

INFERMENTAL 7

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Landscapes of Address

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This ninth edition of *Infermental*, issued first in 1980 as a video magazine by Gabor and Vera Bódy from Berlin, presents in 1988 the videotapes of 58 artists, collected and edited in Buffalo, New York. As an internationally solicited project, *Infermental* affords its editors the opportunity to review at one time an unusually broad range of work. As a juror encountering such a field, I found myself caught up with issues concerning the tapes' various modes of address. I was curious as to whether we would find a broad menu of video "dialects" or rather be impressed by some predictable and legible gestures, suggesting perhaps a widespread engagement with a particular art discourse or a desire for visibility to a specific audience. Perhaps modes of address is presently an American cultural preoccupation, with the clamor of the many markets aggressively demanding our attention within our commodity-driven lives. But more and more it seems that video artists do have to gamble the inspiration, production, and reception of their work in a field that demands their weighing of the resources (tools and audiences) offered by a confidently established television industry against a less centralized art and/or alternative cultural or informational scene.

Included in this show is work which claims for itself the gesture (or responsibility) of critiquing the center — with its intense commitments of resources and capital, its most distanced and calculated manipulations and ironies, and its considerable audience. Other work participates in or aspires to a decentralized intimacy with its place of operations — that place affording the artist an option to manage his/her own tools and/or to perform to more specific audiences. Well-tempered critiques as well as fits of frustration are offered in this exhibition. Deconstructed (re)presentations of popular and "good" taste (Foreman & Harper, Coerper) as well as the assertive voices of the marginal, the child, the humiliated, and the dispossessed (Hahnemann, Würzer, Oursler, Grupo Chaski) are projected. Other work chooses to present a shifting voice — as Margaret Ahwesh in *I Ride a Pony Named Flame* alternates the gestures of "Margie's" apparently autobiographical performance with a script of postures from a generic blue jeans advertisement.

Much of the artists' work in this show reflects or directly concerns itself in some way with the cultural co-presence of commercial television. At a time, at least in the U.S., when almost anything that finds itself in the mainstream media is first intentionally considered or "read" as entertainment, how are other modes of address established or coded? How are subtexts identified? And what role do the tools of address themselves play in delivering to a video or TV audience a subtext about entertainment, comfort, and who's in charge? Volker Anding's *Kelvin* references the generic Philistine TV watcher, beer can in hand-legible self-mocking emblems for any regular TV viewer. The comfortable and sublime state which the caveman achieves upon accessing his heavenly monitor is underscored by Anding's own use of high-end production tools, for they too signal or offer to an artist the potential security of reaching

a large audience — of which Anding's protagonist is a caricatured member. Rob Danielson's *Opposite Effects*, produced for public access television (first come, first served access to TV production tools) forswears the promise of a wide audience in documenting a performance which remains closely tied to a decentralized or intimate articulation of place — Milwaukee, Wisconsin's West Side neighborhoods. Danielson selects to both expose and explore the security of TV watching directly with the local cable TV audience. Simple access to media tools in order to address a large or specific audience remains an issue for many independents and minority media-makers, such as those working through Britain's Channel 4 Workshops (Lopez & Potter), as a collective in Peru (Grupo Chaski) and then through a North American curator/distributor (Karen Ranucci), or in a theater group working simply on VHS in a Moscow apartment (Teatr & Team), also with distribution assistance from outside (Vera Bódy).

In an international forum issues surrounding language emerge, whether the focus is on the spoken language of address (e.g. English, German, Spanish), or the reigning art discourse ringing in the heads of the jurors during the selection process. Additionally, the cognitive modality of address conjures up issues of legibility — through what attentional territory does the artist provide the audience with the most activity or invention? Does the viewer find him/herself in a visually articulated image terrain, where language serves primarily as a subtext (Oursler)? Is the tape engaged with sound instead of language (Steina)? Or, as in the case of most music videos, is attention finally shifted from the sound (music) to an illustrative visual "sub" text, which serves essentially to iconicize the sounds as (music) commodity (Foreman & Harper, Vrana)?

Make Idemitsu's *Yoji, What's Wrong With You?* examines the Japanese "salaryman's" family within the current economic climate, and especially the woman in her roles of mother and mother-in-law. Idemitsu's intimations of sexual encounters between mothers and sons may find a Western audience interested but not shocked — as incest (though more likely father-daughter) as well as women's issues are presented on TV and in art in the West, and Japanese social problems are not pressing on other national media agendas. However, it was suggested that within Japan these observations, critical of the social fabric, would be received by most audiences as "spiritual pornography", a strong indictment. Julie Zando's *Hey, Bud* can be seen as dealing with a re-appropriation of gender-specific codes around voyeurism, violence, and pornography. The two women in party dresses may be immediately legible as models — individuals, but especially women, who play to the cultural (male) gaze. But the women's gestures of intimacy — holding hands, touching — turn out to be sincere and sexual gestures between the two women. Zando's plaintive address "love me" can be startling as a viewer finds that the constructed meaning of the tape changes dramatically depending on how he/she reads the sexual "object" of the performers, thereby delivering shifting perspectives on what might be considered pornographic. Both Zando and Idemitsu address the labile construction of pornography, speaking through fragile representational systems which threaten to be illegible to distant and/or mainstream audiences. Legibility of address is an inevitable concern of both artists and curators in an international forum such as *Infermental*. Certain work may be so particular as to jeopardize some aspect of its visibility when examined from some distant cultural scene or when played to some remote audience. But paradoxically, while this exhibition contacts many places by way of artist or audience, it also inevitably samples and reflects the resource-intense center. There, the promise of certain visibility and legibility develops into a subtext of comfort, entertainment, and predictability, as well as the expression of a common landscape of media images, epidemics, and public agendas.