



**THE
ANTI-CHRIST
OF VIDEO:**

THE WORK OF
JOHN ORENTLICHER

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The Art School in The Art School

SPEAKING WITH THE ANTI-CHRIST

an interview with John Orentlicher

by Joanna Spitzner

Joanna Spitzner: Could you talk about how your interests have developed through your work as a video artist?

John Orentlicher: Initially, as I started working in the late 1960s, after having done some performance-related sculptural installations, I became aware of this technology that allowed you to record them, and you'd have a document, or you'd have some kind of an index of what had been performed. I had met some theatre students at the Art Institute of Chicago, and they were interested in these performances, too. One of the first things I started doing was working with a dancer. I just gave her guidelines, such as: 'You can do this, but you can't do this.' and 'Try to fill up the whole space, and you can only dance, or walk, or move where you've put this material down, and you're going to shape the environment by this activity.' I recorded it on a black and white, open-reel system. It wasn't portable then, it was one of the first generation of open reel video systems. It was a Shibaden, which was not compatible with any other video technology whatsoever.

After I got out of school and I moved to Michigan to start teaching, it became evident to me that there were social ways to use this technology to explore cultures and environments. Unlike film, which is so much more extensive, video had an immediacy about it. Even though it wasn't that portable, you could do a recording and look at it right away. And the person you were working with, if they agreed, could see it and they could interact with you about what they're doing. That became the way of thinking about the work. The subject matter was of interest because it was stuff that wasn't on television, material that the mass media didn't really want to address or think about—they were trying to create entertainment of a certain nature that was really geared toward a mass audience.

'Reality TV' didn't exist at that point. In a sense this predates a lot of today's technology, and what I think has happened is that this culture, over the years, has caught up to what artists were doing early on, which then, of course, negated what the artists were doing.



Plow, Skid, Drag, 1972.7:00 minutes.
Gemini Fire Extension,1971. 5:00 minutes.
black and white, 16mm films made with Andrew Lugg

For instance, I feel that way now about YouTube. Everyone is a video artist. Anyone who's got a camera phone, or any kind of a recording device that can make images, can put things up on the web. You could argue that it lessens the ideals of early video art.

JS: That work was about creating an alternative space, alternative representations.

JO: Yes. It was of people that were not being represented, who yet at the same time were very interesting people—as people—and they were involved in activities that were perhaps eccentric, but they were of interest. I thought they made subjects for strong images. I was still very much interested in image, and how that was going to work in someone's living room, or on a cable broadcast. That you could put these out—they didn't necessarily have to be in a gallery, or in an art museum—it had the potential to come into someone's home, or someone's private environment.

JS: Your work in the 1970s, and even “We Pay to Look Like This” and “About a Ton of Coal,” is about eccentric people. I'm wondering what is that role of ‘the outsider,’ besides providing an alternative view. There's always a chance of exploitation when you're showing something eccentric, because there's always a kind of a draw: ‘These people are funny.’

JO: But by the same token, they are absolutely committed to what they're doing, and wouldn't agree to be in a video if they didn't trust the person they were working with. And because it's video, they get to see what's being done. They can interact with it right away. It's not like I just disappear and they never see it. They were absolutely committed, and absolutely believed in what they were doing, and they wanted to share that. Some of them were, perhaps, awkward about talking on camera. But by-and-large they were very willing to share and give me access to their world, and invite me to come and do this. So I never felt that it was being exploitative.

People with a certain ideology, such as those in “We Pay to Look Like This,” —anybody who is anti-war would be horrified that these people are playing at war games. In fact, a lot of these people were veterans, and upon returning, felt very misunderstood and misaligned, because it wasn't a popular thing. Yet they had had the experience, and were living it out. And you could say ‘it's time to get



Things I Say, 1975. 4:00 minutes.
You Send Me, 1976. 15:00 minutes
black and white, NTSC.

past this, it's time to get over this,' but some of them clearly couldn't. It affected them, and they're still playing at it.

JS: Do you feel the videos were a document of the relationship you had between you and your subject(s), meaning people?

JO: Yes, that was part of it. I think also I was interested in the phenomena, in that there were people that formed these groups to explore, to participate, or to make, etc. I needed to somehow make connections with them, to allow them to feel like I was somebody that was reasonable, and that wasn't going to exploit them.

JS: In the work from the 1970s, such as "You Send Me," the relationship is between you and one other person. "We Pay to Look Like This" and "About a Ton of Coal" portray a group of people. How was it different, and what were the challenges, in thinking about collective groups vs. individuality?

JO: With the early black and white work, there was an intimacy there. Black and white, I think, lends itself to it. I think it puts another aesthetic layer on it and makes it more—I hate to say it, but—'artful' on some level. Whereas the color is just 'what it is,' and then it approaches voyeurism. It seems like I'm only working with one person a lot of the time, but in fact there were a lot of people behind the scenes. Most of the women I worked with had boyfriends who were very leery. I had to convince them that as a couple, or as a small group, that this was okay and that I was okay.

JS: Could you describe that work in the 1970s? You made several tapes primarily working with women.

JO: There are "You Send Me," "I Think I Like It," "Things I Say" and some others. In "Things I Say," Lucinda Devlin is telling lies about how she got certain body scars. She is pointing, on her body—you don't ever see face—and she says, 'I got this scar when this happened, and then I got this one...' "I Think I Like It" is about women and how they felt about their buttocks, and they expose their bodies, and tell stories about that.

JS: How would you begin the relationship with the people you worked with?



We Pay To Look Like This, 1989
color, stereo, NTSC, 15:32 minutes

JO: I often knew the people, and they knew me as an artist, or otherwise. So it wasn't like I was approaching people right off the street, except in a few cases. They knew me, they sort of knew my work, and I would tell them about my idea, we would talk about it, and I would ask, 'Would you be willing to participate, are you interested?' And they'd think about it and agree or not. The woman in "You Send Me" was a performer at a club here. And back in that period, it was a topless club because they weren't allowed to be completely nude in Syracuse. I had heard about her because she did this thing with pythons. So I went down and saw her perform a couple of times, and talked to her. Her boyfriend was a crazy, he had some personal issues. He had met her when she was very, very young, like 18, and got her into the business. I don't know what their relationship was like, and I really didn't care. But it turned out that they lived near me on North Geddes Street. It took a while to do that tape—to get her to be okay with it, and to get him on board. And he was around when the taping was going on.

There were a number of early tapes made when I lived on Geddes Street, when I first moved to Syracuse. I started going out and meeting with people and going to clubs. I had done some work in Michigan, too—the "She + She" and "2+1+1." I had made a video about spousal abuse, "Under His Thumb," in which one woman has a little dog in her lap, and keeps rubbing her thigh, and talking about her abusive husband. So I had already started in this direction, but I think it intensified when I got to Syracuse. I shot the video of "Because It's My Image, Watchin' the Leatherman" and sent the footage to Tom Sherman. He did some of the writing for it and some other tapes. It was a pretty good time, and there were a lot of things going on.

JS: I'm wondering about your position as a man, working with women, and often, it's about some aspect of sexuality. What is your relationship to feminism, or what have you learned from feminism?

JO: I was aware of it. Certainly, I was involved with people who were interested in feminism, and I'm not aware that I was anything but sympathetic. I think, in relationship to the work: yes, there is a visual interest, there is an image, there is sexuality and tension.

JS: But, for example, addressing the argument in Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," do you think that you are doing something different from how she describes the way that images of women are used?



About A Ton of Coal, 1988
color, stereo, NTSC, 13:00 minutes

JO: I'm not convinced I am. But, in my work there is no punchline, there is no resolution. Things are often just left hanging. And you walk away, as a viewer, with your own thoughts: 'I'm really pissed off because this guy did this, said this, that he was doing this to these women.' In a sense, there is no 'money shot,' as in pornography. There is a vague environment that is created, and you're caught in this kind of tension, which is what I was interested in. I just thought the medium was so powerful. Video is able to create this kind of visual, aural tension, to put you in an environment that other forms, such as painting and sculpture, couldn't do. Because you could deal with time, and evolve something, it felt like a very powerful medium. But what was once interesting, and avant-garde, or progressive, has become usurped by all contemporary media, and everyone can do it now. It is really hard to bring that sort of thing to an 'art experience.'

JS: I think new media has embraced the egalitarian ideas of early video, but that might be where the similarity ends. In your work, there is a sense of duration, and a tension is built out of a longer image, or a slow unfolding of a story, or through fragments that the viewer has to put together. That's very different from the kind of clarity and quick pace of a lot of popular new media.

JO: Right. I think that forces anyone who is watching, who wants to participate—either they're interested or they get really angry. It is about creating this kind of space, this tension, but again, it doesn't resolve, and I think people don't like non-resolution. I've had, in some ways, more difficulty with "Cantadas" because it doesn't resolve itself. People are sometimes incensed that these people weren't punished for doing this, or they just couldn't accept the fact that it happened so long ago and it's never going to be resolved. That really upset some people, it was just amazing to me.

JS: Is that what drew you to that story? Or stories, I guess, because it's about multiple narratives. Or was it the place?

JO: It was the place, and it was the story that was built on a myth. No one really knows what exactly happened. I found it interesting that it wasn't resolvable, even though I knew there were people trying. When I started doing the work, I learned a great deal more about it, but it was still clear that it wasn't going to get resolved. The evidence had disappeared, they didn't have DNA. All they could do was surmise, 'This is what we think happened, and we don't know.'

This happened a long time ago, so the people involved were dead. It was a very intriguing story, and it was a very hard place to get to, and that was part of it for me, the allure.

That is something that you haven't asked me about, and I think it's something very important, something I'm very much interested in: that the artist puts his or herself, their body, into the work. I need to go to the places, I need to put myself, a physical body, into these spaces to experience it and to understand it, and then put something together out of that. It is a modernist idea, it's not a postmodern idea, where everyone is working with data. They are mining data from all over, and they don't leave their living room or their computer table. I have to be there. I have to travel to the place myself, physically, to these spaces. And so in my work, I often say, 'Taped on Location,' and for me that is a critical thing, that I have actually been in that space, and I've made the images there.

JS: In your videos there are a lot of walking, moving, and handheld shots. Are those indicators of your presence?

JO: Yes. And I do that intentionally. I'm trying to put you in that space to the extent that I can. That aspect is much more present in the recent work.

JS: Alongside the lack of resolution in your videos, how have you explored alternative narratives? When we think of narrative, we think of the classic beginning, middle, end, with a resolution. There are alternatives to that structure, which much video art explores.

JO: I think that there are elements of storytelling in the work. Certain tapes, like "Cantadas" and "3 X Named," which is about my adoption, have a very narrative structure. But the other ones are not so concrete. I think there's a story, but it is not necessarily told in a linear fashion. The story is implied, or there are bits and pieces and you've got to put it together. I was never really trying to write a story, I never write scripts. I write notes, and I try to figure it out. I start with an idea of what I'm doing, but it's not clear how it is all going to end. It really starts to come together in the editing. When I've looked at and logged all the tape I think about how I am going to make sense of this to somebody who will see it. I really do try to imagine someone watching it, how's this going to unfold for them. And to that extent, there is a narrative, because I'm concerned about how a viewer is going to get through the experience.

JS: There are open spaces within the work. You are asking the viewer to participate.

You have done work about the city, which tends to be more about desire, and then you have work about rural environments, which includes “Cantadas” and most of the work in Chile, as well as “About a Ton of Coal” and “We Pay to Look Like This.” I’m wondering what draws you to these rural areas. Does it allow you to explore technology and its impact? For example, in “Wave Cycle,” it is about a small town, but it’s about this stream of information, and about modern technology (radio) and the area turning to that.

JO: “Wave Cycle” is not shot in a small town, that is a very large province, the area is bigger than Texas. The radio is covering all of that. And what I’m simply doing is looking at interiors—living rooms and living environments—where that sound and information is coming into.

“Night Walking” and “Coffee with Legs” are definitely about urban phenomena. Those are very much about quoting Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* as a resource to focus the viewer to have some inkling about the voyeur, or about looking from a distance. There is surveillance and voyeurism, but also tension about this sexuality and looking.

The rural work is very much about my interest in agrarian ideas, and the struggles of people that that kind of landscape imposes on them. I see it as very different from the urban landscape. There is work that I’d done down in Punta Arenas, way at the tip of Chile. The tape made in Huasteca, Mexico was very much about the transition from working in the country to working in the city. It is about realizing that by playing music one can make three times, in one night, than one can make in a month digging potatoes out of the field. In this country we certainly experienced that, but I think that people lost sight of it. For example, the migration from the South up to Detroit, up to the ‘Industrial North.’ That is not as true now, but in the early 20th century, that was that same transition. African Americans came up out of the South, ended up in the industrialized North, and that changed the complexity of our culture.

JS: And even earlier, in the 1800s, there was a Jeffersonian agrarian culture, and when industrialization began there was some resistance to it.



Cantadas, 2003
color, stereo, NTSC, 29:30 minutes

JO: Those were the underlying things that I'd experienced when I was in Chile because I had been thrown back into this very agrarian environment.

JS: This was when you were in the Peace Corps, in 1964?

JO: Yes. I thought "What the fuck's going on here?" because I grew up in an urban environment, in Washington, DC. But I began to appreciate the complexity of that situation, and the government's ability to respond to it. It just opened my eyes. After two years I finally understood the problems from a perspective that I probably would not have ever understood had I not gone there.

JS: When did you go back to Chile?

JO: I didn't go back until Pinochet had stepped down. The first time I went back was in 1991. I went to look around and I did a project in the far southern part, where I had been a Peace Corps volunteer. I also spent some time in Santiago on that trip, and I got to know some people, and they encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright, which I received in 1993. With that, I returned and I lived there for a half a year and the summers. That was a different kind of experience. I have gone back a couple more times to do projects. I think the critical trip was in 1991, when I revisited some of the people that I had worked with in 1964 and who were still alive. I went to re-touch base with them as an adult.

When I was there before I was 20 years old. I went to just catch up, and I'm glad I did, because shortly after that, most of them had passed away. They were quite elderly.

JS: Was there a certain amount of nostalgia in going back? I think we have nostalgia for the rural and also for our own past.

JO: I don't think it was nostalgia. I just wanted to touch base, from a different perspective, and with the idea that I might make work about it. What I was trying to do when I was there as a kid was to get this area opened up. For six months of the year, it was closed because it had no bridges, and the rivers would flood and they couldn't ford them, they were too big. And they would have to stay in. People there would have to stock up for six months and get through the Spring-Winter thaw before they could get out again.



Cantadas, 2003
color, stereo, NTSC, 29:30 minutes
Sendas Huasteca: Huapangos, 2006.
color, stereo, NTSC, 28:30 minutes

My work there with the Peace Corps was about building roads and building big enough bridges that could be used year-round. I had been following the place from a great distance and I wanted to go back after the Pinochet left.

The first video I made there was very much about ‘the road,’ because that was what I had worked on there. I knew that the military, under Pinochet—not out of any concern for the people, but out of military concern—had approved the road. He did so because they had border wars, skirmishes with Argentina in that sector, so they were trying to make sure they could get their ground military there. But the side effect was that the people benefited from getting the road. That is what the tape “Conflations of Memory” is about.

Some of the people actually said ‘You came, and then you left.’ They were upset because we left and they hadn’t forgiven me for that. Other people heard I had gotten killed in Vietnam. I never went to Vietnam. It was hardly nostalgic, it was weird. I brought a college student from Santiago with me. She had studied journalism and had been recommended to me, and she did some driving and taping. The people there didn’t want to talk to her because ‘She’s from Santiago,’ or they would tell her ‘You stay up in the kitchen, women don’t come out here.’

JS: Can you describe the region?

JO: It is a very rural area. It is called the Aisén province, it is the next-to-last province from the tip of the continent. It has characteristically very high, rugged, snow-capped mountains, ice fields, and very narrow valleys. There is some pasture that was made by mass burning. In 1900, the Germans came in and tried to create pasture land, and the fire went out of control. They burned down this huge Ponderosa Pine forest. The tree stumps and logs are still strewn everywhere. People are cutting those up for firewood and fuel and then clearing pastures. Latin American countries are notoriously centralized; the capital cities draw everybody in. The way the area was settled was they told people from the Northern cities who had trouble with the law to go down there and then they wouldn’t have to serve a prison sentence.

So it had that kind of edge about it. People are pretty private, pretty suspicious. They can be a little rough-around-the-edges in places, and they are not terribly educated. But slowly, little towns began to develop and the law and order did come to some.



Wave Cycle/Onda Ciclia, 1996
color, stereo, NTSC. 11:20 minutes

When I first moved to the village that I was in, they had no police there at all. People were getting shot up in the hills, so they decided they were going to bring in police. The police started arresting people, and dragging them out of the hills, and then things started to calm down a little. It was kind of a frontier area. When I went back I simply wanted to see what in that 20 years had really changed, how had things progressed, how had they reshaped the villages. Had the road really been put in? How did it influence the place? By and large, they all said, 'Yes, we're doing better, things are better. But Santiago still doesn't give us enough money. They still don't pay enough attention to us.'

JS: I know you have an interest in how technology develops and its impact on society. So, this would seem like it's a great area for you to explore these ideas.

JO: Yes. In some ways, they jumped over a lot of technology that other countries evolved through. They could just jump over it because they were never committed to that kind of infrastructure, or they hadn't committed resources to do things a certain way. Cell phones are very big there now, because it's very simple and hard lines would have been impossible to put in. The distances were too great, they couldn't have hard-wired phone lines, so cell phones make sense. Satellite TV makes a great deal of sense there, and that's what they're doing. Transportation is another problem. They will never resolve that completely because it's such a rugged environment and the weather is so difficult. Roads are always going to be gravel roads, because if they get fucked up you can fix it fast. They're not going to bother paving them. It is too young a country, and it is too violent. They have earthquakes there, they have huge snowfalls, and ice dams. But other technology is built, such as in "Wave Cycles," which was about that development of technology. Now, I'm sure it is much more sophisticated there.

JS: Can we talk about surveillance and your interest in it? I imagine it connects to the idea of imaging technology. You use surveillance in "Nightwalking," "Coffee with Legs," and in "Stable." In that video you see the four-camera footage, and an association I make is to Foucault's 'Panopticon,' to some kind of authority watching. This happens more so in "Stable" than in "Nightwalking" and "Coffee with Legs" because of the shorter distance between the surveillance camera and the subject in those.



Night Walking, 1999
color, stereo, NTSC. 11:30 minutes

JO: Part of it is driven by the technology. I'm interested in the ability to have simultaneous points of view, as in "Stable." People have told me that was very difficult to read the images. I didn't have that problem, but I also set up the system. I think the other tapes, where I use the small surveillance cameras, came out of this notion of the voyeur, who's in the crowd but is not part of the crowd. I located myself in these environments, but at the same time, I was holding back from it. I wasn't participating in the same way that other people in the environment were. I thought I was causing some tension there.

JS: There is a distance. To me, surveillance always feels a little creepy to watch, because you are in the place of the voyeur.

JO: Yes, but in some cases, like "Coffee with Legs," it's very non-intrusive, because the camera was in a bag and simply set on the floor. In "Nightwalking" it is much more difficult because the camera is right in front of the woman.

JS: In "Nightwalking," you manipulated the video more than in any other of your works. There is a lot of overlaying, and the soundtrack is very abstract.

JO: When I was doing that piece Jimmy Rahn was very interested in it, and I asked him to mix the sound and play with it. I was getting some weird sounds, and I wasn't interested in just making straight cuts. He said he really wanted to mess with it, and I thought he came up with some pretty nice audio.

JS: So you were responding to that audio when you edited?

JO: Yes. Jimmy and I worked together on it. I wanted to create a track that accentuated certain kinds of sound, and Jimmy had some ideas. We put in some voiceover in of these girls talking about their jobs. It wasn't musical, it was a collage of these different sounds. It is a different piece, it stands out in that way.

JS: Another aspect to your work is role of technology, which I think is related to the surveillance camera. There is the potential for instrumentalization in the relation of objects to subjects. For example, in "Stable," there is a medical procedure going on, and this is also in "Neurite," which shows a brain surgery, and "Misaligned Shafts," which is about vibrators.



More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses.



Coffee with Legs/Café con Piernas, 2002.
color, black & white, stereo, NTSC
14:40 minutes.

Your work has very neutral sorts of views. You're often not doing a voiceover, we don't see you, even though there's the indication of your presence.

JO: I've never put myself in my work. It is me looking, experiencing, so the camera is, in a sense, my eye. You're seeing it through that. I don't need to speak on camera.

JS: But when we see these medical procedures, it is very uncomfortable. I associate it with some of the discomfort I feel with surveillance. It is about this technology enacting itself onto people—and I'm putting the animal—the horses—in that role, too. What are your interests in this scientific rationalization?

JO: I'm interested in that imposition on the body. I think the interest with the medical procedures is that we claim that we have these technologies, or that we can 'fix it,' but it is difficult in that it doesn't always work. The brain surgery tape, for me, started from a very personal perspective; I lost my mother to this. So I was curious to experience what that looked like, and what that felt like. It is that sort of imposition of technology and human knowledge on the body.

JS: A kind of disciplining, I'm thinking more in Foucault's terms.

JO: I'm not thinking in theory at all. With "Stable," it's very much about that kind of thing. But those apparatus made for strong images. That footage is all handheld, and I'm trying to get in there and look at this, and yes, it's edgy. But I knew after I saw it once it was an incredible image. I'm responding on the very gut level. It is powerful stuff, when you shove your hand down some horse's throat.

JS: Or take a power drill to its teeth?

JO: Yes, because we all don't like the drill at the dentist. There are some things that are built into this. I have that same visceral response.

JS: Because it's so visceral, it allows us to actually see this enacting of a system on a body. That happens in more subtle and invisible ways in some of your other explorations in the relation of people to technology, or even the freedom people find in being eccentric, there's this tension between control and freedom. This may be forced, but I'm trying to make connections throughout your work.



Stable, 2007.
color, stereo. 9:29 minutes

JO: Are you saying you think it's exploitative, or just makes it uncomfortable for you?

JS: It is uncomfortable, but I think that is part of what you are exploring.

JO: In part, I am. But I'm also, through my own intuitive sense, working with these technologies. I understand a strong image when I see a strong image. I'm pulled to that, I can't help that, and that's in part why I did it. In "Misaligned Shafts" — I don't know how to talk about that one as much. I enjoyed the tape, and I enjoyed the history of what starts out as medical procedure for treating hysteria in women.

JS: But it becomes a history of the vibrator in an institutional setting.

JO: In part it does that. But they don't do the water cannon or the douche therapy anymore, it is now disguised as massage device for the upper body. Originally, it was designed for the clitoral, vaginal area. There was this real history there. I was having fun with it, too. It was big in the 1980s.

JS: "Stable" does connect to some of that work, even though in the 1990s and 2000s, you were exploring place, and in parallel the idea of the commodity. There is moving through space and experiences.

JO: I'm always going to be moving, I'm not sitting around, that's just not the way I work. That is very important to me. I don't think I could ever have made work where I was just in a studio. It just made more sense that way, to be out, into some place.

JS: So it is always a relation to the world, not an interior exploration.

JO: Yes, it is a relationship to the world, and in that relationship, some of those ideas get explored. But I'm not trying to resolve it, I think that is where the difficulty is.

JS: Okay. I'm going to stop now.



girl ask whoever hears this to tell the Chigua

