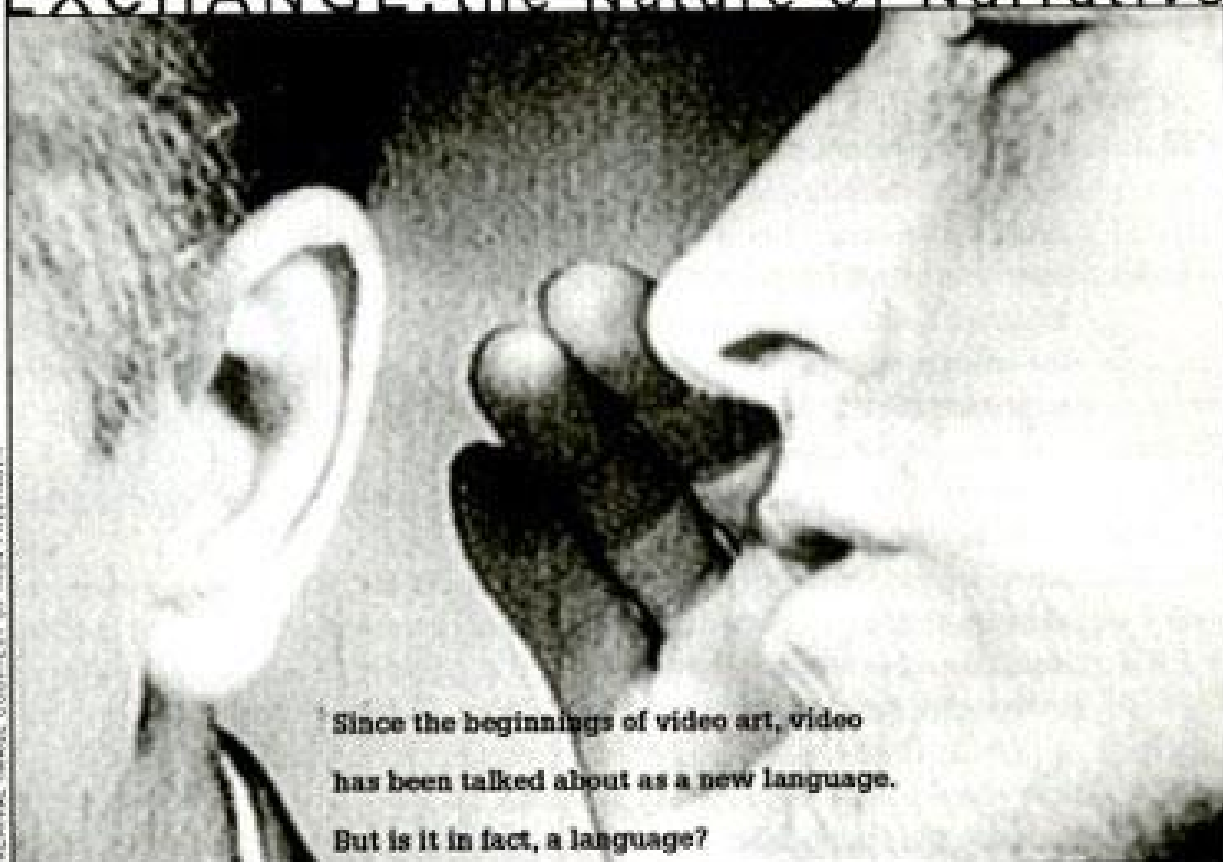


EXCHANGE: the Nature of Narrative

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Since the beginnings of video art, video has been talked about as a new language. But is it in fact, a language?

The Postliterate is about poetry and fiction and the processes surrounding video as a language and the impact of television on literature. We asked Ed Bowes, Ed Friedman, Stan Evans, Ardele Lister, Pat McCoy, Janice Tanaka and Don Trammel to discuss the following topics:

What attracts them to work in narrative?

Is storytelling different in video than in other narrative forms like the novel, or film?

Are there any specific literary theories that apply to video and/or their methods of using narrative?

What, if any, are the relations between the novel, narrative, linguistics, and television? What is the image of television in literature? Is video the new literacy? Let's see what they said. — Editor

A Brief Conversation Between Ardele Lister and Pat McCoy, June '92

PM: Is there currently something of a crisis in narrative representation? I'm thinking of this question in terms of all the arts but perhaps you'd like to address it more particularly from the standpoint of an artist/author working in video?

AL: A crisis in narrative? I think it's more a crisis in meaning. The kind of narrative I work with is more experimental than the linear narrative of TV movies-of-the-week, and acknowledges our familiarity with traditional narrative structure, but I don't have to be as linear as television is, or as uni-dimensional, in terms of how many levels meanings can operate on.

PM: Wouldn't the term "experimental" actually refer almost directly to the idea of how narrative can be constructed or interpreted?

AL: Some artists work more with narrative texts, some more with pure imagery, where the narrative might be constructed out of different visual elements. I think I keep the word "narrative" for my work because I like making meaning, telling a different kind of story while using some of the conventional structures as a part of that process.

PM: To let the viewers know they're still being spoken to?

AL: Right. Maybe the kind of narrative I create is more literary. I do work with words, with language. While the word "experimental" fits my work, I use both spoken and written language and a number of types of visual imagery to build a structure for however many levels of meaning in the narrative.

PM: How would you portray your narrative interest?

AL: As a catalyst... to provide a critical response to what I see. Narrative traditionally begins with or assumes a state of equilibrium which is then disrupted. In my narratives the status quo is disruption; the search for equilibrium unfulfilled within the piece. We need some people to be acknowledging IN CONCRETE FORM the spaces between the lines of mainstream media and what our lives are really like. Edgy, complicated. (It's definitely David to Goliath.)

PM: Is your use of the media an intervention to deconstruct received conventional narratives?

AL: In addition to deconstructing the myths that we've been given through the hegemony of TV and Hollywood, I'm working psychically and physically with the images and texts in films of the 40s and 50s which I believe have been osmotically imprinted on our collective psyche.

PM: Can you describe that process?

AL: I'll give you an example. In *Behold The Promised Land* (1991), I use a short sentence fragment from a film *What It Means To Be An American*: "He started at the bottom and worked up to his present position." The image is of an African-American,

Bill, a housing construction worker, on a site. The film was meant to deliver the American dream to people of all colors and backgrounds. Clearly, how this was perceived forty years ago would have been different from how it is perceived today, given the real history of African-Americans in this country. But I find it very useful as a trope to show how the myth was constructed, forcing us to look more carefully at the ever increasingly sophisticated versions of the myth in our contemporary culture. I use archival bits from many different films, editing them together to make the meaning I want.

PM: How do you see the relationship between post-modernism and feminism as ways to critique these narrative conventions? Perhaps these recent movements have come to exist precisely in order to provide a critical perspective to received conventions and conventional meanings.

AL: I think both movements come together in that area of acknowledging deconstruction, or demanding deconstruction, or giving permission for the inclusion of forms and strategies for making work that might not have been allowed prior to either movement's emergence. Feminism appears to run parallel to post-modernism but my gut tells me that feminism is more primal in generating a voice, a place and an expression. Or maybe it has a clearer, more positive agenda than what I perceive to be the nihilism of post-modernism. I do find it interesting that just when women and other marginalized voices began to speak publicly, the post-structuralist, post-modernists —boys for the most part— DECIDED AND PRONOUNCED that there was no meaning anymore and/or



Still on left
and on page 79
are from
Ardole Lister's
*Behold the
Promised Land*.

there were so many meanings that none of it really mattered.

PM: Perhaps one could say that a post-modernist deconstruction is more theoretically based where a feminist deconstruction is more a culturally experiential enterprise. If so, post-modernism sets itself to deconstruct what some people might call "master narratives" while continuing forth possibilities for narrative and humanistic values but feminist discourse catalyzed the area of the "cultural other" which had been marginalized by the received and ongoing canonization. How do you see the work of feminist discourse being very particularized in opening up issues of post-modern investigations?

AL: I'm not sure about feminist discourse... it exists of course, but I don't consider myself an expert. My work as an artist/activist and the work of feminists in academia has been going on *simultaneously* for two decades. Maybe feminism and its discourse laid the ground for post-modernist investigations or maybe at some point there was a convergence of these two streams in the culture.

PM: While you don't lay claim to being the academic scholar in feminist discourse, there is always a feminist consciousness in your work which functions as an intervention to deconstruct largely male-constructed myths in our culture, but your work is very much that of a conscious person in our time.

AL: I recognize the significance of popular culture as it is situated within a wider framework over time. I work in the forms of my time —media— I address those forms and I cannibalize them, as images and as structures. My work first emerged within a feminist media collective in which the imperative to create work that represented our voices and visions developed out of a mixture of disbelief, rage, joy and an enormous commitment to change. What stories would we tell if we could? Would we tell them differently? In what medium? Video, for example, was fresh, not a man's medium, and lent itself to our process of creation. So the very fact of developing a body of works in which multiple meanings exist, multiple voices, and so on gives a different sense of power to the kind of work we're doing. And let's face it —Madison Avenue and MTV have co-opted the narrative and aesthetic styles of our early work, and as much of the content as they can, so we've made our mark, overtly acknowledged or not.

PM: Your work is willing to open the questions and keep all of the elements mutually entertained...

AL: I like to keep them all in there and really mix them up, NOT anarchically, but as evidence of leaks and possibilities, with threads that are part of an interweaving of intentional meaning, consciously built. And see the humanity in that. And the pathos. And the beauty. ■