



Expanding moving
images since 1988
April 12-20, 2018
imagesfestival.com

Images Festival

A machine to drain meaning from the world

by
Jon Davies



Steve Reinke, *A Boy Needs a Friend*, 2015

“This is how it works. At bottom, at core, is a well or reservoir of primal impressions: images, words, gestures. This is cushioned by a layer of fluid anxiety. A piston, lubricated by anxiety, the false hope that things must make sense, be meaningful, forces up random unconscious material. And we are stuck, then, perpetually shuffling these bits around, forming them into unlikely scenarios, appalling stories, even as more primal bits are flung up.”

—Steve Reinke¹

I like to fancy myself to be post-biology, shunning the tired routine of reproduction and the burden of genealogical lineages for a queer chosen-family tree of the living and dead, real and fictional, that I’ve cultivated over four decades of life. While my birth certificate may attest otherwise, I prefer to imagine my parents as Valerie Solanas and Andy Warhol, or my conception as a sordid encounter between a George Kuchar video (perhaps of his cat) and a haughty pronouncement by Susan Sontag. I have been made and unmade by the images and words that have consumed me.

Until very recently, most queer people came of age with few visible models to forge themselves from and against, just a haze of shadows and whispers. We had to take what was culturally on offer and make it speak our queer feelings as best we could.² As the bodily urges that marked our genders and sexualities were *verboden*, we learned to identify with things that did not quite fit in or line up, like Dorothy’s magic ruby red slippers, the violent gusts blowing through Douglas Sirk’s *Written on the Wind*, or the deliriously atrocious performances of Maria Montez. Through the experience of the closet and, for some, of passing under society’s radar, we learned that surfaces were highly deceptive, and that even the most seemingly straightforward and innocuous representation likely hid depths of complicated feelings. Each cultural object or image could secret a damp, dark basement of desire.

Steve Reinke started his landmark series *The Hundred Videos* (1989–96) near thirty years ago; it was to stand as his work as a young artist. The short tapes, spanning several hours total, collectively act as a primer for how the then-adolescent medium of video allows any spectator (with the most modest technical means) to transform images according to their desires. The epic kicked off with *Excuse of the Real*, an evisceration of the documentary tradition and a Molotov cocktail lobbed into debates about the ethics of representing AIDS. In it, Reinke claims to be a filmmaker whose next project will take on the epidemic: “a close personal look at a guy dying.” As he tries to control life’s variables, including the timing of his subject’s inevitable demise, his “project risked degenerating into fiction.” For Reinke, documentary is imaginatively lazy, and deceptive in pretending that the world is self-evident and not distorted by the whims of the artist behind the scenes. It hides egos under an alibi of humanism and the miasma of social good. This is the “excuse of the real.”



Steve Reinke, *A Boy Needs a Friend*, 2015

Another provocation it offered: the image is not as important as what you do with it, as a catalyst for thought. Matching found and recorded images with Reinke's distinctive voice-over, *The Hundred Videos* reveal him as a philosopher and fantasist mining the media archive for material to rub up against or violate. The image bank is not simply a pool of genetic material generative of our present-day psyches through acts of identification and refusal, but a flesh-and-blood, polymorphously perverse body to be poked and prodded like a scientific specimen. Images are libidinous, physical things. Through the dulcet, even hypnotic, tones of Reinke's iconic voice-overs, his videos cleave away the meanings that have accrued to images through inertia. With the slate now cleared, they can be filled with the narrator's singularly deviant projections. Reinke's endgame was not about media literacy or critique, exactly, but something more primal. Watching Jeffrey Dahmer's dad being interviewed by Oprah on TV, for example (in *Box*), we are coerced to think and feel certain platitudes that cement the moral order of the universe, right and wrong. Like a devil appearing on your shoulder, Reinke's voice seduces us to read such scenes against the grain, no matter what depraved twists and absurd turns such frottage may take.

Reinke's hijacking of the "I" statement throughout his sprawling oeuvre replaces earnest sincerity with endlessly generative irony. Identity is not a stable position but always wrought in affective relation with an "other," whether it be a disturbing YouTube clip or one of Reinke's many students and protégés such as Jean-Paul Kelly, Emily Vey Duke & Cooper Battersby, Dani (Leventhal) Restack, and Christine Negus. Reinke's work with typically younger collaborators, most fruitfully with the Welsh artist James Richards, allows for precisely this encounter with difference toward creating the uncannily new. In *What Weakens the Flesh Is the Flesh Itself* (2017), Reinke and Richards push and pull at the body of the German production designer Albrecht Becker. Found in the Schwules Museum* archives, this enigmatic figure, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis for his homosexuality, performs in photographic self-portraits that detail the extensive tattooing and extreme body modifications that he undertook before his death in 2002. He stands exposed between the two artists, who share the spectacle of his body across generations.

Following several years of what Reinke now calls "Interim Videos," *Anthology of American Folk Song* (2004) emerged as a blistering, fragmented portrait of War on Terror-era America. It ushered in a suite of episodic works as ambitious as *The Hundred Videos* in that they will proliferate until his ultimate death. Each volume of *Final Thoughts* thus declares its finality only to be followed by another, and another.

Reinke's tapes are carefully scripted, and eventually this focus on writing grew to encompass its next-of-kin, drawing. His 2005 anthology *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema*, co-edited with Chris Gehman, announced how vital animation had become as a rubric for Reinke, a kind of ecstatic, protean spirit that video should aspire to. Animation is a medium capable not only of transforming any image at will, but of imitating the speed and fluidity of thought itself, of capturing a kind of *informe*



Steve Reinke,
*Anthology of
American Folk Song*,
2004

interiority before it calcifies. In his *The Genital Is Superfluous: Final Thoughts, Series Four* (2016), Reinke goes so far as to claim, "After all, the world is a cartoon in which images are free to roam phantasmically." Ina Blom's book *The Autobiography of Video* suggests that this fluidity is inherent to the medium. She places analogue video's status as a signal or "force" front and centre in her "life and times of a memory technology," reminding us that no video image is fixed or stable.

While Reinke's work has always been episodic, many of the components of the *Final Thoughts* evidence a sense of immediacy as if trying to catch but not freeze thought, as images fade and aphorisms quiver across the many hours of his "last words." In *Rib Gets in the Way: Final Thoughts, Series Three* (2014), he speaks of entering the archive "and switch[ing] out one sign for another [...] Possibilities emerge where meanings are destroyed." The *Final Thoughts* are particularly self-reflexive, charting their own coming into being, promiscuously trying out and discarding possibilities, and flirting even more with the obscene than before. Such practices answer Reinke's call to look beyond the big picture and break things down to the molecular level. Each disquieting image breaks down into a pixel, each pithy phrase into a word, and Reinke's stream of video-thought continues apace. The corpse won't stop talking.

¹ Both the title and the epigraph are from Reinke's video *Rib Gets in the Way: Final Thoughts, Series Three* (2014).

² Simon Watney, "Queer Warhol," *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, edited by Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 24.