

In the late '70s Jim Hoberman – the individual charged for a troubled decade to turn the visionary aspirations of the American film artist into verse – wrote that *cinema* exhibited a double aspect. While both were time based, both moving sound and image towards an authorial inscription in the rear, the first was chemical, the second electronic. Infused with the punk populism (careerism disguised as art) pervading New York, Hoberman thus cojoined film and video. One further point seemed to make this union inevitable, both relied on the art of animal husbandry in their respective beginnings – film on the training of race horses and video on the animation of mice.

The May 1988 opening of Canada's National Gallery offered an opportunity to test the limits of his naming. Both film and video are gathered beneath a single, newly appointed administrative office whose first public offering would be the Gallery's opening. The video room is approached through the corridors of contemporary art, a neon monitor naming its intentions before the double glassed doors ushers one inside. Four state-of-the-art monitors stand equidistant before an easy array of reclining furniture. The tapes run continuously throughout the day with breaks signalling geographical shifts – Quebec at 11:00, the East Coast at 2:00, the Plains at 3:00. Video's ongoing presence insures an accessibility equal to any other medium in the Gallery, with one notable exception.

The films are downstairs, presented alternately in the palatial surroundings of the grand auditorium or the more demure setting of the flat-floored educational room. The setting signals the status of the event as theatrical spectacle. Each film is run once before returning to their distributors – the Gallery has committed to buying video, not film. In the Gallery's opening show there is only one filmmaker not born in Ontario. This is meant to suggest no mean-spirited exclusion but to state that artist's film remains a largely urban phenomenon – rooted at present in Toronto and Vancouver. And while the videotapes reprise a number of social concerns – ranging from Richard Fung's reworking of gay porn to Marilyn Burgess' anti-nuke tract – many of the films still evince the calling of modernism's high priest Clement Greenberg. His demand that each medium express the qualities of its own manufacture can be found in the 45-minute film that trucks over landscapes, or the film that presents 10 successive, silently enumerated still-lives or the film whose screen is blank for 30 of its 35 minutes. Most often made by white, male middle-class urban dwellers, the ensuing struggles with the modernist imperative seem inevitable.

The cinema is all money but the money figures twice: first you spend all your time running to get the money to make the film but then in the film the money comes back again, in the image. I think it's true what they say, that the order and content of the image follows the order and content of the money. The cost of identity is high when the making of images is determined by the distribution.

- Jean-Luc Godard

Laid on the reductive couch of semiotics, films reside with the signifier while video takes up the signified. Formally bankrupt, all too content to concede to broadcast television the forms of its expression, many of the tapes nonetheless express an engagement with the social that has utterly destroyed Kant's notion of art's existence apart from its surround – an imagined autonomy elongated through the modernist enterprise of autonomous signifiers. It is a curious paradox that finds video makers hailing from art schools making work that looks like television and filmmakers graduating from community colleges or universities making work that looks like 'art'.

One might point, in a last evocation of the decade consciousness that has so neatly scissioned our century, to a possible confluence of the admittedly (hopelessly) reductive model offered above in the decade ahead – to an engaged film praxis both informed by and informing the 'real'. Whether we will be able to address questions of constituency, race and gender in the work's making/reception are questions which will underscore the continued relevance of this kind of filmmaking.

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