EARLY FEMINIST PROJECTS

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Historically, women have had a difficult relation to facts. Scientifically gathered information has often been interpreted as proof of women's social, psychological, and physical inferiority, or the status quo and for attempts to counter old oppressive patterns. These feminist documentaries generally rely on established codes of realism, but employ them to create new social meanings. Thus, the works are direct descendants of the romantic realism of social realism and scientific sociopolitical philosophers (Marxism, et al.), and more recently, the radical left-wing cinema and photography of the '50s. For feminist artists, then, using documentary films, photographs, and new videotapes (not to mention feminist paintings, theater, and all types of literary realism) usually involves a redefinition of reality by asserting the validity of women's existence and experiences, by challenging accepted ideas about those experiences, or by a combination of both strategies. This article is limited to a discussion of feminist video documentaries in the U.S. in an attempt to narrow a potential subject. This is an arbitrary choice. It is based on the coincidence of two important political and cultural phenomena: the renaissance of the feminist movement and the rise of feminist, alternative, progressive media in the late '60s. Among other effects, this overlap (not to be confused with a causal relationship) led to the involvement of women in video production. At the video groups which emerged throughout the U.S. in the early '70s. During this period several women's video collectives formed, utilizing women's video festivals organized in all this is in addition to various women video artists working more or less individually. Although the tapes produced by these women are not uniform in any sense, many reflect feminist concerns and documentaries prevalent.

The four video tapes I have chosen to represent the genre of feminist video documentaries for the purposes of this analysis are works which have variously affected my thinking about political documentary, but do not intend to valorize these four tapes as masterpieces. Indeed, one of my main theses is that they are tentative examples of the convergence of a popular political movement, a form of cultural production and distribution, and an aesthetic approach. Collectively, they belong to a genre generally neglected by video history and critics and unknown to many feminist historians and critics. It is a genre now virtually in eclipse but one, I would argue, which has hardly been exhausted. First, however, without regressing much beyond 1968, let me sketch some of the relevant political, technical, and aesthetic influences which shaped the genre and these four tapes.

When relatively low-cost portable video equipment ($1500-2000 for portable recorder, black and white camera, and a monitor) became widely available in the U.S. in the late '60s, portankas and light-weight cameras were quickly assimilated as tools of "counterculture." The arts and of these early experimental video were filled with the rhetoric of revolution on the revolutionary potential of alternative television. For example, Michael Shamberg, a propagandist for what he called "the aesthetic revolution," borrowed language from the New Left vocabulary: "Survival in an information environment demands information tools...[there is] potential in Guerrilla Television...[and in information infrastructures] for Media America, a grassroots network of indigenous media activity." These projections for the future of video, afterwards sometimes realized a decade later and a shocking medium, were sometimes colored by entrepreneurial ambitions, but were more often founded on genuine if naive visions of democratic alternatives and democratic utopias. The names which various early video groups gave themselves is indicative: Video Free America, People's Video Theater, Videofreex, Global Village, Media Access Center, etc. All revolutionary allusions aside, however, the prominent figures among the first generation of video artists were almost all white, middle-class women, blacks, Latinos, Asians-American's, etc., playing supportive roles.

When independent video made its debut, media-consciousness was extremely high. The politically engaged arms of the alternative television movement set about recording events and issues of the day: war, anti-war organizing, prison reform, rock music, Black Panthers, Native American activists, ecology, and women's liberation. The tapes which resulted borrowed heavily from two different traditions: television journalism and cinema verité. These politically committed documentarians hoped to call attention to subjects and view points which they felt commercial television ignored or ignored. Cinema verité, U.S. style, provided an aesthetic model for many of these tapes since this form allowed personal, emotional elements to structure presentations of social reality. The mechanical economy of video production, the small-screen size of the machine, the sheer political claims of these documentarians, however, hinged on potential systems for video distribution. Community viewing centers, the public television network (PBS) and its community stations, public access channels on cable TV, even communications satellites, promised decentralization and an audience for independent video. Some projects, most notably the National Film Board of Canada's Challenge for Change, were practical experiments in community-based media production where the process of making tapes and films was integrated with other programs for community self-definition. Most media activities in the U.S. lacked the generous financial support of a government agency like the Film Board (or compensatory fundraising skills) and had to settle for more modest community involvement. With a few exceptions, their revolutionary fervor faded by the late '70s, when the complexities of financing community media centers became apparent and the "so simple anyone can do it" approach resulted in hours of out-of-focus, badly lit, and not very compelling tapes. At that point many filmmakers either changed tactics or abandoned the field.

Against this scenario of energetic video activity in the early and mid-'70s let me superimpose the more familiar recent history of the women's liberation movement. As issues like women's health, sexuality, marriage, rape and other kinds of physical abuse, gender roles, were claimed and defined as feminist concerns, books, periodicals, films, and a steady stream of videos and videos appeared in the feminist arena. The journals which I will analyze here must be considered as part of that movement.

In 1968 Anne Koedt published the first version of "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," a short but widely circulated and influential feminist essay on the implications of Masters and Johnson's research on sexuality. In 1972 Mary Jane Sherley published her book, The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexuality, a detailed biological and physiological refutation of standard beliefs about female sexuality, which also drew on the work of Masters and Johnson. Both works added to and were part of feminist conversations which identified the female body as a site of political struggle.

Julie Gustafson's videotape The Politics of Intimacy (1972-73) is predicated on these and other debates on sexual politics at the most personal level; indeed, it is a tape constructed from pieces of such conversations. The tape is all talk, almost entirely talking heads. The women who speak could belong to some ideal consciousness-raising (c-r) group, though this is unlikely. They vary in age, color (one woman is Black), in sexual experience and orientation (there is one obvious lesbian), and in marital status (some mention husbands). All, however, seem to be middle-class North Americans. Brief lectures in psychology by Dr. Sherley (the same) are the only exceptions to the predominant tone of subjective, personal testimony. The c-r tamper of the tape is enhanced by its structure, the ten women seem to be commenting and building on each other's statements, but the changing backgrounds soon reveal this as artificial. Not that Gustafson was trying to deceive anyone. Conscious or unconsciously, she chose a form which reflected the feminist sources of her tape.

The impression of the tape as a polyphonic discussion among trusted friends is furthered by several devices beyond the production of diverse voices and disjointed structure. The reiteration of closely framed, animated faces telling intimate truths puts the audience in the position of a partner in the conversation. Stories of self-exploration abound, but not all of the women are actually talking to each other, although this only becomes clear midway through the 50-minute tape. In general, the listener is off-screen and silent.

FROM THE "POWER" SECTION OF POLITICALS OF INTIMACY (1972-73), BY JULIE GUSTAFSON.

I WAS 17 WHEN I MET HIM. AND I COME FROM A FAMILY THAT'S VERY STRICT. MY MOTHER NEVER LET ME DO ANYTHING. THE BIGGEST THING TO ME WAS TO TURN HIM ON... WE WENT TO THE BEACH ONCE AND, BOY, DID HE GET-- OH, WOW, IT'S INCREDIBLE--HE GOT HOT, HOT, HOT, AND THERE WAS NOTHING HE COULDN'T DO, AND MY DEFENSE ON HIM, TO KEEP HIM FROM DOING ANYTHING WAS, "MY MOTHER KNOWS WHERE I AM."

DURING MEZOLITHIC TIMES, BEFORE CIVILIZATION EXISTED, WOMEN WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH FRESHER. THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH MORE SEXUALLY AVAILABLE... HOWEVER, WITH THE ONSET OF ANIMAL HUSBANDRY... AND THE ONSET OF ALL CULTURE WHICH REQUIRED SETTLED HOMES AND THE PRESENCE OF MANY CHILDREN... IT BECAME NECESSARY FOR LAWS OF INHERITANCE TO COME INTO BEING AND WOMEN'S SEXUAL ACTIVITY HAD TO BE CURTAILED.

IT'S IMPORTANT FOR ME TO HAVE SEXUAL SATISFACTION, BUT I THINK THAT I MIGHT WANT TO DO SOMETHING FOR MY HUSBAND AND TRY TO MAKE HIM SAD." I THINK THAT I'LL JUST WANT TO SAY, "WAIT," AND PUT HIM OFF. I WANT TO SEE MY HUSBAND SEXUALLY SATISFIED.
FROM AMA L’UOMO TUO (ALWAYS LOVE YOUR MAN, 1974), BY CARA DE VITO.

NOW YOU ASK ME WHY I MARRIED HIM? I USED TO LIVE WITH MY BROTHER AND MY SISTER-IN-LAW WHO WAS VERY MEAN TO ME ... AND ONE DAY I SAYS, "IF THERE COMES A HORSE WITH A HEAD ON AND A PAIR OF PANTS, I'M GOING TO MARRY HIM. AS LONG AS I GET OUT FROM HERE.... HE'S A BUSINESS MAN. I'M SURE THAT A PIECE OF BREAD, I'LL NEVER MISS IT. IF I RAISE A CHILD, I'M SURE THAT HE'S NOT GOING TO MISS ANYTHING."

Second, the conversations which comprise the tape's raw material have been out and spliced to construct plausible conversational sequences around six topics like "power" and "sex." These techniques establish a sense of continuity and direct the viewer's attention in predictable ways, but it is the editing of Politics of Intimacy which most clearly shapes its meaning. Oddly, the choice and ordering of material results in two distinct and essentially contradictory meanings. As I have suggested, the basic reference for the tape is the c-c group whose accounts of personal experience contributed to analyses of the operations of political power. A plurality of views is necessary to ensure collective accuracy, and Gustedt argues in his essay, "Some of the women may have sexual activities; some don't. Some like to masturbate; others think it's stupid. Some want to please their husbands; others think that men are a waste of time, that women are inherently better lovers; Etc. One woman declares, with resignation, "I think it's just a lot of hard work."

In addition to plurality, Gustad also gives us a moral. For some of the women, speaking about sex is difficult, even painful, whereas others easily recall private desires and experiences. Consequently, the ones for whom language is an acute problem, the ones who talk with hesitation, quiet voices, fall into the stereotyped characters of "repressed women," watching them become embarrassing. Meanwhile, a desirable standard is set by the relaxed, multi-organismic woman or the cheerful, uninhibited Jewish. These hierarchical relationships, anthropological to the democratic principles of c-c, can be attributed, I think, to the reliance on a fair conventional documentary format. If conversation is the primary method of developing a theme and the major building block in the editing process, as it is here, performance ability, not honesty or accuracy, will control the tape's effect. Certain characteristics are more appealing, more attractive, than others; hence their words are more convincing.

This critical evaluation can be turned around, however, since Gustad introduces several variants into the verbal documentary formula. Women doing all the talking on substantive topics like sexuality is still unusual. Women talking freely about sex and their own pleasures is even more uncommon. While several of the women are sexually naive or confused they are not typecast in familiar media terms. None of the women, save Dr. Shirley, are presented as extrastituary, and no authoritative voice frames their conversations. Ultimately the technical flaws and even the moralistic layer are neutralized by the power of women speaking for themselves. Intimacy is not only a topic for discussion in Politics of Intimacy, it is the precondition for most of the conversations which supplied Gustad's raw material. It is not incidental, then, that Gustad's mother and sister appear in the tape, though they are not identified as such to the audience. Nonetheless, this information underlines the basic role of family relationships, especially female kinship, in many women's lives. In Amn L'Uomo Tuo [Always Love Your Man], 1974), an easy rapport between the two is evident. Cara and her grandmother Adele Lugiana similarly depends on an atmosphere of familiarity which encourages personal disclosures. The tape is based on Adele's life, but it releases a partial biography centered on her 50-year marriage and her husband's violence toward her. This narrative line which structures Amn L'Uomo Tuo begins with a recollection from Adele's childhood in Italy—her mother's suggestion of a possible fiancé and her response, "Married? Me?" It ends with a gruesome account of her near-death following a botched illegal abortion which she didn't want but her husband, Benni, insisted she have. In between, she recalls Benni's authoritarian attitudes and several beatings. A few times de Vito interrupts the sequence of bad memories (Benny is now dead) with scenes in the present that depict Adele as a capable, active person. Early on, for instance, a series of brief vignettes show her cleaning, mending, visiting with friends, etc., edited to the cadence of an Italian ballad. The upbeat tempo and mood of these scenes relieves somewhat the intensity of Adele's vivid descriptions of Benny's brutal behavior.

What would attract and hold a woman like Adele to a man like Benny? The question seems obvious, the answer less so. Adele understands her own motivation and answers unapologetically: she opted for financial security for herself and her children in a culture where not marrying, even divorce, was unthinkable. Her concluding words (de Vito's chosen finale for the tape) betray another, less rational factor governing such relationships. "Ama l'uomo tuo. Always love your man, no matter what," she intones. When all the parts of de Vito's composite portrait of her grandmother are added up, the impression of Adele as a victim—of her husband and of social codes—persists.

Just like Gustad's ambitious use of established documentary forms, de Vito's tape subverts and is subverted by assumptions about depictions of reality. In this tape, too, unaffected, personal observations about fairly ordinary (though in this case, terrible) experiences manage to break through the naturalized behavior as much as speech. Another strategy de Vito uses to avoid condescension is her obvious but unobtrusive presence behind the camera which establishes her relationship with her grandmother. Even more effective is de Vito's attention to the mundane details of housework and Adele's domestic environment. The enclosing interior views produced by de Vito's wide-angle lenses place Adele in her familiar space and establish her as the central figure there.

Still, the presence of Adele's reminiscences risks turning Amn L'Uomo Tuo into a "human interest story." While a documentary profile of an individual often doubles as a sociological case study, an opposite movement also occurs: the conversion of social phenomena into personal conflict can distort arguments for political action. No one could accuse de Vito of exploiting Adele's trust; the respect and love Frames from Hamlet (1973), by Nancy Cain.

Harriet follows Hamlet Benjamin, her neighbor in the rural Catskill Mountain town of Lancaster, N.Y., through her daily chores. The tape opens with a long shot of Harriet gawking at her older children off at the school bus stop. She washes the dishes, hangs out the laundry, prepares lunch, watches the soap operas, etc.—the familiar pieces of domestic life. All these actions are recorded in a straightforward "direct" style, i.e., no overt intervention by Cain. The frequent wide-angle views and skewed camera angles accentuate the crowded, claustrophobic space of the Benjamin's trailer home but don't intrude it grotesque. Cain relies mainly on camera movement, emphatic sounds, and dramatic editing to make ordinary activity interesting.

Like hints of an anarchist rebellion, flashes from a different scenario momentarily invade Harriet's domestic routines: Harriet throwing a suitcase in a car, Harriet getting behind the wheel, Harriet driving away laughingly. These recur irrationally, and eventually these events are played out. The tape concludes with a long sequence of Harriet driving down the highway away from Lansville singing, "Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun." This escape from domestic responsibilities is itself preliminary to Harriet's desire for autonomy rings true nevertheless. Like other feminist artists who have stretched definitions of reality to encompass the human experience. In this context, Cain uses the realistic connotations of documentary to depict actual experience and to indicate dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Harriet is not only Cain's portrait of her neighbor presented as a feminist fable. Though it was made within a specific social context for a specific audience. In 1971, Cain and other
members of the Videorex, later renamed Media Bus, mini
groups to the small town of Gainesville. The group brought with them a low-power television transmit
ter with a broadcasting radius of about three miles and installed it in a room. For six years they broadcast a weekly program, live and taped, from their farmhouse headquarters; Harriet was one of many video artists who displayed and performed for their immediate community.

It is not too presumptuous, I think, to propose that Cain’s video practice could be seen to influence or be influenced by other neighbors than by strangers. For instance, aired in the imper
conal context of nationally broadcast television, 14 Harriet easily be
comes a character, charismatic character—though not in the TV sense, but in the sense that her popular per
donality is very attractive. In the process, social issues be
come individualized, identified with the main character. To a Lan
essian audience, Harriet likely appears to be a less abstract character, and, therefore, the feminist questions raised in the tape will be more pointed precisely because the people of Gainesville are close observers.

A common premise circulating among video groups in the mid-70s was that independent documentaries were ideal ve
cules for political interventions in mass media terri
tory. Public television seemed the most attractive outlet for this work, and those able to secure the support of a local station felt able to produce a project. In the case of the San Francisco video collective Optic Nerve and edited by members Lynn Adler, Shernie Rabinowitz, and non-member Bill Albert, a group of young blacks and whites, the project was a prime example of this premise. The producers of this tape about the 1973 Miss California pageant appear neutral; the tape is less personal, less engaged with its characters than the first three works discussed here.

In Harriet, the producers of Fifty Wonderful Years re
made the video of Harriet, and I argue that anonymity is more pronounced here since the camera work and audio tech
iques are essentially the same as those used in network public affairs programs like 60 Minutes. The difference is that there is no Interview to guide us through the pageant, and the camera, microphone, and editing assume this func
tion. Whereas a documentary video about a beauty con
test might reproduce feminist concerns, one made by an alternative collective in 1973 probably will. Superfi
cially, no critique of homogenized feminine beauty as glorified in each contest is made by Optic Nerve. The result, an audience of beauty contestants and their mothers would probably not be offended or threatened by this tape. The few scorns, denunciation, and distortion protesting the Miss California competition might seem an irritating but undeniable real part of the whole event. The only concluding sequence, when a tape with mediaLang, is按摩ed into the closer range as if it reveal greater truths. This visual device is merely rhetorical, though, borrowed from the repertoire of TV news. The mediaVex are the observed, the young women are shown without voyeuristic delight. A further critical comment is added through shots of a male judge juxtaposed with the producer of the United (Russo, 1933-45), and of the Confessions of a Young Man (Brecht, 1928), 17 cinema Verity in America: Studies in Uncensored Documentaries, by Stephen Member (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974); Documentary Expression and Thirste America, by Ran; among numerous that analyz
es the everyday physical abuse of women in feminist terms.


6. Harriet was aired on WNET-TV's national broadcast series Video Television Review, as part of the composite tape Lanes
ton TV, on June 28, 1979.

7. My interpretation of Fifty Wonderful Years as a feminist critique is confirmed in Optic Nerve’s synopsis of the tape which appeared in the May 1980 issue of the Women's Video Festival: "Fifty Wonderful Years" reveals the people responsible for the pageant and (for) revealing the images of women at the top.

8. The 1963 media panel at the National Endowment for the Arts, the arbiters of $200,000 in federal government dollars for video artists, decided to deny support for "video journalism," but offered award grants for documentaries on the basis of artistic merit. No specific criteria for either "journalism" or "artistic merit," were, however, established.

9. I should add, moreover, that experimental political video seems to be flourishing.

DISTRIBUTORS

Politics of Invisibility: Global Village, 454 Broadway, S., New York, N.Y. 10013

Mr. Uomo Tuo (Always Love Your Mate) Environmental Art Intermix. 84 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011

Harriet and Fifty Wonderful Years are no longer in distribution.