

IRONY RISING: THE BODY AND AIDS IN THE 1980S

JON DAVIES

"The simple physical law that no two bodies can occupy the same space at the same time translates into an ethical principle – each has the same value as the other." – Gregg Bordowitz, "Renew Our Days"ⁱ

"Every human, Rolanda, is exactly interchangeable. By this I don't mean that everyone is born equal, born with the same human rights, or anything as confusing as that. I simply mean that we are all exactly interchangeable." – Steve Reinke, *Talk Show (#80)* (1996)

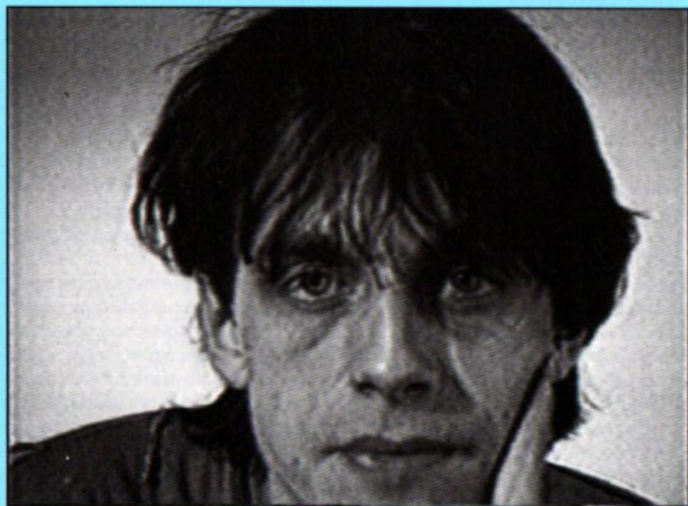
How do we measure the distance between these two statements? How can we be certain that any testimony is really believed by its author to be true, and does it matter? Is the second less ethical than the first?

During the 1980s, video became the foremost medium for confronting the massive medical, political and social disaster that was the AIDS crisis. A weapon on the battlefield of representation, video was used by many artists and activists to create more truthful and complex images of People With AIDS (among other motives), distinct alternatives to the distorted and demonized depictions peddled by the mainstream media. However, as is apparent in "meta-AIDS video"ⁱⁱ like Gregg Bordowitz's extraordinary *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) and various communiqués from and chronicles of the movement (notably John Greyson's crucial essay "Strategic Compromises"ⁱⁱⁱ), there were both unspoken conflicts and outright debates over representation – and not just between effete aesthetes and alpha radicals (a false dichotomy cleverly torn asunder in Greyson's 1989 *The Pink Pimpernel*). One such tension was between the goal of mainstream accessibility (to reach the marginalized populations most affected by AIDS with urgent messages) and the then-politically incorrect desire (in some circles at least) for conceptual and aesthetic experimentalism. This went hand in hand with the need to provide a public service and the equally pressing need to express very personal feelings that didn't necessarily find a place in activist rhetoric, whether it be outright despair or exasperation with what Greyson has called the "culture of certainty," relied on as much by AIDS activism as by the dominant culture. There was also friction between the belief in the eye-opening politically progressive power of the indexical image – particularly those that gave voice to the voiceless, or revealed hitherto unrepresented oppressions – and a more self-conscious and ironic position suspicious of all of documentary's truth-claims, especially those bent on being corrective and virtuous.

This programme seeks to chart some of these productive stresses in 80s video, specifically with regard to the staging of the queer body, and the dawning realization that confessing bodies cannot always be trusted. Beginning in the mid-80s, the utter transformation that AIDS effected on the representation of the body ran parallel to the developing self-awareness of video artists about their medium, which meant that even their own alternative representations warranted deconstruction. What tensions can we discern between generations, between activists and ironists, and between artists and their subjects, who are always much more complex and messy than their directors plan for?

My programme runs backwards chronologically, beginning with Steve Reinke's *Excuse of the Real* (1989), a scathing critique of the supposed objectivity of documentary, especially the practice of taking "real" footage at face value in AIDS films and videos. At this point at the end of the decade, AIDS was so prevalent a subject of representation in his milieu that Reinke could announce, "Like everyone else, I wanted to do something on AIDS," in his case "[...] a close personal look at a guy dying." The "excuse of the real" of the title is the belief that artists are not personally responsible for the images they put out into the world; as long as the material is indexical and presented earnestly, it is somehow beyond contrivance – and critical scrutiny. As is typical, an unseen Reinke narrates the tape, this time verbally performing the role of a documentary filmmaker. However, thinking in terms of narrative storytelling (and keeping in mind the project's budget), Reinke can't help but invest his real subject's real fight with AIDS with all the pathos and eventfulness of a well-crafted fiction, and to carefully control the man's death – essential for its dramatic effectiveness, which Reinke equates with its viscerality – to make for maximum emotional impact. Reinke speaks dispassionately, fitting his subject's dying days into his production schedule with Teutonic efficiency. The filmmaker wants to emulate the conventions of the genre as faithfully as possible.

The visuals of Reinke's tape are in two parts: the first half is entirely composed of stuttering, repetitive, anonymous home movie footage of a party, while the second is a close-up formal interview – ostensibly with Reinke's PWA subject – which foils our desire for a conventional AIDS testimonial by instead focusing on a single illogical and narratively unsatisfying dream (the voice also does not match the subject's lips). There is no great self-revelation, no educational or emotional value, just an anemic story, the kind of oneiric anecdote only marginally interesting to its teller. Not only does this tape assert that documentary genres that were not self-reflexive were naïve and depleted – particularly the confessional mode, so sacrosanct for making queer and other disenfranchised voices heard



EXCUSES OF THE REAL

Steve Reinke, 1988, 4:31

– but it arguably puts forward a post-identity stance as well: “Individual identity and the passions from which it arises are ultimately trivial and devoid of meaning, at best arbitrary and at worst fictions and fabrications [...] After truth and selfhood are stripped away, the mutely organic remains; the body and sexual compulsion.”^{iv} The first of Reinke’s seminal *The Hundred Videos* (1989-1996), *Excuse of the Real* heralded a new talent on the video scene, one whose intelligent and funny work is steadfastly, impishly impossible to recuperate as politically progressive – a controversial position. Announcing the start of a new decade, Reinke’s motives, morals and “authentic” subjectivity are much harder to discern as he is intent on re-inscribing the possible meanings of every indexical image he comes across, transforming everything into fiction through a haze of ambiguities and ironies: “*Excuse of the Real* might be taken to mean that there can be no real insofar as its representation is concerned. Experience has been depleted by its endless textual and iconic duplication [...] Reinke creates a kind of shrine to a loss of the self in representation.”^v

John Goss’s bare-bones 1989 documentation of a dumpster drag fashion show performance by a collective dubbed *Stiff Sheets* outside the County/USC Medical Center in Los Angeles offers a procession of boisterous, campy fags sauntering down a make-shift red carpet runway in fashions inspired by the murderous discourses and tired clichés around AIDS. They are like a procession of ghosts brought to life by Reinke’s caustic invocation: they do not stand out in their individual subjective identities, but instead personify emblems of oppression. A home movie of sorts, it shows a performance designed to entertain activists during a particularly grueling overnight demo, and as such is very rough and rowdy. With costumes ostensibly designed by the government bureaucrats responsible for the city’s lackluster medical response to AIDS, the “fabulous fascist fashion show” features a Christian vampire, campy concentration camp garb, activist and safe sex gear, and most importantly, a slew of outfits designed to cope DIY-style with the crumbling American for-profit health care system, from sporty IV-drips and BYOB (bring your own bed) ensembles to a mummified safe-sex bride and clothes based on specific ailments like night sweats: “more than a fashion, it’s a condition, more than a style, it’s a symptom.” Faced with the prospect of quarantine centres for PWAs, the activists’ costumes and wry commentary seem to capture that provocative moment where camp activist theatrics leave the sour aftertaste of despondency rather than hope for a brighter future, where the negativity often strategically repressed from activism returns with a vengeance. Each costume is a glamorous vision of subjugation, an exaggerated, excessive and brassy imagining of how one’s imminent demise at the hands of the powerful –

who come down the pike in the “Homophobes on Parade” finale – might be sparkled up a touch. While smartly comic, the show develops an undeniable gravitas and sense of horror as the fashion victims pile up, and we metaphorically witness an entire generation of gay men wiped out.^{vi}

Greyson’s *The Perils of Pedagogy* (1984) is also about the question of how to make a spectacle out of a queer body, in this case, a young heartthrob whose strings are being pulled by an older gay director, who dolls him up in a suit, a toga and finally schoolboy dress for a drastically slowed-down and sideways-framed music video version of Lulu’s hit song “To Sir With Love.” As the older man comments on his protégé’s performance, we hear the boy’s inner thoughts, and Greyson in turn ironically critiques the gaudily-dressed mentor’s pretensions through cut-ins of text – “whose fantasy?” – and oblique imagery. Without specific reference to AIDS – the first Canadian videos responding to the pandemic would come soon after, and Greyson would become perhaps the most formally inventive, playful and vital forces in AIDS media – Greyson here targets the condescending attitudes that an older generation of gay men can hold toward the community’s young (drawing parallels to Ancient Greece). A manifesto for queer youth liberation, it includes footage from Lindsay Anderson’s hot-headed film *If...* (1968) about an armed insurrection at a boy’s boarding school, ending with the yummy Malcolm McDowell cutting down all the grown-ups with machine gun fire, which Greyson juxtaposes with the ecstatic, smiling face of a newly-liberated young heartthrob. Similarly, Greyson fiercely (yet playfully) liberated radical queer representation from realism.

Finally, Rodney Werden’s “*I’ll Bet You Ain’t Seen Noth’n Like This Before*” (1980) is the unforgettable recording of an interview-cum-demonstration with a lanky, white-haired, bespectacled older man. Casually sitting naked in his easy chair in a cramped but tidy apartment, and with his body completely shaved, the man – called Tom in writings about the tape – boasts to Werden of a very special skill: he can penetrate his anus with his own flaccid penis. An instigator and documentarian of some of the most startling sexual confessions imaginable, ever-curious Werden naturally wants to see it: “I can’t believe it...I can’t imagine it...Could you do it for me? Could I see it?” Now the problem is figuring out the best way of showing off his sexual prowess to the camera, and we bear witness to the calm negotiations between Tom and Werden to exhibit his trick to the greatest effect – as viscerally as possible *pace* Reinke. Discussing the logistics of the act and its representation in gritty detail, Tom and Werden share an easy rapport, and the subject talks candidly about his experimentation with his own body that has led him to this state of grace where fantasies are redundant and his own privates and their unexpected

capabilities are the all-consuming real. The tape is startlingly de-erotized, Tom's testimony largely clinical and unemotional; Jennifer Oille has commented about Werden's tapes, that, "The relationship between the voyeur and the narcissist, cognizant of each other's intentions, demonstrates a complicity more ethical than many inventions passed off on the public."^{vii} Of course, Tom revealed even more than he is aware; in Werden's words, "He's a very anti-social person. I mean what you see there is the total of his life [...] he just eliminates the people. So now he's just left with himself. And the fact that he can fuck himself is pretty important. It's not just a trick. He is very self-sufficient [...] To me that's the most important thing about that tape – his advanced state of loneliness."^{viii} In the second part (not shown here due to time constraints), Tom stimulates his penis with the varying vibrations of a shortwave radio speaker. Here Tom again takes a tool that was meant for two (a giver and a receiver) and "deposit[s] into his own bank,"^{ix} as Reinke put it, instead of using it to communicate interpersonally. In the context of the AIDS videos that had yet to be produced at this time in Canada – this programme straddles our pre-and post-AIDS video national landscape – I can't help but regard this piece as an instructional safe-sex tape.^x

An unexpected through-line that surfaced, further uniting these four videos, is their diverse interpretations of the idea of "home movies," whether in terms of this most intimate of genre's conventions – the strange mix of confession and cliché, self-expression and convention – or simply the budgetary restraints. And in each, the subjects misbehave, they do not perform – whether this entails dying, crooning, sashaying or self-fucking – according to schedule, they don't fit the frame exactly as planned. And who is the central figure in these home movies? Well, the Father, of course: the adventurous senior diddling himself, the old queen who just wants to show his charge what life is all about, the paternalistic medical, political and religious establishments and those who believed in the indexical image's capacity to reveal the hidden truth of queer lives.

^{vii} From the journal *Documents* c. 1996-2000. Gregg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings, 1986-2003*, ed. James Meyer (Cambridge, MA & London: The MIT Press, 2004), 165-71.

^{viii} Alexandra Juhász, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press, 1995), 240.

^{ix} John Greyson, "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices," in *Reimaging America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia & Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers, 1990), 60-74.

^x Robin Metcalfe, "Black Box: The Videos of Steve Reinke," *Parachute* 100 (2000): 94, 96.

Tom Folland, "My So-Called Life," *Fuze* 18.4 (1995): 34.

^{vii} This tape was distributed through the seminal *Video Against AIDS* compilation of 22 international tapes curated by John Greyson and Bill Horrihan in 1989.

^{viii} Jennifer Oille, "Peter Wronski / Rodney Werden," *Vanguard* (November 1983): page unknown.

^{ix} Gene Youngblood, "The Lives of Rodney Werden," *Video 80 Magazine* (Winter 1983): 40.

^x Steve Reinke, "Economies of Desire: The Videos of Rodney Werden," (*My Rectum Is Not a Grave*, 2000), <http://www.myrectumisnotagrave.com/writing/werden.html> (accessed October 18, 2006).

For more on Canadian AIDS film and video see Thomas Waugh, "Anti-Retroviral: A Test of Who We Are," in *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 277-326.