VDB

Mike Hoolboom

Ironic Nostalgia: an Interview with Nelson Henricks

MH: Artists often play with the means of expression, the way a message or story is told. For the uninitiated, this often makes the work bewildering and confusing. Why is it necessary to alter the shaping of pictures?

NH: If I understand the question correctly, I believe you are asking why artist's work looks so much different that what we see in mainstream media. My initial response was going to be that artist's work is part of a larger constellation of alternative uses of film and video media, so it isn't all that extraordinary. When we think of image production in the broadest possible terms—amateur video and filmmaking, home movies, surveillance videos, web cams, film and video outside of the occident, pornography, et cetera—we see that the majority of moving images produced globally are not what we usually think of as the mainstream (though the mainstream is unquestionably dominant). Most people underestimate the breadth of possible uses of media. Artists are simply engaged in a conscious exploration of the alternatives.

But are all artists willfully exploring? A commitment to experimentation and what used to be called the "avant-garde" has certainly guided my work. But beyond this, I think that it is much easier for people to make the work that they make, than it is for them to follow conventions. The work of most artists is guided by an interest in representational

systems other than Hollywood cinema and network television, and refer to a broader spectrum of human activities than can usually be contained within conventional forms.

When I was in a band we started doing cover versions but soon realized that it was easier to make original material. I remember the singer saying, "It's easier to write and play our own songs because no one can tell when you make a mistake." You immediately abandon questions of technique ("Can I play this perfectly?"), and move onto something more enabling ("Can I play SOMETHING?"). Perhaps this is all a question of intellectual styles. Some people naturally gravitate towards imitation and technical mastery, and they would call me a lazy guitarist because I can't play Stairway to Heaven. Yet, I have written a few songs. Was it more work? I don't know.

MH: We are all familiar with the virtues of the small moment, narrowcast not broadcast; small dreams not "I am the king of the world." But where is the political efficacy in this range of fringe media? Isn't it only too easy to ignore these willful obscurities, which may be found only in specialist houses playing to in-crowds? Or is it, instead, supposed to rely on the 'universal' values of great art: transcendence, the truth in materials, consciousness, time and memory? At a moment when the lies of mainstream, corporate-owned media are more transpar-

ent than ever, how is fringe media working to enter the breaches of representation?

NH: Well, I don't think fringe work is politically efficacious. Most of it was never meant to be. Someone said (I forget who) that politics should not be used as a measure of the worth of something. Bad art can have good political effects, but does that make it better art?

Deleuze and Guattari wrote about rhizomatic structures as a way of combating fascism. The current historical moment is probably a good time to again consider ways of eliminating fascism. Their argument was that fields of decentralized modules (like a potato plant) were the best way of destabilizing monolithic, centralized structures (like trees). But it's not enough simply to make a bunch of rhizomes. The key is to connect them. When linked, rhizomatic structures can have political potential.

Perhaps the queer festivals of the eighties and nineties are a good example of this. Make a queer movie, and so what? But get a hundred people to make a queer movie, show them all together and call it a festival and suddenly you have something that has some political weight. So if we want to make fringe work political, maybe we need to think about creating links.

I choose to understand politics as activities that have social effects. Usually, I am depressed that my work is so useless, politically speaking. But if I think in terms of social effects, perhaps my production has encouraged other people to make bewildering and confusing work (and I believe it has). If one thinks rhizomatically, this probably has some net political effect.

I saw a seventy six-year-old woman do a puppet show a few days ago. She was a Holocaust survivor, and the show was about her experiences in the camps when she was fifteen. I was literally speechless afterwards. The people I was with—video artists, performance artists and experimental musicians—were all mute. There was a question and answer session and no one in the audience could say a word. I would be hard pressed to explain why this was so powerful (in political and other ways), but it had something to do with the immense humanness of this person. There weren't more than twenty-five people in the audience. Was that old woman's testimony useless because she wasn't on TV? Was it any less politically efficacious? Was her puppet show good art? I am not sure I can answer that question, but I know that for me what I experienced that night made all the difference in the world. It was like the difference between life and death.

MH: Video art began in the mid-1960s with the advent of portable video recording, finally the apparatus could be taken out of corporate broadcast centers and put into the hands of individuals. Going back through the literature of this time there is much talk about a hoped for utopia of representation, that these tools would make possible a genuine democracy of what could be shown. Television by the people for the people. And on the other hand personal expressions which lay far from the strictures of ratings and advertisers could also be celebrated. But the liberation of production was not accompanied by a liberation of exhibition, the portals remain as closed today as they were then. Another utopia has come and gone. How do you see the ongoing disconnect between production and exhibition? Do you feel that most artist's work simply shows to other artists, and that

this in-crowd insularity is creating a body of work whose means and messages lie further and further from any who don't already know the secret handshake, possess the decoder ring, speak the riddle?

NH: Video, as a medium, has been always dogged by a certain between-ness: between television, cinema and art, but never completely of them. I think people had already begun to realize that video's utopian potential—in terms of broadcast television anyway—was pretty much nil by the mid-seventies. People (myself included) continued to explore this terrain up into the current decade, but with limited success. And let's not forget that other utopias have disappeared as well. People don't even pretend that television has the possibility to educate anymore. It's nearly impossible for anything difficult to survive in the current televisual ecology. And don't get me wrong: I love television. But I just don't go there with the same expectations that I do when I enter the cinema or an art gallery. Perhaps this is why I feel that my work functions best at festivals or in galleries. Over the past five years, I have begun to feel more strongly that the gallery is where my work belongs. I am an artist and I make art. Festivals (unless they are dedicated to art or experimental work) tend to provide a distorted context for the work. They set up the wrong kind of expectations about how the work should be seen, how it functions, what it should do.

As a video maker, I feel that the potential for audience is great, and my most satisfying experiences have occurred outside of the usual venues. In Atlanta, my work was shown in a public park, and a few teenagers really responded strongly to it. They simply weren't an audience I ever imagined having. Another time, I was working with ten 'at risk' kids in an alternative school, and we made a tape collaboratively. When it was done, we presented it to the entire school. The students were so enthusiastic that we watched the tape three times in a row. They cheered when it was over. So I believe the audience is out there. Somewhere.

As a person who comes from a working class background, I was very conscious of the rift between the general public and art

from the outset. One of my friends said to me while I was in art school, "Don't forget that you are making work for us too." And I suppose those words have stayed with me. This is primarily a problem of educating the general public. But I think there are ways for people who have no education in art or experimental film to enter my work. I have employed narrative and tropes derived from popular culture in order to facilitate this. I don't think every artist needs to do this, but some of us do. This is a niche I am happy to inhabit because I adore pop culture. And art. I am a pop artist!

I think we underestimate the value of our own production if we don't admit that it is a specialist discourse on some level. You couldn't expect to understand everything a doctor says without some education. Some aspects of medical practice are extremely specialized and can take years of education to understand. When it comes to art, there is an expectation that this simply isn't the case. There is an assumption, by both artists and the general public, that art is transparent and requires no special expertise. It's the same kind of thinking that let's people say things like, "My kid could do that!" when they are standing in front of a Jackson Pollock. Not all aspects of medicine, physics, or even hairstyling are accessible to everyone. And the same is true of art.

There is a subtext to your questioning which seems to assume a natural and interlocking relationship between visibility, popularity and success (financial, cultural and political). I am not sure we can assume that this is so. Three years ago, three of the most successful artists in contemporary music worldwide were Canadian: Celine Dion, Alanis Morrissette, and Shania Twain. (And let's not forget Avril Lavigne and Nelly Furtado!) Now I ask you, is this the best Canadian cultural product, musically or otherwise? I realize that this is going to sound like a loser's argument, but it seems to me that there is a hazard in making work which is too accessible, too popular. And that hazard, I suppose, is that you are going to start making kitsch; making entertainment.

Between the most popular bit of television fluff and the most impenetrable chestnut of

experimental film there is a vast spectrum of work. For myself, a healthy cultural ecology supports both fluff and chestnuts, and everything between them. Our society is increasingly inclined towards entertainment, so it falls to artists to do something else: to provoke, to educate.

MH: The advent of digital video is realizing the utopian hope of the sixties: that "everyone" can do it. Soon, video/cel phone at the ready, "everyone" will. But who will watch all this stuff? There is more artist's media work being made this year than in all the previous years put together, but the rise in audiences is not commensurate. Is such a proliferation of personal expression such a good thing when it leads to increasing disappointments and dashed dreams? Will we ever get over the sense of having come "too late," after all the important events, discoveries, inventions, have already occurred?

NH: Teaching video at a university level gives me the impression that production and dissemination will probably occur much differently in this century than it did in the last. The emerging generation conceives these issues within an entirely different framework. One of my students posts his work on a website as soon as he finishes it. Some say broadcast television as we knew it is on the verge of collapse. The new model of web distribution for television, film and video favours small, specialized audiences (recall the rhizomatic structure I mentioned earlier). Clearly we are entering another utopian paradigm, one dependent upon storage space, bandwidth and data flow. Time will tell whether it is viable or not. We may need to rethink our notion of what an audience is and how they interact with work.

The transition from analogue to digital has been a long and painful process, and the question of distribution is hopefully the closing bracket on this slow and expensive arc. The shift has had both positive and negative repercussions. I marvel at the fact that the post-production facilities on my laptop are vastly superior to what was available in 1986 at Em/Media (the artist run centre where I first started making work). Paradoxically, I am dogged by

the feeling that making video is much less interesting now that it's so much easier to do. I would have killed to have personal, unlimited access to these kinds of tools twenty years ago. Now that I have it all here at home, it seems very ordinary. I feel that is reflected in a lot of the work being produced today, which seems very banal. That probably sounds snobbish, but there you go.

MH: The first person to rub two stones together produced an unthinkable fire, then everyone did it so no one notices anymore. The first couple of generations of video art are filled with utopian and originary gestures large and small that mapped out the field. Our generation, on the other hand, seems condemned to montage, recutting and reshaping moments which often already exist (either as found footage or modeled in other lives/works). Everything's been done, and who would know better, our generation learned all about it in "art school." The major strokes have been laid down, the outlines and arguments constructed, it's been left to us to fill in the colours, fuss with the borders. We are the generation of ornamentation, made helpless by privilege and precedent. Gatekeepers between the analog world of presence and a digital microverse of mirrors.

NH: The epoch we are living in now is incredibly unique. I can't think of another historical period when there was such a glut of images and information. Certainly the invention of the printing press and the first wide proliferation of books must have been similar moment. Perhaps moving away from authorship and towards filling in colours and fussing with borders, as you say, is the only suitable response. This, I feel, is the crux of what Barthes was saying when he described the 'death of the author.' When I was working on *Satellite*, I was very satisfied to be working with found footage. It felt responsible: reduce, recycle, reuse! As artists, we are working in an unprecedented historical moment: one would think that this alone would allow us enormous possibilities to create something original (and I think it has). I remember walking into a group exhibition in Rome in the summer of 2004 and seeing so much poorly installed, conceived, and constructed video work that for two

weeks afterwards I was convinced the only option left to me was to move onto another medium. Most of the time I still feel this way. Every video I have made since *Planetarium* feels like my last one. And with my newest project, I feel I have made a decisive (if self-sabotaging) break from single-channel work. It's sad for me to think that I may have to abandon video, because it is the medium that best suits my voice. I still have things to say with video (in fact, I have two projects that need to be finished). But the sheer glut of bad production coupled with a lack of critical and curatorial standards necessary to contextualize it, leaves me increasingly wary of going any further.

In private I wonder: am I an anachronism? Is my failure to love this glut of badly crafted, ill-conceived work just a failure to keep up with the times? I think we all need to ask ourselves these questions. Has the medium reached its endgame in the same manner that painting and sculpture did, and is now poised to be absorbed within a new multi-media hybrid? Or is this a paradigm shift that merits serious critical attention? Diplomatically I feel I should say it's the latter, but in my heart, I am almost sure the former has prevailed. I don't feel that I need to defend video. But I can't imagine myself becoming one of those people who gleefully shouts, "The emperor still has his clothes!" when clearly he does not. Being a deluded fool is a fate more terrible than working with an admittedly anachronistic medium.

MH: *Satellite* (6 minutes 2004) looks like it's made entirely of 50s industrial playthings culled from the Prelinger Archives. He's taken his block long stock footage library and put it online, an open source dream available to anyone with a download button. Do you feel that your movie is one possible arrangement of an infinite series? Or does it signal, more ominously, an exhaustion of imagination where there is nothing left to discover?

NH: I am embarrassed to say it, but *Satellite* was built in old school fashion. I happened upon a guy selling educational films. The first one I bought was called Hearing and the Ears. I bought several more in the next months, took them back to my studio and
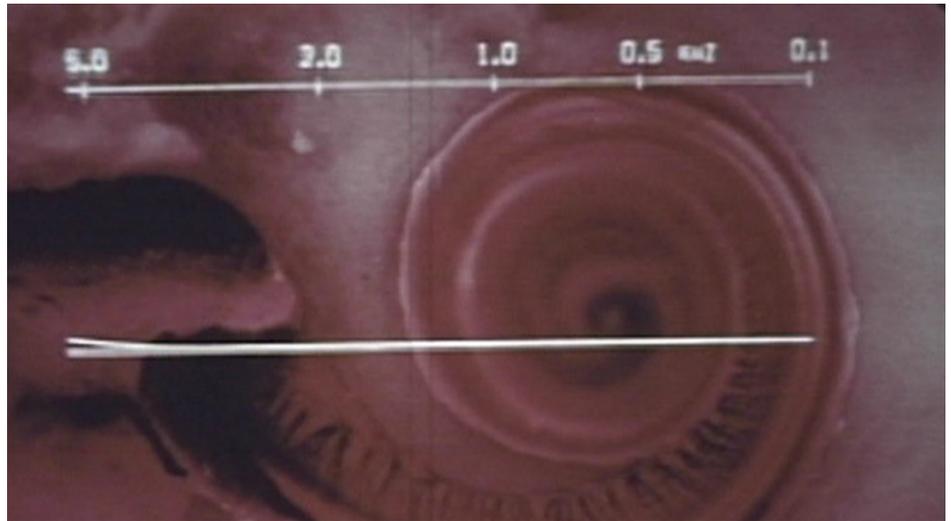
Satellite, Nelson Henricks, 2004

watched them one at a time. The films I didn't think were useful I returned and exchanged for others. When I felt I had enough material to work with, I reshot the films off the wall of my studio and built the rough cut. Eventually I had professional film transfers made. Still there wasn't enough footage. I found another person selling 16mm films and repeated this process a second time. All in all, *Satellite* is built with elements from eight or nine films, though I viewed many more. Lack of immediacy (among other things) is one of the reasons *Satellite* took nearly two years to complete.

Even though five versions of *Satellite* exist, the arrangement never really changes. This is largely due to the text, which is (kind of) carefully ordered. As the images are linked to the text in specific ways, I don't think they would be easy to shuffle. I suppose my interest in using these images was due to their generic, 'archetypal' quality. In my work I often tend to use pictures as ideograms. In montage theory, Eisenstein compares film editing to Japanese ideograms. He theorized that montage produces meaning in the same way. In Japanese, the symbols 'child + mouth = scream,' 'knife + heart = sorrow,' 'door + ear = listen,' and so on. So I guess what I am trying to say in a pretentious and overly complex way is that I use images as symbols. Still, there is a nuance to Eisenstein's idea that is interesting, namely, that meaning is produced in an interval between two images, rather than by the images themselves. These educational films

produced that 'ideogrammatic' effect abundantly. A friend commented that the images in *Satellite* look like things I could have shot. Maybe watching educational films in junior high and high school influenced my camera aesthetic. I was also interested in notions of the scientific and objective truth, which was another level of appeal these images contain: they seem to represent a world of absolutes, which the text attempts to undermine.

MH: "You are everything you hate. Intelligence is insanity by consensus." These titles occur in rapid-fire succession over the pictures, provocative throwaway lines (unrelated, unattached) in this throwaway world. "Stare at something until it is meaningless. Ambiguity is obsolete." Everything is visible but no longer means anything. Isn't that also part of the message you're conveying? Even your catchphrase "Hangover Without Pleasure" evokes a party you weren't invited to, perhaps the original place where these pictures were made. All you can feel, all you can deliver to the audience, are the after effects, the reaction shot. "The characters are trapped in the same story." Are you, the author, condemned to rewrite the same book, or is the audience condemned to watch the same movie?

NH: Yes, the aphorisms were trying to tap into an ephemeral style of language which is prevalent these days: advertising buzz phrases; mottos you could have tattooed on your arm, write on a t-shirt or spray-paint on

a wall; slogans for political parties; names of bands, films, magazines or products. The kind of language that is prevalent in urban environments. I was also very interested in paradoxes and nonsense. I suppose I wanted the aphorisms to be disposable, but at the same time, to stick in your throat. There is something disturbing, off-kilter, or just baffling about these phrases that is hard to dismiss.

"Everything is visible but no longer means anything." I think perhaps meaning is where we make it. The brain has a fantastic capacity for creating sense out of random information. What I was trying to do was set up a space where the production of meaning was problematized. People have described *Satellite* alternately as political, bleak and funny. Or my favourite: ironic nostalgia (which simultaneously sounds like an aphorism from *Satellite* and a good capsule description of my work generally).

MH: There are a long and curious set of superimposed titles which close out *Planetarium* (21 minutes 2001). Titles like: Essen Ich Koln NR. Can you talk about how these texts were generated and what they mean? Their scrambled rearrangements recalled for me Joyce Wieland's Reason Over Passion or some of Hollis Frampton's work. Do you find moments of your fringe movie viewing sneaking into your work, especially because as a teacher you likely see some things time and again? Do Harold Bloom's well known formulations around

Planetarium, Nelson Henricks, 2001

anxiety of influence concern you (all texts are created out of existing texts, and "break throughs" occur within a generational tension between canonized forbears and the present), or has all that been left behind?

NH: I was sitting around in my studio killing time, waiting for someone, and I started doing anagrams of my name. I'm interested in games and unproductive uses of time. Most of the phrases come from sitting around making up anagrams. 'McKinley Morganfield' is Muddy Water's original name. 'Merc Montclair' is a reference to a song by Captain Beefheart called When Big Joan Sets Up. "Uh turqoise scarf 'n uh sleeve rolled up over uh Merc Montclair." (He's referring to a car, a Mercury Montclair.) I listened to Beefheart exclusively during the editing of *Planetarium*. I was interested in how he uses nonsense to create really wonderful meanings.

This interest in nonsense fuelled the writing/collecting of the *Satellite* aphorisms, which were originally to be included in *Planetarium*. Most were removed because they made the tape impossibly dense. A few are still there: NO REVOLUTION and YOU KNOW YOU ARE WRONG, for example. It is about names and naming, and forms a kind of credit sequence. It leads the viewer through a field of nonsense until it arrives at my name and the end of the tape simultaneously.

"The West moistens everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples." Roland Barthes

Perhaps my use of the word nonsense is misleading. I think I am not trying to absolve people from searching for sense in the work, but I am raising the bar considerably higher than what the general public is accustomed to. It's a broader, more diffused sense, and people have to work harder to order an experience. In the occident, and particularly in the mainstream media, all information is totalized in order to make some kind of meaning. And as a people, we are very frightened when we encounter things that don't make sense, or rather, that aren't groomed to make sense by a boardroom full of power brokers. I believe that there are a whole lot of things that I encounter on a daily basis that don't make sense. I am buying hothouse tomatoes in my grocery, while on the radio, the American president announces the commencement of the bombing of Baghdad. What kind of sense can I make of that? The fact is it does make sense, but one that is hard to contain or totalize within speech. We feel the sense of it intuitively, somewhere beyond the limits of language. And this is one place where I think art can actually perform rather well. It is perhaps the only thing we have: this ability to speak in a way that doesn't fix meaning into these little iron hard pellets of ideology. OK, now I am slipping into a rant. Can you

hear my fist pounding on the desk all the way in Toronto?

I hadn't really thought of Weiland or Frampton though I love their work very much. Any plagiarism/citation was unconscious. I can't say I am aware of Bloom's ideas, though generally I would agree with that hypothesis. It sounds like an apt description of my process (though that is probably a damning confession to make). I quote/borrow/steal very liberally in my work, usually taking for granted that in the process of translation, the theft will become invisible. For example, the soundtrack of *Window* is meant to be a combination of the bands Tortoise with Cypress Hill, but because I lack the skill to do this well, I end up with 'Nelson Henricks.' I have always felt that style is something artificial: my videos are very diverse, stylistically speaking, and I have tended jump from one aesthetic to another. What is original is the content—the writing and the ideas—and I think there is a lot of consistency from one work to another.

MH: The anagram/nonsense titles appear over an image (of you? a friend?) spraying shaving cream over his body in reverse motion, mostly in such close-up splendour it's difficult to know what we might be looking at. Apart from its ambiguous beauty, why this picture to end everything (I was going to ask: why did you leave this as the last image in the corpse's eye, which would have to resuscitated by forensics)?

Time Passes, Nelson Henricks, 1998

NH: That's me with the shaving cream. My earliest works were performance-based, many were concerned with constructing aliens out of the human body. 'Become an alien.' I also wanted *Planetarium* to look cheap, aesthetically speaking. 'Plastic' was the guiding material theme. And of course, because the tape was a comedy, a slapstick style of abject humour prevailed.

Like the nonsense texts that accompany these images, it is very difficult for me to talk precisely about what this sequence means. I proceeded intuitively, sensing if something was right or wrong, whether it worked or not, whether it was boring or interesting, and building things accordingly. It's like cooking spaghetti: if you throw it at the wall and it sticks, it's done. If it falls to the floor, it's not. Everything in *Planetarium* is the stuff that, for one reason or another, stuck to the wall. I do remember very vividly that we had leftover shaving cream in the bathroom and deciding to shoot this scene was very spontaneous. My partner Pierre did the camera work. My hope—my very sincere and honest hope—is that work is capable of articulating something, of making a sense which is beyond the limits of language. This makes it a bit frustrating to talk about. I can explain what I was thinking about or why I did things, but I can't always discuss what something means.

I suppose another guiding principle throughout *Planetarium* was to give the viewer unrecognizable images and have them slowly become recognizable. So there is this alien body running backwards, and at some point it becomes apparent that it's a guy spraying shaving cream on himself. And there is the text running backwards and slowly becoming recognizable as anagrams of my name. I liked the feeling that the tape was running backwards towards the beginning (rather than ending), which is why the tape ends "Nelson Henricks a video by *PLANETARIUM*." This idea of reversibility, that the tape can be played forward or backwards, is also present in *Window* and *Crush*.

I don't really know why I wanted to leave people with this image. I suppose the idea of reversibility made it the logical end sequence (that, and the music, which refers back to the opening credit sequence). It's also a signature to the work, in which I am presented in a somewhat ridiculous position while taking credit for the work. And it's funny. It's like a pie in the face. I wanted to end on something upbeat, after so much death and destruction.

MH: *Time Passes* (6.5 minutes 1998) is made of exquisitely rendered time lapsed shots inside and outside your apartment punctuated by intertitles. It is a portrait of a place, and a writer's solitary. "They write in order to disappear." It is a portrait of something which can't be pictured, the act of writing remains an invisible activity, even if you can watch pen move on paper. Whatever led you to this porous abyss?

What led you to want to show the unshowable? The opening and closing phrases are the same, does this suggest that living and writing arrive in circles, that we are condemned to repeat ourselves? Or is it simply that our display modes are acts of repetition, because we are forced to accommodate already existing forms (in language or clothing) in order to make sense? In this sense writing is always an act of rewriting.

NH: I was looking for a third work to flesh out the *Window* trilogy. I was toying around with some ideas on paper that dealt with silence. For many years, I had been interested in making a work about an empty house. What is it like when no one is there? (This impulse winds its way through *Murderer's Song, Conspiracy of Lies*, and *Comédie*, which all feature architectural spaces devoid of people.) Sometime during the early nineties, I read Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse. The middle section is a thirty-page description of an abandoned house, falling into decrepitude. This was really enabling for me, because I could see (through Woolf) how it could be done: how you could make something about nothing, but keep it dynamic and exhilarating.

I had borrowed a Super8 camera from Yudi Sewraj and Monique Moumblow with an intervelometer function: it allowed the camera to expose one frame automatically every few seconds, depending on where you set the frequency dial. It was December 1997. I had a couple of spare rolls to burn

(and no ideas, having just finished *Crush* that month). The film cartridges had already been opened and I wasn't sure if they'd been used or not. I was reluctant to put a lot of work into a shoot and then have it all come back unusable, so I devised a low effort method of burning the film: I set up the camera on a tripod looking out my window and pointed it at the horizon visible from our living room.

I have never liked shooting. In fact, I hate it. And so I was walking around all that day, shopping, talking to people, having lunch, and I kept thinking, "I am shooting! This is great!" But other things were rolling through my head too: the trilogy, Virginia Woolf, writing and time. I realized that I had finally found a way to make my video about an empty house. I came home and over the next week hammered out the script that would become *Time Passes* (which is also the name of that central chapter of To the Lighthouse which I found so inspiring).

The opening and closing sections then, are about an empty house. I edited this together as a rough cut and realized it didn't make much of a video on its own. I had a beginning and end but no middle. So I added the section about writing, which was cannibalized from two other works in progress. Aside from the reference to Woolf, my interest in writing sprang from an interest in superimposing two different time scales that make up human experience: the time of the mind and the time of the body. The time of the body is slow: the time it takes for a scar to heal, the time it takes to age and mature. The time of the mind is lightning quick, mercurial. So I suppose what I wanted to do was start and end in this slower, organic time of the body and then take the viewer into this space of the mind: that protracted temporal envelope where it is just you and the words, locked in the here and now. I felt that writing represented that friction between the two time spaces well: those moments when the thoughts are coming fast and your hand just isn't quick enough to get it all down. And of course the character in the text is writing to escape the body.

These weren't things I was engaging in consciously. My interpretation, sitting here at my desk in 2006, is that the tape was about these momentary epiphanies: moments of intense awareness bracketed by what Woolf herself referred to as "cotton wool" moments (those times when we are less conscious, less aware). But this is one interpretation among many. One of my professors in film school told us we should never trust what the director says about the work. They can only tell you what they intended, but not what they achieved.

MH: "History is everything that happened to me before I was born." *Shimmer* (7 minutes 1995) is a tape about memory, and I wonder if you could recount it to me now, from your memory of it. Would it concern you if only a single picture survived, or just one phrase, if an entire audience left the theatre after seeing it and a poll was run and a week later just one picture remained? Would that be OK or would that be a failure? This memory brief refuses storytelling, and while it is ostensibly "about" your parents they hardly appear, there are no home movies or recountings, just a few pictures which quickly fall out of frame. Instead we see stylized, dramatized moments which stage instants of recall: there is a toy train, a camera panning a bedspread (like a descending plane), a hand holding a cup to a wall. Why these moments? Why so much refusal and restraint?

NH: Recount the tape from memory? Do you mean, recall the whole tape, word for word, shot by shot? I am sure I could. I have a very good auditory memory. I can play the soundtrack of the video in my head right now. If I wrote it down, I could fill in the images later. This is essentially how I have worked for many years: sound first, picture second. All of my early work is build that way, and *Shimmer* is no exception.

"Would it concern you if only a single picture survived…?" That's a good question. Of course, I'd be concerned. I would want the audience to remember all of it! But the reality is, they probably only do remember one image, one phrase. And that's if you are lucky! I think we can't really count that as

a failure. What I remember from the whole corpus of all the film and video I have experienced probably comes down to just a few moments. Jeanne Moreau leaving Marcello Mastroianni's book launch in La Notte, and aimlessly wandering the streets of Milan. Things like that. It's not the images or the text that are memorable, but the sensations they evoke. For example, the sense that, at that precise moment, Jeanne Moreau just decided to walk out of the narrative flow of that film. It's amazing to me because I remember all the times that I have attempted to do that in my life.

Shimmer stands at the end of my autobiographical work, and in many ways it is a summation of all those impulses. It is a rallying of all the techniques and tools I had developed in my early work, deployed in one concise statement. It was the first time I really felt in control of the medium; that things weren't just occurring accidentally. On one hand, the restraint you speak of was due to material concerns. I was incredibly poor, I could only afford to buy so much film, so retakes were impossible. But there were other impulses at work as well.

I was very impressed by the work of two Irish artists/authors: James Coleman and Samuel Beckett. I had seen an incredible film installation by Coleman called Box in which shots of two boxers fighting are intercut with black leader. Every cut to black left strong retinal retentions: ghost images of the two fighters remained for a few seconds after the image cut. So the idea of using long passages of black in *Shimmer* came from there. I was interested in retinal effect, which is much stronger in the film version, as a physiological analog for memory. I liked also how the film interacted with the eye physically. The conceit in *Shimmer* was to work with a film theatre in a site-specific manner: the cinema as the inside of someone's head and the screen as mental imagery that flashes before the mind's eye. At one point, I wanted to present *Shimmer* as an installation in an actual cinema. I wish I'd had the courage to do this, as it is probably the way the piece should be shown. So that's why many of the images appear as they do: a colour field, an out of focus image, a flash, a simple image.

Shimmer, Nelson Henricks, 1995

It was about making the architectural space of the cinema analogous to mental space: a theatre inside the dome of the skull.

The one image that I will carry with me from *Shimmer* is the glass against the wall. That image alludes to the sources of the work. When I was moving out of my first Montreal apartment in 1993, I had intended to do a performance once it was empty. I would light each room with a different coloured light bulb and lead the audience from room to room. I wouldn't have any props: only a water glass, which I would hold to the wall and listen through. In each room, I would recount a story of a previous occupant of the apartment (the building was over a hundred years old). Anyway, somehow the process of moving AND doing a performance (Ah youth!) were a bit too ambitious, so the project was scrapped. The script I wrote became the basis for *Shimmer* and the image of listening to the wall with a glass was the only element that remained from this aborted work. The other images that I will carry with me forever are the blue and yellow screens. These colours were the poles of *Shimmer*. When you are on the prairies, and the setting sun hits the horizon, all the light is golden, and all the shadows go purple-blue. I don't really know of any other place in Canada where you can see this. It's a really a prairie thing.

Anyway, James Coleman and poverty had some influence on the restraint in the images. Beckett was responsible for the spartan

text. I was reading his later texts, Worstward Ho, Stirrings Still and Ill Seen, Ill Said and I was really impressed by the economy of language. I suppose up until this point I was under the impression that good writing should be evidently so, with gymnastic uses of adjectives and punctuation, the kind of writing that draws attention to itself. Beckett seemed to be the reverse of that.

Shimmer opens with an ominous dedication: 'For Mom and Dad.' In a way, the tape was first conceived of as a gift for my parents. Then it became a way of saying, 'Thanks. I love you.' Then it became an apology. Heavy-hearted was I in the sound booth, doing the voice-over paragraph by paragraph. On the final section, I cried on the first take (à la Michael Jackson). I thought this was brilliant. Laurel Woodcock and Nikki Forrest (who were operating the tape) said, 'Um, we don't really think that's working. Maybe we should edit the text.' And so we did right there. It helped enormously. It opened up something that was very closed and personal into something that had the possibility of speaking to a public beyond my parents. So hopefully it is more about memory and the place of family in defining identity than it is about the relationship I have with my parents and my homeland, per se.

From the perspective of 2006, it's easy for me to find fault with *Shimmer*. It is too personal and precious for my taste, and verges dangerously close to being maudlin.

There are images that I don't think work as well as they should, particularly the ending, and this undermines the strength of the overall work. Still, it was a big breakthrough. I was able to resolve my autobiographical impulses, which was very liberating for me. It gave me a lot more options as a writer. I had also gained a great sense of how to organize a time-based composition, and this had a great impact on everything that came afterwards, especially *Crush*.

MH: *Crush* (12 minutes 1997) is a movie made in close-up, gathering moments of flesh (a torso turning, a hand clenching) in a monologue about changing shape, "becoming animal," dissolving the self. "When I become animal I will dissolve, become anonymous, interchangeable with any other member of my species." Is this a critical take on gay male gym clone culture, where a steady diet of work outs, aimed at the same muscular ideal, has produced bodies that appear alike? Is this a harbinger of the body's globalization? "Becoming animal" is a term I hazily recall from Deleuze/Guattari who were inveighing against genital-oriented hierarchies and sexual pleasures, insisting that revolt against hegemonic capitol needs to begin with one's own body. Do these social pressures and shared ideals form the crush of the title?

NH: In some ways, *Crush* was a response to that cult of the perfect body that is emblematic of mainstream queer culture. But questions of body image are also a

concern for heterosexual men and women, and they also engage in these practices. Gay men have just invested in it in a more conscious manner. In fact, gays have articulated a variety of modified bodies as fetish objects (I am thinking about bears and growers as well). I suppose we are pioneers in that regard. Meanwhile, alteration of the body occurs in more underground and subversive ways, too. I was interested in all the axes that extend from that discourse of body modification—tattooing, subcutaneous implants, voluntary amputation—basically everything that ReSearch brought to the fore in the book 'Modern Primitives.' The character in *Crush* is interested in an extreme form of body modification that will allow him to become an animal. It is more about efficiency than aesthetics. He wants to become an aquatic creature: a seal, or a fish, or a sperm, something that swims in a school. Moving from human to seal to fish, or from man to sperm, evolution runs in reverse.

Crush is part of a cycle of works about animals that include *Emission* and *The Pig's Tale*. About two years after I'd finished *Emission*, I had come to feel that the tape was a complete failure. Out of anger, frustration, or perhaps in a sudden moment of clarity, I scribbled out a short text that said everything I'd failed to say in *Emission*: a kind of postscript. At a certain point, I planned on making this into a second tape and tacking it on the end of *Emission*. This short text became the basis for *Crush*.

I had done a lot of research for *Emission* around this idea of the half animal/half human. It's a powerful archetype, and it appears often in mythology and contemporary pop culture. *Emission* situated human consciousness on a trajectory between machines and animals. *Crush* was a crystallization of those impulses regarding one half of the spectrum: where does human begin and animal end?

The title, alas, is a bit of a red herring. I liked the sonority of the word and I liked its paradoxical meaning. On one hand it means being 'in love,' and the other being destroyed; the destructive power of love

and a love of destruction. In some ways, this encapsulates the protagonist's journey: he is following this desire but there is something destructive about it. I didn't really want to resolve his dilemma at the end. I wanted the spectator to choose between either of two possibilities: either he succeeds and swims happily away, or he has entered into a world of delusions. The title echoes that duality. There is also the sense of compression and refinement contained in the word 'crush' (coal being crushed into a diamond) and this fit well also. So the title isn't meant to direct your reading that specifically. It is more like an odour than a sign-post. Not long after *Crush* came out, a feature film and several pop albums of the same name were released, so I have certain misgivings about the title. But it is definitely better than the original name (Brotherhood) which was scrapped for obvious reasons.

In my reading of Deleuze and Guattari, what captured my imagination was the dissolution of ego boundaries, the idea of becoming multiple. So perhaps another 'crush' is invoked: the crush of bodies in a crowd. It's about becoming a fish or a school of fish (or sperm). On a related topic, I had also heard about a phenomenon called 'the rapture of the deep.' Deep sea divers, the ones who go down very deep, sometimes experience a sensation of no longer being capable of determining where their body ends and the water begins. Here is another unresolved duality: is this transcendental or a destructive loss of self?

Incidentally, *Crush* is probably the work that is most indebted to experimental film. The shots of the lemons at the end were a very conscious nod to Hollis Frampton. Marie Menken inspired the flowers. Even the knife sequence was a quote from Bunuel and Dali.

MH: *Window* (3 minutes 1997) features a rapid-fire oscillation of seasons, entirely constrained by the views outside your window, a nearby tree blooming and icing over as the year turns. Punctuated by titles, this yearlong vigil offers a meditation on knowing (how do we know what we know) through theme and variations (same win-

dow, different look, or a variation on a look). The title prepped me for an ambient experience, instead, there is a compressed, every moment counts feeling, as if a mind is rapidly recalling (in reverie? Nervously flicking through the once moments?). Can you talk about how you structured this movie and the inspirations behind beginning?

NH: I started shooting *Window* in the winter of 1996. I had just bought my first video camera and for some reason felt compelled to film out my front window. I really loved the arrangement of the dark bare branches that slashed across the frame. It always reminded me of a Japanese watercolour. For both *Crush* and *Window* I was living with a camera. It changed the way I shot, I don't think I would have engaged in this kind of structuralist exercise if I didn't have that camera sitting on my desk everyday.

By the end of 1996, I had traversed the seasons in Montreal. I vaguely thought about using the footage for an installation; something about time. But an opportunity arose which dictated otherwise. PRIM and La Bande Video (video production centres from Montreal and Quebec, respectively) were initiating a project called 'Neige sur Neige' (the title translates to 'snow on snow', and is an obvious nod to Malevich's painting White on White.) Videos on the subject of 'snow' would be produced through PRIM using their new AVID. I had never edited non-linear before, and was eager to try out this technology. So I pieced together a proposal for the project. I did several demo versions of the tape on a Hi8 edit system. The text was a paragraph I'd written for something else. I honed it down to a Haiku, and then ran the English and French texts forwards and backwards over each other to beat the dual-language problem of subtitling.

It had been awhile since I had completed *Shimmer* and *Crush* was far from being over. I felt that I needed a hit single in order to maintain visibility for my work. I took Holland-Dozier-Holland as my inspiration. Armed with the footage and the rough demos, Monique Moumblow and I edited *Window* in two eight-hour sessions. A week or two later, Martin and I worked out the

soundtrack in about the same amount of time. At this time, I was under the influence of hip-hop and Chicago post-rock: De La Soul and Cypress Hill (who were using big booming bass beats), and Tortoise (noisy ambiance of the first album). All through out the editing, I had Carole King's "winter, spring, summer or fall" running through my head. My partner Pierre had a copy of Tapestry that I listened to a couple times. I did some impromptu scratching that we edited together for the credits.

Every tape seems to have a particular screening which marks it and become memorable. The idea behind the 'Neige sue Neige' project was to project the finished works on snow onto a wall of snow. The Quebec people had sculpted a massive television set made of ice on St-Denis, just facing the cathedral that is integrated into the UQAM campus. It was here that *Window* was premiered. It was very, very cold. We drank vodka to keep us warm. Between the cold and the alcohol, I didn't get the feeling anyone was really watching the tape. But while it was screening and you could hear my voice counting backwards, the church bells started to chime the hour (9 o'clock). It was a great moment.

MH: Nelson your early work continues to overwhelm me. It is so unexpected, succinct, fragmented, unabashedly beautiful and playful, terse and cinematic, it provides a terrifying basis from which to proceed, as if you'd written all your hits at a too young age, ensuring you would have to play them even when they trot you out in a wheelchair. I'm wondering if you could describe the three part structure of *Emission* (12 minutes, 1994), how you gathered material and shaped it. Were there particular circumstances that led to its making?

NH: It's funny that you can be so enthusiastic about a tape like *Emission*, which I count among my least successful works. It was my first Montréal production, based on a script I wrote in Alberta, and I have always regarded it as a transitional work. Transplanting my practice to the east was difficult. I had to build a new crew, find locations in an unfamiliar city, and work with a new video

production centre where the costs were higher than what I was accustomed to in Calgary. As a consequence, I didn't always feel in control of the project. Though I had a production assistant, I also had to do a lot of the production work in French, a language I could barely speak. As *Emission* is a video that is preoccupied with semiotics, working in Montreal gave me an opportunity to explore those avenues in ways I couldn't have done in Calgary. But otherwise, it presented a series of challenges on all fronts, many of which hampered my ability to obtain effective results.

Emission was based on three performances I did in Calgary in the late eighties. I was an active performance artist from 1985 to 1991, and there was a strong interplay between my live work and the videos during this period. Performance allowed me to create in a spontaneous manner. Video became a method of archiving the best of the live experiments. *Emission* was also inspired by a carpet commercial— 'CRAZY CRAZY CARPET FACTORY WAREHOUSE FACTORY OUTLET'—with lots of text rolls and images flying up at the screen. It was intended to be like one very long, dense, television commercial (in six different languages) for sex, illness, gender, language, communications technology, animals, werewolves and evolution. Ideas that, for some reason or another, I felt were complementary.

When time came to finalize the script in Montreal, I wanted to go into detail about the connections between these themes. So I started to do research, and the script got longer. And longer. At a certain point, I discarded the idea of credits altogether, opting instead for a bibliography. The tape became impossibly baroque. I would get into conversations at parties where someone could mention almost any topic and I would say, "Oh my tape is about that." I was getting a lot of raised eyebrows. Then one day, I realized that I wasn't actually smart enough to write the script I had devised. It was too complicated. And so I radically cut back the structure to what it is today: twelve texts in three languages in a three-act structure.

I had moved to Montreal to study cinema at Concordia. Initially I was in film studies, but then I moved to film production. The 16mm footage was all shot during my second year at film school. My first film, Silent Film, was incorporated whole into *Emission*. Only one image from the performances ended up making it into the video: the newspaper dress. The other tableaux, though theatrically flavoured, were all developed for the tape or resulted from improvisations.

Emission is a mixed bag of stuff: newly minted film work and original video material were combined with texts I had written for performances five years earlier. This, coupled with scripting troubles and transplanting my practice from one city to another, accounts for many of the tape's weaknesses. This is not to say that it hasn't had a certain amount of success. It has been shown a lot, and some people genuinely seem to like it. But for me, its weak points outnumber its strengths. Sitting here today, it occurs to me that the project had probably gone stale on me, and I was suffering from a kind of writer's block. Throughout the nineties, I often felt I was one project behind. When I was working on *Conspiracy of Lies*, I really wanted to be making *Emission*. When I was making *Emission*, I really wanted to be working on *Shimmer*. This lag continued up until *Time Passes*.

The perceived failure that was *Emission* ultimately was productive. I channeled it into more resolved works. As I said earlier, *Crush* was an attempt to correct the errors of *Emission*. *Emission* tried to take on too many themes. Focusing on just one, as I was able to do in *Crush*, allowed me to obtain better results. Over the years, I have come to assume that the reason people like *Emission* is the same reason I dislike it: it is incoherent. This has led me to feel that incoherency is its chief strength, and I have tried to emulate this in certain works. *Planetarium* was a conscious attempt to create something looser and open-ended like *Emission*, and *Satellite* was probably the closest I ever got to realizing that 'CRAZY CRAZY CARPET…' tape. Failure can be generative, if you try to learn from it. This fall, I will extricate Silent Film from *Emission* and show it

Comédie, Nelson Henricks, 1994

as it was conceived: as a stand-alone piece without sound. I feel good about this. It feels like a kind of restoration of sorts.

MH: *Comédie* (7 minutes 1994) is a philosophical psychodrama, a contradiction in terms I know, psychodramas are generally wordless, exactly about the entry into language, but having arrived there, the author remains a spectral figure in your movie. He is never seen, though features prominently in the voice-over. He is captivated by a station in the metro, speculating that there are patterns in the tiles, that he is surrounded by secret alphabets if only he had the eyes to uncover them. At last he realizes the tile spacings represent tones, and when he puts them through a music program at home we hear an amateur version of MacArthur Park sung while the credits roll. Is this movie a one liner, or is there something more going on? It is so beautifully shot and carefully composed, its progressions avowedly cinematic at a moment in video art when those who cared about the image were (mostly) busy making films, and those who cared about other things (like content for instance) were busy making video. This is a ridiculously reductive schema of course, but your early work, with its universalist themes, its looming black and whites, its use of silence and dark spaces, the time lapse and quick edits, all these seem to belong to a world of film.

NH: Well, *Comédie* is a bit of a one liner. Or a two liner. As I mentioned previously, I was

studying film at Concordia University. I'd already been through one year-end screening with Silent Film, a work which people admired for the lighting more than anything else. I wanted my second film to be a real crowd pleaser, something funny but tough. And that's where *Comédie* came from. I remember the idea came to me very suddenly and I wrote it all down on a cafeteria napkin. Of course, this must be a false memory: cafeteria napkins are notoriously difficult to write on. But I choose to believe the essence of the story, which is basically that the tape came to me fully formed, in one lump.

Comédie is indeed a very cinematic work. It continues what I was doing with camera movement in *Conspiracy of Lies*, and refines it through Eisenstein's ideas about montage aesthetics. I can't remember if I'd already seen Frampton's Nostalgia or Godard's Deux ou Trois Choses Que Sais D'elle, but it seems likely. Ultimately *Comédie* was finished as a film, with a neg cut, an answer print and everything, but I didn't like it. *Shimmer* was released and distributed in a 16mm version, but the print of *Comédie* lacked subtitles and there were colour-timing problems as well. Because they could only print my black and white film on colour stock, the images would turn blue during the dissolves. So *Comédie* has only ever been available as a video.

In spite of *Comédie*'s cinematic pedigree, it has stronger allegiances to video. Robert

Morin and Lorraine Dufour's The Thief Lives in Hell was a template: an archetypal video about the social reality of living in Montreal, and *Comédie* was, above all else, a kind of homage to my new home and all the architectural sites which fascinated me. I was also reacting to Steve Reinke's work. I had met Steve around this time and organized an exhibition of his work at a gallery here. So if *Comédie* bears a resemblance to Squeezing Sorrow from an Ashtray from The Hundred Videos, it's probably not accidental.

The text came from autobiographical sources, but I was definitely writing with other people's voices in mind. I wanted C.K. Cousins to do the English voice, because I liked his delivery. There was a fellow student at Concordia I wanted to do the French voice over. He was a young guy with a working class accent that reminded me a lot of Robert Morin's voice. But on the day of the recording, he couldn't make it, so the duty fell to my partner, Pierre Beaudoin. Pierre was terribly ill, but he came through in an emergency. His voice sounds dreamy and disembodied because he was delirious with fever. He has a clearer accent—more of a Radio Canada voice than working class—but he did a great job. This was the first of many contributions Pierre made to my work.

In the end, *Comédie* did work very well at the year-end screening. People laughed, which is the result I wanted. It was easy for me to make. It has a simple structure and

Conspiracy of Lies, Nelson Henricks, 1992

is one of the few pieces I didn't write the music for. It was supposed to be a trilogy but the middle section got cut. Which is why it maybe seems a bit... partial.

So is it a film or a video? At the time, I felt pretty adamant that I was putting film in the camera and videos were coming out. My fellows at Concordia were mostly producing conventional narrative work, so my stuff looked very arty by comparison. I was convinced *Comédie* and Silent Film (and later *Shimmer*) were videos masquerading as films. Looking at it now, I can see that perhaps the reverse is true. I don't know. That's why I am such a bad defender of inherent characteristics for either film or video.

MH: *Conspiracy of Lies* (12 min 1992) begins with this line, "I found some papers in a shoebox when I was walking to work today." What follows are, presumably, writings contained in the shoeboxes, which range from lists ("Things that would probably bring me happiness") to diary entries. Here's the description you wrote which appears in distribution catalogues: "*Conspiracy of Lies* speaks of the alienation of minorities, consumer culture, urban isolation and the fine balance between mental order and chaos. The tape begins with my voice recounting the story of the discovery of a series of diary entries and lists written by an anonymous author. When I found the texts, I assumed the author to be a white, gay man, like myself. Through the use of

twelve narrators of different race, gender, religion and sexual orientation, I attempted to destabilize my own subjectivity and challenge my preexisting assumptions regarding difference. The tape begins and ends with two texts written by myself. This, I hope, helps to render the boundary between myself and the anonymous author more fluid, thereby questioning the 'authority' of authorship."

This work recalls (amongst others) Sophie Calle's The Address Book, which similarly turns around a found street object. Calle interviewed everyone in the book and published the results in the French newspaper Liberation in the summer of 1983. The owner of the book returned to Paris and found that his missing property had been turned into a very public artwork. I wonder if you might lend further comment on the relation between these two works, and your very different treatments. The visuals which accompany these voice-overs are blue toned, low resolution tracking shots (usually), moving over supermarket shelves, emptied diners, bars and dance clubs. Why these pictures with that text? What does the title of the work refer to? And why do you have an interest in taking apart your own identity, or anyone else's?

NH: There are definitely marked similarities between *Conspiracy* and the work of Sophie Calle, whose practice I became aware of long after I'd finished the tape. I

enjoy her work very much, though I sense that she is more concerned with investigating the dividing line between private and public space. I can't really say that this was among my chief preoccupations when it came to making *Conspiracy* though the tape does obvious implicate itself in the ethical problems related to privacy, and what happens when we introduce intensely private things into a public arena.

My concerns emerged from dynamics in my own practice that needed to be resolved. As I mentioned earlier, I was actively engaged in performance art from 1986 to 1991. My work was autobiographical in nature, text-based, and anecdotal. At the time, I felt I could best speak about my own experience. I didn't trust myself with material that lay beyond my own subjectivity. My first video (after the eight tapes made while still a student at the Alberta College of Art and Design) was called *The White Studio Tapes* (1987). Like *Emission*, it was based on performance work. My second tape, *Legend* (1988), was created as a video installation and was also autobiographical in nature. Dreading accusations of narcissism, I decided to try to take on two projects that looked outside myself. The first, *Murderer's Song* (1991) was about a childhood friend I'd lost touch with for fifteen years, who ended up shooting and killing an R.C.M.P. officer on the outskirts of Calgary. It was derived entirely from newspaper accounts of the story, cut-up and reassembled à la

William S. Burroughs. The second was *Conspiracy of Lies.* Both were based on found text. Though they bear no real aesthetic similarities, they were deeply related in their attempt to engage subject matter that was beyond my experience.

The story of the discovery of the texts is true. Some people think it is fictional, but it isn't. As I said in the quote above, when I read the texts, I made a lot of assumptions about the author. I don't think I was capable of articulating it in this way at the time (or even in the didactic text you quoted, which seems awfully rigid) but I guess I was interested in the space of projection that exists between the self and the other. I felt that by filtering the words of the author through many people, many voices, some essence of that person would emerge; something that exists outside the space of projection. I don't think the piece is an attempt to break down identity per se. It's about destabilizing the position and privilege of the reader. This is another distinction between Calle and *Conspiracy*. She is engaged in a kind of detective work. I never really wanted to find the author in such a specific way.

The bulk of the tape is made up of found lists and diary entries. There are two texts written by myself: the introduction (obviously) and the last monologue. The title—*Conspiracy of Lies*—is the last line we hear in the tape. The closing text is one of the most over-wrought, pretentious and self-pitying things I have ever written. I felt that if I had put the author on display to his or her disadvantage for so many minutes, it was only fair that I expose something embarrassing about myself, to achieve some balance. So I suppose if we want to know what the title means, we need to go back to that text. It seems to be about the necessary illusions "…we maintain to continue our existences." This seemed appropriate to the subject matter of the tape. It was a real improvement on the working title, Shadow Song.

Conspiracy was conceived in late-1990 or early-1991. Like *Comédie*, it came to me fully formed, in one lump. I remember someone asked me what I was working on one day, and I said, "Well, the tape will open like this…" and I described it from start to finish.

I had the whole video in my head. Making it was like taking a dictation. I never once doubted or questioned what I had to do. As with many of my works, the soundtrack came first. It was produced for a radio show in Calgary. I did the shooting and the final video edit during a residency at the Banff Centre during the summer of 1991. Many of the images in *Conspiracy* came from the text: the Off Centre Eatery which is mentioned by the author, other locations were chosen in relation to the author's goals (go to more movies, visit art galleries) or activities (I worked at an Italian restaurant). I added a few generic locations that fit with the notion of routine or the difficulty of negotiating social space, an idea that impregnates the found texts pretty heavily.

The treatment on the images is another question entirely. I deeply wanted *Conspiracy* to be a beautiful video. I felt that the facilities at Banff would allow me to do this. But in those days, artists only had access to 3/4" gear, not BetaCam. Still, I had a good camera, so I was sure I could get beautiful images once the footage was dumped onto Beta and put into slow-motion. When the process was complete, I realized the video footage was full of jumps and jitters, which hadn't been visible when it was running at full speed. I was very angry. In frustration, I refilmed all the slow motion footage off of a monitor. It was like taking a beautiful, tightly rendered drawing and then scribbling all over it. Still, the final result is intriguing and it is probably better than what I originally intended.

In the end, *Conspiracy* wasn't that successful in evading autobiography. After the first screening, people came up to me and said, "That video is about you!," which I found more funny than frustrating. It was the first of my tapes to show outside of Canada, though initially it didn't do very well. Because of the move to Montreal, I don't think it really started showing until 1992 or 1993. I feel it still holds up rather well. I think many people feel that it is my best tape, and that I haven't made a good one since then.

MH: Does the reaction shot to your work figure in your making? How do you contend with your audiences? As your "popularity" as a video artist grows (this is admittedly a slight proposition) has your making become more self conscious, and how has this impacted on your work? You also teach, does having to convert motion pictures into explanations and digestible comprehensions help or hinder your practice?

NH: That's an interesting question. Really, I would like to think that on some level I am not all that concerned with audience, but this has been a reoccurring theme in many of my responses, so I can't deny this. The idea of audience has had greater and lesser relevance from tape to tape. Certainly *Comédie* was made with a specific audience in mind. *Shimmer* was made for my parents. *Window* was conceived for a specific context. *Handy Man* was to a certain extent conceived for queer audiences. When I am making the work, I'm engaged in a dialogue with my peers, whoever I perceive that to be at a given time. Other tapes weren't really affected by these questions. They were just things I was working on, and I didn't consider the public beyond the fact that I wanted to make something that was satisfying to watch. So perhaps my sense of audience contracts and expands. When I'm in the edit suite, I am really just thinking about one person, one viewer. The works are literary in that sense. The relationship between the work and the audience is like that between a reader and a book. It's intimate.

My popularity, fame or notoriety for me as an artist is difficult for me to quantify. I feel a certain degree of entitlement because I have been committed to making work for twenty years, so some recognition is not exactly unexpected. But I don't imagine for a minute that there is a throng of people waiting for my next tape. For this reason, I haven't tended to be overly self-conscious from work to work. Perhaps this is a minor benefit of limited success: you don't really have to obsess about these things. This is one thing that makes me sad about independent film and video, and visual art in general. There is a very low level of discourse around the work. I would like to go on a site like allmusic.com and see all my tapes rated and reviewed, but that is never going to happen. Every video seems to have

its own career and it can take years for a director to get a sense of whether a tape 'worked' or not. Some tapes show everywhere in one or two years and never show again. Others show one or two times a year for many years. And other tapes surprise you by doing things you would never expect.

In order to teach, you need to learn. Much of what I have learned as a teacher has benefited my work in some way. It has probably deformed my practice as well. Again, it's difficult for me to quantify. I tend to feel that teaching has little bearing on my practice as an artist, but has an enormous effect on me as a writer, curator, and a person who is called upon to speak about screen-based art in various contexts (juries, panels, and so on). Teaching gives you a perspective on how young artists see video fitting into their practices. Beyond this, teaching forces you to return to those fundamental questions and articulate a conscious response to them. Why make art? What does art do that nothing else can? Hopefully when you have answers to these questions (at least provisional ones) you can move onto other things. It's like peeling an onion, but you never get to the centre.

MH: *Map of the City* (21 minutes 2-screen installation, 2006) presents itself as an inventory of fragments: neon signs, maps, book shelves, the feet of statues, the faces of statues, graffiti tags, and these collections are juxtaposed with or interrupted by titles which interrogate them, trying to make meaning of all this. Many titles are written in the second person, to "you," is that because this is the viewer's journey after all?

NH: I have used this style of direct address writing since my first videos and performances. It's something I probably borrowed from Laurie Anderson, and have since made my own. I like how the second person pronoun involves the listener. I suppose this also gets back to what I was saying earlier about audience and a certain literary quality that the works aspire to. Really I am just narrating to one person: that is my ideal audience. This became apparent when I began translating the works into French. Translators would always write 'vous,' as

in the plural 'you guys' or 'you people:' the audience as a mass. But for me, 'you' has always meant 'tu:' singular and informal. Describing the narrative as the 'viewer's journey' is a good way of putting it. I want people to feel that what I am describing is happening to them.

MH: Are you concerned that the singular attention of a black box (cinema) audience will be missing when you present your work in galleries (the white box), that viewers will arrive "in the middle" and leave after just a few minutes (a length of time which is already greater than most spend watching any piece of art)?

NH: If people decide just take a peek and walk away, I have to accept it. It is part of the conditions of working with the gallery as a site. Map was built from a series of short episodes, so you can jump in at any moment and have an experience. And I am surprised at how patient installation audiences can be. In pieces like *Fuzzy Face* (2001) or *Happy Hour* (2003), which are unedited performances that clock in at thirty minutes and twenty minutes respectively, people did sit through the entire loop, which astonished me. That said, Map does have a narrative arc of sorts: it is a video with a beginning, middle and end, so people who duck in and out will definitely miss something. It's always a compromise.

Working with gallery space has allowed me to do things that can't be done in a cinema. Both Fuzzy Face and Happy Hour were unedited duration performances. They emerged out of the same performative impulse that fuelled *Planetarium*, and were a return to tapes like *Emission* and The White Studio Tapes, which were also performance-based. I deeply admired the bravery of a lot of seventies video: people like Colin Campbell, Lisa Steele, as well as Americans like Bruce Nauman. They would do these long boring works that were almost aggressive in their refusal to entertain. I adore these works, and I wanted to do something in the same spirit. *Planetarium* was supposed to be about twice as long as it is now, but I knew people wouldn't stand for it. You just can't make long work

any more and have people sit through it (let alone distribute it). Our sense of pacing is different than it was in the seventies, so working in a gallery permitted me to explore those impulses. I was grateful to have that option.

The gallery context also allowed me to work with multiple screens, which is something I can't adequately explore in a theatrical setting. I know there is a history of expanded cinema extending from people like Abel Gance through Warhol and up into the late-sixties/early-seventies, but I feel freer to do that type of work in a gallery. The ability to edit spatially was something that slowly evolved in my work. *Handy Man* (in its installation form) was a triple screen piece, as was Happy Hour. *Satellite* was a double screen piece that ran synchronously, as does Map Of The City. The ability to edit both linearly and laterally is very exciting to me. The two pieces I am working on now (one about Africa and another about singing and music) will both use multiple screens.

MH: You adapted some of your text from the Bible and the Gospel of Thomas, uncommon sources in a media arts scene which is largely godless. Why these texts?

NH: Actually Gary Hill used the Gospels of Thomas as the basis for Disturbance (Among the Jars). In the end, I don't think I used much of the Gospels, partly because I knew that Hill had already been there. There are just four lines that made it into the final edit. The majority of the text is from the book of Ecclesiastes: this appears on screen whenever you see small objects on coloured backgrounds.

The decision to work with The Bible was difficult. I usually do my own writing. I had used found text before but referring to The Bible as 'found text' is an impossible understatement. You can't. It has too much weight to it, but this weight is paradoxically what attracted me to it.

There are two stories I need to tell you in order to explain my decision to use Ecclesiastes and the Gospel of Thomas. As you know, Map was conceived during a

six-month residency in Italy. One evening I was with a friend in Viterbo, a small city just north of Rome. It was a cold evening and we were walking by a wall. You could see the Renaissance wall built on the medieval wall, built on the Roman wall, built on the Etruscan wall. My friend ran his hand over the Etruscan block at street level and he said, "One day, someone put that rock there." Not long after I was in Pisa, looking at a museum filled with Madonnas. Many women, all holding babies. It is that pre-Renaissance Byzantine style which is more iconographic than representational. I look at virgin after virgin. Suddenly, it occurs to me that these images emerged from matriarchal pagan cults that pre-date Christianity, and that this narrative, this history, is still embedded in these images. Many women were represented here: a woman of the 13th century is standing in for Mary, who is herself standing in for a Roman or Etruscan goddess. Suddenly I could sense the textual depth in these paintings. These images were the sum of something much greater that they appeared to be.

The words from Ecclesiastes and the Gospels attracted me because they also had this kind of textual depth. And there was no way I could write it. One day, several thousand years ago, someone wrote this down. And we are reading it today. These texts come from Greek philosophy and from Hebrew cultures that are much older than Christianity. So all that history is there, though superficially, what we are left with is The Bible.

I was astonished when I read Ecclesiastes, especially the translation I found, which uses 'meaningless' in lieu of 'vanity.' "Meaningless. Everything is meaningless." You don't expect The Bible to say something like that. It's not supposed to be bleak and existentialist. It's supposed to be dogmatic and crystal clear. I would define myself as an atheist, and I have a general antipathy towards Christianity because it has been grafted to a right-wing political agenda that I disagree with. The Bush Administration has a lot to answer for. Yet, as a discourse, I believe that the spiritual has enormous value, and perhaps people of my generation and political

background (or myself anyway) have been too quick to dismiss it. Reclaiming this as a lefty queer was very empowering. It was like saying, "Look! The Bible is very contradictory and vague and even kind of bleak and existentialist!" It's a slap in the face to all those people carrying 'Corinthians 1 6:9' placards at anti-queer rallies. My interest in engaging with religion as a discourse also emerges from my experience in Africa in the summer of 2002 and 2003. My partner and I were in Senegal for ten weeks. It was amazing to me to see a culture that is organized around a spiritual paradigm, rather than a scientific one. I had read so much about modernism and its connection to the scientific paradigm, but I don't think I really understood what that meant until I spent time in Africa. *Satellite* was definitely a response to that experience: destabilizing the scientific. And so is Map of the City, in its own way. It's an attempt to reconsider the spiritual as a discourse that is several thousand years old, and recuperate it.

In the end, I am not sure that the text is immediately recognizable as 'biblical.' Most people I have shown it to assume I wrote it, but I am sure people who know their Bible will spot it immediately. I rewrote the passage a bit (which was also a bit daunting), changing some punctuation and making certain passages less gender specific. But otherwise, it is unchanged. I am also afraid that it will scare people off or alienate them from the work. Again, it was a hard decision to make, but I needed to follow this impulse to its conclusion.

MH: This installation refuses (for want of a better word) "the real," or some documentary trace, some engagement with the outside. Everything is reduced to simulation and model, all experience is leveled out (granted the same amount of time, presented without context), design elements of an overarching consciousness belonging to the narrator/author. Everything is air tight, controlled, and clean above all, this is a very hygienic display, there is scarcely a sign that any of this has been lived. You write, "Millions of images, each crying for attention" and certainly your animation technique delivers a steady flow-but these pictures are

all interchangeable, there is no punctum, no place in any of these pictures to "look back," to hurt or touch the viewer. Why this sealed simulation of exchange, the impossibility of the Other?

NH: I find it a bit depressing that you feel there is a lack of engagement with the outside in this work. In my practice, there are two streams: one that is more outward looking (*Conspiracy*, *Comédie*, the *Window* trilogy) and others that are more inward looking (*Shimmer, Crush, Planetarium*). I usually alternate between one style or the other, though occasionally both appear in the same tape. Map of the City is inward looking, like *Shimmer*, trying to reproduce the texture of mental space, and built from a documentary approach. I lived with my camera and took thousands of photos for months on end. Though the small objects are definitely staged (more on that later), other sequences emerged from reactions to certain places: museums, people's apartments, cinemas, hospitals, as well as the streets of Montréal and Rome. These images were born from a lot of wandering and a high degree of responsiveness to my surroundings. I hoped some sense that these images emerged from lived experience would be apparent in the work.

That said, I do know that from very early on I wanted Map to feel cold. Because I knew the subject matter (and material) I was dealing with was emotionally charged, I felt that I needed to counter-balance it with a more reserved approach. This really dictated a lot of decisions I made musically. I went back and raided the soundtracks for *Planetarium* and *Time Passes,* as well as generating a lot of new sounds that had a neutral emotional register. I was thinking about clicks and beeps: bank machines, alarm clocks, slide projectors and roulette wheels. So perhaps this antiseptic quality that you sense is linked to certain aspirations I had for the work not only in terms of mood, but how it would ultimately be displayed.

The twin poles of Map of the City are the book and the building. The building as book, the book as building. I was thinking about places like Giotto's 'Cappella degli

Scrovegni' that is like an immersive, three-dimensional book. This is typical of many basilicas and chapels, where the Bible is presented spatially. So on one hand, Map is like a book (which you can infer from the double screen format, which looks like facing pages), but meant to be projected large enough on the walls of the gallery to surround the viewer. It was conceived as a design element in relation to architecture, like paintings or mosaics in chapels and basilicas. And its graphic quality refers back to books and page design. The possibility for exchange is perhaps simulated, but not any less so than it is with a book. Or architecture. It requires an active reader.

As for the ability of the images to "'look back,' to hurt or touch the viewer," I am not really sure that was my primary aspiration. Again, I was trying to create a work that had a certain emotional neutrality. In any case, this type of response is a deeply subjective, and will shift from one person to another. For example, the small objects are things I have been collecting since I was a kid. The green turtle was on my sixth birthday cake. Other objects have very specific meanings that obviously won't be apparent to anyone but my family and me. They are a physical manifestation of my memory. I wanted to use these objects because I liked them as a texture and I felt that, at the very least, they would communicate a sense of the repository, an accumulation of data. I was worried that they wouldn't act as memory triggers for other spectators. Yet, people connect with very obscure things. A woman came up

to me after a screening and asked, "Do you know so-and-so?" because she had seen an image he had made that was incorporated into one of these sequences. And again, this amazed me because the photos are up for FOUR FRAMES EACH: less than a sixth of a second. But she recognized this image and had a very specific experience. So that was encouraging for me. It seemed to signal that, yes, these images, these objects, could work in the way I hoped they would.

There are images in the tape that have teeth for me. Hadrian's face. Certain drawings. My mom in that crazy fur-lined coat. So perhaps punctum is in the eye of the beholder.

MH: You've raised the specter of experimentalism, a notion I once imagined every artist embraced. There are few rewards for invention, to produce something incomprehensible, illegible, hated and ignored, what could be the point of that? Part of the problem is that only received forms are intelligible, but surely part of the rub in new shapings is to allow new contents to issue. Do you feel that your work has been engaged with bringing new contents to the screen? Do you feel that being queer puts you "outside" somehow, lends you a productive vantage through which, from which, to view the onslaught of mainstream medias?

NH: Stephen Merritt from The Magnetic Fields pop group says he only likes two kinds of music: pop and experimental. And this pretty much sums up my ethos. I actu-

ally enjoy experimental work, and I assume there must be other people out there who like things that are incomprehensible, illegible, hateful and ignorable. I get a definite frisson from discovery. I am awed by the ability to think outside of conventions so I try to emulate that in my work. Even though we have dispensed with the avant-garde in this post-modern age, I am still part of that tradition. Whether I have managed to bring new content to the screen is not a question I feel I am in a good position to answer. My voice as an author is original, but the content? Perhaps that is for others to say.

As for how queerness fits into that equation, I have a lot of strange and arcane theories about that. When asked why Canadians are so funny, comedian Mike Myers said something like, "When Americans watch television, they are watching television. But when Canadians watch television, they are watching American television." This little interval, this space of reflexivity, is crucial. Perhaps we queers participate in society with the same built-in distantiation. We see everything that transpires in the straight world from a distance: as artifice, as a performance. So authenticity and 'the real' in both perceptual and ideological terms have to be parsed in more complex ways. I know that instability and removal have infected my vision in other ways as well, whether it was my knowledge of being colour blind from an early age, or my experiences with drugs when I was a teenager. The outside world has always been provisional. Being queer has compounded that sense.