

Feminism and Video: A View from the Village

Joan Braderman

My first undergraduate filmmaking class circa 1968 at Harvard had fifteen students; fourteen of them were men—boys, really—and I was the one female. It was the only film production class at the entire university. The professor, Robert Gardner, was very much a man, an old-fashioned gentleman artist, a documentarian, alternately gallant to or oblivious of me—as was the general wont in those bygone days between older men and their female students, at least when no lechery was involved. Though hardly shy, I barely spoke, so sure was I that a mere question of mine would reveal the depth of my stupidity when it came to cameras. At the time, I probably thought that the gap in my comfort zone in the world—the mechanical and electronic—was genetic: women were inherent Luddites. We shot on Bolexes and edited on Movieolas. Since I was unable to speak in the class, I sat by the Charles River with the manuals, the camera, and the light meter for hours, trying out everything without peer surveillance. Student strikes against the war in Vietnam were key features of my film education. You often didn't finish editing because you would not cross the picket line by the middle of spring semester (1968–70) to enter

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the art building where the equipment was. Another age indeed. And video—the form in which I, like so many other women artists and filmmakers, was to find a voice—did not yet commonly exist in small formats for general use.

Neither *feminist film and video* nor *feminist film theory* were terms used in the academy at that time, though the second wave of the feminist movement was beginning to gain ground in the US, Australia, and Western Europe. The twin framing paradigms of my own life and work—feminism and video—were to come of age together over the following ten years, at roughly the same historical moment. I take both of these terms to involve forms of representation as, for example, terms like *femininity* and *masculinity* are representations of their subjects' genders. The women's movement would need to strip such representations of their apparent transparency. And video is literally an electronic language for representing ideas. Hence my work has been about creating alternative representations of dominant rhetorical categories such as woman, sexuality, space, or politics. Film studies, too, was just beginning to gain a foothold in the academic world.

Entering graduate school at New York University in 1971, with my much-read copy of *The Second Sex* under my arm, I lucked out. A brilliant female teacher, critic, writer, and editor named Annette Michelson took me on and was willing to take our small self-initiated seminar on the history of women directors under her wing. She commissioned my first piece of professional writing for *Artforum*, "Report: The First Festival of Women's Films."¹ In a sign of the (changing) times, one of the other female editors refused to include the list of filmographies of women, those in the festival and the historical figures whom our seminar had dug out of old copies of *Photoplay* and *Movietone News* at the Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts. "Well, what does this coupling—this 'women/directors' mean," she asked, "and why would one ghettoize the woman director in this way?" This remark always brings to mind a comment my mother received when she was working at the Museum of Women in the Arts fifteen years later. A man said to her, "Come on, dear, after all, who needs this? There are plenty of women down the street at the National Gallery and the

Hirschhorn.” “Name one,” my mother offered coyly. “Okay,” he replied with certainty, “Joan Miró.”

For one thing, no one had ever heard of any women directors, except for Shirley Clarke, maybe, and just maybe, in that world of the avant-garde in New York City, Maya Deren. I am fairly sure that the editor at *Artforum* did not know that the largest number of women directing movies thus far was in the silent era, when being on a lot as an actress or an actor’s wife meant you might get a shot at a two-reeler. As revealed by our listing, this phenomenon was interesting, but not because these directors’ styles were similar. Indeed, they were precisely those of the reigning cinematic clichés of the time, but the terms of their working were economic and structural and gone by the rise of the studio system in the early 1920s, when the movie business got organized on the order of other emerging corporations of the period. As Sylvia Bovenschen answered so brilliantly to the question she posed in her influential “Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?”: “Certainly if one is talking about *aesthetic awareness* and *modes of sensory perception*; certainly not, if one is talking about an unusual variant of artistic production.”² The history we did reveal not new forms but different points of departure, different areas of emphasis. That *Artforum* editor clearly was unaware that Lois Weber had made a film about abortion in the 1910s, that Germaine Dulac had done a critique of bourgeois marriage in the 1920s, or that Ida Lupino had made B movies in the 1940s about bigamy and rape.

We were hungry to think through this history and how it had worked. About that time, Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking article, “Why Are There No Great Women Artists?” came out.³ Her critique of the “genius” theory of art history and her detailed examination of the very specific kinds of families and economies that produced artists were stunning to many of us. How was a woman to learn to paint a figure if she was barred from sketching nudes in the conservatories anyway? As the floodgates opened, women’s film festivals, like the one I had reviewed at the old Fifth Avenue Cinema in lower Manhattan, erupted all over the US and Western Europe, and a literature also began to emerge. I still have my crumpled newsprint first issue of *Women and Film* (edited by

Sieh Wah Bei and others), four of whose editors went on to start *Camera Obscura*. When I began to teach a course called “Women Directors” in 1973 at the School of Visual Arts, Bill Everson, the great film collector and historian, began to slip me cans of film containing remarkable historical works such as *Dance, Girl, Dance* (US, 1940) by Dorothy Arzner (a print Claire Johnston would borrow for her amazing Arzner series and text, *The Works of Dorothy Arzner*), *Hard, Fast, and Beautiful* (US, 1954) by Ida Lupino, *Mädchen in Uniform* (*Girls in Uniform*, Germany, 1931) by Leontine Sagan, and Germaine Dulac’s *La souriante Madame Beudet* (*The Smiling Madame Beudet*, France, 1922).

A few years later, I saw Yvonne Rainer’s performance at Westbeth of “Story about a Woman Who . . .,” which was to become her exhilarating *Film about a Woman Who . . .* (US, 1974), which screened at the Bleeker Street Cinema. For me, this film, so original the theater seemed electric, enabled a kind of opening in how to imagine the possibilities for female subjectivity at the movies, for women speaking in the first person in the cinema. B. Ruby Rich wrote about this sense of discovery in a monograph about this early work when she was still programming films at the Film Center of the Chicago Art Institute.⁴ Soon nearly every film journal had a special issue about women. The consciousness-raising (CR) group I had joined received some black-and-white reel-to-reel informal videos called *Videoletters*—stories and images from meetings of other CR groups, which circulated under the radar around the country. I later found out that *Videoletters* had been conceived and set in motion by Ariel Dougherty, one of the founders of Women Make Movies. Chris Choy and others at Third World and San Francisco Newsreel made *The Woman’s Film* (1971), *Up Against the Wall*, *Miss America* (1968), and many others, while in the Bay area, Liz Stevens and Frances Reid made *In the Best Interests of the Children* (1977) about a lesbian child custody battle, which led to the foundation of Iris Films, a production and distribution company that focused on the lives of lesbians.

Other distributors of work by women such as New Day Films and the Video Data Bank were coming into being. Enter Laura Mulvey’s transformative essay in *Screen*, provoking responses and

further work from brilliant young theorists like Mary Ann Doane and Judith Mayne.⁵ *Jumpcut* was founded in 1974. Tri-Continental distributed Cuban films like Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera* (*One Way or Another*, 1974). Sally Potter's *Thriller* (UK, 1979), Chantal Akerman's *Je, tu, il, elle* (*I, You, He, She*, Belgium, 1974), and Helke Sander's *Die Allseitig Reduzierte Persönlichkeit—Redupers* (*The All-Around Reduced Personality*, Germany, 1977) were shown at venues like the Collective for Living Cinema, the Invisible Cinema at the Public Theater, and Anthology Film Archives, as were the group of four's *Sigmund Freud's Dora: A Case of Mistaken Identity* (dir. Anthony McCall, Claire Pajaczowska, Andrew Tyndall, and Jane Weinstock, US, 1979) and films by Beth B. in Super 8. Julie Dash's *Illusions* (US, 1983) soon followed as the women of the L.A. Rebellion began to make films and videos about the African American experience. Many "women and film" types, both critics and image makers, went to the Feminar at Northwestern and the "Alternative Film/Video Conference" at Bard. We attended the highly charged "Feminist and Scholar Conference" at Barnard in the year of "Toward a Politics of Sexuality"—the hot debates about the role of representation in shaping sexual practice then at the center of the feminist sex wars. On one side were the free-speech-at-all-costs believers like me, but some wanted to ban what they called pornography altogether, with themselves as the arbiters of what it was—a slippery area of definition at best, as a new female cinematic erotics was developing with filmmakers like Barbara Hammer and Donna Deitch, and later, with Sheila McLaughlin and her *She Must Be Seeing Things* (US, 1987).

Twenty women artists and writers founded *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* in 1976, and I included a still from Julia Reichert's *Union Maids* (US, 1976) in the first issue. At about this time, Martha Rosler and I sat down in the Sixth Avenue Library, where there was an open-reel video deck, and we showed each other our work. She showed me the incomparable *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and I showed her *July 4, 1976*, a documentary I had made with others about the Bicentennial without Colonies events in Philadelphia. It was on that project that I learned to shoot with a Portopac and edit open-reel black-and-white video. Friends

taught me how to edit at state-funded media access facilities in New York City and at the infamous Lanesville, New York, center founded by several of the Video Freex, where various wild early experiments in alternative news, signal jamming, and the like had taken place. We stayed in the Lanesville house during the edit, cooking collectively and working around the clock. Shamefully, far fewer such access centers exist today due to the Right's radical funding cuts to the arts. In 1981, Dee Dee Halleck started Paper Tiger Television, where I made my first solo piece (with the filmmaker and digital theorist Manuel Delanda at the switcher, doing design on the fly, and with many Paper Tiger members who were to become independent artists, like Shu Lea Cheang, Diana Agosta, David Shulman, and Adrienne Jenik doing production). In that piece, *Natalie Didn't Drown, or Joan Braderman Reads the National Enquirer* (1983), Dee Dee had dared me to slander the *Enquirer* editor, and there at the Manhattan Cable Access Studio on 23rd Street, by God, you could.

Now my students shoot in Mini DV (digital video) and edit on the software program Final Cut Pro, long after Steenbecks and the old Sony 440 controllers that had guided the U-matic decks, after the Media 100, Toasters, and Pinnacle, and after Premiere and low-end Avid Express had gone the way of all video. Videotapes in no fewer than *fifteen* different formats litter my studio in NTSC, the US video standard, alone. OK, for a swift run through the history, here they are, serving, if you will, as a concise history of video:

- black-and-white open reel
- the original, failed VHS Beta
- VHS
- 3/4 inch
- 3/4 inch SP
- 8mm video
- hi-8 mm video
- beta SP
- one inch
- CD-ROM
- mini-DV

- hi-def mini-DV
- DVD
- digital beta
- DV cam

I have not yet gotten rid of my old workhorse Sony U-matic editing equipment, and I don't know if I ever shall. There are Super 8, 8mm video, and hi-8 film and video cameras in a pile in the corner, and a wall of 3/4-inch source tapes from previous videos. And I have to transfer my one-inch masters to digital beta because soon the transfer companies won't have any one-inch machines left on the floor anymore. A 3/4-inch videotape looks to my students like media from another planet, and I regularly lose track of mini-DV tapes because they are too small to find in the bottom of my purse.

Looking over these few words and thirty-five years, and thinking through the amount of change in languages, in modes of understanding and perceiving gender, and then of filmmaking and videomaking protocols, I wonder if there has not been some kind of deep trauma to all of us who have had to relearn everything over and over. Or perhaps it has kept us on our toes. Some of the early-generation women video artists who have continued producing throughout the endless format and edit device changes (myself included) are Rosler, Halleck, Shu Lea Cheang, Jeanne Finley, Branda Miller, Janice Tanaka, Cecelia Dougherty, Sherry Millner, Vanalyne Green, Dara Birnbaum, Lourdes Portillo, Joan Jonas, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Kathy High, and Cecelia Condit. (This is not an exhaustive list; I mean here to suggest that video was an especially welcoming form for feminists to choose for their work because it was new, relatively inexpensive, and not yet completely territorialized by men.) We all learned the hard way that video was not, God forbid, easy, as the myth had gone. We all have edit decision lists (the shot list you use for onlining or making a finished cut of a piece from the source material) running twenty and thirty pages, with the time code or control track number for every in-point and out-point of every sound and image written out in longhand.

TiVos, which have nearly replaced VCRs after all, did not exist at the beginning of my story, when TV had five channels and all of the talking heads on them were men. The intense sense of discovery of working on our own in video and independent film, the vernacular languages of mass culture, have given us a perverse kind of intimacy with the voices and languages of power. It was their detritus, in fact, the throwaways from the early TV stations, that first fell into the hands of video artists and put the independent video movement in motion, or so the story goes. (Actually the Portopac, the first portable video camera with a recording deck that hung over a shoulder, was invented in 1965 by Sony and in US dollars cost between \$1,000 and \$3,000.⁶)

Forty years later, yet in that same trajectory, I gamely put thousands and thousands of dollars on my credit card for the basic gear I will need to shoot and do sound for my new work in progress, *The Heresies Film Project* (working title). I will spend this coming sabbatical year tracking down and filming the twenty women who (along with me) began meeting to create a collective feminist magazine or school in 1975. My feature-length experimental documentary will describe their work today and the roiling cauldron of the New York City art world of the 1970s. With fiction as well as nonfiction, archival footage, and images in many forms made by women over the past twenty-five years, I hope to evoke the *Heresies* collective's sense of optimism, anger, purpose, deep commitment, and passion, as well as the fun we had stretching to achieve remarkable political goals. We published for nearly fifteen years. Then, as suddenly as it began, *Heresies* ended. The era had changed, and the distinctly different art world that *Heresies* had helped to bring into being no longer had the same urgent need for it. Individual members were ready for other missions. The last issue was published fourteen years ago. Yet the goals of *Heresies*, while fought for mightily, are still far from being won. A recent study showed that of the Museum of Modern Art's principal exhibitions, still only 4 percent show work by women.⁷ The *Heresies Film Project* will suggest a different kind of art world, a diverse universe, welcoming to women and the many other others who still lack support, time, tools, and public voices. That place where many subjectivities and styles get

play, where art making is a radically inclusive activity, remains a utopia—and envisioning it is part of the purpose of our film.

Impossible to express in these pages is the way some of my generation of women lived the deep solidarity and lifelong friendships of working in countless groups of women to alter the very way we came to know ourselves and the way the world would come to know us. We have experienced the deep frustrations as well as the passions and sheer joy of these many years of feminisms, though it is hard to measure our successes in the jungle of gender signs out there. However, one measure of the impact of our project can be seen in the very fury of the backlash against it and its ugly daughter, postfeminism. These forces express the terror we unleashed and may offer stronger evidence than the number of female anchorwomen or the incipient gender fires we lit. Sometimes I think you can only really see it—in this, our strange current moment of for-sale TV weddings, Manolo Blahniks, Iraq, and Katrina—when you watch young girls on the soccer field, their young bodies pitching through space as if unconstrained by the forces that kept us in skirts. For whatever scars that were incurred, finally, how very lucky we are. We have to pinch ourselves to remember this now, of course, as we find ourselves in the maw of the feuding fundamentalisms of our time, in which backlash is reality and the words and worlds we have been working to transform are facing possible erasure. And my young students often look at us with wariness, if not outright distrust.

When talking about feminism with these younger women, second-wave feminists often have the feeling that they are speaking across a chasm of misconception. Two common perceptions seem to dominate the political and social understanding of younger generations. On the one hand, it seems to appear to them that people who still call themselves feminists are beating dead issues because equality was already achieved sometime in the 1970s. On the other hand, even though there is still blatant gender inequality of many kinds, they believe that feminism has nothing to do with fixing it. To some, feminism seems as if it is an archaic, perhaps exotic but inaccessible moment, one now past. Others fear that feminism is not about possibility but about the denial of the pleasures of being

feminine. (In that fictive world of caricatured feminism, lipstick is always taboo; all men are bad; sex is bland.) With the mass media at work on all of us from infancy, young women have been lulled into a sense that the issues faced by the women's movement cannot touch them—until, in fact, they do.

They imagine that choice means not just choice on the market but freedom to choose how to live—that combining full-time work and having children is effortless, that women have gained equality in the public sphere, and that only merit determines one's progress. Once they discover that there are some assumptions here that do not pan out, they may not know how to think about what has happened to them; they may have little experience in organizing people to act. They may find it hard to even imagine anything different from what they have already experienced, and they may have no practice in the art of utopian dreaming. They may not understand that each one of us, acting together, could be part of the answer for all. There was a physicality and political urgency in the early years of both the second wave of feminism (with its thousands of women's groups) and the coming of age of independent film and video (with its access centers, cable shows, and collectives). Old categories that shaped feminist debates—such as the relationship of private and public spheres and the experimentation with power and power sharing embodied in the collective itself—are now interpolated by digital networks that can go anywhere. Though the move to small formats and computer desktops suggests another kind of access, and the movement of rebellious bodies across borders and into the streets is often organized on the Internet, where are they going?

As Listservs mediate debate and blogs offer alternative views to that of the mass media (providing, without question, a tremendous relief and enormous gain for movements for gender equity and freedom of speech), what prospects are there for taking real power back from that weird alliance of corporate interests and fundamentalists that now rules the land with a (gloved) iron hand and a ventriloquist frat boy speaking for Big Oil and the Rapture in the rhetoric of a movie cowboy? Will the next generation reinvent feminisms of its own? Is there still space for them in the shrinking

arenas of democratic public life here in the US? Will the relative freedom of speech on the World Wide Web allow for a new wave of independent films and videos that many will access? *Will they matter* in the shaping of consciousness for the much-needed next struggles for gender equity, democratic freedoms, civil rights, and peace? But that is another story.

Notes

1. Joan Braderman, "Report: The First Festival of Women's Films," *Artforum* 11 (1972): 86–92.
2. Silvia Bovenschen, "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?" trans. Beth Weckmueller, *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* 1, no. 4 (1978): 10–12.
3. Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 145–78.
4. B. Ruby Rich, *Yvonne Rainer* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1981).
5. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18; Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 17–32; Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism," in *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), 49–66.
6. Michael Rush, "New Media in Late Twentieth-Century Art," *Video History Project*, Experimental Television Center, www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/people/ptext.php?id=75&page=1 (accessed October 2006).
7. Mira Schor, "She Demon Spawn from Hell: The Ism That Dare Not Speak Its Name," M/E/A/N/I/N/G Online, 13 January 2005, writing.upenn.edu/pepc/meaning/.

Joan Braderman, a video artist and professor of video, film, and media studies, holds a BA from Harvard and an MA and MPhil from New York University. Her award-winning videos (such as *Joan Does Dynasty* [1986]; and *Joan Sees Stars* [1992]) have been shown in festivals, galleries, universities, and on TV internationally, and are in the permanent collections of such museums as the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. A founding member of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, she is currently working on a new feature film about the women's art movement at the center of the debates about art and politics in New York in the 1970s.



Joan B. and Dana Master edit with Sony U-matic decks and a 440 controller in 1990.