

# Video artist Braderman is the substance behind all those images

By DEBORAH OAKLEY

She sweeps into the classroom at 11:15, lugging two partially zipped briefcases stuffed with lecture notes. A bulging purple nylon purse is slung over her shoulder, and a set of cables leading to a video deck she used earlier in the day is wound around her wrist.

A few strands of long wispy hair are clinched at the top with a wide plastic fan clip, and a pair of earrings the size of Christmas tree ornaments swing from side to side as she offloads the briefcases onto her desk. She smooths her knee-length shoulder-padded shirt, adjusts a commanding string of chunk jewelry that has slipped to one side, and turns to face her audience with the dazzling, jack-o-lantern smile.

"When I first heard about her work in film theory, and read some of her articles, I expected to meet a woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a tweed skirt and oxfords," filmmaker Mark Rappaport laughed. "She wasn't at all what I thought she would be."

Things not being what they seem is exactly the message video artist Joan Braderman, Hampshire College's newest addition to the School of Communication and Cognitive Science, seeks to convey about the film industry that, while the industry appears to be entertaining us, in fact it preys on some of our deepest fears and desires, and dramatically influences the way we view the world.

Braderman wears her beliefs, quite literally, on her sleeve. The Joan Braderman "look" is a combination high "Dynasty" fashion slashed with a "50s bobby-sox spit-in-your-face rebelliousness, which punctuates her work about the way programs like "Dynasty" use clothing as one of many tools to seduce their audience.

But beneath the loose tongue-in-cheek stylishness that has become her trademark boils a ferocious intellect fueled by an impressive array of political and artistic credentials.

Her official title in the fledgling video program is Associate Professor of Television Production. But Braderman has never worked comfortably within the narrow definition of video producer.

"The hiring committee wasn't really sure what they wanted," Braderman said. "Originally, they advertised for an intellectual to teach documentary. But because of the set-up at Hampshire, which is interdisciplinary, the committee also needed someone with skills varied enough so that the person hired could serve on other department committees."

No one could have answered the call for diversity better than Braderman, who spent a considerable portion of the 1970s as a political activist framed against the backdrop of a South Bronx in flames, and, in 1975, as the co-founder of Heresies, a feminist publication on art and politics.

According to Braderman, her investment in video was a series of accidents that began with her "wandering around Radcliffe shooting videos of birds and donuts" to a three-year stint at New York University that shaped her unique per-

spective on the film industry.

"At Radcliffe, I had no idea what I was doing with video," Braderman says flatly. "I just ran around shooting miles of footage during the day, and spent the evening trying to get past the picket lines to edit it."

After graduating from Radcliffe, Braderman spent a year in Africa, and then decided to pursue a graduate degree at N.Y.U.

"I met the chairman of the department, George Amber, in a Bleeker Street bar," Braderman remembers. And he said the program at N.Y.U. was a production/theory program. Braderman hesitates and then bursts out laughing. "I think he wanted me to go there because he spent his youth in the Foreign Legion and was excited because I'd been to Africa."

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When Braderman enrolled in the program and discovered that it involved only minimal hands-on experience with video equipment, she became enchanted with the history of film and its power to persuade.

"I watched all these independent filmmakers spending 99 percent of their time raising money, and one percent of their time thinking about their work," she said. "I suppose I could have spent all my time in the advertising industry making Pepsi commercials, but I decided I'd rather work with ideas and communicate them to other people."

Thus, Braderman launched a 14-year career at the prestigious School of Visual Arts in New York City.

A.S.V.A. Braderman was instrumental in developing the video production department, and in bringing quality artists to the school. It was there, too, that Braderman developed a way to coerce her reluctant students into thinking intelligently about films. "I made them laugh about the films they were watching," Braderman says. "A lot of professors talk about 'serious' films as though they were some sort of holy lazaracle that you have to endure rather than enjoy. But if you give students some clues, if you make them think about what, in the film, is specifically making them fall asleep, they become more attentive."

Braderman brought her no-nonsense attitude to Hampshire College last fall, and was pleased to discover bright students who responded enthusiastically to her, and who seemed to be more focused and more realistically directed than the students at S.V.A.

"The students in New York were very heavily influenced by the myths of Hollywood and TV," Braderman explained. "Most of them were from blue-collar families living in the boroughs of New York, and they were full of fantasies of fame and glory."

"Because television and the movies comprised such a large part of their lives, they automatically assumed that the industry would be easily accessible to them as filmmakers."

One of the most difficult of Braderman's tasks, therefore, was to warn the students that not only was all that glittered in Hollywood not gold, but also that what did glitter probably wasn't accessible to them.

"I had to keep telling them that while my job was to teach them about image-making, I also had to tell them that the industry is essentially closed, the unions are closed, and that after four years of working with me, they'd probably wind up delivering chicken."

Braderman teased, and then, flashing that Cheshire smile, continued, "Some of my most brilliant students are still delivering chicken."

At Hampshire, Braderman said she felt more encouraged that some of her students would be able to realize some of their dreams as filmmakers.

"A lot of these kids are privileged," she said. "They have more resources, their families have connections and they have access to equipment. No one is ever going to make a lot of money in this industry, but some of the students at Hampshire may be able to produce some independent films."

Braderman strongly supports the emphasis Hampshire places on individual tutorials. "Their work can only be better as a result of working on a one-to-one basis with me," Braderman says. "I can help them edit mentally, which saves them a lot of time and frustration."

"Also," she continued, "I can be a kind of cheerleader, make them believe in themselves as filmmakers."

One of her students, Steve Ausbury, says that Braderman's, advent into the program has been a tremendous inspiration both to her students and to other members of the department.

"She made it a point to show independent video art, which no one in the department has bothered to do before," Ausbury said. "Working with Joan was more like working with another artist than with a professor," he said. "She's both aggressive and funny, and I never felt a hierarchical distinction between us." He continued, "By talking with me as though I were a fellow artist, she made me feel like an artist, and that gave me more confidence in my own work."

In the classroom, Ausbury said, Braderman left no doubt about the message she promoted about the visual arts.

"She said, 'BEWARE,'" Ausbury said without hesitation. "Joan never said don't do this or that when you're thinking about film. She said, 'Beware of what you're seeing, be aware of how TV is manipulating your deepest fears and desires.'"

Braderman's technique for accomplishing this is to threaten, cajole, coddle, tease and provoke students into thinking formally about the films they see.

"I make them write in the dark," she says. "Our society is conditioned to sit back, stuff popcorn in their mouths and allow themselves to be hypnotized by movies. I want them to know that watching a film is not a time to be lost, but a time to be more present."

Braderman employs a technique in the classroom she says is distinctly European — that of combining hands-on production experience with formal theoretical considera-



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR of television production Joan Braderman joined the video department at Hampshire last year. (Photo by Deborah Oakley)

tions. "In many schools, application and theory are taught separately, mostly because people don't have time to delve deeply into both," she said. "But I don't think students can make a successful film unless they understand why certain images produce a particular effect." She continued, "They have to be aware of the palette of possibilities before they can create something that is uniquely theirs."

Braderman encourages students to take notes during the film, and answer specific questions about the way the film makes them feel. For example, if they feel fear, how does the lighting or the soundtrack contribute to that feeling? How does the length of camera shots determine the pace of the film?

"Images are constructions, and I want them to know the building blocks of those constructions," she says.

"When they see a film like 'Jaws,' and a particular scene frightens them, I tell them to listen to that ridiculous music in the background, which is forewarning them that something scary is about to happen. Once they become aware of what the director is doing, they laugh when they hear the music rather than feel afraid."

But as resolute as Braderman is in her crusade to heighten aware-

ness of the manipulative power of movies and television, Braderman readily admits to being a junkie movie junkie who curls up in her Fruit Street apartment with a stack of cassettes, her two kittens and — yes — a bowl of popcorn.

"I actually got started watching 'junk' films because all my students see them," she says with just the hint of a smile. "They see whatever is most sensational — movies with exploding heads, blood, falling buildings. People think that filmmakers like Orson Welles and Eisenstein are the most influential, but it's really the commercially produced films that influence us the most." She added, "You can't make films like 'Rambo' and 'Jaws' go away, so you have to search for the reasons they excite."

In her most recent film, "Joan Does Dynasty," Braderman addressed the television series, "Dynasty," with a vengeance. Using a series of clips from the series, Braderman delivered a chilling narrative about the ways in which the show influences our feelings about power and money. Inserting herself into the clips as the black-clad victim of "Dynasty" — a persuasive stance about the effects of power, sex and money in society, Braderman, delivers a caustic and often humorous account of the machina-

tions of Joan Collins, Linda Evans and John Forsythe as they struggle madly, calculatedly, for control.

Another of Braderman's films, "Natalie Didn't Drawn," skillfully attacks the Enquirer, with Joan, again, as representative of the millions of Americans beckoned into the mire of Hollywood sensationalism.

A third film, which was co-directed and edited by Braderman, reflects her feminist/political consciousness. In 1984, Braderman journeyed to Nicaragua to interview women embroiled in the turmoil of revolution. The sensitive documentary, received with considerable acclaim, punctuated Braderman's strong feminist proclivities, a passion she hopes to pass along at Hampshire.

"About 50 percent of my students at Hampshire are women," Braderman says. "I think a lot of them may have decided to take courses in video because there's finally a woman teaching video here."

Braderman noted that only 10 percent of the film industry is comprised of women. "At S.V.A., about 90 percent of my students were men," she said. "But when I taught a course in Women Directors, 50 percent of the class was women."

"All they need is a little confidence," she said.

