

Inside Out/Outside In?

RUMINATIONS ON MEDIA ART FESTIVALS, ARTS FUNDING,
VIDEO ART, AIDS, QUEERNESS AND COMMUNITY

by Andrew James Paterson

Toronto is on the verge of catching up to Montreal with regard to its plenitude of film (and video) festivals. In addition to what is now called The Toronto International Film Festival (formerly The Festival of Festivals) Torontonians are now offered The Reel Asian Film Festival, the film and video component of Desh Pardesh, the Southern Currents Latino Film Festival, the Rendezvous With Madness Festival, and others—in addition to the annual Images and Inside/Out film and video festivals. More festivals mean many things—greater competition for public and government purses as well as for corporate sponsorships and media coverage. The festivals that initially established themselves and then continued to develop are the ones that have shown aptitudes for achieving profiles.

All of these festivals contain Queer or at least Queer-related content. We do after all allegedly comprise ten percent of “the public” and gay dollars have been paramount to commercial economies for some time now—in fact, a large percentage of the gay lifestyle media takes pride in the fact that fags, dykes and maybe even a few other Queer shit-disturbers are superior to straights when it comes to making and then spending. The Queer presence in practically all of Toronto’s media arts festivals has benefited the annual Inside/Out Lesbian & Gay Festival—viewers plan their schedules around what has already been shown in addition to what is visible within Inside/Out’s programming. Still, the Inside/Out Festival is the one Toronto media arts event that has shown the steadiest growth—or the greatest “progress.”

The recent 7th Annual Inside/Out Lesbian & Gay (and Bisexual and Transgendered and...) Film and Video Festival was enthusiastically praised by its staff and volunteers as the best one yet. On the occasion of the finale—the Best of The Fest-cum-awards ceremony—everybody was smiling and, for the most part, deservedly so. Certainly this Inside Out was the best attended, with practically all of its some forty-five programmes sold out and the theatres always looking full.

1997 has been a make-or-break year for many in the arts and cultural sectors. I’d like to consider the Inside/Out Festival in a context of today’s economic and political climates for time-based or media art works. The relentless cuts coming from both The Canada Council and, here in Ontario, from the provincial arts council under pressure from the most reactionary provincial government in many of our memories (and not to mention the unstable climates surrounding the Toronto Arts Council with regard to the already-dreadful megacity) have made it clear to media-arts programmes and festivals that it’s time to either put up or shut up.

The arts funding advocacy rhetoric that justifies government or public cultural funding on the grounds that arts and culture are good rather than taxing for the economy has always seemed more applicable to performing arts rather than visual arts. Mainstream theatre, homegrown drama (especially that for which tele-broadcast or extended theatrical play is pending or obviously possible) and concert-oriented

WORLD-CLASS & QUEER



Jodie: An Icon, Pratikha Parmar, UK, 1996, video, 25 min.
Photo: Courtesy Associated Press.

YOU GOTTA BE STRONG YOU GOTTA BE TOUGH

music seem easier to explain to individuals and interest groups who are suspicious about elitist, tax-wasting art than painting, sculpture, and the more experimental time-based art practices for which exhibition possibilities are limited at best. But time-based works, even of the not-necessarily performing variety, still imply and demand public presentations for which audiences are a prime (if not *the* prime) part of the operative equation.

Thus Toronto's time-based media-arts festivals have had to take the bull by the horn, so to speak. They have been forced to "perform." No longer can festivals such as *Inside/Out* (or *Images*) be seen as small, durable and reliable—relatively isolated events catering to small and loyal audiences or repeat viewers. These festivals, to put it mildly, have had to both outgrow and translate beyond their initial root "communities" or else they would become media-arts history.

Since the *Inside/Out* Festival's inception in 1991 the festival has grown steadily. Initially many Queer film and video producers primarily wished to showcase their works before Queer or at least Queer-positive audiences. Initiated by a Queer media-arts collective, the festival provided space for varieties of approaches to film and to video. The festival immediately provided screening opportunities for works that were either too Queer for some festivals or not arty enough for others. Simultaneously, as submissions became greater in number, and from more varied sources, the festival expanded far beyond just programming somebody's work because the producer was known to be a practicing Queer. From 1991 to 1996 not only did audiences grow steadily, the programming became increasingly international in flavour as contacts were made and then strengthened with other festivals as well as distributors.

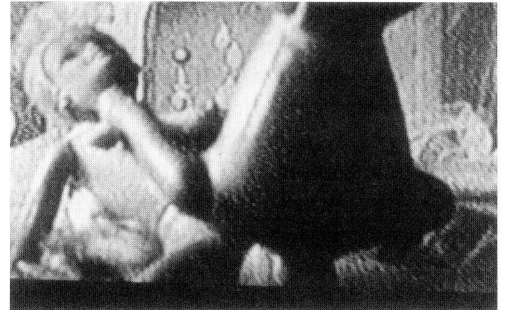
The collapse of the Metropolitan Theatre, which had been the poorly defined ghost of The Euclid

Theatre—initially founded to showcase Toronto's independent media-arts producers and programming curated by that "community" but which had clearly failed to "progress" beyond that community or audience—provided an opportunity for the *Inside/Out* Festival to boldly increase its public profile. With increased and essential corporate funding (Yes, Mary, Queers do fly Air Canada) the 1997 festival took place at two of the four Cumberland Cinemas on toney Bloor Street Central, where many viewers and producers alike are casually reminded of their own relative lack of disposable incomes. Oddly enough, the Cumberland Cinemas are yearly deployed by the Toronto International Film Festival for those films or film-programmes for which smaller crowds are anticipated. *Inside/Out* festival director Ellen Flanders wittily described the move as "bringing the back streets to Bay Street"—the festival itself was hardly going mainstream but it was moving armies of perverts and their diversity of images into the mainstream—creating accessibility by means of presence.

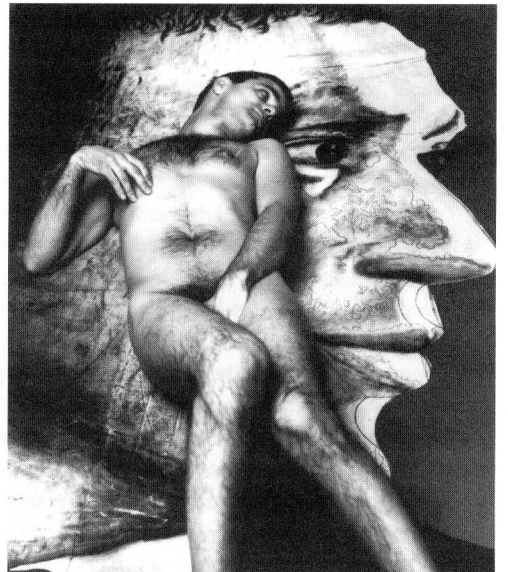
But... is "the mainstream" simply a location? Is it primarily an economic reality or economic construction? Is it a particular mindset that disdains hermetically formalist approaches or that does not sit well with, say, obtuse representational strategies, varying film and tape stocks, dense visual and audio montages in which the relationship between picture and sound does not telegraph obvious meaning and therefore the viewers are required to work? Or does "mainstream" refer to a huge untapped audience or audience-potential that has either never known about Toronto's very own Queer film festival or else has been alienated by previous out-of-the-way locations and apparently difficult programming? Or does mainstream refer to a gay and lesbian and Queer visibility in dominant media that needs to be shaken up and given a few good boots? And from what "margins" is "mainstream" in opposition to? From what marginality is the mainstream a logical or necessarily inevitable progression?

The higher-profile location benefited this year's festival in many ways. The Festival became more social, even for those who weren't on the schmooze scene but who had a more social part of town to mingle in. Exhibiting producers were granted passes to the entire festival. Festival guests were identifiable by their badges that read:

Charlene's Angels, Donna Quince, Canada, 1996, video, 10 min.
Photo: courtesy V Tape.



QU'EST-CE QUE C'EST MAINSTREAM?



UN@UT, John Greyson, Canada, 1997, 16mm, 89 min.
Photo: Guntar Kravis.

NAME; FILMMAKER—even if the producer’s particular works included among the festival programming were in fact produced, post-produced or exhibited on video.

The 1997 festival took place at a period in time in which distinctions between film and video had become superficially blurred, but only superficially. During the Inside/Out Festival (as well as during the Images Festival and, for that matter, among many not only younger producers but also some of their instructors and resident technicians) the festival was often referred to as a film festival and all of the artists filmmakers. This is also a period in time in which primarily but not exclusively younger artists are quite cynical and frustrated regarding arts-funding structures as well as art-world hierarchies and their systems of filing and categorization. Increasingly, many time-based producers are describing their works as “film”—regardless of whatever substance the source materials have been “filmed” or recorded on. This tendency may be due to a variety of factors, some of them conflicting and even contradictory.

A key component of the mandate of the original or initial Inside/Out Collective (as well as the Images Festival) was the festival’s intention to exhibit video art and film alongside each other in the same venues. In the late ’80s, when a movement for Toronto to have its own gay and lesbian film festival was articulated and then put into practice, a good deal of the video art being produced both locally and internationally was narrative in its styles and focuses. Some producers—both Queer and straight—were continuing to deploy sculptural, performative and collage strategies that initially characterized the video art medium. But many producers were edging their way toward something more referent to feature films or television, toward something more explicable or “mainstream.” Video art works in the late ’80s often not only had stories to tell, they had professional actors. This was a shift from the medium’s initial performative impetus—in which boundaries between “acting,” “performance” and “autobiography” were intentionally opaque rather than clear or distinct. Many of the videotapes produced in the late ’80s anticipated and welcomed their own projection onto a filmic screen—this mode of exhibition for video art had already been implemented by such formative events as Toronto’s New Work shows of 1984 and 1986. Video producers had to think in terms of the larger frame, rather than the intimately problematized portrait. Video became more “public” than “private,” so to speak.

“Video art”—not unlike its not so distant cousin “performance art”—has in its thirty-or-so-year

existence been suspected by many different individuals and even interest groups of being a hermetic, formalist and essentially elitist medium. Some formative video art did position itself obliquely rather than directly to its “audiences.” Some of it, in contrast was extremely “in your face” about itself. Nevertheless, the spectre of elitism and willful inaccessibility—buttressed by arts-funding privilege as well as racial and class privileges—has stuck to the medium. Many individuals who use Camcorders frequently, in a manner not unlike the artists who co-opted this problematic military tool to declare their own body politics in the late ’60s and early ’70s, do not declare themselves to be “video artists.” Some do not even consider themselves to be artists—rejecting elitist connotations of that very word. Many Super 8 filmmakers also share this distrust of institutional art-world phraseologies. And, for practical reasons, many Super 8 filmmakers transfer their works to VHS-video for distribution and exhibition purposes. To many producers of Super 8, Hi-8 or Camcorder 8, the distinctions between film and video are negligible.

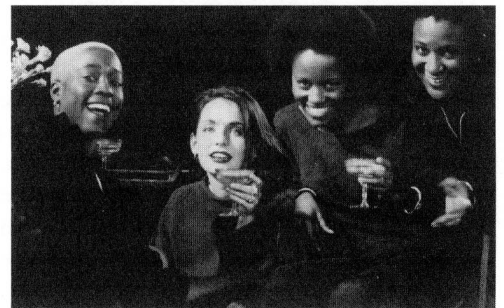
The word “video” for many people, refers to the home entertainment industry—to a more private than public space. Video is something rented for an evening at home with the vcr. Video is a viewing format rather than an autonomous medium. For many, “video” seems to refer to music videos, which are more often than not shot on various film stocks. Many feature and short films are now off-lined and even on-lined on video

IF IT MOVES, IT’S A MOVIE



The Body of a Poet, Sonali Fernando, UK, 1995, video, 29 min.
Photo: courtesy Women Make Movies.

The Watermelon Woman, Cheryl Dunye, USA, 1996, 35mm, 90 min.
Photo: courtesy First Run Features.



MAKE IT FAST, OR MAKE IT LONG



1919, Noam Gonick, Canada, 1997, video, 9 min.
Photo: Szu Burgess.

Video artists, as well as experimental filmmakers, are constantly inundated with questions concerning when they are going to make their move by making a feature — as if such a move is a desirable as well as a career-necessary progression.

performances rather than dramatic acting may well confuse and exhaust certain targeted audiences.

Many time-based artists who have continued working with the video medium have moved toward installational formats and away from narrative. Many time-based artists who began their careers with video have moved toward either television drama or feature films. (Some, to their credit, do a little creative oscillation.) Video artists, as well as experimental filmmakers, are constantly inundated with questions concerning *when* they are going to make their move by making a feature—as if such a move is a desirable as well as a career-necessary progression. While many different and often conflicting factors play in producers' choices of medium and approach—audience, distribution, access, perhaps even size of frame and picture resolutions—I am suspicious of any notion that a trajectory from video to film is essentially progressive.

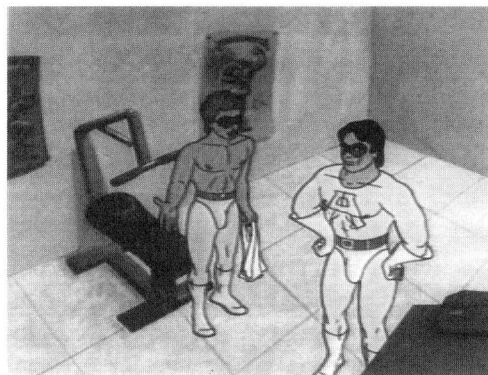
However, it certainly is less of a promotional mouthful for Inside/Out and similar festivals to be referred to as “film festivals.” There has been a creative surge of low-budget works, shot usually on Super 8, Hi-8 or Camcorder. These speedy works combine many of the attributes of formative video and performance art with post-MTV attention spans. The sculptural basis of works by such seminal video artists as Vito Acconci, Eleanor Antin or Colin Campbell is either absent or else parodied. Many of these works in Toronto and other North American cities and even some European centres are either self-funded or produced through activist initiatives (for example locally the 3-Minute Rock star festival and the On The Fly short film—actually Hi 8—festival) operating independently of government funding. Many of the emerging artists involved are arguably appropriating the world of “film” even when working with low-end materials. These initiatives and interventions are vital and in fact necessary. However, I wish there was more of a balance in the festival between the fast and furious and the features that comprised much of the festival's programming. Many of the works conceived and executed on film are in fact exhibited on video as videotapes, and thus are more portable and cheaper to fly within the international postal system. Does this fact make those particular works videotapes? I wouldn't think so, myself.

More than ever the festival's content leaned toward features that constituted programmes by themselves, with the occasional preceding short thrown in for good measure. The emphasis was increasingly international, as many of the works have been touring the global Queer festival circuit. The programmers' initiative in obtaining and presenting works that undoubtedly would not be seen otherwise can only be applauded. The festival's initiative in booking features that played at last year's Toronto International Film Fest but that either remained without distribution or else have missed out on

by means of transferring the film stock and then creating an edit decision list with an AVID computer. Video here becomes a material component of the finished film—a transitional material.

Also, at this particular moment in time video art actually has a high profile in parallel, public and even some commercial art galleries. Video installations and projections have become *au courant* over the past few years for visual arts (rather than performing arts) audiences. Much recent video art, even its more narrative manifestations, has been creatively plundering the medium's formative origins in body sculpture and performance as well as political activism. But video art may seem to many viewers and even programmers to be a dated medium—its constructed sets, long-takes and emphasis on portraitive

Ambiguously Gay Duo #1, J.J. Sedelmaier, USA, 1996, video, 3 min.
Photo: courtesy the artist.



MURDER and murder, Yvonne Rainer, USA, 1996, 16mm, 113 min.
Photo: courtesy Zeitgeist Films.

theatrical release was personally appreciated. But I would have liked to see viewers' choices less polarized between features or collections of shorts. I would have liked to have seen more films or tapes in a thirty to forty-five minute range that did not seem obviously made for television (television of course is the other superficial blender of film and video). That timeframe is well suited to a rigorous collage-essay approach (mixing documentary and found/archival footage with performance and perhaps even footnotes) that characterized my personal favourites of the features I witnessed.

The 1997 festival occurred in a period of time in which AIDS—the ongoing epidemic and

AIDS: NOT GONE BUT BUBBLING UNDER

representations of AIDS-related situations and conundrums—is undergoing a transitional stage. Many producers who have produced both activist and poignant AIDS-related tapes or films have either succumbed to the syndrome themselves or else decided that they have nothing further to say about the general subject. Representations of the epidemic, its casualties and its ravages have long been trivialized by liberal documentaries, boring movies-of-the-week, and by well-intentioned sexless features. Many producers are all too wary about making work that only winds up being absorbed into an ineffective conundrum. In 1997 *Inside/Out* did not include an AIDS programme *per se*, although AIDS was an underlying presence (or ghost) in many of the shorts programmes (particularly *Love Letters* and *Resistance is Fruitful*), in some of the features, and in the portraits and documentaries of deceased pioneers such as Derek Jarman and Marlon Riggs. (And in the voice of the late Vito Russo deployed by Mike Hoolboom in *Letters From Home*.) Again, these figures are not necessarily familiar to all those who were attending the programmes. I struck up a conversation with a few gentlemen in the line-ups who did not recognize the names of auteurs Jarman and Riggs. The names of these particular directors may remain with these viewers after the programme's conclusion, and they may or may not seek out other works from the respective oeuvres. This in itself is not bad at all. It also could be indicative of the fact that the *Inside/Out* Festival has a profile extending to viewers with very different viewing habits and selective processes than mine.

AIDS is itself being transformed—especially in the “mainstream media” from being a fatal illness to a manageable one. AIDS-related stories now fall on page fifteen rather than page one. AIDS has become both mainstream (here meaning over familiar) and marginal (it's still too early for conclusive work to be produced regarding protease inhibitors and HIV cocktails, and who is going to produce this work and where?) Already, Persons Living with HIV/AIDS, who may or may not have been cut off their HIV disability funds, which enable them to purchase and then use their protease inhibitors, are articulating some unpleasant side-effects with the drugs themselves. This relative silence within mainstream media (which perhaps has declared AIDS to have enjoyed its fifteen years) itself cries out for sharp incisive analysis.

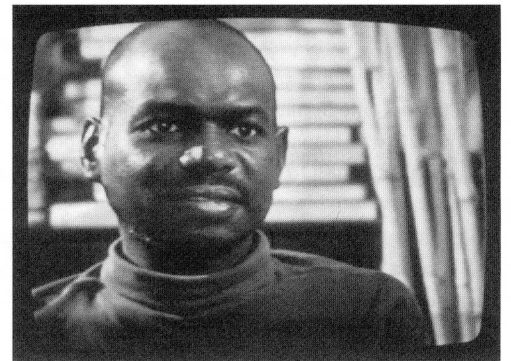
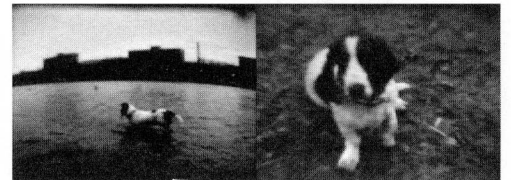
Yvonne Rainer's film *Murder and Murder*, in its final half, places living with breast cancer within the context of pharmaceutical multi-nationals and environmental suicide. The politics surrounding the relegation of AIDS to yet another sinister aspect of our paranoid Zeitgeist as we all move toward the Almighty Millennium need to be placed under some very observant microscopes. AIDS cannot be absorbed into some generalized mainstream because, like everything else involving individual bodies, it is both too convoluted and particular.

As it is easier to refer to a “film festival” rather than a “film and video festival,” it is also less of a mouthful to

QUEERNESS, INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

say “Queer” rather than lesbian and gay. “Queer” is a word that can and has worked to cut across falsely assumed demarcations—between men and women and between bisexuals, transsexuals, polymorphs and strictly fags and dykes. “Queer” can and has been an inclusionary rather than exclusionary word. However, “Queer” can also be an exclusionary word not unlike “community.” In the eyes and minds of some pundits and

Maude, Ryan Drew Mellon, USA, 1996, video, 4 min.
Photo: courtesy the artist.



I Shall Not Be Removed: The Life of Marlon Riggs, Karen Everett, USA, 1996, video, 57 min. Photo: California Newsreel.

perhaps tastemakers there are Queers and then there are those who are merely gay. “Queer” can and has effectively problematized absolute, essentialist sexualities. It can also refer to mindsets quite at odds with bodies, and as well to performance. It may not mean all that much to gay men living and dealing with HIV disease in their bodies and then in their minds. Much of the “Queerness” I enjoyed throughout the festival was irreverent—film and video producers offered flippantly “Queer” polaroids and even documentaries that showcased subjects that became downright Queer when viewed through perverted lenses. AIDS does not always lend itself to polyesterish campiness: it is a body thing.

But then many audiences are tired of depressing subjects like AIDS (and hate literature and its proponents and censorship and Queer bashing and racism and classism, etc.). Audiences themselves mirror communities (although they should hopefully problematize definitions of fixed communities who like this and who don’t go for that). Some of the works that remain with me after the festival are those problematizing notions of “community.” The 1997 festival specifically included young and old Queers in their programming and their imageries.

I would have preferred that the *Out at Work* programme did not run concurrently to the *Young Queer Rebels* programme that I attended and enjoyed. Many of the Queerest people on the planet earth have to “keep a lid on it” when they go to work, and this is especially applicable to youths who are just beginning to define themselves with regard to their sexual practices. Youth and the employed are hardly oppositional, and the *Out at Work* programme itself acknowledged this. Therefore, this was a particularly difficult programme selection choice for this viewer. To its credit, the festival included a Queer music programme that itself addressed many young Queer concerns and provided space for youths who feel alternatively contemptuous and intimidated by “mainstream” gay culture and its dominant “community.” To be a world-class Queer festival one has to acknowledge that a lot of very Queer business happens outside the officially designated ghettos.

Another work that haunted me was Arthur Dong’s *Licensed to Kill* documentary revealing seven Queer bashers and even Queer killers all speaking to the filmmaker from prison. One inmate particularly chilled me. A man whose religion forbade him to “come out” was also a compulsive park-sex practitioner who, upon learning his positive HIV status, decided to exact revenge on all the homos responsible for his illness. This gentleman for me represented an extreme instance as one who is and is not a part of “the community.” He went looking for action in a park that enjoyed a notoriety—that is and is not a Queer space. Needless to say, many cities and even (maybe especially) small towns have these spaces that are Queer one minute and not the next—just like this particular killer himself. On my way home a bus was taking too long to arrive and I was frightened by the appearance of one particular approaching pedestrian. I had just seen *Licensed to Kill*.

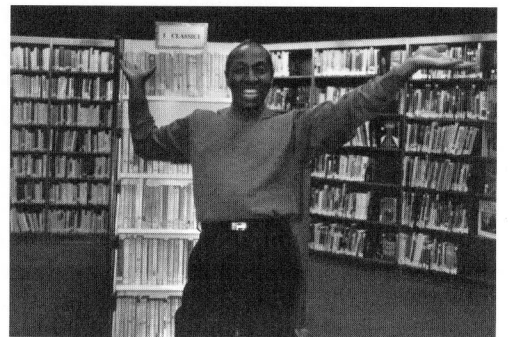
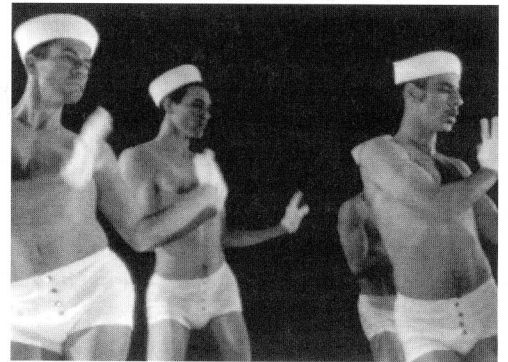
Inside Out hopefully will continue to grow and exhibit works such as these and others that challenge and disturb as well as

BIGGER, BETTER, AND WIDER

gratify. I would like to see even stronger curatorial presence, and less of a binarism between local, short, and cheesy shorts versus serious international features. I realize that all too often programmers have to work with what is available and that means what gets made in the first place. I would have appreciated some work from Quebec and more from the First Nations of Canada; but I realize there are reasons for these omissions involving distributors as well as more fundamental funding and access issues. So, congratulations to all involved and may 1998 be even sharper, more incisive, and yes, funny.

Andrew James Paterson is an interdisciplinary artist who works in video, performance, fictional and critical writing, and musical composition. He is Queer and he is the chairperson of the Time-based committee for YYZ Artist’s Outlet.

An Illustrated History of Western Music, Dennis Day, Canada, 1997, video, 12 min. Photo: courtesy V Tape.



Out At Work, Kelly Anderson & Tami Gold, USA, 1996, 16mm, 55 min. Photo: courtesy AndersonGold Films.