

THIRZA CUTHAND IN CONVERSATION WITH NICOLE GINGRAS

FIFA EXPERIMENTAL - FOCUS THIRZA CUTHAND



Courtesy of Vtape, image from *Reclamation* (2018), © Thirza Cuthand

N.G. – When did you make your very first video or Super-8 film?

T.C. – I made my first video in 1995, it was *Lessons In Baby Dyke Theory*. I had made a couple of other videos before then as part of a school project, but this was my first video specifically for festivals.

N.G. – What was this video about? And in which context was it done?

T.C. – The video was about being a teenage lesbian in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and how there were no other visible lesbians in my age group because they were closeted. I made it with a couple of friends doing two of the voices, and by manipulating a collection of dolls made out of pipe cleaners and coloured foam. I was sixteen years old when I made it and even though I was very obviously queer, I was also a little closeted at school for safety reasons. But this video went on to show in *The Fire I've Become* in Calgary, where some Alberta MLA heard the title and decided it was a queer recruitment video. I think that festival lost their funding. They also outed me by putting my name in the papers. I don't think anyone ever told them they were attacking a teenager.

N.G. – This must have been quite a strange and disturbing debut for you!

Over the years, you've developed a very rich body of work based on voice, voice-over narration and storytelling and, also as a performer or speaking body in front of the camera. In one work after another, you're addressing various ideas and concerns which we'll talk about.

It seems to me that the strength of your work rests on your ability to shift roles. In *My Sister* (1996), a collaboration with Danielle Ratzlaff, the video following *Lessons In Baby Dyke Theory*, you're addressing important questions related to disability and singularity. You're also engaged in a conversation with someone else, which is rare in your work.

I find *My Sister* quite troubling because of the intimacy between the two characters. If you reflect back on your work, do you think that your use of voice and words has changed over the years?

T.C. – I think *My Sister* is one of the few videos (maybe the only one?) that I shot in dialogue with someone. We had edited our sisters together and then just had a conversation while we watched the video. There's something there that I didn't really explore later on, since the majority of my videos were based off of monologues. I think I was just very focused on having a singular voice as an artist and not willing to compromise by finding someone to collaborate with on an ongoing basis. It's maybe a side comment, but I've just not often found myself feeling open to collaborative relationships as an author of work. Which is funny because now as I've grown older and gotten larger budgets, my work often has required more collaborative relationships. But as for my voice, I think I also grew from speaking from one viewpoint to trying to think in a more community based way.



Courtesy of Vtape, image from *My Sister* (1996), © Thirza Cuthand

N.G. – Indeed, most of the time, we hear your voice. You lend it to the storyteller, the witness, the critical and lucid observer, sometimes as an ironic figure, sometimes a playful one, at the centre of each video or film.

You also use various speech strategies: oral tradition from the history of your family, autobiographical experiences, expository mode, confession, provocation. In so doing, the text – anchor of the narrative – becomes crucial and embodied.

I would be curious to hear from you how a text finds its way into your images? Or is it the other way around?

T.C. – Usually it begins as a text, and the images come after. It operated differently with *My Sister*, and to some degree with *Extractions* (2019). But generally every video starts out as a prose piece where I explore my thoughts around a subject. Afterwards I start jotting down images that I feel relate well to different sections.

N.G. – How different was the image and text relation with *Extractions*?

T.C. – With *Extractions* I think it was a mix of finding source material to work from with the stock footage, and using that to inform the monologue. I wasn't able to film resource extraction myself so I used stock mostly, except for the fertility drug scenes. I tried to speak to the main resource extractive industries in Canada or promoted by Canada. I seem to recall collecting a lot of footage before I sat down to do the monologue.

N.G. – Have you ever done any verbal improvisation as a voice-over? I'm asking this for two reasons: first, you are a strong performer with a good sense of timing; and second, the flow of words in your work is constant, really fluid. It's as if the text is endless. It gives a melodic tone to your speech and your narration, somewhere between music and litany, and it also attracts the listener's attention. It also seems to be an astute way of developing a connection or relationship between the viewer/listener and your work.

T.C. – I usually write all of my voice-overs, except for *Helpless Maiden Makes An "I" Statement* (1999) which was improvised, and *Manipulation/Dictation* (1999) which was also improvised. At the same time a lot of my voice-overs are written very quickly, like a stream of consciousness. So in a way it's close to improvised. I don't usually edit my monologues very heavily before recording them, they get edited with the video though. I've been slowly sliding more into performing and acting in my videos, which has sometimes required memorizing lines. I find that aspect difficult for anyone who hasn't been trained as an actor. Some of my videos have allowed room for actors to improvise, like *Through The Looking Glass* (1999) and *Reclamation* (2018), I find people can connect to characters and themes easier when they are given room to help create it in their head. I think it also helps them embody the character more. I'm curious about that idea, though, of improvising the voice-overs. I'm making a doc about my experience with IVF and how it didn't work out, and I tried to interview myself when the process was happening. It has more roots in standard documentary styles though than a purely improvised voice-over.

N.G. – One work of yours, *Madness in Four Actions* (2008), has no voice-over narration. In fact, it is the only one where we are not hearing or seeing you speak. It's not a silent film, despite the fact that you're not using your voice to provide the narrative. The images are quite evocative of various sounds and noises of the filmed scenes shown in loops. The soundtrack, based on music, is quite strong. A text appears on the screen; it is charged and quite informative about psychiatric treatments and the conditions in psychiatric institutions.

In the perspective of the focus on your work at FIFA, I find it quite important to explore, with this work, the shift from watching and listening to watching and reading, especially since we, as readers, usually read in silence. Despite its relative silence, *Madness in Four Actions* carries your voice differently. These words we are invited to read do resonate in one's head, very powerfully. How was *Madness in Four Actions* born?

T.C. – *Madness in Four Actions* came about because I wanted to make a video, but did not have access to a video camera at the time since someone broke mine. So I sourced footage from an older Hollywood film, *The Miracle Worker* (1962), starring Patty Duke, and turned it into a very performance art styled video. I also didn't have access to an audio recorder, so most of the sounds came from freesound.org or also from the NASA website for the Cassini space probe. The text came from a lot of anti-psychiatry texts I was reading by both ex psych patients and others critical of psychiatry. At the time I was recovering from a hospitalization that was very abusive, and I didn't feel like I was ready to use my own voice to talk about it.



Courtesy of Vtape, image from *Madness in Four Actions* (2008), © Thirza Cuthand

But I still wanted to talk about abuse in psychiatry, so I made this video to highlight the things I was thinking about and that were informing my feelings about that experience. I am not so anti-psychiatry now, but I am still critical of some of the dehumanizing aspects that can happen in those institutions.

I'm currently making a doc about my experience with IVF and how it didn't work out, and I tried to interview myself when the process was happening. It has more roots in standard documentary styles though than a purely improvised voice-over.

N.G. – Why a documentary?

T.C. – It's an experimental doc, so mostly in the same vein as a lot of my other work. In this instance it will be a hybrid with footage recorded when I was getting eggs retrieved, and footage from now when I talk about the end result and my options, along with visuals that just seem to make me think about the experience. Most of my autobiographical work is really documentary.

N.G. – I would like to go back to the way you express ideas: it is dense, compact. I recognize the approach of collage and a quite sophisticated assembling/editing process. It may sound paradoxical, but most of your videos are as dense as they are fluid. Would you comment on this?

T.C. – I think most of my videos are dense just because they are so short and I try to pack a lot into a small amount of time. Ha ha! maybe that sounds funny. I think it's just also the way I think as a neurodiverse person, I have multiple ideas at once that can often relate to each other, so it makes sense for me to play with them in my videos and try to express them that way. I think particularly in some of the newer works, they have gotten more complex in terms of coverage of intersecting issues.

N.G. – Let's go back to *Extractions* then. It's a powerful essay, very political in terms of the definition of a territory, resources (which obviously are not infinite), the place left to people, to whom the land and its resources belong, how many Indigenous people were and are being displaced, the destructive power of those who practice extractions.

The tension between text and image is quite clearly stated: the land as a body, filmed with a documentary eye, and, in parallel, your own convictions and contradictions expressed very bluntly as well as your personal experience of in-vitro fertilization. This is a lot in 16 minutes. I would like to discuss with you this idea of the land as a body, which is clearly addressed in *Extractions*. It is also present in two other works: *Reclamation* (2018) and *Thirza Cuthand is an Indian Within the Meaning of the Indian Act* (2017).

T.C. – I think the idea of the land as a body is something kind of inherent in Indigenous thinking and ways of being. We've always considered the land to be an animate being, to feel ourselves a part of it and with it as a community. I think also the fact that Indigenous bodies are also being "mined" in the child welfare system makes this particularly significant. I feel like ideas of ownership of "property" in regards to land has never sat right because of this sense of the land as its own being/body. I think it's a worthwhile exercise for settlers to consider their relationship with this place currently called Canada, how they relate to the land and if it's a territory or a body.

N.G. – There is a lot to be said about the land: whose land it is? How deep is our connection to the land? I remember being struck by this when I first saw *Homelands* (2010). *Homelands* is very impressive and eloquent; it's a patient journey going back to your ancestors both in America and in Scotland. And now, eleven years later, it's as if *Homelands* was prefiguring some ideas explored in more recent works of yours.

T.C. – *Homelands* was probably one of my earliest videos exploring what land means to the people who've inhabited it for so long, especially when colonization interrupts that relationship. I was hoping to get across the fact that both Indigenous people and Scottish people were colonized by the British. It's interesting though because in some ways Scottish people also came over to Canada and were involved in colonizing us here, so it's been an unusual relationship to have as someone with mixed heritage. But I think my interest in the land and how colonization has tried to change our relationship to it is just something that is always present in my head. I also find it interesting that I still wanted to connect with my Scottish roots when my Great Grandmother who came from Scotland is someone I never got to personally meet in her lifetime. I think it's a more uplifting film than say, something like *Extractions* which explores a lot of the darker parts of colonial extractivist policies here in Canada. At the same time there are elements of that in *Homelands*, like discussing being pushed onto land further North than our traditional territory.



Courtesy of Vtape, image from *Anhedonia* (1999), © Thirza Cuthand

N.G. – From *Anhedonia* (1999) to *Medicine Bundle* (2020) would you say that your narrative strategies have evolved over the years?

Do you see yourself as an observer, a storyteller, a passeur, a healer?

T.C. – I think of myself as a storyteller. My family had oral storytelling traditions. My Grandfather told us a lot of stories about our family history, things he didn't want to be forgotten, things that happened way back in the past but weren't told properly in the history books. I think of myself as trying to assert what our family and what my community knows to be true about things, at the same time knowing someone else could or has said contradictory things about it. For instance, there was a painting done by Kent Monkman of Poundmaker stopping the war chief from continuing to fight, but in real life my Great Great Grandfather was the war chief and had been injured and was being doctored at the same time this painting was supposed to be happening. My Mom got really upset about it because it wasn't true. I think Kent renamed the painting.

N.G. – Both your parents are artists. Do you see this as an advantage or a disadvantage for your own practice?

T.C. – I think having parents who are artists has been an advantage really. They were always supportive of my work, which I think would have confused a different set of parents. They were also a bit more permissive of me making more sexually charged work than I think parents who didn't understand what was going on in Queer Canadian art at that time. Like, sometimes when I was younger I would go see my Mom sit on panels and there would be artists making very Queer work on the panel with her, that was just part of growing up.



Courtesy of Vtape, image from *Medicine Bundle* (2020), © Thirza Cuthand

N.G. – I’ve noticed in some film/video credits you mention your mother’s name, meaning that you’ve been recording video or filming in her presence and, from time to time other members of your family. For example, in *Homelands*, you were travelling with your mother and another member of your family.

I guess I’m pointing at two things at the same time: the personal (the familial) and the political, both of which seem quite intertwined throughout your body of work.

Would you comment on this? How or when did the personal and the political mix or blend into each other?

T.C. – I think also since my Grandfather bought me my first camcorder that I used to make videos, there's just always been this sense of being seen and encouraged by my family. And my Mom did come with me on the trip to Scotland, and her and my cousin Deanna traveled with me around Canada and the States when we shot that part of the video. And sometimes I have helped her with her projects too. I think it's also just been a thing that my Mom and I talk with each other about our ideas for projects. It's nice having someone to bounce concepts around with. I also think since my parents have made such politically charged art works, it's just part of our lives. I kind of think there's not a way to be Indigenous in Canada, or probably anywhere, without inhabiting a political site.

N.G. – What do you wish for yourself in the near future?

T.C. – I guess what I wish for myself in the future is to continue making work, to continue challenging myself and posing questions. I think also something this pandemic has allowed me time to do is engage more with other work, other films, tv shows, experimental shorts. I'd like to keep some time set aside for watching and experiencing others' work.

N.G. – There are some important topics we’ve not touched upon during our conversation. One must be mentioned here: your interest in how medicine and magic operate across cultures. This crucial notion is subtly addressed in the last work in the program: *Medicine Bundle* (2020). Let me refer to your words to end this interview in an open manner:

“I’ve been raised with stories of the medicine men in my family. A bundle that was used successfully to heal people. Stories of bear spirits that took care of us. I don’t know about my Scottish side as much, but I did know some of the last names of my ancestors over there. Christianity brought to Scotland an end to widespread beliefs in folk magic, and persecution of the women practitioners. And in Canada, with my Great Great Grandfather, the things he was healed from and healing others were wounds from wars with the Canadian Government, and epidemics of smallpox and Spanish Flu that were threatening our family. My hope is that this work leads people to draw their own conclusions about spiritual, magical, medicinal histories.” Thirza Cuthand

Biographical note – Thirza Jean Cuthand was born in Regina, Saskatchewan (Canada) and grew up in Saskatoon. Since 1995, she has been making short experimental narrative videos and films about sexuality, madness, youth, love, and race, which have screened in festivals and in galleries internationally. She is of Plains Cree and Scots descent and a member of Little Pine First Nation, and she currently resides in Toronto.

This interview with artist Thirza Cuthand has been conducted by FIFA Experimental programmer, Nicole Gingras, from February 13 to March 15, 2021, via email exchange, as a companion to the Thirza Cuthand Focus at Le FIFA 39.

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Courtesy of Vtape, image from *Medicine Bundle* (2020), © Thirza Cuthand