

VISIBLE EVIDENCE, VOLUME 5

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*Feminism and  
Documentary*

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Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, Editors



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## VISIBLE EVIDENCE

Edited by Michael Renov, Faye Ginsburg, and Jane Gaines

*Public confidence in the "real" is everywhere in decline. This series offers a forum for the in-depth consideration of the representation of the real, with books that engage issues that bear upon questions of cultural and historical representation, and that forward the work of challenging prevailing notions of the "documentary tradition" and of nonfiction culture more generally.*

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[ 4 ] *Bad Girls Come and Go, But a  
Lying Girl Can Never Be Fenced In*

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*We live in a culture of oblivion that perpetrates a kind of self-induced denial in which the meaning of the recent past is continually lost or distorted . . . much like feminist history was always lost or distorted. The cultural history each generation creates is immediately turned into waste: "That's old shit!" Whereas my work is addressing issues involving 3000 years of Western patriarchal imposition. So if I'm fighting with some younger artist about the past 15 years—I'm already suspicious: those are not the right stakes!*

:: Carolee Schneemann, interviewed in *Angry Women*

I am a feminist in my early thirties; Carolee Schneemann is in her late fifties. I have been making and writing about feminist and queer film and video since the late 1980s; Schneemann has been making transgressive feminist art since the early 1960s. What are the "right stakes" for a discussion about the recent feminist past? In an interview I videotaped with this "angry woman" for a documentary about feminist film history, Schneemann let me know that her anger is not, in fact, directed only at three thousand years of Western patriarchal tradition. She insists that our culture, my generation, owes her a lot: recognition, a living wage, the ability to continue to make new work and preserve and archive past work. What are the right stakes for conversation about the recent feminist past, and why would we want to talk in the first place? In the interview, Schneemann seems to suggest that successful dialogue with a younger artist would hinge on that woman's *self-induced* recovery of and connection to past feminist work, not as old shit but as live artifact. This is difficult; in our postmodern condition, the past fifteen or twenty years are *history*: lost, forgotten, obsolete, "immediately turned into waste." Yet feminists have a need for the recent past—history—to be alive, instructive, interactive, so as to be able to

perpetuate (the) *movement*. Living, working, and fighting in a perpetual present—a culture of oblivion—allow little opportunity to progress; there’s nothing to build on.

By analyzing the video presented in two landmark, decade-defining feminist art shows (*Bad Girls*, 1994 and *At Home*, 1983), I will make a history from documents of the recent past to promote feminist dialogue and to better understand the present condition of feminism. Perhaps surprisingly, the documentaries in these two shows—separated by a gulf of ten to twenty years—share most fundamental qualities: small-format, inexpensively produced personal investigations of women’s sexuality and gender roles that push boundaries about female propriety. Sometimes humorous, sometimes clinical, sometimes sexual, and often serious, what unifies this strain of feminist video are its transgressive content and form. Therefore, my historical survey of recent feminist video also becomes a recent history of women’s transgression. What can we learn, in the present, from feminist video documents of women’s transgression, from feminists’ transgressive documentaries?

*Bad Girls* video demonstrates how women activists and artists are drawn to documentary and avant-garde form (and their hybridization) for similar reasons: these are accessible and adaptable sites of cultural production that allow feminists to mold a medium to the shape of their anger and desire. You could call the vast majority of this video work “documentary” as it is composed primarily of images of a videomaker’s unscripted performance as she breaks rules of female propriety. Recorded on tape for later exhibition, these are documents of a politicized (usually autobiographical) self-expression: a woman performing and archiving her defiance against the rules of sex and gender. These transgressive documentaries record in something close to real-time the real words, real needs, and real anger of women. However, the transgressive content of the work demands that formal rules are broken as well. Women’s defiant words and actions are expressed through amalgams of usually discrete generic forms: talking-head testimony is cut with scripted segments, voice-over narrates real-time recordings. Thus, I feel as comfortable calling this formally diverse work “art video.” This largely semantic debate proves to be useful in that it reveals one reason why feminist video (like feminist history) is, as Schneemann argues, universally “lost or distorted.” Slipping between the cracks of academic and art-world categorization, most of the tapes I will discuss here have gone unanalyzed and unremembered because they are neither straightforward documentary nor bona fide art. Needless to say, the consequences of this inattention are significant.

Because earlier feminist work immediately becomes waste, contempo-

rary work is celebrated as anomalous and defiant rather than part of a larger movement. For example, in 1994 the New Museum in New York City and the UCLA Wight Gallery presented a bicoastal art show based on a “resurgence of activity around feminist issues in the arts.”<sup>1</sup> The curators were quick to assure us that this work was special: it “has a distinctly different spirit from much of the ‘feminist’ art of the 1970s and 80s. It’s irreverent, anti-ideological, un-doctrinaire, non-didactic, unpolemical and thoroughly unladylike.”<sup>2</sup> The Bad Girls show promised to showcase a “new breed”: “Those addressing feminist issues in an overtly funny way and, at the same time, operat[ing] outside the boundaries of propriety.”<sup>3</sup> With great fanfare, the Bad Girls art show exploded into popular culture, daring to go where feminists had never been and do what feminists had never done. “Bad Girls make trouble by being honest, outrageous, contentious, wicked, and wanton,” trumpeted the museum’s press release.<sup>4</sup> The mainstream press bought the spectacle whole, behaving properly outraged, surprised, titillated, and even amused by this shocking turn of events: *feminists* acting sexy, funny, wanton—what a great gimmick. For as *Newsweek* reminded us, it is common knowledge that “feminist art created over the last 25 years is . . . dour, strident, dense and homely.”<sup>5</sup>

And it was true that the work highlighted in the show was anything but *that*. In Bad Girls Video (nearly three hours of video programming that accompanied the show to much less media attention)<sup>6</sup> the curious voyeur could see the slick, wet, undulating images of women in water that had colored Diane Bonder’s adolescent sexual fantasies (*Dangerous When Wet*, 1992), lots of beaver shots in Mary Patten’s *My Courbet or a Beaver’s Tale* (1992), and beautiful black lesbians eating bologna sandwiches (*I’ve Never Danced the Way Girls Were Supposed To*, Dawn Suggs, 1992). The pretty cheerleaders in *Love Boys and Food* (Lee Williams and Angela Anderson, 1993) chant “F-U-C-K-Y-O-U, that’s the way to spell Fuck You,” while in *Girl Power* (1993) lesbian pixel-vision wunderkind Sadie Benning presents images of her bobbing, whipping head as she slam dances to a Riot Grrrl sound track edited against cut-up letters spelling “F-U-C-K-Y-O-U-M-A-N,” and “H-E-A-R-M-E-O-R-D-I-E.” These nineties bad girls are angry, violent, and ready for action.

Yet you know what? Although certainly hot and even bad, such work is not necessarily new. For instance, take one of those “dour, strident, dense and homely” feminist art shows from a decade before—the Long Beach Museum of Art’s 1983 At Home show, which, like Bad Girls, was organized as a retrospective of the previous decade of feminist art production. In the seventies and eighties feminists also acted sexy, funny, wanton. They used their portapak to document themselves having sex with a

the border of my conditions as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.”<sup>12</sup> In 1974, the border that confirms existence for Ilene, the second-wave feminist video artist, is nothing more threatening than a well-lit, relatively clean cement tunnel. But this banal site proves to be the ideal place for her to disrupt the sanctions of her mother and come into life herself. Even though her passage is unmolested and lacking disorder, a break has been made. Kristeva explains:

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter — since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. (8)

The joke is on Mom, about Mom: her fears are trivial, without warrant, at her own expense. Bad girls’ work is funny because humor helps us displace our real fears. Laughter frames the border of the abject for the daughter; then Mom gets crossed over so that her daughter can move on. The sites of the mother’s unsanitary fears are her daughter’s gritty playpen, but this is much more than a messy game. “Where there is dirt there is a system,” explains Mary Douglas in her seminal work on purity and danger.<sup>13</sup> The rules about dirt by which Mom led her life — where to buy raincoats and steaks, letting Dad make all decisions about money, never going underground — are proven to be part of an unfair system that serves to control both mother’s and daughter’s potential movement. The laughing but scared videomaker finds that she *is* by confronting her Mom’s rules, testing them, and breaking through them into the dirt. It matters not at all that the tunnel proves to be clean; Ilene becomes a warrior by transgressing the system that her Mother’s imagined dirt outlines. Again, Kristeva: “It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Women like Ilene access the abject by breaking the rules of their mothers; they do so with humor, but this laugh is at all women’s expense.

Camille Paglia and Glenda Belverio’s controversial *Glenda and Camille Do Downtown* (1993) is the Bad Girls show’s direct descendant of this tradition. The Mothers to act out against may have changed (in this case “the mainstream feminist establishment” set in place by the very movement Segalove documents twenty years earlier), as have the Daughters (what Paglia calls “drag-queen feminists”), but the effects are remarkably similar. Camille and Glenda feel empowered — bad — by transgressing into the social and sexual spaces “their ‘antisex’ Mothers” told them were dangerous. They construe Greenwich Village, Gay and Lesbian Bookstores, and The Piers as virgin spaces to penetrate, all the while making sure their Mothers

are noticing how naughty they are behaving. But look Ma, these places aren't so dangerous after all! Setting up establishment feminists as an easily slaughterable straw man (as Ilene did to Elaine), Camille and Glenda fail to realize (as did Ilene and Elaine) that some feminists have been going downtown, underground, or the many other "sleazy" places in between for a very long time.

To remember only the feminists who are afraid of dirt is to do all women a disservice; for every Mom afraid of sleaze there was another fore-mother fighting to revel in it. But instead of here dividing at the ubiquitous pleasure-danger fault line, as Paglia and Berverio taunt us to do, it is more useful to interrogate how the Daddies really keep us down. Otherwise, we miss a most convincing explanation for our amnesia about the bad girls who paved our way: we need mothers to serve as our straight men. Get this: mothers are the easy stand-ins for the signposts to the man-made margins that control us. Yet as I've been attempting to establish, this joke is really on both mother *and* daughter. The father's rules remain unscathed as we women triumphantly travel through his tunnel or walk along his downtown streets, all the while snubbing our noses at our timid (if not also righteous) moms who were never the enemy anyway.

Comparison between the shows demonstrates both repetition and progress. For there are three tapes from the Bad Girls show that do take one step forward and identify the dirt system as Daddy's. Their new site of transgression is the act of calling men (not mothers) on our fears of their whistles, leers, and urination in public spaces. The documentary *God Gave Us Eyes* (Elizabeth Beer and Agatha Kener, 1993) edits together into one long leer, without remark or interruption, the offensive comments of men on the street who explain why they harass women who walk by: "You say to her, 'Hey beautiful,' and all the things you can do to her. Even if she doesn't look, it's a big feeling that makes you sure that you're a man." *Bicycle* (Meryl Perlson, 1992) narrates images of city streets with a voice-over imparting a series of incidents of harassment that occurred to a woman on a bike as men in cars (including undercover cops) screamed insults or reached out to touch her. Although the narrator took down and then reported their license plate numbers, nothing happened to her harassers, and after two minutes of affect-free narration the voice drones forward, more stories to tell, nothing improved. *Street Walk* (Kimberly Stoddard, 1992) is a two-and-a-half-minute, black-and-white "documentary" film that turns the harassment table by following the butt and crotch of a man as he is propositioned, winked at, gestured to, and grabbed at by a series of lecherous women, including one who takes on that most offensive of male stances as she squats, pees, and jeers at him in one fluid



movement. By quoting black-and-white, hand-held documentary style, these table-turning performances imagine a reality where women are sexual voyeurs.

A system is certainly challenged as women voice their anger at male violence and even act like lascivious men. In 1994 the humorous transgression of these bad girls is their insistence that men take responsibility for the inequitable doling out of sexual roles on the streets of this society. Yet this site of transgression, where contemporary women disturb “identity, system, order,” is the demand for personal safety on the same city streets where in the recent past our foremothers took back the night (as well as other strategies) so as to map them as unsafe. In her introduction to the 1970 *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, Robin Morgan describes her initial break into a feminist consciousness:

It makes you very sensitive—raw, even—this consciousness. Everything, from the verbal assault on the street, to a ‘well-meant’ sexist joke your husband tells, to the lower pay you get at work . . . everything seems to barrage your aching brain, which has fewer and fewer protective defenses to screen such things out.<sup>14</sup>

Decades later, to identify how your brain aches because of verbal assaults on the street is not movement, although it may still be personally liberating.

How can it be that this “new-wave of feminist art activity” breaks into consciousness at the exact same site that it did for a much-read feminist writer twenty-five years previously?<sup>15</sup> Perhaps feminist history slips through our fingers because transgression is itself an ambiguous foothold from which to build a movement. As Georges Bataille explains, transgression is fundamentally illogical because “there exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed.”<sup>16</sup> Bataille writes of how taboos are transgressed while still remaining within strict rules: in war (the taboo on murder), in religious sacrifice (the taboo on killing), in marriage (the taboo on sexual deflo-ration and repetition). Therefore, the female transgression of calling men on sexual violence is, like all taboos, “as subject to rules [as] the taboo itself” (65). The social order women seek to outstep has already worked to contain them: the transgression demands permission, ritual. Thus, the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, as well as these angry yet funny videos, are best understood as ritualized transgressions: the permitted and contained, if still briefly threatening, exposés by women of men’s crimes of sexual harassment in public places. Because the society already acknowledges this site of trouble, it knows how to make safe the angry actions that occur along this illicit border. The joke, seemingly on the jerky male subjects

of the tapes, is also on the bad girl makers who still don't get the bigger picture.

Sigmund Freud wrote that all taboos, primitive and civilized, "designate a particular kind of ambivalence,"<sup>17</sup> what Bataille calls their "illogic." According to Freud, "there is no need to prohibit something that no one desires to do, and a thing that is forbidden with the greatest emphasis must be a thing that is desired" (87). As I have established, there is a history to women's articulation through video of their desire to end the imbalance of sexual power in public settings: there is a taboo against it, and it feels "bad" when we do so. Railing at our mothers or even our fathers about the danger of city streets *does* break across a boundary of propriety (that's why these tapes continue to titillate), but this border is one that is already surveyed, mapped, and guarded. In a culture based on a system of taboos that serve to protect male dominance over women through establishing rituals around who has the right to perpetrate sexual violence and who does not, and then who inevitably fights such violence, the question must become, are there modes of transgression for women that are less ritualized, more radically disruptive?

Interestingly, whereas Bataille and other theorists concerned with taboo, transgression, and the abject list many illicit sites of action—from snot, to cum, to menstrual blood, and shit, from religion, to cruelty, murder, and orgasm—for our two generations of feminist video bad girls there is minimal play in the full array of potential transgressive fields. These artists, it seems, were not concerned with excretions, secretions, the repulsive. *Pretty, Fluffy, Cheesy, Bunny* (Alix Pearlstein, 1993) does seem, in title, to be the Bad Girls video that gets the closest to reveling in these sorts of prohibitions. But like the majority of feminist work I surveyed the video turns out to be concerned less with prohibitions around the sense of sleazy touch than those around sexual autonomy, period. The most provocative moments in the tape are images of a woman suggestively licking an index finger edited right up against her biting into a hot dog. Again, Freud in *Totem and Taboo*: "In the case of taboo, the prohibited touching is obviously not to be understood in an exclusively sexual sense but in the more general sense of attacking, of getting control and of asserting oneself" (91). Just so, for feminist video artists in the two shows, acts of transgression seem to be less about the want of a sleazy touch and almost exclusively about the threat of demanding rather than relinquishing self-control. Prohibited touching needs no nasty object, no slippery surface when touching in and of itself is against the rules for women. Feminist videomakers fight merely for the subject position from which to reach out.

In her chapter "The System at War with Itself," Douglas writes

specifically about how social systems manage to control the internal dangers of gender distinction: "The whole society is especially likely to be founded upon contradictions if the system is one in which men define their status in terms of rights over women."<sup>18</sup> In a society like ours, where these rights are demanded in some spheres and then contradicted in others, Douglas believes that there will be a plethora of rules around "sexual pollution." In such societies, rules about what is right, wrong, dirty, and clean for women—sexual pollution—are where the contradictions of men's unnatural rights over women are controlled. "We find pollution ideas enlisted to bind men and women to their allotted roles" she explains (141). According to her theory, a society like ours, in a time of extreme contradiction about the allotted roles of men and women, would have many pollution ideas about women's sexuality. Therefore, it is in the realm of sexual pollution—signified through an array of representations of self-control—that transgressive art by women most often attempts to redefine and then storm the borders of gender distinction.

In the videos of the *At Home and Bad Girls* shows the most common forms of transgression are not enacted through depictions of assholes or farting, knife wounds or vomit, but through independent sexuality. Feminist videomakers do not descend to the bawdy orifices of the body, because as Angela Carter in her 1978 book on feminism and pornography explains, "Women do not normally fuck in the active sense. They are fucked in the passive tense and hence automatically fucked-up, done over, undone."<sup>19</sup> For a woman simply *to do*, as opposed to being undone, is to cross a boundary, to transgress into the polluted spaces where established patterns break down. As Douglas writes:

Each culture has its own special risks and problems. To which particular bodily margins its beliefs attribute power depends on what situation the body is mirroring. It seems that our deepest fears and desires take expression with a kind of witty aptness. To understand body pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try to recognize what appositeness is there. (121)

With witty aptness (humor) women mirror the known danger of their own bodies—merely being active—to revel in a margin where power is at stake. In the videos from both decades body pollution turns out to be nothing more dirty than female self-autonomy. No wonder men so rarely find our work funny. And thus, one of the blind spots of Bataille's brilliant *Eroticism*, his inability to differentiate modes of eroticism in light of difference (gender, sexual orientation, race) so that all sexuality is cast as a building, growing, swelling, spurting sort of activity, is corrected through the specific

modes of badness found again and again in these videos by feminists. These women need not fuck and kill, they need not murder and explode, all they must do is be active. "A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster," says Carter (27).

The monstrous women in *At Home* and *Bad Girls* claim the erotics of active sexuality often by merely claiming activity alone. In *Waiting at the Soda Fountain* (Susan Mogul, 1980) and *I Am a Famous French Director* (Mira Gelly, 1993), the respective feminist videomakers, one from each generation, do just that—play at being male directors. The big laugh is that they get to pursue their actors, boss them around, subject them to sexist jabs, and pretentiously claim a unique, artistic vision. It is equally funny and threatening in 1980 and 1993 for a woman to claim such sexualized authority, even if there is no sex. And we see this particular joke again and again in feminist video. In *Pink Slip* (Hildegard Duane, 1982) a female, white-collar businesswoman propositions and seduces a male, blue-collar repair man. She gets the pink slip, but it's okay by her: just like a horny man, she lets her hair down and exits out the window with her lower-class lover. Ten years later, *Grapefruit* (Cecilia Dougherty, 1989) and *Freebird* (Suzie Silver, 1993) allow women to play at that most virulent, adored of male aggressor/artists—the rock 'n' roll star. To be active—just like a man—is to be funny, bad, and polluted when performed by a woman's body. Thus, the at first more benign-seeming series *On Art and Artists* by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield exposes what is really at stake in the ubiquitous "famous French director" genre of feminist tapes. By recording talking-head interviews with foremother feminist artists Judy Chicago (1974), Arlene Raven (1979), and Miriam Schapiro (1979), Blumenthal and Horsfield transgress the rules imposed both on female action through artistry, and on the passing on of feminist history: they pretentiously claim a unique artistic vision for themselves and their documentary subjects. This series of talking-head documentaries makes clear a condition relevant for all of the tapes under consideration: a woman's claim to an authoritative and permanent (taping) position is a transgression. With witty aptness, these very serious tapes mirror feminists' deepest desires. They act as (male) directors, and it is an offense.

*Brains on Toast: The Inexact Science of Gender* (Liss Platt and Joyan Saunders, 1992) serves as metadiscourse on all feminist works that grovel in ontological transgression. The tape focuses on the artificial constraints of activity and passivity built along gender lines in our patriarchal society. In send-up after send-up of scientific study bent on proving the biological basis of sexual difference, the tape challenges our society's fixation with the neat lining up of sex, gender, and sexuality. This is elaborated on in *Strut*

(Heidi DeRuiter, 1992), a silent film where a male is confronted by a lipstick-packing female in a woman's restroom. "What are *you* doing in here!" reads the title card. The woman's threat transforms into eager sexual pursuit upon the "man's" revelation of her breasts and therefore her status as butch which permits the "woman's" concurrent revelation of her status not simply as woman but femme. *Tomboychik* (Sandi DuBowski, 1993) and *The Fairies* (Tom Rubnitz, 1989) allow the male videomakers to dress like girls and be pretty, while *Love, Boys and Food* enables the most passive of girls, cheerleaders, to become aggressive and alter the traditional subject of their cheers from football heroes to cultural enemies like Jessie Helms, Mickey Mouse, and Clarence Thomas. Finally, *My Penis* (Lutz Bacher, 1992) is perhaps the most effective of all these humorous-but-serious gender-bending critiques. Bacher takes on William Kennedy Smith's masculinity by forcing him to repeat one phrase, through the editing and reediting of a sound blip first spoken as he sat on the witness stand charged with rape, "My penis." After the tenth or fifteenth repetition of "My penis," it becomes clear that Smith's penis is nobody's but Bacher's, whose video antics have turned his cherished member from phallus to farce. Mary Kelly, in one of the many (including this essay) decade-comparing "conversations" about feminist art during the past few years, discusses the connection between feminism, humor, and potency:

Historically the avant-garde has been synonymous with transgression, so the male artist has assumed the feminine already, as a mode of "being other," but he does it, ultimately, as a form of virile display. So what the bad girl does that's so different from the previous generation is to adopt the masquerade of the male artist as transgressive feminine in order to display her virility. In zine speak you'd say: a girl thing being a boy thing being a girl thing to be a bad thing, or something like that.<sup>20</sup>

Bacher's boy-thing, girl-thing virility gets us back to two of the oxymoronic places where we started: feminist humor and the fixity of the women's movement. First, nearly every one of the tapes discussed so far is built on humor, and second, I can switch back and forth between feminist generations willy-nilly since their concerns so directly speak to and respond to each other. For the most part, both era-defining shows of feminist art video find active sexuality—his penis is my penis—to be something new, something dangerous, and something funny. Yet I continue to insist that the angry-if-humorous demand for an active female sexuality may be where we are, but it is no place new.

The areas of movement around active sexuality which I did uncover involved transgression in the terrain of sexual orientation and race. In the

Bad Girls show, African American lesbian curator Cheryl Dunye includes several tapes by lesbians, women of color, and lesbians of color, who insist that speaking their difference in a racist, homophobic society is transgression in itself. The At Home show includes no work by women of color in the screening series (although video installations by two Japanese feminists were included in the art show), and no work explicitly about lesbianism although many of the artists are themselves lesbian, and Nancy Buchanan and Barbara Smith's tape *With Love from A to B* [1977] playfully enacts a girl-gets-girl, girl-loses-girl, girl-gets-back-girl romance between two sets of hands, both of them female). In Bad Girls videos, *Girl Power*, *Glenda and Camille Do Downtown*, *Grapefruit*, *Freebird*, *Dangerous When Wet*, *Smut*, *I've Never Danced the Way Girls Were Supposed To*, *War on Lesbians*, and *My Courbet or a Beaver's Tale* all assume an active lesbian sexuality. However, one need go back no further than the 1972 *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* to find that although this might be movement in respect to our two representative video shows, it's not so far forward in terms of lesbian feminist history:

Women's Liberation means independence. Feminists demanded control over their own bodies and over decisions that shape their lives. They demanded freedom from sex-role stereotypes. With independence foremost in their minds. It is now clear that the lives of Lesbians provide an example of Feminist theory in action.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, the idea that to be nonwhite or non-American and also female is to be transgressive is the subject of *My American Friends* (Cheng Sim Lin, 1989), where Lin explains that her first three American friends—Tom, Dick, and Harry—eventually settled where they were supposed to (a banker, an aerobics instructor, a rock star), while she ends her piece uprooted, traveling, crossing borders: "I bought a Japanese car and became an American citizen." Nough said: this is transgression in itself for a girl. Then the idea that to be black and gay is transgressive in its own right is played with in Dawn Suggs's *I've Never Danced the Way Girls Were Supposed To*, where a narrator speaks to a presumed white or homophobic video voyeur who's just got to know what black lesbians *really* do in private: "This is a video about what girls do at home. Just another day in a black, lesbian household." The joke's on the honky or homophobe viewer—all these girls do is go about their business: eat sandwiches, shine their shoes, make love. "Sometimes I wonder what goes through straight peoples' heads when they think about gay people," ponders our narrator. Yet if that presumed white or straight viewer had read the 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, perhaps Suggs wouldn't have had to assume

that women continue to know so little of each other. Cheryl Clarke writes in 1981:

For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance. . . . The black lesbian is coerced into the experience of institutional racism—like every other nigger in America—and must suffer as well the homophobic sexism of the black, political community.<sup>22</sup>

In the vast majority of feminist cultural production of the recent past, to actively be—female, lesbian, nonwhite, sexual, an artist—is an act of resistance, a site of transgression. However, when feminists continue to make work that remains lodged in the same sites of transgression (for instance, being a black lesbian as an act of resistance), the culture learns how to recognize, respond to, ritualize, and make safer this still real threat. Whoopi Goldberg's black lesbian character in *Boys on the Side* demonstrates just how palatable this one particular threat has become. Denied her sexuality and reworked into that most familiar role of mammy, Whoopi caters first to all the white girls on her road trip whose needs are infinitely more important than her own. Although the threat of being a black lesbian in a racist, sexist, homophobic culture may remain equally real over several generations, the transgression itself becomes defanged, already known, ritualized.

I insist that sexual agency for women—straight, gay, black, white, Chinese—like our desire to end male violence, is dangerous, but that danger is already known, prepared for. In *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, Lynda Hart is concerned with how the representation of lesbian sexuality is displaced by images of female violence that usually take the form of female aggression. She argues—as our videos have also demonstrated—that it is less a crime for a woman to desire another woman than for her to desire, period: “If desire inevitably confirms masculinity, so does crime. Masculinity is as much verified by active desire as it is by aggression.”<sup>23</sup> So what are the representational consequences when a woman not only acts like a man through claiming active desire, as we have seen in the majority of the videos from both decades but, more important, when she compounds this with images of actual criminal or aggressive behavior?

Bataille insists that “demolished barriers are not the same as death but just as the violence of death overturns—irrevocably—the structure of life, so temporarily and partially does sexual violence.”<sup>24</sup> Is sexual violence, Bataille's transgression that allows man to “assent to life up to the point of death,” equally liberating for woman? It appears not, for significantly in

none of the transgressive videos that I viewed were there images of female violence, at least if we take this to mean murder or cruelty. For instance, the videos I've already mentioned, concerned with sexual violence *against* women, do not match it with violence of women's own. Women's violence instead takes the form of articulating the problem, not violating the violators (although *Strut* gets closest to this, as the fictive male character is forced to feel for himself the violence of voyeurism). Similarly, in other tapes from the two shows there is carnage, decay, and death, but never as a direct consequence of a woman's hand. In *Excerpts* (1983) Aysha Quinn has postcoital discussions about the relationship between sexuality and death: the lovers discuss the recent suicide of a friend who was only thirty. The man strokes her face: "Anyway, I'm not dead." "Try to kill me with sex," she replies. Her violence is her active desire and her ability to film it. Just as the tunnel need not be dirty for transgression to occur, the murder need not be literal. Whereas in the nineties American popular culture has been fixated with girls with guns—we see them everywhere, in movies, the nightly news, their own special magazines—none of the videos in these series presented this manner of bad girlism. As has been convincingly argued by both Carol Clover and Jeffrey Brown, these gun-wielding, muscle-bulging, women-cum-male-action-heroes are *male* fantasies about (the containment of) women's power.<sup>25</sup> Feminist video artists need not document such high levels of aggression. Even without the now standard pistols, steroids, and explosions of contemporary blockbusters, there is sexual violence in these tapes if we define that eroticism in terms specific to the boundaries placed on *women's* humanity and sexuality.

In the few works from these shows that actually include carnage and decay (four in total from a field of thirty-seven), the violence looks nothing like that enacted by male action heroes. Instead, feminists' bloody, murdered meat is bought at the grocery store, prepackaged, sealed, and stamped with the Board of Health's approval. For example, in *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* (1976), Suzanne Lacy frames her transgression in a manner similar to Segalove and Paglia. The tape begins from a position of matriarchal stability and sanction—a televised cooking show dedicated to "today's lamb, which means zesty flavors which challenge the wildest imagination." Lacy—ladylike, refined, poised—mocks what was perceived as transgressive for the mothers preceding her. She jokes that this earlier generation of women found transgression through "zesty flavor" and "establish[ing] a good relationship with the butcher. Learn to speak his language. Okay, let's see it in the flesh." However, as she begins and continues her clinical, butcher-like mapping of the flesh of a lamb shank, there is a progressive breakdown in order: a movement into her own coming into being. Her



speech starts to slow and slur, she begins to touch the lamb meat suggestively. A jump cut in the video transforms our polite hostess into a monster with speech-impeding plastic vampire teeth. She's talking the butcher's language no more. "If all this seems too complicated, get down on all fours and imagine you are a lamb," she instructs. As the vampire-instructor begins to really feel up the shank, there is a cut to black: "Due to the adult subject matter of this program, it has been edited for TV."

Lacy has transformed from good girl to bad woman as she learns to speak the adult subject matter of both the butcher *and* the lamb. Her transgression is to break from the order of her mother *and* the law of the father. This is sexual violence for women: to learn and speak where the meat comes from but not to speak this as a man would. Carter subtitles the "Speculative Finale" of her 1978 *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* "The Function of Flesh." She explains that flesh is human, whereas meat is "dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption" (137). Flesh becomes meat when a person is treated like an animal. "My flesh encounters your taste for meat. So much the worse for me," she writes (138). So much the worse for all of us lambs and women, Angela. She continues:

The murderous attacks on the victims demonstrate the abyss between the parties to the crime, an abyss of incomprehension that cannot be bridged. The lamb does not understand why it is led to slaughter and so it goes willingly, because it is in ignorance. Even when it dawns on the lamb that it is going to be killed, the lamb only struggles because it does not understand that it cannot escape; and, besides, it is hampered by the natural ignorance of the herbivore, who does not even know it is possible to eat meat. . . . The relations between men and women are often distorted by the reluctance of both parties to acknowledge that the function of flesh is meat to the carnivore but not grass to the herbivore. (138-39)

Lacy bridges the abyss of the language of sexual violence and gender relations not through literal violence but through an aggressive breakdown of language. Also from the At Home show, Martha Rosler performs violence on (the language of) the kitchen. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), she displays kitchen utensils from A to Z. But each signifier carries a hidden signified: with a (K)nife she (S)tabs, with an (E)ggbeater she (B)eats. She hurts no individual. There is no pool of blood, no ripped flesh. But there is violence nonetheless: she exposes the anger and danger signified just under the surface of the (signs of the) kitchen. In a sexist society, this is a violence specific to women's humanity and sexuality.

In *Hey! Baby Chickey* (1979), Nina Sobel also explores the difference between store-bought meat and flesh, again exposing the sexual violence

underlying the sanctity of the home. The tape begins with a woman's hand opening a package of supermarket chicken. Performing her housewifely duties with the clear and capable movements of cherished routine, Sobel begins to prepare a chicken for dinner by pulling the neck from its inner cavity. But in the semiotics of this kitchen, the (n)eck is a (p)hallic (w)eaapon, which this housewife uses to rigorously fuck the chicken's gaping orifice. Next, she pulls out the gizzards and gently rubs the chicken's other hole with them, then reinserts them so that they are again hidden inside only for her to sensuously retrieve them once more. There is a cut, and now our housewife is naked and dancing with the carcass. She cradles it like a child. Another cut. The chicken is suggestively reclining on a plate. Sobel's face enters the frame, accepting its invitation. She licks the chicken carcass. She bites it. She sucks the drumstick as she would blow a penis. Another in-camera edit. The woman lies naked on the ground of an outdoor chicken coop; she is held by a body-sized wooden picture frame. Live chickens move freely around her, and she attempts to draw them with pencil and paper. A baby cries offscreen and the tape ends. Joke's on Mom once again. Even if she can learn to speak the language of the carnivore, she's still stuck at home tending the lambkins.

From the *Bad Girls* show, only *The Scary Movie* (Peggy Ahwesh, 1993) makes sexual violence its explicit focus. In this truly scariest of movies, two prepubescent girls perform a macabre melodrama, complete with severed, bloody hand, repetitive sexualized stabs into the villain's back with a phallic tinfoil knife, and an agonizingly slow death scene suggestive of orgasm. Yet it is not the ritualized images of violence that make this a terrifying, transgressive film but, rather, the sexualized images of pre-sexual girls performing them. The film ends with the girls, Martina and Sonja, doing a provocative MTV-influenced hip-hop dance. The taboo here is not violence, but female (adolescent) sexuality. "In common speech, a 'bad boy' may be a thief, or a drunkard, or a liar, and not necessarily a womanizer," writes Carter. "But a 'bad girl' always contains the meaning of a sexually active girl" (47). In the rare cases where women deal directly with sexual violence, the violence falls away to expose the sexual as the site of women's transgression.

Which is why I get to lying and back to documentary. For if it is true that to be a bad girl as a woman is only to be sexual, and that it also turns out that to be violent as a woman is also always to be sexual, then perhaps to become transgressive across borders where women are least expected is to be "a thief, or a drunkard, or a liar." In such places, women would not just claim men's activity but would then pervert and destabilize this stable identity. When men are thieves, drunkards, or liars, their perversion does

not necessarily stem from their sexuality. When they lie, women seek the same freedom. And the hybrid art video/documentary is just the form through which to enact the particular violence that is the destabilization of truth. Instead of getting stuck demanding merely our fair share of men's hold on subjective authority (as evidenced in women's claim to standard documentary style), lying videos demand a flexible, mobile position from and style with which to speak about the complex self and her needs.

There are two videos from my selection, one from each show, that deal directly with the kind of transgression that occurs not within the women's sphere, which is sexual, but within men's borders of propriety—crime and truth. In *Nun and Deviant* (Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton, 1976) the artists continue the plea for individual artistic agency, which is articulated in all feminist tapes. Over the image of a cement courtyard where the two artists are dressing up respectively in wimple and cap to play their self-selected parts, Nancy Angelo whispers: "I am Nancy Angelo. I am an artist. Sometimes I am a nun. My work is about transformation. My work is about being where I want to be, to say what I want to say, to be heard, to be seen, to be loved." It is the *transformation* part that sounds new; this sounds like that *movement* I've been looking for. Not just a demand for stable (male) agency, but a demand for agency-plus-nunnery, agency-in-flight. This is agency that moves beyond mere identity, identity that is so secure that it can risk change. Meanwhile, in long-take, Nancy's collaborator, Candace, approaches the camera as Nancy departs, and Candace says in extreme close-up: "I am a juvenile delinquent. I'm a deviant. I've committed crimes. I've committed grand theft, and I've shoplifted." Do you believe her? Do *girls* do that? Candace—in drag as a boy delinquent—returns to the background to continue the tape's other naughty task of breaking a table of plates, and Nancy moves again to the foreground, but her story has switched: "Forgive me. I'm guilty. I'm bad. I'm wrong." Now the deviant's flip side: "I've never done anything bad. I'm not a bad person." And finally, Nancy again: "I am Nancy Angelo. I'm an artist. I'm a nun of my own design."

Both women demand at the same time artistry, nunnery, deviancy. They want to be good girl, bad girl, and in-between girl. Lying enables them to claim sites of transformation: places of change, mixed meanings, instability, places of multiple, contradictory, identities. For women in 1976, one space for such transformation is the newly accessible terrain of video. And the way to do this transgressive work best is by turning long-take, black-and-white, on-location video—(male) cinema verité's authorizing grip on veracity—on its head. Where I earlier noted that talking-head video in itself is transgressive for feminists in that it depends on a stable, perma-

ment subject behind the camera, I now suggest that this too is another of our already ritualized transgressions: known, permitted, and easily defensible. However, to demand the stability of the documentary camera and then also to lie in front of it allow these seventies feminist artists a radical position of flight from which to record and perform. In this case, while the doing and the taping are transgressive, the doing and the taping become doubly transgressed because of the lying artist's disavowal of the permanence of both documentary and personal integrity. Lying documentary is dependent on both the security and flexibility of identity. Truth, rather than sex, becomes the currency of exchange.

This holds true into the nineties, where racial identity also enters the terrain of *Lying's* destabilization. *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* by Kelly Gabron (Cauleen Smith, 1992), a film with a style that looks nothing like the previous one's portapak, unedited, black-and-white video, nevertheless uses documentary film to create a dense, multiple, ambiguous, self-designed space where the feminist artist can be more than herself, where she can take (male) agency one step further. In her weaving of highly layered colored film stock, Kelly Gabron, the mythical author of an "autobiographical" piece about her life as black girl, proves to be lying, as we find out that she's been in places, times, and situations that are mutually exclusive. In this case, the artist takes on and then breaks from another authenticating (feminist) documentary discourse—autobiography—by claiming that her authentic voice is a multiplicity of voices. Gabron/Smith demands her own individual agency *plus* the authentic (if untrue because they are not "hers") voices of others like her. "Truth" is questioned as she gravitates between the veracity of an individual's self-knowledge and the weight of communal, identity politics.

We are told by two competing narrating voices, one male and one female, that Kelly Gabron has been sighted in 1983 in California, where she fell into "the surf, dread, punk scene." Daughter of a sharecropper, she was also seen in Texas in 1945, Philadelphia in 1961, France in 1927, and she died near the Bermuda Triangle in the Middle Passage in 1763. Kelly Gabron's life is nothing less than the history of all black women. Cauleen Smith lies and tells people that she is Kelly Gabron as a way to claim the truth of those many histories for herself. Like so many of her video foremothers she insists, "We will be seen and we will be heard," and that the way to accomplish these familiar goals is through making media. "The only way I'm going to get on TV is to make my own fucking tapes and play them," Smith explains. Therefore, the last entry in Kelly Gabron's life is "San Francisco, 1990: Cauleen purchases new technology. Sound out." Documentary—the technologies that allow the mimetic recording and

exhibition of the black, female, artistic self—is not secondary to the transgressive acts it records. Rather, for Cauleen and Kelly the act of documenting makes them both real, even if this is a lie.

And if all this ends up sounding like a catalog of postmodern effects—unsettling identity, truth, singularity, race, history, autobiography—there is a decidedly feminist spin on these effects. The transgressions of criminality are already ritualized for men: we know they will be “liars, drunkards, thieves”—postmodern cowboys. However, for a woman to twist herself outside of her sexuality and into the male spheres of time, space, and truth allows her to move, at last, into unguarded terrain where the sentries are not yet expecting girls. Yet, needless to say, this is not the first time a feminist has made such work or drawn such conclusions. Here is Schneemann from a 1993 interview:

[My work is] about transformation. Layers of metaphor are moving through any of the visual imagery that I am producing. It does not matter what the material or the materiality is, but there is the sense of the metaphor that recharges and is often visually disjunctive. In some sense this work is never symbolic; one thing does not represent something else. . . . Every construction or image I make has to do with the clarification of space as a time figuration.<sup>26</sup>

To be in dialogue with Schneemann, other feminist foremothers, and my contemporary sisters has taught me a great deal. I have heard echoes of current work in video from the past and I have seen the changes that are also possible across small increments of time. I have found that women’s struggles for personal and sexual autonomy may be the most effective if we can dislocate the primary role of the body, so as to also claim space, time, material, and truth as our rightful transgressive legacy. When we lie, when “one thing does not represent something else,” we are freed from the trap of individual subjectivity locked into the always sexed female body. If, as I have established, the women’s movement has been founded on attempts to acquire human agency through sexual transgression, the reason why we may have been so politically immobile is that in the field of sexual danger it is easy to get caught. These are borders that are ritualized, monitored, sanctioned. Whereas transgression itself seems to be profoundly apolitical, about accessing spaces, if only temporarily, where one can abdicate control (those borders on the margins where you can’t tell if you are alive or dead, in or out, solid or fluid), women seek these transgressive sites of instability for another reason: to gain self-control and therefore political power. Much of the movement’s lack of movement may be the result of this fundamental contradiction.

Freud explained that “sexual needs are not capable of uniting men in

the same way as are the demands of self-preservation. Sexual satisfaction is essentially the private affair of the individual.”<sup>27</sup> I agree with him as far as men go: transgression seems exactly the wrong place to unite men and found a movement. But women can and must unite around the “individual” and “private” issue of “sexual satisfaction” because this is also how we demand “self-preservation” in the public arena. Thus, feminists’ response cannot be to abandon sexual perversion (as has a prominent faction of the “movement”), but to complicate and dislocate it through simultaneous perversion within the fields of identity and documentary. This is not to abandon sexuality, history, or identity—as we see in Smith’s tape, she tells her life story by lying about the stories of others—but to demand multiplicity, contradiction, and fluidity within the terrain of representation. As Schneemann explains, “The real dance is with the material.”<sup>28</sup>

And this is not funny. The two lying tapes are also decidedly the most serious within the two shows. The transgressive videotapes in both shows use humor to gain permission to say the impermissible, and in the process they pin themselves down to a place where women in the struggle have already been fighting. This is why, despite technological change, the tapes of the two generations seem so eerily the same. Lying, however, proves to be the one transgressive site of unstable play, by definition always moving, always new, ever adaptive. Although shows from both decades include one piece about lying, Cauleen Smith’s lie looks nothing, in form or content, like Candace Compton and Nancy Angelo’s. While what women struggle for—agency—may stay the same from decade to decade, what we are willing to lie about is as flexible and unique as are any individual’s dreams and desires about herself or video. Which leads me to speculate that while bad girls certainly do come and go, a lying girl can never be fenced in.

## NOTES

1. The New Museum, *Exhibition Fact Sheet: Bad Girls* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994).
2. Marcia Tanner, “Preface and Acknowledgment,” in *Bad Girls Catalogue* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994), 10.
3. The New Museum, *Exhibition Fact Sheet*.
4. The New Museum, *Bad Girls Video Upsets Gender Conventions* (press release) (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, February 1994).
5. Peter Plagens, “Bad Girls for Goodness’ Sake,” *Newsweek*, February 14, 1994, 53.
6. Although video has been curated as a part of some museum and gallery shows since the seventies, it is rarely reviewed by the mainstream and art press that covers the events. If video portions of art shows are covered, it is almost always in film and video specific publications.
7. Carolee Schneemann, interviewed in *Angry Women*, ed. Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991), 70.
8. Shirley Clarke, interviewed in Sharon Smith’s *Women Who Make Movies* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1975), 46.
9. Anais Nin, quoted in Ally Acker, *Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 1991), 96.
10. Grace Glueck, “A Broader View of Feminism,” *New York Observer*, February 7, 1994.

11. Quoted in Jonathan Napack, "Talking 'Bout Bad Girls (Beep Beep)," *New York Observer*, January 31, 1994.
12. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
13. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 35.
14. Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), xv.
15. The New Museum, *Bad Girls* press release.
16. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 63.
17. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 84.
18. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 149.
19. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 27.
20. Mary Kelly, "A Conversation on Recent Feminist Art Practices," *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 58.
21. Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman* (New York: Day Books, 1978), 136.
22. Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1981), 128, 130.
23. Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), x.
24. Bataille, *Eroticism*, 106.
25. See Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Jeffrey Brown, "Gender and the Action Heroine," *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (1996): 52-71.
26. Quoted in Carl Heyward, "Interview: Carolee Schneemann," *High Performance* (January/February 1993): 13.
27. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 92.
28. In Heyward, "Interview," 13.