

Fringe Experientiality

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Being contemporary means to be with “the times” or, rather, in the “now.” However, as I recently sat down to write a paper for the Tulips panel aimed at discussing generational shifts in the production of fringe media works and the social and critical discourses which surround(ed) these changes, I struggled to grasp the notion of “the times.” What are they exactly? And, more specifically, what are the principles and practices that influence and mediate the experience of their passage? It is my intention here to argue in favour of sense, or specificity, as a means by which to understand my particular experiences of recent events on the fringe rather than resorting to abstractions. This will allow me to situate my thoughts within the broader context of these debates. I begin with a brief examination of the politics of “the times,” specifically with respect to what the contemporary media artist is and could be attuned to both in practice and in theory. Conversely, I am also strikingly aware of what divergent times “the times” comprise, which leaves me to consider whether there are indeed materials, ideas, events which are left out of the conventional discourse of “the times” —lingering as possibilities, lying just beneath their constructed surface. How then might the fringe media artist address and inform these alternate conceptions of “the times”?

On July 7th, 2001, at an Ottawa Art Gallery symposium entitled *Re(p)lay and Retroaction: The 1960s, Revolution, and/in Contemporary Culture*, filmmaker and scholar Gary Kibbins commented, “We need to extend the period of experimentalism to see where it goes.” This declaration implicitly calls for an expansion of the tensions that exist between art, politics, and the realm of the social in favour of an experimental practice that is process-oriented and “useless” by design. His statement emerged from a debate following his talk entitled “Work and Anarchy,” which detailed how the historical avant-garde (e.g. the Dadaists and the Situationists) made art so as to respond vigorously to the cultural ambivalence toward work, particularly physical labour associated with the necessities of life. His statement is well taken, in that our current times appear to be such that we are in need of an avant-garde (or what I have chosen to call a “fringe”) of renewed cultural significance, which produces aesthetic works that somehow avoid overt commodification and capitalist incorporation. The very fact that there is such a need implies that whatever period of artistic experimentalism we are currently in is predisposed to playing through the current cultural situation to get through to...well,

whatever is next. Therefore, let me pause to scrutinize the discursive and practical terms by which we continue to define experimentalism and the limits at work therein.

In the program notes for a series of six experimental video screenings held in the Fall of 2001 at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa, Ontario,¹ curator Jenny Lion writes,

Many of the tapes in *Magnetic North* take risks—risks of offending, of self-revelation or self-assertion, of political commitment, of resisting censorship...or of choosing to entertain in the face of catastrophe. At stake is the act of invention: the process of trying something out, and a willingness to gamble. I use “experimental” as an inclusive term associated with inventive, often subversive approaches to process, context, or content.

I find Lion’s comments pleasantly bold, yet also perplexing, as it is unclear to me whether her words help to shed light on or obscure the understanding of either the historical avant-garde scene in Canada and its contemporary descendants, or the socio-cultural significance of producing and experiencing fringe work. In fact, Lion’s choice of language is particularly revealing in terms of how she defines “experimentalism” in a generally closed sense. Recall her assertion that many of the *Magnetic North* tapes “take risks,” and, while doing so, acknowledge the fact that she is saying so in the present tense. Is it necessarily so that all avant-garde works are forever situated in “the times,” taking risks in their efforts to subvert or criticize more conventional forms of representation? I would argue against this, and, interestingly, this exhibition seems to back up my claim. Certain earlier videos featured in the program, such as Al Razutis’ *98.3 KHz: (Bridge at electrical storm)* (1973) or Pierre Falardeau’s *Continuons le Combat* (1971), might be more accurately described as having *taken risks*, with respect not only to the socio-historical context in which they were originally produced, but also in terms of how they are received in the now. The distinction is quite important in this context. To imply that all experimental works at all times are *always* in the process of taking risks is problematic, for the avant-garde’s themes and strategies are indeed transformed by the differing needs of a changed historical era. Furthermore, to say so limits the terms by which we try to define experimentalism as something other than a genre or a collection of effects. It does not allow the works to fail, to be other than “risky,” or to “breathe” if you will, for a good criterion of important (perhaps canonical) work is that it should always be experienced anew. In sum, I generally find Lion’s description of experimental works discursively limiting and enframing, which is definitely not her intention in spite of the critical effects her language seems to produce.

That being said, one must acknowledge that a significant portion of fringe media (more so within video than film) made in the previous generations of the “~~avant-garde~~” (to borrow Mike Hoolboom’s term) was formally and aesthetically dependent on the centre, or was being produced with the implicit/explicit agenda of problematizing the codes of mainstream ideological mastery. Thus, as a viewer, one can pick and choose amongst examples from whatever era (the tapes of Colin Campbell, Vera Frenkel, or Lisa Steele from the late 70s and early 80s immediately come to mind) but one theme remains: the makers of these works often enacted irony so as to borrow from or hijack the codes, conventions, politics, aesthetics of more dominant sites of address and ways of seeing (read, the mainstream). As I wish to point out, this just is not enough any more. John Champagne’s complex description of marginality in his 1995 book *The Ethics of Marginality*—as that which is always constructed both inside and outside of the normalizing centre(s)—helps one to understand that fringe work has always been made simultaneously alongside/against its conventional counterparts in the mainstream. However, I would argue that the shifting socio-economic realities of “the times” necessitate that experimental media artists respond accordingly, and they are doing so currently by contributing to the crafting of “useless,” affective space(s) within the broader culture.

Recall my criticisms of Jenny Lion’s description of “Canadian” experimentalism as “always taking risks” from earlier in this essay. Her program notes imply that all experimental works at all times are *always* in the process of taking risks, which is a tenuous assertion given that the fringe’s themes and strategies shift according to the differing needs of that historical era. Rather, experimental works are always seen as “meaningful” when experienced phenomenologically, even though the meaning(s) of these works and responses to them shift in accordance with the politics of “the times.” Thus, experiencing earlier tapes such as Frenkel’s demonstrates that her art’s relationship to Michel Foucault’s unthought (that which is inexpressible and beyond language) or Gilles Deleuze’s non-sense (that which is beyond sense and logic) was different than it is now. In looking at her videos phenomenologically through a subjective analysis of their affective qualities, one can see the ways in which works from previous eras related to the unthought and can help us do the same in a contemporary context.

Phenomenology and the Fringe Experience

As Foucault points out in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Senses*², temporary sets of classifications can prove useful and do not have to be universal in their scope, unlike Aristotelian classifications of the

world. Thus, the personal and subjective experience of fringe media does not necessarily reflect the aesthetic and political concerns of the time in which certain films and videos were originally made, because some works may no longer be experienced in the way they were in other contexts. In any given period, experimental works correspond loosely to contemporary theoretical paradigms, be they transcendental phenomenology, structuralism, psychoanalytic feminism, semiotics, activism, queer theory, or identity politics to name but a few of the “trends” of the last thirty-plus years. In turn, even though these paradigms formed the original contexts in which fringe works were both produced and (affectively) received, these models are not necessarily always useful now, nor in keeping with *my* (or anyone else’s) experiences of fringe work in the present. As I will explain, the phenomenological model of double articulation offers the best explanation for these shifts in viewership contexts, because each time a work is perceived, its expressions (though historically specific) are received anew.³ This observation came to me as I surveyed my sensory interactions not only with older works, but also the more “current” works from the early to mid-1990s on. Generally speaking, their form and content did not seem so easily slotted in accordance with a prominent aesthetic associated with progressive discourses of “risk” and/or resistance.⁴

Since the histories of our era are still being written, I find loose, tentative assessments of phenomenological reception of audio-visual stimuli more in keeping with the contemporary situation. In fact, I want to suggest that affect and the categories it inspires shift in the chronological ebb and flow of Canadian experimental media production, and that the way to assess and define affect alters across time and space. For example, in the late 1970s, a formalist critic looking at Patricia Gruben’s film *The Central Character* (1977) might have seen the film’s black and white extreme close-ups of pallid hands holding a sweeping broom, or its use of negative printing for the image of a solitary woman, as a literalization of how the natural world can consume and blur the order apparent in the everyday. It would no doubt have been categorized as a “feminist” or a “formalist” film. Yet when I, a particular, intertwined body and mind who is embedded in the locatedness of the social, the political—the “times,” if you will—see *The Central Character* for the first time (as I did in June, 2000), what am I to experience and then classify as sensorially “important”? The same negative printing and detailed imagery still remain as essences of the film, and yet the way in which they function so as to signify other phenomena—social, cultural, conceptual, what have you—have changed in terms of how I affectively make sense of those phenomena in the “now.”

Thus, my phenomenological categorization of fringe media both coincides with and diverges from strictly cognitive approaches, and, indeed,

from other paradigms that dominated particular periods of fringe media production and reception. On the one hand, in certain works, affect is deployed so as to enable its audience to make sense of what the work is trying to do. Yet, on the other, I refuse to say that this is the *only* thing at work in the doubly-articulated relationship between the way the film perceives what it perceives (its look and sound, its feel, and the way the audience receives what it expresses). Affect occurs both in the expression of the work itself and in my reception of the work's expression. Moreover, the affective value of experimental media in general lies in these subjective qualities, as if it is relaying to the audience the message, "*I do not want you to ever fully know me.*" Perhaps this, in turn, is where the pleasure of experiencing marginal media is derived, in that a work can never be truly known, but only experienced multi-sensorially through affective engagement with its form, aesthetics, and content. Nevertheless, my own embodied social and political locatedness as a subject initiates a particular affective reception of experimental film and video that, in turn, provides a valuable interpretive tool as to how to understand these works as (cultural) theory.

This kind of film and video analysis via phenomenological double articulation involves three interrelated aspects. The first is that of perception by the work itself, and bears a resemblance to content, or how a work is "about something." The second element involves the way the work expresses itself, to the extent that this can incorporate form and aesthetics, or the look and sound of the "thingness" of the work in its particularities. Last, and most importantly, is the reception by the viewer (me) and how s/he (I) receive that expression. Again, reception can imply a cognitive approach, whereby the viewer makes an effort to assemble some kind of understanding or "knowledge" from her/his experience of the work. However, while my subjective analyses do at times touch on these kinds of experiences, my overall intent is to stress how affect in experimental media is perceived/received in the body of the socially and politically located spectator and how it is "valuable" as cultural theory.⁵

Conversely, and with respect to Lion's thesis, one idea does stand out from her comments in terms of loosely defining experimentalism, and that is her notion that something is "at stake [in] the act of invention." Implicitly, the act of trying something carries with it an inherent cultural value regardless of how it turns out. This reduces the complexities of my earlier point about Razutis and Falardeau to a critical position whereby one can simultaneously acknowledge that these artists did "experiment" with the medium of video, yet whether or not that past experiment is still of cultural value or importance is moot. For it is the very act of experimentation that mattered and continues to matter, and not the end result.

This description of experimentalism allows us to move towards considering the making of contemporary time-based art as “laboratory work.” Another way to state this could be, “The aesthetic of ‘making do’ with a time and a space that are no longer considered abstract, utopian, or alternative will allow us once again to create, represent, and project ourselves as subjects into a History that seems to do very well without us.”⁶ Thus, defining the practice of experimentation as “making do” embraces Deleuze’s logic of sense inasmuch as it emphasizes the value of “uselessness” inherent in the present tense.

Similarly, fringe works do not (and should not) necessarily have to lead somewhere or be quantifiable in their end result, as it may not even be possible to assess this. For example, there is a 1996 video by Susan C. Rynard entitled *Eight Men Called Eugene* that I would argue functions as an allegory for how (as a culture) we need to experience, participate with, and produce the fringe in a non-sensical and loose manner. The tape is stylistically structured in the form of a faux documentary in which a female genetics scientist tours the viewer around a high-tech laboratory so as to explain how the evolution of the human genome project is equal parts progressive technological development and not-so-humorous teleological coincidence. For you see, Rynard’s *Eight Men* attempts to adapt the slick production look and generic conventions of the corporate infomercial so as to interrogate the limits of how audiences often subordinate audio-visual experience to instrumental ends. In responding to the video’s expressions (the “thingness” of its sounds and image) affectively, which is a relationship mediated in part by how we subjectively view the shortcomings of the work’s “professional-looking” aesthetics, one opens up a way of seeing how Rynard’s experiment relates to the unthought. Her replication/co-option of mainstream conventions in order to invert their ideological implications is an example of Massera’s “making do,” in that the work opens up the space of how social knowledges are fallibly constructed. In this instance, Rynard’s video relates to the notion that the social and political construction of “knowledges” sometimes manifests results of grave significance; read: contemporary genetic engineering as an extension of Eugenics.

Too Much Art/Not Enough Utopia?

Unlike the historical avant-garde that Kibbins described in his talk “Work and Anarchy,” the contemporary fringe artist does not appear to be (falsely) captivated by the possibility of realizing utopia. This stance is made quite literal within the discursive strategies of productions such as Kika Thorne’s *Work* (1999) and Steve Reinke’s *Afternoon (March 22, 1999)* (1999), though it is not exclusive to these two videos alone. In the

latter work, the artist/narrator Reinke invites an affective response to the video by asking his audience to think of its ephemera as “a jazz improvisation after years of experience making other compositions.” Included in the work’s loose structure, which is mediated by Reinke’s narrated exploration of in-camera editing and the technological limitations of his recently purchased digital video camera, is a section in which he wonders whether there is just too much art currently being made. The viewer affectively experiences Reinke’s struggle to get the camera to focus on a colour slide that he juxtaposes with his apartment window, “Because a test of good art is if looking at a work is more interesting than looking outside.” Once he achieves focus he comments, “I want to make good work but I don’t think it is possible at this time... All we can do is wait, cower and wait.” He goes on to note, “This century has played itself out,” which is a coy spatially—and temporally—specific reference to the mass media driven anxiety surrounding the new millennium that was, at the time he made *Afternoon*, little more than nine months away. However, it is also a playful/sombre speculation on what the future (of art) might possibly bring, which implicitly asks: what kind of art is currently being produced out on the fringe(s)?

One could make the “too much art” argument about how the contemporary fringe merely produces a parade of references to its own disjointed and marginal history, and in doing so, becomes increasingly disconnected from the social.⁷ In this regard, perhaps the “art school problem” of how critical and institutional strategies led to the problematic canonization and museumization of certain works has reached its unflinching end? However, Reinke’s *Afternoon* and his comments therein allude not only to how there is much left to be done with respect to the fringe production of (socio-cultural) theory, but suggest also that contemporary art should be up to the task.⁸ His work is experienced not as a eulogy for the impossibility of (art) realizing utopia, inasmuch as it reinvigorates the need for fringe alternatives to the mainstream in terms of progressive viewership positions, or “visual grammars,” and its politics of representation that do not problematically determine the Other. In their own ways, videos such as *Afternoon*, John Greyson’s *Packin’* (2001), or Gary Kibbins’ *Carl Andre’s Overalls* (2000) demonstrate that artists’ alternatives *need* to be produced and are continuing to be brought forth. Thus, to play out the scenario that ours is an era in which “everything is derivative” or “been done before” might be a fair, *cursor*y assessment of fringe media, though this argument can be disproved if it is consistently followed through. As I have shown here, in conjunction with my earlier re-configuration of Lion’s useful definition of experimentalism, all fringe experiments (from whatever era) are valuable and can be experienced anew. An affective

response is progressive in that it both respects the original value(s) of the work and allows the viewer to change its meanings and be changed by them in the now.

In this context, even contemporary works which are reactive in their polemical structure have some “value” to them, particularly in how they expose the limits of irony, which has long-dominated Canadian cultural production. In Jubal Brown’s *The Blob* (1999), the tone of the narrator’s sinister, nasal voice in conjunction with his choice of language, which equates participating in mainstream culture with being “slaves” or “zombies,” together create a confusing barrier to making sense of the work’s jarring aural and visual montage. The images, plundered from broadcast television and edited in the jagged, cyclical style of Istvan Kantor’s *Jericho* (1991) or *Accumulations* (1999)—think of the image equivalent of a DJ scratching a record—intend to generate a sense of the (post?) apocalyptic panic that radiated throughout culture at the time of its production, though with a more explicit political intent than in *Afternoon*. Brown’s random loops and blips do sever the logic of suturing ideology to image that permeates the TV screens kept in suburban basements across North America. And yet, the narrator’s words are (intentionally?) over-performed to the extent that they neither serve to rally the audience to attack the tyrannical hegemony of the mass media, nor do they provide the viewer with the “out” of ironic dark comedy. The viewer’s reception of its aggressive affect is unsettling inasmuch as the video, while demonstrating that tweaking the representational codes and conventions of mastery inherent in mass culture *is* formally and aesthetically possible, collapses the possibility for social and political subversion. The work’s expressions insist that criticism of a centre also implies compliance. The potential problem then seems to be that ironic contemporary fringe works like *The Blob* (or, to a lesser extent, *Eight Men Called Eugene*) become black holes that spiral into negativity, whereas what the fringe needs is enough energy to spiral out into the new, the unknown. This seems to be the issue with some current fringe artists as negativity, or critique, is necessary but not sufficient for the “new” to come into being. Plus, any glance at one’s broadcast television screen shows how irony is instantly incorporated by capitalism. Which raises the question: where can that energy, to “spiral out,” come from (now)?

Fringe Art-Making, Digitalism, and the Problem of Capitalism

Contemporary works demonstrate that while art might not be able to “defeat” capitalism, artists do need to be “smarter” than capitalism, which engulfs and incorporates everything to its purposes. In this regard, subversion and critique are inside-concepts, problematically lodged

against the outside that is the mainstream. Similarly, I have noted how current fringe works are experienced as theoretical models for a kind of experimentalism that is more “autonomous” in its representational strategies and not so reliant on the mainstream as its nemesis, its mirror. Scholars like Kibbins and Sean Cubitt argue that contemporary media artists need to further develop this autonomy. Cubitt even offers his own Deleuzian model for a new “digital aesthetics” that evaluates work not in terms of internal consistency or of wholeness (for wholes get eaten), but in terms of its openness, for the open is not easily incorporated.⁹ Cubitt demonstrates how in the digital age it is less effective than ever to merely subvert or critique the codes of the mainstream, as what is beneficial is the crafting of “useless” media that is more autonomous and less intent to crack the mirror that is the centre.

A related problem of the age of digitalism is that contemporary media artists, unlike the fringe video and filmmakers of previous generations, have not only had to contend with a loss of indexicality (which is to say the difficulty or veritable impossibility for the film/video image to connect with, point to, and/or represent a reality which exists in extraction and proximity) but, more pertinently, they are dealing with the fact that capitalism has produced a world that is already saturated with “too many” images. There are numerous elements which are significant about this shift, though in experimenting with the conditions produced by these changes, the fringe artist develops affective paths to the “new.” In this light, a world that is clogged with commodified media (both sound and image-based) can be seen, optimistically, as a database for artists. If it is true, as some assume, that all images have already been made then, as Lev Manovich would say,¹⁰ the task of the artist now is to create, not just react. One way of creating involves developing new affective “interfaces” to the database of already-available commodity-images in order to develop meaningful “sorting mechanisms.”

Indeed, if after the death of God [Nietzsche], the End of grand Narratives of Enlightenment [Lyotard] and the arrival of the web [Tim Berners-Lee] the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database. But it is also appropriate that we would want to develop the poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database.¹¹

Manovich’s idea applies in particular to many recent fringe works. Ho Tam’s video *99 Men* (1998), for example, presents the viewer with a series of 99 portraits of Asian men organized so that each photograph appears slightly out of focus. The three-minute piece is sutured together with light

string music that seems to have been hijacked from an Asian melodrama, giving a simultaneously whimsical and menacing tone to Tam's work, as the experiencer is gradually obliged to make meaning of this expressive interrelationship. As a result, *99 Men* can be seen on one level as an interface that alludes to the politics of racial profiling, in that the artist is asking the viewer to examine the cultural stereotype that all Asian men presumably look alike. The images of these men have indeed already been made (and likely reproduced countless times in yearbooks, magazines, or perhaps mug-shot albums), although Ho Tam's intent is neither to make new images, nor to identify an indexical relationship between the photos and a specific historical past. Rather, he uses the medium of video as a theoretical "sorting mechanism," a homoerotic interface to a racist database that gives us meaningful insight into how *all* databases are organized and carry messages as to how they are to be used, by whom, and to what end.

Perhaps the fringe needs to be reinvigorated as an *explicitly* anti-capitalist space, insofar as capitalism instrumentalizes meaning and requires images to be ideologically "useful." Purportedly, one of the supposed "defining" conditions of the video medium still being taught (definitely in academia's historicizing terms and when you look specifically to the "beginnings" of video and the aspirations of artists ranging from Nam June Paik to Vito Acconci to Joan Jonas) is that fringe works were/are not made for profit.¹² Even more overtly anti-capitalist discursive strategies within fringe production communities do seem possible and might prove quite fruitful, especially in the way this practice could tie in with broader contemporary social movements such as that of labour, students, the working class, anti-poverty, and anti-globalization activists. However, anti-capitalist space is not the same thing as non-commercial space. Ultimately, capitalism is about encoding, framing meaning, and making meaning "useful"—often in terms of exchange-value, which is highly problematic. While non-profits often engage in this as well in their own small (different) ways, what the fringe does best is to uncode, to make useless work in the construction of a cinema of playful misunderstanding, of feeling, non-sensicality, and inconcise experience.

The Cultural Value of (Canadian) Fringe Experientiality

In her essay entitled "Melodrama Revisited,"¹³ Linda Williams theorizes that the history of mainstream Hollywood cinema is founded on a melodramatic narratology that effaces "real" tragedy so as to be accessible and discernible to a mass audience. Williams is but one of many critics who argue that we need to determine what *use* audiences make of a cinematic work. Subsequently, she argues for the *purposeful use* of an embodied response: that the audience's investment is not one of rational interest in a story but

an embodied response to affect which, in the context of the Hollywood cinema, has the use-value of binding viewers to the American ideology that the individual can triumph over social injustice. To re-work this argument for this discussion: what is the purposeful use of embodied responses to the fringe? What is its socio-cultural “use value,” if you will, in terms of what those who experience it “*get out of it*”? Williams speaks about pathos as a reason for why the Hollywood audience goes to the multiplex to experience those kinds of films and what they get from their consumer spectatorship. While it is clear that the fringe does not have the same purposiveness, her essay causes me to wonder: why is the fringe audience there?

I wish to assert that an affective response to experimental media need not be instrumental, as it is in Williams’ description of melodrama, but can exist for its own sake, in the form of unbounded emotion and embodied feeling, or energy. Earlier I described how the particularities of a fringe work’s form and content (the thingness of the light and image on screen in tandem with the sound bouncing about the undoubtedly poorly renovated auditorium) inform the particularities of what the viewer experiences in the body phenomenologically. My answer, then, is that the fringe audience is there to translate, to make “sense” of experimental works in order to elicit questioning or wonderment. These are phenomena which are *only* traceable or readable through bodily experience, thus the affective analysis of fringe works offers up a way to get beyond ideology critique, which, as I have argued, mainstream media now incorporates because there is no “outside” to capitalism any more (if there ever was). Bodies are particular (subjectively constructed, located, and lived) and can respond in particular ways. Again, it seems the particularity of sensory experience while “taking in” fringe works is what must be stressed, as it allows one to look for what Deleuze calls the sensible, the resolutely particular. In doing so one must look to and produce fringe works that signal a shift towards a distinctive cinematic experientiality. There must be a balance between the need for malleable utility and practicality—of having an other-than-capitalist cinematic space that engenders thought, emotion, action—with the awareness that *to make fringe works too useful is beside the point*.

Nevertheless, the “mainstream” (which is not as homogenous as one might think) is clearly purposive—it is *for* something, whether to sell things, to manipulate, to impart ideology, or to “move us” (as in Williams’ understanding). So again, what is the fringe for/should it be for? My response is that the cultural value of fringe work is that it should never be finitely pinned down in terms of the particularities of what it is about or wants to be about for the spectator who perceives it. I align myself with cognitivist media criticism to the extent that I believe fringe

works are constructed so as to be made sense of. Although, more significantly, I wish to emphasize that the experience itself in its “uselessness” is more important than generating useful knowledge(s) in the brain sutured to ideology, which is the goal of most cognitive approaches. For example, in this context, an affective analysis of Susan C. Rynard’s 1999 video *The Day Jesus Melted* emphasizes how it is fun, playful, sinful, serious; it is all of these things and none—it is many things. The video, in Deleuzian terms, makes a sensible rather than an abstract connection. The work must be felt in its particularity. Rather than making sense of a work in terms of “decoding” it, fringe audiences make it sensible in their bodies.

Even still, the mainstream has changed! Formally and aesthetically it has long since incorporated the codes and conventions of the historical avant-garde, though of course it remains ideologically inflected. Arguably, the stark social and political consequences of linking capitalism to systems of communication, expressivity, and visibility are more pronounced now than ever before. The same digital cable revolution that appears to offer choice offers very little but the truth that choice is not (currently) ours to have—it is concentrated and elsewhere. In the context of the histories that Kibbins’ talk described, which encompass anarchism and the Situationists’ idea of art-making as a defiant “non-labour,” one might assume that the fringe and its artists should/could be leading a resistant, productive response to the phenomena of transnational global capitalism. Videos such as *99 Men, Afternoon, Packin’*, Thorne’s *The Up and the Down* (2001), or Aleessa Cohene’s *Absolutely* (2001) do demonstrate that the fringe is currently continuing to respond, minus the end goal of utopianism that dogged earlier generations, but can experimentalists be doing more?

The question about generational differences I was provided with as a means to focus my discussion for the *Tulips* conference panel caused me to wonder if “younger artists should (in fact) learn their history.” In terms of the fringe, the history that is being taught has (to this point) lacked a sufficiently affective methodology to help make sense of experimental works as vibrant expressions of (cultural) theory. This absence of a doubly-articulated model for experiencing fringe media has produced a critical viewership whereby the avant-garde can only be historicized on a scale that slides between the “success and failure” of previous productions and movements. Success in the sense that—“once upon a time not your own”—artists used to think that making film in a certain manner would change the way people thought about and behaved in the world; and failure in the sense that, once those films were made and received, the art-for-social-change experiment was revealed to have been a failed one, and the world stayed the same regardless. However, there are critics and theorists (such as William C. Wees, for example¹⁴) who, in a different way, have

proposed alternative or shifting views of a history of the fringe. Similarly, I would argue that we need to further an understanding of *ways of experiencing* how the fringe's supposed "failure" (in terms of being co-opted into mainstream aesthetic hegemony), can be seen, in the "now," as a worthwhile "success," due to the notion that there can now be a clean slate for artists to make work in the present.

Notes

1 This program of videos also later appeared at Toronto, Ontario's Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre.

2 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Senses* (London: Tavistock, 1970).

3 This model is developed by Vivian Sobchack in *The Address of the Eye: Phenomenology and the Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

4 Gary Kibbins' essay "Flaming Creatures: New Tendencies in Canadian Video," *Lux: A Decade of Artists' Film and Video*, eds. Steve Reinke and Tom Taylor (Toronto, Ontario: Pleasure Dome and YYZ Books, 2000) 48, substantiates my observation, as he notes how contemporary fringe video is not easily defined in terms of strict theoretical paradigms.

5 For the record, I self-identify as a male, activist, writer, and artist who is a third generation Anglo-Canadian of middle-upper class parentage. Then again, I also see myself as a Socialist trade unionist who is a guitar-playing citizen and participant in culture(s), both marginal and mainstream.

6 Jean-Charles Massera, abstract, "Towards an Aesthetic of 'Making Do,'" *Re(p)lay and Retroaction: The 1960s, Revolution, and/in Contemporary Culture* (Ottawa Art Gallery, 7 July, 2001).

7 I am interested, in this context, to see the criticism that emerges following the October 2001 debut of Charles St. Video's *Blah Blah Blah* program, which comprises nearly a dozen artists' videos shot during the FTAA protests last April in Quebec City. Will audiences and/or critics see these works as contributing to an effective space within culture where the art and activist video intersect?

8 This is particularly apparent if one looks to the emerging scholarship around low-tech, "under-the-radar" works. My scholarly friend Laura U. Marks' paper "Invisible Media," which she presented in an early draft stage at Blowing the Trumpet to the Tulips, addresses these and other issues. It will soon be published in an anthology entitled *Digitextuality: Theses on Convergence Media and Digital Reproduction*, eds. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell (Routledge, 2002), and can also be seen in this issue of *Public*.

9 See Sean Cubitt's *Digital Aesthetics* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1998), xi.

10 I am thinking of two essays by Manovich. Both "Avant-Garde as Software" (1999) and "Database as a Symbolic Form" (1998) can be found online <<http://www.manovich.net>>.

11 Manovich, "Database as a Symbolic Form" (1998), 1.

12 See Martha Rosler's essay, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York, NY: Aperture/Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), pp. 31-50, for a nuanced re-thinking of video art history's earliest defining moments.

13 Williams' essay is anthologized in Hick Brown's *Refiguring American Film Genres* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 42-88.

14 See Wees' article in this issue.