

VDB TV: *Decades*, The 1980s

Steve Reinke

## *Problematizing Pleasure / Punk Theory*

I was born in 1963, and so the 1980s mean something to me, but I'm not sure what. I think it good, for instance, that I didn't get AIDS and die. Also, that I only flirted with semiotics. Like cybernetics, which started in the 1950s, grew to dominance in the 1960s and simply faded away in the 1970s, we once believed in semiotics. In the 1980s, it was the way to understand how images contained meanings/produced discourses, and how texts circulate. (How do they circulate? Intertextually.) Perhaps semiotics was the dying gasp of modernism, a conservative strain of modernism posing as postmodernism. The death of the author resulting not in the birth of the reader, but in the birth of a severe, obscure, hermetic semiotician.

### Problematizing Pleasure

***Possibly in Michigan*****Cecelia Condit**  
**1983, 12:00, U.S.**

I decided to build this program around Cecelia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan* (1983). I like it, and I like showing it to people as they usually have a strong, complex response. The first scene is in a shopping mall, the ground zero of 1980's culture.<sup>1</sup> That it is the protagonists' indulgence in perfume which triggers the events leading to cannibalism seems quite reasonable. Their shared whiff both propels them back, like Proust's tea-dipped madeleine, to remember a possibly-crazy aunt microwaving her dog, and

propels the plot forward by attracting the possibly-malevolent male forces. Although it has been read as a feminist empowerment tale (the women turning table on their male aggressor), it is on the level of affect rather than plot that *Possibly in Michigan* is most effective and radical. It problematizes pleasure, mixes delight with dread, until one doesn't know how or where one is being tickled, or when the tickling is breaking through the skin. Affect wasn't a prominent concept in the 1980s, but the male gaze certainly was. Here Condit demonstrates that by problematizing pleasure, the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality / the patriarchy (the "male gaze") is disrupted, challenged. *Possibly in Michigan* disrupts, challenges.

I showed my Project Digital Film class *Possibly in Michigan* last week. One of them asked me if I'd heard of YouTube Poop. I had not. Unlike previous generations' fast-paced remixes of VHS video junk (Animal Charm, etc.), YouTube Poop involves subtler remixing: often looping and slowing down a single source. The naughty little brother of ASMR, YouTube Poop eschews fast-paced editing and political content. *Possibly in Michigan* is a popular source of YouTube Poop (which is the context in which my student first came across it – I should note that she was not the least bit surprised to also see it in a video art class). The video's first act, posted by Condit seven years ago as "*Possibly in Michigan* (excerpt)", has recently taken off in the Poop world, and has well

over a half million views. The full video on Vimeo has an impressive 90.4K views. *Possibly in Michigan* is a work of art that does its job – problematizing pleasure – to a wide audience in whatever context it is found.

### Phantasmagoria

***Grand Mal*****Tony Oursler**  
**1981, 23:45, U.S.**

Recently Tony Oursler has been making exhibitions and projects – including the massive, gorgeous book *Imponderable: The Archive of Tony Oursler* (2015) – out of his collection of materials pertaining to the occult and media archaeology. He began building the collection in earnest around 2000 in relation to his large outdoor installation *The Influencing Machine* that linked the evolution of technological advancements to our seemingly constant need to know/touch some impossible, nagging other: angels, the dead, aliens, etc.

Back in the day, one would have read *Grand Mal* (1981), along with Oursler's other early single channel videos, as part of that genre exemplified by Mike Kelley's *Banana Man*: a small group of people acting as cast, crew, costume-makers and set-designers use the studio as a series of theatrical sets and act out a few dozen skit-like sections linked, often loosely, around a group of themes, characters, voices, gestures. And *Grand Mal* certainly is that, though the relation

<sup>1</sup> I'd also like to recommend the excellent 1986 movie *9½ Weeks*, which alternates scenes of shopping with scenes of sex.



*Possibly in Michigan*, Cecelia Condit (1983)



*Grand Mal*, Tony Oursler (1981)

it has to theater and performance is productively anxious: the world/ stage is shrunk and fragmented: not human, but worm-sized. Its spaces are both internal and external, mythic and quotidian, allegorical and narrative, subconscious and conscious, serious and silly, aggressive and sentimental. The worm remains whole, the human fragmented, partial, rising and falling through the very scenarios it seems to have both created and enacts (disembodied fingers become the flames of a fire), yet is never in control of. *Grand Mal* mocks human agency: the worm rules, if with a stupid, uncaring blankness. In one section, they – the actual live worms that haunt the video – are meant to run a race, but writhe unconcerned at the starting line as a human voice coaches them on.

Today we'd be more likely to read the *Grand Mal* in light of Oursler's subsequent work, which is, in turn, read in light of his *Imponderable* archive. But this difference is not great, a shift in focus rather than any kind of break. Now we have an historic chain, unbroken in its spooky yearnings, that links everything profound and spiritual, goofy and technological. We no longer need to be dead to haunt the shit out of everything and everyone! Technology can be our death, the video signal a supernatural conduit.

### Dirtier Than Cynicism

***Damnation of Faust: Will-o'-the-Wisp (A Deceitful Goal)***

**Dara Birnbaum**  
1985, 05:38, U.S.

***Evocation of Faust: Charming Landscape***

**Dara Birnbaum**  
1987, 07:00, U.S.

I'm showing the last two of three sections of Dara Birnbaum's *Damnation of Faust Trilogy* (1983-87). The work exists in at least six iterations: a single trilogy, three individual works, and two installations. Like many artists of the Pictures Generation, Birnbaum's work is partly about context: framing and reframing. Her work has an immutable modernist formal rigor that leads, through various possibilities in terms of presentation/reception, to something quite chimerical.

With the possible exception of Tony Oursler, Birnbaum is the artist to have received the most critical / art historical attention. From Johanna Burton: "Birnbaum's *Faust* uses the trappings of the everyday as the site for the monumentally elegiac."

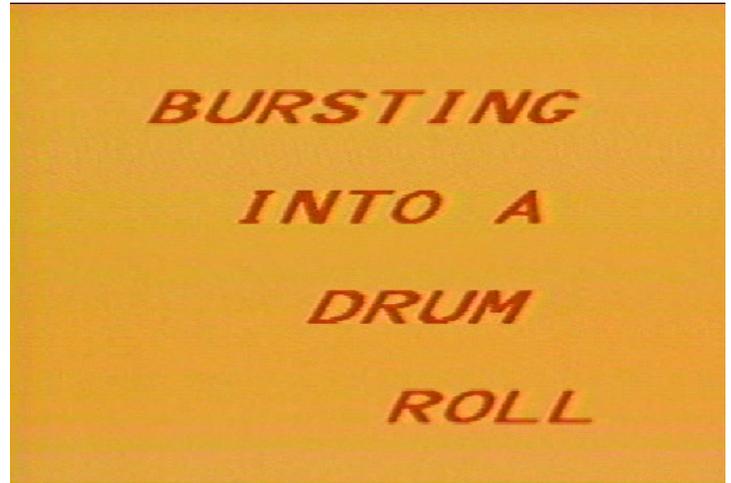
In *Damnation of Faust: Will-o'-the-Wisp (A Deceitful Goal)* (1985), a woman looks out of her window, while the voice over speaks so banally of an absent lover that one cannot be

sure how to take this evisceration of German Romanticism. What would usually be the primary material in a video is here replaced with the elegant foregrounding of what would usually be merely formal elements. Burton: "Birnbaum mobilizes the kinds of aesthetic effects that are meant to usher in identification on the parts of viewers (like music, special effects, slow motion); but these effects are rendered highly tangible, used not as subtle framing devices, but instead as densely material things. On-screen wipes and other formal tools obscure images (or become images themselves), the soundtracks overwhelm, and the narrative refuses to fully coalesce and remains dispersed."

Yes. The works couple formal clarity with exquisite beauty. Unlike Burton, I would not say that the narratives become dispersed; they simply fade away as placeholders, clichés. Birnbaum takes things further with the third and final section, *Evocation of Faust: Charming Landscape* (1987). Here the melancholic subject of European enlightenment is replaced by the already nostalgic subject of engaged documentary practice. The playground introduced in the first video is here shown being demolished, while in voice-over two girls speak of loss and longing in the standard terms. The video ends with a montage of demonstrations from television news: civil rights, antiwar, Tiananmen Square.



*Damnation of Faust: Will-o'-the-Wisp (A Deceitful Goal)*, Dara Birnbaum (1985)



*Earthglow*, Liza Béar (1983)

I fear the formal clarity and exquisite beauty of the work coupled with the emptying out of affect and the obliteration of meaning make it dirtier than cynicism. Here, the abyss doesn't look back at us, for we have drained the abyss by decorating it into inconsequence.<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Buchloh questioned Birnbaum about this formalism. Birnbaum replied that she, "...can see a time coming when formalist strategies will be re-embraced. Then one could recognize that elements of repetition, dislocation and altered syntax function as catalysts for creating alternative perspectives, rather than placing them on the side of the oppressor." I don't see that time coming. That time was the Pictures Generation, who are mostly, of course, still alive and mostly, of course, pursuing other avenues.

## Figural

### *Earthglow*

Liza Béar

1983, 08:00, U.S.

Béar, among other accomplishments, co-founded both the seminal *Avalanche* and still vital *Bomb* magazines. Béar describes *Earthglow*

(1983) as a film about writing, which it most certainly is – the visuals consist entirely of text on screen – but it also about listening. "*Earthglow* is a film about the writing state of mind; past and present perceptions are reconciled in the act of writing." It is less in the act of writing that these perceptions are reconciled than in the act of listening. In *Earthglow*, the writing, as dynamic as it is, becomes the backbone for a primarily auditory experience.

D. N. Rodowick, in a book that should be more well known – 2001's *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* – describes a moment in the 1980s as his "MTV epiphany." Used to thinking about the moving image in filmic terms (montage with a bit of *mise-en-scène*), he is faced with the livelier possibilities of video: layers of images that act as if they had discursive rather than merely visual meaning and, in particular, text flying around as if its meaning was more visual than linguistic. Through Eisenstein, writing in the 1920s that it was a primary task for the artist to break down the barriers between linguistic and visual meaning, Rodowick develops French theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of the figural as the force that temporalizes

images, opening them up to discursive/linguistic meanings, and spatializes text, giving it visual as well as linguistic meanings. *Earthglow* evokes the space of writing not through the writing itself, but through the figural, the animation of text (within, of course, a primarily auditory world).

## Punk Theory

### *Hey Bud*

Julie Zando

1987, 11:00, U.S.

*Hey Bud* (1987), along with Julie Zando's other work, was a touchstone for me and my band of artist friends in Toronto in the late 1980s. It offered for us a muscular intellectual engagement: timely, not prioritizing (to quote Joyce Weiland) reason over passion and, perhaps most importantly: not boring. Others have written about it better than I can, so I quote them. (All the quotes are from Judith Mayne's *Julie Zando's Primal Scenes and Lesbian Representation*, though the quotes are sprinkled with other quotes.)

Throughout Zando's work, lesbian desire inflects fantasy and rubs against the grain of dominant psychoanalytic thinking<sup>3</sup>, just as fantasy inflects

<sup>2</sup> Not unrelated to Jameson's "postmodern pastiche" and one of the concepts that perhaps tried to counter it, Craig Owens' "mimetic rivalry."

<sup>3</sup> Though the difference between classic and radical psychoanalytic theory seems, academically speaking – I'm sure it's quite different clinically – non-existent.



*Evocation of Faust: Charming Landscape*, Dara Birnbaum (1987)



*Hey Bud*, Julie Zando (1987)

lesbian desire and rubs against the grain of some cherished myths of lesbian identity. In suggesting that Zando's videos interrogate the space where these fantasies intersect, I do not want to reduce her work to an intellectual or theoretical exercise. For what is so exciting and stunning about the work is its visual density, its sonic field, its narrative richness. Bill Horrigan says of Zando's work that it, "evidences the application of a sympathetic intelligence, *une raison ardente*, onto lived values, in the passionate interest of restoring to the subject (themselves/us: we're both of us I) the possibility of an imagined wholeness always partially lost." Zando's videos are theoretically challenging, to be sure, but this is not theory that seeks easy hierarchies or master narratives.<sup>4</sup> Rather, in Zando's work, theory is an engagement in complexity, contradiction, and most of all, in lesbian pleasure, visual and otherwise. As Zando herself puts it: "I like theory as an intellectual game, but I prefer it when I can apply it to my own experiences. I don't want my tapes to act as a light where my role is to flip the switch and illuminate some theoretical concept. I'm more interested in putting the viewer's finger into the socket, allowing the

shock waves to carry the message in a sudden jolt of understanding."

**VDB TV: *Decades*** celebrates forty years of Video Data Bank's support for video art and artists. This five-part series, programed by experts in the field, casts a distinctive eye over the development of video as an art form from the early 1970s to the 2010s.

**Steve Reinke** is an artist and writer best known for his videos. His work is screened widely and is part of several collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Pompidou (Paris), and the National Gallery (Ottawa). His videos typically have diaristic or collage formats, and his autobiographical voice-overs share his desires and pop culture appraisals with endearing wit.

Born in a village in northern Ontario, he is currently associate professor of Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern University. In the 1990's he produced the ambitious omnibus *The Hundred Videos* (1996), and a book of his scripts, *Everybody Loves Nothing: Scripts 1997 – 2005* was published by Coach House (Toronto). He has also co-edited several books, including *By the Skin of Their Tongues: Artist*

*Video Scripts* (co-edited with Nelson Henricks, 1997), *Lux: A Decade of Artists' Film and Video* (with Tom Taylor, 2000), and *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema* (with Chris Gehman, 2005).

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<sup>4</sup>No shit.