

**After-the-fact quasi conversation  
between Yvonne Rainer and Cecilia Dougherty  
July 1997, Bard College**

Conversation between Yvonne Rainer and Cecilia Dougherty, Bard College, 1997

Yvonne: Cecilia and I were both teaching at Bard College in July '97. Matthew Stadler invited us to have a conversation about filmmaking, to be transcribed and published in The Stranger. As there was very little lead time, we couldn't get together, so Cecilia wrote a piece about her own practice. Now, in great haste, I am reading that piece and trying to re-invent it as a conversation with me.

Cecilia: In 1989 I made a videotape called *Grapefruit*. It was a trip to the outer limit of the role and meaning of "director" because it seemed like video was closer to writing, painting, or sculpture than it was to filmmaking, and I had to borrow the idea of "director" from filmmaking, and use it as an element in my work. I did not want to be in my role as director as a film director is. I wanted directing to be one of the materials, and as I said, an element in the work. It was like a stroke, or like style, or like structure. It was not like *auteur*.

As a director however, I needed a theme, story, settings, and actors. The simple theme was lesbianism as it influences reception of popular culture, as one grows through both lesbianism and pop culture. A complication of the theme was the continuation of what is learned or remembered from popular culture in a woman whose primary social support system is encountered in lesbian subculture, and how the subculture influences a woman's memory of, and earlier relationship to, pop. The theme involved community and personal identity, post-modernist ideals of de-centering the narrative to re-place marginally represented sub-groups into a new center of the story. The story depicted relationships among Yoko Ono, John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr and George Harrison. The theme of the story was Yoko Ono's struggle to remain an artist in her own right even though she had married one of the biggest stars in the world. The story involved history and memory, the idea of struggle and the search for resolution in personal fulfillment. All actors were women.

One of the settings was a video studio with a two-camera set-up including a production switcher and special effects generator. I made paintings which were used as backdrops for the studio shoot. One was of large happy faces, yellow circles with dots for eyes and grins for mouths, and the other had a blue background representing the sky, with solid

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white shapes representing clouds. The second setting was the living room and dining room in my apartment in Bernal Heights, San Francisco. The actors were other video and performance artists, a rock musician who performed in local clubs, and one of the editors of a magazine called *On Our Backs*. I was the script writer, the set designer, and one of the camera operators as well as the director. I was in charge of casting, music, props and costumes. I edited the tape and found a distributor.

I kept a notebook of scenes I wanted to tape, based on research into actual events and supposed conversations among the people we were portraying, and on my memories of the events as I learned them through music, films, and memorabilia. From these sources, I fashioned the skeleton of a script. I wrote a series of note cards with lines and quotations for each of the 5 characters, and when we shot any particular scene, I provided each actor with the cards. Their job was to improvise dialogue around the specific lines as written on the cards, and to sprinkle those exact lines into their improvisational conversations whenever they had the opportunity. I gave clear instructions to the actors about both dialogue and action before each taping, but I did not explain to them what their specific functions were in my investigation into the limits of video art as directed narrative.

Yvonne: Reminds me of a period in my life - 1969 to 1972 - when I no longer wanted to direct the group of dancers I had worked with for a number of years. They were all highly skilled performers and talented choreographers in their own right. I felt I couldn't produce work fast enough to keep them amused. So, with a bit of prodding from Barbara Dilley, one of the members (Barbara often played the role of "bad girl/trouble-maker), I decided we would become a co-operative. It wasn't a forthright decision that everyone voted on. I simply allowed the dance we had been performing on the road to disintegrate and re-form as the participants began to exert their own initiatives in performance. The group became known as the Rio Grande Union and carried on without me for some years after I left to reassert my role of director as a film-maker in 1972.

Cecilia: Improvisation was essential to the investigation because through improvisation, each actor was free to use her own memory of the time period and pop cultural events as the basis for her characterization, dialogue, and delivery. Specifically, as director I

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told the cast which scene we were shooting, where they should stand or how much room they had to move in relation to the camera and each other, and how much of the story was being covered within the scene. I provided the sets, costumes, wigs and props, but did not want to interfere with each actor's decisions regarding how she would create her character or which elements of the story she would highlight within her characterization. Each actor's own memory, or mis-interpretation, of "actual" events was a key element to developing the theme of lesbian interpretation of popular iconography as filtered through what she knew and lived through inside the lesbian sub-culture. Their memories of pop events, however skewed or fuzzy, moved the story from beginning to end.

Yvonne: My first film - *Lives of Performers* - depended to a limited extent on improvisation. I wrote a disjointed script, a series of vignettes, descriptions, one-liners, all having to do with the (fictional) emotional entanglements of a group of performers working under my (actual) direction. I assigned various pages to the performers - 2 men and 2 women - and indicated where they were to paraphrase and where they were to read as it was written. Meanwhile, we had shot the film (16mm) MOS (without sound). During a live performance of the dance we had been rehearsing (parts of which had been shot) a rough-cut of the film was projected on one side of the performing space. The live performers sat at microphones and read or paraphrased from the script to coincide with what we were watching (I took John Erdman's part because he was in the hospital). So, for example, during a CU of Valda speaking (MOS), Valda's V-O says "Now Valda is telling about a visit to John's house..." Occasionally my voice comes in saying something like "See, there's a lot of time here. You don't have to describe everything that's going on..." The audio recording was edited into the final film.

Cecilia: Editing the scenes into a complete experimental video piece, *Grapefruit*, provided me with a forum to show the results of the investigation. I discovered that individual women were able to identify with, recall, and re-figure popular culture in a way that placed them, even as members of the minority sub-culture of lesbians, into the center of the action, the center of their own memories, the chief interpreters of their own culture. There was not a dominant culture which oppressed or erased the culture of out-casts. There was a dominant culture which was enjoyed, absorbed and translated meaningfully into the rich language of marginalized and differently-identified sub-groups. The investigation led me to understand that two cultures can be better than one. The role

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of director was to lead all the elements of the tape into the investigation, and to allow them to interact. The role of editor was to make sense of the material as it was, to not force the meaning, but to put things together that would clarify it. This approach is the opposite of needing to tell a story, create a fantasy, or provide valuable moral/immoral lessons through narrative. It was the opposite of subdividing the elements of a story into theme, script, actors and action, and linearly applied/linearly received logic. The experiment was a complete success.

Yvonne: Reminds me of that tape of yours about the dysfunctional family. It take bad a acting to an epiphany. Like taking shards of *cinema verité* and soap opera and trying to fit them together. Somehow the spectator can slide in and out of the resulting cracks and still be engaged. Don't know how you bring it off but you do.

Cecilia: In 1991 I made a videotape called *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*. It was a trip to the limits of the meaning of narrative in experimental media. I wanted to know if video art could be sustained in a feature length narrative. I wanted to find out if a story and its elements could be used as material in media-based artwork in the way, for example, that wood, paint and metal are material for sculpture, and language is material for poetry, and oil and plastic are material for painting. I also wanted to know if an artist could meaningfully lose one of her materials and how that would change the work, i.e. what it would mean art-wise if a character dies. I had two of the main characters die.

Any story would have worked for this investigation, but I chose to work with my own life story, so as not to belabor the point. I was already familiar with the characters, events, important moments of triumph, entropy and tragedy. I cast people into roles based on what they looked like, what their own work was like - they were artists, writers and film or videomakers - and their eagerness to participate. Their participation in my project as people who were engaged in their own projects of representation seemed important. I did not have to explain too much to the cast about why I was making this tape.

It seemed perfect. But I did not understand the nature of autobiography and artistic exorcism when we began shooting. I did not know that the story, which was not part of popular culture but part of an individual private memory, was going to involved real emotions and identification of the actors with the action and events in the story. There

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was a suspension of disbelief. Each taping session became a psychodrama. When something bad "happened," we were sad or confused. When the characters had "sex," the actors fell in love. As the director, I fell in love with my leading lady. We had fallen deeply into the pit of filmic narrative, and the experiment had only just begun. At the end of each day of taping, I looked at all the material we had shot. It was like watching tapes of my actual family, with close-ups of my parents' faces, of myself and my siblings. I knew what was going to happen next to "my family," and how it would effect them, and was not able to change the memory (scene) or stop the pain (action). It did not matter that the actors playing the parents were the same age as the actors playing the children, or that as the children grew into adulthood they did not age, or that no one in the family resembled anyone else. Death was death, it no longer seemed like material. I seemed to be making a documentary!

Yvonne: The basic operation of a theater audience is suspension of disbelief. You allow the character to inhabit the body of the performer. When something goes wrong, you withdraw that permission. (You're hot, you don't like the way he walks, you think she's too old or too young for the part, the writing sucks, etc. etc.). Even in mainstream films one detests, however, there is no need for suspension of disbelief. The credibility of the story, the acting, the writing - may all be in question, yet the configuration of the film/spectator relationship - the black hole of the theater (the screen reflects much less light than the lit stage) coupled with apparitions rather than people - already creates a distance that muddies the performer/persona duality. I have never walked out of a play, but have walked out of many movies. The commitment to suspend disbelief holds me in the former situation, whether or not I like what I'm watching, while the mediated relationship to the flickers is both more totalizing and less demanding.

Getting back to *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* - it is weird to watch a narrative film that requires suspension of disbelief. Not only demands it, but gets it! At least that was my experience - I willingly committed. You have gone so far out on a limb, against the grain of all mainstream standards of effective seduction, that you've come out the other side.

Cecilia: The original investigation continued regardless. Editing the material into a video piece rescued the work from the psychologically unwieldy tropes of film and turned it

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back into media-based artwork. In editing I turned the tape into fiction, and was able to disturb the smooth running of the story. I was able to jumble things up sequentially, to turn tragedy into camp, to suggest that good and evil were elements of chance, were random elements in performance-based work, and death was a metaphor. I was getting into an area I had not anticipated. Metaphors, displays of emotion on the screen, literalness and cult iconography emerged as brand new ideas in video art. Gone were the purely conceptual emotionless game-playing strategies of avoidance and pure art. Newly arrived were hard-core sex, real drugs and drink, a working out not of my life but of the lives of the performers. My leading lady came out on screen. My father figure reverted to alcohol to enhance the realism. No tea at all, but whisky. My brother figure became distant, quiet and determined. My mother figure was sweet and kind, a success in her own right. The experiment was out of control, but the tape was a success.

The only place left to go was through the flower, as Judy Chicago once said. I began examining video as an expressionist medium, as one that could be beautiful, mysterious, real and rugged, superficial, disturbing, direct, uplifting. I began to make videotapes that were beautiful. I began to invent the form based on electronic possibilities in framing, mixing, coloring and scanning. Video is not film. Filmic necessities of director, story, character, excessive crew, fictional time and place are not translatable into video, but are transformed. Transformation is out of fantasy, out of fictional landscape or apartment, a direct link to the mind and back into memory of culture, memory of popular culture, replacement and mapping over new life in sub-culture.

Yvonne: Film is the unwieldy leviathan the lumbering behemoth the white elephant. If you take it on you try to reinvent its blandishments, throw a spanner in its works. I want to present speech as an unnatural act, theory as performance, poetry as dialogue, fictional prose as reportage. In other words, I want to mix up the formal constraints and conventions that traditionally deliver truth or fiction, fact or artifice in the highly coded formats of TV news, soap opera, political documentary, whatever. The more I get involved with these codes, the greater the necessity to work against them. The difference between you and me - at least in my last film *MURDER and murder* - is that you flout "the codes" from the get-go, while I entice the viewer into my parlor (with professional acting, lighting, so-called production values, blah blah) and then turn the tables (addressing the camera, jumpcuts, theoryspeak, ghosts-turned-sociologist).

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Cecilia: And lesbian subculture?

Yvonne: *Privilege* contains a lesbian character. I wouldn't say she's a token lezzy - she has some meaty scenes. But her subjectivity is short-circuited, partly because my main focus was the heterosexual dilemmas of the central character, and partly as the result of oversight (negligence). As a friend said after seeing the film, "Why is one kind of subjectivity always elaborated at the expense of another?" I was focusing on racial and gender inequities at the expense of sexuality. "Becoming" a lesbian changed all that. And maybe that's the crux in my practice. Art follows life. My latest way of phrasing it is that I raid, appropriate, and reinvent my autobiography. *MURDER and murder* is about 3 unholy groups - lesbians, old ladies, and cancer survivors. The deviant the damned and the desperate. It had to be a comedy. As well as other things.