

Brenda Longfellow's
Our Marilyn

A woman swims across Lake Ontario in the dark in 1952. All we can see of her are her arms and head moving in and out of white splashes of water. The image has been treated, drained of all colour and detail, a Rorschach pattern of black becoming white becoming black. The swim continues in a monotonous rhythm – struggle, setback, struggle – endurance. The image never seems to change much either – a continuous disturbance of ragged white on a dark field – but it holds a strange fascination. Somehow it is weirdly beautiful, seductive to watch.

This is the core of Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn*: a woman, a lake and an optical printer. From these three elements you can make magic, something the film does effortlessly. This is a film whose images and sounds have a hypnotic sensuality, working with the emotional force of a chant, insinuating itself into the regions you can't reach by sense alone.

This all may seem somewhat strange for a film that is on one level so cerebral. The context for the film's sensuality is rigorously theoretical, but the body of the film exceeds theory, if by theory we mean the sort of discourse that walks around a thing countless times before deciding it must first interrogate what it means to walk.

Existing happily in the chasm between Fine Art and television, video artists of the past few years have accomplished what would have been impossible within either institution: they have championed the decommmodification of art; explored social issues which had little popular support; reconstructed narrative formats and redefined, 'the story' in its relation to entertainment.

Operating in the chasm, however, has meant foregoing the economic validation associated with sundry production industries. In 1977 a well-established video artist, completing a tape which took 12 months to make and cost \$5,000, could reasonably expect \$50 to exhibit it in a gallery or festival. In 1987 the fee is exactly the same but the tape probably cost \$20,000-30,000 to make. A much-sought-after museum sale might net the artist \$500 or \$600. Not surprisingly, worth and economic value are seldom discussed in the same breath by video artists.

However, it is clear that, in their effort to garner support for their art form, video artists must speak, at least partially, in the *lingua franca* of our soci-



WEARY, BUT STILL FULL OF FIGHT, MARILYN PLOWS ON

Our Marilyn intends to explore the differences between the female bodies two countries appropriated as icons at a particular moment in history: America consumed Marilyn Monroe, a child in a woman's body, a body bred for the pedestal or the rumour mill, while we Canadians consumed our own Marilyn, Marilyn Bell, a marathoner, an emblem of endurance, an icon of denial.

Longfellow takes on a lot here; the film is ambitious. It analyses the way we construct the bodies we will worship and attempt to emulate, the way we want them

to be resistant to change, to pain, to decay. Marilyn Bell was an adolescent who undertook an enormous challenge, partly to test her own body, to determine its limit, but mostly to beat an American who was also vying to be the first to cross the lake. The comparison to Marilyn Monroe is a bit of a reach, but it's never dwelt upon; the tragedy of that body remains largely as a reference point. On this level the film is thoughtful and sometimes provocative. But it's the story, the narrative of Bell's triumph, that seizes you.

The effect of this narrative is direct, complicit. It isn't careful like theory is; it grabs you by our critical distance and makes you need to follow it to the end. There can never be a simple opposition between theory and practice, but the practice in *Our Marilyn*, the actual retelling of the story stands out disturbingly from its context; too often this narrative seems to be the real film trying to get out, the film *Our Marilyn* wants to be. It might be a lesser film, but it might also be more intense.

The power of the story is strange because you know how it ends, you know Bell makes it – the film even shows you the front-page celebrations first. But the drama still draws you in. There are those wonderful, abstracted images, a powerful soundtrack – the water, the narrator's rhythmic voice – and a text that follows the chronology of the swim.

Our Marilyn is a personal documentary, a blend of theory, formal experimentation, and historical reconstruction. But it's more than that; it's a confessional written from one body to another.

Cameron Bailey •

OUR MARILYN d. Brenda Longfellow l.p. Marilyn (contemporary) — Linda Griffiths; Marilyn Bell (voice) — Brigitte Cauchery; Gus Ryder (voice) — David Fraser orig. score Gayle-Marilyn Young add. arrangements Jamie Bonk Archival Music: "How Far is She Now" performed by Jack Kingston and the Mainstreeters, c. Procan 1954; "Marilyn" written by Doctor Leslie Bell and performed by the Leslie Bell singers, c. 1954. optical printing Cindy Gawel, Brenda Longfellow super8 shoot Glen Richards sd. ed. Petra Valier sd. mix Sound House neg. cut May Bischoff Made possible through the financial assistance of Ontario Arts Council; Studio D, National Film Board, National Film Board, Toronto Regional Office, Queen's Film Department running time 27 min. b & w and colour 16mm.

V I D E O T A L E S

by Geoffrey Shea

ety: dollar-value. Realizing this, artists have gallantly rebuffed the broadcasters' offers over the years to show video art for grossly less than standard television fees, realizing that they would be forfeiting any claims to a reasonable rate of pay later on.

At the same time however, the artists have spent precious little effort concerning themselves with other venues of validation. Hence the 10-year price-freeze on the absurdly low rental fees.

A survey of several price-setters reveals a variety of attempts to improve this condition:

V/tape's existing rental fee structure is: Single Screening: 0-30 minutes – \$50; 30-90 minutes – \$75. Library Screening: 0-30 minutes – \$100; 30-90 minutes – \$150. ('Library' usually means one public showing followed by screenings-on-request, for a period of one or two weeks.) These basic rates were established 10 years ago and have been com-

monly adopted by many distributors, exhibitors and artists.

Now, in consensus with the film and video caucus of the ANNPAC (Association of National Non-Profit Artists' Centres) V/Tape is planning to institute a new fee schedule: Single: 1-15 min. – \$50; 15-30 min. – \$75; 30-90 min. – \$100. Library: 1-15 min. – \$100; 15-30 min. – \$150; 30-90 min. – \$200.

V/Tape recommends that institutions pay at least \$400 for a purchase, but leaves the actual price-setting to the artist.

CARFAC (Canadian Artists Representation) has established a Recommended Minimum Exhibition Fee Schedule for visual artists exhibiting in public and artist-run galleries. This schedule does not presently include film and video, but CARFAC intends to develop a film and video policy as soon as it can.

The Centre for Art Tapes in Halifax has hit upon an uncommon but obvious fee

structure for its audio and video exhibitions: for a three-week show, whether it is an installation of a Library Screening, they pay \$1,000, a rate slightly in excess of CARFAC's recommended fee for visual artists. The healthy respect this implies for the work of video artists may be spreading: YYZ, one of Toronto's most conscientious artist outlets, has recently included film and video in its ongoing exhibition program and has also adopted a fee structure close to CARFAC's recommended rate for visual artists.

Given these last two recent developments, it seems ironic that V/tape is increasing its fee schedule as little as it is; and that CARFAC does not actually have a recommended rate for film and video. Perhaps if video-makers wish to be considered seriously as artists, they should initiate exhibition and fee structures which are on a par with artists working in other media. For it is clear that if artists, their representatives, and artist-run centres do not start to accord their own work more value, our cultural institutions (museums, broadcasters, funders) certainly never will.

Geoffrey Shea •