



Programme:

Prime Cuts, Paul Wong, 1981, 20:00

Working the Double Shift, Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak, 1984, 18:30

---intermission---

7 Day Activity, Paul Wong, 1977, 13:00

A Demonstration of the Fear of Pain, Kim Tomczak, 1980, 14:00

The Damages, Lisa Steele, 1978, 13:00

Makin' Strange, Lisa Steele, 1978, 16:00

Paul Wong, Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak were among the winners of the 2005 Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts. Tonight we honour them with a program of their short work from the late seventies and early eighties that exemplifies their commitment to performance as a tool for political change, critiquing fallacious mass media representations with wit and charm.

Wong, Steele and Tomczak all started making tapes separately in the seventies, and many of these works are now canonical examples of body and video art: Wong's *60 UNIT: BRUISE* (1976) and Steele's *Birthday Suit — with scars and defects* (1974) immediately come to mind, as does Steele & Tomczak's brave meta-porn *In the Dark* (1984). Not to be ignored is the enormous contribution that all three have made to building institutions for the support of artists — especially the video scene — in Canada: Wong with *Video In and On Edge* in Vancouver, and Steele & Tomczak with Toronto's own *Vtape*.

In Wong's comically deadpan *Prime Cuts* (1981), a group of glamorous young people performs privilege, affluence and pleasure, while in *7 Day Activity* (1977), Wong documents his severe acne and his attempts to discipline a body out of control. Steele and Tomczak's *Working the Double Shift* (1984) deconstructs the same idealized, commercial images that *Prime Cuts* parodies, examining how patriarchal, capitalist culture is encoded in television; its barrage of kitschy ads and a fantasized mass resignation of parliament lend humour to this bold manifesto. Tomczak's *A Demonstration of the Fear of Pain* (1980) features a man's awkward, pained rant bluntly detailing his hardships and marginalization in the face of official history. Finally, in *The Damages* (1978) and *Makin' Strange* (1978), Steele performs one of the most memorable characters in Canadian cinema: Mrs. Pauly, who was based on women Steele met working in a shelter for women and children, many survivors of domestic violence. Caught in a web of medical, legal, financial and romantic red tape, Mrs. Pauly never simply lays down and dies — the result is incredibly poignant and wryly funny.

Paul Wong – Essay by Elspeth Sage

Paul Wong is a multidisciplinary artist best known for his video and live art projects. He is self-taught and has been exhibiting videotapes, installations, photographs and performances since the 1970s. He is an extraordinary artist and visionary whose ideas and works have influenced an entire generation. He has paved the way for his art form from being referred to as 'not TV', to a respected practice on the national and international stage. Born in Prince Rupert, B.C., Wong has produced works that often reflect his cross-cultural influences of being Chinese and Canadian.

Wong's early works were troubling, and alienated more conventional audiences. Yet they proved magnetic to the burgeoning and disgruntled youth movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The angst and hopelessness of that generation (late 70s punk, early 80s void culture) were encapsulated by Wong in stark works like *60 Unit Bruise* (1976) and *intensity* (1978), and in lavish nothingness pieces like *Prime Cuts* (1981), *Confused: Sexual Views* (1984) and *Body Fluid* (1986), a portrayal of 1980s glamour transformed into proletarian chic. Vacuity was in, and Wong embraced it. Later, he began to explore his Chinese heritage with *Ordinary Shadows*, *Chinese Shade* (1989) and *Chinaman's Peak: Walking The Mountain* (1992). Once again he mirrored his times in reflecting the shift toward inclusion, multiculturalism, and an interest in and acceptance of the 'other.' Wong's work is influenced by, and critical of, mass media and pop culture. He vacillates between fiction and nonfiction, positioning biographical portrayals of his friends with ostensibly autobiographical portrayals of himself. He uses a vast array of elements, from the organic (roses, incense, earth, candles, fire, cedar trees, oranges, bottles of Scotch) to products that characterize the 20th century (mirrors, motorized devices, M16 rifles, Harley Davidson motorcycles, welding kits and state-of-the art digital technologies).

His work has been shown around the world, starting in 1974. He has represented Canada, or been exhibited, at: international festivals such as Edge 88 in London, England (1988); The Museum of Modern Art in New York (1978-); *Life/Live* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1996); and *Journey to the East*, an experimental performance festival in Hong Kong (1998). His work has also been presented at many non-gallery sites – abandoned warehouses, malls, cabarets, deconsecrated churches and carparks – from Belfast, Shenzhen, Regina, Taipei, Halifax and Newcastle to Venice.

He received national recognition with a solo show, *On Becoming A Man*, at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 1995. In 2002 the Vancouver Art Gallery presented *Paul*

Wong: From The Collection. This exhibition of photoworks, videotapes and installations included *Confused: Sexual Views*, originally banned by the VAG in 1984. His seminal work, *Hungry Ghosts*, was presented in Extra 50 at the Venice Biennale in 2003.

Hungry Ghosts, a five-channel video installation and large-format laser prints, included new and remixed materials from projects on death that spanned two decades. The video installation provided an ephemeral form of interdisciplinary elements configured with fleeting moments, manipulated images, visual clips, photographs, text, narrative stories, home movies, sound bites, edited fiction and real-time documents digitally projected onto transparent surfaces. There were elements from previous works such as: *Murder Research* (1977), an investigation of a murder; *in ten sity* (1978), a performance about the suicide of a friend; *Dave* (1991), a funeral for a murdered Hell's Angels enforcer; and *Chinaman's Peak: Walking The Mountain* (1992), about ancestral worship and feeding the "hungry ghosts" (defined as "those in the spirit world who are cared for by the living; a main principle of ancestral worship, where hungry ghosts are fed so they will not come back and disrupt the lives of the living").

The video projections were shown on a moving vaporetto (sea bus) that transported the work and audience on a journey. *Hungry Ghosts* was a transformative work, constantly moving, providing a site for remembering the past while sailing in the present. It was a novel medium for dealing with such intensely personal and emotional subjects as death and loss. Wong described it as a site of memory where the very private becomes public, a virtual 'walking the mountain,' a way to honour and remember those who had gone before.

Parallel to his outstanding contributions in the field of video and media art, Wong has consistently had a strong local, national and international commitment to developing new avenues for production, exhibition and distribution. From his early days in the 1970s he lobbied the Canada Council for equipment and support for his field, made public appeals for access to the television media and broadcasting at the CRTC and produced groundbreaking exhibitions like *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1990), a national touring exhibition of 25 Asian Canadian artists working in film, video and photography. This was the first exhibition to feature Asian Canadian work with such prominence, and led to the development of a community identity that resulted in numerous subsequent shows.

Paul Wong is a media arts pioneer and the recipient of the 1992 Bell Canada Award in Video Art (administered by the Canada Council). In 2002, he also received the Asian Heritage Transforming Art Award for his role as a mentor, and, in 2003, the NFB-CHUM-TV Expression Award in recognition of his role as a "trailblazer" in the area of cultural

diversity.

Wong is well known for his curatorial and cultural consultancy and community art projects. He is a regular and vocal participant at national symposia and international conferences on art and culture. He is a past member of the Canada Council's media arts advisory committee and a co-founder of two Vancouver-based artist-run centres: the Satellite Video Exchange (Video In), in 1973, one of Canada's first and longest-running media production centres, and On Edge, in 1985, an organization dedicated to producing and exhibiting work previously marginalized by conventional definitions of 'art.'

Wong has produced, created, presented and performed his art for over 30 years. When others left the field because they tired of the poverty and alienation, he stuck it out. When others became co-opted by the systems they had earlier railed against, Wong stuck it out. He has survived countless incidents of censorship and controversy. He has somehow managed to be a working artist since he was 18 years old. He has had no other career. *Elsbeth Sage is a co-founding director of On Edge, a curator, writer and producer.*

{*Prime Cuts*, Paul Wong, 1981}



Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak – Essay by Peggy Gale

Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak work separately and together as artists, administrators, teachers, writers, curators, mentors, lovers, collaborators, hosts, instigators, friends. A unique couple, they have accomplished much, inspired many, and profoundly influenced developments in video and media art in Canada since the early 1970s.

The work of Steele and Tomczak, rather than being a simple forward progression, is marked by lateral shifts, as central themes – obsessions – are revised and renewed. Knight's moves. At the same time they are thoroughly *in the world* through their written texts and editorial projects, their organizing of panels, exhibitions and events, their presence on boards and advisory committees and their ongoing production and exhibition schedule.

When Lisa Steele made *Juggling* in 1972, her first video piece, she was already respected for her photographic work and her early involvement with artist-run A Space in Toronto. Her *Birthday Suit – with scars and defects* (1974) has entered the master canon as body art, autobiography and feminist identity – a beacon. Thirty years on, it remains fresh and revelatory, as it counts out and recalls visible small wounds. *A Very Personal Story*, from the same year, records Steele's poignant memory, while still a teenager, of finding her mother dead at home a decade before. These luminous black and white recordings are direct, seemingly simple, yet their visual elegance and use of understated narrative established the place of the body and the self as central to the medium at that time. Later, *The Gloria Tapes* (1980) moved outwards to a social milieu, to introduce Steele as Mrs. Pauly, a rattled welfare mother, anxious to please despite the snarls of a "helping" bureaucracy. Steele has a striking presence on camera.

Kim Tomczak, photographer and part of the artist-run Pumps group in Vancouver, came to Toronto in 1982, where he became a co-founder of Vtape, now the premier distributor of independently-produced video in Canada. He remains executive director and an indispensable expert in the restoration and conservation of early tape formats and artists' works for museums, including the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada. Through Vtape, he has overseen projects involving festivals and exhibitions in Japan, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and, with Lisa Steele, was instrumental in organizing the on-going international media biennale *Tranz<>Tech* in Toronto, among many other projects.

Steele and Tomczak complement each other ideally as artists and individual personalities, as writers, curators and activists, and in the many advisory roles they have taken on. They have been teachers as well, currently at the University of Toronto,

but in Steele's case, for over two decades previously at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

In 1983, Steele and Tomczak began working collaboratively and immediately presented *In the Dark*, a performance questioning the conventional morality of sex as a private matter, beyond discussion, better left hidden and unremarked — censored, in effect. With *Working the Double Shift* (1984), a larger domestic life is imaged, the politics of kitchen and laundry, of taking turns at making morning coffee. These short works, among others, are declamatory, demonstrative, a call to logical action and right thinking, yet often intercut with humour.

In the following decade their video productions darkened, while becoming also deeper and more poetic. Their works probed family histories and repressed memories, deeply felt wounds in the personal and social fabric. *In Legal Memory* (1992, 80 minutes), a story unfolds around homosexuality and homophobia in genteel Victoria, with historical data indicting the government and the armed forces (the real-life murder conviction that is documented led to British Columbia's last death by hanging in 1959).

The Blood Records, written and annotated (1997, 52 minutes) responds to another family fragment, recreating tuberculosis treatment at Fort San in Saskatchewan during the mid-1940s. Once again, close research has yielded up documentary footage and vintage photographs to layer with re-enacted events in the original buildings of the sanatorium. The resulting video and lush accompanying catalogue toured Canada from 1999 to 2003.

Recent work has become even more subtle and understated. *We're Getting Younger All the Time* (2000, 20 minutes) is a double portrait of Steele and Tomczak, bare-shouldered, gazing levelly at the camera, the jittery image quality the result of greatly-speeded recording (from intervals totaling four hours) reduced to 20 minutes, then played in reverse. The direct gazes belie the work's mysterious construction, rendering minute changes fascinating. Paul Ardenne notes the laconic quality of their images generally, "the exact opposite of the booming images of the mass media and entertainment industry," rising from their "belief in the value of a discreet approach, in the viability of persuasion that works not brutally but by osmosis, by slow seepage. Rather than alarm viewers, Steele and Tomczak give us time. They offer us images divorced from the concept of impact, favoring a pensive gaze instead.¹ *In Make Love, Not War* (2003, 2 min., 5 sec.), so succinct, we see the classic phrase presented as a crawling script over glorious lilies or aggressive ants in close-up, feeding.

Thoughtful viewers sink slowly into the work of Steele and Tomczak, reflect on these realities, give meaning to their own memories and experience, create anew their

perceptions, informed and seduced by text, by slow transition, by the flow of time over and through the body, the mind, the consciousness. Yet each new piece poses its own challenge.

Their current project, *commonshares*, springs from recent news stories about corporate scandals and the misuse of money and power. Fraud seems suddenly pervasive, and misjudgment common internationally at all levels. Despite the issue's topicality, however, the finished work will undoubtedly transcend both the moment and the details under discussion. Their ambitious works use the specific to address a larger reality, with visual elegance and the technical sophistication appropriate to art.

Now beauty has crept into the revelation of contentious social issues, and poetry has slyly infiltrated their texts. Steele and Tomczak are inventing a new visual language in their video projects: an original embodiment of time, its perils and potential.

Peggy Gale is an independent curator and critic.

1. Paul Ardenne, "Steele-Tomczak / Trouble Tracked to the Depths of the Body." In *Lisa Steele - Kim Tomczak ... before I wake* (Paris: Canadian Cultural Centre, 2003), p. 68.

{*Working the Double Shift*, Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak, 1984}

