

Commentary: The 1996 New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival  
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Lesbian and gay film and video festivals are an interesting phenomenon. In the beginning, the organized screenings of the 1970s, however loosely structured they might have been, meant we were taking control of our own representation. We invented overtly gay and woman-identified imagery. We eliminated or bypassed official censorship and harrassment, and established friendly screening venues. We constructed new roles for ourselves as makers and as audience.

People go to lesbian and gay film festivals to see ourselves reflected, and to advance our collective fantasies. We have been enormously betrayed by our role in popular media as troubled and alienated deviants, insufferable mama's boys, murderous lesbians, perverts, suicides, sissies, guilt-ridden frigidaires and bulldaggers. But outsider status gave us free reign to invent, describe, poeticize or politicize our grossly under-represented community. We took the ball and ran.

Film came first, and men are recognized as having organized the first festivals. The first screenings, in turn, only showed work by men. Video, on the other hand, which had developed in the late 1960s as an experimental medium, was becoming more content-oriented, and women began to use it widely. 1970s feminist art is a part of feminist and art history by now, but it's language still functions in work being made today. The gay community, including lesbians, was not always working towards

the same end, however, and the established political/social hierarchies of race and gender remained intact.

In 1985, I pointed a video camera at myself and my friends in a gesture of ethnographic urgency. The impetus was to document and lend visibility to a rather loosely-formed group of friends, lovers, bar buddies and political acquaintances. I wanted to show us as we were, and believed we deserved to be seen. This impetus was not unique. Today we have an international circuit of queer festivals, and the optimism and naive determination that spirited early screenings is still evident. Although some of the films and tapes at festivals frequently offer less than the program guides promise, there is always new work, and some of it is very good.

Audiences are invited to not only see work, but also enter into the dialogue. Gay/lesbian festivals are a site where the audience can take on the role of its own representation, where we create and destroy our own histories. Many non-gay film and videomakers as well have found these venues open to their work. An expanded definition of queer expression, if not of queer identity, may include work which examines and reconfigures race and gender issues, feminism, masculinity, ethnicity, colonialism and body consciousness. As lesbian and gay film festivals are now one among many types of festivals in the circuit, there is a good exchange of work which crosses over in both directions--from marginal/experimental/queer to mainstream, and back again.

### The New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival

The 1996 New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (June 6 - 16 at the Joseph Papp Public Theater) brought audiences to a rather quiet milestone in the number of features by and about lesbians, and saw a second generation of videomaking in full swing. Two films are particularly

resonant: *I'll Be Your Mirror*, by Edmund Coulthard and Nan Goldin, and *The Watermelon Woman*, by Cheryl Dunye. There were several outstanding video programs as well, including *Jungli Boogie: Queer South Asian Film and Video*, and *No One Said it Would Be Easy: Experimental Lesbian Video*.

*I'll Be Your Mirror* is Nan Goldin's first film, which she directed with Edmund Coulthard as a BBC sponsored project. The film is about her life and work as a photographer, showing the intersecting commitments she has made to each. It is a documentary, an autobiography, and a monograph. Goldin narrates her own life story in an insistent monotone, but most of what we understand about her is from the photographs. There are, however, too many repeated shots of particular stills, underscoring the nostalgia that is part of almost every picture, and making it occasionally too potent. A constant stream of downer music is another drawback in the film, as every montage of still photographic imagery is accompanied by an overly appropriate song.

Goldin's life is at once remarkable and commonplace. She seems very much a part of her times. The slow infiltration of AIDS into the narrative turns the point of convergence away from the filmmaker to the subjects which appear most in her work: loss, aloneness, community, and the inability of photography to keep a person present. Images of Cookie Mueller, in particular, embody a rich text about sexual identity, personal expression, seemingly unconditional love, and an ideology of living fully. Although much of the film consists of still imagery, and some of the scenes are not interesting visually, there are segments which are nothing less than beautiful. These are always of people, shot and framed with

Goldin's particular stark and empathic vision, the one which has come to be recognized through her photographs.

Cheryl Dunye uses an opposite approach to biography and autobiography in her feature film *The Watermelon Woman*. There are several stories within a story, as narratives abruptly cut into each other, overlapping, clashing and upstaging one another. Dunye does this very well. Her background as an experimental videomaker is evident in the non-linear structure of the story, and the use of a combination of scripted and unscripted dialogue. There is a love story here, there are characters, and there is a fictional search which results in a fictitious documentary.

The main story is of a filmmaker who researches a Black actress from the 1930s and 40s, to take her from the assigned obscurity of mammy and maid roles in films, to the stardom she deserves. That the story is fiction, and the actress, Faye Richards, never existed is a wonderfully literal declaration about the construction of history. The history of Dunye's fictional subject becomes paradoxically true, and what is resurrected is not a fictional actress, but a diagram of the methodology of erasure.

The acting is self-consciously casual, the characters are less than believable, and the subtle humor in some of the individual characterizations is much more resonant than the forced humor of the plot. The film's intelligence makes all these elements, which could hurt a less experimental film, work well. Dunye frequently addresses the camera as though she were interrupting another film in progress. Her presence marks each point where the audience itself functions as an essential formal device of the film, as the point where fiction and construction meet reality.

Most remarkable, both visually and conceptually, are the segments in which the fictitious film star, the Watermelon Woman herself, is created. Photographs and short film sequences shot by Zoe Leonard provide an eerie sense that we know this film star, and we understand something about her life.

Regarding video, one of the most exciting programs to feature video prominently is *Jungli Boogie: Queer South Asian Film and Video*. The work in this program is especially compelling, using the medium in a wide range of styles and references. *Hindustan*, by Gita Reddy and David Dasharath Kalal, is a 3-minute satire on Orientalism in Hollywood musicals which, in turn, becomes a lesson about colonialism and the politics of assimilation. *Hindustan* worked as an excellent foil for *her sweetness lingers*, a complexly beautiful piece by Shani Mootoo. The tape is a sophisticated electronic marvel about sexual desire and delay of gratification, imagination, presence, and inevitable loss. Mootoo displays an unabashed use of chroma-key, strobing, effusive electronically generated colors, and the video box within a box. *her sweetness lingers* uses beauty as content, with careful crafting and the invention of a rich electronic language.

Also in the South Asian program is *Letter from Home*, by Shaffiq Essajee, a 12-minute video performance. This tape is simple and brilliant, relying on one of the most enduring traditions of video: the single performer, one camera, and a monologue. Essajee recites a letter from his mother in which her love and prayers slowly become a manifesto against the homosexualization of the South Asian male by Western, particularly American, culture. That she is both wrong and right is an

irony presented with pungent humor, well-timed melodrama, and the performer's direct gaze outward.

Another video program worth noting is *No One Said it Would Be Easy: Experimental Lesbian Video*. There were 6 tapes in this somewhat uneven program, which included work by Sally Sasso, Tammy Rae Carland, Elisabeth Subrin, Sadie Benning, Thirza Jean Cuthand, and Kimberly SaRee Tomes. Most of this work represents a second generation of videomakers, who came out of either an activist or academic environment.

The works are linked thematically by an overwhelming expression of frustration, confusion, rebelliousness and revenge. They represent a collective offer of new configurations for feminist perspectives. Sasso's tape *Spin Out* has a message, in the traditional sense, arguing for the necessity of women to take control--of the streets, of politics and of representation. The narrative rambles effectively, as does the camera. The fantasy of feminist revolution is undercut, however, as the tape turns into a portrait of one of Sasso's friends. At that point, what occurs in dialogue between camera and subject becomes an diversion from what seemed to be the original motivation of the tape.

Tammy Rae Carland's *Lady (Out)laws and Faggot Wannabe's* uses a number of video devices which have become a new standard to define and take apart the theme of criminal love. Split screen, simultaneous (double) narratives, and text which appears as a formal element result in a slightly over-done piece. However, Carland's inclusion of class as one factor which determines outlaw status is very interesting, as class is one of the most frequently over-looked points in this kind of work. Maker's often resort to an offensive stereotype of the working class and welfare

class as "trash." Carland replaces the stereotype with an imaginative analysis.

Also included in this program is Sadie Benning's *German Song*, a music video collaboration with the band Come. This tape is more like a message in a bottle, a relaxed and lyrical step away from her effectively claustrophobic early work. Elisabeth Subrin's *Swallow*, on the other hand, is dense and anything but relaxed. The sound track is a carefully crafted story in itself, combining voice-over, scripted conversations, music and effects. Sometimes there is too much information in this piece. But the theme of coming of age in the 1970s, when 60s Utopian ideals were supposedly put into practice, is an effective backdrop for the real drama, which is internal, psychological and ultimately existential.

There were many other interesting films and tapes in the New York Festival, some of more dubious distinction than others. One film that must be mentioned as being a festival highlight, however, is Jim Hubbard's *Memento Mori*. It is, possibly, one of the most quietly powerful films about life in the age of AIDS.

Where the phenomenon of lesbian and gay film festivals will go is not exactly certain. Will the amount of cross-over work, which is becoming more common in the festivals, ultimately work against them as makers decide to bypass the festivals and go for the mainstream? Possibly, but I think we will still see an enthusiastic continuation of real dialogue, as new makers emerge and older work is understood in new contexts. I look forward to every festival, I want to be there.