

Stories from a Generation: Video Art at the Woman's Building

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Introduction

In 1994 Elayne Zalis, who was, at the time, the Video Archivist at the Long Beach Museum of Art, brought a small selection of tapes to the University of California at Irvine for a presentation about early video by women. I was teaching video production at UC-Irvine at the time and had heard from a colleague that Long Beach housed a large collection of videotapes produced at the Los Angeles Woman's Building. I mistakenly assumed that Zalis's talk was based on this collection, and I wanted to see more. I telephoned her after the presentation. She explained that the tapes she presented were part of a then current exhibition called *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75*, curated by JoAnn Hanley. She said that although the work from *The First Generation* was not from the Woman's Building collection, the Long Beach Museum did in fact have some tapes I might want to see. Not only did they have the Woman's Building tapes, but there were more than 350 of them. Moreover, I could visit the Annex at any time to look at them. I felt as if I had struck gold.¹

Eventually I watched over fifty of the tapes, most of which are from the 1970s, and unearthed a rich and phenomenal body of early feminist video work. A considerable amount of the material was based in autobiography, performance, documentation and political interpretation of popular culture. I was interested in how the work compared to the larger picture of artists' video at the time, and I wanted to know why this work had been all but lost to the history of video. I could cite neither the fact that it was by women, nor that it

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was feminist in content, as the only reasons for the cultural amnesia surrounding the collection. Artists such as Dara Birnbaum and Valie Export, for example, had made unequivocally feminist tapes in the early and mid-1970s, and Joan Jonas, one of video art's pioneers, created a persona called "Organic Honey" in her most well-known work that was assertively female.²



Dara Birnbaum, Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, video art, 1976. (Source: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/technology-transformation/>.)

The answer is more complicated. The political logic behind the Woman's Building as an art center lies in sharp contrast to some of the standard art practices that interpret new media in traditional terms. A canon of exceptional individual artists in video was established early on by curators, critics and museums, perhaps to prepare the world for the experience of artists' video in traditional art terms and to make space on the landscape for the new medium. An official history of the medium developed based on a narrative of individual pioneering artists who eventually became masters. This story prevails today and manifests in the phenomenon of expensive blockbuster museum exhibitions, which raise the stakes on all media artists, especially those who work collaboratively or with small budgets.

The Building's founders wanted the space to engender an actual women's art community that could exist not only as a support network, but also as the social foundation of an ideology influencing every aspect of the individual artist's life. This perspective guaranteed that most of the video work at the Building, especially in the early years, would be produced collectively or would be an expression of shared experiences and common lives. It also seems to have guaranteed obscurity for most of the work.

Male artists also used video in the early 1970s to investigate personal identity, psychology and social interaction—themes that seem to have links to feminist theory about individual roles within politicized contexts. They did not have a feminist theoretical framework, however, and the tapes produced are seldom read politically. Interpretations of early work by Chris Burden or Vito Acconci, for example, lean towards discussions of the psychology of power, aggression, trust and danger. The artist becomes situated in opposition to not

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*Chris Burden, Shoot, 1971. Shoot, F Space, Santa Ana, California (USA)
(Source: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/shoot/images/2/>.)*

only an art world power structure, but also to audiences and participants. These artists expressed or created situations within the work that were considerably outside the social norm, which directed the dialogue about their work.

The strategy was successful. Non-political readings of early video, however socially transgressive the work may have been, preserved a romance about the alienated artist as a prominent part of the narrative. The myth of individual ownership of ideas lingered even through contemporary notions towards the de-commodification of artwork. Interpretations within this narrative preserve the bias towards modernist models of genius, rebellion, creativity, invention, purpose and individual initiative. The true story may be obscured by an attractive fantasy of art adventurers and daredevils engaged in modernist escapades through uncharted mental, aesthetic, cultural and economic territories. Myths such as these unravel in the consideration of collectively produced work, especially political or autobiographical work by women. The collective strategy, exemplified in the body of work produced at the Woman's Building, was in fact transgressive. In terms of Modernist art practices, this was a daring and confrontational moment.

Video in the Hands of Artists

There was a great deal of enthusiasm about the power of video in the hands of artists, regardless of the priority of art institutions to establish a hierarchy among practitioners. To artists, the possibilities seemed endless. The rules had not yet been written, and the field was still wide open for the creation of a new electronic language. Artists like Peter Campus, Nancy Holt, Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman and Lynda Benglis were making the most rudimentary discoveries about video.³ New York and Boston public television sta-

tions sponsored and broadcast entire series of video art which, if broadcast within the conservative climate surrounding public television and the arts today, would prove to be a prohibitively expensive risk. Video was an intensely popular medium for women at the Building as well. The tapes from the 1970s represent the most interesting part of the collection—both works in themselves and as manifestations of the ideals and goals of feminist art-making. The work was in tune with a general fascination with video among artists on an international scale and was developed within an art context that functioned simultaneously as an organized political community.



Lynda Benglis, still from *Female Sensibility*, 1973 (Source: http://www.artnet.com/Artists/ArtistHomePage.aspx?artist_id=2296&page_tab=Artworks_for_sale.)

The videomakers at the Woman's Building carried out their experiments in video, placing a wildly optimistic and imaginative set of ideals about postmodernist art making onto a detailed and unyielding feminist ideological ground. The results set this work apart. Feminist art as a genre includes process and methodology as part of the product and has personal, political and social history at its foundation. Given traditional art historical models for recognizing and validating work, it is easy to make connections between the politicizing of artwork and the erasure of politically based works from art history.

Ideological Background

In 1976, Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal were in Los Angeles to conduct a summer workshop at the Woman's Building. Together they had founded the Video Data Bank three years earlier and were involved in both feminist issues and in trends in video art. During a subsequent visit to the Building they taped an interview with Arlene Raven, one of the Building's co-founders. The tape, currently distributed by the Video Data Bank as *On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven*, is a document that reads like a manifesto, a pure statement of ideology about feminist art education and the role conceived for the Building

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Kate Horsfield and Candace Compton. Summer Video Program, July-August 1976. (Photo by Sheila Ruth. Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)



Lyn Blumenthal, instructor. Summer Video Program, July-August 1976. (Photo by Sheila Ruth. Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

as a force within a community of women artists. Raven insists, for example, that within contemporary societies women are a class of people and as such, women's class oppression had led directly to relationships structured by systems of competition. Accordingly, women's oppression occurs chiefly within psychological contexts of crushing isolation and silence. Female artists could turn it around through "supportive criticism and self-criticism," a concept that fuses art criticism and individual responsibility towards a healthy collective progress.⁴ Raven's assertion seems to be not only about responsibility and collective struggle but also contains the language of self-diagnosis, correction, redemption, and healing—a powerful mixture of influences within an interpretive feminist logic.



Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield, Still from On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven, 1979. (Source: [http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi?\\$tapedetail?ARLENERAVE](http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi?$tapedetail?ARLENERAVE).)

Raven's explanation marks a path into a revolutionary system of self-evaluation and group liberation. Supportive criticism, a key element of the theory, is accomplished through the invention of what she terms "Sapphic education," which in Raven's words, "proceeds from a feminist education entering all areas of life." Women must take the opportunity to share information about their everyday lives as part of a "mutual educational process," with the assumption of "peer-ship among women, everyone having something to offer," and "ridding oneself of power dynamics" in personal and professional relationships.⁵ Out of this process comes artmaking.

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The women who worked in video seem to have taken the promises of a redemptive and progressive approach to heart. They created one of the most interesting and phenomenal bodies of experientially based works in video that exist today. The tapes show not only the makers' interpretations of formal concerns and issues of content as passed through an energizing filter of "Sapphic education," they also document the development of an entire school of feminist art video.

In the Beginning

Initially video was used to document absolutely everything at the Woman's Building. It was used constantly and avidly as an experimental art medium as well. Considering that the ideological task at hand incorporated the psychology of the artist as well as the psychology of artmaking, it is not surprising that there were about 350 videotapes produced at the Building, many within the first decade. The tape collection consists of video art, documentaries, cable television programs, performance documentation, public service announcements, unedited source material, and footage so raw and unprocessed that it is difficult to define. Much of the work is black and white, produced on portable reel-to-reel equipment and edited with a tape splicer—techniques that are daring by today's practices.

The tapes were cleaned, transferred from the original half-inch open reels to cassettes, where necessary, and catalogued with generous assistance from the staff at the Long Beach Museum Video Annex. For years many of them had been stored in boxes in Annette Hunt's⁶ garage in Los Angeles. Hunt rightly saw the videos through the focus of her own memories and experiences, having worked on many of them herself. She was admittedly too close to the material and too familiar with the context of its creation to assess its historical value. One morning she moved the boxes of tapes to the curbside, where they awaited disposal by the Los Angeles Department of Sanitation.

That same day Hunt received a telephone call from former Woman's Building video colleague Cheri Gaulke. Gaulke was calling to let Hunt know that the Long Beach Museum wanted to archive the tapes. The timing was remarkable, and Hunt rescued the tapes from the curb before they disappeared forever. With the cleaning and transferring of many of the tapes, the enormous scope of the video project at the Building is only now coming to light.

According to Annette Hunt there was no self-conscious questioning among the Building's videomakers about what it meant to use video. There was a portapak, and there was an

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abundance of opportunity to shoot. Hunt and other women therefore undertook an extensive project of documentation.⁷ They shot everything in and about the Woman's Building that could possibly be documented and every aspect of what they shot illustrated the ideas that were the Building's political foundation in practice. The architecture and organization of the space, the exhibitions, the 400 to 500 women who renovated the building, the street that it stood on and the approaches one took to reach the front door, the visiting artists at work, and the art and writing workshops in session were all recorded. There are video tours of the site, many interviews, staged scenes, and ordinary conversations among women. The camera was everywhere.

By 1976, women who had already been producing tapes established their own workshop, calling it the Los Angeles Women's Video Center. Annette Hunt, Candace Compton, Nancy Angelo and Jerri Allyn set up the Women's Video Center as an entity apart from the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) in order to become eligible for public funding. Members applied for and received CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) money to pay themselves an \$80 per week salary teaching video and making tapes. According to Hunt, they had it made.

The Tapes

The tape collection is studded with gems of early video. Performance and conceptual art strategies were put into practice as well as straightforward documentation of events. Most of the makers represented are not currently part of art or academic communities, but some are. One finds tapes by well-known artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Cheri Gaulke,



Annette Hunt documenting with video on the first work day of the Feminist Studio Workshop, Oct. 22, 1975. (Photo by Sheila Ruth. Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)



L.A. Women's Video Center members Nancy Angelo and Jerri Allyn. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

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Vanalyne Green, and Susan Mogul throughout the collection. Some of their work is among the most intelligent and video-centered. But thinking back to Arlene Raven's description of the theoretical environment at the Building, it makes sense that the art process was itself the main point. The process, which was often performance-based, led the maker through a transformation. The product was understood as a record of how the transformation took place, and for most of the video artists whose work is untitled and uncredited, the tapes they made are traces of their struggles in earnest for self-realization.

Susan Mogul's *The Woman's Building: FSW Video Letter* (1974) is a notably unself-conscious, funny and enthusiastic tour of the Building. It begins as role play, in which a young woman carrying a large suitcase and supposedly new in town, asks an older gentleman for directions to the Building. He points out the way and her gaze frames the viewer's introduction to the space. The actor here is Pam MacDonald, a member of the FSW, whose words ring like a testimonial—"I have changed so much [since becoming involved with the Woman's Building] I have to race myself to the mirror every morning." Mogul, who wears a bulky thrift store coat and a broad smile, follows MacDonald to the door, unhindered by portapak, cables and microphone. Once inside her camera turns to any available subject for an impromptu interview. She finds Judy Chicago. Chicago, resplendent in Jewish Afro, wide-collared shirt and large sunglasses, tells the camera that "old techniques, abstract work, are not meaningful," that the "traditional art context is unsatisfying," and artists have a need to create "responsible communication," to "make your statement public."

Constructive Feminism (1975) by Sheila Ruth, is a documentary about the Building itself featuring interviews with co-founders Sheila de Bretteville and Arlene Raven, as well as students from the FSW. This tape is important because it delineates how the Building became a metaphor for real power through political change, and a sense of collectively enjoyed pride and responsibility runs through the piece. The piece opens with Sheila Ruth at the entrance to the Building with microphone in hand, wearing what appears to be a corduroy pants suit featuring elbow patches and bell-bottoms. She is the reporter as well as tour guide who gives the viewer her first glimpse at the Building in operation.

The reporter is not objective, of course, and as the camera roams the different spaces, some of which are still under physical construction, Ruth talks about the Building as a "public center for women's culture." The tape includes photographs of women reconstructing the Building's interior, documents that reveal the optimism and confidence

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the workers experienced. Additionally, the photographs borrow a social realist aesthetic, within which the common person is rendered extraordinary. A connection is made between having the physical space available and realizing ideological goals. From a distance of more than twenty-five years, whether or not these ideals were achieved, or were achieved on a regular basis, is no longer the point.

Ruth interviews the workers themselves, asking them how they feel about the process of renovation. Says one, "It takes out the frustration. When I'm through, I can stand back and see something that I have built, see something that is actually visible." This statement is simple and amazing. The worker addresses her work as actually changing the specific relationship of herself, and by feminist logic all women, to the everyday world, the world in which we were kept ignorant of the details of its very construction.

The Artist-in-Residence program is the focus of another series of tapes, including Claudia Queen and Cyd Slayton's 1977 documentation of Kate Millett's visit to the Building, titled *Kate Millett*. Millett, with cigarette in hand and appearing glorious in a white dashiki, is surrounded by fans and followers, many of whom are helping her create sculptural pieces for an installation. These are rather gigantic *papier-mache* "ladies" which, in Millett's words, "overwhelm their situation." They do indeed. Eventually one sculpture is installed on the roof of the Building to celebrate its fifth anniversary.



Still photo from Kate Millett's Naked Ladies installation at the Woman's Building. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

An uncredited tape called *Single Mothers: Two Personal Perspectives with Anita Green and Debra Alford*, (n.d.) is one of the most distinctive, if seemingly unfinished or abandoned pieces I viewed. In this tape, Anita Green and Debra Alford sit at a table, on top of which is a pot of coffee and a microphone ill-concealed in a vase of flowers. Behind them is a wall of now vintage feminist posters. They are having a strained discussion about the problems encountered by single mothers, which appears to be rehearsed, but the tape progresses seemingly without an idea of its own future.

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What makes the *Single Mothers* conversation specifically feminist? With statements such as “all mothers feel guilty,” and “not a lot has changed,” the real themes of isolation, loneliness, and resentment emerge through the language of hopelessness and desire. At the end of the conversation both women face the camera and the image slowly fades out. The moment is honest, awkward and beautiful.

One of the best-known pieces produced at the Woman's Building is *Nun and Deviant* (1976) by Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton. *Nun and Deviant* is a performance tape that provides an extraordinary step by step description of how to recognize, understand and identify selves that may lie only slightly beneath the surface. As the tape begins, Angelo and Compton have set up a card table in an empty parking lot and sit facing one another. Angelo puts on a nun's habit as Compton gets into dyke/juvenile delinquent drag, using each other as a mirror and asking each other if the desired effect has been accomplished. The answer is always “yes.”



Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton, documentary photograph taken during taping of *Nun and Deviant* videotape, 1976. (Source: By Our Own Hands, Faith Wilding. Photo by E.K. Waller.)⁸

Each woman takes turns walking to the camera for a close-up shot, with her performance partner in the background smashing crockery on the parking lot ground. The “nun” or “deviant” in close-up each tells a story about her identity,⁹ as the emerging personas become increasingly defiant. They could be talking to themselves, since they used the camera as a mirror. On playback, however, the image reflects the audience rather than the performer, universalizing the narratives and inviting the viewer to find herself in the characters. Angelo and Compton's relationship to the camera creates the intimacy of a confession, while the background performance of dishes being smashed provides the psychological context for each story. At the end of *Nun and Deviant*, the performers rate themselves in a few brief moments of self-criticism, concluding that they did a good job. They also clean up the parking lot!

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Angelo uses the “nun” persona in another tape called *Part 1, On Joining the Order: A confession in which Angelica Furiosa explains to her sisters how she came to be among them* (1977). There are two main shots: one an extreme close up of Angelo as Sister Angelica Furiosa, the other of a rose being dipped in honey. Sister Furiosa’s confession unfolds in a softly worded story of incest. The language Angelo uses to describe one particular incident of abuse is filled with painful irony and poetic double-speak, as she tells the story of a girl’s rape by her father in terms of a mutual betrayal of the mother. It is obvious who has been betrayed. At first the tape appears to be structured as Angelo’s attempt to untangle an emotional knot of righteous anger, regret and guilt. The beauty of the tape, however, is in how it requires the viewer to re-arrange logic, to turn lies into truth, and to untangle the knot herself.

In 1979, Nancy Angelo constructed a video installation called *Equal Time in Equal Space: Women Speak Out About Incest*. For this piece, Angelo taped six women talking individually about their experiences of incest. To create the installation, she placed six monitors and decks in a circle, each showing a different woman’s story, to be played simultaneously. Chairs were set between each of six monitors and the installation itself replicated the form of a consciousness-raising group. The women on the monitors were a part of the circle, as were the audience seated on chairs. Pillows on the floor made it possible to accommodate extra members of the audience. The decks were synchronized by pausing and playing each deck at the same time because there was no technology available to insure that the six tapes would play as intended.

Angelo invited children from Los Angeles public schools to view the installation, and it received positive local news coverage. *Equal Time in Equal Space* was groundbreaking. Angelo entered and explored an area that was taboo, invited others in for discussion, and brought the theme to children, who may have benefited from it the most. The installation was part of a two-year exhibition (1979-1981)



Screening of Equal Time in Equal Space, video installation by Nancy Angelo, 1980. (Collection of Terry Wolverton. Photo by Bia Lowe.)

at the Building called *The Incest Awareness Project*, which involved visual art, workshops, panel discussions, media events, and talks with children, called *Bedtime Stories*. *Equal Time in Equal Space* went on to Toronto in 1981 for exhibition at the University College Playhouse at the University of Toronto.

Candace Compton's work went in a different direction. In her *Women Communicating Series: #1 My Friends Imitating their Favorite Animals, #2 My Friends Sharing and Teaching Something, and #3 My Friends Sharing and Teaching Something* (Summer 1979), Compton's "deviant" persona has become less arrogantly deviant and more candidly flirtatious. One gets the impression that the flirtation is not only with the camera. In each segment, Compton introduces herself and gives a brief introduction in turn to each of her friends. Individual segments begin in the same empty backyard space. The friend enters the frame and creates what appears to be in impromptu performance.

It was typical in organized women's communities at the time for work, politics and love relationships to become intertwined. *The Women Communicating Series* illustrates the interconnection of work, friendship, artmaking and love relationships in her circle so effectively that Compton's introductions become humorously predictable. A considerable number of the women "sharing and teaching" or "imitating animals," have also shared apartments, lovers, job skills, have belonged to the same publicly funded carpentry collective aptly named Handywomen, and have played on the same baseball team, Catch 22. Compton's flirty introductions, which initially seem immature, are an effective device for illuminating the viewer as to what sharing and teaching really meant in the context of a consciously-formed lesbian community.

Other performance-based work includes a series of obscure short works produced by Suzanne Lacy in 1974, which are visually and conceptually extraordinary. *Three Works for the Teeth Series* (1974) contains three performances totaling less than eight minutes in which Lacy (1) brushes her teeth using an over-abundance of toothpaste while looking into a mirror, but not into the camera; (2) is spoon fed by an unidentified woman while wearing plastic false teeth which render the feeding almost impossible; and (3) is telling a story about false teeth, most of which the viewer cannot decipher because once again Lacy's mouth is full of plastic teeth. The impact is powerful, rendered by its utter visual simplicity, absurdity and defiant logic.

In a better known performance piece, entitled *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, Suzanne Lacy performs a spoof on television cooking shows directed at housewives. Initially

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the camera follows Lacy's hands as she fondles different sections of a lamb's carcass. The camera seems to disregard her face, until the viewer is gradually made aware that Lacy is "growing" teeth. Lacy devolves from a helpfully hinting housewife to a raw meat-eating vampire, with the aid of plastic teeth. The real emphasis is on the body of the lamb, however, which looks disturbingly nude and evokes other meanings, related to sexualized violence. The parallel between the lamb and the woman preparing it as a meal is strikingly clear. "Where does the meat come from?" she asks. "It comes from you," she answers.



Suzanne Lacy, documentary photo of *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, videotape, 1976. (Photo by Raul Vega. Source: http://www.suzannelacy.com/1970smonster_meat.htm.)

Documentary work from the Video Center includes documentation of two notable public performances, *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977) and *Record Companies Drag Their Feet* (1979). *In Mourning and In Rage* is a well-known performance by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz staged solely as a media event. It was created to protest the failure of the police department to apprehend a serial murderer known as the "Hillside Strangler," who had been raping and killing women in the Los Angeles area. The powerful documentary footage of the performance evokes the anger and sadness that originally inspired the event. It makes one wonder if we could ever again be so strongly unified and uncompromisingly creative in a collective response to sexual terror.

Record Companies Drag Their Feet by Leslie Labowitz was another performance-based media event that involves a feminist analysis of pop music album covers. Images of women as victims of sexual and other types of violence used to attract customers and promote record sales were specifically targeted. Today issues of censorship, sexual freedom and freedom of expression would most certainly be used to complicate this classic feminist analysis of the relationship among sexual imagery, the economy and the quality of women's lives.



Women protest album cover violence. Video production still from *Record Companies Drag Their Feet* by Leslie Labowitz. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

Some of the videotapes are impressive because of their brave and naïve honesty, the de-centering of ego, or the sheer inventiveness of the electronic language. *Effects of Atmospheric Pressure on Sculpture* (1977) by Elizabeth Canelake is an ironic and subtly powerful six-minute sculpture-based performance tape. An unidentified woman, presumably the artist, uses an air gun to position blocks of an unidentified sculptural material on the studio floor. She is creating a piece of sculpture, a performance piece and a videotape simultaneously. There is neither explanation nor voice-over, and the artist's self-consciousness before the camera is matched only by her determination to complete the installation. The camera never focuses in close-up on the performer, which makes her and her activity read as inseparable. Canelake uses video as well as sculptural processes effectively in a doubling of concepts.

A tape by Judith Barry, also from 1977, called *The Revealing Myself Tapes*, is quite the opposite. Barry enacts a long performance in a room full of junk, toys, food and trash, which have been scattered over a particularly bad, large painting. The accompanying monologue switches from first person to third, but the logic of this tactic is not clear. According to the monologue, the installation and performance are about reorganizing the past, but the final effect is a confusing and unsuccessful word play. Barry herself seems bored by the end of the performance. One wonders if there is a limit to the effectiveness of making artwork from a chiefly internal dialogue. The connection to larger issues seems to have been short-circuited in the unsuccessful attempt to make public an anguished inner voice.

Other short experimental works from the mid-1970s include a particularly timeless monologue called *Snafu* (n.d.),¹⁰ by Leslie Belt. Claiming that she is “fearing the worst” about herself, Belt talks to the camera about depression and self-help strategies from her position on an old sofa. She exudes a disturbed restlessness. The camera is not in focus and its positioning looks uncertain—the shot itself is centered on the sofa, as though the performer merely happened to enter the scene. What results is a tense admission of personal crisis, ostensibly a performance but seemingly more authentic as the piece unfolds.

What is remarkable by today's standards for performance art is that much of the work does not take into account an audience able to identify characters or personas on the basis of head shots or eye contact. An imagined audience is sometimes addressed, as in *Snafu*, but most of what is communicated is done through the process of mak-

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ing the tape rather than through rehearsed monologues or development of a script. The artist's identity is not a key factor. In fact, in some of the tapes we never actually see what the performer looks like. Close-ups simply do not matter. Three other performance-based pieces which exemplify this are *Tuna Salad* by Chris Wong, *Jealousy*¹¹ by Antoinette de Jong, and *Quandary* (1976), by Linda Henry. *Tuna Salad* is the most enigmatic of the three, involving no language and framing the performer's body in abstracting close-ups. At first, the performer has placed a speculum and a mirror between her thighs, and then she stuffs her bra with tissue. The camera is not only a mirror; it is a tool of self-examination, without revealing the subject's face.

In *Jealousy*, by Antoinette de Jong, the performer sits on a chair framed in a medium long shot, which places her awkwardly in the lower half of the frame. For eight minutes she rants against an unfaithful lover, and the awkward framing suddenly makes sense: she needs to shout, to "get things off [her] chest," and this requires plenty of headroom.

Linda Henry's *Quandary* is much quieter, as the camera focuses on plates of food set in front of a performer whose face is out of the frame. A monologue ensues about the order in which bread, wine, apples and cheese should be consumed, and it begins to seem like an illustration of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Nothing else happens and OCD is not named, but the obsession about the manner in which the food should be eaten is unrelenting. As in *Tuna Salad* and *Jealousy*, there is no need to explain, identify or provide meaning outside the performance itself. That the artists do not show their faces or show them only in long shot, completely counters more contemporary performance videos that are primarily invested in close-ups of the performer, and where the artist's identity and reputation provide content. These women are evidently more interested in catharsis achieved in the process than they are in asserting individual identity or inventing personae.

Transformations into the Late 1970s

Performance video moves into experimental narrative in *On the Road to . . .* (1976), by Vanalyne Green and Nancy Angelo, and in *Eclipse in the Western Palace* (1977) by Cheri Gaulke. While many of the women who made work at the Building did not continue as artists (Angelo, for example, has become an organizational psychologist) both Gaulke and Greene currently have careers as videomakers. *On the Road to . . .* is an eight-minute tape of tightly framed imagery. Feet, flowers, petit fours, clocks and cornucopia are

positioned for the camera. What happens is much less a performance than a series of actions, colors and events, all of which are visual metaphors for exploring new territories.

Eclipse in the Western Palace is another performance specifically for the camera that relies on video framing to develop content. A naked female body, with head completely out of the shot, seems to consume women's shoes. High heels of many colors, cork wedgies, and other 1970s footwear are guided "into" the performer's vagina by virtue of clever camerawork, creating a somewhat monstrous sight gag.

Gaulke, Angelo and Green created precursors to what was on the horizon in video art in general. Their visual language seems obvious today, and the feminist message seems direct, but the two tapes discussed above are distinctly in contrast with much of the earlier work. Tapes from the early and mid-1970s were based on a reconsideration of familiar popular representations of women, reclaiming female imagery from arenas of male identification. Faces and bodies moved, talked and gestured in reaction to a newer set of guidelines and took to task popular conceptions of what a woman may be, what women may look like, and what women do. The early works suggest that women start over by creating alternative representations. Work produced a few years later begins to look and sound different. In addition, the equipment and editing facilities had improved enough by the late 1970s to include color cameras and a switcher with a special effects generator, all of which guaranteed that a great deal of the work would look and sound different. However, technology does not account entirely for the transformation.

Performance on tape was still popular at the time, but some makers had discovered that framing and placement of objects might communicate visually as much as a performance in front of the camera might communicate narratively. Losing control on camera as a performance strategy was eventually displaced by a gaining tighter control of both image and editing. As the picture begins to contain a visual language based more on the camera's ability to frame objects specifically, what is conveyed exists outside a reference to real time. The ability to establish fictional space, non-space and illusionist space evolved from a previous necessity to establish an authentic place. The new video frame reflects the ability to create original meanings based on how the imagery is sequenced using new and not necessarily linear, narrative logic. Documentation and affirmation of real life and common lives no longer dominated the content of the work. Creating journals and reenacting actual events fell out of practice, and it was no longer necessary to play in front of the camera. What was placed before the mirror had changed, and video space was discovered.

Legacy

One wonders what is the influence of a body of work virtually ignored by art historians, with most of the work still unknown to contemporary curators and audiences. The ideals of feminist art practice as enumerated by Arlene Raven in her 1979 interview¹⁰ seemed to incorporate obscurity into the work they engendered. Videotapes were made under conditions and with goals opposite those that might lead the makers to have recognition in the mainstream art world. While some of the women who made videos at the Woman's Building are well known today as artists and educators, the legacy is not to be found in individual successes.

Since the mid-1970s, people working with extremely limited funding and very little access to equipment have been part of a community of independent producers and have generated major dialogues around issues such as identity politics, appropriation and media, interactive and internet strategies, and activist media. Students, people of color, and people within queer and activist communities have all picked up camcorders creating a grassroots movement of independent media. Small organizations such as Pittsburgh Filmmakers, Chicago Filmmakers, 911 Arts Organization in Seattle, and Artists Television Access in San Francisco began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, and were founded by film/videomakers and performance artists. However, independent videomakers today are not especially aware of the work by their predecessors, and indeed do not realize that the history of their own work may be related to the feminist video experiments of the 1970s.

The gay film festivals that emerged in the late 1970s, and function today as launching points for women videomakers of all persuasions are clearly related ideologically to the feminist art movement. Media artists such as Jocelyn Taylor, Suzie Silver, Cheryl Dunye, Barbara Hammer and Sadie Benning all received recognition and audience followings at these festivals. Frameline: the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, the oldest and largest of the gay festivals, first showed video in 1985, nine years after their first organized film screenings. The video presentations were hosted in a barroom called The Firehouse across the street from the Roxie Cinema, which was the film venue. We sat on barstools or leaned against a wall, pints in hand, staring at a 19" monitor. It was a beginning. Today there are many venues throughout the world for work by and about sexual minorities, and engaging civil rights and feminist issues. While festivals are always looking for new feature films to showcase, they still provide screening venues for the lesbian, gay, feminist and alternative video community that continues to encourage new makers. Of course now our videotapes are shown alongside the films.

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Showing a keener interest in video and perhaps one of the most lively festivals on the circuit is the New York Experimental Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, known simply as the Mix Festival. Mix was founded in 1987 by writer Sarah Schulman and filmmaker Jim Hubbard, and began showing video in 1991. Programming decisions are based on issues close to the hearts of artists and independent media producers. Mandates for particular thematic strains, industry-compatible production values, or narrative logic do not exist. Curating is done collaboratively, based on work submitted in an open call, and not on what may be perceived as the hottest topics in an already over-canvased queer community. Mix screenings are frequently packed with audiences who genuinely appreciate experimental work. While the festival in San Francisco has become as mainstream and commercialized as other international non-gay festivals, the intrepid Mix Festival continues to invite work from a variety of quarters—queer, alternative, experimental, progressive—resulting in unceasing originality from many directions.



Barbara Hammer, still from Double Strength, 16mm, color, sound, 16 min., 1978. (Source: <http://www.barbarahammerfilms.com/lesbian-sexuality.html>.)

Other venues such as Artists Television Access in San Francisco and Dyke-TV in New York were organized within communities of videomakers and performance artists rather than in terms of festivals. Artists Television Access (ATA) is a nonprofit screening and post-production space founded in 1984 by Marshall Weber and John Martin, local artists hoping to begin a private video art gallery in the South of Market art scene. The private venture failed and an artists-run nonprofit venture was born. ATA became an alternative space, attracting many feminist-oriented and lesbian videomakers such as Leslie Singer, Azian Nurudin, Lise Swenson, Julie Murray, Valerie Soe and myself. ATA provided a supportive space for practicing complete freedom from conventional programming considerations and invited presentations of oppositional or genuinely difficult material. ATA currently describes itself as “a nonprofit breeding ground for road-less-taken thinkers, an artists-managed media arts center.”¹³

New York experienced an explosion of video activism and a collectivization of talent in the 1980s around the AIDS crisis. In 1987 there was the founding of Testing the Limits, a

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collective which used video to record history as well as to influence action. In 1989, some of the Testing the Limits collective formed DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists) TV, including Jean Carlomusto, Ray Navarro, Catherine Saalfield, Gregg Bordowitz, Ellen Spiro, Costa Pappas and others. Video activist James Wentzy became involved in 1990, and, from his Tribeca basement apartment, revived the cable access program DIVA TV.¹⁴

Dyke-TV, also in New York, hosts a cable access program and holds classes in video production and post-production specifically for lesbians. It began operating in 1993 as the brainchild of videomakers Harriet Hirshhorn and Mary Patierno. The goal of their biweekly half-hour news program “for lesbians and by lesbians” is “to present lesbian lives—in all our variety—with intelligence and humor.”¹⁵ Dyke-TV’s tactics are a combination of documentary news gathering and guerrilla television. They take cameras into the heart of political organizations and proceed from the interview scene to the scene of a public action, legal demonstration, and sometimes civil disobedience. The line between news gathering and participation in the action being covered is crossed many times in the process.



Logo for Dyke TV, the first (and only) cable access TV show by, for and about lesbians. founded in 1993 by Linda Chapman, Ana Simo and Mary Patierno. (Source: http://www.dyketv.org/new_site/test.php.)

In the 1980s and early 1990s, lines were being drawn and re-drawn in attempts to categorize and eventually ghettoize identity-based video. While like-minded videomakers formed working collectives, the down-side is that many artists became known only in terms of their sexuality, politics, or by whatever cultural affinity their approach to media may have suggested. For example, one frequently encountered work simply labeled as “lesbian,” or “African- American,” or “AIDS activist,” as though these terms alone could provide real descriptions of content, strategy, and formal invention.

The identity-based media movement of the past fifteen years did indeed include post-colonialist, feminist, lesbian and gay themes, as well as a focus on the perspectives of communities of color. The old liberal issues were turned inside out as artists and academics began a close re-examination of the ideas surrounding the representation of difference, marginality and mainstream. Formal aspects of artwork underwent a process of re-invention and reorientation through experimental documentary, narrative and non-narrative film and video work. Communities who had been misrepresented or under-

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represented in popular culture became allied not only through shared screening venues and a shared desire to displace the norms of culture, race, gender and sexuality in representation, but also through formal innovation. By way of the identity politics movement, artists engaged in a re-negotiation of the terms of cultural participation, expanding narrative and documentary visual languages, and making new imagery accessible to artists and audiences alike. The next generation may already be rejecting the identity politics movement, but not without inheriting its goals, and not before refining its creative language.

A chief consideration of new generations working in video and film today is distribution. A number of new micro-distributors have sprung up with a priority to make films and tapes available to a young audience of very limited means. On the West Coast, Portland videomaker Miranda July founded Big MissMoviola in 1995, a film and video distributor specifically for work by women. July was interested in distributing work either as part of the interactive ChainLetter series, or in compilations, which she calls the Co-Star series. According to July, "to be included on the ChainLetter, you send in a copy of your movie and something for the ChainLetter's companion Directory (anything you want) and include \$5 (to cover both dubbing and postage). Then you sit on the curb and wait for your ChainLetter Tape and Directory to arrive. It will have your movie as well as 9 others."¹⁶ The Co-Star series is a compilation curated by July and screened at venues such as ATA in San Francisco, 911 in Seattle, and at lecture tours on college campuses. In 2000, Big MissMoviola was renamed Joanie 4 Jackie, and continues to distribute compilations of work by women, producing traveling video shows and in-person lecture tours.

From Durham, North Carolina, Mr. Lady Records and Videos is becoming one of the best known of the small video, music and CD-ROM distributors. Mr. Lady, founded by Tammy Rae Carland and Kaia Wilson, came into being in 1996 with a minuscule \$34 in start-up capital. The initial \$34 was backed up by a sincere passion for women's music and video, and a strong belief that female artists must take control of their own situations. Carland teaches photography and video on the college level, and Wilson is lead singer and guitarist for a dyke band called The Butchies. Wilson also works at Ladyslipper, one of the country's oldest distributors of women's music. Their mission at Mr. Lady is direct and uncomplicated:

Mostly we felt like there *weren't enough Women- &/or Dyke-run record labels* (although we also take this moment to honor those that came before us and are thriving/struggling—and in doing so have made this possible for us). We also

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wanted to create *an affordable and accessible means of distributing work by independent video artist and film makers . . . cross the borders between music and visual work* in an attempt to break down preconceived notions that one is more accessible and the other more elitist.¹⁷

Mr. Lady distributes tapes and CDs mostly by women, a majority of them lesbians, as well as work by gay men. These include video and electronic artist Leah Gilliam, Nguyen Tan Hoang, Elisabeth Subrin, video and installation artist Mary Patten, and Carland herself. They also distribute CDs by female musicians such as Azalia Snail, Le Tigre, and of course The Butchies. Last year I contracted with Mr. Lady to have some of my own early video work made available. The key word is available. The purchase price for a videotape runs between \$15 and \$25, as opposed to the usual price of between \$125 and \$500 set by art and academic distributors, who mainly sell or rent tapes to institutions. Low prices provide the video devotee or young media maker with an affordable way to see and collect artists' work. Most of the business is conducted via mail order. For the artist there is an advantage in selling work at such a low price. A broader audience may emerge outside the more common venues of college film, video and theory classes, art galleries and film festivals.

Finally, perhaps a direct line from the Woman's Building's vast videotape collection to a similar contemporary video community cannot be so easily drawn without showing many detours and alternate routes. I cannot find most of the wonderful tapes produced at the Woman's Building listed in video distribution catalogs, nor are my favorite titles and makers described in the pages of video and media theory books. Sometimes this work seems beyond esoteric—one must be a researcher, a detective, or a confirmed videophile to know that it exists at all.

What is evident is that a thriving community of electronic artists continues to organize screenings and festivals of work that can only be described as having grassroots origins. The politics have evolved from liberation movement dogma to critical theory and global awareness. The participants live miles or even continents apart, and collective identity becomes more virtual than actual.

There are nevertheless strong ideological and methodological ties to the Woman's Building's experiment in video. Video continues to be the primary medium for performance artists, for confessional language, for identifying the self and its relationship to ideological and formal contexts, for direct address, and for recording the history of ideas through its participants. Every show of alternative work, every nonprofit post-production house

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and small distributorship, and every group of artists that curates itself into a weekend of screenings is evidence of the link from the 1970s to the present.

Of course things have changed. The route taken by artists may still reflect how arts communities are defined, but now community identities are presented as more fluid, more comprehensive, and less fixed in singular ideologies. Form and process lead to a currently popular aesthetic of unresolved endings, and new technologies combine with the old to create a desired vision of unmap-able destinies. The personal and the political have merged in the possibilities of the medium, and we cannot yet see the “building” we are constructing.

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¹ Since the time this essay was completed, the collection has been moved to the Department of Contemporary Programs and Research, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA.

² Joan Jonas used a persona she called "Organic Honey" in several of her early videotapes and in performances. Organic Honey wore a feminine mask with a costume of Harem pants, jeweled bra and a large feathered headdress. This persona appears in Jonas's most celebrated early piece, *Vertical Roll*.

³ Many of the discoveries about video as a new medium may have been first made by Ernie Kovaks in the late 1950s and early 1960s in his live unscripted television shows.

⁴ Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, *On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven*, video recording (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1979).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Annette Hunt is a video artist who worked at the Woman's Building and was one of the co-founders of the Los Angeles Women's Video Center in 1976.

⁷ Annette Hunt, interview by Dougherty, Los Angeles, CA, 20 March 1997.

⁸ E.K. Wallen's photo of *Nun and Deviant* was published in Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands*, (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977.)

⁹ For a detailed description and an interesting analysis of *Nun and Deviant* see Chris Straayer, "I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s," *Afterimage*, November 1986, 8-12.

¹⁰ Many of the tapes have not yet been dated, but I would judge this piece to be from 1976 or 1977, based on dates of other tapes on which Leslie Belt is credited.

¹¹ Similarly, *Tuna Salad* and *Jealousy* have not yet been dated, but appear to be from 1976 or 1977.

¹² Horsfield and Blumenthal, *On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven*.

¹³ Quote taken from the Artists Television Access website at <http://www.atasite.org>.

¹⁴ For more details see "A Report on the Archiving of Film and Video Work by Makers with AIDS," by Jim Hubbard on the ACT-UP NY web site, at <http://www.actupny.org/diva>. This site lists all tapes produced by DIVA TV as well.

¹⁵ Quote taken from the Dyke-TV web site at <http://www.dyketv.org>.

¹⁶ Tara Mateik, "Surveying the Scene: Excerpts from the D.I.Y. Distro Resource Guide," interview with Miranda July, *Felix: A Journal of Media Arts and Communication*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1999, 317.

¹⁷ Quote taken from Mr. Lady Records and Tapes first catalog, italics and bold lettering in original.

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