

There's Too Much Love in the World

By Andrew James Paterson

Reviewing *Everybody Loves Nothing: Video 1996-2004* by Steve Reinke (Coach House Books, 2004) and Reinke's videos

During the top half of the 1990s, Steve Reinke became not only a high-profile video artist but also a bona-fide Art Star. His vehicle was the serial-conceptual project *The One Hundred Videos*. This grandiose volume consisted entirely of short works, the longest an uncharacteristic ten minutes. The average length of these tapes was closer to three minutes, and some were less than a minute long. They referenced duration performance, inventory-art, nonchalant voyeurism and personal diaries, while throwing darts at first-person confessionals, psychoanalytic orthodoxies, and verisimilitude in general. Most of the tapes made no bones about their paltry budgets and their disinterest in industrial-standard production values. This project was, for many artists and observers including myself, a welcome shot in the arm during the early-90s zeitgeist of relatively unmediated earnest documentaries and calling-card films masquerading as socially significant dramas.

Reinke's *One Hundred Videos* offhandedly montage original, archival, pop-cultural, and gay pornographic imagery with voice-overs or monologues, recited by the artist with a signature deadpan delivery. These texts were not always obviously related to the corresponding images, as is often the case with experimental film and/or video in which both montage and mise-en-scène are intended to encourage viewer ingenuity. The majority of Reinke's voice-overs, excluding the one-line jokes and deliberate throwaways, would have translated to print without requiring images.

Steve Reinke's freshly published book *Everybody Loves Nothing (Video 1996-2004)*, presents writings and images from his body of work following the *One Hundred Videos*. That project was completed four years earlier than the artist had originally anticipated; it was intended to comprise Reinke's body of work as a young artist and thus lead to a more mature phase. Maturity implies growth, and indeed the cryptic reductionism of much of the early work has expanded into a commitment to structural experimentation, a more sophisticated playfulness involving forms and systems, and a collaging of memorable images and/or sound-bites that echo against subsequent montages within the same individual work.

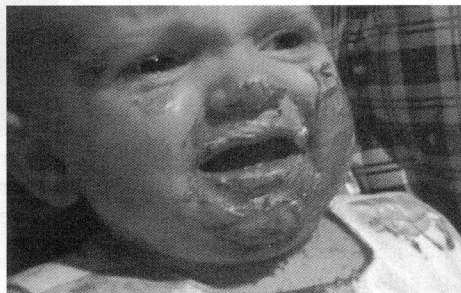
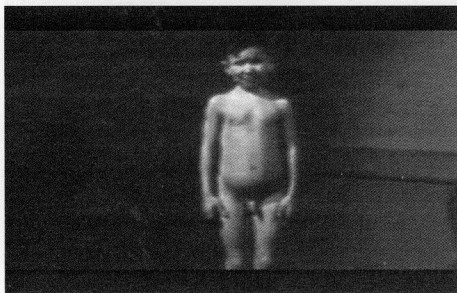
A commitment to making longer tapes allowed Reinke to explore possibilities permissible within

larger structures. Many of the thirteen works excerpted within the book were created by following predetermined sets of instructions, an option the artist felt he had been denied by the brevity of the *One Hundred Videos*. In his dialogue with frequent collaborator Mike Hoolboom, Reinke refers to the rigorously playful compositions of John Cage, as well as to time-honoured structuralist film practices. The artist also declares that the compactness of the *One Hundred Videos* didn't permit him to engage directly with documentary production, even though many of those tapes did indeed problematize conventions of documentation and "reality."

However, Reinke also states that he has "a general inability, or even refusal, to engage with people as documentary subjects." A high percentage of Reinke's videos, both of the *One Hundred Videos* project and his subsequent body of work, problematize issues concerning voice, authorship, and testimony. For many disenfranchised individuals and communities, documentary formats hold appeal, since they are at least theoretically committed to respecting voices and offering testimonial opportunities. Steve Reinke, in contrast, is fascinated by monologues that are not restricted to particular speakers. He articulates a skepticism as to how easily the repetition of relatively homogenous voice-overs becomes assimilated into the stultifying spectacle-at-large constituting mainstream media and information-systems.

The first of the *One Hundred Videos* cheekily announced Reinke's strong ambivalence toward documentary conventions. In *Excuse of the Real*, Reinke's voice-over outlined intentions to make an AIDS documentary with a subject who, though obviously sick, was not about to screw up production schedules by suddenly dying.

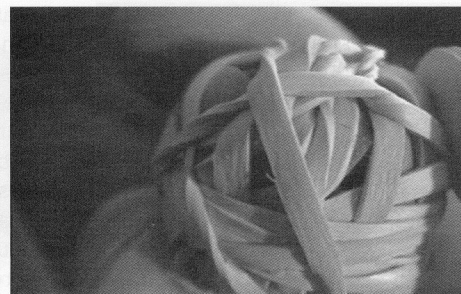
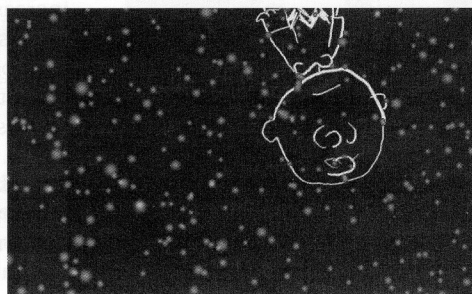
The videographer's subject had to be a representative of the artist's own demographic (Western, white, urban gay male), since transgressing ethnographic boundaries would introduce serious complications. Visually, *Excuse of the Real* consists of seemingly random home movie images that may or may not be the artist's own and that violate documentary expectations—no talking heads nor statistical roll bars. This video indeed ruffled many feathers, appearing during an early 1990s personified by the likes of *The*



Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter and CITY-TV's weekly report by its resident PWA (person with AIDS). These and similar programmes provided access to the epidemic's primary afflicted demographic, showcasing heroic gay male resisters, deploying a minimum of directorial intrusions, and thus appearing "authentic." Meanwhile the AIDS epidemic was out of control and earnest documentaries, let alone scientists and politicians, were not providing cures. Reinke's title caustically observed that the realities of the AIDS pandemic had themselves become assimilated into prime-time spectacle, with their relentless victim images and testimonies.

Testimony is a word with contradictory meanings. Although it often suggests evidence and therefore proof of what is real, it also implies performance. Documentary subjects, like criminal-trial witnesses, are testifying and thus performing, and performers are commonly known as actors. Intelligent documentarians factor this contradiction into their productions, but overt performance has seldom been a comfortable fit with documentary's vocabulary and its "excuses of the real."

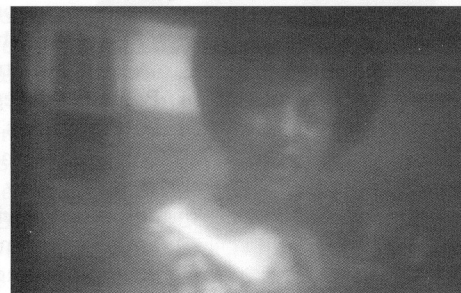
Reinke's refusal to engage with documentary subjects parallels his avoidance of dramatic structures. He decidedly rejected many video-art tendencies of the 1980s and 90s, when artists were incorporating conventions of melodramatic film and TV dramas such as professional actors and "believable" characters into their work. Video art arguably originated at a curious intersection of documentary and performance, and "acting out" has been a consistent trope of this self and social documentation. Portrait-performance is crucial to formative video art. Influential artists as diverse as Vito Acconci, George Kuchar, Colin Campbell, Lisa Steele, and Rodney Werden have made tapes either characterized by their own portrait-performance conceits or by their



encouragement of others' exhibitionist and/or narcissist tendencies.

So Steve Reinke has indeed been attracted to many varieties of documentary language, while remaining suspicious of accompanying assumptions involving voice and/or authorship. But this "man with the movie camera" has never been ashamed of his voyeurism, and many of his tapes have encouraged performative testimony or serious exhibitionism. Reinke's first tape following the completion of the *One Hundred Videos* is one he describes as an ethnographic portrait. His subject, a fledgling porn star named Andy, is a perfect exemplar of Reinke's own demographic. Andy is obsessed with home decorating and his enormous cock; therefore he is simultaneously exotic and familiar. The subject is also a very willing performer—he is extremely proud of his furniture.

Reinke's next few tapes expand his range of archival source-materials while essaying different relationships between visual and verbal languages. *Everybody Loves Nothing* and *Echo Valley* both play with Reinke's interest in monologue, independent of specific voices or speakers. *Incidents of Travel* references words-as-pictures, evoking Marcel Duchamp and Richard Serra and "conceptual art," a designation with which Reinke claims to feel an increasing antagonism. *How Photographs are Stored in the Brain* atypically dispenses with voice-over and foreshadows the artist's



increasing attention to silence, nostalgia, and emotional resonance.

During this period Reinke moves beyond sampling television and his porn-collection and begins appropriating images from Rick Prelinger's Ephemeral Films Archive. While he describes himself as a "browser rather than researcher, more a dilettante than expert," Reinke's relationship with archives and image-banks parallels his ambivalent engagement with both documentary subjects and dramatic narrative. In addition to the wealth of superficially objective educational and scientific films to be found in the Prelinger Archives, Reinke appreciates the fact that Prelinger encourages browsing rather than insisting on specific research trajectories. As a committed browser, Reinke enjoys the option of subjectively interpreting curiosities within the public domain. The artist has the freedom to overdub his or her own voice(s), which not only cynics might argue that documentarians do regardless of their announced intentions.

With *Spiritual Animal Kingdom*, Reinke raised the bar both in terms of general production standards but also regarding the artist's commitment to making something he feels to be "more substantial, made with a presence that would be able to seduce an audience into sustained, thoughtful engagement...a container for an arrangement of individual, modular components." The individual modules in this tape and others from its template, particularly *Sad Disco Fantasia* and *Anthology of American Folk Song* play against each other sequentially but also at more distant intervals. These fragments are stylistically quite varied, but they successfully jell as coherent entities. Some sequences are silent, creating space for intellectual and emotional reverberation. But the elevated production values of these particular tapes have not dissuaded Reinke from making more difficult, or confrontational works.

Regarding the in-camera edited performance homage of *Afternoon* (March 21, 1999), the hands-on book gluing comprising *Anal Masturbation Object Loss* and the serial killer anchoring the serially-structured video *The Chocolate Factory*—

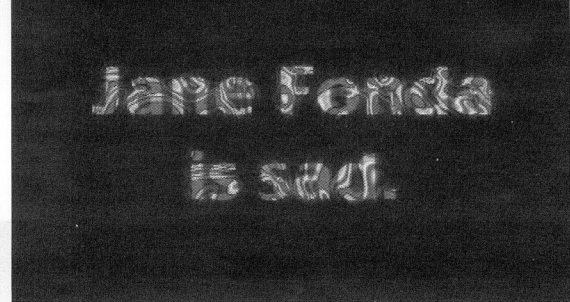
Reinke engages in performer/audience top and bottom games that the artist knows some will enjoy and some will not.

Everybody Loves Nothing: Video 1996-2004 commences with a conversation between Reinke and Hoolboom titled *Sad Disco Master* and then excerpts segments from thirteen works. The title of the interview segment is intriguing, as Reinke's soundtracks often deploy familiar disco and pop tunes that he has radically slowed down and sonically altered. Reinke, who has also edited books on film and video, has a good sense of what works on paper and what doesn't. Just as his tapes are usually structured to discourage literal readings, so is this book. For example, *Echo Valley's* monologues are presented on pages implying images. These pages are followed by a roll bar of close-up frame-grabs. This design is consistent with Reinke's interest in monologue without character. Throughout the entire book, images and texts are not obviously symbiotic. I do wish that the images were in colour, but you can't always get what you want.

Hoolboom, responding to what he regards as the artist's frequent tendency to test audiences' stamina in tandem with unpleasant subject material, asks Reinke if he wants to be loved. The artist responds that there is too much love in the world. I myself agree, since love so easily becomes hate and who needs that. However, respect is a constructive alternative to love, and Reinke has much respect for audiences. He presents himself as a thoughtful observer of contrasting exhibition formats—theatrical and installation—and how they encourage particular responses and attention

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Steve Reinke



spans. He correctly perceives that the days of separate histories for experimental film and video art are now redundant. In this digital age it's no longer radical or perverse for *Sad Disco Fantasia* to be in the same show as Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*. It is not only younger viewers for whom boundaries between visual-art, video, documentary, experimental film and good writing have become increasingly irrelevant.

A simultaneous resistance to, and acknowledgment of, biology have marked Steve Reinke's entire video output. In *Afternoon* (Mar. 21, 1999) the artist reveals more of his body than in any of his other works. Since Reinke has a hairy chest, hypothetically he has more in common with Vito Acconci than he previously thought. The confrontational Acconci, the gently voyeuristic prankster George Kuchar, and many less obvious others, are Reinke's artistic parents. But the hairy chest and indeed the body are biologically inherited. Reinke claims not to feel an anxiety of influence but wonders why, when he was a prose poet before engaging with video, his writing had much in common with various Canadian literary icons. He intellectually rejects biological and national determinism, but its possible veracity haunts him. He also states a belief in the death drive, then refuses to elaborate further. However, deaths do frequently occur throughout his body of work, and not only the deaths of biological parents and serial killer's victims. Reinke has already commenced a working volume titled *Final Thoughts*, a life project that will not be completed until his death. The man is barely 40.

Steve Reinke, who has often seemed reluctant to talk about his work since it has been completed and thus out of his hands, tops off *Everybody Loves Nothing* by radically perverting the traditional concluding acknowledgments. The usual credits have been usurped by an extremely fragmented monologue—a litany of possibly-cut up assertions and opinions, all wildly contradictory. The artist's acknowledgments deny rather than provide information; they are an example of technologically determined automatic writing. A committed bibliophile, Reinke typically maintains his intrinsic resistance to autobiographical imperatives. **POV**

Steve Reinke

