

Magnetic Sequences

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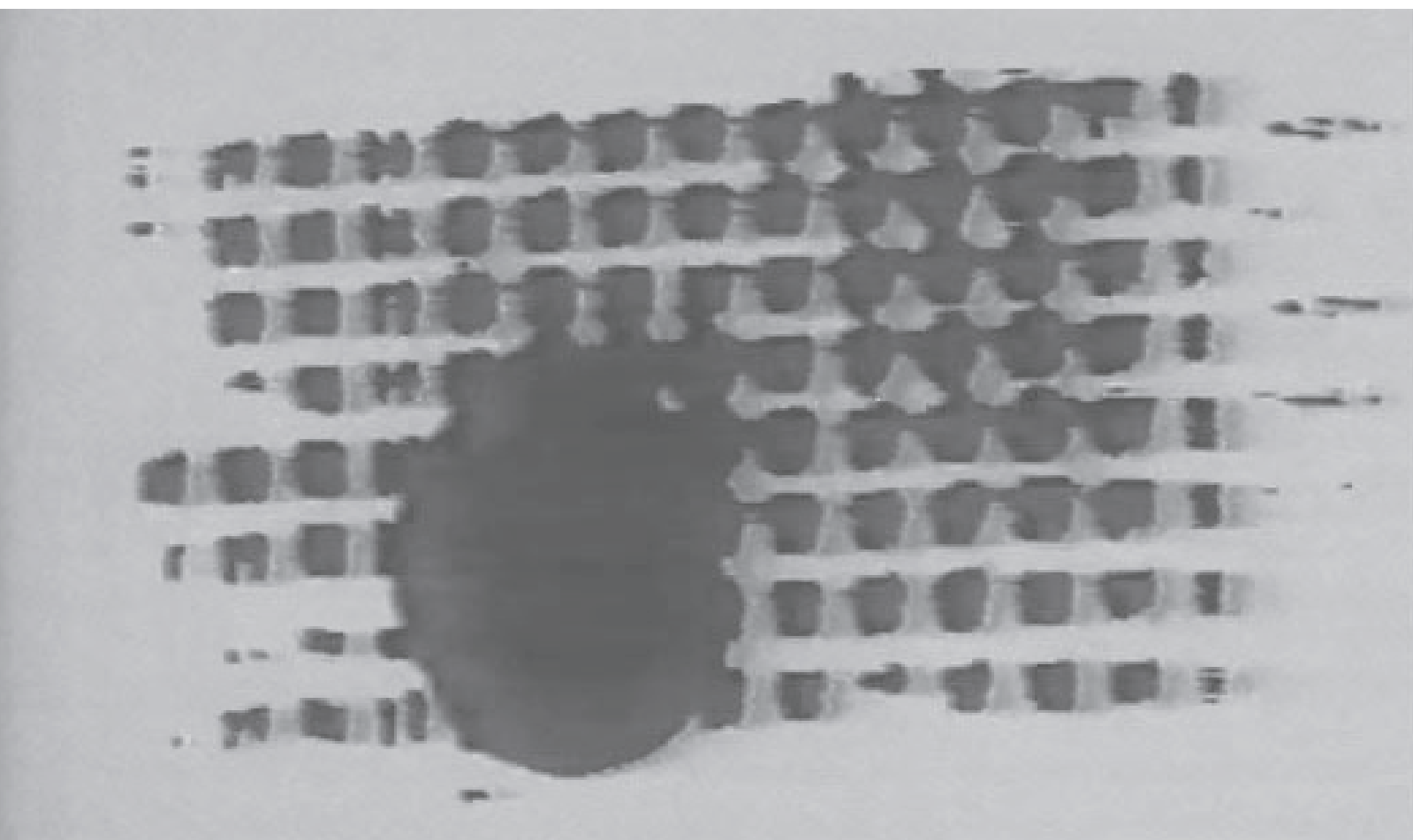


Photo: David Rahn, *Video Clouds*, 1976.

Foreword

Magnetic Sequences brings together holdings from Artexte and Vidéographe collections along with selected works from Vtape and GIV and the personal collection of filmmaker, videographer, and holographer, Al Razutis. Why do we bring these collections together? We do this because we want to encourage multiple readings of early video practises and the technologies invented to support them. We want to trace cultural, social, and technological connective tissue through the close watching of tapes and print documents produced when video – its form and nature – presented a new frontier of artistic and narrative possibilities and inspired the creation of communities and sites to support it.

On behalf of Artexte and our colleagues and friends at Vidéographe, I am very happy to present the curatorial work of Karine Boulanger with research support from Joana Joachim. The artists and all the people who have donated and looked after these videos and documents over the years are with us in the gallery and we do our work in care for the gifts they have given us.

- Sarah Watson
General and Artistic Director (Artexte)

Magnetic Sequences: Exchanges and collaboration in the Canadian video milieu in the 1970s

Since the early 1970s, artist-run centres in Quebec and Canada have been important meeting places and have played a significant role in the development of technical expertise and artistic experimentation in the field of video. *Magnetic Sequences* explores the ways in which these groups were founded with an ethos of exchange and an interest in the circulation of knowledge and videotapes.

In the exhibition space, the videos respond to the printed documents – material forms of communication, information and networking – that have contributed to their existence. We have chosen to highlight works that explore the technical and creative potential of the medium, whether through editing in *Keeping Marlene Out Of The Picture* by Eric Cameron, or the use of feedback in *L'amertube* by Jean-Pierre Boyer, colorization *Video Clouds* by David Rahn, *Electronic Sunsets 25* by Jane Wright, re-recorded mass media images *Femmes de rêve* by Louise Gendron, direct interaction with the apparatus *Birthday Suit - with scars and defects* by Lisa Steele, *Janet sees Herself* by marshalore, *Fill* by David Askevold, bonding with film or computer *Not Fiction* by Elizabeth Vander Zaag, *98.3 KHz: Bridge at Electrical Storm* by Al Razutis, for example. Each of these approaches adopted a personal, even intimate, appropriation of video technology.

Context and Key Figures

1967: SONY makes portable video commercially available. This new technology fascinated a diverse range of practitioners who used it for social activities, activism, artistic research, even therapy. In Canada, certain institutions acquired video technology, such as Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). But it was at the beginning of the 1970s that the independent video scene exploded and became more organized with the emergence of artist-run centres. Video began to be used by interdisciplinary groups such as Intermedia (1967, Vancouver), A Space (1971, Toronto), Véhicule Art (1972, Montréal) and Western

Front (1973, Vancouver). A number of groups dedicated to video also began to emerge, many of which are still active today, such as Trinity Square Video (1971, Toronto), Vidéographe (1971, Montréal), Satellite Video Exchange Society – later known as VIVO Media Arts Centre (1973, Vancouver), La Femme et le film – later known as Vidéo Femmes and then merged with SPIRA (1973, Québec), Groupe intervention vidéo (1975, Montréal), Réseau vidéo des femmes – later known as Réseau Vidé-Elle (1975, Montréal), Ed Video (1975, Guelph), Coop vidéo de Montréal (1977), and Centre for Art Tapes (1979, Halifax). The majority of these centres combined production and distribution, with artists handling every aspect of the work involved.

These artist-run centres were hives of activity that served as catalysts for encounters and emulated the interests of their artist members. In Quebec, the influence of NFB social documentary was significant, mainly because the earliest practitioners at Vidéographe were producers and technicians from the NFB's Social Research Group as well as its Société nouvelle. Elsewhere, the impetus was more tied to contemporary art. Performance, for example, is central to the work of numerous artists such as Lisa Steele, David Askevold, marshalore or Tom Sherman. Yet the different uses of video were not (yet) pigeonholed; Robert Forget, founder of Vidéographe, underlined this need for knowledge transmission, 'It must be remembered that everyone, here or elsewhere, who works in video, even if their practice is aesthetic, are resources for the community. Everyone is enriched by this osmosis between different types of activity.'¹ This is why dynamic creative and administrative collectives are important. Marion Froger saw the emergence of new forms of sociality, notably among marginalized groups – 'young people, women, artists' – who were finally establishing themselves in the public arena.² Video practitioners soon created and set up their own networks for dissemination – specialized publications, meetings, symposiums, and festivals. Video began to appear in interdisciplinary exhibitions and dedicated exhibitions soon followed.

Video as Community?

This community spirit extended to viewers, of course, who we imagine were actively engaged in their reception of the videotapes. At Vidéographe, for example, monitors were fixed to the ceiling of a screening room, with seats arranged in a circle. Eschewing the typical frontal arrangement of the movie theatre, the intention was to encourage debates and discussions that often followed screenings.

A real effort was made to disseminate videotapes. Their distribution often escaped commercial routes, the user only paying for the tape itself, or the costs of reproduction or postage. Vidéographe, for example, made copies of its productions for free while Video Satellite promoted direct exchanges between producers or groups. The current VIVO collection was established as the result of the voluntary collecting of works at the MATRIX International Video Meet

(1973, Vancouver) and many exchanges. *Radical Software*, a major magazine about video, published a regular column, 'Feedback,' which announced videos to be given away or exchanged, in the United States and elsewhere. As production grew, catalogues began to be produced by different groups to publicize the videos; samples of these can be seen in the exhibition. The concept of a collection or a media library that was generated and managed by the video community rapidly emerged. This is a fundamental characteristic of this mentality of access and sharing; other art forms did not act as agent and driver of their own conservation and institutionalization.

Community television, as a site of production and dissemination, was also seen as a way to connect with the public directly. Vidéographe, in addition to launching the community television station TVC4 in St Jérôme, experimented with a type of video on-demand called Sélectovision, through which viewers could call their local cable station to choose from some 80 titles that would then be broadcast. In western Canada, programs initiated by artists such as *Images from Infinity* by Byron Black (1973-1974, Vancouver) or *The GINA Show* produced by John Anderson (1978-1981, Vancouver) contributed to the artistic vitality of the region.

Technical Invention

The desire for free expression and the democratization of video production through access to technology and the ability to master it became crucial. Retailing at some \$1,500, the first portable video systems were not affordable for all budgets and it was not uncommon to share. Many efforts were made to find different avenues of access and to establish contact between them. The special 'Canada' special issue of *Radical Software* released in the summer of 1971 listed 21 organizations, collectives and groups working in video. In 1972, the 'Video Repertory' of the same magazine identified 53 individuals and groups possessing or having access to video in Canada. In 1971, Michael Goldberg published the first *Video Exchange Directory* (1971-1978) in Vancouver in an effort to identify all the key players in video and to promote exchange.

People mostly learned to use video informally and on their own. Gilles Chartier, a pioneer of feedback and performance video in Quebec, was self-taught, for example. Images of his work can be seen in the booklet *L'image électronique* by Jean-Pierre Boyer and Danielle Lafontaine, presented in the exhibition. In the mid-1970s, training workshops began to be organized, often as part of targeted programs, and these remain central to the activities of many video centres today. In the same way, technical development was initially largely artisanal. Artists and technicians built machines to suit their needs and wishes. Vidéographe developed the 'Éditomètre,' one of the first editing systems, a complex process for videotape; Jean-Pierre Boyer invented the 'Boyétiseur' and Al Razutis developed FELIX, two personalized synthesizers; David Rahn, for his part, experimented with a system of colorization. Each of them attempted to push the technical limits of video.

Such technical 'invention' was accompanied with the publication

of a number of texts and manuals intended to promote self-teaching and the reproduction of 'DIY' techniques. In 1976 in Canada, Goldberg published *The Accessible Portapack Manual*, which was based on his own practical experience and that of the numerous contributors that he consulted. A draft document can be seen in the exhibition. Technical discoveries, including those made at Vidéographe, have been published in the Société nouvelle journal, *Médium Média*, among other places. A copy of this is displayed in the exhibition. Video itself served as an educational tool through the production of tutorials. A four-part series on using video became part of Vidéographe's collection in 1976. Technical imagery – plans, diagrams, illustrations of machines, whether real or imagined – was prevalent in publications of the time, as evidenced in many of the publications exhibited here.

Conclusion: Post-Analogue Issues

Did early video achieve its ideal of sharing and community? As a driver of social transformation: rarely; as an alternative source of information: sometimes; as a witness of its era: often; as an artistic practice: for the most part. The transition to digital has turned this technological and artistic ecology on its head. The world of paper, like magnetic tape, has largely been replaced with online dissemination and promotion. The digitalization and conservation of videotapes, when the physical supports reach the end of their lifespan, presents major challenges to artist-run centres. Certain challenges remain the same, however: finding an audience, developing and showcasing collections, promoting engagement in the centres. The resurgence or the survival of often obsolete analogue technologies in contemporary creative practice is perhaps indicative of a need for materiality and for remembering. To conclude the exhibition, we have therefore selected a range of analogue works from the beginning of the 21st century that used techniques such as re-recording (*Puerto Rico Tautology (14 dubs high)* by Rob Feulner), hybridization with cinema technics (*La reconstitution du bulbe paranoïaque* by Guillaume Vallée), the use of VHS (*How Flowers Never Became a Food Group*, by Charlotte Clermont and Alain Lefebvre; *Bleu nuit* by Sabrina Ratté), and the use of historic synthesizers (*Minotaures* by Jean-Pierre Boyer, *Rantdance* by Katherine Liberovskaya). A bridge has been built.

- Karine Boulanger (Vidéographe), curator

Notes

1. Anon., *Interview with Robert Forget*, Vidéographe, 1972, 31 minutes.

2. Froger, Marion. « Les dynamiques collectives au Vidéographe (1971-1973) » in Bonin, Vincent, *Protocoles documentaires (1967/1975)*, Montréal, Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2010, pp. 395-404.

Videos:

Jean-Pierre Boyer, *L'Amertube*, 1972, 12 min. Vidéographe collection.

Jane Wright, *Electronic Sunsets 25*, 1974, 4 min. Vtape collection.

Eric Cameron, *Keeping Marlene Out of the Picture*, 1976, 3 min. Vtape collection.

Lisa Steele, *Birthday Suit - with scars and defects*, 1974, 13 min. Vtape collection.

Elizabeth Vander Zaag, *Not Fiction*, 1976, 4 min. Vtape collection.

David Askevold, *Fill*, 1970, 8 min. Vtape collection.

Louise Gendron, *Femmes de rêve*, 1979, 10 min. GIV collection.

Terence McGlade, *Frivolous*, 1974, 4 min. Vtape collection.

Al Razutis, *98.3 KHz: (Bridge at Electrical Storm)*, 1973, 12 min. Artist's collection.

marshalore, *Janet sees herself*, 1977, 14 min. Vidéographe collection.

David Rahn, *Video Clouds*, 1976, 3 min. Vidéographe collection.

Rob Feulner, *Puerto Rico Tautology (14 dubs high)*, 2016, 7 min. Vidéographe collection.

Charlotte Clermont, Alain Lefebvre, *How Flowers Never Became a Food Group*, 2017, 5 min. Vidéographe collection.

Guillaume Vallée, *La reconstruction du bulbe paranoïaque*, 2017, 11 min. Vidéographe collection.

Jean-Pierre Boyer, *Minotaures*, 2002, 9 min. Vidéographe collection.

Sabrina Ratté, *Bleu nuit*, 2011, 8 min. GIV collection.

Katherine Liberovskaya, *RantDance*, 2009, 12 min. Vidéographe collection.

Documents:

Artexpte collection.

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Vidéographe