

The Curatorial
INCUBATOR:v.12

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A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Brat

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INTRODUCTION

ARTISTS ACTING UP

"I am not afraid to make a mistake, even a great mistake..."

So boasts James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, that canonical tale of a sensitive, artistic youth coming of age. This year, *The Curatorial Incubator, v.12* has asked emerging curators to get a little naughty and put a contemporary spin on this classic by considering media artworks that come together to create *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Brat*. Happily, the programs they have assembled are as brash and fearless as Stephen Dedalus, hero of Joyce's 1916 Modernist classic.

Daniella E. Sanader finds the young brat hard at work adjusting (or not) to the near constant state of instability created and sustained by neoliberal capitalism, and proposes that her program, entitled *Exercises for Precarious Living*, acts as a "crisis-mode training session". With *Bad Timing*, **Adam Barbu** locates "the temporal instability of humour" by selecting works that hover uncomfortably over questions of cause and effect (or should that be *affect*?). Finally, **Shauna Jean Doherty** tests Rosalind Krauss' 1976 axiom about video and narcissism by returning to iconic works from Canadian video art history for her program *In Perpetual Search for the Self*.

With assistance from independent curator Sarah Robayo Sheridan, this year's three participants were selected from a strong field of applicants and in the summer of 2014, they began their term as "official Incubatees". Workshops are a vital component of The Curatorial Incubator. This year, an artist and a curator who are both well-versed in contemporary idioms of "acting up" within the visual arts, gave presentations. Jean-Paul Kelly is a visual artist whose video works have screened in festivals and galleries around the world; recently, he received the Kazuko Trust Award from the Kazuko Trust and the Film Society of Lincoln Center and in 2015, he will be a resident at the Delfina Foundation (London). *The Globe & Mail* nominated curator Su-Ying Lee as a 2013 Catalyst in the Arts; her recent exhibition *TBD*, which proposed that the definition of a contemporary art gallery is not fixed, was presented at MOCCA (Museum of Contemporary Art) where she is the Assistant Curator.

Throughout the writing phase of *The Curatorial Incubator* participants were each assigned an editor for their essay. Jim Drobnick, OCADU professor and co-editor (with Jennifer Fisher) of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* worked with Daniella E. Sanader; filmmaker and editor of *Explosion in the Movie Machine* (2013) Chris Gehman worked with Adam Barbu; author and curator Peggy Gale, an acknowledged expert on early video art histories worked with Shauna Jean Doherty.

I extend my appreciation to all the staff at Vtape who each contribute their expertise: Distribution Director Wanda Vanderstoop who provides on-going advice and support for all participants; Kim Tomczak, Restoration & Collections Management Director and Technical Coordinator Brian Gotro who produce excellent screening compilations; Natalie Dunlop, Distribution Assistant, who ensures that the Incubatees have preview access; Kate Barry, Submissions and Communications Coordinator, who, among other things helps the public find our programming by maintaining our Facebook and Twitter profiles ; Chris Gehman and Deirdre Logue who provide all the administrative expertise that allows us to continue to exhibit exciting programs of challenging video art to the public. And many thanks to Philip Jonlin Lee and all at Linseed Projects for again giving us a handsome publication. Finally I thank the three 2014-15 Curatorial Incubator participants for their careful and focussed research. Well done!

Lisa Steele, Creative Director, Vtape

FORGET!

Christine Negus *forget.* (2010)

EXERCISES FOR PRECARIOUS LIVING

DANIELLA E. SANADER

I have been told I carry my worries in my muscles. These anxieties typically manifest as a hunched back and crunchy shoulders, as knots in my neck. My efforts with painkillers, back-stretchers, massage therapists, and chiropractors have provided temporary relief, yet in times of stress, one poor night's sleep can cause me to seize up again. Few will argue with the notion that anxiety leaves physical traces on the human body. There's an entire industry devoted to stress relief and, by inference, self-improvement: many seek betterment by investing in a frenzied trade of self-help books, motivational posters, yoga classes, life hacks, mindfulness seminars, to-do apps, and productivity clickbait. Stress relief is typically understood as a mode of self-management – the popular narratives around anxiety rarely place the blame on the systems that may have generated the negative tension in the first place. It is the promise that internal self-betterment is protection enough from external threat, as if a limber body and cultivated mind could better prepare me for the machinations of an increasingly precarious and insecure world.¹

The core principle of self-improvement culture is the calculated management of *bodies* – their surfaces and gestures, modes of self-representation, and everyday states of being and living. Writing of the contemporary crisis-mode of neoliberal capitalism, Lauren Berlant has indicated that human bodies undergo physical adjustments in order to bear the affective weight of everyday stress. Our bodies are constantly negotiating with the corporeal and emotional impacts of temporary job contracts and unpaid internships, the varied micro-aggressions (and aggressions proper) of racism, sexism, and homophobia, increasing levels of securitisation and surveillance, and the erosion of once-reliable social institutions. Adjusting to what Berlant understands as the crisis-mode of ordinary life means re-calibrating our bodies to negotiate with instability on a day-to-day basis:

Precarious bodies, in other words, are not merely demonstrating a shift in the social contract, but in ordinary affective states. This instability requires, if not psychoanalytic training in contingency management, embarking on an *intensified and stressed out learning curve* about how to maintain footing, bearings, a way of being, and new modes of composure amid unraveling institutions and social relations of reciprocity.²

Self-help culture institutionalizes this process of adjusting to instability, promising commodifiable solutions to the embodied discomforts of precarious life and relieving stress without approaching its politics. Relaxation, in other words, is a coping mechanism in constant need of renewal (and repayment).

The artists in this program each endeavour to follow Berlant's stressed-out learning curve with varying degrees of earnestness and cynicism. As the majority of these titles rely on a formally simple, yet historically loaded, visual vocabulary of performance-based video work (a body, a camera, a space, and often nothing more), these artists attempt to maintain sure footing and stable composure in the face of rising anxiety. Shown together, the works cumulatively approximate an exercise program – an association I have welcomed and exaggerated. It is a workout for precarious living, a crisis-mode training session. Like any other exercise program, it mitigates moments of intensity with moments of rest, and offers words of motivation and wisdom to its would-be participants/viewers. Yet, in opposition to the discourses of self-management and commodifiable enlightenment offered up by the self-



Divya Mehra *The Yogi* (2005)

help industry, these are exercises in awkwardness, in exaggerated anxiety, in stumbling and fucking up and asking stupid questions. They perform a level of deliberate brattiness that Lucy Clout has identified as central to her own practice – a sulky, reactionary refusal to self-improve in the face of precarious embodiment: “It takes embodying transience with more urgency than the primary existential problem of mortality, to understand that ‘NO, FUCK, NO’ makes ecstatic sense.”³ Eschewing improvement and emphasizing the deliberately unproductive, these exercises welcome Clout’s ecstatic (I would add silly, anxious, and weird) alternative to the ever-receding horizon of self-actualization and stability.

So, are you ready? Fuck, no? Let’s begin.

STEP 1: SET YOUR INTENTION

“For the next few minutes, I will be as calm in appearance as possible,” **Martha Wilson** flatly intones for the camera. The artist sits in a nondescript chair, pauses for a moment, and slouches lower onto its frame, adjusting her

shoulders and splaying her legs. Prior to this, she was standing upright and rigid, reading a monotone description for the full scope of her performance from a sheet of paper. *Routine Performance* (1972) literalizes the display of desirable behaviour and, in wry conceptualist language, fully breaks down the performativity of her gestures at relaxation: “the person who is throwing himself into acting calm is paying so much attention to the play-acting aspect that he is seldom genuinely calm. Consequently, my activity cancels itself out.” Wilson’s awareness of the camera both disrupts her relaxation yet enables her to declare its validity; enacting an implicit doctrine of much self-help rhetoric, she seeks ownership of better feelings in the mimicry of their forms.

STEP 2: FIND YOUR BALANCE

Bridget Moser’s *Asking for a friend* (2013) shares in Wilson’s aesthetic of self-reflexive blandness. On-screen, Moser wanders throughout a plain white room in sweatpants and sneakers, engaging with a haphazard assortment of everyday objects including two folding chairs, a bicycle tire pump, and a nondescript wooden bench. While Wilson is declarative, however, Moser

can't stop asking questions. The video is filled with waffling inquiries on the measures of personal success, the limits of creative expression, and the outcomes of a calmer outlook: "If I eventually achieve some sort of balance, should I expect to feel better? Or more successful? Is successful the same thing as better?" Beyond the wind chimes that twinkle vaguely throughout the video – another failed gesture at serenity – Moser is never given answers. Instead, as she awkwardly sandwiches her head within a folding chair and drags herself across the floor underneath the bench, her body meets the limits of what the industry of self-improvement can offer.

STEP 3: EMPTY YOUR MIND

Step three includes two titles: a moment of intensity, and a moment of release. **Tom Sherman's** *Hyperventilation 2011* (2011) involves footage from the early 1970s of the artist hyperventilating until passing out, then re-performing this feat in 2011. Taking a gesture to calmness (take a deep breath) and accelerating it to a destructive level, Sherman's endurance-based performance induces intense discomfort, yet carries a strangely hypnotic quality. However, after *Hyperventilation 2011* concludes with a collapsed Sherman slowly regaining

his breath from the floor, there is a sudden flare of colour in the next video – **Christine Negus'** short animation *forget.* (2010). Picturesque bouquets of flowers fade on and off the screen, accompanied by a jarringly disjunctive sequence of messages. Using the easily recognizable visual vocabulary of countless inspirational quote posters and jpgs, Negus' animation is perhaps a ridiculous counterpoint (or fantastical consequence) to Sherman's macho masochism: it manifests as a vaguely murderous trance-like flowerscape induced through a complete loss of air. Both pieces suggest that the purest form of serenity might only be possible through total oblivion, yet Negus' animation tempers the seriousness of Sherman's self-inflicted asphyxiation (and its effort at mythologization through re-performance) with a playfully persuasive urge to forget.

STEP 4: SEEK ENLIGHTENMENT

As seen in the final two titles of this program, the capacity for serenity is fetishized in certain bodies over others. In **Divya Mehra's** *The Yogi* (2005), the artist leads viewers through ten yoga postures, displaying her superior abilities as a "mystic Indian."⁴ Keeping with the logic of instructional yoga videos,

Tom Sherman *Hyperventilation 2011* (2011)



all her postures are helpfully illustrated and accompanied by meditative sitar music. Yet, as she tumbles out of her trikonasana (“triangle pose”) and fails to reach her toes in paschimottanasana (“front stretch touch toes”), Mehra comically sabotages the orientalist biases inherent to the commodified search for enlightenment. Even her white kurti and scarf – clothing meant to signify a free-flowing and easy spirit – tangle and twist around her body, becoming a further hindrance to her efforts. However, Mehra never grows frustrated in her struggles with flexibility. After each pose, she stands up, brushes herself off, and occasionally nods in satisfaction of a job well done. With her “victorious breath” at the end of the session, Mehra’s mystical serenity is subverted with a perfunctory gesture.

STEP 5: DISAPPEAR COMPLETELY

Lucy Clout’s *Shrugging Offing* (2013) both begins and ends with the dull *thud* of a lifeless (and green screen suit-clad) arm repeatedly hitting the hard surface of a table or floor. Though Clout’s figure is never fully pictured, the video is remarkably embodied. Filmed amongst the mess of a garment factory, the video’s jarring soundtrack fluctuates between the ecstatic and disgusted shrieks of pimple-poppers on YouTube and the soft murmurs of a dermatologically-focused ASMR video. A hugely popular online phenomenon, members of ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) culture seek out a tingling, pleasurable calmness induced through auditory stimuli such as whispering. As *Shrugging Offing* indicates, ASMR videos frequently involve young women role-playing in various submissive and service-oriented positions, and Clout’s work questions the potential for ulterior motives present in the pursuit of relaxation. As loose and gauzy clothing floats by on-screen (visually simulating waves of sensation across the surface of the body), soothing whispers are punctuated by violent screams and dry-heaves triggered by bursting zits. In producing both tingling calmness and abject catharsis across the skin, Clout transforms the surface of her own body into an expanded field of sensation – one of mutual relaxation and discomfort. By exploring the capacity to generate physical feeling through virtual means, *Shrugging Offing* locates itself within the somewhat ambiguous territory where the need for relaxation meets the desire for other forms of release – and how the bodies of women become implicated within the industry of stress relief.



Bridget Moser *Asking for a Friend* (2013)



Lucy Clout *Shrugging Offing* (2013)

Program Notes

The distribution of relaxation has a politics.⁵ While some cannot afford the trappings of stress relief – financially or emotionally – others are belittled through demands to calm down (“Just relax, you’re taking this too seriously.”). From a critique of self-help rhetoric to an exploration of the very sensations of calmness, the titles in this program collectively consider how the industry of commodified relaxation both assuages and exacerbates stressed-out bodies. As an exercise program, these titles also push at the corporeal limits of their artists and viewers, creating a stress-out/work-out space where awkwardness meets intimacy and anxiety meets comic relief. These are bodies adjusting to new forms of anxiety and release, moving from declarative statements of intent (“I assert that I am calm.”) to total cathartic dissolution. Yet, like any other finished workout, the post-exercise endorphins can only last so long. Soon you’ll have to start all over again.

End Notes

1. For more on the notion of anxiety as a dominant public affect, see the Institute for Precarious Consciousness, “Six Theses on Anxiety & the Prevention of Militancy,” April 17, 2014, <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2014/04/17/six-theses-anxiety-prevention-militancy/> (accessed September 15, 2014).
2. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011):197.
3. Lucy Clout, “Bratty, Bratty, Brat, Brat.” In *Lucy Clout: Shrugging Offing* (London: Limoncello Gallery, 2013): 6. In this quote Clout is referring to the fat activist writing of Samantha Murray. See “(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics,” *Social Semiotics* 15:2 (2005).
4. Divya Mehra, “Portfolio | Video | The Yogi,” <http://www.divyamehra.com/portfolio/video/the-yogi/> (accessed September 17, 2014).
5. On this point I am informed by Sara Ahmed’s work on the uneven distribution of happiness between normative bodies and those that are marked as queer or racialized. See *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

EXERCISES FOR PRECARIOUS LIVING

Daniella E. Sanader

@vtape January 9 - 30, 2015

Daniella E. Sanader is an arts writer and researcher living in Toronto. She holds an MA in Art History and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies from McGill University. Her writing has been featured in a variety of publications including *CMagazine*, *BlackFlash*, *The Journal of Curatorial Studies*, and *Canadian Art*. She currently works for the recently-federated Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and University of Toronto Art Centre, and she was selected as a runner-up for the Canadian Art Foundation Writing Prize in 2014. Her current independent work focuses on messy things and ambivalent feelings.

Her research notes for the program Exercises for Precarious Living can be found here: desanader.tumblr.com

ROUTINE PERFORMANCE

MARTHA WILSON

1972

Length: 2:10

By flatly narrating the bodily gestures of “calmness” for the camera, Wilson deftly breaks down the performative aspects of desirable behaviour, and the shared aspiration/failure in attempting to fully embody its forms.

A highly influential performance artist, gallery director, and founder of New York’s Franklin Furnace, Martha Wilson’s work has engaged with the performativity of gender and feminist politics since the early 1970s. The American-born Wilson lived, studied, and worked in Halifax before moving to New York in 1974. Alongside her performative explorations of gender, she founded DISBAND in the late 1970s, a conceptual punk band of female artists who couldn’t play any instruments. In 2013, she received a Honorary Doctorate from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. marthawilson.com

ASKING FOR A FRIEND

BRIDGET MOSER

2013

Length: 9:56

Wandering through a bland white space equipped with an absurd assortment of everyday objects, Moser asks a series of rambling, speculative, and existential questions. She receives no answers.

Bridget Moser is a Toronto-based artist who stages performances that sit between prop comedy, experimental theatre, and intuitive dance. She has presented work in a variety of venues across Canada including La Centrale (Montreal); VIVO Media Arts Centre (Vancouver); Video Pool (Winnipeg); The Khyber Centre for the Arts (Halifax); the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto); and Mercer Union (Toronto). She performs regularly at Doored, a monthly Toronto performance art and comedy event organized by Life of a Craphead (Jon McCurley and Amy Lam). bridgetmoser.com

HYPERVENTILATION 2011

TOM SHERMAN

2011

Length: 8:30

Sherman revisits an endurance-based performance he staged in the early 1970s: he hyperventilates on-camera until passing out. *Hyperventilation 2011* features the final minutes of both early and recent iterations of the act.

Tom Sherman is a video artist, theorist, and writer. His video works typically combine elements of both text and voiceover. His works have been exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Musee d'art contemporain. He currently holds the position of professor in the Department of Transmedia at Syracuse University in New York., teaching video production and media history and theory. Vtape.org/artists

FORGET

CHRISTINE NEGUS

2010

Length: 2:52

Pleasant bouquets of flowers fade on and off the screen, yet the messages they carry emphasize destruction and oblivion over picturesque serenity.

Christine Negus is a multimedia artist and animator whose work frequently engages

with humour, nostalgia, and loss. Her work has been exhibited and screened at the Montreal Underground Film Festival, the Art Gallery of York University, Xspace Cultural Centre, and Gallery TPW (Toronto); Artists' Television Access (San Francisco); and Microscope Gallery (Brooklyn). In 2008 she received the National Film Board of Canada's Best Emerging Canadian Video/Filmmaker award through the Images Festival. christinenegus.com

THE YOGI

DIVYA MEHRA

2005

Length: 13:20

Ten yoga postures are performed with the utmost serenity and poise by the "mystic Indian" artist, illustrated helpfully in English and French.

With a research-based practice that foregrounds otherness and the empty promise of diversity, Divya Mehra is an artist that divides her time between Winnipeg, Delhi, and New York. Her work has been shown in a number of exhibitions and screenings including at Creative Time and MoMA PS1 (New York); MASS MoCA (North Adams); Plug In ICA (Winnipeg); Artspeak (Vancouver); Georgia Scherman Projects and the Images Festival (Toronto) and the Beijing 798 Biennale (Beijing). In 2013, she was long-listed for the Sobey Award. divyamehra.com

SHRUGGING OFFING

LUCY CLOUT

2013

Length: 10:33

Filmed within a textile factory, *Shrugging Offing* is the evocative accumulation of a green screen suit-clad body, the dulcet whispers of an ASMR video, gauzy and loose floating garments, and the shrill catharsis of zit-bursters on YouTube.

Lucy Clout is a video and sculpture-based artist working in London, UK. Her work frequently engages with the corporeal limits of the female body, while exploring representations of intimacy and sensation. Her work has been exhibited at Limoncello, Tate Britain, and Jerwood Space (London, UK); International Project Space (Birmingham); Oriel Sycharth Gallery (Wrexham); and Annet Gelnik Gallery (Amsterdam). Clout participated in London's LUX Artist Associate Program in 2010. limoncellogallery.co.uk/artists/lucy-clout/



Laurel Woodcock *Conditions* (2006)

BAD TIMING

ADAM BARBU

A certain kind of uneasiness arises when humour is not supported by laughter, and when this uneasiness is prolonged, drawn out, and abstracted, something unexpected is often revealed. Here, the visual and rhetorical joke or *blague* (a term often tied to early avant-garde practices, and Duchamp in particular) can be read as a disturbance in the exchange of information between its source and its expected recipient. In contemporary life, to assume the role of *blagueur* is to operate in a regenerative state of bad timing. The *blagueur* interrupts our habitual anticipation of coherent, timely speech with a critical slant: Humour is constructed as dead on arrival. In this sense, the idea of bad humour is not simply a matter of the selection of politically provocative content. Instead, it emerges through a formal disarrangement of “active speech” that exploits the meaningful arrival of otherwise agreeable, cohesive iconographic parts.

Bad Timing relates the comedic impulse in contemporary video art practice to a particular mode of self-doubt. In this context, brattishness is better identified as a shifting, skeptical orientation to the world than categorized according to a set of static “antagonistic values.” Together, the works in this program lean away from a conventional reading of “misbehaviour” – presenting it not in terms of absolute determination or defiance, but as a tendency toward the awkward, the mundane, and the unspectacular. Humour, here, is political insofar as it develops out of an inability to comfortably transcend the present conditions of one’s experiences. This is a kind of resistance that is achieved through a self-reflexive questioning of the role of the artist as an agent of change or transformative potential, where the event of self-representation is deliberately held in a tension between action and inaction.

Bad Timing works to locate the temporal instability of humour itself and traces the ways in which situations of humour occur when our expectation of the causal structure of the world is unfulfilled. When we perceive something to be either too true or too untrue we reach a field of semantic ambiguity that enables new modes of perception. Most critically, this ambiguity should be read not as a closure, but as an opening. In a broader context, the artist’s performance of bad timing can be read as an interruption of the logic of origins, preceding speaking subjects, and thus, the basic structuring of authoritative “active speech” itself.¹ If “active speech” constructs and sustains the notion of a whole, coherent and undisturbed subjectivity, than the performance of bad timing results in the unraveling of the self-awareness of the speaker. This is the fragmented, differentiated field in which bad humour emerges. It amounts to a playful (yet hardly indifferent) experimentation with conventional patterns and flows of speech, from which the artist enacts the disarticulation of naturalized cultural tropes such as “assertiveness,” “brevity,” and “transparency.”

Bad humour is bad timing is bad history. The artists in this program explore the distances between ideas of the constructed and constructing, the converging and diverging, and the affirmative and suspicious. No matter how this is manifested, to be in a state of bad timing means that desires will not be met and that change is not easily made. Working in the medium of video only heightens the precariousness of this situation of bad timing, as the camera produces both a representational index of the artist and an irrefutable proof of

the disembodied absence of the speaking subject. In different ways, the artists use this fundamental structural tension to help them think beyond ordinary, accepted forms of reality.

Within the combined narrative space of these six videos, two key questions arise: How can a critical displacement of the delivery of the joke into the realm of “bad humour” become a kind of exchange through which to imagine new social contexts? And how does this exchange come to trace a kind of decentralized portrait of the artist in its own right?

Steve Reinke’s *Twenty-Four Jokes, 89* (1996) begins the program with the continuous take of a young man who delivers a continuous string of offhanded jokes. Paired with this somewhat offensive humor, the fluency of the narrator’s speech is unsettling. Together, this series of one-liners highlights the ease with which the concealed hierarchies of identity can be untied and retooled. Importantly, the narrator depicted in the video acts as a prototype of “political incorrectness” – a kind of stand-in for Reinke himself. *Twenty-Four Jokes, 89* also considers the ways in which humour arises from discomfort and pain rather than joy. Locating the figure of the *blagueur* in rather explicit fashion, Reinke’s video stands as both a precursor and a point of contrast to the works that follow

Vincent Chevalier’s *So... when did you figure out that you had AIDS?* (2010) captures the scene of a mock daytime talk show, featuring the artist, at the age of thirteen, playing the role of a “man dying from AIDS.” This childhood portrayal anticipates the artist’s own actual HIV status by six years. As the host of the show uncomfortably negotiates the seriousness of the situation based on his characterization of AIDS, the work positions this obscure coincidence of the artist’s pos status in the tensed space between gravity and levity. That Chevalier would decide to complete this work in 2010 frames the artist as both grounded and displaced by the traces of a former self. By turning to the past, through this disembodied re-performance of his younger self, the video offers perhaps a skeptical view about future political life. Bad humour operates precisely within this uneasy temporal ambiguity, circling and reshaping at this site of both break and return.

As in Chevalier’s work, **Steven Eastwood’s** *I Make Things Happen* (2001) works on the question of active speech. The video extends from the



Steve Reinke *Twenty-Four Jokes, 89* (1996)

perspective of a narrator who attempts to change the conditions of her material surroundings through the power of her willful speech. She states, for example: “If I light this cigarette, the bus will come.” Through the video’s various sequences, her project is characterized by a continued failure to effect change. As she continues to try to alter her environment, and eventually the video itself, speech itself is lodged in a continued state of deferral where spoken desire does not, and cannot, correspond with action. Eastwood prolongs the joke indefinitely; there is no resolution or consensus from which to anchor our laughter.

With **Emily Vey Duke & Cooper Battersby’s** intimate confessional *The Fine Arts* (2002) and **John Marriott’s** public performance *The Roll of the Artist: An Adventure in Art* (2004), focus shifts to the social figure of the artist. In *The Fine Arts*, Vey Duke stands topless in front of the camera, contemplating the quality and character of her creative work. In *The Roll of the Artist*, Marriott (with the help of a stunt double) announces and performs his simple, absurd task of rolling down a hill. Where Marriott proudly states to his audience “I assume the aesthetic risks,” Vey Duke negotiates with the camera, saying, “This is not

a good idea. This is an idea which is stupid.” Accordingly, as Marriott’s speech takes on a certain element of theatricality, where humour is tightly contained and delivered through both the absurdity of the situation and the energy of his presence, the frustration and confusion evident in Vey Duke’s voice signals a deviation from the conventional spectacle of public performance. Both videos suggest that honesty and artifice can easily be read as one and the same. In this context, both narrators are engaged in a kind of self-doubt by critically questioning the public that seems to be at stake in the “success” of the work.

The program ends with **Laurel Woodcock’s** *conditions* (2006), a fixed, single-shot video capturing an unusual scenario in which a lawn chair is tethered to a set of balloons in a suburban landscape. The viewer waits uncomfortably for some substantial event to occur – for a person to speak or appear, for the chair to fly away, etc. As this expectancy is further drawn out, the mundane leans toward the pathetic. By playfully flattening the absurd, *conditions* becomes an abstract portrait of the ambiguous situation of bad humour itself.

Bad Timing demonstrates that the distances between the screen, the viewer, the artist, and the work are never quite traceable. The artist-brat cannot be measured according to a supposed index of “presence,” but rather, becomes an ambiguous figure of muddled pasts and presents. Here, the self-portrait becomes a troubling concept, with each of the works exemplifying a shift from a *looking at* toward a self-reflexive *looking from*. This subtle move allows us examine the destructuring of humour with a new critical lens. We may not be able to fully apprehend this shift, but the experience leaves us better able to question the conditions that motivate the gesture itself.

End Notes

1. Claire Colebrook, “Humour and Irony: Deleuze and Guattari,” in *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), 131-135.



Vincent Chevalier *So... when did you figure out that you had AIDS?* (2010)



John Marriott *The Roll of the Artist: An Adventure in Art* (2004)

Program Notes

BAD TIMING

Adam Barbu @vtape February 6 - 27, 2015

Adam Barbu is a writer and curator currently based in Ottawa. He has produced exhibitions nationally and internationally that explore themes of displacement and cultural memory. Recently, he was the curator in residence at the Parque Cultural de Valparaíso (Valparaíso, Chile). In Ottawa, Adam works for the international contemporary art space La Petite Mort Gallery.

TWENTY-FOUR JOKES , 89

STEVE REINKE

1996 Length: 3:38

In this single-shot video, an unidentified young man delivers a continuous string of politically incorrect one-liners. The offhanded jokes occupy a fragile territory between the ridiculous and the inappropriate.

Steve Reinke is a video, media artist and educator based in Chicago, IL. In his practice, Reinke engages with concepts of humor, desire, and disclosure as they intersect with the politics of the body. From the 1980's onward, Reinke has produced an extensive body of video work, perhaps best known for The Hundred Videos project, which was produced between 1989 and 1996. His work has been exhibited and collected by major institutions across the world. Vtape.org/artists

SO... WHEN DID YOU FIGURE OUT YOU HAD AIDS?

VINCENT CHEVALIER

2010 Length: 5:36

This mock daytime talk show scene features the artist playing the role of a “man dying from AIDS.” The video is comprised of footage taken when Chevalier was thirteen years of age.

Vincent Chevalier was born in Montreal, QC, and lives in Peterborough, ON. His conceptual practice centers on questions of index, memory and negotiations of private/public identities. Chevalier often works to produce tensions between the physical and the virtual, and the autobiographical and the iconographic. His work has been exhibited across Canada. vincentchevalier.ca

I MAKE THINGS HAPPEN

STEVEN EASTWOOD

2001 Length: 6:00

A young woman travels through South London and attempts to change the conditions of her immediate surroundings through the power of her willful speech.

Steven Eastwood is a video artist and filmmaker based in London, England. Eastwood's work ranges across genres and subjects, and is connected by an interest in the performative aspect of narration. His practice incorporates both fictional and documentarian strategies. His work has been exhibited in galleries and film festivals across the world. In 2010, Eastwood co-wrote and co-directed the feature length film Buried Land. vtape.org/artists

THE ROLL OF THE ARTIST: AN ADVENTURE IN ART

JOHN MARRIOTT

2004 Length: 13:43

In this recording of a live public performance, the artist appears with his “stunt double” to perform the simple, absurd task of rolling down a hill.

John Marriott is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based in Toronto, ON. His works employ strategies of humor, appropriation and public intervention to question the construction and mediation of cultural meaning systems. Marriott has exhibited in venues that include The Blackwood Gallery, The Power Plant, and The Rotterdam International Festival of Film and Video. johnmarriottstudio.com

FINE ARTS

EMILY VEY DUKE & COOPER BATTERSBY

2002

Length: 3:38

Emily Vey Duke appears topless in front of the camera, contemplating the quality and character of her creative work. Her delivery of speech is laced with apprehension and frustration.

Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby are an artist duo currently based in Syracuse, NY. Vey Duke and Battersby combine a variety of stylistic elements to construct layered, and fragmentary narrative contexts. Their work has been exhibited at venues that include The Power Plant, The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and recently at the Ann Arbor Experimental Film and Video Festival. They were nominated for the Sobey Art Award in 2005 and 2010. dukeandbattersby.com

CONDITIONS

LAUREL WOODCOCK

2006

Length: 2:17

This single-shot video captures an unusual scenario where a chair is tethered to a set of balloons in a suburban landscape. The chair is eventually blown over by an unemphatic, random gust of wind.

Laurel Woodcock is a multidisciplinary artist based in Toronto. Her practice reaches across several mediums that include sculpture, video, audio, photography and performance. Recently, she has explored intersections between materiality, site specificity and language. Her work has been exhibited in galleries that include The Art Gallery of Ontario, The Power Plant, and The Agnes Etherington Art Centre. laurelwoodcock.ca





David Askevold *It's No Use Copying* (1972)

IN PERPETUAL SEARCH FOR THE SELF

SHAUNA JEAN DOHERTY

Since the publication nearly forty years ago of Rosalind Krauss's canonical article, *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, her words have continued to resonate within critical discourse on video art. My selection of works for Vtape's annual Curatorial Incubator takes Krauss's text as a point of departure to discuss works from the same period, the 1970s, in Canada, and includes works by David Askevold, Kate Craig, Colin Campbell, Tom Sherman, and Elizabeth Chitty.

Krauss describes narcissism in her article as the primary aesthetic element uniting video works of the 1970s. In Krauss's account, the video medium facilitates a type of narcissistic affirmation, wherein through real-time

feedback via the presence of the video monitor, the artist is presented with an instantaneous re-presentation of his or her own image. According to Krauss, the closed circuit of the artist and the immediacy of the projected image cause a misrecognized self-image, which frustrates an impulse to confirm one's presence. Krauss aligns this narcissism with a type of vanity she saw as endemic to video art as a form. As she maintains in her text, self-regard is "*the condition of the entire genre*" (50). From this concept of narcissism, Krauss concludes that the videotape recorder in its directness and immediacy summons the mirror as its primary aesthetic and conceptual metaphor. Maureen Turim in "The Cultural Logic of Video" collapses this concept referring to the camera apparatus as the "video-mirror" (337), a device that inherently enables the artist to explore and express content that is largely self-evaluative in nature.

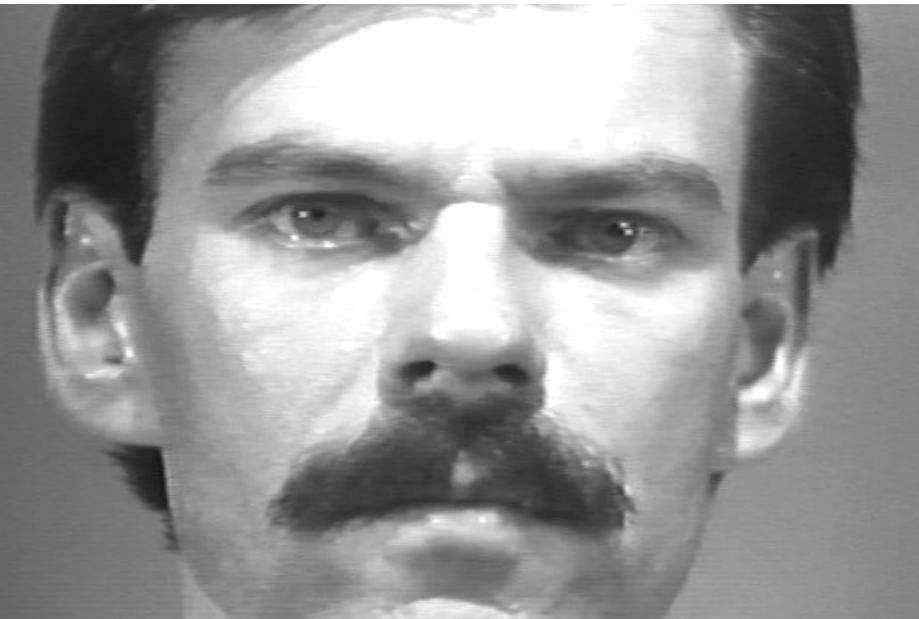
The legacy of this proposition can be felt in the fertile dialogue that has emerged linking narcissism to autobiographical experimental video, wherein the analogue monitor is positioned structurally and fundamentally as a reflective surface. This proposal extends into the present in relation to the digital screen.

From the vantage point of 2014, I feel compelled, as a curator who came of age in the past decade, to observe the parallels or continuations apparent in Krauss's notion of narcissism. This narcissism prevails in contemporary culture, whose primary modes are dominated by the pursuit of an articulated self through net presence and personal branding. It has been widely observed that today digital media offers an outlet for self-representation within a paradigm that facilitates the very public narrativization of one's own existence. With the pervasiveness of YouTube culture and self-documentation through various social media outlets, this age of "selfies" seems to point to a narcissism that continues into the 21st century.

It stands then that the perpetual questioning of the self is a preoccupation that is not unique to the decade in which these works were created. As an impulse, it may be more closely related to a particular age and stage of both artistic and personal development. Each work in the selected program marks an early stage in the artist's career, yet it seems that the compulsion to locate the self prevails over time. The tools through which this impulse is interrogated and enacted are predicated on the evolution of technologies.

It is acknowledged here that narcissism as a conceptual metaphor has been extrapolated beyond Krauss's original sense and in some cases has done away with the attendant monitor so essential to Krauss's original analysis of early experimental video. For the current program the term has been opened up into a conceptual and cultural lens through which to analyze these pioneering works. It is true that narcissism enfolds dimensions that go beyond those explored by Krauss, and numerous theorists have found the term a potent locus of consideration. In the early 20th century, Freud related narcissism to a primal fear of death. Lacan furthered Freud's psychoanalytical writings, expanding on the notion of the mirror stage in relation to self-construction, ego-stabilization, and the pleasure of looking. Narcissism expands also to more banal modes of interrogation, particularly in relation to online self-promotion.

The video camera – whether analogue or digital – remains a self-reflexive device, an instrument for self-construction, presentation, and reflection. An emotional honesty runs through these five works, as each artist engages in a process of studied self-observation. They share many formal qualities



Tom Sherman *Envisioner* (1978)

including the use of long, unedited takes and minimal camera angles or movements characteristic of early video. Some rely on sync sound while others offer voice-over dialogue, where the voice of the artist dominates. Each of these works has an autobiographical component, particularly in the video artists' use of themselves as the primary subject or image on screen. The resulting works are at once diaristic, critical, austere, and distorted as the artists search for identity through their various performances for the camera.

The featured works are representative of a particular moment in Canadian experimental video art. Since the emergence of the form the artist's body has been central, due in part to the very conditions of video technology wherein the artist can work alone, without a camera operator. As Peggy Gale recounts in her article, "A History in Four Moments," video art in the 1970s frequently featured the video-maker as the single figure on screen, while Kay Armitage suggests that the viewing of video art is itself a typically lonely endeavour (72).

Helmut Friedel further notes in his text, "Video Narcissus – The New Self Portrait" that, "It is precisely this aloneness of the video artist that is a further essential reason for the creation of a very intense, intimate dialogue between the artist and the camera in which the artist is described, presented, and shown, unobserved from the outside"(121). This aloneness is illustrated poignantly by **David Askevold's** *It's No Use Crying* (1972) in which the video art pioneer's upside-down face commands the screen. In a demonstration of strained self-control Askevold resists the urge to blink for the duration of the recording, while maintaining eye contact with the viewer, as mediated by the camera. Ray Charles's plaintive song provides the soundtrack, setting the tone for the entirety of the artist's performance. The black and white image, achieved in one take, is at once unembellished and intimate. This work, like the others, is unrelenting in its openness, sacrificing beauty for sincerity in its rough and simple aesthetic.

Dot Tuer describes the viewer in relation to autobiographical video artworks as "a distant witness to the complexities of self-interrogation/self-recognition that unfold under the all seeing electronic eye of the video playback machine"(107). In **Kate Craig's** *Delicate Issue* (1979) the viewer is invited to observe the artist/subject with discomforting closeness through a series of extreme close-ups of various – sometimes unidentifiable parts of Craig's body. The viewer may

recognise hair follicles, freckles, and then an eye turned on its side. Yet despite this attempt at full physical disclosure the work offers very little in the way of personal revelation. Craig's soothing voice guides the viewer as she asks, "At what distance does the subject read?" The physicality of the video is heightened by the sound of a beating heart and deep breathing throughout. The camera, acting as intermediary, translates the body into subject as well as object, yet even with the camera's close proximity, the artist's identity is made no further legible. In the camera's extreme closeness, the body - and by extension the artist's identity - is rendered disfigured, ultimately offering a mere surface description.

Craig's questioning of the camera's ability to translate truth reflects a general skepticism of the camera's representational veracity that emerged in the 1970s. Through the use of the camera each artist attempts to achieve clarity, but further obscurity is often found instead.

Colin Campbell's *True/False* (1972) is one of the artist's earliest works, and is, according to Peggy Gale, exemplary of the confessional form which came to prominence in the 1970s. In *True/False* Campbell explores his personal identity through a series of disclosures while questioning the camera's ability to translate such intimacies. Recorded in a single 15-minute take, a young Colin Campbell appears in the video as the single figure positioned in profile, in a plain and anonymous setting. In an exercise of self-presentation that verges on self-obsession, he offers a list of sixteen statements pertaining to his personal life. Following each confession -- I still masturbate -- I snort coke -- I recently attempted suicide -- he pauses, claiming the disclosure to be true, then false. With a palpable deliberateness in pacing (Campbell seems to swallow hard at multiple points in the performance) the validity of the claims seems to reduce in importance as the viewer begins to focus instead on the self-portrait Campbell creates through his testimonial. Following this list of pronouncements, which he both confirms and denies, he turns and faces the camera, repeating the same list, now confronting the viewer directly. Through his reliance on video as the mode of direct communication the artist problematizes video as a form capable of conveying (personal) information faithfully.

In **Tom Sherman's** video, *Envisioner* (1978), the artist similarly questions the faculty of text to translate truth while exploring his own articulations of his self-image. The work begins abruptly with a quick flash of the artist's



Colin Campbell *True/False* (1972)

mustachioed face followed by a series of statements. To begin, Sherman admits in a monotone voice that there is "instability in my self image". He seems concerned not only with his own self-presentation but with the private and public behaviour of his acquaintances. He critiques the superficiality of conversation while conceding his own flaws. Words from the beginning of each assertion roll down the screen, and the first sentence from each phrase repeats until he moves onto the next clause. The artist's portrait is intercut at intervals throughout the 3:00 minute video, offering a momentary vision of the artist's identity. The work ends with Sherman's assertion that "It burns my ass to hear people advertising their one-of-a-kind identities".

In **Elizabeth Chitty's** video, *Telling Tales* (1978), the artist further examines the inadequacy of the camera as interlocutor while presenting and constructing her personal image. Over the work's 26:30 duration, Chitty experiments with the conventions of narrative while offering the viewer a story that is non-linear and incomplete, through a chaotic composition of momentary characters, failed telephone calls, and articulated demands made by the artist to her viewer. To begin, a news report of a nuclear meltdown fills a room

with white noise as a couple makes out on a couch, unmoved by the drama of the broadcaster's message. Text scrolls over the screen as the artist's voice is introduced. She begins to tell her story, but admits immediately to the insufficiencies of her recounting. The video returns again and again to Chitty, sitting in a studio space outfitted with multiple television monitors and audio recording devices. These are the tools that she deploys to tell a fragmented tale of characters and to play out a cast of tenacious personae, which together offer a portrait of herself. At a certain point she instructs the audience to "have your answers sheets ready." A series of oblique questions follow, relating to news events, political leanings, and eventually to personal inquiries regarding an unnamed girl, presumably an iteration of the artist. It ends with the question – "Could she balance her behaviour with her self image?" Chitty then performs a spirited version of *I Will Survive* by Gloria Gaynor. Armed with gold lamé pants and a myriad of low-fi video effects, the performance is earnest and austere, but with the absence of a visible audience the performance seems utterly self-involved.

She then rifles through a collection of cards, indexed alphabetically, the actions immediately displayed on screen. Here Chitty enacts the very behaviour Krauss diagnosed in her historical essay. The artist immediately witnesses the image of her actions, through the video monitor. In this case however, she captures not her face but her hands, a seeming denial of the vanity of the feedback loop. She relocates to a private room, touching herself passionlessly for the camera. The moment, though brief, extends back onto the video screen, where Chitty coolly watches the scene that has just occurred, an allusion perhaps to the masturbatory efforts of the video artist. She then (seemingly impulsively) flips through the pages of a women's magazine called *Look* with the heel of her shoe. The video ends as Chitty puts on a trench coat and sunglasses, exiting the scene as she proclaims, "She was always telling tales".

This, the most chaotic work in the program, demonstrates the artist's attempt to negotiate an image of herself within a pool of saturated media. The fragmented scenes together offer a partial representation of the artist's self image.

Each artist in this program carves out a self-portrait while acknowledging the inadequacy of the camera as a tool for reflection. It is here that the Narcissus myth most potently takes hold, wherein the effort to see one's reflection is

perpetually undone. As Narcissus reaches into the water to behold the image of his own likeness his reflection is immediately and eternally destroyed. In many ways the allegorical framework of the self-infatuated Narcissus betrays the generous and questioning self-presentation offered by each artist in their works. Almost all performed in solitude these works stage each artist's negotiation of the self on a spectrum that ranges from self-control to self-doubt. In their search for the intangible self through the articulated representation of their physical bodies as mediated by the camera, they demonstrate a youthful obsession with one's own appearance underpinned by a sage consideration of its ephemerality. Through their performances, the artists suggest the impossibility of faithful representation due to the limitations of the camera apparatus, yet they remain undeterred in their efforts. The location of the elusive self through available technologies continues to prevail in the 21st century, as we may see in Narcissistic modes across time.

End Notes

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Program Notes

IN PERPETUAL SEARCH FOR THE SELF

Shauna Jean Doherty @vtape March 6, 2015

Shauna Jean Doherty is a freelance curator and art critic based in Toronto. Her academic and curatorial interests rest within the field of new media art. She received her MFA in Art Criticism and Curatorial Practice in 2014 from OCAD University. She has written exhibition and book reviews for publications which include the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *C Magazine*, and *Daily Serving*.

IT'S NO USE CRYING

DAVID ASKEVOLD

1972 Length: 3:30

The artist stares into the camera for the duration of this black and white video attempting not to blink. Ray Charles's song "It's No Use Crying" plays in the background. The artist deploys the camera as a tool to produce an intimate and austere self-portrait, engaging the viewer directly through unbroken eye contact.

David Askevold was a pioneering video artist and educator who lived and worked primarily in Nova Scotia. Askevold is well known for his major contributions as a faculty member at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and at the University of California. His works have been exhibited widely across North America and are held in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

DELICATE ISSUE

KATE CRAIG

1979 Length: 12:36

The camera traverses the artist's body, inviting the viewer to observe the artist with discomforting closeness through a series of extreme close-ups of various – sometimes unidentifiable – parts of Craig's body. Accompanied by a voice over provided by the artist, this work interrogates the camera's ability to represent the artist beyond her surface qualities.

Kate Craig was born in Victoria, British Columbia and lived in Vancouver beginning in the early 1970s. She was founding director of the artist-run-centre, the Western Front Society and her works have been exhibited across North America, Europe, and Asia. She is internationally renowned for her works in performance and video art and for her attention to themes related to feminism.

TRUE/FALSE

COLIN CAMPBELL

1972 Length: 9:00

A list of 16 disclosures is dictated by the artist directly to the camera. Each assertion is followed by the artist's statement "True" and then "False". The potentially revealing statements, through the artist's immediate disqualification of them, remain ambiguous. Through his reliance on video as a mode of direct communication the artist problematizes video as a form capable of conveying (personal) information faithfully.

*Colin Campbell was a pioneering video artist and educator. His first teaching appointment was at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, where he created the video *Sackville, I'm Yours*, which remains a canonical Canadian video work of the 1970s. His work has been exhibited internationally, at venues which include, the 1980 Venice Biennial, the Toronto International Film Festival, and the National Gallery of Canada. His works are currently held in collections at the National Gallery of Canada, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Art Gallery of Ontario, among others. colincampbellvideoartist.com*

ENVISIONER

TOM SHERMAN

1978

Length: 3:00

Representing Canada at the 1980 Venice Biennale, this work combines text, an image of the artist and a voiceover provided by the artist. The artist's portrait is intercut at intervals throughout the 3:00 minute video, offering a momentary vision of the artist's identity. Throughout the work the artist engages in questions of self-image, superficiality, and public persona.

Tom Sherman is a video artist, theorist, and writer. His video works typically combine elements of both text and voiceover. His works have been exhibited internationally National Gallery of Canada, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Musee d'art contemporain. He currently holds the position of professor in the Department of Transmedia at Syracuse University in New York., teaching video production and media history and theory. Vtape.org/artists

TELLING TALES

ELIZABETH CHITTY

1979

Length: 26:45

In a fragmented collection of clips, Elizabeth Chitty examines the inadequacy of the camera as interlocutor while presenting and constructing her personal image. Chitty experiments with the conventions of narrative while offering the viewer a story that is non-linear and incomplete, through a chaotic composition of momentary characters, failed telephone calls, and articulated demands made by the artist to her viewer.

Elizabeth Chitty is an interdisciplinary artist whose career stretches almost 40 years. Working primarily in video and performance Chitty is regarded as a prolific Canadian artist whose early works were concerned with gender issues, information technologies, and the deconstruction of media. Her current work explores subjects which include non-violence and the periphery between inner and outer landscapes. elizabethchitty.ca

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