

BORDERS: A VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

by

Joseph Lee Vanderway

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF PHYSICS IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 1990

Copyright © Joseph L. Vanderway, 1990. All rights reserved.

The author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce and to
distribute copies of this thesis in whole or in part.

Signature of Author

Joseph L. Vanderway

5/25/90
Department of Physics
June 4, 1990

Certified by

Glorianna Davenport

Glorianna Davenport
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Aaron Bernstein

Professor Aaron Bernstein
Chairman, Department Committee

BORDERS: A VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

by

Joseph Lee Vanderway

Submitted to the Department of Physics on June 4, 1990 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science.

Abstract

A direct cinema style video documentary of the collaborative process behind a multi-media performance was produced. The Artemis Ensemble, a group of poets, musicians and photographers presented their combined work in a performance on October 29, 1989. Using a small video camera, I recorded several rehearsals and meetings of the Artemis Ensemble prior to and including their performance. Editing this footage yielded a 22 minute video focused on the process by which they developed this unique artistic creation.

Thesis Supervisor:
Title:

Gloriana Davenport
Assistant Professor of Media Technology

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Background	5
Methods	6
Acknowledgments	8

Introduction

The Artemis Ensemble is a collaboration among poets, musicians and photographers working together in an theatrical environment. Their production, "Borders," scheduled to be presented on October 29th, 1989, began as a series of poems by the group's creative directors, Emily Hiestand and Katherine Jackson, but soon developed into an artistic exploration. As an experiment, to complement the poetry read, music and slide photographs would be added by working with other artists. As a performance space, the Artemis Ensemble had been granted the use of a room at the Habitat Institute for the Environment, a nature preserve in Belmont, Massachusetts.

I was approached by Katherine and Emily in late September and asked to make a video tape of their "Borders" performance. I explained the difficulties of videotaping poets and musicians in the midst of room darkened for a show. As an alternative, I suggested that I document their collaboration rather than simply record the performance. Both directors were positive about the idea and, after consulting the other artists, invited me to the group's first meeting at Habitat.

Background

I set out to create an organic portrait of the artists and their work by shooting in a "direct cinema" style. There would be no interviews, in fact, no questions asked or directions given during the taping. Rather than producing something for the camera by setting up situations, or asking to see the subjects perform specific tasks, the camera would be used as a means to permanently record observations. These observations - shots - could then be carefully edited together to tell a personal story.

In order to avoid having every interaction within the group be completely dominated by the presence of the camera, it is crucial to establish a good rapport with the subjects. Everyone needs to eventually feel some degree of comfort with being recorded, a state that is not always easy to achieve. The subjects must trust that I am well intentioned, and will not distort what I observe in the final video, and I must trust that they will let me know whenever my presence is disruptive as well as be aware of when objections may go unspoken. If no positive relationship develops, the story will have a very removed quality to it, losing any sense of intimacy with the subjects.

The direct cinema style of filmmaking does not start with a well defined vision of an end product. There is always the possibility that nothing of interest happens while the camera is running, or that the observations made are flat out dull, in which case, there is no cinematic story to tell. I made several false starts by working with subjects where no story developed, which had the benefit of increasing my camera experience as well as building my ability to work unobtrusively.

Methods

Equipment and Video Formats

It was necessary to use a small format video camera to avoid disrupting the work I was recording. The camera needed to be lightweight, small and battery powered, since I would shun a tripod in favor of handholding for mobility. Because of the format's size, high resolution and ability to deal with the darkest of lighting situations, I used a Sony CCD-V99 camera recording in the Hi8mm video format. For sound, the camera was outfitted with an external Canon M200 microphone. On several occasions, I employed a Sigma wide angle adaptor lens.

For the purposes of editing, source Hi8 tapes were transferred directly to 1" videotape and an edited master was made from these dubs. Because of the shooting approach, and the nature of the subject, sometimes the picture quality is poor, primarily as a result of inadequate light. I felt that it was better to be as unobtrusive as possible and use available light which might result in a noisy video signal rather than adjust the location lighting or bring in portable video lights. In most cases, while the light was very poor, I was pleasantly surprised how well the images came out.

Shooting

I met with the Ensemble on a total of five separate occasions and produced nearly seven hours of footage. In the beginning of their first meeting at Habitat, I discussed my observational strategy and assured the group that I would do my best to shoot around them and not interfere with their work. I began to be referred to as "that unseen person" almost immediately, which probably arose from the suggestion that I be ignored for the most part.

At the meetings and rehearsals I attended I did not seem to be of much of a problem

for the group, however, I was asked not to attend the sessions where poets were recording with musicians in the studio. This work was done in early October, only a week after I had begun to tape, and the artists were concerned about feeling required to perform for the camera. By the time the actual rehearsals and performance came around, however, everyone felt fairly comfortable with my presence.

Despite my precautions, it was impossible for me to not have been of some influence on the performance. From time to time, I was drawn into the conversation, and eventually by the end of the first planning sessions, the performance itself. Intrigued by my own project, the artists suggested that their performance could begin by giving their audience a sense of artistic collaboration. The "Artists Talking" tape was actually an audio dub from one of my videotapes.

Editing

I avoided taking any footage out of context while condensing my observations into a coherent picture, which I believe maintains the integrity of the video as an accurate portrait of the artists' process. Of greatest difficulty was finding a structure for the video, or a way to tell this story of collaboration when the actual performance was too dark to record. I chose to focus on the process rather than the result, starting with the close of the performance, and then jumping back in time to where they first started to work in their performance space, considering how the slides would fit into their creation. Each separate meeting was cut as a separate segment and strung together by short cuts of Katherine talking about their original inspirations and ideas. The video ends with the end of their preparations and the beginning of the "Borders" performance.

Acknowledgments

I wish first and foremost to thank the members of the Artemis Ensemble for their generosity and cooperation.

Poets:

**Katherine Jackson
Emily Hiestand**

Musicians and Composers:

**Peter Dunn
Charles Eisenhardt
David Rothenberg**

Audio/Visual Artists:

**Fred Brink
Jon Sachs**

Theatre Artist:

Barbara Hindley

Additional thanks to the Habitat Institute for the Environment, the MIT Media Lab and Professor Glorianna Davenport.