
*Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video,* edited by American independent curator and film/video maker Jenny Lion, was conceived as a “book/catalogue” accompanying an exhibition screening series of the same name that Lion herself curated in association with Minneapolis’ Walker Art Center. The still-touring exhibition comprises an eclectic collection of 40 Canadian tapes by 47 artists of the most diverse experimental tendencies from the 1970s to the present, including pioneers such as Lisa Steele, Colin Campbell, and Kate Craig; classical Quebec figures such as Robert Morin and Pierre Falardeau; Inuit artists such as Zacharias Kunuk or Madeline Ivalu; early conceptualists such as David Askevold; and many more recent artists, such as Cathy Sisler or Thirza Cuthand. The exhibition is organized into a series of programs around six thematic concerns, described by Lion as “the body inscribed by time, disease, or experience; the diverse possibilities of the medium, from political advocacy to feedback loops; the performance of self and identity; the spectacularity and banality of everyday life; external conflict expressed in the flesh; and explorations of self-disclosure, voyeurism, and surveillance” (pp. 30-31). The series “is not a historical survey,” insists Lion, but rather a personal selection of Canadian work of the last 30 years, with obvious important historical omissions, attempting to link the present with the past (p. 27).

The book, for its part, consists of a hybrid assemblage of commissioned texts by a wide variety of emerging and senior scholars, theorists, curators, and artists, both Canadian and American, meant to reflect, according to Lion, different “associations and groupings than evidenced in the screening programs” (p. 31). The texts are the fruit of the editor’s mixing and matching of videos from the programs with specific individuals invited to freely respond to the works according to their inspiration. These thus range from critical and analytical essays to anecdotal accounts, scripts, excerpts from personal correspondence, and even purely visual responses, dealing as much with theoretical as with practical dimensions of experimental video. At the root of the concept was an attempt at cross-fertilization, explains Lion, to create “alliances and interaction across media, intentions, and generations as well as geographic borders” (p. 24). As with the screening series, her intention was to propose a number of dialogues and coincidences suggesting an ongoing process of improvisation and flux open to extension by others.

This intriguing “mix and match” approach results in a 384-page colour publication—of which some 250 are video stills and photographs of artworks in other media—offering five critical essays, 10 response texts to videos by artists and curators, two transcribed dialogues, four scripts, as well as the exhibition program listings, listings of Canadian artist-run centres and of suggested readings, in addition to forewords, acknowledgments, and all the contributors’ video artists’ biographies. Its slick graphic design, lush illustrations, and glossy paper accomplish an impressive aesthetic experience, while the often unusual textual content has undeniable value, particularly in light of the scarcity of existing publications on Canadian video art in general. However, for me its montage of images and words works well as a more elaborate than usual exhibition catalogue but becomes problematic as an in-depth look at experimental Canadian video, as its back cover suggests.

Indeed, the book does not, in my view, succeed in sufficiently mapping the territory of the “unknown and essentially unimagined” context of Canada and its art practices to the book’s admittedly targeted public of Americans, for most of whom, Lion says, “not enough Canadian art makes it over the border to even generate stereotype” (p. 24). Thus its declared project “to export experimental Canadian art video to the United States and beyond, and to facilitate significant critical dialogue about the work by artists and critics...
from both sides of the border” (p. 24) is hard to envision outside of the context of the exhibition.

An important factor for such a shortcoming lies in the choice of information to be included in the publication. One aspect of this choice is the areas of focus that structure the book. These are articulated by four critical essays, meant to anchor the volume: that of Nicole Gingras on voice and language, that of Bruce Jenkins on film/video hybridity, that of Victor Masayesva on indigenous aesthetics, and that of Chris Straayer on the body in performance. The articles themselves are generally engaging, particularly that of Gingras on the place from which the voice comes, from which one speaks, and that of Masayesva presenting the rarely considered perspective of colonization by technology in indigenous experimental production.

The problem is, rather, that their atypical reframings of Canadian independent video-production take the analysis to a level requiring, in my opinion, much more background knowledge on art video in Canada than can be found in the volume. Many of the other different pieces present the same difficulty. For example, while the transcribed telephone conversation between Puhipau and Zacharias Kunuk reveals fascinating comparisons between Hawaiian and Inuit cultures and histories, it barely, if at all, addresses the particularities contextualizing the practices of independent video in the two areas, such as Kunuk's unique approach of re-enactment of past traditional activities by all the generations of his local community. Nowhere else in the book is such information available either.

Peggy Gale's historical overview does provide a certain perspective, and its approach via central artistic concerns—conceptual, narrative, dramatic, social—is interesting, yet it remains a relatively short article that races through events, places, and technology. It also regrettably stops short of the most recent revolution in independent video—the possibility for artists to acquire their own production and post-production equipment, from the Hi-8 format of the early '90s to today's affordable digital camcorders and non-linear editing set-ups—and its important implications for the reality of the practices and processes of experimental production since. Though such a lack of background material would not necessarily represent a grave shortcoming for many a subject, in the case of Canadian experimental video it becomes more serious, as documents on the subject can be quite hard to come by even in Canada, and in the U.S. are almost impossible to find.

Another editorial decision limiting the book's scope (again in relation to its aspirations to offer an in-depth investigation of Canadian video) is the resolve to have all texts but that of Gale revolve almost exclusively around Lion's subjective selection of 40 videos. This limitation is further reinforced by the fact that, with few exceptions, most of the contributions assume the reader's prior knowledge of the videos and thus never really present them. Unfortunately, the numerous stills illustrating the book do not remedy the situation, for they rarely provide enough of an idea of the works because of video's time-based nature (unlike the important documentation role photographs can play in publications dealing with more static art forms). The articles and interventions can thus be hard to follow for a reader unfamiliar with the videoworks discussed. Such is the case, for example, with George E. Lewis' challenge to the TV power standpoint analysis of Stan Douglas' *Television Spots*, or George Kuchar's very personal and spontaneous reaction to Simon Hughes' *Awakening of Desire* and Doug Melnyk's *Danny Kaye's Eyes*.

Also not always easy to follow is the raison d'être of some of the video-respondent combinations concocted by the editor. Indeed, certain associations are extremely clear, almost too evident, such as Asian-Canadian video artist and writer Richard Fung on the work of Asian Canadian Paul Wong, or B.C. First Nations artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun on Métis artist Marcel Fayant. Other connections are much more subtle. Sara Diamond's text on Jan Peacock, for example, reveals the importance of the latter's video *Whitewash* for her revision of the Banff Centre's Television and Video program. Similarly,
U.S. artist Wendy Clarke’s intervention traces parallels between the traditional collective women’s activity of making a seal-oil lamp in *Qulliq* by the Inuit Women’s Video Workshop of Igloolik and her own recently taken-up hobby of spinning wool collectively with a group of women.

But the logic of some of the matches remains a mystery, for this reader anyway. For example, what motivated the association of Robert Morin’s classic *Le voleur vit en enfer* with American poet/novelist/media critic Ernest Larsen, who delivers a brief two-paragraph text on the appropriation of the everyday? The text does not even begin to address the francophone East Montréal climate of the early ’80s out of which the work grew as well as the unique ideals of Morin’s Coop Vidéo collective in relation to the independent Québec video scene of the time, so important, in my view, for its understanding. Interestingly, most of the respondents whose presence I question seem to be Americans that I don’t, or barely, know, compared to the Canadians who are all more or less familiar to me through my involvement with the Canadian independent video-milieu since the mid-’80s. I then find myself wondering how the selection of Canadians will be perceived by American readers. This may again be a question of an ineffective introduction. I am not sure whether the brief biographies at the beginning and end of the book provide sufficient information about the participants to allow the editor’s desired cross-border interaction to take place or whether their brevity rather accentuates the divide between the two cultures.

In summary, *Magnetic North* is a heterogeneous collection of fragments that has its value. Leaving questions of sufficient background material and adequate introduction aside, the book is a welcome effort. In addition to increasing the still scarce inventory of available publications on Canadian independent video, it offers a good deal of intriguing and unusual material that rarely gets seen, such as the very personal notes and anecdotes as well as transcribed casual conversations and video scripts. The perspectives of the critical contributions are also, in general, novel. The book is interesting too as a mirror reflecting back to the Canadian art-video world members the effects of their practices on their counterparts south of the border. One would thus want this beautiful publication to go beyond the function of a superb catalog, beyond the purpose of specialized document for the initiated, so as to become the in-depth volume on Canadian experimental video that it aspires to be—and an information source truly able to inspire the cross-border open improvisation process sought by the editor. Instead, it is, to be sure, most valuable for scholars previously familiar with art video in Canada as well as theorists, curators, critics, and artists already involved with experimental video in general. It is not, however, the book that I would recommend to anyone hoping to grasp Canadian experimental video for the first time.

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