Frame enlargement from *Single Mothers: Two Personal Perspectives with Anita Green and Debra Alford* (n.d.) uncredited.

Frame enlargement from *Constructing Feminism* (1975) by Sheila Ruth.

Stories from a Generation: Early Video at the LA Woman's Building

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In 1994, Elayne Zalis, Video Archivist at the Long Beach Museum of Art, brought a number of tapes to the University of California at Irvine to do a presentation on early video by women. The tapes were from a show curated by JoAnn Hanley called "The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75." I was teaching video production at UC, Irvine, and had heard from a colleague that Long Beach had a collection of tapes from the Los Angeles Woman's Building. I mistakenly assumed that Hanley's show was based on this work. The tapes that Zalis presented from "The First Generation" show were very exciting both as video artwork and as documents of the feminist movement of the 1970s, but the show was not in fact based on the Woman's Building collection.

My mistake became my good fortune. Curious about the archive at Long Beach, I began to research the Woman's Building tapes. Eventually I watched over 40 of the tapes and therein rediscovered a rich vein of early feminist video work. The work raised questions about the presence of video at the Woman's Building and how it compared to the larger picture of who was working in video at the time. I wondered why this work had been all but lost to the history of video.

In 1991 the Woman's Building in Los Angeles closed its doors after almost 20 years of operation. It had been designed as a place for women to make art in a non-competitive environment. The plan was utopian by today's standards, but within the framework of the feminism of 1973 it made perfect sense. Video was an intensely popular medium at the Building, and by 1991 approximately 350 videotapes had been produced there. The tapes from the 1970s represent the most interesting part of the collection in terms of an expression of ideals of feminist artmaking, and in terms of having every element of purpose and experimentation in common with the early works of recognized pioneers: Nam June Paik, William Wegman, Bruce Nauman, Chris Burden and Vito Acconci. The videomakers from the Woman's Building go a few steps further than these canonized videomakers by placing a wildly optimistic and imaginative set of ideals about artmaking onto a detailed and unyielding feminist ideological ground. Some of them made work that incorporates the ways in which women's sexuality, and specifically lesbianism, could be politicized, theorized and represented in content, and even more frequently as context. Personal love relationships did promote collaborations at the Building, and it seemed important for personal identity and group identity to be fused.

Feminist art as a genre not only involves process and methodology, but also has personal, political and social history at its foundation. Given traditional art historical models for recognizing and validating work, it is easy to make connections between the politicizing of artwork and their erasure from art history. That the work is in video makes it that much more obscure. The situation calls for revision.

Video History

The accepted history of video, however prematurely written, goes something like this: when artists took up video in the early 1960s there were one or two "fathers of video" who understood its meaning as television, mechanism and mirror.[1] They had the insight to explore its properties in an art context, and were able to make the art world take notice. Shortly thereafter other artists began to use video in what seemed like a simultaneous explosion of experimentation and process-oriented, non-object artmaking. A canon of artists, mostly male, was quickly put into place. David Ross contributes a paragraph of his essay, "Postmodern Station Break: A Provisional (Historic) Overview of Video Installation," to this story:

> [I]t is generally proposed that video art's specific origins are located in the early 1960s' German avant-garde scene dominated by Group Zero and Fluxus and the parallel American scene dominated by the confluence of Pop Art and Happenings. Accordingly, the first works to be considered as "video art" per se, were produced by artists working within the period of the late '60s and early '70s critically described as the Post-Minimal movement.[2]

Early catalogs of video exhibitions tell a different story. For example, catalogs produced by the Long Beach Museum of Art, which exhibited video regularly, abound with long lists of artists and descriptions of their work. There seems to be no hierarchy of artists or subjects. Unfortunately, the "heroic" history of video, with a shorter list and a more exclusive perspective, has emerged as the main story.

A few women, nevertheless, do receive recognition as innovators and true experimenters. Joan Jonas, Steina Vesulka, Ilene Segalove and Shigeko Kubota are all prominent artists whose early video work is considered classic. Some of these artists were making process-oriented work, engaging with time-based issues and working with the video apparatus itself to determine the image. Others composed video-dependent narratives, or used video as a performance element. Jonas's magnificent and ground-breaking 1972 piece *Vertical Roll*,[3] for example, represents one of early video's milestones, and is regarded as a masterpiece. Women working in video does not constitute feminist activity; that *Vertical Roll* can sustain a feminist reading, for example, does not mean that it is primarily a feminist piece, and according to Jonas it was not constructed as such.[4] Regardless, feminist video is a genre simply because so many artists began making specifically feminist work.

Other artists who were loosely associated with the Los Angeles Woman's Building had worked with some of the members, students and teachers at the Building, but shied away from having their work officially associated with the space. This may have been partly due to the realization that feminist artwork was not considered mainstream enough for building a career. It may also have been due to an underlying homophobia on the part of some women whose associations with feminism might have also lead to an unwanted association with lesbianism.[5]

Catalogs of early video exhibitions acknowledge work that was aggressively feminist. For example *Southland Video Anthology 1976-77*, published by the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1977, lists and describes works by Suzanne Lacy, Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton in feminist terms. *The Anthology* describes the characters in Angelo and Compton's *Nun and Deviant* (1976) as "aberrant female archetypes," and quotes extensively from both Compton and Angelo. States Angelo, "Nun and Deviant: two women out of social context seen through society's eyes." She continues in a description of the politics behind the making of the tape. Basic feminism becomes museum catalog copy. This type of acknowledgment has gradually fallen away from writings on the history of video, making the "history" little more than a predictable tale of artistic heroism. To acknowledge Jonas's *Vertical Roll* as a brilliant piece by a single artist does not mean that a collectively-guided effort by a group of artists is any less notable. While Jonas is duly recognized, collectively-made and politically-inspired work is relegated to the footnotes.

When artists first began using video, Janson's *History of Art*, then the ultimate survey of mostly Western art, and the most required college-level art history text in the country, did not include any female artists. This was by design and not by accident. In an introductory essay for a show in Halifax of works produced from 1972-82 entitled "corpus loquendi/body for speaking," curator Jan Peacock writes, "It is now largely acknowledged that early performance art, body art and video saw the participation of an unprecedented number of women artists. Their "in" to the artwork after years of exclusion was characterized by their insistence on the vitality of intimate subject matter and personal narrative."[6]

Feminist video, which flourished in the early years of the medium, is now minimized as one of the interesting sidelights of video artmaking. The failure of historians to acknowledge and analyze feminist video as an important genre in itself follows in the tradition of art history as a gender-specific science—specific for the most part to the gender and work of men. Work such as Vito Acconci's *Pryings* (1971), *Undertone* (1973) and *The Red Tapes* (1976),[7] and Bruce Nauman's *Stamping in the Studio* (1968) and *Wall/Floor Positions* (1968)[8] are not only considered to be important pieces within the bodies of work by each artist, but also considered to be key works of video as art. This work plays a large part in establishing how early video is defined and understood. It is largely about identity, and in these cases male identity.

Video artists from every community were working on similar themes inspired by investigations into the medium itself. Men and women began doing the same thing at the same time. However, work by many women did not receive the kind of recognition granted video's male pioneers. Instead, we are provided with a limited perspective of video art as the singular expressions of creative individuals. Video history thus becomes more tractable at the high cost of leaving out some of the most interesting works based in non-art ideologies, collaborative structures, populist practices and inclusive content. A misleading, elitist and ultimately sexist myth of artists' video has been created. While Acconci was challenging audiences with truly

provocative explorations in both video and performance, and while Nauman was busily obsessing in his studio, there was an entire community of women in Los Angeles creating their own challenges to the sexual status quo and to the art establishment, using video as their medium of choice.

The Los Angeles Woman's Building

In 1970 Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro founded the Feminist Art Program at California State University, Fresno, as the first art program based in feminism. In 1971, that program moved to the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts), and Arlene Raven was added to its faculty. At Cal Arts, the program involved a series of consciousness-raising groups and classes for women, designed to enable women artists to identify and manifest their own art priorities in a supportive climate of mutual respect. In doing so they not only acknowledged the reality of sexism in art institutions, they challenged the school by offering a politically-based alternative to female students. The Feminist Art Program ended in 1972, culminating in a widely publicized collaborative installation called "Womanhouse," in Los Angeles.

In 1973, Chicago and Shapiro had gone their separate ways. An idea had already begun to take hold of Chicago and Raven, however, based on their successful experience at Cal Arts. They discussed creating an independent feminist arts institution, one not subject to the conventions of a traditional art school, nor to the value system of "old art history, old art."[9] A third founding member, Sheila de Bretteville, expanded the vision to include more than the establishment of a program for female artists. de Bretteville wanted the program to have its own space, a building that could house art studios, galleries, classrooms and workshops, and even private spaces for women artists. She envisioned an entire arts center that included community participation, a bookstore and women's businesses. Raven and Chicago liked the idea, and together the three of them founded the Los Angeles Woman's Building.

At the Building, the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) was established, with the deceptively simple idea that women should learn artmaking skills from each other. Behind that idea was an unyielding radicalism, a hybrid of personal transformation therapy, a sprinkling of Maoist ideology (criticism/self-criticism), and a lot of sexual exploration and feminist cultural production. According to Raven, feminist art education would provide a transition for women from a situation of oppression to one of support. Raven theorized that women's oppression had led us to relate to each other through competition, isolation and silence. This was to be turned around through supportive criticism and self-criticism, because women "shape one another through . . . criticism," and have "a supreme ability to not criticize."[10]

The emphasis on criticism/self-criticism shows the influence of leftist political thought, and was practiced in regular consciousness-raising sessions where women discussed not only their work, but also their lives, dreams, memories, desires and possibilities for the future. Leftist ideology was further combined with the invention of what Raven terms "Sapphic education." Briefly stated, Sapphic education "proceeds from a feminist education, entering all areas of life." It involves women sharing information about their everyday lives as part of a "mutual educational process," with the assumption of "peership among women, everyone having something to offer," and "ridding oneself of power dynamics" in personal and professional relationships.[11] It was in this climate that women were invited to make art.

Leftism and feminism often included people of color in terms of somewhat utopian principles, based on ideals rather than on practical measures toward inclusion. The small numbers of women of color in the FSW did not represent what the artists who had started the Building envisioned. Nor did it represent the demographics of the population of Los Angeles. It would have been necessary for women of color to be involved in the core of the initial planning for the program to serve them well. Working-class women, as well, might have provided a different set of goals from those established by the art professionals and academically-oriented women who founded the FSW. The experiences of women of color and working-class women deserved to be addressed.

Terry Wolverton, who was involved with the Woman's Building for 13 years, examined the issue of race and regional difference in a 1986 *Afterimage* article entitled "Artist-Run Organizations and the Issue of Inclusion":

> There are many artist-run organizations with similar histories. Some came into being to address the needs of particular cultural or geographic communities, others to provide opportunities for emerging artists or artists working in media that were considered too experimental or too controversial for mainstream institutions. These organizations were all attempting to grapple with the issue of inclusion.
>
> However, we have sometimes fallen into a xenophobia that rivals that of mainstream arts institutions. Thus, a women's arts institution may neglect to include women of color in their programming. An experimental arts organization may neglect to include women. In our urgency to meet the needs of our defined constituency, we may forget that others are out there, fighting the same battles with different troops. Or (to mix metaphors) we are so hungry to get a piece of the pie for our own, that we forget that we began with knowing it was necessary to create a whole new recipe.[12]

At the founding of the FSW, the understanding was that "female" constituted a class, and "woman" was an essential category. Race issues and issues of economics that would have enriched the woman-as-class perspective, were overlooked in favor of a unified theory of sexual politics. The feminism that was practiced at the Woman's Building was influenced by contemporary Black Power and civil rights ideologies. Since the ideological foundation was based on the experience of white middle-class women who were art professionals, the difficulty, it seemed, was in reaching the populations that provided some of the political insights, and much of the inspiration.

As the Woman's Building programs continued into the 1980s, changes developed in the ideology. A practical multiculturalism was not only adopted, it was embraced. The programs, while still concerned primarily with giving women opportunities to develop artmaking skills, expected the artists to remain strongly identified with their own varying communities. The underlying feminism was less based in the politics of personal interaction, and art issues were defined as less polarized along gender lines.

Video from the beginning to 1979

Video was initially used to document everything at the Woman's Building and was used as an art medium as well. Considering the ideological task at hand, it is not surprising that there were 350 videotapes produced at the Woman's Building, many of these during the first decade of its existence. The tapes consist of completed video art and documentary pieces, cable television programs, performance documentation, public service announcements, unedited source material and footage so raw and unprocessed that it is difficult to define. Much of the work is in black and white, produced on portable reel-to-reel equipment and edited with a tape splicer—techniques that are daring by today's standards.

The tapes, which are currently archived at the Long Beach Museum of Art Video Annex, are being cleaned, transferred from the original half-inch open reels to cassettes where necessary and cataloged. The work of identifying the makers and participants in the works, many of which lack titles or credits, is being done by Annette Hunt and Kathleen Forrest. Hunt was involved in Woman's Building video projects in the '70s, and is one of the founders of the Los Angeles Women's Video Center. Forrest was part of the Media Arts Committee at the Woman's Building during the '80s, and her love and knowledge of the work led her to this current project.

Many of the tapes now archived in Long Beach were, for years, stored in boxes in Hunt's garage in Los Angeles. Hunt thought of them in terms of her own memories and experiences, having worked on many of them. She was also admittedly too close to the material and too familiar with the context of its creation to assess their value in historical terms. One morning she moved the boxes of tapes to the curbside, where they awaited pickup by the Los Angeles Department of Sanitation.

That same day Hunt received a telephone call from former Woman's Building video colleague Cheri Gaulke. Gaulke was calling to let Hunt know that the Long Beach Museum wanted to archive the tapes. The timing was remarkable, and fortunately Hunt was able to rescue the tapes from the curb before they were taken away. With the recent cleaning and transferring of many of the tapes, the works are finally ready to take their place in video history.

According to Hunt there was no self-conscious questioning of what it meant to use video. There was a portapak, and there was an abundance of opportunity to shoot. Hunt and other women undertook an extensive project of documentation.[13] They shot everything in and about the Woman's Building, and every aspect of what they shot illustrated the ideas that were the Building's political foundation in practice. The architecture and organization of the space, the exhibitions, the 400 to 500 women who renovated the building, the street that the building stood on and the approaches one took to reach the front door, the visiting artists at work and art and writing workshops in session—all were documented. There were video tours of the site, interviews, staged scenes, workshop sessions and conversations among women.

The tapes

The Woman's Building videotape collection provides an amazing and invaluable record of early videomaking. It is also a record of many guided struggles towards self-realized identity through feminist artmaking. The video artists at the building had diverse approaches, ranging from experimental and performance strategies and conceptual methodologies to straightforward documentation of events, interviews and talk shows. Some of the work is a cross between confessional and accusatory narratives, but public performance art and spectacle were a major part of their strategies as well. The collection includes early works from now established artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Gaulke, Vanalyne Green and Susan Mogul.

Mogul's *The Woman's Building: FSW Video Letter* (1974) is a wonderfully unselfconscious, funny and enthusiastic tour of the Building. It begins as a role-play in which a young woman, supposedly new in town and carrying a large suitcase, asks an old man in a park for directions to the Woman's Building. He points her in the right direction, and the young woman, on finding the Building, becomes the viewer's introduction to the space, and to the FSW. She is Pam MacDonald from Nebraska. She is not really new, but is part of the FSW, stating "I have changed so much [since becoming involved with the Woman's Building] I have to race myself to the mirror every morning," as she is being followed by Mogul. Mogul, who wears a bulky thrift-store coat and a broad smile, is seemingly unhindered by portapak, cables and microphone. MacDonald and Mogul find the Building, and once inside Mogul's camera turns to whomever is available for an interview. She finds Chicago.

Chicago, resplendent in her Jewish Afro, wide-collared shirt and large sunglasses, is giving advice to a woman who wants to know how one gets one's writings published. Chicago shows the woman her new book, *Through the Flower*,[14] and suggests that she hire an agent. The woman looks puzzled, perhaps expecting a more radical feminist approach to publishing. Chicago tells the camera that "old techniques, abstract work, are not meaningful," that the "traditional art context is unsatisfying," and artists have a need to create "responsible communication," to "make [their] statement public."

It is no stretch of the imagination to understand "traditional" art in this sense to mean the male-dominated art world. The connections between "male art" and abstract art, and the inclusion of public art as being against abstraction, are interesting as feminist values because these are values expressed by Fluxus artists as well. The association with Fluxus may not have been a conscious one. Nonetheless it shows influence from a non-feminist, albeit ideologically similar art movement, and provides another contemporary art context for the ideas at work in the FSW.

Frame enlargement from *On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven* (1979) by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield

Another important piece from 1975 is Sheila Ruth's *Constructive Feminism*, a documentary about the Woman's Building featuring interviews with de Bretteville, Raven and students from the FSW. A sense of pride and responsibility runs through the piece. It opens with Ruth standing outside the entrance to the building with microphone in hand. She is the reporter who is going to take the viewer on a tour of the Building. This reporter is not objective, however, and as the camera travels through the different spaces, some of which are still under construction, Ruth tells the viewer that the Building is a "public center for women's culture." That in itself insists that there is such a thing as women's culture, and that it is inclusive, open to the public. The tape includes photographs of women reconstructing the building's interior, images that are realist in a manner that equates femaleness with competence, power and potential, in a non-competitive environment. The pictures are valuable documents that successfully evoke the optimism and confidence the workers had in reconstructing the actual building interior. They borrow a social realist aesthetic, depicting the common person as extraordinary. They also borrow from radical journalism. The photographs clearly show the connection that was made between having the physical space available, and realizing ideals. From a distance of more than 20 years, whether or not these ideals were achieved, or were achieved on a regular basis, is no longer the point.

In another segment, Ruth interviews the workers themselves, asking them how they feel about what they are doing. Says one, "It takes out the frustration. When I'm through, I can stand back and see something that I have built, see something that is actually visible." This statement is simple and incredible. It expresses one way in which "woman" came to be considered a class. In our relationship to the everyday world, women were kept out of the very building of it.

Other slices of life at the Building can be found in Claudia Queen and Cyd Slayton's 1977 piece, *Kate Millett*, and an uncredited piece called *Single Mothers: Two Personal Perspectives with Anita Green and Debra Alford*, (n.d.). *Kate Millett* is a documentation of Millett's activities as an artist in residence. Millett always appears surrounded by fans and followers, many of whom are helping her create sculptural pieces for an installation—gigantic papier-mâché "ladies" that, in Millett's words, "overwhelm their situation."

Single Mothers is one of the most distinctive pieces available for viewing. In this tape, Anita Green and Debra Alford sit at a table with a pot of coffee. Behind them is a wall of familiar, now vintage, feminist posters. The two women are having a conversation specifically feminist? With statements such as "all mothers feel guilty," and "not a lot has changed," the real themes of isolation, loneliness and resentment come crashing through. *Single Mothers* seems like a video experiment that did not work out as planned. At the end of the conversation both women face the camera and there is a slow fade-out. The moment is achingly honest, awkward and beautiful.

Many of the other tapes show to what extent the creation of a persona was used to develop autonomous identities and new relationships to power. One of the most well-known pieces to emerge from the Building is *Nun and Deviant* (1976) by Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton. This piece is an extraordinary step by step description, through Angelo and Compton's performances, of how to recognize, understand and identify selves that may lie only slightly beneath the surface. As the tape begins, the two women have set up a card table in an empty parking lot, and sit facing one another. Angelo puts on a nun's habit as Compton gets into dyke/juvenile delinquent drag, using each other as a mirror, and asking each other if the desired look is sufficient and complete.

The performance goes into stage two as each woman takes turns walking to the camera for a close-up shot, with her performance partner in the background smashing crockery on the parking lot ground. The "nun" or "deviant" in close-up each tells a story about who she is,[15] as the personas that emerge from each narrative become increasingly defiant. The monologues are interesting not only because of content, but because of the relationship of the performer to the camera as well as to the anticipated audience. They could be talking to themselves, and the camera does indeed provide a mirror. On playback the image reflects the audience rather than the performer—however, immediately universalizing the narrative and inviting the audience to find themselves in these characters. Angelo and Compton's relationship to the camera creates the intimacy of a private conversation, or confession, while the background performance of dishes being smashed provides the psychological context for each story.

Angelo continues the persona of "nun" in a second tape called *Part 1, On Joining the Order: A confession in which Angelica Furiosa explains to her sisters how she came to be among them* (1977). This is another confessional piece that carries a heavy impact. There are two main shots: one is an extreme close-up of Angelo as Sister Angelica Furiosa, the other is of a rose being dipped in honey. The confession unfolds in a softly-worded story of incest. The language used to describe one particular incident of abuse is filled with painful irony and poetic doublespeak, telling of a girl's rape by her father in terms of their mutual betrayal of the mother. It is obvious who has been betrayed. The beauty of the tape is not only in the strong single image of the narrator cut with the metaphoric image of the honey-dipped rose, but also in how it requires the viewer to rearrange his or her logic, to turn lies into truth, and form his or her own mental indictment of childhood sexual abuse.

Frame enlargement from *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977)by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz with members of the Feminist Video Collective.

In 1980, Angelo constructed a video installation called *Equal* [illegible] together. The decks were synchronized by pausing and playing each deck at the same time because there was no other technology available to insure that the six tapes would play in sync.

Angelo invited children from Los Angeles public schools to view the installation, and it received positive local news coverage. *Equal Time/Equal Space* was ground-breaking. Angelo entered and explored an area that was taboo, invited others in for discussion, and brought the theme to children, who may have benefited from it the most. Angelo still has these tapes, and is currently considering giving them to the archive at Long Beach.

Equal Time/Equal Space premiered at the Woman's Building, and in 1981 went on to Toronto for exhibition at the University College Playhouse at the University of Toronto. The installation was part of a two-year exhibition at the Building called *The Incest Project*, that involved visual art, workshops, panel discussions, media events and talks with children called Bedtime Stories. Compton continued to work as well, but took a different direction. In her *Women Communicating Series*, the "deviant" persona has become less arrogantly deviant and more candidly flirtatious. One gets the impression that the flirtation is not only with the camera, but also with her many friends.

The *Women Communicating Series: #1 My Friends Imitating their Favorite Animals, #2 My Friends Sharing and Teaching Something*, and *#3 My Friends Sharing and Teaching Something* (Summer 1979) gives the viewer a glimpse of the Woman's Building and its members' relationships at that time. In each segment, Compton, in an ordinary backyard setting, introduces herself and gives a brief introduction to each of her friends. For each friend, the segment begins in an empty backyard space, and the friend enters the frame to do her performance. It was typical in organized women's communities for work, politics and love relationships to travel down similar paths, or cross and re-cross paths. These three pieces illustrate the interconnection of work, friendship, artmaking and love relationships so clearly that Compton's introductions become humorous in their predictability. A considerable number of the women "sharing and teaching," or "imitating animals," have also shared apartments, lovers and skills, have belonged to the same publicly funded carpentry collective (aptly named Handywomen) and to the same baseball team, Catch 22. Compton's flirty introductions, which initially seem almost childish, are an effective device for inviting the viewer to understand what sharing and teaching meant in the context of a consciously-formed lesbian community.

On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven (1979) is one of the most historically revealing documents from the tape collection. In this tape, which never cuts to the interviewers, Raven gives some of her own history, as well as the history of the FSW and the Woman's Building. Raven's clear intelligence and powerful determination define the spirit of the time, as she describes the politics that were the Building's ideological foundation. Many of her memories of involvement in movement politics, from having joined the NAACP while in high school, to the founding [illegible] with the development of a practical art education. Raven says that she moved to California from the East Coast to work with Chicago at Cal Arts. They were both "quite dissatisfied" with the traditional art education environment, and wanted to form, in Raven's words,

> an independent feminist institution that would not be subject to the value system of even a liberal institution like California Institute of the Arts, where we were. We [Raven, Chicago, and co-founder de Bretteville] put out a brochure stating our purpose of gathering women together to form a support community, and about 35 women responded to us, and then we had to have a place to hold this feminist studio workshop, and found a building that ironically belonged to California Institute of the Arts, and was available for an educational endeavor. We decided that we would just call up all of the feminist organizations in the community that had a relationship to feminist culture, and ask them to go in on this building with us, and that was the beginning of the Woman's Building. It was really a practical solution to the fact that we needed a space.[16]

This tape is not only about the history of the Woman's Building, it is also about the role of personal commitment in 1970s feminist activism. The tape serves now as a document of American feminism, as a map of how feminist priorities led to concrete activities, and as a delineation of the role of activism and politics in artmaking. In the interview, Raven delineates the connections from lived experience to theory, and from theory to community, all leading to a new understanding of art practice based in feminism.

In 1976, the Los Angeles Women's Video Center was established at the Building. It was founded as a workshop apart from the FSW by Hunt, Compton, Angelo and Jerri Allyn. As a separate entity, the Video Center was able to apply for public funding and the members received CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) money to pay themselves a salary of $80 per week for teaching video and making tapes.

The Video Center documentary work includes two notable public performance documentations: *In Mourning and Rage* (1977) and *Record Companies Drag Their Feet* (1979). *In Mourning and Rage* is a well-known performance by Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, staged as a media event, to which only local politicians and members of the media were invited. It was done in protest of the failure of the police to apprehend a serial murderer known as the Hillside Strangler, who had been raping and

killing women in the Los Angeles area. The powerful documentary footage of the event still evokes the anger and sadness that originally inspired the performance.

Record Companies Drag Their Feet was also designed as a media event for local television newscasts, in order to reach as broad an audience as possible. *Record Companies* is based on a feminist analysis of contemporary pop music album covers that often used images of women as victims of sexual and other types of violence to attract customers and promote record sales. Today the issue is considered less straightforward than it was two decades ago. Censorship, sexual freedom and freedom of expression would most certainly be used today to counter this classic feminist analysis of the relationship between sexual imagery, the economy and the quality of women's lives.

One aspect of both these pieces that continues to fascinate, and that also runs through much of the other documentary work, is a consideration of how the participants felt about what they were doing. Whether it was being engaged in the *Record Companies* and *In Mourning and Rage* actions, or doing repair work and construction on the actual building, the repeated question of how participation effects the individual emphasizes a desire and need for the artists themselves to understand the nature of feminist process. It is clearly in contrast to other performance-related film and video documents of the same time period, such as those of Chris Burden's work, for example, which point to an antagonistic relationship to audience, to participant, to media and to the self.

In 1976, a year before the public action, Lacy produced a well-known performance tape entitled *Learn Where the Meat Comes From.* The performance is a spoof on housewifery and cooking shows, and was done specifically for the camera. Initially the camera follows Lacy's hands as she points to and fondles different sections of a lamb's carcass. The camera seems to disregard her face, until the viewer is made aware that Lacy is "growing" teeth. Lacy de-volves on camera from a helpfully hinting housewife to a raw meat eating vampire, with the help of plastic teeth. The emphasis in the tape is on the body of the lamb, which looks disturbingly "nude," and which takes on meanings related to sexualized violence. The parallel between the lamb and the woman preparing it as a meal is strikingly clear. From where does the meat come?, she asks. It comes from you, she answers.

There is a series of less well-known short works by Lacy that are wonderful, both visually and conceptually. *Three Works for the Teeth Series* (1974) are performances totaling fewer than eight minutes in which Lacy (1) brushes her teeth using an over-abundance of toothpaste while looking into a mirror, but not into the camera, (2) is spoon fed by an unidentified woman while wearing plastic false teeth that render the feeding almost impossible, and (3) is telling a story about false teeth, most of which the viewer cannot decipher because, once again, Lacy's mouth is full of plastic false teeth. These short descriptions cannot come close to the impact of the work, an impact that comes from its utter simplicity, absurdity and defiant logic.

Other documentation includes an ironic and subtly powerful six-minute sculpture-based performance by Elizabeth Canelake called *Effects of Atmospheric Pressure on Sculpture* (1977). In this tape, an unidentified woman, presumably the artist (there are no credits), uses an air gun to position blocks of indeterminate material on a studio floor. There is no explanation or voice-over, and the artist's self-consciousness before the camera is matched only by her determination to complete the sculpture. Canelake uses both video and sculptural processes effectively in a doubling of concepts.

A tape by Judith Barry, also from 1977, called *The Revealing Myself Tapes*, is quite the opposite. The tape is of a long performance in a room full of junk, food, toys and trash, that have been laid out over a particularly bad painting. There is an accompanying monologue that switches from first to third person, but the logic of this tactic is not clear. According to the monologue, the installation and performance are about reorganizing the past. The whole effect of *The Revealing Myself Tapes* is a confusing and unsuccessful word play, and Barry herself seems bored by the time the performance ends.

Other short experimental works from the mid-1970s include a particularly timeless monologue called *Snafu* (n.d.),[17] by Leslie Belt. Claiming that she is "fearing the worst" about herself, Belt talks to the camera about depression and self-help from her position on a couch. She exudes a disturbed restlessness, which may be part of her performance, but that may also be the actual case. The camera is not in focus and its positioning seems uncertain throughout the tape. Both these devices work to give meaning to the form, and create visual analogies to the tension expressed in Belt's monologue.

Three other performance-based pieces worth noting are *Tuna Salad* (n.d.) by Chris Wong, *Jealousy* (n.d.)[18] by Antoinette de Jong, and *Quandary* (1976), by Linda Henry. *Tuna Salad* is the most enigmatic of the three, involving no language but showing abstracting close-ups of the performer with a speculum and mirror between her thighs, then stuffing a bra with tissues. The camera is not only a mirror, it is a tool of self-examination. The viewer never sees the artist's face.

In *Jealousy,* the performer is sitting on a chair, in a medium long shot that places her awkwardly in the lower half of the frame. For eight minutes she rants against an unfaithful lover, and the awkward framing suddenly makes sense: she needs to shout, to "get things off [her] chest," and this requires plenty of headroom.

Frame enlargement from *Vertical Roll* (1972)by Joan Jonas.

Quandary is much quieter, with the camera focused on plates of food set in front of a performer whose face is never shown. There is a monologue about the order in which bread, wine, apples and cheese should be consumed, which seems to provide an illustration of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Nothing else happens, and OCD is not named, but the obsession about how the food must be eaten is unrelenting. As in *Tuna Salad* and *Jealousy*, the idea of explaining, identifying or providing meaning outside the performance itself is not part of the piece. That the artists do not show their faces, or show them only in long shot, is completely unlike performance work that is primarily invested in the identity of the performer, where the performer's identity and reputation as an artist provide some of the content. These women are clearly more interested in the process of making the piece, in a possible catharsis to be achieved in the process, rather than in asserting individual identity.

Performance video moves into experimental narrative in *On the Road to . . .* (n.d.), by Green and Angelo, and in *Eclipse in the Western Palace* (1977) by Gaulke. Both Gaulke and Green have continued to work in video; Angelo has become an organizational psychologist. *On the Road to . . .* is an eight-minute tape of feet, flowers, petitfours, clocks and cornucopia. The performance is framed for the camera and is much less a performance than it is actions, colors and simple narrative—somewhat literate in its ideas regarding exploring territories in collaboration.

Eclipse in the Western Palace is similar as a performance framed for the camera, containing elements more related to video framing and narrative than to conceptual concerns. A naked, headless female body seemingly consumes women's shoes. High heels of many colors, cork wedgies and other footwear are guided "into" the performer's vagina by virtue of clever camerawork, to create a somewhat monstrous and very uncomfortable sight gag.

In so many of the earlier tapes, familiar popular representations of women were successfully recontextualized, taken back from arenas of male identification. In these tapes, the faces and bodies moved, talked, and gestured in reaction to a new set of guidelines. These guidelines took into account popular conceptions of what a woman is, what women look like, and what women do, and suggested that women start over, creating alternative representations. The work is extremely gendered in a very oppositional way.

Later there is a shift in processes and aesthetics. Work produced in 1979 and 1980 begins to look and sound different. Gaulke and Green, in this case, whose work from 1977 is described above, created precursors to what was coming. The equipment and editing facilities had improved enough to include color cameras and a switcher/special effects generator, which would have guaranteed that much of the work would look and sound different. But this does not account entirely for the transformation.

Performance on tape was still popular, but by this time many had discovered that framing and placement of objects might say as much as a performance action of confession, rage or love. Losing control on camera as a performance strategy was displaced by a strategy of tighter control of both image and editing. Works from 1979 and 1980 are somewhat more claustrophobic as well. What is communicated exists outside of a reference to real time as the picture begins to contain a visual language based more on the camera's ability to frame objects closely, than on its ability to describe a situation or record a performance. What evolved from the necessity of establishing a real place was the ability to establish fictional space, non-space and illusionistic space. The new video frame reflects the ability through editing to create original meanings based on how the imagery is sequenced, and using new and not necessarily linear narrative logic. There was no longer a priority to document real life, to create journals, or to re-enact actual events. It was no longer necessary to play in front of the camera. What was placed before the mirror had changed, and video space was discovered.

Nina Salerno created several tapes in 1979 that are now in the collection and that typify the new relationship to video-making. *Darwin Was Right: Survival of the Fittest* is a short performance of screaming insults, chewing gum and breasts. In *The Italian Way to Alleviate Obnoxiating Things,* Salerno suggests that "Jerseymaid" brand low fat cottage cheese might provide some answers. Both works are an expression of a less collectively-oriented consciousness. As in much traditional art, the artist's own persona as artist, her individual style, and her individual identity are the subject of these tapes.

Conclusion

The Woman's Building videotape collection represents only one of the many groups of people who organized around video. But the tapes themselves and the history of their making simultaneously embody both 1970s feminism and early video art. They are evidence of the makers' enthusiastic participation in both dialogues for at least a decade, to the point where the idea of a collaborative feminist self-exploration and the idea of the exploration of a performative video space became one and the same.

The history of video as it stands today has not fulfilled its early expectations. The large numbers of exhibitions, catalogs and screenings that promised so much in the 1970s and '80s have waned considerably, as video screenings have moved from the art circuit to the film festival circuit. The story of video as art, which was originally about the incredible energy of many people trying out something new and vital, has become a rather static image of a few of our old reliable stand-bys. A feminist revision might not only bring other works to light, but might also provide a fresh approach to understanding what this medium really is, regardless of who is behind or in front of the lens. The more inclusive "larger picture" of video is, fortunately, bound to be overwhelming and unwieldy. It is the "nature" of the medium.

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NOTES

1. Some of the early books on the new mediums include exhibition catalogs as well as anthologies. Included are: *Southland Video Anthology 1976-77,* (Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1977); Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema,* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970); Frank Gillette, *Between Paradigms: The Mood and Its Purpose,* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1972); Paul Ryan, *Cybernetics of the Sacred,* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974); Beryl Korot and Ira Schneider, eds., *Video Art: An Anthology,* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1976); Joanna Gill, *Video: State of the Art,* (New York: The Rockefeller Foundation, 1976); Kathy Rae Huffman, ed., *Video: A Retrospective 1974-84,* (Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1984); Gregory Battcock, ed., *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology,* (New York: Dutton, 1978); Peggy Gale, ed., *Video by Artists,* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1976).
2. David Ross, "Postmodern Station Break: A Provisional (Historic) Overview of Video Installation," *American Landscape Video: The Electronic Grove,* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1988) p. 47.
3. *Vertical Roll* by Joan Jonas is distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
4. Joan Jonas, in-person faculty presentation, Bard College, Summer 1995.
5. This is based on a conversation with a founding member of the Women's Video Center who remembers specific videomakers based in Los Angeles coming to the Building to work with crews from the Center. Some of them specifically refused to do official residencies there, however. Based on my source's experience at the Building, she states that some women declined invitations to participate because they preferred to make a name for themselves as individual artists, and they did not want their work to be identified with collective feminist or lesbian politics. Such identification, they feared, would hinder their acceptance by the art mainstream. At the request of my source, I have agreed to not name names here.
6. Jan Peacock, introduction to *corpus loquendi/body for speaking: Body-centered video in Halifax, 1972-1982,* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1994), p. 7.
7. Vito Acconci's videotapes are distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.
8. Bruce Nauman's videotapes are distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.
9. Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, *On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven,* (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1979).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Terry Wolverton, "Artist-Run Organizations and the Issue of Inclusion," *Afterimage* 14, no. 3 (October 1986), p. 18.
13. Personal interview with Annette Hunt, March 20, 1997, Los Angeles.
14. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist,* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).
15. For a detailed description and an interesting analysis of *Nun and Deviant* see Chris Straayer, "I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s," *Afterimage* 14, no. 4 (November 1986), pp. 8-12.
16. *On Art and Artists: Arlene Raven.*
17. Many of the tapes have not yet been dated, but I would judge this piece to be from 1976 or 1977, based on dates of other tapes on which Leslie Belt is credited.
18. Similarly, *Tuna Salad* and *Jealousy* have not yet been dated, but appear to be from 1976 or 1977.