

# Rodney Werden

## Ordinary Queerness

by Alvis Choi

v tape

The 2011-12 Vtape Fellowship Essays

3 essays produced in association with the  
Curatorial Incubator v.9:

**GOING SOLO:**

**On the unfamiliar beauty of solitude**

The innovative mentoring project Vtape's Curatorial Incubator continues to generate crucial writing and analysis of contemporary media arts. Julia Paoli - then a recent graduate of the curatorial program at Bard College in New York, now assistant curator at the Power Plant in Toronto - was awarded the Curatorial Incubator residency for 2011-12. Her solo exhibition of Aleesa Cohene included single channel projections as well as site (and scent)-specific installations at Vtape. Paoli's monograph on Cohene's work is being included in an up-coming catalogue on the artist's work published by Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne.

When Paoli was selected, three other emerging curators - Ulysses Castellanos, Alvis Choi, and Ebony Haynes - were awarded Fellowship opportunities which included support for their research and professional editing for their essay on the artist of their choice.

We extend our appreciation to the editors for their work on these texts: artist and writer Luis Jacob worked on Ulysses Castellanos' essay about the early works of Tasman Richardson and Jubal Brown (JAWA Collective); Steve Reinke, artist and academic currently teaching at Northwestern University in Chicago edited Alvis Choi's essay on Rodney Werden; curator and Assistant Professor in the Criticism and Curatorial program at OCAD University Andrea Fatona edited Ebony Haynes' essay on Wendell Bruno.

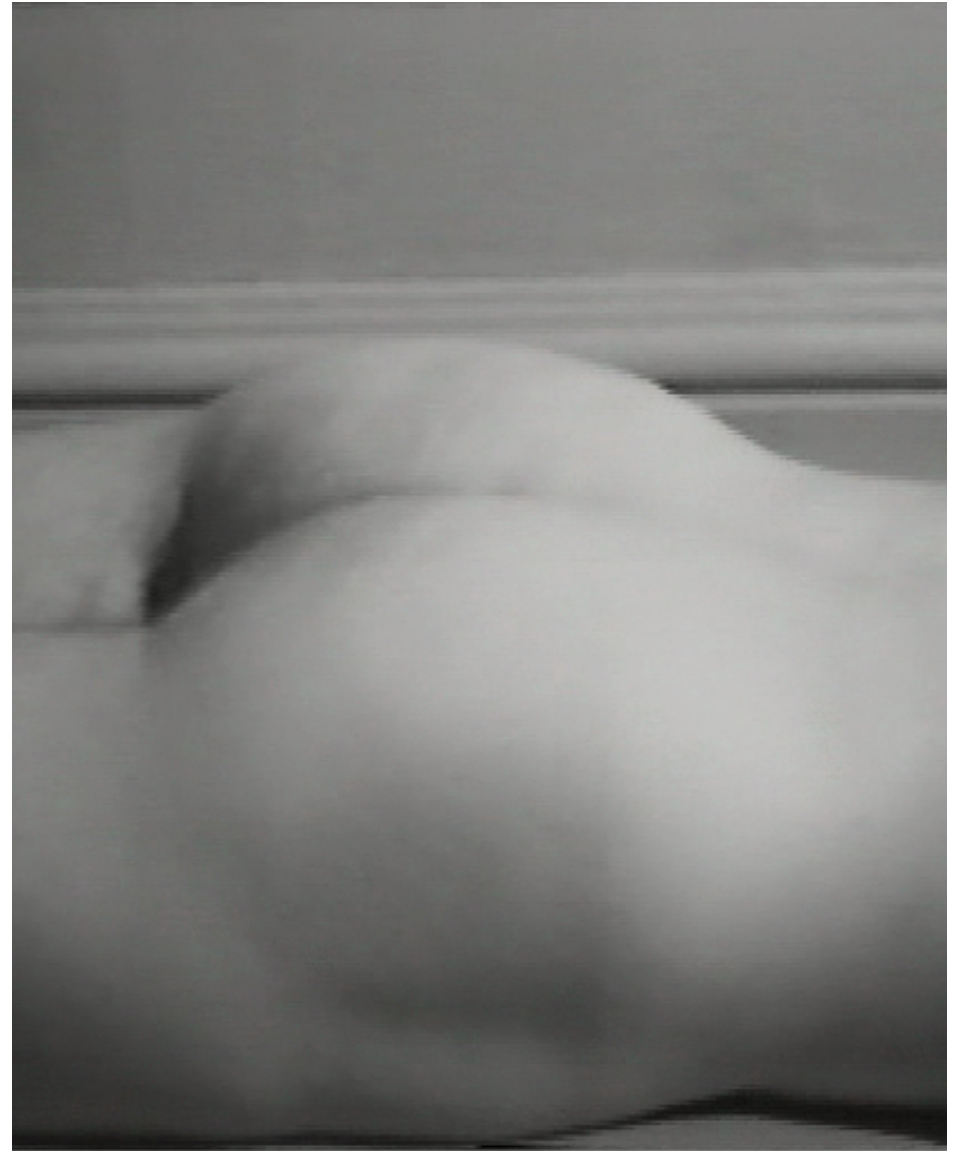


## Rodney Werden: Ordinary Queerness

by Alvis Choi

Rodney Werden's work creates an uncomfortable kind of intimacy. His interest in power dynamics, sexuality, and the economy of desire consistently recurs in the seventeen titles produced during his most prolific period between 1974 and 1993. While his work incorporates a wide range of forms and genres, there is always the common ground of presenting personal stories that challenge the definition of normality. Nearly forty years after Werden produced his first tape, these videos are still relevant to many contemporary social issues. The manner in which his work pushes boundaries, and the boundaries which he chooses to push, make it significant work worthy of further consideration. His work has not been brought into focus in the last decade, neither in nor outside of Canada, where he is from. As artist and writer Steve Reinke wrote, "[Werden's video-tapes] constitute one of the richest bodies of work in the medium – though at this time they lie largely ignored."

This essay gives an overview of Rodney Werden's body of work by focusing on a selection of characters that he deployed throughout the years. This body of work is tied together by an idea of "character" that goes beyond fiction; Werden makes use of alter-egos, documentary subjects, and fictional characters, and it is the traits



Rodney Werden - "I'm Sorry"



and qualities of these various characters that form the essence and energy of his work. These characters are his art, and whether they are real or fictional, they lend a peculiar sentiment that connects his videos to each other.

Werden's alter-ego "Rod" appears in three of his early works. In *I'm Sorry* (1974), Rod strips and is lightly caned. In the beginning of the tape, a person writes the title on a transparent surface in front of the camera with some lipstick-like material. We do not see the person's face but their hand and writing. It is soon revealed that it might be Rod as he walks into the frame naked and lies down on his stomach. Off camera we hear the voice of a female, who starts to whip Rod's buttocks at an inconsistent pace. The whipping is carried out in a controlled yet intuitive manner. The sound of the cane is heard. The second shot of the video focuses even more on Rod's buttocks, using a close-up that no longer shows other parts of Rod's body. There is no word or noise from Rod to tell whether for him the caning is torture, pleasure, or both. The camera remains still, creating tension and leaving the audience to speculate about the next whipping. The tape integrates video, still photography, sculpture and performance. At the end, Rod's name appears in the credits, marking the first appearance of Werden's alter-ego.

Another tape, *Typist* (1976), presents a scene that resembles a recording of a television program. We see a set with a production crew getting ready. Rod and another young man walk into the studio and onto a temporarily constructed,

small stage. Rod sits down by a typewriter with his profile facing the front while the other man, who is a musician, takes hold of his electric guitar, standing in the centre of the stage. As the director cues, the musician starts playing and Rod begins to type on the typewriter. The musician improvises to the typing sound Rod makes. As Rod continues to type and push the carriage return, the text of the story that is being typed out is overlaid on the screen at intervals, occasionally rolling up like film credits. Although not revealed directly, what is being told is perceived to be Werden's personal story. While maintaining his physical appearance, Werden does not speak to the audience from a first-person perspective. Rather, he mediates his own experience in three progressive layers, first through his presence as his alter-ego; then through playing the role of a narrator and the act of typing his story out in the identity of Rod; and lastly, displaying the words typed as rolling text on the screen.

**"He was not geared to succeed. He was geared to fail."**

In *AM Radio Was His Only Friend* (1977), the identity of the subject is visually ambiguous. For seventeen minutes the images consist of an extreme genital close-up of various heterosexual sex acts. The repetitive actions take place in silence for two thirds of the entire video run, building suspension and likely expectation for explicit content that is not purely graphic. As we patiently endure the repetition, a female who is off-camera begins a monologue describing the emotional state of a man. The narration gradually



reveals the identity of the man as an artist and establishes a disjunction between the visual content and verbalized story. It could be Werden's intention to distract the viewer by deploying a teaser that serves to fail our expectation. While his deliberate combination of the narration and the unrelated graphic sexual content surprises and in some way fools the viewers, it does not distance us from the subject being discussed. Rather, it only draws us closer by allowing unreserved disclosure of his desires and anxieties related to his artistic practice, and his constant state of depression.

As the viewer comes to understand Werden as the subject being analyzed, it is easy to imagine that his approach to mediate his emotional state is out of a need to create a comfort zone. Yet, Werden stated in an interview with Peggy Gale, "what I want to say has more value than what it means to me."<sup>2</sup> By relating his personal thoughts and feelings through the narrator's voice, these words become not only about his personal experience, but also about their wider social and political meanings.

**"You want a show? You get a show."**

In *I'll Bet You Ain't Seen Noth'n Like This Before...* (1980), the subject is a man who reveals his self-sufficiency by demonstrating his ability to penetrate himself with his own penis and getting off with the vibration of a short-wave radio.

Werden is amazed by this and curious about the details of how he accomplishes it. This man, whose name is purposely crossed out in most of the



Rodney Werden - "I'll Bet You Ain't Seen Noth'n Like This Before..."



archival materials, is known to be the father of Pauli Schell, the subject of another one of Werden's videos. In the eponymous work, Pauli Schell reveals her sexual fantasies and interest in sadomasochism - presenting her tools and past experience - as well as detailing the abusive, incestuous relationship between her father and her. Throughout the tape, Pauli Schell sits comfortably on a couch in front of the camera, articulating her personal stories - strongly taboo material - in a candid manner. Completed in a single take and presented unedited, *Pauli Schell* (1975) reveals true and poignant stories of an ordinary working-class woman in an honest manner without dramatization, prompting us to review the 'perverseness' that is happening every day in the world we live in.

In the 1980s, Werden further explores his interest in desire, negotiation and humiliation through scripted, dramatic works. In *The Story of Red* (1984), the protagonist, Red, accuses a prostitute - who refuses to provide him services after taking his money and rejects him from her traveling trailer where the sex trade is supposed to happen - of humiliating him. Red says, "I paid you to humiliate me. I paid you to make me fail." The prostitute responds, as she looks down at Red from the trailer, "Nobody can make you fail." It is common for sex workers to be the dominant power in Werden's work. Considering the social status of sex workers at the time, this can be seen as a form of social class liberation.

Such a claim to power can also be seen in one of Werden's earliest works *Call Roger* (1975), which

presents the complication of completing a successful session of sexual services. As an experiment, the artist posts an advertisement on the newspaper in the name of "Roger" offering the service of posing as a nude photography model. Throughout the tape, the then-young artist poses in front of the camera in a professional, seductive way. The audio is a recording of multiple conversations between the artist and potential johns who call to inquire about the details of the service. In the beginning, Werden answers questions regarding Roger's appearance, sexual orientation and sexual interest in an unpracticed manner. As the experiment goes on, he seems to have created a consistent persona for Roger. The last conversation presented in the tape records a negotiation that shows the most intense power dynamic. By asking a series of blunt questions, a potential john seeks to find out Roger's boundaries in sadomasochism. In return, Roger repeatedly inquires about the john's specific interest but the john fails to reveal such information. Roger then refuses to answer more of his questions, which seem never-ending and economically unpromising.

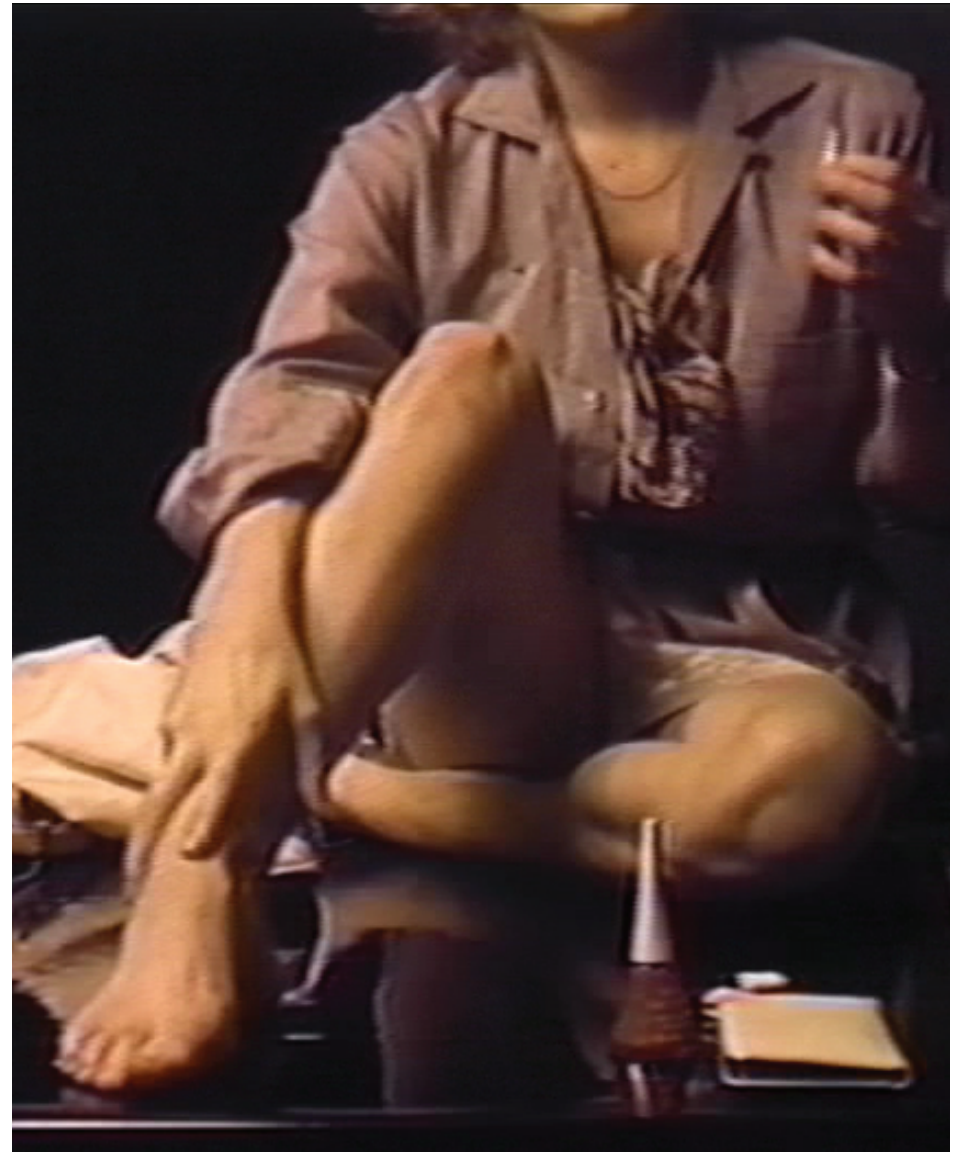
With the vividness of his characters, Rodney Werden's work confronts the audience with socially undesirable stories and forces us to come face to face with these individuals who are commonly considered as outcasts. In his interview with Peggy Gale, Werden confessed that he considered himself "quite ordinary"<sup>3</sup>. Through presenting and examining his characters, Werden not only explores his subject of interest, but also reflects his own desire to be unordinary. For some of us, reconciling the feeling of being



special with being considered socially acceptable – and not weird or awkward – is a constant struggle. Watching Werden's work reminds us of how even ordinary people have the most peculiar stories to tell and how the institutionalized world we live in disapproves of differences and minorities.

**"I've always had the desire to cross-dress; not get off on it sexually but psychologically like to be able to be, well starting out as a young girl then a teenage girl then a woman. It's a better feeling."**

In *Baby Dolls* (1978), a young adult talks about their sexuality and the clinical details of their upcoming male-to-female sex reassignment surgery. The person's face is never visible. Werden zooms his camera over the person's naked body in a voyeuristic gesture that is observable in his other documentaries as well. Close-ups are used repeatedly. At one point, the camera stops at the person clipping and polishing their toenails. The audio and video in *Baby Dolls* are detached from one another, a strategy also used in *AM Radio Was His Only Friend*, *I'm Sorry*, and *Typist*. Such distancing approach creates temporary disassociation between the two, and has us question whether the story is true or constructed. Sitting between documentary and fiction, *Baby Dolls* does not seek to represent the then-stereotyped transsexual or address the bigger politics of the issue but only aims to expose this specific personal story of an individual who chooses a different way to perform sexuality. Here the subject is portrayed as exactly who they are, in a transparent way without



Rodney Werden - "Baby Dolls"



analysis or judgment. The manner in which the story is presented is set against the social norm and embraces the often-unmentioned differences in reality, creating a validation of individuality.

Werden is not only conscious of his choice of subject, but also of his desire to extract the most private stories from them. With his unique sensitivity, he creates situations that encourage them to open up. These situations are not necessarily safe. They are sometimes provocative in a way that puts the subject at risk. In *Money Talks Bullshit Walks* (1986), Werden interviews a number of sex workers whom he hires and requests to wear as little as possible in front of the camera, asking them about the specifics of their job - how they started, how it felt for the first time, how much they charge etc. Werden occasionally challenges them for more disclosure and repeatedly zooms his camera onto the subjects' faces, breasts, and other parts of their bodies. The situation here portrays the artist as a voyeur with a camera fetish and the service that the prostitutes are obliged to provide is to sit in front of the camera and answer questions. At the end of the tape a young man masturbates and asks Werden if he wants him to come. As private as these acts might seem, the relationship between the artist and the subjects is developed purely upon a trade.

In contrast, the effort Werden puts into luring Pauli Schell into revealing private stories is much more notable. "...Pauli Schell wasn't done in one sitting. Pauli Schell was seduced. I did many audio interviews with her. On one another occasion, I brought video equipment and she wasn't in



Rodney Werden - "Money Talks Bullshit Walks"





the mood. And one day she was in the mood and we did it... They never rationalize [that part of themselves] or try to put it into words so someone else will understand. At first she was almost incapable and I'd have to drag it out of her."<sup>4</sup> Even though Pauli Schell was aware that the tape would be seen by a larger audience, the show that she put on was for Werden alone. It was a one-on-one conversation and the content is intrinsically private.

Later in the tape, it becomes obvious that the subject is growingly led by her own unguardedness and becomes the dominant power in the interview scenario. At one point, Pauli Schell asks the artist who remains off-camera but audibly present, "Do you want to carve me?" Werden responds, "I can't." By interacting with his subject in a way that is more intimate than an ordinary interviewer would, Werden inevitably puts himself in a vulnerable situation. Whether intentionally or not, he becomes one of his own subjects and becomes part of the show. While Steve Reinke considers Werden's inability to "explicitly position himself as author within the documentary project" as failure<sup>5</sup>, I see it as evidence of Werden's relationship with his subject. The documentary is not only an interview; it documents an intimate connection between the subject and the artist developed upon trust and the tape would not have existed without such relationship.

All of these characters, be they real or fictional, are Rodney Werden's art. They are both a means of exploration and representation of his consciousness. As these characters expose their personal history and desire unreservedly in front

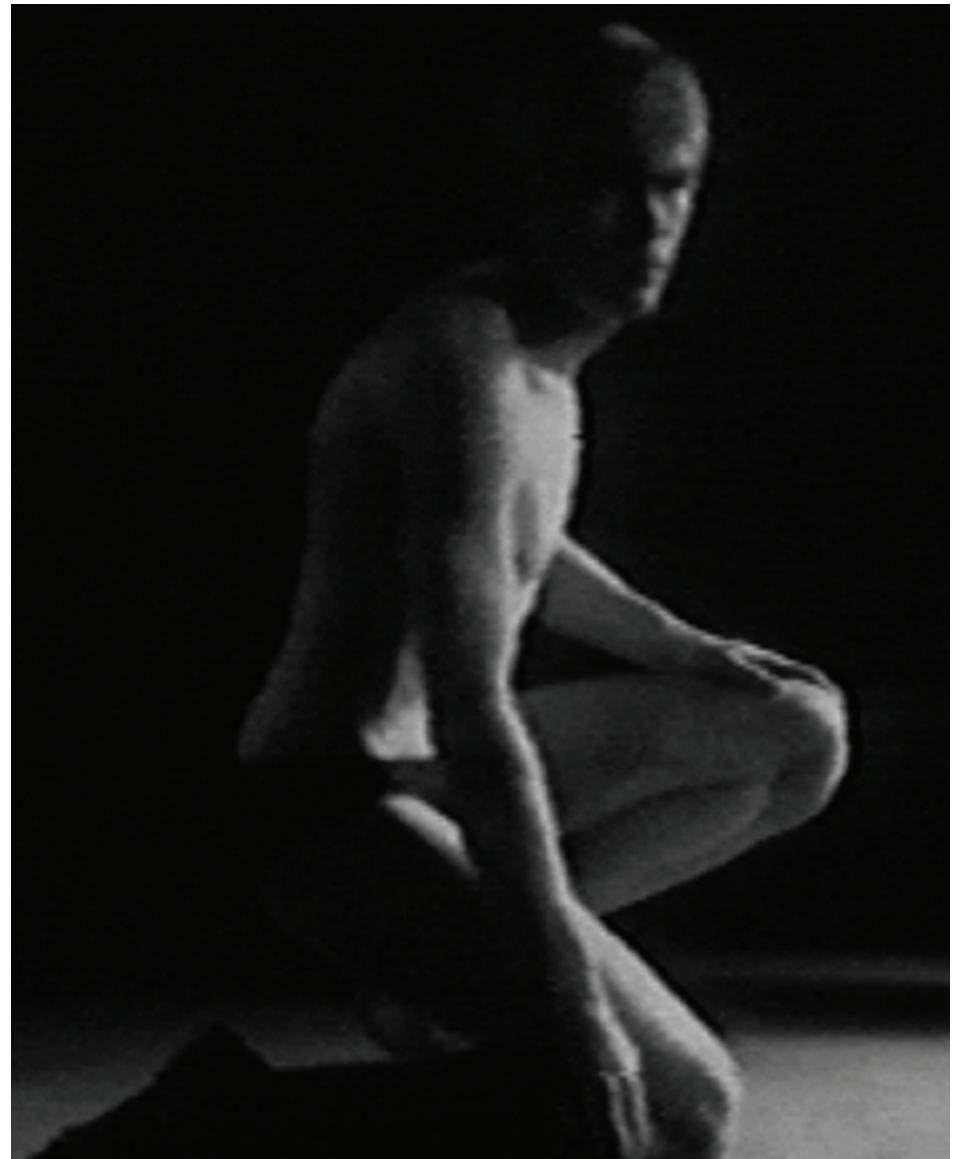


Rodney Werden - "Money Talks Bullshit Walks"

of the camera, viewers are connected to them on an intimate level. The subjects' vulnerability creates a sense of familiarity, therefore urges one to re-evaluate their own definition of normality. Perhaps these individuals are someone we know; perhaps they are not as weird as we would think; perhaps we are one of them.

In his final work to date *Pig and Bear Go To Market* (1993), we see Werden disguised as a pig selling baked potatoes, presenting an ultimate allegory of desire and economy through dehumanization of himself and humanization of animals. The tape reminds me of the furies<sup>6</sup> who pursue freedom and creativity underneath an animal outfit and leads me to imagine a world that values self-understanding and exploration, where we as individuals are able to identify our own desire and to seek pleasure without having concern for social judgment.

The reasons why Rodney Werden stopped producing videos and disappeared from the art scene remain a mystery. When I asked people in Toronto about him they either never heard of him or commented that his work is extremely intriguing. His period of intensely investigating marginalized groups produced remarkable work. By revealing his own struggles as an artist and showing us the barely visible sexual minorities in the 70s and 80s of Toronto through his video works, Werden suggests being different and failing as something that is ordinary, not necessarily shameful, or even pride worthy. As Oliver Sacks writes, "The universe is not only queerer than we imagine, but queerer than we can imagine."<sup>7</sup>



Rodney Werden - "Call Roger"





For Werden, it could be that we are all quite ordinary and queer at the same time, and it is in our own hands to celebrate this uniqueness by honoring distinction as synergistic diversity and following our true self as his characters do. ■

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Steve Reinke, *Economies of Desire: Notes on Rodney Werden's Video* (Felix, Spring 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Clive Robertson & Marcella Bienvenue, *The 1978 Canadian Video Open*. (Arton's Gallery, Calgary, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Clive Robertson & Marcella Bienvenue, *The 1978 Canadian Video Open*. (Arton's Gallery, Calgary, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Erotic Amateurs, Part Two - The Lives of Rodney Werden*. (Video Magazine, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Steve Reinke, *Economies of Desire: Notes on Rodney Werden's Video* (Felix, Spring 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Commonly defined as a person with an important emotional/spiritual connection with an animal or animals, real, fictional or symbolic. Some of them see themselves as "other than human", and/or who desired to become more like the furry species they identified with.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist On Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*. (Vintage, 1996).

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Rodney Werden** is a photographer and video artist and a central figure in the video art movement from the 1970s. In 1983, in an article in *The Globe & Mail*, critic John Bentley Mays wrote of Werden, "His course was set when he emerged on the local video scene a decade ago, in his late twenties, preoccupied (as he is today) with Toronto's culture of drastic need - fetishism, sexual obsession, prostitution, bizarre and frbid-den games."

**Writer: Alvis Choi** is an independent curator, artist and project manager based in Toronto. She is a member of SYNAPSE - The International Curators' Network at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin) and the working collective at Whipper-snapper Gallery in Toronto. Previously she served as Assistant Manager of Videotage (Hong Kong) and workd with various institutions and festivals including the Hong Kong Museum of Art, Asia Pacific Tiennial of Contempporary Art (Brisbane), Microwave International media Art Festival (Hong Kong), Australasian Cooperative Research Centre for Interaction Design (Brisbane) Chapter Arts Centre (Cardiff) and Hong Kong International Art Fair.

