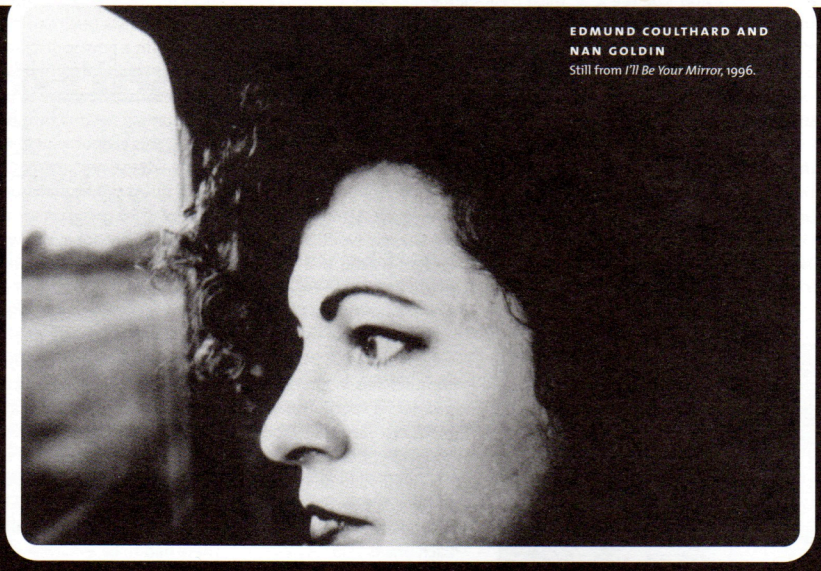

EDMUND COULTHARD AND NAN GOLDIN
Still from *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 1996.

NO ONE SAID IT WOULD BE EASY

THE 1996 NEW YORK LESBIAN AND GAY FILM FESTIVAL

BY CECILIA DOUGHERTY

Lesbian and gay film and video festivals are an interesting phenomenon.

In the beginning, the organized screenings of the '70s, 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 harassment, and established friendly screening venues. We constructed new roles for ourselves as makers and as audience.

We go to lesbian and gay film festivals to see ourselves reflected, and to advance our collective fantasies. We have been enormously betrayed by our portrayal 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 rein 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 '60s as an experimental medium, became more content-oriented, and women began to use it widely. Feminist art of the '70s is a legacy of feminism and a part of art history by now, but its language still functions in work being made today. The gay community, including lesbians, has not always worked toward the same ends, 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 as I believed we deserved to be seen. This impetus was not unique. Today we have an international circuit of queer festivals, and the optimism and naïve 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 not only to see work, but also to enter into the dialogue. Gay/lesbian festivals are sites 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 that examines and reconfigures issues of race and gender, 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 that crosses over in both directions—from marginal/experimental/queer to mainstream, and back again.

The 1996 New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, held in June 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 Goldin's first film, which she directed with 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 comes from the photographs. There are, however, too many repeated shots of particular stills, underscoring the nostalgia that is part of almost every picture, and rendering 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 that emerge most often in her work: loss, loneliness, 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 that are nothing less than beautiful. These are always of people, shot and framed with Goldin's particular, signature, stark and empathic vision.

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Cheryl Dunye uses an opposite approach to biography and autobiography in her feature film *The Watermelon Woman*. The film tells 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 that results in a fictitious documentary.

The main story is of a filmmaker, played by Dunye, who researches the life of a black actress from the '30s and '40s, attempting to take her from the assigned obscurity of "mammy" and maid roles to the stardom she deserves. That the story is fiction and the actress, Faye Richards, never existed makes a wonderfully literal declaration about the construction of history. The story 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 might 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.