Essay

Joanne Kelly's video artwork is known for its compressed, superimposed images, in which each frame reveals a carefully constructed tableau. An early experimenter with the visual manipulations of video, Kelly's work reflects much of the history of image processing technology. From the stacked monitors and early color enhancement technologies of Vertivision (1974) and Tilt the Wheel (1975) to the disorienting, dizzying multiplication of the image in Surrogate Sisters (1986) and the carefully crafted overlays of Beauty is a Simple Pleasure (1988), Kelly plays with the technical possibilities of the medium, building a dense, multi-layered visual style. Even in the recent mediation on nature and visual appropriation, Hear Us Speak (1997), made without image enhancement or manipulation, Kelly builds a meticulously crafted visual design, incorporating the kinetic vibrancy of the randomly shot images into a carefully woven and richly textured visual tapestry.

Underneath the beauty and lyricism of these densely layered images, her work reflects a deeply investigative urge to uncover and connect divergent threads of a story. Superimposition and multiple layering, in a sense, become techniques to investigate connections and relations, to hold onto contradictions and conflicts, creating a series of carefully uncovered and reworked perceptions. From the relatively straightforward factual presentation of Grenada: Portrait of a Revolution (1983) to the troubling fragmentation and repetition of Words (1975) and Once Again (1987), Kelly works at conveying the complexity of information, the relationality of issues and the tension between diverging memories and perspectives.

Joanne Kelly began making video in 1972, when its use as an art form was still wide open. Artists were just beginning to play with the many possibilities of the medium and the field had not yet been canonized into established forms and areas of activity—single-channel work, installation, documentation, performance, etc. Coming to video as a dancer, she pioneered the synthesis of video and dance in her early work, yet continued to reach out and experiment with different aspects of video—including her often overlooked documentaries—in a career that spans over fifteen years.

The early seventies were, of course, a time when many aspects of personal relationships, political structures and cultural values were, themselves, seen as being wide open to change and reformulation. Kelly's work must be read in this context. Responding to the socio-cultural experiments of the hippie decade and the challenges of the emerging women's movement, she reveals in her work a constant struggle with questions of personal independence and responsibility. The thematic concerns of her work reflect the breakdown of certain traditional structures of family and relationships and the need to reformulate and redefine these bonds rather than simply abandon them.
Throughout her career, Kelly's work has been deeply collaborative, ranging from her early involvement with Video Free America to her work with numerous dancers, choreographers and performers. She has used these collaborations as diverse means to develop her own wide ranging and yet unified body of work, integrating diverse social concerns and a feminist perspective on personal issues with a strongly articulated sense of visual construction and design.

From her background in dance, she brings an underlying concern with movement, staging, composition and kinetics to her work in video. Early pieces such as Tilt the Wheel and Words stand out for the use of female self portraiture and autobiographical storytelling; deeply personal and diaristic, they form powerful statements about female self-awareness and self-construction. Early performance pieces such as Part Four Segway (1976) and Tahmar (1977) use journeys and the exploration of physical landscapes to chart complex accumulations of memory and experiences.

The early foundation on the body and questions of personal identity and integrity in a sense develop throughout her work, popping up subtly even in documentary works on Grenada and abortion.

In varying ways, these early works play with different scenes of construction of identity: the physicality of Vertivity's encounters with movement and technology, and the more troubled, more mediated encounters with the other through memory and image in Tilt the Wheel and Words. This concern with display and the theatricalization of self was developed most explicitly in the 1980 video performance work The Goddess, where Kelly played with the layering and removal of clothing and its construction of distinct female identities. The at times painful vulnerability of these early tapes and performances—their replaying of female encounters with aesthetic objectification and personal victimization in an effort to assess these relationships and gain control of them—is echoed in recent works like Once Again, which replays the artist's relationship with her daughter as a scene of identification and loss.

Underlying the divergent genres—dance-video, video art, documentary, installation, performance—an intersecting set of questions and concerns emerges, about the body, about female identity, and about the power dynamics of family relationships and other forms of personal attachment and responsibility. At times, these take recognizably political form, as in the documentary Grenada: Portrait of A Revolution; more often however they remain submerged in the density of private, individual relations—as a lover, partner, mother or daughter. While some trajectories are explicit—the key footage and images that appear and re-appear in later works—others emerge more subtly. Repeated concerns about the relationality of identity, of intimacy, conflict and responsibility, structure works as different as What Follows Next (1982), the meditative video art piece Once Again, and the issue oriented PBS documentary Abortion: The Divisive Issue (1979). Intense and sometimes obsessive interrogations, they reformulate a series of perceptions and relationships, mapping out dynamics of human relationships into powerfully choreographed, and oddly moving works.

-by Liz Kotz.

Ms. Kotz is a San Francisco based writer, whose articles have been published in Alterimage, The Independent and SF Weekly.
**Selected Videos 1972-1988**

**Beauty is a Simple Pleasure (1988)**

*Beauty is a Simple Pleasure* marks a return to work with dance and video with the New York based choreographer Bill Young. The tape is an effort to visually pay tribute to invisible qualities of character. The camerawork traces the interactions among the bodies up close, without master shots or distance. Almost effacing any sense of location or space, this close focus creates an awareness of texture and color, emphasized by superimpositions and colored planes.

A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.
Camera: Skip Sweeney
Editor: Stephen Buckingham, Skip Sweeney
Choreography: Bill Young
Dancers: Bill Young, Allyson Green
Larry Hahn, Emily Stern, Elizabeth Maxwell, Susan Blackenasp
Facilities: Video Free America
Music: Mia Morales
Copyright 1988.

**Hear Us Speak (1987)**

*Hear Us Speak* is a stunningly beautiful look at natural images made abstract. Opening with a quotation from Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature*, the video builds a sensual relationship with nature that acknowledges the beauty and visual power of plants and trees and fields without trying to capture them as images or objects—not the Hallmark landscape nor the scientific territory. Working through assemblage of fragmented, yet meticulously crafted perceptions and portrayals, the tape could be described by a statement by Trinh T. Minh-ha on her film *Reassemblage*: "the strategies adopted in the shooting and editing stages... prevent the viewers from appropriating content of the images by their brevity and dispersion."

Through a wildly spinning camera and overexposed shots the piece makes the familiar—a tree, a dandelion—unfamiliar, powerful and mysterious. Traveling past grassy paths or leafy trees, the camera presents images that blur, and then for a second hold steady long enough for the eye to recognize a familiar object, before again moving on, to create a series of glances and glimpses, grasped for a second then gone. Kelly recounts how she spun around with the camera, threw it into bushes and ran recording random images. Vibrantly colorful, kinetic and imaginative, the tape undermines the clichéd images produced by deadened senses and the use of vision as control.

A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.
Camera: Joanne Kelly
Editor: Stephen Buckingham
Facility: Video Free America
Text: "Women and Nature" by Susan Griffin
Music: African Headcharge
House: Mark Thompson, Tim Collins
Special Thanks to Megan Kelly-Sweeney, Skip Sweeney, Tim Zagrann.
Copyright 1987.

**Once Again (1987)**

A lyrical three part meditation on raising children, Kelly's *Once Again* works through repetition and accumulation to evoke the revisitation, re-working and re-loss of childhoods experienced as a parent.

Framed by lace curtains waving and unfurling to the Resident's haunting version of Fur Elise, the tape sketches three glimpses into the adult's relationship with the child. In part one, Kelly mixes
shots of toys crashing and toy animation from her 1980 video performance piece *The Goddess* with more recent footage of her son’s birthday party and daughter’s ballet lessons. The scenes suggest the times parenting can allow adults to be kids again, and to redevelop a relationship with their own childhoods, often lost or distanced through time or sadness.

The second movement is darker, scarier, as Kelly’s camera follows her daughter through mazes at a children’s playland, on the carousel, and at the circus. Suddenly, more self-conscious, the mother loses her sense of identification with her child, and instead feels the intensity of responsibility—and the inescapable inability to prevent pain and resentment that may distance her child from her.

In the third section, the parent’s bedroom becomes the frame for all action. The scenes (also re-worked from *The Goddess*) mother and father hold and care for the baby girl. The two parents never appear at the same time; one is always turning into the other who disappears and again turns into the other. Rhythmic and kinetic, the figures enact a dance of presence and absence, and are joined by overlays of family photos, taken in the fifties, of Kelly’s own parents with her as a young child. The melancholy music suggests the sadness of a lost sense of family.

The artist as a child and her relationship with her own parents layers onto the portrayal of the artist as an adult and the relationship with her daughter. The fifties snapshots of smiling parents and happy families haunt and disturb; the reality of the photos poses a problem where memory doesn’t match with the image, setting in motion a chain of questions about the reality or accuracy of one’s feelings, memories and perceptions. As we return to the lace curtains of the opening, the piece seems to ask: Which is more real?—and also, by implication, how will she, the daughter, later remember and perceive her, the mother, and these times? Will her memories match with these images? How will she integrate this into her own life?

A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.

Camera: Joanne Kelly, Skip Sweeney, Stephen Buckingham, Tim Zgraggen
Editors: Tim Zgraggen, Stephen Buckingham, Skip Sweeney
Music: The Residents
Facility: Video Free America
Special Thanks to Megan Kelly-Sweeney, Dylan Sweeney, Homer Flynn
Copyright 1987.

**Surrogate Sisters (1986)**

Based on a performance piece by Zoe Elton, *Surrogate Sisters* charts the dis-satisfying and disorienting issue of surrogate mothering. With its multiplying images and garishly intrusive technology, the visual structure of the videotape comes close to provoking nausea. Images divide and subdivide frenetically, as the artificial, almost singsong performers recount tales of being surrogate mothers and discuss the difficult choices in women’s lives, where economics and emotions collide. Any sense of reality or emotional identification breaks down as the aggressive reorganization of the images distances them to the point of disturbing insignificance.

A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.
Excerpted from "Platypus Reveals All"
A Theater Piece by Zoe Elton
Performers: Suzanne Grey, Janeen Wyatt
Musicians: Patricia Weiss, Zoe Elton
Facility: Video Free America
Camera: John Lymberg
Sound: Liz Gaffney
Editors: Tim Zgraggen, Skip Sweeney
Special Thanks to Homer Flynn
Copyright 1986.
Photos from Vidae (1973) and Indigenous (1972) JK
**Voodoo Automatic (1985)**

A tightly controlled and cool videotape of a Soon 3 Performance piece, *Voodoo Automatic* depicts a beautiful, athletic woman rowing in place. Slowly and rhythmically, she pushes her oars through the water, creating a disturbing tableau of physical effort and concentration without effect. Carefully composed shots frame the stillness of her figure and curved wipes envelop the technically controlled figure. At the end, the rower takes a key and unlocks the handcuff that ties her to the oars, and gets up. Similar to *Surrogate Sisters*, the visual technology overpowers the human scale of action, creating a sense of detachment and removal.

A Videotape by Joanne Kelly,
Writer/Theater Director: Allan Finneran, Soon 3
Performer: Karina Epperlein
Music: Bob Davis
Camera: Megan Roberts, Raymond Ghirardo
Editor: Miodrag Ceretic
Facility: Video Free America, One Pass, KOED-TV
Copyright 1984.

**Emergency Exit (1984)**

*Emergency Exit* is based on the performance piece *Miracle Mile* by Nina Wise and Lauren Elder. It features a wall collage of bright geometric road signs—Stop. Go. Danger Ahead. A woman, played by Nina Wise, recounts her feelings as a pressured professional, wife and mother, for whom life has become an accumulation of stressful obligations and roles. As she tries to plan a trip, even her escape route becomes another garish road sign—"Island"—yet one more thing to be arranged in the overall information overload, her world a technically controlled and overdetermined landscape with no real release. With humor and energy, she battles challenges and choices, and makes

off alone to a tropical island, dreamily reflective under the mosquito nets. Tightly-structured and claustrophobic, the videotape evokes a sense of closed-in anxiety and overload, a frenetic struggle in a visually stunning and strangely static set.

A Videotape by Joanne Kelly,
Performance: Nina Wise and Lauren Elder
Music: Nina Wise and Greg Jones
Camera: Skip Sweeney
Editor: Eric Shackelford
Production Assistant: Lisa English
Facility: Video Free America, KOED-TV
Special Thanks to Greg Swartz.
Copyright 1984.


A ground breaking half hour documentary on the budding socialist experiment in Grenada. It is one of the few media accounts of life on this small Caribbean island prior to the US invasion in 1983. Narrated through a series of intimate interviews with ordinary people and with government officials, the video paints an engaging portrait of a small country's efforts to overcome the legacy of colonialism, severe underdevelopment and a disastrous balance of trade. Despite some troubling problems—the continued imprisonment and torture of political prisoners—the socialist government is presented as an important vehicle for the hope and dignity of the Grenadian people.

Presenting a clear and concise historical context for the current events, *Grenada: Portrait of A Revolution* is organized thematically into units exploring the economy, tourism, woman's place and social progress. Kelly's interest in and sympathy for her subjects is reflected in the trust and honesty shown by the many people who appear on camera discussing the vicissitudes of life in a revolutionary society. The ending turns to confusion and

"This program is now one of the primary sources of information... of foremost importance are the interviews with the recently assassinated prime minister, Maurice Bishop, members of his cabinet and the citizens of Grenada."

-San Francisco Chronicle
What Follows Next makes excellent use of dazzling video effects—multiple layering of images, freeze frames, slow motion, light that seems to come from lasers. On a more personal level, they lead us into the private world of a dance partnership. It's a special intimacy, as practical as a marriage, as passionate as a love affair.

-San Francisco Chronicle
Vertivision (1974)

A playful piece combining installation, performance and dance, Vertivision features a set of interconnected monitors that mirror and replay the movements of the woman climbing, walking and sliding among them. In an almost Alice in Wonderland fashion, the dancer seems like a doll moving among gigantic toys. The technology, rather than being intimidating, instead seem like so many oversized building blocks. The constant re-framing of the dancers' movements through the stacked sets of monitors creates a collage-like set of images, constantly reflecting back the image of the dancer who is both climbing on and depicted in the toy-like boxes.

Unlike many installations using linked monitors to create a wall of images that overwhelms the human scale to an often eerie effect, the video instead develops a more playful, handcrafted use of advanced video technology. The dancer interacts with the sculptural elements more like a child on a jungle gym than a person confronting overpowering technology.

A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.
Performers: Susan Banyas
Technical Assistance: Skip Sweeney
Jono Miller
Facility: Video Free America
Special Thanks to Jed Handler.
Copyright 1974.

Indigenous (1972)

A multilayered dance video work using saturated black and white images in a collage of visual and movement images in a dense video art tape reminiscent of the work of George Melies.

Videotape by Joanne Kelly.
Performers: Jill Simaton, Marilyn, Joanne Petroff
Music: Motion Subotnik
Facilities: KUED-TV, Utah
Biography

Joanne Kelly was born in Wilmette, Illinois in 1952. She attended the University of Utah and graduated from New College in Sarasota, Florida. In 1973, she met Skip Sweeney at a dance-video workshop and that year moved to San Francisco and joined Video Free America. In 1974, she premiered an evening of dance-video performance at the Merce Cunningham Studio in New York, was a visiting artist at the Chicago Art Institute, and produced a program for the KQED-TV series Open Studio. She has also performed video-dance pieces at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York (1976), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1977).

Kelly has a strong interest in broadcast television, beginning with an apprenticeship with Dance in America (WNED-TV, 1975). She has produced and directed performing arts specials for public television, including Images of Modern Dance (KQED-TV, 1981), Four Dances for Television (KQED-TV, 1982), New Performances (KQED-TV, 1985), Video Free America Presents (KQED-TV, 1987), New Video: San Francisco Artists on Television (KQED-TV, 1988) and Armchair Video Art (KQED-TV, 1989, 1990). She has also worked on KPIX-TV’s Evening Magazine as a field engineer (1977) and as a segment producer for National PBS’s Good Morning, Mr. Orwell (1984).

Kelly’s challenging documentary work addresses social and political conflicts. She produced Abortion: The Divisive Issue (1979) when pro-life advocates were just becoming established and tackled the conflict between conservationists and land developers in Lake Tahoe: The Politics of Ecology (1979). Five months before the U.S. invasion of that island country, she produced Grenada: Portrait of A Revolution (1983), which was nominated for an EMMY award for Best Documentary. Kelly has also worked closely over the years with Skip Sweeney on personal documentaries. Kelly produced and Sweeney directed My Father Sold Studebakers (1983) and My Mother Married Wilbur Stump (1985), two award-winning family portraits presenting Sweeney’s relationship with his family.

Her works have been screened in festivals and museums across the country, including The Whitney Museum of American Art, Equitable Center (1989), On Screen: Celebration of Women in Film (1989), the American Film Institute’s National Video Festival (1986), Video Culture, Canada (1985), and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (1982). She has received support from The Pioneer Fund (1990), National Endowment for the Arts (1988), and the Western States Regional Video Art Fellowship (1985).

Videotapes by Kelly are part of the collections of the Anthology Film Archives, New York’s Donnell Library, and the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library in New York. Her tapes are distributed by New American Makers, San Francisco.