

Lisa Steele
**The Conceptual
Anthropology of
Narrative Works,
1976-1982**
by Joshua Thorson

The 2010-11 Vtape Fellowship Essays
3 essays produced in association with the
Curatorial Incubator v.8:

**GOING SOLO:
unescorted dreaming**

At Vtape, we're always looking for ways to celebrate video artists and the works they have created. When we awarded Allison Collins the Curatorial Incubator residency for 2010-11, we also selected 3 emerging curator/writers, Ananya Ohri, Henjreta Mece and Joshua Thorson, to receive this new Fellowship opportunity: support for their research and professional editing for their essay on the artist of their choice. The presence of these essays on-line marks an evolution in the functionality of the Vtape website as we make all the curatorial writing we commission and publish available not just to local visitors but to the international community of artists, curators, students and the public at large.

We extend our appreciation to the editors: Erik Martinson, artist and Vtape Submissions and Outreach Coordinator, worked with Ananya Ohri. Jean Paul Kelly, artist and Programming Director at Trinity Square Video, worked with Henrjeta Mece. Peggy Gale, independent curator and writer, worked with Joshua Thorson.



**Lisa Steele: The Conceptual Anthropology of
Narrative Works, 1976-1982**

by Joshua Thorson

Lisa Steele's impressive body of solo work moves with great facility through divergent artistic and epistemic modalities: from more purely conceptual work to auto-ethnography to research-based feminist anthropology to more blatantly narrative works.

Through these differing usages of storytelling, Steele never completely leaves the conceptual behind. Conceptual art,¹ often viewed as a reaction against the commodification of art witnessed in Abstract Expressionism and its offspring Pop Art and Minimalism, took art off the gallery walls and into language, thought, and action. In a recent lecture,² Steele cites *Avalanche Magazine* as her first insight into conceptualism, noting works by Vito Acconci and, later, Mary Kelly as sources of inspiration and solidarity. A video such as "Juggling" (1972), Steele's first tape, features the artist awkwardly juggling three balls, finishing with an imagined outcome in the form of a few brief sentences about getting good enough at juggling to be able to use weightless, invisible balls. Following this tape and some multi-channel installation works, similarly using the conceptual strategies of action or statement, Steele begins to engage with narrative more directly.



Ethnography

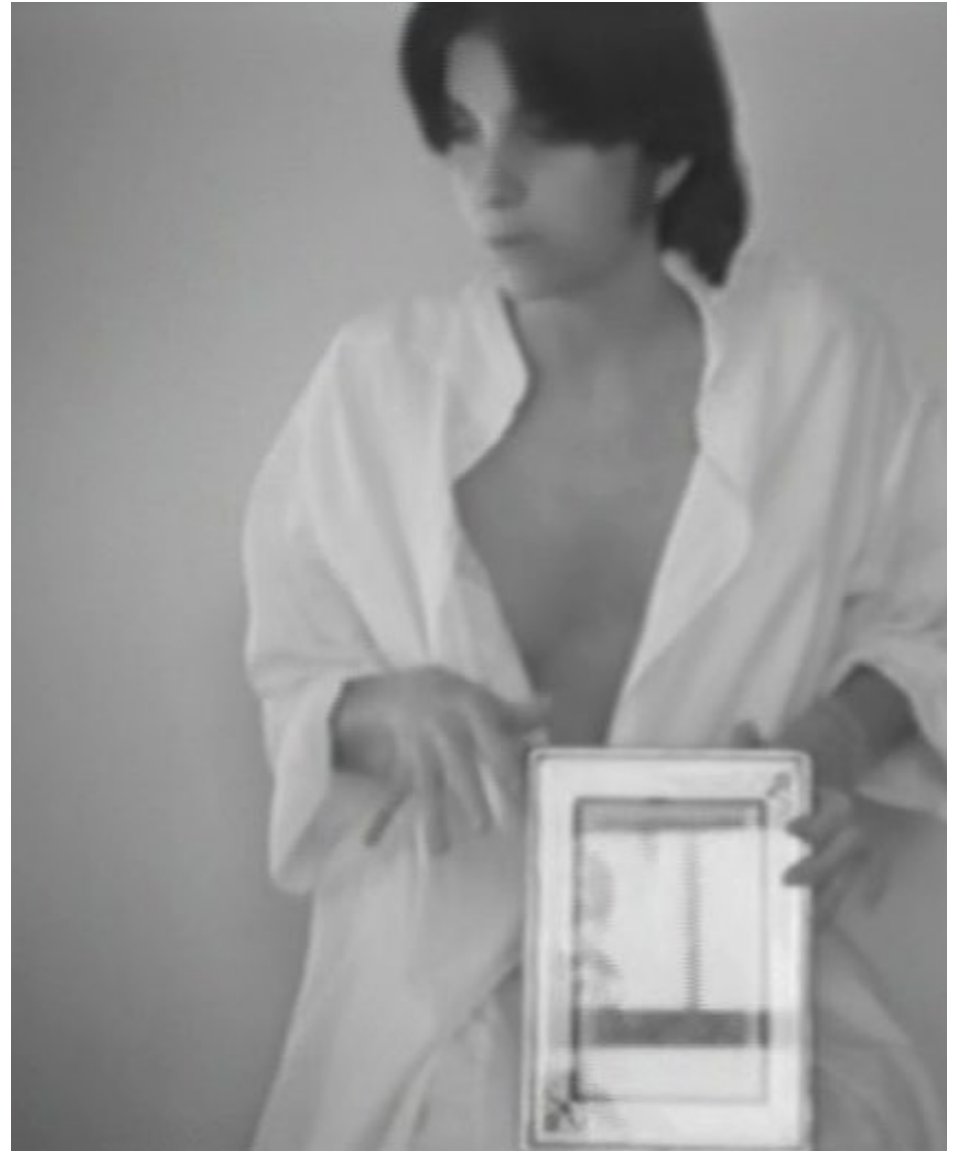
Steele's best-known early work, "Birthday Suit - with scars and defects" (1974), uses conceptual strategies that are in some ways similar to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979), performing a kind of auto-ethnography that catalogues when, where, and how she acquired these scars and "defects." In "The Ballad of Dan Peoples" (1976), Steele tells one of her grandfather's stories, taking on his unique character and accent, to use what could be called an anthropological or folklorist methodology in her reconstruction of voice. The conceptual component of this anthropology lies in the rhythm and repetition developed and through the masking of the framed image of Dan Peoples with a glare on the frame's glass, the image obscured from view until the end of her performance. The means with which Steele constructs the 'dialogue' in this tape will return again in different forms throughout her more narrative works following *The Scientist Tapes* (1976-77), most directly in a much later work, "Talking Tongues" (1982). Here, Steele recalls the speech patterns and mannerisms of a woman who has been in an abusive relationship, but directly to the camera without any interventions or other actors. These works conceptually carry out something akin to Richard Bauman's "storytelling event."³ Like Steele, Bauman pays precise attention to the speech patterns of participants in various specific



cultural contexts, but carefully and methodically so as to not allow the recorded story to veer into stereotype or predetermined linguistic cliché.

Science Studies

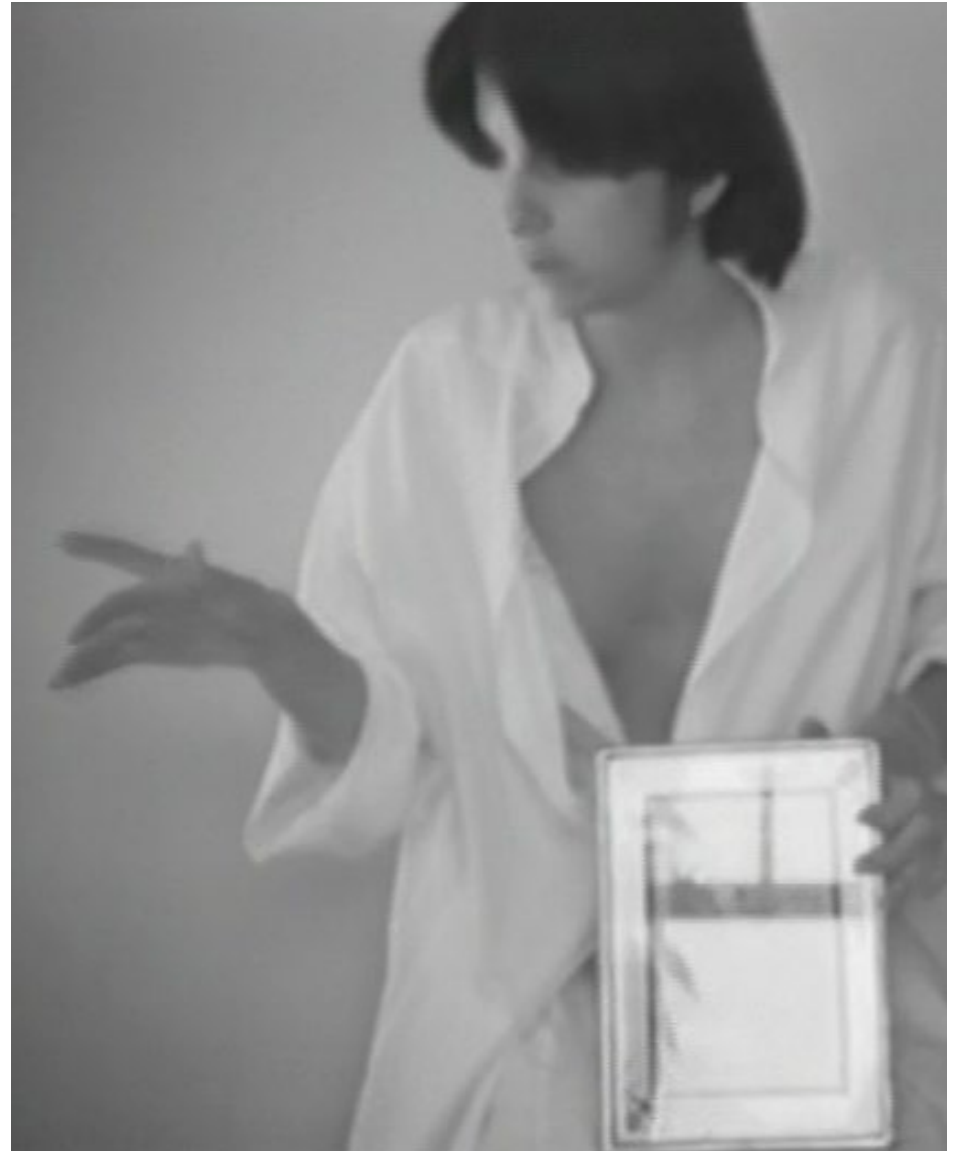
Before Steele continued with what could be defined as a more directly anthropological art practice, she completed the somewhat anomalous serial *The Scientist Tapes*, made while Steele was living in Los Angeles with her friend and collaborator Colin Campbell, whose influence is very much apparent. The slow, measured, conceptual use of dialogue-as-statement and the formal construction of the shots, similarly used in Campbell's works of this period, in particular *The Woman From Malibu* series (1976-77),⁴ are deployed with wonderful effect. Steele gleans narrative concepts from current news events, such as cultural anxieties about newly discovered techniques of manipulating DNA, Legionnaire's Disease, and SkyLab,⁵ but filters them through a romantic affair between two scientists, moving from her own body and memory as subject matter to a cultural body and memory. The dialogue between the lovers, played by Steele and Campbell, is strange and could seem cold if one were looking at it from an emotional or "realist" point of view, but this tape's formal use of enunciated statements and incongruous scene constructions maintain its roots in conceptualism, even as it



Lisa Steele - "The Ballad of Dan Peoples"



involves narrative that has shed the personal or autobiographical performative body. It's not so much that their emotions have been "neutralized by the detachment demanded of their profession," as suggested the exhibition guide to the recent retrospective *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell*.⁶ Rather, in *The Scientist Tapes*, the subjective romantic affair is collapsed with the objective scientific experience in order to illuminate the subjective experience that runs through all objective truth-seeking.⁷ For this reason, *The Scientist Tapes* is a profoundly feminist work, though on the surface it appears less so than the works that follow it. Sandra Harding, in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge: Thinking from Women's Lives*,⁸ introduces the notion that the strong subjective reality of women's exclusion from science creates a standpoint from which women can better see an objective truth than those who are not excluded (men). The injection of romance into science - a contamination, a spliced gene - articulates a collapsed space between objective processes and subjective passions, excavating the repressed controversy of their separation. In the fourth part of the tape, "A Few Years Later," the two lovers are drifting off into outer space. We learn that they haven't had contact with mission control for six years, and have begun to mutate and perform experiments on themselves within their self-sustaining environment. The



Lisa Steele - "The Ballad of Dan Peoples"



lovers' insistence on remaining objective in their discourse, even as they have made the highly subjective decision to let themselves drift away from Earth in order to be together, "free of long-distance phone calls," underlines the precarious subjective, and ultimately transcendent drives within "objective" scientific knowledge-making; the seemingly transcendent gesture of going into space to be together, as scientists, has the adverse effect of being radically and wonderfully anti-transcendent.

The lovers faces are shown floating, serious and alone, on the television screen inside of "mission control," intermittently interrupted by static, until the signal is lost completely. The tape finally ends with Willie Nelson's "She's Gone Gone Gone" (1977), a humorous punctuation mark to the ridiculousness of an objective scientific endeavor - a tongue-in-cheek 'goodbye' to the grand-narrative of scientific objectivity.

Anthropology

The body of Steele's work that follows *The Scientist Tapes* takes up issues of women's abuse, health, education and agency within bureaucratic and legal systems as its subject matter and utilizes a more familiar, less obviously conceptual kind of narrativity - though gaps within the story maintain an authenticity that prevents the narrative from being subsumed by the desire for certainty or closure. Here,

again, we find an anthropological practice approached through fiction. Richard Walsh proposes in "Fictionality and Mimesis"⁹ that "what we understand, feel, and value may be ultimately grounded in the abstract and the general [non-fiction], but it is not in general terms that we experience understanding, feeling, or valuing it. Fiction enables us to go through that process, for the sake of the experience."¹⁰ By leaving much of the story out of the narratives, these tapes ask the viewer to fill in the narrative gaps herself. The viewing experience becomes a part of the process of fiction appealing to the general. By asking the viewer to collaborate in the storytelling act, consumption is transformed into participation.¹¹

The tapes in this body of work include "The Damages" (1978), "Makin' Strange" (1978), *The Gloria Tapes* (1980), "Some Call It Bad Luck" (1982), and "Talking Tongues" (1982). Each of these videos use Steele's real-life experience working at Interval House, a home for women escaping abusive relationships and situations,¹² as a point of sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic research from which the stories are derived. Many of the "actors" are Steele's friends, colleagues, and co-workers at Interval House.¹³ Though it's hard not to be aware that Steele is "performing" versions of "real" people, her performances are nevertheless sharply



convincing and feel true to their painful origins. Steele has an intense, sad, yet charming and awkwardly humorous presence on camera.

The most overtly psychological of these works, "The Damages" unfolds like a Kleinian¹⁴ analysis of childhood trauma. In the course of the eighteen-minute tape, Steele plays a young girl, an adolescent, and a young mother without changing her appearance, embodying an entire lifetime in one image. The tape begins with a bedtime story being read to Steele's character by her father, indicating family ritual while insinuating incest. Following this, we see her reading a book, then the camera pans down to reveal that she is wearing no underwear, followed by a vignette in a white room in which the character enters and begins to talk about poo-poo and blood and (presumably) her parents' fighting. The character's situation at home seems alarmingly abusive, and the following scene begins with a shot of a bandaged vagina. The bandage is removed and the character begins dancing, though we don't hear any music. The camera slowly zooms out, and she finally removes her headphones. "If I Can't Have You" by Yvonne Elliman (1977) is playing, suggesting the inner life of adolescent trauma coupled with the teenage fascination with popular music and the escape it provides. Finally, the tape breaks from the more Kleinian mode of storytelling



Lisa Steele - "Talking Tongues"



and we are faced with the present. We find the character, now a young mother, discussing a situation about a baby with a social worker - something bad has happened to a child. It is unclear whether whatever has happened was to her own child or the child of someone else, but as she is interviewed by the social worker, we understand that the woman is clearly traumatized. During this interview, Steele begins to embody the ethnographic voice she is beginning to develop from her experiences working in the shelter, establishing a rubric she will continue to follow in subsequent tapes.

"Makin' Strange" acts as a sequel to "The Damages", picking up where it left off. Now we find the character in an unfulfilling and possibly abusive relationship¹⁵ that is presumably putting her child in danger. Her boyfriend, Wayne, is a loser and it is clear that the social worker does not want him around the baby, in addition to being concerned about them illegally receiving two social security checks by not declaring their co-habitation. Steele's acting in "Makin' Strange" feels more precise and carefully studied, though it flows easily and without hesitation. Clive Robertson has noted a comparison of this body of work to *Mary Hartman Mary Hartman*,¹⁶ the television show that aired from 1976-1977, where the absurd cartoonishness of the other characters on the show is



Lisa Steele - The Gloria Tapes (a 4 part series)



prevented from becoming parody by the stark, abject quality of Louise Lasser's portrayal of Mary Hartman. Similarly, Steele's precise portrayal of the character maintains a balanced disjunction between the contrivance of "acting" and the supposed reality or desired reality of an ethnographic realization of "character."

The Gloria Tapes use the same ethnographic methodology of her two previous tapes, as well as one-shot camera set-ups for the scenes, though this time she returns to a longer episodic format and uses color video for the first time. *The Gloria Tapes* are ultimately about Gloria's struggle to overcome an abusive childhood as its symptoms are manifested in very real adult anxieties about having a child of her own. She is awash in worry about food, diapers, rashes, how to hold the child, etc. It is clear that she wants to do a good job at being a mother, but doesn't know how and is potentially in what may be an abusive, or in the least unfulfilling, relationship with her boyfriend. Gloria finally realizes she can overcome her past by "just talking" about her father's abuse when they were children, and must struggle with her sister's shame and reluctance to do the same. In a scene where Gloria confronts her father about his abuse, albeit in a very non-confrontational way, all we hear is the sound of the shower. When Gloria lets him know that "nothing's gonna



happen [to him], it was a long time ago," the shower is turned off, a chilling effect. Still, one senses that Gloria will persevere out of her sincere concern for her own child, ending the cycle of hurt through her willingness to talk, share, and work through her problems, pursuing her desire to understand how things work and how things can be different. Gloria is the most hopeful character in this body of Steele's narrative works.

Whereas *The Gloria Tapes* portray a legal system that has compassion for women, its cast comprised almost entirely by women who play the social workers, judges, and friends, "Some Call It Bad Luck" is about the entrapment of women in legal systems and bureaucracies designed and administered by men who protect their own - in this case, policemen who force a woman to confess to a crime she didn't commit in order to save their colleague's reputation as an officer. Shot by Norman Cohn¹⁸ with multiple cameras that move and zoom and pan around, with shot-reverse-shot editing done with Steele's future full-time collaborator Kim Tomzcak, this tape has a sophistication more in line with conventional television that the others do not, with their one-shot scene constructions established out of earlier more distinctly conceptual practices.¹⁹ Despite its refined image quality and commercial shooting style, the narrative in "Some Call It

Bad Luck" is still open-ended. One is never entirely sure what happened to Donna that night at the lab where she analyzes fecal samples.²⁰ Just as Donna doesn't completely understand what has happened to her or why she is being harassed, intimidated, and degraded by the police, the viewer also does not know what exactly is going on; the viewer must sympathize with Donna in her confusion. Perhaps because of this formal success, however, the tape, in its refinement, slides more into melodrama than any of the others. After the narrative is done, titles explain the supposed reality of what happened to Donna and the offending police officers, leaving one to believe that what has taken place is in fact truly "based on real events." Perhaps in coming so close to television, melodrama, and cinema, Steele, a conceptualist at the core, felt the need to pull back from the use of narrative techniques borrowed from popular culture. "Talking Tongues" returns to the one-shot framing of a single character, Beatrice Small, with a completely improvised script.²¹ Though Steele and Kim Tomzcak continue to use narrative and conceptual strategies in their collaborative works, "Talking Tongues" marks the end of Steele's direct investment in narrative within conceptual and anthropological video making.

Steele's narrative body of work has a lasting importance for both art and the politics of



culture, combining conceptual performance found in art world contexts with more academically driven interests in anthropology and ethnography by way of a cautious, minor usage of popular cultural languages. Through Steele's unique narrative arrangements, a humanity is revealed to itself by way of the image, after having been blinded by the glare. □

Endnotes

¹ Peggy Gale discusses the emergence of video from conceptual art at length throughout her *Videotexts* anthology. The coincidence of the development of video technology and the emergence of conceptual art should not be over-determined, however; many of early video's inherent limitations lent themselves particularly well to conceptual practices. Peggy Gale, "When Video First Captured Our Imagination," in *Videotexts*, Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press and Toronto: The Power Plant (1995), 26.

² Lisa Steele, "I Will Still Make Boring Art," The 14th Annual Janet E. Hutchison Lecture, University of Toronto, Tuesday September 14, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIdwCM0yKvk> (accessed May 23, 2011).

³ Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, Cambridge University Press (1986).

⁴ *The Woman From Malibu* series overlaps into with the third part of *The Scientist Tapes*, where Campbell is in the Mojave desert, a reference he makes in "Hollywood and Vine" (1977). This section once again confuses the nature of their purpose as scientists/lovers, leading the viewer to believe at first that they must go to the desert in order for Steele's character to safely decontaminate from her exposure

to a deadly biological toxin, only to reveal later, after Campbell's monologue about Whooping Cranes, that they had been on vacation, which caused a real, though less serious, infection by a tick bite (though none of this is explicit).

⁵ Clive Robertson, "Lisa Steele: Recent Tapes," *Centerfold*, (June/July 1979), 251.

⁶ Jon Davies, *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell; Exhibition Guide*, Oakville Galleries (2008), 15.

⁷ My reading of things tend to favor the structural over the hermeneutic.

⁸ Sandra Harding, *Whose science? Whose knowledge? : Thinking From Women's Lives*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1991).

⁹ Richard Walsh, "Fictionality and Mimesis: Between Narrativity and Fictional Worlds," *Narrative*, vol. 11, no. 1 (January, 2003), 110-121.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 120.

¹¹ Like the annals of history in Hayden White's "The Value of Narrativity," Steele's narrative works' "failure to narrativize reality adequately has nothing to do with the modes of perception which they presuppose but with their failure to represent the *moral* under the aspect of the *aesthetic*." The moral is never underlined in any form of closure or discernible linearity, but in the gaps between the narrative itself. It is up to the viewer to locate his or her own morality within the context of the work, a gesture that, like *The Scientist Tapes*, opens up a more "real" or "objective" space within the storytelling act.

Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, (Autumn, 1980), 5-27.



¹² Catherine Russell, "The Lisa Steele Tapes: Investigation and Vision." *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema Since 1980*, William Beard and Jerry White, eds, Edmonton: University of Alberta (2002), 439.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See, for example, Melanie Klein, *Our Adult World and Other Essays*, New York: Basic Books (1963).

¹⁵ The boyfriend here is, interestingly, the same actor who played the father in "The Damages."

¹⁶ Clive Robertson, "Lisa Steele: Recent Tapes," *Centerfold*, (June/July 1979), 251.

¹⁷ Ask any video artist what his or her favorite television shows are and *Mary Hartman Mary Hartman* will often be included on the list.

¹⁸ With Clive Robertson.

¹⁹ Warhol's use of the camera and the frame up until Paul Morrissey took over on *My Hustler* comes to mind. Before Morrissey began working on Warhol's films, Warhol insisted that the camera sit in a fixed location. It could zoom, but it was basically fixed in place. Though *My Hustler* was directed by Chuck Wein, the 180 degree pan shot and quick cuts are attributed to Morrissey's influence. As Warhol began to play less and less of a direct role in the execution of his films, we see what Stephen Koch has called the "collapse of a cinematic idea, the idea that had sustained him throughout his early career," namely to put the camera down and have something happen in front of it. Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: The Life, World, and Films of Andy Warhol*, New York: Marion Boyars (1991), 85

²⁰ The policemen insultingly refer to her as a "shit-tester," performing "a miserable fucking job." Zizek's discussion of the *burakumin* seems useful here. The *burakumin* are "the caste of the untouchables" that perform work with dead flesh and excrement, comprising the excluded "part of the no-part" in Japanese society. This position of the "part of the no-part" carries with it the political potential to stand in for "the true universality of Japanese society." Slavoj Zizek, "A Leftist plea for 'Eurocentrism' (International politics)," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 4 (1998), 991.

²¹ Catherine Russell, "The Lisa Steele Tapes: Investigation and Vision." *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema Since 1980*, William Beard and Jerry White, eds, Edmonton: University of Alberta (2002), 437.



CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Lisa Steele is an artist. She has worked exclusively in collaboration with Kim Tomczak since 1983, producing videotapes, performances and photo/text works that have been extensively exhibited nationally and internationally.

They have received numerous grants and awards including the Bell Canada prize for excellence in Video Art, a Toronto Arts Award and in 2005, a Governor General's Award for lifetime achievement in Visual & Media Arts. They were awarded an honorary doctorate in 2009 by the University of British Columbia (Okanagen). They are co-founders of Vtape, a Toronto media arts centre and teach at the University of Toronto where Steele is the Associate Chair of the Department of Art.

Joshua Thorson was born in Iowa in 1978 and received a BA in Cultural Studies and Film Studies at the University of Minnesota before relocating to New York to work with video. In 2005 he completed an MFA in Film/Video at Bard College. His video and curatorial projects have been screened internationally in galleries, festivals, and other theatrical venues such as The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Rotterdam International Film Festival, The New Museum, MIX NYC, American Repertory Theater, Cinema Texas, and The Pleasure Dome in Toronto, among others. He is currently a Ph.D. Candidate in Electronic Arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and was recently awarded a Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences Fellowship. He is currently working on a feature length video and curatorial project to accompany his dissertation, as well as a new body of short fiction.

Joshua extends a special thanks to Peggy Gale, Kathy High and Tamar Gordon.

