Desire Lines

Experimental Video as Social and Spatial Interventions

A Guide for Postsecondary Education

Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV) – Archive/Counter-Archive

Educational Guide

archive counterarchive

since 1975 GIV since 1975

moving image research lab MIRL

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

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Recommended Study Levels Undergraduate Students, Graduate Students

Subject Areas Film Studies; Media Studies; Women and Film; Sexuality Studies; Gender Studies; Canadian Studies; Quebec studies

Themes Feminist film and video; Queer film and video; Archives/Counter-Archives; Video Art; Experimental Video; Performance; Intervention

About Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV)

Founded in Montreal in 1975, Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV) is one of the few centres in the world dedicated to the preservation and promotion of media artworks by women (women is used here in the most inclusive sense of the term), distributing and disseminating them while actively supporting production. Anchored in an intersectional approach, GIV supports artists of different ages, backgrounds and communities, and the practice of media arts in its various forms and currents, both artistic and action-oriented. GIV's ever-growing distribution catalogue reflects a plurality of approaches and treatments and bears witness to the multiple social, technological and artistic transformations of our world and the constant redefinition of our identities. The catalogue currently features 1,950 works by 490 artists from Quebec, Canada and abroad.

Throughout the year, GIV organizes year-round programming and creative activities in collaboration with artists from a variety of disciplines, guest curators, festivals and community organizations, as well as streaming a wide range of digital works. GIV's policy is to pay royalties and artists' fees for all its activities. The cultural and generational diversity that has been at the heart of the centre's mandate for decades contributes to the development of their network. This desire to bring different communities together is reflected not only in their activities, but also in the people involved: artists, staff and audiences.

GIV video artists have shed light on important questions and themes: revolution, domesticity, gender, HIV/AIDS, LGBT2Q+, immigration, racism, and many more. The A/CA Case Study, *Through Feminist Lenses: Video Works at Groupe Intervention Vidéo*, thinks about the ways in which video artists have approached these subjects throughout the years, from 1975 to now, amidst the continuous shifts in video technology and production contexts.

More at https://www.givideo.org/pages/groupe-intervention-video

About Archive/Counter-Archive

Archive/Counter-Archive (A/CA): Activating Canada's Moving Image Heritage is a seven-year research creation project led by Janine Marchessault and funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant. Comprising four universities, numerous community partners, memory institutions, and policy advocates, the project is dedicated to activating and remediating audiovisual heritage created by Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), Black communities and People of Colour, women, LGBT2Q+ and immigrant communities, and to fostering a community and network dedicated to creating best practices and cultural policies. As part of the project, Archive/Counter-Archive has produced a number of open-access educational guides which are available for free on its website: counterarchive.ca

About the Guide

This guide includes a selection of twelve videos curated by Alanna Thain and Ylenia Olibet.
It includes a curatorial essay by Thain and Olibet, synopses, and discussion questions oriented toward a range of thematic areas. We recommend previewing the works before you screen them for your students in the order that they are suggested. We also recommend reading the contextualizing information provided in this guide.

Please note that some of the videos contain distressing themes.

Curatorial Essay
Desire Lines: Experimental Video as Social and Spatial Interventions by Alanna Thain and Ylenia Olibet

The archive of Groupe Intervention Vidéo is an atlas, tracking movements between the streets and the screen as a space for feminist interventions. An iconic "in-house" production, *Les Marcheuses*, produced by GIV's general director Petunia Alves, artistic director Anne Golden and artist and activist Stella Valiani, is a direct record of their participation in the 1995 event the "March of Bread and Roses," which saw feminist activists and citizens in Quebec set off on a ten day march from three locations, converging on Quebec City to deliver their feminist complaints (Ahmed 2021) around poverty and social exclusion to the political powers-that-be.

This video documents a durational feminist intervention: in making demands on a government that failed to enact a feminist public sphere, the march both acts in the public sphere of political activism and enacts feminist counterpublics of solidarity, imagination, and demand. Footage of the marchers is intercut with talking head interviews, describing the various and often long-term political engagements, experiences, and solidarities that motivate them, as well as moments of pause and respite at the end of the day: from community centre dances and singalongs to swimming, playing and hanging out. In this way, political activism is insistently indistinguishable from the actions of everyday life, and the space of political activism is remade as a 24/7 embodied existence. An intimate and affective record, any pre- distinction of public and private fails to cohere. Political demands are presented as a solidarity cultivated through a soft sociability that leaves room both for shared concerns and a heterogeneity of needs and desires.

Les Marcheuses is not the only film in GIV's archives that both enacts and takes place in a space of political struggle: one could think of other works by Alves such as *2000 bonnes raisons de marcher* (Petunia Alves and Ryofa Chung, 1998) and *La meilleure façon de marcher* (Petunia Alves, 2001), documenting respectively the International Preparatory Meeting for the World March of Women in the Year 2000 and the march itself in New York City, or Marik Boudreau and Alves' *Montréal Star* (2004), composed of sounds and images of queer protest and parties during Divers/Cité in 2004, which—equally political—are left to speak with each other through formal composition rather than explanatory interviews or text.

Les Marcheuses is an icon of the wider work of GIV, as an artist-run centre that produces, curates and distributes work made by women in "its most inclusive definition," including many non-binary artists whose entry point has often been feminist identification. At the heart of GIV's practice is redistributing access to the intimate publics of those who must make demands to be heard: not simply to be included in a normative public, but to insistently remap a politics of participation that is all too often predicated on exclusions, violence, indifference and marginalization.

If *Les Marcheuses* highlighted feminist labour and life as the demand for bread (liveable wages and economic support) and roses (quality of life and everyday joy), the curatorial program assembled here explores thresholds of representation for stories too complex for a straightforward visibility. In looking at these works by twelve artists from GIV's collection across four decades of work, **we consider how artists have used the affordances of experimental video to make felt what it means for a feminist body to be "*intervening*."**

Intervention—meaning interruption, a coming between—is the lens through which we put the works in this program in relation to each other. Part of the name of this artist-run centre, intervention carries political and ethical connotations partially connected to the utopian discourse around media as catalyst for social change in the 1970s. Yet, far from endorsing a techno-utopian vision, within GIV, intervention has always entailed thinking about *process*—of making video, of making feminist politics, of creating infrastructures for distribution and exhibition.

"Intervention" also registers a very physical dimension: it draws attention to an embodied relation to video technology and conjures up bodies that make videos by carrying around the heavy Portapack—the portable video recorder first introduced in 1967 and "misnamed" in French "vidéo légère,"—and the bodies that perform feminist protests in the street, that cook food and sustain bodies, that organize conferences, that work in community centres. We also interpret "intervention" within GIV as the continuous reinvention of the uses and affordability of the technology of video itself.

Throughout GIV's existence, we identify two main approaches to video in its collection: realist political documentaries and video-art works. While this distinction is just one way to "order" the archive according to established feminist film and video histories (de Lauretis 1985; Juhasz 1999), it allows us to articulate our two-fold understanding of intervention both as socio-political work and as formal experimentations. While our focus on experimental video may appear more aligned with the latter, we argue that these two tendencies cohere across these films to underscore that feminist representation is always and also a work of fabulation and creation.

These two facets of intervention extend to the engagement with its own archive that GIV carries on through curatorial assemblages presented in public events. Curation's propositional relations spark meanings and enlighten the semantic potentialities of those experimental video-art works that are more difficult to interpret as stand-alone pieces. This is what Anne Golden, GIV's artistic director, calls "le potential alchimique de l'acte commissarial" (the alchemical power of curation work)(2023). Curation is a performative practice that activates the archive by forging relationships and providing exhibition contexts.

In this program, the sphere of intervention is found in actual spaces, such as the streets of Winnipeg, Montreal, or Africville. It is equally found in the space-time of memory as a mediation of the personal or experiential that does not map neatly onto formal or authorized cartographies of state history. It is also the space of media itself, as a collective reservoir of images, identities and authorizations that solicit our attention and that, in these works, becomes sites of intervention. The selected works thus intervene through the making of desire lines across all of these spheres of action.

A desire line is a term from urban planning, describing the paths that feet trace off the formal and established routes of sidewalks that attempt to corral movement into predictable and managed coordinates: a path that cuts across the lawn of a park shows where else we might want to go, an informal testament to other directions at work. In doing so, these videos also make propositions about why the simple actions of crossing a street or existing in public are themselves interventions and interruptions of everyday exclusion, as well as demonstrations of survival tactics for feminist lives. Desire lines are both traces of reorientations and at the same time pave the way for further feminist work. Desire lines in the videos of this program are visual and aural motifs, or themes evoked through storytelling. Desire lines are spawned by feminist complaint (Ahmed 2021), from pointing out injustices, situations of threat, grappling with traumatic individual and collective histories of dispossession and displacement. Yet, desire lines are also crafted by resistance, objection, strategies of survival, as well as by the work of attuning to those stories of complaint.

Part of the tactics of engagement found across these works is an ambivalent relation to the politics of representation, and an expansive and intimate cartography of struggle, pleasure and demand. Against realist documentary evidence, **this curated program asks viewers to attend to embodied filmmaking, remixing, and somatic performances as feminist tactics of intervention articulating sensations of precarity and threat, but also of revolt, resistance, and coping mechanisms. How do formal techniques expand the (in)direct testimony of embodied presence to complicate what we know of the world and its operations?**

The bodies at work in these videos are not so much *in* space as (re)making space, intervening in normative coordinates of action and appropriateness through disorientation and re-assembly. In *au Canada* (kimura byol lemoine, 2014), *Aberrant Motion* (Cathy Sisler, 1993), and *My Heart the Tourist* (Anne Golden, 2001), the p.o.v. of the video-camera, a 360-degree shot, and abrupt zooms respectively convey sensory experiences of crossing national borders by flight, of spinning in public spaces as a metaphorical act of "deviation" from binary gendered norms and expectations, and of nightmarish feeling and ghostly presences in an abandoned amusement park.

In *Win-nip-egg* (lamathilde, 2015), the fixed frontal shots—distant and then closer— of a corner store's entrance traversed by diaphanous bodies coming and going anchors a disembodied, French-European speaking voice, a curious and humble acousmêtre seeking to name the racist and gender-based violence banalized in the everyday and embedded in language. In *Deb!* (Dayna McLeod, 2021), a lo-fi avatar—an animated potato repurposed from a Zoom plug-in—shelters a story about the pervasive threat of sexual assault in a public park, as both very specific memory and as a collective experience, making humour a survival strategy for real life.

Like the work of curation itself, remixing is another tactic to safely engage the volatility of audiovisual archives—those of national and diasporic broadcast media and those of the settler colonial state—from the perspective of feminist, queer, and racialized bodies. In *Static* (1995), Nik Forrest challenges homophobic background noise from radio shows through fluid watery tumbles, intimate forms of sociability, and dreamlike movements in urban settings that, combined, refuse to confine sexuality to a private matter. In *Agenda* (2011), Kim Kölle Valentine explores the unreliable memory of the cinematic spectator that remediates cinematic experience through their own embodiment and wanderings in urban locations.

In *Traces Souterraines* (2011), the visual colonial archive is literally unearthed: Michelle Smith reuses photos and short sequences of film and videos from missionary archives superimposed on waves of water and roots of plants to denounce violent histories of erasure and assimilation of the Métis people. In *Two Snakes* (2015), Kriss Li's assemblage of diasporic experiences of deracination and queer embodiment mixes Chinese folklore, its queer remediation and rememory in popular culture, family photo archives and the empty places of suburban Ontario. In *Where We Were Not; Feeling Reserved, Alexus' Story* (Jess MacCormack and Alexus Young, 2001), a "twilight tour"—a terrifying extra-juridical kidnapping by cop experienced by a Two-Spirit Indigenous person—shields their voiceover testimony of police brutality through tender and intimate animations that deflect visual evidence of violence into a new emotional, traumatic, and truthful geography of winter landscapes outside Saskatoon.

Finally, at the heart of this program is how the immediacy of embodied presence is both an insistent testimony to the urgency of the here and now, and a medium for threading the local and the global, the past and the future together. *Comptines* (Diane Poitras, 1986) pays homage to Irish women's inventive way of protest by making noise with trash lids in support of hunger strikers in the 1980s and connects it with the imaginative potential of children's songs and games in the street. *Welcome to Africville* (Dana Inkster, 1999) uses mockumentary interviews with queer people to document the demolition of the African-Canadian neighborhood of Africville in Halifax and, with it, the loss of past community and the necessity of fabulated spaces for future encounter that keep such memories alive.

In conclusion, the artists featured in the program work directly with sensation, formal experimentation, and disorientations to animate feminist demands and an expansion of the everyday. These works model how video can serve as an intervention in our habits of perception and understanding, allowing audiences to suspend what they think they know about the world, and to recognize feelings and sensations that might go unarticulated in everyday life. The videos in this program specifically articulate intervention as tactics of creative expression and protest, bringing forward a shared sense of the challenges of doing feminist work in the public register, and they take up the risk and labour of feminist embodiment. In all of the selected works, desire lines remap space to the rhythm of other wants and needs; they are invitations to step out of official lines and to walk in the company of other absented presences.

Curated Films and Videos for Classroom Viewing

12 short videos were curated by Ylenia Olibet and Alanna Thain for classroom screening.

Total run time: 1 hour and 15 minutes

The films and videos are available to stream via the Canadian streaming and distribution platform VUCAVU or by contacting Groupe Intervention Vidéo

au canada (kimura byol lemoine, 2014)

Length: 1:40min

Language: French

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: Two years after an expulsion letter 'From Canada,' the sky is witness to the filmmaker's return due to a letter from Immigration Canada bidding them "Welcome."

Aberrant Motion #1 (Cathy Sisler, 1993)

Length: 10:42 min

Language: English

Genre: Experimental, Performance

Synopsis: A woman spins on a Montréal street to the beat of jazz and poetry, in this lively and engaging video poem. The Spinning Woman explores movement as a strategy to destabilize normalcy. Rotating on the same spot attracts attention, disturbs, breaks the flow of passers-by.

Static (Nik Forrest, 1995)

Length: 7:00min

Language: English

Genre: Experimental, Video Art

Synopsis: In defiance of the background noise of homophobia, a series of dreamlike images evoke the interplay between private and public spaces, and the continual disintegration and reconfiguration of queer identity within (and on the periphery of) dominant culture.

Comptines (Diane Poitras, 1986)

Length: 4:00min

Language: French, English

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: One day, in Belfast, upon learning of the death of yet another Irish prisoner, angry women gathered in the city square. With a trash can lid in hand, they hammered the ground to emphasize the courage of this ninth hunger striker who died in silence. Poitras's video reenacts this powerful and symbolic action, while a song by Marie-Claire Séguin plays in the background.

Win-Nip-Egg (lamathilde, 2015)

Length: 4:12min

Language: French and English

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: The filmmaker reflects on her encounter with a dead body floating in a river in Winnipeg.

Content warning: This video deals with Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, gender-based violence, and systemic violence against Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Welcome to Africville (Dana Inkster, 1999)

Length: 15:00min

Language: English

Genre: Docufiction

Synopsis: Inkster's beautiful fiction references the destruction of Africville on the outskirts of Halifax in 1969. Four characters speak directly to the camera about their lives and sexuality. This use of direct address says documentary, but the actors speak Inkster's bittersweet words.

Content warning: This video contains explicit mentions of sexuality and sexual acts.

Agenda (Kim Kölle Valentine 2011)

Length: 5:02min

Language: English

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: *Agenda* is a chapter in the series foursquare, a retelling of the same story *four times*, taking a different perspective each time. *Agenda* follows clues to a mysterious woman and her continuous re-invention.

Where We Were Not: Feeling Unreserved, Alexus' Story (Jess MacCormack & Alexus Young, 2011)

Length: 6:00min

Language: English

Genre: Experimental, Animated Documentary

Synopsis: Alexus shares her story of a 'starlight tour,' a practice of police brutality against First Nations peoples in Canada where individuals are driven out of town, stripped of their coats and shoes, and left to freeze to death. This work highlights the systemic violence at play and the silencing effect it produces.

Content warning: This video deals with systemic violence against Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Deb! (Dayna McLeod, 2021)

Length: 2:13min

Language: English

Genre: Animation

Synopsis: The artist and Deb go to the mountain when the Pope dies. The artist is also a potato.

Two Snakes (Kriss Li, 2015)

Length: 9:30min

Language: English

Genre: Experimental, Animated Documentary

Synopsis: An experimental animation and documentary about diasporic desires for foundational myths. Seeking a home in reclaimed ancestry and seeking a self in reappropriated narratives and finding fragments instead.

Traces Souterraines (Buried Traces) (Michelle Smith, 2010)

Length: 7:55min

Language: English

Genre: Experimental Documentary

Synopsis: *Buried Traces* explores questions of Métis identity, cultural loss, and renewal. Motivated largely by an exploration of Smith's Métis ancestry, the film addresses the colonial legacy of shame and hidden identity which continues to inform the Métis experience. The film, which interweaves missionary archives, photographs, fiction and non-fiction sequences shot in both film and video, is also a meditation on the community's historical legacy of struggle and cultural persistence.

My Heart the Tourist (Anne Golden, 2001)

Length: 2:00min

Language: English

Genre: Experimental

Synopsis: The primo tourist spot, Coney Island, as seen by a wandering heart.

Discussion Questions

1. **How do the videos in the program reflect on identity, gender, sexuality and belonging? For example, how do the videos address the challenges and risks of presumptive heterosexuality?**

2. **Many of the videos in the program explore space not as a neutral site, but a fraught threshold. How do the artist use non-normative forms of movement, embodiment and positionality to make sensible the (dis)orientations of bodies in space: from crossing borders to urban landscapes and more? What is the point of these disorientations?**

3. **How is animation used in *Two Snakes*, *Deb*, and *When We Were Not*? What is achieved through the use of animation? In what ways does animation serve as a tool of feminist disruption (both in a sociopolitical sense and a formal sense)?**

4. **What kind of experimental techniques do these filmmakers use: in the image, in the editing, in the soundtrack? How do these both complicate what the stories tell, and help to tell these stories through other means than plot or narrative?**

5. **What kind of performances, in videos such as *Aberrant Motion*, *Welcome to Africville*, and *Comptines*, amongst others, can you distinguish in the program? How do they make a feminist intervention - in the public space, in archival engagements, in rearticulating demands and desires?**

6. **How does the technique of "remixing" existing material in *Static*, *Welcome to Africville*, *Two Snakes*, and *Traces Souterraines* enable the artists to work beyond the limitations of the archive, history, and/or memory?**

Screenshot from *Comptines* (Diane Poitras, 1986)

Screenshot from *Two Snakes* (Kriss Li, 2015)

7. **In what ways do the selected works resist settler colonialism and white supremacy? Refer to and give specific examples from *Traces Souterraines*, *When We Were Not*, *Welcome to Africville*, *au canada*, *Comptines*, and *Win-Nip-Egg*, considering both the work's content and form.**

8. **Alanna Thain and Ylenia Olibet assert that: "Desire lines are both traces of reorientations and at the same time pave the way for further feminist work." How do the works in this program reorient your sense of what is a matter of feminist concern? How can we learn from the videos in this program to generate more feminist futures?**

9. **How does the program help you think feminist interventions–ordinary or exceptional–in your everyday life?**

Screenshot from *My Heart the Tourist* (Anne Golden, 2001)

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Guide Credits

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Contributors

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Chloë Brushwood Rose is a Professor of Education at York University in Toronto. Her research explores the intersection of media, art, and pedagogy.

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Alanna Thain is an Associate Professor (English, McGill University) and director of the Moving Image Research Lab. Her work is broadly interested in bodies, how they move through media and in the world, and their affects and intensities in time.

Ylenia Olibet is a FRQSC Postdoctoral Fellow currently working on women's film festivals and the geopolitics of feminism at McGill University. Her research interests focus on feminist film theory, transnational approaches to film studies, and digital media.

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