

Film and Video News

The Fruit Machine: Sweet, Healthy and Familiar

THE FRUIT MACHINE: A RETROSPECTIVE OF GAY AND LESBIAN FILM

NOVEMBER 25–DECEMBER 8, 1994 CINEMATHEQUE ONTARIO, TORONTO

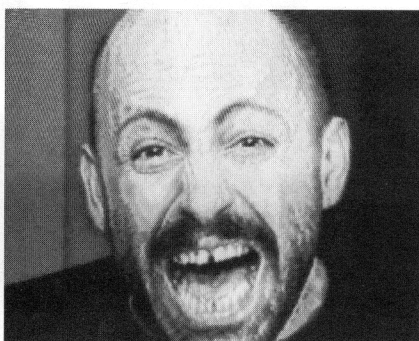
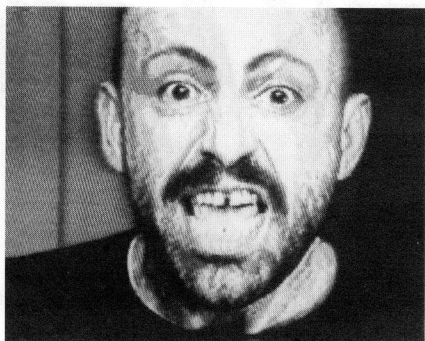
Review by Andrew James Paterson

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Police in the late '50s and early '60s, tests thought to aid the force in its Monty Pythonesque game of Spot the Homosexual—Queer men and women being, of course, such high security risks.

Guest curator Thomas Waugh had initially estimated the number of lesbigay-authored films and tapes to be approximately seventy-five. While previewing titles and scanning catalogues, however, he realized that the actual number was closer to 400. Although The Fruit Machine was scheduled to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall

Riots in New York—considered by scholars and activists alike to be the birthdate of the modern gay-liberation movement—there were many works among the survey's fourteen programmes chronologically predating Stonewall and also referencing pre-liberationist or pre-affirmative scenarios and situations in which the love that dares not speak its name was forced to be clandestine about showing its face.



It has only been since the advent of gay and lesbian cultural history courses that some of the prehistorical works—characterized by inarticulate adolescent longing and confusion, hermetically formalist art-world conceits and victim ideology camouflaged by performing bravado and other alibis—have been contextualized or programmed as Queer-authored works. As for the affirmation pieces, while their

declarations of personal and community identities were (and are and shall remain) brave and inspirational, throughout the survey these landmark works became

departure points for post-affirmational reclamation, recontextualization and research.

The passage from our prehistory to our post-affirmation is more a circular pathway than a linear one. Dissatisfaction with imagery that has

become arguably standardized and thus sanitized has prompted many (usually) younger Queer media artists to re-explore formal practices largely rejected by the identity artists of the late '70s and early '80s pre-AIDS affirmational period. Oblique representational strategies characterize the recent works of artists such as Steve Reinke and Nelson Henricks, who posit scepticism about the wisdom of representing issues as seemingly diverse as approaching death and the remembrance of home with simplistic unequivocal images. Meanwhile, the post-affirmational works which, unlike their

Still from *Shut the Fuck Up*, General Idea, video, 1985. Distributor: V Tape.

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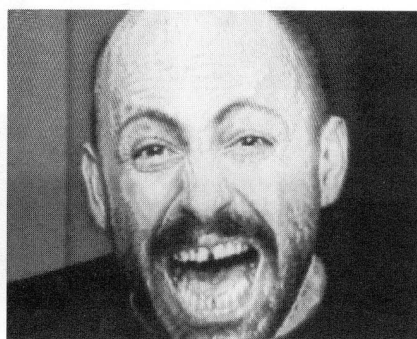
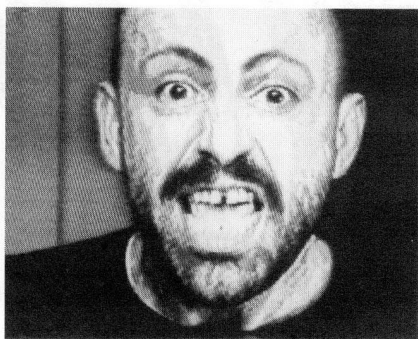
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predecessors, speak to Queer-assumed audiences, are busy proclaiming the idea of any homogenized gay and lesbian community—and this survey allowed for very minimal space for separatisms—absurd as well as insulting to those of us who self-identify as Queer. Some producers, of course, gleefully reclaim unrespectable images formerly more the property of law-enforcement officers and psychiatric workers. Other producers systematically critique consumerist images taken for granted for far too long. Sometimes the gleeful scavengers and the critical reframers are one and the same.

Waugh's programming studiously avoided the *de facto* gender segregation still too often a reality at many festivals. Because of the demographic reality of the AIDS pandemic, the programme AIDS: Reeling



From the Crisis predominantly presented male voices. In contrast, however, many of the groundbreaking anti-institutional works, such as *Still Sane*, *PAW*, and *A Woman In My Platoon*, have been researched, developed and produced by women. In terms of regional breakdown, the programmes in the survey reflected the availability of production and post-production facilities and funding possibilities across Canada. An overwhelming percentage of the works were produced in either Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver.

There was only one First Nations-authored work in the survey. Often the breakdown seemed like one of Quebec and the rest of Canada, which could be a result of either Waugh's base at Montreal's Concordia University or the relatively high rate of film production in Montreal (and not just by Francophone film and video artists). The urbanity of the programme reflects, of course, the truism that many young men and women might identify their sexualities in rural settings and smaller towns but realize these sexualities in urban environments—especially those with support communities.

The politics of funding, both private and governmental, were apparent throughout The Fruit Machine. The delays between conception, production and completion exist for a variety of reasons, not least of which is myopia and denial on top of red tape with regard to both production companies and granting agencies, not to mention the National Film Board (NFB). The trajectory of the NFB—from the animated alibis of Norman McLaren to the

American-fixated *Some American Feminists* and the suppressed delirium of *Passiflora* through to the breakthroughs of *Forbidden Love* and *Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth*—warranted a complete programme of its own. The NFB's characteristic caution was evident within other works scattered throughout the survey. The fact that the most creative responses to the AIDS epi-

demic and the most visually and intellectually challenging investigations of desire and pleasure have come from independents (and frequently on video) is obvious and telling.

The Fruit Machine was not a festival. Festivals compete with one another for

the latest titles—they form their own circuit. The Fruit Machine largely presented works that were familiar—in some cases over familiar—to the Queer filmgoer. The survey was directed toward a more historically oriented film audience and seemed like a film course presented within the context of repertory cinema.

Cinematheque Ontario operates year-round as an outlet for the international and not completely eurocentric canon of art cinema, a canon in which many Queer-authored films have become formalized as art films and the sexual preferences of their auteurs played down. Many of the films and tapes in The Fruit Machine were programmed in order that their auteurs could be, in fact, reclaimed from that canon.

The semi-outing of internationally renowned Canadian auteurs such as McLaren and Claude Jutra is itself part of the reclaiming process central to post-affirmational debate and production. The premise that shorter works by staples of the international queer film and video circuit (John Greyson, Midi Onodera, Richard Fung, Shawna Dempsey, Michael Balser/Andy Fabo, Jeanne Crépeau, and Bruce La Bruce) are as much a part of the rep-cinema canon as the oeuvres of Pasolini, Fassbinder, Ackerman, Jarman, Ottringer and even von Praunheim—not to mention regional works and transient artists such as Maureen Bradley, Lorna Boschman, James MacSwain, Angela Fung, Ronita Bezalel and Wendel Bruno—seems like an almost audacious and constructive intervention. The juxtaposition of video and film, while standard practice on Queer film circuits, is almost daring when done at the Cinematheque. A greater presence of punk-flavoured queer videos shot on super-8 film would have been welcome.

Still from *The Wild Woman in the Woods*, Shani Mootoo, video, 1993. Distributor: V Tape.



Still from *Passion: A Letter in 16mm*, Patricia Rozema, 16mm, colour, 1985. Distributor: CFMDC

particularly successful.

The programme composition was particularly suited to media-arts students and budding cultural historians, the latter group in which I would include

But who and where, for that matter, were the audiences? With a substantial body of the work being known to the festival crowd, at least one other audience was anticipated by both the Cinematheque and by Waugh. The audiences at the screenings I attended were small and not easy to read. Cinematheque regulars and/or members were scarcely present. If *The Fruit Machine* intended to present worthwhile, Canadian, Queer-authored films and tapes to the Cinematheque's membership, then the survey was not

myself (Waugh himself is a cultural historian). I suspect that for many of the films and tapes included in Waugh's programmes the next audiences might be found through television. Television functioned as a sort of absent other within the survey—for example, many of the alternative media and self-produced safe-sex advertisements—and television is also a

medium that has contributed to the further decontextualization of many of the NFB's tentative affirmations. As much as I appreciated seeing many familiar works recontextualized and many almost legendary works revealed, I wonder how Waugh's programmes would have played on television—maybe a sort of *Queer Moving Images* series, complete with acidic commentary by Professor Waugh. The thought of casual home channel surfers zapping into many of the works in *The Fruit Machine* is a pleasant concept so far as I am concerned.

Andrew James Paterson is a bent-intermedia-beyond-disciplinary artist and writer living in Toronto.

Karen Tisch's regular Film and Video News column will return next issue.

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