

# Ready Access

*(Ain't it a shame that all the world don't got keys to their own ignitions)*

Jan Peacock

A beginning is an artifice, and what recommends one over another is how much sense it makes of what follows.<sup>1</sup>

A month after 9/11, someone writing for the latest American President had him say, “Adversity forces us to confront our selves.”<sup>2</sup>

Which selves are those, I wonder? Are they the selves that have now (sensibly) cancelled their apparently limitless sense of entitlement? Those that, suddenly, at this injunction, have ruminated on the real costs of Western wealth to other parts of the planet?

And are these the same selves that did, until recently—but do no longer, of course, and never will again—thrill to pluming fireballs and otherwise so-called unimaginable images of mass destruction devised as cinematic entertainment?

Here is something a little more realistic:

To regard (anything) as a surface or an organization of signs offering readily recoverable meaning is to fail to see that there is nothing behind the painted veil but one's own desire for there to be something.<sup>3</sup>

The injunction to confront the self implies that confrontation produces ready understanding, and that ready access to the self is a pre-condition. Well, why not? We have ready access to anything of value—Why not the self? (that is, if you can hear yourself think with ten thousand flags flapping in your ears). Surely, artists and terrorists and hookers with hearts of gold can be forced to confront their selves. Even they can enact the transformative Hollywood narrative of ready access—you know: the one where the outsider comes inside, changing for the good because she is moved to do so by the essential goodness of her neighbours. Unified and homogenous, the self is a beautiful thing. ~~There goes~~ Here comes the neighbourhood.

Ain't it a shame that all the world can't enjoy your mad traditions  
Ain't it a shame that all the world don't got keys to their own ignitions  
Life is the longest death in California.<sup>4</sup>

Allowing consciousness and the body to be pushed and channeled through the marketplace without reflection or resistance is nihilistic. If we have learned anything from the totalizing institutions of the state, it is that when our addictions are chosen for us, life can equal death.<sup>5</sup>

It turns out that experimentalism isn't a genre or a style. It comes closest to a practice (or, perhaps, a self-chosen addiction) if a practice is what wakes you up while you are eye-deep in a world so porous, so infused with available images and images of availability, that you might otherwise be lulled into the sleep of ready access. An experimental practice may animate the question, "What does this require of me?"—not when jingoistic injunctions to self-confrontation surface in the press, but continuously, nomadically, across time. Again, "What does this require of me?"

Access, in technology, has no time to it—it is a *present*, open channel. You *get* access, and you *have* access, just as you *get* and *have* any other commodity. *Global access* is stakeholder-speak for a small, subscriber segment of the planet, for whom *access* is not a ruminative, experimental, complex, attenuated, and failure-riddled *process*—not a process at all, in fact, but a *service*. A simultaneity of expectation and supply is built into this obliteration of time. Our inability to conceptualize metaphors of time which relate the body to technological processes has helped to produce a culture of entitlement.

The best description of a reality does not need to mimic its velocity. Whole books, whole research departments, are dedicated to the first half minute in the history of the universe. Vertiginous theories of chaos and turbulence are predicated upon the supremacy of initial conditions which need painstaking depiction.<sup>6</sup>

Access—not in the dictionary sense of "coming towards" or "a way or means of approach," but as the materialized, immanent present—is something video artists know something about.

One need not have a video recorder on in order to make video. One operates the video camera and the circuits are immediately put into action. . . . The camera always works: there is always an image. There is always something that already works before it starts—like in the universe.<sup>7</sup>

It is this inherence of image within a continuous (but morally inert and conscienceless) apparatus that video artists must contend with.<sup>8</sup> Because image inheres in video, considerations of time in video are fundamentally different from those for film. Look only to the unblinking and insomniac

eye of the public surveillance camera, or of the continuously orbiting satellite eye, to understand that structures of time in video arise from our embodied experiences of its uses. With TV, as with the video camera, “the world is always already an image”<sup>9</sup> (and continuous and morally inert and conscienceless). How we dilate and compress time in video vis-à-vis these phenomena is the very materiality of the work. It is not just a question of authorship or subjectivity, but of agency. And certainly it is possible to author a video work subjectively without exercising agency, since we have all, from an early age, internalized the temporal order and tend to reproduce it.

“We do not create images, we process them,” say video artists.<sup>10</sup>

Time also dilates and compresses as we work the work, and here, in the process of working the work, experiencing and gaining agency with time are equally important. Oddly, time is not much discoursed upon in the process outside the work (as if process is *ever* outside the work); flows and elisions of the time of experimentation have only recently been reflected upon by the institutions of funding and programming with which video artists continually negotiate. One must suppose that until now only writers and painters went crazy in the attenuated, shapeless isolation of their studios.

Video has been uncomfortably housed in a number of temporal sites. From film, video has inherited both the group “screening” of short works and the “festival,” or event-structured, spectacle binge. Video work that shows well to seated audiences in group screenings and festivals tends to maintain stronger relations with filmic narrativity.

Time is not conceptualized on its own terms but rather is conceptualized in significant part metaphorically and metonymically. . . . These metaphors of time arise from our most common, everyday embodied experience.<sup>11</sup>

Since common cultural experience gives rise to the metaphors of time embodied in everyday life (hence, the problems of *audience* for experimental work in North America—the ~~cultural~~ temporal diet is exceedingly narrow), it comes as no surprise that a number of metaphors we use are common to almost all cultures—time as flow, as substance, as spatialized medium; the picturing of events in time as objects in space that move past us (fixed subject) or that we move past (moving subject). However,

One of the most striking characteristics of Western Culture is that time is conceptualized in general as a resource and in particular as money. . . . Our

culture happens to have a great many institutions that reify the Time Is A Resource and Time Is Money metaphors—paying people according to the amount of time they work, appointment books, time clocks, business hours, and deadlines. . . . Not every culture has such institutions, and not every culture has a Time Is A Resource metaphor...the Pueblos do not even have in their languages a means of saying the equivalent of “ I didn’t have enough time for that.” They can say, “My path didn’t take me there” or “I couldn’t find a path to that,” but those are not instances of time being conceptualized as a resource.<sup>12</sup>

The construction of time as a fixed commodity, as a non-renewable resource, and certainly as an object of theft by the working underclass, sits its fat ass squarely in the midst of ideas about time as flow. Our cultural pathology is that we believe that time *is* flow, scientifically and philosophically, but we enact time as non-renewable resource every time we collect a paycheck.

Nothing less than meaning itself is controlled by time. Video flows through the discourses of other media, through institutions which fund its making, and through institutions which show it, carrying it away with floating bits of lexical debris, including—most significantly—ideas about time. Often contradictory metaphors of time are found embedded in the language of institutions that fund artists making (*producing, researching, experimenting with*) video, and which present (*exhibit, screen, stage, showcase, frame, array*) video work.

Video is nomadic, never situating comfortably with institutions that have attempted to accommodate it, perhaps because its sense of purpose is so provisional, so contingent. As an art medium, video’s plural discourses are a gloss on film, performance art, painting, and sculpture. Inevitably, the narrative theory applied to literature and cinema, the communications theory applied to television and the internet, and the representation theory applied to photography and painting are all implicated in the web of video practice. Phenomenology, and other philosophies of perception, subjectivity, and consciousness, are often called upon to describe video art.

After only thirty years of observable practice, video is still trying to map its own history as a concrete set of references, the very project of which falsely delimits the flux and range of actual practices and processes and associated schemas of time. As soon as you get through the list of discourses above, someone is likely to turn to you and say, “And what about dance? And linguistic theory? And particle physics?” Video’s nomadic tendencies keep it moving along the perimeters of already determined modes of cultural production. People who want to “read up” on video in

order to inform themselves and better appreciate the work they see are justifiably frustrated with the hermetic feel of the form and of the literature that attaches to it.

Institutional language continually reacts and evolves in relation to embodied cultural metaphors and the values they represent, as well as those values they reject. Recently, the Canada Council has grouped together *Film and Video Awards to Artists* with monies available to artists via two categories: *Research/Creation* grants and *Production grants*.

It is worth emphasizing here that the Canada Council always consults closely with working artists (by means of nationally representative advisory panels) on periodic changes to the structure and language of arts awards. It is, in other words, artists themselves who internalize, reproduce and communicate certain values and practices to Canada Council for implementation.

Canada Council's current application guidelines for *Research/Creation* fairly overflow with *flow*. Here, words such as *experimentation* and *creative renewal*, *individual creative development*, *research*, and *creation* enjoin us, as artists, to "*concentrate* full-time on a program of work" [my emphasis]. On the application form, we are told that assessment will be based on (among other criteria) "the quality of your reflexion on your approach to the program of work."

In previous incarnations of *Research/Creation*, if an applicant even implied that a program of work would culminate in an actual project, he or she might receive the sad news that the jury could not consider the application as *Research/Creation*, because it looked too much like a production ("You are encouraged to reapply to the *Video Production* section").

The demarcating of time into conventional stages such as *pre-production* and *post-production* is steadfastly avoided in the language of *Research/Creation*. Instead, when we are asked to "include the details of the activities to be undertaken and a work schedule," we are to break down such details into "the stages or types of experimentation necessary to your project." Still, when time is divided by its uses, there is an expectation of a goal to be attained—hence, the emphasis on *project*, and on identifying particular modes of experimentation as those which are "necessary to your project." Here the word *experimentation* adheres to its position and role in the scientific method, rather than as

a practice in itself,  
presumed to be fruitful,  
whose purpose is not apparent.<sup>13</sup>

For a very long time, the two media (or *aesthetics*) of video and film<sup>14</sup> had been meticulously separated on historical and material grounds at the Canada Council. When a new awards category of *Video Production* was introduced in the mid-1980s—where the really *big* money was (and still is—now up to \$60,000 for a single project, equal to the largest *Research/Creation* grant available to the most senior artist)—it was a source of controversy for over a decade that the guidelines and application forms automatically adopted the language of *scheduling* and *budget breakdown* and *distribution plans* obviously transposed from conventional film production models. Though the language of *Video Production* has softened since then, *Production* grants are still those which support “the normal production and post-production activities of an independent film or video artwork.” Certainly, many video artists whose experimental practices were continuous with a studio art background had no idea of how to feign interest in this sort of thing, much less an idea of how to proceed in a “normal” way.

Other artists, who had gained regular employment on high-budget music video productions with the arrival of MTV and MuchMusic in the early 1980s, understood very well the financing structure, the strict divisions of labour, and the hierarchy of salaries involved. One can only speculate that such artists truly saw the future of video art in big budgets: gorgeous production values would make it popular and finally deliver the larger audience that video art deserved.<sup>15</sup> This experiment with popularization and popularity was perhaps the most peculiar in video’s chequered experimental history.

Video was first a small medium. A medium of detail, of proximity, of immediacy, and, above all, of individual reclamation. A camera that jots things down. An eye that mulls things over.

Smallness was never adversity.

In the 1970s, if you wanted to contend with scale in video, scale had to do with duration, attenuation, attentiveness, repetition, the scale of looking in time. In the 1980s, scale became associated with production budgets and production values. High-end technology got cheaper, and every artist-run centre went shopping for gewgaws and everybody started to have fun. Then, in the 1990s, scale became real and physical, splayed across space onto receiving surfaces made to accommodate the vast, projected image.

The present collapsing of film and video awards areas speaks to developments in digital technology that have given way to working processes now familiar to both film and video makers. Significantly, however, video has *not* been amalgamated with, say, *New Media*, or even with *Visual Arts* (Do you know any visual artists under thirty who haven’t made a video work? Okay, a few, but not many), in spite of the fact that any

boundaries among these practices seem increasingly difficult to describe, if they exist at all. *New Media*, incidentally, either naïvely or without much history to get politically mired in, managed to get its language famously clear from the first publication of its guidelines: “Research grants buy time...” and “Production Grants cover direct costs...” Buy an artist some ~~time~~ flow; form will follow.

The collapsing of technologies and the scale of the projected image may be the only shared interests of film and video at present, and, even here, the organizing and interpretive codes are quite different. In practice, the main shift in video making, which distinguishes it clearly from filmmaking practice, has been that most artists—both the very young and the very experienced—now make it a point to have their own video cameras, so that they are continually looking and shooting, regardless of whether they are also working on a “piece.”<sup>16</sup>

In Europe (where video festivals began), funding for video festivals is still supplied primarily through state film project subsidies, which relates to the way in which video has been presented. The recurring method of presentation is the screening—the presentation of a variety of works on a single screen (usually in a darkened theatre) that has been borrowed from festivals of short film.

In the early 1990s, festivals started to include video installations, and there emerged a division between what gets *screened* and what gets *exhibited*. As Søren Grammel points out,

...the assumption seems to be that a work is “worthy” of an installation only when it requires two or more simultaneous screens (and not for instance when it perhaps unfolds in a temporal sequence that cannot be conveyed within the reception context of cinema). In addition, a hierarchy eases its way in here between the permanently installed, continually repeating works, and those lasting for the mere minutes of their projected duration.

One of *Videonale 9*'s primary goals is to abolish the hierarchy between screenings and installation during their presentation at the event. There will be no screenings and lavish installations this year. Instead a space and presentation structure has been developed [“Robed Wall,” by Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller] in which the works will be shown continuously and simultaneously throughout the day either on monitors or as projections... In this way the exhibition acts as a turntable in which the works may rotate in daily fashion. Even if the dramaturgy of the event does suggest particular patterns of reception, it is nonetheless far from the rigidly centralized and determined diachronicity of the screening: viewers can and must decide on the amount of time they wish to view the pieces, and the order in which to do it.<sup>17</sup>

Here is a curator prioritizing experimentation with video time at the level of presentation over the authority of inherited conventions of presentation, so that he might jar loose lexical debris that he finds does not amplify the experience of video work. Artists working with newer technologies must continually prioritize experimentation as well. The widespread utility and commercial value of the technological tools we are using can very easily erase the rich, dialogic, interrogatory, and multivalent relationships that artists generally cultivate with materials and materiality. How shall we open and question a particular mode of materiality when, culturally, the material we are using happens to be understood as currency? Baudrillard might even speak of the technological image's inarguable presence as *pornographic*, because we are incapable of negotiating its meaning; it is just there, *accessible*, to have.

In this technological moment, things seem very black-and-white—a kind of superstitious stone-age of computerdom. Technology is dystopian (invasive, contaminating, hegemonic) or technology is utopian (universalizing, democratizing, transformative). Either belief simultaneously expresses its willingness to suppress and distort its opposite.

In teaching interdisciplinary art-making practices and non-traditional media (at my home institution, these are unfortunately named “Media Arts,” which complicates things), I point at newer technologies as part of an available array which includes technologies that may have been discarded by the commercial mainstream. Perhaps enough has been said about the “object” in the art of the early 1990s, but it has not percolated through the broader culture, except in sentimental and nostalgic paradigms of loss and retrieval (*The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville*). The notion of the object stands for a form of surplus unique to late capitalism. A technology (or image, or celebrity) is expelled from use (made “obsolete”) for its perceived lack of competence in fulfilling an imagined necessity; but, truly, it is expelled because of the unsustainability of the imagined *necessary*. As with all free markets, what is really necessary is excess. Art writing in the 1990s situated *object* objects and art works that used recently discarded lo-technologies in relation to the usual modernist paradigm of technological progress.<sup>18</sup>

But, as Tom Sherman has pointed out, art and artists are inherently “conservative”—art never throws away any method, material, or technology. Historically, it keeps (collects, holds onto, conserves) everything. In a jewellery studio, one person works on ancient cloisonné techniques beside another person working with NASA-tested alloys. Sherman says, “By contrast, try walking into a biology lab and asking someone there if they are doing *anything* today the same way they did it twenty years ago—even five years ago.”<sup>19</sup>

In a life of interdisciplinary experimentation that may embrace both late-breaking technologies and discarded lo-tek—that may be focussed not on technologies in themselves, but on their intersection with our daily lives, and where experimentation is understood as *a practice in itself, presumed to be fruitful, whose purpose is not apparent*, our work is splayed out into overlapping and elastic schemas of time that are broadly resistant to the rigid schema of time as a resource:

CONCEPTS DEFINED RELATIVE TO THE TIME IS A RESOURCE SCHEMA:

**Actual Expenditure:** The amount of Time used

**Ideal Expenditure:** The least amount of Time that could have been used

**Scarcity:** The lack of enough Time to achieve all of one's purposes

**Efficiency:** The ratio of the Ideal Expenditure of Time to the Actual Expenditure of Time

**Waste:** The difference between the Actual Expenditure of Time and the Ideal Expenditure of Time

**Savings:** The difference between the Actual Expenditure of Time and a larger expenditure of Time that would otherwise have occurred

**Cost:** The Value of the Actual Expenditure of Time

**Worthiness (of the Purpose):** The degree to which the Value of the Purpose exceeds the Value of the Time required to do it <sup>20</sup>

The peculiar resistance of time in experimentation to the schema of time as a resource can be observed in a short video work from 2001 by two young artists in Halifax, Colleen Collins and Claire Greenshaw. The work is called *Going*, and I will describe it for its submerged and oblique position in relation to culturally dominant metaphors of time.

In *Going*, we watch as the artists wander in tandem and anonymously (their faces are never entirely revealed) through eerily deserted public spaces that are normally animate with familiar patterns of social movement. The two women re-inscribe these spaces with *found movement*,<sup>21</sup> varying only by degrees from “normal” citizens’ use of parking lots, streets, sky tunnels, and the public swimming facilities of an empty community centre.

They are nomadic performers, finding their way into and through these usually populous spaces; in unison and in syncopation they drop from a fence, turn on a water fountain, step down into a vast empty public pool, stand at the mirror in a changing room. This is nomadism in the post-modern sense of gravitating away from the “centre” and toward the unexplained and unmapped back corridors and loading bays of late capitalist experience, where public discourse gets lost and confused and unwritten.

Silently, and *collaborating hard*,<sup>22</sup> they lay claim to some small alliance between them, some narrative of being *here*, then here, that has been separated out from the usual, required alibis of these social arenas (shopping, parking, keeping fit). One performer proceeds, then pauses, waiting for the other to “catch up.” Time is time that simply allows them to proceed *together*. The smallness of the alliance is significant. These are spaces that have been colonized by horror movie directors, graffiti artists, and vandals. Greenshaw and Collins, however, provide an entirely new inscription of activity to counter these associations.

Time here is taken out of focus; it is *purposeless*, deliberately and gently loosened from its usually purposeful trajectory. The surveilling eye of video is their (and our) apt companion, a placid witness to quiet choreographies of movement without product and without destination. These seven minutes, or thereabouts, unfold and expand into resemblances and recognitions as large as the present.

*Going* was shot with a single, inexpensive camera—no additional sound, no additional lighting, no personnel save the performer-directors, with simple cuts in the edit returning us to each site we have already visited. It is the common-sense scale of the artists’ experience, reclaimed and laid open. Here are signs of an experimental practice—its purpose perhaps not readily apparent—which is looking hard, in the field of the local, for keys to its own ignition.

#### Notes

- 1 Ian McEwan, *Enduring Love* (Vintage Canada, 1998), 17-18.
- 2 I have no source for this, but I know you will believe me when I say, “I saw it on TV.”
- 3 Jean Fisher, “The Echoes of Enchantment,” *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of the 20th Century*, Catherine de Zegher (Kanaal Art Foundation, 1996).
- 4 Rufus Wainwright, “California,” *Poses* (DreamWorks Records, 2001).
- 5 Critical Art Ensemble, “Addictionmania,” <<http://www.critical-art.net/ECD/contents.html>>
- 6 McEwan, 17.
- 7 Bill Viola, “Space Between the Teeth,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Paris): 65.
- 8 Am I describing video as a collaborator whose sociopathic tendencies we try to rehabilitate?
- 9 Søren Grammel, “Video, flows and real time,” catalogue for *Videonale 9* (Bonn, Germany, 2001), 206.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 137.
- 12 Lakoff and Johnson, 161, 164.
- 13 I liked this very much and gave it its own poetic space.
- 14 Artists must indicate on the application form whether they are working “in a film or video aesthetic.” (This is a new provision; wait for it to mutate in short order.)
- 15 As of September 2001, there have been half a million visitors to the UFO Museum in Roswell, New Mexico. I saw this on TV too.
- 16 Get a camera, even if you can’t really afford one. I truly believe that I went too long without one, and that it stunted my growth.
- 17 Søren Grammel, “Videonale 9,” introductory essay, catalogue for *Videonale 9*, unpaginated.

18 Portions of this section are redeveloped from “1/14/99,” published with Paula Levine in *LUX*, eds. Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2000).

19 In conversation, Halifax, April 1999.

20 Lakoff and Johnson, 163.

21 This term gained currency through the 1970s choreography of Yvonne Rainer, who resisted hierarchical categories of movement inherited from classical dance, preferring to organize, in time, simple acts of walking, sitting, etc.

22 Ursula Leguin, a characterization of what novelists and readers do, in “It was a dark and stormy night or why are we huddling about the campfire?”, *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).