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Perspectives of the body in Canadian video art

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Alternative Perspective



OF THE BODY
by Dot Tuer
IN CANADIAN VIDEO
ART



EVERY STRUGGLE, EVERY ATTEMPT AT STRUGGLE, OVER THE
 LAST TEN YEARS OR EVEN LONGER, HAS CONSISTED OF
 STRUGGLES FOR THE RE-APPROPRIATION OF USE-VALUE - THE
 USE OF TIME, SPACE, OF BODIES, OF KNOW-HOW.

Armand Mattelart, 1990

In 1974, Vera Frenkel, a Toronto-based performance/installation artist, used Northern Telecom's fledgling technology of instantaneous image transmission to produce an interactive art piece. Composing a pattern of communication based upon a game, cat's cradle, Frenkel's *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video* was played out through interactions between two groups of people facing a camera in two different cities across Canada. In contrast to the scripted phone-in format of broadcast television, the intervention of the host was not in evidence during this exchange. The embodied echoes that bounced back and forth through a satellite-studded space reverberated as spontaneous gestures. Reaching earnestly towards the telematic image of their counterparts, they appeared to be motioning, as if disbelievers witnessing an apparition: Are you really there? Can you exist? Do you see me? Constructing a metaphor for presence as absence, they became prophets of a yet unimaginable future, the vanguard of a brave new universe.

In 1992, all that remains of *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video* are a few deteriorating fragments of black and white videotape. Resurrected from technological ruin through archival restoration, these fragments form a fleeting memento to a low density electronic signal. Once touching, almost tangibly, the frontiers of simulation, the gestures of the participants now rebound with the pathos of the past. No longer prophets, but phantoms, these ghostly black and white silhouettes dance slow tangos to silent scripts of decline, bear witness to the distance

travelled by the body through technology in the intervening years. As stealth bombers sweep overhead searching for zero targets and children play out fantasy as reality through Nintendo games, their presence as Janus-like figures adds poignancy to the ambiguity and uncertainty that envelops the mediated body in the twilight of the twentieth century.

Shaped by mass production and technological innovation, the destabilization of the body through mediation has long been a central theme of modernism and modernism's crisis of representation. From Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, the body has been theorized and formalized by successive avant-gardes, fractured as a representational object, decentered as a Cartesian subject. Read through the psychoanalytical canon of Freud and Lacan, the body is encoded as a fragile construct that fills the gap/gape between identity and projection: mirrored and doubled through the cinematic lens, bound and fetishized by the spectator's gaze. Reread through a psychoanalytical feminism, its mediation acquires a hue of ideology, a cloak of sexual difference that divides the image and its reception along the lines of gender.

In her 1975 article, *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey forwarded the premise that the codes of dominant (Hollywood) cinema construct a visual pleasure that is entirely masculine in orientation. Locating within cinema's "complex interaction of looks"² a binary dependence between a feminine image as passive idealization

Previous page: COLIN CAMPBELL
Janus (1973): Still from b&w videotape: 20 min

Above: VERA FRENKEL. *String Games* (1974)



HONA HATOUM

Changing Parts (1985); Still from b&w videotape; 24 min

and a masculine spectator positioned as active voyeur, Mulvey argued that the representation of the female body is central to the eroticization of cinematic space: a lynchpin in the construction of cinematic narrative. In response to this entangled web of fetish and projection, Mulvey called upon artists to engage in a radical filmmaking that "frees the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment."³ Proposing a strategy of narrative disjuncture and visual rupture to counter a cinematic voyeurism, Mulvey envisioned the possibility of arresting the flow of perception and reception: of distancing the spectator from the entrapments of the celluloid body of illusion.

Like two divergent streams springing from a common source, Frenkel's simulated gestures and Mulvey's theorization of difference signaled the beginnings of a chasm between the immediacy of a technological feedback and (de)constructed ways of seeing that would mark the parameters of early videowork in Canada. While filmmakers responded to Mulvey's call for a materialist cinema by reworking familiar narrative structures to politicize representation, video artists anticipated a materialist cinema by treading new territories of technical innovation: challenging the boundaries of representation itself. In contrast to an advocacy of a "passionate detachment," experimentation with the video medium in the 1970s sought to enact a simultaneous embrace of the body and its image, to close the gap between the image and the viewer. A reflection of a historical moment in which electronic technologies began to redefine the mediation of the body, video art's exploration of a sculptural intimacy between camera and subject re-aligned issues of gender and technology, reinvented perceptions of the real and the imagined.

In *Janus* (1973), by Colin Campbell, the camera records the artist, nude, profile to the right, making love to a life-size nude photograph of himself, profile to the left. The video image, in black and white video, blurs the distinction between the representation of the performer and the representation of his photograph. Carressing a reproduction of himself while simultaneously watching himself make love on a video monitor, the artist confuses the boundaries of inside/outside, of the real and the not so real. A mirrored sexuality, a homoerotic imagery unfolds. Detachment is achieved, not by the absence of the

body as visual fetish, but by the doubling of its presence. Identification of the spectator with the voyeur position is deflected, the dividing line of gender effaced. Constructing visual pleasure as internal to the frame, Campbell's embrace of himself becomes an embrace of mediation, an auto-erotic fantasy, a proto-simulation.

By contrast, *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974), by Lisa Steele, enacts an inversion of visual pleasure to expose herself as performer to an almost painful level of scrutiny. Displacing the female body of classical cinema, who undresses by taking off her glasses and thereby transfixes the spectator symbolically through her gaze, Steele kneels naked in front of a stationary camera to impassively describe each imperfection that marks her body as a chronology of years. Mixing the codes of the confessional with visual surveillance, she moves her body anxiously within the frame to allow the camera to carress each defect/scar as a surface signification. Whatever pleasure to be gleaned here does not reside with the body's idealization, but with a pathological attention to the stroking of imperfection: a sort of medical textbook examination personified and personalized.

"1947: Surgery at birth to remove goiter," intones Steele, fingering as proof a long thin scar. "1953: Stubbed toe on rock while running barefoot. Permanently discoloured nail," she announces, holding her big toe up to the camera's lens. "1959: Tendons cut by glass in school cafeteria," she declares, displaying a permanent mark on her palm. "1968: Ran into branch while looking for waterfall in Banff National Park," she tells the viewer, pointing to a half-moon scar below her eye as a tangible memory of pain. "1974: Surgery for removal of benign tumour" she contemplates, to complete an inventory of seventeen injuries that add up to her body's imperfections, and by implication, its ontological presence. A votive offering to the technological gaze, *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* downplays the representation of the body as a gendered subject, highlights its tangible physicality as an object within an electronic medium.

In *Delicate Issue* (1979), by Kate Craig, this strange combination of corporeality inside of a "cool" technology finds its boundaries pushed, and questioned. Unlike the entrapment of the body by a static electronic eye in *Janus* and *Birthday Suit With Scars and Defects*, the camera in *Delicate Issue* moves constantly to pan closely over the artist's naked body. Glistening skin, delicate hair, strange

beauty marks are scanned. Red lips, nipples, earlobes, move in and out of focus. A heartbeat sounds. Deep breathing is heard, then lulls, a lullabye, a sleeping sigh. The camera brushes by genitalia, blurring pubic hair and labia lips, soft contours and cavities. Shooting so near to the body's surface that recognition falters, the camera's macroscopic lens turns identification inside-out: generates the body as condensation upon an electronic skin.

As the object of the camera's relentless roving gaze, Craig parallels the visual intrusion of her body with an oral interrogation of the viewer. "What is the dividing line between public and private? At what distance does the subject read?" she asks – intervening as a speaking subject with a disconnected voice. "How close can the camera be? How close do I want to be? How close do I want you to be? How close do you want to be?" she demands – connecting her body to her voice, her image to the spectator. "Who is in the frame? Who is willing to be in the frame? Who is willing to watch the frame?" she inquires – further implicating the spectator and the artist inside an intertwining structure of looking and exposing.

Observation follows upon interrogation: "The closer the subject, the clearer the intent. The closer the image, the clearer the idea. Or does intimacy breed obscurity?" Her questions pose a limit to a fluid interchange between the viewer and the body on the screen. "When do I stop sharing? When do you stop accepting? When do you stop receiving? When do I stop sending?" Her questions envision the potential to overreach the limits upon the body's mediation and the viewer's participation. "How real do you want me to be? How much do you want? How much do I want from you?" A testing ground of representational boundaries, and technological possibilities, *Delicate Issue* builds upon a process of inquisition until the artist herself demarcates the parameters by asking "When do I cut out? When do you cut out? At what distance does the subject read?" in order to reply "This is as close as you get. You can't get any closer."



Photo: courtesy V Tape

As if anticipating not only Mulvey's materialist manifesto, but the techno-fantasies of body simulation in *Terminator II*, the impressions/sensations/interrogations of *Delicate Issue* construct the body as an electronic membrane grasping at the real, crying out for a location, a place, within an global electronic network of instantaneous transmission and reception. Complicit with this attempt to close the gap/gape between identity and projection, another set of unasked, unspoken questions are raised: questions about the relationship of gender to simulation, about the future perfect fusion of the body and technology. Emphasizing the body's presence as a mediated subject and a material object, the early works of Canadian video artists become premonitions of a paradoxical space, a cyberspace, where boundaries between the real and the imagined are eliminated, distinctions between biology and destiny are blurred, erased.

Like Alice in Wonderland who fell through a rabbit hole into a dreamscape of absurd symmetry, video art's experimental embrace of an electronic technology becomes a faint echo of a global restructuring of mediation as high-tech simulation. In the laboratories and think-tanks of the world's military-industrial-communication elites, the body is being wrestled from the artist's grasp, reformatted by the shock troops of a digital empire.⁴ Here, the spectre of virtual reality fuses the body's materiality to its ephemeral representations. Genetics breeds mutations. Gender as the dividing line of difference between culture and nature disappears. The rough grids of lived experience and the smoothed over phantasmagoria of simulation become inextricable trajectories that will never meet face to face. Technology haunts, pursues, eludes, then intrudes – at once a fiction and a science, entrapping consciousness.

Reverberating in a "hothouse" atmosphere of corporate networks and computer blueprints, the body can now feel and touch a computer-generated reality, embrace its image as a tactile other. Literally "enframed" within the

LISA STEELE. *Birthday Suit – with scars and defects* (1974); Still from b&w videotape; 12 min



MONA HATOUM
Changing Parts (1985); Still from b&w videotape, 24 min

video/computer screen, it moves effortlessly through a three dimensional realm where abstract and tactile space collapse into one. Modernity as negativity, with its investment in an oppositional/subversive stance and its failed revolutions, and post-modernity as specificity, with its politics of identity and its promise of personal salvation, flail equally against this synthetic phantom. The search for a fixed identity, an imprint of subjectivity, uncovers instead an image of a cyborg: "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."⁵

Confronted with this corporate fusion of the body and technology, with this cyborg stalking the edges of representation, video art's experimental embrace of the body and image appears not only nostalgic, but antiquated. Downsized by the competition of *Terminator II*'s mass appeal, video art's reinvention of the real and the imagined becomes a pale imitation of a contemporary simulation. Yet, as in a dream, surface readings are deceptive. The media wizards of a corporate white magic are, after all, the engineers rather than the architects of a future blueprint: playing with function rather than content, technique rather than form. Video artists, on the other hand, are the producing subjects of their own images. Creative participants in a global circuitboard of simulation, yet marginalized from the resources under corporate control, they can be seen to occupy a contradictory location within a contemporary system of mediation: a location from which to politicize an information revolution.

Donna Haraway, the author of the *Cyborg Manifesto*, suggests that cyborgs are everywhere and invisible: "as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness – or its simulation."⁶ Video art, by framing and reframing the body as a refraction of lived differences and simulated fantasies, becomes an investigation of this cyborg's hybrid claim to existence. Once turning the camera inwards upon the body to investigate its primary and primal relationship to a new technology, video artists of the last decade have turned the camera outwards to visualize the invisible webs of mediation that interconnect the body and ideology. Mapping layers of signification, they seek to materialize the intimate embrace of technology and the body politic. In so doing, a restaking of gender takes place: not as homogeneous construction of identity, but as heterogeneous location from which to explore the simultaneous

claims of class, of race, of ethnicity, of sexuality, of age.

In *Talking Tongues* (1982), by Lisa Steele, the artist as performer faces the camera to deliver a highly staged and highly charged monologue about wife abuse. Originally transmitted as a live satellite videocast from Toronto to Paris, Steele mixes codes of impersonation and the confessional to act out the character of Beatrice Small with a self-conscious irony and a degree of panache. Constructing a camera "persona" from a composite sketch of Toronto's welfare class, Steele becomes a "host" body for (an)other woman's story. Gesture and tone disclaim her image as authentic, decenter a documentary reading of the subject as victim. All pretence at *cinema verité*, at exposure of a "real" oppression is abandoned. In its stead, Steele becomes a cipher for many women's experiences with poverty and violence: offering those excluded or overdetermined by mediation an opportunity to speak with impunity. Her presence within the frame signals the presence of a hybrid, a cyborg: locating the body within its technological trappings, revealing the material traces of social memory as a simulated projection of gender and class.

In *Changing Parts* (1984), by Mona Hatoum and produced at the Western Front (Vancouver), the use of the artist's body as a physical witness to the intimacy of mediation is also displaced. In its place, the body becomes a metaphor for the ways in which simulation enloaks experience. Mona Hatoum, as a Palestinian-born artist, projects a body encased by the oppression of gender, of history, of geography: a body struggling towards social and political self-determination. This is the body on the other side of the viewfinder: a body targeted by the stealth bomber, obscured by the fantasyland of Nintendo, murdered by the practical applications of virtual reality. This is a body upon which the forces of a global technology converge: conflating the personal and the political, thwarting identity, crushing desire.

In opening sequences of *Changing Parts*, the body is absent from the frame. Dissolve shots of black and white photographs offer perspectives of the empty interior of a tiled bathroom and its objects (a cracked mirror, a shaving brush, a sponge, faucets, sink and pipes, a soapdish). A modernist reverie of spatial angles and geometric space and cool pristine lines is created. The music of Bach lulls the viewer into a gentle passivity. Suddenly, a harsh sound intrudes: disrupting the conceptual space, startling the

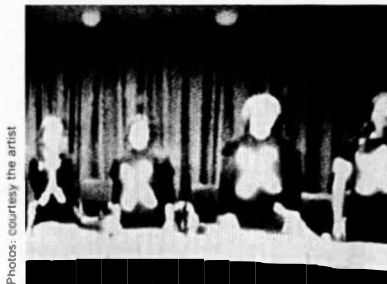
viewer. Ambiguous in origin, as if the video monitor or the videotape itself, has malfunctioned, a white noise of interference continues to intermitently disturb the quiet bathroom intimacy. Just as suddenly, feet, and then hands, appear within the frame. Gesturing through an opaque gauze, they flail as if entrapped, enwrapped by layers of mediation. The static noise becomes more frequent. A sense of urgency increases. A body, now visible through the gauzy substance, struggles as if drowning, biting at the screen, falling backwards into oblivion. Hands claw desperately at the filmy texture of the barrier. Another substance (blood?) is seen smeared across the screen. The white noise is constant. Voices are barely audible. Is it the noise of water hitting a plastic curtain shower? Is it the garbled frequencies of a shortwave radio? Whose body is rolling and struggling, mouth biting, hands ripping at the gauze that obscures? Is there a massacre? Answers are not forthcoming, but speculation is rife. Re-encapsulated through the vision of the artist, reworked through low-end technology, the body becomes a hieroglyph of an information revolution: a symptom of its own simulation.

In *Francesca Woodman* (1990), by Katie Thomas, the body becomes an allegory for the ruin of women's representation, a remapping of gender that privileges memory over presence, mediation over experience. Alternating shots of her naked torso with photographs taken by Francesca Woodman, Thomas's simultaneous embrace of the self and its image is refracted through (an)other woman's body, (an)other's desire. The auto-erotic fantasy of simulation gives way to a juxtaposition of representations. The body is exposed as neither illusion nor material, but rather enwrapped in its own fragmentary constructions of meaning. Divided by gender, and by systems of mediation, Thomas's body becomes a symbiosis of desire and desiring machines, of identity and cybernetics: an expression of the ambiguity that envelops the body as technology in the twilight of the twentieth century.

Within the current context of high technology and

video art, it is no longer the body and its imaged double, the gap between the viewer and the subject that divides looking along lines of gender. Rather, the significance of gender as a marker within representation becomes an issue of materializing cyborgs: of charting the shifting locations and fluidity of consciousness within a highly mediated system. Where wo/man and machine meet, where boundaries become porous, penetrable, permeable, cyborgs hide behind the illusion that the body and its representations can be disentangled. When both the spectator and the body, projection and identity refract within a proliferating web of simulation, cyborgs hide inside of cinematic narratives, documentary truths, dominant culture, fixed identities. On the other hand, the cyborg emerges as tangible through formal strategies of video artists that refuse the body such a trans-

parency within representation, that unmask the body as a metaphor, hieroglyph, symptom, allegory, touchstone, abstraction: speaking to the importance of politicizing not only experience, but simulation. In so doing, the impact of their collective vision cannot be overemphasized. As Donna Haraway suggests in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, "who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival."⁷

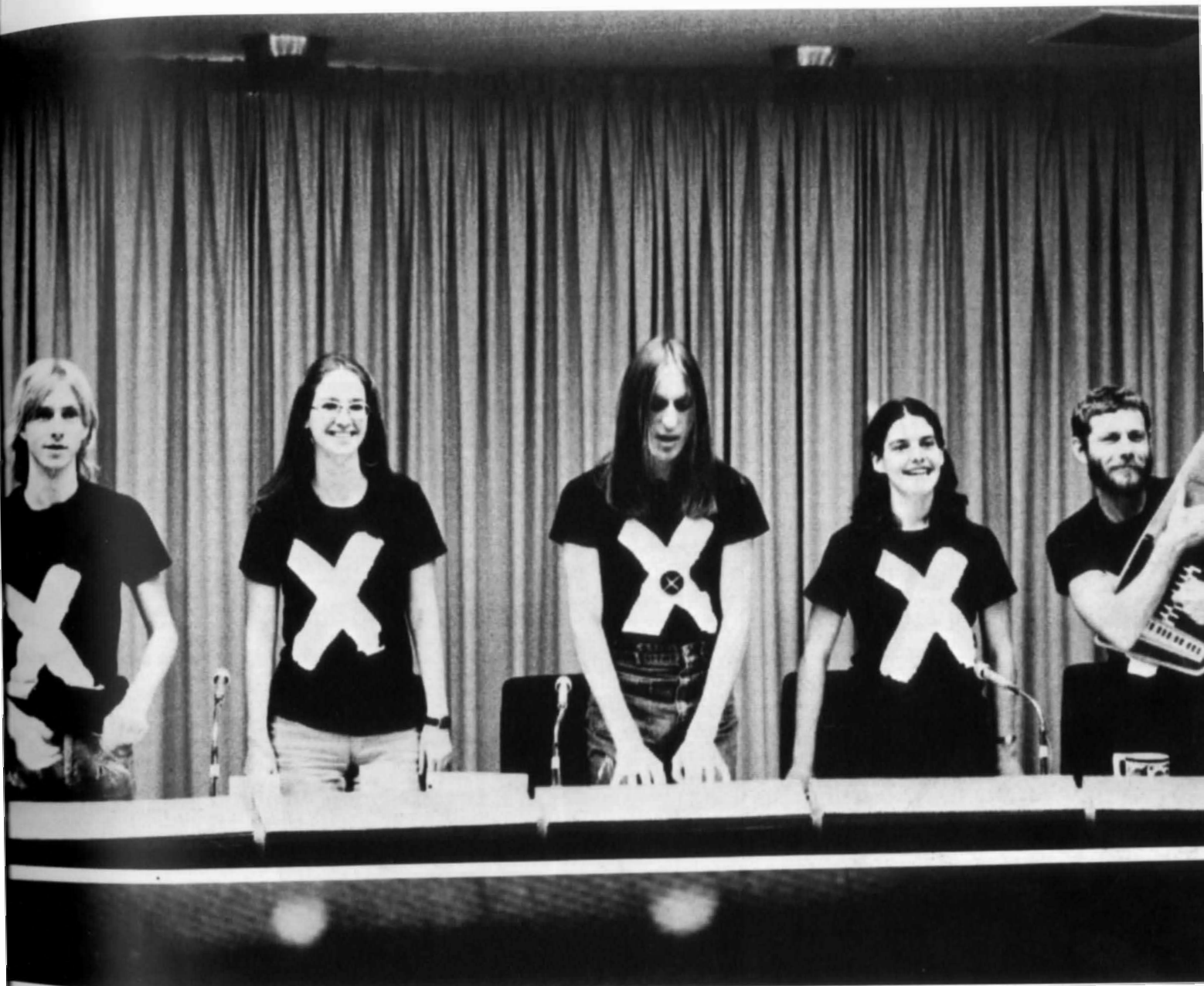


Photos: courtesy the artist

NOTES

1. Armand Mattelart, *Carnival of Images* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1990), page 68.
2. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen Magazine*, Volume 16, #3, Autumn 1975, page 18.
3. *Ibid*, page 18.
4. See Stewart Brand, *The Media Lab; Inventing the Future at M.I.T.*, New York: Penguin Books, 1988. & Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).
5. Haraway, Donna, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1990), page 149.
6. *Ibid*, page 153
7. *Ibid*, page 153

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Above and previous page | VERA FRENKEL
String Games (1974)