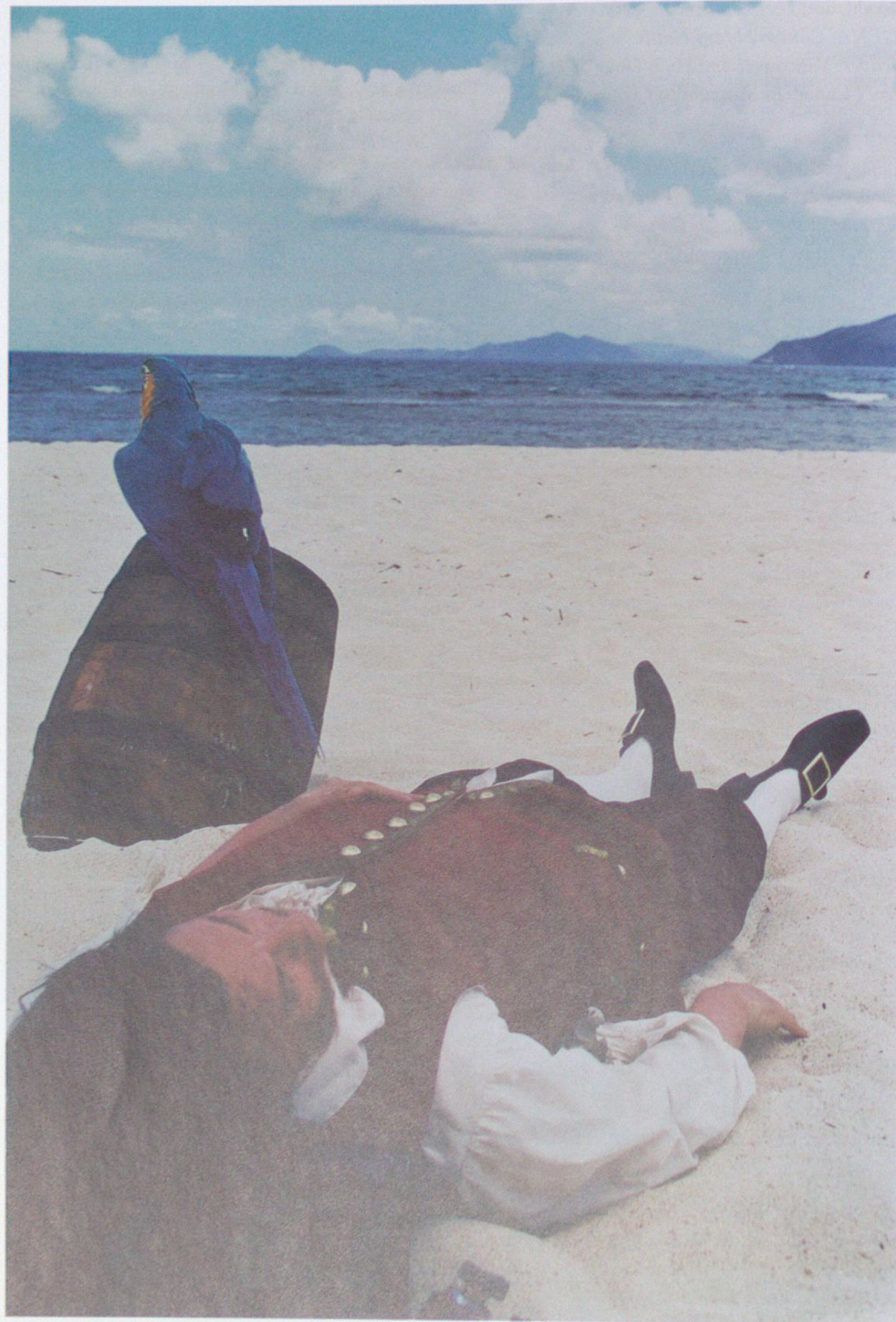


Chapter 19

Experimental Video in Canada and the Question of Identity

Christine Ross

No single aesthetic characterizes the field of experimental video in Canada. This observation comes from a consideration of the imposing number of works produced over the last 35 years, in conjunction with the many communities that have formed themselves around the two dozen or so artist-run centres dedicated to the production and distribution of video art in Canada. If such an aesthetic were to be named it would be only through the erasure of a fundamental heterogeneity of practices, despite the clear evidence of influences, micro-alliances, and similarity of concerns. Canada is the nation of heterogeneity par excellence: it is founded on at least three national cultures (First Nations, French, and British) and its multiculturalism is reinforced by both the Official Languages Act (1988), which recognizes both English and French as the official languages of Canada, and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988), which recognizes and promotes "the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage." Heterogeneity means a coalition of identities but not a binding identity, and this reality is important for understanding the development of experimental video in Canada.

Few video practices have dealt directly with the question of Canadian identity, although Ardele Lister's (b.1950) and Robert Morin's (b.1949) *Yes Sir! Madame …* (1994) and Daniel Dion's (b.1958) *Système des beaux-arts / System of Fine Arts* (1980; co-directed with Philippe Poloni, b.1959) and *Great Divide / Grande barrière* (1990) are important exceptions in this regard. However, the promotion of identity difference at large (be it linguistic, cultural, geographic, political, gendered, racial, or sexual) has been at the core, both institutionally and thematically, of Canadian independent video. I want to take advantage of this chapter to move away from asking "What is Canadian video art?"—an unsatisfying question that implies classification and its inevitable omissions and false sense of cohesion. Instead, the chapter asks: "How has Canada's heterogeneity enabled the growth of video to the point of turning it into one of the most vibrant fields in Canadian contemporary art?" and "Why does Canadian video matter for the understanding of video art in general, and more particularly for the electronic investigation of the (un)realities of the image?" This is also a perfect occasion to look back at the deployment of an art-and-communications practice at a moment when video—much like photography and film—has ceased to exist analogically and has been increasingly absorbed (which does not mean cancelled) by the digital.

An In-between Aesthetics for an In-between Nation

In his 1998 assessment of the historical impact of video art, media theoretician Philippe Dubois stated that video occupies a fragile and

Figure 19.1
Rodney Graham, *Vexation Island*, 1997
35-mm film transferred to laser disc, 9:00 min

transitory marginal position between two strongly established image and sound technologies: film and the digital. Expanding on Dubois's view, Françoise Parfait concludes her book on the history of video art by arguing that video's status is to be "'between': between the image and the absence of image, the analogue and the numerical, the object and the process, visibility and invisibility, mobility and immobility, the live and the pre-recorded, the outside and the inside, the over and the under, awakeness and sleep."[1] The "in-between-ness" of video has resulted in the uneasy acceptance of the medium in relation to film, often reducing it to the status of the poor cousin. But it has also offered, especially in its first decades, a valuable sense of lightness of production that requires a minimum of technological know-how and financial investment, and that favours one-person-crew creation. These conditions enabled artists to address the everyday, the banal, the minor and the unimportant, undecidedness and ambiguity, as well as personal perspectives on communication and gendered, sexual, and racial difference.

The quality of lightness—and therein lies the productivity of the in-between—captured what the sustained attention and heavy technical apparatus of cinema would have abandoned, requiring from both the video-maker and the viewer a sense of distracted attention. In contrast to the process of digitization, which tends to erase distinctions between media, video is still able to open new spaces between categories. This view echoes throughout the writings of Canadian media artists and curators, including Gary Kibbins, who has been particularly interested in video (notably, the work of Steve Reinke [b.1963] and Rodney Werden [b.1946]) that exposes the "messy" act of thinking—its wanderings, emotionality, confusions, and (ir)rationalities.[2] Likewise, media artist Jennifer Abbott (b.1965) writes that "video art straddles multiple and oppositional worlds"[3] in a reiterated back-and-forth between social activism, institutional art, anti-television, television, and film. The in-between view is at the heart of artist Jenny Lion's curatorial statement for Magnetic North (2000), an exhibition intended to highlight how much experimental video "is perhaps also well characterized by all the things 'it isn't' and all the things 'it's not not'":

> It's not the bastard child of cinema, though it's often treated as such. . . . It's not permanent…yet it's the tool many use to preserve historical record. . . . Video isn't a clean or contained medium, which is perhaps why it has lent itself so well to representing all sorts of things that are often perceived as dirty or out of bounds: the body, rebellion, sexuality, narcissism, marginality, decay, politics, death, humour. …And because of the continual activity of the electron gun spraying electrons in hundreds of sequential horizontal lines across the phosphorescent coating inside your television screen, the image isn't exactly there; yet it's not not there: we see it.[4]

This Canadian insistence on the in-between status of video is not without what French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has identified as the passage from the grand to the little narrative. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) Lyotard contends that the legitimation of knowledge has fundamentally changed in computerized societies. The most significant aspect of this change has been the collapse of the grand or metanarratives of the Enlightenment tradition, especially the overarching philosophies of history (notably Hegelianism and Marxism) that seek to explain humanity in its totality and to enunciate the laws by which humanity will achieve its emancipation. Having lost their credibility, metanarratives have been partly replaced by "little" narratives that disclose how much individuals now evolve (despite globalization) in smaller contexts in which they

adopt localized positions for judging actions and producing knowledge. For Lyotard, these little narratives have become the main forms of legitimation of knowledge. They allow for mobile communicational affiliations or nodal points whose success relies on how well individuals perform in various limited roles.

Video must be understood as an image and sound technology that has embraced the little narrative. It has done so to describe a world less and less reducible to universal forms of legitimation of knowledge, and to signal a crisis of identity. This investment manifests itself in the final sequence of Nelson Henricks's (b.1963) video *Conspiracy of Lies* (1992; Figure 19.2), where the narrator—in voiceover—explains her inability to reach clarity about the world and how, in the end, existence is inseparable from lies:

> All my life, I have never said the right things. There was never a poetry of eloquence in my speech, never a clarity in my voice because there was never any clarity in my thoughts. . . . Always a hesitancy, always a trepidation . . . . There is no truth. Nothing so absolute as to be an ultimate truth. Only the half truths or lies we conspire with to continue our existence. Our conspiracy of lies.

The little narrative's location in the narrator's or video-maker's disbelief in absolute

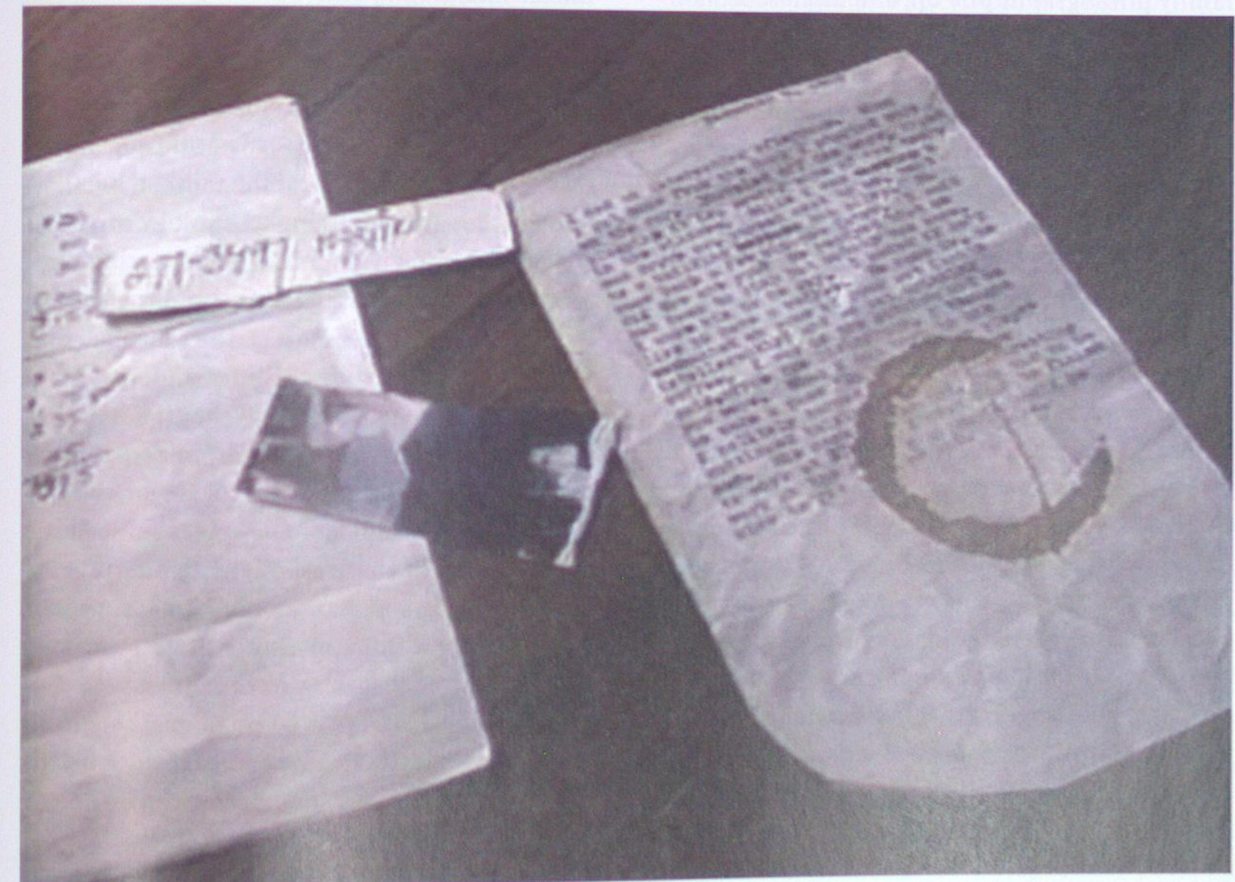


Figure 19.2
Nelson Henricks, *Conspiracy of Lies*, 1992
3/4" cassette, 12:00 min

truth can be seen not only in Henricks's work, but also in the videos discussed throughout this chapter. In these works, identity is set up as an enigma, a question, or a quest: a confusing process consisting of doubles, fictions, ghosts, detours, or falseness, which can and must be addressed but that are never truly resolved. For example, in what could be considered Henricks's first self-portrait, *Legend* (1988), the wandering of the narrator is concomitant with the awareness of the difficulty in establishing communication between a transmitter and a receiver. The video starts with black and white images of Henricks's childhood home of Calgary. The distorted, low-resolution images, made weaker by electronic interference, transmit radio noise. Recurrent maps and family photographs pile up, and disclose a self in search of itself. These images unfold while Henricks sings a song denouncing a national consciousness colonized by American culture: "I am not American. This is not my dream. This is someone else's dream. This is someone else's dream and I can't wake up . . . I'm lost in America." And also: "I have no name, I have no place to be. That night I went for a walk, I never stopped walking. Restlessly searching but not searching, trying to find you, trying to find a place to be, because I have no name, because we have no name."

Henricks conveys in *Legend* the opacity of the self: a self that is nationally ill-defined. I am arguing here that the in-between status of video has specific resonances in Canada, not only because Canada is itself an intermediate nation (between America and Europe), but also because video has consistently relied on technological discourses to affirm Canada's status as a nation. In "Technological Nationalism," his 1986 study of the role of technology in the constitution of Canada as a nation, Maurice Charland showed that at least since the construction of the coast-to-coast Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in the early 1900s and increasingly since the creation of a state-supported broadcasting system (the CBC), a rhetoric of technological nationalism in English Canada has ascribed to technology "the capacity to create a nation by enhancing communication."[5] Thus, the CPR's physical linking of the disparate parts of a land—a linking that was to facilitate commercial exchange—ultimately ensured the development of a political nation-state by enforcing the central government's political control over the country. This it most notably did by excluding American interests, fostering immigration, establishing a military presence, and uniting Canadians through patriotic sentiment. In short, both as a technology and as a mythical rhetoric of national origin, the CPR offered Canadians the experience of a technologically mediated political unity that transcended geographical obstacles. Charland's study reveals that the development of electronic communication in Canada renewed and reinforced the discourse of technological nationalism by securing the country's territory not through the space-binding technology of the railroad but through the culture-binding technology of radio and television. Yet if communications technology is affirmed as the binding element of Canada, it is so only inasmuch as it is state sponsored. Canada, by its early sponsorship of radio and television, attempted to prevent the airwaves from becoming American, thereby anticipating the more recent post-NAFTA struggle for cultural diversity in international trade agreements. This cultural policy has been especially significant for English Canada, which cannot rely on language to distinguish itself from the United States. Charland argues, however, that this protective measure does not provide *identity* to Canadians, because it focuses on technological process to the detriment of content. Moreover, although electronic communication is state sponsored, its linking effect has been threatened from the start by the Americanization of Canada's airwaves.

These debates are crucial for understanding the development of independent video in Canada precisely because it has remained uninterested in issues of nationalism, in favour of community concern. Alternatively, when it *has* addressed nationalism or nationhood, it has been systematically critical of those discourses. Artists engaged in video have moreover denounced the communicational technology of television, notably its codes of representation, its ideological stakes, and its numbing modes of address. Although attempts have been made to take advantage of television's powerful reach to broadcast independent video, opportunities have been rare (both on community television and on major networks) and have only underscored video's marginalization. Content-wise, such single-channel works as *Fait divers: elle remplace son mari par une TV* (1982) by Jean-Pierre St-Louis (b.1951) and Linda Craig (b.1956), *Manufactured Romance* (1982–85) by Anne Ramsden (b.1952), and *Whitewash* (1990) by Jan Peacock (b.1955) have been crucial for the feminist exposure of television culture as a powerful site for the construction of femininity. General Idea (a 1969–94 collective consisting of Jorge Zontal [1944–94], AA Bronson [b.1946], and Felix Partz [1945–94]), created videos that were intended for broadcast but that used strategies of appropriation and parody to address the clichéd rendering of the artist as conveyed by the mass media. These works include *Pilot* (1977; produced for TVOntario), *Press Conference* (1977), *Test Tube* (1979), *Loco* (1982), and *Shut the Fuck Up* (1985). *Press Conference* mimics and mocks the event in its title, as three young white males answer questions about the state of art in the world. This staging discloses how such discussions about art are absent from the offerings of major broadcasters and reveals how the latter speak about art only by turning it into a commodity.

Neam Cathod (b.1954), from DEI (Département d'entraînement à l'insanité), has also been crucial in providing a critique of media. Through strategies of appropriating television images and combining them with sound and image manipulation, Cathod turns the visuals into a densely layered cacophony that perceptually assaults the viewer. The work of Stan Douglas (b.1960) has been another crucial instance in the critique of television. *Television Spots* (1987–88) and *Monodramas* (1991), originally conceived as short video inserts within regular advertisements on television networks, were broadcast nightly, unannounced, as part of scheduled broadcasting blocks. The sequences tell short melodramas, using imagery that undermines mainstream televisual narrative by showing empty places, individuals in a state of waiting, and banal scenes without coherence or resolution, as well as by editing scenes to a rhythm that is much slower than that of the usual advertisements. Although these micro-narratives imitate the dramatic language of television, they disrupt viewing expectations by their refusal to make sense, entertain, or inform. Finally, in the more general context of communications—and clearly anticipating the emergence of the webcam—the work of Tom Sherman (b.1947) makes us aware of how, in transmitting images of selves who are in search of public recognition, the video camera rapidly took on the role of an alter ego. His video monologues of the 1980s (*TVideo*, 1980; *Exclusive Memory*, 1987) show the artist recording himself at home in a daily conversation with the camera or a robot and gradually blending with the machine. Although communicating with the viewer via the camera, Sherman's voice is mechanical, and technology serves as a mechanism of protection. Technology thus defers direct contact with the viewer, who is, of course, not there and who will be there only after the production of the tape. If television records life, it records a life that has passed away before it is viewed; it records a self who might be talking to us (in deferral) but who increasingly depends on video technology, less to communicate than to narcissistically confirm the self's identity.

The unique vibrancy of experimental video in Canada can be attributed to the impressive

number of institutions that have been dedicated to the medium, the sheer number of artists working in the field, and its persistence over time. This vibrancy allows video to systematically trouble Canadian technological nationalism from the inside, rejecting an overarching conception of identity. It supports instead issues of lack, anxiety, non-plenitude, the difficulty of communicating, and the reality of difference (gender, sexual, racial, and national). I want to contend here that this embrace of little narratives is a recognition of what Kieran Keohane in his 1997 book *Symptoms of Canada* has called this country's radical indeterminability. If Canada is a myth, as Keohane and others (Alan Sekula, Ian Angus, Maurice Charland, Jody Berland) have convincingly argued, then experimental video is Canadian in its reinforcement of incompleteness.

Revisiting the Question of Identity Politics: The Image, Fiction, and the Document

In light of video's and Canada's in-between position, it is not surprising that much experimental video in Canada has dealt with identity politics. Assessing the third UK/Canadian Video Exchange in 2000, Catherine Elwes argued that—compared to the British contributions—"Canadian work is overlaid with the urgency of identity politics born of almost universal experiences of displacement and migration."[6] Gary Kibbins, in his book *Tapes That Think* (1996), more generally maintains that "video has helped carry forward another major tendency: the shift from an oppositional model based on mass movements to one favouring 'micro-politics,' whose principal form is that of identity politics."[7] However, it is important to note that regional differences are at play here. The development of Quebec video, for example, is inseparable from the francophone documentary tradition set up by the National Film Board of Canada and the Challenge for Change program (1967–80, created to shed light on social problems through the production of films), together with Quebec's experience of modernity and concomitant nationalist concerns. And although feminism was crucial to the establishment and evolution of such distribution centres as Vidéographe and Vidéo Femmes, it was even more important in English Canada, where it played a leading role in shaping the voices heard in independent video. Gay and lesbian concerns, except in the narrative work of Marc Paradis (b.1955; *La cage*, 1983; *L'incident Jones*, 1986), have not been at the forefront of Quebec video. They have, though, mobilized non-francophone, post-1980 video artists—notably John Greyson (b.1960), Richard Fung (b.1954), Paul Wong (b.1955), Dennis Day (b.1960), Lorna Boschman (b.1955), Paul Lang (b.1966), Zachery Longboy (b.1963), Shani Mootoo (b.1957), Joe Sarahan (b.1962), Carla Wolf (b.1958), Maureen Bradley (b.1967), and Shawna Dempsey (b.1963) and Lorri Millan (b.1965). More important, as already suggested in my brief reference to video's questioning of television, Canadian experimental video has been unique in its investigation of the ways in which identity politics are inseparable from a critical reflection on the "transparency" of the image as well as its communicational functions. As Jennifer Abbott argues in her essay "Contested Relations" (2000), independent video is motivated by the double assumption that technology in the hands of television tends to disregard the complexity of social relations (especially the experiences of oppressed groups), and that distributed technology encourages interactive communication in the production, transmission, and reception of video.

One of the earliest problematizations of the transparency of representation is to be found in the video work of Colin Campbell (1942–2001). His production is preoccupied with the video image as a site of fundamental ambivalence.

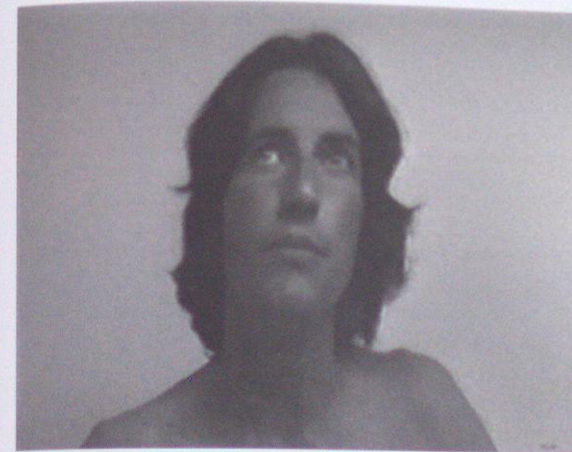


Figure 19.3
Colin Campbell, *Sackville, I'm Yours*, 1972
1/2" open reel video, 14:40 min

Oscillating between fiction and document, his works transmit the ambivalences of the self. Already in *True/False* (1972) Campbell utters a series of revelations that are systematically both denied and asserted, so that truth is continuously deferred. This performance recalls John Watt's (b.1953) *Choice* (1974), in which contradictory testimonies about a man are given simultaneously by the man himself and by his girlfriend—a doubleness that shows how reality is a question of interpretation as the viewer is left to decide which story is the most convincing. With Campbell, however, the ambivalence of representation is also a marker of identity. In *Sackville, I'm Yours* (1972; Figure 19.3) he stages himself as the androgynous "Art Star," not so much blurring the masculine and the feminine as making it impossible for the viewer to know the character's gender, or to know if the tape is a self-portrait or a personification of a fictive character. These two levels of uncertainty are reinforced by an ambivalence of speech, leading Bruce Ferguson to observe that Art Star's

> mode of intimate face-to-face expression disconcertingly offers no verification for his statements. Instead their status is suspect. Both the confessional mode and the interview mode seem to be under interrogation. … There is nothing on the videotape's soundtrack to affirm or disaffirm anything the character says. Speech from Art Star, and perhaps always, opens up onto the possibility of lying. The audience is held in suspense throughout his speculations.[8]

In the documentary tradition, problematizing the transparency of representation has also conveyed subjectivity to the image, as has been the case with Norman Cohn's (b.1946) single-channel pieces documenting children in hospitals. One such video is *Peter in Long Term Care* (1979), which is about a two-year-old boy suffering from various congenital abnormalities, including apnea. The images show Peter's daily life in the hospital in a way that gives significance to a suffering human being who, other than being filmed, is closed off from the outside world. Cohn succeeds in making Peter's life significant not only by speaking compassionately to the boy, but also by using shots in which the boy reacts to the presence of the camera. Subjectivity becomes an ethics for recording and providing identity recognition to the isolated beings of society. In their own long-term project to document the lives of the marginalized, Robert Morin and Lorraine Dufour (b.1950) have not so much subjectified the image as rendered it opaque by intertwining reality and fiction. *Le voleur vit en enfer* (1982), the Super 8 diary of a young welfare recipient, shifts between what seems to be reality—the telephone conversations among a young man, a help-line service listener, and a social worker—and the protagonist's paranoid perspective. The viewer is left with a progressive sense of uncertainty as to the truth of the narration, not knowing if the protagonist is the victim of his own imagination or deliberately lying. In *La femme étrangère* (1988), the now blind

Figure 19.4
Donigan Cumming, *A Prayer for Nettie*, 1995
videotape, 33:00 min

Helena Valero, kidnapped when she was 12 by a Brazilian Yanomami tribe, narrates the events of her capture. At the same time those events are acted out by members of the tribe in a way that blurs performance and documentation, present and past.

Morin and Dufour's *La réception* (1989) goes a step further in the process of fictionalization as a carrier of reality. Based on Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians*, the video stages 10 ex-convicts, all invited by an unknown host to a remote manor, where they are asked to play their own roles and eventually simulate imprisonment and death. The mise en scène creates a final traumatic situation that triggers uncontrollable forces and revelations. Morin and Dufour's reconfiguration of the documentary must be seen to belong to the tradition of cinéma-vérité insofar as it provides realities that become increasingly uncertain and identities that intensify in fragility and otherness. Fiction thus works not to dislodge but to exacerbate reality. This redefinition of cinéma-vérité, although using a more subjective approach, is also at the core of Donigan Cumming's (b.1947) video production, notably *A Prayer for Nettie* (1995; Figure 19.4), *Cut the Parrot* (1996), *After Brenda* (1997), and *Erratic Angel* (1998). Privileging the hand-held camera, Cumming works with actors and models whose statements can be either improvised or scripted. He interacts with them to direct from off-screen, in ways that not only make the artist's presence manifest but also force the viewer to

respond to the ethical dimensions of representing beings who are poor or ill, drunk or dying. His production is part of the moral need to record marginal beings through the channels of fiction but with such a sense of embodiment that, as Chris Straayer has maintained in the case of *A Prayer for Nettie*, "We never suspend our disbelief because we see *them* acting. And, as with all acting, they perform their bodies."[9] Again, as with Morin and Dufour, and Cohn, fiction provides the means of engaging with reality, without the need to clearly distinguish between the two.

With Zacharias Kunuk (b.1957) the documentary tradition completely relies on fiction in an attempt to record what has not yet been recorded: the stories of Inuit elders who carry (through oral tradition) the memory of past Inuit life. To be attentive to the identity of a people is to be critical of the images and sounds that transmit that identity. Kunuk's actors and residents are asked to play different roles and, although a script is initially written, action and dialogue are improvised, creating a history based on storytelling. His video work between 1989 and 1995, notably *Qaggiq* (Gathering Place, 1989), *Nunaqpa* (Going Inland, 1991), *Saputi* (Fish Traps, 1993), and *Nunavut* (Our Land, 1994–95), stage family events centred on collective tasks and social rituals. *Qaggiq* (Figure 19.5), for example, tells the story of four families building

Figure 19.5
Zacharias Kunuk, *Qaggiq* (Gathering Place), 1989
3/4" cassette, 58:00 min

a qaggiq (a large igloo used to celebrate the coming of spring) and stages as a subplot the love encounter of a man and a woman. Detailed renderings of the quotidian (the gathering of friends, discussions about the hunt and potential marriages, the step-by-step building of the communal igloo, the slow preparation of tea) unfold in what Kunuk has called a "past-present" form of temporality: a re-enactment of the past by contemporary actors and residents. Devoid of nostalgia and working neither as scripted drama, ethnographic cinéma-vérité, nor television, Kunuk's videos convey the past but only through a reliance on fiction.

Even in Canadian video works not specifically concerned with the documentation of the marginal, there is interest in narration as a way to stage identity as a form of self. But in these works reality and fiction are worked out in succession or overlap rather than being viewed in opposition to one another. Charles Guilbert's (b.1964) and Serge Murphy's (b.1953) work, notably *Le Bal des Anguilles (Contes Sinueux)* (1992; Figure 19.6), casts friends as actors, asking them to play either themselves or others and to speak about relationships (love, friendship, nationality). These relationships, however, are embedded in a layer of artificiality that shows how ordinary life is made up of tortuous quests, self-projections, and make-believe. At its core, Steve Reinke's *The Hundred Videos* (1990–97), a series that comprises five hours of short narratives, also deals with lies. In contrast to Guilbert and Murphy, however, he relies on self-portraiture and found footage to make his inquiry opaque and to complicate identity. Using voiceover to talk about love, homoeroticism, banal history, and mostly unfulfilled yet always re-enacted desire, Reinke incites the viewer to believe what is being said. But the scientific, self-assured, or sometimes melancholic narrative voice, a conveyer of truths, keeps being troubled by the reiterated performance of *I*'s that shift from one tape to the other. The encyclopedia of little imaginary selves adopted by Reinke (such as the "Steve"—who is loved by the entirety of queer New York—or the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer) accumulates instead of cohering into a specific self. This is reinforced by Reinke's use of popular genres of representation, including home movies, porn flicks, television footage, and educational films. These disclose how his confessions (many of them about homosexual desire) are mostly about fantasy. The image is not just something one watches from afar, but a thing phantasmatically invested.

Figure 19.6
Charles Guilbert and Serge Murphy, *Le Bal des Anguilles (Contes Sinueux)*, 1992
Betacam SP, 69:00 min

This exploration of the inseparability of reality and fiction as a way to point to the real can also be understood as a means by which the viewer is provided with a critical sense of doubt in the actual reception of the image. Stan Douglas's video installations must be situated precisely in this use of video as an in-between aesthetic that complicates the spectator's televisual expectations. This in-between state is particularly evident in those videos that present two views of a reconstructed past, splitting them apart yet bringing them together as a way to disclose the historicity underlying that past—or more precisely some of its hidden ideologies.

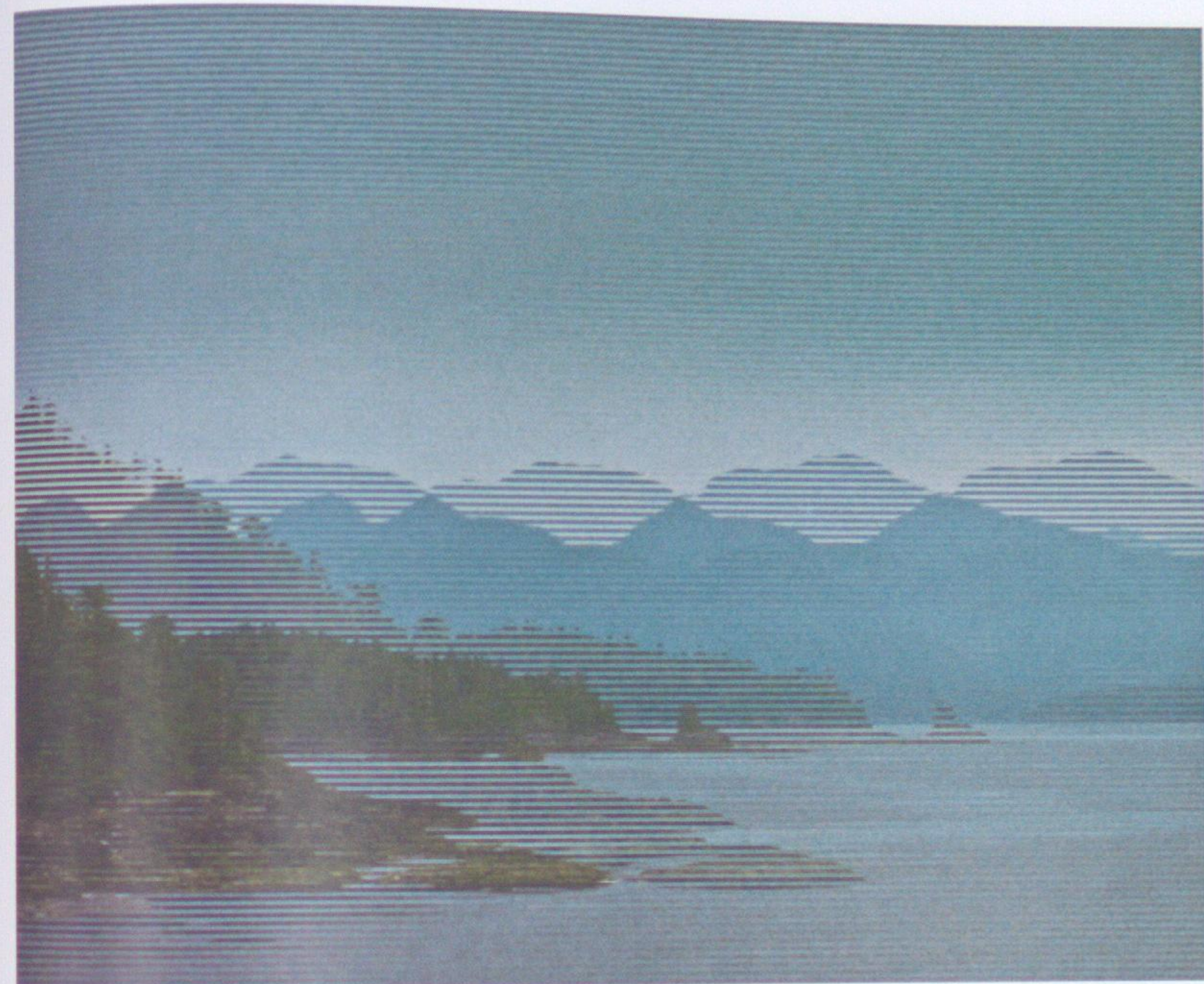


Figure 19.7
Stan Douglas, *Nu°tka°*, 1996
single-channel colour video projection and quadrophonic soundtrack, 6:50 min

Douglas achieves this through scripted fictional narratives. Viewers of *Hors-champs* (1992), which includes a suspended screen with its two-sided presentation of a free-jazz performance by African-American musicians of the 1960s, are confronted with a split that forces a process of critical association. On one side of the screen viewers see the performers playing. On the other they see what television excludes through montage—the interaction between musicians, the waiting, the preparation, the hesitation. What is reconstructed here is not merely a concert but the televisual representation of a concert and its rules of montage. In a comparable way, but this time to disclose modernism's legacy of territorial claims and unrealizable utopian dreams, the video projection installation *Nu°tka°* (1996; Figure 19.7) proposes a single screen that shows two interlaced image tracks, weaving together two 360-degree panoramas of Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island, an early site of cultural exchange between First Nations and Europeans in Canada. The images were shot in two continuous takes from one vantage point. Two oral narratives support the superimposition of the images. One is by Esteban José Martinez (commandant of

the first Spanish occupation of Yuquot, British Columbia), and the other is by his English captor, Captain James Colnett. Both speakers affirm their right to land that was in fact home to the Mowachaht and Muchalaht peoples. On six occasions the intertwined panoramas and discourses come to rest in exact registration, to give a legible yet only temporarily unified transmission of both the landscape and the voices. But they unify only by uttering excerpts from Gothic and colonial literatures from Edgar Allan Poe, Cervantes, Captain James Cook, and others, and by providing an uncanny image of a landscape mobilized by conflicting winds and tides. This in-between aesthetic shows an image that hesitates to adopt a single perspective. It "has lost the assurance of cinema,"[10] that is, cinema's grand narrative potential, because the truth of this past can lie only in the cracks of the image, its lack of plenitude.

In Shifts and Transfers, an exhibition of Canadian video-based works held at the Ottawa Art Gallery in 2003, curator Nicole Gingras wanted to bring together productions that "examine the suspension of activity required for observation."[11] The majority of works explored the transience, fluidity, and temporality of the electronic image as a way of interpellating the viewer as a contemplative observer. Viewers were thus incited to mix their own mental images with what they saw and heard. In such explorations, the result is somewhat beyond the electronic image and there are as many images as there are spectators. In Kate Craig's (1947–2002) *Delicate Issue* (1979), for example, the question of identity is from the start made complex by the viewing process. Opening with the question "What is the developing line between the public and the private?" the single-channel videotape zooms in on Craig's body with a camera held by her husband, artist Hank Bull (b.1949). The camera gently but persistently travels close to the skin, magnifying and abstracting it. The camera's gaze is continuously interrogated by Craig as she raises questions about the boundaries between the self and the other, between the act of seeing and being seen, and about the impossibility of knowing the body through closer looking, as such proximity inevitably leads to abstraction. This limitation of the activity of seeing opens up moments of pure derealization that succeed in disrupting the objectifying tendencies of the look, and in triggering mental associations in the viewer.

Although not part of the Shifts and Transfers exhibition, Lisa Steele's (b.1947) *Birthday Suit—with Scars and Defects* (1974), like most of her early single-channel works (including *A Very Personal Story*, 1974, and *Facing South*, 1975), also radically challenges the neutrality of the image. Despite using a scientific voice together with detailed close-up modes of observation, Steele finds ways to trouble the objectivity of the visible through such incongruous gestures as erotically eating plants (*Facing South*) or rubbing her scars with too much insistence (*Birthday Suit*). These videos document the inscription of time on her body and the existence of the self in time as experienced in that body. In *Birthday Suit* (Figure 19.8), Steele systematically isolates, shows, dates, and identifies the scars of injuries experienced through her life until her 27th birthday, thereby documenting the inscription of time on the body. But the objectivity of such factual compilation is quickly weakened not only by the repetitive gesture of the insistent fingers, but also by the meanings suggested by the scars themselves. Scars are not about just the objective passage of time; they are also about the subjective experience of the self in time (because they record memories of injuries that have been inflicted on one's body). Their truth lies in the remembrance of life events, constructed and reconstructed, told and interpreted, recalled, projected, and forgotten.

As Steele's work suggests, embodiment, and the related view of video as a site of time and memory, have been pivotal to video's critique of the transparency of the image. There is insufficient

Figure 19.8
Lisa Steele, *Birthday Suit—with Scars and Defects*, 1974
Betacam SP, 13:00 min

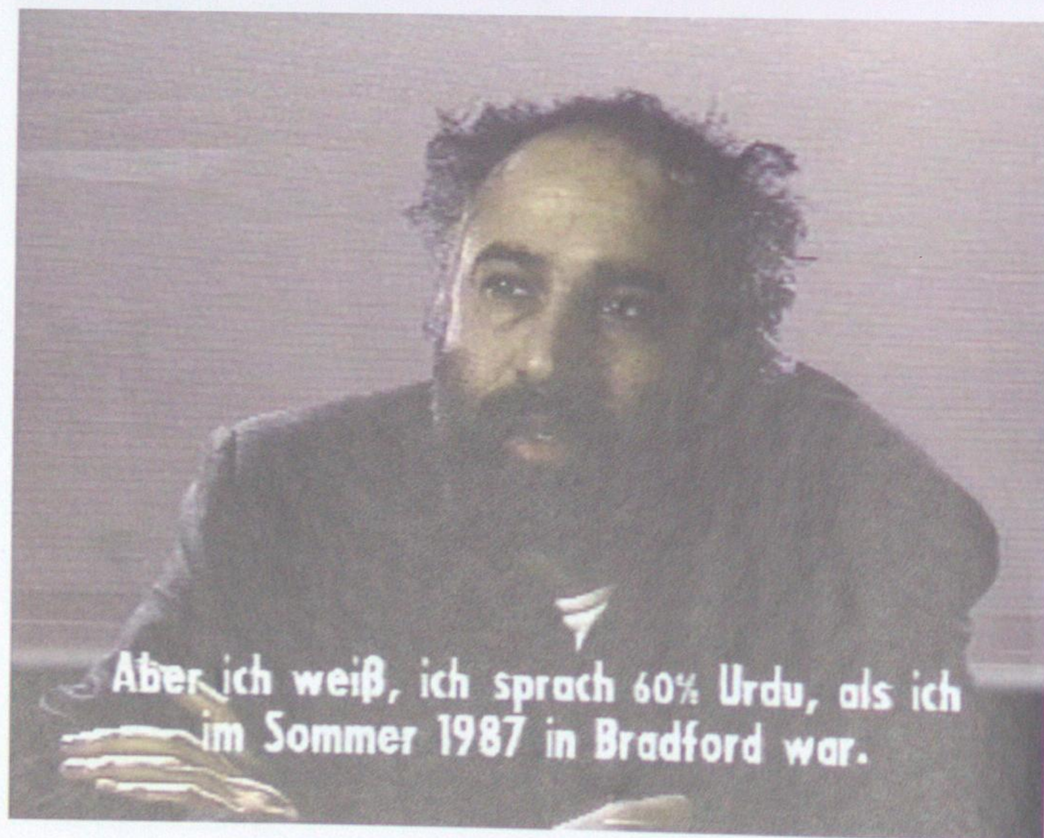
space here to discuss all the Canadian voices that have dealt with this concern, but a crucial player is Paul Wong. His early work—produced either solo or collaboratively with Ken Fletcher (1954–78)—integrated a ritualistic approach to the body. This approach engaged with practices of self-mutilation, injection, exhaustion, and aggression: practices that often took the form of ceremonial blood rites that mark fraternal bonding or transitions from childhood to manhood. As Karen Knights remarks in "Sculpting the Deficient Flesh," most of these rituals have a "continued obsession with the disruption of epidermal Integrity."[12] Such is the case in Fletcher and Wong's *60 Unit: Bruise* (1976), where blood is transferred from one body to another through injection and the close examination of the resulting bruise and discolouration follows. Other rituals involve projecting violence onto oneself and others. During Wong's 1978 *in ten sity* performance, viewers watched monitors that showed the artist, inside a 2.4 × 2.4-metre cube, violently knocking himself against the walls and later attacking one of his friends who invaded the cube. As such, these video

Figure 19.9
Paul Wong, *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade*, 1988
Hi-8 video, 89:00 min

performances not only refer to the skin, and thus implicitly to the electronic interface as a site of negotiation between the self and society, but also put identity into crisis by testing the limits of the body. In *Prime Cuts* (1981) Wong contests the borders of the body and of society by using young bodies that exemplify media conventions of beauty, choosing real-life models whose posing emphasizes and discloses the artificiality of their world. Later, when he began to explore his Chinese-Canadian identity in such works as *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese Shade* (1988; Figure 19.9) and the video installation *Chinaman's Peak: Walking the Mountain* (1992), the narratives vacillate between dominant representations of "the Chinese" and personal stories that offer various interpretations of history or geography by narrating different experiences of immigration. Also preoccupied with the question of mixed cultural identity is Richard Fung (b.1954), a Trinidadian-Canadian of Chinese ancestry. In his single-channel work *The Way to My Father's Village* (1988), Fung adopts a personal documentary format to record his journey to China and convey an intimate portrayal of his father, but only inasmuch as he simultaneously discloses his struggles as a documentary-maker through a strategic use of the voiceover.

This question of memory—memory of the body but also of video as a site for the documentation of memory—is at play in the video production of Chantal DuPont (b.1942). In her *Corps d'oeuvres* (1988), images of art and nature are superimposed over the image of dancer Lynda Gaudreau's body. As is the case with most of DuPont's work, the body is disclosed as a site of memory, as a series of movements performing the cultural or natural environment in which it persistently evolves. Memory is thus elaborated by an inlaying approach to the electronic image. In contrast, the video installation and Internet pieces created since 1992 by Vera Frenkel (b.1938) articulate memory in its narrative structure. The six-channel installation *... from the Transit Bar* (1992; Figure 19.10), first shown at Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany, invited viewers to take a seat at a piano bar, read a newspaper, order a drink, and listen to the recorded stories of 14 different people shown on the monitors in the bar. The narrative is built through a fusion of documentary and fictional realities, confessions, and storytelling. As in the narrative approach adopted by Sara Diamond (b.1954) in her multi-channel, eight-monitor installation *Patternity* (1990), where she stages her father's memories as a New York Jew involved in the union movements of the early twentieth century, Frenkel uses storytelling and confession to reveal not only the past but also one's memory of that past. Dealing with issues of displacement and interculturality, *Transit Bar*'s stories are uttered in different minority languages (including Yiddish) and are therefore difficult to understand for many viewers. As a result, the realities of displacement may be experienced in the actual effort to hear the stories and read through the visual signs. In this effort, viewers lose their capacity to distinguish fact from fiction. These moments are crucial. They create a space for the migrant—a space where everyone, including the viewer, is in transit and engaged in the transitory nature of memory.

Frenkel's next project, the video/photo/text installation *Body Missing* (1994), furthered this interactive docu-fiction approach not only by mixing archival material with storytelling, but also by featuring a website (www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing/intro.html). Dealing with the fate of artworks that have been missing since World War II and staging a major inquiry into the art policy of the Third Reich, the project was first installed in Linz (Hitler's hometown). It was then turned into a website whose point of departure is a conversation overheard by the bartender in the transit bar (now fictitiously located in Linz) expressing the desire to recover the missing works. The website is a locus of documentation (users can access archives); however, this is true only inasmuch as it is also a project of memory that involves a process of invention—the invention of a virtual museum made out of the interventions of several regulars of the transit bar, who contributed poetry, personal histories, and fiction to the project.



Video, as the medium best suited to convey the inseparability of memory and forgetting, has also been at the centre of Stan Douglas's "recombinant" narratives (including *Suspiria*, 2003; *Inconsolable Memories*, 2005; and *Klatsassin*, 2006) and of Rodney Graham's (b.1949) film/video projections. In both practices the story is imbricated within a continuous cycle of repetition by a video looping device that underscores the unreliability or incapacitation of memory as well as its unavoidability. Graham's short four- to nine-minute single screen projections (35-mm films transferred to DVD) insert a variety of modern heroes, played by Graham himself, into a Sisyphean cycle of awakening and unconsciousness, desire and failure, domination and submission. An eighteenth-century shipwrecked Englishman wakes up on a desert island only to find himself stranded and soon knocked out by the coconut he was attempting to get by shaking its tree (*Vexation Island*, 1997; Figure 19.1); a cowboy rides in on his horse, dismounts, sings a melancholy tune accompanying himself on guitar, and remounts—only to travel, in reverse, the same route he just traversed (*How I Became a Ramblin' Man*, 1999). Video looping is explored here as the technology most suited to the representation of the modern subject. As curator Jack Liang observes in the catalogue *Rodney Graham: Vexation Island and Other Works* (1998), while Graham's use of wide, high-resolution screens, rich soundtracks, dramatic camera angles and costumed heroes belongs to the tradition of cinema, the projections do not "*behave* like cinema" precisely because of the slow progression of plots whose outcome is amnesia *and* recurrence.[13]

To Conclude

Despite the inevitable omissions of this too-brief examination, the works discussed show a Canadian videography concerned with the (un)realities of the image: a videography that seeks to complicate the properties of the image in order to speak about identity as a quest and a questioning, an uncertainty, a detour, a representation yet to be revealed, a thickness made out of continuous negotiations between self and society, an embodied temporality, and a transitory memory. Turning the indeterminability of being Canadian into a video aesthetic, experimental video has the singular characterization of conceiving of the image as a site for the intertwining of reality and fiction, so as to deal with the vicissitudes of the self. In more recent years Janet Cardiff's (b.1957) audio and video site-specific "walks," made in collaboration with George Bures Miller (b.1960), have taken the fictionalization of the real outside the museum, into the street and other public spaces. Wearing a portable CD player or watching the screen of a camcorder, the spectator is invited to follow the artist's directions through specific sites. In *Real Time* (1999), for example, visitors were asked to walk through spaces in the Carnegie Museum of Art Library in Pittsburgh, guided by an audio and visual narrative presented on a hand-held video camera and through headphones. In *Her Long Black Hair* (2000), a 35-minute journey that began in New York's Central Park South, visitors walked Central Park's nineteenth-century pathways, retracing the footsteps of an enigmatic dark-haired woman. In these journeys, whose transmission is facilitated by Cardiff and Miller's use of technology, users are invited to aurally immerse themselves in the fictions via the sounds of voices, footsteps, music, cars, and gunshots. In this and other work (such as *The Paradise Institute*, 2001; Figure 15.10) Cardiff and Miller investigate the complexity of subjectivity in today's highly technological world, where the distinction between fiction and reality continually collapses, sometimes creating a quasi-schizophrenic tension between the inside and the outside.

Video in Canada thus continues to be a privileged site of anticipation and questioning of the virtualization of the real. This is achieved, as I have claimed, through

Figure 19.10
Vera Frenkel, ... *from the Transit Bar*, 1992
six-channel video disc installation and functional piano bar, 45:00–70:00 min

little narratives that are more interested in the confused syncopations between reality and fiction than in the merging of reality and fiction. Video artists have turned Canadian incompleteness into a means to explore technology in order to engage with micro-politics or a discourse of ambivalence and ambiguity. Following Maurice Charland's claim that Canada has always been an absent nation, Kevin Dowler has argued that the imperative is not to fill this absence "with some sort of positive content,"[14] but to acknowledge that Canadian identity already occurs in its very absence. Video in Canada must be situated in this context as a radical questioning of images that provide single views of the world and as a claim for the richness of indeterminate representations of different worlds.

Notes

1 Françoise Parfait, *Vidéo: un art contemporain* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001), 343. (Author's translation.)

2 Gary Kibbins, "Flaming Creatures: New Tendencies in Canadian Video," in *Lux: A Decade of Artists' Film and Video*, eds. Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor (Toronto: YYZ Books / Pleasure Dome, 2000), 46.

3 Jennifer Abbott, "Contested Relations: Playing Back Video In," in *Making Video "In": The Contested Ground of Alternative Video on the West Coast*, ed. Jennifer Abbott (Vancouver: Video In Studios, 2000), 11.

4 Jenny Lion, "Project / Process: An Introduction to *Magnetic North*," in *Magnetic North*, ed. Jenny Lion (Minneapolis and Winnipeg: University of Minnesota Press / Walker Art Center and Video Pool, 2000), 29.

5 Maurice Charland, "Technological Nationalism" (1986), reprinted in *Communication History in Canada*, ed. Daniel J. Robinson (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28.

6 Catherine Elwes, "Moving Pictures: UK/Canadian Video Exchange 2000 on Tour," *Poolside* (2001): 62.

7 Gary Kibbins, *Tapes that Think* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1996), 46.

8 Bruce Ferguson, "Colin Campbell: Otherwise Worldly," in *Colin Campbell Media Works 1972–1990* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1991), 9–10.

9 Chris Straayer, "Performing the Body: Work, Eat, Die on Video," in *Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video*, ed. Jenny Lion (Minneapolis and Winnipeg: University of Minnesota Press / Walker Art Center and Video Pool, 2000), 283.

10 Françoise Parfait, *Vidéo: un art contemporain* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001), 346. (Author's translation.)

11 Nicole Gingras, "The Art of Seeing," in *Shifts and Transfers: On Some Tendencies in Canadian Video* (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery, 2003), n.p.

12 Karen Knights, "Sculpting the Deficient Flesh," in *Making Video "In": The Contested Ground of Alternative Video on the West Coast*, ed. Jennifer Abbott (Vancouver: Video In Studios, 2000), 52.

13 Jack Liang, *Rodney Graham: Vexation Island and Other Works* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1998), 6.

14 Kevin Dowler, review of *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness* by Ian Angus, *Canadian Journal of Communications* 23, no. 3 (1998): 406.

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