

# This is Paradise

Art and Artists in Toronto

May 28–31, 2015

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery & University of Toronto Art Centre

## Making Scenes: Film and Video

### Wyndham Wise, *The Events Leading to the Formation of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, the First Artist-Run Distribution Centre in Canada*

The summer of 1967, the famous “Summer of Love,” was a magical time for the Toronto art scene. The city saw its first love-in, held in Queen’s Park; its first large-scale art happening, held in the refectory of University College; its first “Cinema Explosion” of film and video, held at Cinecity; and, no less momentous, the creation of the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC), Canada’s first artist-run distribution centre.

**Wyndham Paul Wise** founded and was the editor-in-chief of *Take One: Film & Television in Canada*, (1992–2006). He has taught film studies at Algoma University and York University, and media writing at Sheridan College. He served as the last Toronto reporter for *Cinema Canada* magazine, launched *POV* magazine for the Canadian Independent Film Caucus and edited the final issue of *Independent Eye* for the CFMDC. In 1997, he was instrumental in founding the Toronto Film Critics Association and launched *Canadian Screenwriter* for the Writers Guild of Canada in 1998. In 2001, Wise edited *Take One’s Essential Guide to Canadian Film*, a concise history of Canadian cinema published by the University of Toronto Press. In 2008, Wise was hired by the Canadian Society of Cinematographers to edit *CSC News*, which he transformed into *Canadian Cinematographer* in 2009. He is a former contributor and consultant to *Historica’s Canadian Encyclopedia* and the author of over 550 articles, interviews and reviews.

### Andrew James Paterson, *Tele Video Situations*

I will refer to the video medium’s relationship to television and how television is video’s ancestor and antagonist. *Tele Video Situations* will reference various scenarios involving Toronto-based video-practitioners and their encounters with television networks and infrastructures. Artists in play here include General Idea, Centre for Experimental Art and Communications (CEAC), VideoCabaret and the Hummer Sisters, Tom Sherman, among others. I will also refer to tele-video events such as the Fifth Network Video Conference (1978) and the series *Television By Artists*, initiated through A Space Gallery and broadcast on Rogers-TV in 1980. I will look at how some artists met the tele-visual medium on its terms and how some met it on their own terms; and how some artists talked back to the medium while playing by its codes and rules.

**Andrew James Paterson** is an inter-media artist working with video, film, performance, writing and music, based in Toronto. Paterson has been making non-camera video works, many of them musically-based, working with his computer-drawings and the materials of the Final Cut Pro editing system. His body of work focuses on inventories, tensions between bodies and technologies, and language. Paterson has a history of activity in Toronto’s artist-run galleries, having served on boards of Trinity Square Video, A Space and YYZ. He has curated video and film programmes for these centres as well as Cinematheque Ontario, Available Light in Ottawa and Mercer Union in Toronto. He also served on YYZ’s Publishing committee and co-edited (with Sally McKay) the book *Money Value Art: State Funding, Free Markets, Big Pictures*. He is the coordinator for the 8 fest Small-Gauge Film Festival, a Toronto film festival entering its ninth year.

### Peggy Gale, *Rose-Coloured Glasses for Toronto Video*

In 2014 my essay, “All These Years: Early Toronto Video,” appeared in *Explosion in the Movie Machine: Essays and Documents on Toronto Artists’ Film and Video*, edited by Chris Gehman for the Images Festival and the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT). The text is dense with names, dates, facts, artists and venues: a useful reference tool. For *This is Paradise* I draw from that research to compare what “video” was in its earlier days with its more current situation. In the mid-1970s I noted narrative issues as a defining motif for video in Toronto, expanding the study in *Videotexts*, published in 1995 by Wilfrid Laurier University Press and The Power Plant. Since that time, “video” as a digital form has overrun celluloid to become a new normal. Brief clips from selected works will be included.

**Peggy Gale** has published extensively on time-based works by contemporary artists in numerous magazines and exhibition catalogues. Having edited three anthologies in Art Metropole’s *By Artists* series, she prepared *Video re/View: The (best) Source for Critical Writings on Canadian Artists’ Video* with Lisa Steele in 1996, and was editor of *Artists Talk 1969-1977*, from The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax (2004) among many other titles. A long-time independent curator, she was co-curator for *Archival Dialogues: Reading the Black Star Collection*, inaugurating the Ryerson Image Centre (Toronto, 2012) and most recently, co-curator for the Biennale de Montréal 2014, titled *L’avenir (looking forward)*, at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal and elsewhere (October 2014–January 2015). She received the Toronto Arts Award for Visual Arts (2000) and in 2006, the Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts.

### Zoë Heyn-Zones, *Programming Process: Pleasure Dome <--> Film Farm*

This paper reflects on the intersection of Toronto-based moving image cultures and the intertwined histories of local artist-run media institutions through a case study of Pleasure Dome’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary Film Farm screening. Reflecting on the question of how curatorial collectives can offer support for artisanal processes, this presentation will address considerations of place and positionality in our city’s experimental film history. As a member of the programming collective at Pleasure Dome, a Toronto-based experimental media arts exhibition collective, I have recently co-programmed

## Tele-Video Situations      Toronto

Nam June Paik, one of the progenitors of video art, has stated that the video apparatus meant that artists and citizens could now talk back to their television sets —talk back to the dominant culture, so to speak.

In order to establish a fund for the relatively fresh practice of “video production” in the mid 1970s — at the Canada Council and with regards to other funding agencies, “the distinction between the practice of video ‘art’ and the ‘industrial’ organization of television production constituted in the federal government’s film and video policy had to be clearly established. “. (Kevin Dowler, *Interstitial Aesthetics and the Policy of Video at the Canada Council*, p.38, incl. in *Mirror Machine Video and Identity*, ed. Janine Marchessault, pub.YYZ Books 1995)

Thus, video had to be distinguished from television, as well as from film. TV monitors provided an exhibition structure, but television was a rather distant reference among so many early video artists. In Colin Campbell’s *Sackville I’m Yours*, television is a ghost, as an implied interviewer has been edited out of Art Star’s performative monologue.

Video was art and TV was not.

Except, for many different video artists, video was television and vice versa. Television was not the evil ghost in the machine. Rather, it was there to be occupied and infiltrated and deconstructed and enjoyed.

In order to talk back to television, one had to get onto television. One had to get on the air. Or, maybe not?

Today, film and video and digital moving pictures are all classified under the rubric of “media art”. But, in the formative years of video art, I suggest that a media artist was someone who used the media as canvas, who staked out presence in the media at least as much as in gallery and other fine art systems. And... by media, I mean television.

Colour changed the picture. Colour video was a break from the grayness of black and white video art. Colour was available for those who wanted to consume and be consumed.

Although this presentation will focus mostly on Toronto-based video artists and practitioners, the California collective Ant Farm, whose prime members were the architecturally-trained Doug Michels and Chip Lord, must be noted with regards to the terrain of video artists celebrating and confronting television. The group was a self-described "art agency that promotes ideas that have no commercial potential, but which we think are important vehicles of cultural introspection." (Ant Farm Wiki entry) Ant Farm were media artists who understood that one had to attract the media’s attention in

order to have a presence – in order to get on television. In *Media Burn*, Ant Farm connected with the media and then executed an event in which their Phantom Dream Car crashed through a bank of fifty flaming television sets. The car was a vintage Cadillac and this action was performed in the parking lot of San Francisco's Cow Palace. On the Fourth of July, 1975, artist-president John F. Kennedy (Doug Hall) asks the audience: "Now I ask you, my fellow Americans: Haven't you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen? "One could say that Ant Farm simultaneously burned the media and let the media burn. Although the parallel critique of symbols such as television and the automobile is idiosyncratically American, Ant Farm's influence on Toronto artists was unmistakable, particularly with artists as wildly different as General Idea and to the inter-media ensemble VideoCabaret.

General Idea also understood that one couldn't just talk about wanting to make television, one had to make it. General Idea had no desire to put their collective feet through any monitors let alone the medium at large. GI didn't want to destroy television; they wanted to stretch the canvas. In the 1977 videotape *Pilot*, General Idea stated: "More and more artists are turning to popular media in an attempt to examine the effectiveness of their work. Not only in an attempt to reach a larger audience, but also to obtain access to the immediacy of newspapers, magazines, rock & roll and, of course, television itself." (*Pilot*, GI, 1977). General Idea both sincerely and ironically proclaimed themselves product. They pitched themselves as already famous artists with a series of framing devices they had created which it seemed anybody in the know should already know.

"Pilot... was conceived as a "pilot" for a non-existent series, and acts as an introduction to General Idea. Much of it was shot with super-8 film, only the head-and-shoulder segments being recorded in the television studio. 29 min. "(from Video Data Bank or). Pilot was commissioned by TVO, a local educational network, where there was in place individuals and programmes such as Reiner Schwarz's Nightmusic... There was also an expatriate American artist named Tom Sherman working at TVO.

"Yes I worked with Reiner Schwarz at TV Ontario. He was the DJ/VJ, the host of a cultural talk show called Nightmusic. The show was produced and directed by Richard Johnson. I was with the show for a couple of seasons, 1976-1978. Technically I was the "visual coordinator," but I did a lot of things, including making hundreds of music videos. Reiner would bring in stacks of vinyl LPs and I would visualize them. We needed music videos to segue between guests (with commercials we had difficulty transitioning from guest to guest). The music videos became a major feature of the show (4 years before MTV and Much Music). "(email from Tom Sherman, May 6, 2015)

At TVO there was Nightmusic and there was also *Afterimage*, a weekly show of experimental film and video art that Sherman curated for TV Ontario. Pilot was produced for *Afterimage*. "It might be noted that TVO was delighted with *Pilot*, and programmed it regularly for some months." (Peggy Gale, from *A History in Four Movements*).

Nightmusic would programme other video works by Toronto artists. In conversation Apr.21, Saul Goldman (technical coordinator for Centre for Experimental Art and Communications) mentioned videos by himself, his colleague Ann Zaza, and others being played on Rainer Schwartz's Night Music. These videotapes were electronic pattern works, devoid of verbal language. They were diametrically opposite to the narrative performative works of artists like Colin Campbell and Lisa Steele and also the product-referent videos of General Idea. They might well be classified as "electronic information". So ... what is meant by the word "information"?

The Centre for Experimental Art and Communications, with a lengthy history documented by Dot Tuer (The CEAC Was Banned in Canada), in Is Toronto Burning, curated by Philip Monk, and in Mike Hoolboom's fascinating investigation into the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre and its numerous branches) believed in video as a means of sharing information. Videos were to be shared and exchanged. According to CEAC associate Bruce Eves, their first foray into both the conference format and operating internationally would have been (CEAC co-founder) Amerigo Maras's participation in an international video symposium in Buenos Aires late in 1975. Attendance at this event enabled Maras to both connect directly with like-minded artists as well as reinforce the desire to utilize video as an alternative information system (email from Bruce Eves, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015). ). Here he (Maras) met CAYC (Centre for Art and Communication), a collective of thirteen Argentinean-based artists "who called for the gallery system to be replaced by a system of workshops that would encourage a wide range of multidisciplinary activities. Within this system of workshops, the artists envisioned the video medium as a tool to diversify the hierarchies of information and media, to ferment political unrest and promote revolutionary aims." (Dot Tuer, The CEAC Was Banned in Canada, p/64).

According to Bruce Eves, the Kensington Arts Association who later evolved into CEAC] did not begin the ambitious construction of a video-production studio emphasizing broadcast quality and colour technology in 1976. Eves dates the development of the CEAC production studio to post Crash and Burn demise in later 1977. Neither Eves nor Goldman recall the 1977-78 CEAC video facilities as being "broadcast quality" in line with conventional bandwidth specifications. "In early 1976 there was a project with Ryerson to produce a series of multi-camera broadcast quality videos. My project was aborted when the camera crew stormed out in protest at the appearance on set of a man naked except for boots, vest, and chaps." (Eves, April 23<sup>rd</sup>) Yes, here we have a relatively early instance of censorship, in which "broadcast quality" is a convenient synonym for "inappropriate content", or perhaps unnecessary information.

CEAC was shut down in 1978 for reasons detailed in Tuer's essay and other sources. According to Eves, CEAC had some very ambitious plans still in formative stages at the time of closure: : a Toronto branch of Joseph Beuys' Free International University; a New York satellite office; book and periodical publishing and distribution; artist film and video production and distribution; Crash 'n Burn Records for the production and distribution artist's music and audio works; commercial video production and studio

rental (to finance art production); and commercial photocopying (to finance art production). During the later nineteen-seventies, Toronto had four video production facilities: A Space Video (which became Charles Street), Trinity Square Video, 15 Dance Lab (courtesy of Lawrence Adams) and CEAC.

CEAC's building at 15 Duncan Street also hosted The Liberal Party of Ontario, the punk music club Crash and Burn and the genesis of The Funnel Experimental Film Theatre. The latter two were under the general auspices of CEAC, although Crash and Burn was short-lived and the Funnel moved to and flourished on King St. East. CEAC hosted a sizable performance space where many international and Toronto performance artists performed. CEAC's emphasis on and commitment to body-based performance art contrasted with A Space and other parallel Toronto organizations, where performance at least flirted with popular culture and popular media. It could be observed that, when CEAC did get themselves into the mainstream media, it was due to the STRIKE and Red Brigades hysteria that led to their being shut down.

A completely different artists' collective or organization that talked a lot about television as being beyond the gallery confines was VideoCabaret. Videocab was founded by video and performance artist Marien Lewis and theatre writers Michael Hollingsworth and Deanne Taylor in 1976. Lewis and Taylor, along with Bobbe Besold and Janet Burke, comprised The Hummer Sisters, whose inter-media theatre video rock'n'roll performances included *The Patty Rehearst Story* (1976) and *The Bible as Told to Karen Ann Quinlan* (1977). Both these titles clearly refer to media burn and media burn-out. Video Cab combined banks of monitors with live cabaret theatre – think Ant Farm meets Saturday Night Live. VideoCabaret were, in the seventies into the early eighties, media artists based in theatre and parallel galleries (Lewis worked at A Space). But their subject matter, and also their ambitions, was the media.

“In the 70's Marion invented and refined the concept of the single camera video reporter and Moses Znaimer adopted its revolutionary style as the signature brand for City TV personalities.” (from Marien Lewis, *Someone*).

Even if the above proclamation is exaggeration, it is true that The Hummer Sisters and VideoCabaret were persons of interest to particularly City TV. Imagine if VideoCabaret had expanded their playback system to include links or feed-ins to other broadcast or telecasting satellites or similar outlets. The live video performed with hand-held cameras by Lewis and other Hummers veered away from documentation and toward abstraction with their fondness for video feedback. Ironically, The Hummers and VideoCab made it onto TV in 1982, after Lewis and Besold had departed the group. In 1982, The Hummer Sisters (Taylor, Burke, and Jennifer Dean) ran for mayor of Toronto as “A. Hummer”. Since no other candidate running against incumbent Arthur Eggleton (Art vs. Art was the name of the Hummer campaign project) had any media profile, the Hummer Sisters actually received ten percent of the vote. The Hummers' promotional clips looked like television...like high-grade broadcast-quality advertising. No feedback... no abstraction. Almost indistinguishable from the network's regular programming, except for the three-headed hydra candidate. As public performance engaging and infiltrating the media, Art

vs. Art was certainly successful. But...did it critique the electoral structure or situation, or simply provide the dominant media with some necessary entertainment fodder, as some façade of an election was necessary even when the incumbent was running virtually unopposed?

In 1978, there was a video conference” called Fifth Network, held at Toronto’s Masonic Temple which is best known as a live concert venue. The conference contained “tele-performances” from most artists recognized as being part of the Toronto video community of the time, although nobody from CEAC presented anything. The tele-performances took precedence over screenings of existing artists’ videotapes. Lisa Steele, writing in Parachute Winter 1978, questions the conference’s priorities. “Why in a Conference that focused on video, did live performance, as opposed to tape screenings, assume a dominant position in the festival presentation?... why were the performances taped and presented on a local cable station but the tapes not?”. (Steele, PARACHUTE). As one of the organizers explained, “people love to see live performance. They’ll really turn out. If in the process, they’ll have to endure a little video, well...”

So, here, video is not television but theatrical performance is. People will turn out for live performance but tune out for video? This decision reveals a fear of exploring the possibilities that new works in a still-relatively new medium just might make as much sense on TV as most of the programming in place. No, for video artists to ‘cross-over’, there must be content accessible to hypothetical average viewers. Live music, theatre, dance, satirical news... not anything using the tele-medium to problematize or challenge that very medium. Writing in 1978, Steele challenges the tele-centricity of the conference organizers. “Nor is video necessarily TV (broadcast, that is, although it can be broadcast.) ... Most of video has moved out of the shadow of direct television references and has started to develop its own content and considerations” (Steele, PARACHUTE).

Yet some prominent video artists still wanted to be on television, by engaging with and then twisting the cables of the host medium. In *Television By Artists* (curated through A Space in 1980 by John Watt), six artists (Watt, Tom Sherman, Dan Graham, Dara Birnbaum, Randy & Berenicci and Robin Collyer) each made half-hour programmes for this series. Watt’s and Sherman’s in particular engaged and confounded viewers. In Watt’s Two Way Mirror, a gentleman sits on a sofa while the events of his soap-opera companion *The Young and The Restless* play themselves out in a mirror behind the gentleman. Details of his apartment alternate with scenes projected from the soap-opera; and as his narrative takes place over several months the engaging chap frequently rearranges his furniture. Many citizens of Toronto who viewed this particular episode of Television By Artists on Rogers cable as arranged were anxious to see the next episode of Two Way Mirror. Tom Sherman’s TVideo is a half-hour work addressed to home viewers who get to see Sherman at home. He spends the first five minutes making coffee, mostly with his back to the camera, invoking a proto-reality TV rather than a conventional entertainment format. He painstakingly describes his daily routines and every once in a while drops bombshells such as ‘by the time viewers get to see this video I’m making I will be dead’. Many viewers were seriously concerned about Sherman’s health in their responses to this programme... “clearly, a certain identification with the

audience had been achieved. There seemed little recognition that the work was fictional and theoretical; perhaps the visual and verbal information of the piece seemed literally too mundane to have been an intellectual construction". (Peggy Gale, There's Something Perverse About the Relationship, in Video Texts, p.133)

Again, what is meant by data or information?

And, today, what is television? People talk and talk about the obsolescence of film but there seem to be fewer and fewer people who watch television, except on their computers. What now constitutes talking back to the medium? What really is a two-way mirror? People now share programmes or clips via YouTube or VIMEO et cetera. And "media-art" is now primarily deployed as an umbrella term for film video and digital constructions that are ubiquitous in galleries world-wide; while "the media" is as much The Internet and The World-Wide Web as it is television – the eternal monitor notwithstanding.