

This essay accompanies the Gallery TPW exhibition by the 640 480
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Lossy Life and Keepsakes 640 480's Grand Gestures

By Sally McKay

What is 640 480? At the beginning of the 21st century, when members of the video collective 640 480 was forming, it was the formula that referred to a standard resolution format for video. But due to our seemingly insatiable desire to see more and see it *clearly*, media technology is driven to produce more and better video displays. Nowadays, a more common formula is 720 x 486, although there are plenty of variables depending on the machines you are using. The technology changes rapidly, and even the term "video" has come to refer to almost any moving image in any format.

Video is inherently digital. This system of translating visual information into chunks of electronic data emerged with television, back in the 1940s — a flickering light pouring out of the screen, events in the world translated simultaneously into images in our private homes. Artists began shooting video in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Consumer video cameras and home computers became available in the early 1980s. Now, of course, with cell

phones, iPods, YouTube and billboard projections, video has become ubiquitous. No longer a just a system for spectacle, critique, information, art and entertainment, video has become our constant companion, enveloping us in a continual flow of life in translation. But this sense of "flow" is fundamentally an illusion, as video, like film, is comprised of frozen moments strung together in a line.

Under their (slightly) old fashioned moniker, 640 480 steps outside of this seeming flow. *Grand Gestures* is an exhibition in three parts, each of which presents us with video in a form that is static and concrete. The show occurs in three locations. At Trinity Square Video we are presented with a wall of commemorative pins, made from pieces of actual video tape, that we are invited to take away with us. Bronze plaques are installed along Queen Street, each one commemorating a home-made Youtube video that was shot at that location. The pins we've picked up at TSV may be left here with



640 480, *Grand Gestures*, Bronze Plaque, 2007



640 480, installation view of *Grand Gestures*, Bronze Plaque, 2007

the plaques, or we may wear them as keepsakes. In a further act of distillation, 640 480 will have one of the tapes from the Youtube videos made into a diamond. At Gallery TPW, we see panels explaining this process, one that is available through companies who will transform the carbon in the remains of your loved one into a precious gem. There is also a sample diamond on display.

There have always been artists and writers drawn to the physicality of video. In a reprinted and revised essay, originally written in 1977, video critic Peggy Gale wrote,

“Whereas film remains a series of visible images on celluloid (even in storage), videotape appears as an undifferentiated opaque gray ribbon with one shiny side, its message decoded only electronically. In this sense, video images have no tangibility. Yet response to the video image can have a surprisingly physical quality. We see video emanating as a source of light; it is ‘here,’ projecting from within, as would a person standing before us. Its presence demands attention.”¹

Early video and performance artists such as Lisa Steele or David Askevold used the real time qualities of video and the intimate immediacy of the television monitor to make work about the body and physical experience. Second only to live performance, video manifested as a connection of physiological engagement between viewer and artist. The idea of video as an object appears in contemporary work as well. In Andrew J. Paterson’s recent video, *Eating Regular*, a man cooks and eats video tape for dinner, as if it was pasta. The 2002 horror film, *The Ring* (an American remake of the 1998 Japanese film, *Ringu*), involves a video

cassette with the power to kill its viewers. And of course a plethora of video installation projects marry the moving image with concrete sculptural elements.

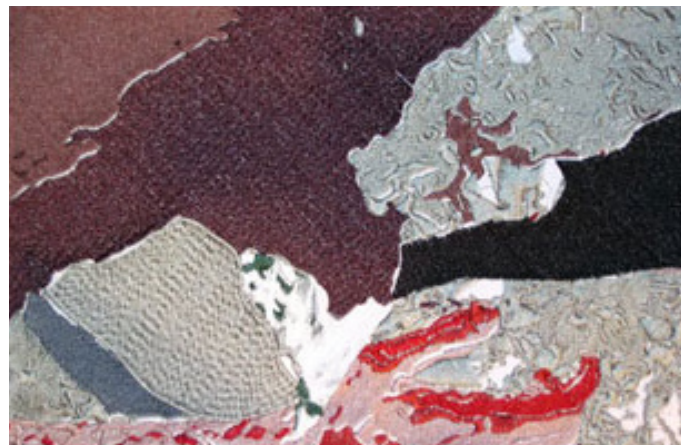
Nonetheless, video is essentially ephemeral, and the lack of a physical commodity, combined with unlimited reproducibility, positioned early video art in a radical position outside of art markets and museum criteria. Nowadays, of course, the positioning of video as an art product is highly strategized, with some artists selling limited editions at collector prices, some selling high-end prints of video stills as wallworks, and others selling copies of their work in quantity at consumer prices. But the question of value remains a thorny and contested issue, especially in the current context of online dissemination for digital video and network art.

Value is a key concern for 640 480. The group made a splash in 2004 with their installation *True Love will Find You in the End*², in which they used an embroidery machine to reproduce single frames of video.

“The object status of a digital piece of work is still debatable considering its reproducibility. Under this umbrella, *True Love Will Find You In The End: Video Embroidery* by 640 480 aims to produce each and every one of 1800 frames in the one minute video as a unique and tactile art object. Each individual frame is frozen out of the video and into a graphic representation of the moving image, undermining the notion of video as art, while championing machine-driven craft. If each still sells for \$75 CAD, 640 480’s video will eventually be worth \$135,000 CAD if all of the frames are transferred to embroidery.”³



640 480, video still #802 from
True Love Will Find You In The End, 2005



640 480, embroidery of video still #802 from
True Love Will Find You In The End, 2005

The proposal is, of course, absurd, and the irony runs deep. *True Love...* pokes fun at the art market, suggesting that video must be translated into another medium altogether in order to function as a commodity. At the same time this project represents a genuine attempt by these young artists to earn some cash. It is characteristic of this collective that the project is both post-modern and earnest, both funny and sincere.

The financial wranglings of technology and the art market are compelling in a self-reflexive way, but it is in their explorations of translation that 640 480 really gets interesting.

In translation, there is loss (hence the quirky technical term “lossy compression”). This was demonstrated directly in the collective’s 2003 project, *Reduced to Clear*⁴. Video tapes were constantly recorded and re-recorded throughout the exhibition. Each generation represented a loss in quality. As the video on the tape was slowly destroyed, the tape itself became an increasingly unique object, one-of-a-kind.

The theme of loss comes up again and again for this collective. The works in *Grand Gestures* — pins, plaques and a remembrance diamond — clearly invite us to memorialise something. But what is it, exactly, that has been lost?

1980s feature films, such as Atom Egoyan’s *Family Viewing*, or David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, projected exotic and dystopic scenarios in which video becomes central to the human psyche. Nowadays, these projections seem both quaint and prophetic. Video has become so prevalent that it functions like a technological ether embodying the experience of middle class society. Video artist and

critic Tom Sherman describes the situation:

“People’s minds will be filled, bombarded with drawings and paintings unfolding everywhere they look, in popular and unpopular culture, in advertising and games and propaganda, and in personal communications media of all forms. They will nibble and gulp at this glowing, clamouring conglomeration of memory that constantly moves and evolves and fascinates until they are absolutely saturated with the fabricated images and sounds and ideas of others...”⁵

But of course it’s not all bad. This video ether amplifies experience, makes culture tangible, and acts as a kind of group memory deposit bank. We record our lives, and share them around, and in some sense this running meta-narrative gives us comfort and the impression that our activities have meaning. For the members of 640 480, consigning memory to video functions as a kind of security against the inevitable passage of time.

In Peggy Gale’s brilliant 1988 essay “Memory Work,”⁶ she makes a distinction between direct experience and commemoration. She described the implications of video as a time-based medium. In order to see it, we must experience it. The meaning of artworks evolves from the conglomeration of ideas that spring from the mind of the artist, the mind of the viewer, and the infinite network of ephemeral cultural associations that each brings to the moment of looking. Time-based art experience can be especially rich, as the memories of the viewer are invoked and engaged so seamlessly that, unlike an act of commemoration, we are not given an opportunity for detached reflection.



640 480, installation view of *Reduced to Clear*, 2003



640 480, post-exhibition tape destruction from *Reduced to Clear*, 2003

It is the experience of life as it passes that is absent and commemorated in 640 480's *Grand Gestures*. The memorial plaques posted along Queen Street are particularly poignant. Each describes a scene that is banal in the extreme.

"Hunched at the table, she self-consciously pulled at her black sleeves and used her two straws like chopsticks to eat the slush of her iced coffee." ⁷

The plaques also bear dates for context and veracity, and time codes indicating that the source is video. At the bottom are tags, key words that point back to the original YouTube posting, should you desire to watch the video when you leave the outdoor public sphere and get back home to your browser. But the work really functions when you are standing on the street, reading the text, and forming a picture in your mind — "This happened here." The fact is, "this" is an utterly unremarkable event. The characters — teenagers at Starbucks, confused and drunken party types, a couple tobogganing in the park — are all extremely familiar, representing a kind of experience that belongs to everyman, turning the utterly banal into an icon, and thereby creating pathos. To commemorate these moments — the fleeting worthless moments that wouldn't otherwise stick out in our memory — is to commemorate life itself, the structureless precious life that we spin out as we rush through time, fixating on other seemingly more significant signposts that, at least in our minds, give life a shape.

There is a similar strange sadness to 640 480's 2005 project, *Video Snapshots*. In this perverse reverse animation, people posed casually as if for a snapshot, but in fact were asked to hold the pose for an extended duration while multiple stills were taken. The stills are then run together as video, producing a weird effect — the image shakes and quivers with an oddly robotic kinetic tension. Again, our attention is directed to what is absent — direct experience and the analog flow of time.

Grand Gestures is less flashy than *True Love Will Find You In The End*, but it is just as funny. The group goes to elaborate lengths to promote and address the medium of video while at the same time keeping video out of the project completely. The maudlin memorialising has a surreal quality to it and the precious diamond, made of corporal video-remains, is indeed a grand gesture in the extreme. There is something sci-fi about the diamond, as if

all of video, all of its recorded moments and all of its technological implications, could be compressed into a single glinting crystal. There is also something poignantly grasping about the exercise, as if these artists were trying to capture and control a phantom that is always slipping away.

In a recent essay on modernity written for Documenta XII, artist and writer Mark Lewis describes a film made in 1903 in which pedestrians try to hang on to their hats as they pass by the base of the infamously windy Flatiron Building in New York. Lewis describes these passersby — living in an age, inaccessible to us now, in which wearing hats was a societal imperative — as looking at the camera. Not in the sense we've come to know well, in which we pose ourselves to somehow present an image to the future viewers on the other side of the lens, but looking at the camera itself, as an unfamiliar object of curiosity.

"Can these people walking in and out of frame really imagine themselves as the subjects of a film? Would they know, like us, how to adjust their gait, their manner, and their expression? Surely not. We, on the other hand, know too much about film: we know how to behave, how to hold ourselves, how to look, and what poses to strike. Today, as is well known, our lives are already films." ⁹

Lewis describes this time in 1903 as a moment on the cusp, when modernity held a promise of a better future. Now we are deeply mired in the consequences of that modernity, confused by history and largely unable to predict future trajectories with clarity and enthusiasm.

For all the absurdity of this project, 640 480 has managed, momentarily, to divest video of its contemporary, boggling, experiential context. We are given a moment of detachment and discernment, a chance to look *at* the medium of video as a curiosity. In our current murky context, such brief moments of clarity may be one of the greatest services that art can offer.

Many great thinkers — George Grant, Ursula Franklin, Marshall MacLuhan — have written about the insidious powers of technology to form to our thoughts and behaviours. As 640 480 member Jeremy Bailey says, "Technology is pushing in one direction and as artists we want to push back. Technology needs a purpose, a context. If you can do without it, you should." ¹⁰

Footnotes:

1. Peggy Gale, "When Video First Captured Our Imagination," in Videotexts (Toronto: The Power Plant), 1995, p. 30 (Note: This essay, revised and retitled in 1994, was originally published in Parachute 7 (Summer 1977) and In Video (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1977) under the title "Video Has Captured Our Imagination.")
2. *True Love will Find You in the End*, 2004, an exhibition by 640 480, curated by Emelie Chhangur and Presented by The Art Gallery of York University, Zsa Zsa Gallery, Toronto (with thanks to Andrew Harwood)
3. Excerpted from the artists' statement for *True Love will Find You in the End*, available online at www.640480.com
4. *Reduced To Clear*, 2003, an exhibition by 640 480 at Sisboombah gallery, Toronto
5. Tom Sherman, "Video/Intermedia/Animation," in *The Sharpest Point: animation at the end of cinema*, Chris Gehman and Steve Reinke, eds., (Toronto: YYZ Books), 2005, p.197
6. Peggy Gale, "Memory Work," in Videotexts (Toronto: The Power Plant), 1995 (Note: An earlier version of "Memory Work" was published in Descant (Spring 1988))
7. Text from bronze plaque, installed as part of the 640 480 exhibition Grand Gestures, 2007, Trinity Square Video and Gallery TPW, Toronto
8. *Video Snapshots*, 2005, an exhibition by 640 480, Photo New York Art Fair, Metropolitan Pavillion Hotel, New York
9. Mark Lewis, "Is Modernity our Antiquity?", in Documenta Magazine No. 1-3, 2007 Reader, Georg Schöllhammer, (Kassel: Documenta XII), 2007
10. Jeremy Bailey, in conversation with the author, August 2007

About the Artist

The 640 480 Video Collective is Jeremy Bailey (MFA, Syracuse University, 2006), Patrick Borjal (BA, University of Toronto, 2002), Shanan Kurtz (MFA, Parsons the New School of Design, 2005), Phil Lee (MFA, Goldsmiths University of London, 2004), Jillian Locke (BA, University of Toronto, 2003), and Gareth Long (MFA, Yale University, 2007). Since meeting at the University of Toronto in 2001 the award winning collective has created and curated projects for galleries, art fairs, rock bands and on the web. Though seldom the end product, video is the starting point for most of their projects. Their work has often explored the value of the medium by translating video to other forms. For more information please visit 640480.com

About the Writer

Sally McKay is an independent curator, artist and writer. From 1997- 2003 she was co-owner/editor of the Toronto art magazine, *Lola*. Recent curatorial projects include the touring group show *Quantal Strife* (2006-ongoing) organised out of the Doris McCarthy Gallery UTSC, and *Woodlot: The Third Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery Biennial* (2007). For more information please visit www.sallymckay.ca.

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