From Garbage to *Garbage Hill*
Public Culture, Memory, and Community Access Television in Winnipeg

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ABSTRACT

VPW, a community-access television station in Winnipeg, Manitoba, hosted an array of programming ranging from the pragmatic to the truly bizarre, from 1971 until the station was bought out and dismantled in 2001. Grassroots media does not have the same institutional and archival frameworks as its mainstream counterpart; its losses often go unremarked, or must be reconstituted and memorialized in improvisational, provisional ways. In recent years, several Winnipeg artists have begun a kind of reclamation project around the station. This paper considers the various threads of nostalgia, political economy, and decline narratives at work in VPW's reclamation. It argues that thinking about why certain things are celebrated and others thrown away is itself a problem of aesthetics, politics, and publics. It examines why certain shows are remembered and others not, and the role of unanticipated uses of public infrastructure in such a dynamic.

VPW, une station de télévision communautaire de Winnipeg, au Manitoba, a présenté une programmation variant du pragmatique au véritablement bizarre de 1971 jusqu'à 2001, lorsque la station a été vendue puis démantelée. Les médias populaires ne bénéficiant pas des mêmes cadres institutionnels et archivistiques que leur homologues grand public ; leurs pertes se produisent souvent sans qu'on y porte attention ou doivent être reconstituées et remémorées de façon improvisée et provisoire. Plusieurs artistes de Winnipeg ont récemment entrepris un projet de remise en valeur de la station. Cet article met en lumière les nombreux fils de nostalgie, l'économie politique et les récits de déclin en jeu dans ce projet. Il soutient que l'esthétique, le politique et le public jouent un rôle

dans la sélection des éléments à célébrer et examine les contrecoups de l'utilisation inattendue de l'infrastructure publique dans une telle dynamique.

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INTRODUCTION

Prologue

The personal is not only political, but historical and dialogical as well.

- Mark Williams, *Considering Monty Margett's* Cook's Corner.

What if the thing you love about a place was the thing that made you have to leave it? My friend Matthew Rankin asked me this as we were walking along North Main Street in Winnipeg, on our way to the ancient and beloved C. Kelekis restaurant. Artist John Paskievich recently published a book of photographs of Winnipeg's North End taken from the 1970s to the 1990s; it is startling to see how little the area has changed over thirty years. Were it not for the distinctive facial hair and bellbottom jeans on the people in the photos, one would be hard-pressed to identify the earlier era as any different than today.

North Main is so economically devastated that it remains one of the few places in Winnipeg – maybe in North America – that is almost totally bereft of signs of global capitalism. Chain stores and multinational corporations keep their distance, and most of the businesses are locally-owned, or boarded up, and often both. Rankin tells me he thinks this is the only part of Winnipeg that *isn't* a slum. On our way to C. Kelekis we pass my family's business, a fabric store that for sixty years has eked out its existence in what is considered one of the worst neighbourhoods in the city.

Rankin and I grew up in Winnipeg, our families' houses one block apart; in 1997 we both moved to Montréal for school. After finishing a B.A. and M.A. in history Rankin returned to Winnipeg to make "Winnipeg art"; I stayed in Montréal.

Rankin's Winnipeg art deals largely in images of decay and rituals of self-annihilation. His films are often degraded by hand, the film stock bathed in acid or scored with an x-acto knife. His characters are usually desperate losers, obsessively pursuing their own demise; his settings make use of depressed neighbourhoods and housing complexes whose optimistic names reference a more hopeful time in the city's history. Sometimes he and his artistic collaborators erect huge posters of Winnipeg (anti-) heroes around town – at last check the enormous crimson face of Burton Cummings still greeted the fabric store's staff from the defunct Starland movie theatre across the street. Over time the weather, and the efforts of people who are less than enthusiastic about seeing ten-foot-high effigies of the former singer of *The Guess Who*, wear away the posters until they are barely discernible from the surfaces on which they were pasted.

Rankin is disgusted by the city's attempts to gentrify Main Street through widening sidewalks and putting flower planters in the median (which are covered in snow seven months of the year). I understand his sentiment and recognize the city's efforts as a band-aid solution to an area affected by much deeper problems; still, I am secretly pleased that my parents and the store's staff have some flowers to look at when it's warm enough.

What if the thing you love about a place was the thing that made you have to leave it? I am tied to Winnipeg through bonds of family, friendship, memory, and economics, but ten years in Montreal have made me an outsider of sorts; I am not sure on what authority I can stand to speak about the city and its losses.

In the summer of 2005 Rankin and some collaborators engineered a hugely successful festival at Winnipeg's independent movie theatre Cinemathèque. The festival

was a three-day affair called *Garbage Hill: A Showcase of Discarded Winnipeg Film and TV*; it showcased a range of screen items – TV commercials, short films, and public-access television shows – produced in the city since the 1970s and mainly consigned to dumpsters and dusty videocassette cabinets since then. Marked as it was by loss and demise, *Garbage Hill* was nevertheless a joyous proceeding, or at least that's how I perceived it – as a celebration of overlooked and underappreciated artistic and community labour, curated by a group of people demonstrating some kind of ongoing commitment to and belief in the city and its viability as a centre of cultural production.

One program shown at *Garbage Hill* was curated by visual and performing artist Daniel Barrow, and was called *Winnipeg Babysitter*; it focused on shows produced on VPW, a public-access television station that operated for about thirty years and broadcast to the greater Winnipeg region.[1] I recognized in these programs something I have been following in other aspects of both my academic and non-scholarly work – they spoke to my interest in grassroots media, zines, community radio, independent publishing, and other initiatives that operate on a principle of non-expansion and commitment to the local. I have long been invested in stories of social justice through media democratization, and in how marginalized people come together to create means of making their desires and selves public; VPW is a part of that story, and its history, as I've discovered, is a rich and instructive one. Beyond that feeling of recognizing and being recognized, though, I was compelled by the sense that what happened on VPW was of an exceptional and precious

[1]In actual fact, there were at one time two public-access stations broadcasting in Winnipeg – VPW-13, operated by the television company Videon Cablesystems, and Cable 11, operated by Greater Winnipeg Cablevision. The two stations emerged from similar social and technological forces (as well as CRTC mandates), and sometime in the mid-1970s they made an agreement to share content; while this does not make them synonymous, it seems needlessly complicated to treat them as entirely separate entities. For ease of writing and reading, I will henceforth refer to Winnipeg's public-access station as VPW, unless Cable 11 is specifically called for.

nature, all the more so because it no longer exists. So my desire to approach VPW as a researcher and in the form of a scholarly project comes in on two parallel channels – one that is interested in the station itself, as a vaguely epistemological approach to an important moment in Canadian (or at least Winnipeggian) broadcast history, and another that is drawn to efforts to revive, revisit, and revitalize the station – though perhaps it is less a means of reanimating the original energy of VPW than it is about finding a fitting way to memorialize it and lay it to rest.

In the same way that Ann Cvetkovich attempts to complicate her relationship with ACT UP when she interviews other former members of the radical activist organization to which she once belonged (*An Archive of Feelings*, chapters 5 and 6), I want to complicate my relationship with VPW and Winnipeg, first of all by acknowledging the complications inherent in writing about a place you come from and people you care about, and again by paying heed to the roles of affect – my own, others' – in coming to terms with a period of time and a site that no longer exist.

The major idea behind *Garbage Hill* and *Winnipeg Babysitter* seemed, to me at least, to be about taking discarded objects seriously; inherent in that tactic is a critique of the decline narratives – the stories in the public imagination that conceive of community media as a failed or failing enterprise – that surround both media democracy movements and Winnipeg itself. The twin engines of decay and renewal drive Winnipeg's imagination of itself, and are also at work in the retrospective; arguably, these two modes are at work everywhere, but, nevertheless, I must assume that there is something particular to Winnipeg and VPW that can help explain the potency and work of these stories, and my own interest in them. It is now to those decline narratives and their dominance in the domain of radical media movements that I will now turn.

Expand or Perish: Grassroots Media's Decline Narrative

> *Benjamin: Wayne! Listen, we need to have a talk about Vanderhoff. The fact is he's the sponsor and you signed a contract guaranteeing him certain concessions, one of them being a spot on the show.*
>
> *Wayne: [holding a Pizza Hut box] Well that's where I see things just a little differently. Contract or no, I will not bow to any sponsor.*
>
> *Benjamin: I'm sorry you feel that way, but basically it's the nature of the beast.*
>
> *Wayne: [holding a bag of Doritos] Maybe I'm wrong on this one, but for me, the beast doesn't include selling out. Garth, you know what I'm talking about, right?*
>
> *Garth: [wearing Reebok wardrobe] It's like people only do these things because they can get paid. And that's just really sad.*
>
> *Wayne: I can't talk about it anymore; it's giving me a headache.*
>
> *Garth: Here, take two of these! [dumps two pills into Wayne's hand]*
>
> *Wayne: Ah, Nuprin. Little. Yellow. Different.*
>
> *Benjamin: Look, you can stay here in the big leagues and play by the rules, or you can go back to the farm club in Aurora. It's your choice.*
>
> *Wayne: [holding a can of Pepsi] Yes, and it's the choice of a new generation.*
>
> (*Wayne's World*, dir. Spheeris 1992)

A comment I have heard often over the past year or so: "You're writing on public-access TV? You mean like *Wayne's World*?" Well, yes and no. Yes, I am writing on

public-access TV; no, I am only writing on some ideas that become especially articulate through the locus of one particular public-access TV station. No, the model I am using is not very much like *Wayne's World* at all; yes, *Wayne's World* is actually a pretty decent touchstone for what I'm studying, and as a large-scale reference point is not only useful but maybe even instructive.

In the scene quoted above, Wayne and Garth, the scrappy metalhead hosts of the cable-access show *Wayne's World*, are confronted by Benjamin, a slick, "The Man"-type network executive who is trying to exploit their show's underground popularity for corporate profit (and also steal Wayne's girlfriend, but that's for another paper). Wayne and Garth verbally defend the DIY honour of their show, while their actions form a meta-counter-commentary, implying that not only Wayne and Garth, the characters, but Mike Myers and Dana Carvey, the actors playing them, would willingly trade in (or sell out) their show's grassroots lo-fi authenticity for cold, hard cash – or, if nothing else, a movie contract. This is, as far as broad cultural understanding goes, the main struggle of public-access television and grassroots media in general: to stay "real" in the face of a ravenous capitalism that wishes and has the ability to devour anything in its path, repackaging true instances of authentic self-expression into cheap simulacra that can be bought low and sold high. This is, in fact, the story that is told of so many grassroots social and cultural movements – and since as a story it is so far-reaching and seemingly incontrovertible, it can be hard to think of these movements ending any other way. In a struggle between powerful multinational corporations with seemingly limitless strength and capital, and *The Manitoba Cat Lovers' Hour,* who do we think is going to win? Expand or perish.

I am grateful to *Wayne's World* for making this struggle visible (and hilarious), for its pointed and loving satire of public-access TV and its producers and followers, and

for giving me, and the general public, some cohesive and near-universal point of reference for what TV made by "the people" can look like. There are other examples, many of them closer to home – SCTV's Bob and Doug McKenzie sketches parodied the CRTC's demand for Canadian broadcast content by plopping two plaid-wearing beer-drinking hosers in front of the television camera; even the *Kids In The Hall*'s Sir Simon Milligan and Hecubus skits seemed to be steeped in the overzealous, overly-self-important, totally-unfunny public-access-television-show-host tradition. But I chose *Wayne's World* for my opening critique just because it's so seemingly prevalent in the public imagination, and it is precisely this act of common imagining that I want to challenge, or at least question.

In *Disrupting the Nuptials at the Town Hall Debate: Feminism and the Politics of Cultural Memory in the USA*, Melissa Deem considers how feminist public culture has been domesticated and limited by how it is being remembered and talked about:

> Something particularly insidious is taking place in the machinations of the juvenalizing discourses of feminism. Rather than extend vitality and potency, feminism is delegitimated. [...] The contemporary discourses partake in a regressive nostalgia that laments the development of feminism from a tough, strident and powerful set of practices into an immature, narcissistic and ineffectual discourse. The use of history for these discourses partakes in larger structures of cultural amnesia that animate the mass-mediated public sphere, although in ways specific to feminism. (2)

Deem's piece considers how revisiting certain aspects of 1970s feminism – specifically, Jill Johnston's body of work, including her *Village Voice* column, her book *Lesbian Nation*, and her "indecorous" performances – offers new possibilities for thinking about

feminism as part of a historical continuum in a way that does not foreclose on the possibilities created by marginal, ephemeral moments that often go unrecognized because they do not fit easily into the dominant tale of feminism's rise (and perceived decline):

> The publication of *Lesbian Nation* in 1973 and the political performances preceding it appear precisely at the historical moment when Echols dates feminism's decline, and, not surprisingly, Johnston becomes a marginal figure who in many ways is simply emblematic of a turn to separatism and lifestyle politics. However, situating Johnston's performances more broadly interrupts this narrative and offers another history not premised on fragmentation and decline. (7)

I am interested in a similar project of revisiting the ephemeral, and taking issue with the dominant decline narrative that surrounds public-access television. I wonder how to think about a history of the public-access movement that's "not premised on fragmentation and decline." Of course, one cannot simply refuse to talk about fragmentation and decline – such a move would be, practically speaking, ahistorical, and more importantly would rob the site of study of a particularly fruitful area of investigation. But I take encouragement from Deem's project to look beyond the dominant narratives towards less visited sites that may open a window in the apparently concrete-encased cubicle of narratives of small-scale cultural and political movements. What happens if we assume for a moment that the "failure" of public-access (to expand, to thrive) can be re-remembered, and even retold? That the dictates of capitalism, though certainly deep-rooted and hugely influential, are not the be-all-and-end-all mode through which to chart public-access's lifeworld? Moreover, what does it mean when real people are currently involved in such a re-remembering and retelling? What might be revealed

by unpacking such a strange and ephemeral project? How does it help redefine the scope of what might be thought of as democratic participation in the public sphere? These questions guided my investigation generally; below is a plan of how the argument develops along more specific lines.

Chapter 1 locates the station's development within a larger social and technological climate, and attempts to explain how the infrastructure for public-access television came to be used for unanticipated – but, as it turns out, extremely interesting – purposes, and what these formal mutations indicate about the nature of publics and how they communicate. Chapter 2 goes into detail regarding several specific shows which aired on the station, and how those shows (a) revealed the codes written implicitly into abstract ideas of media democracy and publicness by *breaking* them, and (b) form their own kind of disruptive "queer" public space. It attempts to situate these shows in the discourse on queer and feminist modes of expression, while also recognizing their uniqueness as a product of a particular time and place. Chapter 3 looks at the attempts of several Winnipeg artists and activists to revisit and "reclaim" the station, its shows, its aesthetics, and its heroes and anti-heroes; this chapter goes beyond the specific work of the station itself to consider a kind of cultural memory project that is presently taking place on or around the fragments of VPW.

Before that, I should explain a bit about the methods and theoretical frameworks which I used to investigate the admittedly fragmented (and arguably declining?) narratives of VPW, media democratization, and cultural memory.

Methodology

There are not a lot of models for what I am trying to do. Much of the writing on public-access media concludes, in a somewhat frustrating tautology, that those who participate in community-oriented media projects feel a sense of community as a result of their work, or that people who make themselves public become part of the public sphere (see, for example, Steiner 2005, Langer 2001, King & Mele 1999). Which is certainly very positive and encouraging, and not untrue of VPW either, but my intent is not to prove this pattern over again, when the work has already been done. There is not a very large body of scholarly work on public-access television, and nothing specifically on VPW, or public-access in Canada at all, as far as I can tell. The models I draw from for theory and framework, then, are partly analyses of reality and talk-show TV program formats, which have proved extremely valuable for their incisive rendering of class and gender dynamics on television, their considerations of the meaning of "public", and their analyses of the political economies of TV production. There are, of course, obvious differences in the mechanics and motivations of these types of show from the kind I am studying, the most glaring one being that public-access TV, very much unlike reality or talk-show TV, is not a profit-driven model.

This is not simply a qualitative difference - in fact, it speaks to one of my drives in this study, which is to question the working of capital and commerce with regard to how people attempt to gain access to a means of expressing themselves. Any similarity between, say, *Maury Povich* and *The Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show* should be marked by the observation that, in the case of the latter, what was at stake was not exactly network profits, and the producers in charge of content were not boardroom executives

looking out for the bottom line, but the hosts, Ron and Natalie Pollock, themselves. This reality necessitates a deeper consideration of what it means to be "exploited", or, more generally, it necessitates complicating the relationship between labour, production, and reception.

Whenever I describe this project to people, it's common for them to define my use of VPW, its programs, and the surrounding discourse, as a "case study". Fair enough, but my own perception of the project is slightly different – it's a case study of an atypical case, an experiment for which there is no control group. I do not locate VPW along a continuum of public-access television's development nationally or internationally (though I do take into account certain key technological and cultural circumstances in its development). Nor do I determine through statistical or observational data what effect the station had or has on its community. VPW for me is interesting as a site where various threads overlap, including (but not limited to) discourses on the public sphere, on media democracy, on gender and styles of publicness, on urban culture and meaning-making, and on my own position as an observer, analyst, and fan of the programs produced, as well as the conversations and materials around them. At the same time, VPW also fans out onto these various arenas in a way that highlights their effectiveness as particularities rather than abstractions. Although the nation has a place in this conversation, my primary goal is not one of locating VPW as part of a nation-building project.

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich describes the curious intersection of threads in her study: she notes "a queer dimension to my interest in migration, a predilection for stories that don't claim to be central or representative but that may nonetheless be revealing or symptomatic," (120). I admit to a comparable interest in what she identifies as a "queer" dimension, in that the stories I tell here should not be read as

small-scale models of a larger, largely homogenous system. There are reasons why some things never make it past the scale of the local, and these reasons do not always have to do with failure (though they would seem to, given capitalism's expand-or-perish dictates); my interest here is not in whether or not public-access succeeded or failed, but in how revisiting "failed" sites repositions their work not as moving toward a goal but as creating a situation – one which seems worth returning to, as evidenced both by the "reclamation project" I examine in Chapter 3 and by my own scholarly (and also non-academic) interest in the station.[2]

Interviews and Archival Materials

There is no true existing archive of VPW material. In fact, the loss of the archive and the processes by which various stand-in archives have been cobbled together forms an important part of my study; later on I will discuss in detail the "destruction" of the video materials of VPW and the conversations that take place around it, as well as how the varying traces of the archive have come to take on cultural weight and presence. In addition to obtaining what written material I could on the station, I also conducted a series of interviews with people who played a range of roles connecting them to VPW. I interviewed two former staff members, one of whom was instrumental in founding the station, one production assistant who also occasionally produced his own shows, two show hosts, and two artists who also identify as fans of the station's programming, and

[2] I have to be careful here; in discussing failure, there are times when I feel like I'm teetering on the edge of the semantic rabbit-hole: if VPW's "failure" can be reclaimed and re-imagined, does that make it a success? And if it is a success, then it is has also failed to fail, making it a different sort of failure… You can see why one would want to give such discussions a wide berth.

who are key figures in the reclamation project I am attempting to identify and map.

Although it was not my original intent, what also became apparent to me as I conducted my research was that I am not simply working with an existing archive, incomplete and gap-ridden though it may be, but that through the interviews I conduct and my dedication to revisiting this lost and discarded material, I am also creating a new archive comprised of oral and to a certain extent material histories (incomplete and gap-ridden though they may be). Even among the relatively small group of people I spoke with, various stories and themes would repeat themselves - I took this not as evidence of the "truth" of any given recollection or feeling, but as indicative of some kind of larger desire for certain stories to be told (and others to be silenced). Almost every interviewee I worked with expressed pleasure that someone was paying attention to the work they had done, work which at present has almost certainly been relegated to some dusty corner of the cultural scene – finally, they seem to be saying, someone is going to tell my story the way it should be told. Of course, telling "the whole truth" is an impossible task for anyone other than an extremely dedicated investigative journalist, and the success of an investigative journalist's ability to tell one story properly always necessarily involves riding roughshod on someone else's life. So. I am not here to tell the "real story" of VPW, or to shore up gaps in public or recognized knowledge of the station. What I am doing is conducting a close reading of a site of particular interest (and interesting particulars) whose implications may open a window onto some new ways of thinking about publics, media, and how we communicate with each other.

In his forays into gender and television history, Mark Williams describes the possibilities that oral histories can offer offer in tracking the unwritten aspects of media development:

> Like television, and to some extent television studies itself, oral history has traditionally been considered as a kind of bad object within larger "official" and authoritative discourses of history and cultural analysis. But oral history can afford inroads toward issues that are central to contemporary historical inquiry: subjective history and its relation to historical issues of subjectivity, personal memory and popular memory, but also local and regional history in light of the principles of multiculturalism. In terms of television studies, oral history offers an alternative method of research concerning an apparatus of considerable power in the very shaping of subjectivity and popular memory, and a movement away from – though potentially supplemental to – the industrial and commercialized discourses currently prevalent in our historical understanding of this medium. (Williams 52)

Following Williams' framework, where official histories and popular representations of public-access television (those few that exist) describe an ideological project gone awry (i.e. the *Wayne's World* expand-or-perish paradigm), my project gathers up other stories and instances for which there is little room in official texts. Unsurprisingly, many of these stories have, to use Cvetkovich's term again, a *queer* dimension – that is to say they operate on principles that skew normative means of accessing histories of broadcast media. To take Williams' ideas a bit further, oral history (I should perhaps expand his term into "unwritten history", or possibly "grassroots history"), in its addressing of "the very shaping of subjectivity and popular memory", implies a questioning of the mechanisms of popular memory itself. Holes in the body of text, though at first hard to see, can direct us toward observing how official histories work, what principles guide

remembering and imagining; once these principles are seen, it becomes easier to deconstruct them. Following a phenomenon that any interviewer will recognize, many of the most interesting conversations I had took place once the tape recorder had been turned off, and therefore must be considered "off the record"; I must acknowledge these aporia without expressing them, and also recognize that the purpose of aporia is to cause discomfort and force the recognition of the necessary incompleteness of any study, and to highlight why certain things get talked about and others don't.

Much of the written source material on VPW itself, and public access in Canada in general, comes from the personal files of Dorthi Dunsmore, and the collection of documents under her name which she donated to the Manitoba Public Archives so they could be accessed by researchers such as myself. While I am very grateful to Dunsmore for her enthusiasm for and willingness to cooperate with my study, and for her efforts to ensure some part of the history of Winnipeg's public-access movement be preserved, it seems rather indicative of my points above that, were it not for the archival impulses of this sole woman, most of this information would be lost.

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

I am strongly influenced by the methodology Ann Cvetkovich takes in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Here Cvetkovich uses a combination of interviews, stories and narratives, material evidence, and theoretical framework to think about affective culture, without separating "feelings" from the objects, practices, people and events they are related to, and which they work to stick together. From her I get a sense of how to animate the less-often recognized narratives

and sites of cultural and everyday life into explorations that refuse to foreclose discussion into pat conclusions. In her chapter on AIDS activism and the disruptive tactics of ACT UP, Cvetkovich specifically addresses the idea of cultural memory in trying to come to terms with her own experiences with AIDS activism, now that she is no longer part of what was once a very tight-knit and cohesive movement:

> What kind of memorial would be appropriate for a movement that while not exactly dead, since ACT UP/NY and other chapters, for example, continue to meet, is dramatically charged? When is it important to move on and when is it useful, if painful, to return to the past? I ask these questions about ACT UP in particular because in the process whereby AIDS activism was the catalyst for what has now become mainstream gay politics and consumer visibility, something got lost along the way, and I'm mourning that loss along with the loss of so many lives. (Cvetkovich 156)

Although her work addresses the actual formations and commitments of publics less than I would like it to, her methodology alone is exemplary in its ability to make room for minoritarian politics and fields. I also appreciate her designation of her work as "experimental", and the recognition that label entails of the necessary strangeness of rethinking cultural norms.

I am also indebted to Michael Warner's articulation of "publics and counterpublics", expressed in the book of that name (and in particular the title essay); I will be referencing his work continually as a foundational mode of thought into the claims made and assumed by those who utilize, analyze, and criticize the "public sphere". A brief gloss on Warner's public works introduces a kind of taxonomy of conditions of publicness; I do not plan to reiterate these conditions here, but will just note that what

Warner seems to be doing is quarrelling with idea that a "counterpublic" is simply a public with an oppositional or contrarian motive. In critiquing Nancy Fraser's work on feminist counterpublics, Warner suggests her description falls short of a productive analysis of counterpublic work: "Fraser's description of what counterpublics do – 'formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' – sounds like the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics, with the word 'oppositional' inserted," (*Publics* 118). Instead, Warner mobilizes the idea of counterpublics to suggest a framework wherein the *style* of presentation and articulation (of self, interests, needs, etc.) itself is oppositional, and at the same time complicates the idea of "a public" by blurring boundaries between public and private styles of behaviour and expression. He suggests that such counterpublics exist always in opposition (but not necessarily with a consciously-articulated oppositional politics) to a dominant public:

> A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media. The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness. (*Publics* 119)

Warner implies here (and says outright elsewhere) that counterpublics rely on not just an oppositional "message" but a disruptive style of presentation. But "style of presentation" means more than a mode of performance; it is not merely a matter of dressing up one's publicness in drag and having it tap-dance (though that may in fact be a halfway-decent

starting point). The kind of paradigm shift Warner is talking about, I think, is the suggestion that "counterpublic" as a concept works to name, legitimate, and describe the kind of fuzzy, ephemeral movements that are the products of slippage between public and private, between discursive and performative, and to which problems of discourse circulation and memorialization are completely germane. Jill Johnston did it in Deem's analysis, ACT UP did it for Cvetkovich, and Warner has his She-Romps; I can only hope that I will have some similar degree of success in talking about Winnipeg and VPW and their relationship to counterpublic practices.

Conclusion

I should note that I care very little that, as a study of media forms and their relation to publicness and democratic access, my site of interest is presently defunct, and much less temporally relevant than a study of, say, daytime talk shows, podcasting and other internet-based forums, or reality TV. Actually, I like to think that VPW occupies a privileged position in the milieu of the public's access to the means of production, in that we now have enough distance to actually track how it rose and fell, and where its fragments landed. It is not a question of whether or not society today "needs" public-access television, or would benefit from its existence; such speculative argumentation seems beside the point, and in any case there are certainly a plethora of opportunities for today's individual to produce and disseminate a mediated version of her concerns, experiences, and existence. It is rather a matter of considering how we are thinking and talking about movements of media democratization, and especially how we conceive of them in their absence. When ideas and movements fail, or, having served their purpose,

move on, or vanish from the face of the earth without any clearly-articulated or recognized reason, we are then presented with an opportunity to examine some of the basic, endemic, and foundational ideas that surround how we think about communication, how value gets assigned and designated, and the power and circulation of economies of images and movements.

In truth, there are more opportunities now for people and communities to come forth and make their lives and desires public than there have ever been, and television in particular is overrun, one might say, with images of "real people" doing "real things". Talk shows and reality shows by far outnumber scripted comedies and dramas, and to some extent they owe their success to the pioneering work of public-access stations, which at least proposed the idea that real people might be worth watching (even if they couldn't always make it stick). But, like Cvetkovich, I feel "something got lost along the way"; following the line of what that *something* is, and why it matters, will be my entry point into the next section of this project.

CHAPTER 1

Communicator Stimulator: Winnipeg Gets Public-Access Television

Introduction: "Real Human Rights Kinds of Humans"

In the summer of 2005, Winnipeg's artist-run movie theatre Cinemathèque hosted *Garbage Hill: A Showcase of Discarded Winnipeg Film and TV*, a three-day festival of locally-produced screen detritus. Featured were home-grown commercials, mostly from the 1980s, short films by local filmmakers grouped loosely under the thematic of loss, and perhaps most notably, *Lo-Fi Fantasies/Winnipeg Babysitter,* a two-part four-hour retrospective of shows produced on VPW, Winnipeg's public-access TV station, which was on air from 1971 to 2001, and which experienced a kind of "golden age" in the 1980s. Curated by visual and performing artist Daniel Barrow, *Lo-Fi Fantasies/Winnipeg Babysitter* featured clips from such shows as post-apocalyptic cult-classic *Survival*, music variety show *Alternative Rockstand*, and the self-explanatory *Cooking With Fran* and *Manitoba Cat Lovers' Hour.* The videos were accompanied by Barrow's textual sidenotes, a series of written comments on the shows which were projected onto an adjacent screen and provided information ranging from the biographical to the personal and strictly subjective.[3] According to the organizers, the festival drew Cinemathèque's largest audience up to that point in time; from personal experience I can attest to the presence of hundreds of giddy Winnipeggers lining up for hours in advance to gain admission to the 120-seat theatre.

[3] For instance, during a segment of *Math With Marty*, Barrow's notes inform you that host Marty Green currently spends his free time touring his Yiddish opera, *The Ballad of Monish.*

The last half-hour of *Winnipeg Babysitter* consisted entirely of footage from *The Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show,* a sort of variety program featuring "everyday people" doing essentially whatever they want, hosted by siblings Ron and Natalie Pollock (a.k.a. Rockin' Ron and Nifty Nat). The Pollocks describe the show as having a "human rights" agenda, in that, if nothing else, human beings are prominently featured – "real human-rights kinds of humans," as Rockin' Ron described one pair of giggly teenage guests (*Winnipeg Babysitter*). The show's actual form, however, quickly revealed itself to be more Barnum & Bailey than United Nations. A man in a feather boa, miniskirt, and little else played piano and sang, painfully and hilariously butchering *New York New York*; a punch-drunk (or just drunk?) former middleweight boxing champion droned along with *At The Hop* while Rockin' Ron Pollock held the mic and bobbed excitedly; the cross-dressing man from earlier reappeared shirtless with another guy, the two of them "muscle-dancing" for what seemed like an hour. Natalie Pollock's closing interpretive dance, done to the strains of AC/DC, brought down the house. Next to me my friend actually laughed until she cried at the muscle-dancers – "It's like… when my boyfriend and his dad get drunk together…" she gasped, weeping. Later on, at the post-screening reception, the real-life Natalie Pollock greeted her fans (new and old) glowingly: "When we get the show back on the air, you're ALL going to be on it!" This was the ethos of VPW writ large: that cable-access television could and must provide a space for self-expression, but not merely for those who could enter the public sphere with a sense of decorum and deference to the responsibilities of public life, as so much discourse of public broadcasting describes. If *Pollock & Pollock* and certain other VPW shows are any kind of example, public-access in its ideal shape meant exactly that: a forum for members of the public in all their inarticulate, tedious, overzealous, awkward,

unrehearsed, silly, boring, and occasionally brilliant and avant-garde forms. As my colleague Liz Springate commented, how could it *not* fail?

Imperfect Embrace: Creating Public Infrastructure for Counterpublic Use

> *It is often thought, especially by outsiders, that the public display of private matters is a debased narcissism, a collapse of decorum, expressivity gone amok, the erosion of any distinction between public and private. But in a counterpublic setting, such display often has the aim of transformation. Styles of embodiment are learned and cultivated, and the affects of shame and disgust that surround them can be tested, in some cases revalued* (Warner, *Publics* 62).

Counterpublics, for Michael Warner, describe a kind of shift of popular discourse on the "public sphere", one which bears upon the relationship between people and mediated life by taking "unpublic" styles of discourse seriously. My aim is not to prove scientifically or empirically that VPW and its imagined community constitutes a counterpublic (although considerations and analyses of counterpublics will certainly be relevant to my argument) and thus, once plugged into the equation, its value as a transformative medium will become immediately apparent. Instead, I would like to investigate the circulation of discourse that surrounds and enables the production of media-based counterpublics, in order to intervene in what I imagine to be the popular discourse surrounding public-access television in Winnipeg.

VPW and its attendant culture constitutes a distinct and articulate moment in the arc of conversations surrounding the use (and abuse) of media where the "general public"

is concerned. These moments flash up occasionally and ephemerally, but rather than conceiving of them as accidental and coincidence-ridden uses of technological networks – short-lived chronotopic flukes – I would like to reimagine the scope of their work. Or, rather, I would like to take their accidental and coincidence-ridden nature into account as a factor in outlining the sphere of their influence and as a critical part of understanding what kind of work they do.

VPW began in, and was born of, a kind of interval stage in Canada's technological and social continuum – a shaky, hopeful, slightly queasy period in which CRTC mandates, a socially progressive media ethos, inquiries into national identity which led to officializing and legislating multiculturalism and "difference," and the development of cheaper, more readily available recording and broadcasting technology all came together to create and provide infrastructure for increasing the public's participation in mediated life. But, crucially, it was the infrastructure that was the focus of this movement and not its content – the machine without the ghost, so to speak. This imperfect embrace was what allowed for deviations like *Pollock & Pollock* to occur; but where the running discourse on public-access television speaks of its failure because of such instances of odd and inherently "useless" programming, I will suggest a different reading, one which considers the generative and productive capacity of such "failures," and hopefully will be able to some extent to deconstruct the success/failure model itself. Chapter 3 will consider the workings of "failure" more specifically; at this point in the argument I will focus on the infrastructure itself and how it came to be used in a public (and counterpublic) capacity.

King and Mele's 1999 ethnographic study of a public-access station in Cape Cod addresses what seems to be the prevalent way of thinking about this deviant "other"

programming:

> For increasing numbers of media commentators and observers... many public access programs fall outside the parameters of content relevant to the public sphere. So-called fringe programs present a spectrum of lifestyles, values, issues, ideas and viewpoints to audiences with specific tastes and interests. Relentless religious proselytizing and irrelevant, self-indulgent silliness (as portrayed in the parody film, Wayne's World) are seen as undermining public access television's potential as a tool for animating progressive social and political change. (603-4)

King and Mele's comments accord with my own sense of the dynamic surrounding the general reception of public-access television (and they mention *Wayne's World* too!) – they suggest, as I am here, that the public-access ideal model is of a particularly liberal and rational nature that implicitly excludes or derides non-liberal, irrational modes of use. In other words, how dare people take the call to "express themselves" so *literally*! This stance conceives of instances of bizarre and irrational behaviour (including, presumably, shows like *Pollock & Pollock* and certain others on the VPW roster) as having failed to carry out public-access's mandate. King and Mele's solution is to *redefine* the public sphere through their study, taking into account the critical potential of community production, and not just community product:

> Employing recent feminist critical social theory, we argue that assessments of the democratic potential of public access... cannot be determined exclusively by normative judgments of the content of programming. By shifting our analysis and critique from cable access programming (i.e. "the product") to its production (i.e. participation) we redefine traditional

> notions of the public sphere to include meaningful action on the part of local citizens from various backgrounds in a medium otherwise dominated by commercial and corporate interests. (605)

The foundational idea of King and Mele's study is an important one – that in order to appreciate the contribution of public-access to the media climate, the medium must be thought of as part of a circulatory network of public activity, not simply as a two-dimensional output channel. That they use feminist critical theory to perform such re-imagining is encouraging to my study as well; however, I depart from them in my consideration of the democratic potential of "irrelevant, self-indulgent silliness" (if not "relentless religious proselytizing") and its ability not just to *redefine* the public sphere but to call into question the principles underpinning the idea of the public sphere itself. Could "silliness" be potentially radical? Or, because that questions sounds slightly ludicrous, how does "silliness" and the criticism it receives reveal the implicit codes detailing what is commonly considered the "proper" way to be public, and how might it challenge that hegemony?

One last consideration to preface this conversation on publics and their mobilization through media: it is easy to fall into the trap of debating which format is better for the public good – the sober, deliberative model, or the performative variety/freakshow? Should people put aside their minoritarian commitments in order to enter the public sphere and speak their piece, or should iconoclasm and non-deliberative, embodied modes of expression be given their due weight? This kind of argument for and against these two particular styles of publicness can (and does) go on indefinitely (see, for instance, Habermas 1989, Fraser 1989, Young 1990); what is interesting about VPW is that, for a short period, it was able to sustain *both*. The polarized forms of presentation

discussed here are perhaps arbitrary – or, they are not arbitrary, but they have been produced and gelled through discursive tactics that were intended to be descriptive, but somehow ended up drawing lines in the sand. They need not be mutually exclusive, though they are often talked about as if they are. It seems a shame to spend too much time on a prescriptive mode of thinking about media access – what kind of medicine should the public take, and how will we get them to swallow it without complaining too much? – when in fact examples like VPW stand as evidence that such deliberation may be beside the point when actual people are actively involved in "making media". A more useful tack, then, will be to think about what factors had to be in place in order for the station to sustain both a "sombre feminist show", to quote Ron Pollock, alongside Ron's own decidedly un-sombre (and arguably feminist) program; why such factors no longer exist or failed to sustain themselves; and how and why certain shows are talked about and remembered one way, and others differently.

"It's Just a Tool, Like a Pencil": The Social and Material Origins of Public-Access

The majority of criticism, both internal and external, levelled at the public-access media initiative addresses its professed deviance from a sober, professional-feeling format in which members of the public could "talk back to the television," to use the trope employed by public-access television's early proponents. Public-access was devised to serve a particular and perceived need in the media climate – this need is explicitly referenced in the literature and policy of public-access's pioneers, as I will demonstrate later on. In order to appreciate the formal mutation of this medium, the discourse that surrounds it, and the repercussions and resonances of its shifts in nature, it

will be useful to look at what kind of media and technological climate it entered into, and what sorts of ideologies fostered it.

Technological nationalism has long been a guiding principle of Canadian media development – much has been made of the use of broadcast technologies to unite citizens and develop community in disparate corners of the country (Tourigny 1983), to collapse distance or render it invisible (Barnett 2004), to affix feelings of national identity across provincial and even less tangible borders (Morgan 2006). Jim Prentice, a former production assistant at VPW, explains that

> Canada was ahead of maybe the world, in terms of public-access – the CRTC legislated that we had to have a certain amount of local content in order to balance out the American content. [The cable companies] would slap in some Canadian shows, because they had to spend ten percent of their profit on Canadian content... but at the same time, it wasn't a moneymaking venture for them. (Prentice 2007)

Prentice characterizes the relationship between the cable company and the community station as "paternal, but not really caring," (Prentice 2007); nevertheless, the CRTC mandates can be thought of as having hardwired the *possibility* of community television into the development of Canada's broadcast landscape. Since it seems futile to think about the form and content of one instance of broadcast media without taking into account the imperatives toward citizenship in which it is sunk, I will look at some of the ideologies and technologies (and the extent to which they are symbiotic) that led to public-access television's official launch in Winnipeg in the early 1970s.

Historically, the movement to provide members of the general public with access to means of media production rose out of the socially progressive ethos of the 1960s;

projects like the NFB's *Challenge For Change* were manifestations of the idea that public-access media had the potential to empower its participants, promote community-building, and mobilize media outlets toward more broadly democratic ends (Higgins 1999). *Challenge For Change* was an initiative of the National Film Board that provided underprivileged communities and groups with film equipment which they could use to document their lives, raise awareness of their problems, and establish networks through which they might augment change. Its language is very much the language of grassroots activist ideology – an eponymous 1968 NFB film documenting the project states in its write-up:

> What happens with children from deprived areas when they are given a free hand to make their own films? Who can be a better voice for Indian needs and aspirations than an Indian film crew? How angry are the black people with the way society treats them? How do government representatives react to social change and the role of the Challenge for Change program? Can a film project serve as a cohesive agent and catalyst for change within a community, and at the same time serve as a means of communication with government? What is community organizing? What role can film play in participatory democracy?[4]

Similarly, the language used by Videon Cable Access's early promotional material exhorts the public to be actively involved in the creation of media forms rather than consume them passively.

The forces behind public-access television's arrival in Winnipeg could be thought

[4] National Film Board website, http://www.nfb.ca/trouverunfilm/fichefilm.php?id=11410&lg=en&exp=&v=h. Accessed 16 April 2007.

of as an attempt to embody an instrumental reading of Jürgen Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*; if one interpreted Habermas' description of European coffeehouses and the modes of subjectivity and citizenship they fostered as a kind of instruction manual, one might end up with something like the mandate of public-access television in the late 60s and early 70s. Here are a few excerpts from the Community Planned Public Access Policy through which Videon, VPW's parent company, explicitly stated its mandate as a provider of public-access media:

> Our community programming objective is to make the electronic medium accessible to all residents of the licensed area, for purposes of expressing their ideas without editorial control and exhibiting their talents without restraint of traditional production techniques; to achieve this goal within the bounds of good taste, legal requirements and budget limitations. [...] It is our concept that CATV [cable-access television] programming should respond to the wants of the people and serve the needs of the people, not only as is evidenced today but as we anticipate tomorrow. In our role as "Communicator Stimulator" we will strive to interest citizens in acting upon problems related to themselves. Because we think that people learn better by participating than by simply looking or listening, we encourage that participation, along with the initiative, responsibility and dedication that develop leadership. (Community 1975)

One feels here a deep sense of public-access's pedagogical role, its potential work as a training ground for the citizens of tomorrow. Richard Edwards, who acted as VPW's station manager for much of the 1980s, relates that many of VPW's early volunteers, employees, and programmers went on to have considerable success in various related

areas, some going on to work for the CBC and other large-scale media corporations, or pursuing careers in comedy or performing arts after "practicing" on their VPW programs (Edwards 2007). Although the policy above is a fairly robust outline, we will see that certain of its key concepts are rather more subjective than at first glance – specifically those revolving around the idea of "good taste" and its relationship to what Michael Warner would refer to as "world-making" (*Publics* 2002).

VPW's original by-line was "Your Participation Station", and ads posted in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Winnipeg Tribune* and VPW's newsletter *Access* attempted to garner viewership with the unpretentious slogan "See Someone You Know On VPW" – which, in some ways, was the most salient feature of the station at the time. Dorthi Dunsmore, considered by many to be VPW's de facto founder, was hired officially as the program manager, but according to my interview with her, her job consisted mostly of promoting the station's presence around Winnipeg, recruiting programmers, and generally letting people know that it was not only possible, but desirable and potentially empowering to be on the production end of television (Dunsmore 2007). In a 1978 article in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Dunsmore is quoted as saying "There's a great big myth outside that television is a very hard thing to do, that only an incredibly talented professional who's been doing it for years could conceive of coming on television. It really isn't hard to do. Television is just a way of sending sound and pictures over distances. It's just a tool, like a pencil." (Nudell 17).

A gloss on newspaper articles spanning the first dozen years of the station echoes the sentiments of the *Community Planned Public Access Policy*. The previously-mentioned 1978 Winnipeg Free Press article was entitled *Community TV lets man-in-street have his say*, and describes the work of Dunsmore and Edwards to aid community

members in producing shows. A Winnipeg Tribune article from 1977, entitled *TV 13 is your chance to tell it to the world,* quotes VPW community animator Inga Carr:

> Ordinary people need to develop their competence and confidence in the use of the media for their own purposes, to define and celebrate their own lives and concerns, to deepen their own awareness, to speak out their anger. We also needs means of technical access, so that groups who wish to propose or protest can get their message seen or heard in dramatic form. (29)

A 1983 Winnipeg Sun article, entitled *Everyday folks in focus*, quotes program manager Bob Foskett as saying "Community television is in some ways extremely conservative. When it began, we thought, 'Oh, every radical in town is going to get on and it's going to be a message from the crazies.' But they're not crazies. They're just everyday people," (Cormier 18).

Where conventional wisdom on public-access media tends to imagine a public brimming over with the need (but not the means) to express itself, fomenting an imperative toward technological development that can meet and satisfy this need, Dunsmore's testimony suggested a perversion of this model, where the technology and the infrastructure through which it could be used came *prior* to the public's "need" to see itself on TV. Dunsmore describes the process through which, as program manager (and community animator) at VPW in 1971, she tried to encourage people to reconsider TV as an input-output medium:

> My main role was to animate the community and get things going. I started out with the two newspapers [*Winnipeg Free Press* and *Winnipeg Tribune*] every day and various organizations, and I phoned people. And

> so many people would say, well, you don't get something for nothing. So that was one response. And the other was, well there's nothing *on* Channel 9 on my television.[5] Well, there wasn't. So it was kind of slow, we were getting one person at a time. People hadn't even thought of it. At the beginning it was always me phoning people. I don't know at what point people started phoning us. (Dunsmore 2007)

If the movement toward public-access television at this time had a slogan, it would sound less like "Power to the People" than "Run it Up the Flagpole and See Who Salutes." Tracking who actually *did* salute points in some ways to the promises inherent in the public-access mandate, and how these promises fit with the idea of a public that is actively engaged in representing and watching itself on TV.

"Other": A Culture of Producers

> *Richard Edwards: The concept was almost shocking to some people: allow people in the community to say what they want to say, how they want to say it, and not try to change what they want to say. [...] There were some shows where I'd get a phone call every Monday to complain about something they saw, and I'd say I appreciate you take the time to call me and express that you don't share their opinion, if you don't like it you can turn the channel, and they found this insulting, because they considered it my job to present something they wanted to watch, because they were paying for cable TV.*

[5] Before it became VPW-13, the public-access station broadcast on Channel 9.

Interviewer: What were people complaining about, mostly? Being uninterested, or offended?

Richard Edwards: Yeah, or embarrassed for the people, saying "How dare you put these idiots on TV, they're idiots! (Edwards 2007)

The model of public-access television differs from other "reality" television models not solely by virtue of the fact that it is a non-profit economy, with unpaid labour (and talent) being called upon to serve the public rather than boost network profits. It becomes clear from the agenda of its progenitors that this is not primarily a site of reception or dissemination but a site of *production*; audience, in a sense, was beside the point, at least to those responsible for creating the infrastructure. Which, in itself, is a radical departure from mainstream TV culture. As Edwards points out above, VPW's programming was often a source of consternation to certain viewers, who couldn't understand why such trivial, boring, and/or unprofessional people were being given the same airspace as Johnny Carson, MTV, or *Who's The Boss*.

It is not as though VPW took no interest whatsoever in its audience – even a short number of years after VPW's inception, discussions were already taking place within the station's internal newsletter *Access* concerning the professional quality, or lack thereof, of the station's programming. Since the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement Ratings had no way of tracking the popularity of individual shows on VPW, as they fall into the category "Other" and are thus not individually traceable (Kesselman S10), in 1976 the station circulated a survey among Winnipeggers to get a sense of public interest in the programming. Nick Ternette, a frequent voice of criticism within VPW (and a regular producer of the program The Ternette Profile, as well as the *Access* column The Ternette Report), writes in the August/September 1976 issue:

> One of the most frustrating occurrences at VPW is to watch a show and say "How awful!" One must examine the motives and interests of people producing shows at VPW. [...] There are too many community producers who somehow view VPW as their playground and forget that theirs is a paying audience that gets turned off by poor programming. VPW is public and we are public figures, and therefore responsible to the public at large. [...] Community programmers better listen, when over 1,000 of those that watch less than once a week or never repeatedly commented that VPW being boring, amateurish, not interesting, badly organized, poor sets, too many talk shows, not enough variety etc. (4)

Clearly VPW did not conceive of itself as broadcasting into a vacuum; nevertheless, Ternette's concerns raise an aspect of the station's work that was not part of the original agenda – no one had thought about making the station a site of production of *entertaining* material. In retrospect, it's easy to recognize that the amateurish quality Ternette is describing here is what made the station *interesting*, and in Chapter 3 I will discuss in greater detail the aesthetic and formal characteristics that shaped the station's reception, circulation, and memorialization. At that point, however, the failure to match the standards of profit-based broadcast television was, for Ternette, a source of shame; for others, like Richard Edwards, it was simply the by-product of a broadcast framework with no goal beyond letting people have their say in public.

There is something very interesting about a media movement that, at least in the abstract formula laid out by its progenitors, hailed the public not as consumers or receivers but as (potential) producers, and which implied through its mandate that production is intimately tied to citizenship. This very grassroots ethos links elegantly

with similar developments in print and radio cultures, and even grassroots political movements that took place on the level of the neighbourhood garden and community centre. These directives to empowerment through creation and community, not entertainment and consumption, suggested implicitly that such conversations were not already occurring; as the phrase "Communicator Stimulator" suggests, VPW saw itself as literally having to *stimulate* communication among the public, and not just provide a channel through which the communication could take place. The public-access movement, if I can refer to it with such large-scale cohesion, rested ideologically on faith in the idea of a public, and specifically a public predisposed toward salon-style deliberation and careful investigation of its own needs and commitments. As Edwards' comments indicate, a certain number of "growing pains" were anticipated and even counted on, as the public became accustomed to thinking of television in vernacular terms. What the early public-access mandate did *not* account for was the arrival of spectacle[6] on its shores, and it is precisely this development in which I am interested. VPW can be thought of as contributing to Winnipeg's development as a centre for audio-visual production – but not in the way that its earliest manifestations may have suggested.

It is important at this point to underscore the relative unsophisticatedness of Winnipeg's screen culture at the time VPW came into being. Large urban centres like New York or Los Angeles had long-established traditions of film and television production; in Quebec and Ontario, the support of the NFB and the presence of certain notable vanguard filmmakers – Norman McLaren, Arthur Lipsett – gave these provinces a rather established, urbane relationship with the screen. Manitoba, by contrast, had very

[6]Or perhaps I should say anti-spectacle, or "spectacle" – see chapters 2 and 3 for a discussion of the "everyday spectacle" of public-access TV.

little in the way of provincially-produced content – indeed, the majority of stations on the dial in Winnipeg were American in origin, with local media outlets providing mostly news and sports coverage. If one can picture such an environment, it is easy to imagine the difficulty the public would have reconceptualizing television as anything but a one-way transmission – the reimagining of television's possibility as an input-output medium was the work of individuals like Dorthi Dunsmore.

Before VPW officially went on air, Dunsmore was involved in mobile TV unit initiatives similar to the *Challenge For Change.* In fact, *Challenge For Change* had two projects underway in Winnipeg in the late 1960s – one focusing on Winnipeg's core area and the other looking at Windsor Park, one of the city's first planned communities. The success of these initiatives encouraged the University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies to look into doing more mobile video work. "They wanted to develop a community using video," Dunsmore says (2007), and it was at this point that Dunsmore became involved in the video-activism movement, participating in workshops that addressed issues of local concern, such as a lack of seniors' homes in one neighbourhood, or kids misbehaving at a community outdoor pool. Without any channels (literally and figuratively) over which to broadcast the results of the video work, the participants had to make do with existing scenarios – according to Dunsmore, participants in these workshops would hold screenings in the neighbourhood K-Mart because it was the largest space available. These screenings would be followed by town-hall-style discussions, during which the social and cultural problems outlined in the videos would be discussed (Dunsmore 2007). Such actions were the beginning of a creation of a sort of vernacular of television – a means by which ordinary citizens could conceive of themselves as having the means to speak with and through television technologies. The success of these

early ventures encouraged the University of Winnipeg to hold a conference on community television, to which the manager of Videon Cablesystems was invited. Following much bureaucratic drudgery and CRTC hearings, Winnipeg's first community-access television station went on the air in 1971 (Dunsmore 2007).

VPW did not have producers in the sense that network television does – show hosts were considered "producers," and the station provided a technically-adept person for every taping session called a "production assistant," who had no input into the show's actual content (Prentice 2007). In a stroke of innovative genius, Dorthi Dunsmore had small yellow business cards printed up, with the VPW logo and the title *Producer* written on one side, underneath which was a blank space into which show hosts could fill in their names (Dunsmore 2007). In terms of large-scale content-control, the station manager or production manager would be held responsible for programming, but according to former station manager Richard Edwards, careful steps were taken to ensure the station never became the vision of one person but rather would uphold the community-oriented mandate of a public-access station (Edwards 2007).

Although VPW began auspiciously and with considerable growth of participation, there was nothing particularly "televisual" about these early programs. With only two cameras and a switching board, and no editing technology, broadcasts were as close to "live" as one can conceive[7] – the phrase "live to tape" was used by production assistants to describe this context of TV production. A program could consist of one continuous single shot of a public event, or regular and gentle fades between two viewpoints, as though one is slowly turning one's head to follow a conversation.

If the early programs were generally lacking in formal experimentation or robust

[7] See Chapter 3 for an expanded discussion of the materials and aesthetics of "liveness/realness".

use of the possibilities that televisual media offer, it was due as much to the constraints of budget and volunteer labour as to the sense that experimentation had no place on television that was funded by the public's dollar. Nevertheless, the end result of these material and labour boundaries was that programs tended to reproduce the deliberative model of public communication, wherein sober, talk-based solutions are privileged over non-linear, oblique, or performative explorations. Jim Prentice describes the early shows as being "very much talking heads – though it's not that different now if you flip around the dial," (Prentice 2007).[8] Richard Edwards suggests that many programmers based their show ideas on popular network-television:

> They all wanted to be a Johnny Carson... though that's not exactly true – some of them thought "There's another way to do it". Sometimes those were pretty interesting, and sometimes we got criticised. Which we were comfortable with, because we were used to saying "It's community television, we're allowing people to do what they want, if you don't like it you can always turn the channel." (Edwards 2007)

Interestingly, Ron Pollock also references *The Tonight Show*'s popularity as a factor in how he thought of his own program: "At the time Johnny Carson was still on, and in my mind we were competing with him. If you're watching that then you're not watching us. If they're gonna watch Carson maybe we can get them to come over to us, we're gonna be crazier, more colourful, more local," (Ron Pollock 2007).

Although *Pollock & Pollock* began as a straightforward magazine show where Natalie Pollock would interview guests of local interest and repute, its popularity and

[8] A notable exception to this rule was Prentice's own participation on VPW – although his work was primarily behind the scenes, Prentice would occasionally create experimental "television kaleidoscopes" for broadcast, using a sort of feedback loop created between the camera and the display monitor.

subsequent "cult following" began when Ron Pollock intervened in the format, encouraging more of a variety show (Pollock 2007). This deviation could arguably be thought of as a neat condensation of the dynamics at work in public-access television. A 1987 feature article on *Pollock & Pollock* in *The Winnipeg Sun* describes how the show faced criticism and complaints, necessitating intervention on the part of Richard Edwards, who was program manager at the time. Interestingly, the article quotes Natalie Pollock as saying the negative feedback resulted from the politics of the show "shifting from left to right". Here the Pollocks claim they were not allowed to voice opinions unless they were "liberal", and due to their views they decided to replace any attempt at political engagement with a more performative strategy. "Anytime you're in doubt, dance. It's safe. No one can object," the article quotes Ron Pollock as saying. "Everything was sexist or banned and there wasn't much more we could do," (Kesselman S10). This is especially curious in light of how the show came to be perceived retroactively (by outsiders, and by the Pollocks themselves) as a bastion of openness for gays, cross-dressers, and so-called social misfits, as I will discuss in chapters 2 and 3.

By the 1980s, VPW's grid was a variegated mix of programming, including focus on minority communities, children, and old people, but also with a growing slant toward anomalous, often contentious and uncategorizeable shows like *Survival* (a satirical "panel discussion" where masked vigilantes discuss life after nuclear holocaust, or "Cataclysm," as they call it) and *Pollock & Pollock.* In 2001, Moffat Communications, who owned VPW's parent station Videon, was bought out by the Calgary-based company Shaw (Edwards 2007, Prentice 2007). VPW went off the air, and, in a move that would become both literally and symbolically foundational, the archived material from twenty years of the station's life was disposed of by the new owners. Based on the testimony of three of

my interview subjects – Dorthi Dunsmore, Matthew Rankin, and Daniel Barrow – the loss of the archive is nothing short of Winnipeg's own Battle of the Plains of Abraham – a deeply formative and far-reaching annihilation that would colour Winnipeg's perception of itself irrevocably. "From a historical point of view [the trashing of the archives] was just an abomination," Rankin says. "And culturally it's an abomination too, but it's something that we keep encountering in Winnipeg, this belief that you can just wipe these cultural traditions from the face of the earth and it won't even matter, and no one will even complain," (2007). When I asked Dunsmore what happened to the tapes of the shows produced under her aegis, she replied "You're going to cry. I almost cried," (2007). The significance of the archive's loss will become especially valuable further on as I look at the attempts various people have made to revisit the station, its material and its meaning.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that VPW's formation rested less upon a concern for encouraging people to communicate their desires than an ideology of creating infrastructure for "publicness", without really considering what "publicness" meant. Of course, the public-access project itself should not be thought of as strictly or solely ideological – whatever the driving motivations, VPW provided space, equipment, dedicated personnel, and real material infrastructure for general public use. The way in which this infrastructure *reacted* with "the public" and the manifestations of its various desires gets at the relationship between the promise of public-access and the conditions of publicness that seem to be inherent in the social fabric. In the next chapter I will take a

closer look at some actual uses of the public-access framework, and what they might reveal about the nature of such tacit conditions.

CHAPTER 2

Too Much Stimulator, Not Enough Communicator: Public-Access Gets Weird

> My kid says to me 'Why can't you be *normal*?' And her mother says "He *is* normal. What you meant to say was *average*."
> - Utah Phillips, *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*

> We got a complaint from the Archdiocese of Winnipeg. I was honoured.
> - Natalie Pollock, author interview

Introduction: The Conditions of Publicness

> *In the idea of a public, political confidence is committed to a strange and uncertain destination. Sometimes it can seem too strange. Often one cannot imagine addressing a public capable of comprehension or action. This is especially true for people in minor or marginal positions... The result can be a kind of political depressiveness, a blockage in activity and optimism, a disintegration of politics toward isolation, frustration, anomie, forgetfulness. This possibility, never far out of the picture*, reveals by contrast how much ordinary belonging requires confidence in a public. (Warner, *Publics* 70, emphasis mine)

Much of the critical literature surrounding instances of "real people" on television tends to offer up a vision of oppositional or resistant politics, a countercurrent of performative exhibitionism produced through behaviours mostly coded as feminine, queer, or both. Jon Dovey's *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*, for instance, examines the intrusion of the private into public life via the "true confessions" format of TV production, to what Dovey suggests are productive and even liberatory ends:

> As a name *Freakshow* carries a pejorative sense based upon a particular historical response to this form of side-show entertainment. However the social changes that are part and parcel of neo liberal economies clearly opens new domains for the expression of identity. These spaces are filled by voices proclaiming and celebrating their own 'freakishness', articulating their most intimate fears and secrets, performing the ordinariness of their own extraordinary subjectivity. The performance and display of difference has become a driving force in our aspirations. We are all learning to live in the freakshow, it is our new public space. (4)

Here Dovey invokes the spatial metaphor that is a predominant mode of thinking about the effect of alternate subjectivities appearing in public – any kind of community, especially ones cropping up around "alternative lifestyles", need space in which to flourish, grow, argue, and so on. Necessarily, some of these spaces must be public, in order to force some kind of recognition of historically marginalized groups, or if nothing else to get people talking about them. The "space" of television, in the language of Dovey and others following similar tacks (see Gamson 1998, Shattuc 1999), offers a powerful medium for conveying and performing one's publicness. While I respect and agree with much of what critics like Dovey are saying, I must also recontextualize their comments for a scenario that does not quite conform to either the model of deliberative discourse idealized by public-service broadcast goals, or the no-holds-barred "freakshow" programming of network reality or talk-show television. Warner's idea of "political confidence", as expressed in the opening quotation, is key to understanding the analytical purchase of "performing publicness" – contra Dovey, the goal of "living in the freakshow" seems sadly limited if there is no kind of critical hook on which to hang it.

In this chapter I will look at the kind of spaces that VPW made possible, even and especially those not conceived of in the station's original mandate. Chapter 1 suggested that the station's formation rested less upon a concern for encouraging people to communicate their desires than an ideology of creating infrastructure for "publicness"; here I will look at shows that (a) formulated their own definitions of "public" (or "counterpublic"), effectively going against the grain of the original mandate and (b) forced through this action a consideration of the political economy of normative behaviour. That is to say, the unanticipated uses of public-access channels necessitate a consideration of what kinds of behaviour rightfully belong to "public" figures, and also what kinds of behaviour mark out difference and non-belonging, and hence are targeted as "problems". How can political purchase be articulated through public display of bodies and performance – or is such a thing even possible? Shows like *The Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show* re-imagined what "publicness" could look like, and how it could function as a mode of political confidence; at the same time they are limited by the conditions of their publicness, in that the circulation of discourse around the station (and the show) pointed to the tacit undercurrents shaping what publics are, and what they can do.

Real People are Weird: "Difference" and the Public-Access Mandate

It's worth pointing out that although many of the things to occur on *Pollock & Pollock* and some of the other shows were decidedly weird, they were not *that* weird. Like anything, the degree of strangeness is contingent on context, and compared to an average afternoon of reality TV or daytime talk-show viewing, even VPW's most

"outrageous" or "notorious" shows seem tame. *Pollock & Pollock*'s resident drag queen wore a bedraggled boa and seemed more like a kid playing dress-up than a coiffed über-femme; there was no eating of insects or other nausea-inducing activities, no jumping from planes with or without bungee cords; no catfights between maniacal moms and drug-addled daughters. But the "weird" of daytime and reality TV is, at this point, a kind of commodified and overdetermined "weird", such that it is almost a parody of itself; to a viewer watching retrospectively, public-access TV of the 1970s and 80s offers a newer, fresher "weird" by virtue of its detachment from the contrivances of network television (even if to its contemporary viewers it appeared boring and uncomfortably amateurish). There is a kind of weirdness of the everyday on display here that collapses the distinction between "freaks" and "everyday folks" while still depending on a loose definition of "difference" and the need to display it to maintain the necessity of the public access mandate.

The designation of "freaks" haunts any discussion of difference on public display – Gamson's book *Freaks Talk Back*, Dovey's aforementioned *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*, and, of course, the "regular, everyday people" who referred to the Pollocks as freaks, as told to me by Barrow, the Pollocks themselves, and even Richard Edwards, who described how people would call in to VPW to complain about "those freaks" on Channel 9 (Edwards did not say specifically which show was being referred to here, but whether or not it was *Pollock & Pollock* seems beside the point; the term had been gelled) (Edwards 2007). So what is interesting is partly how certain behaviours become coded as "freakish", but also what it means to exhibit a kind of "difference" that is not regulated under the institutionalized (Canadian) definition of the kind of difference it is okay to exhibit on television.

Eva Mackey suggests in *The House of Difference* that the Canadian initiative of legislating multiculturalism was a means of *managing* difference, at the cultural as well as the governmental level (Mackey 1999). By providing designated spaces for ethnic minorities to express their cultures, Mackey suggests, Canadian official policy was able, in a sense, to domesticate and reduce the "threat" of immigrant cultures to Anglo-Saxon (and also white French Canadian) hegemony by limiting the expression of such cultures to acceptable and easily-digestible forms like food, costumes, dancing and other consumable forms. I wonder about the kinds of difference public-access television showcased, and what they indicate about the nature of "differing". One might observe (and probably correctly) that the "freakshow" programming on VPW is the provenance mainly of white folks, since ethnic communities would not have the same freedom to move beyond explaining their beliefs and practices (and maybe tacitly defending their right to hold them) within the framework of public-access television. Both Richard Edwards and Jim Prentice reference one particular incident involving a Sikh community show – according to Prentice, the airing of a certain segment resulted in two separate Sikh factions squaring off outside the station, "kirpans drawn", as he told me (Prentice 2007). Edwards goes into more detail, explaining that due to the fact that none of the station's managers understood Urdu, they allowed a segment to run which contained a live performance of a song that gave "a blow-by-blow account of the murder of Indira Gandhi, told by someone who had to have been there," (Edwards 2007). *That* sort of "political confidence" went outside the station's regulations, and resulted in a need to monitor and police the ethnic community shows to a greater extent than was already occurring. This incident illustrates well the idea that Mackey and others (see Burman 2001, for example) have put forth concerning Canada's stance on multiculturalism in the

public sphere: that it is okay for ethnic communities to talk about their foods, songs, and traditions, but not okay for them to put forth contentious or potentially incendiary political messages; that is the condition of *their* publicness. We might conclude that as long as minorities hail the public as *consumers*, they can be considered relatively safe and therefore acceptable.

The last thing I want to do is to fall into some kind of reductive sociological mathematics of equality, measuring the effectiveness of the station's ability to represent difference and engage diverse communities by how many people of varying ethnicities participated, and in what capacity. Rather, the point here is perhaps that although providing a space for "difference" was one of the top priorities of public-access television, the various "differences" that ended up being shown are far more indicative and illustrative of the mechanics of Canadian public broadcast policy and also the more subtle undercurrents of cultural attitudes toward "otherness" than they are a transparent representation of "real human rights kinds of humans". I don't want to bracket or plaster over questions of race and ethnicity – but I do want to acknowledge that I am aware of the extent to which my study could be reproducing the uncomfortable dynamic of ignoring real attempts to formulate a space for true public debate on multiculturalism because it's not as sexy or exciting as contentious, notorious, all-singing-all-dancing mayhem.

At the same time, I am bringing to the table a consideration of that dynamic itself and its discomforts; in Chapter 3 I will discuss in greater detail the memorialization of the station and how that was steered and influenced by qualities rather different than those that govern conventional archival practices. Stating one's awareness of the problems of selecting one trajectory over another is not, of course, the same as doing something about it; still, I think there is something important in recognizing that the politics of legislating

difference need not be carved up along ethnic or identitarian lines. If nothing else, considering why some programs and some conflicts are thought to be more interesting or worthy of discussion than others gestures towards lacunae in the field, which is the first step toward addressing such gaps.

Let me now turn to the aforementioned all-singing all-dancing mayhem. I have already briefly mentioned the appearance (and aberrance) of *The Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show* and its disruption of the gentle arc of the public-access trajectory, steering it instead toward a (perhaps necessary) contemplation of the politics of muscle-dancing; I will spend much of this chapter focusing on the details of this shift and its repercussions. A thumbnail history of *Pollock & Pollock* might be useful here: a relatively conservative sister and brother start a public-access show featuring "real human rights kinds of humans"; one wishes to be taken seriously as an interviewer and host, the other has aspirations toward toppling Johnny Carson. The show develops a large cult following when it deviates from its original format; the pair felt restricted by VPW's mandate, and so replaced any kind of expression of opinion with performance. The performance aspect takes on a weight of its own, and seems to embody a kind of queer consciousness that was not really part of the mainstream culture at the time, and the show's following grows (as do the complaints against it). In the mid-80s, the show is cancelled by VPW, "in the prime of life", as Ron Pollock put it (Pollock 2007). The official reason for cancellation is ambiguous, and in any case is far less publicly known than Natalie's claim that the show was cancelled because the station manager didn't like the way her breasts bounced when she danced (Pollock 2007). The Pollocks maintain a public (if not televised) presence in Winnipeg for the next twenty years – both Ron and Natalie have run for mayor – and in 2005 their work on VPW is honoured in the *Winnipeg Babysitter*

screening: Barrow's textual sidenotes salute the show, and the hosts, for being "avant-garde" and "unconventionally sexy" (*Winnipeg Babysitter* 2005). With this outline in mind, we can now turn to a more detailed investigation of the curious dynamics at work.

What Kind of a Queer Space Is This, or, If I'm Queer, Does That Make Me Gay?

> *Ron Pollock: It really truly was a breeding ground for weirdness, because you would have church groups following our show...*
>
> *Natalie Pollock: And a feminist show, after our show...*
>
> *R: They had a very sombre feminist show...*
>
> *N: They didn't like us.*
>
> *R: They couldn't STAND us, because obviously human rights to them didn't mean what we were doing. I don't know if you would call yourself a feminist, but -*
>
> *Interviewer: I would.*
>
> *N: A different kind of feminist.*
>
> *R: Okay, well then I'll exclude you from this – they were very politically correct, they wouldn't let you say ANYTHING...*
>
> *N: It was a different time ...*
>
> *I: It was the eighties.*
>
> *N: It was the hairy-legged time for feminists. Hairy armpits, organized, we-hate-men kind of feminists. Not your age. Now women can look sexy and ...*
>
> *R: Back then, you were either one of them, or... you couldn't be both.*

N: When I was working as a waitress across the street, I was sitting with a whole bunch of girls, women, whatever... and I said I liked men, and that was the end of my friendship with these people I had been friends with forever. They wouldn't talk to me, they scattered whenever they saw me, because I said I liked men as friends.

I: That's pretty doctrinaire.

R: Yeah, doctrinaire. And their idea when gays were coming out, they wanted them to be "straight gays". They didn't like the idea of...

N: Like [former Winnipeg mayor] Glen Murray.

R: Like Chris Vogle [host of Coming Out, *VPW's gay and lesbian magazine show]. They talked and had very doctrinaire discussions of socialism, and lesbianism. Instead of doing all that, we had a wild drag show.*

N: My friends who are gay, they're wild and flamboyant. The pride parade in front of the Legislature – that's what our show was like.

My conversation with Ron and Natalie Pollock echoed, in general shape at least, the kind of binary discourse that, as I have mentioned, surrounds ideas of publicness and participation in the public sphere. The Pollocks saw their show as going against the current of the sober, deliberative public-access model, in a kind of performative and carnivalesque refutation of the Habermasian rational-critical ideal. Their perception of the period in which their show aired was one of dogmatic political-correctness and strict limitations on who could say what and how, and they suggest that their "wild drag show" was a means of critically interrogating such dogma.

Their vision of the show and its disruptive tactics has echoes in several streams of

critical thought that examines how traditionally marginalized groups – women especially – use non-traditional means to challenge the hegemony of the ration-critical ideal. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995), for example, uses Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque as a framework to examine women's disruption of the generic formalities of film and television with embodied and crude performance. Other theorists, such as Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young, suggest more generally that "unruliness" is a strategy of resistance adopted by participants in the public sphere who are not white, straight, and male (Fraser 1989, Young 1990). Young characterizes the Habermasian rational-critical ideal public sphere as privileging "unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one's understanding of others," (Young 300). One way of disrupting the hegemony of this particularly liberal model, in which participants tend to "suppress difference among themselves or... exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify" (Young 300), is to pay attention to the modes of participation taken by these traditionally marginalized groups. Counterpublic practices are one such mode of participation, though as I discussed in my introduction, Fraser's definition of "counterpublic" has been contested by critics like Warner, who find it to be overly liberal and not particularly resistant to the pitfalls of the traditional rational-critical public sphere (*Publics* 118).

I am interested in pushing this discourse just a little further, and marrying it to some extent with the ideas I suggested above regarding spaces and conditions of publicness. How might we conceive of the space of *The Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show* – not simply the studio space in which it was taped, or the "space" of its immediate content, but a broader (and less easily contained) "public space" of discourse surrounding

the show and the kind of publics (or counterpublics) it made visible and possible? And, how might we use this spatial notion to frame some of the manifestations of publicness that were central to VPW's programs?

At a certain point in my interview, Ron footnoted a long discussion of the show's campy style with the disclaimer "By the way, we talk a lot about gay people, but we're not gay." Natalie chimed in with an insistent "Oh no, oh no". Their need to clarify this point with me is indicative of certain currents in identity politics – as a researcher with some background in queer theory, I am acclimatized to the use of the term "queer" in a broad sense that is mostly unrelated to sexual practice. It's clear to me that many things can be "queer" – parades, hairstyles, parties, advertisements – in a way that does not have a direct reference to homosexuality, but rather to a public display of transgression of traditional codes of heteronormativity. So when I am talking about *Pollock & Pollock* as a "queer space", in my own reading this does not suggest that the hosts of the show are gay, only that their show is queer. To them, the distinction is perhaps felt, but not consciously articulated.

What my conversation with the Pollocks might point to is the shift of the term "queer" away from a strictly identitarian designation to a signifier of non-normative practice. That is to say, it becomes useful as a way of noting or identifying a particularly transgressive mode of expression as being not just odd or bizarre, but *publicly* and thus potentially threateningly so. For example: Ron and Natalie Pollock are not gay, but *Pollock & Pollock* is queer. Glen Murray and Chris Vogle are not queer, though they are openly gay. I am not the first to consider the performative rather than intrinsic or empirical nature of queer life; in fact, this conversation makes up a good part of Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* (see, for example, Chapter 1: *Public and Private*,

and Chapter 2: *Sex In Public*, co-written with Lauren Berlant). Qualities in this kind of discourse are unfixed from their objects, and are shown not to be dependent on what something "is" but rather what it's "like". This is perhaps a particularly *queer* method of identification or taxonomy, one which is based not on factual, historical evidence but on observation, extrapolation, and nuance – that is to say on style of presentation rather than content. It also puts to work the semiotic universe of queer "visibility" – i.e. puffy sweaters, "swishness" (or moustaches and plaid, alternately), and so on, a mode of existing that has been used both to limit, contain, and demarcate homosexual communities from outside, and to help those within a cramped space of queer life identify and congregate with fellow members without revealing their identity to a hostile mainstream society.

What is at stake here, though, is what kind of queer space is being created or used on *Pollock & Pollock.* If no one in this queer space actually identifies (openly) as gay, is it still queer? Is it queer when, say, my nine-year-old male neighbor (who grew up to be a staunchly heterosexual football player, a charming and confident embodiment of the straight masculine ideal) puts on a dress and lip-synchs to Barbra Streisand? Many popular academic readings would say *yes* – but does that not at the same time constitute a watering down of what queer is? If everyone is queer then perhaps no one is – or, more to the point, if everyone is queer, why should any self-identified queers ask for recognition, visibility, equal rights? This cause for concern aside, however, I don't want to be caught up in a policing of the borders of queer space or queer identity; perhaps it is more useful to think about how the presentation of this *particular* space – the space of *The Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show*, contained within the broader "public" space of VPW's public-access experiment – provokes these kinds of discussions in the first place.

According to Daniel Barrow (who curated the *Winnipeg Babysitter* portion of *Garbage Hill* and was instrumental in getting the Pollocks involved with the retrospective), in addition to the somewhat unwanted and often condescending attention from the media, the Pollocks received "a lot" of hate mail in response to their show. Curiously, Barrow states that much of the mail was homophobic in nature – that is, it referred to the Pollocks as "faggots" (2007). It is perhaps obvious to point out that in a heteronormative culture, slurs about sexual orientation are a notoriously easy means of bestowing offence and feelings of disgust onto others, even (or especially) when the object of derision bears little relation to the actual meaning of the slur; the Pollocks, who are brother and sister, could at best (or worst) be construed as a slightly off-colour heterosexual couple; there is simply no evidence or suggestion of homosexuality per se in their behaviour. One might say, however, that there is ample evidence of queerness. That is, the accusations of "faggotry" pick up, quite accurately (if rather derisively), on instances of camp and gender performativity on the show that echo queer counterpublics and their strategies of operation and modes of visibility. There is far more that is "queer" about *Pollock & Pollock* than there is about, say, the "hot girl-on-girl action" of Madonna kissing Britney Spears during the presentation of the 2003 Video Music Awards.

"Queer" has a long etymological and sociological history. I use it here in a sense similar to the way Queer Nation, the radical activist group that emerged in New York in the early 1990s, employed it to suggest a union of people whose sexual and gender politics did not square with mainstream "straight" categories, rather than to denote a specifically homosexual orientation. In *Queerly Canadian: "Perversion Chic" Cinema and (Queer) Nationalism in English Canada*, Jason Morgan explains that

> The term "queer" denotes both inclusiveness and transgression. Initially coined as an alternative to the repressive heterosexual/homosexual binary, it has been defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning, when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically,". (Morgan 216)

It may seem that I am making too much of what may well be off-the-cuff, poorly orchestrated remarks designed purely to offend without consideration of meaning – but in a way, that is exactly the point: that terms of insult have meanings that accrue with reference to their public use and not their etymological origins. The Pollocks and their guests' display of campy sexuality, indecorous behaviour, and ambiguously loaded personal relationships suggest a kind of out-of-placeness within the public realm of television that is commonly associated with homosexuality as a mode of existence. Michael Warner illustrates the tension of this relationship in *Publics and Counterpublics*: "Nelly boys are said to be "flaunting" their sexuality, just by swishing or lisping. They are told to keep it to themselves, even though the 'it' in question is their relation to their own bodies. Butch men, meanwhile, can swagger aggressively without being accused of flaunting anything," (24). Behaviour by men that is read as effeminate, if performed in public, is intrinsically and automatically queer because it makes "difference" palpable, if only for its overt manipulation of gender codes. While sexual practice itself may be largely a private matter (cruising and bathhouse culture notwithstanding), queerness or "faggotry" is etched out indelibly in public terms whenever something felt to be of the private sphere (i.e. sexual orientation and practice) is acted out in public (i.e. swishing or

lisping). Thus calling the Pollocks "faggots" illustrates precisely the way in which their behaviour transgresses acceptable codes of what should and shouldn't be acted and shown on television.

The dichotomy between *queer* queers and straight queers is paralleled strikingly in Joshua Gamson's book *Freaks Talk Back.* Gamson looks at gay and lesbian visibility on daytime television talk shows, and considers how the narrowness of that framework allows for only two kinds of queer to appear: the "boy next door (who just happens to be gay)" and "lipstick lesbian" versus the flaunting, strutting drag queen or flaming fag and the mannish (and man-hating) butch dyke. But, Gamson says, the talk shows often fail to keep these categories as clean as they would seem to desire:

> Although... they continually managed to shut down exactly the doubts they crack open about sexual order, talk shows have made it at least quite a bit more difficult to hold onto a single framework – a true world order of sexuality and gender – into which all of these words and images and testimonies can be fit. There is no single story, and different truths pop up one after another; none is the truest, none is demonstrably false. Even the manipulation and performing cannot keep a lid on the deeper reality finding body in all of these appearances, a reality that, we will see, triggers all sorts of anxieties and hostilities: these are humans, of all kinds, strange and boring, whip smart and dumb as doorknobs, from all kinds of places, who know what is has been like to live the lives they have been living. (105)

"Real human rights kinds of humans," Ron Pollock might add to this litany, and truly his show emphasized the messiness of sexual and gender categories. At the same time,

sexuality itself never seemed to be at the forefront of the show's concerns the way it is within talk-show formats; without ever explicitly referencing homosexuality, the show mobilized its codes and symbols in an identifiable (and thus potentially controversial) way.

In *The Trouble With Normal*, Michael Warner takes issue with the idea that queer culture should strive for an image of "normalcy" at all costs. This idea has been expressed in many ways by many people, but in particular Warner is critiquing the writings of Andrew Sullivan, specifically when Sullivan calls for gays to "move past" the more performative, outrageous, and public modes of queer culture. Warner parodies Sullivan's sentiments here : "*When gay people give up the perverse notion that they are perverse, they will discover that they have been normal all along.* Pathology is our pathology. Normally, we would be normal," (*The Trouble with Normal* 141, emphasis in original). What Warner implies here, and in the book at large, is that the strength and purchase of queer communities rests endemically on a queer style of presentation, rather than a "straight" style of presentation with "queer" inserted as an identitarian afterthought.

This inquiry is perhaps pointing towards the idea of norms, and how there need to be some in place in order to track deviations. Where are the "others" who these "freaks" define themselves against? If the designation of *Pollock & Pollock* as a counterpublic space holds true, then we might conclude that the show figures by absence the "dominant public" Warner identifies; although the extremely popular *Tonight Show* may have been an inspiration to Ron Pollock, he was nevertheless aware that his show garnered far more controversy than Johnny Carson's vehicle, understandably enough. And though the Pollocks did not ask to receive hate mail, or for their show to be cancelled *in media res*,

they were aware (at least in retrospect) that the show was bound to invite criticism because it showcased people who would otherwise not be able to appear on TV at that time – cross-dressers, old people, fat people, people with disabilities. Still, the show could also be thought of as embodying a kind of bastardization of a Derridean principle, in that "there is nothing outside it"; what made it exceptional, perhaps, was the assumed normalcy of its guests – like Utah Phillips' partner in the quote that opens this chapter, the show's format recognizes that such people, if not *average*, are still normal. Although you might see a shirtless old man dancing with a broom, you would never see the same man being interviewed about what it's like to be old, shirtless, and dancing with a broom – such behaviour is seemingly beyond questioning, at least within the counterpublic space of the show. At the level of production, coded within the show's mandate, is the assumption that such bodies have a space within the public sphere; in a climate where "different" (i.e. normal, if not average) bodies are relegated to the position of having to continually explain and regulate themselves, *Pollock & Pollock* is queer indeed.

In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson examines the American freakshow and how it depended upon, exploited, and reinforced the idea of the norm:

> Since identifying and claiming status is perhaps the greatest anxiety in a theoretically egalitarian and volatile modern order, the boundaries of power must be clear. The body's material authority provides a seemingly irrefutable foundation upon which the prevailing power relations can thus be erected. The figure of the freak is consequently the necessary cultural complement to the acquisitive and capable American who claims the normate position of masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle-class. (64)

Where the touring circus freakshows Thomson describes may have figured by absence the normate body, *Pollock & Pollock* has engineered a kind of reversal of this process; while one could certainly imagine watching the show and thinking "I would never in a million years do that", it's more likely that the discomfort the show provokes stems from its participants being not particularly *abnormal*. If, as Garland says, "the body's material authority" is the touchstone for understanding the workings of power dynamics and regulation of difference through observation, the bodies that appeared on *Pollock & Pollock* offered a kind of democracy of normal, a suggestion that anyone and everyone could (a) appear on television and (b) perform a "freakish" and abnormal kind of self.[9]

Never Mind the Pollocks, Here Comes *The Gooferz*

To further this inquiry into publicness, normalcy, and embodiment, I would like to draw on an excellent and highly illustrative anecdote Warner provides at the outset of *Publics and Counterpublics*. He describes how, according to legend, "whenever he felt sexual need, [the Greek philosopher Diogenes] walked into the central marketplace and masturbated," (21). For Warner, this story is a fitting epigram for his questioning of the values of public and private, and the inevitable sense of disgust and moral outrage that is a common result of the collapse of the distinction between the two. For my purposes, the

[9] It seems worth noting here that, as a large and large-breasted woman, Natalie Pollock in particular was the target of a lot of the derision aimed at the show. Natalie noted that her figure made her the subject of an extraordinary amount of media and local attention, not much of it positive: "Basically it's about the fact that people think I'm a slut. A hooker, a stripper... they loved my boobs or hated my boobs. It's all about breasts," (Natalie Pollock 2007). So in this case the "material authority" of her body itself was perceived as transgressive, and indeed she experienced the kind of hyperembodiment that is common to those whose bodies do not square with the "average".

story of Diogenes and the discourses it provokes resonates with one of the earliest and most illustrative stories of VPW – the legend of Glen Meadmore and *The Gooferz*.

In my interview with Daniel Barrow, he points to *The Gooferz* as the definitive moment at which someone demonstrated that public-access television need not consist entirely of religious programming (which, until that point, Barrow suggests it did). *The Gooferz* was a half-hour weekly show programmed and hosted by Meadmore, who, after leaving Winnipeg for Los Angeles, went on to have a relatively successful career as a performance and drag artist with a substantial cult following. But his career ostensibly began on VPW, where, according to Barrow, he would enact a kind of avant-garde television performance that was especially striking considering it took place in a smallish prairie city in the mid-1970s. One could, for instance, tune in to VPW to see Meadmore staring at the camera under a battery of heat lamps and squeezing his pimples for the entire duration of the show. Meadmore would also engage in dramatic or musical performances with a markedly queer, drag-oriented edge (Barrow 2007)[10].

Besides the decidedly crude symbolic parallel one could draw between pimple-popping and masturbating, these two illustrations together bear upon the significance of the allegedly private act performed in public. It is possible to read these instances simultaneously as a breach of decorum – and a violation of public-access's contract to provide space for self-expression within "the bounds of good taste" – and as what Foucault, by way of Warner, calls "'performance criticism' – a way of calling attention to the visceral force behind the moral ideas of public and private," (*Publics* 21). Further, if

[10] I feel it necessary to point out here an important similarity between Diogenes and *The Gooferz*, which is that both currently exist primarily in the realm of legend and rumour. The stories of Diogenes' masturbatory escapades are not related by Diogenes himself, nor has Barrow ever actually seen episodes of Meadmore's show. But he knows, via the Winnipeg grapevine, that it existed and to a certain extent what happened on it. In any case, what is important is that both of these examples have a sort of urban-mythic status that far exceeds the actual range of their "broadcast".

we are to read the breakdown of the public/private spheres and its ensuing indecorousness as a constitutive characteristic of a counterpublic, we are then free to consider what modes of subjectivity are made visible and palpable by these practices.

In *From Bobbitt to SCUM: Re-memberment, Scatological Rhetorics and Feminist Strategies in the Contemporary United States,* Melissa Deem points out that "Some have argued that the very substance of the bourgeois subject is constructed through sanitized modes of address," (444). Deem, very much in line with Warner, argues for an embodied, performative subjectivity that is made visible through transgressions of the rational and liberal forms of expression: "The violation and/or transformation of dominant norms of sociability, often through the indecorous, is a sign of counterpublic practice. [...] Rather than being transparent, indecorous rhetorics strive to render the body visible in discourse," (*From Bobbitt to SCUM* 448). Does that suggest, then, that the very "unsanitaryness" of Meadmore's performance works against the rather more bourgeois context of mainstream television culture? Does its essential indigestibility promote an alternative economy of media images? These questions are perhaps semi-rhetorical; what they are really asking may be this: to what extent did the subjectivities and lives these practices made visible have a kind of political purchase – or political confidence, to use Warner's term – within the discursive space of VPW and its community?

The visibility of both un-average bodies and unusual, "unsanitary" practices and performances should not be underestimated as a kind of radical claims-staking. Whatever its directives toward offering intellectual content, television is also, obviously, a visual medium, one with a particularly (if tacitly) crystallized set of formalities, and the body often acts as the material touchstone for the maintenance of that formal order. As I

mentioned earlier, certain critics (like Kathleen Rowe Karlyn) have gone into greater depth than I will in discussing the disruptive and radical potential of the appearance of unusual bodies on mainstream commercial television; what makes the various transgression of these normative codes by VPW programmers different is that they did it in a publicly-funded space intended for sober deliberation, with no (explicit) financial or commercial motivation. As Barrow states, "I knew they weren't trying to sell me something," (Barrow 2007). Perhaps I can pervert Barrow's statement slightly to suggest that what, if anything, these individuals may have been "selling" (consciously or not) is the notion that publicness always entails a certain degree of performance, and those performances that seem perhaps *overly* performative are only pointing toward the tendency in the social sphere to think of sober deliberation as the proper object of public life. As I will now discuss, these performances were often given with this restriction on publicness in mind.

Just Be Yourself, No One Is Watching: Modes of Publicness

> *Natalie Pollock: We had a lot of guys come on in disguises. We had a doctor come on in a mask, because he wanted to be on, but he didn't want people to know. He was hiding.*
>
> *Ron Pollock: They didn't want to be seen on the show because they thought it was notorious, but at the same time they wanted to be on it, because I guess they felt the need. So they would wear a mask, and we'd make up a fake name...*

Interviewer: What would they do on the show?

Ron: They could be themselves.

Natalie: Dance. Jump in each others' laps.

Ron: Whatever they wanted that they couldn't do [in their day-to-day lives], because they were hidden.

As I was transcribing that last quotation, I initially typed "in their *public* lives" in the square brackets. Of course, I immediately had to pause and reconsider that designation, for what is there to distinguish appearing on a TV program – albeit an unpopular one, by industry standards – from being in public? But the public of *Pollock & Pollock* is not the public of daily life, or politics, or social profile. Contrary to Ron and Natalie's assertions, their show was not exactly a place where people could be themselves – gay, queer, transgender, cross-dressed, or otherwise. Rather, they could enact "private" fantasies in public, by virtue of the fact that they were in disguise. For some guests, the show constituted a public closet. The freedom to be oneself is necessarily mitigated by the need to be disguised, to defamiliarize oneself, to perform a self that is not the self one would readily exhibit for family, friends, or the community at large.

So what kind of a public space is this, or, what kind of (counter)public practices are taking place in it? Early on in *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner cites the example of the ladies of Casa Susanna, a group of drag queens who would meet periodically in the eponymous New Jersey home and photograph each other:

> The suburban and domestic scene in which we find them – paneled and centrally heated – is being put to an unusual use. It is a space of collective improvisation, transformative in a way that depends on its connection to several publics – including a dominant and alien mass public. [...] The

> ladies of Casa Susanna are doing glamour, which for them is both a public idiom and an intimate feeling. Its thrill allows them to experience their bodies in a way that would not have been possible without this mutual witnessing and display. (13)

Warner's description begins to get at another way of thinking about the means, modes, and conditions of being public that are available to people with non-normative practices and identifications. There is an interesting slippage that is at work in both the Casa Susanna scenario and on VPW's airspace, a kind of blurriness around strict categorizations of public and private, deliberative and performative, inside and outside. I like this slippage because it starts to get at the conditions of possibility for publicness that VPW enabled, while still acknowledging the limitations of the format. The effect of "mutual witnessing and display" seems key to the participants on *Pollock & Pollock,* in line with the show's mandate of having everyone and anyone on it. But it's not so much that you have to just get people on TV, at which point a liberatory and democratic politics will automatically ensue (although this does seem to be the line toed by Ron Pollock, if not the general mandate of public-access television in general). Or, that is to say, it *is* all you need to do; over and over I come up against this question: is it transgressive to simply have unusual bodies on television, regardless of their claims toward liberatory or democratic politics? It seems impossible to answer this question in a productive way; its purchase, perhaps, rests on considering how actual instances and appearances of such bodies moved through discursive spaces and engineered some unusual and creative responses.

Conclusion

The two shows I've discussed in detail here are not the be-all and end-all of transgressive public-access shows, or even of unusual or contentious shows on VPW specifically.[11] They are merely nicely condensed examples of a broader dynamic at work – the suggestion that "silliness" has, if not always a radical capacity exactly, then at least an ability to claim space for itself, if taken seriously. Barrow's recontextualization of *Pollock & Pollock* in *Winnipeg Babysitter* suggests all kinds of resistances at work – he conceives of the show as being a kind of avant-garde performance art, in an era (or at least a place) where there was no framework with which to understand it as such:

> We did a press conference for the screening, and [co-organizer] Walter [Forsberg] and I invited members of the press, and a lot of people attended, and we talked about what was going to happen, and then we showed the clip [of *Pollock & Pollock*], and when we finished, people from the press were talking about how disgusting the Pollocks were. So I had to say something, that this is a program that situated the Pollocks' work within the history of contemporary art. (Barrow 2007)

Whether or not it was consciously conceived, Barrow suggests, the show (and others like it, such as *The Gooferz*) entered into a critical, socially progressive conversation, simply by existing. Of course, it then requires an articulate, dedicated artist like Barrow to follow through with the appropriate commentary. So perhaps, then, Warner's idea of political confidence truly comes into play when we begin to consider not just how the

[11] Sadly, due to time and space constraints I haven't even discussed *Survival*, the satirical cult classic that was constantly in danger of being taken *too* seriously.

station and its shows were created and perceived initially, but how they are situated within a discursive space beyond the boundaries of the station's actual existence; how they have filtered through into the present, and how they are remembered, forgotten, talked about, ignored, archived, thrown in the dumpster, and retrieved again. Which brings me to Chapter 3 and a consideration of the politics and economies of cultural memory.

CHAPTER 3

From Garbage to *Garbage Hill*: The VPW Reclamation Project

Prologue: Memory Is a Queer Thing

> *One reason why we have not learned more from [the history of AIDS activism] is that queers do not have the institutions for common memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built. Every new wave of queer youth picks up something from its predecessors but also invents itself from scratch. Many are convinced that they have nothing to learn from old dykes and clones and trolls, and no institutions - neither households nor schools nor political groups - ensure that this will happen. And since the most painfully instructed generation has been decimated by death, the queer culture of the present faces more than the usual shortfall in memory. Now younger queers are told all too often that a principled defence of nonnormative sex is just a relic of bygone "liberationism." This story is given out in bland confidence, since so many of the people who would have contradicted it have died.* (Warner, *The Trouble with Normal* 51-52)

Why am I beginning this chapter with a quote from Michael Warner about AIDS activists and decimated queer populations? Although the characteristics of people affected by the AIDS epidemic and those of broadcast media are obviously very different (and I do not mean to trivialize the losses felt due to HIV/AIDS by comparing the two), there is something I recognize in Warner's description. His comments speak to what I feel are

very crucial dynamics at work in what might be thought of as cultural memory. Like queer culture, grassroots media does not have the same institutional and pedagogical frameworks as its mainstream counterpart; like queer culture, its losses often go unremarked, or must be reconstituted and memorialized in improvisational, provisional ways. I would like to think about the work these alternative histories (or, more accurately, histories created through alternative methodology) do – they should not simply be thought of as transcriptions of lesser-known battles and heroes. Instead, they should be recognized as having a productive capacity – they circulate, inform, reveal, gloss over, inspire and sometimes stultify. Ultimately, they can point toward the mechanics of remembering, and propose creative and progressive means of recognizing the unacknowledged labour of counterpublic practices. It is to these de- and reconstructed histories of public-access in Winnipeg that I will now turn.

"Mythed Opportunity" and Other Questionable Puns

I recently went to see Winnipeg writer, art critic, and *Border Crossings* magazine founder Robert Enright speak at Concordia University on Winnipeg's unique and burgeoning art scene. In a startling incidence that seemed to confirm everything I've been thinking about, his talk was entitled *Winnipeg: City of Mythed Opportunity*. I could not conceive of a more fitting or telling title, not just for Winnipeg itself but for how it is discussed, characterized, and, well, *mythologized*, as much by its inhabitants as anyone else.

Enright's talk characterized Winnipeg in a way that is becoming, if not a full-blown trend, then at least a common enough occurrence to be worth consideration. He

outlines, as many have before, how Winnipeg's history began with great hope and promise, the city seemingly destined to become "the Chicago of the North" (this phrase coined by no better authority on Chicago-ness than *The Chicago Tribune,* according to Enright), and how this promise never really panned out the way it was intended (though Enright does not offer any real reasons as to why), leaving Winnipeg a parochial, slightly backwards mid-sized prairie city quietly harbouring decaying, unused relics of its past (near-) glory. He described, for instance, how Winnipeggers persist in living in a hostile environment, building homes on a floodplain as though completely unaware of the inevitable spring river-surge that sends them running for sandbags on an annual basis. His implication seems to be that Winnipeggers suffer from a form of either amnesia or picturesque brain-damage that makes them especially compatible with misery, and also completely incapable of escaping their fate. [12] Such romanticization (if I can call it that) of the Winnipeg psyche shows up in the work of several Winnipeg artists,[13] and indeed form a foundational ethos in what I am referring to as the "reclamation" of VPW.[14]

Any sort of reclamation project is curious to me, because of the philosophical implications therein – what does it mean to revisit discarded artefacts (material, cultural, or psychological) and claim them as one's own, or as components of some kind of foundational (but invisible, or unrecognized) infrastructure? Without delving too deeply into psychoanalytic territory, does it indicate some kind of cultural "return of the

[12] His description might sound apt, but consider, by comparison, the city of New Orleans: I have not yet come across a commentator who would characterize that city's residents as ridiculous for building their homes six feet below sea level. Perhaps it's because there are many other obvious factors that make New Orleans a *desirable* place to live; my point is that Winnipeg seems to be characterized as pathetic in a way that other places are not.

[13] Some pop-culture examples of Winnipeg self-flagellation: the Venetian Snares album *Winnipeg Is A Frozen Shithole*; The Weakerthans' song *One Great City* that features the chorus lyric "I hate Winnipeg".

[14] At the same time, I want to draw a distinction between Enright's comments, which I see as uncritically adding to the myth-making project, and the work of the people directly involved with the VPW reclamation, which seems to be invested in both making myths and commenting on the process and effects of myth-making itself.

repressed," whereby past damages become manifested as a fondness for (and near-fetishization of) failure and its material representations? Does it perhaps propose an alternate, disruptive economy of images by thrusting value onto things previously thought to be worthless, in a sort of disavowal of the dictates of cultural capital? These questions become all the more freighted when they are tied to the reclamation of a city with which I am intimately familiar, and in whose representation I am (now, thanks to this project at least) deeply invested.

In this chapter I mean to consider these questions as a pathway into thinking about the political economy of images and media movements, and how such economies function as the provenance of a sort of counterpublic consciousness that resists or recontextualizes the so-called "decline narrative" of small-scale media movements. The *Garbage Hill* screening, and especially the *Winnipeg Babysitter* component, constitute a large part of the reclamation project in which I am interested. However, I also wish to extend the argument beyond the borders of this one particular project into a more general consideration of the kind of myth-making practices in and of Winnipeg, and what these practices indicate about the nature of cultural memory and its relationship to counterpublic practices.

Garbage Hill: The Loss (and Reconstruction) of the VPW Archive

> *One of the first things I did was call Shaw and say what do you have left of this, and they said "We have nothing – we destroyed it." I mean obviously even VPW didn't keep everything, but what did remain was thrown out, and I was really shocked to hear this, and I asked the guy why, and he*

> *said, well, it's crap, nobody wanted to watch it, it was garbage. He was saying this to me as if I was some kind of dummy.* (Rankin 2007)
>
> *You're going to cry. I almost cried.* (Dunsmore 2007)

In *Exhausted Commodities*, Will Straw looks at the relationship between the material and social lives of cultural objects – specifically vinyl music recordings – observing (via Michael Thompson) the disjuncture of value therein: "Long after objects have ceased to hold any significant economic value, they continue to exist as physical artefacts," (Straw n.p.) – such objects form literal mountains of "exhausted desire" which communicate the rapid movements of global commodity sales and trends, even as the objects themselves decay more slowly than most empires. But, Straw suggests, these mountains or gluts of unwanted commodities take on significance by the very fact of their colossal physical presence:

> The sites in which unwanted cultural commodities (old records, books, etc.) accumulate are, at one level, museums of failure, but by collecting failure in one place they endow it with a monumentality and historical solidity. (n.p.)

The phrase "museums of failure" seems like something that might effectively complement Enright's characterization of Winnipeg, both as a city and an artistic scene. Indeed, the abstract concept (as well as the actual circulation) of failed objects may very well be at the heart of the VPW reclamation project – as I will discuss later on, a sense of loss, a fondness for decay and discards, and a kind of scrap-hound dumpster-diving ethos informs the work of those artists directly involved with revisiting the station. The *Garbage Hill* screening itself, as indicated by its title, seems to be playing out the kind of "monumentalizing" of discards Straw describes, referencing the fact that most of this

work had been quite literally thrown away, but also that taken as an *oeuvre*, it adds up to something rather more memorable and lasting than pure waste. In the same way that the actual original Garbage Hill, a grassed-over landfill-cum-toboggan-hill-cum-makeout-spot-and-surreptitious-concert-viewing-venue in Winnipeg's South Central area, has taken actual garbage and made it into something almost useful and clandestinely legendary, *Garbage Hill* seems to be moving toward a reclamation based partly on sheer volume of material, but also on the idea that thinking about why certain things are celebrated and others thrown away is itself a problem of aesthetics, politics, and publics, and not simply the purview of the crass economics of disposable culture.

Before considering how VPW is being reclaimed, I must first think about what exactly of VPW was *discarded.* In Chapter 1, I mentioned that there is no true existing archive of original VPW material, and there is even a considerable lack of archived or written material *about* the station, other than the files provided for me (and any visitor to the Manitoba Public Archives) by Dorthi Dunsmore. The "museum of failure" Straw imagines in *Exhausted Commodities* does not exist in VPW's case, at least not in a physical or material sense, which seems to be one of the things that motivated Barrow, Rankin and others to begin to pick up the pieces. And again, as I have mentioned, the loss of the archive of taped material from the station's years provokes feelings of great sadness and loss in everyone I spoke to, even those who had not been directly involved in the production of the tapes. Jim Prentice expressed perhaps the most pragmatic view, noting that the idea of a complete VPW archive is more or less fictional, since tapes would often be re-used over and over, with successive shows being recorded over their predecessors (Prentice 2007). Daniel Barrow notes that the people who attempted to get show producers to pick up their tapes were mostly low-level "janitorial types" (Barrow

2007) largely uninvolved with the broad-scale movements of the station. Nevertheless, the fact remains that when VPW's parent station Videon was bought out and taken over by Shaw, the tapes were thrown out, despite the requests made by Dorthi Dunsmore and others to keep them at least long enough for someone to pick them up and figure out what to do with them (Dunsmore 2007). In a sense, such a total loss was *good* for the reclamation project, if only because it offers the kind of extreme dramatization or manifestation of the underlying themes of loss and failure as to make for a very pleasing metaphor. It necessitated the kind of contextualization and mobilization of ideas around loss and failure that would not be possible had the tapes been appreciated and cared for in the way that my interview subjects suggest they should have been. Thus, the way in which the station was *reconstituted* opens up a locus for thinking about memorialization and its relationship to ephemeral cultures and things, and what about a "museum of failure" is perhaps particular to and enabled by the specificities of VPW's cultural context.

The chapter index of Herschel Hardin's *Closed Circuits: The Sellout of Canadian Television* reads like a maudlin taxonomy of Canadian failure – subheadings like *A Trail of Broken Promises, Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing, The Bubble Bursts,* and *The Little Station That Didn't* describe a brief trajectory that went from bright ideology to failed practice in almost no time, due to the various machinations, self-interest, and greed of Canadian media governance. (Interesting to note there is no mention whatsoever of VPW in this book, which centres almost entirely on media based in Ontario and Québec.) Hardin's book is a useful crystallization of a broader phenomenon, that is to say the discourse of failure that surrounds Canadian broadcast media. Prentice and Edwards agree that the turn away from public-access television, culminating in the Shaw buyout

and the cancellation of VPW, was primarily a move forced by financial motivations – VPW was not making money, and the cable companies figured they could still fulfil the "serve the community and showcase Canadians" directive by switching to a magazine-show format, which ultimately allows for much less possible deviation from the public-access mandate (Edwards 2007, Prentice 2007). Still, while economics may have been a guiding force here (as they are no doubt everywhere), I maintain that there are other influences at work in the all-around discarding of the station and its products.

In *Queerly Canadian,* Jason Morgan discusses the triangular relationship between queerness, nationhood and identity through English-Canadian cinema. He notes how "the loser paradigm" connotes a popular framework for successful Canadian cinema, where the (anti)hero is typically marked as helpless, weak, or deviant (Morgan 222). This structure is tied to a general state of "lack" that characterizes Canadian identity: lack of national mythology, lack of homogenous national symbolism (hockey and Tim Horton's notwithstanding), lack of existing cinematic forms on which to found a national screen identity (Morgan 212-213). But Morgan reconceptualizes the "loser paradigm" through the work of "perversion chic" films like *Love and Human Remains* (dir. Denis Arcand 1993) and *Lilies* (dir. John Greyson 1996), which "queer" the framework of the national narrative by suggesting that difference and contradiction are the conditions of possibility for imagining a heterogeneous, "impossible" national identity that both unifies and distinguishes. Here failure is reconceived as an inability to exert homogenizing control, in a symbolic and in a literal form, over bodies that are marked as different or transgressive.

With this reading in mind, we might see VPW's "failure" as a deregulation of categories, or of categorical approaches to visibility and viewership. Once taken out of

the deliberative discourse model of the public sphere, we might even conceive of something carnivalesque about the forms of expression taking place on VPW, an excessive overturning of rationality that serves to make visible a queer, feminine-coded mode of participation in public life. In any case, I argue that the kind of programming I discussed in Chapter 2, in light of the way it is presently being revisited by local artists and citizens, works to "queer" the economy of images in which most discourse on the use of media is nested. It is the failure of these programs to jibe with a working economy of North American models of successful use of public-access channels, and their consequent discarding, that makes them worthy of consideration as material interventions in the conversation on media and citizenship.

Garbage Collectors: Curating *Garbage Hill*

When Daniel Barrow and the Atelier national du Manitoba (an artistic/activist collective consisting primarily of experimental filmmakers Matthew Rankin, Walter Forsberg and Mike Maryniuk) teamed up to produce *Garbage Hill,* their curatorial practices began to both reveal and shape the story of VPW and its relationship with the city. For Barrow, compiling the shows to be used in *Winnipeg Babysitter* was in part an archival project, an attempt to restore or pin down some of the energy that had been produced during the "golden era" of VPW (Barrow 2007). *Winnipeg Babysitter* was culled primarily from the VHS collections of private citizens, fans of the station who created their own video libraries of the station's work, and from producers who had had the foresight to tape their shows as they aired.

It would be simple enough to read *Garbage Hill* as an ironic celebration and

glorification of 1980s kitsch, along the lines of the newfound appreciation for and reappropriation of musical forms like hair-bands and video games like Galaga and Ms. Pac-Man.[15] It can be difficult (and, I might add, sometimes unnecessary) to unbind one's experience of a medium from one's nostalgic feelings toward the era it references. However, it is apparent from our conversations that Barrow and Rankin approached this project with complete and utter earnestness and respect for the archival materials. "It was really important to me that people understand that this isn't a joke," Barrow says. He also felt that the Winnipeg screenings "were tainted by nostalgia and hysteria," – "I was really inspired by [the station programmers and their stories]. That's why I was disappointed with the Winnipeg response to the program, because I felt like people never stopped laughing," (Barrow 2007). Matthew Rankin's analysis insists upon a kind of aesthetic virtue which is a product of the lo-fi, bargain-basement character of the shows: "Because we live in such a processed world, [the screening of these images] provokes the desire to confront that. In part that's why Daniel and I wanted to do this, and in part why it was so popular," (2007).

Contra Barrow, my own sense of the audience reaction to the screenings was that, while there was certainly an element of manic frenzy, it was equalled by a genuine sense of appreciation and earnest enjoyment of the programming. I mentioned in Chapter 1 my friend's tearful reaction to *Pollock & Pollock* – undoubtedly evidence of the kind of "hysteria" Barrow is referring to – to illustrate not just the emotional extremes the screening provoked but the very personal and subjective alignment viewers seemed to be experiencing through the shows; these programmers may have been freaks, but they were

[15] It should be noted, however, that not all the material shown in *Winnipeg Babysitter* was from the 1980s, or played upon a kitsch or camp aesthetic; various contributions, for instance, from Royal Art Lodge members Neil Farber, Myles and Drue Langlois, and Marcel Dzama dated from 1996-2000.

our freaks. In any case, I insist upon an interpretation of audience reaction to the viewing which allows that an ironic, hipster appreciation, laden with quotation marks, and a genuine, heartfelt admiration are not mutually exclusive states of being. What some have labelled a "post-ironic" stance (a reappropriation of all that's uncool, along the lines of the catchphrase "it's hip to be square") I prefer to think of as a re-evaluation of the economy of cultural capital, an attempt to revisit and recycle discarded objects with an emphasis on their value within a circulatory network rather than as stand-alone works of art, or "art". In the case of the show's curators, it seems their desire to revisit and present the material is strongly tied to a sense of its value as expressing a counterdiscourse to the shape and quality of current television forms.

The manner in which the archival materials were gathered, which itself was necessitated by the inexistence of the original archive, created a sort of self-editing mechanism by which the program took on a particular colour and tone. Barrow selected the pieces he wished to recover largely from his own memory of the shows, and contacted the producers initially through the Winnipeg White Pages and then through word-of-mouth (Barrow 2007). Given that many of the pieces came from viewers' own collections, it is natural that there would be a greater abundance of work in the sensationalistic realm than the deliberative or historical one – it is hard to imagine anyone other than those directly involved wishing to preserve a choral performance of the 1986 Girl Guides Fort Rouge Chapter, or a report on the lack of old folks' homes in Windsor Park. So the oddball shows outweighed the frank investigations or straightforward tapings of live events – in a sense, the former type of show can be thought of as *mobile*, as its appeal is not temporally or spatially contingent. That is to say, although these materials are products of a very specific time and place, and their content and form

reflects its uniqueness, their meaning or ability to engage an audience is not restricted to that chronotope – indeed, Barrow found that when he toured an abridged version of *Winnipeg Babysitter*, visiting parts of Canada and a few locations in the United States, audiences reacted with as much fascination and awe (if rather less hysteria) as they did at the Winnipeg screening (Barrow 2007). Whereas the rather more *fixed* forms – shows which depend on an acute understanding of local politics, geography, and sociology – have a seemingly more limited appeal. What is interesting is that the humour and strangeness of the pieces is evidently mobile, but the sense of loss is not.

There might be a kind of reverse-engineering of value that occurs here, where contemporary audiences can come to see Barrow's selection of shows as inherently more interesting and important because they survived (where, of course, to a local historian nothing could be more compelling than an exploration of the demographics of Windsor Park). When I asked Richard Edwards how he thinks people conceive of the station now, he replied:

> There were certainly some things that people remember the channel for. They might not remember *Reach For The Top* [a trivia quiz show where teams of high-school students compete] even though we took it on after CBC dropped it. People might not remember that, but they might remember shows where people took self-expression [to the extreme].

It goes without saying that any editorial or curatorial practice reflects the interests, tastes and intentions of the person doing the selection, and their sense of responding to currents in the cultural climate – by definition, that is the point of curatorship – and it is therefore rather inappropriate to evaluate Barrow's work as being a "fair" or "unfair" representation of VPW. Instead, I look to his editorial faculties for evidence of what kind of codes these

deviant shows transgressed, for it seems that their notoriety and robustness as material forms is based on the degree to which work they did exemplified unusual and contentious uses of public-access media. There is something mildly tautological about claiming that the "freakshow" programming's hardiness is due to its preponderance of scandal – it's a bit like saying "*Pollock & Pollock* is notorious because it's notorious". But this tautology is, in truth, a somewhat accurate reflection of the dynamics of much of contemporary media stardom – it is almost cliché at this moment in time to point out, for example, that Paris Hilton is "famous for being famous". So perhaps it's not inappropriate to assume that this dynamic is also at play here; nevertheless, it can be said with some certainty that the "queerness" of *Pollock & Pollock* (and the other shows that made it into *Winnipeg Babysitter*) bolstered their ability to be remembered. However, "being remembered" does not simply and automatically flow from the transgressive content of any particular show. In the case of an ephemeral movement like public-access television, "being remembered" also depends on the presence of a circulatory network that has far more to do with elements like desire, identity, and other less tangible threads.

The Less Tangible Threads: Gossip and Preservation

There is, one might say, a queer dimension to the way Barrow collected the material and curated the *Winnipeg Babysitter* portion of the show. With no "official" channels through which to proceed (it's not as though he could simply order the material through some sort of catalogue of TV ephemera), Barrow, as I mentioned, had to rely on pathways of gossip and word-of-mouth. According to Gavin Butt, there is something queer about gossip itself – partly in the way that it serves to enable and bolster alliances

(and also generate juicy rifts, fights, and pissing contests) within queer art communities, but also in that the mode of communication itself is "queer". In *Between You And Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948 – 1963*, Butt attempts an epistemological refiguring by considering how gossip presents an alternate but no less substantive mode of "knowing":

> By adding in gossip to the category of evidence, by allowing it to supplement the "hard facts" of history, I offer a rethinking of the evidential which deconstructs the bases of authoritative constructs of truth. This I do by allowing the *dangerously supplemental* nature of gossip to displace so-called verifiable truths from their more positivistic frames of reference and to render them instead, like gossip's narratives, as projections of interpretive desire and curiosity. In this way I bring the sometimes luminous and racy narratives of gossip's "hard core" into play with the realm of "hard" facts in a bid to pay heed to (homo)sexuality's disruptive effects on evidential discourse. (7, emphasis in original)

Gossip is queer because it depends on unreliable "evidence", because it calls into question the primacy of factual, text-based truth as the proper object (or subject?) of meaning-making, and instead relies on pathways of desire, bodily exchange and performance as intrinsically important to any epistemological project. Such channels were clearly at work in Barrow's curating practices; the ephemerality of the material, its ability to literally disappear into thin air, led to a necessary mobilization of the "grassroots" pathways of undocumented forms of communication and archiving – gossip, hearsay, telling tales.

Gossip also bolstered one of the undercurrents beneath another VPW show, a

well-loved musical program called *Cosmopolitan Time/The Cosmopolitans/With A Song In My Heart,* which featured the keyboard-and-drums duo of Marion Clemens and Louise Wynberg, two older women with a penchant for light rock and Latin American music. Barrow's textual notes, which he uses during the screening of *Winnipeg Babysitter*, states unequivocally that the women were lovers, but also that their sexualities were not public knowledge when the show originally aired:

> Louise and Marion met in Europe while working for the technology company, Siemens. They fell in love and made a home together in Holland. Estranged from their respective families, Louise and Marion began to contemplate a life distanced from the disapproval of their families and the general turmoil of Europe. [...] Looking at a map of Canada they were drawn to the pastoral landscape of Manitoba. They aspired to purchase a home in Churchill and commute to work in the city of Winnipeg (a 12-hour drive). Needless to say, the expanse of Canada came as a shock to both young women when they arrived in 1958. They instead made their home in Oakbank, where the daily commute would be less protracted. Other residents of Oakbank assumed they were sisters and the Cosmopolitans seldom felt it was worthwhile to correct them. (*Winnipeg Babysitter* 2005)

In my interview with Barrow, I asked him how he was able to track down Marion (Louise died in 2002) to interview her for his text, invite her to the screening, and get access to her collection of tapes of the show she and Louise had produced for twenty-two years. His answer affirms the far-reaching and world-making abilities of gossip in the queer community:

> I didn't know this for sure, but I assumed they were lesbians, and I thought, the lesbian community in Winnipeg is so small, I bet I should start there, by just asking people who are lesbians if they know them. And the first person I asked, do you know Marion or Louise, I didn't even know their last names, and they were like, Oh yeah, sure. (Barrow 2007)[16]

It is significant to note that gossip maintained this tacit alliance – an underground economy of sorts – among members of Winnipeg's lesbian community long after the show went off air, where other more "tangible" forms of documentation failed. In 2005 you could not access The Cosmopolitans' "canon" through a public archive or any officially-sanctioned mode of preservation – but the "lesbian network", though undocumented, proved strong enough to maintain the link between the past and the present.

In addition to the "queer dimension" of the retrospective's curatorship, there is also something particular about the look of many of the shows featured that begins to get at what it is about their production specifically that made them objects worthy of re-valuation. Here I will consider the relationship between the aesthetics of some of the shows and the role they play in the economy of images used to memorialize the station.

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[16] According to Rankin, Barrow revealed that the thing that tipped him off to the Cosmopolitans' lesbianism was their gingham shirts. Something about the fact that they wore these shirts for every taping triggered some kind of semiotic red flag in Barrow's "gaydar", in the same way that the use of particularly "gay" vocabulary could, in the 1950s, inform one gay man of another man's homosexuality, without giving it away to an eavesdropping audience – and if the receiver of the subtly dropped hint was not "in the life," he would probably not pick up on the signal, and would therefore not respond with hostility (See Chauncey 1997). So do marginalized and criminalized groups proceed through nuanced and subtle modes of performance. It is fascinating to me to think of how, in 1980s Winnipeg, a couple of women played polka versions of "Stairway To Heaven" for an audience of retirement-home residents in front of VPW's cameras, while a young boy (and future visual and performance artist and curator of all things queer and outmoded) watching the show at home picked up on what he later felt certain were overt but coded signals of a queer lifeworld.

Return of the Real

In *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, Marc Andrejevic presents an analysis of modern TV's most prevalent form that delves into the actual productive economy of making television. His suggestion, that reality TV's promise was to bring back "the real" as an antidote to the bloated contrivances of scripted sitcom television, strongly echoes the sentiments of public access television's pioneers, though clearly the goals and frameworks of the two media are rather different (and work to rather different ends):

> As culture is commodified and its production rationalized, responsibility for production is monopolized. The participation of the public is reduced to that of consumer/spectator. The hope offered by the advent of the network society is that the converse might be true: that the return of public participation via interactivity might revitalize not only politics and production but also culture -- that the interactive aesthetic is a more democratic one that either of those provided by mass society: high culture and the culture industry. Reality TV partakes of the appeal of the interactive aesthetic by taking it literally in order to challenge the abstracted relations of cultural production and reception with the promise of the return of the real. (Andrejevic 46)

"The promise of the return of the real" is perhaps the central promise of public-access television as laid out by its pioneers. Hailing viewers as citizens and important participants in public life may have been a goal, but as I demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2, such noble aims were compromised by the actual use of the station. Richard Edwards suggested that, in the early days of VPW at least, many viewers tuned in not to be

entertained or informed, but to catch "bloopers" and screw-ups that were the unavoidable side-effect of low-budget TV production (Edwards 2007). Many newspaper articles of the time made similar suggestions, referencing comical and embarrassing moments in a kind of anticipation of *America's Funniest Home Videos* (the popular TV show which began in the 1990s and features footage sent in by "regular Americans" of dogs catching fire, people falling down, babies burping songs, and so on) and the advent of "caught on tape" entertainment. Several articles reference a flustered show host saying "We're going to have a wonderful orgasm" (instead of "organization," presumably), along with stories of nervous tics, tops coming undone, and spiders crawling on guests' faces as they speak (Cormier 1983, Prokosh 1987, Allan 1980). But the articles also seem to be highlighting these moments as instances of accidental liftings of the veil that surrounds television and makes it seem an impenetrable and opaque space of scripted performance – they stand as proof of VPW's difference and radical potential as a community TV station. Nevertheless, this is probably not the kind of "reality" envisioned by the station's mandate.

So what does "reality" look like, in terms of the images of VPW? Let me describe an excerpt from *Winnipeg Babysitter,* a best-of episode of *The Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show*: Rockin' Ron Pollock introduces the next guests, Kari and Nikki, who he describes as "real human rights kinds of humans". Because it's a pre-recorded "best of" show, true editing cuts are possible (and not just the cross-fades of the live-to-tape shows), and we now see two teenage women with absurdly poofy blonde hair seated on high stools in the VPW studio. They pass a microphone back and forth and speak short breathy phrases into it, saying hi to their teacher and their boyfriends, their dialogue punctuated by giggles, desperate glances at each other, and barely-concealed whispers of "Say

something!" "YOU say something!" A brief sample of dialogue, starting from the opening of the segment:

> Kari: *The Pollock & Pollock Show* is hip.
>
> Nikki: It's cool.
>
> Kari: They're happenin' fools.
>
> Nikki: We're here to talk about this and that…
>
> Kari: With Rockin' Ron and Nifty Nat.
>
> Nikki: …Yeah.
>
> Kari: [giggles nervously]
>
> Nikki: [speaking not into the mic] …say hi to Brian Donnelly, we know he's watching.
>
> Kari: Yeah. [giggling] So hi. (*Winnipeg Babysitter* 2005)

The shot, which began with a middle-distance frame, slowly and dispassionately zooms in on Kari and Nikki during this exchange, and remains fixed on them long after they have said their piece, as though demanding they continue to speak, the way a radio show host can let the threat and weight of dead air impel an interviewee to open up and talk. It is almost unbearably awkward. Once their two heads fill the frame, the camera begins to zoom out just as slowly and mechanically, to an almost comic effect, as though these two teenagers are being abandoned on an ice flow and we are watching them from the rescue plane as it takes off without them. It is kind of like a (conscious or accidental) homage to Michael Snow's *Wavelength,* the 1967 film where one camera spends forty-five minutes on a single zoom across a warehouse space. Although various characters in *Wavelength* enter the space and action occurs in and around the area framed by the lens, the static motion of the point of view never changes to accommodate the narrative. This *Pollock &*

Pollock taping is a far cry from the shaky hand-held am-cam disaster home movies, for instance, described by Amy Wes in *Caught on Tape: A Legacy of Low-tech Reality.* Temporality is major a factor in the distinctive feel of these shows – one could easily, for instance, create an edgy, frenetic montage made up of clips from *Pollock & Pollock* that would look not all that different from a homemade YouTube video or MTV approximation thereof. But the feel of such a video would be completely estranged from the drawn-out, almost tedious quality of the original programs; the format of these shows carries as much aesthetic weight as the content.

As easy as it is to be carried away by the wave of joyous kitsch the Kari and Nikki segment inspires, it is important for me to attempt to get beyond it into some consideration of the aesthetics of "the real" and its relationship to archival practices and memory. We might compare the claims of screening technologies like IMAX to "make it seem like you're really there" (a rhetoric deconstructed and debunked by Allison Whitney in *Through the Looking Glass: Myth, History and IMAX 3D*) to the reproduction of "reality" experienced by VPW viewers – in actual experiential terms, watching VPW is much more like "being" at a city council meeting or in an old folks' home than watching an IMAX film is like "being" in the Antarctic or scaling the Grand Canyon. The relative popularity of each medium begs the rather rhetorical question of whether or not it is actually *reality* that audiences wish to experience via their viewing practices. So the "return of the real" on VPW is perhaps indicative of the desire, of a small amount of people at least, for images that do not conform to audience expectations of spectacle and gloss. I will now consider how the alternative to mainstream images is being conceived of by the people involved in VPW's reclamation.

"Raw Images": The Aesthetics and Conditions of Cultural Memory

> *Douglas Kellner: When I began my studies of media spectacle, McDonald's was a figure for triumphant global capitalism. [...] Suddenly, however, McDonald's became the poster corporation for protest in the anti-corporate globalization movement. [...] Whenever there was an anticorporate globalization demonstration, somewhere a McDonald's was trashed.* (King 32)
>
> *Matthew Rankin: When we were kids, going to McDonald's wasn't an unacceptable thing to imagine doing. It maybe wasn't an especially healthy thing to do, but it was not totally unacceptable. Whereas now it's a totally unacceptable thing to imagine doing. In part because the whole world is McDonald's.* (Rankin 2007)

I am not trying to be precious in setting these two quotations side by side; while it might seem like a pretty insignificant coincidence that one of my interview subjects and a noted media and cultural critic both mention McDonald's in their discussion of resistance to global capitalism, there are, I think, conclusions to be drawn. These two quotations suggest a way of approaching the problem of aesthetics and metaphor when thinking about cultural movements and memory. Kellner's quote comes from his piece *Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle*, in Geoff King's The *Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond.* Rankin's quote is from the part of our taped discussion where I asked him to explain what appealed to him about VPW and its images; he suggests here that as artists, activists and intellectuals – that is to say, as members of a critically engaged left-leaning movement – we necessarily regard the chain fast food

depot as an ethically (and gastronomically) unacceptable place to patronize. McDonald's, for Rankin, as for the protesters Kellner talks about, is a metonym for the standardized images that are the product of late capitalism and are antithetical – and not just antithetical, but actually destructive – to the kinds of images and products that grassroots movements foster. The big yellow M has an apparently universal currency to stand in for (and also enact) the most destructive elements of global capitalism and the eradication of the local.

According to Rankin, VPW's programs produced a kind of "raw energy" that was very much in contrast to the "processed images" that are the hallmark of global commercial media forms (Rankin 2007). Rankin draws a parallel between Winnipeg's economic and cultural "failure" and the public reception of VPW, both on the site of production and the site of reclamation. His comments also reference the "mythed opportunity" narrative that Enright sketches out:

> Even if you read books about Winnipeg history, this is how the story of Winnipeg is structured – as something with great potential, that could have been a great powerful metropolis, and failed. And I think that people are fascinated with that because there's a certain grace to that somehow. And I feel like you can make that a thing of perfection in a way. That's precisely what people hated about these VPW images, is that they reeked of failure, of that incapacity to seize some kind of legitimacy in the North American context that is driven by success and gloss and wealth and prestige and so forth. And [VPW] just incarnated [that failure]. And I think that's why people love [VPW] so much, because it makes that alienation of Winnipeg from all those things into a thing of perfection.

> And that's beautiful in a way. (2007)

The schizoid nature of viewer reception described here – people both loved and hated VPW and its images – is perhaps not uncharacteristic of the discourse on the station, and of larger discourses on Winnipeg itself. Rankin's discussion of "raw images" versus "processed images", a binary friction which guides his work in general, is tied to Winnipeg's development as a sophisticated and cosmopolitan centre for screen activity and especially production. Where the site of production of VPW's programming conceives of these "raw images" as often-distasteful aberrances from the intended use of the medium, the site of reclamation considers this failure to conform, to create productive, deliberative discourse models, as a kind of claims-staking of a space from which to engage in media-production that does not reproduce the Habermasian "public sphere" in all its cramped spatiality.

Barrow also invokes the spectre of global broadcast media in his explanation of his interest in public-access television, as well as the principles that guide his artwork in general. His artistic and curatory ethos, as he explained, is guided by

> ...this search for authenticity, and my inherent mistrust of corporate media. When I present shows I use overhead projectors, sort of antiquated technologies that lend a certain singularity to my voice and the voice of the narrative, and that has a relationship to public-access television. You knew when you watched public-access television that there was no ulterior motive. People were doing it voluntarily, they had something to say. Even if their only motive was exhibitionism, I could trust that; I knew they weren't trying to sell me something one way or another. (2007)

As wary as I am toward any claim of "authenticity," I see in these two instances a

recognition of changing media priorities and directives, and a desire to challenge the assumptions on which this shift rests. I am interested in how both Rankin and Barrow conceive of themselves as self-appointed custodians of discarded material – they seem driven by a conscious desire to "dumpster dive" Winnipeg's material and psychological waste.[17] The practice of dumpster diving itself rests necessarily on the waste products of capitalism and rampant consumerism. It is not a *solution* to North American wastefulness (or the third-world exploitation practices it is predicated on), but it is a creative way of forging a sustainable lifestyle outside the producer-consumer framework, or at least taking care of one daily need for free. Similarly, the VPW reclamation project is not a solution to the tide of "processed images" that threaten the local and erode the public's ability to sustain interest in it. It is instead a provisional mode of claiming a space from which to speak.

Conclusion

The series of events, sentiments, and ideologies that I have termed the VPW "reclamation movement" interpellates what is perhaps an imagined economy of images. The constraints and limitations within which the station operated in the 1970s and 80s – not just financial, but cultural and social – resulted in programming with a particular set of characteristics which in some ways typified the era and the medium, but which for the

[17] And the term "dumpster diving" can be thought of here in a literal as well as a metaphorical sense: *Death By Popcorn*, a film created by Rankin and Atelier collaborator Walter Forsberg, consists entirely of found footage, much of it taken from the dumpster outside Winnipeg television station CKY. The filmmakers were originally ordered to cease and desist screenings of the film since they had not acquired permission to use the material; a media war ensued, and ended with the film getting the blessing of CKY (Gilmour 2005, Ross 2006).

most part seemed an inimitable end-product of a unique set of circumstances. Those individuals who have invested themselves in the reclamation and reimagining of VPW do so to propose, I think, that the station's programs form a counterdiscourse and indeed a *counterpublic*, one which is inherently unable to face the supremacy of global media forms head-on, because to do so would be counter to its grassroots and local nature. In fact, it is perhaps VPW's *failure* to thrive in and square with a global economy of images that makes it so worth thinking about, and remembering – it offers a moment in which we might reconceive of the power and presence of grassroots media movements, not as declining and ultimately failing but as creating a situation in which we can see the workings of public cultures outside the dictates of commercial media.

CONCLUSION

I just finished watching the first segment of *The Best of the Pollock & Pollock Gossip Show* on YouTube, and am still a bit sore from simultaneous laughing and cringing. When I began research for this paper back in 2006, the internet was mostly mute on the subject of Ron and Natalie; now you can watch the entire *Best Of* segment in six-minute increments. I don't know enough about internet research data to say if the 1,500 or so views the clip boasts is significant or not, or how a viewer with no means to contextualize the clip would interpret it; what I'm more curious about is how it, or *anything*, ended up there at all.[18] A friend of mine remarked recently that what is fascinating about YouTube is not just the catholicity of its content but the fact that someone somewhere thought to preserve it. Old commercials, cancelled TV shows, music videos for flash-in-the-pan bands – someone cared enough about each of these things to record them, save them for decades, and transfer them to a digital format. Of course, it may not always be as intentional as all that – imagine someone who, say, videotapes the 1988 American presidential debates for a friend who has to work that night. This person leaves the VHS running and unintentionally tapes a Pepsi commercial featuring E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial. A year later the VHS cassette ends up in a box, and is ignored until 2004, when this person moves house and goes through old possessions. Now the commercial has cultural caché – maybe even more than the presidential debate – and ends up on the internet; the "museum of failure" may yet rise again.

There is no value judgment here – I'm not suggesting that the commercial is more

[18] In the case of the *Pollock & Pollock* segment, my query is a little bit disingenuous; from reading the comments thread it's pretty safe to assume that Natalie and Ron themselves posted the clips.

or less important or precious because of how it was preserved. Rather, I am finding that the more you follow the lines of how things end up where they do – especially when those things and those lines are short-lived, ephemeral, underground, and/or not accounted for in mainstream or canonical histories – the more you begin to get a picture of an economy of images that has little to do with capital exchange. In part, that is what this project has been – a mapping of the threads that shape grassroots media history, paying attention to the links between desire, ideology, nostalgia, and preservation.

This mapping, however, has implications beyond providing a kind of alternative historiography. The idea of putting media in the hands of the people (that is to say, reimagining it as a community tool and not just a source of information, entertainment, or advice on which products to buy) was, in the 1970s and even 80s, a radical one; today its political purchase seems to have mutated. While media activists still emphasize the importance of free press and inclusive, community-accessible media forms, the "regular people" on television today ("regular" in that they are not professionally or passionately invested in media democracy) have, if a plethora of possible outlets, a very narrow choice of forms. It is like being presented with a hundred pairs of pants to choose from – all of them nearly identical. Although, as Gamson, Dovey, and others have pointed out, there are instances in which a range of subjectivities show themselves through the stiff framework of talk-show and reality television, they still manoeuvre within a rather cramped space of identity politics and network profits.

So, then, the "regular people" have moved to the internet. This, in many ways, is a fine development, if of a somewhat different tenor than public-access television, which above all else hinges on a commitment to the local. The promises of the internet – to unify, empower, allow for expression of difference and meaningful debate, and so on –

are very similar to the promises of early public-access television – and just as fraught. If the kind of public-access television I've spent the past hundred pages discussing has any kind of lesson to offer, it's that there is something to be gained from looking *beyond* the promises to the ideologies that guide them, and, if not deconstruct them, then at least question what they take for granted about what it means to be part of a communicating public.

Community-access television was developed, originally, to offer an alternative to television with strictly commercial, for-profit goals, with an implicit ideology that once capital gain was taken out of the picture, the public could focus on important social issues and progressive political debate – that is to say, early public-access meant to hail the public not as consumers but as *citizens*. But the kind of television I've documented here hailed the public as neither consumers nor citizens, exactly; as what, then? Producers, perhaps, or if it isn't too cute of me to suggest, "real human rights kinds of humans" – which is not the same thing as *citizens*, at least not in the classic liberal definition, since it's extended as happily to giggling, terrified teenagers as it is to civic leaders. But, the point is, for Ron Pollock (for example) the mere act of appearing on his show *was* a form of citizenship, and its implications far-reaching. Whether or not we agree with his generosity with the term is perhaps moot; what is worth analyzing is how that disruptive and contentious position has been and will continue to be present in the media climate. Barrow and the Atelier national du Manitoba took it seriously – as, I suppose, have I. Will others?

I presently write in the wake of the Bouchard-Taylor commission into "reasonable accommodation" in Québec, and I can't help making some links between the debates on what kind of "difference" this province is willing to "accommodate" and the kind of

"difference" VPW was able to foster. More generally, and I will allow myself this one instance of utopianism, could a project like VPW assist in smoothing over the process of different cultures adapting to each other? Even without that sort of speculative logic, it's a fairly commonly-accepted idea that community media access is instrumental in the formation of any sort of "public sphere" in which marginalized groups can contest the hegemony of rational-critical discourse and white liberal modes of expression and representation. So if the public-access project and the public's ability to remember it have teeth, they are here – in the notion that we need not behave as though no one has ever encountered these questions before and we are starting from scratch, and also that there is more than one way for publics and counterpublics to form and mobilize around problems of identity, expression, and communication.

As important as these ideas are, I don't want to stray too far from the particularities of VPW itself, and its relationship to Winnipeg and that city's public cultures. This project has been an investigation of some lesser-known (or lesser-canonized) sites of cultural production; it offers a different way of thinking about cultural memory, one that acknowledges the presence of failed sites without dismissing them, and attempts to engage critically with a reclamation movement that even seems to *love* failure, or at least consider it a proper framework for contending with Winnipeg's cultural scene.

In an earlier footnote I mentioned a song by Winnipeg band The Weakerthans called "One Great City!"; the song title refers to the motto that greets travellers who enter Winnipeg by car, posted on a highway sign as you enter the city limits: WINNIPEG: ONE GREAT CITY. The chorus of the song is one phrase long, and it goes "I hate Winnipeg". The last time I saw The Weakerthans perform, it was here in Montréal, shortly after the release of *Reconstruction Site*, the 2003 album that features "One Great

City!". I remember feeling self-righteously annoyed and disturbed to hear frat boys and urbane hipsters singing along with that song – they had no right, they had no idea what it means to hate Winnipeg the way *I* hate Winnipeg. I recognize retrospectively that this is a pretty silly way to feel about a song (and a city); still, there is something curious and, I think, accurate about being protective of your city's status as a kind of misunderstood loser-ville. New Yorkers get prickly if you suggest you *don't* heart NYC; Winnipeggers, or at least the ones I know, bridle at the suggestion that anyone else could understand the dimensions of their hatred for it – which in some ways is a lot like love.

All this is a long-winded and perhaps overly sentimental way of saying that feelings about the city and its products run deep and complex. Connected intimately to these feelings are the questions I have raised in this paper – those of how to remember the ephemeral, and how to conceive of narratives surrounding the ephemeral in ways that do not plaster over the work these narratives do, even if they do not do it forever, or in such a way that visibly impacts the economy or the cultural milieu. Then again, I must suggest here that the impact VPW had on the cultural milieu is anything but negligible. As I suggested in Chapter 3, the work of artists like Barrow and Rankin draws directly on both the aesthetics and what one might call the lo-fi "spirit" of VPW's programming, as well as the sense of loss fostered by its demise; other artists like The Weakerthans may do it in a less conscious way, while still evoking that spirit.

It might seem at times like this paper is tacitly arguing for improved methods of grassroots media preservation; that kind of stance is not uncharacteristic of some of my previous work (see Leventhal 2006), and I certainly applaud any attempts at it. But I want to stress that although Winnipeg's failure to officially preserve the work of VPW had consequences, I am trying to push past an automatic tendency toward promoting

archivism and preservation. In some ways this paper has been about what it means to forget, or to let go. In my introduction I wrote, only somewhat facetiously, of the "ravenous capitalism" that snaps at the heels of any grassroots movement; sometimes it becomes necessary not to turn and battle that beast, but to keep moving, keep adapting. I think the artists behind the VPW reclamation recognize this, and have managed a fascinating mode of engaging with VPW's loss without resorting to paralyzing degrees of mournfulness or nostalgia. I hope they will keep doing what they're doing. And I hope in some way this paper will help the unofficial sites of transgression and resistance I've documented here to continue their ghostly presence and influence for years to come.

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