

Delicate boundaries

“How close do you want to be? How far apart do you want to be?” These are some of the vocal musings of Vancouver artist Kate Craig in her 12-and-a-half-minute video, *Delicate Issue*. This work was on view March 27 – June 1 at the Ottawa Art Gallery as part of *Shifts and Transfers*, an exhibition of 22 video-based works by 18 Canadian artists. Curator Nicole Gingras states in the exhibition catalogue that these works were selected for their examination of the “suspension of activity required for observation.”¹ Using the medium of time, they slow down our seeing to remind us of the minute experiences that channel memory and thus identity. Gingras reinforced this exhibition experience by installing the works as alcoves of private places carved into the public spaces of the gallery.

Kate Craig’s *Delicate Issue*, the subject of this review, was created in 1979 when video was a relatively new medium for artists. It is recognized by many video historians as a seminal work and remains at the forefront of contemporary aesthetic discussion on personal identity and social perception. Craig’s video opens with the question, “What is the developing line between the public and the private?” The camera, held by her husband, Hank Bull, zooms in on her body, magnifying, for example, hairs and skin pores, which become abstract and nameless. All the while, the artist’s intimate tone of voice, in unison with the soft camera movements, poses questions about personal boundaries and seeing. There is a timeless authenticity to *Delicate Issue* that, while inspirational, has never been equalled. It is not a clinical examination of body parts, as some more recent works have attempted. Neither is it sexual, although it contributed to feminist discourse in the 1970s. It is a video about the thought or impulse that bridges action and seeing. It challenges us to see how our physical positioning in space affects what we see and how this affects personal identity. To reinforce

this debate, the artist intermittently prompts us with questions such as, “At what distance does the subject read?” This open and emotionally affecting approach perhaps helps viewers recognize at what point they feel too close or at a comfortable distance in the presence of her body. In these ways, this video is accessible to those who are new to this art medium.

As the video progresses, Craig’s voice continues to accompany the slow but sometimes not-so-subtle movements of the camera: “Who is in the frame, who is willing to be in the frame, who is willing to watch the frame?” Posed to her husband holding the camera, or to the viewer, these questions also raise the issue of the role of different media in framing, or defining, individual and social identity. In spite of the intimacy established by the voice and body of the artist, the viewer is at times reminded of the intermediary presence of the camera. At one point, part of the camera lens is pressed against the skin, creating a horizon line much as a painter might create perspective in a landscape.

Although Craig produced *Delicate Issues* more than two decades ago, it remains fresh in its involvement of the viewer. For some, it may evoke feelings of discomfort over whether to remain, look away, or perhaps just hope no one else enters the viewing room. There is also a sense of being part of a “real-time” experience in this work as it alternately positions the viewer as participant and voyeur. In this way, the artist explores limitations in how we have been taught to see.

Kate Craig’s 1979 aesthetic investigation challenges us to not only recog-



Kate Craig, 1979. *Delicate Issue*. Video installation. Collection: Vancouver Art Gallery, donation of the artist.

nize the fragility of the “developing boundary” between the personal and public, but to also accept responsibility for the way we position ourselves in relation to the “other.” Although it was created in the era when “body politics” were topical for artists and feminists, the notion of the “developing line” between public and private can also be read in the context of the pervasiveness of today’s electronic media. The Ottawa Art Gallery is to be commended for offering this rare opportunity to view this work, and for providing a forum for the creative work of Canadian video artists.

Kate Craig died of cancer in 2002. She was a founding member of the Western Front Society in Vancouver, a nonprofit organization renowned as an international centre for visual arts, video, performance, music, dance and poetry.

Sandra M. Hawkins

Interdisciplinary artist, writer, lecturer
Ottawa, Ont.

Reference

1. Gingras N. The art of seeing. In: *Shifts and Transfers: on some tendencies in Canadian video* [exhibition catalogue]. Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery; 2003. p. 1.