

Corporeal Returns: Feminism and Phenomenology in Vancouver Video and Performance 1968-1983 | By Marina Roy

Scene: September 1975; Vancouver Small Claims Court; Diana Douglas in the witness box after being sworn in by the judge.

Judge: Your name please.

Douglas: Diana Douglas.

Judge: Miss or Mrs.?

Douglas: Ms.

Judge: Pardon?

Douglas: Ms ... M...S...

Judge: What does that mean?

Douglas: It means that I feel that it is not relevant whether I am married or not.

Judge: Um...You mean you are a nonentity...

From a distance of over twenty-five years, it may seem hard to believe that this scene between a judge and a citizen occurred during International Women's Year, at the height of the women's movement. For a representative of the law to say that women were either Miss or Mrs. and nothing in between, underscores the limitations put on women's roles within society and the problem of symbolic domination that women had to contend with. A woman's social role had traditionally been defined in relation to that naturalized institution, the family. Foucault tells us that "juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent". The judge's use of the word "nonentity" is significant in terms of the phenomenological issues that were being discussed within various cultural fields at the time—the idea that one's body was an experiencing entity in-the-world. The juridical projection of "nonentity" onto Douglas uncovers deep-seated essentialist views. Cultural law projects readymade feminine attributes onto women, then somatizes them as a "metaphysical substance" inherent to "woman".

When women attempt to shed these social fabrications, performing roles as subjects rather than objects they are disrupting the sexual division of material life, the very stuff on which the political economy of capitalism is based. This disrupts the repetitive flow of day to day collective social habits. According to Judith Butler our identity is constructed temporally by repeated and ritualized performative acts, a reenactment of a set of meanings already socially established and simply reproduced as natural: "If gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to

perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time...then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (*Theatre Journal*, vol.40, p. 519).

In the 1970s many women artists in Vancouver were practicing this "different sort of repeating" using various performative strategies within video and performance art. These strategies were in many ways an extension of the spirit of the times. Theories of language and communication (e.g. Searle's performative speech acts) and phenomenology (Merleau Ponty's lived experience and his placing of the body at the centre of experience) were based on the idea of sentient agents acting within a socially-constructed environment. Simone de Beauvoir also used a phenomenological approach in her feminist classic *The Second Sex*. The days of Cartesian subjecthood, as psychically transcendent, divorced from the physical body, and epitomized in Western art by abstraction, essence, and genius, were beginning to recede into the modernist past. Lived experience was founded on the corporeal. The separation of all fields into essential categories was being deconstructed and reconfigured. The traditional division of labour on which heterosexual relations were enforced and naturalized, crumbled as women sought agency outside the confines of the domestic sphere, the family unit.

In Vancouver, from about 1968, the new media of performance and video art were developing at the same time as the feminist movement and the beginning of artist-run centres. Within these centres one had free access to equipment and studio space, and found oneself part of a supportive community of artists practicing divergent disciplines. For one of the first times in history, many women found an alternative space to that of the home where they could live and work as artists. Collaboration meant the cooperation of bodies performing within a communal space, but it also meant taking part in an international network, as with correspondence art and video distribution networks. Funding for these collaborative ventures was increasingly provided for by the Canada Council. Also in 1968, the CRTC was instituting community access cable programming, thus signalling for many artists, the possibility for a more inclusive distribution of information and cultural expression.

It may seem paradoxical that such a heterogeneous array of media and agents should have come together at the same time to form such unparalleled opportunity for artists in Vancouver. A body-centred art practice worked in tandem with new forms of technological reproduction (video), avant-garde artists often found support from the cultural establishment (the Canada Council, the Vancouver Art Gallery), and video artists sometimes had assistance in production and distribution from broadcast television (Cable Ten). Women artists were at the forefront of this new activity in the 70s. A particularly wide variety of communities, counter-cultural, and activist strategies were formed by, and made available to women. The 70s signaled a moment of historical rupture for society and culture. Not only were the categories of Miss and Mrs. torn asunder; so were those of traditional art practice, reception, and distribution. Although other cities in Canada could vaunt a similar cultural climate, Vancouver's social and cultural situation was unique.

The period covered here, from the late sixties to the end of the seventies has come to be known culturally as the "Canadian renaissance". The success of Canada's centennial

celebrations, especially at Expo 67 in Montreal, gave the nation a cultural presence on the international stage, seen as excelling in the fields of technology and communications. The key national cultural institutions of the CBC, the Canada Council, the National Film Board, and Telefilm Canada were instrumental in forging a national identity in an attempt to unite a small population across a vast territory. Radical changes were brought about in the arts in large part due to the Canada Council (established in 1957), with its arm's length distance from government intervention. Without access to such funding, work space and equipment would have remained inaccessible to artists wishing to experiment with new technologies and approaches to making art. The pressure to create marketable art works was alleviated by the presence of artist-run centres, opening the way for a more socially-engaged praxis. While most commercial galleries were still steeped in modernist paradigms, the artist-run centre began an investigation into interdisciplinary approaches to new and traditional media. The government encouraged the use of this new technology in the cultural realm, for it served to strengthen Canada's image and reputation globally. The eventual institutionalization of artist-run centres and alternative community groups, set up through various funding programs, was also a way of keeping more activist, oppositional groups under wraps: "The lessons of the Roosevelt era in the U.S., which saw the absorption of the radical movements of the 1930s through meagre but widely accessible state funding, were not lost on the Trudeau government, itself a product of populism and the mass media" (_Vancouver Anthology_, p. 63).

Vancouver had always been isolated geographically, and it was only with increased air travel and broadcast communications that there was a turn toward a more national and global perspective. Vancouver's supposed lack of history, its profoundly multicultural status stemming from a constant influx of immigrants, perhaps made people feel that there were fewer homespun traditions constricting their identity. People tended to come to Vancouver with an image in their minds of the last frontier, a land burgeoning with unlimited resources and opportunities, factories implementing the ideals of progress and innovation, not to mention its reputation as lotusland—a welfare and drug culture. One came for economic opportunity and a lifestyle. Because Vancouver was a peripheral city, not a centre in the modern sense of the word, it was very much at home with the idea of networking, incorporating innovative communications systems, as a way of keeping in touch with the world, in turn drawing the world to it. Its dispersed, elusive identity, and its new economy of "dynamic services" in the 70s, made it warrant the title of "postmodern city".

The utopian impulse to blur the boundaries between art, life, and technology began in the early sixties when a new generation of artists was breaking away from the lyrical regionalism of landscape painting associated with Vancouver. In 1961, a giant leap into the international arena of art took place at the University of British Columbia, under the guidance of B. C. Binning and June Binkert. The Festival of the Contemporary Arts took place every February for the next 10 years (1961-71). These collaborative events included works by a host of prominent local, national and international artists and poets (mostly from New York and California: Cage, Cunningham, Halprin, Rauschenberg, etc.). The festivals were initially inspired by the "surge of postwar artistic energy first released by the abstract expressionists in New York" (Alvin Balkind), but in the end it was the anti-establishment practices of interdisciplinarity and experimental play that were de rigueur, in the areas of music/sound, poetry, dance, happenings, film, theatre, installation, etc.

The festival acted as a catalyst for the emergence of a new kind of artistic praxis, of an international rather than regional or national character.

In 1966, a group of artists and architects, many of which had participated in the activities of UBC's art festivals, decided to create an artist-run centre where collaboration and new electronic media would signal the dawn of a new utopian consciousness. With some local financial support, and \$40,000 from the Canada Council (the first artist-run centre ever to be funded), these artists bought film and electronic equipment and founded Intermedia in 1967. The space was essentially a democratic one, upholding an open door policy to anyone who wanted to experiment with multimedia. The first video portapak was introduced to Vancouver artists via Intermedia in 1968.

Without a doubt, the most important collaborative activities to come out of the late sixties were that between Intermedia and the Vancouver Art Gallery under the aegis of Anthony Emery and Doris Shadbolt. The VAG's Special Events programming and three consecutive years of Intermedia week-long festivals (1968-1970), were the principal venues for new explorations in performance art. It was one of the only spaces available where artists Gathie Falk, Evelyn Roth, and the Helen Goodwin's dance troupe could realize their performance works. Such visiting artists as Ann Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, and critic/curator Lucy Lippard were especially inspirational to these artists. The VAG and the Vancouver Public Library also played an important role in initiating and sponsoring women's art events such as Women in the Arts that presented performances and discussions.

In 1968 Deborah Hay held workshops at the Douglas Gallery and Intermedia in what was then called "dance-oriented live performance". Originally inspired by the Black Mountain College experiments and happenings from the 50s, Hay's workshops sought to incorporate body movements from everyday life into performance: "From my work with artists, I learned to appreciate the way non-dancers responded within the context of a performance. I never asked them to execute movements that they did not do in everyday life." 1968 heralds the dawn of performance art as a discipline in its own right in Vancouver. Before this time, artists and dancers would experiment with sound, multimedia light shows and installations, more or less in an improvisational manner, without any solid idea except perhaps a McLuhanesque notion of global communication and counter-cultural communalism. Women had been taking part in these collaborative intermedia events, especially as dancers and poets, but they were often ignored and given second place within multimedia events. While collaborative performance was an alternative to and a critique of individualistic (male-dominated) modes of art production, this rarely meant that women were granted an equal place within that community. After Deborah Hay taught dance performance workshops in Vancouver a whole new direction was taken in performance-based works by women.

The use of repetition within these dance-related performances was directed toward creating a new type of audience participation. The process of performance was made transparent through the use of variations on repetition, as constitutive of the social rhythms of the body. The audience would relate to performers through their use of mundane movements and non-hierarchical relations between dancers. This type of performance would reflect the everyday lives of all members of the audience, implicating them in a non-hierarchical fashion. Bodies repeated the same actions so as to allow the

audience to see these movements. The use of repetition also evokes what Judith Butler calls “identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts”. In phenomenological terms, the body is displayed not only as being in-the-world, or as a sensuous and experiencing entity, but in a state of perpetual becoming: “The body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities...the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (p. 521).

Works performed by such dancers as Helen Goodwin and TheCo used everyday movements such as people slowly moving along a wall, or “dance” movements where each member would execute one of a number of separate activities in a continuous repetition: one person rolling themselves in paper, one person walking with sponges attached to their feet, another performing actions with an umbrella, etc. From the very start, Helen Goodwin had been very active within the UBC Festival for the Contemporary Arts and had been a founding member of both the Sound Gallery and Intermedia. Her work was in close collaboration with musicians and multimedia artists within these communities. The Anna Wyman dancers presented a more professional dance performance situation, employing everyday, repetitive movements within their dances, set to electronic music by modern composers such as Stockhausen. They also performed at the VAG during Intermedia festival events.

Evelyn Roth combined performance and video art in a thought-provoking way. Costume design is usually considered secondary to theatrical production or social life. Yet the sartorial displays social codes, setting up hierarchies between subjects. Through crocheting and donning videotape garments Roth came to embody a persona during the 70s. As a bag-lady-cum-fashion model, she somehow elevated the idea of being a mundane public media figure into the realm of art. She is best known for her performances in crocheting recycled video tape into garments, hats, car covers, gallery awnings. The action of covering bodies, cars, and buildings in used videotape could be construed as a comment on the technologization of bodies and spaces, our entrapment within the very medium of communication that we use to try to transcend our bodies. The use of crocheting within the context of art also placed value on women’s work.

One of the most acknowledged performance artists to have come out of this Intermedia/VAG collaboration was Gathie Falk. Her performances began within the context of Hay’s workshops. Everyday, task-related activities and repeated objects played a central role in her artwork, signaling the repetitive nature of women’s domestic work and the fetishization of women into objects of desire.

Falk’s girl-child costumed persona (white blouse, pinafore, maryjane buttoned shoes) seems to reinforce the idea of masochistic entrapment that Falk within her work. Her use of eggs (with its references to fertility) is abject and disturbing in two of her performances: *Eighty-eight Eggs* (in which she is pelted with eggs by the audience) and *Some are Egger than I* (where she bats around ceramic eggs croquet-style until she hits a raw egg; by some absurd logic she then proceeds to eat a boiled egg; this action is repeated eight times). The impact of *Eighty-eight Eggs* as a performance relates to masochism: she is egged by the audience as if in reaction to a bad performance, and yet she performs nothing. This being egged “before the fact” becomes a statement unto itself, implying perhaps inadvertently that this is how women feel when they are

discouraged from expressing themselves or put down publicly if they do attempt to play roles that are considered inappropriate to their nature. The slapstick nature of audience participation falls short of the mark, turning into pathetic spectacle.

Another example is *Red Angel* where a winged Falk sits atop a commode while five record players with ceramic parrots on them, do a musical round of “row, row, row your boat”. Falk herself repeats the same lines last. The idea of being a broken record, driven to repeat the same lines over and over like a parrot, reflects her role as woman trapped within the vicious cycle of repeated acts, as a woman passively displaying herself as a decorative ornament, repeating what she is taught to say. Once the musical round is finished, a woman wheels in a washing machine, removes Falk’s gown, washes it, and then leaves the space. Falk then repeats the exact same opening sequence. The performance repeated a second time is however profoundly different. The repeated sequence speaks of entrapment. The angel follows the motion of a technologized controlled rhythm, just as women’s work is controlled by the technological rhythms of home appliances.

As a body-based art form, performance had its roots in early 20th century avant-garde art. In the 1920s (in Europe), and again in the 50s and 60s (in the U.S.), a type of ‘theatricality’ formed itself in opposition to the modernist myth of the autonomous work of art, legitimized by the art institution, created by the male ‘genius’ artist. The prototype was *Picasso in Europe, Jackson Pollock in America*. Amelia Jones in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* has pointed out that the fascination with Pollock’s performative process of action painting, first seen in photographs from the late 40s and early 50s, was downplayed by theorists such as Greenberg. They emphasized product over process in the work. In reaction to modernist criticism, minimalist artists made work that Michael Fried characterized as degenerating away from art and moving toward theatre—what lay between the arts. Preoccupation with duration, whereby the beholder became implicated in the art work, was considered anathema to formalist critics. In an ironic gesture pop art elevated mass media for the viewer. Subsequently, conceptual art elevated the philological notion of art as idea in the form of instruction sheets, card files, and even photographs of deadpan performative acts (or the result of these acts). These practices favoured the dematerialization of the object.

Video art and performance art by women could be seen in part as a culmination of, and a reaction against many of these strategies. (In many ways, one could see feminist strategies as one of the major vital forces behind postmodern turns in art.) The process-oriented, performative aspects of action painting, the inclusion of the beholder and of duration within the artwork, the dematerialization and ephemerality of the work, were elements that were retained from the art strategies of the 50s and 60s. But the preoccupation with formalism and information at the expense of figuration or the body was considered to be foreign to women’s experience. Having always been relegated to the status of immanence rather than transcendence in the Cartesian tradition of Western thought (transcendence/mind/male vs. immanence/ body/ female), women were relegated to the realm of the corporeal, weighed down by their biology. Thus the importance for many women of representing their bodies and life experiences within art works. One of the main reasons women turned to performance and video in the late 60s was that it was still uncharted territory. While men had made a history for themselves in the more traditional media of painting, sculpture, film, and photography, video and

performance was so new that women felt they could truly make the medium their own, make it speak for them without the historical baggage of male precedence.

The chief social reaction to the end of the war in the 1950s, a time of unparalleled economic wealth arising from a war-fuelled economy, was a soaring marriage and birth rate. Family became a sacrosanct institution. In Canada, as in the U.S., television was to become the ideological channeller of such a vision: "Members of the Fowler Commission viewed television as a unifying source for the rejuvenation of family, serving as a headquarters, a gathering place, enhancing family encounters in the home and strengthening the moral fabric of the nation...what was striking about this focus on the family was not only the reification of the home as the source of moral order, but the way in which television was contextualized as a fixture not of community, nor of the individual, but of the family unit" (Dot Tuer, "Family: An Examination of Community Access Cable in Canada", Fuse, Spring 1994, p. 26).

By the 60s a new strain of ideology, in the form of the movie star, the rock star, the media icon, and artist genius, touted individualism as the religion. Given the socializing influence of television, distortions of reality determined how people perceived themselves and one another. The coincidence of the sixties generation with the media culture boom meant that youth developed a narcissistic relationship with new archetypal role models. As the hegemonic structures of broadcast and press information began to belie their morality and truth-value, artists took Marshall McLuhan at his word and took on the role of "perception experts" and "educators of the future". Video's phenomenology, its format and its inherent "real time" aesthetic, connects it to television. For this reason, using video as a new form of global media, became a way of expressing disillusionment with television's biased, manipulative nature.

One of the great advantages of video was its reproducibility, exchangeability, "synced audio-visual portability, low-cost reusable tape, and instantaneous record and playback capabilities" (Paul Wong). The medium was very much in tune with the times, with the idea of a free-floating distribution system of ideas dashing across the globe, setting up a network of collaborative projects by artists made through the process of exchange (mail art), of special interest groups not bound by the strictures of space and time. Performance and video artists fought against the alienating effects of television in two ways: through ironic posturing and through social-activism.

1973 was an extraordinary year for video art in Vancouver. There was the Matrix conference that gave rise to Video Inn/Satellite Video Exchange Society (through the donation of 120 tapes by artists who partook in the Matrix conference); the Pacific Vibrations Exhibition at the VAG showcased video and performance works; the Women's Film and Video Festival gave rise to Reelfeelings, a women's film and video collective. It was also the year that the Western Front came into being. That year a group of artists found themselves homeless thanks to the razing of old buildings to make way for new more expensive ones. Rents had also been hiked and they were looking for housing alternatives. Needing a home and studio space, and no doubt inspired by Intermedia and New Era Social Club, not to mention the Maplewood Mudflats community in Dollarton, these artists came up with the idea of pooling their money together and establishing a communal living space. Founding members Michael Morris, Vincent Trasov, Kate Craig, Eric Metcalf, Glen Lewis, Mo Van Nostrand, and Henry Greenhow set up the Western

Front. Unlike previous artist-run centres, the Western Front was much more selective in terms of the facilities' conditions of use. Equipment and studio space was reserved for themselves, select friends, and artists-in-residence.

Fluxus type activities began when Image Bank was formed, a mail art network inspired by Ray Johnson's New York Correspondance School of Art. In keeping with the latter activities, Western Front artists took up pseudonyms and personae that stuck with them for years: Dr Brute and Lady Brute, Mr. Peanut, Flakey Rose Hip, Marcel Idea, etc. These in turn became future roles within cabaret events. This use of "larger-than-life" media-style personas was at once playful and critical inspired as much by Dadaist strategies of the 1920s as by the glamour stereotypes of mass media. The use of pseudonyms was based on the fantastical idea of being able to change life into art or rather, art into lifestyle. It was also a comment on the facticity of the so-called norms of identity tailored to everyday life as produced under capitalist modes of production.

The construction of personas was also very much about liberating oneself from the strictures of nationhood and geography. Creating a new persona and being known as that persona had a somewhat tribal or totem-like ring to it. Demarcating oneself from the status quo became a political statement steeped in irony. It signaled being part of a different tribal community, one bound by relations other than kinship ties. For women it was a way of criticizing the structure of the normative family relations. Community and public agency were seen as breaking the bipolar categories of home/work, private/public, husband/wife, life/art. Trapping oneself within a persona was about breaking free from this socially-regulated somatized prison.

These extravagant high camp gestures were thus based on a will to form a community outside of the usual roles of daily life, they literally wanted to unmask the alienating effects of traditional roles on everyday life. By making their lives a public spectacle, they were also becoming fictional embodiments of cliched glamour images, parodying the ubiquitous Hollywood and TV star. Being a West Coast city, Vancouver quite naturally has a cultural dialogue going on with a place like LA. The Western Front participated in (and the Image Bank helped organize) the Decca Dance in Hollywood in 1974. It was a parody of the Academy Awards that attracted hundreds of performance artists.

Kate Craig organized the Western Front's video production studio in 1976. In 1977, she established and curated the Artist-in-Residence Video program. Her strong administrative role within the society, her leading role in video production, and her prominence as a performance and video artist in Vancouver, all contributed to the formation of a strong presence of local, national and international women artists at the Western Front. Some of the women who have been more directly involved with the Western Front over the years have been Jane Ellison, Daina Augaitus, Elizabeth Vander Zaag, Karen Henry, Annette Hurtig, Susan Milne, Babs Shapiro, Corrine Wyngaarden, Elizabeth Chitty, Margaret Dragu, Mary Beth Knechtel, Judy Radul. Craig's performance of Back up in collaboration with Margaret Dragu, reflects a panoply of activities and narratives, gender stereotypes, and new roles enacted by women. Without being overtly political, they play out the lifestyles of school girls, pool-hall tough girls, scientists, upper-class debutantes, and domestics.

This mercurial role-playing reflects Craig's inclination towards adopting quite a variety of

personae in her art-as-lifestyle. She was one of the Soni Twins, one of the 'Ettes, and at one point she identified herself with the colour pink (via an extensive pink wardrobe). Her most lasting alter-ego however was Lady Brute, a female stereotype based on leopard-spotted accoutrements. In her own words, Craig says that: "Lady Brute was...very much a part of Dr. Brute, a collaboration with Eric Metcalfe in terms of our marriage and our lifestyle together. Lady Brute was a mask, a point of focus, where you could step one pace behind and use it in a very specific way without necessarily becoming that person...One of the wonderful things about Lady Brute was that there was a stand-in at every corner. If I wore the leopard skin it was only to become a part of this incredible culture of women who adopted that costume".

Craig based at least two videos on her persona Lady Brute. Through the Image Bank mail-art directory she acquired a huge collection of leopard skin paraphernalia and garments. The fashion statement associated with faux fur and mimetic animal patterning seems to signal female aggression and animal sex drive. As a sign-system it serves to mask the alienating effects of the colonization and exoticization of the female body, grounding it in a reversal of predator/prey fantasy. In the video *Skins* (1975), Craig documents herself modeling her Lady Brute wardrobe. She dresses and undresses in front of the camera, taking on different poses and stereotyped attitudes for each costume. The female stereotypes named in the video soundtrack describe the type of woman Craig becomes in each new outfit. Her multiple incarnations as Lady Brute underline the parodic nature of the video, as it traces out the many fantasy construction that dominate women's lives.

Craig was also involved in collaborative performances as one of the 'Ettes, an all-women song and dance group. During the Mr. Peanut 1974 mayoral campaign, this group of women were cheerleaders, playing out the adolescent fantasies of being symbols of reward or "objects of pleasure" associated with sporting events. Their presence on the political scene cast an absurd light on the mayoral campaign, where the electoral process became framed as little more than a game performed by aristocratic nuts out to score the most points, based on the best rhetoric and spectacle value. The 'Ettes included Mary Beth Knechtel, Suzanne Ksinan, Lin Bennett, Babs Shapiro, Helen Tuele, Judith Schwartz, Barbara Best and other guests. They also came together as the Cocanettes and Infinettes at A Space in Toronto, and as the Vignettes for a media-hype style performance for the Amy Vanderbilt Debutantes Ball. The scandal surrounding Amy Vanderbilt's death inspired this performance and ball. Later on a lot of the same and some new members, came together to form the Girl's Club. They would get together for informal women's meetings over dinner when visiting women artists came to town. At other times they would turn out for media events. This coming together of individuals into loosely formed collaborative groups reflected a certain optimism and real community spirit. Spontaneous performances in a wide variety of public contexts could affect people in unforeseeable ways, for instance, as when the 1974 Mr. Peanut won 2,685 votes in the mayoral campaign. Working collaboratively meant that no one person would steal the show.

Early video has often been denigrated by mainstream factions using such epithets as dumb, boring, narcissistic, lewd, badly made (Jan Peacock, *Video Re/view*, pp. 144-160). This had much to do with the nature of early video technology and budget constraints. Content was quite often privileged over form. A raw aesthetic certainly

conveyed its own message—"this is not TV; this may even be critical of TV; this is presenting something that TV would never show you". Most artists working in video wanted to counter the seductive aesthetics of television that catered to a mass audience. A lot of early videotape was used in a documentary fashion, as a way of spontaneously recording the surge of unprecedented artistic collaboration going on at the time. Documentary was also the medium of choice for works made by activists, feminists, and community groups in conjunction with cable programming, education and consciousness-raising being the focus.

In 1973 the Matrix International Video Exchange Conference/Festival was organized by Michael Goldberg, Patricia Hardman and Noelle Pelletier. The condition of admission to the conference was the donation of a favourite videotape. This in turn, became the foundation for the Video Inn library and the Satellite Video Exchange Society. This was meant as a way of setting up a global network of communication between artists and communities and was a reaction against the centralized mass media of broadcast television. As one of the first major international video conferences, Matrix attracted some of the most prominent video artists in the field. Unlike the Western Front Society, Video Inn (known as Video In after 1987) members were committed to social activism and education through the uses of video as a communications and information medium. Like the Western Front however, it had an "almost familial structure" (Diamond, p. 56) and in the early years collective dinners were a par for the course. The strong presence of women (Renee Baert, Shawn Preus, Jeanette Reinhardt, Barbara Steinman, Peg Campbell, etc.) meant that there was much collaboration with women's groups in putting on the Women's Arts Festival (1974), Conceptual Women's Art Tapes from Europe, Japan and North America (1975), Women and Video Art (1976), Rape (1977), Video Inn Women's International Exhibition (1977 & 1978), Feminist Tapes (1979), Women's Media Nights (1979-1985). At Video Inn the equipment department and workshops were also largely run by women, signaling a strong feminist presence that attracted women artists to the medium.

Unlike film, video provided a more immediate form of expression and greater distribution possibilities for women. At a time when "spreading the word" was essential to the strengthening of women's positions within society, video provided a fast and somewhat inexpensive means for doing this. Many of the women associated with Video Inn made tapes that dealt directly with women's issues. Peg Campbell made many videotapes about wife battering. *A Rule of Thumb* (1977) for instance refers to the Common Law Doctrine that, until 1897, "allowed a husband the right to beat his wife provided he used a switch no bigger than his thumb". The video reveals the extent of women's suffering within abusive relationships, aggravated by a lack of concern over violence against women within a patriarchal structure. In association with Reelfeelings, Barbara Steinman made *Breast Examination*, an educational tape where she teaches a group of women how to go about the procedure. Her interest in educating women about health issues extends into the contentious issue of abortion in *Dr Morgentaler Speaks* from 1974. As well as being one of the founding members and administrators of Video Inn and long-time managing editor of *Video Guide*, Shawn Preus has made works about the harmful and alienating effects of television on the psyche and on environmental concerns such as pesticides and recycling. All of these videos covered social concerns related to women and the environment that were not aired on television.

In 1970 the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada was published in response to the resurgence of the women's movement, especially prominent in the urban centres of Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto. It was a very progressive document that made 167 recommendations on how to promote gender equality. The immediate response of many Canadian women and women's groups was to begin implementing the report's recommendations. Pay equity, day care, the right to abortion, protection against violence, sexual abuse and harassment, equal opportunity to higher education and higher skilled jobs—these are amongst some of the key rights and issues that were being addressed by women. So far this paper has discussed the participation of women in artist-run centres only where both men and women worked side-by-side on video and performance-based works. From about 1973 on however, there was also the rise of women's art organizations, focused on activism and formed with the intention of educating women about their rights.

In "Daring Documents: the Practical Aesthetics of Early Vancouver Video," Sara Diamond outlines the many documentary practices of women's art and media organizations. Most of these organizations hoped to reach a mass audience with their work, sometimes securing Cable 10 or Co-op Radio as a venue. The activist video work made by these women's collectives was in reaction to the exclusion of women's issues and their representation within history and contemporary mass media. The low quality production value of many of these video documents reflects the emphasis on content over technique, their refusal to abide by the rules of aestheticization of content, but most of all, it reflects the need, within a limited budget, to produce as much information as possible so as to make an immediate impact on women's lives.

In 1973 the Status of Women Action Coordinating Council of B.C. sponsored the Women's Alive Group to produce a television series broadcast on Channel 10. In the same year, Women and Film film festival began at the Pacific Cinemateque. Later, these festivals were organized by ISIS, a women's media distribution and production centre. Reelfeelings began as an attempt to create a women's film and video festival in Vancouver, one similar to the one organized by Marien Lewis in Toronto. This women's collective existed between 1973 and 1977, producing mostly film, but also video, photography, and sound. One of Reelfeelings' main goals was to provide positive images of women within a narrative format. In 1975 Reelfeelings began a weekly half-hour program on Co-op Radio. One of the group's best known films, written by Ardele Lister, was *So Where's My Prince Already?*, where anti-matrimonial statement is expressed with humour and anger. Traditionally considered as a woman's highest goal, marriage and motherhood are sized up and unmasked for what they are often really worth.

Women in Focus began in 1974 in association with the UBC Women's Office. It began as a production centre creating a weekly program on feminist issues at Cable Ten, a local cable station. Along with Metro Media and Pumps, it was one of the few instances where an artist collective was granted production assistance from broadcasting. Under the aegis of Marion Barling, Women in Focus used higher production values to address the experience of oppression of women and the absence of their experiences represented in media and art. They created a weekly program designed to inform a wide audience on the need and the possibilities of social and economic change for women. Straddling the arts and women's collectives, Women in Focus often had problems

getting sufficient funding, but in 1985 it received funding from the Secretary of State and later from the Canada Council.

After its closure in 1992, Women in Focus' tapes were donated to Video In. Most of the works produced or circulated by Women in Focus were centered on education in the areas of sexual harassment, rape, wife battering, abortion, history of the suffrage movement, and working conditions for women. Rape is a Social Disease and It's not your Imagination are among the most popular of Women In Focus' productions. It's not your Imagination discusses the degrading experience of sexual harassment in the workplace. Harassment had devastating economic effects on women, in terms of job performance, self-esteem and even holding onto one's job. This consciousness-raising tape is an example of the type of material that could be used in future to lobby for women's rights in the workplace.

Most of these organizations were formed with a unified feminist voice in mind. Most women were white, middle-class, and heterosexual. Therefore, much of the focus was on women's domestic lives, within heterosexual relationships rather than the establishment of alternative lifestyles, outside of these often constraining relationships. If anything, these films concentrated on women achieving more independence and self-sufficiency. Discrimination along racial, sexual orientation, and class lines within the gender context were rarely addressed until 1980.

Amelia Productions began in 1980 as a women's video production collective and lasted for eighteen months. They used the Cable 10 cablevision facilities and equipment from Simon Fraser University. They created fourteen tapes which the group called "Occupational Videos". In these works they focused on documenting women in the work place, their strikes, protests and their take-over of buildings in an attempt to better their quality of life. In the attempt to portray and encourage a unified political voice amongst women, Amelia Productions tended to videotape confrontational events such as T.W.U. Tel (1981) and Concerned Aboriginal Women (1981). T.W.U. Tel portrays the telephone operators' occupation of the province's major telephone centres in reaction to a contract dispute and in order to provide better service for the public. B.C. Tel management had been cutting services and staff so as to increase revenue. Amelia Productions covered the women's side of the story, not seen on network news. Concerned Aboriginal Women portrays the occupation of the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) building by one hundred First Nations women, their arrest, and support activity surrounding the event. These women demanded that an inquiry be conducted into the DIA's policies. The DIA's policies had had destructive effects on their bands and their entire people. One by one, the women described their atrocious living conditions, the increased rate of suicide, sexual and alcohol abuse, the abuse by priests and nuns, the sterilization of young women, their lack of jobs despite teacher and construction worker training. The control over resources by the DIA was driving them off of their land, forcing them to move to the city.

Amelia Productions was the first women's collective to address how gender issues were often inseparable from other forms of discrimination—class, race, and sexual orientation. Much of their work was based on the effects of technology on women's lives. It reflects the changes in the women's movement, away from strictly middle class white women's problems to that of more oppressed groups: working class women, First Nations women,

and lesbians (Lesbians against the Right). The blind spots encountered within films and videos by Reelfeelings and Women in Focus, their decidedly unified, white, middle-class, and heterosexual stance, was called into question by a more inclusive perspective of Amelia Productions.

Some time in the early seventies, a group of artists, sharing a common neighbourhood around Main Street in Vancouver, came together to form Mainstreet Inc. These artists were Deborah Fong, Carol Hackett, Jeanette Reinhardt, Marlene McGregor, Mary Jane Way, Charles Rea, Ken Fletcher, and Paul Wong. All were also members of other communities such as Video Inn, Pumps, Western Front, etc. Unlike a lot of the collectives or artist-run centres, Mainstreet Inc. seemed cynical towards the notion of unified community spirit and disillusioned with the idea of greater social change. The insularity of their group is described at the start of their video "4" as a maze of rivalling interrelationships, an endless cycle of breaking up and moving in together amongst themselves: "...Jean used to go out with Ken. Paul had a crush on Jean. Kevin moved in with Jean. Kevin used to go out with Ann. Marlene lived next door with Don. Jean and Kevin moved out...". This is hardly the typical heterosexual family structure that men and women tended to gravitate toward. Yet they were all practically like family, some having grown up together since elementary school.

Their artistic strategies were anarchic, displaying social criticism through aggressive and self-destructive behaviour. As the S.S. Girls (Sisters towards Sluthood), Deborah Fong, Carol Hackett, Anastacia McDonald, and Jeanette Reinhardt performed a semi-autobiographical portrait of their relationship with one another in the faux cinema-verite video, "4". While they did not display stereotypical gender roles, their tough girl, self-indulgent, self-destructive, often lewd and rude behaviour, distanced them from the feminist stances of the 70s. Their lifestyle and fashion-conscious display of a sex, drugs, booze, and punk rock ethos, revolted against middle-class family values. Their bodies display excess as they swear, drink, do a striptease, talk about themselves and one another immodestly, and exhibit violent behaviour toward men who screw them around. While Paul Wong is credited with directing the video, I am more interested in the S.S. Girls as an all woman performance group, how they perform the very embodiment of their lives and lifestyle for the audience. The S.S. Girls were also amongst the many local solo and collaborative women performers at the Living Art Performance Festival of 1979.

Between 1975 and 1985, the Mainstreet Drag Balls were organized by Mainstreet Inc. These were part of the ongoing tradition of cabaret-type performances that began at the Western Front with their tradition of costumed personas, cross-dressing, and parody. But in the case of the drag balls, there was a definite homosexual, bisexual, and transvestite element that was not part of the earlier cabaret tradition in Vancouver. In many ways it seems that the advances made by feminists on the cultural front were inspiring others to take up their own cause, on the grounds of sexual orientation, race and class.

1983 has represented a pivotal moment in Vancouver's cultural and political history. The B.C. Social Credit Party's economic program of restraint executed severe cuts to education, medicare, social programs, human rights, amongst other budgetary measures. Nancy Shaw has described how collaborative and interdisciplinary practices were delegitimized in 1984 under financial pressures, reflecting "perhaps a symptom of a radically altered social climate" (Vancouver Anthology, p. 86). With the tightening of

the Canada Council's purse strings, art organizations became progressively bureaucratized. More organizations competed for the same dwindling funds. This is hardly conducive to the collaborative, optimistic spirit of the 70s. At the end of this decade, definitions of feminism changed to include other, broader instances of discrimination, as documented by Amelia Productions. This concern with identity politics continued throughout the 80s with the video and performance works of such artists as Corrine Wyngaarden, Sara Diamond, Judy Radul, and with the censored video *Confused: Sexual Views*, a collaboration between Paul Wong, Jeanette Reinhardt, Gina Daniels, and Gary Bourgeois.

Feminism taught us that domination insinuates itself into all systems of (re)production and communication, in language and in new modes of technology. These systems are instrumental in the formation of new subject positions. Women increasingly abandoned the home front in the 70s for new models of subjectivity and participation in the public domain. Since the 80s, new strategies have been created for dealing with this sense of "home", identity, and belonging, in the shifting realm of race, sexuality, and class dynamics. When notions of gender, class and nationality were seen as contingent to one's identity, one could find strength in building new paradigms of community and new languages to articulate difference. In light of digital technology, gender, sexuality, class and race could be seen to be less bound by the alienating relations of power that pervade day-to-day bodily contact. The cybernetic idea of using digital technology to free oneself from the prejudices attached to the body sounds empowering. Yet one cannot help but be suspicious of the homogenizing effects of new imagined, non-corporeal identities. Not only do notions of difference get erased and ignored, but those who have no access to these networks are excluded from "public" life altogether. In light of the digital revolution and the crumbling of our national cultural institutions, artists need to find new support structures and strategies to fight the corporatization of culture.

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