

Disclosure

Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak: The Collaborative Tapes

In the tape *A Very Personal Story* (1974), the twenty-seven-year-old Lisa Steele recounts an important event in her past: the death of her mother. In a close-framed head and shoulder shot, the artist nervously plays with her fingers in front of her face as she tells us how this separation posed the question of her identity: “I guess I felt really more like myself then than I’ve ever felt before.” Characteristic of tapes of the period – forthright narratives of an autobiographical nature – the story is told simply and directly in the time that it takes to tell. Her hands both conceal and reveal her face, offering her protection while at the same time signalling symptoms of anxiety as if to say that that identity was not secure but still in a process of constitution. Video perhaps had therapeutic value in this project, as did narrative itself. Yet the narrator is telling *us* something more than herself. Right at the beginning of the tape she says, “I’m going to tell you the end of the story first. The story is about . . . my mother dies in the end . . . so there won’t be any punch line, so you know that before we start.”

On the one hand, by negating the urge to finish a story and to make every element in our anticipation lead to that end, this device lets us concentrate on the telling itself and on the narrator rather than on the ostensible content of the death of her mother. In the process, the nervous twisting of Steele’s hands cues us to this uncertain identity. On the other hand, that early revelation potentially establishes the artificiality of the construct and of everything that we took as signs of authenticity – the close-up denoting “directness,” the nudity denoting “truth,” the fixed camera establishing unswerving objectivity, all of which, like narrative itself, compose a code. The hands now function to draw our attention to the acts, facts, and fictions of disclosure. In interposing between us and what is being told, the presentation asks us to question what is revealed and what is concealed in the process of a construction.

This second retrospective reading may be at odds with the intention of *A Very Personal Story*, which may be more of its time than I imply. *Birthday Suit*, of the same year, catalogues in chronological order the scars of injuries Steele had sustained to that date, along with brief reports of their happening. In composing its account from these indexical registers, the tape uses strategies similar to those of many forms of art of the period. And Steele herself recounts that *A Very Personal Story* was an attempt “to let memory become present tense” in the real time of telling. The second reading of *A Very Personal Story*, however, could only be prepared by subsequent works, the collaborative tapes made with Kim Tomczak, and, in particular, their first joint production *Working the Double Shift* (1984).

Artists working in video have often modelled their subject, look and production techniques on television; and the internal history of the medium has followed patterns of address from direct, unadulterated presentation to manipulated construction. Television, like film, is a collaborative endeavour, produced under the conditions of industrial manufacture with dozens to hundreds of contributors. And yet television is delivered to us or we deliver ourselves to the movies under conditions that disguise that production: on the one hand, through devices that personalize the rapport between program and audience; on the other hand, through effects that spectacularize the image and our response. The history of television shows this in every one of its genres: compare the changes in the newscast, for instance, from the 1950s to the present. In the period of its origin, video art was taken as a personal tool of investigation, but due to the narrative demands, for instance, that artists put on the medium, it developed a collaborative character as cast, technical crew, etc., became necessary. And if television became one of the sources of critical inquiry – or parody – the collaborative nature of independent production began to mimic that of the commercial industry.

If Steele and Tomczak work together to produce videotapes, their aim is partly to make evident that television and its messages are *made*. Collaboration, for them, is a practice that brings out an image of production. This is both a positive and a negative image, a representation of their own activity and a critique of another. In other words, they produce an image that in both cases shows itself to be a social relation at the same time that its message is produced. It turns the image back into its making and intention. This process is implied by Steele and Tomczak's own individual tapes, but it is the overt theme of their collaborative productions. At the same time, their intention is not solely critical in an attempt to undermine television's authority by preparing a critique of its practices. They insert their own agenda; but they use the medium of television, its format and found footage, in order to transmit their message.

Video art provides a response through its own productions to the constructions of television. At issue in the *reception* of television for most of us as viewers is the lack of any representation of our own values in the dominant media. Values are ideals or ideologies consciously acted upon or unconsciously practised. They are enacted daily but we do not necessarily picture them to ourselves: that representation comes from outside. We see ourselves as television or advertisers tell us we should be rather than having the means to picture for ourselves what we are, how we live and work, or what we value. The dominance of television gives it the power to do more than create role models; it actively constructs social class and gender through its representations. In *Working the Double Shift*, Steele and Tomczak address the lack of representation of domestic realities. As they say:

This tape presents a visual depiction of the fact that mass media – television in particular – do not reflect most people's lives. We produced imagery within our home that directly conflicts with mass media "home life" imagery and values. We also took images that originated within the mass media and totally changed their value system either by isolating the implied (and very conservative) messages and naming them or by entirely replacing the sound-track, and

thus creating a “new script.” We did this in order to suggest that criticism is possible, and to further suggest, that this critical attitude does not necessarily have to lead to cynicism on the part of the audience.

Steele and Tomczak’s response is ideological as well – any representation of value is. And, after all, their tape is a construction, however much it presents another version of production. But the tape is multivalent in its presentation (as both a production and representation, a critique and construction) as well as in its tone. It is critical and didactic, playful and ironic at once. The artists’ mixing of messages has nothing sententious or prescriptive to it.

Working the Double Shift has as its subtitle *or changing politics on the domestic front*, but this is not its sole subject. Media representations are confronted in a number of areas, including the stereotyping of artists. By implying that the political enters the domestic or private realm through the agency of representations, the artists make all representations subject to an analysis of their political content.

The work is structured in three parts or three acts. The first act sets out the “cast of characters” immediately after the titles, as if these were universal or archetypal social positions of unvarying characteristics: man, woman, family. Immediately, it juxtaposes the images of these subjects from television with a voice-over quotation from *The Anti-Social Family*: “The family remains a vigorous agency of class placement and an efficient mechanism for the creation and transmission of gender inequality. The institution of the contemporary family is the focal point of a set of ideologies which resonate throughout society. The image of idealized family life permeates the fabric of social existence and provides a highly significant, dominant and unifying complex of social meaning.” Television is seen to be a primary agent of construction of the image of idealized family life. The images from television that we have already seen introducing the cast thus are rewritten, respectively, as: “This is a construction of masculinity. This is a construction of femininity. This is an idealized image of a family.” Under this impetus of naming, a can of cleanser is labelled “This is a product”; a dish detergent, “This is a production”; a logo that combines the American Express symbol with an investment firm, “This is ideology”; and an image of a wedding used to sell Polaroid cameras, “This is propaganda.”

When the artists label a still image of a can of cleanser a “product” and a dish detergent a “production” and when later, in another segment, the second still unfolds into the commercial from which it has been excerpted, the point is that, just as the still image is part of a larger picture, a commodity is an emblem of a larger process of production. Moreover, an equation is asserted between the commodity as a product and the commercial as a product that is more obviously a production as well. The advertisement serves not only to sell a product but also to produce an image or reproduce an ideology that supports that role.

The second act is used as a vehicle for the analysis of a number of advertisements, but it is carried out through “a phantasy projection,” the title of this section. Of course, the fantasy encompasses both the original advertisements and the fiction of a Canadian revolution. In this scenario, actual documentary footage of a House of Commons vote is used, but a soundtrack is substituted in which the

politicians vote themselves out of office in a change to a socialist government brought about by a movement of grassroots groups demanding full cultural representation. Artists are part of this self-representative demand, which is also an expression of support for indigenous culture. Presumably, artists have assisted in this transition through their critique of ideology of the kind enacted in *Working the Double Shift* itself.

This segment gives the artists an opportunity to perform a critique on a couple of commercials. In the first, the blasé political commentators who voice the new script now carry out a “Marxist-feminist” critique of a shampoo commercial, addressing not only its sexual stereotyping, which is obvious, but the economic and class values presented as well. In the second commercial that promotes a French wine, they engage a semiotic critique of the misrepresentation of contemporary artists and art production in the figure of a French studio artist standing for traditional subjects and values through the practice of easel painting. As one of the commentators states: “Primarily, it’s that this kind of image of an artist is so out of touch with the reality of art and cultural practice today, well, it’s really absurd, and when you think about it, this kind of image represents a kind of academy art which we have never had in this country. So the whole thing is unreformable.”

The second set of commercials – “pirate tapes” the commentator calls them – are interventions into commercials rather than just critical commentaries. If the first set of commercials constitutes the practice of “naming,” the second set illustrates the activity of “creating a new script.” The first reworking uses the direct imagery of the commercial, leaving it intact and substituting another sound track at odds with its image. A product does not disclose the history of its making, nor does it reflect the social relations instituted by its production. This new commercial takes a GM advertisement and dubs over a voicetrack that treats as a commercial the car manufacturer’s commitment to worker self-management. “We’re working towards full worker control in all areas of production. . . . At GM worker control is good for the economy” becomes its slogan.

The second commercial in this set, by a group of single mothers enrolled in a retraining course, presents a montage of different commercials. It addresses the hierarchy of power established by commercials that show women cleaning and cooking, while a man tells them how to do it professionally, when in reality women compose 40 per cent of the paid labour force: “It’s time we started hearing housework is not just women’s work.”

The “change in media imagery” called for at the end of *Working the Double Shift* has been accomplished in this segment of commercials by using the direct means and images of television at hand. The artists have offered examples of intervention – from commentary, to direct changing of values through appropriation and “subversion” of the original message, to talking back to the media.

While the first two acts of *Working the Double Shift* address the ideological function of television either by bluntly pointing out its mechanisms or by subtly subverting them, the third act looks at the direct effect of these representations and messages on a consciousness – that of a child. What images of economy, society and gender do the media present? For the artists “the message is clear” in every instance: that women economize household budgets while men control power

(economy); that “the family is safe and free of conflict; the world, however, is a very dangerous place” (society); and that “our society identifies through representation certain tasks as being appropriate for each sex” (gender). To demonstrate that “when it comes to gender roles [children’s] personal experience may conflict with media representations,” the artists intervene by showing themselves doing different household tasks, alternately questioning the resultant images with the texts “natural/unnatural” and “male/female.” They conclude the tape:

We think we may have answered the child by example. It’s not enough. The media culture is dominant. We cannot insert ourselves into it easily. It does not fill our free time neutrally. It is ideology. It is profoundly conservative. It represents society as static. It is sexist, heterosexist, racist, classist, and patriarchal propaganda. Representations of those values dominate. Representations of our lives are, most often, invisible. Representations of our values are absent.

If I have concentrated on *Working the Double Shift*, it is because the work is Steele’s and Tomczak’s first collaborative tape and is thus the most programmatic in its practice and critique of the image. Succeeding works, such as *Private Eyes* (1987) and *White Dawn* (1987–88), are more fictionalized or fantasized in their format, without losing their political aim. Or they are more contingent on a social intervention, as was the 1985 *See Evil’s* response to the situation of continuing and escalating state censorship in Ontario.

Private Eyes, playing upon its title’s phonic resemblance to the word “privatize,” comments on the conservative ideological vogue for privatizing public resources and services. Its ostensible subject, the takeover of a public art gallery, is presented loosely in the fictional guise of an investigative news report, but its construction shows us more than this format would allow and is thus just as much a detective story. At the same time, what it does show us is not as editorialized as *Working the Double Shift*, for example. There are interjections and captions but they function more to shift the level of application of analysis of the terms “public” and “private.” Addressing the public policies of an art gallery undergoing privatization, the work asks what would happen if the rules of the marketplace were to determine the production, presentation and reception of art. What would the relation of artist to institution be? How would the autonomy of curatorial research and presentation function? What values would be attached to the work of art and the viewer’s experience? By so questioning the function of an institution, the speculation also allows the artists, especially in the narrative conclusion, to promote the platform of the Independent Artists’ Union, of which Steele and Tomczak are founding members. But what separates public and private also has its consequences in the domain of sexuality and in areas of control where the government legislates the intersection of public and private. Thus the tape in general asks the question, as the artists state in promotional material: “Why is the government busy intervening into the personal lives of citizens while at the same time moving at a furious pace to unload many of its own companies and crown corporations?”

White Dawn responds to another political debate of the moment, the issue of free trade between Canada and the United States. A combination of the Rip Van Winkle story and the American movie *Red Dawn*, the tape presents a bewildered

narrator who awakes to find the balance between Canadian and American culture reversed. The narrator realizes he/she (the perplexed individual on the screen is a man but the narrator's voice is a woman's) has been dreaming of being in Canada where all American cultural reference in mainstream media – in the movie, recording and publishing industries – has been subsumed by Canadian culture. Now it is Canadian culture that dominates, and the American complains in front of an empty drive-in movie screen: “I wanted to look up there. I wanted to see, well . . . us. Us. Who we are. I couldn't see us anywhere. I didn't know where we'd gone. Where the hell had we gone?” Instead, what we see is a parade of Canadian cultural artifacts replacing the familiar landscape of American classics. Of course, this tape is a fantasy, since the subject is an ironic reversal of the continuing dominance of American culture that overwhelms the representations of ourselves as Canadians. But the tape is also about our willingness to let this dominance continue, a willingness to subsume our differences in attraction to the cultural products of the United States.

All these collaborative tapes find common ground in confronting dominant media representations with the demand for full cultural representation. Representation of differing and opposing values, the critique of television, and the support of indigenous culture are combined in varying relations and emphases in all these tapes. While each tape speaks to its own specific issues, each presents an example of the artists' collaboration that is both a critique and a positive construction, that enables us as viewers to address our own critiques and assert our own values.

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