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## **Video Art for the Uninitiated**

Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video is a great place to begin a foray into video art

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It was just this year that I discovered video art, and the scene in Toronto. From the showings going on throughout the city and the many events, I have, in a rather short period of time, acquired at least a steady flirtation with video art.

There is a lot of great stuff going on in Toronto in this field. Every event I have been to has been both student-friendly, offering a student discount, and at least interesting. There is, of course, some unevenness. Such is the case with all art. I wouldn't expect brilliance to leap off of the screen every time I went to see a video. However, there have been several gems that have stayed with me, most notably the works of Miranda July, Stephen Reinke, and Colin Campbell and a fabulous video by Johanna Householder called Next to the Last Tango, which simulated the anal sex scene in Last Tango in Paris with a wonderful PoMo slant. I writhed with joy through the entire thing. Well, pass the butter...

For some reason, there is something about video that intrigues me. I don't make video. I watch it. Whenever I possibly can.

Part of what I find so captivating about video is its non-physical nature. Though I have a friend who swears by the "sexiness of manipulating analog material, i.e. film" (see "When Video Killed the Pornstar," overleaf), I don't buy it. It is not that I'm dismissing film as a medium. That couldn't be farther from the truth. But video offers something different from film, and I believe that part of that has to do with video's abstract nature. You can never really hold it in your hands. You'll never see it in any way other than on a screen.

Though this may seem like a somewhat heady premise with which to begin, this aspect of video definitely contributes to the artistic productions made in the medium. Video is image and sound which can be distorted, overlapped, endlessly manipulated and edited. As all of my friends who would sit in a room hand-splicing super-8 could tell you, there's a point where you just have to stop with film.

Another way in which this somewhat non-physical nature of video contributes to its products is the ability for integration. If something is on video it can be edited into any other video, resulting in a medium of appropriation and recontextualization. Stephen Reinke discussed this at a workshop he hosted at the Power Plant on January 9th, and his videos often offer good examples of found footage use. The result is a mode of creation which is dynamic, potentially visually/auditory confusing, and which offers incredible potential.

Nowadays, with digital editing being frequently used with film, and with transfers between media being relatively easy and cheap, a lot of people opt to work with both film and video. The lines between the two are not so crystal clear. However, film is expensive. Very expensive. And video is not.

That accessibility engenders another aspect of video which contributes to its appeal for me. Students, young people, and the disenfranchised can create video along with others who may have more resources or experience to attain funding or grants. The result is an astonishing variety of work, from all around the world, made by people who wouldn't necessarily be able to have access to or afford film. So, you can have an 18-year-old Russian woman's video showing alongside a 35-year-old white North American male's. Video is open in a way film is not, and this allows for a body of work which is broad, relevant, and which communicates the voices that could be left out of film.

That breadth is reflected well in an exhibit currently running at the Power Plant; Magnetic North: Canadian Experimental Video. This exhibit shows the variety not only of voices, but also approaches to the medium that Canadian artists have produced. There are 40 videos, created by 47 artists on view there. If you're interested in checking out some of the possibilities that video holds, this is a great place to start.

In a small room, there are three television sets, with earphones, an aspect I enjoyed, because it allows you to be intimate with the soundtrack of each video. Hours of material — roughly eight hours worth, to me somewhat more exact — are looped, each TV playing two of the six programs, organized by thematic concerns. It is possible to switch from TV to TV for hours, watching radically different videos which range in length, subject and style.

All of the videos shown fall under the rubric of “experimental,” yet how each of these videos is experimental varies widely. Some deal with controversial subject matter, others manipulate the medium in interesting ways. There is always a sense of the experiment, however.

Allan Harding MacKay’s *Somalia Yellow* implicates both the camera and the viewer, while maintaining a remote distance. Colin Campbell’s *Hollywood and Vine* asks questions about identity in a modern-kitsch culture and in narrative. The *100 Videos* by Steven Reinke, of which excerpts are shown, the total running time of the whole sequence is just short of five hours, are frequently funny. I’m not sure how he does it, but Reinke can make the idea of doing a documentary on an HIV-positive male amusing. They deal with a broad range of thematic issues, including the creation of identity, depictions of the human body, artistic formulae, and video as a medium, to mention a few. *Prayer for Nettie*, a video by Donigan Cumming, in part concerns validity, honesty and artistic power: is it behind or in front of the camera? Doug Meinyk’s *Danny Kaye’s Eyes* is a medium-bending piece, which incorporates animation, found footage and comments on other time-based media -- performance art/ TV/ film.

These are just a few of the highlights there. It is highly recommended. Though I wouldn’t suggest trying to take it all in one viewing. However, at the very friendly student price of \$2 a go, it is possible to go a few times to try to get your fill. The Power Plant also offers a free discussion of the exhibit on Wednesday January 23rd at 7pm, for those of you who are interested in what video artists have to say about the exhibit and Canadian experimental video.

*Magnetic North* showcases both the potential of video, and the range of artistic expressions one can achieve with it, and some very good Canadiana to boot. It’s also a good introduction to video as an art-form, in an accessible space, with little pretense and no intimidating throngs. It’s a

great place to start exploring this rich artistic medium.