



# **Remapping Boundaries**

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**Artists Space**

**V**anguardist art movements—from Cubism, to Dada, to Pop—have consistently appropriated bits and pieces of popular culture into the terrain of “high” culture. From Braque’s newspaper clippings to Duchamp’s porcelains, to Warhol’s soup cans, each of these modernists have carefully preserved the boundary between “high” and “low” culture by reframing everyday products in a high culture context. More recently video artists and media activists have adopted a strategy of critically “reading” popular culture products, affording the artists a safe academic distance from the suspect escapism of entertainment.

The artists included in *Remapping Boundaries* embrace popular culture forms, intimating that the boundaries between these vertical demarcations of culture may be less tidy than was once thought. We are grateful to Liz Kotz for organizing this program and for writing the thoughtful essay which accompanies the show.

Ms. Kotz has written frequently on film, video and visual arts for such publications as *Afterimage*, *High Performance* and the *San Francisco Weekly*. She organized “The Rules of Attraction,” a conference on lesbian and gay media, that took place during the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Our thanks also go to the artists in the program, who have begun the work of remapping the terrain between video art and popular culture.

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Executive Director

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cover: still from  
STEPHEN (1991)  
Robert and Donald Kinney

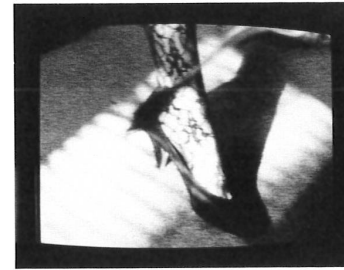
## Remapping Boundaries

by Liz Kotz

**W**e’re all familiar with the format of artists and critics “reading”—or parodying—the products of popular culture, usually from a safe and critical distance. While this may mark a welcome artworld engagement with popular cultural forms and genres, the pervasive tendency to dismiss them as naive, or to establish them as materials for a critical reading without fully addressing their status as quite powerful, albeit non-theoretical statements in themselves, strikes me as problematic. Such strategies seem to risk reasserting conventional hierarchies between popular and critical discourses—discursive hierarchies that rest all-too-often on class-bound and culturally-specific notions of what constitutes a critical position.

In putting together this show, I wanted to examine recent videotapes that explore other kinds of relationships to pop—in particular, works that come from a more indeterminate, less stable place, where neither “sophisticated” derision nor “naive” embrace are possible. How do subcultural artists engage and rework the forms and formats of soap opera, rock music, television melodrama and pop nostalgia? How do you inhabit these twisted representations and popular fantasies when the supposedly-rational alternatives seem just as warped? This program presents six tapes which question conventional hierarchies between “art” and “popular” discourses and work to destabilize the boundaries between them.

Of the artists in this show, Leslie Singer and Dale Hoyt, for instance, both insist that their tapes, however excessive, are not satirical. It’s an effort to make what they can out of these fragments of popular culture, simply because that’s what they have—and because they seem to doubt the very stances of critical distance and superior insight



still from  
SWAMP (1991)  
Abigail Child

claimed by more theoretically-oriented approaches to pop. For several of the artists here, this attitude rests in part in relation to the legacy of punk, and its suspicion toward the administrative impulse embedded in projects of analysis and critical reason. As Matias Viegner notes in a forthcoming article on gay punk videos: “punk mounts a challenge to critical vocabulary and in fact, to the possibility of speaking ‘reasonably’ at all.”<sup>1</sup>

The San Francisco locale<sup>2</sup> of much of the work in this show suggests some shared influences and points of departure: the low-budget melodramas of George Kuchar, the “bad boy” conceptual and performance art of Tony Labat (and Tony Oursler), the arty spins-offs of the early-eighties punk scene represented by alternative spaces like Artists Television Access and Club Generic. This locale also perhaps accounts for some of the striking absences. With the virtual non-presence of more mainstream visual arts culture in San Francisco, smart people tend to gravitate elsewhere. Theory tends to be marginal and less relevant, functioning more transparently as a legitimation strategy than a forum for discussion; in an ever-peculiar time-lapse, the rhetoric of Post-modernism is now hitting San Francisco.

While based in the visual arts, much of the work in this show is also obliquely influenced by traditions of cinematic melodrama, most strongly Sirk and, unmistakably, Warhol. There’s also a connection with the flip side of sixties experimental film—not the canonized lyricism of Brakhage or the academically-oriented structuralism of Michael Snow, but the trashier, angrier, more pop-influenced likes of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Kuchar, and Warhol. And while not all the artists in the show are gay, it’s hard to miss the “gayness” of many of the traditions they work out of. Many

of these efforts to re-invest contemporary and historical materials are aimed at challenging the boundaries of “gay” and of “feminist” cultural practices, and offering alternate female and gay identities situated within and against pop cultural narratives and landscapes. Among the themes and devices that seem to occur and re-occur: uncertain relationships, celebrity impersonation, borrowed materials, historical re-enactment, cross-gender and cross-race drag, switching roles and genres, and the use of music as structure.

Dale Hoyt’s *The Complete Anne Frank* (1986) is a hallucinatory and aggressively-anachronistic retelling of the World War II story, complete with submerged sexual tension and four actresses in the lead role. With a clash of acting styles and accents from faux-European to valley girl, the tape veers between historical periods from the war to the 60s to the 80s. Deliberately fractured and discontinuous, the tape proceeds by a series of scenes and carefully staged visual tableaux, as alternating actresses read and act out sections of the diary including the previously-omitted parts published after Otto Frank’s death. Like Hoyt’s earlier collage-based and punk-inspired works which often revolved around the eruption of violence and tragedy into everyday life, *The Complete Anne Frank* examines the tense and oppressive relations among the sequestered members of the secret annex as an extreme extension of more familiar experiences of family and confinement.

Hoyt’s controversial tape combines lurid lighting, whiney performers, and morbid jokes. The violence of the war is represented by a sequence from Hitchcock’s *The Birds*; the break-in to the annex is restaged as a phone sex call. Aggressively reinterpreting a treasured cultural figure, Hoyt’s tape uses vulgarity and shock to break through the embalm-



still from  
GRAPEFRUIT (1989)  
Cecilia Dougherty



still from  
HOT ROX (1988)  
Leslie Singer

ing qualities of historical documentation and heroization—not to make fun of its subject in any way, but to bring the viewer perversely closer to the scared, uncertain girl whose writings were as full of ruminations on her emerging desires and the dullness of confinement as on the horrors of war. Like Cecilia Dougherty in *Grapefruit*, Hoyt works to restore banality to a distanced and inaccessible past, in order to evoke something of its emotional reality. Through odd cultural details—the “Hello Kitty” diary or the photos of missing children on the milk carton Anne reaches for—Hoyt collapses history into a clash of contradictory documents.

The tape self-consciously revolves around the question of who “owns” the memory of Anne Frank. Beginning with Hoyt reading a legal contract stating the terms by which an individual relinquishes control of their image, the tape shifts to a slide-guitar rendition of the melody “You Belong to Me.” Yet the question of who owns Anne’s words is played out most graphically in the three-part restaging of one of the suppressed passages from her diary, where she states “I go into ecstasy when I see the naked figure of a woman, Venus for example, because it strikes me as so wonderful and exquisite I have difficulty in stopping the tears from falling down my cheeks.” Recited first by different male members of the annex—a troubled teenage boy and a sadistic older man—the words have taken on such dense meanings and associations that by the time Anne recites them they have no innocence left.

The debased decade of the 1970s provides a fertile ground for Leslie Singer’s *Hot Rox* (1988), a Rabelais-meets-the-Rolling-Stones epic of seventies revisionism and sixties nostalgia. Energetically embracing culture as always-already

borrowed, always endlessly derived from something else, Singer’s videos revel in “low” genres, tacky materials, and supermarket culture. While her earlier works were short, snappy and funny, *Hot Rox* is all about duration: a forty-minute non-stop performance to camera, it tells the story of a suburban girl’s rise and fall. Alternately tragic and hilarious, *Hot Rox* tosses off art and pop references: bits and pieces of Kathy Acker, Karen Finley, and Cindy Sherman stream by, alongside the more out-front homage to the Stones and other bands.

In her work, Singer is trying to bridge the art and rock worlds, which she views as both equally limiting and closed-in on themselves. Citing the proto-punk New York Dolls as an inspiration, Singer takes as a model their anarchic energy, confrontational directness, and their play with gender, artifice and visual excess. In *Hot Rox*, she switches costumes and sets constantly. Alternately smearing herself with food, popping pastries, and giving birth to a set of bowling pins, Singer takes on all the junk of her culture as material. Yet it’s all assembled with sincerity and even desperation; Singer is totally emotionally engaged with her materials, however tacky. Her work is about really inhabiting, not just commenting on, a world in which boundaries between “high” and “low” cultures are in question. Like the pop music she’s inspired by, Singer wants access to everything around her:

“The songs on *Hot Rocks* inspire me to go further and bring more of the world into my art. I want my art to live up to the funkiness, raunchiness, everythingness of the Stones and I want to surpass it. I want to take what’s good about them, and take it further.”<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, Singer’s strategy of ignoring high/low cultural boundaries is not unlike that of Cecilia Dougherty, whose work isn’t really so much about challenging the marginality of lesbian culture, as simply starting from the stance that it is not marginal, but central. While Dougherty’s earlier tapes invoked a project of self-definition and demystification, her recent video works represent a departure from more direct modes of contestation. Whimsical, deadpan and also very funny, *Grapefruit* (1989) features an almost all-female cast re-playing Yoko Ono’s tale of life with John Lennon and the Beatles. Like Singer’s *Hot Rox*, it re-works 70s icons and our nostalgia for them.

With its day-glow colors and mix-and-match costumes, musics, and performance styles, *Grapefruit* plays with the inevitable distance and disalignment between historical “truth” and contemporary “re-enactment.” Like Dale Hoyt’s *The Complete Anne Frank*, *Grapefruit* relates to the past by ignoring historical accuracy and instead re-investing historical figures from a contemporary, pop cultural point of view. Rather than making any claim to realism or to some rationally-grounded critique of pop mythology, the tape locates itself within the realms of popular fantasy and an open-ended manipulation and reinterpretation of cultural history. This destabilization of any sense of “reality” is reinforced by the cross-gender and cross-race casting, which re-opens the myth to different levels of commentary and counterpoint. Constantly embracing artifice and distortion, simulation is not even an issue. Susie Bright (Susie Sexpert of *On Our Backs*) plays Lennon; Azian Nurudin as the easternly-mystic George Harrison reads her lines off index cards with

varying accents and inflections. Mapping the lesbian subculture onto the heterosexual mass culture, *Grapefruit* locates lesbian subjectivity within this popular sphere, setting up a tension between mass cultural and subcultural elements that is never allowed to resolve itself into a polarity or neatly compartmentalized division.

Azian Nurudin’s *What Do Pop Art, Pop Music, Pornography and Politics Have to Do with Real Life?* (1990) features herself as Andy Warhol, interviewing a few well-known personalities from the worlds of art, pop, porn and politics. The anti-realistic celebrity interviews are intercut with street scenes from Nurudin’s own neighborhood, the north Mission district of San Francisco, well-known for its violence and active drug trade. Yet what is really “real life” is left open to question—the jerky hand-held street scenes are no less manufactured than the David Hockney-esque interiors where the interviews take place. Like Dougherty’s *Grapefruit*, Nurudin’s tape plays on the disequilibrium between actor and character, inviting local subcultural figures to play international celebrities. Reprising a role from her own video *My Life as A Godard Film* by Whitney Houston (1988) Leslie Singer (who is white) plays Whitney, who declares she’s planning to fund an American remake of *Jeanne Dielman* starring Kim Basinger. If *Three Men and a Baby* could make it big, she asks, why not this? The boundaries of publicly-acknowledged “pop” and “art” lesbian cultures are questioned, and when asked about her sexuality, “Whitney” professes a preference for bondage. Local rocker (and occasional videomaker) Clara Lux, whose early 80s band Typhoon helped kick off San Francisco’s punk women’s music scene, plays Italian porn-star-turned-politician



still from  
WHAT DO POP ART, POP MUSIC,  
PORNOGRAPHY & POLITICS  
HAVE TO DO WITH REAL LIFE? (1990)  
Azian Nurudin

Cicciolina as a campy dominatrix, alternately whipping and riding Jeff Koons around a pretentious black-leather-and-chrome yuppie living room.

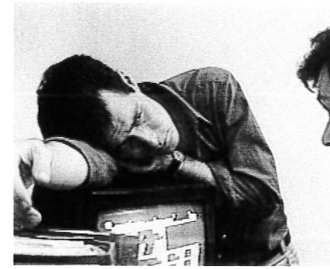
The Malaysian-born Nurudin's more minimal early works often hybridized post-punk aesthetics and Third World experiences in an aggressively post-colonial diasporic collision of cultures. Her early performance-based *Malaysian Series 7-6*, (1987) featured Nurudin in a black motorcycle jacket and floral print sarong alternately whipping and beating various small appliances. Other tapes looked at violence on a number of contradictory levels: the eroticization and theatricalization of violence present in punk/industrial culture, the pervasive social violence against women in first and third world cultures, and the theatricalization of violence in lesbian S&M. In *What Do Pop Art, Pop Music, Pornography and Politics Have to Do with Real Life?*, Nurudin returns to questions of ritual and cultural hybridity in a media-saturated "first world" context, looking at modern rituals of self-promotion and display.

Nurudin's tapes question the presumed "authenticity" of cultural forms, embracing masquerade and the construction of identity through style. Intentionally unlocalizable, her work constructs a cultural politics out of a perpetual sense of disalignment. This refusal of a clearly-defined position challenges many of the identity-based politics of much gay and feminist cultural production. Like Singer, Nurudin uses the aesthetics of punk to open up and extend—not refute—feminist practices. As I noted in an earlier article, "Clearly feminist and yet not 'feminist', these post-punk works probe how to construct a position while avoiding the available vocabulary of politics or dissent. In

their place is an odd kind of silence, a disarticulation of positions."<sup>4</sup>

Like Nurudin, the San Diego-based videomakers Robert and Donald Kinney work with masquerade and the subversion of gender roles, using them to explore the doubling and indistinctness of personal and cultural identities—in particular, the kind of loss-of-self present in oppressively-close familial or love relationships. *Stephen* is the third installment of a trio of works by the Kinneys which locate gay subjectivity within popular literary and dramatic narratives. In their first joint video, *Talk to Me Like the Rain* (1989), the Kinney brothers, who are identical twins, play a pair of estranged lovers, restoring gay content to the closeted Tennessee Williams' text. In their subsequent collaboration—a faux-opulent production of Jean Genet's *The Maids*—the notoriously multi-layered play proves a dense battleground of artifice, paranoia and conflicted sexuality. The Kinney brothers play the two sisters Claire and Solange, whose own relationship deteriorates as they plot the death of "Madame."

Based loosely on a chapter from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Stephen* explores the claustrophobic relationship between two twins who are also lovers. The original Wilder novel is a meditation on the possibility of faith in the modern world; the Kinney's update blurs the identities between the two twins in its distanced, allegorical, and highly-fragmented narrative. Stylistically, their work explores gay subjectivity in a terrain where the borders between "popular," "subcultural" and "high art" influences have become all but invisible. The tale unfolds in a kind of middle American boyhood transplanted to suburban San



still from  
STEPHEN (1991)  
Robert and Donald Kinney

Diego. Like the films of Sirk and Fassbinder, objects and decor constantly threaten to overpower the characters, as the setting suggests the contradictory values and beliefs that constrain and determine their lives. Surrounded by the domestic signifiers of pop consumer culture, religious iconography, Trix boxes, and art deco furnishings, the brothers' world is a minefield of conflicting ideologies. The Kinneys, who were raised as fundamentalist Christians in Iowa, use these objects to probe the fragments of their own conflicted cultural history.

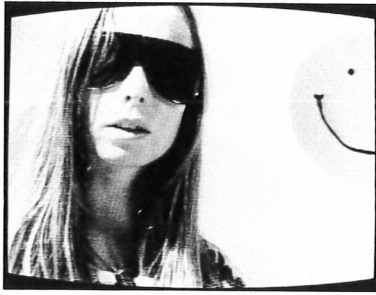
As the plot develops, the interest of one twin in another man drives a wedge in their relationship; when he dies, that estrangement becomes permanent. Cryptically ending in a garish yellow-toned scene with the remaining twin crossing a bridge along a hyper-modern highway, the tape suggests the world's imperviousness to human desires. Alternately frivolous and serious, banal and allegorical, the tape indirectly explores how AIDS causes us to question our faith in science, society and even our own bodies. Unlike the long takes and static camera of the previous collaborations, *Stephen* combines fast-paced edits of images, music, and silence with an almost TV-melodrama feel. It maintains a claustrophobic sense of containment, as the characters move from one ideologically-defined world into another and the tape shifts aesthetics from camp to modernist. As Bob Kinney stated at a recent panel: "I think of my aesthetic as having been influenced by....Jean Genet and daytime television."<sup>5</sup>

Abigail Child's *Swamp* (1991) uses the soap opera format to play with the structures and expectations of the family melodrama. Enthusiastic overacting and a predictably convoluted plot set the scene for labyrinth-like tale of

submerged connections, masked relationships and disguised identities. Following the melodramatic formula that "if it can happen, it will happen," coincidence and unlikely events abound in *Swamp's* gleeful send-up of lurid intrigue, threatened morality and endless double-crosses. With dialogue by Sarah Schulman, the video brings together a Bay Area cast including filmmaker George Kuchar, writers Steve Benson, Carla Harryman and Kevin Killian, comic Marga Gomez, activist Teddie Matthews and *On Our Backs* editor SusieBright.

In her films *Perils* and *Mayhem*, Child has explored the construction of suspense and cinematic pleasure, inspired by the narrative discontinuity of early American silent films and the complexly-choreographed plots, expressive music, and visual motifs of film noir. In *Swamp*, Child turns to the family as the site of subterfuge, in a mock-morality tale of threatened culture and progress run amok. The confused heroine, played by Harryman, runs a beleaguered bookstore and is trying to find time to tell her busy fiancé that she's seeing another woman—her psychiatrist's receptionist. But he is distracted by plots of his own, involving the co-optation of a working-class waitress, played by Gomez. Behind the scenes, George Kuchar, in a Bogart imitation, busily concocts his own scheme, "The Swamp: America's new family entertainment," combining theme park and INS encampment. Not unexpectedly, as plots and characters pile up, their intrigues begin to converge. With looped and repeated edits, fast-paced action, and aggressively-funky video effects, Child layers on artifice and excess as the TV serial sputters apart in a dizzying, discontinuous montage.

While going in many different directions, these works all seem to come from a shared strategy, one which



still from  
GRAPEFRUIT (1989)  
Cecilia Dougherty

energetically embraces everything around them—from the supermarket to the museum—as materials for cultural and political exploration. The very *indeterminacy* of many of these tapes, their refusal to take a clear position or to spell things out, may sometimes make them hard to understand. Yet this lack of clarity is not apolitical, but instead marks an effort to come to terms with shifting cultural boundaries—between “high” and “low,” between “dominant” and “marginal”—that themselves profoundly reflect and inform shifting relations of social power and influence. Often the politics embedded in these works are less about where they are coming from (what position is being argued, what identity constructed) than what they are doing—crossing styles and influences, questioning hierarchies, and remapping boundaries between art and pop, gay and punk, official and underground, and more.

1. Matias Viegner, “Queers, Punks and Skinheads: Strange Bedfellows,” forthcoming in John Greyson et al, eds., *Queer Looks* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991) ms p.1.

2. Besides Singer, Dougherty and Nurudin, who are all based in San Francisco, Dale Hoyt lived in the Bay Area while making *The Complete Anne Frank*, and Abigail Child’s *Swamp* was shot there.

3. Leslie Singer, program notes, 1988.

4. Liz Kotz, “Interrogating the Boundaries of Women’s Art: New Work in Video by Four Women,” *High Performance No. 48* (Winter, 1989) p.38.

5. “The Rules of Attraction: a conference on lesbian and gay media,” San Francisco, June, 1990.

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