

Nelson Henricks: Ghosts of Video **By John Zeppetelli**

Like a rallying cry ordering chaos, the words THE SUM OF ALL SIGHT AND SOUND open Nelson Henricks's *Window*. By a deft control of time, breath, visual pulse and written commentary the three-minute tape manages to summon all sentient resources in the viewer while simply framing the fleeting banality of the street outside an apartment window. Textual elements in two languages embedded in images further fragment and multiply a loose narrative already open to a variety of meanings, readings and pleasures.

Summing up Henricks's work, art historian Christine Ross identifies three interlocking themes: invisibility, communication and identity. The result of this convergence Ross writes, is that "identity establishes itself only by a sort of detour that cuts through the unperceived, the imperceptible, the anonymous..."¹ and I would add, the humorous. Legend illustrates this amply: maps, photographs and landscape paintings are hinged to questions of personal and national identity construction, errant love and the politics of representation. Puns and absurdities pervade the work as well, typified by a comment Henricks makes during a mild diatribe about the ubiquity of bad photographs: "The bad ones are misplaced but easier to find." Or consider the black humor of *Comedie*, a tape which proposes, among other things, a reading of the arbitrary placing of decorative tiles in a Montreal subway station.

Used as a rhetorical device, invisibility is articulated in many of the artist's tapes to advance stunning visual and narrative play on the spectral. Although much of his work originates on film, the phenomenological effects of the post-production are intimately connected to video's ontology: of continuous appearance and disappearance whereby "an electron beam scanning the screen (from top to bottom and left to right) renders the progressive "unmasking" of the image visible."² Specific to video are also the glitchy bursts of light and residual bleeds emitted by waning electronic signals, which in Henricks's capable hands assume the ghostly, receding afterimages of cognition itself.

As in all of Henricks's work one senses mysterious surges of activity stirring beneath even the quietest surfaces. In *Time Passes* accelerated images of sunlight quietly sweep across the languor of a living room. In another room with a skylight the camera painstakingly amasses the daily phenomena of gathering darkness. These sequences contrast with images of the artist furiously writing in a notebook, punctuated by colossal close-ups of pen nib making spiritual contact with blank page. A work illustrating the intersection of personal and objective vectors of time, it is the frantic, compacted record of a life lived to make a shape from spilt ink.

Fragmentation, episodic structures and clashing tenses displace linear storyline movement throughout. Henricks explores, to great communicative and emotional

effect, the infinite permutations of sound and image. Confounding various forms of writing within video and film (be they textual or textural inscriptions, staged performance or one of many judicious uses of post-production effects) he continuously activates semiotic play and seamlessly connects contradictory "types of video spaces-while at the same time he often mines spoken language for oddly ironic configurations of yearning and loss. In *Shimmer* -a lament about the transience of all things- the narrator gestures to his dead grandmother: "Imagine if memory were passed on genetically, I would remember your memories."

Crush begins with fragments of a male body (or bodies) which seems both an object of comparison and desire for the narrator. A desire not to desire perhaps, or at least to return to some primordial, prehuman state devoid of the debilitating paraphernalia of social life. "The goal" a voice-over murmurs "would be to swim to the sea, immensely dissatisfied with being human". Exquisitely crafted in song and pictogram. *Crush* stages a powerful gorge and spew of words and pictures, of noises and images. Issues of authenticity and the generative tension between documentary and fiction figures emphatically in Henricks's work, most notably in *Murderer's Song* which is based on the true story of the murder of an RCMP officer by a mother-and-son team. Ostensibly a re-composition of the incident, the tape also charts-through puppet reenactments- the knotty byways from event to myth, or as Henricks puts it "the passage of fact into folklore." Recurring passages of pulsating light for instance, literalize attempts to cover and reveal, withhold and disclose information.

Conspiracy of Lies begins with the discovery of a shoe box and proceeds to catalogue its contents (and its contents' contents): "four lists, three & 1/2 pages from a diary, 2 budgets, a telephone number written on the flap of a cigarette package, a fragment of a photo which seems to depict two people in a restaurant kitchen". What follows over tracking shots of supermarket and liquor store shelves, clothing stores and art galleries, are various voice-overs (both male and female) reading the lists and diary entries. Drop by speculative drop this accumulation of detail outlines a character rife with disquieting ambivalence. Immeasurably suggestive is the gay disco sequence for compressing a galaxy in a curious few seconds of sound and image. Over slow pans of flashing party lights which weirdly animate an empty dance floor the narrator recounts a meeting with a man called Raymond: "I think it would be nice to get to know him. Maybe.". Through a careful concatenation of camera movement and Henricks's own soundtrack the tape achieves the suspended animation of an uninterrupted, protracted and slowly drawn breath. However, what we gain in ambiguity we lose in certainty, for a close reading of all these videotapes yields at least three categories of profound bewilderment: the numinous, the ominous and the luminous.

1 Christine Ross "Je vais vous raconter une histoire de fantomes" vidéos de Nelson Henricks (Montreal, les éditions Oboro. 1995)

2 Christine Ross "Video: Toward a Renewal of Art Criticism" in Video re/View Peggy Gale and Lisa , Steele eds (Toronto Art Metropole and V-Tape, 1996)