

Catching up to video at Home and abroad

Tony Conrad

I.

Calculating exposure: vector products

Technology has been mutating so fast that our "software" is always playing catch-up — Gilles Deleuze says that technology is de-territorialization. Paul Virilio comments that

"All current technologies ... produce shorter and shorter distances ... The field of freedom shrinks with speed. And freedom needs a field. When there is no more field ... there will be nothing left but absolute control, in immediacy which will be the worst kind of concentration."¹

Four works bear upon distance and transportation in competing ways: Peter Callas's *Kinema No Yoru* (Film Night) (Australia, 1986), Daniel Minahan's *Aesthetics and/or Transportation* (USA, 1987), Karl-Heinz Hahnemann's *Kaspar Hauser Stirb* (*Kaspar Hauser Dies*) (GDR), and Olhar Eletronico's *Varela In Xingu* (Brazil, 1985).

Peter Callas' work was created during a residency in Tokyo at the Marui Department Store. Its visual material is from 1930's Japanese cartoon figures; they have implications, for Japanese, of imperialist fantasy. When this work appeared on the huge screens in the square outside, facing one of Tokyo's busiest districts, the imperialist themes were muted only by the formalization and decontextualization of the images. This presentational strategy in turn functioned to emphasize the space of the screen and the formal energy of the video medium itself — and in consequence, Callas' topic of address became, legibly, the endocolonization (by imperial Japan) of the space of the TV screen.

He had observed how "television in Tokyo was earnestly engaged in the process of constructing an expansive mental terrain for a city [with] ... rigorously cramped living conditions and intolerably long and impossibly crowded commuting distances", and saw Japanese society responding in turn by implementing "(t)he idea of technology, particularly image-transmitting technology, as territory (in the sense of something to be traversed, lived in or off, colonised ...)"²

"*Aesthetics and/or Transportation*" is a prescient essay by Gregory Battcock which appeared in *Arts* in April, 1974. In Daniel Minahan's videotape with the same name, an intertitle explains how "Vicky Aliata" appeared as Battcock's surrogate (or other?) at the Museum of Modern Art; in the tape, we see "Vicky" reading the essay while Gregory lounges about his hotel room in Puerto Rico with his juicily muscular young traveling companion. The source text emanates a hauntingly post-modern aura; the tape is replete with structural figures that foreground Battcock's thoughts while doubling his (writerly) voice. Overall, Minahan's tape functions as a demonstration of radically diminished distance — not shrunk by technological means, but by shifting the means of measuring: the distance between text and utterance, between idea and culture, between death and life, the mental and the physical, representation and narration -all are telescoped onto collapsing atomic equivalences by the measuring rod of the distance between Battcock's text and Minahan's tape.

The other two tapes, from the German Democratic Republic and Brazil, respectively, both span cultural and political terrain which expands with the viewer's distance. The *Finis* of *Kaspar Hauser Dies* is a mock-heroic tableau of the three principals congratulating one another; we know from this gesture how impossibly distant these artists find themselves from making a "real" movie. By contrast, "Varela", the parody Brazilian newscaster, is superficially so convincing that we (who speak no Portuguese) (and who expect to find Brazilian TV alien

anyhow) are prepared to take this as television, so that the encounter which ensues is doubled for us in its otherness. As we discover that our Indian interviewee sports what may be the most extreme and curious adornment on earth — and as we ponder whether everyone watches the lips as people speak — our point-of-view as spectators is swept up in widening oscillation.

Kaspar Hauser Dies also oscillates before us, but for other reasons. The costuming accoutrements, stylised poses and costumes, and an unstudied faltering realism (as when the sheet is put down for the assault scene to play on) snicker to us that this thing is all pretense; yet the childish naughtiness of these guys going without pants in the country does not mesh with their patent dedication to the portrayal ... What it adds up to is a painfully sweet and insouciant jadedness; a strident contradiction that plays havoc with our sympathies, and leaves us at a loss: what did their audience in Berlin look like? How did they understand this? Our suspended ambiguity is surely as fulfilling as was their self-absorption.

For me, not only does *Kaspar Hauser Dies* falter continuously in its maintenance of narrative distance, but it does not even establish any clear relation to the Kaspar Hauser story. In this absence, another certainty appears: these guys have left the city far behind, and are out in some unlocatable place, far from ... Like Xingu, we don't really know where this is, or where we came from. Both works rest on their material representations of the actual procinematic space; each team of makers has traveled to this place according to an alien plan.

This says nothing to address the crisis of Brazil's Indians, whose welfare is as imperiled as it has been for five hundred years. Ruby Truly's "... *And The Word Was God*" (Canada) is looking for this address, starting from an ikonic pose, in which her role is balanced and ambiguous: part teacher, part pupil, but perhaps more and more a voice over the viewer's shoulder, "Is this real?" "Did they really do this kind of teaching? (brainwashing?)" "What right does this person have to make up a text like this, if it's made up? What right does this person have to use this text like this, if it's not made up?" Self-answering questions.

Truly's vocabulary of technical devices is sophisticated without being glitzy; articulate without being overbearing. The need for a media palette which is pervasively Native American is very great; this need is measured by the urgency of the message which requires it. "The sickening fact of the United States of America hunting down and murdering our women, children, and warriors is still fresh in our minds."³

II. Epidemiology: Voicing Otherness

The independent individual voice is fascinated by the voice of Otherness (witness the contrasting reflections of physical alterity in Paula Levine's *Mirror Mirror* (USA, 1987) and Paul Sharits' *Rapture* (USA, 1986)); our technological colonization of Death "can itself be divided into three different subjects: first, the difficulty of expressing physical pain; second, the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of that difficulty; and third, the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or, more simply, the nature of human creation".⁴

In Mark Wilcox's *Celebrities* (England, 1985) the three of these "subjects" are articulately and intricately interwoven — in a tapestry whose warp is life in the public eye (television), and whose woof is disease and death. Wilcox exploits completely the structural functions of alterity, of the double — his key stitch, with which the viewer finally unravels this thanatopsis. Also remarking on (or in) pain, otherness and loss, Carl Wiedemann's *Illiteracy* (USA, 1987) and Helge Leiberger's *Ferne Gegenden (Distant Adversaries)* (GDR, 1984) foreground anxieties in different but distinctive ways.

The most microscopic Death is the one which insinuates itself into the understanding of narrative gesture — which television has learned to capture. In Dennis Day's *Oh, Nothing* (Canada, 1987), synecdochic and apostrophic constructions accentuate fixations of attention, fluctuations in social ritual, and lost moments of arbitrary reflectiveness; and the "plastic" colors and the simple, "set-up" look of the shots meanwhile pretend to a moderno-postmoderno-modishness ...

To invoke a more essential figure, the tape engages in a logic of trance: fixation; manipulability of the sensorium to serve attentiveness. Julie Zando's elegantly original *Hey, Bud* (USA, 1987) discovers and opens out an unexpectedly gravid conjunction, among sexuality, audience manipulability, and the viewer's (resultant?) conception of self. Michaela Buescher's *Flirting TV* (Germany, 1987) is an inadvertent inversion of *Hey, Bud*; it is implicitly, albeit humorously, asking us to experience the manipulative effect of the viewer on the medium. Advertising, it might be said, has forced (like a backstage mother) the sophistication of media devices which manipulate our attention; if any epidemic can bring us to the point of a microscopic Death, it could be driven by advertising. A sunnier side of the advertising "pathogen" is to be seen in Ardele Lister's *Zoe's Car* (USA, 1986), which delicately pivots the viewer back and forth between disgust and delighted complicity.

The descriptive mechanics of Shawn Usha and Ilana Scherl's *Brasil -External Debt* (USA, 1987); the germane colonial reminders (of U. S. TV imperialism) which spring unbidden from Karen Ranucci's *Cross Section One Afternoon Of Mexican TV* (USA, 1985) (along with the echoing stains of passion and loss which comprise the forgetfully effusive balance of its content); and the insistent logic of Grupo Chaski's *Miss Universe In Peru* (Peru, 1984) — all display how the politically damaged tissue of South American culture has annealed itself tensely to each of the functioning organs of the social order; their shared surface a single tautly featureless cicatrix.

AIDS, whose course seems to us unusually decisive, is in the balance numbingly familiar; for most of recent time, many millions of humans have "fought" uncomprehendingly against devastating odds ... like the North African hunger epidemics, AIDS has struck the defenseless. On the other hand, the peculiar etiology and communicability of AIDS do yoke the problem of its defeat together with the project of media-led civic behavior control. The collectively produced *Testing The Limits* (USA, 1987) is an independent effort in this modality.

III. Exposure, Contagion, Mutability

This year *Infermental 7* will engage a gamut of challenging expectations -from its viewers, its producers, and its makers — as world political conditions and *Infermental's* own ontology have conspired, at a stroke, to secure *Infermental's* function as a major global cultural pipeline. With this year's edition, *Infermental* is for the first time both AT HOME in the U.S. and an expected guest in the Soviet Union.

The youth culture in today's USSR is vividly animated; however, "despite the similarities in fashion and their interests in American music and the latest Western films, young Soviet people today are more reminiscent of the Western generation of the sixties than of their contemporaries in Italy or the United States".⁵ A technological aspect of this generational asynchrony is a comparatively greater engagement with independent film (rather than video) by comparison with western Europeans. Valie Export's appraisal is "that the Americans ... still do experimental film work while the Germans and Austrians stopped it. There is hardly any German experimental film existing".⁶ German and Austrian video art is in abundant evidence; its vitality and strength are clear from the limpidly sarcastic conceptualism of Paula

Coerper's *Die FFF Show* (*The FFF Show*, West Germany, 1986) and in Ursula Pürer and Angela Hans Scheirl's technological inventiveness and crisp composition (*Im Original Farbig* [*Colored in the Original*] [Austria, 1986]).

Africa (in Boris Jochananov's *Afrika as Gagarin* (USSR, 1987)) is the assumed of Sergei Bugaev, a Moscow artist who has become sensationally visible; his paintings share the primitive sexy splashiness of the other Moscow "New Painters", who often work with collage and on temporary surfaces. The New Painters are young; they play in rock groups, do acting; they have made magic marker films. "This movement has coincided with the new possibilities for Soviet rock-culture in the last two years. The resulting phenomenon is not unlike that of the East Village, and has produced a ... younger generation the likes of which Russia has never seen ..."

"The New Painters and Popular Mechanics function more or less as the pop stars of the Soviet Union."⁷ Sara Hornbacher's *Anti-scenes in Panama* (*A Tropical Movie*) (USA, 1985) might help us to remember what New York's art world is like, by comparison. Are these tapes translations of one another? "Peter Nagy as Alan Shepard", and "Land-Skates in Karelia (a Figure-Eight Film)", as it were?

IV. Conversation as Communicability

What is new in the West is the unprecedented counterpressure that has been built up in late years by the companies that manufacture production equipment for consumers. This sector happens to include some of the most aggressive and unregulably novel industries of recent times, whose (independent) consumers are involved in things like computer self-publishing, video production, home music studio production, and interfacing via telephone lines.

The front of this wave of energy is hardware anxiety. Imagine the video makers — beset by unfulfillable production ambitions, incomprehensible technological complexities, equipment frustrations, simplistic audience expectations. Like lovers' jokes about sex, and soldiers' jokes about guns, their ironic tapes twist the world on the spit of the makers' preoccupations. Manfred Neuwirt's *Experten* (*Experts*) (Austria, 1986) takes revenge for the power of knowledge, Volker Anding's *Kelvin* (West Germany, 1987) lets itself lance the viewer. Gary Hill's *Mediations* (USA, 1979/86) assaults and obliterates the hardware directly, and Axel Klepsch, the Tati of tech, in *Augen Zu!* (*Eyes Closed!*) (West Germany, 1986), puts us side by side with the maker.

In describing Pre-Columbian America, Tzvetan Todorov concludes that "the necessary memorization of laws and traditions imposed by the absence of writing determines, as we have seen, the predominance of ritual over improvisation".⁸ Television, of course, dispenses with writing, requires eidetic interpretive sophistication, and achieves audience empathy through devices of recognition, of ritual. Perhaps this is to say that writing (reading) is technologically superior to television — though the practice of each entail parallel trances, analogous social traces. Some works (e.g. David Smith and Lee Murray's *Continuous Entertainment* (USA), Petr Vrana's *Medienpornesie* (*Media Pornetics*) (West Germany, 1987), City Group's *Valvegrind* (New Zealand, 1985/86)) incorporate specific ritual, performance, or quasi-shamanistic elements, which serve to emphasize the works' distance from social norms, or more specifically from text, from writing. Steina's *Lilith* (USA, 1987) uses focalplane shifts and frame-grabbing to enthrall our gaze, to transfix and hypnotize us; then her protagonist, cobra-like, darts across the paradoxical landscape (that has become Steina's signature), with a sibilant and ambiguous voice; her image inscribes, indelibly, the fact of presence, but — ironically and impossibly — without the content or context of presence.

Woody Vasulka's *The Art of Memory* (USA, 1987) is strikingly analogous in its aims, if not in its strategies. The linchpin of the work is his title's invocation of *Ad Herennium* (Anon., ca. 86 BD) — the founding text for the memory techniques of Roman rhetoric — and (more particularly) of Robert Fludd's *Ars Memoria* (1919), which introduced the "Memory Theater".⁹

Juan Downey's *La Madrepatria* (The Motherland) (USA, 1987) is an intimately personal yet "traditionally" artistic (balanced, elegant, judiciously articulate) echo of his Chilean homeland. Here, the interplay between surrealist/ psychological elements and formal design rhythms is translated into a reciprocal but immiscible flow between the intimacy of home and family relationships, on the one hand, and formal societal contexts, on the other.

Armin Heurich's *Last Rites* (USA, 1987) "colonizes" technology — demanding "my tools", over and over, in an overbearing and theatrically authoritative tone — a gesture focused more pointedly by the decontextualizing device of his continuous swish-pan — an invasive gesture that makes of "tools" an Other. This fascination with claiming the terrain of tools functions as a decentralizing mechanism, since it implies ownership, either personal or collective. Heurich has written on the "democratization of the distribution of art tools", with particular (and enthusiastic) attention to the recently-introduced Pixelvision system by Fischer Price (of East Aurora, NY). This complete portable video system, which records on audiocassettes at very low resolution, sells as a children's toy for about \$ 230, monitor included.¹⁰

John Cage once advised, "Don't write music that you can't have performed." Given the choice of a select but tiny audience or "getting on TV", there are reasons to go the Pixelvision route. Valie Export again: "The taboos are increasing. There is always the question if you change it or not. I don't have to change it, but then they wouldn't have broadcasted it or there would have been problems with the contract. On the other hand they can simply cut it out since they own the rights."¹¹

1 Virilio, Paul, and Sylvere Lotringer, *Pure War*, tr. Mark Polizotti. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983. Pp. 68—9.

2 Callas, Peter, "Technology as Territory/Video and Desire in Japan." Fremantle, Western Australia; Praxis: 1987. Exhibition catalog. Emphasis added.

3 Heap of Birds, Edgar. "Sharp Rocks", in Wallis, Brian, ed. *Blasted Alkgories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*. New York, Cambridge Massachusetts, London: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, MIT; 1987. Pp. 170—3.

4 Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1985. P. 3.

5 Kagarlitsky, Boris. "The Inteligentsia and the Changes", tr. Brian Pearce. *Neu, Left Review* 164, 1987. P. 5—16.

6 Sommer, Ines. "Valie Export Interviews." Chicago: RNperimental Film Coalition Newsletter 4:2, June 1987. P. 3.

7 Caley, Shaun. "To Russia with Love", *Flash Art* 137, 1987. Pp. 86—8.

8 Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, tr. Richard Howard. Harper & Row, 1987. Pp. 156—8.

9 See also Yates, Frances A. *The Art of Memory*, 1966.

10 See Heurich, Armin. "Quakervision." *Buffalo: The Squealer* Dec 87/Jan 88. P. 6.

11 Sommer, Ines. *Op. cit.*, P. 4.