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Stalling Art

Diamond, Sara

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'stalling art

by **SARA
DIAMOND**

**A
REVIEW
OF
LUMINOUS
SITES**

LUMINOUS SITES RANKS AS ONE of Vancouver's most visible and far-reaching video events. Drawing on video and installation artists from across Canada, the curators placed the series squarely within the current debates surrounding the future of video. The sites included works by English-speaking artists from Eastern Canada, New York and Vancouver: Tomiyo Sasaki; Barbara Steinman; Paul Wong; Cornelia Wyngaarden; Ian Carr-Harris; Max Dean; David Tomas; Randy and Berenicc; Kate Craig and Vera Frenkel.

Varied treatments of the medium emerged. Some artists continued to foreground video, both as medium and as tool for social and aesthetic commentary (Cornelia Wyngaarden, Randy and Berenicc, Tomiyo Sasaki). Others drew upon the formal nature of the medium, deploying it as an element in a larger sculptural scheme (Barbara Steinman, David Tomas, Kate Craig, Vera Frenkel). Yet others commented on its inherent qualities and history, as medium for surveillance or for mass entertainment (Max Dean, Paul Wong (whose performance I did not see), Ian Carr-Harris). Some artists combined these elements.

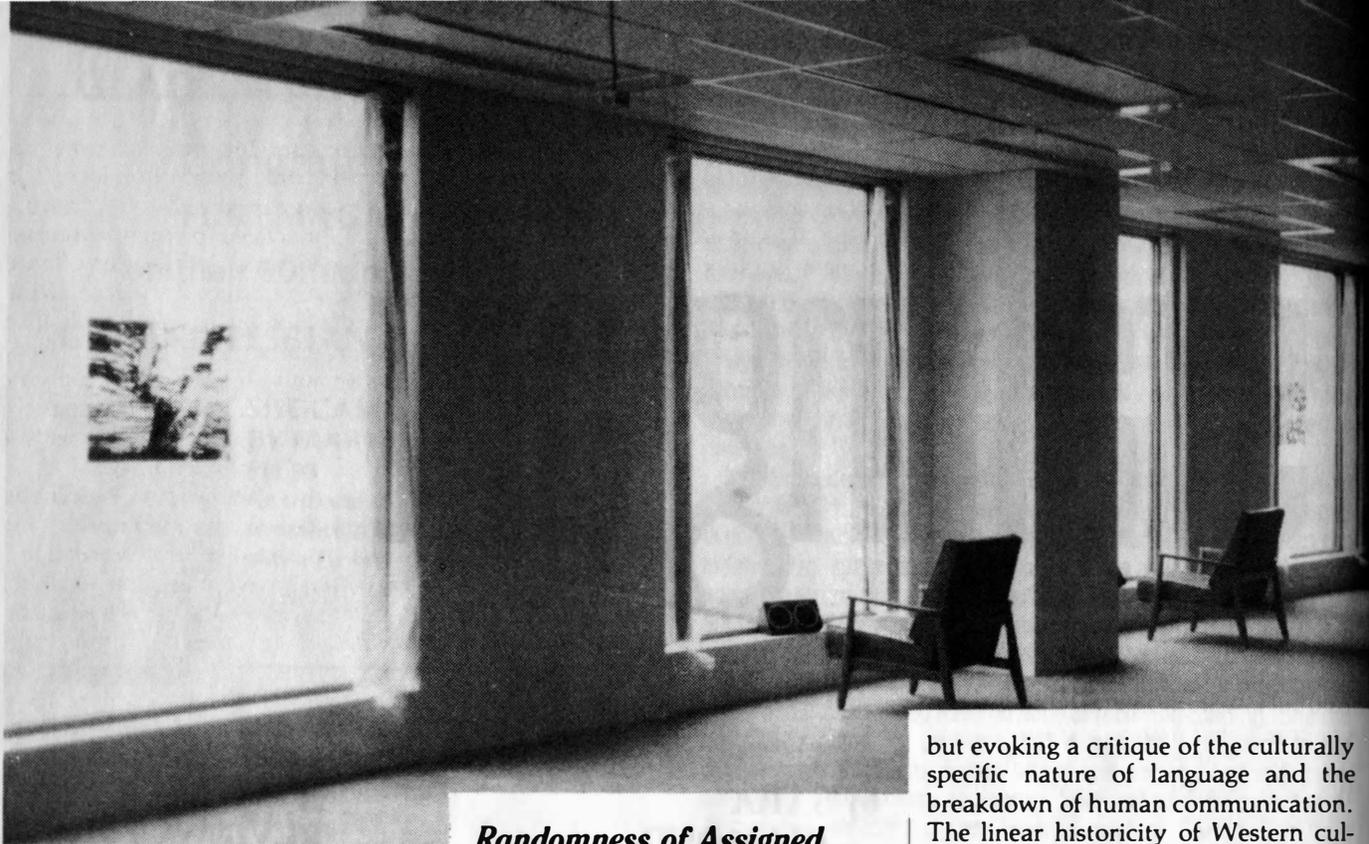
The series was timely, for video art is pulled by two, contradictory magnets, both threatening to erase its past. On the whole, the medium is becoming

more technologically intensive, less accessible and more visually flexible. At the same time, video is increasingly acknowledged as a legitimate post-modern medium by critics and galleries. Installation, as Martha Rosler pointed out at Video '84, is particularly attractive to the curator, critic and formalist because it highlights the sculptural and medium qualities of video, fits appropriately within the gallery-space and tends to downplay social commentary. There is also an existing discourse within visual art and multi-disciplinary work that it can adopt: a discourse centred on formal issues of representation, the nature of specific media and concerns about the role of the artist.

On the other hand, video art faces an increased popularization, an incorporation into rock video and television technique. This process is barely realized in English Canada in comparison with the United States and Britain, but the carrot is still held out. And certainly the Quebec phenomena of Michel Lemieux and his accompanying high tech artist-associates suggests this process at work. Within these stresses there remains a strong community-based and parallel gallery interest in video art with a healthy, continuing tradition of in-

dependent screenings. Some artists who work with more popular forms and with installation, continue to engage with social issues within a continually developing aesthetic. Video installation that required audience interaction with the installation context and medium is still perceived as viable by some artists. Installation work is not inherently reactionary. It can provide a context that intensifies meaning stated within tapes and can be constructed in any environment. The value of the community context for viewing is that it allows direct interaction between audience and artwork. The presence of artists at screenings and the allowance for discussion time has facilitated critical response.

Luminous sites displayed the different directions of video installation in the 1980s with the related, inherent tensions. It is not then surprising that a central issue was that of the nature of representation: the relationships between artist and object; object and viewer; critic and viewer; critic and artist and so on. Works such as Ian Carr-Harris' *On TV*, Vera Frenkel's *Lost Art: A Cargo Cult Romance*, David Tomas' *Through*



the *Eye of the Cyclops*, centred on these issues. All of these artists approached this fraught terrain with intelligence, but limited their audience by choosing the high ground.

For example, Carr-Harris' work is concerned with the reinterpretation of Manet's *Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe* and *Olympia*. His images: a slide projected field and a constructed wrinkled tablecloth/bedsheet, represents the context of the paintings, but absents the naked women from them. The viewer is forced to construct the absent models and recall their confrontative look. The spoken text explores the gaze of the women in the pieces. In *Dejeuner*, she is "an intelligent subject, and we are addressed neither as authority, nor allowed to assume anonymity. We are, in fact, addressed by her as present, equal and inconsequential."

The works challenge the easily colonizing male gaze (and Manet's contemporaries' [assumed to be male] understanding of prostitutes and other working class women). The artist demands that we watch television with a similar responsibility in constructing our relationship with the image. The work draws on recent art historical commentary on 19th century sexual representation and on critical theories of ideology. The problem is that reading the work requires a familiarity with the images.

Randomness of Assigned Cultural Meaning

Frenkel's installation is a humorous critique of the Canadian art system and the randomness of assigned cultural meaning. She constructs a mysterious panel discussion at Banff, surrounds it with images and objects from a cargo cult society. With video and text, she provides a layered and amusing narrative about the search for a winged prison toilet, an unimportant creation that assumes an amplified meaning as critics eulogize it and artists search for it.

Tomas presents a three dimensional photo montage. He superimposes a series of texts on representation and on the Western, male quest for culture/civilization, including Homer, Fox Talbot (19th century photographer), and Vertov (Soviet filmmaker). The artist constructs a false historical moment, one that brings together these culture-bearers from distinct historical epochs, to comment on the destruction of the critical eye within existing codes of representation. (Odysseus pierces Talbot's eye while Vertov looks on through the video camera of mass culture). This results in a visually strong but idiosyncratic installation.

Randy and Bereniccí's *Rune*, streamlined together concrete constructions of language based on ciphers or codes, on their own meaningless to the viewer,

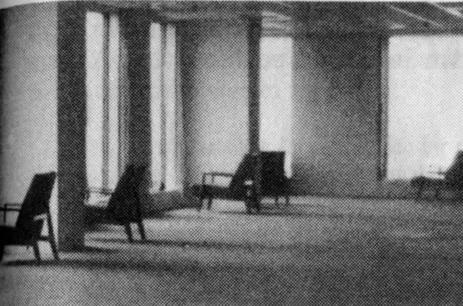
but evoking a critique of the culturally specific nature of language and the breakdown of human communication. The linear historicity of Western culture was represented by an archeological dig; bleak, decaying construction site and the towing of "history" out to sea by the artists in an entertaining performance/ritual. This contrasted with versions of history and language imbedded in other cultures, equally limited and culturally bound.

A paradewalker is tortuously strung with threads. Carrying a giant head-dress sewn to his body, he advances towards a temple. This suggests a painful and repetitive relationship with historical memory. In a Chinese board-game, the future is told by cards and a bird alighting on the board. History is a random but repeated gesture. The message is not optimistic: human communication is fraught, patterned and incomprehensible. This work attacked issues of representation through a broader existentialist discourse on the crisis of human society.

Sasaki and Craig chose lyrical, visually stirring approaches to video installation. In both pieces, video is incidental, a tool to develop a pleasurable environmental landscape. Tomiyo Sasaki's *Spawning Sockeyes* reiterated this artist's concern with the delicate ecology of natural cycles. It was a sculptural work, with video loops of sparkling salmon on monitors scattered on a cascade of rocks. Kate Craig's *Clay Cove, Newfoundland. Park Place, Vancouver* contrasted the sounds and shapes of the Newfoundland seacoast

with the landscape and skyline of Vancouver.

The above works were skillfully executed cultural puzzles, glimpses of natural beauty rendered warm within a usually cold medium or celebrations of the power of technology. While they



Installation by Kate Craig

were amusing, entertaining, visually beautiful or witty, they functioned for a very traditional gallery audience. This was a point of frustration. Luminous Sites was heavily publicized and attracted a larger than usual crowd. Many of the works either eschewed their viewers or simply pleased them.

Several of the artists were effective in combining a critique of social reality with exciting video language. As *A Wife Has A Cow*, by Cornelia Wyn-

gaarden, is based on entertaining stories told by a woman rancher (Keely Moll) from Rock Creek. The work addresses issues of gender identity in its choice of an androgynous and highly competent heroine. The installation counterposes the male world of the rodeo, where cowboys attempt to ride angry wild cows with the serenity of Moll's symbiotic lifestyle and humour. The audience is surrounded by bales of hay and six monitors, in fact corralled by the work. The effect is a gentle fun-poking at media stereotyping and the Western mythos.

Barbara Steinman's powerful *Cenotaphe* is about the impact of fascism. Based on Hannah Arendt's quote, "The radicalism of measures to make people disappear...as if they had never existed is frequently not apparent at first glance." It is a tomb to the disappeared; a solid, silent monument with blue video flame. It is a remembrance of those murdered by the military in South and Central America, the victims of fascism in Germany and Native people in North America. It is a sensitive and simple work, effective in a period when monuments to dead astronauts grace American streets and Canadians leap eagerly to the right.

Also of interest was Max Dean's *Prototype*. This was the only interactive installation, one which sought a street audience. Placed in the storefront Or Gallery, Dean's surveillance construction was activated by hand pressure from the viewer. As the surveillance camera swung around, the face of the viewer captured on the black and white monitor became increasingly distorted. It was an apt statement on the capacity of self-induced monitoring, particularly the state censorship variety, to create a distorted and controlled image.

Despite its limitations, Luminous Sites provided an important opening for video art and installation in Vancouver. By centering on work about art-making and beauty it provided a new legitimacy for video, one that needed a more subversive balance. It is to be hoped that future projects of this scale will use community as well as gallery environments and include more issue-oriented and documentary artists in redefining video installation. Nonetheless, the efforts of the curators, Karen Henry and Diana Augaitus, in realizing this scale of work, in a variety of gallery spaces, deserves respect.

Sara Diamond

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