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Luminous sites

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ON OFF TV

"Luminous Sites" Vancouver

Not since Paul Wong's *Confused: Sexual Views* was cancelled by the Vancouver Art Gallery has video art received such wide attention in this city as with the recent "Luminous Sites" exhibition. The scope of the project, the variety of artists and the effective

publicity before and during the series had the potential of engaging an audience beyond those traditionally interested in art in Vancouver.

"Luminous Sites" included ten Canadian artists: Tomiyo Sasaki, Barbara Steinman, Paul Wong, Corry Wyngaarden, Ian Carr-Harris, Max Dean, David Tomas, Randy and Bereni-

cci, Kate Craig and Vera Frenkel. With the exception of the 31st floor of Park Place (a luxury office tower), and the Sears Harbour Centre Parkade, the works were housed within parallel galleries.

Although artists manipulated the medium in a variety of ways, a minority, most notably Corry Wyngaarden and Barbara Steinman, rose to the possibilities of this high-profile project in their choice of issues. Others concentrated on exploring the nature of representation and the role of art in society.

This division occurred in part because artists too readily complied with the tradition of installation, one embedded in the gallery context and post-modernist discourse. This is unfortunate, for, as Martha Rosler discussed in her presentation at "Video '84" in Montreal, video as a form is being subverted by institutions of 'high art': public galleries and museums, criticism and art history. Three characteristics integral to this process are: 1) the preference of institutions for the sculptural qualities of installation work, 2) the stripping of social meaning from the work and its replacement by formal criticism and, 3) a disengagement from an audience beyond the gallery context. In this process, the dialectic between possibilities inherent in the form, its social references to mass culture and video's strong historic emphasis on narrative and social content is devalued. In choosing to mix installation artists' work with that of video artists the curators may have reinforced this process within the parallel gallery context.

While works such as *Through The Eye of the Cyclops* by David Tomas or *On TV*, by Ian Carr-Harris were exciting visual puzzles, they required a developed knowledge of twentieth-century aesthetics and the attendant discourse on representation. Tomas's piece wound together the Western quest myth of Odysseus with Vertov's exploration of film theory and Talbot's writings from 'The Pencil of Nature', to "redefine what it might mean to look and see had we not been subject to the historical conditions which have crystallized in the form of industrial capitalism", using fragments from the texts, a laser beam and video surveillance.

Ian Carr-Harris examined Manet's intentions in producing *Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe* and *Olympia*. Carr-Harris projected the image of a field without human presence; in front of the projection lay a table-cloth or rumpled bedsheet. The viewer was forced to imaginatively create Manet's picknickers and naked women. An audio lecture suggested that Manet sought both confrontation and compli-

city with the male gaze by presenting a confrontational female gaze. The artist invoked the viewers to question their voyeuristic relationship to television, arguing that the way that we watch television is no different from how we view art. While the work was critical of the sexism embedded in the male gaze, its success resided in a familiarity with the visual imagery under discussion and with Lacan's theories.

Tomas and Carr-Harris's work is strongly rooted in the visual arts installation context. However, video artists also addressed the issue of assigning meaning in art-making. Vera Frenkel's complex and fragmented narrative *Lost Art: A Cargo Cult Romance*, provided a tongue-in-cheek discussion of problems of representation and the nature of art. Frenkel makes an analogy between the art object, stripped from its roots in the romantic vision of art production and the phenomenon of cargo cult. The artist provides a lush environment of spruce trees and tropical tourist artifacts. With two opposing and empty panels from a distant Banff conference situated behind, the viewer sits before a winged prison warden (the lost art object in question). We embark on a search to return meaning to art and, by extension, experience, through a layered video narrative. Frenkel's point is well taken: the struggle for interpretation has replaced the pleasure and freedom of the art process. The art system idealizes the object, obscuring its roots in actual production. It is a lesson that can be applied to some of the other work in "Luminous Sites."

Corry Wyngaarden's *As a Wife Has Cow* and Barbara Steinman's *Cenotaphe* used video in specific and forceful ways. Both were successful for similar reasons: they spoke to fundamental social concerns; used appropriate means to represent these and also addressed issues of representation. Not surprisingly, these installations appealed to a varied audience, including the uninitiated.

As a Wife Has Cow relies on a series of stories provided by Keely Moll, a woman rancher. She is an engaging and relaxed narrator, whose motto, taken from Gertrude Stein, is "considering how frightening everything in the world is, nothing is very dangerous". The stories feature Rock Creek characters, confrontations with survival in rugged country, deep caring for the children who she has raised, and pithy wisdom, her own as well as Gertrude Stein's.

The installation provides far more than engaging social history, for Moll is a woman in a traditionally male world who retains a strong grounding in her femaleness and personal strength. Wyngaarden works with her subject and the issues that her life suggests in a sensitive way. She examines one of her ongoing concerns, male domination over nature, through a repeated slow motion video sequence of men riding bucking wild cows at a rodeo. This contrasts with footage of lush ranchland, of Moll herding cows and of animals grazing without human interruption. The obsessive quality of the rodeo and the natural rhythms of the ranch are in stark contrast.

Equally clever is the construction of the installation. There are six monitors faced into a circle, each on a bale of hay. As we watch from the periphery the installation context



Corry Wyngaarden: *As a Wife Has Cow*; 1986; installation at Contemporary Art Gallery. Photo: Chick Rice.



Vera Frenkel: *Lost Art: A Cargo Cult Romance*; 1986; installation at Community Arts Council. Photo: Chick Rice.

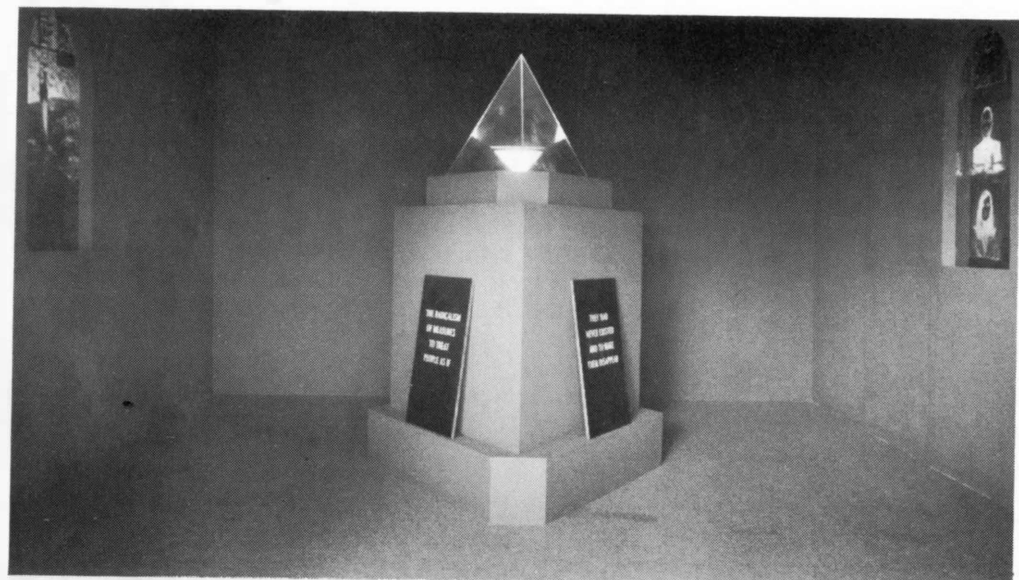
moves between the rodeo and the listeners' circle: we are made complicit with the tension of the rodeo and with the slow pleasure of the landscape. The carefully edited tapes move between simultaneous action and discontinuity during Moll's narratives. Wyngaarden makes an effective statement about gender identity, prodding us to examine masculinity, femininity and associated values, a demand to look beyond the representation.

Barbara Steinman's *Cenotaphe* is dedicated to the disappeared: Central and Latin Americans, Native Canadians, victims of European fascism... It addresses the capacity of written history to liquidate actual memory. In a darkened space, the artist constructed a monument topped by an eternal video flame, a cool, illusionistic medium made hot. At the base of the monument we read a quote from Hannah Arendt: "The radicalism of measures to treat people as if they had never existed and

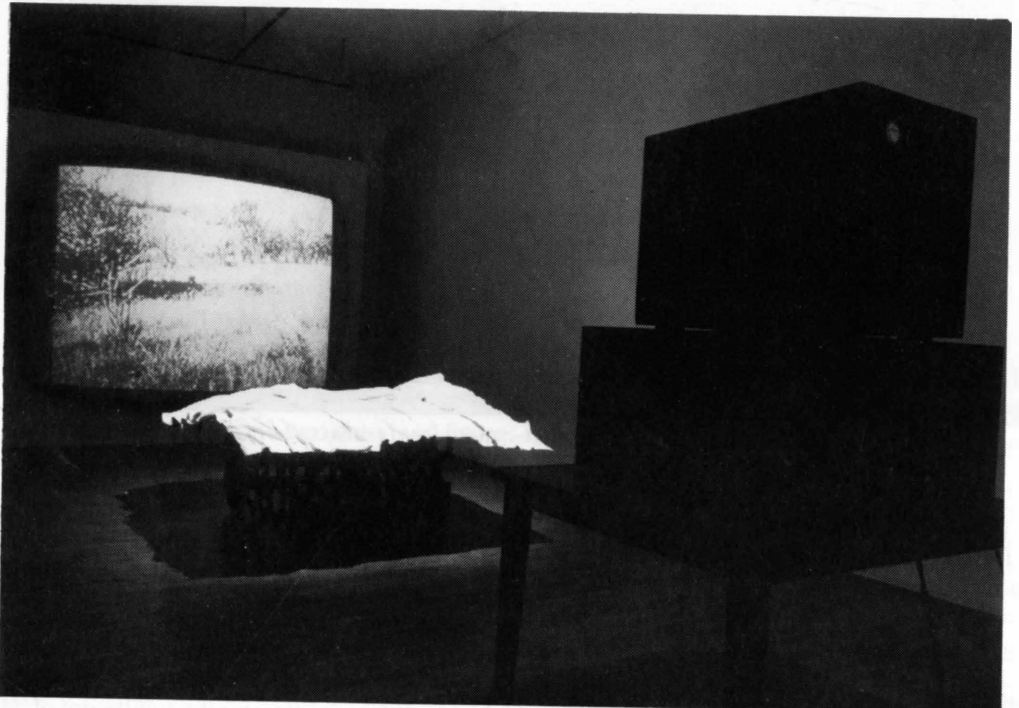
to make them disappear is frequently not apparent at first glance." On either side of the monument are arched windows; here, slides of disappeared individuals, fragments from their lives, images from lost cultures flash in sequence. The images are grainy, transforming the windows (a means of sight) into grave-stones. This work was shown at Presentation House in North Vancouver, a building which was once a prison.

"Luminous Sites" provided a valuable exposure to video installation for Vancouver's art audience. It raised public and media awareness of video as a creative form. Despite the narrowness of some of the works and the containment of the sites to primarily gallery contexts, it has opened the way for an ongoing presentation and discourse of and about video art and future outreach to a wide audience.

Sara Diamond



Barbara Steinman: *Cenotaphe*; 1986; installation at Presentation House. Photo: Chick Rice.



Ian Carr-Harris: *On TV*; 1986; installation at the Western Front. Photo: Chick Rice.