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# *But Aloud She Said: An Interactive Videodisc Installation*

Kiersta Fricke

*It was precisely by photographing and enlarging the surface of the things around me that I sought to discover what was behind those things.*

—Michelangelo Antonioni [1]

## GENESIS

I was four years old and living in New York City when I discovered an intriguing shoe box high up on a shelf in my bedroom closet and found a stepladder in order to retrieve it. The box was overflowing with mysterious black-and-white photographs. Among the baby pictures of me and photos of my pretty mother, there were a few of my father, who had left us in Colorado the year before. These hushed portraits were set in the bucolic, small-town atmosphere of Aspen in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, it seemed to me that drama lurked in the distant, imposing mountains and in the quiet, landlocked expressions of my parents.

My mother looked gently radiant, if uncharacteristically still, in the pictures my father took of her. In the pictures my mother took of my father, he was handsome, detached and also placid. One image in particular seemed to provide a powerful and enchanting clue to his absence.

Standing on a snowy mountaintop, holding his skis, his face closed but ingenuous, he appeared poised for a fast, downhill getaway. Captivated by this photograph, I quickly fell in love with a sharply intertwined idolatry of remote beauty, loss and longing. I also clearly understood that I should talk of other things. It is in these pictures of my parents that the romantic images of my past transfixed me and influenced my understanding of the roles of children, men and women.

Almost three decades later, I created the interactive videodisc installation *But Aloud She Said* (1989), in conjunction with my friend Jessie Heminway, to reflect the intersection of romantic images of our individual lives and our culture. *But Aloud She Said* is about the nostalgia, hope and fear we experience when confronting the ways we use these images to invent ourselves.

In *But Aloud She Said* there is no narrative. Events are implied. Gestures are enacted, not explained. Many of the images are of young women caught in the passage from childhood to adulthood: laughing, deliquescent, skipping, coy, pensive. There are visual correlatives connecting many of the shots: patterns of color, clothing, aspect, gesture or background subliminally suggest associations to the viewer, as they would in real life. With these impressionistic images we intend to evoke rich, interior worlds and also to depict the idealization of the mute appearance of women. The same image is seen and understood differently depending upon its context and the user's point of view.

By creating "collages," or montage sequences, from the found and original images Heminway and I have presented, users develop their own stories and interpretations of our collective stories. *But Aloud She Said* makes the dialectical process of imagining ourselves visible. Figure 1, an example of one possible sequence, depicts this process. The words and images portray young women conflicted by the lure of independence and the promise of love. Arranged differently, or combined with other images, this collage could easily depict not fascination, but action: for example, a road trip or a wedding. The story discovered depends upon the user, just as the user is created by the stories she tells. In this way, *But Aloud She Said* involves the viewer in the emotional process of creating identity and desire. Through interactive technology and a database of personal and public images of women and romance, the user acts as a grown-up version of the child explorer searching for clues to her identity in family pictures.

## CREATION

The word "collage" was chosen to refer to the technique used in the installation, although "montage" is technically the more appropriate term, because the process of making a collage is inherently organic, interactive and transformative. Buried truths are unveiled and perspectives revealed by positioning material in ways that resonate with the viewer.

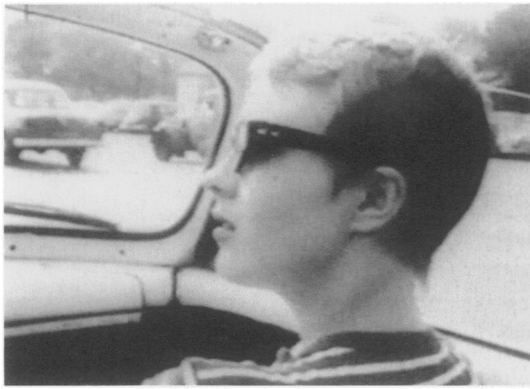
In the Dada and surrealist traditions, collage artists use material, including text, that is "found." The results are multilayered depictions of the fleeting nature of memory and experience. In its metamorphosis of previously disparate pieces into an aesthetic whole, collage is at once subversive and hopeful. By rearranging the status quo, it destroys it. In addition, collage is often sensuous and rough around the edges. This handmade appearance, along with the limitless amount of time users can spend viewing and ordering each of the collage elements, helps to humanize the technology in *But Aloud She Said*. This type of interactivity enables Heminway and me to get closer to a constant goal: to demystify technology and make the process of creating art accessible.

## ABSTRACT

*But Aloud She Said* is an interactive videodisc installation that engages the user in the invention of identity and desire through the creation of imagistic "collage poems," or montage sequences. The viewer creates these collage poems by either deliberately or serendipitously selecting material from a database of found images and text. In this article, the artist contextualizes this interactive installation and describes the components and process involved in its production.

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(a) "If Wishes Were Horses," video still from the film *Breathless*. (Courtesy New Yorker Films)



(b) "Promises to Keep," digitized still by Fricke.



(c) "Am I a Fool?" digitized still of a found image.



(d) "Can I Come Too?" video still from a Heminway family home movie



(e) "A Strange Sight," video still from *Breathless*. (Courtesy New Yorker Films)



(f) "Phases of the Moon," video still of Heminway by Fricke. Colorized with a LIVE! board and Invision software.



(g) "You Hold Me," video still of Fricke by Heminway. Colorized with a LIVE! board and Invision software.



(h) "Smoke," video still from *Breathless*. (Courtesy New Yorker Films)

Fig. 1. One possible montage sequence, or "collage poem," from *But Aloud She Said*, 1989. Each image is linked to an aphoristic line of text, which appears on the screen and here serves as a title for the image.

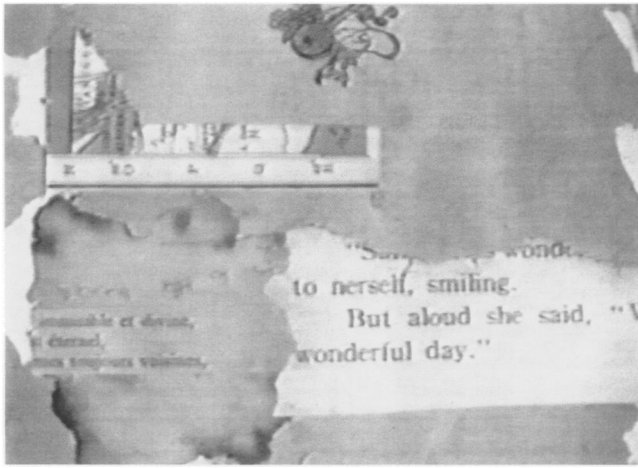


Fig. 2. Digitized still of paper collage by Lorraine Berger from *But Aloud She Said*.

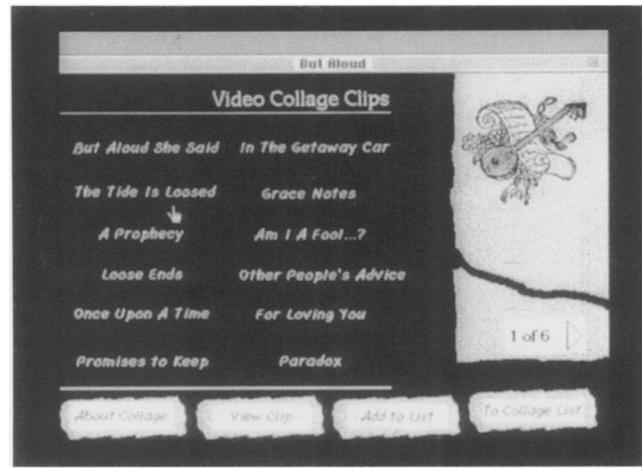


Fig. 3. Interface screen from *But Aloud She Said*. Each collage clip can be previewed by highlighting a title and then clicking on "View Clip."

## ELEMENTS

The opening screen of *But Aloud She Said* is a still of a birthday-card collage a friend made for me years ago. One of the text fragments is a torn piece of narrative: "... to herself, smiling. . . . But aloud she said, . . . a wonderful day." Parts of this singed, yellow-and-sepiatoned collage were scanned and used as a screen design motif throughout the piece. This collage, pictured in Fig. 2, is emblematic of the piece's concern with the self's many representations: perhaps the woman in the narrative smiles to herself—mischievously, secretly—while outwardly she says the socially acceptable "Have a wonderful day." She is thinking one thing but saying another.

*But Aloud She Said* is comprised of a database of 72 visual images on videodisc, each with a corresponding aphoristic line of text and abstracted computer-generated images stored on the computer hard drive [2]. The images and text that appear on the computer screen are also displayed on a large monitor. The videodisc images are shown on a second large monitor located directly next to the first one. The computer images include the aphoristic texts as well as images based on the videodisc: black-and-white computer-generated stills scanned and manipulated to be more abstract than the video images. The computer images fade or dissolve in rhythm with the videodisc images, covering the lag of a few seconds as the videodisc searches for the next image.

The videodisc images, each 3 to 5 seconds long, were culled from various still and video sources, including Godard's *Breathless* and Pabst's *Pandora's Box*. Original 8-mm and 1/2-in black-and-white and color video was also used. Some sequences were colorized and slowed down. This digitizing process also gives

life to still images by making them quiver and appear to "breathe" [3]. The overall visual effect, which is at once painterly and actively present, reflects the tension in *But Aloud She Said* between dreams and truth.

Each of the collage clips can be previewed by highlighting the title of the clip and then clicking on the "View Clip" button. The user can preview the visual segments first and arrange the collage by choosing an order for the images, or can choose lines of text first, either randomly or deliberately, and then view the resulting video based on the chosen sequence of text. These choices are indicated in Fig. 3, which depicts an interface screen from *But Aloud She Said*. There is an added element of surprise in the creation of the collage if the clips or text are not previewed. The result is somewhat akin to the automatic poems of the Dadaists: serendipitous, disturbing and playful connections are produced.

Michel Petrucciano's dreamy rendition of "My Funny Valentine" accompanies the images as the disc is played straight through. If the viewer rearranges the video clips to create a collage, however, only the related segment of the music is heard with each collage clip. To underscore the theme that what is said is not always what is meant or what is true, there are no spoken words throughout *But Aloud She Said*, only occasional subtitles that appear in the shots from *Breathless* and *Pandora's Box*.

For the installation, the two large, 24-in monitors and the computer screen are draped in gauzy fabric, some of which hangs from the ceiling. Colorful paper flowers are strung across the space to make it more intimate. The walls are draped in glimmering pink and purple chiffon. The black-and-white photograph

of my father on the mountaintop and a black-and-white postcard of a smiling, young Marilyn Monroe in a field of flowers are affixed to the folds of chiffon. An easy chair and an old floor lamp, which is the sole source of light, are placed in front of the screens. The mood is meditative and reflective.

## CONCLUSION

*But Aloud She Said*, for me, is about the mythologies of a young woman coming of age. Not wanting to lose her gamine status or her love of the small gesture, she uses her changeling outlook to find her larger, woman's voice. By exploring the hold of certain images, she is no longer beholden to them. What she says out loud clearly reflects what she feels inside.

## References and Notes

1. Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni, or, the Surface of the World* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985) frontispiece.
2. Heminway programmed Hypercard, the Macintosh authoring system, to control the videodisc player.
3. A LIVE! board was used with Invision software on the Amiga to colorize, animate and slow down some of the sequences in *But Aloud She Said*.

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