

Hey, That Art Has No Boundaries!
Video artist hopes we all 'go home and make stuff '
By Jason Rehel

Occupying the rarefied air of video art can be tricky for a creative type. The practice doesn't even warrant an entry in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary (though for some reason, video diary does), meaning audiences can be hard to come by. But the resulting aesthetic freedom can be liberating, both for the artist and for those fortunate enough to happen upon their work. Just ask Nelson Henricks.

"I think artists have the capacity to occupy a really fluid social space, and that their work can touch on a lot of other disciplines and aspects of culture," he says. "Really brave artists aren't limited in the type of content they take on. They feel as if anything can become the content for art."

The veteran Montreal video artist was feted last week in a retrospective spotlight at the Images Festival that covered more than 15 years of Henricks' work in the medium, pieces that, while not widely seen within Canada, have become an important part of the broader video art scene internationally.

Henricks graduated from the Alberta College of Art in 1986 and moved to Montreal in 1991, receiving a BFA from Concordia in 1994. His videos have been presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and he has made numerous contributions to art publications, including Fuse, Public and Coil, in addition to spending time curating and teaching.

When it came time to put together the program for the Images Festival this year, though, the festival's artistic director knew there was a gap that needed to be filled. "By selecting Nelson, in consultation with members of the local media arts community," says Pablo de Ocampo, "the festival is creating a venue for an artist who has shown plenty in the last few years in Montreal and other parts of Canada, but who has been largely absent from the Toronto scene."

Among the nine tapes shown chronologically from Henricks' oeuvre is Conspiracy of Lies (1991). A pseudo-narrative of a troubled soul living in a new city originally pieced together from a lost notebook and some scrawled lists that Henricks found on the street, the work has a smooth, styled aesthetic and a quick-paced and challenging visual style. The point, Henricks offers on his website, was to utilize several narrators in the piece to chip away at his own initial assumptions about the found objects and the person they traced. Seventeen years later, the work is anything but dated, given the amount of text that the average person is asked to digest in the course of a day.

A more recent work, Untitled Score (2007), a collaboration with Jackie Gallant, shows Henricks is still interested in the some of the same material: how texts, sounds and images work on our minds to construct the worlds we call home,

work and politics. But since 1997, coincidentally shortly after he had begun a parallel career as a lecturer and teacher at Concordia, McGill and Université de Montréal, Henricks has ceased to look at his art simply as a linear progression of videotapes.

"My work has really spread out in a lot of different ways: I started to develop parallel paths of research, say with narration or performance-based work or installation work versus single-channel work," he says. "So the idea of a steady progression fell apart and was replaced by the idea of a lateral exploration -- going in a lot of different directions that are really about continually taking risks."

While Henricks isn't particularly drawn to the idea of "anti-entertainment" or what most people might call "slow" or "boring" ideas of video art, he allows that one of the strengths of the form is its elasticity and ability to shift according to the tenor of dominant mainstream visual styles.

"I think that no matter what historical moment you're in, you're going to find an inversion of it in some way," he says. "But it's really hard to generalize with a medium like video art because so often artists are trying out aesthetic strategies plural to one another." His latest works, *The Sirens* and *Countdown*, reflect his evolving idea of how the visual aspects of art relate to sound, time and the body. "At this point," he says, "I'm really interested in works that are loose, unstructured and can kinda feel unfinished in a way. "For myself, the best reaction I can have to someone's work is that it makes me want to go home and make stuff. And if my work can make other people feel like that, then I'm absolutely delighted. What I'm really trying to do is to make work that I'd like to see and that can get people thinking."