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Pornutopian premises, positive practices: Michael Balser's video art and activism

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Pornutopian Premises, Positive Practices:

Michael Balser's Video Art and Activism

by David McIntosh

As the technologization of identity increases through the 1990s, the shape of cyborg destiny becomes clearer. In the guise of offering new forms of Net democracy and the supreme rule of the individual by remote control, global multinationals are extending their ideology of mass cognitive consumerism through a digital command and control system designed to tame, train and homogenize identity as well as to eliminate the bodily self. We are entering an era of global ordering based on mutant recombinations of feudal and insect organizational principles, where a concentrated hierophancy of symbolic manipulators and sysops manage billions of underpaid, undernourished and finally unnecessary McJobbers.

No identity remains entirely outside of or uncolonized by technology and its ideology; however, pockets of individual and collective identity based in bodily realities have resisted complete absorption into the machine. Exiled from preceding stages of identity technologization and denied commodity status in mass media representations, these pariah bodies have negotiated unique relationships with technology in order to sustain and evolve flesh identities. The emergence of Queer culture over the course of the last decade stands as one of the most potent illustrations of the intricacies, instabilities, contradictions, perils and pleasures of negotiating a cyborg future from inside our bodies. More specifically, a historical map of the broad shapes and dynamics of gay male appropriation and occupation of media technologies provides crucial insights into the nature of oppositional body identity.
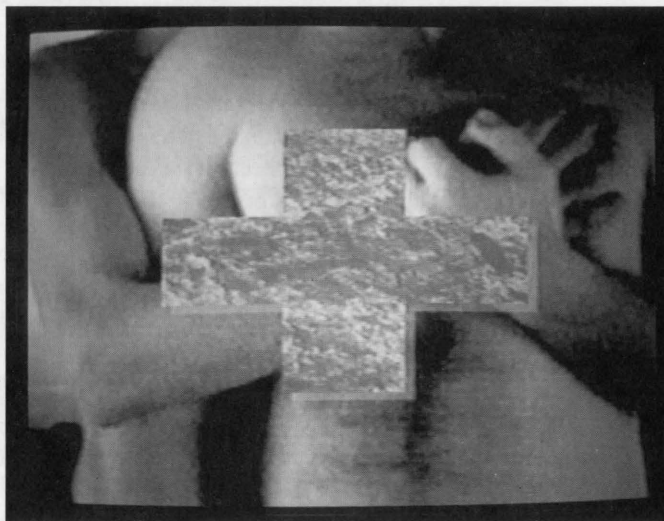
In the evolution of a collectivity of Queer image-sharers, each new advance in imagemaking technology triggered an analogous flurry of nation formation.[1]

Both vanguard and populist, gay male efforts to embody explicitly homosexual individual and collective identities through successive waves of new technologies have been negotiated on irregular, tenuous, non-binding and often contradictory terms, in contrast to the positivist arc of technology assimilation in the mainstream. Nineteenth-century photochemical technology's restriction of the production of homo-erotic identity to ambiguous subtext in still photographic images was coded primarily for elitist, formal academic, aesthetic or anthropological functions, a project perhaps best exemplified in the work of Baron von Gloeden. These limits were not overthrown until the '50s with the emergence of Polaroid photography and the first home porn. This inexpensive, uncomplicated and accessible technology provided the

means to widespread democratization and explicit sexualization of Queer self-representation, the massive evidence of which can still be readily found in New York's Gay Treasures archive. This populist aesthetic and political project reached its fullest artistic expression decades later in the work of Robert Mapplethorpe.

Also in the '50s, motion picture technology, peaking in profitability and market penetration, sought new consitutencies to fend off the impending threat to its monopoly on popular consciousness by television. This corporate conflict between a mature photochemical process and an emerging electronic media technology opened a space for the nascent gay avant-garde film movement. Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) and Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950) signaled a new relationship between film technology and gay identity, spawning a flourishing film underground in the '60s (Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Gregory Markopoulos, Ken Jacobs) as well as a populist commercial hardcore gay porn film industry in the '70s (Wakefield Poole, Fred Halsted, Joe Gage). Gay occupation of motion picture technology's most exalted industrial commodity—the theatrical feature film—was only fully realized in the late '80s and consolidated in the '90s by auteurists Gus Van Sant, Todd Haynes and Gregg Araki in a movement designated by critics as the "New Queer Cinema."

Since its inception, broadcast television has resisted all efforts to negotiate even a minimal site within its totalizing reach for any Queer identity other than niche market or underexploited consumer colony. Paradoxically, gay identity construction played a determining role in the assimilation of VCR technology in the early '80s. Backlists of gay porn films from the '70s and a steady output of new films were repurposed to videocassette, a format that afforded unprecedented access to gay images outside of major urban centres and in the privacy of viewers' homes. Mass Queer demand for VCRs and a constant supply of sexually explicit imagery brought VCR technology to critical mass, shaping its evolution from prohibitively expensive gadget to affordable household appliance. The subsequent growth of an extensive underground network for the circulation of gay porn videos provided the crucial link between production and consumption. And within this integrated system of image circulation, a constellation of perpetual motion fuck stars, heroic role models and fantasy stimulators took shape. One of the earliest and most widely emulated VCR stars was Richard Locke, a butch, bearded trucker in Joe Gage's trilogy (*Kansas City Trucking Co.*, 1976, *El Paso Wrecking Corp.*, 1977, *LA Tool & Die*, 1979), whose vigorous sexual performance reached iconic status in the evolution of collective gay con-

sciousness and sexual behaviour. With the proliferation of consumer video cameras in the late '80s, the production of gay porn evolved from a centralized industrial process into a personal prerogative. A new form of self-representation, home video porn, redefined the map of technologized and sexualized embodiment as an emergent and pliable working surface for diverse desiring subjectivities, much as Polaroid technology had done forty years earlier.[2]

The relationship of Queer identity to the latest wave of new technology—digitally based computers—is still being explored and negotiated. To date, digital technologies have been applied by Queers to enhance, proliferate and extend access to applications of last wave analogue technologies. Traditional notions of publishing have been overturned by the Queer zine explosion, an anarchic, experimental, populist shifting ground of subjective self-representations powered by merging desktop computer publishing with photocopy technology. Computer enhancement has transformed telephone technology into an array of Queer voice-mail and chatline services (Manhunt, Cruiseline, Manline) where thousands of gay men regularly speak and project their sexual identity anonymously, as they search tree structures of categories—long-term relationship, casual encounter, SM, bisexuals, group sex, phone sex—for an eventual bodily connection. Phone technology also sustains Queer e-mail services where computer and modem equipped subscribers can construct and exchange digital text and picture representations of self through a global network. More extensive digitalization of Queer identity will be highly problematic; the ideology of the mutable, meatless, intellectualized and loathsome virtual body that propels digital technologies is on a collision course with a resistant Queer identity grounded in the non-negotiable pleasures of specific, inflected, flesh bodies.[3]

Still from *Positive Men*, Michael Balser, 1995, video, 50 min.
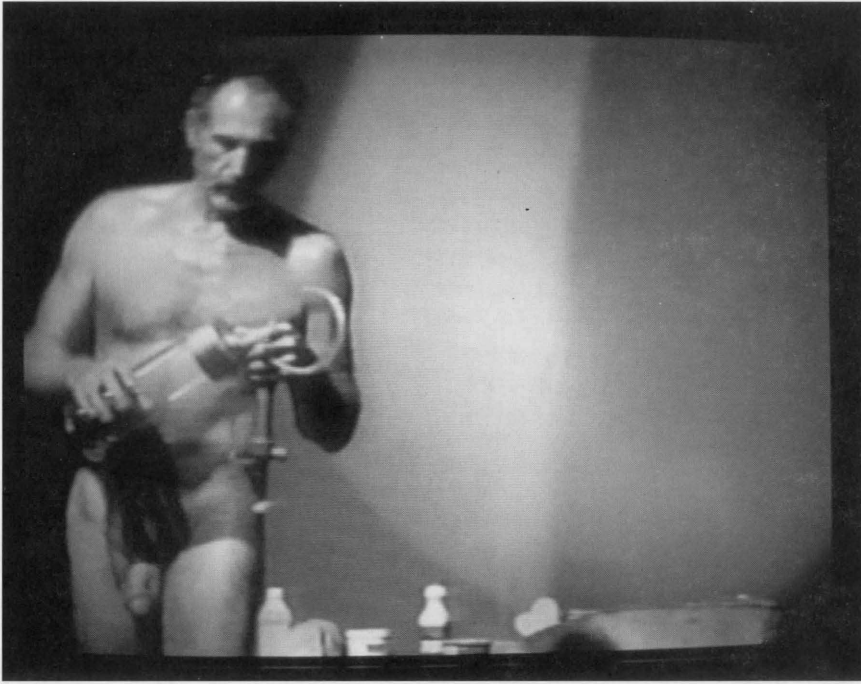
Perhaps the most crucial determinant in the history of the dynamics of Queer identity's transformative interaction with technology is the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In 1982, mass media technologies that refused any Queer imagery to this point suddenly turned their focus on gay men with a vengeance. Hysterical media constructions of the gay male body as the ultimate metaphor of death and disease became lodged in popular consciousness through the relentless propagation of dangerously false notions of "gay cancer" and "GRID" (gay-related immune deficiency). Meanwhile the physical bodies of infected gay men were delivered into the hands of another system of technology — science-based medicine — for testing, observation, categorization and experimentation. Almost fifteen years after the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the technologies of science and medicine have yet to develop a viable comprehension of, or reliable, successful treatment of HIV/AIDS, while mass media technologies continue to resist education and prevention efforts. By the mid-'80s, video as a technology of resistance was fully deployed by gay artists, activists and community groups to produce and distribute explicit information on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, as well as to resituate battered technologized identity in the physical realities of desiring sensual bodies.

In March of 1983, I read Larry Kramer's article in The New York Native — "1,234 And Counting." That was the first time a publication had used the word "epidemic." My world changed.[4]

One of the artists who has played a pivotal role in mapping and negotiating Queer identity through the complexities of changing technologies and the HIV/AIDS epidemic is Toronto video artist and activist Michael Balser, whose project has consistently embraced collective as well as individual aesthetics and processes. An HIV+ gay man, Balser has been a leader in community- based video production throughout the AIDS epidemic. As an originator of the "Toronto Living With AIDS" cable television project, he produced a series of fourteen half-hour videos by artists working with community organizations to create HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention and treatment materials constructed from within diverse racial, gender

Stills from *An Evening with Richard Locke*, Michael Balser, 1992, video, 9 min.

and sexual identities. He also co-directed two segments in this series: *The Great AZT Debate* with John Greyson, and *Voices of Positive Women*, with Darien Taylor of the AIDS support group Voices of Positive Women. Under the umbrella of the Second Decade project, he coordinated and produced a series of fourteen public service announcements for broadcast television by gay and lesbian artists and AIDS activists. In addition to these larger collective projects, Balser has maintained an ongoing collaboration with his partner, visual artist Andy Fabo, to produce a series of acclaimed art tapes, while continuing to elaborate his individual artistic vision in a range of solo video and installation works. Comprising over twenty-eight tapes produced over a fifteen-year period, Balser's artistic/activist project illuminates a range of normally inaccessible interstitial zones of evidence and experience underlying Queer identity. Entering his second decade of living with HIV/AIDS, Balser has recently produced three videotapes of remarkable insight which coil around the dialectical and adaptive relationships between the complex organization of sexualized, embodied collectivity and technologies of representation and communication.

Beyond the Helms of the Sensors (1992, co-directed with Andy Fabo) is simultaneously a documentation, deconstruction and parody of the emergent digital Queer nation. The state of "Pornutopia" is a videocracy founded on the principles of dildo voodoo (a vulgarization of the frigid techno-rhetoric of virtual sex) and ruled self-reflexively by directors Balser and Fabo. Reconfigured and projected into their construction as two sleazy sultans, they toy with technology, spinning antique zoetropes to animate stills from Warhol's *Blowjob* and drawings of winged phalluses. Relegated to the realm of projected desire by the ravages of time and the passing of their own corporeal perfection, these two indulgent porn adepts dedicate their lives to the production of the ideal artifact of Queer pornography. They are displaced from their plushly carpeted and richly draped palace by Ryan, a sex worker in real life who performs an archetypal scene from gay porn video.
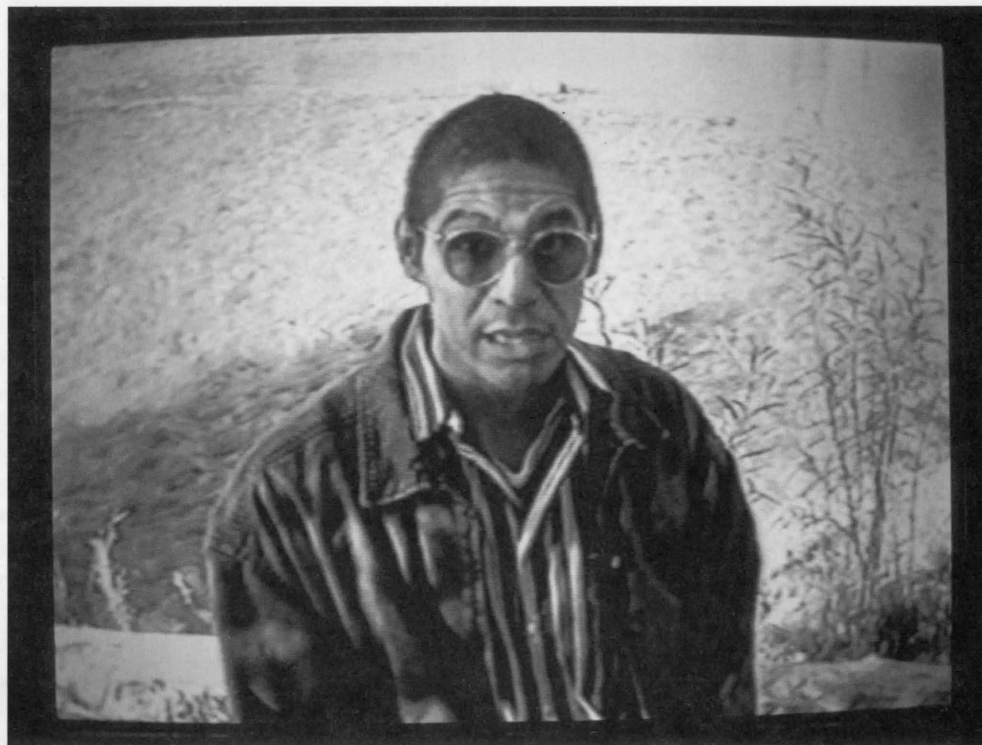
Richard Locke appears naked and aroused on stage in front of a live audience updating the traditionally silent ritual presentation of his body as an object of lust.

Ryan, costumed as a construction worker, strips to reveal a perfectly muscled youthful body and a luscious hard cock. After caressing and jerking himself off to a thrilling climax, he dresses, picks up his hammer and dismantles the sultans' pleasure palace, which is nothing more than a flimsy studio set.

Elsewhere in Pornutopia, lesser porn directors (singer/performance artist Meryn Caddell and screenwriter Ed Riche) struggle to imagine and construct porn artifacts, pondering questions like "Should there be emotional content? Should it be funny? Should it be two hours of hard fucking?" More porn sequences emerge. Documentary footage of an Alberta rodeo slips into a recreation of a cowboy fuck initiation scene from porn's past — "This is how we do it in the Wild West, boy" — based on Richard Locke's performance in the 1982 classic *Heatstroke*. The real Richard Locke, some twenty years later, appears in a documentary interview, recalling the growth of the porn industry and his sexual stardom and artistry. More interviews with filmmaker John Greyson and writer Robin Hardy elaborate the history and meaning of gay porn production.

Above and p.25: stills from *Positive Men*, Michael Balser, 1995, video, 50 min.

Looping through Pornutopia's system of sexually explicit images, *Helms* eventually finds its way into the bedroom of two consumers, bored lovers trapped inside porn projections and alienated from each other, their sexual practice mediated by VCR sex stars. One complains "When we first got the VCR it was fun having sex to raunchy porn videos, but now it seems that's all we do and I'm frustrated." His lover responds "We've had fun in the past without the tapes and we'll have fun again in the future. I really need these images right now." Falling back in on itself in a circular deconstructive gesture, *Helms* concludes with reiterations of previous scenes coded as documentary interviews, however the reiterations are obviously performed retakes.

An arousing, ideal artifact of Queer pornography itself, *Helms* is a shifting non-linear terrain of recurrent and recombinant phenomena ranging from the factual to the fictional, existing in modes of address from documentary to performative, from direct to multiply mediated. While acknowledging its place within the syncretic his-

Balser's unique project recombines formal artistic, AIDS activist and oral history strategies to relocate resistance in our flagrantly sexualized bodies.

tory of technologized Queer identity, *Helms* problematizes current and incipient developments in the relationship between technologized systems of representation and the pleasures of Queer flesh. At what point does Queer consciousness projected through technology become a circular, self-sustaining system of infinite mirrored regression disconnected from its foundation in organic sexual activity? Will remote symbolic cerebral sexual exchange eclipse the lascivious liberational impulses which have till now guided Queer strategies for technological occupation? Will post-digital ideologies and techniques to transform the surplus organic body into an endlessly reproducible virtual body seduce the Queer body politic into obsession, passivity, dissolution and, ultimately, alienation from sex itself?

In his following tape, *An Evening With Richard Locke* (1992), Balser responded to the issues raised in *Helms* by focusing on a live performance by one gay man as a site of resistance where history, desire, body and technology intersect. Employing the simplest of production strategies—single-camera video coverage—Balser stripped away layers of technologically induced artifice to construct a direct portrait of Richard Locke. A late '70s video-porn star, Locke, now in his fifties, is grayer than his timeless video incarnation and also HIV+, but still a powerful icon of collective Queer consciousness. Reprising his in-person sex performances, Locke appears naked and aroused on stage in front of a live audience updating the traditionally silent ritual presentation of his body as an object of lust by speaking in the first person. His running monologue offers personal insights into Queer history ("Queer nation is magnificent. If my generation had only been more militant"), aging bodies ("I'm an older gentleman and sometimes it's hard for younger people to relate to older people. I'm always worried the younger generation may not hear what I have to say") and safe sex practices including explicit accounts of proper fisting and dildo techniques.

Balser has intercut this performance with a series of information cards containing HIV/AIDS statistics: "There

are 267 new cases of AIDS every day," "There is one AIDS death every nine minutes," "Forty million people will be infected worldwide by the year 2000." With this simple tape, Balser strategically defuses the spiraling threat of hyper-technologization of bodily realities by recoursing to simpler technological platforms, articulating an identity recomplicated and reactivated by the bodily threat of HIV/AIDS. In juxtaposing the actuality of Richard Locke's aging, organically real HIV+ body with the virtual memory of his youthful body immortalized in film and circulating beyond time in Queer consciousness, Balser plots the two axes of desiring identity. He then splices in medi-

epidemic. Framed by a set dressed with turn of the century photos of male couples, evidence of a generation now gone, the actors simultaneously enact and analyse their evolution as a group, starting in 1983 with the formation of AIDS support groups. It was in the safety of this space that gay men learned to speak about the epidemic for the first time and that a vocabulary of AIDS evolved. Balser counterpoints this mediated personal and community oral history with a parallel
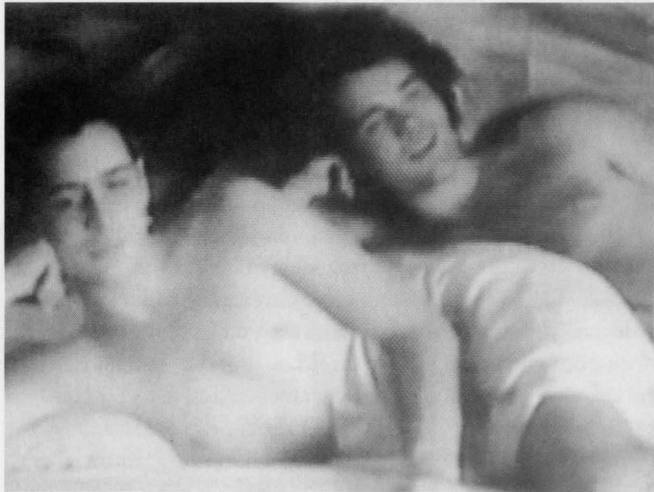
ated realities of the AIDS epidemic, altering the genetic core of our historical constructions of desiring embodied selves. This unique project recombines formal artistic, AIDS activist and oral history strategies to relocate resistance in our flagrantly sexualized bodies.

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history of the failing technologies of science, from the development of unreliable HIV tests to a recent scientific admission that the very nature of a viral entity is not understood. This segment closes in the present: December 1, 1994, World AIDS Day, a memorial to lives lost.

Balser's most recent tape, *Positive Men* (1995), stands as his most powerful and expansive occupation of history, technology and bodily reality to date. Inspired by Marlon Riggs' video *No Regrets*, a documentation of the lives and the voices of dying cultural activists, Balser has assumed a strategy of visibilization through technology which counters both the virtual and organic disappearances of our bodies. Organized from inside the paradigm of HIV+ gay male artists, *Positive Men* is a journey through the collective experience of HIV/AIDS over the last decade to connect pieces of lived history into new meaning. The first half of this one-hour tape is a fictive construct in which eight men speak from an illusory space not fixed in time. Part performance and part re-enactment, colliding documentary with dramatic conventions, this segment distills and recovers the history of individual and collective responses to the HIV/AIDS

The second half of *Positive Men* is structured as a documentary journey through the lives and work of nine North American gay male artists/activists living with HIV/AIDS whose diverse approaches to technology cumulatively articulate a "by any means necessary" strategy of survival and representation. Poet Courtnay McFarlane relies only on the furious power of body and language to name and commemorate loved ones. Computer whiz Beowulf Thorne has appropriated the most sophisticated digital publishing technologies to produce the anarchic HIV humour zine *Disease Pariah News*. Andy Fabo creates fourteen-foot

Stills from *Blood Risk*, Michael Balser and Andy Fabo, 1989, video, 22 min.

drawings of people with AIDS under microscopes to express the extreme subject/object relations that develop under the gaze of medical technologies. Stephen Andrew's *Facsimile* grows out of photographs of friends who have died of AIDS. Transmission by transatlantic fax erases portions of the photos, leaving technologically reduced

nous compliant consumer colony and the disappearance of impure bodily selves into digitally virtualized insignificance. Positioned at the edge of this widening conflict between reality and representation, between body and technology, *Positive Men* interlocks with Balser's other works to weave disjunctively and intuitively through the broad landscape of technologized Queer identity to date, activating oral histories, received histories, collective memories, personal imaginaries, sensual ephemera, pornographic pleasures, illusory narratives, theoretical parodies, artistic artifacts as well as acts of mourning and commemoration. His agile manipulation of these elements elicits electrifying instants of insight into the unrepresentable subjective realities of embodiment in Queer flesh. Balser's work constitutes an intricate and prescient map of the promiscuous, unallied, artistic occupation of any and all representational technologies — new wave, last wave and no wave — for the purposes of assuring Queer sexual, physical and community survival.

visual memories of the body, much as people recede in memory when they are lost from their bodies. The last interview in *Positive Men* returns this tape to its source of inspiration, Marlon Riggs, a powerful artist who died before this project was completed, and whose final galvanizing words resonate with fury and hope.

The dialectical and syncretic relationships between technology and Queers built over the past fifty years are disintegrating into an irresolvable opposition. On one hand, the AIDS epidemic has signalled the failure of mass media and science technologies to adapt or respond to basic physical survival issues. On the other hand, rampant fetishization of corporate technological determinism embedded in digital command and control systems promises the dissolution of embodied communities into a globally homoge-

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Notes

1. Tom Waugh, "Cultivated Colonies: Notes on Queer Nationhood and the Erotic Image" in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2-3, 1993, p. 167.

2. A unique and invaluable reference tool in sketching this all too brief history of sex and technology was John R. Burger's *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography,* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995).

3. For more extensive examination of the construction and deployment of digital systems, refer to my article "Cyborgs in Denial: Technology and Identity in the Net," *Fuse Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1994. Another relevant article which proposes an organically embodied critique of cyborg ideology is Margaret Morse's "What Do Cyborgs Eat? Oral Logic in an Information Society," in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, (Dia Center for the Arts, 1994).

4. Dialogue from Michael Balser's video *Positive Men*, 1995.

Still from *Beyond the Helms of the Sensors*, Michael Balser and Andy Fabo, 1992, video, 30 min.