

[Activating the Archive]3

Lisa Steele

*finding
the DIFFEREN(t)CE
looking for the self and the other
in the work of John Orentlicher*



On February 25, 1993, Art Metropole presented *[Activating the Archive]*³. Lisa Steele, a Toronto video artist and writer, spoke on the work of American video artist, John Orentlicher. This publication acts as written documentation of this event. As well, the event was videotaped by Kim Tomczak. A copy of this videotape has been donated to Art Metropole's archive and is available for in-house viewing.

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PRELUDE

[The playing of the tape *Latex Lure* (1976), no introduction other than the title.]

The question of enunciation — who is speaking, who is spoken to, what codes do they share to communicate? — implies a whole range of important political issues about who is empowered and who is disempowered in the representation of difference. 1

OVERTURE: LOOK WHO'S TALKING

This tape is entitled *Because It's My Image* (1979). The copy in the Art Metropole archive contains a voice-over script written and performed by another artist, Tom Sherman, in collaboration with John. Tonight, I will show this tape with no sound. When you view it again, you can turn the sound up and hear what this collaboration produces.

Here he's saying that he made this jacket, that it used to have sleeves but he took them off.

He's saying he made the pants. "How do you like them? People wonder why I like to be in leather. It's because it's my image."

I think this man may be alone in his room. I think that John set up the camera and either left the room or sat down, passive not active in relation to the recording being made. John is not so much neutral in his presence as he is catalytic — increasing the images, stories, obsessions, interior spaces of his subjects.

Sometime soon this man will put a record on his turntable. It's Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*; it plays throughout his display/demonstration of his leather gear. It obscures some of his words; his leather mask takes care of the rest.

Here he's referring to pants which he made. "I'll put my belt on..." (the copy that I heard becomes inaudible at this point).

When I was asked to do a project here at Art Metropole, I agreed because I was interested in doing a piece of writing on works produced by a man. I have written on a number of women artists — photographers, filmmakers, video artists — over the past ten years. In fact, the last guy I wrote about was Francis



Latex Lure

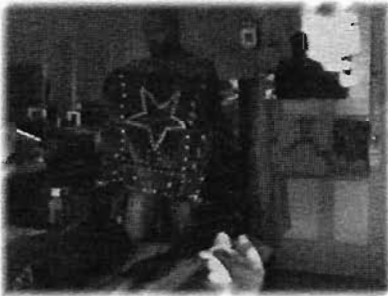


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Ford Coppola in 1979 when I took exception to the indulgences present in *Apocalypse Now*.

I have developed a vocabulary and syntax for discussing work which has a female voice, regardless of the content. But I had little contemporary experience in analysing the work produced from the perspective of a man — let alone works such as tonight's, which waded directly into the bog of sexuality — ambient and direct, present and potential, charged and ready.

In that zone which our culture affords for our gestures and speech, transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence through which it becomes all the more scintillating. A rigorous language, as it arises from sexuality, will not reveal the secret of man's natural being, nor will it express the serenity of anthropological truths, but rather, it will say that he exists without god; the speech given to sexuality is contemporaneous, both in time and in structure, with that through which we announced to ourselves that God is dead. From the moment that Sade delivered its first words and marked out, in a single discourse, the boundaries of what suddenly became its kingdom, the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression. 2



Because It's My Image

[The rest of the tape plays.]

Like Georges Bataille, grand master of excess on the way to his version of the Mystic's own Palace of Wisdom, "***it [is] my aim to express myself clumsily.***"³

ACT ONE: ON COLLECTIONS AND VALUE

"Now then! Show your ticket, child!" the Guard went on, looking angrily at Alice. And a great many voices all said together ("like the chorus of a song," thought Alice), "Don't keep him waiting, child! Why, his time is worth a thousand pounds a minute."

"I'm afraid I haven't got one," Alice said in a frightened tone: "there wasn't a ticket-office where I came from." And again the chorus of voices went on. "There wasn't room for one where she came from. The land there is worth a thousand pounds an inch!"

"Don't make excuses," said the Guard: "you should have

bought one from the engine-driver.” And once more the chorus of voices went on with “The man that drives the engine. Why, the smoke alone is worth a thousand pounds a puff!”

Alice thought to herself “Then there’s no use in speaking.” The voices didn’t join in, this time, as she hadn’t spoken, but, to her great surprise, they all thought in chorus (I hope you understand what thinking in chorus means — for I must confess that I don’t), “Better say nothing at all. Language is worth a thousand pounds a word!”⁴

As I navigate the slough of interpretation, I aim to break the flow of meaning: with non sequiturs, with ellipses left vacant, with quotes unmoored from their sources. Tonight I will take some liberties. Let me be perfectly clear here: the conclusions to which I will so confidently jump are completely uncorroborated. The inferences which I will broadly draw may as easily be flights of fancy as fact. It will be for you to decide.

Before continuing, I must confess, first, that although I know John Orentlicher, I do not know him well. I last saw him five years ago; and, second, that in preparation for this paper I did not interview him, nor did I seek any personal information about these tapes and the conditions under which they were produced — things that I am about to talk about. Some things, details, I know or think I know because I remember something — perhaps that I heard years ago. I have avoided the authorial source in order to highlight certain participatory processes. and to echo the challenge to authorship presented in John’s works. But more of that later.

Tonight I choose the chaos of associative thought — but not without reason. This is about an archive, after all, a repository of books, documents, boxes of papers, things — information, but information that exists in voiceless form. The voice must come from both experience and associations. The experience will derive from the works themselves, flowing quite directly to the viewer/reader, but where do the associations come from? Tonight they will emanate from sensations, that viscera of the intellect which feeds equally the mind and the imagination (and, in turn, feeds upon each, without discrimination).

But I cannot ignore the inherent meaning of the term “archive”, which is said to be, among other things, a repository of evidence. In this case, here at Art Metropole, the evidence is of art activity as practised in the late twentieth century by European and North American artists working in a variety of “avant garde” media. As this “archive” is open to the public, it can be said that the collecting is being done for the “public good” and that this collection fulfils the classical meaning: from the



photo: Roger Bywater

Art Metropole archives

Latin, and the earlier Greek *arkheia*, meaning “public records,” from *arkhe*, a Greek word of unknown origin which means “to begin, to rule, to command.” Which is to say, again: knowledge is power, and the Greeks knew it well.

But how do these mute objects enter into discourse, whether polite or rude? Do they erupt, carbuncle-like, propelled by some inner imperative? Or must they be coaxed, coy and giggly, from their acid-free winding sheets, from their dust-free crypts? To live again. These Undead. Ready to rise and warm once more in the gaze of a beholder’s eye. For us. And we beholders and beholden together, what is the right mixture of forceful analysis and passive enjoyment when in the presence of this sleeping silence? How much foreplay is necessary in order to extract pleasure for ourselves without forgetting the fragile shell of becoming that encases each object, each text, each record before us here? And what of history? Or truth?

For, while it is true that these books, documents, boxes of paper, things, exist and are all here in this place, does that necessarily mean that each contains any provable *truth* at all? Or embodies any kind of truth or stands for truth or defends truth like a warrior (here, let us distinguish between the terms “soldier” and “warrior”: the former being paid for services [from the Old French *solde*, “to pay”]; the latter being impelled by zeal.) Many may be lies or fictions or borderline pathologies. Which is not to say that we may not lie with them in ecstasy or in secret. Or, as has been said:

“To a greater or lesser extent, everyone depends on stories or novels, to discover the manifold truth of life. Only such stories, read sometimes in a trance, have the power to confront a person with his fate.”⁵

Nor may I sidestep the delicate and contested territory of “collecting.” Historically, collections of immeasurable religious and spiritual value to the tribes, societies, and cultures from which they originated have been pillaged, plundered and stolen in the name of science, art, preservation, or greed. Yet it has been written,

“Some sort of ‘gathering’ around the self and the group — the assemblage of a material ‘world,’ the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not “other” — is probably universal. All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self.”⁶

And, for another, collecting is ***“as essential as dreams.”***⁷ But there is collecting and there is collecting. There are those who

amass objects and others who squirrel away images, people, experiences. The latter, if not done with the utmost delicacy, may cause the individual who indulges to be considered to be questionable to the point of criminal. This is precisely the territory inhabited by John Orentlicher.

[Turn attention to the silent image being projected in back of me.]

Behind me now we have entered into the world of Jade and her companions. And the meanings inherent and implicit within “collecting” are about to fragment before this artifact. This tape is entitled *You Send Me* (1976).



[Activating the Archive]3

ACT TWO: LOOK WHO'S LOOKING

The good collector (as opposed to the obsessive, the miser) is tasteful and reflective. Accumulation unfolds in a pedagogical, edifying manner. The collection itself — its taxonomic, aesthetic structure — is valued, and any private fixation on single objects is negatively marked as fetishism. Indeed a “proper” relation with objects (rule-governed possession) presupposes a “savage” or deviant relation (idolatry or erotic fixation). 8

This refers directly to my own ambivalence and attraction to this tape. First, to consider the primary act that has taken place at the time of recording: Who is the collector in the acts portrayed here and who has been collected? Which is to ask, who is the voyeur and who is the object; which is active (to look), thus rendering the other passive (in this case, she who receives the look — his, mine, and ours). Should we travel this binary version of the true/false quiz, then He, I, We are implicated. Now, I gaze; you gaze; he, she, and we gaze on Her. But then we can multiply the meanings here to mirror the primary act: sitting tonight in this repository of evidence, this archive, we again collect. This time it is more imagery for our own use — now, later, to store, to consider, to forget only to remember, unexpectedly at some later date.

Now we have illuminated the bed upon which all of John's works from this period are seeded. All spring from this highly contested territory. By implicating himself so thoroughly, exposing himself (in all his absence), he drains power from the traditional (male) source of power — the gaze — transferring it outward, democratically, to all who subsequently view. This transfer creates such discomfort, such self-reflection, such incriminating ties that divisions between author and reader, artist and viewer



You Send Me

(*) *This genuine desire to melt together would be more typical within representations (written and pictorial) of s/m where power relations, while not ignored, are sent up through the acting out of various theatrical scenarios. And surrender by one partner in a consensual relationship yields pleasure equal to the pleasure derived from inflicting domination, and in some cases pain.*

(*) *My usage here is intentional – although perhaps less than standard. A bain-marie, of course, is a pot where water is heated and within which smaller pots are floated to enable even and gentle cooking, utilizing the indirect heat of the water.*

*In my use, I have returned to the root meaning: from the medieval French *baïneum Mariae* “bath of Marie” which, according to the Houghton Mifflin Dictionary, is a mistranslation of the medieval Greek *kaminos Marias* “furnace of Maria”, referring to Moses’ sister Maria who was said to be a practicing alchemist.*

Thus the bathtub is referred to as a bain marie and allowed to become a site for transformation for Jade and her reptilian companions, a site where the characteristics of each co-mingle together.

are neutralized if not obliterated as we all focus on the jointly held/revered/damned “object of desire.”

In psychological terms, the persona is the role that a person assumes in order to display her/his conscious intentions to self and others. Nothing more accurately defines John’s presentation of “the human form” in his works. As if to say, “I am as you see me here.” Like many of his works from this period, *You Send Me* enlists the collaboration of a female voice, a female body, and indeed a female persona. Here, if we were to follow Mulvey et al; whose analyses we are indebted to for decoding the heretofore endless waterfall of meaning produced by narrative cinema, the male “gaze” (occupied by John, who is standing in for all of us) is the active participant; Jade occupies the space reserved for the passive “object.”

But as important as this theory is, it makes no relevant reference to this work, to the truly transgressive fixation of John’s camera, to this completely yielding male gaze that seeks not to dominate or subdue or even objectify but to attain the impossible state of *not bisexual* but *presexual* union with the object of desire. To state the obvious, this melting oneness is seldom the territory assigned to male sexuality within the arena of representation.*

As each tape progresses (and this one is a good example), participants are actively encouraged to share, to divulge, to confess. Yet all is accomplished in highly mannered, highly structured, carefully framed environments stripped of any superfluity. Environments which, in minimalist fashion, acquire the status of the “meta-real,” where each detail is obviously added, consciously, intentionally, offered us thus for analysis and interpretation. (Take, if you will, the unsettling detail of Jade oiling her newly shaved legs before immersing herself in her vital, alchemically charged *bain-marie** to bathe her beautiful reptiles, symbols of the hyper-phallus, yet comfortable as pets within this totally self-contained tableau.)

And what is excluded is often more important than what’s actually there. (The face of the speaker in several works is excluded from the frame, creating disembodied story-tellers, whose authenticity we cannot confirm, whose eyes we cannot gaze into to gauge truth or fiction.) Even more fundamentally, the missing ‘speaking part’ truncates our experience of speech, making it impossible to link the body on screen with the voice in the air; are they even talking, or are we the victims of elaborate electronic ventriloquism?

In *Things I Say* (1975), women proffer scars for his/our consideration, each revealing herself twice, offering a different “cause” for this marking of her surface. Both are presented not whole, but as sections on screen: one a torso who unbuttons

her blouse to reveal naked breasts and faint scars; the other, from waist to just below crotch, who turns while dropping her pants to reveal a large very ragged scar on the back of thigh. Each different account (car accident, moles removed for fear of cancer, birthmarks, stabbed on the streets of Detroit in a botched robbery attempt) is somewhat plausible, but “truth” eludes us here — structurally and actually. We lack information necessary to arrive at a verdict; lies or truths, part or whole, we have no idea. The unifying point in all, however, lies in each woman’s reference to male doctors, husbands, or boyfriends, who, implicitly or explicitly, are blamed for making the already present scar worse than it needed to be. Thus, the desire to pry, to “fix,” is seen as damaging to the body of the woman/speaker, an extension of the violation of the first assault/surgery/accident. And always the perpetrator/surgeon/driver is unequivocally identified to be male. The formal presentation of this work — the absence of the women’s faces and “speaking parts” — puts their bodies directly into evidence, making their words more testimony than conversation.

In *Sometime In September* (1979), the screen is filled with the eyes and forehead of a woman, hair parted in the middle; the thirteen-minute monologue that occurs is her account of being attacked while walking late at night alone. Her attacker, an acquaintance called “Teddy,” violently beats her, threatening her with a knife — all for supposedly telling his girlfriend a lie. Her account is rivetting in its bland factuality; only occasionally does the terror invade her language: “It was the quiet stealth that scared me more than anything,” she says. Again the “speaking part” — her mouth — is missing, depriving us of the connection to her witnessing. The story ends (as an earlier account of a woman beaten by her husband which ends with her return to him) with apparent acquiescence on the part of the woman; she decides not to press charges in spite of her fear. But, in both cases, John draws no conclusions on behalf of anyone; the end is the end because that’s all that is going to be said.

To quote a Beat generation icon:

“naturally, facetious won’t do — just to start at the beginning let the truth seep out.”⁹

This could be the artist’s instructions to his subjects in all of John’s testimony-recording tapes. All deliver information that either is or appears to be based solely on personal experience, or embroidery upon personal fact (tales woven around scars). In *I Think I Like It* (1977), three women talk about their bodies: what they like; what they aren’t comfortable with; about their



Things I Say



Sometime in September



I Think I Like It

“asses” and men looking at their asses; about the size of their breasts; about feeling like a child because of a flat chest; about being roughed up on the dance floor and bitten on the ass, crying in surprise and anger; about being uncomfortable with seeing Father pat Mother on the ass; about wondering if people were staring at unbound breasts and noticing that one was a good two inches lower than the other. All three of them are referring to defects in their bodies: unwanted hairs, misshapen parts, yet they are talking, incessantly talking, laconic, not anxious, having reflected on these statements for a while — a lifetime, indeed — and ending up telling him, John. And he’s our conduit to them; now they’re telling us all. And they don’t seem worried about that.

But back to the original terms of reference: this tape playing now, above all others by John, has, in effect, “collected” me, reciprocating my attention with a wealth of yielding details, reveries on power and control and who’s caught looking. I sink into this visual over and over. I love the look of the small girl-like woman with the big snakes, which overpowers nascent intimidation (or conscience) caused by my consideration of the camera/gaze/recording person/voyeurism and all the other conditions affecting my perception of the overall effect of the meaning of this work — or that should affect the meaning of the work.

Among all of John’s tapes, *You Send Me* boils to the surface an uneasy, spongy “boundary-as-permeable-membrane” between these two states. I describe what I see: a woman performs extremely private grooming acts in what appears to be her own apartment while being recorded by an obviously present cameraperson. The tape is an eighteen minute unbroken single shot of her activities; at the seven minute mark, the mix shifts. Up until the moment when the snakes appear, this tape walks a tightrope of banality and discomfort. John could almost be acting out the quote from Bataille: “*it [is] my aim to express myself clumsily.*” The camera movement is awkward and obvious, panning accomplished with the aid of a very human hand, zoom in on the snake, zoom out to catch the whole action. Yet, all the while, Jade never breaks the so-called Fourth Wall — that invisible barrier between herself and the camera (who is John himself, who is standing in for all subsequent viewers, including us, tonight).

He could have touched her that day. I have no idea if he did. But, separated by years, we can almost touch her here tonight. Because of its sheer (implied) physicality, the video image invades where other representations put up pale fronts. Here, we know that Jade did, indeed, walk that floor, wear (and shed) those clothes, gently bathe those arching reptiles,

meaningfully ignore the intrusive camera that lurked only inches from her body at times. We cannot dispute this representation of her body. She lives.

Although, for all we know, she may be dead now. Or, if not her, then her companions, perhaps. Who knows the life span of a snake? This is the poignancy of this recorded past. It has come, unannounced, unexpected and certainly uninvited. You have not asked to meet Jade.

But here the screen floods with pleasure and discovery — even years later. Like when someone shows you something, some part of themselves that you didn't know about before. Someone you don't know well but maybe have decided to have sex with. Once someone showed me their third nipple and told me this long story about how it was a sign of the devil blessing (or curse, I can't remember which), but the person was a concert cello player and had a very serious demeanour and I always thought that the person told me this story in order to interest me because this person thought that I was a lot more "wild" and "far out" than they were. But that person did have a third nipple, which was something that I did not.

Some might say that, in classical (Hitchcockian) terms, Jade is being pursued by the camera/voyeur and we are meant to believe that she is unaware of its presence. This reading is, however, very unconvincing in terms of the outcome of the piece. She simply exits the tub, dries the snakes, and dries herself. Others might say that, given the obviously fictional set-up of the performance — that is, the impossibility of the woman not knowing about the camera's presence — it is possible that the piece is simply a poorly realized fiction, meant to make us uncomfortable and claustrophobic but not succeeding in that it doesn't have enough cuts/angle changes to reflect the multidimensional nature of consciousness that should be represented in a true fictional "suspense" tale.

Neither view accurately represents the potential for transformative ecstasy possible to experience when viewing this work. I think that Jade is in control — so much so that she drags the whole past into the present here tonight. She directs the camera with her movements, allows each action (the disrobing, the shaving of legs, the bath itself) to take as much time — real time — as it takes. She is confident that the camera/eye will remain trained on her. Think of the last time you were this confident, this self-contained. They (Jade and John) have talked about this before the camera was turned on. They are in this together, this extended performance for the camera/John/us. They both know we will be surprised. I think he has recaptured the moment when he first learned about her snakes, that this was the intention of the piece itself. But, of course, I have no way of knowing if this was true or not.

Writing so as not to die, as Blanchot said, or perhaps speaking so as not to die, is a task undoubtedly as old as the word. The most fateful decisions are inevitably suspended during the course of a story. We know that discourse has the power to arrest the flight of an arrow in a recess of time, in the space proper to it. It is quite likely, as Homer has said, that the gods send disasters to men so that they can tell of them, and that in this possibility speech finds its infinite resourcefulness; it is quite likely that the approach of death — its sovereign gesture, its prominence within human memory — hollows out in the present and in existence the void toward which and from which we speak. ¹⁰

POSTSCRIPT: THE BELIEF OF THE EYE

Why I did this in the way I did it:

Tonight I presented tapes by John Orentlicher and a reading of his work. I had intended to have John here tonight in order to interview him following this presentation; this was not possible. The printed text will contain his written responses to my questions.

Quoted material in the text, identified by superior numerals, is from the following sources:

^{3, 5}

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⁷

Baudrillard, Jean. *Le Système des objets*. 1968.

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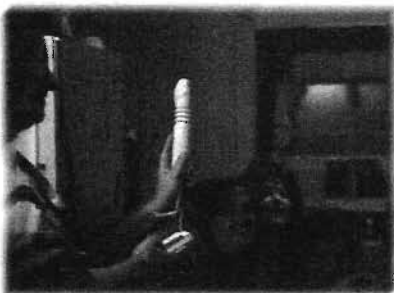
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Pleasure Profits

[The playing of the tape *Pleasure Profits* (1981).]

LATER

Following the lecture at Art Metropole, I spoke with John Orentlicher and presented him with a series of questions, which he then answered, briefly, in writing.

QUESTIONS

How well did you know the people you interviewed?

Where did you meet the interview subjects?

How did you suggest doing the recording?

What did you talk about before you turned the camera on?

John Orentlicher

ANSWERS

In most cases, I did not know the participants well or for long periods of time. I was always looking in that period [1974-79] for people who did not fit, who were viewed as “other” in some way by the dominant culture.

I was active in going to clubs of erotic performance (Jade, Jello), while other stories came from more personal contacts (*Things I Say, Sometime In September*). Once I had a body of work out in exhibition, people would approach me with stories or experiences they had. *Because It's My Image* came from my tracking down the performer, who I had seen several times on the street.

The approach to all of these encounters was to introduce myself as a video maker who wanted to capture something about these special people, reveal something in their histories that provided a tension between the subject and the audience through imaging technology.

Our discussions concerned their stories and how they wished to address and represent themselves on camera: I would offer a process by which my concerns and their stories could come together. After we discussed which details were relevant to the tape, i.e., a particular place or time to keep the history more focused on events, not place. Place was within the tape. In *Because It's My Image*, the performer was uncomfortable with my presence in the room during recording, while in *You Send Me*,

Jade felt my idea was too tame. Her interest was in a more sexual/erotic behaviour. I was uncomfortable with this in that the tension I hoped to create would be lost.

In *Things I Say* both participants were known to me: one was my ex-wife and the other a former graduate student. Conceptually, I was interested in the media/confession/sexual tension. In *Sometime In September*, the storyteller was a colleague, who, with much discussion, was able to recount her experience. This was set up to confront and create empathy, for her to penetrate the viewer.

The works produced during this period utilized similar structural strategies in locating the viewer within the psychological space of the encounter. This was also always part of my discussions with the performers. Most would agree to this. Others needed some modification to feel at ease.

For me, the connection by the audience to video was very important. Given the technology of this period — open reel recorders with clumsy cameras — the approach needed to be simple and stark. The issue of personal voice was always implicit in our discussions, and while I wanted to have structural control, it was their story, their image, we entered into an understanding. To make a tape — that was always the goal.

– John Orentlicher

other titles available in the *[Activating the Archive]* series:

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