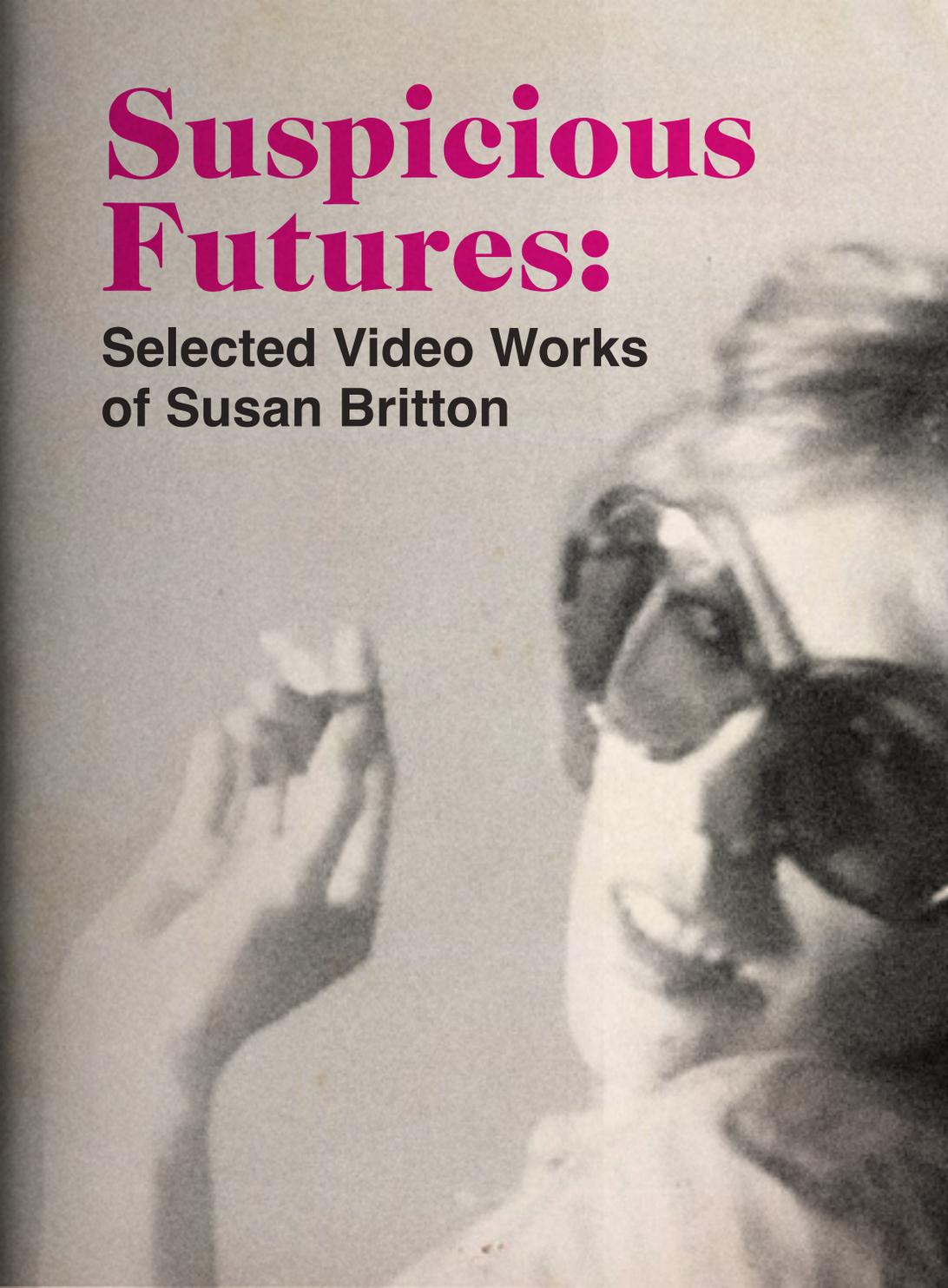


# Suspicious Futures:

Selected Video Works  
of Susan Britton



# An Introduction

## Selected Video Works of Susan Britton: curated by Allison Collins

With the *Curatorial Incubator, version.8: Going Solo*, we are diverging from our previous thematic programmes of the past 7 years. Rather than encourage the development of a strong curatorial thesis supported by the artworks, we want to create a situation where the work of a single artist becomes the focus of a young curator. We also wanted to provoke discussion about the value of solo exhibitions within the media arts and we saw the Curatorial Incubator, Vtape's annual mentorship programme, as an ideal platform for these ruminations.

*ACT I:* Our timing was lucky. We were just beginning a restoration project on the early video work of Susan Britton. Britton is one of the original artists/founders of Vtape\*. Her work has been out of distribution – and thus out of the public eye – for almost 15 years. We are grateful to Susan for giving us the opportunity to return her work to the public. Over a period of months in 2009-10, Kim Tomczak and Mark Pellegrino, with assistance from their interns, carefully cleaned and re-mastered all of the work that Susan brought to us. What emerged as each reel came back to life was nothing short of a mirror on the tough, funny, politicized world of the 1970s and 80s, as Britton embarks on an intense interrogation of life at the dawn of the information age.

*ACT II:* Enter the young curator. Allison Collins was just completing her Masters in Critical and Curatorial Studies at the University of British Columbia when she was selected to be the 2010-11 Incubatee at Vtape. One of her graduating projects was an important exhibition “Hold Still Wild Youth: The Gina Show Archive” presented in the early summer of 2010 at the Or Gallery and VIVO in Vancouver. This major survey show focused on an artists' cable television project. It featured restored tapes, archival photographs and other documents that spoke eloquently and in an appropriate modality capable of addressing this era of the Vancouver arts scene – the late 1970s with all the communality and rivalry of a hyper-active artist-run culture, alive with possibility. In other words, in the era just before Vancouver got “ambered” into the rigid “photo-conceptual Vancouver School”.

This background is important in that it provided Collins with a unique perspective to approach the work of Susan Britton, much of it made in this same era, some even with the same players! And Collins' recent immersion in the whole crazy, fertile late 70s video art world of The Gina Show seemed to us to be a good intro to Susan Britton's work. We looked at this as an opportunity to facilitate a generational mash-up.

Which we did.

*ACT III:* Poring over stacks of DVDs (analog goes digital), Collins has assembled this sprawling, ambitious body of work into a beautifully structured whole, with just the right amount of loose ends as befits Britton's proto-punk personae. Collins' essay here is not so much reappraising as excavating – perhaps for future reappraisal. Looking at (relatively) recent history is always tricky. So many meanings can elide together and, absent specific time-frame context, start to speak in tongues not their own. Collins has avoided this with close readings of script/texts, sparsely judicious applications of theory and, when nothing else will do, going out on a limb.

In her essay, she has a straightforward way of taking the historical context of the time of production and weaving it into the here-and-now. For example, in beginning to offer an interpretation of Britton's content and context, Collins cannily describes a shift in our relationship with technology as "... the melting away of hardware and the transition from goods to services, from the flow of products to the flow of data", urging the reader to "...remember there was a time when the flow of information was tethered more closely to the earth—seemingly wired into our bodies as much as our politics." It is a great pleasure to have this chance to take another look – through fresh eyes – at this important part of Canadian video art history. And it is wonderful to have Susan Britton's work back at Vtape.

**Lisa Steele**, *Creative Director*, Vtape

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\*In 1980, five artists agreed to work cooperatively to promote each others' work under the banner of Vtape. The original members were Susan Britton, Colin Campbell, Clive Robertson, Lisa Steele and Rodney Werden; in 1982, with the assent of the original members, Steele and Kim Tomczak began to evolve Vtape into its present form as a distributor and media arts resource centre.

## Acknowledgements

Each version of The Curatorial Incubator is a large group effort. As is our practice, the Curatorial Incubator calls on the professional curators and writers in our community. This year, we offered our Incubatees workshops by curators with expertise in assembling solo exhibitions. Barbara Fischer, Director/curator, JM Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, University of Toronto; independent curator and writer Peggy Gale; and Jon Davies, Assistant Curator at The Power Plant each presented case studies of the nuts and bolts of working on solo exhibitions. Jon Davies also applied his considerable editorial skills to the essay of Allison Collins.

In association with this project, we also organized a symposium, *Scarce as hen's teeth: considering the merits and challenges of the solo exhibition in media arts*. Thanks to the curators who spoke: Jean Gagnon, interim Director of Collections at the Cinémathèque québécoise, Montreal; Emelie Chhangur, Assistant Director and Curator at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU); and Kerry Swanson, independent curator and former Executive Director of the imagineNATIVE International Film + New Media Festival. Each shared their considerable curatorial experience to broaden and extend this conversation about the role of the solo exhibition and how curators approach this challenge. This symposium was co-presented by OCAD University. Thanks to Rosemary Donegan for all her help in mounting the event.

I also want to acknowledge and congratulate the Vtape Fellowship award winners for 2010-11. This is a new development for us. When we saw the number of high quality submissions to the Curatorial Incubator open call – and realized that only one would be selected to do an exhibition – we quickly decided to initiate a new category of Incubatee. This year's winners of the Vtape Fellowship Award are Henrietta Mece, Ananya Ohri and Joshua Thorston. Each attended the workshops and has been provided with extensive research support to assist in developing a proposal for a solo exhibition. Their essays will be edited by professional editors and will appear on the Vtape website later this year. Congratulations to all three.

Finally, I extend my thanks to all of the Vtape staff whose individual work makes the engine run smoothly. First, through the efforts of Kim Tomczak, both historical and contemporary, Vtape's extraordinary restoration and recovery facilities were pressed into service to deliver this restored programme of Susan Britton's early video work. He was aided by Mark Pellegrino and interns Ginger Scott and Kristie MacDonald. Thanks to Laura Paolini for providing her personalized and highly effective promotion and to Erik Martinson for his work on both the catalogue and the presentation of the programme. Finally, many thanks for the continued efforts of Deirdre Logue, Wanda Vanderstoop and Chris Gehman whose support for programming at Vtape have ensured that it continues to thrive.



**Susan Britton:**  
**The  
Lure  
of  
the  
World**

**Our protagonist is straining in a dim light, with the contrast turned way up, knowing, or hoping maybe, that someone will be disturbed. Sentences turned out slowly on an old machine that seemed so new once. These chunky plastic keys are grey, the narrative is distorted and the prose is fading out with the signal, degrading over time. Are we still communicating? Big ideas and a short text, a diary or a time capsule that launches ideas in the form of words, spoken and typed, from one time into another. Will someone find them? Without knowing, she can only type and wait.**

We have to start somewhere, so we might start by discussing the information age, the melting away of hardware and the transition from goods to services, from the flow of products to the flow of data. It's been quite some time now since this shift occurred, but as we move into an era where we can look forward to waving our cell phones at RFID chip readers to pay for our groceries, we ought to remember there was a time when the flow of information was tethered more closely to the earth—seemingly wired into our bodies as much as our politics. By the same token, we must also continue to address practical matters, like, how are we going to pay the rent? These two seemingly disparate topics are what will guide us through the next few pages, and maybe the last thirty years.

“Welcome to the future,” lilted the well-dressed smiling woman in *The International Band* (1982). “We are entering a new age, the information age. Data is a natural resource. Information is its refined product.” The performer, video artist Susan Britton, peers at us from behind the TV screen, posing as the future in the past, a female interlocutor techno-doll who will one day grant us our flight information, announce our transit stop, direct our video phone calls and maybe send us out to work in our hover cars. At the time this video was made, technology's promise still included such fancies: it was the same year—1982—that *Blade Runner* promised us human-cyborg relationships in a techno-dystopia. Time was moving fast, a projection forward that was meant to fulfill our desires.

But whatever happened to them?

Revisiting a stack of Britton's videos takes us back to this era, to what feels like a different reality, and a chance to recall a previous future. Her performance for media and video practice projects a unique brand of creative skepticism that she developed over a full decade. A prolific artist, writer, presenter, producer and promoter, at the time Britton was making art, the frameworks for disseminating video were just being solidified. Trained as a conceptual artist at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, she worked in video, as well as on paper, with photography and collage. She was a founding member of Vtape and like many of her peers, struggled to find a way to control and further expand the channels for

screening her works. At the time of their production, Britton's videos were being shown and discussed alongside many well-respected artists of the day, including Vito Acconci, N.E. Thing Company, Martha Wilson, Dan Graham, Colin Campbell and Lisa Steele, to name a few. She was included in exhibitions and screenings across Canada and the USA, seen at Kunsthalle Basel and MOMA, chosen to represent Canada in the Paris Biennial of 1980 and included in Videoblitz at the Dusseldorf Kunsthalle. Yet despite her wide range of screenings and growing reputation, Britton wasn't making much of a living. Grants covered production, and a brief period starting in 1979 saw her co-managing an art bar in Toronto called the Cabana Room, but overall her efforts were outweighing the rewards.

Leaving Toronto for New York in the mid-1980s, Britton continued producing. She involved herself at Franklin Furnace, co-founded a short-lived distribution company called Machine Language, and co-produced a television program based in the Lower East Side of Manhattan with Willoughby Sharp, called *Willoughby Sharp's Downtown New York*. The show was successful by the standards of the era, with production money granted by Time Inc., but after its short run and with little enough significant response from distribution channels for her tapes, Britton changed careers and ceased making artwork. Her priorities shifted, and she quietly withdrew her previous videos from circulation and dropped out of the art scene. This may account for the lack of name recognition and the meager amount of critical analysis her work has garnered since it appeared in the 1980s. Unless you were making video art (or writing about it) circa 1985, chances are you may not have heard of her. Unlike other artists whose practices have met more abrupt ends, the termination of Britton's art career elicited little public response. There was nothing to decry, she simply chose another path, hanging up her camera and her personae for other ways and means. In simple terms, she had rent to pay, and at that time, even a successful career in the art world just couldn't cut it.

With the re-emergence of these videos today, we are offered a communiqué from a Britton of the past. Her characters, foils for her own struggles to make sense of the world, become our guides. As we have become slowly detached from the stereotypes of the day that Britton bit into, her questions

appear "refreshed." Emerging all at once, her practice seems to occupy a solid block of time, as if collected on purpose in a time capsule. The videos chart a certain set of personal inquiries by a young female artist struggling to make sense of the cultural zeitgeist, always positioned firmly in relation to mass media and politics as they unfolded on a grand scale. Consistently they inquire into the nature of video itself; over time progressively deconstructing the medium. As the conditions around her shifted, Britton's works also conveyed a growing skepticism about technology and progress, even while taking advantage of its most innovative forms. Addressing her reflections, one can't help but wonder if our own promises to ourselves about the future we desire will succeed or will fail to be realized.

Britton used advances in technology as both a tool and a concept to mash together implications drawn out of the growing adoption of computers, the shift in economy from hard to software, and the loaded potential of tech advances on daily life. She brought her knowledge of technology into proximity with simple bodily realities—sex, love, life and death—with ample attention given to material form and process. Although her characters, inventions and performances like those in *Rent Due* (1983), barely knew what would hit them when they spoke to one another (for us) about how the economy would work after the severing of goods and services, it's hard to imagine Britton did not.<sup>1</sup> Set against our present backdrop Britton and her Speedo-branded back up dancer friend in *Tutti Quanti* (1978) seem to implore us to consider how they must entertain us in service of the entertainment industry. Equally, her actor-artist friends in  *Casting Call* (1979) remind us of how video process has transformed, though they probably had no notion of how their melodramatic scenarios would further unravel as the medium they inhabited dematerialized. Britton weaved her own insights into all of her works, using characters to ask questions and give skeptical speculations on the future, the present

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<sup>1</sup> "How does information make money? I don't get it."

"It means people have to pay to use the phone. Well, it means banks and other corporations have computers, computer systems, networks of computers. There's a shift from goods to services."

"Services?"

"Dry cleaners, cable TV"

"Does that mean there are enough goods?"

"Enough for what?"

and the past. Her savvy satirical take on rhetoric around the future, in particular, float missives through recordings: ideas brought to us today in the form of performance media from the past.

These performances, made for tape, archived and stored in early prototypes (U-matic, and later VHS) for easy transmission were part of the first wave of video, when the potential for mass dissemination was just budding, and video work was still largely tied to monitors and electromagnetic tape. We were still processing how the implications of these changes in artistic performance were tied to creative procedures that could impact or construct reality. These are all changes that have been realized in the present; since these works appeared, the rents have gone up, and the notion of information has dissolved. Women have shed a layer of social expectation and the address of personal politics has shifted from gender to gender roles. Meanwhile, technological advance still threatens promises of progress, and the ground is still shifting under our feet.

Despite our purported progress, it is relevant to wonder: have the questions Britton fixed on ever really been resolved? Just how do we constitute our subjectivity in relation to a mass-media machine that spews out unrealistic “role models,” or manage our personal experience of time and space as technological progress interrupts it more and more? How do we take advantage of the future, and our own potential, and survive as ourselves in the present?

Considering Britton’s tapes presents an opportunity to address the contemporary through the continued presence of the recent past. Realized over a relatively short period of time, from 1976 to 1987, Britton’s efforts in video question the structures and frameworks of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when speculative economics was already on the rise. The escalation of mediated fear and growth in global interactions was coming together in this moment. Technology was progressing on fast-forward in those days, much as it has perhaps ever been, but it was doing so in a way that serves as the most recent cultural prototype for our time—just long enough ago to be considered the past, and quite like our present, but not the same. This era of recent history is just out of phase with today, as the



Tutti Quanti (1978)

useful items and innovations that once spoke to us of the future are now out of date. The old phones, camcorders, monitors and headphones survive as evidence of a moment when new ideas about the role of machines had an impact on femininity, subjectivity and frameworks of artistic practice. Britton addressed these subjects in playful ways. Through melodrama and formal considerations, she took on practical situations where technology invaded the female subject, and constructed fantastic parodies out of her skepticism with her surrounding environment. Using herself as a common element, both as performer and producer, she contributed a powerful and dissenting set of notions to a discussion about the technological invasion into subjectivity, and the question of how to cope with it all.

**Britton’s earliest works take the form of shorts, only a few minutes in length, that convey small vignettes or statements largely about female roles, or moody non-normative lifestyles. In these, she casts herself as various women, taking on topics for a kind of artistic enunciation—and she often means to provoke.**



Why I Hate Communism No. 1 (1976)



In *Why I Hate Communism No. 1* (1976) the artist is subject to the camera's eye as it moves up and down in a simulation of missionary-position sex. As she and the invisible man whom she addresses (who holds the camera over her) discuss ideology, we are not quite sure where the real Britton stands. We feel implicated as the camera eye takes our position and makes us the uncomfortable voyeur. "I'm an artist, they're trying to destroy art. Communism has nothing to do with art," Britton appeals, looking at her partner and at us, but for that, she gets a slap: "Bourgeois bitch." Provocative sex is offered up as metaphor for ideological argument in a messy confrontation that also provokes a reflection on gender roles and sexual power. Britton's uncomfortable display of her body and vulnerability forces the viewer to address a relationship that is bound up in a kind of confounding confusion. We never really figure out why communism is against art, and there is no intelligible counter-argument either, just a warning: "I don't want you to talk about this, it hurts you." What we do know is that the argument really isn't going anywhere, and that one player—the man in this situation—isn't afraid to force his dominant opinion on the other. Britton's on-screen persona is grateful for a chance to be asked about her views, and is willing to take the blows in this orchestrated work. Is this an early declaration by the artist that she is willing to take a few hits in order to be heard? Staking out a claim over ideology itself, she is implicating her male counterparts in an unending, unbalanced conversation. She keeps personal details out of the work, despite the uneasy sex, and the viewer is left to extrapolate on her ideological standpoint. Incidentally, this political struggle is also informed by the art-school politics from which Britton emerged.<sup>2</sup> But wherever the inspiration is derived, Britton provokes with no reservations, raising the continued interlocking conflict between capitalist and Marxist ideology to the level of aesthetic and conceptual gesture, and perhaps fittingly, dodging any conclusion.

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<sup>2</sup>In an interview, Britton reveals that this work was informed by the relations she witnessed while taking part in an extra-curricular art school Marxist reading group, where the members were more often studying each other than the texts.

This inquiry into ideology from a female subject position continued throughout Britton's practice. She established a whole line of personae, some more personalized than others, and early on used them to explore questions of her own political leanings. As she performed, she tried on each character, many whose beliefs starkly contrasted with her own (fashion pundit, terrorist, back-up dancer, one half of a couple in a suicide pact, the female love-interests in Italian cinema, a ditzzy modern office worker and a tech-savvy hostess, among others). Through each transformation the viewer watches her doubt her own words. The personae, for their part, make us laugh, even while they fail to convince us of their authenticity. But it is not a failing of the work, since these gestures are not meant to be masterful pieces of fictional cinema or examples of professional acting. Rather, they are imperfect, persona-driven, and semi-diaristic—little provocations that eke out a critical stance on what is one-dimensional in the way women are being represented culturally. Britton, the much stronger character, always manages to convey her own presence through her wit and orchestration of it all. Her strategy, common to feminist performance of the era, enables a dual action, as the personae the artist adopts convey both their truth and their falseness.<sup>3</sup> This practice is said to have evolved along with media performance works as a means of lending legitimacy to modes of address more commonly ascribed to and undertaken by female artists, whose work was often seen as too personal; considered lesser artists unless they adopted more male-driven strategies.<sup>4</sup> This self-aware parody underwrites much of Britton's presence on camera, and tethers her works to her own strong personality, whether explicitly feminist in aim or not.

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<sup>3</sup> Jayne Wark, 150.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 59.

This sorrowful portrayal of a deflated female ends with a monologue in which the arti

As Britton's practice evolved, these vignettes begin to look like prototypes. Many of her early short works explicitly position female characters as archetypes, an interest that is evident beginning with her earliest tape, *Susan* (1976). Completed while she was a student at NSCAD, *Susan* presents Britton's fictional autobiography of the artist as a prostitute, wandering the streets window shopping and enjoying the public garden. This focus on female archetypes also takes shape in *Love Hurts* (1977), in which the progression of the narrative shifts from a static shot of a barely legible sheet of paper on a typewriter, as words are punched out about the end of a relationship, to a blurry close-up of Britton's face crying along to the song "Love Hurts." This sorrowful portrayal of a deflated female ends with a monologue in which the artist painfully regurgitates popular song lyrics (also from "Love Hurts") and talks about her most recent indignities. Miss Broken-Heart meanwhile preens in underwear, garter and stockings, turning her sexuality into a sad prop. This role, derived from long-standing stereotypes of women, also comes off as self-implicating. The character wears provocative but imperfect underwear, probably Britton's own, and she divulges too much in her bid for sympathy. Speaking superficially through the words of others, she puts it all on as a show that seems just a little critical of the adoption of melodrama in the work of any over-sharing artist.



And A Woman... (1977)



In The Mood (1977)

In these early works, Britton also responds to clichéd images of women derived from the media or popular culture. She reconstructs these roles using clichéd phrases: of the darling mistresses of Italian Cinema—“My husband? Please, let’s just talk about... us” (*And A Woman...* [1977]), of a wealthy woman on the beach—“there comes a time in every life to move beyond compromise” (*In the Mood* [1976]) and of a nostalgic, smoky, trench coat-wearing existentialist—“I am my own freedom. No joy. No lightening flash... A void blurred by its own aspect... I am nothing, I possess nothing...” (*vide ordure* [1976]). Britton turns these female roles in on themselves, exposing their flawed characteristics through succinct sound bites. These early tapes also demonstrate her concise adaptation of rhetoric from cultural sources in the service of parody.

The biting, critical digestion of gender roles drawn from media sources is in line with Britton’s other major preoccupations, technology (as a tool and a phenomenon), mass media and the structures or suppositions of the art world. This early body of short scenes builds a kind of vocabulary used in the scenario structures of Britton’s longer works; those in which these scenes multiply to become many parallel narratives that weave in and out of one another.

A further strategy of practice that contributes to the meaning found in Britton’s works is her establishment of setting. She often chooses the most economical means—the static photographic images of Paris used as establishing shots in *vide-ordure*, the simple lawn chair and drink to stand in for a leisure space on the beach in *In the Mood*, the extreme poverty of props in later works like *Lightbulb Goes Out* (1978) or *Casting Call* (1979). Britton established minimal surroundings for her characters, using available studios or easy-to-access outdoor settings, not an uncommon practice for videos with low production budgets, but an effect that forces the viewer to address the characters themselves and whatever drama unfolds through dialogue while implicating the narrative as a construct.

Even the more elaborately campy projects like *Freeze Frame* (1983) convey a DIY construct. In this piece, a young, well-dressed woman (played by Britton) frets about how to manage her work tasks so she can pay the bills, until she becomes trapped in a hardware nightmare. There’s not much around except a few paltry pieces of office furniture, but after moaning

about her work and fretting about her time, the office worker narrowly escapes being bludgeoned by a clunky typewriter. She drops her coffee on the carpet and halts in time and space. As the narrative freezes, the video visuals multiply, and the strange logics and absurd possibilities of the medium are put on display. A high scream follows and the tape is launched into an anarchic dance party, with Britton the-office-worker starring in her own music video alongside bulky filing cabinets. The futile stresses of getting the memo done on time are supplanted with a bored office worker’s funny fantasy (or concussed hallucination): a “fuck you” gesture of flinging all of those dull papers into the air for an escape into 1980s synth-pop dance moves.



Freeze Frame (1983)

Silly or absurd interactions with hardware are often found alongside Britton's satires of hype about the future. *The International Band* runs as a kind of mock-informational public service announcement that ramps up rhetoric about the information age to a cultish level. The hyper-synthetic music shimmies back and forth, in and out of dominance over the visuals as characters—played mainly by Britton—offer sound bites like “welcome to the international band, the antagonistic voices of history have grown silent in the face of technology, mass memory has distilled the truth.” Voice-overs and avatar-like guises perform next to stock footage of whirring motors and laser grids, glued together by the optimism of the synthetic beats. Now and again, the logic of the narrative is interrupted by the image of a headphone-wearing Britton listening intently to a radio, hearing, we assume, what a televised Britton in the video is saying. The televised Britton intones, “science has finally succeeded,” and visuals proceed to confirm: stacks of informational text scroll down a DOS monitor and printed pages roll off a dot-matrix printer. The dry irony of these vague optimisms becomes all the more palpable in the present, since we have likely discarded most of that information along with the technology it was made on. The unbroken character and oh-so-sincere-looks of the Britton-avatar throw further doubt on the matter:

**“You are tuned to the international band.”**

**“The world is presently undergoing a second industrial revolution.”**

**“We have reached a tender moment of giddy expectation and uncertainty.”**

**“The dilemmas of the past have been replaced by the new dilemmas.”**

**“The International Band is the slim band of scientific progress beyond nation and class that encircles the world, inspiring trust and confidence in the future.”**

**“The International Band is the servant of all our society: just, docile and frank.”**

**“Scientific progress indulges society's difference and is a willing and pliant slave to its insatiability and its banality.”**

**“The International Band proposes progress, not utopia, recognizing that a need for venture manifests itself in conflict, as well as discovery.”**

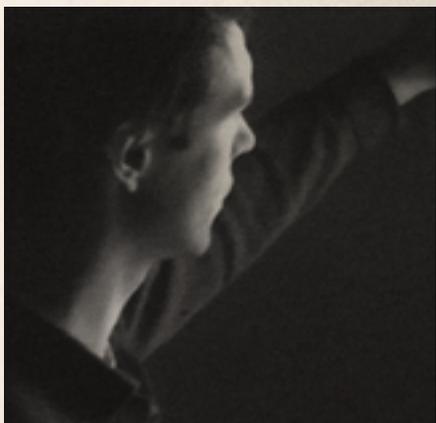
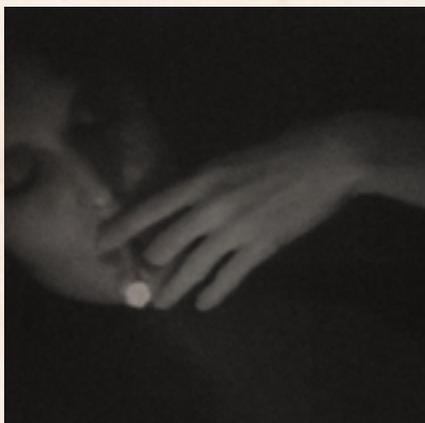
**Ramping up the rhetoric, Britton continues:**

**“Our wildest dreams have been surpassed.”**

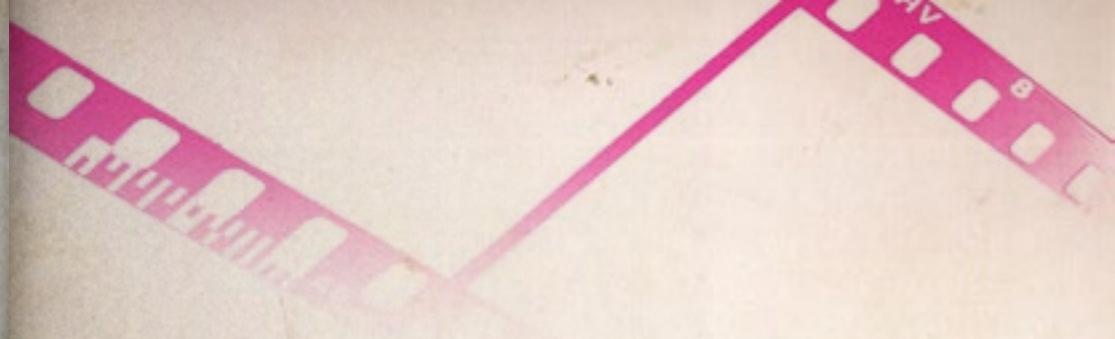
**“Doubt no longer exists in the International Band.”**

**“Science is security. It just *is*.”**

The artist's deadpan voice advertises progress, but meanwhile the images evolve to include shots of black helicopters in smoggy cities, and of military conflict. An unspoken question looms in the air: if globalization and international scientific advancement are progress, what is the outcome? The interruption of a brief scene—a perfect melodrama for television—comes barging in at the end of the tape to reveal the artist's doubt and bring all the swirling commentary back down to the level of the quasi-personal. Four unhappy characters engage in conflict over lunch: the drunken Ingrid (Britton) is ordered away by Willoughby Sharp, but the audience is not privy to the source of the drama, and instead are left to focus on a proclamation by Ingrid: “I'm not a machine, I'm a human being!” When Britton the televised narrator returns, her voice is cut off abruptly. “You are tuned...” And the tape ends with whirling reels and synthetic beats and a lingering sick feeling that for all notions of progression what is really happening is more like deterioration.



Lightbulb Goes Out (1979)



Doubt and deterioration could be considered a driving factor behind many of Britton's works. In *Lightbulb Goes Out*, a slow dark sci-fi scenario involving a small band of revolutionaries who lay withering in the wake of a failed interstellar revolution, her disdain for organized politics becomes evident. The scripting takes place in the form of a slow rhythmic spoken "transmission" cast over the slow panning of repetitive visuals. What unfolds is a short story where audio adds to a scenario of gloomy looking ladies laying about, left behind while a repeating broadcast calls for help. The plot articulates a futile political struggle and a grating audio track reiterates the idea that help is not on the way. This work is pure fiction, revisiting Britton's interest in desperate broadcast (as with the sad young woman of *Love Hurts*), but it also seems a bit complacent: these last refugees look lazy and even a bit glamorous as they pose and smoke.<sup>5</sup> Hardly the revolutionary cause we wish to rally behind.

With Britton's ability to advance somewhat incongruous performance by employing unusual progressions in narrative and engaged dialogue, we find a set of characteristics that establish her practice as enduring, that is, still relevant. Her works speak equally about their individual stories as they do about the technical possibilities available to tell them. Because they address the particular possibilities of their construction they do this in a way that conveys their own specific time and place. It is here that we find the defining features of her practice: the simultaneous building and undoing of narrative elements; the particular attention she pays to video as a material and; her own hand in holding the structure together through tight editing.

<sup>5</sup>As Lisa Steele points out in her review, the women "doze and huddle around tiny fires, like classy bums in back alleys." Lisa Steele, "Bakunin Meets British Vogue." *Centrefold*. Feb/March 1979. 119.

In *Casting Call*, realized during a production residency at the Western Front in Vancouver, this inquiry, issued at the intersection of concept and procedure, is most apparent. The characters, sets, conversations and cadence could take place at any moment, but the specific nature of the apparatus Britton uses point to the 1980s: the visual disruptions of the videotape, the U-matic decks in the editing room, the magnetic line that lingers across the monitor when the image is on pause, the sounds of live editing on an analogue machine, and the use of footage shot off a monitor. Today, these same technologies, once the standards of video editing, have become anachronistic.

The formal and physical qualities of the machines and processes are a consideration because Britton emphasized them in making the work. She peeled at the narrative framework of the video layer-by-layer, disassembling the script and a group of characters who convey the situation of a casting call. The characters talk about their favourite films, and respond to their cues even as Britton creates a plot that reflects on media. She foregrounds her own various roles as editor, director, producer and actor, playing each throughout the video. She also makes her editing evident in the narrative sequence by visually representing editing techniques and including explanations of the editing process as part of the narrative. In her own words:

“The mirage of production. Just do what I tell you to do. Introducing the cast of characters, script, morose and uncooperative. The hardware: sinister, menacing, a wrench in the assembly line.”

“Can I see that again? Can you run through that again?”

“The plot, dead, erased, sad, introverted, catatonic, makes you think about metaphysics. The camera, paranoid, schizophrenic, occasional delusions of grandeur, required constant tranquilization.”

The words remind us that the apparatuses that support artistic process can play an active, even antagonistic role in determining content. Britton, the auteur, frequently on the television screen, was searching for the next layer of experience in a struggle to escape from the logic of video itself. To do



Casting Call (1979)



it, she developed a tension between structure and the decomposition of logical narrative. Beginning as mediated performance parodies of female archetypes, her repertoire shifted—without abandoning her personae—to incorporate a parody of the frame of art. Her skepticism compounds until it absorbs even the logic of video, extending to the space of the viewer.

*Tutti Quanti*, literally “everything all the time”, is a three-channel piece set up symmetrically with two identical monitors book-ending a third, central one. The work broadens Britton’s focus to include the physical in addition to the conceptual structure of video. The installation features synched sound between two tapes with different visuals that correspond. The plot unfolds over both, with different but related simultaneous actions and characters. The narratives and sounds, linked, waver from channel to channel making use of the sculptural aspect of an installation. Despite this shift in focus to incorporate space, the characters dominate. Like her early works, *Tutti Quanti* relies on Britton’s studies of individuals to propose a matrix of subplots that revolve around a suicide pact; relationship conflicts between a battered woman (Britton), her boyfriend Bob and friend Adele; a fashion pundit (Britton) who reassures us with a prescription about this year’s styles; and a monologue and slide presentation by Britton (as herself, perhaps) about history, the present and the future. The formal aspects of the work incorporate a slideshow of empty slogans, a discussion of anarchist tendencies, dancing girls in Speedo branding, and the constant beaming presence of technology.

Reprising once more the role of the storyteller, Britton conducts these scenes as if they were elements in a musical composition, weaving an abstract set of narratives together into one. They are exhibited as a kind of public conversation, with overlapping scripting and gestures of futility in communication and confusion. The failure of meaningful personal gestures from the suicide couple who can’t agree and give up on their plans (“oh shit, I was going to write a *note!*”) compound with the intense Britton as director and pontificator about time and destiny who produces a slideshow featuring disembodied words like “THEORIES,” “PRACTICE,” “MORALS” and “VICTORY.”

“We have the future before us, and the past behind us. Our heritage and



vide ordure (1976)

our future. That gives us the will to go on. Can you hit the first slide please?”

“Individuals, generations, nations, come and go. But we can trust in history. Trust in the past and in the future. Coherence and assurance of the future...”

“Cycles, cycles, cycles... Can I have another slide please?”

The emblematic characters are added like ingredients into this stew of ideas: the dry expository prose of a man who discusses his existential tendencies, the battered woman whose aggression seems mitigated as she watches television, the empty glamour of the Speedo girls, each with their own way to tell a story. Perhaps this is why the tape begins with Britton, who throws books onto the ground but follows that up with impatient directions and a monologue: “We’re trying to figure out what we *really* know...” Britton is getting at a problem here, an issue of how to sequence a narrative, and how to keep it all together, physically. Through it all, the constantly blinking “PANASONIC” sign remains on, reminding us of how she did it: by addressing technology. The video’s deluge of ideas about structures of belief in art and in life becomes not a thesis as much as a cacophony of superficial failures of communication, a cycle of thoughts articulated through variations that are repeated, in cycles. The final result is inconclusive, but the unfortunate characters attempt desperately to speak.

“Can I just get a shot right in here *please?* Just trying to focus on this *art.*”

Ultimately, this and other of Britton's videos were venues for her to speak of her views on art as part of life. She was skeptical about its trends<sup>6</sup> and focused her energies away from theoretical dressing, toward a mix of personal and political experiences. She adopted art-historical imagery as a stand-in for art as a whole, often expressing frustration with contemporary modes of constructing meaning. In giving equal weight to content and structure, her works conducted a kind of conceptual-aesthetic inquiry, addressing life through its technologies, roles and daily dramas.

Today we are faced with a changed everyday reality. The dilemmas of the past have indeed become replaced with new dilemmas. Some of those old rhetorical assertions took root: data has become un-tethered and information shapes many practical aspects of our existence. What was once, in the 1980s, a "refined product," a new consideration in defining the potential structures of the future, has become WikiLeaks, online banking and ubuweb.com. It's now a surrounding environment filled with information as diffuse as air or as pervasive as a cancer depending on how you look at it.

In the meantime, our old sense of technology is falling apart. All those specific old things we used like video decks and square television monitors have begun disappearing. This process of retreat may just be the final fallout of an explosion that blasted apart our bodily connection to individual forms of technology, right along with that shift from goods to services. The fallout has extended through time like light traveling to us from some far off place traced back through video art of the 1970s and 1980s. Britton's reflections on media, then, draw it out for us, staked as they are at the centre of this explosion. Her frenetic, entertaining, satirical videos captured the import of technology on human subjects, and relayed the details of life as it shifted from hard-wired to software.

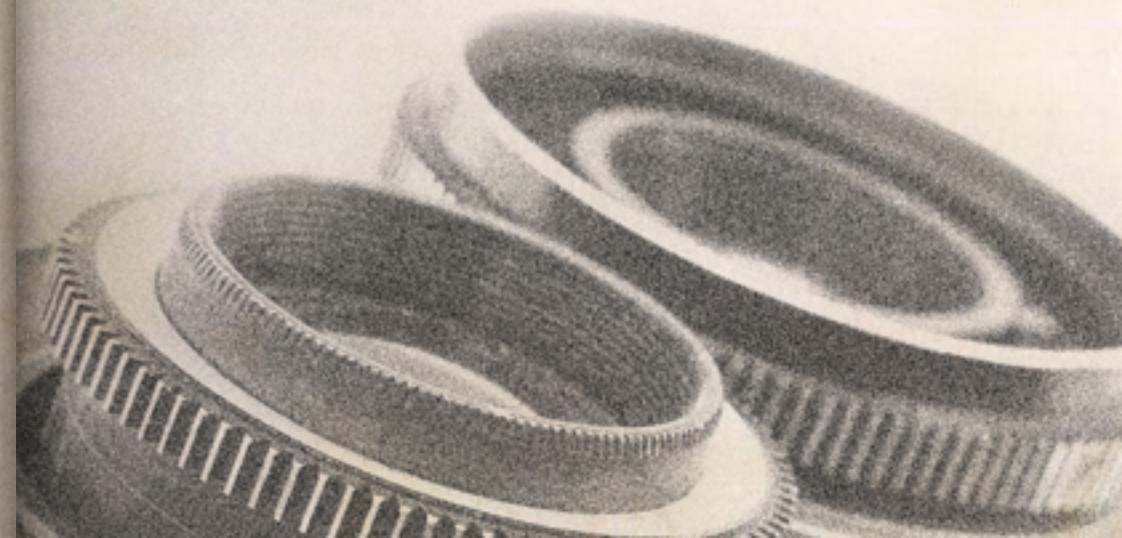
In attempting to steer clear of over-mythologizing Britton in discussing her career, there remains a purpose in articulating precisely what her art practice contributes today. Revisiting these videotapes is not necessarily

a matter of ascribing a new, backward looking interpretation or fastening undue importance onto them. Instead it is to simply pinpoint what we can witness in these works that has somehow endured. Beyond all their connotations of technology and their relation to a moment in time, there is a presence in them: Britton's. Her works were buoyed by her vivid performances, which display a unique character and a depth of inquiry that make them worth watching again. If now is not the right time, a ripe time fertilized by the waste of the technology that so shaped her practice, perhaps there isn't one. It is possible that we could return to her work at any moment, but they have arrived here, now.

Of those people whose activities contribute to an understanding of our personal and collective histories, there are always some who are under-appreciated. People don't always stay put, waiting to see whether the ripples that they have caused are going to generate waves. Ultimately, it seems Britton performed a kind of personal *deus ex machina*, yanking up the narrative around her to accompany the shift. A consummate organizer, she was shown, seen, talked about, reviewed and then simply not seen around much anymore. If you accept the idea that quitting can be a kind of resistance, each personal revolt can expose a flaw, leaving us to ponder how to make a shift in the cultural paradigm—or not. It's a personal decision. We too could take on a mid-life revision, instead of a crisis, and abandon our imaginary future selves as our culture and circumstances change around us.

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<sup>6</sup> At the International Video Art Symposium of 1979, Britton delivered a playful address that questioned the need to address artworks through rubrics of semiotics and theory-driven analysis. Her text delivered a short story about a woman who got drunk while dialoguing about art over lunch.





Rent Due (1983)

The truth is, if you can't beat 'em and you can't join 'em, you can just leave 'em. Turn out the lights, maybe, but leave the door wide open to see what the transients will do with the place once you exit. Just leave the dust on the ledges, no need to arrange a careful presentation once you walk away. There's always the chance, anyway, that you're the last person on earth.

But then, there is always hope that you're not alone, and maybe those words you typed, and the transmissions you left will find someone else; will be found and become part of something that wasn't there before. Or maybe they will just show that you let go of someone who you aren't anymore. The rest of the world is willing to forget the past, so why not?

But is the world really willing?

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**Allison Collins** is an independent curator and writer based in Vancouver British Columbia. Her recent work investigates formal and material qualities of artistic procedures and materials in relation to contemporary art discourse and rhetoric. At present her research focuses on media documentation as well as contemporary practice. She was the curator of *Hold Still Wild Youth: the GINA Show Archive*, held at the Or Gallery and VIVO Media Arts Centre in 2010 and will curate a series of emerging artist commissions for the LIVE Biennial in 2011. She holds an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia.

**“Welcome to the future,”** tilts the well-dressed smiling woman in *The International Band* (1982), **“we are entering a new age, the information age. Data is a natural resource, information is its refined product.”**

The Curatorial Incubator v.8.

# Suspicious Futures:

Select Video Work by Susan Britton  
Curated by Allison Collins

presented at Vtape

January 29 – February 26, 2011

## The Programme

**Love Hurts**, 1977, *b/w, sound, 9:00*

**Why I Hate Communism No. 1**, 1976, *b/w, sound, 3:00*

**Standard Format No.1 Da-Da Go-Go**, 1980, *colour, sound, 45:00*

### INTERMISSION

**Freeze Frame**, 1983, *colour, sound, 2:00*

**Rent Due**, *colour, sound, 5:25 (a section from Countdown, 1983)*

**1984**, (*unreleased*) *colour, sound, 3:45*

**Casting Call**, 1979, *colour, sound, 33:00*

With a 3-monitor video installation **Tutti Quanti**, 1978,  
*b/w, sound, 30:00*

Susan Britton

# Videography

**Susan**, 1976

*b/w, sound, 10:30 min*

A young woman walks the streets of Halifax, and speaks of her love of the gardens, her family, and life as a prostitute.

**I'm Okay, You're Okay**, 1976

(unavailable)

*b/w, sound, 3 min*

"Do cigarettes taste queer now? Does life seem entirely hopeless? Are you sure who you are?" A serious questionnaire for the modern neurotic, completed by sound advice for abandoning anxiety.

**In the Mood**, 1976

*b/w, sound, 3 min*

The artist lounges on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean, the stars are almost close enough to touch. Relaxing in luxury, she confesses, "There comes a time in every life to move beyond compromise."

**Edge City**, 1976 (unavailable)

*b/w, sound, 6 min*

Turns out the artist lives in Edge City. If you play the edge too long, sometimes you go over the edge.

**vide ordure**, 1976

*b/w, sound, 8 min*

A fast, stylized, existential dilemma including trench coat, Gitanes and a traditional brooding voice-over. Nostalgia for the post-war blues.

**Why I Hate Communism No. 1**, 1976

*b/w, sound, 3 min*

Sex, violence and politics.

**What Does Alienated Labour Mean to You?**, 1976

*b/w, sound, 10:20 min*

A reading of Buddhist mystical thought, regarding oneness, emptiness and reality in juxtaposition with fashion advertising, products and cosmetics.

**Tango**, 1976

*b/w, sound, 12 min*

An endless choreographed embrace accompanied by a processed version of Stefan Grapelli's famous tango "Jealousy."

**Love Hurts**, 1977

*b/w, sound, 9 min*

An egocentric in love is a one-sided affair. This tape is dedicated to indulging in a broken heart and features lots of emotive tears, the favourite sad record and a high strung self-obsessed monologue. An embodiment of love scorned.

**Don't Get Cute**, 1977

*b/w, sound, 8 min*

A fast moving thriller featuring rape, murder and a chase scene and including an audio track that attempts to provide some insight into the nature of production.

**INTERFERENCE, 1977***b/w, sound, 52 min*

'Interference' is an arena of broken circuits and loose connections. Everything is contaminated with meaning but nothing ever gets through. This is a dense tape, containing, for example, the slipshod rhetoric of intuitive politics, a twisted "correct" analysis comprised of insults and obscenities, various forms of psychotic idealism and, naturally, continual deranged feedback.

**...And a Woman, 1978***b/w, sound, 8 min*

Two heavy-lidded debutants in designed gear touchingly enact every early 1960s Italian romance shown on late night tv. They even talk out of sync.

**Tutti Quanti, 1978***b/w, sound, 30 min*

(2 separate tapes played simultaneously on three monitors). "Tutti Quanti" means everything, everywhere, all at once, forever, right now. This tape is a fight between form and content. Form wins, by default. The three monitors throw light on the symmetry question.

**Lightbulb Goes Out, 1978***b/w, sound, 54 min*

An authentic document from the late "civilization" of the planet earth. Records the last days of the Actualist Party and its resistance attempts following the neutron wars of the late 20th century. A tragedy.

**Message to China, 1979***colour, sound, 23 min*

"In the '80s East meets West! Let's

reinvent politics together! Hi China! Hi China!" A funny, upbeat message, derisive of traditional political positioning and enthusiastic about the cultural mutations of the future.

**Casting Call, 1979***colour, sound, 36 min*

A moody, sinister piece wherein the means of production, although sulky and reluctant, control the production. After a few halting attempts at plot, fear and loathing take over and the entire project is abandoned to float in the dreamy blue glow of self doubt.

**Standard Format No. 1 Da-Da Go-Go, 1980***colour, sound, 45 min*

The artist regresses to left wing infantilism in this dizzying surrealist narrative with a funkadelic soundtrack.

**Up-Down Strange, 1981***colour, sound, 55 min*

A three-part drama of suspicion, in which production and narrative come together, and then come apart.

**The International Band, 1982***colour, sound, 9 min*

A fast-paced mock public service announcement, complete with stock footage of laser grids, rolling dot matrix print outs, and a televised host.

**Rust, 1985 (unavailable)***Each episode 4 min*

Television episodes, "a vivid comedy of blight".

**Freeze Frame, 1983***colour, sound, 2 min*

Does life imitate MTV? In this brief psychodrama a thoughtful secretary contemplates cause and effects. The dream of personal liberation through technology.

**Countdown, 1983**

A compilation including a loosely abstract sci-fi music video; an anxious rumination on personal responses to rhetoric around the future, computers and the information economy; a family melodrama; a showdown of espionage on the D-train; and an abstract rumination on time imploring the viewer to follow advice for the future.

**Weightless and Fearless***colour, sound, 3:25 min***Rent Due***colour, sound, 5:25 min***Interactive Christine***colour, sound, 4 min***D Train***colour, sound, 3:20 min***1984 (unreleased)***colour, sound, 3:45 min***Art and Telecommunications, 1983 (unavailable)***colour, sound, 60 min*

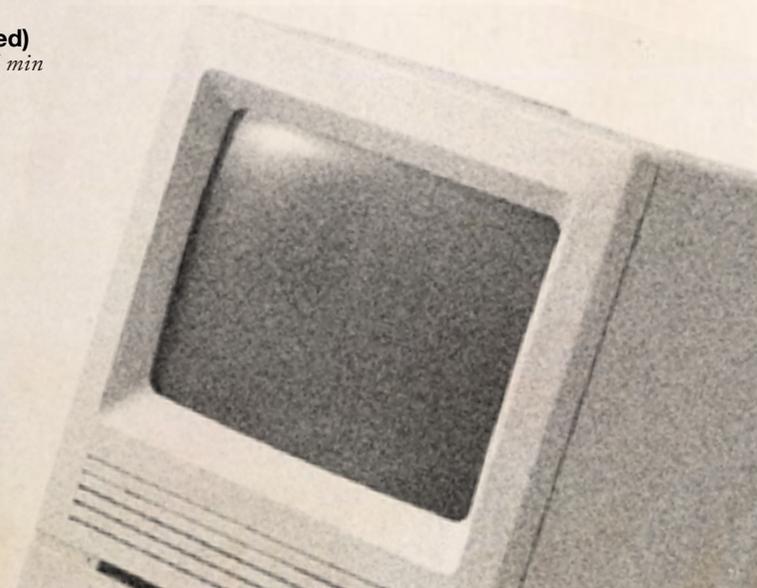
(co-produced with Willoughby Sharp and Wolfgang Staehle) A fast-moving, entertaining and informative videotape that resulted from a series of symposia of the same name held at the School of Visual Arts in New York City in the spring of 1983. The tape offers insight into artists' attitudes toward new technology.

**You, You're the One, 1984***colour, sound, 8 min*

A look at women in contemporary advertising as they relate to classical painting, set in a bathhouse for a Vogue photo shoot.

**The Business of America is a Business, 1985 (unavailable)***colour, sound, 10 min*

An examination of the changing fortunes of today's entrepreneur.



Susan Britton

# Chronology

**1952**

Born in Winnipeg

**1972**

Dropped out Advertising Art Program, Red River Community College to enroll Nova Scotia College of Art & Design

**1976**

Graduated with BFA, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax

**1977**

Moved to Toronto

**1978**

**March:** interview with Peggy Gale in Centrefold

Exhibited at A Space, Toronto; The Kitchen, New York

*Interference* wins prize at the Canadian Video Open

**April:** Exhibition at Isaacs Gallery, Toronto (photos and video)

**June/July:** "Kanadische Künstler", Kunsthalle Basel

**1979**

Exhibitions at Franklin Furnace, New York; Arthur Street Gallery, Winnipeg; Long Beach Museum, LA

**1980**

Exhibitions at Western Front, Vancouver; included in "Biennale de Paris"; Artists Space, New York City; A Space Gallery, Toronto

**1981**

Exhibited at de Appel Gallery, Amsterdam; The Pylon Theatre, Toronto

**1982**

Included in "New Imagery", Museum of Modern Art, New York; "Videoblitz", Dusseldorf Kunsthalle

**1984**

Included in "Videonale 84", Germany Formation of Machine Language production facility and distribution, New York

**1985**

Exhibited at Winnipeg Art Gallery

**1986**

Co-producer, *Willoughby Sharp's Downtown New York 1986* compilation distributed by Monday/Wednesday/Friday Video Club, Staten Island, N.Y.

**1989**

Included in "A Reservoir of Predictions", an Activating the Archive project by Tom Sherman for Art Metropole

**1994**

*Susan* included in "Corpus Loquendi (Body for Speaking)", curated by Jan Peacock for the Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax; toured to the Oakville Galleries; YYZ, Toronto; Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal; Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery, Cornerbrook, Newfoundland; Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina; and the National Gallery of Canada.

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