

Vtape presents

CURATORIAL

INCUBATOR

ROUND II

January 18 - March 25, 2005  
Vtape Video Salon, 401 Richmond, suite 452



An Introduction by Lisa Steele  
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, VTape

This year the Curatorial Incubator (round II) took a different path - a comparison between Canadian and international video art. It started a couple of years ago when Vtape Managing Director Wanda Vanderstoop noted that, while Vtape is primarily known to represent Canadian artists, few curators, educators and general public users knew about the work of international artists available at Vtape.

The result is the Curatorial Incubator, round II. In May 2004, we did an open call to young artists, curators and artist/curators for proposals to construct programmes that paired the work of Canadian video artists with international artists.

We received over 70 submissions. These were juried by Ben Portis, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Orla La-Wayne-Garriques, Vtape Board member and independent curator, and Lisa Steele, Vtape Creative Director. It was a strong field of candidates. We arrived at 5 young curators and artist/curators who were invited to participate. They came with amazing experience and interests, diverse and particular to their immediate circumstances. Some came directly from under-grad programmes in visual art or art history; others came from post-grad programmes in curatorial studies; some had organized festivals; some had organized exhibitions. All evidenced intense focus in the media arts.

Over the summer, we offered 3 workshops for the Curatorial Incubator, round II participants to acquaint them with various curatorial strategies. All the workshop presenters had experience with programming the work of Canadian artists in relation to international artists. They were: Ben Portis, AGO curator; Chris Gehman, former programmer for the Images Festival in Toronto; and Anne Golden, festival programmer from Montreal.

Each of the 5 selected participants did extensive research. Each arrived at intriguing pairings of works that opened up their specific fields of inquiry. Each is unique and individual. Each is highly personal. And, most important, each is surely accessible to the public. In addressing the matter at hand, each participant opened up her/his own (highly individual, highly personal, sometimes specifically personal) field of interest to the scrutiny of the public.

We are grateful for their honesty.

Their selections made, each participant produced a substantial essay on their choices. The resulting written works were edited by AGO curators Ben Portis and Michelle Jacques, and Lillian Allen, award-winning dub poet and educator.

Vtape is proud to present the curatorial series of the Curatorial Incubator, round II. Each programme is focused on the particular issues - be they formal, content-oriented, or personal - of importance to the curator; each is specific to the artist, the curator, the artist/curator's dreams. We are proud to enter into this dreamscape. It is, we believe, the future.

The Ties That Bind: Motherhood in Performance  
Videos by Ulrike Rosenbach and Mirha-Soleil Ross  
MEREDITH DAULT

At the edges of the Pacific Ocean, the Golden Gate Bridge looming postcard-like in the background, a woman frolics in the waves. She is the picture of radiant happiness. Caught in the light, carefree place where, sea water lapping at the toes, women slip back to girlhood, she skips and twirls and laughs her way along the beach in slow-motion, hair and dress streaming out behind her. She appears pregnant; enjoying what might be the last few weeks of freedom before the demands of motherhood shackle her to responsibility. The woman smiles with warmth and familiarity at the person behind the camera-perhaps the father of the child-and it's clear that she is enjoying her performance. Indeed, the woman seems conscious of the perfection of the setting and the fact that she is starring in the paragon of family film footage, giving the kind of woman-with-child performance that her grandchildren will one day watch fondly, the beauteous moment embellished in family history.

Only there won't be any grandchildren, because there is no baby. The woman is Toronto-based performance artist Mirha-Soleil Ross and she is, in her own words, "performing pregnancy". Ross, a transsexual, appeared pregnant every time she was in public from May 2001 to February 2002, the normal nine-month human gestation period. The Pregnancy Project, a performable art cycle, was conceived to explore transsexual women's relationships to motherhood and reproductive technologies. Created together with her life partner Mark Karbusicky, **ALLO PERFORMANCE!** is the thirteen-minute beach-frolicking video piece that was produced to be part of it. The voice of the artist's mother supplies the soundtrack. Over the course of the performance, she describes, in a deliciously unsophisticated French Canadian lilt, what it was like to be pregnant and to give birth to Mirha-Soleil.

Thirty years earlier, in 1972, ground-breaking German video artist Ulrike Rosenbach sat down in front of a camera and performed her own testament to motherhood, **Wrapping with Julia (Einwicklung mit Julia)**. Nestling her young daughter in her lap-Julia looks to be four or five years old-self-consciously facing the camera, Rosenbach proceeds, over the course of five minutes, to bind their bodies together with what looks like a large fabric bandage. Because of the position of the child on her mother's lap, Rosenbach seems to be reattaching the girl to her body. Every time her mother encircles their bodies with the bandage, young Julia is required to lift her arms up in front of her, allowing the fabric to pass without constricting them. The performance is eerie and rhythmic and is accompanied by the sound of exaggerated breathing, timed perfectly to coincide with Julia's arm movements. Once bound, Rosenbach shifts in her seat, turning the pair towards the audience and allowing a side view of the reattached mother and child.

In the brief existence of video art, thirty years is a yawning historical chasm separated by huge social and technological distances, yet Ulrike Rosenbach's binding rite, and Mirha-Soleil Ross's pregnancy performance play out a remarkably ageless theme. There are, naturally, the



Ulrike Rosenbach - Wrapping with Julia (Einwicklung mit Julia), 1972



obvious connections. Most significantly, both videos document artists performing for the camera, both investigating notions of staged pregnancy, be it in Mirha-Soleil Ross's obvious wearing of the mother-to-be costume, or in Rosenbach's more subtle and suggestive re-binding of child to body. We see issues relating to motherhood-particularly the bonds between mothers and their children - being investigated in both pieces on a number of levels. The two videos even speak to one another through their use of rhythm and visual treatment.

Mother-daughter relationships have been the subject of literature, film, and therapy sessions for countless years. There is something inherently fascinating in the notion of the woman and her female offspring, the child being a kind of physical embodiment of the mother's own youth, the negative associations roaring to life as the child ages, when she ultimately morphs drearily into her mother. A daughter's growing up is also the ultimate signifier of a mother's own slow creeping towards death.

Watching a mother symbolically unite her growing daughter's torso to her own then, as Ulrike Rosenbach does in *Wrapping with Julia*, is both poignant and disturbing. Is she trying to stop the hands of time, binding her developing daughter like the feet of aristocratic women in Ancient China? It's as if, having watched her daughter grow to her current age and size, the mother is now saying symbolically, "That's enough. I'm going to keep you here". Ultimately, Rosenbach says something about the nature and power of the mother-daughter relationship. With her daughter seated on her lap, Rosenbach is a kind of tongue-in-cheek Madonna, the definitive, iconic mother figure.

Although *Wrapping with Julia* may be based in a more direct emotional investigation of motherhood, the result is decidedly clinical. Cold and calculated, the five-minute segment has the methodical pace of a science experiment. One cannot help but be struck by the minimalism of the exchange, by the hypnotic manner in which the wrapping unfurls. The viewer detects little rapport between mother and daughter. There's a self-consciousness to the action - the performers clearly watching themselves, the child fidgeting - as the wrapping takes place. It may well be in part due to the nature of early video work. One imagines that for Rosenbach, the act of binding her daughter to herself - in performing the ritual - may have been more important at the time than the aesthetics of the piece. Ulrike Rosenbach was, after all, one of the first German artists to experiment with video technology, not only for documenting purposes, but also for making art using electronic images and sounds. *Wrapping with Julia* was one of her early pieces. Rosenbach, who studied with Joseph Beuys in Dusseldorf in the 1960s, went on to make dozens of other video works, as well as to enact a vast number of performances, many of them documented on tape.


In *ALLO PERFORMANCE!* motherhood plays out both in the artist's performance and in her mother's voice-over, wherein she muses about the trials of being pregnant with, and ultimately raising the very person we are watching onscreen. Mirha-Soleil Ross, a well known transsexual activist and performer, was born male into a working class, French Canadian family. *ALLO PERFORMANCE!* is a highly personal video. Using

documentary-style storytelling and a light, witty touch, the thirteen-minute piece takes us on a mother's journey, documenting her experiences of pregnancy and the bearing of her child, to watching that child grow up. But there is more to it than that-though her commentary is entertaining in the unceremonious view it takes on childbearing and childrearing, it is initially little more than benign storytelling, amusing chitchat. We laugh right along with her as she tells stories of her banana cravings while pregnant or her husband's beer-soaked glee at becoming a father. We laugh because the stories are funny. But we're also laughing at her delivery-at her blue-collar, French Canadian twang, and at her uncouth language. The storytelling ultimately takes on a deeper emotional engagement when Ross's mother starts to describe her boy-child's love of dolls, his feminine face, his girlish mannerisms: "I tried all kinds of clothes on your back but you looked like a girl, you never looked like a boy. People would ask, 'Are you a little boy or a little girl?' cause you had a high-pitched voice and the postures of a girl." At this point, if we haven't realized it already, it starts to become clear that this mother is speaking frankly about the boy who was *and* the woman now onscreen before us. It is also at this point that the piece becomes subtly political, raising questions about nature vs. nurture and gender fluidity.

The story is so successful because it deals with something few have experienced. It tells us, in language we can understand and relax with, about raising a child while watching it wrestle with questions of gender. Mirha-Soleil Ross's mother, though an undereducated, working class woman, makes it clear that her child didn't make the decision to become female; it was predestined: "What do you want me to tell you! It's destiny. Our destiny is traced in advance and that's it, that's all. There's nothing we can do about it. You didn't ask to be that way either." She also makes it quite clear that she accepts that fate, embracing her child's new life and identity, speaking warmly about her male partner. This is a refreshingly open-minded attitude that dispels easy stereotypes of working class ignorance and bigotry.

Of course there is a poignancy in the fact that Mirha-Soleil Ross, a transsexual woman, will never bear her own biological children. Near the end of the tape, her own mother speaks, laughingly though with an underlying sadness, about her daughter's pregnancy performances, which she doesn't entirely understand. At the same time, she contemplates that she will never have grandchildren either: "Of course, we sometimes think about it when we see someone who's just become a grandmother or when someone asks: 'what? You still aren't a grandmother?' So we answer that no, that our daughter is not able to have children. What else can we say? For sure it hurts a little not being a grandmother but destiny is destiny. We can't change anything."

Both *ALLO PERFORMANCE!* and *Wrapping with Julia* are solidly grounded in visual rhythm, though to different effect. What makes *Wrapping with Julia* so unsettling is that although it is based in a strong mother-daughter union, the video, when looked at in a certain light, does not soothe. Indeed, there's something quite unsettling about the whole piece. Rosenbach may even be perceived as aggressive in her actions.



**You didn't play with trucks, just with dolls.  
So I wasn't a total fool either.**

Mirha-Soleil Ross - ALLO PERFORMANCE!, 2002

Instead of freeing her child, she binds Julia, holding her daughter prisoner to her own needs. Suddenly, mother stops being a comforter and starts to become a threat. The loud rhythmic sighing/breathing of the soundtrack becomes a sort of lullaby turned on its head, calming yet disturbing. One imagines the sound of someone trying to breathe through a plastic bag, desperate to get enough air into the lungs.

In *ALLO PERFORMANCE!*, breathing manifests itself in the rolling waves, sighing onto the shoreline, superimposed so they appear to flow into the scene from all sides, flooding then receding. Although we don't always hear them, they imbue the scene with a distinctive atmosphere and visual pace. Of course waves have been classically associated with women, the tides intrinsically linked to the waxing and waning of the moon and thus to the menstrual cycle, female fluids even compared to the saltiness of the sea and its rocking, lulling waters.

Although having been produced thirty years apart, *Wrapping with Julia* and *ALLO PERFORMANCE!* seem to speak to one another in terms of visual language. Both works, shot in black and white, share the gray graininess of antiquated home movie footage. Today, video has become a medium inexorably connected to the capture and creation of family memories. Both Ulrike Rosenbach and Mirha-Soleil Ross are telling their own tales of family, but reassemble the personal into a work of art that has a very public destination.

So what makes a mother? Both *ALLO PERFORMANCE!* and *Wrapping with Julia* challenge conventional notions as to what motherhood looks like. These are not the mothers of so many Hallmark cards, plumped up with pillows, awaiting breakfast in bed brought in by fair-haired, rosy-faced children. In both videos, we experience a motherhood as performance, falsified by the very fact that it is being performed. Both feel raw and accessible-and perhaps that much more real-because they are propelled along by genuine emotions and ideas, based in one of the most significant of all human relationships, the connection between mother and child. Whether it's a woman engaging with her young daughter in a performance for the camera, or a mother's voice providing a backdrop to a transsexual woman's staging of pregnancy, one thing seems certain: mothers never stop being mothers, even as their children grow up and away from them, even when their boys blossom into beautiful women.



## Black Beyond Essentialist Stereotypes

REINALDO JORDAN

"In the 18th century slaves like Philip Witley read poems to prove he was human, to prove that we [black people] weren't furniture, to prove that we weren't robots, to prove that we weren't animals"  
Kodjo Eshun in *The Last Angel of History*

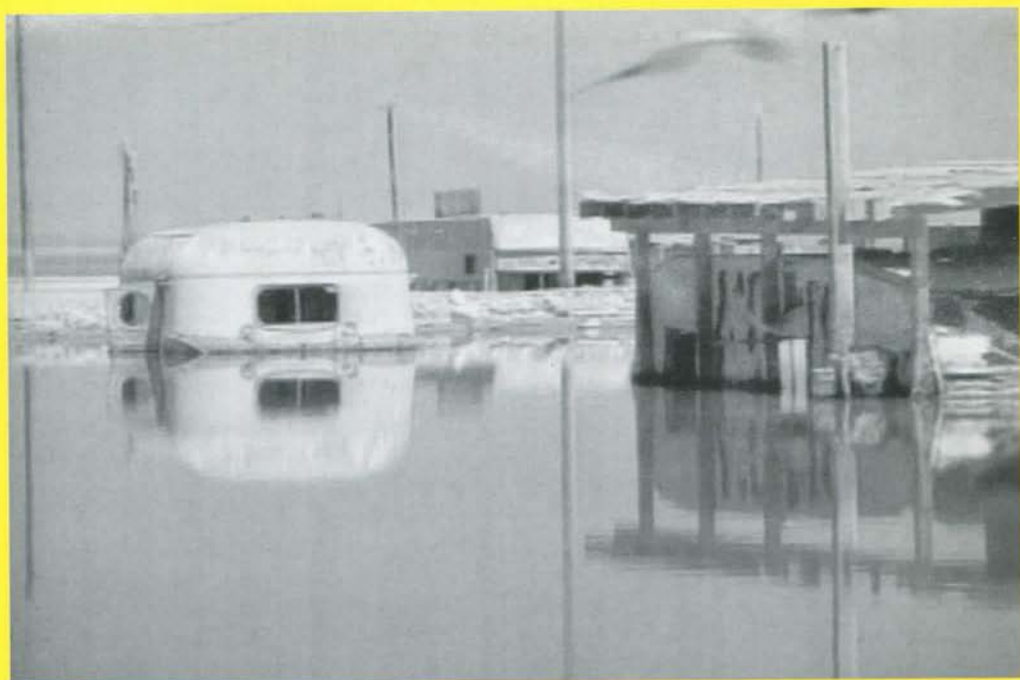
### Black in relation to a definitive white standard

Assuming an identity partly depends upon our alignment to socially constructed standards that represent who we ought to be by way of comparison to the characteristics that they uphold. These standards can be conceptualized in ways that are too narrow and homogenous to encompass the constantly changing and complex lived experiences of individuals and their community members. Even though the concept of race and racial superiority is no longer considered to be scientifically valid, the identity of a black person is still conditioned by white-supremacist discourses that assert that black people are a biologically and culturally inferior race. At the same time, standing at the other end of the spectrum there are essentialist Black Nationalist discourses that react against anti-black racism by asserting that Black people are a racially superior race whose cultural identity is founded in accordance to the model of the patriarchal heterosexual black family.

Both of these stereotypical constructions create simplistic and homogenous narratives that cannot be useful in defining individual and collective identities. Under these confining categorizations, the identity of the black subject is conditioned by discourses that assert the superiority of the white race as well as the universality of the patriarchal heterosexual black family. Both of these imposing discourses amalgamate rigid and definitive characteristics that confine the identity of an individual to homogenous categorizations. As a result, they contribute to creating a sense of alienation, as the individual is not suitably represented by either subjective definition.

To better illustrate the restrictive characteristics of stereotypical categorizations, I have chosen two works to exhibit in Vtape's Video Salon that demonstrate the incompetence of stereotypes in constructing the identity of black subjects. Both John Akomfrah's film, *The Last Angel of History* and Jason Ebanks' video entitled *Home* speak up and break the silencing and excluding character of essentialist narratives. Ghanian-born, London-based filmmaker Akomfrah's *The Last Angel of History* is a documentary essay that analyses how socio-political factors contribute to the subjective alienation of the African diaspora. Toronto-based Ebanks' video documents responses that describe various black people's understanding of home. In this case, home emerges as a reference point that describes their understandings of origin.

When concepts such as origin and alienation are analyzed in relation to stereotypical subjective categorizations, they are able to reveal how unsuitable stereotypes can be in constructing the identities of black subjects. If stereotypical racial constructions condition our understanding of self-our home, who we are - they also contribute to creating a sense that we inhabit identities that are not



John Akomfrah - The Last Angel of History, 1996

able to encompass the diversity which is present in our daily lives as well as in our complex cultural histories. As a result, black people by virtue of our humanity and multiple identities, cannot be limited to such homogenous - and ultimately racist - constructions. For instance, consider that stereotypes exist to justify, grasp and organize behaviours and actions that are compared and contrasted in relation to a 'norm.' Though the particular characteristics of the norm vary through different time periods, they are constantly based upon the preposition of the racial supremacy of the white race and cultural superiority of Eurocentric values. This categorical norm is a construction rooted within the history of modern European imperialist expansion, and the politics that have conditioned the identity of black people in the slavery and post slavery period. Consequently, it is only logical then that stereotyping forms part of the power relations that condition our society. Stereotypes have served to construct the identity of black people as racially inferior beings in comparison to the stereotypically constructed and superior white subjects. In an effort to construct the inferiority of black people as racialized subjects, stereotyping resorts to that which it negates - heterogeneity and diversity - as the means to create an illusionary and discrepant understanding. Stereotypical constructions appear natural by their claim to a set of 'irregularities' and differences that become the illusionary elements through which generalizations are justified and differences constructed.

The manner in which *The Last Angel of History* and *Home* profile the identities of black subjects opens up the narratives that stereotypical constructs seek to maintain as closed. These narratives are defined by the various geo-political events and overlapping identities that condition our understanding of self. For instance, *Home* emerges as a question-and-answer documentation that highlights the voices that are silenced through the essentialist narratives conditioning the stereotypical categorization of black people. Ebanks' work alters the subjective terms of engagement that are characteristic of stereotypical modes of representation. In contrast to the process of stereotypical categorization that engages with the subject with the intent of homogenizing and negating diversity, Ebanks' utilizes his documentary as a vehicle for reflecting on the world in a way that also renders an image of himself: by looking out, he is able to look in. Ebanks does not attempt to render his subjects as objects that serve to legitimize his constructed identity.

Ebanks transgresses the stereotypical equation, as his aim is not to present generalized, one-sided conceptualized characteristics that define black people. *Home* is composed of interviews of a diverse group of people whose answers reveal both similarities and differences. There is no intention to equate 'all the black people' in the video within a subjective-objective categorization strategy. They are not categorized under the umbrella of blackness for homogenizing purposes, but rather the video captures their understandings along with their names in ways that associates their varied and individual responses with diversified images of blackness. In capturing the worldviews of some of the people that surround him in his everyday life, Ebanks is also speaking about himself not through contrast and distancing

but instead through engagement with the people he interviews. As a result, *Home* constructs a narrative that recognizes the diversity and complexity of the subject with whom it interacts. In presenting a part of himself which is complex and not purely objectified, Ebanks paints a picture of blackness that is not constrained by the imposition of homogenized categorization that would serve to define his superiority at the cost of others.

**Black in relation to the traditional-patriarchal black family**

"The form itself, the convention of the narrative in science fiction, the way it deals with the subject; it comes from someone who is at odds with the apparatus of power in this society and whose profound experience is one of cultural dislocation, alienation and estrangement."

Greg Tate in *The Last Angel of History*

In some of the essentialist discourses emerging out of the politics of Black Nationalism, the image of the 'traditional' heterosexual black family serves as the standard upon which the cultural identity of blackness is to be modeled. Within this understanding, the patriarchal family stands as a central element that shelters black collectivity. Black as a conditioning element to the cultural identity of subjects of the African diaspora is narrated along the lines of a journey back to pre-slavery African civilizations. Much of the purpose of this cultural narrative is to assert an affirmative sense of intellectual agency to black people that has been denied through white-supremacist racist stereotypical constructions ever since slavery.

Within the discourses that define this nationalistic narrative, a prototypical patriarchal family looks towards a mystical and overtly positive image of Africa. As Paul Gilroy asserts: "It is deeply significant that ideas about masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are so prominent in this redemptive journey. The integrity of the race is thus made interchangeable with the integrity of black masculinity, which must be regenerated at all costs". Under this construction, similar to the stereotypical constructions characteristic of anti-black racist categorizations, exclusion through the modes of definition confine blackness within the symbolisms and value systems that support patriarchy. Black subjectivity that stands outside of this constructed boundary is muted through the definitive terms that construct the image of blackness.

Within this confined space, *The Last Angel of History* wedges itself in order to transgress multiple categorical boundaries by bringing into the discussion the conditions that form a sense of alienation in the identity of black subjects. Akomfrah explicitly engages with the language that allows for criticism to emerge and counteract the exclusionary claims coming from both Eurocentric and Afrocentric essentialist nationalist discourses. In his work, science fiction serves as a backdrop through which alienation from both the white and black essentialist discourses can be contested.

Akomfrah highlights cultural dislocation, alienation and estrangement as three of the social tenets that condition the socio-cultural experience of the African diaspora. While he maps the boundaries that set out the cultural geography of the African diaspora, Akomfrah acknowledges





Jason Ebanks - Home, 2004

the various and overlapping identities that condition black people as social subjects. At the same time, he highlights the sense of alienation that influences the culture of the African diaspora while projecting the images and voices of excluded subjects. In *The Last Angel of History*, lacking a sense of cultural and national belonging is discussed in relation to the individuals whose identities position them at odds with the structures of power. While speaking on alienation and marginalization of black subjects, he presents Manuel Delany and Octavia Butler, both science fiction writers who also assume identities that stand outside of boundaries set out by essentialist narratives. In the film, Butler stands as a feminist black woman and Delany as gay black male. Akomfrah also features the worldviews of artists whose works center on a quest to transgress the confining boundaries that condition their surroundings.

Both *Home* and *The Last Angel of History* speak along similar lines by presenting images and voices that challenge the rhetoric attempting to validate stereotyping as a viable and generalizing categorical process. Both characterize stereotypes as oversimplifications, revealing their tendency to construct identities that deny diversity and serve as naturalizing agents for social marginalization. Both Ebanks and Akomfrah utilize their documentaries as openings through which they project an image of themselves as black subjects, with diverse and complex identities that counteract the hegemonic claims and power relations conditioning present day social interactions.



Jennifer Matotek on the inner pairings of Keith Sanborn's *Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft* [Critique of Reiner's Judgement] and Eduardo Menz's *Las Mujeres do Pinochet* (Pinochet's Women)  
JENNIFER MATOTEK

## Introduction

The works of Eduardo Menz and Keith Sanborn show more than they show. Sanborn's *Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft* [Critique of Reiner's Judgement] and Menz's *Las Mujeres de Pinochet* (Pinochet's Women) take visual material culled from one nation's popular culture and structure it to mean something different through the employment, alteration and repetition of text and sound, camera movements and focus.

I like watching the two works together because they are personal, yet political. They provoke emotional and intellectual responses. Their similar structures and deceptive simplicity intrigue me. Sanborn constructs a complex and confounding statement, Menz composes a clever and critical indictment.

*Let me illustrate my interest in structure. If this were grade ten English class, the above paragraph would break down as follows:*

*Thesis: The selected works show more than they show and exhibit similar structures.*

*Method Points: To prove the above thesis, I will compare and contrast each artist's treatment and/or use of:*

1. a. Subtitles/text,  
b. audio/sound,  
c. camera movement and focus
2. Repetition
3. Found footage

*Conclusion: A paraphrase of my initial thesis.*

*I will prove this thesis in 2500 words or less.*

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## 1. a. Subtitles/Text

Keith Sanborn's work, *Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft* [Critique of Reiner's Judgement], is available in three different formats. I chose to exhibit the third format, which features the German language version without subtitles, followed by the German language version with subtitles, for two reasons. First, I chose the third format because it is the artist's preference. Second, I chose the third format because I prefer the viewing experience.

I like the absurdity of the young boy in Austrian folk costume, on a stage covered in bales of hay, playing the accordion to a clapping studio audience. I like the seductive, unfamiliar lilt and rhythm of the German language. I pathetically translate by pulling out words that sound like names, places, and numbers. I break words into syllables, compare them to English words, and cross-reference stray syllables with fragments of French and Latin. I like having

the experience barely demystified as the piece cycles again with subtitles that don't explicitly decipher the significance of the work.

The English subtitles used in Eduardo Menz's Spanish language work, *Las Mujeres de Pinochet (Pinochet's Women)*, also don't function as expected. The visual, audio, and textual components of the piece exist in two halves. The first half features one cycle of images, text, and sound repeated nineteen times. The second half features another cycle of images, text and sound repeated nineteen times. As the first half opens, the subtitles are so large only single words like "beaten," "drenched," "lit," and "abandon" are decipherable. With each cycle, the size of the image increases, the audio increases, the text reduces until the subtitles become legible for a single cycle, and then dwindle in size. The opposite happens in the second half: with each cycle the size of the image decreases, the audio decreases, the text increases until the subtitles become legible for a single cycle, and then grow so large only single words like "commemoration," "beauty," "Chilean," and "Miss Universe" are decipherable. As the text moves backward and forward, shrinks and grows, I experience the seduction of an unfamiliar lilt and rhythm - and I contemplate how the text of Menz's syllabic fragments strangely mirror my translation experience of the un-subtitled first half of Sanborn's piece.

The subtitles in the translated portion of *Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft [Critique of Reiner's Judgment]*, elaborate on things the viewer has likely figured out - that the accordion-playing boy is competing for the best score from a panel of judges. The subtitles indicate that one of the pseudo-celebrity judges, "folk musician extraordinaire" Reiner Zwanzleitner, finds the boy's accentuation and rhythm "overdone." After introducing the other judges, the subtitles showcase the emcee prattling: "Things are running nicely. I'm very pleased with how things are going."

The textual elements of Sanborn and Menz's pieces are as meaningful when absent or seeming to malfunction, as they are when present. The same is true of the audio component of each work.

### 1. b. Audio/Sound

Sanborn minimally alters the audio track of his found footage to ensure the ambiguity of his piece. The work opens with a live performance of "The Mountain Goat Hunter's March" - a song that might be meaningful to someone versed in the peculiarities of Austrian folk music, but a song that sounds to the untrained ear indistinguishable from any other Eastern European folk song for the accordion. The goofy sincerity of the boy's performance is undercut by the "perverse seriousness"<sup>1</sup> of Zwanzleitner's critique and the audience's non-verbal responses to his remarks. The video's conclusion marks Sanborn's sole audio alteration: an abrupt fade to silence, a fade that confirms Reiner Zwanzleitner's critique as the video's climax, and begs two questions: Why might Reiner's critique be significant? Why has Sanborn concluded the piece at the specific moment when the contest's host introduces "the assistant state deputy"?

Menz alters the audio tracks of his two pieces of found



footage in three ways: he transposes each half's audio and visual components, he accompanies the sounds of people speaking with music, and he gradually increases and decreases volume. Silence opens the first half, and as the audio grows louder, the viewer hears a woman speak with straightforward conviction to the sound of cameras clicking, people clapping, and dark strains of music. Subtitles pull back slowly to reveal her experience of being burned alive by the Chilean military, juxtaposed with images of a woman in a "Miss Universe" sash receiving an unknown commendation from two officials: one male, Augusto Pinochet, and one female wearing a red suit. Loud guitar strains open the second half of the piece, complimented by a journalist's introduction to former dictator Augusto Pinochet's reception for the Chilean Miss Universe and images of a woman with a burned face speaking at a press conference. It is clear by the fourth cycle of the second part, that the moving image of each half has been swapped with the sound and subtitles of the other half.

### 1. c. Camera movement and focus

Over the first half of *Las Mujeres*, Menz's camera moves slowly toward his footage, like a child stepping towards a television set playing across a dark room. His first edit captures the footage as a near-sighted blur, cycles in closer to achieve a focused picture, and then slowly moves into the green, red, and blue phosphor strips that make up a colour television's image. Over the second half, pixels are fluffed like a bed sheet and reborn, as Menz's camera moves slowly away from his footage, momentarily revealing a distinct image before fading into the same myopic blur where the first half of the piece began. Manipulated text, visuals, and audio create, and then solve, a visual and aural puzzle critiquing the hypocrisy and violence of the Pinochet regime.

Sanborn, like Menz, alters his found footage with forward-creeping camera movements - but where Menz's movements are shot hand-held and pieced together edit by edit, Sanborn freezes his footage mid-frame and zooms in digitally. Before the boy's musical performance concludes, viewers are slowly forced between his paused, hard-working fingers into a pure field of abstracted, unmoving colour - an image as absent of visual information as it is full of it. As the audio portion of the work becomes sharply delineated, the viewer listens without visual distraction. With one sense suspended, the viewer can critique the standardized and trivial structure of the competitive 'talent show' genre. With one sense suspended, the viewer can critique the implicit, non-verbal and explicit, verbal critiques delivered with gravity to the performer by the jury, audience, and host. With one sense suspended, the viewer can critique the boy's performance and each judge's assessments. With one sense suspended, the German-speaking viewer can critique how well the subtitles capture the German of the host and grumpy judge. And with one sense suspended, the viewer can critique Sanborn's video piece as a whole.

In both works the disjoints between the audio, visual and textual components make events seem to occur in an unreal realm of disorientation - omnipotent floating voices morphing into a separate consciousness. In *Kritik*, unseen voices act as the boy's subconscious monologue, invoked by performance

anxiety. In *Las Mujeres*, unseen voices speak truths about the public and private personas of the former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. My true passion for both works lies in these disjoints – in the spaces the artists create by dismembering audio, visuals and text, leaving room for the viewer to think both inside and outside their works.

## 2. Repetition

Repetition is the occurrence of an event that has occurred before. Repetition is basic, but powerful. Repetition imparts authority. Repetition reinforces patterns and rhythms to create structure. Repetition deepens impressions, creates memories, and breeds familiarity. Repetition is fundamental to success. Repetition demands your attention by creating expectation. When it withdraws, observed differences become meaningful and significant. Repetition, in the way it is manipulated by Menz and Sanborn into audio, visual and text events, is as powerful in its absence as it is in its presence.

I liked my first encounter with Sanborn's work. I loved how, as the piece cycled the second time, I thought, 'Why is this playing again? Is this a mistake?' Then subtitles popped up, and relieved, I thought, 'Whew, that last part made no sense. I hope it makes more sense now.' But the repetition and the subtitles, while imparting that what is going on is important, do not "explicitly decipher the significance of the work."<sup>2</sup> I reveled in the absurdity of the repetition of the viewing experience even though I had no idea what was happening. I contemplated the video's 'inner repetitions': the repeated melodies in the musical piece, the boy's repeated practicing, the repeated black and white close-up photographs of accordions hanging behind him, the judges repeating their roles in identically competitive situations, repeatedly trotting out the same critiques. I imagined the repetitive hosting duties of this presumably annual contest, with repeated introductions, repeated sponsor recognition, repeated pauses for and welcoming backs from commercial breaks. This line of thinking continued as I contemplated Menz's work: I contemplated the beauty queen's repeated competitions, winnings. I imagined the burn victim repeatedly reciting her story to the press and public before she was finally heard, and Pinochet's repeated public acts celebrating civic pride and repeated private acts of politically motivated torture.

My initial reaction to *Las Mujeres* was, 'Oh, great – another experimental, silent, short format video using found footage and employing text to address a political issue' – but the video's repetition hypnotized and seduced me. The repetitive structure set up a mystery, a mystery that made viewers pose the questions: How loud will the sound become? When will the clips stop looping? Why doesn't the sound match the image? Where Sanborn's repetitive structure creates a linear mystery that cannot be solved, Menz's repetitive structure circularly leads to the most important question – if and when Pinochet's crimes against humanity will ever come to justice. Yet Menz's found footage leaves room for ambiguity.

## 3. Found Footage

Eduardo Menz and Keith Sanborn use video materials they find



Keith Sanborn - Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft [Kritik of Reiner's Judgement], 2002



Eduardo Menz - Las Mujeres de Pinochet, 2004



themselves - materials recorded by other people. The allure of using found footage, for many artists, draws from the idea that with "found footage, one can somewhat alter the past,"<sup>3</sup> and that by using loaded, familiar images, the viewer can observe "work (they've)... seen, or think... (they've) seen" to realize they've "never really looked at it" and failed to question it.<sup>4</sup> Taking a piece of the world and manipulating it can also be cheaper than shooting and manipulating original footage, permitting the penurious and hurried artist to strive for maximum results using a minimum of time and resources.

The relationship between each artist and their footage interests me greatly, even though it's an issue more extrinsic than intrinsic. The origins of each artist's found footage suggest both works emerge from each artist's experiences as an outsider looking into another culture. But I do not think Menz or Sanborn is your average tourist. Both artists select footage for reasons as personal as they are political, and treat this footage in ways that cannot be classified. Neither Menz's nor Sanborn's work fit neatly into the definition of compilation - a work that draws a collection of footage together to make a straightforward point; collage - a work that pieces together footage to create metaphors and make audiences think more critically about the source footage; or appropriation - a work that uses found footage to create decorative surfaces.<sup>5</sup>

The footage in *Las Mujeres* was taken from clips of South American news shows featured in Patricio Henriquez's political documentary "Images d'une dictature (Images of a Dictatorship)". Menz selected images he saw years earlier as a child when his family swapped hours of South American television programmes with other members of their South American community in Edmonton, Alberta.<sup>6</sup> Menz's father settled in Edmonton in the 1970s after his release from the imprisonment and torture he was forced to endure because of his ties to Salvador Allende's socialist government when Pinochet came to power in 1975. Through manipulation of this footage, Menz gives the uninformed viewer a glimpse of life under Pinochet's regime. But Menz's ambiguous phrasing also allows the viewer to consider how such atrocities connect with unpunished crimes taking place in other dictatorships, countries and cultures - the undemocratic oppression, torture and killing of political protestors. The work also encompasses a debate about the global subjection of women and women's rights.

The found footage used in Sanborn's *Kritik* was also drawn from a television program - the artist discovered his footage on Austrian television while visiting Cologne in 2002.<sup>7</sup> *Kritik*, like other works by Keith Sanborn, uses popular culture as a self-reflexive tool for examining contemporary culture. Like other Sanborn works, it challenges notions of copyright infringement and authorship, explores the concept of found footage as a visual, historical and cultural document. It exhibits ideas about 'doubling' and is a puzzling and psychologically unsettling macrocosm with inner microcosms.<sup>8</sup> (For example, *Kritik* becomes a meditation on the nature of judgment using video footage of someone making a judgment.) *Kritik*'s digitally captured images of Austrian popular culture may present recognizable clichés about Austrian nationalism, a culture that the general population has seen presented in films like *The Sound of Music*. But

Sanborn's act of taking familiar images and treating them in an unfamiliar way forces the viewer to alter their initial notions of Austrian culture, and extends this alteration by forcing the viewer to deconstruct "culture" and nationalism by exposing the devices that are used internationally to enforce these notions.

## Conclusion

It is through the repeated employment and alteration of the text, sound and image of each artists' found footage that these two works show more than they show. While disparate in tone, this pair of works explores similar themes - content contained within each piece's inner pairings. *Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft [Critique of Reiner's Judgement]* and *Las Mujeres de Pinochet (Pinochet's Women)* are both about role-playing and performance, pageantry and formality, critique and reward, judgement and punishment, the seen and the unseen, the heard and the unheard, the named and the nameless, the signifiers and the signified. Watching the videos together, viewers witness theft and atrocity; truth and beauty; nationalism and memory.

<sup>1</sup> paraphrased from the artist's description of the work in Vtape's catalogue

<sup>2</sup> Matotek, Jennifer. "Jennifer Matotek on the inner pairings of Keith Sanborn's *Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft [Critique of Reiner's Judgement]* and Eduardo Menz's *Las Mujeres de Pinochet (Pinochet's Women)*"

Curatorial Incubator II catalogue. (Toronto, Vtape, 2005.)

<sup>3</sup> quote from an email sent by the artist, Oct. 29/04

<sup>4</sup> from an interview with Sanborn talking about his work located at <http://www.othercinema.com/~pnelson/sanborn/sanborn.html>

<sup>5</sup> ideas about the three uses of found footage as drawn from Wees, William. "Found Footage and Questions of Representation," from "Found Footage Film" Cecilia Hausheer, Christoph Settele, eds., Lucerne, Switzerland: Viper/zyklop verlag, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> paraphrased from an email sent by the artist, Oct. 29/04

<sup>7</sup> paraphrased from the artist's description of the work in Vtape's catalogue

<sup>8</sup> conclusions drawn from research of Sanborn's previous works, and from an interview with Sanborn talking about his work located at <http://www.othercinema.com/~pnelson/sanborn/sanborn.html>



## Hollywood Remake:

A selection of videos by Laura Parnes and Johanna Householder & b.h. Yael

CLAIRE ECKERT

If we believe "there's no utterance by anybody that isn't somehow a quotation of something else,"<sup>1</sup> then in art, as in life, there is a compulsion to repeat. It is fair to say that we constantly copy, manipulate and rearrange what is around us. Likewise, in video art there is a tendency to openly appropriate. Be it through a play with duration, an alteration of context, or elaborate cutting and pasting, soft copies of found images and audio are remixed with the aim to produce poignant, new or counter messages.<sup>2</sup> Corresponding with (yet markedly different from) this attraction to and handling of media stuff is the notion of the remake - the retelling of a borrowed story.

By common definition, a remake is an updated version of an original. In a cinematic or literary remake, characters may be altered, the soundtrack rewritten or the time period, setting and plot tweaked. Arguably, we gauge the original text's transferability and relevance by how well it translates over time and through various mediums into the present.<sup>3</sup> Based in part on nostalgia, profitability and the allure of a great story, the remake is ubiquitous in our culture, and nowhere is this ubiquity as evident as on the big screen, the domain of Hollywood.<sup>4</sup> The notion of the remake and our love of Hollywood are at the heart of Laura Parnes' *Hollywood Inferno (Episode One)* (2000 / 2001) and Johanna Householder and b.h. Yael's *Approximations (Parts 1 - 3)* (2000 / 2001). This heart is decadent and defined by heavy-handed direction and trauma, yet equally, it sustains a critical beat which draws us in.

*Approximations (Parts 1 - 3)*, a series of short videos by Toronto-based artists Johanna Householder and b.h. Yael, are shot-for-shot reenactments of scenes from three highly acclaimed films of the 60s and 70s. These include the bedroom scene from Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), (recreated as *The Mission*), the dismantling of HAL in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), (recreated as *December 31 2000*), and "the butter scene" in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1973), (recreated as *Next to Last Tango*). In these videos, Householder plays the starring role - or roles. She roams deliriously and half-naked around a bedroom in *The Mission*; she dons a spacesuit in *December 31 2000* and wanders around her makeshift spacecraft, (which is actually a very domestic-looking basement, kitchen and laundry room); she plays both Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider in *Next to Last Tango* by superimposing (with the use Final Cut Pro) the image of her two selves to become, in an eerie, humorous way, both the giver and taker in the film's infamous sex scene. According to b.h. Yael, the filmic texts abound in, and are appealing in part for their "gendered and apocalyptic" content.<sup>5</sup> This connotative space which the videos aim to disrupt is significantly androcentric and rooted in film mythology. It is through "gender play" and "an assertion and insertion of self into an existing image/text narrative," that Householder and Yael re-contextualize images and meanings that are established in cinema and rarely challenged.<sup>6</sup> The act of imitation in *Approximations* is about a mimicry that leads to a type of personal ownership, albeit a fraught



Laura Parnes - Hollywood Inferno, episode 1, 2002



one. Householder embodies the scenes in physical terms; she becomes the characters that she portrays. In a sense, she temporarily and superficially claims the Hollywood images as her own. As a vehicle to disrupt and challenge filmic texts and as a means to individualize mass media imagery, this type of embodiment also speaks about the power and limitations of digital technology.

*Hollywood Inferno (Episode One)* by New York based artist Laura Parnes, (shot in 2000 and premiered at The Museum of Modern Art, NYC in 2001) is a 40 minute video that updates and re-imagines Dante's poem *Inferno* (1306 - 1321). The storyline loosely follows Dante and Virgil (Dante's guide and the voice of reason) as they descend through Hell. Parnes recasts these characters in present-day suburbia, Dante becomes Sandy, a teenage candy-store clerk and although Virgil retains his name, here he is a middle-aged screenwriter whose fascination with Sandy is particularly creepy and sexually aggressive. In suburbia, hell dwellers appear as teenage garage band members, kids playing video games and models posing in front of stills from the Columbine massacre. Lucifer, recast as a hybridization of actors Willem Dafoe and Christopher Walken (played by an actor wearing a mask in Dafoe's likeness and impersonating Walken's distinct speaking style), appears at the end of the video to brutalize Sandy's sister. Cinema-oriented quotes layer the Dantesque plot: Parnes' fast-forwarded orgy scene borrows its audiovisual form from Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and the Lucifer/Dafoe/Walken character lectures lines from director George Lucas and cultural critic Dave Hickey.<sup>7</sup>

Although disparate in look and feel, these videos are united as thoughtful, yet decadent, narrative remakes. Parnes' video reads like a supernatural morality tale concerning adolescent disillusionment, the evils of Hollywood and suburban life, while Householder and Yael comment on Hollywood by literally taking on - with the goal to subvert - its tropes. Nevertheless, they simultaneously parody, participate in and critically tear at Hollywood mythology, which is heavy with notions of glamour, sex and power embedded with patriarchal and epic trappings.<sup>8</sup>

Both *Hollywood Inferno (Episode One)* and *Approximations* revel in artificiality; the acting is deliberate and unnatural. Sandy (played by Alissa Bennett), exaggerates the teenage vernacular to epitomize what Parnes describes as "the disillusionment of a generation raised on hyper-consumerism and media over-saturation."<sup>9</sup> After watching her two friends and boyfriend make out, Sandy sobs a line reminiscent of the 'video art scene' in *American Beauty*: "Sometimes things are so fucking beautiful that I, like, totally want to puke."<sup>10</sup> The obvious over-acting is paralleled in *Approximations*. Householder, by domineeringly taking on the double identity of artist and actor, flags the theatricality of the videos; they are parodies that by laboriously staying true to the source only highlight the differences between the remake and the original.

Interestingly, the line between acting and being is blurred more than once in the original films. As film lore tells us, Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now* was not so much acting, as he was truly drunken and hysterical. His binge allowed for a naturalistic rendering of his character, but it also



Johanna Householder & b.h. Yael - The Mission, 2000

allegedly led to Sheen's non-fatal heart attack. Marlon Brando is said to have given up acting (except for large sums of money) after shocking himself by coming so close to non-acting in *Last Tango in Paris*. Anecdotal perhaps, but the stories tied to the original films, be it the myth of the scene's filming, the actors' name recognition, or the film's place in history, are all layers that make the remake the palimpsest that it is. These meandering linkages, both ones based in fact, such as *Apocalypse Now* being based on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, and ones based in hearsay, such as Martin Sheen's alcoholic bender during filming, are what make the notion of the remake so intriguing.

In terms of Householder's faithful reenactments of Hollywood sequences, what does she add or subtract from the films' original meaning? The partial answer: she opens up a space to discuss the politics of representation, particularly in relation to trauma, gender and the allure of cinema. Gender disruptions pervade, particularly in Householder's portrayal of Captain Willard (as originally played by Martin Sheen) and in her double duty of penetrating and being penetrated in *Next to Last Tango* where she plays both Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider. These roles are not sexually interchangeable; Captain Willard cannot be re-imagined as a woman without unease. The male-voiced, voice-over monologue and Willard's hyper-masculine gestures jar noticeably with Householder's breasts and womanly figure, which mark her as different and displaced (although her short hair and facial features are noteworthy for their androgyny). Through the character's change of sexual identity, the scene takes on an unsettling, yet admittedly comical, edge. Through her efforts, she reminds us that this is role-play; she is incapable of seamless mimicry (which is arguably the point). This introduces a tension between the Hollywood original and the remake. While watching it, the following elliptical thoughts may occur: What am I seeing? What happened in the original? What am I remembering? We create a palimpsest of sorts as we layer up what we remember of the original and what we are in fact seeing in the remake.

In Parnes' video, the remaking of Dante's *Inferno* is not so straightforward. The cinematic quotes are sometimes obscure and the links to Dante are highly veiled, yet the video's indebtedness to its sources is undeniable. In a way, Parnes suggests that Hollywood is a corrupting force while Householder and Yael put our tinsel town infatuation into practice. Parnes' fictive world revolves around the dark promises of Hollywood; the characters, to their demise, are obsessed with it. *Hollywood Inferno (Episode One)* is a demonstration of excess, the video overloads the senses with titillating and troubled happenings. On the shiny surface there is candy, shopping, sex, rock bands, modeling and seductive promises, while below the gloss there are empty sexual and familial relationships, betrayal, stupidity, Columbine images and crappy employment. The video's form, with doubled, side-by-side frames (which skew the narrative and destabilize the centre) allow for at least two vantage points and distorted voyeurism. Parnes makes sure that we know we are in Hell; otherworldly and disconcerting settings and props dominate. Be it the candy-shop where Sandy and her sister work or the domestic spaces where they live, the sets are garish and surreal. Sandy, in her pursuit of an acting career, pictures glamour and material goods, yet the

brash settings and the characters' abnormal and deviant relationships reiterate the hellish emptiness that these things ultimately bring.

Widespread in these videos is the (re)enactment of a multi-fold trauma. There is the trauma connected to the storyline, in Householder's reenactment of the turbulent actions and emotions of the characters on screen, and in Parnes' recreation of the Hell of Dante's infamous text. To differing degrees, the original films and Dante's poem deal with revolt, death, decadence and regression. (We may recall Colonel Kurtz's disquieting last words in *Apocalypse Now*: „The horror. The horror.%). On a cultural (and perhaps artistic) level there is the trauma of dealing with imperfect mimesis, which takes place both on and off screen. (Arguably, this originates in Plato's disdain for artistic activity; he claims artists are doomed to create inferior copies of perfect forms.) This relates closely to the impossibility of fulfilling the Hollywood fantasy and the compulsion to repeat and remake the traumatic or distressing stories found on film. In relation to the model shoot in Parnes' video, images from a national tragedy are repeated and the trauma of the event is re-imagined (and fetishized) through marketing.<sup>1</sup> The artists' appropriations and pseudo-ownership of the remake images introduces a gap between the original text and its mimic, and this gap is a distressing space. Necessarily, this liminal space is also fruitful; it opens up questions about originality, duplication and how new, creative messages are made with appropriated materials. There may be no such thing as spot-on duplication, for there is always nuance and either deliberate or inevitable difference that comes from a change of place, time and motivation on the part of the re-maker or audience. There is however, conscious duplication that actively desires new meanings to be made - (and perhaps these meanings dwell in the inaccuracies). Through active and attentive appropriation, Laura Parnes, and Johanna Householder and b.h. Yael combine criticality and repetition to deal with the dark side of Hollywood, exposing their own fascination with decadence alongside that of Hollywood's.

<sup>1</sup> Kaye, Nick. *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1996, 244.

<sup>2</sup> Think: Douglas Gordon's *24 hour Psycho*, Seth Price's internet montages or Mike Hoolboom's *Imitations of Life*. (Mike Hoolboom proposes: „In video there is no longer any need to produce pictures, others have already done that with alarming speed and skill. If film meant production, video is reproduction.% Artist talk, Gladstone Hotel, December 6, 2004.)

<sup>3</sup> Through the mass appeal of the themes addressed by well-known and repeated stories, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the story retains its relevance, and the themes are thought of as timeless (if only by virtue of the mass dissemination and reification of the story).

<sup>4</sup> As a note of clarity, I use the term Hollywood in its most common sense, (yet I disregard its literal, geographical location in Los Angeles.) „Hollywood% refers to the American film industry, the conventions that are upheld by this industry and the mass and mythic appeal that Hollywood has in our popular imagination. In Hollywood remakes abound. For example, the movie *Cruel Intentions* (a 1999 film with Sarah Michelle Gellar and Ryan Phillippe) is a contemporary retelling of *Dangerous Liaisons* (a 1988 film with Glenn Close and John Malkovich), which is based on a play by Christopher Hampton, taken from the Choderlos De Laclos 1782 novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Other recent



remakes include films such as *Charlie's Angels*, *Alfie*, *Planet of the Apes* and (Gus Van Sant's) *Psycho*.

Email correspondence with b.h. Yael, November 5, 2004.

Email correspondence with Johanna Householder, November 5, 2004.

According to Parnes, the Dave Hickey quotes are lifted in part from The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty. Art Issues Press, 1993. Further dialogue is quoted from: *American Beauty*, *Dante's Inferno*, *Flash Art*, *Last Temptation of Christ*, *Last Tango in Paris*, George Lucas speaking with Bill Moyers, Mies Van der Rohe, various art dealers, artists and critics, and any movie with Willem Dafoe or Christopher Walken in it. See: [www.lauraparnes.com](http://www.lauraparnes.com).

Albeit, Householder and Yael remake films that are not conventional Hollywood blockbusters. More truly cult classics, through an interest in disturbing or tabooed subject matter and unconventional characters and narratives, these films circulate on the fringe of comfortable mass cinema. Nevertheless, as of 2000/2001, these films are co-opted by Hollywood in the popular imagination: they have just as much, if not more, notoriety than more conventional Hollywood films (Illusionism, escapism, glamour and high budgets are qualities associated with Hollywood conventions. Contemporary examples include *Titanic*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, etc.).

Email correspondence with Laura Parnes, November 9, 2004.

Quote from *American Beauty*: "Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world I feel like I can't take it, like my heart's going to cave in." See [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/American\\_Beauty](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/American_Beauty).

Parnes states: "Perhaps the scene that most connects to the death-drive is the model shoot in front of the backdrop of the Columbine High School shooters as they were presented on the cover of *Time* magazine. A national tragedy is turned into a backdrop for a clothing ad - a cultural death-drive used as a marketing device." Email correspondence with Laura Parnes, November 9, 2004.

*"Hysterics can be powerful gestures, a form of resistance when one is in a weak position. Hysteria is at the same time a falling apart into many pieces, an ecstasy, and a personal exorcism."*  
-Pipilotti Rist

With these words, video artist Pipilotti Rist recuperates the word hysteria from the dustbin of 19<sup>th</sup> century psychology and medicine. She reinvents it to describe her approach to making aggressive, yet feminine videos. Linking it to the analogous word "ecstasy," she reveals the potential pleasure and benefits of extreme emotions and their physical expression. Rist's concept provides a useful tool in the examination of the work of two other video artists, Gunilla Josephson and Blanca Casas Brullet.

Hysteria is a female "disease" that was identified in the time of ancient Greeks. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hysteria was at "epidemic" proportions among middle-class women. Fainting spells, fits of laughing, screaming, convulsions and wild dancing were exhibited by women in the fashionable parlours throughout Europe and America. An ailment that had no visible cause, it was attributed to a disturbance of the womb. Hysteria has been the focus of much feminist and psychoanalytic writing, used in order to question and analyze the construction and representation of the feminine. Of particular note is Hélène Cixous' *Portrait of Dora* and *Newly Born Woman*, Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* and Cristina Mazzoni's *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism and Gender in European Culture*. In this last text, Mazzoni builds a close relationship between hysteria and ecstasy, as two phenomena (often with very similar behaviours or "symptoms") that challenge the status quo because of their inexplicability. Today, hysteria and ecstasy are terms that are not frequently used by psychoanalysis or society at large. However, these words can be adopted and reformulated to be valuable metaphors for gestures of resistance and the bodily expression of intense emotions.

Rist's works are characterized by beautiful, often sexual imagery in conflict with rough and violent editing and abrasive soundtracks, exhibited in her widely acclaimed debut video *I'm not the girl who misses much* (1986). In it, a blurry image presents Rist dancing to the repetition of a single line from John Lennon's *Happiness is a Warm Gun*. Rist sings it, modifying the lyric "She's not the girl who misses much" with a change in pronouns. As she dances gracefully, the viewer is presented with an obvious sexual seduction: Rist's bare breasts jiggle and her mouth is lacquered with bright red lipstick; however, the appeal soon becomes grotesquely distorted. Rist has edited the image so that her movements accelerate until she is dancing in violent fits and the soundtrack becomes shrill gibberish. Suddenly the image is arrested in a slow motion, again soothing the viewer with its calm beauty. Thus, Rist constructs a video that alternates between a dance of seduction and a tantrum of aggression.

Like Rist's videos, the artists selected for this programme portray women in hysterical/ecstatic scenarios. Gunilla Josephson and Blanca Casas Brullet's videos each display a tension between passivity and activity, beautiful and aggressive imagery. Their female characters are doubly caught in moments of pleasure and frustration, compelling them to communicate that tension through physical motion or dance.

*Strange Brew* (2001) is one of a series of works that Swedish-Canadian artist Gunilla Josephson made between 1998 and 2001. Entitled the *Hedda Videos*, the entire series was shot in the same elegant parlour set and focus on the performances of the same woman. In *Strange Brew*, matching stiff dining-room chairs are set beside an emerald green rococo chesterfield in a white room. Light filters delicately through the sheer curtains of the large window. These furnishings evoke Nordic restraint and long hushed afternoons at one's grandparents. In jarring contrast to the demure domestic environment, Josephson has selected the 1960s psychedelic rock anthem *Strange Brew* by Cream as the soundtrack. The woman at the centre of the video performs a wild dance to the wailing guitars chords and Eric Clapton's howls about a possessed woman:

She's a witch of trouble in electric blue  
In her own mad mind she's in love with you.

With you

Now what you gonna do?

Strange Brew - Kill what's inside of you

The performer playing the role of Hedda in the series is Anna-Lena Johansson, a Swedish painter and long-time friend of Josephson. Together they approach making the videos as a collaborative improvisation based on Josephson's concepts. Their ad-libbed sessions are shot with the goal of producing an image that hovers between a film and a painting, something that hints at narrative and character, yet is distilled in the editing process into a charged moment.

In *Strange Brew*, as in several other of the *Hedda Videos*, Johansson's performance involves movement or dancing, yet she is clearly not a professional dancer. Rather, her performance is a wild tantrum of frenetic and joyous energy, clearly improvised and instinctual. Dressed in a girl's pink taffeta party dress, her stance and movements resemble an angry gorilla. Her arms fly above her head then swing between her widely set legs. Her body is crouched and bent forward for stability as she jumps and twists herself around. To heighten the tension of the performance, Josephson has given the video a visual hiccup: the image has been edited so that it sometimes reverses on itself and makes Johansson's motions sputter in convulsions, momentarily suspending her skirt in mid-air. On some of the high jumps, her skirt floats up to humorously reveal her bare buttocks.

This opening scene is followed by an even more bizarre scene in the same room. This time Johansson wears one of the dining room chairs over her dress, achieved by sliding the spindles over her torso, and jutting her arms out the sides. The chair-back is tipped forward as though it is a giant beak attached to the woman's chest. She flaps her arms and rocks back and forth to the sounds of loud squeaking. Soap



Gunilla Josephson - The Hedda Videos: Part 4 STRANGE BREW, 2001



bubbles float through the room and a young girl's giggles can be heard. While Johansson's dancing in the first scene was an ambiguous mix of anger and joy, here her enjoyment is unmistakable.

In 2001 Catalan artist Blanca Casas Brullet (based in Paris) also explored hysterical movement and dance in her video *Prendas*. As in Josephson's work the viewer is again presented with a single woman performing a set of peculiar dances, but this time the action takes place on the streets of an unidentified European city.

For *Prendas*, Brullet collaborated with a professional dancer, Arantxa Martinez. While the dancing is similar to Johansson's in its absurdity, the choreography is more carefully composed and skillfully performed, though it still has a feeling of improvisation.

*Prendas* begins with a shot of a sidewalk, abutted by a graffiti-covered wall. A young woman walks into the scene wearing a long winter coat and a brown knit scarf. Halfway across the shot she suddenly falls. She gets up, adjusts her scarf and begins walking. Again she falls, twisting and lurching backwards. It is as though the scarf is pulling at her, unwilling to continue along the street. Finally, Martinez is able to twist herself out of the scarf to escape.

The scenario repeats itself several times; each one with a different article of clothing. Increasingly, the choreographed struggle grows more difficult. In each new scene Martinez appears less willing to lose her apparel and the clothing is seemingly possessed by a strong will of its own. If Brullet had filmed this on a set or a stage, this performance would automatically be seen as clowning. However, Brullet documented the performance on public streets, without an audience and without any music. This simple documentary style presents Martinez as a deadpan madwoman doing an unusual strip tease. The strange episodes continue, becoming somewhat repetitive, which enables Brullet to further destroy the theatricality of the performance. In one of the struggles, Martinez' shoe seems to be pulled by a magnetic force exerted by the sidewalk, while other pedestrians purposely ignore the spectacle. Like many crazy people on public streets, she is invisible to the sane. In this one episode, the audience gets a glimpse of how Martinez' performance is disruptive to the regular events of the street.

While Martinez' face is neutral throughout these episodes, her movements waver between playfulness and a desperation. In the last scene, Martinez staggers down a narrow street with a blue dress pulled over her head and her arms akimbo in the air. She lurches around the corner and stumbles into an alcove. She spins from side to side, colliding several times with some doors, then slides to the ground, exhausted and beaten by the struggle. Finally she rises, bends over almost double and lets the dress gracefully slip from her head, allowing herself, and also the audience, to sigh in relief. Finally, Martinez has managed to gain freedom though through a painful process; a theme that Brullet explored in her earlier work in other mediums.

Brullet and Josephson's videos share more than just the use of dance as a means of expressing a character and their psychological tension. They are also tied together by an interest in the way inanimate objects, such as clothing and furniture, are symbols of identity. Before turning to video, both Brullet and Josephson created works that examined the symbolism of textiles and clothing.

During the mid 1990s Josephson worked in sculpture, making replicas of Scandinavian rug and blanket designs, by layering wax on felt. Thick and stiff, these blankets were loaded with the symbolism of their past use yet stripped of their functionality.<sup>6</sup> With these sculptures, Josephson explored the role of textiles as intimate objects that refer to past traditions and identities. As she shifted into the video medium, Josephson demonstrated a careful attention to her props and costumes as bearers of meaning.

Brullet's early work focused on clothing as an outer skin, or a physical as well as psychological protective layer. She made delicate textile impressions of her body and would also go on meandering walks to photograph articles of clothing that she found discarded on the streets. When Brullet visited Toronto on a residency at Ontario College of Art and Design, she made her first 16mm film, called *Found Lost* (1999). Documenting her walks in an unfamiliar city, Brullet searched for cast-away clothing and filmed them as the moulted skins of their owners, now possessing a life of their own but tinged with the memories of their past existences. Whereas in her earlier work, Brullet documented the cast-offs like forensic specimens of missing lives, in *Prendas* she films the violent and painful instance of loss from the perspective of a silent witness to a crime.

In Spanish "prenda" means "article of clothing;" however, it also resembles a conjugation of "prendre" in French and Catalan, which means "to take," or "to capture." Thus Brullet, as a Catalan-in-Paris, uses this slippage between languages to literally describe how Martinez is taken and controlled by her clothing as though these objects have become imbued with a strong spirit. Brullet documents a woman who appears to be possessed by the objects that surround her. Like the psychotherapy patient that has to wrestle with painful memories before emerging as a healed person, Martinez has to struggle and slough off her outer skin before being able to walk free.

In a way, Josephson's character Hedda is also possessed by the objects around her. In fact, the set is so fundamental to the Hedda series, that the couch could be called the principal character. A symbol of family traditions and a gesture toward the psychoanalyst's couch, its haughty presence is the necessary foil for Johansson's behaviour. For her, it is the symbolic power of the prim furnishings that bear down on her spirit, and cause her rebellion. Josephson describes the green couch as "the locus of a loaded family history, as if the green paint itself was a layer of unresolved conflict and suffocating confinement."<sup>7</sup> Faced with the couch's symbolic weight, Johansson responds with an ecstatic attack. By reverting to childish dress and actions, she is permitted to act out her pleasure and exorcise her frustration, bathing in the depths of her emotions.



Blanca Casas Brullet - Prendas, 2001

We might liken these women to another hysterical Hedda, Henrik Ibsen's famously troubled character Hedda Gabler in his 1890 play of the same name. Confined within a bland and repressive bourgeois existence, Hedda Gabler lashed out, ultimately leading to the death of her friend and her own suicide. Where Hedda Gabler's rebellion had no counterweight to the self-destruction, Josephson's Hedda and Blanca's unnamed woman are able to find a delicate balance, which allows the characters to discover pleasure within their oppressive situations.

<sup>1</sup> Pipilotti Rist interviewed by Christine Ross, "Fantasy and Distraction: An Interview with Pipilotti Rist," *Afterimage*, Nov./Dec. 2000, vol. 28, Issue 3, 7.

<sup>2</sup> The name hysteria comes from the Greek word "husterikos", from "hustera", which means womb. Since hysterical behaviour seemed to be exhibited primarily in women it was believed that it was caused by some disturbance in the womb.

<sup>3</sup> Christina Mazzoni, "Introduction: Historicizing Hysteria, Hysterizing History" in *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism and Gender in European Culture*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Clapton, Gail Collins and Felix Papallardi, *Strange Brew*, Cream, Reaction Records, UK 593 003 or Polydor, Canada, CP5008.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Kaye, *Gunilla Josephson: Memento Vitae* (Toronto: The Museum for Textiles, 1996) 1.

<sup>7</sup> Gunilla Josephson in email interview with author, November 1, 2004.



## The artists and their curators

### John Akomfrah

Akomfrah is a Ghanaian-born, London-based filmmaker. He has lectured on Black British Cinema at various educational institutions such as: The California Institute of Arts, The Art College of Chicago, The Tisch School of Art, The London Institute and the University of London. He was also founder of the London-based media workshop Black Audio Film Collective. His expansive catalogue encompasses media production for both television and feature films.

### Blanca Casas Brullet

Blanca Casas Brullet is a Catalan artist based in Paris since 1997. She studied at the École National Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris as well as Art History and Fine Arts at the University of Barcelona. In 2001 Brullet was artist-in-residence at the Ontario College of Art and Design and in 2000 she won the Ensab-a Foundation Prize in Video and New Technologies. She has shown her work in Paris, Toronto and Barcelona.

### Meredith Dault

Meredith Dault holds a BFA in film and video production from York University. She is the founder and director of the One Minute Film and Video Festival ([www.minutefilmfest.com](http://www.minutefilmfest.com)) and works as Assistant Director at the Odon Wagner Gallery in Toronto.

### Jason Ebanks

Ebanks is a Toronto-based video artist whose artwork combines commercial photography, fashion and music video along with installation-based video production. His video work has been exhibited at a number of film and video festivals such as Moving Pictures, Rendezvous with Madness, Omiala and the City International Festival of Experimental Film and Video Art. He is also the founder of khofilms and a Production Manager at Trinity Square Video. Ebanks is currently represented by Revolver Film Company for music video production in North America and the United Kingdom.

### Claire Eckert

Claire Eckert is a recent graduate of the BFA program at Queen's University, during which she also studied in Venice and at the Glasgow School of Art. Presently she is completing her MA in art history at York University.

### Johanna Householder

Johanna Householder is a multidisciplinary and performance artist. She became notorious in the 80s as a member of the satirical feminist performance ensemble, *The Clichettes*. She teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design, where she is chair of the Integrated Media program. As one of the founders of the 7a1ld International Festival of Performance Art, a biennale of performance held in Toronto, she has brought many artists to the festival and she is keenly interested in the documentation of performance. With Tanya Mars, she co-edited *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance by Canadian women*, published by YYZ in 2004.

### Reinaldo Jordan

Reinaldo Jordan is a recent graduate with a BA from the University of Toronto, majoring in International Development and Fine Art Studio. His main career practice centers on video-art production and curatorial work. Currently he is employed at Trinity Square Video as a video archivist.

### Gunilla Josephson

Gunilla Josephson is a Swedish-born artist, based in Toronto, with a BA in Social Sciences from Stockholm University and an MFA from the Academy of Art and Design, Stockholm. Josephson's videos have been shown at numerous festivals and galleries in Toronto including Images Festival, Pleasure Dome, and Toronto International Video Art Biennial Trans-Tech as well as internationally at the Video Archeology Festival, Sofia, Bulgaria; The Hull Centre for Time-Based Art, England; and the Femmedia-International Film and Video Festival, Stockholm, among others. She was recently awarded the Canada Council Paris Studio where she completed her most recent title: *The Blood Red Heart of Johanna Darke*. Gunilla has collaborated with Eve Egoyan on video and sound installations, including *Case Studies* at Harbourfront in April 2002, and *The Blood Red Heart of Johanna Darke* which premiered at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, 2004.

### Jennifer Matotek

Jennifer Matotek is an emerging curator, interdisciplinary artist, and video maker whose work has been shown across North America in galleries and film and video festivals such as the One Minute Film and Video Festival, the Chicago Underground Film Festival, the New York Underground Film Festival and Cinematexas. She is currently Programming Assistant in the Media Programming Department of the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

### Eduardo Menz

Eduardo Menz was born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, and is currently completing a BFA in film production at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. His work has been screened at the Echo Park Film Centre in Los Angeles, the Montreal World Film Festival, and the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

### Laura Parnes

Laura Parnes lives and works in New York City. She has a BFA from Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA. She has shown her videos, installations and performed at numerous places including: "Video Viewpoints," The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, "The 1997 Whitney Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, Threadwaxing Space, NYC, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, LA, The Institute for Contemporary Art /P.S. 1 Museum, NYC, and Deitch Projects, NYC. She is also a curator and co-founder (along with Eric Heist) of Momena Art, an alternative space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

### Aubrey Reeves

Aubrey Reeves has been the Programming Director at Trinity Square Video, in Toronto, since July of 2004, where she organizes exhibitions, screenings, themed commissions and residencies. In May of 2004 she completed her MA at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in New York. Aubrey is also a practicing artist, working in video, photography, performance and drawing. Recently her work has

been seen at the Alley Jaunt 2004. Aubrey also holds a BA from University of Toronto in studio art and arts administration.

#### Ulrike Rosenbach

Ulrike Rosenbach was born in 1943 in Salzdettfurth, Germany. She studied under Joseph Beuys at the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf from 1963 to 1970, and began working with video in 1972. She has created over 70 videos and has had numerous solo and group exhibitions. Her work has been exhibited at Documenta and the Venice Biennale, and is included in the collections of some of the most significant museums in Europe and the United States, including the Centre Pompidou (Paris), Zurich Kunsthauus and the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (New York). Rosenbach currently lives and works near Cologne, Germany where she is professor of new media at the Hochschule der Bildenden Künste Saar, Saarbrücken.

#### Mirha-Soleil Ross

Mirha-Soleil Ross is a transsexual video maker, performer, sex worker and animal rights activist originally from Montréal, Québec. Her videos have been screened at queer, women, trans and art festivals in Melbourne, Amsterdam, London and Dublin as well as at other independent festivals across Canada and the US. Last year, she presented her first solo video exhibition *Tremblement de Chair and Other Transsexual Tremors* at AKA Gallery in Saskatoon. Also in 2004, she presented *It was a Pleasure Meeting You*, a piece about intimacy and the transsexual body at the eBent Performance Art Festival in Barcelona. Last December, her show *Yapping Out Loud: Contagious Thoughts from an Unrepentant Whore* was produced as part of the 2004-05 Buddies in Bad Times Theatre season.

#### Keith Sanborn

Keith Sanborn has worked in the mediums of film, photography, digital media and video since the late 1970s. His work has appeared at numerous festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival, the Images Festival, the European Media Arts Festival, the New York Video Festival and the Whitney Biennial. His work has also been shown in museums and media arts centres such as the Walker Art Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art New York, the Pacific Film Archive and the San Francisco Cinematheque, among other venues.

#### b.h. Yael

b.h. Yael is a Toronto-based filmmaker, video and installation artist. She is Professor and Chair of Integrated Media at the Ontario College of Art and Design (on sabbatical), and past Assistant Dean in the Faculty of Art. Yael has worked in the sphere of independent film and video since the mid 1980s. As a past Coordinator of Programming at the Images Festival, Yael was involved in the development of that festival in its first years; she also developed workshops and selected programming at Trinity Square Video. Yael is currently working on a video essay titled *Trading the Future* which questions the ways in which secular culture has embraced 'apocalypse' as inevitable.

- Programme 1 Meredith Dault presents  
 Ulrike Rosenbach (Germany) - *Wrapping with Julia*  
*(Einwicklung mit Julia)*, 1972, 5:00  
 Mirha-Soleil Ross (Canada) - *ALLO PERFORMANCE!*,  
 2002, 13:00  
*Opens Tuesday, January 18th, 2005, 6:00pm & 7:30pm.*  
*On view at Vtape January 18-29, 2005*
- Programme 2 Reinaldo Jordan presents  
 John Akomfrah (UK) - *The Last Angel of History*,  
 1996, 45:00  
 Jason Ebanks (Canada) - *Home*, 2004, 14:00  
*Opens Tuesday February 1st, 2005, 6:00pm & 7:30pm.*  
*On view at Vtape February 1-12, 2005*
- Programme 3 Jennifer Matotek presents  
 Keith Sanborn (USA) - *Kritik an Reiner's Vernunft*  
*[Kritik of Reiner's Judgement]*, 2002, 8:00  
 Eduardo Menz (Canada) - *Las Mujeres de Pinochet*,  
 2004, 11:00  
*Opens Tuesday, February 15th, 2005, 6:00pm & 7:30pm.*  
*On view at Vtape February 15-26, 2005*
- Programme 4 Claire Eckert presents  
 Laura Parnes (USA) - *Hollywood Inferno, episode 1*,  
 2002, 39:00  
 Johanna Householder & b.h. Yael (Canada) -  
*The Mission*, 2000, 4:21  
*Opens Tuesday, March 1st, 2005, 6:00pm & 7:30pm.*  
*On view at Vtape March 1-12, 2005*
- Programme 5 Aubrey Reeves presents  
 Gunilla Josephson (Canada) - *The Hedda Videos:*  
*Part 4 STRANGE BREW*, 2001, 5:06  
 Blanca Casas Brullet (Spain/France) - *Prendas*,  
 2001, 11:30  
*Opens Tuesday, March 15th, 2005, 6:00pm & 7:30pm.*  
*On view at Vtape March 15-25, 2005*



# Vtape presents the Curatorial Incubator Round II

January 18th to March 25th, 2005

Vtape Video Salon  
401 Richmond St. W, Suite 452  
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