

REVIEWS

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Social studies

Social Engagements: Women's Video in the '80s

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IN "VIDEO: Shedding the Utopian Moment," Martha Rosler notes that "museumization—which some might point to as the best hope of video at present for it to retain its relative autonomy from the market place—contains and minimizes the social negativity that was the matrix for the early uses of video." By presenting exclusively socially invested videos "Social Engagements: Women's Video in the '80s" went a long way toward inverting this process. Instead of determining an aesthetic legacy, "Social Engagements" began to locate a political and theoretical history for recent feminist work in the U.S. Nevertheless, as part of the Whitney Museum's New American Filmmakers series, "Social Engagements" was necessarily restricted and flawed as a survey of contemporary feminist practices. Non-North American producers, for example, were neither represented nor discussed, and none of the tapes were premieres or produced by unknown makers. In addition to these institutionally determined limitations, one must also consider how the meaning of a video documentary made to be broadcast on public or cable television, or shown to targeted communities is effected by its inclusion in a museum exhibition.

In the program notes accompanying the series, curator Lucinda Furlong proposed a



The inclusion of *Just Because of Who We Are* within this set of tapes on art and politics is initially incongruous and seemingly insensitive to the issues raised by this documentary on violence against lesbians. But given the tape's use of personal testimony by victims within a specific community along with discussions of discrimination against gays and lesbians and the gay activist movement at large, *Just Because of Who We Are* identifies problems of representation and cultural struggle not completely irrelevant to issues raised by the other three tapes. By including this tape in this program, Furlong further diminishes the widely perceived and traditionally maintained gap between art and politics.

In structure and content, Margia Kramer's *Freedom of Information Tape 1: Jean Seberg* (1980), as part of the media program, similarly challenges this view. Kramer investigates the events of actress Seberg's life that led to her suicide in 1979. Through a series of newsclips and documentary footage of the F.B.I.'s Counter Intelligence Program (Colt-elPro, 1956-1971), interviews with Seberg's family, readings of interviews with Seberg, and excerpts from *Breathless* (1959, by Jean-Luc Godard), one of Seberg's best-known film roles, Kramer presents the government's systematic surveillance of and interference in Seberg's life and the media's subsequent presentation of this "disinformation" and links these factors to her eventual suicide.

Martha Rosler's *A Simple Case for Torture, Or How to Sleep at Night* (1983) extends this investigation of state-sponsored terrorism into more theoretical terms. Rosler relentlessly analyzes the media's representation of terrorism and the U.S. government's manipulation and implementation of so-called terrorist acts. For the good part of an hour, Rosler reads from and analyzes newspaper and magazine articles that describe terrorist acts and human rights violations, while the camera shows her going through piles of relevant clippings and books. Given its gate and the U.S. government's escalating inter-

shift in feminist video from personal testimony in the documentary tapes of the early '70s, to analyses "of representation and the relationship between patriarchy and other forms of oppression" in the performance and experimental narratives of the late '70s, to a focus on specific contemporary issues and social situations in the work of the early '80s. While such an account may initially appear based on linear models of (ar) history, the 13 tapes that made up "Social Engagements" presented a more complex interpretation of this chronology. Individually and collectively, the tapes challenge, expand on, and reiterate many of the issues raised in earlier feminist productions. Personal testimony, for example, is still present in contemporary work, as are conventional documentary and experimental narrative approaches. Similarly, many of the tapes showed a political concern for psychological, social, and gender issues, suggesting that feminist cultural production is less linear than traditional historical models can accommodate.

In an attempt to identify prominent issues within contemporary feminist practice, Furlong divided the tapes into four categories: domestic life, art and politics, the media, and the effect of recent economic changes on women's lives. Though each program was coherent, many of the individual tapes could have been shown in two or more categories, indicating that class and gender, for example, are not separate from questions of art, lifestyle, and politics.

The art and politics program was the most extensive and, in many ways, the most theoretically didactic. It included *Just Because of Who We Are* (1986, by Hera Media), *Gotta Make This Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock* (1983, by Michelle Parkerson), *Sign on a Truck* (1984, by Jenny Holzer), and *The Trial of Tilted Arc* (1985, by Shu Lea Cheang). With the exception of *Just Because of Who We Are*, all of these videos are concerned with artistic practices. *Gotta Make This Journey* is a fairly traditional portrait of the black women's a cappella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. By cutting between interviews with the individual members and songs from their ninth anniversary concert, *Gotta Make This Journey* locates the personal and political histories of the group within the civil rights movement and other political causes and concerns. *Sign on a Truck* documents



Top: frame from *Scenes from the Micro War* (1985) by Sherry Milner. Middle: frame from *Women of Steel* (1985) by Mon Valley Media. Bottom: production still from *Joan Braderman Reads the National Enquirer* (1983) by Paper Tiger Television.

Holzer's 1984 public video piece in which pedestrians' opinions of the Reagan-Mondale presidential race were projected on a 13 x 18-foot Diamond Vision video screen set up on two Manhattan street corners.

While both of these tapes are video documents of political art, *The Trial of Tilted Arc* is a more analytical piece on the politics of art. As an edited transcript of a series of hearings held by the General Services Administration (GSA) in 1985 on whether to remove Richard Serra's steel sculpture from the Federal Plaza in New York City, *Tilted Arc* raises many important questions about the roles and responsibilities of the government and the community in the construction and preservation of public art. By juxtaposing the testimony made in favor of Serra's sculpture by well-known art critics, historians, curators, and artists, with pleas for the sculpture's removal from Federal Plaza security and maintenance employees, judges, and

lawyers, for example, Cheang sets up a seemingly even-handed dialectic. This objective structure, however, is quickly subverted by the more persuasive and pervasive stance in favor of leaving *Tilted Arc* in its site-specific place. Though speakers on both sides of the debate are impassioned, informed political and aesthetic concerns clearly motivate the historians and critics, while those calling for its removal argue from only remotely rational points of view, claiming among other things that the piece obstructs security surveillance efforts and attracts rats. While Cheang's expressed subject is *Tilted Arc*, her real concern seems to be with more general issues of censorship and the power of government-backed minorities to legally determine issues. The tape ends by noting that while 123 people testified in favor of protecting the sculpture and only 57 called for its removal, the GSA approved its relocation.

and the U.S. governments, escalating intervention in Central America, the currency of Rosler's four-year-old tape is haunting.

While Kramer's and Rosler's tapes focus on the nefarious side of the media, *Joan Braderman Reads the National Enquirer* (1983, by Paper Tiger Television) irreverently analyzes and wallows in the "pleasures of the text." Doing one of her well-known "stand-up theory" routines, Braderman and Paper Tiger Television put together a whirlwind, 28-minute cable-TV slot of self-reflexive, ironic analyses of why the *Enquirer* is one of the most widely read mass-circulated weeklies in the U.S. Comparing the *Enquirer* with similar British tabloids, Braderman contrasts the English obsession with royalty to the North American desire for "celebrity," locating the culturally specific origins of mass media productions. This is the only tape to explicitly adopt this theoretical model, and thereby it makes lucid what is implicit in Rosler's and Kramer's tapes.

The three tapes representing domestic issues examine the effects of oppression within personal realms. Sherry Milner's *Scenes from the Micro War* (1985) is an ironic dramatization of many of the same issues raised by Rosler's tape. It shows a "nuclear family" dressed in combat clothes, eating army-rationed meals, training for nuclear attacks, and traveling around in a paranoid state with toy guns in their camouflaged car. Though humorous, the narrative is not naive about current political situations; it juxtaposes two of the Reagan era's most prized values, family and military strength, and in so doing reveals the absurdity of the match.

Secret Sounds Screaming: The Sexual Abuse of Children (1986, by Ayoka Chenzira) and *Trick or Drink* (1984, by Vanalyne Green) both examine the potentially damaging effects of specific adult actions on children either within or outside of a parenting relationship. While *Secret Sounds Screaming* is careful to discuss the larger economic and social factors determining the familial and social structures that allow and lead adults to sexually abuse children, *Trick or Drink* tends to separate the cultural and the familial. Green begins with an account of a young girl's eating disorders/obsessions. A voice reads through a girl's "beauty diary" in which she berates herself for eating too many doughnuts one day or too much bread the

next, while advertisements for women's underwear (among other things) and snapshots of a (thin) young woman are shown. This is followed by an abrupt change in perspective, as the voice-over says: "Those stupid raisins, I hate them. I hate my parents too, you know why." But the viewer doesn't know, until the tape cuts to Green discussing the problems of children of alcoholic parents. In the remaining account of growing up with alcoholic parents, Green does not include any cultural analyses of alcoholism, and in so doing weakens the critique attempted in the first half of the tape. The young girl's eating disorder becomes a personal, family matter. She is a victim of her parents first, and a victim of her culture only because it lacks a social support structure for children of alcoholics. Though this message is important, Green does not articulate a strategy for change. By remaining within the personal, she confronts the effects of alcoholism but not the political, social, or economic origins of it.

Given the extremely complex category of women and the economy, the three tapes concerned with this issue present a some-

what overgeneralized cross section of the economic map in the U.S. *Women of Steel* (1985, by Mon Valley Media) articulates the experiences of women in non-traditional labor; *The Maids!* (1985, by Muriel Jackson) discusses the role of women in paid domestic work; and *Serafina Bathrick Reads Working Woman* (1983, by Paper Tiger Television) analyzes the assimilation of women into the executive workforce. All three tapes provide some cultural and historical analysis, but *Women of Steel* is the only one that explores at length the related concerns of single motherhood, divorce, reentry into the workplace, and the discrepancy between women's and men's pay. *The Maids!* begins to examine the function of class, gender, and race within the economy by contrasting the traditional relationship between the (black) domestic worker and her (white) employer's family with the recent development of team maid services, largely made up of white women. *Serafina Bathrick Reads Working Woman* attempts a psycho-social reading of women "yuppies" as they are written to and about in the pages of *Working Woman*

magazine. Noting the "football rhetoric" that fills the magazine, Bathrick suggests that the ideology of work expressed ignores two of the most important concerns that feminism has raised: women's place in history and the validity of women's culture and sense of community. Bathrick concludes by calling for an assertion of feminist values within the executive workplace.

In order to thoroughly investigate any given category, "Social Engagements" would have had to focus primarily on one issue and not attempt a more general survey of the field. As a general survey, the exhibition is representative but certainly not comprehensive. The lives of older women and adolescents, for example, are conspicuously absent, as are discussions or representations of non-nuclear families. In addition, most of the work did not challenge the traditional forms of videomaking; for example, documentaries consisted mainly of talking heads and newsreel/live footage, and few attempted to explicitly present or challenge theoretical issues. The lack of more theoretically didactic or seemingly "aesthetic" work

placed these concerns outside of the social. While the works of, to name only a few well-known examples, Cecelia Condit (*Beneath the Skin*, 1981, and *Possibly in Michigan*, 1983); Max Almy (*Leaving the Twentieth Century*, 1982, and *Perfect Leader*, 1983); and Dara Birnbaum ("Pop Pop Video" series, 1980, and her more recent *Damnation of Faust: Will-O'-The-Wisp (A Deceitful Goal)*, 1985) are seamlessly aesthetic, they also ultimately consider social/sexual issues. Similar work should have been included in a survey meant to historically define the spectrum of socially concerned feminist work in the '80s. Though the absence of "video art" may have been a conscious curatorial choice toward affirmative action within the art museum and an expansion of the term "video art," we can perhaps only look forward to a time when the aesthetic can coexist with the political within a museum structure.

NOTE

1. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Vidéo*, ed. René Pavani (Montreal, Canada: Artexes, 1986), p. 248.

Parting glances

Fire Over Water

edited by Reese Williams
Tanam Press/232 pp./\$11.95 (sb)

JOANNA SCOTT

IN THE PREFACE to "A study of Leonardo," a short fiction by Reese Williams included in his 1980 anthology, *Hotel*, Williams quotes from Leonardo's notebook: "All the particles together, and each by itself, give off to the surrounding air an unending number of images; each is complete and conveys the nature of the body which produces it. Every particle is the beginning and

guage? Between music and words? Between silence and sound? Provoking questions, certainly. Yet one of the problems with this volume is its single-mindedness resulting from the epistemological concerns shared by the different artists. Williams is a democratic editor, and this collaboration is a worthy tribute to Tanam Press' interesting tenure. But the anthology lacks strong, dissenting voices, divergences, disagreements. The contributors don't exercise their freedom as fully as they might. Fragmentation and juxtaposition are the rule rather than the exception, and though much attention is given to the slippery nature of words, the language tends to be casual.

Even if the pieces collected in *Fire Over Water* bear a kind of familial resemblance, the imaginative worlds created by the individual artists frequently do contain startling images, absorbing riddles, or confident and

Water? The symbol, coupled with Williams's exegesis, suggests not simply an imperative message but also the historical continuity of symbols. As in a chant, where parts of words are separated and recombined to form a whole, cross-cultural symbols can be lifted out of their different systems of meaning to be given new or renewed meaning.

The title itself, *Fire Over Water*, is the image of a hexagram from the *I Ching*. Williams tells us that this symbol was the inspiration for the anthology. Fire over water is, in the *I Ching*, "the image of the condition before transition." Like the chant, "endless, thou," like the symbol of the open hand, the hexagram refers to the process of integrating parts into a whole, to the condition of change. Three times over Williams gives clues to his intentions, defining the name of the press, the title of the book, and the symbol on the cover, encouraging his audience to accept

"... break stillness as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky." Her last phrase in this collection is the evocation of a sound, a bell's peal. Cha's piece is followed by Williams's brief explanation of the word *tanam*, concluding with, "There is a point where movement ceases, where sound returns to Silence, where the active individual melts into the great tradition." By the final page, it has become apparent that this anthology is offered not simply as a monument to Tanam Press but as a cerecloth for the young artist Theresa Cha, cloaking her in "the great tradition" or, more accurately, surrounding her prose and poetry with the words of sympathetic artists.

An essay by Susan Wolf, "Recalling Telling Retelling" (an earlier version appeared in *Afterimage* 14, no. 1, Summer 1986), provides a brief biography of Cha and describes