

NEW VOICES 4: WOMEN & THE MEDIA, NEW VIDEO



Max Almy
Anna-Marie Arnold
Judith Barry
Dara Birnbaum
Lyn Blumenthal
Nancy Buchanan

WOMEN & THE MEDIA: NEW VIDEO

Cecilia Condit
Margia Kramer
Martha Rosler
Ilene Segalove
Lisa Steele
Janice Tanaka
and
Erika Rothenberg

ALLEN MEMORIAL ART MUSEUM, OBERLIN COLLEGE
BULLETIN
VOLUME XLI, SUPPLEMENT, 1983-84

COVER: MARGIA KRAMER, *Freedom of Information Tape:*
Jean Seberg, 1980

Acknowledgments

This is the fourth "New Voices" exhibition and continues the commitment of the first: "to provide a space of operations for artists challenging the limits of tradition." Though the works included are diverse, they are united in their various attempts to exploit, subvert, and deconstruct the popular media in all of its forms—from television and advertising to printed matter, photography and film.

Many people provided access to these tapes and others, thereby affording an education in video: Nancy Frank, La Mamelle, San Francisco; Anna Gronau, Art Metropole, Toronto; Kathy Huffman, Long Beach Museum of Art, California; Ken Kirby, Video Data Bank, Chicago; and Barbara Osborne, The Kitchen Center, New York City. Loretta Campbell, Martha Fleming, and Debra Z. Zimmerman made important suggestions as to artists and resources; and Judith Fannin, Ann Holden, and Elizabeth Shepherd assisted with the essay. For all of their help, I am sincerely grateful. And to the Ohio Arts Council, our thanks for supporting in part our programs throughout the year.

Finally, the artists have been tremendously cooperative, providing everything from tapes to enthusiastic support. They have made this program possible.

Exhibition dates: April 18-May 27, 1984



With the support of the Ohio Arts Council

William Olander
Acting Director and
Curator of Modern Art

Women and the Media: New Video

... for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.

—Walter Benjamin, 1936¹

What is Media?

The forms of media, though dominated today by the film, television, and recording industries, still include the older popular forms of printed matter—illustrated magazines, tabloids, newspapers, novels, advertising on a massive scale, all designed for mass consumption—and the newer, high technological forms of video games, recorders, cameras and cassettes, cable television (from the corporate-controlled pay-TV companies to alternative public access programming), computer hardware and software, equally designed for mass consumption but for an audience ranging from the lower middle class (if that) to the highly affluent and well-to-do. The latter group defines the most desirable consumer for these newer forms of high-tech media, and it is for this group that the production, marketing and consumption of such media are intended. Utopian dreams of alternative programming on whatever level, are subsumed by increasingly powerful monopolies which promote primarily entertainment for an affluent society on a global scale. The vision of the "global village" indeed has come true but in an anti-utopian fashion: the colonization of most of Western society and much of the Third World by mega-corporate broadcasting, movie-making, recording and even print media. (The success of American network television around the world means only that indigenous programming cannot be produced in these same locales.) Thus, it remains an ever more pressing task for politically-conscious artists to develop their own community and cultural alternatives.

Today, many women working with video (not confined to "video art" but more appropriately, with the intent to broadcast beyond the art world—"television art")² are seeking to shape just such alternatives to media domination and its attendant misrepresentations. The latter are addressed not merely within the terrain of images of women, for new feminist production seldom provides the expected pleasure of female identification with a narrative about women or with an heroic female character.³ Rather, issues of sexual difference, oppressive politics, patriarchal power—class, gender, and race—have enlarged the feminist agenda to the point where some feminist works are now unsympathetically received even by the female audiences for which they are most obviously intended. Indeed by working with video, women artists are working with *all* forms of media through the dominant institution of television in radical attempts to

break through the ideological apparatuses of the culture industry, the state, and the information systems that produce and control what we know. And once cracked, the field is re-opened for new, female discursive practices, which can function to demystify the distinctions between high culture and mass culture, between an audience for art and an audience for TV: "If there is a future for art, . . . it lies in the work being produced that breaks the art system's market.... It comes from video, film, and music makers and performers who are trying to reach and communicate with more people . . . We no longer need the protection of the 'rich' and 'intellectual'; we need communication of the masses. The immediate future lies in the hands of those makers who understand how and where high art can meet popular practices."⁴

The Power of Media

For finally it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential, of every human goal, which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power. It was the first to practice deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialisation, etc.; and if it was capital which fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it in the extermination of every use value, of every real equivalence, of production and wealth, in the very sensation we have of the unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation. Now, it is this very logic which is today hardened even more against it. And when it wants to fight this catastrophic spiral by secreting one last glimmer of reality, on which to found one last glimmer of power, it only multiplies the signs and accelerates the play of simulation.

—Jean Baudrillard, 1978⁵

Media, despite its appearance of "reality," its statements which pretend to fact (a news-cast, for instance, which is so often transparently entertainment), is constructed literally and figuratively upon fabrication and simulation. An advertisement, whether produced photographically for the print media or electronically for television, is a fictive construct—a representation—intended not merely to sell a product but to promote desire and promise wish-fulfillment. It sells an entire life-style which, despite an emphasis on individuality, is most often aimed at shaping the imaginary consciousness of a single population: "We live in a 'junk food information' world, subsisting on a debased diet. The staggering amount of data we encounter tends to destroy and neutralize any sense of meaning. In the mass media, a hyperreal, staged and simulated content and form are broadcast, in which differences are homogenized to facilitate commodity production and consumption. This extinguishes any sense of reality, dominates the sphere of social communications and introduces a kind of 'entropy of communications'."⁶



DARA BIRNBAUM, *PM Magazine/Acid Rock*, 1982



JUDITH BARRY, *Casual Shopper*, 1980-81

Within the population, women—simultaneously as consumers and objects of consumption but never as producers (other than reproducers)—are the primary “target”; and woman (note the singular) is the object of the male (and if female, male-determined) media executive’s discourse: their will to dominate the field, to inscribe woman into a masculine frame of reference and to render the female an inactive, passive victim to the male command of language: “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”⁷ That this is true can be proved easily by considering almost any representation (fictive construct of the male imagination) of woman produced by the media, from the obvious subjugation of women within the pornography industry to, in some ways the more perverse, insidious, campaigns to capitalize on the “new woman” by promoting a mythology of “you’ve come a long way, baby” (significantly the male speaking voice with a possessive diminutive tacked on to the phrase) while simultaneously inscribing this mythology in traditional, safe stereotypes—working mother, wife, girlfriend—and thus, producing a double oppression of take-over and reinscription into the familiar. The power of the media is the continuing power of the male voice, the male gaze, the phallocentrism of male-dominated culture: “...the significant issue here is capitalism’s relentless search for areas within a culture that can be colonized... You take whatever the women’s movement has accomplished and you colonize it, you sanitize it and you make it safe. In purely capitalist terms, it’s extremely successful.”⁸

Women and the Media, New Video

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.

—Helene Cixous, 1975⁹

Even if the artists in this program of videotapes did not define themselves within the praxis of feminism, by participating in an exhibition devoted to art by women, by speaking out, they no doubt will be perceived (named) as feminists. The subjects of their works, on the other hand, could be interpreted (safely) as non-feminist, for in some cases there does appear to be a lack of the female voice and this lack may confound expectations. That is, the images and texts which comprise these works are not necessarily those we are most familiar with from the media as feminist—woman-as-



They will be furious when

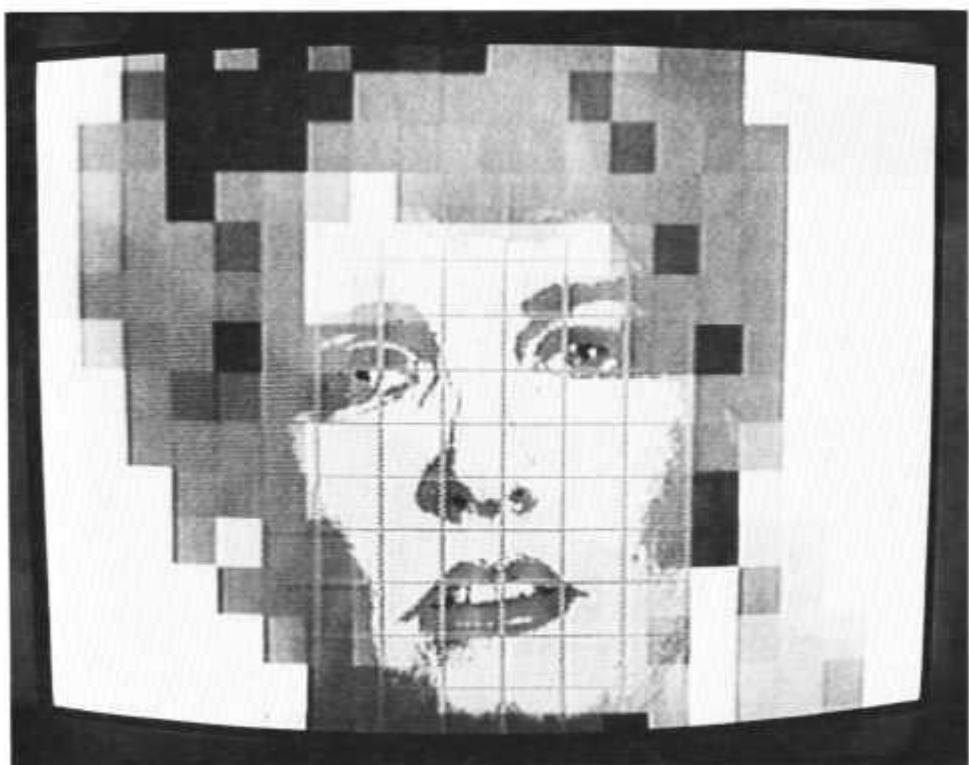


MARTHA ROSLER, *Domination and the Everyday*, 1978

victim issues (rape, pornography, abortion) or the most generalizing "women's rights." Because these works don't necessarily carry the media-defined stamp of feminism, we—fe/male spectators—may not be immediately cognizant of the "feminine" in operation. We are comfortable in this lack and in some cases, we are comforted by the "masculine" subjects of the tapes: for instance, business, executed in an eyewitness news-style form of investigative reporting, the traditional terrain of male journalism (Ilene Segalove's *What Is Business?*); assassination, collaged together from familiar footage of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Anna-Marie Arnold's *Ghost Dances*); political oppression, shaped according to the most unpolished and distracting, unpleasurable criteria (Martha Rosler's *Domination and the Everyday*); and nuclear annihilation, a montage of real threats and conceivable nightmares (Nancy Buchanan's *An End To All Our Dreams*). Yet this is a strategy of interference and camouflage, for these women do speak with female voices even though the language may be male engendered. For crammed into these works, informing each moment is a strategy of subversion and intervention. The critique of production, for example, in Rosler's densely-layered work exploring events of political oppression in Chile and the more subtle oppression of media domination in the United States is interwoven with the more humane and intimate though no less "routine" dialogue between the artist-mother and her son and a tedious discussion of the New York artworld. Lest one not get the point that this work is a critique produced by a radical feminist and not intended to be consumed easily and rapidly, as are most products of the culture industry, the images and texts are repeated a second time, as the mother-son (a classic domestic exchange) dialogue continues.

Rosler's work is only one example of how the feminist voice speaks—jamming the male discourse of the media with the heterogeneous feminine, denying the pleasure of the familiar. The tapes by Dara Birnbaum, Lyn Blumenthal, Margia Kramer, and Lisa Steele equally negate the familiar pleasure of both the conventions of television (for these tapes are constructed according to the narrative structures of T.V.) and the seductive clichés produced therefrom: commercial television's "framing" of female protagonists, as in the boxed-in female celebrities of *Hollywood Squares* who appear repeatedly and ultimately relentlessly (tragically) in Birnbaum's *Kiss The Girls/Make Them Cry*, or taken to its logical extreme, the victimization of Steele's welfare-mother by the system in *The Damages* and *Makin' Strange* (the form derived from T.V.'s soap operas but substituting the typical middle- and upper-class cast of characters with society's invisible others) and the ultimate destruction by the State of film star/activist Jean Seberg in Kramer's *Freedom of Information Tape 1: Jean Seberg*. Our discomfort, our awareness, our self-consciousness is produced not as in past video art productions (these tapes are not boring, real-time events) but by their relentless attention to the manner in which the media can shape and destroy our very lives, or shall we say, women's lives.

The narrative forms employed by other artists suggest that there are additional means of subverting and simultaneously producing pleasure which are not necessarily equal to the "ease and plenitude" of television's simulations. Judith Barry's ambitiously ambiguous *Casual Shopper*, for example, is a straightforward narrative of woman-meets-man/man-meets-woman which is pleasurable to watch in its seducing rhythm. The latter is contradicted, however, by the thirty minute obsessive equation of the shopping mall, attractive protagonists, muzak-style soundtrack and glamorous commodities (fashion magazines, designer clothing, personalized greeting cards) which fill the screen—all typical of an affluent suburban lifestyle which is finally sickening in its empty sameness (the power of the male gaze to reduce difference to a powerful indifference). The pleasure of this text



MAX ALMY, *Leaving the 20th Century*, 1982



CECILIA CONDIT, *Beneath the Skin*, 1981

is "spoiled" by our ultimate discomfort produced by watching it; by its ability to turn us off. As Barry explains, "This is a love story that never advances beyond that which can be imagined, which is never consummated, but returns to a prosaic scene where demands are exchanged and desire endlessly circulates." The electronic collages of Max Almy, Cecilia Condit and Janice Tanaka, on the other hand, produce another kind of disorientation, equally unfamiliar: overload, image-saturation which, no matter how accustomed we have become to television's rapid-fire transmission is nothing compared to these densely packed, hallucinatory tapes. Almy's theme—"Leaving the 20th Century"—is perfectly suited to the hyper-paced editing and artificial, staged images of her tape: a voice-over tells us "Relax" while the images and sound-track bombard us with a barrage of simulated effects frightening in their potential "reality"; it is as Baudrillard suggests: when capital attempts to secrete "one last glimmer of reality.... it only multiplies the signs and accelerates the play of simulation."

The works in this program seek to fill the empty spaces of the late twentieth century with the very contents of its media culture transformed. Whether or not some of these works will themselves be equally transformed—imploded into the dominant discourse (male)—is of course a natural (or rather cultural) possibility. As Martha Rosler has written: "With quotation, as with photography, meaning is heavily weighted by the frame. Simply introducing something where it has been excluded—mass-culture imagery in an elite-culture setting (Pop) or photographs of the unphotographed poor or of subcultures—can be a radical opener, until familiarity dissipates the shock, and closure is again made, with the disruptive elements now inside."¹⁰ Yet, at this time it is still difficult to see these tapes as familiar in any fashion, for the familiar after all is the discourse of men.

William Olander

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, 1977, 224 (originally published in 1936).

² See Carl E. Loeffler, "Television Art in the Eighties," *Watching Television: A Video Event*, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1983, 10-13.

³ Griselda Pollock in "Feminist Film Practice and Pleasure: A Discussion" (with Dee Dee Glass, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Williamson), *Formations of Pleasure*, London, 1983, 157. Craig Owens also discusses the negative effect of so-called "positive" images of women in "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," *The Anti-Esthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Bay Press, 1983, 71.

⁴ Dara Birnbaum, quoted by Loeffler, 11. Also see Connie Fitzsimmons, *Comment*, Long Beach Museum of Art (California), 1983, n.p.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," *Art and Text*, Spring 1983, 28 (originally published in 1978).

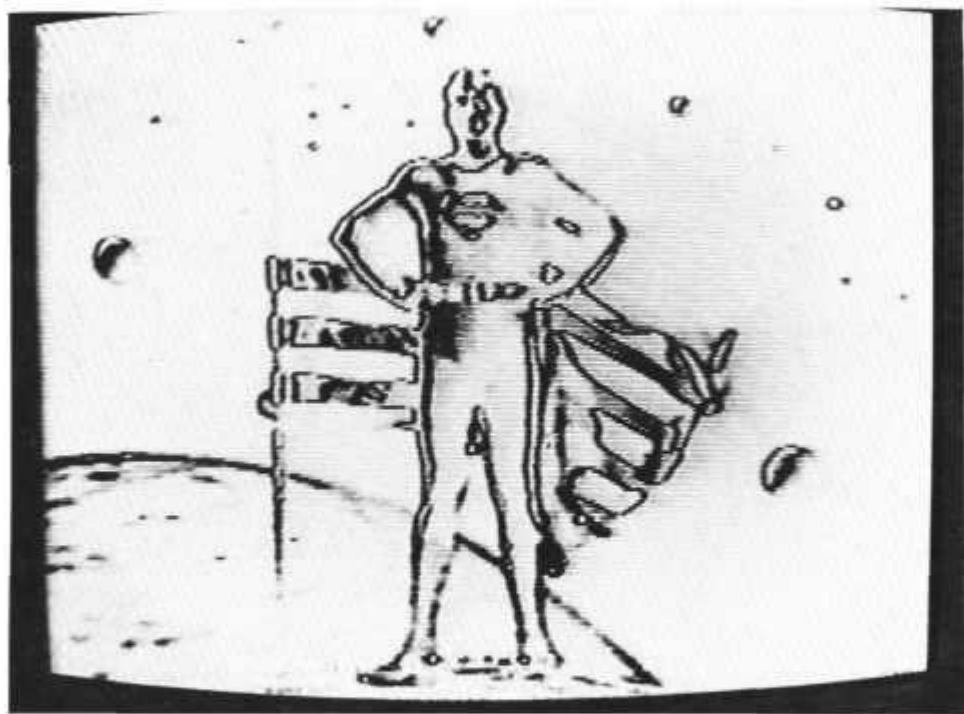
⁶ Margia Kramer, "Notes on Expression/Repression," *Wedge: An Esthetic Inquiry*, No. 1, Summer 1982, 30: "3. our Regular Diet of Junk Food Information."

⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, XVI, Autumn 1975, 7.

⁸ Dee Dee Glass in *Formations*, 160.

⁹ Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminisms*, ed. E. Mark and I. de Courtivron, New York, 1981, 253 (first published in 1975).

¹⁰ Martha Rosler, "Notes on Quotes," *Wedge: The Spectacle*, No. 2, Fall 1982, 69.



JANICE TANAKA, *Ontogenesis*, 1981

Selected Videography and Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise noted, these are 3/4 inch, single channel, color or black-and-white sound tapes.

The works preceded by an * are included in the present program. They have been distributed by The Video Data Bank, Art Institute of Chicago, with the exceptions of the tapes by Anna-Marie Arnold, Nancy Buchanan, Cecilia Condit and Margia Kramer (the Artists) and Martha Rosler and Lisa Steele (Art Metropole, Toronto).

MAX ALMY

Born in 1948, Omaha, Nebraska. Lives in Oakland, California.

Perfect Leader, 1983, 4 minutes

**Leaving the Twentieth Century*, 1982, 10 minutes 40 seconds

Deadline, 1980-81, 4 minutes (originally an installation of the same title)

Modern Times, 1979, 25 minutes (originally included in a performance of the same title)

The "I love you" tapes, 1977, 30 minutes (installation)

ANNA-MARIE ARNOLD

Born in 1960, Cleveland, Ohio. Lives in Cleveland.

The Fluorescent Leopard, 1984, 4 minutes 50 seconds

**Ghost Dancer*, 1983, 9 minutes 30 seconds

Heat, 1982, 1 minute

JUDITH BARRY

Born in 1949, Columbus, Ohio. Lives in New York City.

Space Invaders, 1982, 4 minutes 40 seconds

**Casual Shopper*, 1980-81, 28 minutes (3 versions)

They Agape, 1979, 33 minutes (double channel)

Kaleidoscope, 1977, 50 minutes

DARA BIRNBAUM

Born in 1946, New York City. Lives in New York City.

**Damnation of Faust: Evocation*, 1983, 10 minutes

FIRE!, 1982, 3 minutes 20 seconds

PM Magazine/Acid Rock, 1982, 4 minutes 10 seconds (originally 4 channel installation)

Remy/Grand Central: Trains and Boats and Planes, 1980 4 minutes

**Pop-Pop-Video: Kojak/Wang*, 1980, 4 minutes

**Pop-Pop-Video: General Hospital/Olympic Women Speed Skating*, 1980, 6 minutes

**Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, 1979, 7 minutes

**Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978-79, 7 minutes

LYN BLUMENTHAL

Born in Chicago, Illinois. Lives in Chicago.

**Social Studies Parts I and II*, 1983, 40 minutes

What Americans Are On TV, 1983 (installation)

Untitled, 1978 (installation)

Untitled, 1977 (installation)

Ice Piece, 1976 (installation)

NANCY BUCHANAN

Born in 1946, Boston, Massachusetts. Lives in Madison, Wisconsin

Tech-Knowledge, 1984 (in post-production)

California Stories, 1983, 10 minutes

Webs, 1983, 4 minutes

**An End to All Our Dreams*, 1982, 9 minutes

Short Agents, 1982, 2 minutes

See I A..., 1980-83, 49 minutes (3 versions)

Parallel Fantasies, 1980, 5 minutes

Primary and Secondary Spectres, 1979, 6 minutes

These Creatures, 1979, 1 minute

With Love From A to B, 1977 (with Barbara Smith), 10 minutes

CECILIA CONDIT

Born in 1947, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Lives in Cleveland, Ohio.

**Possibly in Michigan*, 1983, 12 minutes

Dressing Up and Down, 1982, 8 minutes

**Beneath the Skin*, 1981, 12 minutes

MARGIA KRAMER

Born in Brooklyn, New York. Lives in New York City.

Progress and Access, 1983, 36 minutes (with *Progress/Memory*, an installation, 1984)

No More Witchhunts, A Street Festival, 1981, 15 minutes

**Freedom of Information Tape: Jean Seberg*, 1980, 18 minutes (with *Jean Seberg/The FBI/The Media*, an installation, 1981)

MARTHA ROSLER

Born in 1943, Brooklyn, New York. Lives in Brooklyn.

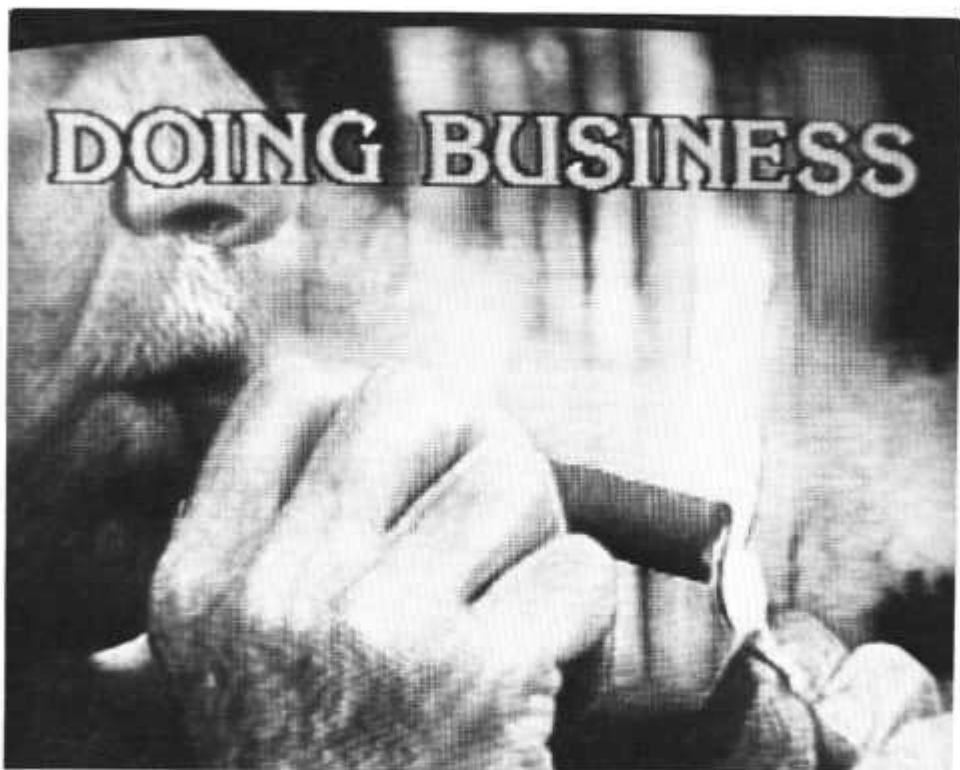
A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night, 1983, 60 minutes

Secrets from the Street: No Disclosure, 1980, 10 minutes

**Domination and the Everyday*, 1978, 30 minutes

Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained, 1977, 40 minutes

The East is Red, The West is Bending, 1977, 20 minutes



ILENE SEGALOVE, *What is Business?*, 1983

Losing: A Conversation with the Parents, 1977, 19 minutes

Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975, 7 minutes

ILENE SEGALOVE

Born in 1950, Los Angeles, California. Lives in Venice, California.

The Birth of Values, 1984, 30 minutes

Why I Got into TV and Other Stories, 1983, 10 minutes

• *What Is Business?*, 1983, 30 minutes

I Remember Beverly Hills, 1980, 30 minutes

5 True Stories, 1980, 6 minutes

Why is the Sky Blue, 1978, 8 minutes

The Cauliflower Alley Tapes, 1976, 60 minutes (with Lowell Darling)

California Casual, 1976, 18 minutes

The Mom Tapes, 1974-78, 30 minutes

The Dorm Room, God, The Dive, 1974, 5 minutes

LISA STEELE

Born in 1947, Kansas City, Missouri. Lives in Toronto, Canada.

Some Call It Bad Luck, 1984, 50 minutes

Gloria, 1980, 19 minutes

Tunnel of Love, 1979, 12 minutes

• *The Damages*, 1978, 12 minutes

• *Makin' Strange*, 1978, 17 minutes

The Scientist Series, 1977-78, 51 minutes, including *Atlanta, Georgia/Cold Spring Harbour, Long Island; By Commercial Airliner; En Route to Las Vegas; At a Later Date*

The Ballad of Dan Peoples, 1976, 8 minutes

Life Story, 1976, 20 minutes

Internal Pornography, 1975, 30 minutes (3 channels)

JANICE TANAKA

Born in Hollywood, California. Lives in Oak Park, Illinois.

• *Superhuman Flights of Submoronic Fancies*, 1982, 10 minutes

• *Ontogenesis*, 1981, 6 minutes 30 seconds

Mute, 1981, 2 minutes 30 seconds

Beaver Valley, 1980, 6 minutes 30 seconds

Manpower, 1980, 6 minutes 30 seconds

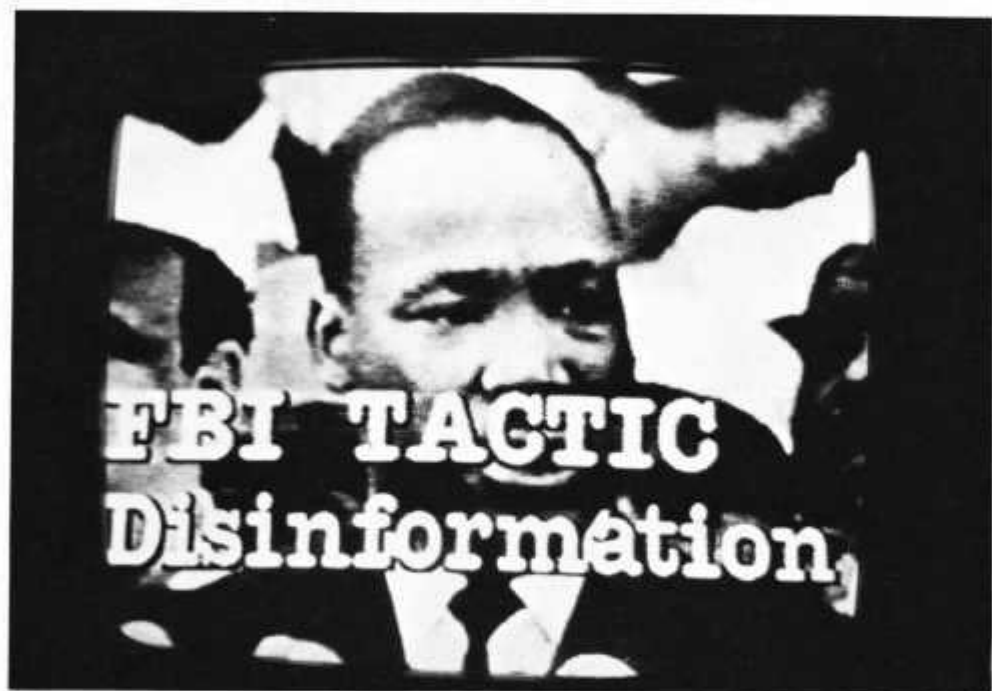
Dual Duplicity, 1980, 6 minutes 30 seconds

AND

ERIKA ROTHENBERG

Born in 1950, New York City. Lives in New York City.

Morally Superior Products: A New Idea for Advertising, 1983, 16 pages (SZ/Press)



MARGIA KRAMER, *Freedom of Information Tape: Jean Seberg*, 1980

Published twice a year by the Allen Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. \$10.00 a year, this supplement \$2.00; mailed free to members of the Oberlin Friends of Art. Back issues available from the Museum, and on microfilm from University Microfilm, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106. Printed by Press of the Times, Oberlin, Ohio.

Copyright © 1984, Oberlin College

ISSN: 0002-3739

