

TEST SIGNALS: SELECTED WORKS BY JOHN WATT,
ALAN FOX AND ANDREW JAMES PATERSON.

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Three hundred people are lined up around a block in SoHo waiting nervously for their chance to be an art star. They are auditioning for Geoffrey Dietch's latest project, an endeavor that has sent the art world following after pop stars, models, designers, chefs et.al. into the world of reality television. Entitled "ARTSTAR", the program will follow the now ubiquitous game show format and ultimately select Dietch Projects newest artist. According to Deitch, "In the 1970s, no self-respecting artist would have stood in line to try to get on a television show"; the queue outside his door suggests that times have changed, drastically. ARTSTAR is the art community's most recent foray into the world's most pervasive medium, television. ARTSTAR is the latest in a long line of work that redefines not only the high/low culture dichotomy but also the role of the cultural producer. The participants in ARTSTAR are jacks of all trades, operating in the spaces between artist and celebrity, curator and television producer, high brow spectacle and mass dissemination.

In the 1980s, before "interdisciplinary" was a buzzword, Toronto artist Andrew James Paterson was a multi-hyphenate: a prolific writer-musician-performer-video artist whose work exemplified inclusive and varied practice. As Paterson's peers General Idea attested in their videotape *Pilot* (1977), "More and more artists are turning to popular media in an effort to examine the effectiveness of their work. Not only in an attempt to reach a larger audience, but also to obtain access to the immediacy of newspapers, magazines, rock & roll and, of course, television itself." Paterson was at the forefront of this movement, making video art, writing for publications such as *FUSE* and acting as the front man for Toronto art punk luminaries The Government. The Government was the key element of Paterson's video and performance work, incorporating music videos and performances by his band into his art practice. The Government's "Electric Eye" album was one such performance recorded at the Music Gallery as the soundtrack to a full-length video production. The Government allowed Paterson to meld video, music and television. Most successful, perhaps, is the 1981 video *How Many Fingers?* by Paterson and collaborator Alan Fox, a video which allowed the boundaries between music video and video art to become fluid. The tape follows the escapades of one young man through a campy Orwellian rock & roll nightmare of media induced brainwashing (the title is from 1984). The herky-jerky soundtrack, vivid computer animation and unabashed over-acting investigate the dramatic and narrative potential within the music

video genre. Coming down from the exuberant media positivism of the 1970s, artists of the 80s began to see television as a darker and more problematic force than previously thought. At the same time, they pursued mass-media outlets more aggressively than ever before. *How Many Fingers?* cautions against succumbing to media manipulation and authority, packaged appropriately as the sexiest and most digestible form of television, the music video.

How Many Fingers? never completed the jump into television and onto the airwaves of MuchMusic or MTV. Another group of artists did manage to get their collective foot in the door of the CHUM CityTV building. It was not under the auspices of Much Music, however, but through a program entitled "Television by Artists" sponsored by A Space, one of Canada's best known artist run centers. A Space was a tenant at 299 Queen St. West (now the CHUM City TV building) until it was forced to move in 1984 to make way for private broadcasters City TV and Much Music. In 1980, artist, curator and writer John Watt produced, curated and contributed to *Television by Artists*, a series of video art that was aired on Rogers Cable TV between May and July 1980. As the audio announcement at the beginning of the program stated:

" Good Evening. A Space and the Fine Art Broadcast Service now presents *Television by Artists*. This series was produced in Toronto in 1980 for your personal reception space...As these artists work within the limitations and potentials of television broadcast they present their forms and concerns for you, the television audience."ⁱ

This groundbreaking event aired works by an eclectic group of artists: Tom Sherman, Randy and Berenicci, Dara Birnbaum and Dan Graham, Ian Murray, Robin Collyer and Shirley Wiitasalo. These video artists were ready and willing to stake their claim in the world's most pervasive and powerful medium of communication. Engaging the malleable properties of television and the issues of access to its inherent audience were irresistible for artists working in video. The progression from video art to broadcast television highlights the common ground and tense differences between the approaches to electronic medium, critic Ann Sargent-Wooster observes, "Video art is more closely associated with broadcast television than a house painter is to Rembrandt. Not only do they share common tools and similar imagery and imaging systems, video art constantly compared itself to broadcast television and defined itself as being different from its jumbo elder relative while secretly yearning for a share in its power."ⁱⁱ It was fundamental for these artists to tap into television's massive audience, to make the medium self-critical and disseminate their work beyond the limited circuit of the gallery and museum system.

When discussing *Television by Artists* the debate whether these artists were in fact making "television" or if they were making "video" arises. While it can be argued either way, what is most fascinating is that the work in *Television by Artists* fell between both of these categories; it was both "video" and "television". *Television by Artists* and Paterson and Fox's *How Many Fingers?* made the always tenuous line between television and video invisible.

John Watt's contribution to *Television by Artists*, entitled *Two Way Mirror*, epitomizes the intrinsic reflexivity of making television about television. *Two Way Mirror* is essentially a television story of someone telling a story of a story on television. It begins with a middle-aged man, sitting on a couch staring out at the audience from a living room, looking into the camera he states, "This is the story of what happened to me." The protagonist then proceeds to detail an eight-year plot arc of the popular soap opera *The Young and the Restless*. A large mirror hangs above the sofa on which the narrator is seated; in the mirror still images of the television characters he speaks of flash slide-show style. As he continues to go deeper into the history of *Y&R*, the furniture around the room begins to change and shift, initially looking like rough edits. Knick-knacks and photos move mysteriously and abruptly, distracting from the wonderfully convoluted story line. As our deadpan narrator goes deeper into the sordid and fantastical lives of the soap characters, it becomes apparent that he too is a construction. The very living room he appears in is nothing more than an ephemeral shifting set. He has become the fabrication he is so obsessed with. The parallel between the mirror and our television screen suggests that perhaps we reflect television more than television reflects us. *Two Way Mirror* is an engaging internal critique of television, as was the entire *Television by Artists* program - but did anyone actually go home, sit down, turn on the TV and watch it?

In the case of *Two Way Mirror*, apparently people were watching, and wanted more. The piece runs 28 minutes, 30 seconds in length, approximately the same time as your average daytime TV soap opera. Rogers Cable received 25 calls wanting more "episodes" of "Two Way Mirror".ⁱⁱⁱ The press's response was favorable as well. On July 5, 1980, *The Globe and Mail* ran a particularly avid but perhaps overly enthusiastic review of *Television by Artists*:

"But with the wind-up last night of Rogers Cable 10's *Television by Artists* series - each of the six half-hour color tapes went over Rogers 300,000 home network twice, on Wednesday and Friday evenings at 8.30 - nobody in this town will ever be able to dismiss video-watching as the exclusive sport of the select and elite."^{iv}



How Many Fingers:

ALAN FOX & ANDREW JAMES PATERSON 1981, 8:30

This is nicely stated, but perhaps it is naïve to think that video art could become so plainly and instantly egalitarian as a result of this event; it is too much to claim for *Television by Artists*. The 1980s were a time of vigilant activism in this area and many video artists fought long and hard to realize the potential of broadcast television and video art, to very little avail. This push towards televised video art still begged the question... does the general public really want to sit at home and watch video art on television? After all, on March 30, 1980, at 6pm, the featured artists and their peers crowded into Trinity Square Video, for the opening of *Television by Artists*, turned on Rogers Cable 10, had a glass of wine and watched the broadcast, just as if it was any other A Space opening.^{vi} Wasn't *Television by Artists* supposed to be about moving video art beyond the gallery space and into the homes of the television-watching public? While the concept of *Television by Artists* was brilliant and its intentions good, it was apparent that neither the artists nor the work was ready to go so directly into the living rooms of the Canadian public.

We may not go home, turn on the CBC, and settle in for a night of contemporary video art although how, where, when and why we see video art has transformed drastically since the 1980s. Today there are an ever-increasing number of outlets for alternative media. Alternative is no longer synonymous with *underground* or *avant-garde*. Artists today have countless methods of dissemination at their disposal. Satellite television and its innumerable channels has made television more specialized than ever before which allows for channels such as *Gallery HD* the first entirely visual art arts themed network which is available through satellite television provider Dish Network. Gallery HD is currently featuring ARTSTAR in its programming. Most recently, Internet disseminated video sharing programs such as YouTube have become the latest compelling mode of circulation of video art. Massive in its popularity, YouTube has provided an open forum for video art as well as sustaining a mind-boggling accumulation of moving images. Couple this with the unprecedented distribution potential of the World Wide Web and in an extraordinarily short time YouTube has changed the way we experience video. *How Many Fingers?* and *Television by Artists* may not have pushed video art into the mainstream but they provided the crucial first steps of a long and circuitous journey in that direction.

ⁱ Fleming, Martha "Television by Artists" *The Canadian Forum* vol.3 no.4, 1981 pg.14

ⁱⁱ Sargent -Wooster, Ann "Reach Out and Touch Someone: The Romance of Interactivity" pg.283, *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* ed. Hall, Doug, and Fifer, Sally Jo, 1990 Apature Foundation Inc. New Jersey.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mays, John Bentley "Cable TV experiment brings video art into the living room" *The Globe and Mail* July 5, 1980.

^{iv} *ibid.*

^v Steele, Lisa, conversation with author, August 13, 2006.