

Women, Art and Experimental Film

Curated by Barbara L. Miller

This series brings together documentary film and experimental video to highlight many political and personal issues that affect women in the arts.

PROGRAM I:

Guerrillas in our Midst

Amy Harrison

1992 35 minutes Color VHS

On their web site, the Guerrilla Girls state that they are "a group of women artists, writers, performers and filmmakers who fight discrimination. Dubbing ourselves the conscience of culture, we declare ourselves feminist counterparts to the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Batman, and the Lone Ranger. We wear gorilla masks to focus on the issues rather than our personalities. We use humor to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny. In 16 years we have produced over 70 posters, printed projects, and actions that expose sexism and racism in the art world and the culture at large...The mystery surrounding our identities has attracted attention and support. We could be anyone; we are everywhere."

Guerrillas in our Midst is a film that documents the mid-80s, predominantly male New York art scene. It looks at the cultural context in which outraged, soon-to-be members of the Guerrilla Girls rallied into action. Many of their activities address the workings of the commercial art world, the sponsorship of museums the editorial practices of art journals and the hiring practices of universities that, to some degree, continue today.

BLO (Barbie Liberation Organization)

1993 30 minutes VHS

In 1993, the Barbie Liberation Organization, a group of consumer activists, entered toy stores across the country. They bought boxes of Teen Talk Barbie and

Talking G.I. Joe dolls. They then took the dolls to their workshops and carefully switch the voice boxes. The BLO returned the dolls to the stores; covertly slipping the boxes of the now altered dolls back onto the shelves. They "reverse shoplifted" the dolls back into the store. Holiday shoppers, looking for those last-minute gifts, "re"-bought the dolls and children across the US woke up Christmas Day to G.I. Joes asking: "Do you want to go shopping," and Barbies proclaiming: "Dead men tell no lies" and "Vengeance is mine." The BLO mailed video statements to several television news stations explaining the reasons for their actions. They wanted to address the negative gender stereotypes that these talking dolls promoted and the influence that these cliched phrases have on children. Their "ambushed dolls" immediately became a prime-time news story. In this documentary tape, the BLO records news footage, adds their own "news" commentary and demonstrates how to switch the voice boxes on your own dolls. They even include a segment from a "Simpsons" episode, which makes reference to the group's actions.

PROGRAM II

Video Art: Leaving the 20th Century and Perfect Leader

Max Almy

1982/3 10:40 minutes & 4 minutes Color VHS

In the 1980s, many artists, including Max Almy began to see that mass media had the power to shape and manipulate a variety of audience responses. Like others, Almy began to use new video technologies to expose the media's manipulative capabilities. *Perfect Leader* is an example of such an endeavor, in which Almy uses parody to make her point. In the video, an omnipotent computer creates the perfect political candidate. The tape begins with a stripped-down male prototype or "blank slate." After a few "failed" experiments, from fascist to pacifist, the prototype finds the perfect combination of charismatic and righteous gestures and becomes a "perfect leader." In the final test, the leader (who looks like a young Bill Clinton) undergoes the ultimate test. He appears on a television screen.

In *Leaving the 20th Century*, Almy raises serious questions about new possibilities that may arise in the near future. In 1982, new technologies and forms of communication that will define the next century were already emerging and were already beginning to change social interactions and political alliances. Almy uses the metaphor of crossing over into the next century to address the then imminent changes. In the tape, she questions whether we as a culture can

leave behind outmoded social, psychological, gender, economic and political relationships. Are we open to alternative life styles and modes of interactions? Can we adapt to new political and personal modes of operation? Or, will we cling to old traditions and outmoded gender stereotypes? Now that the crossover into the 20th century is behind us, the video can be viewed from a new perspective.

Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman

Dara Birnbaum

1978-9 5:50 minutes VHS

In her early video art pieces, Dara Birnbaum appropriated image segments or, as she calls them, "readymades," directly from Primetime TV. Her project was to grab special effects sequences from popular fantasy TV programs such as "Wonder Woman" and expose the seductive syntax — image dissolves, layering and inserts — that enticed viewers to stay tuned. In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, Birnbaum isolates, repeats and slows down the transformation segments that, like similar series such as the "Six Million Dollar Man" and the "Bionic Woman," occur every 20 minutes. In the video, she condenses the time between each special effect so that the transformations occur as a continuous flow. She also repeats Wonder Woman's illusionistic transformations backwards and forwards. The result is that Birnbaum cuts the figure out of its superhero narrative and dispels the viewer's rapture or, as she calls it, our "transformation fix." Rather than accepting a one-way system of communication, Birnbaum manipulates a manipulative medium and, in effect, "talks-back" to it. In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, Birnbaum addresses what she calls "the morose belligerence of the fodder that is our average television diet." (She also includes a song sung by *The Wonder Woman Disco Band*.)

PROGRAM III:

Me and Rubyfruit Program

Sadie Benning

1989 18 minutes Color/B & W VHS

Sadie Benning was born in 1973 in Madison, Wisconsin and grew up in Milwaukee. When she was fifteen years old, her father gave her a Fisher-Price PXL 2000 toy video camera for Christmas. Shortly thereafter she began making

short films in the privacy of her own bedroom. Many of her movies are "coming of age" stories about her experiences as a young lesbian teenager growing up in Milwaukee and feeling isolated from her family and schoolmates. The movies she made with her Fisher-Price camera are flat, grainy and black-and-white. At poignant moments, she includes hand-written phrases that are drawn from her diaries. The flatness of the surface combine with the isolated phrases to produce a claustrophobic portrait of artist's private space.

Despite her youth, Benning quickly gained the respect of the art world. At nineteen, she received a Rockefeller grant and, the following year, her work was screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The *Me and Rubyfruit Program* represents an experimental film genre now called "Pixelvision."

Measures of Distance

Mona Hatoum

1988 15 minutes Color VHS

Mona Hatoum was born in Beirut to a Palestinian family. She attended Beirut University College in the early 1970s, but shortly thereafter moved to Britain to study in London. In 1975, civil war broke out in Lebanon and Hatoum was unable to return to her family. *Measures of Distance* draws upon the artist's memory of that experience of separation and displacement. In the piece, Hatoum takes the letters that her mother wrote to her during the civil war. She superimposes them on top of photographs that the artist took when she could finally return to Lebanon, after the war ended. In *Measures of Distance*, the hand written letters appear as if they are transparent veils that partially obscure photographs of the artist's mother, nude in a shower. "Although the main thing that comes across," states Hatoum, "is a very close and emotional relationship between mother and daughter, it also speaks of exile, displacement, disorientation and a tremendous sense of loss as a result of the separation caused by war. In this work, I was also trying to go against the fixed identity that is usually implied in the stereotype of Arab woman as passive, mother as non-sexual being ... the work is constructed visually in such a way that every frame speaks of literal closeness and implied distance."

Vertical Roll

Joan Jonas

1972 19:40 minutes B & W VHS

Joan Jonas states that although her work grew out of a conceptual context specific to the 60s, she is more concerned with issues of space. In her video artwork, she attempts to dislocate, attenuate and turn space inside out. The piece in which she best accomplishes this undertaking is *Vertical Roll*. Here, Jonas

concentrates on a single feature of the video camera's recording signal – the vertical roll control. Through manipulation of the signal, she causes the frequency signal sent to the monitor and monitor's interpretation of that signal to be out of sync. Once out of sync, the image rolls and the horizontal line bounces up and down. Through manipulating the signal in this way, Jonas changes the function of the vertical control. Rather than stabilizing the image, the bouncing horizontal line shatters the illusion of a three-dimensional space. *Vertical Roll* is a type of anti-performance where a disembodied identity poses for the recording device. Jonas appears in front of the camera, at times, masked wearing a feathered headdress or belly dancer costume and, at other times, nude mimicking suggestive feminine poses. The vertical roll interrupts and fractures each "performance" – her feet, torso, arms and legs appear as floating fragments in an alienated and alienating space. Today, she describes this early work as being in an "out-of-sync manner, questioning our perception of the image."

PROGRAM IV:

Ana Mendieta Fuego de Tierra

Kate Horsfield, Nereyda Garcia-Ferraz, and Branda Miller
1987 52 minutes Color VHS

Ana Mendieta was born in Havana in 1948 to a prominent Cuban family. In 1961, after Castro declared Cuba a socialist country, her anti-Castro parents sent her to the US. Mendieta entered the country via an exodus program sponsored by the US government, the Catholic Church and a number of sympathetic corporate backers. Once in America, she and her sister, Raquel, were sent to Iowa where they lived in foster homes, orphanages and juvenile correction facilities. In 1970, Mendieta became a naturalized citizen and began to study art at the University of Iowa. Mendieta is perhaps best remembered for her earthworks in which she used her body to transform the landscape into sculpture. In an interview, she states, "I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools." For the artist, nature was a symbol, a "Motherland" that she felt was missing from her life. Along with earthworks, Mendieta also did performance art, body art, photography, drawing and site-specific sculpture. Her body of work incorporates Afro-Cuban ritual and music and Latin American history and is concerned with questions of gender, race and sexuality. As one writer has it, her work "gives voice to a profound understanding of the price paid for dislocation and cultural genocide." *Fuego de Tierra* (Fire of the Earth) is a documentary that interweaves the artist's films and

photographs of her performances and earthworks with comments by critics, curators and fellow artists.

PROGRAM V:

Meret Oppenheim

Pamela Robertson-Pearce & Anselm Spoerri.

1989 35 minutes B & W VHS

Narrated by Glenda Jackson

Meret Oppenheim was born in Berlin in 1913 and raised in Switzerland. At the age of eighteen, she went to Paris to become an artist. There, she met Man Ray and became his model. His photographs of her nude body created a scandal and brought her and, more importantly, her work to the attention of the Surrealists. In 1933, Alberto Giacometti and Jean Arp invited her to exhibit with the Surrealists. Oppenheim is probably best known for her fur-lined teacup and spoon. Not only did her *Object: Fur Breakfast* (1936) become an icon of Surrealism almost as soon as it was finished, but it remains one of the most potent examples of "the Surrealist goal to transform the familiar into the strange." Man Ray and Dora Maar both photographed the piece in 1936.

This film documents Meret Oppenheim's life and work from 1932 to 1954. The filmmakers take the artist's words, letters, poems and dreams and weave them into a compelling story of Oppenheim's bid to become an artist in a male-dominated movement. At the film's end, Oppenheim meditates on the question of women in the arts. She states that for a woman to become an artist, she must look outside cultural gender roles to attain a measure of self-confidence. "The creative body of work," the artists states, "is only possible with an absolute stable sense of confidence." Oppenheim herself struggled with this issue — she destroyed much of her early work in a crisis of self-confidence.

VIDEO SCHEDULE

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
10:00 : Program I	10:00: Program IV			10:00: Program III
		11:00: Program II	11:00: Program V	
12:00: Program II	12:00: Program V			12:00: Program IV
		1:00: Program III	1:00: Program I	
2:00: Program III	2:00 Program I			2:00: Program V
		3:00: Program IV	3:00: Program II	