

NARRATIVE OF THE SELF IN VIDEO ART

Jade Boivin

The research exhibition *Reading Performance*, carried out at Artexte in 2017, was an opportunity to activate the annotated bibliography in three stages, with the last of these stages questioning the relationship between the history of performance and image as an identity tool. Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan share common ground with Colin Campbell in their use of video as a tool for exploring desire, fiction and human relationships in light of societal norms.

As part of this exhibition, video was considered an important element of the history of performance art, in part because of the many encounters these disciplines have shared since the 1960s, and also given the democratisation of relevant technologies in Canada during this same time. Many artists used video as part of their performance art, while others used performative processes as part of their video practice.

The showing of Campbell's *Bad Girls* (1980) and Dempsey and Millan's *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature* (2002) and *Lesbian National Parks & Services Presents: Endangered Species* (2009), accompanied by the artists' writings and a selection of reading material about queer video and performance art, created an anachronistic reading and media space; a constellation of sorts, where the artist can be an object of study, a critic and a fictional character all at once.

As *Bad Girls* was projected on the wall, the fiction centered on the character of Robin, moving through the Toronto music scene with her friend Heidi, became the exhibition's main soundtrack. Simultaneously *A Force of Nature and Endangered Species* played on a loop on a small monitor connected to a pair of earphones. These two modes of listening generated an atmosphere permeated alternatively by the voice of Robin, speaking slowly so as to highlight the break in realism orchestrated by Campbell, and the intimate listening of the Rangers, inviting visitors to take their time to learn about the ecosystem created by Dempsey and Millan around their characters (complete with educational leaflets). While they had access to different technologies, all three artists turn to video to challenge the structures of reality, using fiction to create a breach in the social meaning of gender as a model for behaviour¹.

With Campbell, video becomes a pretext for cementing and reinforcing the ties within a community. After returning from California where he had spent nearly a year between 1976 and 1977 filming the series *The Woman from Malibu*, his videos became a gathering place for a whole community of artists. *Bad Girls* became emblematic of this engagement: friendships, as well as intimate relationships, would become part of the creation process. In an interview, Lisa Steele, one of Campbell's close collaborators, recounts how "it became a kind of community project and that was pushing forward the definition of community engagement, in videotape". The way the character of Robin is interpreted and narrated conjures up this mythology around the artist's Toronto friends, as well as the idea that bars—in this case the Cabana Room—can act as both social and artistic hubs.

Dempsey and Millan's numerous projects featuring the *Lesbian National Parks and Services* also call on a wider community, whereas the *Lesbian Rangers'* training camp refers to the need to unite and consolidate social ties in order to increase the number of safe spaces for lesbian and queer women. This ongoing, long-term project uses humour as a tool for civic action and activist awareness: "In the beginning we were building a feminist community. We were part of this community building. When we started performing, there were very few rights for queer people. [...] [W]e were also creating culture within the queer community."² Dempsey and Millan are still very involved in their community, including in the Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA) organization in Winnipeg, whose mission is to create a network of women artists to foster intergenerational cooperation in the creation and definition of women's art practices.

The exhibition's fresh perspective on these videos and texts served to outline the overlap between the respective temporalities of research and creation. As a result, the processes inherent to reading and writing about art history were coloured by identification and appropriation—the very same processes that go into the creation of one's identity and the choices one makes as an artist.

Helena Reckitt also raises this issue, stating that despite the recent need for feminist and/or queer activists and for artists to belong to less linear networks, many are still very conscious of their art historical past: "[W]e trawl the past to make our own subjective art histories. Some historical figures that we identify with [...] occupy a space of hope and aspiration and maybe even heroism or heroine-ism. By identifying with these figures we individualize history"⁴.

¹ Roof, J. (2016). *What Gender Is, What Gender Does*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, p. 232.
² Interview with Lisa Steele, February 22, 2018. In Boivin J., *La performance au Canada 1970-2000 comme dynamique entre féminisme et queer : technologies médiatiques, personification et narration chez Colin Campbell, Tanya Mars et Shawna Dempsey/Lorri Millan*. MA thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, p. 165.
³ Interview with Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, January 22, 2018. In *Ibid.*, p. 168.
⁴ Logue, D., Mitchell, A. and Reckitt, E. (2016). *Not at the Beginning and Not at the End: A Conversation Among Deirdre Logue, Allyson Mitchell, and Helena Reckitt*. In Jones, A. and Silver, E., *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 363.

These issues are especially relevant for feminist and queer artists, as the rise of a queer rhetoric of gender as politics in these last few decades uncovered a paradox between the urgency felt by some to reclaim their identity, and others' wish to reject labels in order to radically dissolve gender categories⁵. This has resulted in a new way of identifying with history, not along linear narratives, but along personal affinities, around an object, a work or a discourse⁶.

The annotated bibliography thus becomes a constellation where various networks of influences informed by desires, fictions and intersubjective relationships can develop. Particularly with video practices that deal with identity and the sense of belonging to a community—as is the case in the works of Campbell, Dempsey and Millan— we bear witness to the creation of spaces where fiction, history, writings, narratives, memories and life converge. It would seem the videographic image can be used as a tool to question identity and desires—those same desires that come together within the underpinning discourse and theory of performance art.

⁵ Halberstam, J. (2012). Global Female Masculinities. *Sexualities*, 15(3-4), 337.

⁶ Logue, D., Mitchell, A. and Reckitt, E. (2016). *Op. cit.*