

Steve Reinke: The Hundred Videos

CURATED AND EDITED BY PHILIP MONK

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TALK SHOWS AND CASE STUDIES: THE HUNDRED VIDEOS BY STEVE REINKE

Philip Monk

The Power Plant exhibition marks the completion and documentation of *The Hundred Videos*, a project that the Toronto artist Steve Reinke has pursued from the turn of the decade to the present. Ever attuned to the conceits of the art world, Reinke declared that his aim was to "complete one hundred videos before the year 2000 and my thirty-sixth birthday. These will constitute my work as a young artist."

It is 1997, and Steve Reinke has already finished the one hundred videos, well ahead of schedule. What is he to do in the years before the millennium arrives? Reinke's introduction to this publication of his scripts, "My Next Project," answers to that question. In its own deadpan way — and we understand nothing of Reinke's works if we do not pay attention to the narrative voice and fictional tone of the tapes, most of which are narrated by the artist himself — this "project" insinuates itself into a peculiar frame of mind that is widespread in (let us be generous and include ourselves) North America. (Perhaps the text has been written with the observation that the television productions feeding the American appetite for stories of serial killing, millennial panic, and alien abduction are filmed in Canada, our locations faking American locales.) With the further ironic twist that the serial killer project makes parallels with the gay rights movement, we realize that some type of mapping is taking place here, one realm of cultural experience being laid over another to create an interpretative grid of sorts. More likely, though, the model is paranoid projection of a mild or extreme disorder.

Most of Reinke's videotapes are short, as if made for the MTV generation, or perhaps those viewers with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). More particularly, they are part of a tradition of literature (a "tradition" of one, perhaps) that Reinke's peculiar style and voice belong to — that of Franz Kafka's reworking of the myths of Western culture so as to introduce, because they assume a quasi-logical form, paradoxes that the reader stumbles over. Except, in Reinke's case, the tapes' narrators think them completely reasonable. Kafka's unsettling of the commonplace shares the effects of the uncanny — when something known becomes disturbingly unfamiliar to us — a feeling that blurs the distinctions between the animate and the inanimate, the physical and the psychic. The "uncanny" has of course

become one more shibboleth of critical orthodoxy, as has the application of Freudian and Lacanian theory in contemporary art. These theories are handily used here not so much to undermine their concepts — although in the process this happens — but to assist the construction of new fictional objects. "Today, perhaps, the uncanny can best be seen in old videotapes," suggests the narrator of one of the tapes, and so the lore passed on to us and preserved in the memory bank of old film and television footage is combined in Reinke's videotapes with that other repository of popular wisdom — the clichés of language. The appeal of recognition thus lends plausibility to Reinke's twisting of documentary evidence.

Reinke's works, like Kafka's "parables and paradoxes," are populated by children and small animals (or other organisms), ghosts, and the dead. Actually, in Reinke's tapes there is no longer a distinction between the *living* and the dead; rather, we find one continuum of the pre-dead, the dead, and the un-dead, all of which speak. As the narrator of one of the tapes says, "While there may be no love among corpses, there is conversation," so these tapes include a host of voices. These voices are emitted as if from a writing machine — their function is to produce sentences. So doing, words thereby bring forth new symptoms, disorders, and monsters of nature. Wishes and desires expressed by the narrators find fulfilment in new objects and organisms, and the libido is immediately gratified in the transformations it brings about. The language employed in these tapes sometimes mimics the clinical protocols of scientific method that, so to speak, describe these things into being. What, then, is the difference between this methodology and the objectification performed by serial killers on the bodies of others? Or the eccentric literary creations of paranoiacs we are familiar with from famous case studies? In these monologues of disembodiment, what divides and connects certain states (desire and fulfilment, the self and other, the living and dead) is some sort of skin, whether human or otherwise. In the end, by completing *The Hundred Videos*, Steve Reinke has perhaps already accomplished one of the intentions outlined in his introduction, if we think of *The Hundred Videos* as a monument erected to the fantasies of dermatology. ✧