machines to see, hear, and act for us, raw experience was a more precious commodity than ever before. The processing of information and the debased notion of interactivity were behaviorist, Secondness-based modes, which besides our computers could do without us. Throughout the decade, experimental film and video artists had been pulling their media from the Secondness-based modes of narrative and critique to a Firstness that was felt only in the body, and a hyper-symbolic Thirdness that was experienced as First by the proxy bodies of our machines. We hoped that new connections, new mental images, some Third thing as yet unimagined, would come to animate our minds again.





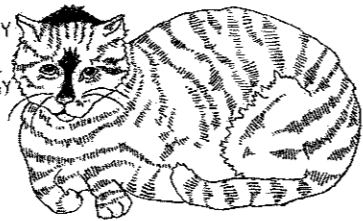
WE SHOULD STAND BACK HERE —
I THINK SHE'S GOT
"LOW SELF ESTEEM".



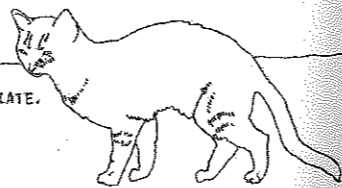
I LOVE
SWIMMING
LESSONS!

I HATE
THAT
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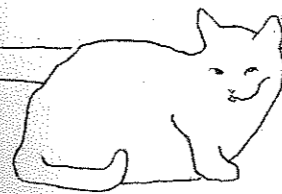
NOTHING I SAY
IS GOING TO
MAKE YOU FEEL
BETTER ANYWAY



THAT'S
JUST
BECAUSE
YOU'RE
INARTICULATE.



YOU LOOK LIKE A
TRAMP.



I PUT ON
LIPSTICK

