

## *A Very Serious Video Program... Seriously*

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While conducting research for this exhibition I came across an essay art historian Lucy Lippard contributed to an exhibition catalogue titled *Visual Satire: Artists' Books*. In it she wrote: "There have been a lot of art shows about funny art, but most of them have focused on either funniness or art rather than on serious content."<sup>1</sup> This struck me as interesting since, in my case, it was the seriousness apparent in my own selection of funny video art that I found most appealing... but it was definitely the serious strangeness of them as well.

Featuring a selection of artwork drawn from the Permanent Collections of the Walter Phillips Gallery and the Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives at The Banff Centre, *A Very Serious Video Program... Seriously* asks: "If an artist has something serious to say, what's to gain from communicating using deadpan humor?"

Various dictionaries include in their definitions of deadpan humor an entry noting the ability to tell a joke with a straight face. It has occurred to me that this could be extended to involve the ability to convey a serious message using alternatively unexpected, unconventional or even altogether surreal methods, but with a straight face.

The videos I've selected for this program present diverse issues such as commercialism, the meaning of life, sex and death, gender and social politics, and technology. However, despite this broad scope I feel they are united through the artists' chosen narrative technique that contrast message content with message delivery by making use of deadpan humour as a tool for critique. On account of the carefully calculated strategies of humor and seriousness found in these videos, the artists' intentions can be multiple, nuanced and complex. Following this, it would appear that the extent to which the artists maintain a straight face in their work (literally and figuratively) is where their use of deadpan humour becomes increasingly challenging to viewers. While some messages can be interpreted quite easily, the various and often conflicting layers of communication that take place in these videos makes each complex and worthy of further attention.

As a medium for artistic practice video can simultaneously incorporate narrative, audio and performance. As far as formal strategies are concerned, early video often found its origins in response to film and theatre, but also to more static art forms such as painting and sculpture. With a diverse range of influences at their disposal, it may come as no surprise that these artists constructed challenging combinations of messages styles in order to establish their manner of delivery and frames for meaning.

The scenes presented in these videos question conventional cinema and sometimes refer to the fantastic, but with serious issues at stake in their messages its unlikely these artists employed unexpected visual and narrative vocabularies simply for shock value. The contrast between each video's challenging audio/visual elements and the content of their underlying messages prepare audiences for one type of experience then deliver something divergent. The creative tensions established between serious and humorous tones form unique situations where viewers must navigate through moments that may seem conflicting or even confusing. The use of deadpan humour by these artists serve to reinforce their unexpected presentations of ideas but viewers may sometimes become completely carried away by one type, or layer, of narrative over another.

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If these artists are communicating serious messages, why would they want to cultivate a sense of conflict and/or confusion? What's to gain from using a type of humour that can potentially be misunderstood? Messages that are too didactic can be considered condescending, but messages communicated with humour often have a more positive impact on their intended audiences. Also, establishing creative tension between serious and humorous tones can encourage viewers to not take a message for granted and to analyze a variety of possible meanings.

Deadpan humour can either hint and nudge gently, or push and pull wildly, but in many cases expectations of understanding can be affected in very interesting ways. The uneasiness that can come from a contrast between the two categories is where curiosity can be peaked and where analytic processes can be more deeply engaged. Finding a successful balance of rationality and fun can be tricky, but it's seriously worthwhile.

Milena Placentile  
Curatorial Work/Study, Walter Phillips Gallery

<sup>1</sup> Lucy Lippard. "Doubled Over" in *Visual Satire: Artists' Books*. Florida: Florida State University, 1988.

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The following videos have been selected as part of *A Very Serious Video Program... Seriously* and may be viewed in any order. Enjoy! For the benefit of others, please rewind the videotapes after use and please do not remove them from this gallery. Thanks!

- Les Levine  
*Diamond Mind*, 1977  
23 min.  
Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives
  - Ardele Lister  
*Hell*, 1985  
17 min.  
Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives
  - Tony Oursler  
*Grand Mal*, 1981  
23 min.  
Walter Phillips Gallery
  - Martha Rosler  
*Semiotics Of The Kitchen*, 1975  
6 min.  
Walter Phillips Gallery
  - Vincent Trasov  
*My Five Years in a Nutshell*, 1974  
29 min.  
Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives
  - William Wegman  
*Vibrating Chair*, 1974  
1.5 min.  
Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives
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