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### Steve Reinke & James Richards: Disambiguation

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BY DAVID BALZER June 02, 2010 21:06

#### EDITORIAL RATING:

To July 3, Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat noon-4pm. Trinity Square Video, 401 Richmond W, ste 376. 416-593-1332. www.trinitysquarevideo.com

Outside the black curtains enclosing Trinity Square Video's current main event — *Disambiguation* by Steve Reinke and James Richards — lies a flat-screen monitor playing another work by the two found-footage/montage artists. It appears to be fragments from a film about important mid-century sculptor and installation artist Ed Kienholz and, like *Disambiguation* and most of the two artists' other work, functions on a dual level. First, there's the film, and second, there's the remix of the film facilitated by the artists' editing — i.e., the content and the context. Here, anomalously, the former wins out: Reinke and Richards retool only one film, in a minor way. And so we are compelled to watch it for what it is — a '60s documentary about laypeople's sociologically indicative reactions to Kienholz's controversial work, such as *Back Seat Dodge '38*, a full-scale replica of a teenaged couple humping in the titular milieu — and to look past its piecemeal presentation.

That's not quite possible with *Disambiguation*, in which the clips and sounds move quickly. Not so quickly that you can't look into the content: it's just that as soon as you get used to something, it disappears, or falls apart before your eyes. For me, Reinke's taste, which appears similar to mine, has always proved distracting. His *Anthology of American Folk Song* referenced sexology and Patti and Harry Smith; in *Disambiguation*, with Richards, he presents an audio-visual mixtape with appearances by Arthur Russell, Hazel O'Connor (in scenes from the '80s rock melodrama *Breaking Glass*), Buffy-Sainte Marie, dancehall videos, Funkadelic, gay and straight porn (mostly gay), Carrie and Bambi, to name a few. It seems wrong to get lost in the specificities of these and not to pay attention to how they relate to one another or are being manipulated. Yet, as a whole, *Disambiguation* doesn't convey much other than generalities about sex, death and self-fashioning. Its best parts resemble animated GIFs: mesmerizing loops of Bambi's father announcing his mother's death under falling snow and of Sissy Spacek and William Katt spinning under coloured lights and glittering stars.

On exiting and seeing the Kienholz piece again, one wonders if *Disambiguation* is, like Kienholz's sculptures, meant to provoke by holding a mirror up to society. Not likely: Reinke's and Richards' practices of archivism and montage are now shared by most denizens of digital culture, where shock via art often seems next to impossible. Indeed, *Disambiguation* explores and embodies the perverse cravings caused by numbness, as suggested by one of the video's rare intertitles, displayed in ominous black-letter font: "If I could, I'd kill myself every day."

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