

Joanne Kelly

## Essay



Joanne Kelly's video art work is known for its compressed, superimposed images, in which each frame reveals a carefully constructed tableau. An early experimenter with the visual manipulations of video, Kelly's work reflects much of the history of image processing technology. From the stacked monitors and early color enhancement technologies of **Vertivision** (1974) and **Tilt the Wheel** (1975) to the disorienting, dizzying multiplication of the image in **Surrogate Sisters** (1986) and the carefully crafted overlays of **Beauty is a Simple Pleasure** (1988); Kelly plays with the technical possibilities of the medium, building a dense, multi-layered visual style. Even in the recent meditation on nature and visual appropriation, **Hear Us Speak** (1987), made without image enhancement or manipulation, Kelly builds a meticulously crafted visual design, incorporating the kinetic vibrancy of the randomly shot images into a carefully woven and richly textured visual tapestry.

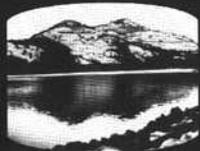
Undereath the beauty and lyricism of these densely layered images, her work reflects a deeply investigative urge to uncover and connect divergent threads

of a story. Superimposition and multiple layering, in a sense, become techniques to investigate connections and relations, to hold onto contradictions and conflicts, creating a series of carefully uncovered and reworked perceptions. From the relatively straightforward factual presentation of **Grenada: Portrait of A Revolution** (1983) to the troubling fragmentation and repetition of **Words** (1975) and **Once Again** (1987), Kelly works at conveying the complexity of information, the relationality of issues and the tension between diverging memories and perspectives.

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

The early seventies were, of course, a time when many aspects of personal relationships, political structures and cultural values, were, themselves, seen as being wide open to change and reformulation. Kelly's work must be grounded, as well, in this context. Responding to the socio-cultural experiments of the hippie decade and the challenges of the emerging women's movement, she reveals in her work a constant struggle with questions of personal independence and responsibility. The thematic concerns of her work reflect the breakdown of certain traditional structures of family and relationships and the need to reformulate and redefine these bonds rather than simply abandon them.

"Tahmar turned out to be an experiment in the use of abstract form to create an autobiographical statement... most of the abstraction was present in the very human image of Miss Kelly"  
-New York Times



Tahmar

Throughout her career, Kelly's work has been deeply collaborative, ranging from her early involvement with Video Free America to her work with numerous dancers, choreographers and performers. She has used these collaborations as diverse means to develop her own wide ranging and yet unified body of work, integrating diverse social concerns and a feminist perspective on personal issues with a strongly articulated sense of visual construction and design.

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

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

In varying ways, these early works play with different scenes of construction of identity: the physicality of **Vertivision's** encounters with movement and technology, and the more troubled, more mediated encounters with the other through memory and image in **Tilt the Wheel** and **Words**. This concern with display and the theatricalization of self was developed most explicitly in the 1980 video performance work **The Goddess**, where Kelly played with the layering and removal of clothing and its construction of

distinct female identities. The at times painful vulnerability of these early tapes and performances—their replaying of female encounters with aesthetic objectification and personal victimization in an effort to assess these relationships and gain control of them—is echoed in recent works like **Once Again**, which replays the artist's relationship with her daughter as a scene of identification and loss.

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

-by Liz Kotz.

Ms. Kotz is a San Francisco based writer, whose articles have been published in *Afterimage*, *The Independent* and *SF Weekly*.



The Goddess

"Among the most technically assured video works I've seen... clear, sensuous, rich, Cibachrome-hued footage provides film standard quality."  
-Robert Adkins, *Artweek*



Abortion:  
The Divisive Issue

## Selected Videos 1972-1988

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

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

*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*

*Camera: Skip Sweeney*

*Editor: Stephen Buckingham, Skip Sweeney*

*Choreography: Bill Young*

*Dancers: Bill Young, Allyson Green, Larry Hahn, Emily Siern, Elizabeth Maxwell, Susan Blackensop*

*Facilities: Video Free America*

*Music: Mio Morales*

*Copyright 1988.*

### **Hear Us Speak** (1987)

**Hear Us Speak** is a stunningly beautiful look at natural images made abstract. Opening with a quotation from Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature*, the video builds a sensual relationship with nature that acknowledges the beauty and visual power of plants and trees and fields without trying to capture them as image or object—neither the Hallmark landscape nor the scientific territory. Working through assemblage of fragmented, yet meticulously crafted perceptions and portrayals, (the tape could be described by a state-

ment by Trinh T. Minh-ha on her film **Reassemblage**) "the strategies adopted in the shooting and editing stages... prevent the viewers from appropriating content of the images by their brevity and dispersion." Through a wildly spinning camera and overexposed shots the piece makes the familiar—a tree, a dandelion—unfamiliar, powerful and mysterious. Traveling past grassy paths or leafy trees, the camera presents images that blur, and then for a second hold steady long enough for the eye to recognize a familiar object, before again moving on, to create a series of glances and glimpse, grasped for a second and then gone. Kelly recounts how she spun around with the camera, threw it into bushes and ran recording random images. Vibrantly colorful, kinetic and imaginative, the tape undermines the clichéd images produced by deadened senses and the use of vision as control.

*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*

*Camera: Joanne Kelly*

*Editor: Stephen Buckingham*

*Facility: Video Free America*

*Text: "Women and Nature"*

*by Susan Griffin*

*Music: African Headcharge*

*House: Mark Thompson, Tim Collins*

*Special Thanks to Megan Kelly-*

*Sweeney, Skip Sweeney, Tim Zraggen.*

*Copyright 1987.*

### **Once Again** (1987)

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

Framed by lace curtains waving and unfurling to the Resident's haunting version of *Fur Elise*, the tape sketches three glimpses into the adult's relationship with the child. In part one, Kelly mixes





shots of toys crashing and toy animation from her 1980 video performance piece **The Goddess** with more recent footage of her son's birthday party and daughter's ballet lessons. The scenes suggest the times parenting can allow adults to be kids again, and to redevelop a relationship with their own childhoods, often lost or distanced through time or sadness.

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

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

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

perceive her, the mother, and these times? Will her memories match with these images? How will she integrate this into her own life?

*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*

*Camera: Joanne Kelly, Skip Sweeney, Stephen Buckingham, Tim Zraggen*

*Editors: Tim Zraggen, Stephen Buckingham, Skip Sweeney*

*Music: The Residents*

*Facility: Video Free America*

*Special Thanks to Megan Kelly-Sweeney, Dylan Sweeney, Homer Flynn.*

*Copyright 1987.*

### **Surrogate Sisters** (1986)

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

*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*

*Excerpted from "Platypus Reveals All"*

*A Theater Piece by Zoe Elton*

*Performers: Suzanne Grey, Janeen Wyatt*

*Musicians: Patricia Weiss, Zoe Elton.*

*Facility: Video Free America*

*Camera: John Lymberg*

*Sound: Liz Gaffney*

*Editors: Tim Zraggen, Skip Sweeney*

*Special Thanks to Homer Flynn*

*Copyright 1986.*





Photos from Vidance (1973) and Indignores (1972) JK



### **Voodoo Automatic** (1985)

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

*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*

*Writer/Theater Director:*

*Allan Finneran, Soon 3*

*Performer: Karina Epperlein*

*Music: Bob Davis*

*Camera: Megan Roberts, Raymond Ghirardo*

*Editor: Miodrag Certic*

*Facility: Video Free America, One Pass,*

*KQED-TV*

*Copyright 1985.*

### **Emergency Exit** (1984)

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

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

*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*

*Performance: Nina Wise and Lauren Elder*

*Music: Nina Wise and Greg Jones*

*Camera: Skip Sweeney*

*Editor: Eric Shackelford*

*Production Assistant: Lisa English*

*Facility: Video Free America, KQED-TV*

*Special Thanks to Greg Swartz.*

*Copyright 1984.*

### **Grenada:**

#### **Portrait of A Revolution** (1983)

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

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

*“This program is now one of the primary sources of information... of foremost importance are the interviews with the recently assassinated prime minister, Maurice Bishop, members of his cabinet and the citizens of Grenada.”*  
*-San Francisco Chronicle*



*“A wry evocation of one woman's inner journey.”*  
*-San Francisco Chronicle*



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

**-San Francisco Chronicle**



tragedy, as we are informed in a post-script that most of the people we have just seen on screen are now dead. The program was aired on many PBS stations after the 1983 invasion, as Americans suddenly—and belatedly—sought to understand something about a country few had even heard of before. Nominated for an Emmy Award for Best Documentary.

*Producer/Director: Joanne Kelly.  
Camera: Skip Sweeney  
Assistant to Producer: Lisa English  
Editors: Jane Blake, Jenny Goldberg, Eric Shackelford, Laurie Simms  
Facility: Video Free America, KQED-TV  
Special Thanks to Gordon Craig, Greg Swartz, Gene Zastrow  
Copyright 1983.*

#### **What Follows Next (1982)**

Part of the *Four Dances For Television* program, this work features dancers/choreographers Bill Young and Mercy Sidbury in a three part duet on partnering and conflict. In the first movement the two dancers, recorded separately and then mixed together, move past each other; as they fly by the unmoving camera lens, they constantly cross paths but without connection. The interaction shifts in the second segment, as they move jointly, almost clone like, following parallel paths trapped in each others movements. In the third segment, their dancing evokes conflict and intense relationality; no longer crashing into each other or dancing in step side by side, their movements create intricate patterns of force and reaction. With an undercurrent of tension and hostility, the duet suggests the power—verging on explosiveness—of this intense, interconnected partnering. The dance becomes a metaphor for an exploration of patterns of relationships, as the dancers re-work the models and predictability of the more traditional duet forms. The visual

design of the piece accentuates an awareness of their movements in space and the relations these create, developing a sense of emotional identification and involvement rare in modern dance.

*Producer/Director: Joanne Kelly  
Choreographer/Dancers: Bill Young, Mercy Sidbury  
Music: J.A. Deane  
Camera: Vaughn Kilgore  
Editing: John Andreini, Jenny Goldberg  
Videotape Recording: Eric Shackelford  
Lighting: Greg King, John Sullivan  
Unit Manager: Janis Blacksleger  
Associate Producer: Kathryn Seeth  
Post Production Co-ordinator: Greg Swartz  
Set design: Christopher Bigelow  
Costumes provided by: I. Magnin,  
Danceworks  
Executive Producer: Jim Scalem  
Facility: KQED-TV  
Copyright 1982.*

#### **Tilt The Wheel (1975)**

A beautiful and at-times intensely vulnerable self-portrait, this short video plays on the shift in power relations underlying the representation of women's bodies created when the artist presents herself to the camera. Under an unmoving, suspended camera, the nude videomaker/dancer enacts a slow unfolding movement. Through now outdated coloring technology, the image is abstracted and manipulated, developing a delicate and stunning depiction of the body whose sensuality and texture are more reminiscent of life drawing than the usual immediacy of video images. In retrospect, the archaic technology used-- with its sepia tones and expressionistic outlining—subtly enhances this effect as it distorts and simplifies the image creating a sensibility altogether different than that of current, more powerful image processing tools.



*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*  
*Performer: Joanne Kelly*  
*Music: Nancy Karp*  
*Video Assistance: Skip Sweeney*  
*Special Thanks to Bill Roarty and*  
*Jono Miller.*  
*Copyright 1975.*

### **Vertivision** (1974)

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

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

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

### **Words** (1974)

Simple images of black and white handwritten text tell and then retail

a story. Diary-like phrases are at first presented randomly, and then re-presented to tell a not-so-simple tale of a woman's short journey, meeting with her lover, and return. Like a disturbing event obsessively replayed and replayed in memory as one sorts out one's feelings and one's sense of what really happened, the tape evokes uncertainty and an almost mundane sense of victimization. In the first version, "he held me" evokes comfort and security; in the second, it suggests threat, restraint, violence. The flatness of everyday events—"I drove to work," "I typed envelopes"—is undercut by a frightening intimation of disruption and loss. Beneath the fabric of these mundane events lies a deep sense of violation and betrayal, revealed more by the troubled replaying of events than by the straightforward depiction of what happened. An abstract work that powerfully suggests the fragmentation and reworking of memory and perception, the tape extends structural techniques beyond games of intellectual manipulation to evoke a painful and confusing process of emotional denial and realization.

*A Videotape by Joanne Kelly.*  
*Voice: Joanne Kelly*  
*Technical Assistance: Skip Sweeney*  
*Facility: Video Free America*  
*Special Thanks to Jono Miller.*  
*Copyright 1974.*

### **Indigenous** (1972)

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

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



*He saw me  
We walked  
down the road*



# Biography



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

Kelly has a strong interest in broadcast television, beginning with an apprenticeship with **Dance in America** (WNET-TV, 1975). She has produced and directed performing arts specials for public television, including **Images of Modern Dance** (KQED-TV, 1981), **Four Dances for Television** (KQED-TV, 1982), **New Performances** (KQED-TV, 1985), **Video Free America Presents** (KQED-TV, 1987), **New Video:**

**San Francisco Artists on Television** (KQED-TV, 1988) and **Armchair Video Art** (KQED-TV, 1989, 1990). She has also worked on KPIX-TV's **Evening Magazine** as a field engineer (1977) and as a segment producer for National PBS's **Good Morning, Mr. Orwell** (1984).

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

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

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



*For distribution information:*

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