

## Undertones By Jon Davies

In Nelson Henricks's 1994 tape *Comédie*, a man describes his obsession with cracking the code behind the apparently random arrangement of white and brown tiles in his local Metro station. After extensive analysis, he concludes that the pattern in fact represents a musical score. Almost fifteen years later, this theme of struggling (often in vain) to create order from the chaos of the world – and particularly of music as one system for potentially doing so – has returned as a major focus of Henricks's work.

While Henricks's tapes of this period and earlier are very much products of their times, there is a self-reflexive collage aesthetic apparent at least as far back as 1988's *Legend* that suggests that the mechanism of representation itself was as much his ostensible focus as the performance of personal history, memory and the vicissitudes of identity (regional, sexual and, perversely, of species). Over the years, his aesthetic lexicon developed and personal self-expression became directed outwards, diffused into broader themes like television (*Emission*, 1994) and voyeurism (*Handy Man*, 1999). (I can't help but evoke video artist and writer Gregg Bordowitz's wish for his own ultimate fate: dispersion into the atmosphere.)

Now in 2008 in the context of Henricks being selected as the Images Festival's Canadian Artist Spotlight, we can see that he has evolved a wide-ranging oeuvre united by a fascination with the ever-malleable video medium's capacity to manipulate meaning, achieved through its ability to effortlessly juxtapose any image with any sound with any text. His conceptual preoccupation with video's essential signifying building blocks has manifested in works that pit image against sound against text to signal a crisis in the progress promised by technology. For many, technological innovation represents liberation: from our messy, fragile bodies and everything they are forced to endure, from a life without meaning or certainty. In Henricks's hands, the technology of video promises an intensification of contingency and entropy: possibilities, change, the risk of failure rather than frozen, dead knowledge, all the ruptures and breakdowns that arise in conveying meaning.

Henricks's key work in this regard is *Satellite* (2004). It burlesques the unwavering faith in reason and progress evident in musty, once-educational science films for children through the use of idiosyncratic, absurd texts that delight in nonsense and in the inappropriately intimate (precisely the outbursts and expressions that would be held in disdain by the upstanding citizens desperately trying to make sense whom we see in these old films). The soiled, unstable subjective contaminates the pristine rational objective, the data-quantifying image track ends up with its pants pulled down by the wacky text. Some of the most prominent sequences are demonstrations of the functioning of the human ear, intimations of the Henricks's growing interest in the aural.

Satellite refines some of the ideas about technology and its sillier manifestations apparent in his *Planetarium* (2001), an examination of, among other things, electronic music. In its mockery of our faith and hope in the glorious "future" - its laser light shows, synthesizers and outer space kitsch - and in the driving rhythm and numerical structure of his *Untitled [Score]* (2007) with composer Jackie Gallant - also about music - we find connections to his new work, *Countdown*, on display at Gallery 44. In *Countdown*, Henricks shot different numbers from 30 all the way down to 1 that he found printed on objects in his apartment (dice, money, product packaging, etc.). He approximated a length of one second for each shot and filmed them in order, thus editing the film in camera. In only 30 seconds it produces rich connotations: First off, this countdown isn't trustworthy or useful because it is susceptible to human error. Second, we are used to countdown as a device to build suspense as it reaches towards a major narrative goal. Something big is supposed to happen: the rocket will lift off, the ball will drop, the system will self-destruct. Instead, Henricks's countdown mirrors (and gently satirizes) the inescapable temporal structure of its own medium of video installation: the endless loop. (Henricks's oeuvre has evolved into the gallery space in the past several years, going multi-channel in the process.)

All of these recent works suggest that attempts at organizing the world are futile. In *Untitled (Score)*, Henricks spells out different 3- and 4 letter words that only use letters representing notes of the musical scale (A-G), and Gallant scored the piece based on these. The images that accompany the words are largely illustrative, as if in a children's primer, and the tape serves as an experiment in bridging two different languages with overlapping forms of notation together. But of course neither system really thrives in these circumstances: this union merely leaves you with two puny, arrested vocabularies rather than any utopian new form of communication. This falling short is also inherent in the artist's expansive, philosophical *Map of the City* (created during a 2006 residency in Rome). In that two-channel tape, Henricks constantly editorializes on the sheer quantity of things: "So many rooms in this world, but you will live in just a few of them," it begins. Approximating the form of an encyclopedia, it attempts to catalogue a world of objects so vast as to be impenetrable - those that have crumbled and gone, those that are still with us, and even those to come. For Henricks here, material culture is paradoxically the apogee of ephemerality and meaninglessness.

In the exhibition with *Countdown* is Henricks's most ambitious gambit, the multimedia installation *The Sirens*. It is a sort of laboratory for contemplating the emotional and physical force of the singing human voice, but through its very absence. We hear other noises, music even, but no voice. We are presented with two monitors and a screen showing a text narration and sequences of oblique images evoking the complex tangle of body, sound, sensation and technology. Partly because its multiple components are arranged throughout the space (giving it a sculptural form), and partly because the screen directly addresses us

with words – "make the loudest sound you can make" – and blank cue cards, *The Sirens* immerses the spectator's body and seems to leave an opening for one's own song, almost as if it were a too-shy karaoke machine. (We are potentially the sirens, after all.) The images illustrate the power play between bodies and instruments: they play guitar and sing (though we only see throats tense, wordlessly), operate projectors and record players, receive acupuncture and tattoos – even cutlery becomes sensuous here (a dinner fork is played like a tuning fork, for example). The video images on the monitors are crisp and detached, while the film clips and slides on the screen are more tactile and analog.

There is a poignancy to *The Sirens* as it is almost inevitably doomed to failure: can one really represent the gut impact of a thing – essentially, the beauty of opening one's throat up to sing – without including the thing itself? With the microphone trained on everything except a mouth? (He literally caresses a speaker with a mic at one point, and then a hand). Can the intensity of embodied, sensual experience usurp the authority of literal representation and rational systems and technologies? Can a hand ventriloquize a voice? Yes, says Henricks, the hand can sing, just trace the rim of a wine glass with your fingertip. His oeuvre is full of such metaphoric slippages – this is that and that is this – suggesting that if video has taught us anything it is that that can't simply be that anymore.