

CECILIA DOUGHERTY

WALTER READE THEATRE AT
LINCOLN CENTER

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In semi-obscure publications, scholars have been analyzing filmmaker Cecilia Dougherty's videos for some time. This year, with her latest video, *My Failure To Assimilate*, presented at both The New York Video Festival at Lincoln Center and the New York Lesbian & Gay Experimental Film/Video Festival at the Film Archives, her stock has doubled. Now people are starting to talk about the artist herself. With a videography of 21 works—ten years of writing, producing, directing, and performing in her own videos—and countless festival entries both here and abroad, Dougherty is coming into her own.

Oeuvre aside, the sheer force of Dougherty's current audio-visual persona is enough to grab you. Her look—strictly dressed down, serio-academic, geek-nerd—coupled with a voice critics have described as "slippery," "monotone," and "heavy plodding," has fashioned for Dougherty a highly recognizable identity. Visually, we are reminded—especially when she wears those horn-rimmed glasses—of silent-film comic Harold Lloyd. Her self-effacing manner recalls Woody Allen. Ironically, although she has claimed the very idea of identity means nothing to her except in terms of language (far too slippery to pin down, continually changing), identity, with gender in tow, is clearly the focus of much of her work.

For some familiar with Dougherty's earlier works—*Grapefruit*, a lesbian version of Yoko Ono's life with John Lennon and the Beatles, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, a parody of her own growing up and coming out, and the brilliant *Joe-Joe*, in which Dougherty and her collaborator, Leslie Singer simultaneously play the role of British playwright Joe Orton—*My Failure to Assimilate* signals a new direction. No longer concerned with fantasy or fiction, Dougherty now faces cold, hard reality—other people's and her own.



Cecilia Dougherty
My Failure to Assimilate,
1995 (video still).

Dougherty describes *My Failure to Assimilate* in academic, feminist-lesbian terms. It is about "the schizophrenic nature of an individual's relationship to language and social structures, which categorically deny her existence. It's also about the high price of becoming visible on your own terms, and acute lack of assurance that an outsider's position can ever be secure." While such language can be distancing, the video itself, a *cri du coeur*, is boldly direct. Dougherty offers us a diaristic collage of pop songs, a lesbian love scene, quotes from R.D. Laing, psychedelic images, interviews with friends, and a particularly affecting, anger-ridden rap, from the artist to her "soft naïve dumb lover . . . asshole liar, after you released me I cried until my face broke."

In the video, everyone, including Dougherty herself (who just broke up with her lover and now finds herself adrift), is searching for an identity, something to hold on to. One woman finds it in her writing, "the creation of a second body," another in her partner. *My Failure to Assimilate* leaves us with a sad song: "I don't know what to do with myself. Planning everything for two now that we're through when I'm not with you I don't know what to do." Though alone and searching, Dougherty still has her work. She could do worse. —Edward Rubin