
THE BOX

April 1–April 30, 2007



Image courtesy of Scott Stark

Scott Stark: *More Than Meets the Eye: Remaking Jane Fonda (2001/2006)*

The prolific Scott Stark has produced more than 60 films and videos since 1980, works that have consistently sought unique and welcome terrain within cinematic traditions. Employing a supple structuralism, Stark's works often start off proposing to explore a provocative audiovisual device, technique, or juxtaposition but ultimately end up in a playful place that is surprisingly moving and charged. *More than Meets the Eye: Remaking Jane Fonda* is no exception.

The video opens with a slow reveal of Jane Fonda leading the aerobic troops of her 1985 cardio classic, *New Workout*. This is the only actual footage of the Hollywood scion/actress/activist/fitness guru/self-described "lightning rod" that we will see in the video. She is instead heard but not seen for the majority of the running time. Standing in for her as the star of the video is the artist himself. With metronomic cutting, we see Stark performing the "Jane Fonda Workout" in a variety of public and private locations. Watching a

man exercising in parking lots and city streets to routines usually associated with women wearing legwarmers provides a solid foundation of absurdist gender-reversal playfulness, around which Stark builds a network of associated thoughts. Overlaid on top of this footage is scrolling text that initially recalls the ambiguous narrator's burgeoning, oppressive sexual identity and the cultural pressures contributing to the instability of the narrator's worldview.

Twice during the course of the video (both Stark's and Fonda's), an up-tempo Jazzercise power anthem dominates the soundtrack—it's as cheesy and as catchy a song as you would expect, but it's also unexpectedly inspiring. The chorus chants "there is so much more to you than meets the eye," and, as Scott Stark writes in his artist's statement, "Letter to Jane Fonda": "that's certainly a perfect song for a workout tape, for women who may have a self-image problem and are exercising to improve themselves and their sense of worth. It's something I find rather touching."¹ During these moments, the tone of the video gets more frenzied and manic and the text gets more pointed. At first it seems that Stark himself is being linked to these usually feminine contexts, but eventually the text begins to deal more specifically with experiences and thoughts about the Vietnam War, and it becomes clear that the quotes are from Jane Fonda. The text scrolls in two directions—horizontally across the bottom of the screen with recent quotes from Jane Fonda's autobiography, *My Life So Far*, and vertically through the middle of the screen with quotes from Fonda's days as a Vietnam activist. But Stark is still obviously linking himself with these carefully selected quotes cataloging Fonda's ideas on war, self-esteem, and patriarchy.

Besides being a remake of a Jane Fonda workout tape, the video we're showing in *The Box* is also something of a remake of an earlier video of Scott Stark's. In 2001, Stark initially released *More Than Meets the Eye: Remaking Jane Fonda*, which was identical to the current version except for the scrolling quotations. In that form the video served

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as an amusing, satirical look at the cultural shifts that took place from the 1960s to the 1980s (and continue today). Specifically, it illustrated how the desire to improve the world was reduced to the desire to improve one's self (or, even more narrowly, one's body). But last year, several years into another unpopular war, Stark started thinking about some of Fonda's Vietnam-era quotes. After reading more of her writing and, more specifically, her autobiography, Stark began to realize how she intertwined and fully integrated her evolution as a feminist and activist. The exercise videos become, to quote Stark again, "a way of empowering women, of personalizing the politic. The video then becomes, for me, an exploratory essay; and it allows me to give voice, using [Fonda's] very public statements, to my own complicated and somewhat chaotic feelings about the world."

As the video cools down, there's a series of zooms into previously hidden imagery within each of the locations. Stark discusses the meaning behind these images and their context in his previously mentioned artist's statement. Here, I'll only point out that the final image of the video is a freeze frame on ocean waves. This image then recedes into the opening tableau of Jane Fonda and her gym partners. In one sense, this zoom out—like the zoom ins that precede it—shows that this politically charged content was hidden within the image that we saw in the beginning. But beyond that, for anyone familiar with canonical avant-garde cinema, this zoom out on the watery image surely indicates an inverted reference to Michael Snow's landmark 1967 film *Wavelength*. Snow's film is (in simplistic terms) a 45-minute zoom across a room, ultimately ending with a close-up of a photograph of ocean waves. *Wavelength* is seen as, among other things, a comment on the reductiveness of narrative: as narrative films progress, they grow increasingly limited in their field of vision and sense of possibilities. Stark reverses this narrowing. By reversing the zoom he expands the field of vision, allowing the viewer to see more of the contextual surroundings. He has created a narrative of ideas. By revisiting his own video, Stark took what was a comparatively reductive work, and with a generosity of thought

and an empathetic spirit, bravely opened it up to chart his own growth and thought processes. The sensibility is as infectious as the workout routine—viewers are encouraged to reexamine their own thoughts along with Stark as well as join in with the calisthenics.

Chris Stults
Assistant Curator of Film/Video

1. Scott Stark's "Letter to Jane Fonda" is the most thorough and definitive writing on this video to date. It can be found on line at <http://hi-beam.net/mkr/ss/letter-to-jane.html>. In this statement, Stark again reverses the formulation of a cinema classic, just as he did with *Wavelength*. Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's film *Letter to Jane* is a narrow-minded and posturing critique of the star; Stark's "Letter to Jane Fonda" is a much more warm-hearted and honest address.

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Scott Stark
More than Meets the Eye: Remaking Jane Fonda
(2001/2006)
Hi-8mm transferred to DVD, 20 mins.

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