

VIDEO SURPLUS / VARIED TOIL

Saturday, May 28, 2011



Inspired by the Mayworks Festival events across the country this month, Modern Fuel presents a video program and a panel discussion that addresses the relationship between artists, labour, and the economy, entitled “Video Surplus / Varied Toil.” The screening “Video Surplus,” curated by **Michael Davidge**, presents a selection of videos by artists including **Emily Vey Duke, Cooper Battersby, Nahed Mansour** and others to provide a composite portrait of video art production in Canada during the past decade as well as a survey of the diverse ways that artists’ work refuses instrumentalization. The program presents a portrayal of art production that underscores yet again the cultural contradictions of capitalism, this time within the framework of the Creative Economy as popularized by figures such as Richard Florida.

“Varied Toil” is the title of an audio documentary by **James Goddard** that presents a series of conversations between different people who in various ways might fall into the category of creative worker. These conversations center around the relationship between art and work, both terms variously conceived. This in the end provides an interesting picture of how this new breed of workers talks about themselves. Goddard will give a presentation on his project and then join in a conversation with the other guest presenters, Emily Vey Duke, Cooper Battersby, and Nahed Mansour.

James Goddard is a Kingston-based radio journalist. He was recently the Spoken Word Programming Manager at CFRC, Kingston’s only campus-community radio station.

Duke & Battersby have been working collaboratively since 1994. Cooper Battersby and Emily Vey Duke work in printed matter, installation, curation and sound, but their primary practice is the production of single-channel video. Their work has been exhibited in galleries and at festivals in North and South America and throughout Europe. Duke and Battersby are currently teaching at Syracuse University in Central New York.

Nahed Mansour is a Toronto-based performance artist. She positions her Arab body among immigrant and racialized communities in a way that challenges Orientalism, capitalism, and other ‘isms’ that plague colonial-settler powers. She was a program coordinator for Mayworks 2011 in Toronto. The screening and discussion will be a free presentation that will take place on Saturday May 28th starting at 7pm at the AKA autonomous social centre, 75

Queen Street, Kingston, Ontario. This project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Community Foundation for Kingston & Area.

Curatorial Essay

In the Spring of 2011, Modern Fuel presented a program of videos I curated on the theme of “Art and the Economy” in conjunction with the numerous Mayworks Festivals that were happening across the country at that time. In collaboration with members of the collective who had presented the previous year’s Kingston Mayworks Festival, we coordinated the screening to take place at the AKA Autonomous Social Centre in Kingston at the end of May, where we hosted a panel presentation featuring several artists included in the program. The goal of the Kingston MayWorks Festival Collective is to increase exposure to and appreciation of creative expressions of work and work-related issues. Through its New Media Workspace, an aspect of our organization that facilitates the presentation and production of new media work, Modern Fuel is able contribute to the ongoing conversations regarding labour and artistic production through this program entitled “Video Surplus” that also offers an aperçu on Canadian video art at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century.

With the aim to further the dissemination of contemporary Canadian video art and provide a context for the work, the “Video Surplus” video program has been integrated with issue 1.4 of *Syphon* which will be distributed for free at various locations in Kingston, across Canada, and internationally. “Video Surplus” presents a portrayal of art production that underscores yet again the cultural contradictions of capitalism, this time within the framework of the Creative Economy as popularized by figures such as Richard Florida.

Though artists stand to benefit from the implementation of Creative Economy cultural planning at the government level, arguments in support of the Creative Economy tend to instrumentalize art production. The content of the video program reveals that not only are artists an unruly bunch, but also their labour, if not wholly unproductive, tends towards a marginalization that diminishes the return on expenditures. Underpinned by the theories of the French philosopher Georges Bataille, notably that artists are “evil” and that their production is constitutive of an “accursed share,” the selection of videos in the program provides a composite portrait of video art production in Canada during the past decade as well as a survey of the diverse ways that artists’ work refuses a calculable yield.

As the videos were presented in the chronological order of their production, the program begins with what must by now be a classic in the Canadian video art canon, **Emily Vey Duke** and **Cooper Battersby**’s “Being Fucked Up” (2000-1), which represents the artist as a crack-smoking slacker whose redemption is dubious. The episodic video includes a sequence of simple animation and live-action scenes that together create a portrait of the artists’ lives as they struggle with various issues, including questions about how to be a good citizen, feelings of worthlessness, empathy, and coping with failure. The duo now teach in Syracuse and continue to make provocative videos and installations together. Like much of their later work, the video “Being Fucked Up” offers a view that is simultaneously cynical, pessimistic, and hopeful, without offering any resolution or easy answers. In the sequence “Head Bangers,” which poignantly closes the piece, the pointed question “Do you believe in the possibility of redemption?” is answered by both artists: one nods her head “Yes” the other shakes his head “No.”

Jennifer Matotek’s “60 Explosions” (2004) provides a typology of sixty explosions, appropriated from mass media footage, that blow-up real good, and nothing more. Matotek is a videomaker, artist, curator and writer based in Toronto. Her video work combines a structural rigidity with a buffoonish praxis and a predilection for the most puerile of subject matter that undermines its ambitions. Matotek’s interest in comedy as a critical tool is evidenced not only in her art and curatorial practice but also in the long-form improvisational comedy routines that she develops with abundant sensitivity and rigour. Though neither Matotek nor Vey Duke and Battersby are evidently “evil” in their practices, their productions are a part of an “accursed share” to the degree that they inhibit the reception of an immediately recuperable message or lesson beyond a kind of sumptuous revelry in the asinine, incompetent, or indecisive.

Bataille's theories celebrated an overabundance of energy that is produced by the natural world whose destiny is waste, and surely one would rather that this energy be used up in the making of art than the pursuit of violence, destruction, and war that the French philosopher places on the other side of the coin in this expenditure of energy. Matatok's parade of explosions ranges from the contained to the catastrophic, humorously (but also disturbingly) only gesturing towards the barely tapped capacity for annihilation that it manifests. The parade of videos in this program is not meant to be viewed moralistically, however, but merely objectively as a kind of shorthand cataloguing of modes of spending time and energy.

Daniel Wong's "The Lotus Eaters" (2006) depicts the artist eating, out of a book, page after page of the Lotus Eaters episode of the Odyssey and reacting to it as if it were a hallucinogenic. Wong is an interdisciplinary artist from Lethbridge, Alberta working in a range of forms including installation, performance, writing, drawing, and music. His work is very often collaborative in nature, proceeding from an engagement with sociality that came about after a long period of reclusive contemplation. "The Lotus Eaters" is the apotheosis of this withdrawal, unrepentant in its hermeticism and acedia. And yet, it retains a woozy pleasure. The program accelerates into a frenetic pace with the next two videos.

Tasman Richardson's "The Game" (2007) proposes, in a hyperactive mash-up, that it is difficult to determine what is a game and what is real, and between labour in leisure, in a world of remote control warfare, hyper-reality, and videogames crafted by the military for recruitment and training. Richardson is a Toronto-based video artist whose work focuses on entropy, tele-presence, synesthesia, and the JAWA style of editing (which he pioneered) that creates musical compositions and abstract narratives entirely from appropriated video.

Similarly, **Jubal Brown's** "Anti-Feelings" (2009) splices together a manic reediting of popular music videos which verges on the obscene and the pornographic. A notorious multi-media artist based in Toronto, Jubal Brown's work references the recombinant nature of contemporary culture, and presents a dizzying, high density layering of innumerable cultural referents. Like the Videodrome nights he has organized for the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto, his videos are in synch with an increasingly distracted contemporary audience whose attention deficit disorder enables the reception of a surfeit of indigestible communications. Bataille fingers non-procreative sexuality as an element of the accursed share, which could be connected with the contemporary proliferation of pornography, but as theorists like Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have pointed out, it is the excess of information rendered available in the post-modern world that is truly pornographic.

The mechanized rhythm and affectlessness of **Nicole Rayburn's** "Pollination Proposition" (2009) suggests a kind of post-modern theoretical porn: it depicts an androgynous figure repeatedly nudging with its Pinocchio-like elongated nose an orchid in a clinical environment barren of bees. The tableau is at once tedious, hypnotizing, and disturbing, suggesting the monstrous and unpredictable potential of mutation. The fictional character of Pinocchio is deliberately evoked by this video to embody an ambiguity and a yearning to be different. To counter the alarming phenomenon of dwindling bee populations, the video proposes the necessity of a hybrid machine/animal to continue their work. Rayburn is a Toronto-based artist from Edmonton. In an artist statement, she declares that she enjoys the absurd and subtly perverse and that she often wears animal costumes in order to proffer questionable propositions. Rayburn's video is also a hybrid creature that combines the task-based performance art of the twentieth century with graduate school theorization and a dystopian science fiction scenario.

Its wry sense of humour almost dispels the chill. The most recent works in the program include **Ulysses Castellanos's** video "Narcoleptic Drift" (2010) which illustrates Buckminster Fuller's theory of ephemeralization through the rise and fall of Vanilla Ice's career. Castellanos was born in San Salvador and lives and works in Toronto. His work encompasses new media, film, music, performance, painting, photography and sculpture-installation, and very often combines these elements into elaborate performance art projects. "Narcoleptic Drift" is one such project, with the video as one element of a specially conceived performance. If the central aim of Castellano's art practice is to demystify established cultural constructs by involving the viewer in the humorous debunking of idealized images, concepts and paradigms, then perhaps his work is closest in spirit to Bataille's linkage of artistic production with evil.

Bataille argued in *Literature and Evil* that in order to communicate fully, the artist, who has the natural talent to do this, must give expression to the entirety of human experience, and touch on its dark aspects as much as its light. By flipping conventions and going beyond received ideas, the artist provides an opportunity to see things from a new perspective. Castellanos' video begins innocently enough with a humorous profile of the artist Vanilla Ice, but slowly and diabolically takes the viewer on a literal journey to hell.

Nahed Mansour's "Vertigo/Vitiligo" (2010) is a document of a recent performance and installation at La Centrale, an artist-run centre in Montreal. Mansour's work references the practice of Blackface in minstrel acts and explores the metaphor of the tap-dancer as way to think about racial identities as they are performed and negotiated. Mansour is a Toronto-based artist who works in performance, installation and video. She also pursues independent curatorial projects and has worked as a Program Coordinator at the Mayworks Festival in Toronto. The materials in "Vertigo/Vitiligo" refer to the iconography of blackface, as well as the practices of tap-dancing and shining shoes. They also refer to the artist's own personal history, as a tap dancer in a high school production based on "Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk," and to her father, who used lotions to cover up de-pigmented parts of his body that were affected by vitiligo. Mansour's performance is a tribute to the exhaustive amounts of energy expended in artistic labour that also raises serious questions about race and social roles. Either by embodying gestures in documents of performances or by manifesting those gestures in the very structures of work produced using the strategies of "Post-Production," the artists in "Video Surplus" provide a complex illustration of the ways in which labour is both ritualized and refused in their artworks, often through the very act of consumption itself. The conceit of this program was that artists are evil and that their work is useless, a point of view that may only slightly exaggerate a conservative dismissal of the value of art beyond its economic returns. The program is meant to concur with that point of view, but only if the correlative conclusion is accepted as equally commonsensical: that massive expenditures of energy and wealth on the arts are a given. The artists Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby and Nahed Mansour presented, along with James Goddard, on the theme of "Art and the Economy" at a panel presentation after the screening at the AKA Autonomous Social Centre. Nicole Rayburn was also in attendance. James Goddard has contributed an experimental audio documentary on the theme of "Art and the Economy" that was presented in preliminary form and can now be heard in full on the AV supplement special in issue 1.4 of *Syphon*. Goddard's documentary explores the contradictory positioning of art as both luxury and labour. On the one hand, Goddard argues, art as luxury is the idea that under-girds, for example, current Prime Minister Stephen Harper's assertion that art is a niche interest for those who attend fancy galas. On the other hand, he continues, art as labour (or at least professional practice) is the idea that sends hundreds of students into Fine Arts programs. Furthermore, Goddard contends that the double existence of art as both a leisure activity and a professional practice makes it difficult to talk about economically. Goddard's radio feature investigates this dichotomy through the processes used in its creation as well as in its content.

By Michael Davidge, Artistic Director, Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre.