



A PATHLESS LAND
Video Sculptures and Installations
GEOFFREY SHEA

D/A
Durham Art Gallery

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Covers: 1000 Glances (detail and except), video installation, 1.5 min, looped, 2003 - 2008

A PATHLESS LAND
Video Sculptures and Installations
GEOFFREY SHEA

Curator: Ilse Gassinger

Durham Art Gallery
July 29 - September 14, 2008

and the

Fabulous Festival of Fringe Film
July 31 - August 9, 2008



A Pathless Land

Michael Tweed

Over the years Geoffrey Shea, in his own relaxed manner, has been creating a body of art in video and new media. The five installations he has gathered for this exhibition employ video in rather idiosyncratic ways to question not only the tales we tell ourselves, but the very telling itself. A small monitor resembling an old cathode ray TV tube rests snugly in a display case. A radar antenna projected on a wall circles while closer inspection reveals a heart-wrenching drama played out on a monitor embedded in an electrical outlet. A keyboard beckons visitors to attempt writing their own narrative on a virtual typewriter. Shifting between monitors, a pair of siblings attempt to relate their separate interpretations of a unique shared experience. Against a flowing backdrop of municipal bylaws is a video of Shea himself delivering a political speech. With these installations, Shea does far more than question contemporary philosophical and literary theory. For while probing the ways in which we individually and collectively interpret the world, the artist cannot help but reveal the intensely personal struggles we all face.

Spiral Text, video sculpture, 1 min, looped, 1991







Pilgrim's Progress, video installation, 16.5 min, 1990



“When you write down the stories that the stenographer tells you, you find it easier to sum up ideas that you had inferred, by using words such as ‘grace’ or ‘spirit’—for she certainly never said words like these. After you re-read it you may feel like asking if there isn’t a moral or a lesson that could be learned, and couldn’t she recall what the court’s opinion had been? But she would just look surprised—not because there was certainly a moral and why hadn’t you discerned it—but rather as

It is unavoidable: life is rife with doubt and questions. Nevertheless, even in the most mundane of tasks—rising from bed in the morning, tying a shoelace or simply opening a door—our lives reveal a confidence and certainty so sure that we question our ability only in the most extreme of circumstances (for example the debilitation of a stroke, or a degenerative disease whether nerve or muscle). But even if by chance we become aware of such aptitude, we seem unable to trust it and once again we succumb to our anxiety.

Since prehistoric times it has been the lot of humans to buffer their fear with rituals in which depictions of the world, both natural and spiritual, played a prominent role. Fertility goddesses and ovoid linga were carved from stone to assuage fears of impotence, bison were sketched on cavern walls to stave off the pangs festering in an empty stomach and coloured sand was vainly sifted into a careful geometry in the hope of providing an assuring counterweight to tip the delicate scales of mortality however slightly in our favour. From such acts, the theory goes, arose the twin penchants of art and religion.

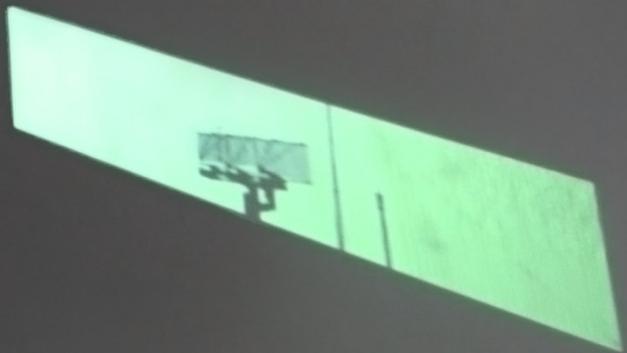


though she had never considered that morality entered into the activity of hearing or repeating stories. Only then will you realize that you always seek to see yourself as the protagonist and the story as part of your life. As though hearing about something made you knowledgeable about it. As though understanding could substitute for being. You try to keep that in mind while you note down the next story..."

Pilgrim's Progress, video installation, 16.5 min, 1990

Just as our fears have yet to be overcome, our conscious life seems predicated on the very angst from which we seek release. And with each new technological advance this angst seems to become more acute, thrusting its roots ever deeper. Over the past several thousand years we have accumulated massive libraries filled with books gathering dust, lying as mute witness to the continued failure of our attempt to provide any but the most provisional answer beyond the childish myths of our bedtime stories.

Nonetheless the daily struggle for survival remains and so we still, too often and far too readily, appeal to tradition or authority, turning to scripture, theory or the media seeking that ever-elusive answer. Well I am sorry to say that it does not appear that Geoffrey Shea's art can provide any answers either. Instead, the authority of the word, even the comforting sovereignty of the image, is revealed to be what it is: the elegant cloak of our still timid unknowing. Shea's art offers only beginnings, however tentative, however hesitant, creating them from whatever residua might linger from the endings that remain to us.



In any attempt to provide a summary of these images one is surprised by the inherently pessimistic vision which comprises the basic material of his video installations:

- » a woman suffering the terminal stages of cancer attempts to relate a poetic narrative in spite of the intermittent interference caused by a rotating radar antenna...
- » a spiral text, already fragmented, spins endlessly, frustrating any attempts to be read...
- » a young woman relates the tale of her infant whose comatose body she cradles each day in her arms...
- » a virtual typewriter the keys of which, when struck, emit random words or phrases...
- » the artist himself delivering a muted political speech to the strains of a canned laugh track...

A surprise all the more acute due to the lack of gloom descending, even throughout repeated viewings. For unsettling as such poignant images may be, Shea does not impose or catalogue the seemingly countless variations of melancholy and despair to which we are prone. What he does provide however is a sort of topography of courage, sketching the geography that stretches between optimism and resignation, hope and despair. This is a pathless land, or rather a thicket littered with the traces of others and crisscrossed with paths leading nowhere, yet which



1000 Glances, video installation, 1.5 min, looped, 2003 - 2008

BLACK-SHEA, BE IT RESOLVED THAT, the Council of the Municipality of West Grey authorizes the Treasurer to transfer \$3,288.00 allocated for the Durham Skate Board Park to the Equipment Reserve. (#413-05) CARRIED.

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SHEA-BLACK, BE IT RESOLVED THAT, By-law Number 112-2005, being a by-law to amend by-law no. 24-2005, he now read a first, second and third



“continue infinitely in all directions, beyond the borders of the fragment you happen to be holding in your hands.”

Touching many of the grand themes of art—mortality, logos, grace, media, gender, politics—these pieces could so easily have been mere exercises of the most theoretical kind. Instead they are engaging on the most human level, for even without knowing the particulars there is no doubt that much in these pieces is authentic, lifted from Shea’s own private life or experiences others have personally recounted to him. Yet no matter how intimate or revealing they may be, still I am reminded of these lines by the 4th century Islamic mystic Niffari:

*All you have shown is your veil
& all you have hidden is your veil
& all you have inscribed is your veil
& all you have effaced is your veil
& all you have covered is also your veil.*

[translated by Pierre Joris]

Speech (*I Want to Know*), video installation, 15 min, looped, 2008



Whatever knowledge we might have gained merely conceals a new beginning, the cycle repeating, much like the rotating of the spiral text contains both the promise and frustration of its own meaning. We may have deluded ourselves into believing that “understanding could substitute for being” but out of kindness, an innate curiosity or simply the fortuitous accidents which are inevitable in the creation of any work of art, Geoffrey Shea has been sensible enough to let the veils fall of their own accord.

We, humans, are a species of storytellers. It is said by some that language separates us from the rest of animal-kind, but is it not rather our obsessive need for stories? From the nursery rhymes and bedtime stories of childhood to the gossip and novels of adulthood, we crave stories. It is this need and its many guises that Geoffrey Shea has taken for the subject of this exhibition, probing the ways in which we individually and collectively interpret the world—the truths as well as the lies, whether unintentional or deliberate.

These installations have been gathered into a single open space and a visitor’s first impression may be the chaotic chatter of the competing voices and images echoing about the gallery—a verbal hubbub much like that which we experience each day due to the voices and images, both familiar and foreign, vying for one’s attention. Yet as one approaches each piece and concentrates on it, a poetic questioning of the stories we tell others and ourselves begins to reveal itself.

On the two video monitors of *Pilgrim’s Progress* a brother and sister retell radically different interpretations of a single unique experience they once shared. Shifting between characters and monitors a testament to the thin line between delusion and enlightenment is dutifully recorded by a stenographer in a scenario reminiscent of the absurd tales of Franz Kafka.

Elsewhere a radar antenna sweeps the skies, while embedded in the wall a small video is framed by an electrical outlet. Moving closer to this piece, entitled *1000 Glances*, the viewer discovers that each sweep of the radar disrupts the poetic narrative

recounted by a frail woman sitting by a river; while through the static which continually garbles her train of thought seep hope and despair.

Even our attempts to type out our own tale on the virtual typewriter of the *Writing Machine* are ironically thwarted, as nothing is written and a seemingly arbitrary word or phrase is spoken with each tap of a key. Yet abandoning oneself to the keyboard one might discover a more musical solution to the need to communicate.

Meanwhile, quietly cradled in a satin-lined oak case, *Spiral Text* continuously swirls on a small video monitor made ever the more precious by the refined settings of its display. Try as one might to discern what is written there, with each rotation the fragments and phrases seem to slip further away escaping comprehension.

But it is in the installation entitled *Speech (I Want to Know)* that Shea not only reveals himself but also the powerful influence that the medium has on the message. A video documenting an actual political speech given by the artist—and former West Grey councillor—takes the spotlight while a catalogue of bylaws he proposed scrolls past. The seriousness and sincerity of the message however is thwarted by the clever use of a canned laugh track like those commonly heard on television sitcoms.

Stories. Trying to cope with reality we tell story after story, fragments of the life which flows by heedless of our desire to capture it, no matter how strong the need to create a narrative from the spray and eddies. We carry on dictating our lives “as if understanding could substitute for being”—a comforting folly gently revealed by Geoffrey Shea in these five poetic installations.

Michael Tweed is an artist and writer; samples of his work can be seen at www.pensum.ca.



Tempestuous

Big toys for big boys

Indolent

Interest is hard to feign

Loathe

Jam

Other people have good ideas

Sam Brown

Jury

Direct access is not always possible

Kindly remove your hat, sir

You're not the one I was talking about

Blundering

Thursday is the middle of the week

Meaningful

Articles of clothes go missing

Interest is hard to feign



Writing Machine, interactive computer program with sound, 2007

Geoffrey Shea is a media artist, musician, researcher and an Assistant Professor at the Ontario College of Art & Design. He is a pioneering media producer whose credits include *Monster Home*, the first feature length production for the web, *Great War Online*, a retelling of Canada's involvement in World War I as a contemporary, unfolding event, and *Shooting In The Dark*, an online documentary about robotic arts pioneer Norman White. Shea's art work is represented in the collections of the National Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art. His musical work with the band Gigi Minor is online at www.gigiminor.com.

Exhibitions and Performances

2008	Mobilefest (Sao Paulo)	1988	Artists' Space (New York)
	ACM Multimedia (Vancouver)		Honolulu Academy of Art (Hawaii)
2006	Words Aloud Poetry Festival (Durham)		Humboldt Festival (California)
	Optic Nerve 2006 Film Festival (Peterborough)		C.B.C. Television Commission
2005	Fabulous Festival of Fringe Film (Durham)		Art Metropole (Toronto)
	Netart Community Congress, (Austria)	1987	Video Culture International (Toronto)
	Modern Fuel (Kingston)		YYZ Artists' Outlet (Toronto)
2002	Art Gallery of Calgary (Calgary)		Trinity Square Video (Toronto)
	Ed Video (Guelph)		Lunatic of One Idea – Public Access (Toronto)
1999	Champ Libre (Montreal)	1986	Kijkhuis Video Festival (Holland)
1996	Garnet Press Gallery (Toronto)		INFERMENTAL IV (Holland/Germany)
1995	ISEA '95 (Montreal)	1985	Centre for Art Tapes (Halifax)
1994	Woodstock Art Gallery		National Arts Centre (Ottawa)
	Vidéo Forme (France)		SAW Gallery (Ottawa)
1993	Garnet Press Gallery (Toronto)		Funnel (Toronto)
	YYZ Artists' Outlet (Toronto)		VOX POP – Video Cabaret (Toronto)
1992	Art Metropole (Toronto)		Six Days of Resistance (Toronto)
1991	Medienwerkstatt Wien (Austria)	1984	SAW Gallery (Ottawa)
	Ed Video (Guelph)		Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff)
	Landesmuseum Innsbruck (Austria)		Plug-In (Winnipeg)
1990	Querspur Video Festival (Austria)		EM Media (Calgary)
	Museum of Modern Art (New York)		Neutral Ground (Regina)
	Art Metropole (Toronto)		Latitude 53 (Edmonton)
	National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa)		Sao Paulo Bienel (Brazil)
1989	YYZ Artists' Outlet (Toronto)		Kijkhuis Video Festival (Holland)
	Galerie 101 Gallery (Ottawa)		International Festival du Cinema & Video (Montreal)
	Centre for Art Tapes (Halifax)		Chromaliving (Toronto)
	Artspace (Peterborough)	1983	Hallwalls (Buffalo)
	Long Beach Museum of Art (California)		Forest City Gallery (London)
	SCAN – Japan Video Television Festival	1982	Video Roma (Italy)
	Glenbow Museum (Calgary)		Festival of Festivals (Toronto)

He spread his sharp brittle soul
thinly, in every direction
till he blended into the world...