



# *nac news*

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MAY • JUNE 1998



# grass and grids

an interview with Lois Andison

*Carolyn Pinder interviewed Lois Andison on Sunday March 15th at NAC with follow up correspondence via e-mail.*

**Carolyn:** Maybe we can start by describing the work here at NAC.

Lois: There are three pieces in the gallery.

**Are they separate pieces, and not to be read together?**

They are separate; however, there is an interconnectedness between the works. The title of the show, 'famished', runs as a central metaphor through all three works. The smallest work in the gallery is a wall piece - a lantern that is made from glass tubing filled with oil, in the shape of the word, 'famished'. There is a wick at the beginning of the tube, at the 'f', and a wick at the end of the tube, at the 'd'. When the wicks are lit, the piece feeds off itself and the whole idea is that the body is consuming itself. It is so internalized.

**Of course, it's burning at both ends.**

Exactly. In the video piece entitled 'Maria's story', my intention was to have a woman speaking about memories of her life, her childhood, and as she speaks her voice is overridden by the voice of a

This page: Detail from *untitled (floor piece)*, installation, 1998.

Opposite: Still from *Maria's Story*, video projection, 1998.

All photos by Ernest Harris Jr.

male narrator. His relationship to the woman is ambiguous as he is never physically present in the video yet he consumes her voice and her story. He stifles her. This was the first time I didn't write my own narrative. I gave both actors the intention of the piece and expressed my concerns, and then asked them to work with the concept. I suggested they do something fictional or semi-autobiographical.

Both of them decided to use material from their own lives which was interesting because it brings an authenticity to the work. I had put them in a difficult position, yet it was also an act of trust to have the actors come up with their own material. In the end, what I found most interesting was how differently the male and female characters came across.

**I think it is really interesting that we are staring at a video of a woman telling her story. The picture, being visual, forces us to scrutinize her physical appearance, her gestures, the way she moves her eyes. I know she is telling her story to us, but we watch her while we listen to him. We study her physical being, which as a society we tend to do to women. When I was listening and looking at the piece, I wanted to hear her, but because of the tone of the man's voice, I couldn't help but hear his voice over hers.**

That was what I was trying to achieve, but because everything is shot or recorded separately, (the background was shot in my studio, Maria was shot on a blue screen etc.), I had this sense of uncertainty about how it would all come together. For the post-production, I was working at Charles Street Video editing with Kelly Morris, and I was feeling pretty vulnerable. I thought, *Oh My God, what am I trying to communicate? Will these layers ever come together or are they too disparate to make a coherent narrative?* And in some way Kelly had to have faith in what I was doing and I had to have faith in him because as an editor he knew the technical possibilities and had input as well. What was really great was that he did connect with it. In the final editing we were discussing how we were straining to hear Maria and how he kept moving closer and closer to the monitor to hear her. I think the viewer resides in the space in between.



**The superimposition of the male and female in the video is very**

obvious, but I see it in the other pieces as well.

Yes. I am also aware of the contradictions happening in all the pieces.

**And what about the large moving installation?**

The floor piece is quite large; it is an 8' X 12' mechanized metal armature filled with grass. This kinetic bed moves slowly back and forth, the grass rising and falling - a field of grass whose move-

"...when one works with mechanical things - you are always dealing with the synchronization of elements. In the end it's logic - it doesn't matter how emotional you get. Yet you think, *Oh my God, it's not working.*"

ments are totally dependent on the machine, totally mediated. There is an absurdity in the enormity of the effort it takes to replicate this natural act. In the same way Maria's voice is constricted metaphorically and we have to struggle to hear her, there is and was this struggle to make the grass rise and fall. There is so much slippage that happens when one works with mechanical things - you are always dealing with the synchronization of elements. In the end it's logic - it doesn't matter how emotional you get. Yet you think, *Oh my God, it's not working. It's not going to work.*

**You have another job besides your artwork, you work as a multimedia graphic artist. Do you think that the technology that you work with on a daily basis has had an influence on your decision to work on a mechanical piece of this scale?**

Yes, I think that had a lot to do with the impetus behind the work. There is this huge force in technology to simulate the everyday experience and replace it. Images are modified and environments are simulated. I work on the computer all day long channelling information and reconstructing reality. It's been hard for me to adjust to the computer - in so many ways the computer denies your body. Everything we used to do by hand is now digitized and the hand and the body erased. I think the piece is a reaction to this predicament. To express this mitigation, I am simulating the mundane. It is one of the paradoxes in the show.

Opposite: *Untitled (floor piece)*, installation, 1998.

**When I first entered the gallery and saw this piece from across the room, to me, it was commanding some kind of reverence to nature, maybe because it appears to be bowing down. And then as I approached it, it became obvious that it is a contraption**

that is causing it to do genuflecting. And I'm sure you'll agree the mechanism is not hidden from the viewer. Once you get up close to the piece, you can't help but to have a new found reverence not for nature but for the workings of the machine. And I can read realization as an extension of your experience working with the new technology of the multimedia graphics industry. But, then I also see it as a gender statement. I see this large rectangular grid contraption, which is beyond me. I mean I understand the basics of the mechanics, but I could never conceive or begin to build something of such a magnitude. I wouldn't know where to begin. I've been scripted as a woman to make other kinds of art based on my gender. Was that a challenge for you?

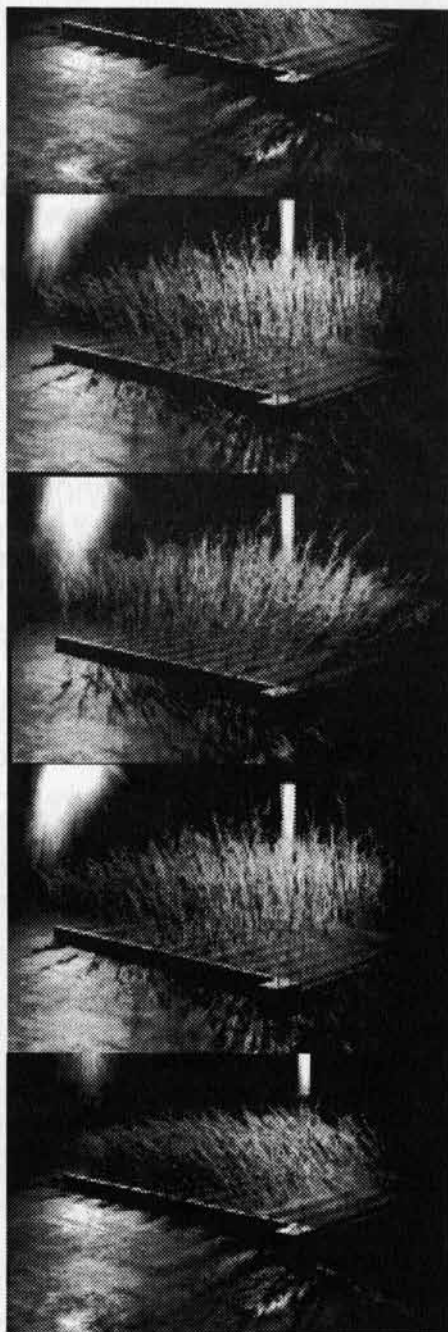
An incredible challenge. The hardest part of course was the mechanics. I worked with a friend of mine, Paul Cahill - he's the brains behind how the armature moves. Inevitably he became seduced by the mechanics. He even said, "Oh no, you're not going to put that damn grass in there." But that's the piece... that's the piece, the grass! The mechanical operation is just to get the grass to move - to provide the experience.

**I see the kinetic piece as a physical collaboration between the genders, Paul and yourself - the grid and grass. Correct me if you think that is wrong.**

I want to show you the original drawings that I did. I knew that the armature had to be based on a grid. The upright rods which fit into the horizontal bars form an arch. Symmetry and repetition. What I didn't know was how to attached all the horizontal rods together and then find a system to make them move with some randomness. That was beyond my experience.

Paul worked out a structure using different size gears with idlers and a chain. The chain turns the gears. The smallest gear at the back moves the least and the front gear the most.

**Have you used grass in your work before?**



I made a grass bed at York University which I used in a performance piece. Conceptually, I was exploring the mother/daughter paradigm and the move from rural to urban space. I had written this elaborate prose poem which was spoken between myself and another woman who was laying in the bed. When you bring raw materials into an industrial space, it takes on a resonance - again the juxtaposition. My work isn't site specific but the gallery in some ways impacts on what I'm going to make. The rawness of the space here at NAC and the regional aspect of this gallery, had an influence on the work I produced.

"I've internalized living in the country, growing up on a farm. Being alone a lot, you internalize a lot of things. In some ways it manifests itself and I am always surprised at the rural aspect of my work."

I grew up in a rural space but I've lived my mature life in the city so I am always dealing with my past. I've internalized living in the country, growing up on a farm. Being alone a lot, you internalize a lot of things. In some ways it manifests itself and I am always surprised at the rural aspect of my work.

**But it makes so much sense to me if you grew up on a farm. The kinetic piece is very physical, probably because it is physically moving and I hold my position about its statement about the genders.**

Yes definitely that is part of it. There is a marriage of elements taking place. Socially you have to look at the predicament of gender scripting in terms of technology - who does what. There is also the integration of the poetic with something very mechanical, and most people would see that as a gender relationship. As well, there is the juxtaposition of materials and structures.

**Carolyn: The video piece is a social comment about the genders more than a physical comment. We are looking at Maria but we listen to Andrew who overrides anything she says. Not that we totally focus on what he says either especially for someone like me who has Attention Deficit Disorder. Maybe we all have ADD. So it seems like a more social comment.**

Opposite: *Famished*,  
Installation, 1998.

I am addressing social issues. Why is that voice heard over this voice, why are the majority of voices heard and in power male? Whose story gets erased? I was trying to apprehend this social dynamic and present it in a way that wasn't too didactic.

**Is his voice actually recorded louder than hers?**

Marginally, but I think it is the tone of his voice that dominates.

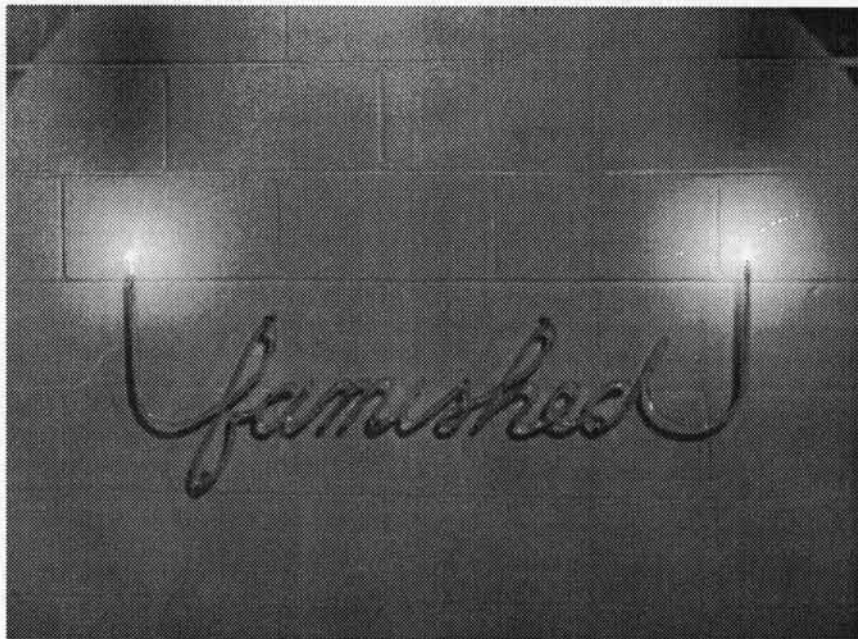
**I actually think he sounds like one of those anonymous voices that narrates a video at the science centre. It's one of those voices, you know, when you put on the head phones and it commands you to learn about cell division or the life of the amoeba.**

When we were mixing the voice-over Kelly and I were thinking, *Oh my God, Listen to him!* The gender differences came across really strongly. I didn't expect that. The way she speaks about her memories and how he speaks are very different. Hers is more considered and there is more of an emotional investment. I was very surprised at how Andrew ended up coming across because his voice was very monotone and terse. He would talk about things and I wanted to break out and laugh but these were serious matters.

**And in the 'famished' piece, which I just love, I see the lantern piece as spiritual- the opposite ends burning and being of one thing. The word famished is an interesting word to use.**

Lois: It's pretty loaded, right?

**I feel it in my gut. It's really loaded. And the fact that it is burning at both ends is beautifully visceral. Even though it is as well, very arduous.**



When you use glass you are also dealing with its physical properties. You worry about it breaking. With this piece there was also the difficulty of filling it with oil and transporting it here. When I applied for the Canada Council grant I thought about doing a series of glass pieces but 'famished' was the only word that really fit the idea. It is actually the embodiment of the definition.

**I've read your work about gender, but more generally maybe it is about the dualism of life, the yin and the yang, the opposites coming together. The thought of the rural and urban, glass tubing and wheat, large contraptions and grass, men and women, seems to make a lot of sense to me.**

I'd like to end the interview with the title of the show. Although all three pieces are equally strong, I am drawn to the lantern. It is gut wrenching to me. When I heard the title and you described your work to me, I wondered how the word famished related to the kinetic piece and the video.

I think there is an insistence in that piece - in the grass rising and falling. Whatever form the insistence comes in, it is present. There is the dryness of the grass and a sparseness, and this grass is dependent on the machine that controls its movement. It is in the lantern as well. It is a lament. In 'Maria's story' her voice is suppressed, she's not heard - someone else is in control. You can look at the idea of famished in many different ways, but the idea in the lantern is that it gets to a point when it feeds off itself; it is consuming itself.

**I was raised in a strong Christian home and we used to sing the hymn, "Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning . . ." The lantern is a strong symbol in Christian iconography. Your piece has turned that symbol upside down or maybe inside out. If the lantern is left to burn, the two ends are fighting for the same oil and each end is depleted by the other. By making the lantern in the shape of the word 'famished', I am left with an emotional response of extreme grief and sorrow for the universal insatiable hunger. What does the word famished mean to you?**

I think there is that aspect of your power being taken away coupled with an insistence to persevere. It's that lump in your throat because that's the space where you are most affected. It is not a space of resolve, it is the space in-between. I see it as an internal famished. I'm struggling for something and it is not without compromises.

*The artist would like to acknowledge the generous support of The Canada Council for the Arts, The Ontario Arts Council, Trinity Square Video and Charles Street Video. The artist acknowledges the efforts of Paul Cahill, Orest Tataryn, Gary Blakeley, Maria Lamont, Andrew Scorer, Kelly Morris and Andrey Berezowsky in the works in this exhibition.*