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It's About Autonomy, Stupid: Sexuality in Feminist Video

For the past four years, I have been working on the documentary *Women of Vision: 18 Histories in Feminist Film and Video*.¹ In the process, I spoke to nearly 200 American women involved in this history and ultimately interviewed 20 women in-depth. My interviewees ranged in age from 65 to 25; they were black, white, Asian-American, Puerto Rican, and bi-racial; they were filmmakers, videomakers, artists, organizers, educators, and scholars; they were straight, bisexual, and gay. I selected these particular 20 women not because they were the most famous or important but rather because they demonstrated the great range of interests and strategies enacted within both feminism and independent media. In an age when 'feminism' has been reduced to its most sterile and threatening of stereotypes, and 'independent media' describes multi-million dollar epics like *The English Patient*, it seems particularly important to emphasize the actual range and complexity within alternative, political culture.

Yet, even given this interest in representing diversity within my documentary, it is probably not surprising that a significant majority of my 20 subjects challenged, enlarged, and interrogated the depiction and politics of women's sexuality in their work. For the women's movement – in its many waves, forms, and faces – has always made central demands and dreams about women's sexuality. Admittedly, these demands and dreams are as diverse as are feminists: the 'sex wars' between pro-sex and anti-porn feminists are only the most visible demonstration of the competing interpretations of sexual freedom and politics which have defined feminism for diverse women. Nevertheless, I have argued elsewhere that whatever may be a feminist's interpretation of her own and women's sexuality, feminists' insistent and constant focus on sexuality evidences a deeper concern for women's control over their own bodies.² This demand for sexual autonomy – cloaked by any number of representations of pure, deviant, damaged, threatened, or celebratory female sexuality – is itself,

ultimately, a demand for personal autonomy, for subjectivity. Thus, for feminists, sexuality is a metonymy for full personhood, even as it is also, always, an action in its own right.

In this article, I broadly describe some of the film and video concerned with feminist sexuality produced by five of my subjects from *Women of Vision*: Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, Juanita Mohammed, Carol Leigh, and Cheryl Dunye. As I emphasize their diverse opinions, desires, and strategies, I also maintain that three features link their work into a broader project for social change: (1) as I mentioned above, the representation of feminist sexuality – at its deepest level – is always a plea for personhood, (2) that for feminists, depictions of sexuality or sexual politics are always laced into a broader politics because any woman's body experiences its sexuality in a world where sex and the body are anchored into history, culture and language, and (3) that these feminists view the recording of sexuality on to film and video – and then the screening of these images with others – to be in and of itself an effective political act.

Carolee Schneemann has been making transgressive art for over 30 years. She uses her own body as her primary medium in her performance, photography, painting, film, and video. Her intentionally transgressive art, equally shocking in the 1960s or the 1990s, represents the unspeakable, the unseeable: using her own body as her primary medium, she envisions a self-confident, active, sensual female body. Ancient and contemporary Goddess-based feminist theory, coupled with her intuition and dreams, provide the moorings from which she hangs on ropes, pulls rolls of text from her vagina, fucks her lover, kisses her cat, and then records these outrageous acts as feminist art and action. Her art continues to break taboos because it is created from her insistence upon being an autonomous person who is fully sexual, entirely an artist, and defiantly a woman. She makes this raucous work and takes up this unseemly position at great cost. For the making of feminist art and a feminist life has always been treacherous because there are so few models, so little support, and so many sacrifices.

I set out to interview Schneemann because I had had two, highly memorable introductions to her. First, I had seen her most infamous film, *Fuses* (1964–7), when I taught a course on feminist film at Bryn Mawr College in 1995. The film had been made 30 years previously, and yet it spoke freshly, grippingly to me and my students about female sexuality, female desire, female orgasm, female creativity. Over the course of an explicit 22 minutes, structured with the peaks and valleys, the lapses and surges of a female orgasm, Schneemann documents herself and her lover embracing, making love, enjoying fellatio, experiencing orgasm – the gamut of sexual experiences.

Yet, the actual recounting of the sex act is only the most blatant form of her sexual representation and experimentation. The camera can only

capture the surface of the reality that it records. Most media depictions of sexuality find that this is enough. In a prude and censorious society, for most viewers to simply *see sex* can be alternatively stimulating, titillating, erotic, or educational. And it is certainly deviant. But Schneemann has a deeper deviance in mind. She uses the medium to recreate the rhythm, pace, texture, flow – the feel – of women’s sexuality. She manipulates the celluloid itself – drawing on it, burning it, altering its color, superimposing one image upon another – so as to push the medium beyond its typical function of *recording* reality to begin to depict her internal reality as well. Thus, images of a cat in a window surrounded by green leaves, or Schneemann’s body alone, running naked on a beach – even as they are not explicitly sexual – are contributions to Schneemann’s unique and powerful representation of sex.

My second exposure to Schneemann, before I had the opportunity to interview her on video, was through her participation in the book *Angry Women*.³ Images of her body splattered with mud and writhing among a sea of similarly slimy bodies, or kissing cats, or pulling snakes (or so it seemed) from her vagina, were etched into my memory. A woman who proved on and with film that she was so deviant, so prurient, so free with her body – seemingly without boundaries – now, that was a rare thing to behold. While I may never need to perform these acts on my own, the fact that Schneemann has, and has also documented it, serves as proof that women’s sexuality is bigger, more complex, more courageous, than our society will admit or allow. Thus, so are women.

Barbara Hammer is the Grande Dame, the mother – no, the Fairy Godmother of American lesbian, experimental cinema. Since the late 1960s, she has made countless shorts and two feature-length experimental films, continually attempting to create a filmic language most expressive of lesbian experience and desire. Importantly, Hammer created these oppositional films from a very solid place, an immersion in the lifestyle, politics, and energy of the women’s movement, and particularly with lesbian feminism, which sought to create a women-centered life, community, and culture outside and in distinction to the norms of the dominant patriarchal society. A housewife until the late 1960s, only then to be awoken by the women’s movement, Hammer began to create her vast body of feminist work as she participated in the radical experiment of building a world comprised almost entirely of women.

I knew more about Hammer than I did of Schneemann, first because I had seen her work (both new and in retrospective) in lesbian and gay film festivals during the 1990s: the avant-garde film community’s first growth-industry since AIDS activist video in the mid-1980s. And second, I knew her because she had been more widely written about in academic journals and books. Her work had been used primarily as an exemplar of what

feminist film should *not* be: an exploration of an essential female body or sexuality, rather than an image of how such a body and sexuality comes to be known through the representation of the mainstream culture. Debates about ‘essentialism’ versus ‘social constructivism’ are yet another arena where competing interpretations of meanings of women’s sexuality are waged between feminists. Hammer’s film from the 1960s and 1970s mirrored one feminist understanding of women’s sexuality – later deemed ‘essentialist’ – which championed women’s exploration of the specificity of their female power, particularly that acquired from the natural rhythms and functions of their bodies and sexuality. Both playful and serious depictions of menstruation, women’s rituals, Amazonian tactics, circular patterns, and women’s organs and orgasms form the basis of images in Hammer’s early oeuvre (i.e. *Multiple Orgasm*, 1976; *Eggs*, 1976; *Superdyke*, 1975; *Menses*, 1974; *Dyketactics*, 1971; and many others). For many women, including Hammer, lesbianism was the ultimate form of such feminist expression. These films, although certainly dated, give us access to a more joyful and idealistic time when women (as did the counter-culture more generally) believed that they could form better communities and better selves by abandoning the patriarchal, stuffy, homogenous mainstream culture to create new, more humane, more *female* traditions. These early films are wonderful expressions of such political interpretations of women’s sexuality on film.

This cycle of short films, however, was only the beginning of a still-active career for Hammer: a career which has changed and adapted as did Hammer’s and feminism’s views of sexuality and sexual politics. Her work from the 1980s and 1990s takes on new issues, debates, and strategies, including Hammer’s attempts to work through earlier critiques against her work. Thus in perhaps her most famous and controversial work, *Nitrate Kisses*, Hammer explores three deviant sexualities – S/M lesbianism, mixed-race gay lovemaking, and the passions and sexual practices of old lesbians – by linking these erotic and private images into a more complex cinematic matrix of public history (particularly that of Nazi crimes against gays and lesbians), theory (particularly that of queers and feminists) and public space (often burned, charred, rotting buildings). When Hammer shows us these ‘private’ sex acts edited against public images and sounds, she effectively argues that sex can never be seen in isolation from the world it helps us try to escape from.

Like Schneemann, Hammer is an experimental filmmaker because she can not represent lesbianism’s difference from and critique of mainstream, heterosexual society using the very language – Hollywood film or mainstream television – which has served to silence lesbians. This means that her interests are always multiple: in interrogating the relationship between the form of film – its limits, its powers, its radical possibilities – and that

which it represents. For most audiences this means that her films are 'hard to watch'. They do not conform to Hollywood's pleasures of closure and continuity.

Thus, in her autobiographical film, *Tender Fictions*, Hammer situates her own lesbianism within a complex montage of personal, cultural, political, theoretical, and familial traditions: not your average biopic, but an important contribution to the construction of lesbian history. However, given that traditional filmic style has led to a tradition of voyeuristic, punitive, demeaning, heterosexist, depictions of women's sexuality, it seems crucial to expand the form of film to expand consciousness of the diversity of sexual experience, especially that which is based in a political critique of dominant society and dominant sexuality.

Juanita Mohammed is a community video artist who works in New York City. She uses inexpensive camcorder video technology to express and respond to the needs of her community. This radical use of television technology 'narrowcasts' specific and targeted information to the usually under-represented and under-served communities who most need it. A working-class, black mother of two who had been forced to terminate her college education in film due to financial and other constraints, Mohammed came into video in the 1980s. Until then, Mohammed was making the art she could afford – particularly poetry, even though her love was for film. What she needed was access to the expensive technologies which record moving images in time. And then, suddenly, there were camcorders, VCRs, and video rental stores. The significance of the rapid affordability of these technologies in the 1990s cannot be overstated. Whereas communities of color have had but a limited role in the history of film and video due to structures of access, Mohammed foresees (and foreshadows with her career) the next period in media history where levels of wealth or education will not impede creative, expressive people from representing their ideas, lives, and fantasies with that most dominant of media: television. Thus her video represents the enormous value sexuality plays in the life, identity, and politics of the regular people who make up Mohammed's community.

Mohammed's video – her personal art and the work she makes for New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis, *Living With AIDS Show* – allows individuals and communities under-represented in the mainstream media to speak for themselves. Given her political commitment to AIDS, Mohammed's work shows women, people of color, drug-users, and gay men living with AIDS. Sexuality is one aspect of the lives of the people she highlights; safe sex is a major component of these diverse lives. For instance, *A Part of Me*, introduces the viewer to Lilly Gonzalez, a lesbian, ex-IV drug user, who is now a safer-sex educator. And *Two Men and A Baby* tells the story of two, working-class, black gay men who adopt an HIV-positive relative. Their lives are more transformed by caring for

another than by the fact of HIV or homosexuality. *Homosexuality: One Child's Point of View* is just that; Juanita's daughter, Jazzy, relating her open views on sexual freedom and identity. While no sex is seen in these videos, it is always present as a sustaining life option, as an identity, as a politicized site around which precaution and education are essential.

I first learned of Carol Leigh when I was making an AIDS activist video about prostitutes and AIDS. In the mid-to-late 1980s, prostitutes, as well as Haitians and bisexuals, were being scapegoated for the spread of HIV to straight white men, and I understood this reduction to be a feminist issue. During my research, I learned about Scarlot Harlot (aka Carol Leigh), a prostitutes' rights, AIDS, and video activist from San Francisco. She was one of a small number of sex workers who were politically and publicly engaged with AIDS. In her enormous body of video work, Leigh documents the struggles of prostitutes: particularly their political struggles for personal freedom and human justice.

A fiercely engaged woman who says her central influence is feminism and the women's movement, Leigh has spent most of her adult life as a working prostitute and thus on feminism's fringe. She explains that a legacy of sexual moralism, at the heart of much first and second wave mainstream feminism, has left women like Leigh feeling abandoned and even demonized. She wishes more feminists would embrace the work of sexually adventurous women.

When I became a film and women's studies professor at Swarthmore College in 1991, I began teaching Carol Leigh's work, as well as that of other outrageous and provocative contemporary feminist videomakers who focus on sexual freedom and experimentation (i.e. Maria Beatty, Annie Sprinkle, House of Chicks, Jocelyn Taylor, Shu Lea Cheang⁴): I was intrigued to find how well Leigh spoke to my college students who were particularly moved – living in a world that for their generation had been defined by AIDS and sexual nervousness – to see a woman who was flamboyantly and also humorously in control of her own body and sexuality, not despite, but taking account of AIDS.

In videos like *Pope Don't Preach (I'm Terminating My Pregnancy)*, *Bad Laws*, and *Safer Sex Slut*, she re-writes and re-makes music videos to espouse and enact a radical lyrics and sexual politics. Given that the majority of her work plays on American cable TV – Leigh has had a public access program for many years – she has also remade the sitcom (*Elaine's* is about the ideals of a leftist waitress), the PSA (*Mom Tapes* where Leigh pretends to be the most concerned and opinionated of Jewish mothers), and the biopic (*Mother's Mink*). She uses common, familiar form but infuses her brand of TV with new messages. Mixing humor, street theater, and civil disobedience in her videos, Leigh performs the role of outrageous, voluptuous, sex-positive warrior and invites anyone so inclined to join her.

Artists and activists like Leigh make video for contradictory reasons, themselves definitive of the medium: it is a form of inexpensive and marginal culture that can mimic expensive and mainstream culture. Video allows for a radical critique from a marginal position and in a dominant form. People like Leigh make video because they have to, regardless if anyone hears and notices, but this does not mean they don't want to be heard and noticed.

Cheryl Dunye is said to have invented a unique style of film and video-making, the 'Dunyementary', which is a hybrid of narrative, documentary, comedy, and autobiography. Dunye has made a number of films and videos about and from her position as African-American lesbian. With the production of her first feature film, *The Watermelon Woman*, her unique take on the world has entered more broadly into, if not the mainstream, at least the art-house milieu. *The Watermelon Woman* is a complex experimental narrative about the relationship between missing precedence and contemporary identity. The 'Cheryl' character, played by Dunye, wants to be a filmmaker but feels she needs to know who her foremothers were before she can claim an identity for herself. Because the lives of black women in film, let alone black lesbians, were never considered part of the historical record, the Cheryl character has a hard time finding 'experts' who will authorize the existence of women like her in the past. This is when Dunye (the actual filmmaker) decides to entirely fabricate the life of a woman who did not, but *could* have existed: Fae 'The Watermelon Woman' Richards, a black, lesbian actress in Hollywood and race movies from the 1920s–40s. The movie follows the Cheryl character as she unearths Fae's 'history' – a story that fuels both Cheryl the character and Dunye the filmmaker. As is true in all of her work, 'Cheryl' falls in love and has lesbian sex on camera. But seeing lesbian sex in a narrative feature is only the beginning of the challenge Dunye poses, for although increasing lesbian sexual visibility is an admirable goal in itself, Dunye's sex scenes are always also about how that sex is a part of Dunye/Cheryl's more complex existence as black American, woman, artist, etc. For instance, power *between* women is often a focus of these scenes – how it is deployed in both pleasurable and painful ways, how it is used to harm – both in black on black scenes (*She Don't Fade*) and black on white scenes (*Greetings from Africa*, *The Watermelon Woman*).

Dunye breaks new ground when she pushes the boundaries of traditional documentary and narrative form so as to push at the boundaries of how to represent identity. She explains that by merely espousing her personal position – as black, female, lesbian, artist, intellectual, middle-class, Liberian, American, Philadelphian, etc. – she creates a new kind of political art practice, based on the complexity and humor of identity. She puts herself into her work, then laughs at her own trials and tribulations

as she seeks for meaning, sex, and romance in her life. Thus, the depiction of her sexual life serves as a vehicle for the audience to consider – and laugh at – the complexity of their own identities: sexual and otherwise.

One of the central goals of *Women of Vision* (and this article) is to broaden knowledge of and access to independent feminist media. In an era where access to images by and of women explodes in mainstream media (due in large part to feminist activism), images of *feminist* women are still absent at worst and tame at best. While I discuss five artists here because I respect and value each of their unique visions, I conclude by asking readers to continue to delve even more deeply into the immense body of feminist film and video (as well as the production of other alternative cultures). My experience of the century's end must be true for many but need not be lasting: an increasing interest and seriousness about the study and consumption of popular culture has led to an unfortunate decrease in commitment (by scholars and others) to the lively, intelligent, opinionated, progressive work of those who strive to challenge all that is safe, expected, simple, and dare I say sexist, about the dominant culture's representation and understanding of women's (and others') sexuality.

Biographical Note

Alexandra Juhasz is an Associate Professor of Media Studies at Pitzer College of the Claremont Colleges. She is the producer of *The Watermelon Woman* and many activist videos about women's sexual health issues, particularly AIDS. She is the author of *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video* (Duke University Press, 1995). *Address:* Department of Media Studies, Pitzer College, Claremont, CA 91711, USA. [email: alexandra_juhasz@pitzer.edu]

Notes

1. *Women of Vision* is available for preview, rental or purchase. Contact: Alexandra Juhasz, Media Studies, Pitzer College, 1050 North Mills Ave., Claremont CA 91711, USA; email: alexandra_juhasz@pitzer.edu
2. See Alexandra Juhasz, 'The Politics of Feminist Realist Documentaries', in Michael Renov, Jane Gaines, Faye Ginsburg (eds), *Essays From Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).
3. *Angry Women*, eds Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991).
4. See the collections of Women Make Movies, Video Data Bank, and Third World Newsreel to find out more about these and other sex-positive mediamakers (contact information listed in Film/Videography).

Film/Videography

The collected works of Carolee Schneemann available from Vesper Productions, 437 Springtown Road, New Paltz, NY 12561, USA.

The collected works of Barbara Hammer available from Facets Multimedia,
1517 West Fullerton Ave., Chicago, IL 60614; 1 800-331-6197, USA.

The collected works of Carol Leigh available from the artist: Box 6724,
Oakland, CA, 94603, USA. email: penet@bayswan.org;

She Don't Fade, by Cheryl Dunye, available from The Video Data Bank, 112 S.
Michigan, #312, Chicago, IL 60603, USA.

Greetings from Africa and *The Watermelon Woman*, by Cheryl Dunye, available
from First Run Features: 153 Waverly Place, NY, NY 10014, USA. email:
firstrunfeatures@msn.com

Homosexuality: One Child's Point of View, by Juanita Mohammed, available from
Mother/Daughter Productions, 107 Linden Street, Brooklyn, NY 11221,
USA.

The collected AIDS video of Juanita Mohammed (and others) available from
The Gay Men's Health Crisis, 119 West 24th Street, NY, NY 10011, USA.

Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway, Suite 500R, NY, NY 10012, USA. email:
tw@tw.org

————— CALL FOR PAPERS —————

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The guest editors are particularly interested in contributions which involve theoretical debates around any aspect of sexuality, identity and gender in regard to these young people. Papers which explore forms of discrimination (such as verbal and physical bullying) or non-recognition of the rights and needs of these young people and the effects on them are also welcome. Papers which document innovative methodologies required to reach this population may also be submitted.

Papers should be submitted by 1 October 1999 and addressed to:
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