AUTHORIZED TO SURRENDER: A VIDEO RETROSPECTIVE

In 1976, Conrad was invited by Woody Vasulka, head of the Center for Media Study at the University at Buffalo, to join the faculty as a professor of video. Although before taking the job Conrad had actually never made a video, he quickly immersed himself in the medium and by the early 1990s had created around two dozen video works. The sharing of videos on the internet would not become common for another two decades, so in order to show his works more widely, Conrad organized a six-hour compilation of his videos that could be easily shipped and screened. Entitled *Authorized to Surrender*, the compilation reveals the stylistic range of Conrad's video projects, including simple single-take videos, videos with special effects, and footage of performances. As indicated by the compilation's title, many of these works deal with questions of authority and power, often with a focus on the triangular relationship between Conrad, his work, and its audience. Produced in Buffalo with the support of Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center, which Conrad helped cofound, and Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, where Conrad had his first retrospective in 1977, *Authorized to Surrender* notably was shown in New York City as early as February and March 1991, when it was screened daily in its entirety at The Kitchen, an experimental media space where Conrad presented his work on several occasions beginning in 1972.

The following descriptions were written by Conrad to accompany *Authorized to Surrender*.

To access the "on demand" menu, choose the number corresponding to the video you wish to view.

Some videos in this compilation contain explicit content.

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Program 1. SNAPSHOT HISTORY

1. ***Studio of the Streets XXVII* (Weekly Buffalo public access demonstration no. 27, co-produced with Cathleen Steffan, 1991, 20 minute excerpt from 59 minute original)**

Studio of the Streets is a weekly **demonstration** at Buffalo City Hall, in support of free speech expression through public access cable television. The demonstration lasts from 12:30 to 1:30 on Friday; the program is cablecast on the Buffalo public access channel every Tuesday at 7:30.

Studio of the Streets is a direct response to Buffalo's suspension of its public access operator last year, which left the city without a public access production facility. Our independently organized public access advocacy group, the First Amendment Network for Public Access Television, approved my initiative to set up our own outdoor public access studio and to do it **right on the steps of Buffalo City Hall**, where it has been open to anyone who appears there each Friday lunch hour—every Friday since May.

Studio of the Streets, like most demonstrations (and artworks), is more important in its symbolic ramifications than it is as entertainment.

There has been a lot of talk about multiculturalism, about empowering minorities, women, and those at society's margins. However, if these persons are to be a part of the discourse, they must first get started by entering into it. Entering into participation in television production is a critical phase of the evolution of a multicultural society.

So far, television's entry level has been regulated effectively by corporations. Public access cable TV is the only noncorporate free speech expression on television. *Studio of the Streets* goes directly to people in the street, and **tests** (examines) their readiness to enter into television discourse. It is simply unique in its way of accomplishing the number one job of public access—which is to introduce new groups of people to doing television production.

It is also comparatively very popular; it shows in at least one downtown bar, for instance, and runs in a full hour prime-time slot.

Studio of the Streets runs without personnel credits, and as a collective expression, it contradicts the ego-centered conception of media art as an esoteric expression of the privileged self.

Many artists have contributed during the production of thirty-two shows; the most consistent participation and leadership has come from Cathleen Steffan and myself, both of whom are seen in program XXVII.

Studio of the Streets is such a departure from the ideas of quality and craft that prevail within the art world that it will probably not receive public support. Presently each show takes about 20 person-hours of time to make, and costs about $35, excluding the borrowed cameras.

The particular show seen here begins with a young man who is eagerly awaiting the arrival of his bride at City Hall; he is getting married and joining the armed forces. Later we encounter still another such couple. Moreover, we hear a woman who works at City Hall describe this as a booming new phenomenon.

And as always, everything we see and hear is fascinating—everything is peculiar and special—at the same time as it is all completely everyday.

2. That Far Away Look (1988, 23 minutes)

By accepting and playing off of the ductility inherent in the classic viewer role, *That Far Away Look* imposes upon the viewer's expectations for "reading" and understanding images. The viewer does not decide what s/he sees, and moreover submits totally to (any) conventions that are offered to support "understanding"—but here this is encouraged in such a way as to result in fundamentally duplicitous relationships between maker and viewer, between actor and work—relationships which are expanded to make room for a rich and varied encounter.

That Far Away Look develops nationalism as a metaphoric model for dominance relationships between the viewer and the work. It is also, necessarily, Japan seen from America—a vision both good and bad, full of contrasts. It arches over a polycultural space, differentiable in its various dimensionalities. The American reading of Japan is caricatured through the Foucauldian figure of flatness.

This tape won the Tokyo Video Festival Special Merit Award and a cash award at the San Francisco Art Institute Film and Video Festival, and is included in *Traversals*, a traveling program from the Long Beach Museum.

3. Teddy Tells Jokes (Video from Super 8 film, 1980, 3 minutes)

This exquisite single shot is a complement to *Combat Status Go*. Here the **viewer** is positioned casually, even though every other element in the film experiences a painful precision: piano, gun, wardrobe; conversation directed at (and across the bow of) the viewer; timing, direction, gaze.

4. Long-shot/run/dead (In progress, 1986- , 11 minute excerpt, with Donna Simpson, Seth Tamrowski, and Julie Zando)

The First Intermediate Period, around 2025 BCE, was the occasion for a remarkable constellation of innovations in Egyptian thought and civil order. After the death of Pepi II, the longest-reigning monarch in history, none of the numerous claimants to his sacred throne was able to reverse the dire drought, which announced the modern incursions of the Sahara into Egypt. One after another these "seventy pharaohs in seventy days" were secretly denounced and executed, and simultaneously Egypt was visited by refugees filtering in across the eastern and western sands.

Local nobles were unopposed in their power for the first time in a millennium, and they attained to the same privileges as pharaoh in the afterworld ("the West"). Eventually for the first time men and women won rights of private ownership, of contracted marriages, and of entry to the West (with a proper burial). Remarkably, individuals began reflecting in writing on the world around them, and the first introspective literature was invented.

Long-shot/run/dead immerses itself in this concatenation of catastrophes, which is elaborated across the mixed space of family, gender, writing, law, civil order, religion, personal identity, and death. Any historical complex is simultaneously an invocation of our own condition—the conviction that sustains "history" as narrative arises amid the multiplication of overdetermining details that compose its "authenticity."

When it is completed, *Long-shot/run/dead* will incorporate scenes set in the present-day US. It is the "Egyptian" scenes that are attentive to authenticating details of period props and costuming.

Program 2. <u>THE SUBJECT IS SEX(UN)LESS: SPOTTING GENDER</u>

5. Combat Status Go (Video from Super 8 film, 1981, 10 minutes)

My 1980 production of three hours of material, from which *Combat Status Go* (as well as the somewhat longer *Beholden to Victory* and the full-length *Hail the Fallen*) has been drawn, involved a set of approaches that have been central to the development of all my work in the 1980s. Central to this core of premises has been a conception of the viewer

as an active contributor to the performance of a work, a premise that engenders completely new principles for constructing images, scenes, and entire pieces.

Combat Status Go has a *game*, not a story—the game of an Officer and a Private. The Officer may use harsh language, for instance, while the Soldiers have no names. But the rules are for the viewer: as you watch, you see interpretations of the rules, "played" by real people, with room for the audience to play, too. The "war film" genre context is a conceit which functions to label the roles as heroic; what reduces heroism to irony is not the nerdiness of the "heroes," but the attitude of contempt that is induced within the audience.

The idea that a film (videotape) should or could **manipulate** viewer attitudes in this way is novel and perhaps injudicious. A corresponding problem in literature concerns the unlikeable protagonist, who makes the book unlikeable too. However, the idea here was to open a pathway into a new (and more dignified) culture, in which viewers are aware of efforts to sway their attitudes and respect (in return) opportunities that are afforded for them to control these affinities themselves.

But then, what is the relationship between:

—the *audience* and the Soldier?

—the audience and the *actor*?

—the *director* and the actor?

—the director and the *work*?

The director must protect his friend the Soldier from the baleful and obscenely intrusive gaze of the ogling **Audience**.

The Audience is an officer corps: they disapprove, as the Officer actors do, of the Soldier(s), the Soldier actors; and in fact, they disapprove of the work itself. It is *my duty* to *my cast* (to *my wor*k) to be sure that you do disapprove of *them*; this is the measure of the heroic stature that this tape wants for them—for them, the Soldier, played by many actors, always harassed by their damn Officer, but always yielding and good natured.

Combat Status Go is a work designed within an economy of distrusts and of abuses of authority; in particular, the respective abuses of our authoritarian roles as director (on the one hand) and as viewer (on the other).

Combat Status Go, *Beholden to Victory*, and *Hail the Fallen* are scintillating failures—they transfer the "Officer" attitude effectively to the audience. The normally ductile viewers (complicitous with the narrative) respond appropriately with contempt for the **film** (!) on the basis of their disapprobation of the childlike Soldier characters. Some viewers who were actual war veterans, though, reported that the demeaning atmosphere of the film was "accurate."

6. In Line (1985, 7 minutes)

A trisection of the spectators' power over their own image language: word, trance, and command are installed as valences of the artist's license, revealed as figures of parental authority.

How peculiar that people like being an audience because they enjoy their submission to the authority of the program. This ritual of being dominated is a conspiracy with themselves that we enjoy but refuse to acknowledge. "Oh, no. I don't like TV because I'm submissive; it's because it makes me feel good." The programs are always carefully crafted to be sensitive to people's self-protectiveness, even if they offer a good scare, or a good cry. Well, if this is all true, what happens when, by chance, you submit to a program that refuses to be polite about your closet masochism? That tells all?

In the wake of *Combat Status Go* and in the course of making the trilogy *The Poetics of TV* (which comprises *Ipso Facto*, *An Immense Majority*, and *In Line*), I discovered that metanarrative devices could be employed ironically—even perniciously. Even "advanced" viewers might not have a chance to enjoy full independence from the strictures of the work—but they would enjoy the demonstration of their encumbrance by older viewing habits (or one might say the

deconstruction of narrative conceits) to the extent that they found themselves trapped by the unraveling devices of these three short tapes.

7. Run Dick, Run Jane (1985, 3 minutes)

This version of the Dick and Jane and Baby Sally tale was influenced by Dorothy Bloch, who stresses the role of childhood fear that the parent will kill the child. An alternative title, "The Scissors Bird," is intended as a reference to "The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb" in Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter*, in which little Conrad has his thumbs cut off.

The clearest issue from the stormy advance of family history over the last two decades is that adult perceptions of children are unanchored and self-absorbed. By killing the imaginary child, *Run Dick, Run Jane* skews the adult viewer's inner child narrative investment.

8. Concord Ultimatum (black-and-white half-inch open-reel video, 1977, 10 minute excerpt from 35 minute original)

Originally intended as one scene in a larger work concerned with the metaphorical destruction of the viewer (through demolition of the camera), *Concord Ultimatum* unexpectedly became the occasion of the larger project's demise. In addressing the camera mechanism itself as a subject, and even offering to exchange positions with it, this performance dismembered at one stroke most of the aporias of the materialist/structuralist position in film theory.

On the other hand, this work revealed no point of access to the visual image; its situationist grounding in a particular structure of events, which placed voice and performance at stage center, simultaneously won me over to the video medium and stripped me of visual tools (until *Combat Status Go*).

9. Eye Contact (1985, 8 minutes)

Eye Contact is a gender-dream, largely constructed from imagery contributed by friends and students. The barely discernable narrative outline begins with a protagonist falling asleep in the tub. It then explores multiple and cascaded slippages in gender identity and gender attitudes, ending with the maker in the role of "boss."

10. An Immense Majority (1987, 7 minutes)

An Immense Majority isolates certain social responses to entertainment media, in its ironic insistence by the on-screen character that he wants greater **authenticity** than that provided by TV. Often people's greatest fear in confrontation with their own actual participation in television (or video) is that they will not know how to act, that they will be perceived as insufficient.

This tape activates the viewer's response to that sentiment through its emphases upon acting, upon the glamorizing role of technology, and upon the idea of one's image of self (as a polyvalent expression, realized through portraiture, dress, personal style, makeup, comportment, and social action).

11. Vidi Vici: Narrative and the death of desire (1988, 11 minutes)

If the intersection of desire and authority is phallus, the intersection of absence and vigilance is vagina. The tape's laconic title (I saw, I conquered—but I didn't come) encodes its vaginal pretense. In effect, *Vidi Vici* is a male artist exploring a vaginal posture. By interleafing different gender characterizations with various narrative impulses, it circumvents linearity while emptying our gaze into the interstices between action and incapacity.

Program 3. <u>PRAXIS SPACES</u>

12. Weak Bodies and Strong Wills (Video from 16mm found footage, 1986, 5 minutes)

The visual track of *Weak Bodies and Strong Wills* comes from my 1973 film, *Enlightenment through Experience: Interim Semester at Albright College*. The found film images had been kept in a closet at Albright College, where I was invited to teach a workshop. I

edited the original silent footage and added audio as a demonstration.

In video, it has been turned into a little song about the rust belt. Incidentally, "The Boss" is played by Harry Truman, seen as he visited Reading, Pennsylvania, sometime around the middle of the century.

13. Height 100 (1983, 8 minute excerpt from 14 minute original)

This tape explores unusual montage strategies and unexpected manipulations of objects (props). The second half of the tape, not included here, shifts from the "creation myth" theme to a "vegetarianism" motif.

Oddly, many people have asked me the title of this tape, even immediately after viewing it. In its frequent iteration, the title frame becomes somehow invisible.

14. Your Friend (Performance documentation, 1982–85, 10 minutes)

In looking at media as an opportunity to change people's minds, I have become intrigued by the various strategies available for rapidly effecting profound interpersonal influence: brainwashing, torture, religious conversion, theatricality, salesmanship, hypnosis, and salaries. *Your Friend*, seen here in an edited Buffalo performance, drew upon the vocabulary of evangelical religion.

By stretching the audience's indulgence—distressing them—and then quickly offering them a recovery at my expense, I was successful through my various live performances to the extent that audience members I later ran into would sing "I'm a Friend of Tony Conrad" back to me, even years afterward.

Although it is couched in an ironic framework, *Your Friend* does contain an authentic gesture of empowerment and authorization, extending to the audience real tools for achieving effectiveness as musicians. This *gesture* becomes a fully articulated *enablement* only later, in the *Studio of the Streets.*

15. Movie Show (1977, 4 minute excerpt from 60 minute original)

A curiosity, *Movie Show* looks backward to the era of structural films, particularly Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*. The clip of film used in this performance is taken from my *Articulation of Boolean Algebra for Film Opticals*, the work with which I closed out my interest in combinatorial and logical structures.

16. Redressing Down (1988, 18 minutes)

The sexual economy of television space. In the body of television, the audience is objectified as furnishings for architectural and social spaces of the protagonist. The commodification of television space inverts the sexual distance between the violated (consumed) body of the subject and the (nonpresent) viewer.

Redressing Down uses the distance between the body and architectural/environmental space as a metaphor for the relationship between maker and viewer. It invokes the body in relation to personal living space, in that personal space constructs an essential site for mediated social activity.

A series of vignettes, each of which grips the viewer in a setting of psychic expectancy, constructs a psychological and cultural "virtual reality"—each viewer's feedback into the tapes is his or her own theatrical construction of the tape's events.

17. No Europe (1990, 14 minutes)

No Europe is an ironic white American recasting of Native American culture in precolonial history, told as a dream.

Program 4. <u>THE SCIENCE OF (OB)SERVING</u>

18. Ipso Facto (1985, 7 minutes)

A story of technology, appropriation, and authority. High technology is a palisade of errors behind which artists are marionettes of industry or addicts of solitaire.

Inappropriate appropriation abounds here—inappropriate because what's quoted is either not an entry in the cultural ark(ive) or is vulnerable to criticism.

Then there's the completely untrustable face, a pasty puffy morning-after case, an old futz that nobody would ever believe, who mouths quotes from Mussolini (an authority no one can take seriously, the most maligned and possibly least-acceptable thinker of the century) and who looks out from his monitor upon an old-fashion audience that listens unblinkingly, without a peep or guffaw.

19. Research: Knowing with Television (Installation documentation, 1983–85, 7 minutes)

In 1983 the installation work *Knowing with Television* was selected for exhibition at Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester. The tape shown here was not a part of that show but is a report on the installation results.

Included in the gallery installation was a documentation camera, which recorded subjects who (voluntarily) sat or stood in front of the installation monitors. The harvested tapes offered a small but significant sample of viewers who actually paused long enough to watch and become involved in the display. Of these, my camera revealed that a substantial number exhibited responses to hypnotic suggestions issued from the program tape.

Knowing with Television used the gallery installation site as a research space, for the purpose of investigating the possibility that a television image might induce signs of clinical hypnosis, even when hypnosis is not specifically mentioned.

20. Cycles of 3s and 7s (black-and-white, half-inch, open-reel video, 1977, 12 minute excerpt from 23 minute original)

Cycles of 3s and 7s is a doubled statement. First and foremost, it is a commentary on computer art and the role of computers in video. Secondly, its arithmetic project has some bearing on the construction of musical scales.

In reclaiming the computer as a performance instrument, I intended that the human operator must compete directly with the computer, doing what the computer does best. The selection of a simple hand calculator was a deliberate denial of the computer aesth/ethic of bigger, faster: computer art must be doable within even the most modest architecture.

Cycles of 3s and 7s shows that it is not the answer that "counts," but the pleasure in getting there. Simple rote calculation is turned into rhythm and song; accuracy of gesture and count become a game. These are "stories" about numbers, the kind machines should like to hear and tell—if they "liked."

The "stories" here are calculated approximations to 1, each having the form

$$\mathbf{p}^{\,i} \times 3^{\,j} \times 7^{\,-k} \times 2$$

In musical theory, the prime numbers 3, 7, and **p** are harmonics, and a just-intonation interval scale with equal steps requires approximations of this form. For instance, our twelve-tone scale depends upon the approximation

$$3^{\frac{12}{-19}} \times 2 = 1.0136$$

21. Suckerman (Performance with Tony Billoni, 1986, 8 minutes)

22. Sip Twice, Sandry (Video from black-and-white Super 8 film, 1983, 60 seconds)

In the concreteness of Barbara Broughel's profile, this famous gestalt psychology image becomes grounded; only with considerable

effort can we turn our perception to the "cup" side of the illusion. The narrative of Sandry, on the other hand, does not seem like an illusion at all. It floats past us—but with a slight effort, we tell ourselves, it would become meaningful. However, Sandry's narrative is constructed like the summary of a soap opera—it moves too fast to follow however "attentive" we are: it is an illusion of/in narrativity.

These parallel compromises of attentiveness illustrate the disunity of our conscious attention and the indomitability of unconscious control.

23. Lookers (In progress, 1984- , 3 minute excerpt)

An analytical crisis ensues when the viewer's activity is accounted within the work: without a (historic) closure, there can be no criteria of quality, nor a universal reference for judgment. Postmodern discourse has at least made a down payment on this cost to theory. *Lookers* seeks a different answer by moving against the tide; it explores the inclusion of discipline itself within the realm of interactions that encompass the work and viewer.

In this fragment, there is a stress on the visual perceptual mode. Other footage expands *Lookers* into other sensory modalities, and implements a more alluring discipline.

THE FOLLOWING WORK WAS ORIGINALLY PART OF *AUTHORIZED TO SURRENDER* BUT IS NOT PART OF ITS PRESENTATION IN THIS EXHIBITION

24. *The Flicker* (Computer-generated video with audio cassette, 1966–91, 23 minutes)

At its inception in 1965 *The Flicker* was an étude in flicker polyrhythm and was intended for a projector that could actually flicker at the projection frame rate, 24 fps. In practice such projection has only ever been used in three screenings of the film.

With the appearance of the Amiga computer, it has finally become feasible to articulate control over image luminance on a field-by-field basis (1/60 sec). Although *The Flicker* was designed with the somewhat slower film projection rate in mind, no change has been made in transferring the score to video, and the operative flicker frequencies fall within the appropriate physiological ranges.

Video recorders are unable to respond to field-by-field changes as extreme as those found here, so *The Flicker* cannot be duplicated on tape.