

The Rest is Real

Selected Video Works of Aleesa Cohene

Introducing the Curatorial Incubator

The Curatorial Incubator is an annual Vtape mentoring programme for emerging curators with interests in the media arts. It is in its ninth iteration. Since its inception in 2003, this highly competitive, award-winning training program has attracted applications from scores of aspiring curators seeking to hone their curatorial and writing skills while working within the creative cauldron of an active artist-run media arts centre such as Vtape.

It provides participants with workshops in practical and theoretical issues pertaining to curating time-based media as well as access to the extensive on-site Vtape resources and professional editing for their written materials. Finally the Incubator provides an exhibition venue at Vtape, with promotion and a promise of public engagement for the emerging curator, an important aspect of a developing practice.

This year I was joined by Oakville Galleries Director Matthew Hyland to jury the wide range of applicants to the Curatorial Incubator. For the second year in a row, we solicited proposals for solo exhibitions. From this very impressive group, we selected Julia Paoli, a recent graduate from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and a very engaged young curator. Julia's research led her to the work of Canadian artist Aleesa Cohene who has shown extensively in international festivals and galleries. I extend my sincere appreciation to Julia Paoli and Aleesa Cohene for all their work that has resulted in an outstanding exhibition at Vtape.

This year, in addition to mounting this exhibition curated by Julia Paoli, Vtape has offered research support to three recipients of the Vtape Fellowship Award. Later this spring, we will launch the on-line essays by Alvis Choi, Ebony Haynes and Ulysses Castellanos on the Vtape website.

Lisa Steele, Vtape Creative Director

The Rest is Real presents a selection of Aleesa Cohene's video works, paired with media and literature chosen by the artist in order to contextualize her practice. Cohene has been creating work since 2001, compiling and editing together found footage from the 1980s and 1990s. Her videos draw from wide-ranging cultural documents in an effort to explore the role of history and popular culture in the formation of contemporary identity. Cohene's approach evolves out of the tradition of appropriation art, which can be broadly understood as the restaging of borrowed elements, objects or images, often from popular culture, within the context of a new work. The earliest emergence of appropriative strategies was indicative of an incipient postmodern culture, and curators and critics alike have invoked various historical pedigrees and theoretical foundations to examine and explain these practices and their connection to postmodernity. Although Cohene's work certainly points to this discourse, I am increasingly interested in her ability to use appropriation in an effort to recontextualize and reframe history. In other words, while resisting the temptation to privilege the genealogy of appropriation, *The Rest is Real* asks what normative assumptions are revealed by a deconstruction of their packaging, and what the stakes of such a deconstruction might be. This exhibition aims to read Cohene's work through this lens, examining the ways in which her approach might aid us in reconstructing – and thereby better understanding – cultural narratives through the use of the recent past.



Top: *All Right* (2003) Bottom: *Supposed To* (2006)



Like, Like (2009)

I have found that Cohene's interaction with history, vis-à-vis cultural artifacts, prompts me to consider contemporary questions of representation and the various ways we are influenced. Her 2003 work *All Right* stitches together a diverse array of found footage to expose and question collective expressions of apathy surrounding Canada's immigration policy. Her 2006 work *Ready to Cope* is a reaction against Canada's Anti-Terrorism Act and the proliferation of imagery contributing to society's obsession for safety and security. 2006's *Supposed To* reflects a shift in Cohene's practice, offering a much less linear narrative than her previous works. In it, she explores the dividing and isolating effects of labour within a capitalist system. These works convey an invitation to resist the consensus implied by the abundance of images that inundate us daily. In so doing, they posit that the meaningless repetition of imagery has the ability to shape contemporary ideology. Therein lies the danger: power structures, hierarchies, class divisions, race, gender and sexual difference are constituted through the ongoing and repetitive assemblage of imagery in popular culture. Cohene's practice weaves together source material drawn from this monolithic cultural representation, effectively creating new narratives that at once challenge and highlight the excesses she is critiquing. It is for this reason that I became interested in her ability to reconstruct actual events and cultural narratives by cutting and reassembling media. As a result, her videos become a lens through which we can re-examine contemporary reality. What might her reframing of the recent past suggest about a politics of representation?

Let us take this as a point of departure for *The Rest is Real*. How might we begin to imagine different versions of how we tell the history of representation as well as



Something Better (2008)

art made under its influence?¹ Collecting institutions are discursive systems whose ability to pronounce judgments, through the selection and exclusion of cultural productions, plays a powerful role in creating and reinforcing a canonical version of art history. As a young curator this prompts me to consider and develop new ways to tell familiar stories: to find historical models of influence that eschew the powerful and conventional canon. It is my hope that Cohene's work might allow us to both imagine different versions of how we tell the history of representation and rethink what shapes our identity. In Cohene's 2009 work *Like, Like*, two love-sick women are created from the actions, reactions and dialogues of multiple women from multiple sources. The original clips are drawn from Hollywood movies in which each woman reads as being involved in a heteronormative relationship. Cohene subverts this original context, appropriating the images and reframing them in order to create a striking new narrative that explores a lesbian relationship. By appropriating the portrayals of various women from mass culture, Cohene successfully highlights the limited presentation of identity in popular narratives. Thus, at the core of this work is a resistance to cultural codes that perpetuate normative sex and gender boundaries. Similarly, *Something Better* (2008) represents three different family members: father, mother and child. Again drawing from conventional Hollywood portrayals of a 'traditional' family, Cohene instead offers three characters who have a simultaneously distant and intimate relationship. In both works, many recognizable

¹I am indebted to Helen Molesworth's question: "Might feminism allow us to imagine different genealogies and hence different versions of how we tell the history of art made by women, as well as art made under the influence of feminism?" "How to Install Art as a Feminist," *Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 504 – 505.

faces create each single character. Through this strategy, Cohene hijacks these most artificial portrayals of subjectivity and reframes them to provide us with a more authentic depiction of the breadth and depth of human experience.

While developing the exhibition's framework – and articulating the aforementioned curatorial stakes for *The Rest is Real* – I considered it particularly important to respond to the ever pressing question ‘why here, why now?’ⁱⁱ Or, to rephrase this imperative, why did it seem necessary to ask these questions within Vtape's space and context? As one of the leading not-for-profit distributors of video art in Canada, Vtape offers its resources and facilities to curators, educators and students. I found that folding the accessibility of Vtape's collection into the exhibition itself offered the opportunity to create a space where the context of the organization was inextricably linked to the show's development and display. Out of these considerations came the exhibition's resource centre, which follows several lines of thinking. The space is intended as a comfortable area for visitors to encounter materials relevant to the exhibition. Further contextualizing *The Rest is Real*, the resource centre serves as a discursive space in which the audience is provided with a point of entry into Cohene's oeuvre. By compiling writing and video works that have influenced her thinking and practice, Cohene has been offered the opportunity to write her own history, to share with us moments in time or artistic strategies that she may identify with or grapple with, or both.

Above all else the space offers an element of discursivity to the exhibition, in which it might be possible to acknowledge individually and collectively shaped beliefs. By providing Cohene the space to set the stakes for herself, the resource centre is an attempt to experiment with the interweaving of influence. Through her selections we can see the moments of connection and alliance and loss and neglect formed in her thinking. Helen Molesworth most gracefully articulates what the past might mean for the future in such a discursive space: “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was,’ but might mean instead to present it as crucial for recalibrating the effects of the new.”ⁱⁱⁱ This framework speaks to Aruna D'Souza's idea of “stranding” as a curatorial approach, whereby the exhibition allows for the presentation of work “within the context of open-ended links to other practices without definitely weaving them into a fully articulated historical narrative.”^{iv} This space, along with Cohene's visual practice, asks us to dig deep into our collective memory, leaving us sharply aware of how the past has been presented to us.

Julia Paoli

ⁱⁱ In asking this question I draw inspiration from Maria Lind, who imparted in me an appreciation for the importance of context in my curatorial practice.

ⁱⁱⁱ Molesworth, “How to Install Art as a Feminist,” 508.

^{iv} Rosalyn Deutsche, Aruna D'Souza, Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Muller, Mignon Nixon, and Senam Okudzeto, “Feminist Time: A Conversation,” *Grey Room* 31 (2008): 40.

The Curatorial Incubator v.9

The Rest is Real

Selected Video Works by Aleesa Cohene

Curated by Julia Paoli

Presented at Vtape

January 21 – February 25, 2012

Programme

Like, Like, 2009 07:00 minutes

Like, Like portrays two love-sick women. The women are composite characters created from the actions, reactions and dialogue of multiple women from multiple sources. A textile pattern that appears in *Like, Like* is painted in larger-than-life scale from floor to ceiling on the gallery walls. Additionally, the video is accompanied by aroma diffusers, emitting a fragrance custom designed by the artist.

Something Better, 2008 08:00 minutes

Something Better consists of three synchronized channels, each representing different members of a family. Spectators are introduced to several film actors who soon merge into three shifting personae: father, mother and child. Through measured picture editing, sound sampling and music remixing, the three characters interact in a microcosm where they hear each other but don't listen, look but don't see and have relationships that are simultaneously distant and intimate. *Something Better* recognizes that our relationships to others are constructed through mirrors of ourselves. In the installation of *Something Better*, the gallery walls leading up to the work are painted with a large-scale textile pattern that appears in the video.

Supposed To, 2006 07:00 minutes

Supposed To examines how work in a capitalist system divides people from themselves. Reediting sampled footage and dialogue from science fiction films, psychological thrillers and corporate training videos, *Supposed To* builds a hybrid narrative of characters who are exhausted by work, acting out, escaping conflict, misdirecting blame and ultimately returning to an inevitable “deep wordless knowledge” that shapes our shared reality. *Supposed To* questions our ontological vocation, reminding us that our destiny is still unknown.

Ready to Cope, 2006 07:00 minutes

In resistance to Canada’s Anti-Terrorism Act, *Ready to Cope* comments on the ways in which society’s chronic obsession with safety and security has become both a private and public crutch. Edited clips from horror and science fiction films, thrillers, self-help guides and motivational instruction videos, *Ready to Cope* is an impassioned record of collective anxiety. The characters are in an unknown tragedy: the baths they take, the halls they walk down and the air they breathe become more important than the crisis itself. *Ready to Cope* is made from the moments before and after, when the plot is at an impasse and the dialogue is silenced, forming a new yet familiar narrative of defensiveness and self-protection.

All Right, 2003 07:00 minutes

Using diverse found footage sources including immigration officer training videos, emotive gestures from horror films and sound clips from Canadian news broadcasts, Cohene takes the viewer on a provocative journey through a labyrinth of issues surrounding immigration policy. *All Right* poses questions around Immigration Canada’s white hegemony, its fear of the “unknown” and collective expressions of apathy vis-à-vis policy making. *All Right* paints a challenging, lyrical portrait of a society detached from the complex relations of multiculturalism, immigration and global politics.

Vancouver-born artist Aleesa Cohene (1976) has been producing videos since 2001. Her work has shown in festivals and galleries across Canada as well as in Brazil, Cambodia, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Scandinavia, Turkey and the United States, and has won prizes at Utrecht's Impakt Festival and Toronto's Images Festival. She has participated in artist residencies in Canada, the Netherlands and Denmark. She recently completed a fellowship at the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne, Germany. www.aleesacohene.com

Julia Paoli is an Independent Curator and Writer based in Toronto, Canada. She was selected to mount a solo exhibition of her choice for the 2011-12 Vtape Curatorial Incubator and is currently a Curatorial Intern at the Power Plant. She is a Feminist Scholar in Residence at FAG (Feminist Art Gallery) and a member of Pleasure Dome's Programming Collective. Paoli received her MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

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