

UTOPIAN VISIONS: WOMEN IN EARLY VIDEO ART

by

Deanne Pytlinski

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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Deanne Pytlinski

Adviser: Professor Anna Chave

This dissertation is a study of a selection of women video artists working in New York City during the pioneering generation of video art, between 1965 and 1985. It examines the artists' engagement with the medium as a new technology and considers whether gender was a factor in their relative success or the subjects they chose. Video artists from this generation often had aims that were political, making claims for video's democratizing impact. While feminism was dramatically altering the women's professional and personal relationships, it was sometimes only one of many social concerns when it came to their art. By analyzing women's participation in the theorization and implementation of early video art, I aim to broaden the relatively scant public record on the medium's early history.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters and each relies heavily on interviews with the artists. Chapter one is a study of the careers of two pioneers in image-processed video, Steina Vasulka and Barbara Buckner. It looks beneath the surface of their apparently successful integration into the video community to see how their experimental processes allowed them to transcend being narrowly identified as women artists among their male colleagues. Chapter two considers the widespread popularity of Marshall

McLuhan's communications theory and the at times ambivalent reception of his ideas among the women artists, Beryl Korot, Shigeo Kubota, Nina Sobell, and Louise Ledeen (formerly Etra). McLuhan framed the electronic medium of video as being an extension of "man's" nervous system, yet these women proposed alternative theoretical frameworks that complicated the intersection between technology and the human body. Chapter three studies the concept of "feedback" as it was used in video art and positions work by Shigeo Kubota and Hermine Freed as using feedback as a feminist strategy. Chapter four documents women's participation in the video collectives, Rainedance, Videofreex, Amazing Grace Media, Women's Video News Service, and Women's Video Collective. Much of this chapter is based upon original interviews conducted with the following members: Wendy Apple, Nancy Cain, Beryl Korot, Rita Ogden, Curtis Ratcliff, Lynda Rodolitz, Cabell Smith, Suzanne Tedesko, Carol Vontobel, and Ann Woodward.

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INTRODUCTION

Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1965 that the electronic medium of television would alter society because of the medium's capacity for instant communication.¹ If members of that society learned to respond critically to those messages, he wrote, television could become a more powerful communication medium than any other in history. If not, however, viewers would become passive consumers, overwhelmed by a myriad of messages controlled by the state.² In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many artists picked up the video camera in order to work outside of the commercial structures of television, film, and traditional artistic media, but by the mid-1980s, critics noted that video was just as easily commodified as painting and sculpture and that MTV had thoroughly coded the word "video" as an advertisement for pop music.³ Recent treatments of early video art cast the medium's pioneers as having been hopelessly naïve in their aims for a democratic form of expression, and the title of this dissertation may invoke such naiveté. Describing the goals and expectations of video practitioners of the late 1960s and early 1970s as utopian, these critics have recently pointed to historic rhetoric by the videographers that declared the new electronic medium to be automatically intelligible by a mass audience, who would merely need access to video equipment in order to gain a voice and dismantle oppressive power structures.⁴

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* 1st paperback ed., (New York, London, Sydney, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), 5.

² Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), 63.

³ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works," *Art Journal* (Fall 1985): 217.

⁴ That audience, of course, won't necessarily dismantle the structures of television and may in fact mimic and reaffirm its commercialism. Norman M. Klein has touched on this issue and then charts the historical construction of standard formats for television programming and the education of audiences in a visual

The term “utopian” may call to mind early twentieth-century projects by artists of the historic avant-garde such as Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin who wanted to unite art and life through the use of industrial forms and materials. Like McLuhan and the pioneering videographers’ embrace of the electronic medium, the avant-garde’s embrace of industry was technologically deterministic, and depended on an assumption that it was the medium itself and not that medium’s historical conditions that would emancipate the citizen.⁵ The Constructivist project failed to liberate the worker, of course, or integrate social and aesthetic practices in a way that would resist being controlled by the state.

Video’s accessibility was noted and celebrated by this first generation of users, and they explored this condition as a unique property of the medium that distinguished it from film. This generation considered themselves pioneers and to be surveying uncharted territory. This has led to their treatment historically as a unified group of people who were all concerned with breaking new ground. The term “pioneer” is a useful one in that it designates a group of practitioners who used some of the first video equipment available to artists and simultaneously connotes their exploration of the medium’s principles. However, pioneer is also a problematic term, and the whole notion of a pioneering generation tends to deify certain video practitioners (often male) as genius artists, mimicking a traditional approach to art history which canonizes a narrow range of

literacy of these formats. “Audience Culture and the Visual Screen,” in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture in association with Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 375.

⁵ Martha Gever has criticized early videographer Gene Youngblood for “determinism that treats technology as natural, thus evolving according to natural laws.” Martha Gever, “Pressure Points: Video in the Public Sphere,” *Art Journal* (Fall 1985): 238.

masters who in turn beget followers, establishing a false lineage and, according to some, compromising those artists' social commitment.⁶

Thus, the utopian concerns of a pioneering generation has come to be used in often disparaging ways in relation to video's history, even by its practitioners who are, by turns, critical of and wistful about their early goals. Beryl Korot, one of the artists who is a subject of this study, commented, "Things we were talking about—the information environment, the ecology of that...the impact of the individual on creating an information environment— became the 'information highway' which was a way, even more powerful than before, of taking information from people who weren't really in control and moving it along."⁷

Yet, by returning to the socially-minded rhetoric surrounding video's early days, we can again focus on the ways that video's practitioners hoped to establish a certain level of critique by using an electronic medium to propose alternatives to broadcast and traditional artistic forms. Video was used in a variety of ways that intersected with documentary, performance, site-specific sculpture, conceptual art, and electronic music. Women who picked up the video camera had an opportunity to work outside of mass communications and artistic media whose internal structures were historically controlled by men. Virtually all of video's practitioners in this early period hailed its apparently emancipatory power, but women perhaps had even more at stake in disrupting those structures which had historically limited their access to broadcast production and traditional artistic media.

⁶ Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture in association with Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 42; Martha Gever, "Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik," *Afterimage* (October 1982): 12-15.

⁷ Beryl Korot, interview with the author, New York City, 28 April 2003, tape recording.

This study examines women video artists who actively promoted technological aspects of the video medium during the pioneering generation. Since women in the United States were socially conditioned away from technical fields from the end of World War II until well into the second generation of feminism in the 1970s, it is particularly noteworthy that these women overcame such social conditioning. Despite their thorough involvement in the video community, much of the theoretical writing that was published in the early 1970s and represents this period was done by men, giving the false impression that women were not as involved with video's theorization. One of the main premises about video technology in these primary documents was that it was uniquely suitable to a democratizing project, yet that was not often explicitly tied to a feminist agenda. This is despite the fact that the women's liberation movement was nearly simultaneous to the rise of the video artist community. Therefore, this raises questions as to how women artists experienced their gender within this community and to what extent they saw their projects or themselves as feminist. When did they articulate a feminist position, and when did they not? What other social and political concerns did they have that might have overshadowed feminism or even conflicted with feminist allegiances? Each woman's individual perceptions of feminism were as diverse as their artistic practices, which embraced documentary, performance, experimental, and political, modes of working. All of these artists, like their male counterparts, were proficient with and passionate about video as a unique medium due to its electronic properties. Yet, women artists in the 1970s were only recently dismantling patriarchal structures which had limited their access to both the art market and to technologies

previously gendered masculine, and therefore their experiences in this community demand analysis.

Video art and the second-generation feminist movement emerged at roughly the same time toward the end of the 1960s. Several authors have pointed out this fact in recent years, and any responsible overview of the history of video art must reserve space to discuss the use of this medium by feminist artists during its first decade of existence. Video Data Bank, a Chicago distributor of artist's videotapes founded in 1976, released in 1995 a nine-part anthology of videotapes called *Surveying the First Decade: Video Art and Alternative Media in the United States* which included a tape entitled "Gendered Confrontations" with excerpts of works by Martha Rosler, Lynda Benglis, Ilene Segalove, and others. Catherine Elwes' 2005 book, *Video Art, A Guided Tour* contains a chapter called "Disrupting the Content: Feminism" in which she surveys explicitly feminist positions and their expression in video by women.⁸ There have been several exhibitions of feminist video art or video art by women, including *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75*, curated by JoAnn Hanley and organized by Independent Curators Incorporated, which traveled to Montreal, Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, California, New York (Poughkeepsie), and Ontario. Following the example of the Whitney Museum of American Art, most museums are including a video component with large exhibitions focused on a chronological period or topical theme. On a local level, the Mizel Center for Arts and Culture in Denver, Colorado presented the exhibition *Upstarts and Matriarchs:*

⁸ Catherine Elwes, *Video Art, A Guided Tour*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2005. Elwes also published an earlier article, "In Video Veritas: A Feminist Perspective on Women's Video Across Two Decades," *Make* (Sept/Nov 1998): 8-10. Her examples in this earlier article were largely British artists from the 1980s to the present.

Jewish Women Artists and the Transformation of American Art including a video component called “Jewish Women Videographers: Shifting the Gaze” in which works by Hermine Freed, Maxi Cohen, Eleanor Antin, Martha Rosler, and others were screened.⁹

The prevalence of video installation (by men and women artists) at major contemporary survey exhibitions, including the international biennials has been noted by several critics, and recent catalogs for such exhibitions have also started to include short historical overviews of the medium in order to establish precedents for some work by contemporary artists, despite the younger artists’ apparent ignorance of such histories.¹⁰ In all of these representations of the video medium’s early days, women’s contributions are noted and analyzed for their feminist content based on familiar themes such as the body, personal consciousness-raising, critiques of media representations, and domestic labor. Looking at the work by women that has been screened in these exhibitions alongside major milestones in feminist history of the period--the First National Women’s Liberation Conference (1968), Kate Millet’s bestseller *Sexual Politics* (1970), the founding of the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (1971), to name but a few--one might assume that feminist perspectives have always been in the fore of critical engagements with the medium. But although scholars and critics have often noted feminist content or given a general nod toward women’s use of video as a tool for recording performances, general histories of video art tend not to consider gendered structures within video’s history or art by women who did not articulate an obviously feminist position. Additionally, documents from

⁹ The exhibition was January 13-May 22, 2005. Videotapes were screened on January 30, followed by a panel discussion with local film, video, and art historians, including Melinda Barlow.

¹⁰ See Laura Cottingham, “New Wine into Old Bottles: Some Comments on the Early Years of Art Video” in *Outer & Inner Space: Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, Jane & Louise Wilson, and the History of Video Art*, (exh. cat.) John B. Ravenal, curator, (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2002).

video's early period often ignored the feminist movement despite repeatedly referring to video as a project of democratization.

To be fair, there is a general lack of substantive historical research that has been done to document video art of the early period. That omission is slowly changing, as evidenced by a selection of archives now available online.¹¹ A few art historians are also emerging with an interest in this medium. There has been one other dissertation on women video artists from this pioneering generation. Titled "Excavating the Goddess in the Nineties: Feminist Performance and Video in Southern California," this 1999 dissertation by Jeannette Elizabeth Klein at the University of Southern California orients its thesis around women who deployed a feminist articulation of goddess spirituality. Klein necessarily stresses issues related to performance, and she responds, as do I, to approaches to feminist video history written in the 1990s which privileged the body and "the autobiographical articulation of identity" in ways that could be seen as precursors to 1990s art.¹² Klein situates the artwork in her study in relation to the theme of the goddess, a theme that some critics denounced in the 1990s, and Klein ultimately argues that a woman-centered spirituality disrupted a "male dominated, modernist art world." In my own project, I have returned to issues of medium specificity and communications theory to consider women's participation. These issues, like the goddess, were disregarded by

¹¹ I regularly made use of two online archives: *The Video History Project*, maintained by Sherry Miller Hocking, Mona Jimenez, and Dave Jones at the Experimental Television Center website, <http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/index.html> and the Vasulka Archive at <http://www.vasulka.org>, sponsored by the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, whose objectives include documentation of the history of electronic and digital media. In the middle of this project, the Daniel Langlois Foundation also co-sponsored, under the direction of videographer Davidson Gigliotti, an effort to make all of the issues of *Radical Software* available online at <http://www.radicalsoftware.org>. This proved enormously helpful, since issues of that journal are rare and incomplete in libraries such as the New York Public Library.

¹² From abstract for Klein's dissertation, Jeannette Elizabeth Klein, "Excavating the Goddess in the Nineties: Feminist Performance and Video in Southern California," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1999. Retrieved on 27 August 2005 from ProQuest Digital Dissertations.

critics from the 1980s and 90s, this time because they were deemed “male dominated” and “modernist.” My return to the period and the women artist’s engagement with these issues is intended to restore the sense of liberation and strength these women felt as they wielded this newly-accessible technology.

The idea for this dissertation began after several years of intermittent study of published documents from the 1970s about what was then the new medium of video. Practitioners tended to write celebratory texts extolling video’s virtues which most commonly were said to consist of its portability, economy, and immediacy. Much of this writing appeared in the pages of the funky, grassroots journal *Radical Software*, published by a group calling themselves Raindance. These writers positioned video not just as an artistic medium, but as a movement, and one which had much in common with the youth movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. These writers, nearly all of whom were male, also related their own versions of video’s early history, and in their accounts of these events, young male protagonists typically played out narratives of discovery and origin. Whether it was referred to as Video Art or as Guerrilla Television, the medium was described as using a language appropriate and familiar to a generation that heavily relied on electronic communications.¹³ Paul Ryan, Frank Gillette, and Michael Shamberg, all members of Raindance, sprinkled their writings liberally with references to communications theorist, Marshall McLuhan. They saw their generation as

¹³ An alternative view of video’s intrinsic properties was written by David Antin, who explored the relationship of the medium to television. Antin countered technologically-driven accounts of the medium by demonstrating how television’s structure was determined by commercial interests that controlled (and still do) the duration and cost of programming. Concluding that these structures were culturally constructed, rather than formally intrinsic, Antin then contrasted television with the use of video by artists such as Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris, and his wife, Eleanor Antin. David Antin, “Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium,” in *Video Art: An Anthology*, eds. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, 174-183, (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976).

having renewed concern with a global social environment, and anthropologist Gregory Bateson's writings also helped to inspire their ideas about an ecology of the medium. Likewise, the architecture and visionary ideas of Buckminster Fuller held out the promise of a utopian future where a benevolent technology would be harnessed to ensure a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.

What I noticed in reading all of this heady literature--which I later discovered was largely generated from a tight-knit community of video practitioners throughout New York state--was that it appeared as if almost no women had participated in making videos that engaged with the theory and structure of the medium. Yet, this apparent absence raised a red flag. As Linda Nochlin and other feminist art historians have pointed out, the art world has historically been structured to exclude women's activities either because they did not have access to institutions that set the standards for education and distribution or their social conditions made it impossible for them to participate as equals in the art world.¹⁴ This suggested a hypothesis that either women had participated in the formation of the medium's theory and were under-recognized, or they did not generally participate in this discourse because social conditions cut them off from theoretical debates. The third alternative was that women were more concerned with using video as a tool to explore performative issues, as those recent approaches to feminist video mentioned earlier, had suggested. Obviously, there were important early videos that had been made by women, among them Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1972) and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) which have often been cited as landmarks. But neither Jonas nor Rosler was involved in this tightly-knit New York video community

¹⁴ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *Artnews* (January 1971): 22-39 and 67-71.

that was heavily invested in defining the properties of the medium. My concern was to examine this community that was writing about and experimenting with video's definitive properties to determine whether gender was a factor.

The historic writing on video's distinctive properties was dependent on constructing this as a "new" technology. Authors such as Paul Ryan, Frank Gillette, and Gene Youngblood referred to cybernetic and communications theory that was dominated by male writers. The theorists took at face value the notions that new technologies produced social change. As Paul Ryan wrote about Buckminster Fuller in the pages of *Radical Software*, "Fuller's great utopian vision depends for its stability on the stability of his geometric structures. Re-engineer the environment, and man's ability to get along with his fellow man will be stabilized in utopian fashion."¹⁵ Nam June Paik invoked Newtonian physics and Norbert Wiener's cybernetic theories in a tract that also proposed Buddhist approaches to technology as an alternative. Paik wrote, "Cybernetics, the science of pure relations, or relationship itself, has its origin in karma. Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase 'Media is message' was formulated by Norbert Wiener in 1948 as 'The signal, where the message is sent, plays equally important role as the signal, where message is not sent.'¹⁶ These and numerous other references to cybernetics, engineering, and the sciences led me to speculate that since these were all fields in which women had historically been underrepresented, video's theorization might have implicitly been coded as masculine (the historical conditions of this gendered system will be

¹⁵ Paul Ryan, "From Crucifixion to Cybernetic Acupuncture" *Radical Software* 1, no. 5 (1972): 39. Ryan actually goes on to criticize Fuller, saying "In his vision there is little appreciation of the need to restructure the primitive emotions." Ryan's alternative proposal, however, is also based on a technological analogy between the electronic medium of video with Chinese acupuncture where he insists both are concerned with the "neural network."

¹⁶ Nam June Paik, "Video Synthesizer Plus" *Radical Software* 1 no. 2 (1972): 25.

discussed in chapter two). Yet, I knew of at least one woman who had been involved in the heavily technical side of video art from its inception. This was Steina Vasulka, who along with her husband and collaborator, Woody Vasulka, had been a respected video practitioner whose work both individually and alongside Woody had been collected and exhibited by museums throughout video's history. The Vasulkas have long been acknowledged as pioneers who experimented with video synthesizers and signal processors as well as digital video. I began to wonder how Steina (who prefers to use only her first name in professional settings, as I will further discuss in chapter one,) negotiated the terrain of this highly technical field as a woman artist.

One of the key documents I had relied upon throughout my self-study on early video art had been an anthology titled *Video Art* that was co-edited in 1976 by a woman named Beryl Korot. Korot was also a member of the collective known as Raindance which published *Radical Software*, which she also co-edited. As I investigated Korot, I began by studying her submission to the artist's pages in *Video Art*. There I saw reproductions of her installation, *Dachau, 1974*, and in her statement that accompanied the images, Korot made reference to the way the structure of her installation resembled weaving. This reminded me of a statement I had read by another video artist, Shigeko Kubota, in which she compared the running of videotape to the blood of menstruation. So that made at least three women who, it seemed to me, were very involved in investigating and defining video's structural properties, unlike Jonas or Rosler, who had denied any interest in such issues.

My criteria for choosing artists excluded those who considered themselves artists in other media, such as sculpture or performance, before taking up the video camera as

one mode of exploration among many. This means I do not focus on artists such as Joan Jonas or Lynda Benglis, despite their important and well-known contributions. My dividing those who were concerned with video as an electronic medium from those who were not follows the way the video community divided themselves in the early 1970s. As Steina put it, “we called them ‘artist firsts’ . . . they had a different interest, because for them video was just one expression of many, and not the all consuming passionate thing that it was for the people who discovered the medium.”¹⁷ Benglis effectively supported this notion in her statement, “Video is no more or less than one of several mediums I use to make art—all deal with the layering of time and space. Video has given me an opportunity to use my everyday surroundings.”¹⁸ Shigeko Kubota made sculpture and participated in Fluxus performances in the 1960s, but she began to experiment with video in 1970 and combined video and sculpture beginning in 1975 with *Video Chess*. From 1970 onward, I argue, Kubota’s project was thoroughly dependent on the notion that video had certain unique properties. When it came time to present an overview, a picture of the contemporary video scene in its entirety, Korot and Schneider included video artists working in a variety of ways in their anthology, *Video Art*. But artists such as Jonas and Benglis never joined video collectives, or wrote about its potential as a mass medium, or investigated ways to generate abstract images with electronic signals.

Video collectives also had a strong presence in the video community of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Historical writings by the videographers in the collectives are peppered with references to video’s distinguishing features. Two of the artists addressed in this dissertation were members of such collectives, although they also produced

¹⁷ Steina, interview with the author, Santa Fe, 24 June 2003, tape recording.

¹⁸ Quoted in Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, eds., *Video Art: An Anthology*, (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 23.

independent works. Beryl Korot was a member of Raindance from 1970 to 1974, and Shigeo Kubota was a member of the all-female group, Red, White, Yellow, and Black between 1972 and 1973.¹⁹ There were many other video collectives, including Global Village, Videofreex, and April Video Collective, but aside from Melinda Barlow, who wrote about Red, White, Yellow, and Black, no one has written specifically about gender and the collectives or done an extensive study of the female members. Documents related to the Women's Video Festivals, held at The Kitchen and initiated by Steina, indicated the presence of many collectives made up entirely of women.²⁰ Until Melinda Barlow published an article in 2003 about the Women's Video Festival, its existence and that of the many women's collectives were virtually ignored in the literature on video's history.²¹ Barlow helped to put the festival into the context of the women's movement; to document the festivals' planning by Susan Milano; and to provide descriptions of the video environments and video installations included in the festival in 1975 and 1976, respectively. Virtually no one has written descriptions of the single-channel tapes screened at the festivals by the video collectives, excepting the brief descriptions that were printed in the festival brochures. Most of these tapes are no longer extant and the programs do not list the names individuals who were in the collectives. Thus, it became clear that my study must at least establish the names of as many members of these collectives as possible and then expand the historical record by documenting their histories.

¹⁹ Melinda Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 17, no. 4 (November 2000): 297-316.

²⁰ A list of these collectives is provided in chapter two, and several of them are discussed in chapter four. Programs and reviews of the festivals are available from The Kitchen archives on the Vasulkas' website, <<http://www.vasulka.org>>.

²¹ Melinda Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972-1980," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 3 (2003): 3-38.

Unlike most previous studies, my dissertation does not isolate the work of artists who engaged the medium from work by collectives, although the collectives and individual artists are generally divided into separate chapters. Although much of the collective work was documentary in nature whereas the artists' work was largely experimental or aesthetically-based, the videographers active in these genres were close, and my treatment of them here retains the sense of their shared vocabulary. It is my hope that the reader will understand that the individual artists also maintained a social consciousness in their work, and the members of the collectives also often had aesthetic and professional goals that superseded the social ones. In a statement that invites the viewer to see all work by women videographers as politically engaged during the 1970s, artist Ilene Segalove said, "Just to put your hands on the equipment was a feminist act."²² Considering that women were socially conditioned away from technical fields, including electronic engineering and filmmaking, between 1945 and well into the 1970s, it was indeed notable that women picked up cameras, synthesizers, editing machines, and other machinery even if they did not make feminism their overt subject matter. This social conditioning is most thoroughly examined in chapter two. This shared sense of entitlement and freedom with a technologically-based medium is what links the women video artists and the women of the collectives.

As one of the first dissertations to deal with video art from this pioneering generation, my work is provisional and by no means comprehensive.²³ After making my

²² Linda Podheiser, "Ilene Segalove, Girl Video Artist," *Boston Review* 9:3 (June 1984), cited in JoAnn Hanley, *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75*, (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993) 15.

²³ At the time I began researching my dissertation proposal in 2000, the following were the only other dissertations on the subject: Johanna Gill, "Artist's Video: The First Ten Years" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 1976), Christy Sophia Park, "Toward a Theory of Video Art" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1980), Deborah Jo Lepley, "Video Art: A Task in Thinking About the Revealing of Self

choices about the initial three artists who would be my subjects--Beryl Korot, Steina, and Shigeo Kubota-- I developed the rest of my project in a necessarily piecemeal way. I interviewed Steina and Korot, who each provided me with contacts for other artists who might prove relevant. In a few cases I came across artists whose work was related but, because of the scope I originally established for this project, I could not include them in it. Vibeke Sorenson is one of those artists, and future discussions of women artists who made intensive use of image-processing tools should include a discussion of her work.²⁴ The bulk of my dissertation includes artists and artworks for which I was able to reconstruct something of their history, within the time constraints of the dissertation project. In an expanded version of this study, I plan to include information on more of the women who were involved in Raindance and April Video Collective.²⁵ Material from an interview with Maxi Cohen was largely left out because her work with the Video Access Center did not neatly fit in with the information on collectives. Although Cohen's 1976 tape *My Bubi, My Zada* has been widely screened, and often situated in relation to feminism, her community video projects have been largely ignored. Therefore, her

Within a Technological Society" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1981), Taehi Kang, "Nam June Paik: Early Years (1958-1973)" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Florida State University, 1988), Donald Robert Richardson, "'Video lets me see what I mean': The Social World of Video Artists" (Ph.D. Dissertation, McMaster University, 1991), Catherine Anne Robertson, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Indeterminacy in Experimental Video" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1994), Melinda Barlow, "Memory and Mortality in the Work of Mary Lucier" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1996) and Jeannette Klein "Excavating the Goddess", (previously cited). Since then, several more dissertations on the subject have been completed.

²⁴ Victor Ancona interviewed Sorenson in "Vibeke Sorenson: Demystifying Video Technology" *Videography* February 1979: 66-69. Sorenson made *Temple*, one part of the larger work, *VideOcean*, while an artist-in-resident at the TV Lab at WNET/13 in New York City in 1976. It is evident from this interview that she was very adept at and interested in using video synthesizers, especially the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor. *VideOcean* is available at New York Public Library's Donnell Media Center and at Electronic Arts Intermix. Because I only came across a reference to her work in the late stages of this dissertation, I have not viewed her work and I do not discuss it here.

²⁵ Jodie Sibert and Megan Williams of Raindance were not available for interview at this time, but colleagues have indicated they would be amenable to future interviews, and I fully intend to do this for a later project.

relationship to other community-based projects initiated by video collectives remains unclear and I intend to examine it at a later time.

Although it was not part of my initial intention, I ultimately limited my discussion to artists and collectives based in New York. This decision was largely a circumstantial one, since all three of the artists I initially chose had lived in New York City at the beginning of their careers and they introduced me to other artists who had been in their immediate environs. Additionally, the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) early on provided a funding structure that supported the proliferation of video collectives in the state. This limited geographic context may have had the effect of slanting my conclusions. There were important video collectives based in California (Optic Nerve, Ant Farm) and elsewhere, but they are only briefly mentioned in this study. My preliminary inquiries suggest that since some of these concerns about the endemic properties of the medium were deemed formalist, many of the West Coast feminist video artists may have rejected a theorization of video in such terms altogether-- but such a conclusion remains outside my scope.²⁶ The fact that many consciously feminist critics and artists in the early 1970s opposed their projects to formalism as it was practiced by Clement Greenberg has deeply affected my research. This rejection of Greenberg manifested in an embrace of personal content and readings, a devaluing of the concept of "innovation," and, of course, themes of sexuality.²⁷ This has contributed to a reading of work that was engaged in medium specificity as inherently anti-feminist.

²⁶ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (September 1987): 326-57.

²⁷ Lucy Lippard, "Changing Since Changing," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1976), 5-6.

My study begins by examining women artists who were heavily engaged in the use of image processors or other tools for manipulation that were based on altering the electronic signal. Chapter one is largely devoted to an acknowledged pioneer in the medium, Steina (b. 1940) who, along with her husband, Woody Vasulka (b. 1937) conducted some of the earliest and most extensive investigations of how the electronic video signal could be manipulated. Among video artists, these two have been considered leaders in the field. Owing to their early founding of an important exhibition space for video, The Kitchen, they had contact with nearly every person working in video in New York, if not the U.S., during the 1970s. Both artists had an early interest in building, tweaking, and altering the consumer-grade equipment manufactured by Sony and others in order to create imagery that could be considered legitimate art while also remaining true to the electronic structure of the medium. These two artists, who have collaborated on and off throughout their careers, often exhibit together, and because of this it is very easy to conflate their ideas and work.²⁸ My first chapter is an attempt to sort Steina's early interests and influences from Woody's, and to look beneath the surface of her apparently successful integration into the New York video community of the early period. Starting with their joint projects using an audio synthesizer (1970) to alter the electronic video signal and extending through her use of the "Allvison" tool (a camera directed at a mirrored sphere) in 1976 and beyond, Steina sought ways to eschew notions of the all-powerful artist by allowing machines to alter images in a way that was somewhat out of her control. Steina was not the only woman who was proficient using

²⁸ One notable exception has been in the writing of Marita Sturken whose essays in journals and exhibition catalogs have attempted to distinguish Steina and Woody's separate concerns. She does not tend to consider gender issues in her analysis, however. See, for instance, Marita Sturken, "Steina and Woody Vasulka: In Dialogue with the Machine" *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media*. (exh. cat.) 35-48 (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996).

image-processing tools, and I finish the chapter with a short consideration of the work of Barbara Buckner. Buckner (b. 1950), whose colorful, abstracted videotapes were often discussed in articles from the late 1970s, has not fared well in more recent historical treatments. Buckner like Steina, avoided any overt feminist subject matter in her work, preferring to frame her subjects in terms of aesthetic and spiritual ideas. Here, as elsewhere in the study, I consider why artists might have chosen not to explicitly mark their identities.

The second chapter of this dissertation deals critically with the impact of Marshall McLuhan's theories on women artists of this period. I focus primarily on the work of Beryl Korot, then on Shigeko Kubota, and then on two artists whose work has been virtually ignored, Nina Sobell and Louise Ledeem (formerly Louise Etra). The unifying concept in this chapter is McLuhan's notion of the electronic medium as an extension of the human nervous system which was set forth in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1965). He proposed that since the human central nervous system was essentially an electronic circuit, there was a natural affinity between it and the television (video) medium which was also based on electronic signals. McLuhan asserted that since television had become so pervasive by the 1950s, it had fundamentally changed the way humans perceived and communicated about their world. In his view, the print medium was no longer relevant to society, and through television's electronic signal, societies would achieve progress through immediate, global communication. McLuhan's ideas were widely disseminated through video publications throughout the 1970s, infusing the video community with a spirit of optimism or utopianism about the medium's potential. Beryl Korot, who co-edited one of the preeminent journals about video, *Radical*

Software, between 1970 and 1974, had extensive exposure to McLuhan's ideas through the articles that appeared on its pages. However, close examination of Korot's positions reveals her ambivalent reaction to McLuhan's ideas, and she proposed an alternative theoretical structure for video based on ancient technologies of communication.

The writings of Shigeko Kubota (b. 1937) figure greatly in this second chapter, as another example of an alternative to McLuhan's would-be gender-neutral statement that the electronic medium is an extension of *man*. Kubota offered descriptions of the video medium that were decidedly *feminine*, in that they compared video to the menstrual process and compared her own art practice to labor that had historically been assigned to women such as childcare. Louise Ledeen (b. 1951) also appears in this chapter as an under-recognized artist who collaborated with her then-husband Bill Etra in making video works that demonstrated the use of the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor. Ledeen performed in numerous tapes where it was her image that was altered, processed, and eventually appeared in the finished product. However, it was not always her body's exterior that provided the imagery for these aesthetic explorations, but also her circulatory system that generated the imagery; and in this way the Etras' joint project provocatively coincides with McLuhan's theory that the electronic medium of television mirrors the circuitry of the human body. Ledeen's participation in the pioneering work of early video art serves as an example of women's deep engagement with using the specifically electronic properties of the medium, and of the way they combined this engagement with issues entailed in performance, the body, and female subjectivity. Although her work as an artist was largely collaborative, she was nonetheless active and also participated in the video community as juror and curator. Despite this, she has

largely been ignored in the literature, especially because many of the historical discussions of the Etras have focused on Bill's co-invention of the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor.

Shigeeko Kubota's work is the focus of chapter three--on feedback--although most of the work by all of the artists discussed in this dissertation could also serve as examples. The term *feedback* is used in video to refer to technical distortions, but also to video's ability to record an image and play it back almost immediately which made it a useful critical tool. Kubota's work serves as an example of the way in which image processing was deployed not simply for the sake of formal experiment, but in order to generate feedback on broadcast television and other older modes of mass communication. Kubota's works are most commonly discussed in terms of video installation and sculpture, forms that are popular among recent artists, but this also tends to sever her historical relationship from the rest of the video community in New York in the 1970s. Through consideration of her use of feedback in both the technical and critical sense, I associate Kubota's blending of biography, documentary, and experimental approaches to video with larger social and political concerns of the pioneering video community. Many practitioners have hailed video for its democratic power and Kubota's recent positioning of her work in terms of traditional sculpture might have undermined its political power, in a way. But as Melinda Barlow has shown, Kubota's activities in the multi-cultural collective known as Red, White, Yellow and Black and her writings, in which she recuperated the video medium as specifically aligned with essentialist notions of the female body, all demonstrate her faith in the 1970s in video's capability for feminist critique.

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation makes extensive use of interviews in order to document the experiences of women who were active in video collectives. I first examine women who were members of mixed-gender collectives, including Raindance, Videofreex, and Amazing Grace Video. The artists shared with me their recollections of the women's movement in the 1970s and its impact on the group dynamics as well their own development. This is followed by an examination of two all-women collectives, Women's Video News Service and Women's Video Collective, once again based largely on my interviews of women who participated. Through these interviews, I was able to record oral histories from several women who were previously undocumented in the literature. This is perhaps the most substantial contribution of my dissertation, since neither of the feminist collectives has been discussed in any detail before.²⁹ Although most of the video tapes produced by these collectives have been discarded or are in outdated formats that were impossible to view, my hope is that these interviews will provide a foundation for future work which might properly analyze the cultural production of these feminist videographers once tapes have been located and preserved in updated formats.

Many of the artists discussed in this study acknowledged some impact from the women's liberation movement that coincided with the rise of artists' video. Most, however, were not what might be termed "radical feminists" and even among the documentary videographers, their social commitments were divided between socialist-inspired community work, consciousness raising and media access projects. Aside from those involved in the all-women collectives, most of the artists discussed here have not

²⁹ Melinda Barlow cited the names of all of the collectives who screened tapes at the various New York Women's Video Festivals, including Women's Video News Service, in her article, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972-1980."

been analyzed previously in terms of their relationship to feminism or their consciousness of gender. One would be hard-pressed to find any gender-specific content in, for example, Steina's oeuvre. But this should raise some flags. In a period in which feminism was entering into mainstream consciousness in the United States, it is instructive to analyze why some women artists would have chosen not to address or openly articulate their gender in their art. Did they not identify with feminism or the women's liberation movement as they saw it unfold? If they did identify with some of the goals of feminism, why did those sympathies apparently not enter into their creative work? Were feminist valences there, after all, in some sublimated form? Was it difficult for women to maintain respect as artists if they also identified as feminists? How might feminism have related to their other social and political commitments? For instance, in chapter four, I examine the video collectives active in the 1970s, many of whose members filmed political conventions, women's caucuses and rallies, and anti-war demonstrations. Women's commitments were often split between the counter-cultural movement and the feminist movement, allegiances that were sometimes in opposition to one another. In fact, feminists were often accused by counter-cultural activists of being bourgeois and apolitical and their agenda was sometimes called a "diversion from the main event."³⁰

By focusing, in three out of four chapters, on video artists who were preoccupied with the electronic properties of the medium, I eliminate discussion of many of the women involved with video who have been particularly hailed for their contribution to feminist art. But I want to argue for the importance of retaining a politicized view of these early women's experiments in video, which have been too easily written off as

³⁰ Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 121.

formalist, and thus as socially bereft. The artists covered in this dissertation felt that simply by putting the tools of media into the hands of artists rather than networks, they were effecting a social change. They could alter the way audiences responded to television by demonstrating that there were alternatives to commercial television. They were responding also, for example, to leftists' observations about collusion between networks and the federal administration in the reporting of facts about the Vietnam War and Watergate. Women responded to the lack of powerful role models on network news programs, in television advertising, and in entertainment programming. Video provided the opportunity for women artists to creatively respond as autonomous subjects, to explore ethnic, spiritual, sexual, and gender identity. They did not always articulate a conscious identification with feminism, but at times it was the luxury of not having to identify as a "woman artist" or with stereotypical notions of femininity, that was powerful. By engaging with the technical aspects of the medium, especially when it came to using image synthesizers and processors, they enjoyed a level of respect among their peers that was, at least, better than most women painters experienced prior to 1970.

One theme that is unique to this dissertation is the consideration of women artists in light of their interaction with video technology. If we consider that the electronic medium of video is a precursor to digital art, and consider the recent proliferation of writing about digital media that conceptualizes human subjectivity as interdependent on technology, it is a wonder that more critics and scholars have not reexamined the pioneering generation of women video artists. Digital media have already generated a substantial body of feminist literature, from which I have drawn for some of my research. However, this discourse has yet to be extended to encompass theoretical premises

established in the 1970s. I have been particularly indebted to Donna Haraway's proposition of the cyborg as a feminist emblem that aligned women's subjectivities with, rather than opposite to, technology, as against some biologically essentialist positions.³¹ I use Haraway's construction of the cyborg intermittently in this study to frame work in which women's embodied subjectivities are at least partially dependent on demonstrating the electronic nature of the technology.

Contrary to initial expectations, women did participate in technologically-based artistic media between 1965 and 1980, but their participation in this dialogue about the relations between art and technology have gone largely unacknowledged. When Maurice Tuchman curated the exhibition *Art and Technology* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1970, not one woman artist was included. This egregious omission was controversial, however, and in fact the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists organized a demonstration against the museum in response. Even a 1969 exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, had included a few women, including Lillian Schwartz, Lucy Jackson Young, and Marian Zazeela.³²

Some writers take the position that while male video artists were engaged in an exploration of video technology for its own sake, women artists moved "beyond" those concerns toward a "return to content" and an "embrace of subjectivity."³³ I argue that the

³¹ Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

³² JoAnn Hanley, "Women, Art, and Technology: A Brief History," in *Art/Women/California 1950-2000* eds. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), 314.

³³ *Ibid.*, 312. Hanley goes on to state, "Women artists ventured outside the prevailing modernist interest in material and form to infuse their works with personal history and social and cultural criticism, thereby laying the groundwork for much of the art, including video art, that would follow in the 1980s and 1990s."

division between an embrace of the technology and an embrace of content is a false division, and is reductive and counterproductive for feminists. Both men and women who were heavily involved in the technological aspects saw the video technology as providing solutions that could be liberating on a social, personal, and artistic level. For women artists, any engagement with a heavily technological medium ran counter to social stereotypes, and thus their projects broke new ground.

It might have taken time for some of the female videographers to become aware of their groundbreaking historical position. Many of the women interviewed for this study recalled a feeling of power from participating in the communities of activists and artists, but the relative ease with which they entered the field of video art was notable considering larger cultural stereotypes about women's supposed incapacity with technology. In 1983, a statement by the editors of a special issue of *Heresies* on film and video cited a socially conditioned fear of technology among women. "Our interest in technology is not to suggest that women join the ranks of the technocrats, but rather to encourage women to overcome a conditioned fear of technology, and to begin to use it as an organizing tool and a source of personal expression."³⁴ By 1983, as this statement makes clear, uses of video in ways that were not overtly political or autobiographical had been called into question as reinforcing a "technocratic" stance.

Although most histories of early video art refer to "portapaks," the relatively inexpensive portable camera and recorder systems that were introduced in the late 1960s,

While exhibition catalogs such as this one have tremendously added to the historical treatment of women video artists and the history of video as a whole, this kind of generalized statement tends to reinforce the binary between feminist video and videos examining the structure of the medium. It also suggests that historical video art from the 1970s somehow needs to be justified in terms of its relation to more recent video art.

³⁴ Diana Agosta, et al., "Collective Editorial Statement," *Heresies* 4, no. 16 (1983): 1.

there were actually several different types of portable systems and they were introduced at different times. Sony Corporation introduced some of the first units and these are usually the ones documented in the literature, but there were many other companies which sold competing versions. The first camera/recorder system that was marketed in 1965 as having a “consumer format” was the Sony CV-2000. This camera wasn’t nearly as portable as later models since it contained a built-in monitor weighing 66 pounds (fig. 1).³⁵ Users would have been required to use a tripod with the camera, which would have compromised their ability to move around and catch events “on the fly”--as did the fact that the camera required AC power. The image was recorded onto ½ inch wide tape, rolled onto reels, attached to a deck which had to be carried close to the camera.

Recordings could not be played back on the same deck unit, requiring the user to view the images only after a shoot was completed. In 1968, Sony introduced the CV2400, a truly portable unit that was less than ten pounds. This would be the camera that was purchased by many video artists of the period. The 2400 was also battery-operated, which fulfilled the needs of artists who used the video systems on the road and in the city streets. Video cameras ranged in cost from \$3,000 in 1965 to about \$1250 in 1968, a cost that was within reach for numerous artists, especially if they shared equipment through a collective or were awarded a grant. The Rockefeller Foundation, an agency which was inaugurated at the same time as video’s use as an artistic medium, funded groups of video artists throughout the early period. Although cameras were made relatively light-weight by 1968, the user still had to carry the additional weight of the video tape recorder unit

³⁵ Hocking, Sherry, “Two Texts Concerning Portable Video” 1992, *Video History Project*, Experimental Television Center, available at <http://www.experimental-tvcenter.org/history/tools/ttext.php?id=17&page=1>, Internet, accessed 27 August 2005.

and the first of these units did not include a shoulder strap. Wendy Apple recalled rigging ways to strap the deck to her body until Sony introduced shoulder straps.³⁶ Members of the collective Videofreex used a baby carriage to carry their recording units.³⁷ Shigeko Kubota recalled that the battery for early portapak was tremendously heavy and she suffered back and hip injuries as well as a miscarriage from carrying the equipment.³⁸ So although the video equipment was celebrated for being “lightweight” and “portable”, it was so only in relation to film equipment. Carrying the various parts could be cumbersome.

The dates of my study correspond very broadly to a pioneering generation of the medium. 1965 was the date, arguably, that video art “began” with some introduction of portable, affordable cameras and recorders. The artists’ first experiments in video largely played out during the 1970s, but some of the ideas they initiated in that decade continued into the 1980s. Video art changed dramatically in the 1980s, not only because of the widespread availability of color cameras, but because, by then, much of the theoretical discussion had shifted away from defining the medium and toward creating narratives that would appropriate and critique television as entertainment.³⁹ This included a large

³⁶ Wendy Apple, telephone interview with the author, 24 March 2005.

³⁷ Parry D. Teasdale, *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective That Turned It On* (Hensonville, New York: Black Dome Press Corp., 1999), 185.

³⁸ Midori Yoshimoto, " Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2002), 251.

³⁹ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh analyzes some of the most successful projects of the 1980s that directly engaged mass culture: Dan Graham’s *Rock My Religion* (1983), Dara Birnbaum’s *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, (1978), Jenny Holzer’s *Sign on a Truck* (1984) and Martha Rosler’s *A Simple Case for Torture* (1983). “From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works” October (Fall 1985) 217-227.

number of videotapes from overtly feminist perspectives that parodied and deconstructed social constructions of femininity in the media.⁴⁰

Video is a difficult medium to research using traditional art historical methods. It is ephemeral, if not as much so as performance. Tapes made in the 1970s used formats that can usually no longer be played unless they have been updated to VHS or digital formats. Some organizations exist to preserve old tapes on new formats, such as the Bay Area Video Coalition, but due to the limits of artists' and museums' financial resources, not all tapes have been preserved. The tapes that have been preserved are usually those that have been discussed in critical and historical documents and have some kind of "cult" status. Thus, there are hundreds of tapes sitting in storage that could serve as important examples of the early video movement, but because they did not enjoy early critical attention, they remain obscure. Museums that had extensive exhibition programs for video in past decades have changed personnel and leadership, and records of those exhibitions, not to mention the tapes themselves, reside in off-site storage facilities, often uncatalogued and therefore completely inaccessible. For example, the Long Beach Museum of Art in California hosted many important exhibitions, conferences, and panels during the mid-1970s. David Ross was curator of film and television there from 1974 to 1979. Despite his championing of the medium, and Kathie Rae Huffman's responsible stewardship from 1979-1984, much of the collection and the related curatorial files from this early period remain inaccessible. Lists of objects in the collection document the existence of some tapes, but only those which are attributed to a named artist (not artists'

⁴⁰ *Revising Romance: New Feminist Video* was an exhibition that included many such tapes. It was curated by Linda Podheiser and organized by the American Federation of Arts in cooperation with the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston and traveled to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Hartford, Connecticut, Montclair, New Jersey, and St. Louis, Missouri throughout the Fall, 1986. Marita Sturken, "Revising Romance: New Feminist Video" (review) *Art Journal* (Fall 1985): 273-277.

groups). These lists--including a list of tapes from the Woman's Building that were transferred before it closed in 1991 to the Long Beach collection--are tantalizing, for they suggest the existence of numerous tapes unavailable anywhere else.⁴¹ The works, however, are locked in off-site storage along with the curatorial files from that era and most likely remain in outdated formats. The tape lists also do not provide dates or descriptions for the works.

Many of the women artists in this study are wives or companions of male artists who were at least as famous as they were, if not more so. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron's important anthology, *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* has already established some groundwork in dealing with this issue, and the authors raise questions about how to frame the contributions of women in a culture where individual genius is so heavily valued.⁴² As they point out, women in these heterosexual artists' couples very often were considered the "pale copies, imitators with little originality of their own" in relation to their more-famous husbands. Perhaps more insidiously, women artists have typically been criticized for not being able to transcend their material conditions or their sources to create an art that is truly unique. All three of the major artists in this study are currently married to successful artists in video or related media and all three have worked intermittently in collaborative relationships with those partners. Steina is, of course, married to Woody Vasulka, and as a couple they have enjoyed tremendous recognition as pioneers of the medium. Beryl Korot is currently

⁴¹ The Woman's Building in Los Angeles was founded in 1972-73 by Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven, and Sheila de Bretteville as a gallery, performance and workspace to specifically address women. Mary D. Garrard, "Feminist Politics: Networks and Organizations," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 92.

⁴² Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

married to composer Steve Reich and has collaborated with him on video operas since 1993 when they created *The Cave*. Additionally, her close, personal relationship with Ira Schneider in the early and mid-1970s informed her thinking about video's potential and led to collaborations, including their co-edited anthology, *Video Art*, their community video projects in Ruby and Saugerties, New York, and even their work in the Raindance collective. Shigeo Kubota's relationship with fellow video artist Nam June Paik extends back to 1969 when they were both using the first portapak cameras. Before that, her relationship with David Behrman led to her introduction to Mary Lucier and Marcel Duchamp. I raise these points not to diminish each artist's individual contributions independent of her partner, but because they are material facts that need to be considered. These relationships have had a variety of effects, from forging professional relationships to the introduction of themes and materials. The relationships also had a powerful effect on the women artists' negotiations of gendered power structures. It would be irresponsible to elide those relationships or pretend that they did not exist, in short, but I do not make those relationships the focus of my study, nor do I examine in any depth the likelihood that the women influenced the work of their partners.

My methodology in this study combines critical feminist analysis with biographical and historical information gleaned, whenever possible, from interviews with the artists, in an effort to expand the historical record on women artists. As Kristen Frederickson has pointed out, these approaches have at times come into conflict since some feminist theoretical approaches challenge the notion of the individual artist as following a masculinist paradigm of mastery to which women historically did not have access. Secondly, feminists influenced by poststructuralism challenged the notion that the

individual artist is separate from his/her social condition or completely knowable to him/herself. Despite these pitfalls, there remains a paltry amount of information about many of these women video artists, and I follow Frederickson and Webb's lead in choosing to write about individual artists based on their own recollections combined with a critical analysis of how their experiences mirrored, reinforced, or, at times, resisted entrenched ideas about gender.⁴³ By combining these approaches, I attempt to open up new considerations of these artists' work. Through this research, we can examine both the day to day interactions of the artists with others in and outside of the artworld--where they encountered sexism or assertively transcended it--and we can examine ways in which they proposed alternatives to a theoretical structure for video that was based on patriarchal models

⁴³ Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb, *Singular Women: Writing the Artist*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003)1-6.

CHAPTER 1

THE MACHINE AS MASK: ENTERING THE VIDEO COMMUNITY

Steina and Woody Vasulka have long been considered pioneers of the video medium. They were among the first generation of artists to experiment with the electronic properties of the medium, building multi-monitor arrays of televisions since 1969 that displayed pure electronic signals manipulated through interruption and synthesized effects. Working largely collaboratively until 1974, they made tapes that would demonstrate the capabilities of video and shared their findings with other video artists. In addition, they invited other artists to show their work in a spirit of free exchange, first at their loft studio and then, in 1971, at the video exhibition space that became known as The Kitchen. This chapter will examine, then, not just Steina's participation in the video community in New York City between 1965 and 1980, when the couple moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, but rather Steina's crucial role in shaping that video community. To do so, I will relay her background in music and her transition into video media, the electronic image, and finally her exploration of the phenomenology of the video camera. I will then discuss The Kitchen in more detail, including Steina's role and the early history of the Women's Video Festival which she initiated at The Kitchen in 1972 and 1973, and which moved to the Women's Interart Center in 1975 and 1976.¹

Woody and Steina were married in Czechoslovakia in 1964 and moved to New York City in 1965. He was an experimental filmmaker, and she was a concert violinist.

¹ Susan Milano, the coordinator for most of the Women's Video Festivals, also brought a version of the festival to the American Cultural Center in Paris and then to Belgium in 1980. Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival," 37, n. 78.

Both expected to live in an environment of free experimentation when they arrived in the United States, but at first encountered a staunchly conservative community of immigrants. The Vasulkas were the only artists in this group, and Steina complained of gender bias in its social structure. At social gatherings, men and women would retire after dinner to separate rooms, where the women's conversations were focused primarily on subjects related to the domestic sphere such as childcare. Such topics were of no interest to Steina, who had come to expect a certain level of autonomy and professional respect as well as camaraderie with her colleagues, male or female. Born Steinunn Briem Bjarnadottir in Reykjavik, Iceland, Steina adopted Woody's surname only after arriving in the United States, where it eased the minds of landlords who were hesitant to rent rooms to unmarried couples. According to Steina, it was common in Iceland to simply call oneself by one's first name, and to this day she prefers to be called simply "Steina" in professional settings.² Steina moved from Iceland to Prague in 1959 when she received a scholarship to study at the music conservatory there. In 1964, she briefly joined the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra. Clearly, she was fully emancipated from her family and had already pursued a career as a professional musician by the time she arrived in New York. In addition, Steina seems to have seen the choice to be a professional artist as a conscious turn away from motherhood and what she called a "bourgeois life".³ To be segregated and alienated from social circles based on her gender would have been a clear sign of cultural conservatism, and a far cry from the expected freedom of American society.

² Steina, interview with the author, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 25 June 2003, tape recording.

³ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

Steina described their experience as expanding dramatically through their exposure to radical youth culture and to the electronic music scene in New York well after they arrived. Despite what she described as her more traditional classical musical training by comparison with Woody's film education in Prague, where he had been introduced to experimental processes, it was Steina who began bringing Woody to watch performances of synthesizer experiments and electronic sound environments staged at such places as Automation House.⁴ This broadening of artistic horizons coincided with new, larger initiatives of questioning authority, including the authority of institutions such as the traditional performance spaces. Describing the milieu among the youth in New York City circa 1965, Steina recounted,

“...it radicalized almost overnight, this idea that you always challenge authority, that if somebody says there's a rule, somebody else says 'who says so?' Very different from now! And that's how we fell into it. So that's why it was so natural for us to say--we tried to exhibit our stuff at other places, and they particularly wouldn't let us--so we said we don't need them. We can exhibit ourselves. There were places like Judson Church, and there was a place called WBAI Free Music Store which was affiliated with the radio station, and these people would give you a space, just raw space. So we did everything, got the equipment in there, and sent out the invitations.⁵

It was in the midst of these self-produced exhibitions and ad hoc performances that the idea for a space dedicated to new electronic media was proposed. One of the most memorable of these performances was a three-night run in the upstairs space at Max's Kansas City in February, 1971. This featured abstract electronic experiments using synthesizers and monitors, recordings of gay theater, and tapes of musical performances

⁴ Steina, interview with the author, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 24 June 2003, tape recording.

⁵ Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

by Jimi Hendrix and other musicians recorded from the Fillmore East Theater.⁶ “That’s where the third guy who started the Kitchen saw us and told us that there was this fabulous place down there in this deserted area called SoHo.”⁷ The exhibition space that the Vasulkas began, along with the third partner, Andy Mannik, was The Kitchen, which opened at the Broadway Central Hotel on Mercer Street in SoHo. The impact of this exhibition space on the video community and Steina’s role in it will be addressed later in this chapter. What is clear for now is that Steina’s experience of early electronic media was that it was anti-authoritarian, youthful, hands-on, and radical.

The Vasulkas began using video in 1969, while Woody was assisting filmmaker Harvey Lloyd, who made commercial and industrial films and who also was using closed-circuit and multi-monitor video systems in installations that were apparently commercial in nature.⁸ Woody began borrowing the equipment from Lloyd to take home so that he and Steina could experiment with it. As recounted in a 1983 article by Lucinda Furlong,

‘What started happening,’ Steina recalls, ‘was that every day Woody would come home from work at five o’clock, and I would have another piece for him. He got so jealous because in the evening he was tired. So he just came home from work one day and said, “I’m quitting!” Using some borrowed equipment and some that they bought in early 1970 the Vasulkas began to work more “systematically,” making feedback loops and using audio inputs to generate and alter the video signal inside black and white monitors.’⁹

⁶ Lucinda Furlong, “Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka,” *Afterimage* (December 1983), 14.

⁷ Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

⁸ Furlong, “Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka,” 13. It is noteworthy that in this case, video installation drew its origins from commercial displays.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Before 1974, most of the Vasulkas' work in video was collaborative, since both artists were trying to master technological aspects of the medium. Often, the person who was responsible for the technical aspect of the project was not responsible for the creative direction of the piece.¹⁰ To teach themselves how to use the equipment, they were hired on the technical crews of many other projects, most of them documentaries made with the new Sony portapak video equipment.¹¹ One of the first technical manipulations of the video signal the two artists investigated was the ability of the electronic image to drift horizontally across the video monitor. In broadcast television, the picture is regulated by timing pulses to remain consistently within the frame of this monitor, but the Vasulkas demonstrated in large installations like *Matrix* (1970-72) that the image can drift out of the frame of the monitor altogether and reappear in another monitor across a field of screens arranged in a grid in a gallery. Both Vasulkas wanted to pursue video experiments for aesthetic purposes, outside the realm of television, and to highlight its flexibility in the face of broadcast standardization. For Woody, who had worked in experimental filmmaking, this was a crucial demonstration of the aesthetic rather than the commercial properties of the medium; for Steina, the musician, it was an elaboration on a new instrument. In *Matrix*, the image was generated by sound waves made visible through electronic audio waves (fig. 2).¹² They purchased an audio synthesizer, noting that since both audio and video signals are made up of electronic waveforms, sound could generate video images and vice versa. This was one of the first areas of the video medium

¹⁰ Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

¹¹ The Vasulkas worked for a year in 1969-70 for the Alternate Media Center in New York, under George Stoney and Ned Burns. Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

¹² A portion of *Matrix* was viewed on a videotape of a program made for WNED in 1978 by the Vasulkas. The Vasulkas provided me with a full set of tapes containing a large portion of their archives. "Matrix/WNED" is on tape 1 of these archives.

that fascinated Steina. When the image was played back on the reel-to-reel playback deck, Woody or Steina could flip the switch to move the image off the screen right or left. Before editing equipment was available in 1972, many artists used multi-monitor displays or a single monitor display with several inputs so that they could alternate between images and, in effect, create an edit without having to physically cut their tape.¹³

The images that appeared on the screen during *Matrix* were also manipulated by external electronic inputs, which Woody and Steina saw as taking the absolute control over the result out of their hands. In most commercially available synthesizers, colorizers, and image layering tools used for broadcast, the users turned dials until the image looked the way they wanted it to. The Vasulkas preferred to manipulate the voltage input on their early machines to control the shapes and colors of their images. They saw this as a “dialogue” with the machines, where the artist shared authority over the image with the electronic signal. They set up the frequency parameters, but the electronic signal itself determined the image.¹⁴

In 1972, the Vasulkas commissioned engineer George Brown to design a tool that could alter the speed of the horizontal drift effect, called the Horizontal Drift Variable Clock. This was among the first of many such collaborations to design tools with electrical engineers. Although this was their first formalized collaborative relationship, the Vasulkas had already worked in 1970 with Eric Siegel, who was building colorizers, and Siegel helped Woody build his own colorizer in that year. But in 1971, after the Vasulkas won grant money from the New York State Council on the Arts, they hired Brown to become their “tool man,” and he built them a switcher in 1971 and a multi-

¹³ Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

¹⁴ Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka," 14.

keyer, which layers up to six images on top of one another, in 1973. In 1974, Brown also designed for them a programmer that would store and replay a sequence of effects such as keying and colorizing. Obviously, this was long before such programs were made available commercially to artists with personal computers.¹⁵ Though the Vasulkas are rightly credited for their pioneering work using such tools to create richly layered moving pictures, the collaborative nature of the design of these tools must be acknowledged. Maverick engineers like Brown and Siegel had the electrical engineering experience to build such machines and the desire to work outside of a commercial setting. Woody, who in Brno, Czechoslovakia had studied metal technology and hydraulic mechanics at the school of Industrial Engineering before he took up filmmaking, knew enough about engineering to assist Siegel making a colorizer.¹⁶ Siegel built the boards for the colorizer and Woody wired them together, which was his first wiring experience with video.¹⁷ Steina lacked this educational background in engineering, but before 1974 she certainly took part in using the equipment and could easily explain how the tools worked. As will be discussed in chapter two, women had largely been alienated from engineering fields in the United States since World War II. Still, Steina developed her own interest in building tools using gears and equipment found in junk shops on Canal Street in New York and she would use this equipment to build semi-automated camera devices for video projects for the *Machine Vision* series.

As mentioned previously, Steina assumed an egalitarian stance in her professional relationship with her husband and the engineers from the beginning of her career, a

¹⁵ Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka," 15.

¹⁶ Marita Sturken, *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 73.

¹⁷ Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka," 15.

position which she claimed was not often challenged. Like other women involved in video in the early 1970s, Steina came across less resistance to her presence among artist and engineer peers than she might have in a commercial television context. However, her status also depended on her assertion of a natural right to be included in the discussions and work sessions. She might not have trained in electrical engineering, but she inserted herself within discussions that took place between Woody and Siegel. She never questioned the appropriateness of her participation as one might have expected during a time when women's participation in technological fields was not a given. But as Jenny Ellis has noted, Icelandic women had a long social history of egalitarianism, that marked their material, lived conditions if not always their political power. Strong models for female strength and competence existed in the literary figure of the "Woman of the Mountain" and even a political culture that was "marked by a strong egalitarian ethic," in the mid-twentieth century which laid the foundation for feminist political parties like the Woman's Alliance in the 1980s.¹⁸ Although Steina had left Iceland in the late fifties, it is likely that some of her independence and liberated character was informed in part by her Icelandic heritage.

When the Vasulkas moved to Buffalo in 1974, Woody purchased a Rutt/Etra Scan Processor. Steina was not interested in working with this machine, and it was at this point that they began working more separately. According to Steina, she became more interested in mechanical devices and moving cameras, and she began pursuing, in 1975, what would become a series of projects called *Machine Vision*.¹⁹ The series explored the way cameras see, and Steina set up mechanical structures to move the camera, so that she

¹⁸ Jenny Lynn Ellis, "Feminist Politics and the Women's Alliance of Iceland," (M.A. Thesis, University of Colorado at Denver, 1993), 31-33.

¹⁹ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

would eliminate what she considered to be her own personal, subjective viewpoint. In the first of these “environments”, called *Allvision*, she mounted two cameras back to back on a turntable, so that when the turntable revolved, it filmed the surrounding space from two viewpoints at 180 degrees to one another. She further complicated this view by placing small mirrored spheres in front of each lens, so that the shot reflected the space behind and including the camera, instead of a straight view in front of the lens (fig. 3). The resulting images, then, were obstructed where the camera blocked the scene. In the first installation of *Allvision*, the images were then displayed on four pairs of monitors placed in corners of the room, in a closed-circuit environment with live images that included the viewer and the viewer’s immediate space.²⁰ Later versions reversed the cameras, so that they pointed inward at a large mirrored sphere placed in the center of the turntable (*Allvision II*, 1976, fig. 4). Other variations of the *Machine Vision* series used a motorized mirror in front of the camera, creating a pan of the room by moving the mirror up and down or right and left in front of the camera, rather than moving the camera itself, giving the illusion of moving through space.²¹ Still other versions used moving prisms in front of the camera, all in efforts to avoid the artist’ control over camera movements. Relying on objects to alter these views rather than manipulating the camera with human hands could be said to have allowed for a certain amount of chance. But for Steina, it was a way of seeing how non-human interventions could create their own views, or allowing for the viewer to experience space as a machine, in a sense seeing through “machine vision.”

Steina has cited a desire to move beyond the artist’s personal, idiosyncratic viewpoints as driving her to create environments where the final image was seemingly

²⁰ Steina Vasulka, "My Love Affair With Art: Video and Installation Work," *Leonardo* 28, no. 1 (1995), 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*

controlled entirely by a machine. According to her, there are certain stereotypical angles and viewpoints that are limited by human vision. As is often relayed in descriptions of her *Machine Vision* series, Steina wanted to allow the machine of the camera to act independently of her subjective manipulations, and she systematically devised ways to drive the camera operations mechanically rather than using her own hands and eyes. Allowing machines to control the speed of a pan for instance, or to show a space simultaneously before and behind the lens meant creating a space that Steina said “had nothing to do with stereotypes and the idiosyncrasy of human vision.”²² At the same time, the artist was very aware of the impossibility of entirely eliminating subjective factors in the camera’s viewpoint. In fact, she emphatically did not want to relinquish her role as an artist at all, but rather emphasized it. In an interview about the aims of “interactive” art, where the viewer is expected to participate heavily and even complete an artwork, Steina refuted the idea of this being a unique feature of media arts.

Interactivity is [in] each medium, in the sense that there is always an exchange, a communication between an author and a receiver....In any case there definitely is this principle of an authorship standing behind it....and this principle implicates a fascist (sic) character. To deny this fact and to tell people instead that true interactivity is only generated by electronic media and to tell it as a democratic art, in contrast to traditional art, is even betrayal.²³

Still, there were certain limitations to the human vision that Steina saw as liberated through the machine. The mirrored sphere of *Allvision* was in part inspired by reading about other species, such as fish, whose vision allows them to see behind their bodies as a

²² Quoted in Marco Maria Gazzano, *Steina e Woody Vasulka: Video, Media e Nuove Immagini nell’arte contemporanea* Roma Palazzo delle Esposizioni 15 dicembre 1994-11 gennaio 1995 (Rome: Editzioni Fahrenheit 451, 1995), 16.

²³ Mona Sarkis, “Perspective and the Media: A Conversation in Europe” in *Steina e Woody Vasulka: Video, Media e Nuove Immagini*, 5.

protection against predators.²⁴ Steina countered the notion of the all-powerful genius artist by insisting on the limits of human vision, and in this way she was similar to feminist historians such as Linda Nochlin who insisted the notion of the genius artist had been culturally constructed rather than naturally gifted with aesthetic sense.

Steina's particular fascination with motorized cameras was unique to her work, and distinct from Woody. However, they shared this interest in removing themselves from authorial control over the image. This is what had driven them to relinquish authority over the image in *Matrix* and in such works as *Calligrams* (1970) and *Noisefields* (1974). For Woody, this strategy was a reaction against narrative structures in film, and it goes back to his pre-video career as a filmmaker.²⁵ The strategy of using horizontal drift, for him, was consciously opposed to the vertical movement of the strip of film through a projector.²⁶ Later, he became interested in the electronic "code" of the video medium, first by using the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor, which he acquired in 1974 and which reduced the recorded image to its component scan lines. This produced a topographic image of the scene, so that the image appeared three-dimensional with brighter areas appearing higher than darker areas (fig. 5).²⁷ Woody, with his student Jeffrey Schier in Buffalo, then developed the Digital Image Articulator, a machine that would translate the electronic signal into individual pixels and then into digital code that

²⁴ Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

²⁵ There are other examples from film history of filmmakers who made non-narrative experimental films. Stan Brakhage, for instance, concentrated on fleeting compositions of light and color while narrative took a backseat or became almost non-existent, as in his classic, *Anticipation of the Night* (1958). Techniques including scratching and painting directly onto film stock, while initiated in 1955 with *Reflections on Black*, became more common for Brakhage in the 1980s and 90s. R. Bruce Elder, *The Films of Stan Brakhage in the American Tradition of Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson*, (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998), 417-423. European directors who made abstract films in the 1950s include Austrian Dieter Rot who punched holes in his film stock in the *Dots* series of films 1956-62. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003) 493-500.

²⁶ Sturken, ed., *Steina and Woody Vasulka*, 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

could be sampled and stored.²⁸ All of this, for Woody, was a way of working with electronic media, composed of signals, or “packets” of information, as distinguished from film, a photographic process. There was a long tradition of film codes that had already been established to communicate to an audience in a seemingly transparent way. As Marita Sturken pointed out, this ambivalent relationship to filmic structures, especially to narrative, grew out of a suspicion of grand, historical narratives that were a part of Eastern Europe’s experience of Communism in the 1940s and 50s. Woody stated,

We all knew about how narratives are constructed and about symbolic language. In communism you must disguise everything in symbolic language so it is a fluid form of expression. I wanted to purge it. I came here to be free of it and that’s why it’s a continuous temptation I have with narrativity—I cannot accept or practice it.²⁹

Steina also acknowledged that her “machine vision” worked against traditional Hollywood camera angles that tried to mimic human vision in a believable way, but the reaction against filmic codes was really more the driving force behind Woody’s work. With her background as a violinist, Steina easily considered her camera as an instrument. After the Vasulkas purchased a Sony Portapak in 1969, Steina said the effect on her career was nearly instantaneous, that she effectively gave up the violin for the camera, though she continued to play violin for a living for several more years.³⁰ The intense scrutiny to which Steina subjected her camera, and the joy she seemed to take in setting up a situation (or score) for her camera to play out, is indeed reminiscent of a musician’s intimate relationship with her instrument.

When the Vasulkas arrived in New York City, one of Steina’s favorite things to do was to stroll through shops on Canal Street searching for machine parts, “looking at

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

³⁰ Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

gears and motors as kinds of miracles that resembled life itself—mechanistic replications of the biological mystery. I love gizmos, such as the ones I find in surplus yards that can be refitted to serve my purposes.”³¹ The fact that Steina aligns these machine parts with the human body, giving them biological attributes, is interesting on several levels. On the one hand, it complicates the divide I have identified between performance and body-based work by women artists articulating a feminist viewpoint in the 1970s and video artists like Steina who were often considered formal modernists, studying the inherent properties of the electronic medium. Secondly, Steina’s identification of the machine in organic terms prefigured later feminist appropriations of the cyborg as a strongly feminist icon that refigured the body as constructed territory.³² On a third level, this represents a very different articulation of the video apparatus as an extension of the human body and in this way relates to Marshall McLuhan’s notion of the electronic medium as an extension of “man”.

Steina combined her musical prowess with her new love of electronic media in the videotape *Violin Power* from 1970-78. This ten-minute tape had three parts, opening

³¹ Steina Vasulka, "My Love Affair With Art," 16.

³² “Cyborg” is a contraction of “cybernetic” and “organism” and describes a body that combines mechanical and organic parts which could function in the space age. The term was coined by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in “Cyborgs and Space,” *Astronautics* (September 1960), cited in Mona Hadler, “Lee Bontecou’s Worldscapes,” in *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective* (exh. cat.) (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art and University of California, 2003) 206 n.23. I am grateful to Mona Hadler for pointing this out to me. The figure of the cyborg became popular through the 1970s among science fiction writers such as Anne McCaffrey, Samuel Delany, James Tiptree, and John Varley and has been used more recently to describe the increasing infiltration of the human body by mechanical prostheses. The character of the cyborg played an important role in popular films such as Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner* (1982), James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984), *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), as well as the television program, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994). Since Donna Haraway’s groundbreaking 1991 essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181; “cyborg” has also been used to describe a non-essentialist approach to female subjectivity stressing its artificiality and, therefore, its lack of oedipal and other patriarchal notions of origin or originality. It subverts the traditionally gendered nature/culture binary.

with a shot of Steina playing her violin in front of the camera. This was followed by a close-up shot of Steina lip-synching to the Beatles' "Let It Be" (fig. 6). Finally, the third scene shows Steina playing the violin again, but now her instrument is hooked up to an audio synthesizer so that the sound generates video patterns. Though the tape was completed long after Steina had made her transition from musician to video artist, it could be seen as charting the artist's transition from classically-trained musician to avant-garde media artist, by way of 1960s counterculture. In the third section of the piece, her performance combined her violin playing with her interest in electronic imagery by hooking the violin up to a Midi synthesizer so that the sounds generated by the violin caused distortions to the image (fig. 7).³³ In this case, she combined the abstractions generated by the sound with a recorded image of herself playing. As in many of Steina's projects, *Violin Power* combined performative qualities with abstract electronic waveforms that demonstrated the electronic properties of the medium. The electronic aspect was often considered to be a formal, modernist exploration of a medium's unique properties, while the emphasis on performance was later hailed as a postmodern strategy to insert the body into the praxis of art.

The tape begins with Steina playing a classical piece standing in a room and playing with dramatic sweeping movements reminiscent of any traditional concert soloist. It is a very young Steina, quite serious and projecting the aura of an intense student, with her concentrated expression and her pointed, black glasses. There is an abrupt cut, and then a different shot of Steina, who has now lost the glasses and pretends to play along to the Beatles' "Let it Be", her movements now grooving in time to the electric guitar and her body jerking more rapidly and loosely. As the camera moves in

³³ Gazzano, *Steina e Woody Vasulka: Video, Media e Nuove Immagini*, 110.

close to her face she gives up playing the violin altogether, faces front and lip-synchs to Paul McCartney's vocals. An extreme close up crops all but Steina's lips, and through the rest of the song her mouth moves along with the music, sometimes missing lyrics or getting out of sync, but always these lips and teeth which are not Paul's viscerally and passionately form a visual analog to the music. A new shot shows Steina playing slow notes on the violin which is now hooked up to an audio synthesizer, so that the sounds that are emitted hum and wail electronically in contrast to the earlier warmth of the sound from the horsehair strings. In a series of variations, two images of the performer alternate, creating a flashing effect on the screen, whose speed is synchronous with the speed of Steina's bow across the strings. The violin was hooked up to an audio synthesizer, which was in turn hooked up to a video switcher, so that the violin controlled the switching between two different views of Steina's performance. All of this remains in black and white and gets progressively more abstract, with the image distorting itself, for example as when the bow turns into waving diagonal electronic patterns (figure 7). This section is slower, more methodical, and Steina's eyes are often closed, once again the picture of a performer completely engrossed in the contemplative mood of her piece. At the end of this second section, the image is pixilated even more, and soon her face is completely transformed into three-dimensional wave patterns through the use of the Rutt-Etra scan processor. Since the image is generated by the sound waves from the violin, every time a sound emits, the topographical landscape of the image grows, and in moments of silence, the screen is completely black (fig. 8). In the third section, Steina's body is no longer dematerialized into pixels, but is now run through a keyer so that her image gets repeated and layered, mirroring itself several times through space. She finishes playing, with a

large grin on her face, looks around at the mirrored images of herself, and says “c’est moi,” raising her hand triumphantly. A low voice chuckles from behind the camera, that of Woody, who has been the camera operator throughout all three sections. He says “alright...” and the camera is shut off. The mood of the piece is extremely playful, particularly the first and third sections, and one senses that the tape was a lighthearted demonstration of a discovery, in which Steina took pride, while refusing to take it too seriously or dramatically. In this last section she wears striped pants and a tight shirt that is printed with the lines of a tuxedo, like a jester’s outfit parodying the formal elegance of a tuxedoed concert musician. Her transition from musician to video artist is one that has been liberating, full of joy and humor, and full of youthful rebellion.

The image of Steina’s transformation from musician to electronic jester is also a transformation into a cyborg. In the last section of Donna Haraway’s groundbreaking 1991 essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” she identified and called for more images of the woman-as-cyborg who counters modernist dualisms between mind and body, public and private, and the idealized spaces of home, market, and work place. She pointed to science-fiction as a source for emblematic cyborgs who use the machine as a prosthesis that moves women into positions of power and exchange. For Haraway, this in no way ignored the fact that technology has played a crucial role in the oppression of women, particularly third world women who in late capitalism make up the primary workforce in technological industries. But a woman whose performance complicates the divisive “machine/organism relationships” through the integration of her corporeal body and an electronic signal works to actively destroy essentialist notions of gender.³⁴ Steina’s playful *Violin Power* could be seen as demonstrating this strategy, where the body-in-

³⁴ Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 178.

performance is integrated with the electronic signal, so the final work becomes a new entity that is neither organic nor mechanistic, analog nor digital. The subject as artist gets transmitted and altered, and its status as natural object is called into question.

Appearing as a cyborg allowed Steina to demonstrate her proficiency with the technology and her power as a speaking subject. As several critics have pointed out, the fact that women like Steina had access to technological media such as video, effectively free of established male-dominated criteria for success, stimulated their prolific examinations of the nature of the image and technology in addition to, and simultaneous with, the examination of subjectivity and perception. As Sara Diamond pointed out:

Women's videos examine: the proliferation of objectified images of women versus the actuality of women's identity and experience; the differences between narcissism and self-representations; the cultural impact of television; the relationship between audio and visual narratives; performance modes versus private modes, the potentially interactive nature of video versus the one-way communication of television; the separation of public and private space, the linguistic function of the television as frame; and other themes.³⁵

Coming from the perspective of a critic writing in the 1980s, Diamond lists a variety of approaches women video artists took in the 1970s, stressing narrative, identity, and performance. By experimenting with the structure of video, especially through altering relationships between audio and visual signals, or by her interaction with the signal, Steina is also studying the "linguistic function," the "frame" of the medium and deconstructing the one-way communication of television as well as questions of

³⁵ Sara Diamond, "Whose Vision Will Rule the Future? Women, Technology and Art," *Parallelogramme* (1985): 19.

subjectivity.³⁶ Through Steina's examination of video's structure, she was able to provide a commentary on the nature of a medium, and critically assess what was possible.

In 1974, Woody began teaching at Center for Media Studies at the State University of New York in Buffalo.³⁷ After moving to Buffalo and beginning to work more independently of Woody, Steina became most interested in machines that would make the image move. She was not satisfied with how her own hand could move the camera and so she used gears to build machines that would make the camera movements instead. This fascination with gears was a novelty, unfamiliar to her from her past, whereas for her husband, Woody, salvaging machine parts had been an old pastime from his youth in Czechoslovakia, where he had picked up World War II scrap. Steina related,

Woody had done this as a boy in Czechoslovakia, he knew everything about motors and gears, and gearing down and gearing up and all those things. To me it was very exciting. He would always say, 'are you really interested in this?' Because he wanted to go more cerebral but I wanted to go down to the material.³⁸

One of the difficulties Steina wanted to surmount with her machines was that the handheld camera was always jerky, particularly when it came to zooming. At the time, lenses zoomed in and out by turning a handle on the side of the lens by hand. Steina replaced this manual zoom with machines that would perform camera operations. *Orbital Obsessions* is a series of four tapes that used such mechanized motors to control the

³⁶ By using the term "deconstructing," I am referring to Jacques Derrida's concept of analyzing an institution or field of knowledge to demonstrate the power structures implicit within it. He invoked "the frame" as a metaphor for the culturally agreed-upon boundaries delimiting a work of art from non-art, for instance, in his essay, "Parergon." By altering the usual relationship of audio to visual in broadcast media, where both usually fulfill a narrative function that supersedes aesthetic needs, Steina points out and critiques the "frame" of television. She also interrupts the flow of the signal so that she speaks as the subject, taking that authority away from corporate broadcasters. Jacques Derrida, "Parergon" in *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 20-23.

³⁷ Although it was Woody who was permanently hired as a professor, Steina was sometimes hired as an unpaid adjunct, allowing her to teach part of Woody's classes. Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

³⁸ Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

camera movement.³⁹ The tape, which was completed between 1975 and 1977 (and revised in 1988), contains excerpts from four different pieces that were all completed in Buffalo, New York. These individual pieces were *Signifying Nothing* (1975), *Sound and Fury* (1975), *Switch! Monitor! Drift!* (1976), and *Snowed Tapes* (1977). Each of the tapes used the camera mounted to a turntable so that the camera slowly revolved in space, recording a 360 degree view of the surrounding space. The turntable was an industrial turntable that came from a discarded computer used for military bombing operations that Woody had found in one of the Canal Street shops. He had taken the computer apart and pieced it out to several artists who found various uses for its components. The turntable was marked “North, South, East, and West” and had been used for calibrating directions. Though Steina never commented on it, this reuse of a war machine would have been extremely potent in the context of the early 1970s and the protests over the U.S. involvement in Viet Nam that were prevalent among the Vasulkas’ countercultural peers. The irony of the artistic use of a World War II machine was certainly strong for Woody who had grown up in war-torn Czechoslovakia.

Signifying Nothing, the first tape in the *Orbital Obsessions* series, begins abruptly with the camera revolving on its turntable and recording the space of the Vasulkas’ studio. Steina and Woody are in the room, watching the camera and they discuss the camera and monitor arrangements. Steina carries a monitor in front of the camera, walking in a circle around the studio while directing Woody, who aims another camera at Steina and at the first camera. They talk back and forth, with Woody telling her what he sees, and Steina giving directions. Onscreen, the image is repeated inside of a box, giving

³⁹ I viewed *Orbital Obsessions* on a videotape in the Vasulka archive. It is also available at Electronic Arts Intermix in New York City.

a mirrored, repetitious effect. At the edges of the studio are an array of monitors displaying what Steina is recording in a live closed-circuit environment. Woody occasionally gives Steina suggestions, which she more often than not rejects, at times saying, “Oh, that’s too corny.” The finished tape is one that is without drama—a straightforward performance of the tasks that Steina had set up for the camera and monitors. *Signifying Nothing*, demonstrated not only how the revolving camera works and how space can be layered through the keyer, but also demonstrated something of the Vasulkas’ working method during this period. One of them, in this case Steina, took the lead as the creative director, appearing both in front of the camera and shaping the environment, giving directions to Woody, who assisted technically.

The next section in the series, *Sound and Fury*, uses switchers to quickly alternate two views of the studio. As the image alternates, it creates an electronic wobbling noise. The camera records pictures of a studio environment filled with tapes, early computers, and synthesizer equipment. The image zooms in and out, close then far away. In the next section the alternating views continue, with the buzz of the electronic imagery loudly playing, but there is also a soft soundtrack of violin music. The image becomes one of Steina moving slowly and methodically in front of the camera, in a rocking dance that corresponds to the speed of the music. In this sequence, Steina injects a performative aspect that goes beyond the everyday completion of tasks or running of equipment. The more formal dance sequence corresponds with the violin music, suggesting that Steina is orchestrating a multi-layered symphony of machine, movement, and sound. As the dance section ends, Steina reaches outside of the view of the camera (mostly likely to flip a switch on the apparatus), and the entire image begins revolving counterclockwise. Soon,

the motion stops, and the angles change, so that we see an aerial view of the camera on its turntable, layered with images of Steina moving through the studio making adjustments to the camera equipment. She makes an adjustment, and then watches the camera proceed, closely watching the camera's progress. Instead of revolving around the room, the camera now records the alternate plane, moving up and down the space of the room. Another abstraction occurs where the image's tones are reversed, creating a negative effect reminiscent of a solarized photograph. The theme of orbits is repeated here, as the piece is mostly made up of turning images, layered on top of one another.

Switch! Monitor! Drift!, the third part of the *Orbital Obsessions* series, takes place in the same studio space, with the camera revolving very slowly around the turntable. Steina walks around the camera, sometimes appearing in the lens' view, then moving out of it. A vertical bar of secondary images moves across the screen from right to left, once again layering two images on top of one another (fig. 9). Steina's hand reaches in and flips a switch, changing the direction of the movement, or sometimes simply changing the speed. Here she is using the Horizontal Drift Variable Clock built in 1972. The shots record this shared studio space so that the recorded images always refer back to the artists whose art and lives are thoroughly integrated. There is one shot of a wall in the studio that contains neatly hanging circles of cables; another shot shows the kitchen space which served both work and domestic functions. Steina briefly captures an image of Woody, standing near the kitchen, looking at the camera, in a stance similar to her own, interested in watching the camera perform its task. His expression is perhaps a bit less anxious than Steina's, as he stands still, chewing his gum.

In *Snowed Tapes*, the final part of the series, a new sound is heard, a loud, echoing tone that throbs across the space of the screen. Every time it sounds, the image becomes bright and overexposed, with vertical bands moving across the screen. Steina appears in headphones, monitoring the sound. The camera continues to revolve, with the image moving horizontally across the screen, alternating between positive and negative in increasing speeds. Onscreen, the viewer sees a richly layered composite of the camera's views at slightly different times. Steina's movements are few and deliberate, which is fortuitous because as the camera cuts and layers them, they become complex like a collage. Technically, Steina was generating sound and image at the same time, and alternating between having the audio signal generate the visual and vice-versa.⁴⁰ On screen, Steina mostly drinks calmly from a coffee mug, occasionally making an adjustment. She allows herself to become the object of focus, but the role she performs is always that of the artist, adjusting the machines, directing and choreographing the situation, but also allowing the work to unfold. The title, *Snowed Tapes*, was an allusion to a particularly bad snowstorm in Buffalo that kept Steina inside the studio for days, tinkering and producing the experimental images that made up the tape.⁴¹

Steina captured her own image in *Orbital Obsessions*, since she was present in the studio while the camera rotated on the turntable, and her image suggests an artist who is thoroughly comfortable around the equipment. Her demeanor is entirely matter of fact, as she watches the camera move and the events take place. Periodically she adjusts dials, but mostly she walks around the camera with her arms folded. She is certainly aware of the camera, and makes no attempt to pretend it is not there, but at the same time she makes

⁴⁰ Steina, email correspondence with the author, 25 August 2005.

⁴¹ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

no overt gestures to perform in front of the camera. As will be discussed in chapter two, there has been a cultural stereotype of women as alienated from computers and electronic equipment in the post-World War II era in the United States, and it does seem notable that Steina's image resists any stereotypes about women's supposed incapacity for machines. Her role, and her image in tapes like *Orbital Obsessions*, provide a strong counterpart, for instance, to images of the control center at Houston during the first manned flight to the moon from 1969, a room filled with computers, screens and dials entirely *manned* by male engineers (fig. 10). Steina insists she never felt uncomfortable or alienated working with the engineers and technicians who have been mostly male throughout her career. However, further pressing during our interview led to the acknowledgement that the stereotypes existed, but that she chose to ignore them and press on with her work. When asked if any of the male engineers thought it strange that she, as a woman, was interested in the gadgetry, she replied,

...there is always a little bit of that, and men have a hard time with women, but if you understand that men have a hard time with women you can just live with it or kind of cut through it or you can just let them think you are inferior because I don't care. It makes no difference to me, I just want to know what I want to know.... what I appreciate about men is that they are not interested in your psychological status. They don't say, 'oh you don't look well today my dear, is there something wrong?' They just take you as you are and you discuss issues and problems.⁴²

Considering her choice to ignore stereotypes or sexist attitudes puts the content of Steina's work in new light. She did focus largely on the possibilities of the video camera, the electronic image, and the phenomenal space of the world as seen through the camera and mechanical gadgets. Steina avoided subject matter rooted in social commentary, including feminist statements, but perhaps rather than being a passive retreat, this

⁴² Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

enunciation of structural and technical concerns was a demonstration of her capability in the face of sexism.

Although I have argued that the phenomenological exploration of space through machine-generated imagery, in which she was engaged, had radical and even feminist overtones, she never explicitly made her experiences as a woman the subject of her videotapes. However, many of her peers chose to more openly deal with issues of female identity, and Steina played a part in seeing that those tapes were screened and reviewed professionally. The main outlet for video artists to screen their work in front of an audience, of course, was The Kitchen. The Kitchen grew out of a need for a public space to show new artists' videotape. As discussed, the Vasulkas had quite often showed their own work and that of others in their own studio, but as more and more artists began using the new medium, a larger space was required. The ad hoc nature of a cheap, functional, sparse space was perfect for a medium that celebrated the fact that footage could be instantly played back or was often live. A work could be shot on a given afternoon and shown to an audience that same evening. Modest funding for such a space came from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), which was eager to support a new medium, but was required to fund groups rather than individuals. This factor will be discussed in more detail in chapter four during the analysis of the video collectives, but it also played a large part in the formation of the Kitchen and the Vasulkas' role in that alternative space.

In 1971, Eric Siegel approached the Vasulkas to join in starting a group that could apply for grants from the NYSCA. The group would be sponsored by Howard Wise, whose gallery had mounted the important *Television as a Creative Medium* exhibition in

1969. This exhibition had included early video art by artists such as Nam June Paik, Eric Siegel, Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Paul Ryan and others. The Vasulkas were not included in the exhibition, but they saw it and were influenced by it. There were no women video artists included in the exhibition and it should be mentioned that this was a time when women were notoriously excluded from the gallery system. This may have contributed to a situation where many women did not initially submit work to some of the first organized video events. Despite the fact that no women video artists were included, cellist Charlotte Moorman had a strong presence at the opening where she wore Nam June Paik's notorious *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* while she performed. Her collaborative role with Paik in this exhibition and other Fluxus-related events was crucial to both of the artists' oeuvres, but as the designer of the video apparatus, it was Paik who was credited for the *TV Bra* and who was invited to participate. The exhibition at Howard Wise was a landmark for the history of video since it was the first art exhibition where the new medium was the focus, and in this technophile atmosphere, women's contributions were marginalized at best. In late 1971 or early 1972, Wise was approached by Russell Connor, the person who distributed funds from the NYSCA, about whether he wanted to start a video group. At the time, Wise was working with Siegel, and he was also in the process of closing his gallery and starting the non-profit organization Electronic Arts Intermix.⁴³ Wise asked Siegel if he wanted to begin a group that Wise would sponsor, and Siegel in turn asked the Vasulkas and a fourth artist, Vinny Novak. The four artists named their group Perceptions, but they essentially wanted to produce

⁴³ Howard Wise's gallery and its involvement with video art is the subject of an article by Marita Sturken, "TV as a Creative Medium: Howard Wise and Video Art" *Afterimage* (May 1984): 5-9.

independent artworks and the group organization was a formality to secure funding.⁴⁴

After the group secured their funding, the Vasulkas decided to spend their portion, \$12,000 in the first year, on finishing a space they had discovered on Broadway in order to show video art. The Kitchen was opened in what had once been the kitchen of the Broadway Central Hotel.⁴⁵ The building housed several experimental theaters, and was known as the Mercer Arts Center. The Kitchen moved to new quarters at 484 Broome Street in July, 1973, one month before the Broadway Central Hotel building collapsed.

The official founders of The Kitchen were Steina and Woody Vasulka, and Andy Mannik, the carpenter who built the space out.⁴⁶ The Kitchen was subtitled, “Live Audience Test Laboratory”, and it was intended to be a space where artists could test their work in front of a live audience. The original plan was not to charge an admission fee, and also not to pay fees to exhibiting artists. It was a free space for experimentation. The Kitchen’s name, evoking an informal and domestic space, also conveyed the idea of a “test kitchen” where artists stirred-up concoctions that were blends of music, theater, and electronic technology. This spirit sharply contrasted with the rigid hierarchies of Broadway theaters and blue-chip art galleries. Of course, the “kitchen” has also been largely coded as “feminine,” adding another level of irony since artists and artwork coded as too feminine would have also been marginalized from the powerful art market. Kitchens were probably not experienced as feminine spaces by the Vasulkas, who rarely followed gendered domestic conventions (Woody has always done most of the cooking),

⁴⁴ This was a common way for many artists in New York to get around the issue of grant money only being available to groups. Howard Wise was very open about his desire to sponsor a group but to award money for individual projects. The state council was aware of the problem, according to Steina, and it was this that drove them to begin the video awards through the CAPS (Creative Artists Public Service) program in 1970, to which individual artists could apply for small grants.

⁴⁵ Victor Ancona, “Strange Brew: What’s Cooking at The Kitchen?” *Videography* (July 1977) 42.

⁴⁶ According to Steina, Mannik had also been a carpenter and dancer for Merce Cunningham. Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

but the informality of the kitchen space was certainly part of their concept.⁴⁷ Notably, the name was cause for some consternation on the part of Bob Stearns, one of The Kitchen's subsequent directors, who complained in 1977 that it was not only confusing because it sounded like the name of a restaurant, but also that it was "...outdated. It has a 1960s antiestablishment ring to it. It's too cute." In this statement, one hears discomfort at the apparent informality and irreverence for traditional media and institutions that was fundamental to the original Kitchen.

Soon after it was established, the profile of The Kitchen became such that artists were nearly guaranteed that their work would be reviewed in both the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times*, which provided an additional incentive for artists despite the lack of commercial support. Woody and Steina were the first directors for the first two years, and under their direction there were to be no curatorial decisions. As Steina put it, "there were 365 nights, and we had 365 artists who wanted to show".⁴⁸ The administrative duties often fell largely on Steina, who said she enjoyed them, though neither she nor Woody had had any administrative experience. As we will see in chapter four, this division of labor mirrors the gendered division of labor in other groups, such as Raindance, with female members often running the daily activities while male members provided the public face. Steina recalled, "...it was very often, again, because Woody was the man, that people would approach him....Woody is this kind of welcoming guy and happy with

⁴⁷ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003. The Vasulkas' practice of using kitchens as an extension to a work space was reinforced for me during my interview with Steina, which took place in the kitchen of their Santa Fe home, and which was dominated by electronic equipment stacked in every corner. The rudimentary kitchen was modest and clearly not the focal point of their lives, but rather a convenient space with a table as a flat surface on which to work.

⁴⁸ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

everybody and everything, so it was always great, and then he would ask them to talk to me about the details, and that's how we would run it."⁴⁹

With a miniscule budget, much of the planning for The Kitchen was conducted using pay phones outside the building, and the Vasulkas depended on their friendly relationships with the tightly knit community of young artists who thrived in an atmosphere of easy exchange. The community grew increasingly more divisive, however, as competition stiffened for grant money from the state council, and as more people became involved in The Kitchen who wanted to make curatorial decisions about who should show and who should not. The Vasulkas saw this as an ideal time to make their exit from The Kitchen. They had also initially wanted the space to be solely devoted to electronic media, but there was a strong desire for performance artists to participate in the venue. By 1973, there were also several dedicated volunteers who had the energy and desire to take over many of the administrative duties. The Vasulkas had always wanted to return to devoting more time to their own work, and while they were fulfilled by seeing The Kitchen begun, they never wanted to direct it full time or on an ongoing basis. When Woody got the opportunity to teach at a workshop and then at the Center for Media Study at the State University of New York in Buffalo, the Vasulkas were ready to leave the city and The Kitchen.

Although the Vasulkas moved to Buffalo, where they remained until 1980, they never became removed from the other video artists working across New York State. Because of the funding process for video projects from the New York State Council on the Arts, many artists and groups moved out of the city to upstate towns to get state funding. The council could not concentrate all of its funding in New York City, so

⁴⁹ Ibid.

projects were begun in places like Binghamton, Saugerties, and Buffalo so that legislators could prove that the program benefited constituencies across the state.

During their tenure at The Kitchen, the Vasulkas began several video festivals extending open invitations to video artists, throughout the New York region and nationally, to screen their work at these events. In June, 1972, Steina and Woody organized the first video festival at The Kitchen. *Video as an Electronic Art Medium* featured artists from across the U.S. and Canada.⁵⁰ Steina noted, however, that very few women submitted tapes to the festival. She considered this shocking because she personally knew many women were producing videotapes, but for some reason, they did not submit their work. In fact, as many women video artists have relayed, many women took up video as a medium in part because it did not have the exclusionary history that older media had toward women artists. So Steina decided to host a Women's Video Festival at the Kitchen, and the first of these festivals was held from September 14 to October 8, 1972, only a few months after the inaugural festival.⁵¹ Although Steina initiated the women's festival, she quickly found Susan Milano, a volunteer at the Kitchen and a video artist herself, to oversee the project. Milano and several other volunteers had migrated to the Kitchen from Global Village, a space run by Rudi Stern and John Reilly. Steina credits Global Village with providing these volunteers with rigorous training, although many left Global Village because of that rigor and what they considered to be poor treatment. Along with Milano, who had extensive technical and

⁵⁰ Flier for Women's Video Festival, 1972, available on The Kitchen archives at the Vasulka website, <http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Kitchen/KWVF/WVF001.pdf> viewed on 1/11/04 .

⁵¹ Holder, 18. The flier announcing the Women's Video Festival gives the dates for the festival as September 14-September 30th. This document is available on the Kitchen archives at the Vasulka website, <http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Kitchen/KWVF/WVF001.pdf> viewed on 1/11/04 . It is possible that the festival was extended past its planned ending date. There is at least one tape that is mentioned in both reviews as an "unofficial entry" by Joanne Kyger called *Descartes*, and this tape does not appear on the printed schedule.

production experience, came Shridhar Bapat, a young male artist from India who became the only paid employee at The Kitchen.⁵² Bapat was responsible for writing the invitation that went out to the female video artists, and—as someone who Steina describes as very educated and sophisticated—seems to have been given many of the responsibilities of writing copy for The Kitchen. When asked if there was ever any controversy over having a young man so involved with the planning of the Women’s Video Festival, Steina replied that it was never a problem. In the first place, she speculated that women never had as much of a problem including men in their projects as men had including women, though this would be difficult to quantify or prove. But secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, she pointed out that the Indian Bapat was “very diminutive guy” and his slight, ethnic bearing was not especially authoritative or coded as particularly “masculine” in an American context.

Very few of the tapes that were shown in the women’s festivals have been preserved. In 2003, Melinda Barlow published the article “Feminism 101: The New York Women’s Video Festival, 1972-80” that gave an important state-of-the-research on these events, in which she brought together photographs, accounts by reviewers, records of tapes and performances gleaned from posters and catalogs along with her own original interviews with Susan Milano. Barlow contextualized these primary documents in light of the women’s movement and contemporaneous feminist literature and popular culture, providing a representation that effectively recreated the spirit of the festivals.⁵³ This article is also extremely valuable in that it establishes which tapes from the women’s festivals are currently extant. Since most of the tapes have been lost, much of the

⁵² Steina, interview with the author, 24 June 2003.

⁵³ Melinda Barlow, “Feminism 101: The New York Women’s Video Festival, 1972-1980” *Camera Obscura* 54 (vol. 18 no. 3) 3-38.

information about the content of the first Women's Video Festival must be gleaned from reviews and accounts from participants.⁵⁴ There were at least two lengthy reviews that are presently available from The Kitchen archives at the Vasulkas' website. The first was written by Maryse Holder for the feminist journal, *Off Our Backs*, and the second was written by Robin Reisig for the *Village Voice*.⁵⁵ According to Holder, on opening night the exhibition space contained eight monitors, a row of four stacked on top of another row of four, and even though many of the pieces were straight documentaries, they were shown on all eight monitors. Holder speculated that this was to "compensate for the lack of esthetic 'novelty'" but the decision seems to relate to Steina's preference for showing artistic videos in a multi-monitor environment, to separate them from the unexceptional experience of viewing television.⁵⁶ The festival opened with three works attributed to the Vasulkas, although one of these works, *Let It Be*, has recently been attributed solely to Steina and it is she who performs in front of the camera.⁵⁷ (The other two works, *Elements* and *Nixon*, could not be found in any catalog by this writer). As confirmed by the review, many of the rest of the tapes in the festival were documentaries, often on topics that dealt overtly with gender or focused on female subjects. There were several tapes that were submitted by feminist-oriented collectives, such as Queer Blue Light Video, who produced *Lesbian Mothers*, or Women's Video Collective, which produced

⁵⁴ I attempted on several occasions to contact Susan Milano for an interview, but did not receive a response. Thus, I relied primarily on Steina's recollections, the reviews of the exhibitions, and Barlow's article (which included interviews with Milano) for my discussion of the festivals. Milano currently lives in New York City.

⁵⁵ Maryse Holder, "Women's Video Festival," *Off Our Backs* (October 1972), 18; Robin Reisig, "Women on Tape: Spinning Tales and Tailspins," *The Village Voice* (5 October 1972): 46. Both articles were accessed through the Vasulka online archives, <http://www.vasulka.org/archive/Kitchen> on 1/11/04.

⁵⁶ As Melinda Barlow recounts, in the 1975 Women's Video Festival, the domestic space of the living room as the common backdrop for television viewing was purposely referenced, rather than avoided, through many of the video installations that year, including works by Maxi Cohen and Mary Lucier. Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival," 23.

⁵⁷ *Let It Be* was used again as the second section of *Violin Power*, discussed above.

Women on Sex: A Conversation or the West Side Women's Video Collective, which produced *Eeyore's Birthday* and *Single Women Raising Families*. Darcy Umststadter's *The Worst is Over*, one of three tapes she submitted to the festival, featured a record of an abortion, recorded by several women using portapak cameras.⁵⁸

Susan Milano submitted two tapes to The Women's Video Festival, one a documentary called *Tattoo* (1972), a kind of portrait of an elderly tattooed woman in a circus sideshow which included discussions of the tattooing process by the medical community and by a male tattoo artist. Milano included on-the-street interviews with the public about attitudes toward tattooing as well.⁵⁹ Milano also screened her first tape called *Transsexuals* (1971) that she had co-produced while a workshop participant at Global Village.⁶⁰ This tape contained interviews with transsexuals and which had won a prize in a similar festival in Minneapolis (Kitchen announcement).⁶¹ Also notable, in the context of this dissertation, was Shigeo Kubota's entry, *Joa: Impasse of the Infidelity* that took as its subject a "sex-dance-theater troupe" that Holder said "included transvestites and, among others a woman weating(sic) a transparent net leotard with cut-outs for breasts. Both the music and the dance were stylish parodies of raunch strip, as well as stylizations of love-making" (18). (This subject matter is similar to footage from a European burlesque club taken in 1972 that appeared in Kubota's *Europe on Half-Inch a Day*, to be discussed later.) Holder also described Kubota's use of a multi-monitor

⁵⁸ The first and second Women's Video Festival were un-juried, in keeping with the spirit during the Vasulkas' tenure as directors. All tapes submitted were apparently screened. The first WVF to use a jury was the third one, held in 1975. Letter from Susan Milano to Lynda Rodolitz dated June 1975, Rodolitz archives.

⁵⁹ *Tattoo* is currently available in the collection of the Donnell Media Center, New York Public Library and was viewed by me on April 26, 2003.

⁶⁰ Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival," 12.

⁶¹ Among the documentaries that seem not to have focused on subjects specific to women's experience was Ann Arlen's *Ex-Attica*, a tape of interviews with two former inmates from the New York correctional facility. (I have not viewed this tape, and reviews provided only limited, formal description.)

installation and formal techniques that abstracted her imagery, such as the use of a split-screen effect and of a delay—where the image in one monitor appeared fifteen-seconds later in a second monitor.

The first Women’s Video Festival was, by all accounts, a success and was well-attended, according to Holder’s review. Several interviewees for this dissertation remembered particularly well *The Rape Tape*, citing it as a powerful document of a subject that had largely gone unspoken in the past.⁶² The Second Women’s Video Festival was held September 28-October 14 1973 at the Kitchen. Again, Susan Milano directed the festival, along with Shridhar Bapat and another volunteer, Patti Hazan.⁶³ By now, the directors for The Kitchen were credited as Shridhar Bapat, Jim Burton, and Bob Stearns. Woody and Steina Vasulka appeared in the credits as “Kitchen Associates,” along with Andy Mannik and Vincent Novack, who had helped found The Kitchen.⁶⁴ Works submitted by artists who are among the subjects of this study include Kubota’s *Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky*, the Vasulkas’ *Golden Voyage*, and Korot’s *By the People*, a tape Korot had made as part of a community cable project in Saugerties, New York.⁶⁵ Other notable tapes in this second festival included the San Francisco collective Optic Nerve’s documentary, *Miss California Pageant 1973* which is a critique

⁶² Produced by Jenny Goldberg and Under One Roof Video, this tape consisted of four women sitting in a group talking about their experiences as victims of rape. I have not located Jenny Goldberg, and it is not known if this tape still exists. It had such an effect on its viewers, that nearly all of the women interviewed about the festival, Steina, Beryl Korot, and Lynda Rodolitz, recalled it vividly. It was also discussed in Holder’s review in *Off Our Backs*, 18.

⁶³ Also credited for their assistance on the festival were Ann Eugenia Volkes, Betty Brown, and Susan Goldstein.

⁶⁴ Women’s Video Festival program, collection of Lynda Rodolitz.

⁶⁵ Kubota’s tape is the subject of more intensive study later in this dissertation. *Golden Voyage* was viewed by this writer on a videotape provided by Steina from the Vasulka archives, tape#2, and Korot’s tape is no longer extant, to my knowledge or the artist’s.

of beauty pageants.⁶⁶ A tape called *Narcisicon* (1973), credited to “Etra,” which is discussed in more detail in chapter two, was a collaboration between Louise and Bill Etra, the co-inventor of the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor. Bill Etra was also credited as a Kitchen Associate in this program. According to a catalog entry in the 1976 Fourth Annual Women’s Video Festival, where it was screened again, the ten-minute tape consisted of a color image of Louise Etra’s face, manipulated using the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor.

The second WVF was co-sponsored by Women’s Interart Center. The third and fourth WVFs would be completely sponsored and moved to the Women’s Interart Center, a non-profit center dedicated to women artists using new media such as performance and video. The center’s artistic director was Margot Lewitin. The festival underwent a major change when it began to use a jury system to select tapes, beginning with the third festival in 1975.⁶⁷ Jurors included Louise Etra and Lynda Rodolitz as well as Ann Eugenia Volkes, Jeanne Betancourt, and Susan Milano. Rodolitz was a member of several video collectives whose work will be discussed in chapter four. By the second festival, Steina had very little involvement, beyond her own participation as an artist and using her connections to invite other artists. The specific reasons for moving the women’s festival are undocumented, but according to Steina, the new Kitchen director, Robert Stearns, was not generally supportive of the festival after the Vasulkas left. Its artistic merits were called into question, and The Kitchen dropped its support.⁶⁸ According to the recollections of both Steina and Lynda Rodolitz, under Stearns The Kitchen moved away from the loose, anti-authoritarian atmosphere of the early videographers. Stearns wanted

⁶⁶ Optic Nerve had both male and female members.

⁶⁷ Program for Women’s Video Festival, 1975, unpaginated.

⁶⁸ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

The Kitchen to become more like other art galleries, with curated exhibitions and a more exclusive stable of artists.⁶⁹ As Steina pointed out, had Stearns been more supportive of the festivals in general, The Kitchen could have boasted of sponsoring the longest-running Video Festival, Women's Video Festival, and Computer Art Festival, since these were all programs begun before 1973 that might have become historically important annual events.

At the Women's Interart Center, literature promoting the Women's Video Festivals emphasized documentary techniques and the dialogue with video as a broadcast medium (fig. 11). In the catalog for the 1976 festival, Milano stressed the need for such a festival to address women's unequal representation in broadcast media. As she wrote:

Why should women, who constitute more than half of the U.S. population, need a special showcase for their work? The answer, I think is rooted in the sociological and technological developments of the last decade. In 1968 women made up 32% of the working force. In media alone, they represented only 10% of officials and managers in radio and television and 5% in newspapers according to EEOC figures.

So one aim of the festival was to showcase women directors, and this ran parallel to the larger alternative media movement goal of decentralizing television and taking control over the production of social narratives. However, the actual program of the festival consisted of a variety of approaches to video, from the aesthetic to the political and everything in between. As always, the festival was open to tapes made solely for artistic purposes, and the tapes included were almost evenly split between such artistic tapes (including several that combined dance and video), and documentary or non-fiction tapes focused on women's issues. The 1976 festival also included a series of "videoletters," tapes collected from monthly information-exchanges between women's groups across the

⁶⁹ Lynda Rodolitz and Steina, interview with the author, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 25 June 2003, tape recording.

country, including Boston, Tampa, Tucson, San Francisco, Seattle, Los Angeles, Portland, Rochester, Chicago, Washington D.C., New York, San Diego and Santa Cruz. In contrast to the practice in broadcast media, these letters were edited very little, so that the content remained the focus; and the letters were thus perceived as preserving their “immediacy”. Milano’s own work was largely documentary in character, and in her promotional writing, she seems to have stressed the accessibility of the medium, its portability, its domesticity, so to speak, rather than its properties as a unique artistic medium. One benefit, as Milano mentioned in an essay for the 1976 catalog, to having the festivals at the Women’s Interart Center instead of The Kitchen, was that the viewing environment was set up to mimic the personal space of a living room, rather than the spare white space of a gallery. Despite The Kitchen’s homey name, its space at 484 Broome St. must have mirrored traditional gallery spaces, for Milano stated, “Since most people watch television in the privacy and comfort of their own homes it always seemed so unnatural to seat them in an austere room with hardback chairs and a table holding ‘the device.’ The viewing environments therefore are an attempt to make it seem more like you’re watching TV at a friend’s....”⁷⁰ Therefore, the festival arrived at a space that responded more to video’s legacy as television—although in this case it was a decentralized, alternative version of television—than to its legacy as electronic compositional tool.

The problem of women submitting to mixed-gender festivals persisted, prompting Steina to initiate similar Women’s Video Festivals outside of New York City. “When we came to Buffalo in the Fall of 73, they already were in process of organizing a women-themed festival, because they had discovered the same phenomena, that women wouldn’t

⁷⁰ Susan Milano, “Introduction,” Women’s Video Festival Program, 1976, unpaginated.

participate in the festivals, and they wanted just to make a point.”⁷¹ In Spring, 1974, she organized a version of the NYC festival in Buffalo (fig. 12), which included work by Shigeeko Kubota.

Although Steina was aware of issues stemming from sexism and in fact began a Women’s Video Festival at The Kitchen to address a lack of participation by female artists in previous festivals, her own work did not use feminist perspectives specifically or themes specific to gender as subjects. In fact, since much of her work takes advantage of processing techniques that abstract the video image, she has more often been grouped with male artists who investigated the formal and inherent properties of video, as opposed to using either documentary or performative techniques, which were considered more typical of feminist video artists. Although Steina was a crucial figure in establishing an electronic “language” specific to the medium, compared to Woody’s efforts, her individual work seems to have focused more on the concrete, physical and phenomenological exploration of the camera-produced image. There are also performative aspects to her work that link her with such women artists as Joan Jonas and Nina Sobell, as well as to male artists such as Bruce Nauman and Peter Campus.

There is a danger, of course, in unproblematically aligning performative techniques and a concern for the physically concrete properties of a medium with female identity in that this can reinforce essentialist or stereotypical notions connecting femininity with the corporeal, whereas masculinity is identified with abstraction and the intellect. Some attempts to conceptually divide Woody and Steina’s work have relied on such essentialist premises, such as a review by Lane Barden of a 1994 exhibition at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). The exhibition consisted of two

⁷¹ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

installations, Woody's *Brotherhood* (1994-96) and one that most likely was Steina's *Borealis* (1993).⁷² Barden rather easily defines this pairing as a dialogue between Woody's commentary on the legacy of war machines and of the relation between war and industry throughout the twentieth century and Steina's emphasis on the turbulent forces of water and ice from the Icelandic landscape as an example of nature's persistent resistance to "man's" culture. As Barden writes:

This is nature and culture, the great twentieth century arch-rivals playing out their drama through the gendered subject. Man, having made his move for the ultimate Faustian power grab, is left to wander amid the detritus of an ill-advised gambit, assembling and re-assembling his war machine.... Woman, having finally broken her unchosen, tacitly compliant assistantship in man's enterprise and liberated herself in urban culture, returns quietly to nature having lost her innocence and retrieved her wisdom.⁷³

The duality was also noted by another reviewer of a similar exhibition in Pittsburgh, although this time the stereotype was acknowledged as such and the critic dealt more critically with the divide when she wrote, "Yet Woody Vasulka opens the lived actuality of a specific and recent war to human compassion and emotion.... Steina Vasulka structures and intellectualizes the primordial wash of water and the deep emotions water inevitably inspires."⁷⁴

Nature as such, or as elementally aligned with female subjectivity, has never been Steina's abiding concern, but it has surfaced periodically in tapes and installations undertaken since 1980. As we have seen, her attention to using the camera as an instrument to reconfigure space began in the early 1970s within the confines of her studio

⁷² The review never gives a title for Steina's installation, although the description recalls *Borealis*, which was also paired with *The Brotherhood* at an exhibition at the Wood Street Galleries in Pittsburgh, reviewed by Mary Jean Kenton in *Sculpture* 16:10, 74.

⁷³ Lane Barden, "Image Medusas: Steina and Woody Vasulka at LACE," *Artweek* (8 September 1994): 20.

⁷⁴ Mary Jean Kenton, "Steina and Woody Vasulka: The Wood Street Galleries" *Sculpture* 16:10, 74.

in Buffalo, and was similar to other postminimal phenomenological investigations. When she did begin using the outdoors as the setting for her explorations, this was more related to her and Woody having moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1980 where their limited studio space served to drive her outdoors. As she stated:

I moved here because I wanted to experience what it is to live in beauty. I did not want to think that it was going to affect my images as much as it did. For the first two years I resisted it. First of all because the beauty of the West is so seductive. And, secondly, I didn't feel up to it. I mean, are you going to take on God? I had always had large interiors in which to work, and suddenly we were restricted to a small house. I just went outside one morning and said, 'Well, my studio doesn't have any walls and the ceiling is very high and it's blue.'⁷⁵

After some resistance, the landscape emerged in her work, but it was not the grandiose or pristine environments of 19th century painting. It was her specific surroundings, either outside her studio or nearby locales used in scientific and military operations. It was the southwestern landscape filled with tall grasses and littered with leftover machines and vehicles. Examinations of the installation *The West* (1983) and the tape *Summer Salt* (1982) will demonstrate how Steina refuted the idea of the pristine wilderness of the southwest. Working with a landscape to which she was personally connected then also led her to return to the landscape of her childhood, the Iceland that is the subject of *Borealis*.

Summer Salt is a continuation of the *Machine Vision* series (fig. 13). The 19-minute single-channel color tape displays images made by Steina's manipulation of a small tube that contains a camera facing a mirrored sphere. This camera unit is a small, portable version of the unit used earlier in *Allvision*. The piece is divided into five

⁷⁵ Steina interview with MaLin Wilson in exhibition brochure, *Scapes of Paradox: The Southwest and Iceland*, reprinted in Marita Sturken, "Steina and Woody Vasulka: In Dialogue With the Machine," *Machine Media* (1996), 46.

sections, individually titled *Sky High*, *Low Ride*, *Somersault*, *Rest*, and *Photographic Memory*. In *Sky High*, Steina mounts the camera/sphere apparatus to the roof of a van and drives down a paved road in Santa Fe. The audio is recorded through the in-camera microphones, so that as soon as the car begins moving, the rush of wind against the microphone becomes the main soundtrack. The image is reflected in the sphere, so it appears stretched around a circular space, like a funhouse mirror (fig. 14). The ever-present camera occupies the center of the image and is the only element that never moves, serving as an anchor around which the world whirls. The brilliant blue of a southwestern sky frames the image, encircling thin white clouds which in turn surround a horizontal strip of pavement that runs under the van.

In *Low Ride*, the camera has been mounted to the front bumper of a truck, this time without the mirrored sphere, so that the viewer gets a visceral experience of moving through the wild grasses and rocks of the land behind the Vasulka studio. This precarious position is thrilling and amplified by the roar of the truck engine, brought to a messy and abrupt halt with the camera dragged through large gravel, coming to a crunching halt. In the next scene, the viewer is treated to a dizzying ride through high grasses that snap and slap against the camera lens, jerkily coming to another stop, then backing up in a quick reverse. This type of exploration of the artist's immediate environment through the camera lens is a strategy taken up by other artists, including Gary Hill, who strapped cameras to his own body as he walked through a rugged terrain in *Crux* 1983-87.⁷⁶ For Steina, however, it was important that the camera view be complicated through the use of

⁷⁶ As I have written in my Master's thesis, *Time and Experience: Mediating the Work of Gary Hill*, Pratt Institute, 1997, this seems to be a literal embodiment of Marshall McLuhan's notion of the electronic medium as an extension of the human nervous system. McLuhan's theories and their relationship to the artists in this dissertation are discussed in chapter two.

mechanical devices, whether the mirrored sphere or the motorized vehicle. There is a recklessness to the project that is exhilarating, as if we the viewers are invited on a joyride with Steina through the dirt and rocks in her dilapidated jalopy. This is a far cry from an ecofeminist approach to mother earth and indeed one might even decry the environmental impact of Steina's project on the desert landscape.

In *Somersault*, Steina holds the camera and sphere in her hands and swings the apparatus through her legs and around her body, performing acrobatic feats with the machine. Most of the time, her own legs sprout from the center of the image in a hilarious distortion of the artist's body. Again, the wind rushes across the microphone, and the camera gets slapped against her body as she earnestly maneuvers around the object. Automobile traffic can be heard from the nearby road next to the studio. The artist is outside near a tree, and the studio sits a few feet away in the background of the shot. Steina jumps over the camera, plays hopscotch over it, turns it upside down and hits it against her hips all with a deadpan expression on her face as she casually chews gum, the expression of an artist conducting a methodical task. It is this deadpan expression that adds to the warmth and humor of the piece, while it also recalls her expression during the earlier tape, *Orbital Obsessions*.

In *Rest*, the camera seems to take a well-deserved break, resting on a hammock gazing up at a tree without the distortion of the mirrored sphere. As the rocking motion of the hammock gets stronger, the image is subjected to a colorizing effect that throws the image into a negative reversal. The acidic colors and the now wildly rocking motion of the hammock is anything but restful, and actually invites nausea. The sound, by contrast, is more soothing, with the occasional bird chirping. This is followed by *Photographic*

Memory (fig. 15), with overlaid shots of a tree in different seasons appearing at once on the screen, accompanied by a low electronic hum. The images of the trees alternate between the colorful leaves of early summer and the snow-covered limbs of winter, suggesting the simultaneous vision of a scene from separate times.

The Allvision machine was incorporated into an installation format for the 1983 two-channel installation, *The West* (fig. 16).⁷⁷ Through the use of the Allvision machine, the viewer sees what was in front of and behind the camera all at once, now translated to a three-dimensional environment through which the viewer moves. As Maureen Turim and Scott Nygren have pointed out, the use of the mirrored sphere elaborates on the concept of the panopticon, and within the context of a visual essay on the western American landscape, with its tropes of sublimity and power firmly established through painting, photography, and cinema, the alliance of vision with power is a strong theme in this work.⁷⁸ In the early planning stages of what became *The West*, Steina intended to do a single-channel videotape on land art projects in the southwestern United States. This was supposed to be a tape that could be broadcast and was sponsored by a grant from the

⁷⁷ *The West* was not viewed in person by this writer. It is extensively documented in exhibition catalogs such as *Steina and Woody Vasulka: Machine Media* from the San Francisco Museum of Art.

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, "Panopticism" originally from *Discipline and Punish* (1977), excerpted in Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 206-213. Foucault bases his discussion of the panopticon on Jeremy Bentham's description of the 19th century panoptic prison. Bentham had described that due to the architectural layout of this type of prison, prisoners were conscious of being subject to ongoing surveillance, despite the fact that they could not tell when guards were or were not actually watching them. This led to the prisoners altering their behavior, as if they were always being watched. Foucault extended this to describe a more implicit structure of surveillance in contemporary society. Vision, therefore, is implicated as a means of control and power. This metaphor has been used in several critical analyses since Foucault, particularly to describe a condition where citizens either are, in fact, under a constant state of surveillance, through security cameras and other measures, or behave as if they are since these systems are constantly in use. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 96-100. This analysis has also been applied to the study of surveillance photography, as in Sandra S. Phillips, ed. *Police Pictures: The Photograph as Evidence* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art/Chronicle Books, 1997).

SUNY Buffalo University Wide Committee on the Arts⁷⁹. In doing research, Steina visited the artists Charles Ross and James Turrell, but she became more interested in ancient Anasazi ruins, which she saw as a precursor to land art. At the same time, she was aware of the Very Large Array (VLA) satellite systems in New Mexico. What she saw linking these three interactions with the landscape—the Anasazi structures at Chaco Canyon, VLA technology, and modern land art—was an attempt by humans to chart the universe and the observation of the skies.⁸⁰ At the same time, she decided to avoid the editing challenges of making a single-channel tape by relying on the multi-monitor installation format. Ever since the beginning of her career in video, before editing equipment was available, Steina had preferred the installation format to editing a linear, single-channel tape.

...my big attraction to installation is that I'm not really adept at editing. Woody is; Woody is an editor; he knows what images should follow and how long they should be. I'm not really good at that so this is my way, in a way, to avoid editing. I send it out on multiple channels, and that's why the material becomes much more forgiving. See when you're looking at a single channel, you are looking like [at] a film, you are looking like a Hollywood (sic), and you expect it to be edited and comprehensive.⁸¹

In contrast, with installation, the viewer may be shown several images at once such that some images become more dominant at times than others, according to Steina. Strong colors, camera angles, or jarring movement may attract the viewer's eye, causing them to shift from one to the other monitor, rather than using physical cuts to eliminate and organize material. This is not to say that Steina never edits single-channel videotapes. But the effect of the video installation seems much more comparable to conducting an orchestra than editing one linear track of information, the electronic signal. Additionally,

⁷⁹ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

each channel of the video installation is itself edited, and Steina also edited the soundtrack onto the videotapes. For the soundtrack, she again collaborated with Woody who designed a four-channel audio environment.

As Davidson Gigliotti pointed out in a 1976 essay on multi-channel installations, the cuts in the narrative that were endemic to video installations were an important way of questioning the seamless structures of broadcast media. Multi-channel systems of communications were in abundant use in the behind-the-scenes operations of networks, but this was masked in order to deliver tidy programs of information formatted in digestible, linear narratives.

Anyone who has ever been in a television control room...will realize that the multi-channel video experience is not new to video, nor is it a product of video art. Input flows into the control room from all the cameras on the floor...each is displayed on its own monitor in an array that can easily be seen by the control-room occupants....Multi-channel displays are to be found in war rooms, newsrooms, classrooms, laboratories, therapy institutions of all kinds, not to mention police and fire departments and other governmental agencies. That they are sometimes used in socially negative and unproductive ways does not detract from the fact that they add dimensions to observation uncontainable by a single-channel system.⁸²

Thus, video installation was seen in the early period of video art as a way of adding a dimension to the work that went beyond the normal, linear flow of information from producer to viewer and rather allowed for an orchestration of multiple inputs to create a work on a grander scale.

From the *Allvision* unit and her preference for installation rather than editing, it would seem that Steina favored the use of mechanical devices over the manipulation of

⁸² Davidson Gigliotti, "Observations on the Scope of Multi-Channel Video Work," in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 214.

the electronic signal and processing waveforms, at least in general. This is usually how her work is distinguished, when it is, from Woody's in critical literature. That might accord with a historical socialization for women toward physical, rather than electronic, manipulations. However, given her resistance to editing, it is important to note also the way she disrupts the images within her work, often using electronic processing tools to do so. One of her early interests was in the effect of video feedback, a distortion of the image that happened when the video camera was pointed directly at a monitor in a live-feed situation. The camera recorded its own image, and because the electronic image was being scanned across the monitor, this generated a pulsing effect. As the camera recorded itself recording itself, it created a pulsing vortex, with the electronic signal becoming a repeated linear pattern that was completely abstracted from the simple scene as viewed by the naked eye. This experience was discovered independently and simultaneously by nearly every video artist who picked up the camera. Almost none of Steina's tapes use a naturalistic, linear visual structure, and it is important to analyze why such structures did not interest her.

Steina has often distinguished, both historically and in recent literature, between her project of making video "art" and those who produced video documentaries. Although in video's early period many videographers actually produced both types of video, beginning in the early 1970s when competition for money became tight and artists needed to define their projects more rigidly, the boundaries between "art" and "documentary" became more defined. Steina spoke with fondness of the days when both approaches coexisted, so that the festivals at The Kitchen were a mixture of those tapes that were more documentary and those that were more visually minded. In fact, according

to Steina there were three approaches to video in the period from 1968 to 1974: the making of documentaries; assays at using the electronic medium artistically and expressively; and experiments in video by those for whom it was one among many possible media.⁸³ Around The Kitchen, the documentarians and the video artists from the second category were particularly close. She also greatly appreciated many of the documentary projects, as was evident when she described the feminist-oriented tapes at the Women's Video Festival. Like many video artists, Steina saw the tapes with a more explicit feminist or political content as being more documentary in style. According to Steina, the most interesting tapes in the Women's Video Festivals were documentaries, including Cara Devito's *Always Love Your Man* (about domestic violence) and Jenny Goldberg and Under One Roof Video's *Rape Tape*.⁸⁴

The issue of a particularly "female" sensibility in video, as in any medium, is a difficult one.⁸⁵ As I've mentioned, Steina's work has on occasion been tied to nature in attempts to fit her to a paradigm that would divide (feminine) nature from (masculine) culture. But such attempts are not rife and, in general, her work has rarely been associated with explicitly female subjects. While she was instrumental in founding women's video festivals, she claimed that her own work was not generally accepted by women's festivals

⁸³ Steina put artists such as Bruce Nauman, Hollis Frampton, and Joan Jonas into this third category.

⁸⁴ *The Rape Tape* was shown at the first Women's Video Festival at the Kitchen in 1972 and at the Women's Video Festival at the Women's Interart Center in 1976. *Always Love Your Man* was shown at the 1976 WVF.

⁸⁵ Judy Chicago has been one of the strongest proponents of an idea of a specifically feminine approach in art, based on the central-core motif. See Chicago's *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1975) and Broude/Garrard's *The Power of Feminist Art*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). Lucy Lippard's writing in the 1970s also advocated a separate aesthetic. See Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Woman's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976). In the medium of video, Canadian artist Nell Tenhaaf has proposed a feminine approach to video that aligns the monitor with the womb, expressed by certain Canadian artists of the 1970s who took the female body as their subject matter. Nell Tenhaaf, "Of Monitors and Men and Other Unsolved Feminist Mysteries: Video Technology and the Feminine" *Parallélogramme* 18:3 (1992) 24-34. Articles criticizing an attempt to identify a "feminine sensibility" include Pat Mainardi, "A Feminine Sensibility?" *Feminist Art Journal* 1:1 (1972) 4, 25.

because it was so abstract or technical, and eschewed explicitly feminist subjects. Although she was not specific about individual cases, she stated that on a very few occasions “there would be women who would say that I was kind of a traitor, I was doing man’s work, I was doing technical things. But you know there are always people who would make those kind of observations, that as a woman you ought not to be screwing screws or fixing gears.”⁸⁶ It would seem that within the circle of artists who wanted to pursue the electronic medium as a mode of artistic expression, so-called feminist approaches to video were defined especially by narratives about what Steina called the “specific trauma of being female.”⁸⁷ Since Steina herself did not experience her gender as such a trauma, making tapes on such subjects never interested her. Like Beryl Korot, Steina claimed not to have suffered very much overt sexism or challenges to her access to video equipment. Since Steina was one of the organizers of major exhibitions and festivals, she rarely was excluded from the video community. Her friendships with other artists, and perhaps her association with her extroverted husband, Woody, kept her squarely within the mainstream of the New York video scene in the 1970s.

Although Steina was not as interested in image-processing as Woody Vasulka, another woman artist working in New York achieved a tremendous amount of success working with image synthesizers such as the Rutt-Etra Processor that Woody also used. Barbara Buckner was quite prolific throughout the 1970s and early 80s, making tapes that explored spirituality and metaphoric themes long common in painting using processed video imagery. Buckner began using video while a film and television student at New

⁸⁶ Steina, interview with the author, 25 June 2003.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

York University, where she took classes with Bill Etra in 1972.⁸⁸ Buckner was already interested in using special effects techniques to produce experimental film, and her exposure to events at The Kitchen introduced her to effects such as keying and colorizing that were considered easier in the video format because they could be done simultaneously with making an image (in “real time”) rather than through editing later.⁸⁹ In 1973, she purchased her own Rutt-Etra synthesizer and added this to her collection of tools, which included two black-and white cameras, two editing decks, a keyer, and a special effects generator with genlock.⁹⁰ In 1976, Buckner moved to Rhinebeck, New York, to live and work at Woodstock Community Video, a farmhouse with equipment available for use as a living and working space by video artists, which was run by Ken Marsh. Her colleagues at Woodstock Community Video included Gary Hill, David Jones, and Stephen Kolpan. There, Buckner had access to color cameras and to the Eric Siegel colorizer.⁹¹ Later in 1976, Buckner began a residency at the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York which was run by Ralph and Sherry Hocking and provided artists with a large assortment of image-processing tools.⁹²

Buckner followed a tradition in artmaking where the image stood in metaphorically for spiritual and natural ideas. Her imagery emphasized transformation, with the shifting patterns of color and shape transforming basic, profane shots of the outside world into poetic representations of inner states.⁹³ Her work was intimately tied

⁸⁸ Marita Sturken, "An Interview With Barbara Buckner," *Afterimage* (May 1985), 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7. Genlock allowed artists to mix taped footage with footage from a live signal. It required synching the two signals together. It is also described in chapter four. Barbara Buckner, telephone interview with the author, 15 February 2004.

⁹¹ Marita Sturken, "An Interview With Barbara Buckner," *Afterimage* (May 1985), 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Buckner's work has been sporadically preserved in public collections and anthologies, but seems rarely to be exhibited anymore. One exception was the encyclopedic exhibition called *The First Generation*:

to a strong spirituality since the early 1970s, but in 1975 that spirituality became more specifically informed by Eckankar, a religion founded in 1965 by Paul Twitchell. In the teachings of Eckankar, the concept of the Soul is central, and spiritual knowledge is acquired in part through dreams and exercises.⁹⁴ Knowing this, one can see why the suggestions of dream-imagery in Buckner's are so strong, but her work also has a visual and technical dimension that translates to the viewer even without knowledge of the specific philosophical underpinnings.

Buckner's *Pictures of the Lost* was created in 1978 while she was at the Experimental Television Center. It contains twenty-two short silent vignettes. The entire piece is twenty-three minutes long. Each short section is a small study of moving light and color, often abstracted from a camera-recorded image. Each section is individually titled, and the titles give important clues as to how to read the images metaphorically, according to Buckner. Speaking about another work, she stated:

So what the title *Geography* did was to give you a framework in which to look at those segments. If you saw little pointed spikes coming out of what looked like a snowbank and I labeled it "Fire under Snow," you would most likely see those pointed spikes as fire, not as oscillator patterns or sewing needles. So the language served to specify and make literal the abstracted image."⁹⁵

Clues are helpful in viewing *Pictures of the Lost*, since Buckner makes liberal use of abstraction. In the segment entitled, *Living Lights*, the image is simply composed of

Women and Video, 1970-75 curated by JoAnn Hanley for Independent Curators Incorporated, which traveled from Canada to Amherst, Massachusetts, Columbus, Ohio, Washington, D.C., Reading, Pennsylvania, Long Beach, California, and Poughkeepsie, New York from 1993 to 1995. The artist lent three very early black-and-white tapes for that exhibition; *Geography*, 1973, *Duo Sanguine*, 1975, and *Moebius*, 1974. Donnell Media Center at the New York Public Library and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York own *Pictures of the Lost* (1978) and *Selected Works I and II* (1979-82), which is where I viewed these tapes. An eight-minute excerpt of *Pictures of the Lost* is also available on an anthology of early video called *Surveying the First Decade* distributed by Video Data Bank in Chicago.

⁹⁴ "Basic Beliefs of Eckankar" *Eckankar: Religion of the Light and Sound of God* 18 June 2004 available at <http://www.eckankar.org>; Internet; accessed 14 July 2005.

⁹⁵ Sturken, "An Interview With Barbara Buckner," 6-7.

shifting forms of color (fig. 17). Here the blue and purple diagonal lines creep across the screen, like ice crystals growing across a smooth surface. The contrast is strong, but the colors reverse themselves, adding to the movement of the piece and contributing to the sense that the images have an organic life. Each vignette is less than a minute long, so that they seem to be small studies or sketches of visual ideas. Not all of the images limit their composition to the flat picture plane of the monitor screen. In *13th Dream or Angels of the Light*, for instance, the color planes that move and shift through the picture space are amorphous and cloudy, suggesting beings that have depth despite being transitory. *13th Dream* is made up of eight different shots, with the first being a pulsing image of grey and black forms shifting from light to dark. In shot two, a shadowy figure emerges whose size and proportions suggest those of a child, who turns toward the viewer. The child is standing further away from the picture plane, in a middle ground that is different spatially from the colors on the surface that preceded it. The rest of the shots alternate between different figures, silhouettes of city skyscraper buildings, the diamond-pattern of a fence, and end with another child sitting. All of the figures and objects remind the viewer of dream sequences, or at least the way dream sequences are often portrayed in cinema, for they are shadowy, murky images that lack the clarity or detail of objects seen in life (fig. 18). Colors are saturated and obscure any facial features, so that silhouettes and shadows suggest objects, and the movements of more than one object on the screen at a time suggest relationships. *Pictures of the Lost* used a combination of images generated by machines and recorded by the camera. This corresponded to two different working processes that Buckner employed. The first was initiated by ideas for images that the artist envisioned. The second process was simply to sit down at the equipment and

experiment (or sketch) what might be possible, using the image generators. For this tape she used the Paik-Abe synthesizer, a keyer, a colorizer, and voltage control devices. The final tool used an audio signal to create waveforms which could then be altered to change color values, luminescence values or levels of keying (layering).⁹⁶ Working together, all of these devices created images that were far from naturalistic, although they retained some connection to their original subjects since filmed objects could still be discerned.

Buckner's work was often compared to painting, and she thought of it in similar terms. "I began with a desire to create a kind of electronic poetics, where the video image expressed a metaphoric identity emerging from its organic structure, yet had a universal quality drawing on the traditions of poetry, painting, and music."⁹⁷ Yet this is also the reason why some critics dismissed early abstract video at a time in the early 1970s when some were rejecting the formal and metaphoric language of painting. As Robert Pincus-Witten remarked in 1974, speaking about the first generation of video artists who had created electronic image synthesizers, "Their art was deficient precisely because it was linked to and perpetuated the outmoded clichés of Modernist Pictorialism—a vocabulary of Lissajous patterns—swirling oscillations endemic to electronic art—synthesized to the most familiar expressionist color plays...."⁹⁸

Despite his displeasure at the way the tools were being used, Pincus-Witten went on to credit this early generation of video artists and their collaborators for the invention of the processing tools, however, which brings the point, rightly, back to the importance

⁹⁶ Barbara Buckner, telephone interview with the author, 15 February 2004.

⁹⁷ Sturken, "An Interview With Barbara Buckner," 6.

⁹⁸ Pincus-Witten was speaking on the occasion of the conference, "Open Circuits: An International Conference on the Future of Television" held at the Museum of Modern Art, 1974. The proceedings were published in the book, *The New Television: a Public/Private Art. Essays, Statements and Videotapes based on "Open Circuits: an International Conference on the Future of Television"*. Ed. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977. Quoted in Lucinda Furlong, "Tracking Video Art: Image-Processing as a Genre," *Art Journal*, (Fall 1985): 234.

of this visual language being structured by its electronic, rather than painterly material. The light and colors that Buckner achieved in her work were not possible in painting, nor was the movement. But the images in *Pictures of the Lost*, I believe, also had a specific impact because they were transmitted via an electronic signal on a television monitor. The effect of transmitted light on the television screen recalls similar imagery emitted from monitors used for scientific purposes, from medical uses to research. These shifting patterns of light connote both science and poetry. As will be discussed in chapter two, theorists related the electronic property of the medium to the human nervous system. Artists interested in electronic media also often used other imaging machines used in science, such as the oscilloscope, a way of graphically representing electronic waveforms. Buckner's images recalled dream imagery and she often described them as such, and through contemporaneous technology, it was actually possible to read images of brainwaves since they were electronic stimulations. Technology was being used at the time to render mental processes visible, and oscillators and EKG machines were used to that end. By the time Buckner and others were experimenting with abstract electronic imagery, these medical images were a part of the collective consciousness. Imaging tools used in medical contexts have a long history of providing positivist proof of scientific and quasi-scientific theories. Photography served in the nineteenth century as "proof" of such sciences as physiognomy, and its status as an indexical sign, one which bears the direct trace of its referent, enhanced its perceived accuracy.⁹⁹ Similarly, the electronic medical monitors have functioned in recent times as an indexical sign for mental states, as they

⁹⁹ Photography as an indexical sign has been discussed by Rosaline E. Krauss, "Notes on the Index, part 1," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), 198; Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* (June 1991): 174-208. The index was most notably theorized by Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* vol. 1 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58) 475-476.

are rendered through electronic signals. My point in this rather convoluted argument, is that the light from Buckner's abstracted moving images signified a fascinating blend of science and poetics that developed specifically out of its character as electronic signal. This made the medium particularly effective for her attempt to convey metaphoric ideas through the shifting, luminescent shapes rooted in nature but evoking a "technological sublime" aesthetic.¹⁰⁰

As with Steina, Buckner's work has never been assessed along feminist lines. Both artists worked completely inside the mainstream of artists pursuing the video medium and both chose to align themselves with aesthetic issues rather than political ones. Buckner describes herself as having been very active in the feminist movement between 1970 and 1974, attending meetings and expressing anger about sexism in general.¹⁰¹ When she became a follower of Eckankar, she retreated from that position because she began to conceive of the Soul as genderless, and the gendered body as temporary. Through reincarnation, she believed, the Soul alternates between being male or female, depending on the lessons one must learn in that lifetime. At this time, she began to understand feminism to be focused on identifying blame and victims, and she no longer related to such concepts.¹⁰² As we will see, her conception of feminism was not entirely unlike Steina's (who couldn't relate to experiencing gender as "trauma") or Beryl Korot, who in chapter two describes spiritual concerns taking precedence over gender. None of these women were blocked access to being artists, and in fact video provided an opportunity to work in an artistic medium that did not have a long history of patriarchal

¹⁰⁰ To use David Nye's term from *American Technological Sublime*, (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1994). Nye identified the first use of the term "technological sublime" by Perry Miller, *The Life and Mind of America, from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965).

¹⁰¹ Barbara Buckner, telephone interview with the author, 15 February 2004.

¹⁰² Ibid.

structures. However, as we will discuss in chapter three, Shigeko Kubota, who as a student in Japan was under social pressure to give up an artistic career for more traditional domestic duties, gender did matter and played a more overt role in her subject matter and forms.¹⁰³

Buckner was very involved in building the tools that would expand her technical choices, and was in the midst of building a new machine in collaboration with David Jones at ETC before she left in 1984.¹⁰⁴ David Jones was and still is the technical consultant at the center and has been described warmly by Buckner and others as someone who worked very well with artists. Trained as an engineer, Buckner said he “didn’t fit the mold of the commercial world,” a description that recalls Steina’s description of George Brown, the Vasulkas’ primary tool designer.¹⁰⁵ Neither of these engineers, who collaborated so closely with the artists and apparently expressed no resistance to working with women, were the norm in the commercial world. They have been characterized as outcasts and renegades, people for whom working outside of social conventions was common, and this tended to be a unifying experience for the artists and engineers. As will be discussed in chapter four, many of the women video artists of the 1970s who went on to commercial careers in film or television experienced heightened levels of sexism there.

¹⁰³ In contrast to other women who attended film school at New York University in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Buckner denied any “outright institutionalized sexism” in that program. According to her, the NYU program was still so new (it was begun in 1965) that it did not have the important commercial connections that it does today and which might have driven more competition and hierarchical structures. She described it as an environment of “passion and camaraderie.” Buckner email to the author, 2/11/04. For a quite different outlook, see chapter four and descriptions of the NYU film school by Wendy Apple and Maxi Cohen. Buckner was a few years younger than Apple or Cohen, and it is possible that the situation had changed by the time she enrolled in the program. Buckner recalls that there were “quite a few” women in her classes, unlike Apple or Cohen. I have not gathered enrollment statistics from the university, which might shed light on the situation.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Buckner, telephone interview with the author, 15 February 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Artists such as Barbara Buckner and Steina Vasulka chose to use electronic tools to create richly layered images that could compete with painting and sculpture in their visual complexity. They chose their electronic medium because of its novelty and relevance to a late capitalist society that was visually attuned to electronic media through music and television. Although their imagery never specifically addressed feminism, their status as women artists affected some of the choices they made. For Steina, her pursuit of a career as a serious artist meant that she pushed through any gender stereotypes and resisted being associated with domesticity or fragility by thoroughly immersing herself in the medium itself. Her awareness of sexism and social problems specific to women was evident in her initiation of the Women's Video Festival and her appreciation of such devastating documentaries as the *Rape Tape*. Still, the particular "trauma" of being female, as she put it, never directly affected her and she turned away from such overt political concerns in her own work. She also said that many of the documentary projects of the early 1970s in New York were focused on specific, local issues, and that as immigrants, she and Woody observed such political engagement from a distance.¹⁰⁶ Their background in Europe under the influence of fascism and communism, and then the cold war, also seems to have inspired their apolitical stance in their work, since they associated politicization with propagandistic narratives.¹⁰⁷ One might criticize such work as turning away from social issues and reverting to formalist innocence. However, Steina and Buckner were radical in their activities as cyborgs, that is, as women who

¹⁰⁶ Steina interview with the author, 24 June, 2003.

¹⁰⁷ Iceland had strong ties to Denmark which were only severed when Hitler invaded Denmark in 1940. Denmark was granted independence in 1944 and formed a parliamentary government at that time, but the specter of fascism had come dangerously close. Jenny Lynn Ellis, "Feminist Politics and the Women's Alliance of Iceland," (M.A. thesis, University of Colorado at Denver, 1993). Steina would have also experienced communism while living in Prague and her attitudes toward political art were likely affected as well by Woody who lived under communism in Czechoslovakia.

complicated the relation between the natural and the mechanical and whose very presence resisted a male-dominated technological world. Their skillful use of their machines allowed them access to experimental laboratories, cable-access video programs, major museum exhibitions of the new medium, and teaching opportunities in international workshops. If the tools at times acted as masks behind which they could pass in an illusory gender-neutral, humanist environment of mainstream video communities, those same tools were also, in a sense, prostheses, playfully wielded to free the artists from the sometimes constraining limits of social constructions of gender.

CHAPTER 2

THE ELECTRONIC BODY

Composer David Dunn, among others, has suggested that the history of a twentieth-century artistic engagement with technology has been a history of a failed utopia.¹ From the Futurists through Bauhaus and Kinetic art, modern artists looked to technology as the tool that would link art to the “masses” and provide a medium through which communication would be made immediate and global. By the end of the 1960s, modernism’s grand narratives were being called into question, including the notion that only that art which is valid in its own terms, Greenberg’s promotion of medium specificity, could be considered important.² Therefore, when video artists during this period explored the nature of that relationship of the electronic technology to artistic principles and how the medium itself could convey ideas essentially different from painting and sculpture, on the one hand, and from television’s entertaining or pacifying function on the other, that initial focus on the intrinsic properties of electronic media was quickly seen by some critics and historians as passé.

So why would a study of the theories that informed such discourse, on the properties and principles of the video medium, now be of interest? For one thing, there is an implied divide in scholarship on early video art between those artists who pioneered the use of electronic technology for its own sake and pursued a formalist exploration of

¹ David Dunn, "A History of Electronic Music Pioneers," *Eigenwelt Der Apparate-Welt: Pioneers of Electronic Art* ed. Peter Weibel, Woody Vasulka, et al., (Santa Fe: The Vasulkas and Ars Electronica, 1992), 21.

² Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* VI no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34-49.

the medium's inherent principles, and those artists who performed in front of the camera using it as an easy medium for examining personal narrative and constructions of self and identity in ways that foretold postmodernism. Yet that divide is in fact much less clear when one considers women artists who were deeply engaged in the implications of the electronic medium. Secondly, the utopian expectations that video would somehow unite users and viewers on a global scale was based on communications theory largely indebted to Marshall McLuhan, who is most commonly cited as the guru for pioneering video artists. David Antin wrote in "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium" in 1975 that, by then, two discourses had already been developed around the new medium, "one, a kind of enthusiastic welcoming prose peppered with fragments of communication theory and McLuhanesque media talk; the other, a rather nervous attempt to locate the 'unique properties of the medium.'"³ He went on to argue that the two discourses are actually intertwined, since one of video's unique properties was its relationship to television, a medium for communication. McLuhan believed that a new form of mass communication would construct an entirely new society in the image of the electronic signal transmitted instantaneously. But in fact, McLuhan's influence was not universal, even among those artists who embraced the communicative function of the medium or who held utopian hopes that broader access to the media would provide broader viewpoints. The women artists who are the subject of this study did not wholeheartedly or unproblematically accept the notion of social advancement through technological progress.

³ David Antin. "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium." In *Video Art: An Anthology*, eds. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 174.

This chapter will examine the relationship between McLuhan's theories about media and two of the artists who are a primary focus of my study, Beryl Korot and Shigeo Kubota. As I will show, both of these artists were aware of McLuhan's theories and even shared some of his views on the potential of electronic media. These artists, however, built their work on models grounded in female subjectivity. Korot structured her video installations on the medium of weaving, an archaic art form historically associated with women's labor. Kubota aligned her use of a portable camera and videotape with female experiences such as childcare and menstruation. Contemporary documents demonstrating artists' concern for defining the characteristic properties of video technology largely cited male artists' projects, and it is their work that was usually used to illustrate the evolving theoretical frameworks for the new media. As discussed in the introduction to this study, women artists were largely credited for their contributions to performance-based video. This bias contributed to that divide between technological concerns and women's participation or subjectivity. I aim to complicate that presumed divide by discussing these artists' simultaneous concerns for the electronic medium itself, and for their subjectivity as female artists. In addition to considerations of Korot and Kubota's work, I also examine work by two lesser-known video artists, Nina Sobell and Louise Etra. These latter two artists provide additional case studies from the pioneering period, figures whose work combined a serious investigation of the electronic medium and its intersections with the human body.

I have proposed in the introduction that major overviews of the pioneering generation of video art generally position Marshall McLuhan as the major theoretical source and McLuhan's writings on communications media as a model for video artists

concerned with defining the parameters of the medium. Video artist Frank Gillette, for instance, used McLuhanesque language in interviews regarding his own exhibitions in 1973 when he said, “It’s the state-of-the-art technology within a particular culture that gives shape to ideas....What is the function of the artist when, through an advanced technology, the culture becomes planetary?”⁴ Gillette also taught a course on McLuhan at the Free School in New York in the winter of 1967-68.⁵ Gillette was an associate of Beryl Korot’s and a member of Raindance in addition to making artwork that was included in most of the major video exhibitions in New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This included his collaboration with Korot’s friend, Ira Schneider, called *Wipe Cycle* in the important 1968 exhibition at Howard Wise Gallery, “Television as a Creative Medium.” While McLuhan’s influence has been cited generally as important on this generation of pioneering video artists, his specific relationship to the female participants has never been addressed. McLuhan’s theories are important for understanding Gillette and Ryan’s work as video artists and writers about video, but his influence on Korot, Kubota, and Vasulka is not as clear. McLuhan’s major premise, that electronic media are an extension of “man,” that is, of the human nervous system, helped many video artists to articulate why the electronic medium was so adept at communicating their ideas on a mass scale. But for Korot, for instance, the transmission of information was a concern that was neither revolutionary nor necessarily effective.

Let us first examine the assimilation of McLuhan’s theories relevant to video as an artistic medium. McLuhan’s impact is most clear in video artists’ publications from the early 1970s most of which contain language and style influenced by his writings.

⁴ Frank Gillette, *Video: Process and Meta-Process* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, 1973), 21.

⁵ Paul Ryan, “A Genealogy of Video,” *Leonardo* 21 no. 1 (1988): 41.

Guerrilla Television was one such publication from 1971 that had the appearance of speaking for the entire community of video makers of the period. *Guerrilla Television* appeared as the sixth issue of the journal *Radical Software*, published by the Raindance collective. The term “guerrilla television” was attributed in the section of the book called “process notes” to Raindance member Paul Ryan, and had also been used by Abbie Hoffman in *Steal This Book*.⁶ I will discuss Raindance in more depth in chapter four and why *Guerrilla Television* was in fact not exemplary of the ideas of all Raindance members, especially *Radical Software*’s editor, Beryl Korot. Although Korot had been the editor of the first four issues of *Radical Software*, it was another member of Raindance, videographer Michael Shamberg, who edited and wrote this particular issue. This issue was also published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston as a book, rather than being self-published as were the other issues of *Radical Software*. For this reason, it has been preserved and archived on library shelves among the books, and thus is one of the most easily accessible documentary sources on video of this period.

In the first chapter, “Media America,” Shamberg established the prevalence of print and then television media in U.S. society. Like McLuhan, Shamberg proposed that American viewers in 1971 were naturally attuned to using the video camera as a means to produce their own messages because they were born into a world that had dramatically shifted technologically. “Whole new technologies conditioned us from birth to relate to a world which was not that of our parents’ childhood. It came as a sneak attack because print-man, impervious to his own bias, was unable to perceive that any time there is a radical shift in the dominant communications medium of a culture, there’s going to be a

⁶Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation, *Guerrilla Television* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), unpaginated. Abbie Hoffman, *Steal This Book* (New York: Pirate Editions, 1971)0.

radical shift in that culture."⁷ McLuhan based his argument in “The Medium is the Message” in *Understanding Media* on the idea that a new technology will inevitably create a new human environment.⁸ In practical terms, this meant that a medium itself, for example electric light, causes people to interact in different ways. According to McLuhan, it is not the content of a televised news program that alters society, but the fact that it is communicated through an electronic signal. He contended that in a myriad of ways, electricity eliminates the space and time that separates people. Its key feature is its instantaneity.⁹ McLuhan warned that if we are not prepared to understand an electronic language, we can be inundated with the simultaneous and instantaneous information without being able to process it or respond critically. Through the electronic circuit, information is conveyed immediately and continuously. We understand the data through “pattern recognition,” a system analogous to the computer processor, that communicates using binary patterns of code. Human experience is marked by a constant interplay with the environment, or a constant exchange of information.¹⁰

Stylistically, early writing on video also borrowed from McLuhan’s publications, such as *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1965), *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) and *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951). McLuhan’s popular books combined images and quotes from a variety of fields, and interspersed them with his own writing in a way that countered traditional academic writing. As one literary critic observed in 1968, “*The*

⁷ Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 1.

⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* 1st Paperback edition. (New York, London, Sydney, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), vi.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Random House, 1967), 63.

Gutenberg Galaxy looks gathered, not written: a pastepup from a hundred histories of math, political theology nationalism, and fur trading, and from a thousand ‘other authorities’”.¹¹ Similarly, the book *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), which was an outgrowth of the first chapter from *Understanding Media* (ironically, changing “Message” to “Massage,”) depends heavily on the use of montage, with bold graphic photographs juxtaposed with short, memorable one-liners, repetition of phrases, and sentences stretching across multiple pages. McLuhan included cartoons from the *New Yorker*, recognizable press photographs, reproductions of electronic voiceprints, all interspersed with quotes from contemporary thinkers such as John Cage and fragments of McLuhan’s original text. The message is conveyed simultaneously and partially through visual as well as verbal structures (fig. 19). Ironically, McLuhan maintained that this “acoustic-visual metaphor” of the printed page was no longer effective, and that in fact the importance of writing had been abolished.¹² Television engages the entire viewer, he said, demanding participation of the “whole person.” “In television there occurs an extension of the sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all the senses simultaneously, rather than that of sight alone.”¹³ It was *The Medium is the Massage* that was most commonly cited for its relation to the pioneering video artists, though many such as Gillette and Paul Ryan, also had direct contact with McLuhan through his teaching.

¹¹ Benjamin DeMott, "Against McLuhan," *The McLuhan Explosion: A Casebook on Marshall McLuhan and Understanding Media* eds. Harry H. Crosby and George R. Bond, (New York: American Book Company, 1968), 118.

¹² Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), 125.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Shamberg, like McLuhan, employed montage to organize the pages of *Guerrilla Television*. The design of the book was by the San Francisco collective, Ant Farm.¹⁴ Hand-drawn chapter headings announced each section, appearing under titles such as “Media America,” “Techno-evolution,” “An Information Economy,” and “Epistemology of Dope.” A photograph of five priests lined up in front of the camera in a group portrait appears with the caption, “Old Style: Heavy Hardware” above a photograph of two young adults, one male and one female, holding Portapak-style cameras and tape decks, with a sound recorder at their feet (fig. 20). The cocky assurance with which they pose, holding the equipment, needs no caption. Their hardware, the camera and other equipment, rests in the hands of the youth and their fresh perspectives, symbolized by two figures, a young man and, notably, a young woman (neither of whom is identified). Both are dressed in funky, contemporary fashions and stand casually with backs against a wall, the woman’s foot propped on a piece of equipment, her knees peeking out from her long dress. The lighter, more exuberant attitude contrasts with religious dogma, the “heavy hardware” that is the condition of the old guard above, symbolized by the line of men dressed in religious robes who stiffly pose for the camera.

Later in the book, an advertisement for a Zenith “flash tuner” (remote mute), announced the ability to “Shut off long, annoying commercials while picture remains on screen.” This ad serves as an illustration for an essay entitled, “How to Bankrupt Broadcast Television.”¹⁵ It appeared opposite a smaller photograph that is actually a photomontage of a guerrilla videographer with a camera poised at his eye, nude save for the deck of the Portapak which coyly covers his buttocks, as he point his camera at a

¹⁴ Davidson Gigliotti, “A Brief History of RainDance,” *The Radical Software Website* 2003; available from <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/history.html>; Internet; accessed 21 October 2005.

¹⁵ Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 40.

television monitor. Inside the monitor his image was repeated over and over into infinity. This served as a visual example of video feedback, with the self-reflexive camera filming media output, broadcasting his own image filming the monitor. The chapter in question gave suggestions for how to talk back to the media, and these images served to signify two methods. Shenberg began this chapter with a reproduction of a letter from the Chairman of the National Conference on Citizens Rights in Broadcasting to the presidents of ABC, NBC, and CBS. This letter was an announcement of efforts by the organization to ensure “adequate expression of the public’s interest.”¹⁶ The letter served as an example of attempts for public interaction with media networks and attempted resistance to corporate control over broadcast media.

Paul Ryan was a video artist who incorporated McLuhan’s ideas into his own work and writing, often through Raindance publications. He contributed the essay, “Cable Television: The Raw and the Overcooked” to the first issue of *Radical Software* and later wrote a book-length collection of his essays, *Birth and Death and Cybernation: Cybernetics of the Sacred* (1973) as well as the essay, “A Geneology of Video” for *Leonardo* in 1988. As a part of the Raindance circle, he was someone with whom Korot had close contact. He was also partly responsible for dispersing grant money to video artists through the New York State Council on the Arts’ Video/Media Program between 1970 and 72 and contributed articles giving overviews of video’s foundations. In “A Geneology of Video,” he discussed how video evolved between 1968 and 1971 from a medium for social action into an art medium with his own allegiances falling squarely on the side of social action. He interpreted McLuhan’s theories as most applicable to an activist use of the video camera stressing access to the medium by underrepresented

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

groups. Ryan's desire to use video for social change was driven in part by his opposition to the Vietnam War. "The ideal put forth by Marshall McLuhan of a more harmonious society based on electronic communications attracted me."¹⁷ As an alternative to entering military service, the draft board allowed Ryan to work as McLuhan's assistant at Fordham University during 1967-68. It was during that time that Ryan began experimenting with video; and in 1969 he was a consultant on behalf of the New York Arts Council with Raindance.

One of the problems with McLuhan's theories was that he did not provide any models for how electronic media could be used for social change. McLuhan did not go beyond the belief that access to the tools on the part of the disenfranchised and underrepresented minorities would empower them.¹⁸ Ryan wrote about his own experiments with using video in those communities, which was most effective when the community members themselves determined how the medium should be used. He continued his own investigation into an "ecological" approach to producing video as a professor at the New School in New York.¹⁹ In other words, Ryan wanted to study how video could be used in a social environment and what changes an electronic mass medium, which was instantaneous and global, would produce. This interest in a "video ecology" was also shared by Beryl Korot in her reminiscences about the Raindance group during our interview in 2003. In his book, *Birth and Death and Cybernation*, Ryan combined cybernetic theory derived from Norbert Wiener with Gregory Bateson's

¹⁷ Paul Ryan, "A Genealogy of Video," 40.

¹⁸ Ryan, "A Genealogy of Video," 41.

¹⁹ Davidson Gigliotti, "A Brief History of RainDance," *The Radical Software Website* 2003; available from <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/history.html>; Internet; accessed 21 October 2005.

cultural anthropology.²⁰ The essays ranged from lectures on how to integrate video into the classroom, to how to set up situations for children and adults to record themselves so as to study the differences between their image of their authentic selves and the way they present themselves to the public. While Ryan criticized artists' videotape as being precious and insular, he acknowledged certain major works and experiments as valuable examples of independent production. He also credited the ideas put forth by Frank Gillette and, briefly, the assistance of the other members of Raindance and the publishers of *Radical Software*.

Beryl Korot, as co-editor of *Radical Software*, was responsible for collecting and pasting up the articles by Paul Ryan and Frank Gillette that helped spread McLuhan's ideas. She first got involved with the group as a writer who was interested simultaneously in learning how to edit a magazine, and in investigating how video, a new communications medium, created a new environment. To McLuhan, the main shift in the ecology resulting from electronic media was the speed at which information traveled. McLuhan and Korot's early video peers saw communication in ecological terms, meaning media literally altered how living beings related to their social environment. Korot conversed with members like Ryan and Gillette about the "ecology" of an information environment; about who was in control of the media, and how the individual could interact with these people and systems "on a more organic level."²¹ Their main concern in the early 1970s was over access, providing information about the medium that

²⁰ In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson proposes an approach to thinking and meaning that he calls "ecology". "The questions which the book raises are ecological: How do ideas interact? Is there some sort of natural selection which determines the survival of some ideas and the extinction or death of others? What sort of economics limits the multiplicity of ideas in a given region of mind? What are the necessary conditions for stability (or survival) of such a system or subsystem?" Bateson also draws from cybernetics and structuralism in this book. Gregory Bateson, *Steps To An Ecology of Mind* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1972): xvii.

²¹ Beryl Korot, interview by author, 28 April 2003, New York City, tape recording.

individuals could use to examine their own issues. According to Korot, however, her individual work as an artist did not in fact deal with these social concerns, and it was her desire to focus on her individual artistic concerns that eventually made her quit editing the magazine. Despite this, one can see in her installations from 1974-1977 an attempt at critically engaging the structure of the medium, revising codes of vision and language in a way that is very informed by theoretical concerns common to the group.

Dachau, 1974, was a video installation by Beryl Korot and was perhaps her first mature, independent artwork. It was also among the first multi-channel video installations, and one whose content is at least as notable as its form or technical innovation. Korot set up an installation of four separate tape decks and monitors. The decks were hidden behind a wall so that viewers concentrated on the four television monitors arranged laterally in front of them. All four monitors displayed footage shot at the former German concentration camp on a trip Korot made in 1974 (fig. 21). The viewer was taken on a 25-minute virtual tour through the site, now a destination for tourists. The general order of the procession through the space is as follows: the entrance from outside the camps; the pathway inside the camp walking toward the guard tower; outside the barracks; inside the barracks; over a bridge along a path toward the crematoria; inside the crematoria; the former ovens; outside at a running stream. Each shot was still, with movement limited to the people moving in front of the camera or the running stream; the camera was mounted on a fixed tripod so there is no camera movement. There was no narration, with ambient sound providing the only soundtrack. Cuts were clean and abrupt. But the four monitors display slightly different versions of this visual narrative, beginning at slightly different times and with two alternating

viewpoints displayed at any one time. As the viewer watched, the eye was attracted by the sudden movement caused by an edit, where the objects in the camera's viewfinder suddenly shift and spatial relationships change according to the camera's location relative to the objects.

Korot carefully charted the patterns displayed at any one time on the four monitors. She devised a notational system for outlining each channel's program based on the grid structure of weaving, a structure I will discuss later in this chapter (fig. 22). The same program played on channels one and three, with channels two and four playing a slightly different view. So the first images on the screen, shots of the entrance to the concentration camp, were similar, with both showing a long view of the road leading into the camp, punctuated at the end with the empty guard tower. But channels one and three were shot from an angle more to the left, with a fence running along the right edge, while channels two and four had the guard tower slightly more centered and closer to the viewer. On the left edge of Korot's chart were numbers indicating the duration of the images. Each minute was further subdivided into four quarters of a minute. Thus, the first image from channel one, for instance, lasted a total of three minutes. Metaphorically, each minute provided the weft, interlocking with the channels, the warp threads. With alternating screens showing different images at any given moment, viewers must move their eyes, jumping from one screen to the next, then quickly moving back whenever they see movement in the periphery of their vision. In each individual image, figures moved in and out of the shot, and their composition within the image is different in each of the four screens at any given moment. In this way, what began as very static footage became activated through cuts and through the juxtaposition of images. In fact, this is what drove

Korot to the installation format for her work. "...when I got back to New York I realized that I had these very, very static images and I scratched my head and wondered how I would bring life to these images, and it was the loom that gave me the clue. Essentially, to bind a cloth you need two sets of two....And so what I did was I created two sets of channels for a four-channel piece."²²

Korot's fellow videographer, Davidson Gigliotti, wrote about the distinct effects of multi-channel video installations in an essay published in *Video Art* in 1976, about a year after Korot's *Dachau, 1974* premiered. Gigliotti observed that spreading an image across several monitors with varying angles, perspectives, and action, requires the viewer to direct her attention across a wider array of information. Rather than contemplating a single program presented in a linear format, the viewer is invited, through installation, to draw connections between competing images, and to consider relationships between separate channels.

Multi-channel work demands a different kind of attention. As our perceptual focus widens, we begin to ask ourselves: How is this work to be viewed? Do these channels all carry information of the same value? Are we to view them all at once, or in some kind of order? Does the nature of the programming provide some kind of clue, or perhaps the nature of the system? Where are we supposed to stand?²³

Korot also activated the video installation with sound, providing another layer of aesthetic information. Each shot recorded by Korot included the ambient sound through the in-camera microphone during recording. In the opening sequence, then, the viewer heard car traffic from a nearby road, though cars are not visible in the image. As one

²² Beryl Korot, interview by Roberta Burkan, 21 January 1994, transcript, American Jewish Committee Oral History Collection, New York Public Library, New York, New York, 1-28.

²³ Davidson Gigliotti, "Observations on the Scope of Multi-Channel Video Work," in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 214.

watched the bicycle pass in front of the camera and people walk past toward the gate, one heard their soft murmurs. Through the shot facing the barrack with its horizontal window forming a stripe across the screen, one heard the very loud crunching of footsteps on gravel, evoking images of marching. Korot related that at this point a busload of tourists had unloaded behind her (although they never appear in front of the camera).²⁴ During the footage shot inside the barracks, the viewer heard murmuring. Outside of the crematoria, the viewer looked through screens in the window. As people moved into the crematoria toward the ovens, one hears a woman laughing loudly behind the camera; as Korot describes it, a woman “playing with her child, a very high pitched laugh.”²⁵ During this laugh, bells suddenly began to chime, so that while the viewer looked inside the ovens, church bells tolled from nearby. In a moment as close to a climax as anything, the ovens appear, two by two, synchronous with the bell tolls, for only a minute and a half. Soon, the images switched, again, two by two, to the babbling brook, its chugging water mixed in with human voices. The bells effectively turned this entire installation into a memorial, and the relative quiet, punctuated by spurts of human activity, makes it a meditative piece, that Korot wistfully says, really belongs in the Holocaust Memorial.²⁶

Korot challenged the communicative power of electronic media as put forth by McLuhan even as she utilized video as a medium. McLuhan thought of electronic media as being an extension from the individual to the world. “Electronic technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement.”²⁷ Television was said to encourage the total involvement of the viewer; and because it can reach a global audience simultaneously, it

²⁴ Beryl Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003, New York City, tape recording.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage*, 8.

works against the supposed regionalism of the print medium with the latter's dependence on an author and his/her narrow audience. Access to television meant, for McLuhan, that youth viewers were exposed to the ideas of the world, more so than the parochial ideas of their parents.²⁸ In *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan wrote that "All media are extensions of some human faculty-psyhic or physical."²⁹ As examples, he said the wheel is the extension of the foot; books are the extension of the eye; clothes are the extension of the skin; and, most importantly for our purposes, "electronic circuitry is an extension of the central nervous system."³⁰ Since electronic media alter our perception of the world, making our perceived world larger, with greater influences, they alter our selves (without defining those "selves").

For Beryl Korot, this idea, that the electronic circuitry necessarily changes the human subject viewing the images, was a problematic one. That communicative power was challenged in *Dachau, 1974*. When she visited Dachau over several days in 1974, her first conclusion was that one could never understand the Holocaust through visiting this place or through images at all. After spending the first day looking at the site before filming, she determined she wanted to consider Dachau as a place where tourists visited, in an attempt to connect to the past through the present physical structures of the architecture.³¹ Korot was born after the war, with no close relatives who perished in the Holocaust, and despite being Jewish, she felt she did not have a direct connection to the concentration camps. At the same time, she was informed by an upbringing that greatly valued such connections to history and memory, as well as to Israel. That first day that

²⁸ McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage*, 14-15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

³¹ Korot, interview by Roberta Burkan, 21 January 1994, 1-26.

she visited Dachau was also Yom Kippur. Her intended perspective was to be as someone distant from the event, and using the multiple channel media contributed to that sense of distance. Without a verbal narrative, there was no overriding message trying to make sense of the holocaust, and in this way *Dachau* resisted the kind of neat histories offered up by documentary films of the period. There is an apparent sameness to the images, a strict formality expressed in the strong horizontals and verticals of the architecture that could be seen as a parallel to authoritarian processes. But upon close examination, one can see that the twin sets of images, those playing on channel one and three, for instance, were actually slightly different. Though each may be a shot of the same place, what was showing at any one time might be from earlier or later in the shot, so that there may be different people moving through the shot, or different light, or even a slightly different camera angle. Additionally, in the space of one section, the tape may have been edited to repeat a movement over and over, looping, so that a person approaching the camera moves off camera behind the viewer, only to return again in the distance to repeat their march toward the viewer. Thus, we are confronted with a place only known from a remove.

Gigliotti wrote of the ways that video installation, as a temporal medium, could dramatize processes of perception and memory that were affected by time. He proposed three types of time: compressed time, real time, and expanded time, which could all express or complicate principles of narrative in film and video.³² Compression occurs through editing to relay the privileged aspects of a story and reject extraneous material, in order to demonstrate the narrative's linear construction and its logical conclusion. Real time might be demonstrated through media, such as a camera set up to record an

³² Gigliotti, "Observations on the Scope of Multi-Channel Video Work," 215-216.

everyday action performed in a naturalistic setting, but it is not subject to the individual's own mechanisms of compression which alter her perception of a scene. Finally, expanded time occurs when an artist uses repetition, scale, and other tools for mediating the straight imagery to encourage the viewer to consider image relationships and contemplate the structure of their content outside of the narrow limits of its narrative. Gigliotti celebrated the potential for this "expanded" time most explicitly in video delay systems, but allowed for other kinds of expanded imagery as well.

I identify its analogue in subjective temporal experience with contemplation. It is similar to the sort of time that we experience when viewing the sea, the stars, fire, fish, clouds passing overhead. These experiences have certain things in common—an element of predictability, an emphasis on the present and the moments adjacent to it, and the absence of a clear-cut beginning or end to the experience.³³

In Korot's installation, the various actions of arriving and moving through the camp are disrupted, get repeated, stalled, and re-started through looping fragments of the journey and alternating the sequences on separate channels. By applying this kind of structure to a memorial location, she highlighted the processes of selection, compression, and expansion that occur in memory. A visitor might try to envisage what it was like to arrive at these gates in 1944 as a prisoner, but such a projection gets frustrated by reminders of the present through jarring insertions of tourists' voices and their bodies that casually stroll in and out of the camera's frame.

Not only did Korot question McLuhan's optimism about electronic media's capability to communicate, but by stressing content in her installations she also disrupted what often appears as McLuhan's modernist framework. McLuhan's aphorism "the medium is the message" strongly evokes Clement Greenberg's concern with medium

³³ Ibid., 216.

specificity, a principle for which Greenberg was highly criticized since it devalued content in art criticism. Greenberg also assigned art a task of “self-criticism,” and through these two concepts promoted a self-referential art that became synonymous with Modernism in the U.S. after World War II. McLuhan proposed a kind of self-referential reading of language by analyzing communications media and considering the “inherent properties” of print and electronic media. As I will show, Korot was concerned with analyzing how video communicated and drawing comparisons with other forms of language. For Korot, despite being thoroughly involved in the publication of a media theory that stressed McLuhan’s popular notions, her overarching concern in her own work was the content and the medium could never be the entire message.

Still, Korot’s adoption of the structures of weaving provided a kind of non-textual framework for her mature work that had its foundation in language. Just before traveling to Germany and filming Dachau, Korot had begun taking weaving workshops at the YWCA on 50th and Lexington with Clare Freeman. Although she did not pinpoint an exact moment when she began to conceive of the loom as an early precursor to video, it had to have been sometime between 1973 and the summer of 1974. She was friends with Marlise Downey, a weaver and the wife of fellow video artist, Juan Downey, who had also participated in Raindance. It was Marlise Downey who suggested Korot take classes from Freeman, and it was in conversations between Korot and Downey that the ideas of the loom as the first computer was raised. The weaver programs a pattern on her loom when she counts out and ties down its warp threads. The pattern is then built line by line, as the weft threads are passed through the warp and pushed neatly against one another by the shuttle. Additionally, Korot made the observation that in video, lines of information

are sprayed onto the screen and retrieved by the viewer line by line. This is done through the raster scan of the video monitor. In a tube television monitor, the phosphorous in the inside of the monitor is energized by an electron beam that travels across the screen from top to bottom and left to right. This happens two times very quickly for each image.

There are 525 lines on American television screens, which use the NTSC (National Television System Committee) format. The evenly numbered lines are scanned in one sweep, and the odd numbered lines are scanned on the second sweep. So each image is made up of two scans. Images are shown at thirty frames per second.³⁴

As Korot edited *Radical Software*, she read many essays about the properties of video and became aware that the video image was created line by line. Weaving is also a way of communicating a pattern line by line, albeit a way that happens very slowly. This reminded her of her own experience as a writer and a reader, in that the print medium is also communicated line by line. In this way, Korot saw a very new technology as having affinities with very old, historical processes of communicating; and, unlike McLuhan, it was these affinities, rather than the differences between the print and electronic media that were at the heart of Korot's insights. It followed that, for her, video, rather than being an entirely new medium that would shape a new and revolutionary content, is actually historically tied to very ancient systems of craft and language. Seeing weaving, print, and electronic media as three versions of the same structure, Korot was driven to find ways to link the ancient and the new, a drive which she related to larger social issues of mending historical rifts.³⁵

³⁴ Videofreex, *The Spaghetti City Video Manual: A Guide to Use, Repair, and Maintenance* (New York, Washington, D.C.: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 5.

³⁵ Beryl Korot, "Language as Still Life: From Video to Painting," *Leonardo* 21 no. 4 (1988): 369.

Associations between weaving and computers provide an enticing starting point for a feminist theory of electronic media. Although recent cultural theory has gone far in reversing gender stereotypes surrounding access to computer and electronic technology, after the cold war, artificial intelligence and computer programming were often gendered as realms for male mastery in the United States. From the 1890s onward in the United States, invention became linked to machines and patents, but before this transition, many women were engaged in the “useful arts,” a concept that prefigured the 1930s term, “technology.”³⁶ With the increasing tendency to associate the development of machinery with technology, women’s contributions to non-machinery invention were erased from what had been a more complex picture of modern invention .

In an 1870 treatise on women inventors by feminist Matilda E. Joslyn Gage, the author included fabrics, mythology, and language, along with certain mechanical devices as important inventions, not defined by legal patents.³⁷ Her writing is emblematic of some women’s resistance toward a growing masculinization of technology and corresponding devaluation of women as technological inventors (fig. 23).³⁸ At the 1876 Philadelphia Fair, steam engines exhibited separately in the Women’s Pavilion that drove six power looms were overshadowed by the fair’s main attraction, a giant twin-cylinder Corliss steam engine at Machinery Hall, a fact lamented by some members of the female press covering the fair.³⁹ As modern industry shifted its emphasis toward the glorification of machines, above all those associated with the manufacture of steel, a realm where few women participated, technology increasingly became identified as a male culture.

³⁶ Ruth Oldenziel, *Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women and Modern Machines in America, 1870-1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

More recently, when computers were first used in the United States in a military context, it was in fact women who first wrote programming code for these machines. Between 1940 and 50, according to Judy Wajcman, while men were overseas fighting, many women were recruited to “work as trained mathematicians to calculate firing tables by hand for rockets and artillery shells...It was because programming was initially viewed as tedious clerical work of low status that it was assigned to women. As the complex skills and value of programming were increasingly recognized, it came to be considered creative, intellectual and demanding ‘men’s work’.”⁴⁰ In the 1970s, under the second wave of feminism, there was a conscious effort to re-educate women and cross barriers that had excluded them from training in what had become the male domains of carpentry, masonry, and engineering.⁴¹ It was also during this time, of course, that feminist artists re-valued crafts that had been considered historically as belonging to the female domain, including sewing and weaving.

Korot has in fact resisted seeing her weaving metaphor as one particularly and historically linked to women, and it seems other members of the community did, as well. When she spoke to the critic who eventually would write a review of her video and fiber installation, *Text and Commentary* (1977) in the *Feminist Art Journal*, Korot says the critic, Tricia Vita, seemed at first wary of relating Korot’s work to weaving at all and expressed an antipathy toward weaving.⁴² This may be because the link between weaving and women’s history had by then become so overdetermined as to become cliché, or it may evince a general antipathy among New York women artists towards essentialist

⁴⁰ Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 158.

⁴¹ Cynthia Cockburn, “The Circuit of Technology: Gender, Identity and Power,” in *Electronic Media and Technoculture*, ed. John Thornton Caldwell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 198.

⁴² Korot, interview by author, 28 April 2003.

notions of gender.⁴³ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews have noted a disparity between East and West Coast feminist artists, with the West Coast artists exploring more explicitly issues of “female consciousness,”⁴⁴ and it would seem that Korot was instead more interested in seeing herself as an equal among her male peers, and in seeing weaving as an ancient, rather than a specifically female, technology.⁴⁵ In fact, Korot discerns a “toughness to the ideas” in her work, elaborating that “It wasn’t just weaving to make an object; it was showing that something as ancient as weaving, as a technology that started so many thousands of years ago, and was so basic, came up with a way of structuring cloth to pull stuff together, was such an amazing feat.”⁴⁶ That technological feat prefigured the way that numbers could be arranged to produce a pattern when programming a computer.

Yet, at least one West Coast critic, Christopher Knight of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, has cited feminism as an important source for Korot’s work and for the development of early video. In a 1988 review of an exhibition of early video art at the Long Beach Museum of Art called “Planes of Memory” in which *Dachau, 1974* was included, Knight wrote, “Much feminist art of the early 1970s explored artistic mediums traditionally ascribed as ‘women’s work’. Korot pointedly called upon her experience as

⁴³ The historical assignment of weaving as a “feminine labor” is further complicated by the question of a weaver’s professional or amateur status. As Sigrid Wortmann Weltge points out, medieval European weaving guilds were made up of men. It was only after the industrialization of the field in the nineteenth century that women were brought in as “unskilled” laborers to work on the power looms. As amateurs in the home, however, weaving and the needle arts have been practiced by women in many cultures since antiquity. Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, *Bauhaus Textiles: Women Artists and the Weaving Workshop*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993, 41.

⁴⁴ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, “The Feminist Critique of Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (September 1987), 329.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Grosz describes this as a “feminism of equality” versus a “feminism of difference” in her article, “Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism,” in *The Essential Difference* eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, 82-97, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Korot, interview by author, 28 April 2003.

a weaver to provide a method for her video installation....”⁴⁷ Though Korot never claimed an affinity toward weaving as “women’s work,” the connection was presumed. An interviewer for the New York Public Library’s Oral History Project also pressed Korot on the issue of weaving and women’s history. Korot described her education about weaving as it was conveyed through Noel Bennett, a Navajo weaver. She described the tradition of weaving as it was passed on orally among generations of weavers, and the interviewer interjects that this is specifically passed on by women. Although Korot acknowledges the point, she never elaborates, despite the interviewer’s prodding.⁴⁸ In my own interviews with Korot, I asked her directly about her relationship to the women’s movement in the 1970s, and she claimed never to have been particularly motivated by feminism. As an artist, she felt respected by her male peers and supported by male members of her family. As I will discuss in chapter four, however, there were instances of sexism within the video community and particularly within Raindance. But since Korot identified “feminist” issues as those largely related to problems of equality, she didn’t actively embrace weaving as “women’s” labor, but rather as an ancient technology. Refusing the label of women’s craft, Korot was able to maintain a level of androgyny that was better suited to her relatively equal status with male members of the video community and was more appropriate to her primarily historical theme.

Since Korot’s drive to find a precedent for video in ancient technologies put her at odds with McLuhan’s announcements of its revolutionary uniqueness, she may have alienated herself from other video pioneers who continued to promote their use of the medium as aligned with futuristic utopianism. She continued to work with Ira Schneider

⁴⁷ Christopher Knight, “Moving Pictures and ‘Planes of Memory’: Exhibit Explores the Impact of Video,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 14 February 1988, E2.

⁴⁸ Korot, interview by Roberta Burkan, 21 January 1994, 1-25.

on broadcast workshops in upstate New York aimed at youth. But today she consistently frames her own work as an artist as quite independent of Raindance or any other group or collaborative entity. On the other hand, she did aim for a connection with people on a nearly universal scale that is similar to McLuhan's idea of a global village. That ambition is rooted in the foundational epiphany that shaped her installations, namely, that there are consistent structures to language that are biologically based and that can unite people cross-culturally; "...my work's always been about elucidating aspects of being human that are universal, and structural at the same time. That's why the way the loom led to later technologies; that's why I sought its structuring to inform the present when people were getting into multiples, because I think it adds a kind of truth and ritualness (sic), a richness that goes beyond my personal preferences...."⁴⁹ I believe her desire to mend rifts, as mentioned earlier, between the past and present, comes at least in part from her experience of Judaism. Though this concern for using technology to explore religious questions of moral behavior and its representation in biblical texts is most overt in Korot's relatively recent collaboration with Steve Reich, the video opera *The Cave* from 1993, it is also present in earlier work such as *Text and Commentary*.⁵⁰

Text and Commentary (1977) is an installation consisting of five weavings facing five video tapes of Korot weaving them (fig. 24, 25). She also included her notations, planning the pattern program for each weaving and similar notations of the plan for the video portion of the work (fig. 26). As with *Dachau*, the alternating channels of video

⁴⁹ Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003.

⁵⁰ Although Korot's collaborations with Reich date from the early 1990s, their artistic interactions extend at least as far back as 1973-1974 when they met prior to Korot's trip to Dachau and were later married. The relationship of weaving to musical structures was discussed by Korot and Melinda Barlow in an as yet unpublished 1993 interview, and is the subject of future writing by Barlow. Personal conversation with the author, 5 January 2005.

relate to one another, with channels 1 and 5 and 2 and 4 sharing similar, but not identical images.⁵¹ To record herself weaving at the loom, Korot suspended a camera directly over the loom, so that it captured her hands moving threads through the warp or her feet pressing on the treadles. One hears the sound of the beater against the warp thread or Korot's chair squeaking against the floor, a sound that will ripple across the installation from five different monitor speakers. The camera zooms in very close to the weaving, and then scans across it, so that the weaving is actually the more animated. The title, *Text and Commentary* is related to how Korot sees the two major texts of the Jewish religion, the Torah and the Talmud. The Talmud is the written commentary by Jewish scholars on the stories of the Torah. Korot became particularly interested in these texts through her own study of Judaism and her desire to deepen her understanding of her Jewish heritage.⁵² To her, the moral lessons that are taught through these stories, and the discussions about their relevancy and meaning was an important part of Judaism. She never saw the stories as historically true or absolute law, but rather as texts to be critically engaged and even deconstructed.⁵³ Thus, the structure of this installation reflects that critical engagement, with the weavings as metaphorical text, and the video recordings of the process as a re-configured commentary, with elements analyzed and reconstructed.

Through *Text and Commentary* and *Dachau*, Korot had articulated her interest in the visual structuring of information, line by line. She had also related this structure to her investigation of language. After *Text and Commentary*, Korot turned away from video in favor of painting and during the 1980s she made paintings for which she initially wove the canvases herself. This allowed her to continue to structure her work line by line,

⁵¹ Korot, "Language as Still Life: From Video to Painting," 369.

⁵² Korot, interview by Roberta Burkan, 21 January 1994, 1-37.

⁵³ Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003.

casting information gradually woven as a form of text. Then she painted images that resembled pictographs, spelling out narratives in a purely pictorial format. Korot understood written language as an analogue to speech, that had developed out of pictographs which were the visual equivalent of cognitive thoughts. “In painting, as in writing, thoughts are transmitted from brain to eye and hand and imprinted on canvas via the simplest of tools.”⁵⁴ Beginning in 1980, Korot invented an abstract language based on a four-point grid structure that would be an analogue to the English alphabet. Each point on the grid corresponded with a letter of the alphabet.⁵⁵ In *One Language, One Speech*, Korot used letters from this invented language to spell out fragments of the story of the Tower of Babel, a parable that warns readers of the dangers of uncritically glorifying technology and power (fig. 27). Large, blue shapes are the letters corresponding to Babel and these in turn contain smaller letters spelling out the narrative. Smaller light blue boxes contained pictographic letters that spelled out a fragment from the story, “And the whole earth was of one language and one speech. And they journeyed from the East to the land of Shinar and there they dwelt...”⁵⁶ The references to the ancient text ground this work in moral lessons contained in the Torah. The laborious task of weaving, devising the script, transposing it to canvas and overlaying imagery recalls the passage of time that occurs not only in weaving but in the historical trajectory from ancient technologies to contemporary ones. As Korot wrote in a 1986 statement for an exhibition, “Whether pictographic or phonetic, when we visualize thought by writing we are always

⁵⁴ Korot, “Language as Still Life: From Video to Painting,” 370.

⁵⁵ Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003.
and subsequent email correspondence 2-10 September 2005.

⁵⁶ Beryl Korot, email correspondence to the author, 2 September 2005.

involved with small packets of information placed in a linear manner, horizontally or vertically.”⁵⁷

In later, related paintings, letters corresponded with a pictograph, so that in a detail of the painting, *A=Girl*, the word “language” is spelled out in pictures borrowed from sources based on Korot’s interest in history and time (fig. 28). The first image is borrowed from published accounts of Lucy, the skeletal remains of an early predecessor to homo sapiens, found in east Africa in 1974. The second image is from an archival World War II photograph of a young girl walking toward the ovens of a concentration camp. The third image is a man fleeing, also from World War II. The fourth image is a figure bowing down to a king, borrowed from a famed painting by Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel* of 1563. The fifth letter, “U”, is a figure described by Korot as a “wolf-child,” a human that was raised by wolves and thus had no access to language. The sixth and seventh figures repeat “A” and “G”, with the word complete by “E”, the final letter, a figure of a man in prayer.⁵⁸ *A=Girl* and other paintings after 1985 were no longer constrained to the structure of a grid, however, and their forms and letters were thus looser and more “calligraphic”, according to Korot, than the earlier paintings.⁵⁹

Using a language invented through her own structure, Korot thus demonstrated the parallel relationships of these different forms of information. Each piece—the picture, the letter, the thread—is laid down linearly, next to one another, so that information is transmitted gradually, over time. Whether electronic, fabric, or painted, the information is structured similarly, and Korot believes there is a link among all humans such that, no

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003.

⁵⁹ Korot, email correspondence to the author, 2 September 2005.

matter the individual language, our human brains understand information in the same way.

There's a way in which language is structured that's common to everybody and that's these little bundles that make up words, these little signs that make up a word, separated by a space.... Whether that descended vertically or horizontally, it's the shape of thought... So my work's always been about elucidating aspects of being human that are universal, and structural at the same time.⁶⁰

Korot's descriptions tend to emphasize the linear structure of language, an approach that—along with her focus on a logocentric notion of language privileging the spoken word—has been challenged by deconstruction, especially in Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967).⁶¹ But Korot's understanding of the theme of history and time also suggests alternative relationships to language. When she speaks of the relationship of weaving to language, she cites singers in Kashmir, who stand before weavers and sing the patterns, since the patterns are understood as notes in a musical composition.⁶² Likewise, as the critic William Judson has pointed out, weaving has historically often taken place in groups, whether in villages or in the weaving workshops of the Bauhaus, with fragments of the groups' discussions effectually making their way into the weaving.⁶³

The weaving process was and is thus constructed as a process under the influence of conversation, so that the patterns, while built up linearly thread by thread, contain multiple voices, and so the information is never simplistic or homogenous. The link between video and language was a concept she began to explore in *Dachau 1974*,

⁶⁰ Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003.

⁶¹ I am particularly indebted to Ellen Lupton for her clear explication of Derrida's project. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, *Design, Writing, Research: Writing on Graphic Design* (New York: Kiosk and Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 11.

⁶² This practice was related to Korot by her brother-in-law during the 1974-75 period when she was first exploring her interest in weaving. Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003.

⁶³ Bill Judson, "Points of Departure," *Carnegie Magazine* (November/December 1990): 9.

developed in *Text and Commentary*, and extended into her paintings of the early 1980s. In *Dachau, 1974*, each channel displays a slightly different version of the text, each sequence beginning and ending in a slightly different point, or shot from a slightly different angle. Additionally, there is a gap between what is recorded through the camera, and the original source material. Especially where early portapak equipment is involved, the resolution is always less than perfect, not to mention that the footage was shot entirely in black and white. The form of the image points to the text as sign for the referent. Finally, on a conceptual level, Korot's notion of structures of language persisting through time suggests an accretion of layers, where each new technology is layered upon the last, but the previous, more ancient layer is partially buried and simultaneously latent within the next. In this conception of history these connections both obscured and revealed. This idea is made visual in a 1985 painting, *Etty's Rosetta* (fig. 29), where letters resembling ancient scripts, like Cyrillic and Semitic, are painted over pictographic silhouettes of human figures. Both the script and the figures are painted on top of white forms suggestive of more letters, which appear through a layer of whitewash that covers the entire painting. Though phrases such as "one language one speech" appear in the lower quarter of a painting titled, *Anordnung* (1986), most of the text in this series of work remains unintelligible, with characters written but not translated (fig. 30). These objects are designed to provide glimpses to the past, but the stress is on the transmission of information, not on the closing or completion of any historical narrative. To refer once again to *Dachau, 1974*: while the viewer is transported to a place, it is not the concentration camp of 1944, but rather the tourist attraction, the empty architecture that remains as a trace of a site of atrocity. Video thus provides an extension of the viewer's

body that, rather than successfully connecting it with other bodies in time and space, reminds us of our frustrated attempts to record history, to understand horrors which only partially remain lodged in the artifacts.

To reiterate, there is a myth that seems to be growing in literature on women video artists that the women did not engage the electronic nature of the medium, but rather focused on issues of performance in front of the camera.⁶⁴ Canadian video artist Nell Tenhaaf wrote that a “male monopoly on the discourse of technology” prompted a need for women artists to insert the female body and its tropes into video culture, but she thereby invokes essentialist notions reinforcing the stereotypic, archaic male/culture female/nature dichotomy. Without diminishing the important, on-going research and analysis regarding women artists’ vital contributions to performance, I wish to counter such generalizations by giving further examples of videos by women in the pioneering generation whose work fully engaged the technology of the medium. Very often, these projects combine the performative aspects of video with its electronic capabilities in ways that disrupt the categoric description of each. Some of the most richly integrated works are in fact by lesser-known artists.

Nina Sobell (b. 1947) began using the video camera in 1969 while a Master’s candidate at Cornell University in order to document viewers’ interactions with her large, movable sculptures.⁶⁵ Sobell was introduced to the video camera and to editing techniques by the librarian for Art, Architecture and Urban Planning at Cornell, David

⁶⁴ The other area of video in which women have been recognized as important contributors is documentary video, especially with topics oriented toward consciousness-raising. For an important overview of such tapes, see Martha Gever, “Video Politics: Early Feminist Projects,” *Afterimage* (Summer: 1983) 25-27. See also, Helen DeMichiel, “Speculations: Narrative Video by Women,” *The Independent* (April 1985): 12-14. I also discuss documentaries by several women’s collectives in chapter four.

⁶⁵ “ParkBench: A History of Firsts on the Web: The Artists” *ParkBench* 1994-2001, available at <http://www.cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/ninabio.html>, Internet, accessed 10 November 2003.

Shearer.⁶⁶ For her thesis exhibition titled *The Disintegration of Objects Within a Sequential Time Period*, she installed her large sculptures on the Cornell campus and videotaped students spontaneously interacting, often rocking inside of, the objects until they fell apart. The participants were later invited to her gallery installation where she played back the videotapes in a public environment, and reconstructed rockable furniture that mimicked the sculptures on which to watch the videos. Looking back, Sobell recognizes an early interest in how video alters a sequential notion of time that has continued to the present.⁶⁷

Out of her experiments with video in college, Sobell began using video to document private performances consisting of interactions with her sculptural materials. “By surveying myself with the camera, I realized I was able to access parts of myself which I would not have revealed to the public.” Even though these performances were done privately, Sobell used the camera to bring her solitary experiments into the public space of the gallery, creating an interaction with her viewer that she claims would not have been otherwise possible. This medium created an extension from her self to her audience that was in keeping with communications theory that inspired other video users. Between 1969 and 1971 when she first began using video at Cornell, Sobell took trips to New York City with Shearer (the librarian) and his family to meet video groups such as Raindance and Videofreex. She recalls being aware of McLuhan’s ideas and his influence on the video community, although she never made a concerted effort to access his writings.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Nina Sobell, email correspondence to the author, 11 November 2003.

⁶⁷ Artist’s statement in correspondence to the author, August 2004.

⁶⁸ Nina Sobell, telephone interview with the author, 15 December 2003, tape recording.

In 1973, Sobell began her *Brainwave Drawings*, an installation in which participants were hooked up to EEG electrodes that read their brainwaves and translated those signals into a visual pattern (fig. 31). These patterns were then overlaid on top of closed-circuit images of the participants recorded in real time. Participants were paired so that their brainwave patterns were combined and overlaid on top of one another. They were then asked to concentrate on correlating their images, to try to produce the same pattern without communicating through words, but instead suggesting a kind of telepathic communication. When their brainwaves were aligned, the Lissajous pattern was a wavy circular shape.⁶⁹

By connecting the EEG monitor to the participants and using it as a tool for their nonverbal communication, Sobell effectively integrated the machine and the organic. Pairs of people sitting together in front of the camera are linked through the communication of their brainwaves and their subsequent visualization on the screen. Sobell arrived at this use of the EEG equipment between 1972 and '73, as she thought about the fact that her intentions in her artwork were to communicate her thinking directly to viewers. "I asked myself, How could I connect what's going on in my mind, through video, since I think of myself as an electronic medium, How can I marry that nature of the electronic media to best express what it is that I am doing?"⁷⁰ Sobell literally made her own, and then others, thoughtwaves visible to the viewer. The

⁶⁹ In 2003, artist Moriko Mori exhibited a similar work called *Wave UFO* in which three participants sit in a large, futuristic structure and attempt to achieve a unity by aligning their brainwaves. Similar to Sobell, if the group achieves this harmony, their brainwaves form what Jeffrey Deitch called a "harmonic ring pattern." Both Mori and Sobell used an Interactive Brainwave Visualization Analyzer (IBVA) developed by scientist Masahiro Kahata. See credits for Sobell's *Interactive Brainwave Drawings, 1972-96*, available at http://cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/parkbench/09.25_96.html and Jeffrey Deitch, "Mariko Mori/Inner Space" in Marko Mori, *Wave UFO* (exh. cat.) (Cologne: Konig, 2003), 143.

⁷⁰ "Portfolio" *ParkBench* 1994-2001 available at <http://www.cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/portfolio/3/frame.html>; Internet; accessed 10 November 2003.

communication process would be made visible by recording two people's brainwaves, transmitted as data to an oscilloscope. The oscilloscope emits a pattern that can then be recorded through ink. Working with Dr. Barry Sturman, a neuropsychologist at Sepulveda Veterans Neuropsychology Laboratory, part of the initial experiment was to see if two participants could make the same brainwave pattern at the same time. The work proved that participants could indeed affect each other's brainwave outputs without their communicating verbally.⁷¹ Sobell continued to use this technology and to integrate it with closed circuit video, with a view to enabling human communication through electronic media.

Sobell's project gains new relevance once again in light of the feminist strategies articulated since the 1980s that are directed at countering essentialist approaches to female identity with a model that constructs the female body as a complex hybrid of the organic and the mechanistic. Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg came to replace the feminist construct of the goddess in the 1980s, substituting a female subject who was partly constructed out of bits of technologies acknowledged to have once belonged to militaristic, patriarchal, and capitalist society. This theory of a cyborg identity, according to Haraway, countered false claims within feminism for a universal and homogenous feminism. "Cyborg feminists have to argue that 'we' do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole."⁷² Sobell's literal integration of two human bodies through the electrodes of the EEG combines the organic and the cybernetic in a prefiguration of this cyborg identity. Of course, her project is not limited to female

⁷¹ Emily Hartzell, "Nina Sobell and Emily Hartzell: Collaborators in Art with Technology" excerpt from *Women, Art, and Technology* (MIT Press) on *ParkBench* 1998, available at <http://www.cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/Leonardo.html>, Internet, accessed on 23 November 2003.

⁷² Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 157.

participants; thus the specific connection of the cyborg to the female body is not explicit. When Sobell said that she thought of herself as an electronic medium, she was not specifically linking electronic synapses of her brain to a feminine biology in the way that Kubota, for one, claimed videotape as an analogue to menstruation. However, Sobell produced other videotapes that did explicitly use female identity as a theme, and I take that as evidence of an interest in female subjectivity—an interest concurrent with her exploring of the potential of the closed-circuit capability of the video medium.

One rarely sees references to Sobell's work in historical literature, yet several of her tapes remain in contemporary circulation. Two of Sobell's videotapes are included in an anthology of feminist performance-based video distributed by the Video Data Bank in Chicago. These are *Hey! Baby, Chickey!* from 1978 and *Chicken on Foot* from 1979, two single-channel tapes where Sobell performs with a chicken carcass in front of the video camera. In both, the chicken carcass stands in for a human baby, and Sobell holds and plays with the carcass as one might a baby. Produced before Sobell herself had a child, these tapes were interpreted by curator Maria C. Troy as expressions of ambivalence toward stereotypically female roles of childrearing, cooking, and being the dominant object of sexual desire.⁷³ As Sobell performed these works, she viewed herself in a closed-circuit environment, where the camera was hooked to a monitor so that she could view herself in real time and record the actions on video tape. *Hey! Chickey Baby!* was included in the video portion of the *At Home* exhibition, a show at the Long Beach Museum of Art that celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Woman's Building in 1983.⁷⁴

⁷³ Maria C. Troy, "I Say I Am" *Video Data Bank* 1998, available at <http://www.vdb.org>, Internet, accessed 23 November 2003.

⁷⁴ Arlene Raven, *At Home* (exh. cat.) (Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1983), xiii

Another chicken videotape from 1974 was screened at the Women's Video Festival of 1975 organized by the Women's Interart Center in New York City.⁷⁵

Although Sobell describes her interest in video as coming from a performance perspective, the closed-circuit capabilities of the medium and the implications of that structure frame all of her work from the 1970s. Sobell used the closed-circuit medium both to perform alone in front of the camera, as in *Hey! Baby, Chickey!* and the *Chicken Pieces*, and as a tool to examine the nature of human interaction in works such as *Brainwave Drawing LA*. In her solo performances, Sobell used the chicken as a humorous surrogate for another human, manipulating the carcass as an object of desire that is organic and pathetic, but entirely without will. For the *Brainwave Drawings*, she set up situations where two human subjects could not only now perform and respond for one another, acting out and engaging in an activity as a dyad, but also opening up the space of activity toward the viewer's space. In a drawing for *Brainwave Drawing L.A.*, Sobell demarcated the image on the screen as "intimate space" and the space of the viewer as "public space" (fig. 32).⁷⁶ The *Brainwave Drawings* are not only meant to only be read by and instructive for the participants hooked up to the EEGs, but their thoughts and mental emissions are also displayed on monitors to be viewed in a gallery setting (now a virtual gallery setting, that of the website).⁷⁷

Sobell's ideas about technology as a positive tool to facilitate human interaction might be seen as utopian were it not for the practical applications in her artwork. Sobell

⁷⁵ Program for Women's Video Festival, 1975, unpaginated.

⁷⁶ "Portfolio" *ParkBench* 1994-2001 available at <http://www.cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/portfolio/3/frame.html>; Internet; accessed 10 November 2003.

⁷⁷ Sobell has reinterpreted the Brainwave Drawings in a series of live and interactive actions on the internet where participants could wear special headsets and connect with other participants in remote locations. The most recent incarnation of the Brainwave Drawings was called *Thinking of You*, a project curated by the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 2004. Available at http://www.brainwavedrawings.com/index_menu.html, accessed 21 October 2005.

stated “many people feel that technology stands in the way of communication.”⁷⁸ The *Brainwave Drawings* proved for her that technology can enable participants to express themselves in a way that they were unable to without the technology. The social function of her work is even more explicit in a project called *Video Voyeur* (1977), an installation at London’s ACME Gallery where Sobell sat in the gallery window and passersby in the street could speak to her through a telephone outside the window. Sobell sat at an angle to the viewer so that her face was obscured. Cameras were set up to record Sobell and the viewer and feed both participants’ images simultaneously to a television monitor using a split screen. The viewer could pick up the telephone and ask Sobell questions, looking at her face on the monitor. Eye contact was only possible through this monitor, since Sobell’s face was obscured by the angle at which her body was positioned. Sobell’s concept was that this relationship was enhanced by the distance the viewer felt from the artist. The “perceived threat” of face-to-face contact was diffused by the technology of the live camera feed and the telephone, so that viewers felt more comfortable speaking with Sobell, a stranger, through this veil. As further evidence of how this installation broke down barriers between artist and viewer, when the installation was repeated in Manchester, England, viewers took over the piece from the artist, putting themselves in both the seat inside the window and outside the window at the telephone. Viewers’ apparent comfort and interest in acting out all parts of the installation effectively broke down traditionally separate positions within the circuit of the gaze and within the

⁷⁸ “Portfolio” *ParkBench* 1994-2001 available at <http://www.cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/portfolio/3/frame.html>; Internet; accessed 10 November 2003.

hierarchies of discourse. They took on and confused the roles of the passive object and the omnipresent voyeur.⁷⁹

Sobell's concern for enhancing human communication through interactive procedures extends back to her years as a Master's candidate at Cornell and those interactive sculptures. It was during graduate school that Sobell began to recognize unequal treatment on the part of her male sculpture professors. Never given a studio, Sobell had to borrow space from other male students or squat in unused studios.⁸⁰ Cornell would eventually embrace her work after its sociological impact was recognized and they would invite her to stay for her Ph.D., but she refused since the university would claim copyright to her research and the resulting sculptures. Her struggle for recognition from her graduate advisors parallels similar problems documented by countless other women artists during the late 1960s and early 1970s, among them, Judy Chicago.⁸¹

McLuhan had presumed video's presence as an extension of the human subject. Sobell engaged questions of physical proximity, interaction, and the positive power of distance in video installations through the 1970s. Sobell renewed her investigation of audience interaction after the advent of the internet in the 1990s. She collaborated with Emily Hartzell while they were visiting artists at NYU's Center for Advanced Technology to produce *ArTisTheater*, the first live performance (art) on the World Wide Web in 1994.⁸² Like many others from the pioneering generation, she has embraced the

⁷⁹ Emily Hartzell and Nina Sobell, "Sculpting in Time and Space: Interactive Work" *Leonardo* 34 no. 2 (2001): 102.

⁸⁰ Nina Sobell interview with the author, 15 December 2003.

⁸¹ Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975): 28-30.

⁸² "ArTisTheater Performance Archive" *ParkBench* 1994-2001, available at <http://www.cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/about.html#kiosk>, accessed 11 November 2003.

internet as a new format for a decentralized media, to which a broad range of users have access.

In 1976, Shigeko Kubota submitted a text and two photographs of video sculptures to the collection of artists' statements and images compiled by Beryl Korot and Ira Schneider called *Video Art: An Anthology*. Kubota's text had been part of a video sculpture called *Video Poem: Self-Portrait*, consisting of Kubota's colorized image emitting from a monitor screen, surrounded by a soft, stuffed pillow. The text of the poem was projected on a wall behind the sculpture (fig. 33). In her poem, Kubota refers to two projects, the first her *Europe on 1/2 inch a Day* where she in 1972 carried her new Sony Portapak camera with her to Europe recording the streets and nightlife of Paris and Amsterdam. In that text, she likened carrying her portapak around Europe to being a Vietnamese woman, alone, carrying her baby on her back. The laborious task of carrying the heavy portapak is also compared by Kubota to the labor of Soviet women, working on the Siberian railway, a second reference to tasks explicitly performed by women. The second tape, here called "An American Family," but elsewhere titled *Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky* included footage of Kubota's trip to a Navajo reservation in Chinle, Arizona to visit the family of her friend Cecilia Sandoval. Her video poem ends with several proposed affinities between the act of videotaping and menstruation, specifically claiming the videotape for women's experience. She employs stereotypical dichotomies between masculinity and cognition versus femininity and the corporeal. "Man thinks, 'I think, therefore I am.' I, a woman, feel, 'I Bleed, therefore I am.' Recently I bled in half inch..3M or SONY ...ten thousand feet every month." Kubota finally ends the poem with short declarations for the power of video: "Video is

Vengeance of Vagina. Video is Victory of Vagina. Video is Venereal Disease of Intellectuals....” As in other works which I will discuss in chapter three, she purposely employs Duchampian strategies for breaking down the seriousness of art by claiming video as a venereal disease, a sexual disease which infects the rationality of the intellect. Ironically deploying the Cartesian separation of mind and body, Kubota aligns the technology of video with sexuality and the body in order to undermine the authority of the intellect.

Kubota’s video poem with its menstrual metaphors was rather unique within the video community of 1976. A glance through the rest of the *Video Art* anthology reveals no other projects that were so explicitly feminist while simultaneously exploiting what was considered unique to the video medium. Technology is important to Kubota’s identification with other women cross-culturally, and the running of video tape—not film, paint, or cloth—is what is likened to bleeding. Although Lynda Benglis published a still from her 1974 tape, *Female Sensibility* in the anthology, she also published photographs of her latex sculptures and of a silkscreened t-shirt emblazoned with her legendary *ArtForum* advertisement.⁸³ Benglis printed a statement that explicitly renounced an engagement with the specificity of the video medium, “Video is no more or less than one of several mediums I use to make art—all deal with the layering of time and space. Video has given me an opportunity to use my everyday surroundings.”⁸⁴ Despite her joyful embracing of the video medium as such, Kubota never spoke of being particularly influenced by McLuhan. However, she rather identified most of her

⁸³ In an advertisement in the November, 1974 of *Artforum* Benglis posed nude holding an oversized dildo, her hair slicked back and her body shining with baby oil. It has been variously interpreted as a refusal of stereotypical construction of femininity as soft and an ironic send-up of phallic machismo.

⁸⁴ Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, eds., *Video Art: An Anthology*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 23.

inspiration as coming from Marcel Duchamp. Kubota's entrée into the world of video and her relationship to the predominant theories informing it bears examining, as does her relationship to other video artists.

Kubota trained as a sculptor in Japan, before emigrating to the United States in 1964. Her first one-person exhibition in Tokyo was at the Naiqua Gallery where she built an installation with metal pipe sculptures viewed from the top of a mountain of waste paper which the viewer was obliged to scale. She was an acquaintance of Yoko Ono, who introduced Kubota to the Fluxus artists who were performing in Japan, Germany, and the U.S.⁸⁵ Kubota met Nam June Paik in 1963 in Tokyo and by 1970, after a two-year marriage to avant-garde composer David Behrman between 1967-69, Paik and Kubota moved to the West Coast for Paik's teaching stint at California Institute of the Arts. Historian Brooks Adams says it was during this time, in 1970, that Kubota began experimenting with the video camera. Kubota may have initially used Paik's video equipment, but she bought her own portapak in 1970.⁸⁶ Kubota began inserting her videotapes into sculptural installations in 1975 with *Video Chess*, a wooden cube with a monitor inside that displayed footage including photographs Kubota took in 1968 of the *Reunion* concert in Toronto with John Cage and Marcel Duchamp playing chess. The video images were further manipulated between 1972 and 1973 when Kubota used processors at the Experimental TV Center in Binghamton, New York, and at WNET-TV lab in New York. The processing techniques of colorizing, keying, and matting were applied to this footage, techniques which will be discussed in detail in chapter three.

⁸⁵ Brooks Adams, "Kubota's Video Sculpture: A Biographical Perspective," in *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture* ed. Mary Jane Jacob (New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), 10.

⁸⁶ Shigeko Kubota, "On Art and Artists: Shigeko Kubota," interview by Jeanine Mellinger and D.L. Bean, *Profile* 3, no. 6 (November 1983), 3.

It is the sculptural format of Kubota's video installations for which she is most renowned, not the electronic manipulations of the actual video imagery. Between 1970 and 1975, however, she participated in many of the Women's Video Festivals at The Kitchen, which showcased both videotapes and video installations. Kubota's footage, when viewed outside of the sculptural environments, may often seem tedious and uninteresting—as, notoriously, do many other early videotapes. The few edits are done abruptly, camera angles are dramatic and shaky, with the raw quality of the amateur home movie. But it is precisely this immediate, untutored effect which was so valued by early video artists and that links her work to the rest of the community, as I will explore here.

Europe on Half-Inch a Day was shot in 1972 and is part of Kubota's ongoing video diary, what she called her "Broken Diary" abandoned and picked up again over a twenty-year period.⁸⁷ The finished thirty-minute tape contains scenes from her trip to Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Amsterdam. The title is a conscious re-working of the traveler's guidebook title, *Europe on \$5 a day*. This tape begins abruptly, opening on a scene of a street performer, who plays recorded carnival organ music on a portable wagon while collecting change from passersby. The performer talks to Kubota and her companion, Paik, who record his energetic movements negotiating the crowded sidewalk and the reactions of the people who are his targets. The "organman" is seen being particularly playful with females on the street, spending more time following and talking to them, but his interactions with them verge on accosting them—an interpretation perhaps heightened by this viewer's sensitivity to women's vulnerability to being harrassed in public spaces. It is possible, however, that Kubota too considers this

⁸⁷ I viewed this videotape at Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.

noteworthy, since she lingers on these interactions for some time. When Kubota asks the organman to talk about his life, he says he is an intellectual who studied social psychology before turning to panhandling. The implication seems to be that he continues his fascination with reading people on the street. The style of the interview is improvisatory, with the camera moving in jarring jolts, losing focus as the organman comes close to the camera lens, and sometimes losing track of the subject altogether. These images are in black and white, recalling a cinema vérité style from the realm of film, but perhaps even more rough. The sound is very difficult to hear, with Kubota's voice from behind the camera asking questions, and the organman's voice sometimes moving too far away from the microphone to hear. As Kubota moves the camera we hear static interfering with the talking, and the sounds of the street are unfiltered, sometimes masking the speech.

The succeeding scenes are all shorter than the first, with quick cuts from one to the next and no fade outs or other transitional clues; they include dark and smoky scenes from inside Burlesque theaters and footage of exotic dancers, as well as a view of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, with Kubota quickly zooming in and out so that the monument moves close to and away from the viewer at a dizzying pace. The camera also lingers on posters in French criticizing Nixon, with large swastikas painted over the former president's face. The tape ends with footage from Kubota's visit to Duchamp's grave at Père Lachaise, with her lingering over the carved epitaph, reading the birth and death dates of her mentor. There is a memorial quality to this final scene, with the camera panning over the letters, moving more slowly than before, and Kubota's voice clearly

articulating her words, as if tracing the name and life of the man who has been called her “artistic father” in the magnetic tape of the video.

Delving deeper into Kubota’s alliance of video and women’s labor, one wonders why Kubota framed her journeys with the portapak as solitary, even lonely. In reality, she seems to have traveled with companions; with Paik to Europe, his voice audible in *Europe on Half-Inch a Day*, and with Mary Lucier and Cecilia Sandoval to the Navajo reservation in Chinle.⁸⁸ She conjures the image of Soviet or Vietnamese women, but critic William Zimmer read her video poem as parallel to the Japanese tradition of the “lonely wanderer.”⁸⁹ Kubota relished the parallels between her own project and that of strong, independent women modestly laboring around the world. As Zimmer points out, the ideal of the lone artist also has connections to the individualistic spirit of the Chinese and Japanese scholar class of artists.

Kubota noted in a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art for the “Open Circuits” conference in 1974 that, as of 1973, synthesized imagery had been an area dominated by men. In this lecture, she gave an overview of women’s participation in video in the U.S. and Japan and stated that at the second Women’s Video Festival of 1973, a significant number of tapes were by “women who had invaded what was hitherto a preserve of male technocracy....”⁹⁰ The artists she mentioned as submitting such synthesized images included herself, Steina, Louise Etra, Olivia Tappan, Jane Wright, Doris Chase and two others who were only identified by the surnames Meyer and Klein.

⁸⁸ Melinda Barlow, “Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 17, no. 4 (November 2000), 297.

⁸⁹ William Zimmer, “Shigeko Kubota: Japan House,” (review) *Soho Weekly News* 9 February 1978, n.p.

⁹⁰ This conference coincided with Kubota’s first year as Curator at Anthology Film Archives. Shigeko Kubota, “Women’s Video in the U.S. and Japan,” *The New Television: A Public/Private Art* eds. Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1977), 99.

Kubota first began using image processors and synthesizers in 1970, at the same time that she first picked up the videocamera, when she used the Abe/Paik synthesizer to alter her image in *Self-Portrait*, the footage that was used in *Video Poem*. The synthesizer added color to successive images of Kubota's face, with shifting hues of green, magenta, and blue. Kubota also mentioned Korot and Phyllis Gershuny as "organizers" of *Radical Software*, and examples of devoted women working behind the scenes to ensure the success of the "video movement."⁹¹

The Paik/Abe synthesizer was invented as a result of a collaboration between Nam June Paik and Japanese engineer, Shuya Abe. The two had begun developing the synthesizer at the television station WGBH-TV in Boston, where Paik had contributed to a broadcast of an artists' experimental program called *The Medium is the Medium* in 1964. They continued to work on the synthesizer while Paik held residencies at the Binghamton Experimental TV Center, WNET-TV in New York, and at the California Institute of the Arts in 1970.⁹² Kubota accompanied Paik to California in 1970, where she certainly had access to the Paik/Abe synthesizer developed there, and it is probable that her access to this synthesizer over the next few years was a result of this relationship. Paik was famously inspired by Marshall McLuhan and inserted references to McLuhan's notion of the "global village" created by decentralized electronic media into his own artwork. *Global Groove* (1973) refers comically to both McLuhan and contemporary pop

⁹¹ Ibid., 100.

⁹² Moira Roth, "The Voice of Shigeko Kubota: 'A Fusion of Art and Life, Asia and America...,'" in *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture* ed. Mary Jane Jacob (New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), 81; Edith Decker-Phillips, *Paik Video* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Arts and The Institute for Publishing Arts, Inc., 1998), 152-3.

culture in its title, and as far back as 1968, Paik had used McLuhan's image on the monitor screen for *Demagnetizer*, one of his televisions distorted by a large magnet.⁹³

More than McLuhan, Kubota's own early theoretical sources seemed to have been John Cage and Marcel Duchamp. As a member of Fluxus through the 1960s, Kubota was influenced by Cage's attempt to merge art and life by expanding the definition of music to include the environment of its performance and non-musical sounds. Fluxus artists widely proclaimed Cage's influence.⁹⁴ Kubota first saw Cage at a performance in Tokyo in 1963. The event was one of several that provoked the artist into moving to the United States, where she felt artists could be more experimental and risk-taking than in Japan.⁹⁵ In 1968 Kubota had two extremely influential encounters with Marcel Duchamp. The first was on March 5, 1968, when Kubota attended an infamous chess game in Toronto between Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, called the *Reunion* concert. Duchamp and Cage played the game on an electronic chessboard. Sounds were produced whenever a chess piece covered or uncovered an individual square, exposing embedded photoresistors to lights, and contact microphones amplified the sounds of the game through speakers surrounding the theater audience. Sound events, played through an oscilloscope, also triggered images on several television screens in both black and white and color. Sounds were composed by David Tudor, Gordon Mumma, Lowell Cross, and David Behrman, who at the time was married to Kubota.⁹⁶ Marshall McLuhan, who was then teaching at the University of Toronto, was invited and attended

⁹³ John G. Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2000): 119.

⁹⁴ Douglas Kahn, "The Latest: Fluxus and Music," *In the Spirit of Fluxus* (exh. cat.) (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993): 103.

⁹⁵ Adams,, "Kubota's Video Sculpture: A Biographical Perspective," 10

⁹⁶ Lowell Cross, "Reunion: John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Electronic Music and Chess," *Leonardo Music Journal* 9 (1999): 36.

this concert, and he has been cited as someone whom Cage admired. The designer of the electronic chessboard, Lowell Cross, was a student in McLuhan's "Media and Society" seminar that year.⁹⁷ Kubota photographed the concert extensively and incorporated these photographs into a 1975 video sculpture entitled *Video Chess*, which was part of her *Duchampiana* series.⁹⁸

Kubota's second meeting took place four days later, during a plane trip from New York City to Buffalo when Duchamp and Kubota were both flying on the same plane to attend a Merce Cunningham performance, *Walk Around Time*. The plane was rerouted during a snowstorm over Niagara Falls, and Kubota was able to have an extended conversation with the former Dadaist. Though she knew of Duchamp's work before these meetings, the events clearly etched themselves in Kubota's memory as the time when Duchamp became her artistic father figure.

The *Duchampiana* series included *Marcel Duchamp's Grave* (1972-75), *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976), *Door* (1976-77), *Meta-Marcel: Window* (1976-77), and *Bicycle Wheel* (1983). These video sculptures further expounded on the homage Kubota had paid to Duchamp by replaying her visit to his grave in Paris in 1972 during the *Europe on Half-Inch a Day* trip. *Marcel Duchamp's Grave* is a visual articulation of Duchamp's resting place. The sculpture consists of a vertical wooden box with openings for eleven nine-inch monitors displaying the colorized footage from Kubota's visit to the grave in 1972. Below the vertical structure is a mirror stretching horizontally on the floor, giving the illusion that the line of monitors extends out into space in an infinite reflection of the vertical string of images. The horizontal line of reflected images, lying flat on the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁸ Jacob, *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture*, 16.

ground, were reminiscent for Kubota of Duchamp's body lying horizontally in his coffin, while the vertical stance of the structure referred to the "universe" where she believed Duchamp went after death.⁹⁹

Cage and Duchamp's chess game had been played on an electronic chessboard that produced both audio and video imagery. Cage had certainly been profoundly influential on the electronic music movement of the 1960s, and Kubota was immersed in electronic music through both Behrman and Paik. Electronic music interested twentieth century composers primarily for its potential to expand the potential "palette" of musical sounds.¹⁰⁰ In the 1930s, Cage began writing as an advocate for experiments in electronic music, which culminated in his 1939 live performance of *Imaginary Landscape No. 1* which incorporated sound recordings played at variable speeds to alter their effects.¹⁰¹ Magnetic audio tape, which was developed during World War II, played a large role in shaping electronic music as a separate genre in the 1950s because of its use as a tool for recording and manipulating sounds.¹⁰² This technology proved to be a precursor to video art, alongside the development of the television signal. Cage, David Tudor, Morton Feldman, and others formed the Music for Magnetic Tape Project in 1951 to collectively experiment with the implications of recorded sound.¹⁰³ So it is evident that electronic music was considered among the most urgent and promising fields within the avant-garde by the generation preceding Kubota's entrance into Fluxus and the New York art world. Cage and Duchamp met in 1942, but developed a friendship in New York that grew particularly close in the 1960s when Cage asked Duchamp for chess lessons, and began

⁹⁹ Kubota, "On Art and Artists: Shigeko Kubota," 4.

¹⁰⁰ Dunn, "A History of Electronic Music Pioneers," 24.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 33.

visiting Marcel and Teeny Duchamp's apartment one or two evenings a week.¹⁰⁴ The *Reunion* concert was a recreation of these evenings together, transferred to a theatrical setting that would also produce a sound environment.

Kubota, unlike Korot or Steina, actively engaged feminism in her earliest video works. She moved to the United States in part to escape the male-dominated art scene in Japan.¹⁰⁵ New York City, by comparison, was a place where there were many single women artists, who she perceived as being very independent.¹⁰⁶ She participated in the Women's Video Festivals at the Kitchen in 1972 and 1973 as a member of the feminist collective "Red, White, Yellow, and Black" which also included video artist Mary Lucier. Lucier wrote of the group's goal as to explore "feminism or anything to do with women..." and to serve as a "kind of clearinghouse for feminist pieces—or not feminist pieces—and perhaps act as a feminist focal point in the avant-garde."¹⁰⁷

It seems clear that curators', and Kubota's own, focus on the sculptural aspects of her video has acted to sever the relationship of her electronic imagery to both communications theory and early video foundations in electronic music. Since arriving in New York City, she surrounded herself with people who used electronic media through her Fluxus connections and through Behrman's world of composers. As video curator at Anthology Film Archives from 1974 to 1983, Kubota was well aware of contemporary discussions about the relationship of video to communications theory. Like many artists and writers writing since the late 1970s, she posits the video community as being divided between two poles, namely those who were more interested in video as a broadcast

¹⁰⁴ Cross, "Reunion: John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Electronic Music and Chess," 37.

¹⁰⁵ Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," 299.

¹⁰⁶ Kubota, "On Art and Artists: Shigeko Kubota," 3.

¹⁰⁷ Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 17, no. 4 (November 2000), 302.

medium, and those who made video art. In more recent articles and interviews, she has claimed her allegiance with video art by casting her video sculptures as her most important work. However, the footage recorded on her portapak, that work which is grouped into the series *Broken Diary*, provided the source material for many of her video sculptures. Footage from the *Broken Diary* is very personally connected to Kubota, rooted in her autobiography. It also records her travels all over the world—to Europe, Japan, Arizona, and elsewhere—and in this way it traverses the global village. Kubota acts out McLuhan's idea for transmitting culture electronically, completing electronic circuits made up of herself as a human subject and connecting with the viewing recipient through an electronic extension of her self. Her message is processed through her own organic nervous system, her neurons firing electronic signals that control the mechanism of her human body. She then transmits that message through electronic images recorded magnetically onto videotape, which is then processed by synthesizers before being emitted through the monitor to the viewer, who, in turn, processes the image internally through their nervous system. Although some interpreted McLuhan's ideas as most naturally applying to broadcast signals, where the communication is instantaneous and simultaneous between viewer and object, the essential quality of the electronic signal is still captured through the artist's videotape.

Kubota was aware of McLuhanesque ideas, but even she seems to have connected these mostly to issues of broadcast. Still, in the early critical engagement with video art, artists spoke widely on these relationships, even if they were not directly and consistently using them in their work. In an interview with Sharon Grace in 1981, Kubota is asked to comment on "how the television educated child relate(s) to the world as compared to the

child who has been educated mainly with books.”¹⁰⁸ Kubota responds, “More electronic information kid may be faster, because the electronic beam changes the brain. Electronics is like a wave over the brain. Books are more time you can read fast or slow, you can control it, but T.V. you can’t control it when its on. Maybe T.V. has a different approachway into the brain.” Similarly, McLuhan wrote in *The Medium is the Massage* that “today’s” child was “attuned” to the extremely rapid pace of television information, transmitted electronically and instantaneously. He further claimed that this child is bewildered when made to enter the “nineteenth century” environment of information that is processed in an orderly, linear outline, a structure easily communicated through the written text.¹⁰⁹ By this claim, he seems to suggest that a rapid editing and barrage of messages on different themes is more recognizable to the child whose brain is trained to understand multiple messages at once. Both Kubota and McLuhan seemed to believe that the brain of the child newly raised on television had been physically altered to receive messages at the speed of electronic transmission, rather than the speed required to read printed text.¹¹⁰

Video synthesizers, on the one hand, seem to be all about manipulating the electronic signal in a way that is very distant from the concrete materiality of the human body. As explained in chapter one, artists like Woody and Steina Vasulka attempted to release video machines from human control. But it is instructive to consider cases where

¹⁰⁸ Sharon Grace, “Televison, Electronic Kids, and Duchamp: An Interview Through the Wires with Shigeo Kubota” *Art-com* 4 no. 15 (1981): 21.

¹⁰⁹ McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage*, 18.

¹¹⁰ There has in fact, been research to indicate that children’s brains are affected by watching television prior to the age of two, and that the rapid editing alters the way their synapses work, possibly leading to Attention Deficient/Hyperactivity Disorder. Dimitri A. Christakis, Frederick J. Zimmerman, David L. DiGiuseppe, Carolyn A. McCarty, “Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children,” *Pediatrics* 113 no. 4 (April 2004): 917-918 available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org>, Internet, accessed 21 October 2005.

the body was instrumental in demonstrating the capabilities of such image processors as, for example, in the work of Bill and Louise Etra (now known as Louise Ledeem). Though Bill Etra is usually credited with co-inventing the Rutt/Etra synthesizer, Bill and Louise Etra are both generally credited as the artists of the videotapes. The Rutt/Etra video synthesizer manipulated the raster scan of television monitors, so that tapes playing in front of audiences appeared abstracted.¹¹¹ Often these images were then re-recorded from the monitor and preserved on a new videotape, since there was no built-in recordable output.¹¹² It was Louise who often served as the model for visual experiments on tape that recorded the capabilities of this machine. In *The Heartbeat Tape* (1974) (which has not been screened by this writer, but is documented as having been screened in April, 1975 at the Women's Video Festival) a circle that is manipulated by the Rutt/Etra synthesizer turns into a heart shape and pulsates to the beat of Louise Etra's pulse, recorded and amplified on the tape.¹¹³ Here, Louise's body becomes the source of energy that drives the visual imagery, but, contrary to traditional paradigms, it was not her exterior body that was represented on the screen, rather, a trace of her circulatory system, translated into audiowaves and further translated into electronic pulses, was represented as electronic imagery.

Also in the 1975 Women's Video Festival, another Louise and Bill Etra tape, called *Lady of the Lake* demonstrated the way the Rutt/Etra synthesizer could interrupt and manipulate the raster scan of the television monitor to create abstracted imagery from

¹¹¹ To reiterate, the raster scan was the mechanism in the television monitor that energized the phosphorous by shooting electrons in repeated horizontal lines across the inside of the screen from top to bottom. This line-by-line movement was the aspect of the video process that Beryl Korot had likened to weaving and to writing/reading (see above). Lucinda Furlong, "Tracking Video Art: Image Processing as a Genre," *Art Journal* (Fall 1985): 234.

¹¹² Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka," *Afterimage* (December 1983), 234.

¹¹³ Women's Video Festival Program 1975, unpaginated.

a recorded source (fig. 34).¹¹⁴ Ledeen described how, “The image of the face was modulated based on a sine wave, which has a very undulating, almost water-like motion.”¹¹⁵ The collaborators extended the series using Ledeen’s face to include tapes that used other technical manipulations, such as the laser that controlled the image in *Laser Quantum L* through a synthesizer. Much of the collaborative work with Bill Etra demonstrated what Ledeen called “textures” through various technical manipulations, and in this way the work was related to her work as a painter.

A self-described color-field painter, Ledeen was a painting student at Hunter College in 1970 when she met Bill Etra, a film student at New York University. Larry Poons and Kenneth Noland were among her favorite teachers at Hunter, and she has also cited Josef Albers as an influence due to her interest in color, especially as transmitted through light.¹¹⁶ Her commitment to color-field painting is instructive when looking at *Video Wallpaper*, a tape by the Etras in the collection of the Donnell Media Center in New York.¹¹⁷ *Video Wallpaper* did not use the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor, but simply free-running oscillators which layered moving bands of color across the television monitor. The tape begins with vertical bands that move from right to left at an increasing speed, then layers horizontal bands that roll from the bottom to the top, ultimately creating a grid of color. As Ledeen pointed out, the transmitted color of the monitor is deeply saturated

¹¹⁴ Ibid. *Lady of the Lake* and five other video stills were reproduced in Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, *Video Art*, 42-43.

¹¹⁵ Louise Ledeen, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 2005, tape recording.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ I screened Bill and Louise Etra’s *Video Wallpaper* and *Computer Project* at the Donnell Media Center of New York Public Library in April, 2003. These works appear on part one of a two-part compilation in dated 1974, titled *Selected Works by Bill and Louise Etra, part 1 and 2*. Part two of the compilation, which was unavailable at the Donnell collection at the time, includes *Video Wallpaper-Gold*, *Miro Matter*, *Abstractions on a Bedsheet*, *Narcissicon*, *Tales from Beneath the Sheets*, and *Ms. Muffet*.

and luminescent, recalling stained glass.¹¹⁸ Later in the tape, the moving bands become waves and then turn on the diagonal, so that alternating bands of blue and green intersect and move cross-wise over the screen, reminiscent of a weaving. Finally, the bars of color turn to waves again, with multiple layers of primary and secondary colors whose edges blur, giving some illusion of space. Work such as this, whose primary interest is formal, became the target of criticism in the 1980s by writers who considered it boring or of limited aesthetic value. However, Ledeen had traded her paint and canvas for video technology, and although she was very interested in approaching video as an aesthetic tool, much like paint, she was interested in pursuing a medium that could not be hung on a gallery wall, but that could be recorded, erased, and shown informally to a group sitting around a television monitor. That she pursued the ephemerality and collective spirit of the new medium demonstrates her rejection of a strictly formalist agenda.

In 1973, the Etras had screened a tape called *Narcissicon* at the Women's Video Festival, a tape that Ledeen described as having been very well received in that context.¹¹⁹ Ledeen's face appeared on a monitor with a split screen effect, and she moved around so that it appeared as if her doubled face was kissing itself and interacting in very intimate ways. Ledeen described the video's sensuality as being provocative, suggesting an acting out of desire among women.¹²⁰ In keeping with the spirit of the festival, this would have represented a radically alternative imagery to the strongly heterosexual messages that came from mainstream media. From these descriptions, *Narcissicon* seems to have provided an example of video imagery that was visceral and passionate, stressing the sense of touch in a way that disrupted assumptions about technology as being cool,

¹¹⁸ Ledeen, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 2005.

¹¹⁹ Ledeen, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 2005.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

formal, or inhumane. On the other hand, from a video still that was reproduced in Video Art, that may have been tempered by the effects of the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor, which, in this reproduction at least, reduced Ledeen's face to schematic linear tracings of the central part of her face, against a dark backdrop dotted with light (fig. 35). Still, if the linear tracings of her face stressed points of contact, this would have combined electronic light signals with eroticized human interaction in a way that disrupted the nature/culture split.¹²¹

Louise Ledeen's personal and physical interventions into the video medium are obvious in a work such as *The Heartbeat Tape*, despite some criticisms of such work as "mindless" and "impersonal" formal explorations of the potential for image processing.¹²² In 1983 Lucinda Furlong tried to defend image processing in video against attacks on formalist approaches to art that privileged concerns for medium specificity over content.¹²³ Ledeen had been unabashedly influenced by the flat, abstract painting of Kenneth Noland that had been associated strongly with Clement Greenberg's critical advocacy. Hers and Bill Etra's experiments with manipulating imagery were oriented more toward formal experiment than with content, although the work generally was not completely without content. *The Heartbeat Tape* illustrated physiological changes that

¹²¹ A short description of *Narcissicon* accompanies the image in the *Video Art* book that reads, "first tape using the R/E synthesizer—a narrative self-discovery theme done in real time in the art nouveau style." Schneider and Korot, *Video Art*, 42.

¹²² Criticisms of image-processing as formalist were widespread in reviews of video exhibitions and articles throughout the 1980s. See, for example, Lewis MacAdams, "Guts and Fortitude: Kathy Huffman & Artist Video Put the Long Beach Museum on the Map," *High Performance* 25 (1984): 42; Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "From Gadget Video to Agit Video: Some Notes on Four Recent Video Works," *Art Journal* (Fall 1985): 217. Lucinda Furlong responded to such criticisms by an in-depth two-part article about image processing that distinguished between different methods and relayed the conceptual basis of such work as a counterpoint to broadcast television media. Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Eric Siegel, Stephen Beck, Dan Sandin, Steve Rutt, Bill and Louise Etra," *Afterimage* 11 no. 1 & 2 (Summer 1983): 35-38; Lucinda Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka," *Afterimage* (December 1983): 12-17.

had been translated into electronic waveforms, and they sometimes experimented with recording those physiological changes, such as an accelerating pulse, as a result of psychological changes, such as changing their proximity to one another.¹²⁴ *Narcissicon* entailed performative aspects that invoked literary references to the myth of Narcissus and to Freud's texts on Narcissism. On a larger plane, however, the Etras' project was involved in a critique of mainstream television and film through interventions in the video medium. That political dimension was actually contained in Greenberg's formalist criticism, in that he maintained the need for an autonomous avant-garde in the face of kitsch, a parallel to television.¹²⁵ This was not acknowledged by critics of image-processed video, mentioned above.

For many video artists from this period, it was tremendously exciting to enter on the ground floor of a new medium, to be pioneers and to be active in the video community. Though she didn't regularly read theoretical writings on the medium, Ledeen was swept up in the revolutionary aspects of the discourse, including the rhetoric about video leading to a democratization of the technology. The fact that artists could afford the technological tools relatively easily, and weren't bound to production studios or television stations, signified a level of freedom. Ledeen recalled that several people were designing processing machines simultaneously around the country--in California and in Chicago as well as New York, for example--and that they would travel around the country showing their inventions to one another and exchanging ideas. The artists were teaching one another while inventing new ways of using the equipment. She and Bill Etra were artists-in-residence at the TV Lab at WNET in New York in 1974--another site

¹²⁴ Artist Barbara Buckner describing a work by the Etras, telephone interview with the author, 15 February 2004.

¹²⁵ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 48-49.

where many video artists went during the 1970s to experiment with synthesizers and broadcast-quality equipment that was cost-prohibitive--and this enabled them to work on equipment that would normally be reserved for broadcast entities and their corporate interests. They saw the fact that artists were building and using these tools in experimental ways as disrupting the broadcast system.

In the early 1970s, when video was largely supported through Rockefeller Foundation grants, there was support to bring the technology as an artistic medium to other countries. Ledeen had worked throughout the early 1970s as a curator of the gallery space in the pedestrian mall of the CUNY Graduate Center campus.¹²⁶ In the mid-1970s, she was involved with a United States Information Agency project to bring video exhibitions to Mexico City and Caracas, Venezuela. As she recalled, 25,000 people showed up the opening of the exhibition in Caracas. The attendance seemed to have demonstrated that artists involved had helped fulfill desires to reach global audiences with video, but it was still a traditional exhibition format, rather than broadcast experimental video that was reaching a newly international audience. When asked to describe her experiences as a woman working on exhibitions that positioned the work as “new technology,” Ledeen recalls that there were challenges, especially for professional women working in Latin American countries where they encountered strong assertions of machismo, but she described herself and the women around her as being youthful and fearless, assuming they could do anything.¹²⁷

Louise Ledeen served as a juror for the 1975 Women’s Video Festival and was invited to do so by Susan Milano and Lynda Rodolitz, who relied on Steina and Woody

¹²⁶ Ledeen, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 2005.

¹²⁷ Ledeen, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 2005.

Vasulka for their contacts even after the Festival moved to the Women's Interart Center from The Kitchen. Ledeen had met Steina and Woody Vasulka soon after she and Bill Etra became involved in video in the early 1970s, and they had been regulars at The Kitchen as well as organizers of projects there from the institution's inception. She describes herself as having been personally affected by the women's movement, and she participated in marches and wrote for the underground press, supporting *Roe v. Wade*, but she refrained from formally joining any organization associated with the movement. She claims not to have consciously imported feminist ideas into her work. At times, she drew criticism from some feminist artists for consistently collaborating so closely with her husband rather than asserting an independent identity as an artist. In response, Ledeen maintained that there were practical reasons for collaboration because the equipment was difficult to use on one's own, particularly in the ways she and Etra experimented with it. In works like *Narcissicon* or *Lady of the Lake*, one person had to control the synthesizers and make adjustments and the other performed in front of the camera. Not only did the Etras collaborate during the filming and manipulation of the tapes, but in the planning and storyboarding stages.

Challenges with controlling the synthesizers led the Etras to experiment with computer art in 1974. They had been using equipment such as free-running oscillators and the Rutt-Etra Scan Processor, which were analog, and effects were often difficult to reproduce. Bill Etra made contact with staff in the computing center of the CUNY Graduate Center, where he and Ledeen both worked periodically in the early and mid-1970s.¹²⁸ Bill learned to program, and they had a PDP-8 computer in their loft, before such time as personal computers became available. Ledeen served on a panel concerning

¹²⁸ Ibid.

computer art at the National Computing Conference and, soon after, she and Bill developed the Computer Art Festival.¹²⁹ Several of their colleagues, including Lillian Schwartz and Lori Spiegel, worked on projects at Bell Labs. The first Computer Art Festival took place at The Kitchen; the next year it moved to the CUNY Graduate Center, after losing support from The Kitchen's director.

The final exhibition in which Bill and Louise Etra were involved at The Kitchen was called *Garden of Electronic Delights* (1977), where the participants constructed several sculptural/video devices. In this exhibition, Louise Etra collaborated with Lori Spiegel and devised several installations that had interactive components. One included a plaster figure wired with metal sensors and surrounded by cameras. Images of viewers were displayed on monitors that were embedded throughout the surface of the figure. As viewers approached the figure, the cameras picked up their images and displayed them on the monitors, while the audience members' voices that were picked up over the sensors also altered the images that appeared on the screens.

Although it was Steve Rutt's and Bill Etra's idea to create the scan raster manipulator, Louise was involved in some aspects of the product layout and design; she provided administrative support and at times even assisted in building the tool. Although she worked with the tool to make art throughout the 1970s, to some degree she considered others "better suited to create art on the tools" and she may have enjoyed the building of the tools more than using them. Again, although she is careful to state that Bill and Steve Rutt were primarily responsible for design and programming, it is

¹²⁹ In our interview 28 August 2005, Ledeen cited the date of this conference and panel as 1976, but the Computer Art Festivals are recorded as having taken place in 1974 and 1975, according to the Louise Etra biography in the Women's Video Festival catalog of 1976. This is confirmed by the artists' statement published in Schneider and Korot, *Video Art*, 43.

noteworthy that a woman of her generation became so involved in the technical aspects of video synthesizers and processors. Her comfort with building tools and working with motion picture technology was influenced by her childhood. Ledeen's father was a precision machinist and worked for an animation company designing camera housings and other equipment. This fascinated her as a child and, as a teen, she became very interested in art.¹³⁰

Bill and Louise Etra moved to San Francisco in 1978 when he received a commission to design a home video synthesizer, a project that never materialized. They attempted to build and sell video synthesizers out of their own shop, which also was not successful. In the late 1970s, Rutt and Etra were sued by a company called Computer Image that claimed to already have a patent on a scan processing device. The legal fees essentially made it impossible for them to continue making the machines, and only a few were ever made and sold to artists and video centers.¹³¹ Bill and Louise then became involved in consulting on computerized special effects for film. The Etras separated and divorced in 1983 and Bill moved back to New Jersey. Ledeen remains in California and is director of production for Media Industries, part of Silicon Graphics Inc. (SGI). Thus she continues to work intensely in the field, albeit in its more commercial aspects through production of computer effects for the entertainment industry.

Korot, Kubota, Sobell, and Etra were all involved with defining a new medium that, because of its electronic properties, served a unique purpose in connecting viewers and artists instantly and viscerally. McLuhan was one of many thinkers to posit a metaphoric relationship between the electronic signal and the electronic firings of the

¹³⁰ Ledeen, telephone interview with the author, 28 August 2005.

¹³¹ Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Eric Siegel, Stephen Beck, Dan Sandin, Steve Rutt, Bill and Louise Etra," 38.

human nervous system. Although each of the above-mentioned artists has articulated her relationship to the electronic medium in a different way, they all see the technology as a kind of extension of the human body and, therefore, of human consciousness.

Additionally, their experience of that human body as female has helped illuminate new relationships between technology and subjectivity, though that aspect of their achievement was one that was largely ignored in the 1970s.

CHAPTER 3

FEEDBACK AS A FEMINIST STRATEGY

As has been exhaustively discussed in histories of early video art, the pioneering generation of artists examined the unique properties of the electronic medium in order to define this medium and also to distinguish its capabilities as different from either film or traditional artistic media such as painting or sculpture. In chapter two, I discussed Beryl Korot and other women artists who considered the electronic circuitry of video to have an affinity with the circuitry of the human body. Another principle of video that was discussed by artists (regardless of gender) in the early period as particularly rich in aesthetic and metaphoric qualities was feedback. Because of its portability and relative cheapness, the video equipment that was marketed after 1968 toward the private consumer was embraced by some for its ability to be used in a feedback “loop.” For a band of guerrilla video artists who were looking for an entire structural change to the way media communicated, this portable and accessible equipment could potentially democratize what had previously been a broadcast medium. This idea of a democratic medium was based on the notion of feedback, a term which could be used in several ways, at times related to each other.

On one level, feedback simply entailed finding a way for audience members to construct their own messages, to speak with one another through a decentralized media. If broadcast television usually transmitted information in one direction, from network to listener, alternative media would provide access for audiences to create their own

statements, to construct a dialogue. This “do-it-yourself” attitude toward the medium was exploited by Shigeo Kubota in her tape, *Europe on ½ inch a Day* (1972), for example, which recorded uninhibitedly locations that she visited in Paris and elsewhere. Margaret Morse has identified two other uses of the term “feedback”.¹ First, it identifies the capacity of a machine to respond to input instantaneously. Video achieves this because it does not need to be developed in order to be seen. One could record an image and play it back in the next moment, or show the images to friends at a screening that very day, for instance at The Kitchen. Alternatively, artists could set up a live feed situation and view what they were shooting at the same time as they produced the images, bypassing the need to record to videotape altogether. This allowed for changes to be made in the moment or even to allow for an audience to watch themselves and respond as the tape was being made. Secondly, Morse points out, feedback also refers to the “noise or interference produced by a system itself.”² The audio form of this version of feedback is the effect commonly experienced in a musical performance when a microphone placed in front of a speaker picks up the sound of a singer played through an amplifier and gets looped back through the microphone. The result is a screeching sound from the electronic signal traveling in a continuous loop. In video, when a camera is pointed at its own monitor, an infinite series of monitors appear to regress into space. As the electronic signal scans the monitor screen, the image becomes a pulsing vortex, described in chapter one, a linear pattern repeatedly moving outward toward the viewer in an endless loop. That interference of the electronic signal was not only a visual effect explored for its

¹ Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberculture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 15.

² Ibid.

formal qualities, but it stood as a model of how artists could interfere with the one-directional message channeled from powerful broadcast media to U.S. audiences.

An example of the use of the term “feedback” within early video discourse could be found in the pages of Michael Shamberg’s 1971 *Guerrilla Television*, a book introduced in chapter two. An essay entitled “Feedback” described how the term was used by cybernetic theorist Norbert Wiener in 1948.³ Wiener asserted that it was the notion of feedback that provided the parallel between artificial intelligence and the human mind, for both systems altered their responses according to the stimuli, or feedback, they received. Shamberg pointed out that the first application of Wiener’s principles was in the military. “The initial application of feedback concepts was in gunnery where to target a missile it was necessary to consider each successive state as stemming from the last rather than assuming an even velocity over the range of firing.”⁴ From there, Shamberg traced a history of feedback from a pre-enlightenment belief in actions deriving from God in a one-way direction (absent of feedback) through evolutionary theories where the concept of natural selection represented a process of progress achieved through feedback. Finally, Shamberg criticized information structures in “Media-America” that he said were designed to minimize feedback by limiting the amount of access citizens had to broadcast media.⁵ Letters-to-the-editor and calling in to radio talk shows were not allowing for substantial critique of information structures, and Shamberg announced that only by completely redesigning these structures to “incorporate

³ Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ By using the term “Media America,” Shamberg identified a situation of information saturation marked by the constant presence of television programs and radio news reports in the U.S. home. Further, these programs were only broadcast from the networks to the audience-as-consumer, without opportunities for audiences to construct their own narratives about their lives or respond critically to the information. Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 1.

two-way, decentralized inputs” could democracy be attained. His notion of a more democratic U.S. was based on the concept put forth by Alexis de Tocqueville of “decentralized, self-governing units of people who could see that their decisions were being carried out.”⁶

Later in *Guerrilla Television*, Shamberg included an essay entitled, “How to Bankrupt Broadcast Television” that included suggestions for producing alternative political advertisements; building archives of presidential speeches and product advertisements; and dubbing and re-recording television programs with new juxtapositions, slow motion, and other effects. Shamberg also devoted several paragraphs to a suggestion to “Electronically Distort the Video Image.” Using the work of engineer Eric Siegel as his sole example, Shamberg described how regular television sets are limited in how they play the image on the screen. Siegel built his synthesizers to allow more control over the image by creating images from electronic signals directly rather than requiring footage recorded through a camera. On the playback side of the video image, sophisticated monitors were said to allow a viewer to manipulate the image and alter its shading. In this section, Shamberg does not use the term “feedback,” but it is clear that he is talking about ways that video guerrillas can manipulate the broadcast image or produce their own images, bypassing and critiquing the broadcast media system and its one-directional messages. Such a two-way system of communication was perceived, to reiterate, as crucial to creating a decentralized media.

In a chapter of *Guerrilla Television* called “You are Information,” Shamberg directly addressed the reader with suggestions for how they might use the video camera

⁶ Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 12.

to produce their own “feedback.”⁷ The suggestions range from organizing children to make their own videotapes to familiarizing people with videotape by setting up “interactive environments.” Drawings by video artist Ira Schneider for such interactive environments were reproduced as exemplary of a situation in which participants had control over their roles as operators or subjects of the cameras. Visitors to the exhibit would determine whether they appeared onscreen, with whom, what actions they would perform, and whether others could observe them (fig. 36).⁸ Interestingly, this project was contrasted with an interactive video environment built by the Museum of Modern Art in 1970 for the “Information” exhibition. Shamberg criticized the Information show for constructing an environment that forced participants to perform pre-planned actions and for controlling how the participants’ images appeared in public.⁹ As Shamberg wrote, “You sat inside and responded to audiotape commands like ‘Sleep, smile,’ etc. You saw no camera but were being taped from another compartment... When your time was up (you were forbidden to bring anyone in with you) the tape was played back next to some live feed monitors on a panel outside the booth. But they wouldn’t tell you when.”¹⁰ So a perceived co-optation of the promise of feedback through interactive media sustained harsh criticism as yet one more institutionalization of the video medium.

Shamberg’s discussion of feedback assumed a supposedly gender neutral position that positioned decentralized media against the broadcast media. However, all of his examples and theories supporting his argument used male artists, engineers, and scientists

⁷ Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 45-54.

⁸ Schneider’s plan, designed in 1970 or 1971 for the Jewish Museum in New York, was never realized.

⁹ Acknowledgements in the *Information* catalog credit Charles Froom, Production Manager, with the installation of the exhibition. Kynaston L. McShine was the curator. The exhibition dates were July 2-September 20, 1970. Kynaston L. McShine, *Information* (exh. cat.) (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970).

¹⁰ Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 53.

as their subjects. He alluded to an anti-military position that the alternative media might take in opposition to the first application of feedback principles to war machines, and in this way he suggested the use of alternative media to question contemporary debates over Vietnam. But as usual in this video manifesto, there was no reference to contemporary activist activity among feminists.¹¹ As evidenced by the multitude of feminist documentaries and experimental tapes made from a feminist perspective that appeared in the annual festivals at The Kitchen, women were certainly using video as a tool to provide “feedback” about the absence of attention to their issues in mainstream media. Among the tapes screened at the first and second Women’s Video Festival that could have been mentioned by Shamberg as examples of women responding critically to the construction of femininity in U.S. broadcast media or women’s lack of representation on television were Optic Nerve’s *Miss California Pageant, 1973*, Women’s Television Project’s *Women on Women*, and Women’s Video News Service’s *Another Look at the Miami Convention*.¹² These are examples of documentary projects that would have fit very easily into the parameters of Shamberg’s argument for decentralized media. Other

¹¹ In a list of “resources” at the end of *Guerrilla Television*, there is a list of videotapes. The list is organized by production group, and under People’s Video Theater, there are two tapes that suggest feminist perspectives. Shamberg provided a one sentence description of each, but the tapes were not discussed in the body of the book. The first tape is called “Women’s Lib March” about which Shamberg wrote, “Brilliant edit. Compare this to broadcast-TV.” An excerpt of this tape appears on the anthology *Surveying the First Decade* (Program 6) distributed by Video Data Bank. The second tape is “Supermarket” about which Shamberg wrote, “Interviews by women of other women about how they like shopping.” Thus, the potential was there for Shamberg to consider these tapes as examples of feedback against broadcast media and the positioning of women as consumers, but he did not make such arguments in the book’s text. Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 97.

¹² Optic Nerve was a San Francisco video collective. Sherrie Rabinowitz and Lynn Adler of Optic Nerve produced *50 Wonderful Years* which also appears on the *Surveying the First Decade* anthology distributed by Video Data Bank. Deirdre Boyle described the tape as follows: “*50 Wonderful Years* in vérité style subtly asked viewers to consider the demeaning nature of the pageant’s policies, not by ridiculing the enthusiastic contestants, but by probing the organizers to reveal how sexism is perpetuated in society.” Boyle, “A Brief History of American Documentary Video” in *Illuminating Video*, 62-63. Women’s Video News Service was based in New York City and is discussed, along with *Another Look*, in chapter 4. Women’s Television Project has not been documented outside of the WVF’s programs.

artists chose to combine elements of personal, journalistic styles with image manipulation to create an artistic response to the straight broadcast style of presenting information linearly. Thus, the immediacy of video that enabled one kind of feedback from individuals independently of broadcast networks could be combined with the kind of feedback that used distortions and manipulations to resist a one-sided narrative structure. This combination was typical of works by Shigeeko Kubota, for one.

Shigeeko Kubota's *Video Poem*, 1968-76, discussed in chapter two, consisted of a monitor displaying a silent, moving image of the artist's face encased in a nylon bag. Kubota's text appeared projected on a wall behind the video sculpture, and this is how the installation was reproduced in the 1976 book, *Video Art*. I have already discussed some of this text's implications in its alignment of video with the menstrual process, but another line of Kubota's poem is relevant here. She wrote, "Man shoots me every night...I can't resist. I shoot him back at broad daylight with vidicon or tivicon flaming in overexposure." The line is provocative, particularly when seen alongside the sculpture (fig. 37). Kubota's image peeked out from a vagina-like, zippered opening in the billowing bag, which had a small fan inside that kept the bag inflated and softly moving. The effect was simultaneously sensual, with the soft, cushiony fabric inviting touch, and repulsive, with the zippered opening suggesting the "vagina dentata" image.¹³ Kubota's line—"Man shoots me every night..."—can suggest heterosexual lovemaking, with male penetration of the female vagina, resulting in ejaculation as the ultimate goal. The phrase could also evoke patriarchal media systems which reflexively positioned women as the

¹³ The vagina dentate observation was also made by Midori Yoshimoto, "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, 2002), 259.

object of the masculinized camera gaze.¹⁴ In her statement, the night's darkness could suggest the darkened movie theater where the masculine gaze voyeuristically ensnared the female body as spectacle. The zippered bag in this sense, then, hides the image of Shigeko as object of male desire. But it can also be the site where Kubota stands ready to take over her position as subject, deploying her "teeth" in a critical reaction, as revealed in later lines of the poem. In this work, she positions herself as both subject and object.

In the photograph of *Video Poem* that appeared in *Video Art* (fig. 33), Kubota wears a shirt on which the face of a Hollywood actress is printed, apparently that of Marilyn Monroe. As video curator at Anthology Film Archives from 1974-1982, Kubota would have been well-versed in film history and criticism. She was most likely aware of feminist critiques of cinematic structures that positioned women as objects and men as powerful subjects as well as discussion of the mechanisms of desire in film. Her poem communicates her ambivalence toward the medium and its stereotypical erotics, and she answers with a practice in which she participates from both positions as spectator and object of the gaze. In irony, she wears the t-shirt celebrating the ultimate example of the objectified female film star, but she stands close to her videosculpture with a smile on her face, taking pleasure in being viewed and being the one in charge of her own view.

Kubota said in her poem, "I can't resist" suggesting that at night she could not resist becoming the object of male desire. It is in the daylight, with camera in hand, that she is able to resist by turning the gaze back upon the male subject. "I shoot him back at broad daylight with vidicon or tivicon flaming in overexposure." She referred to a distortion effect, sometimes called vidicon or tivicon burn that was unique to the video

¹⁴ Laura Mulvey's influential analysis of such gendered relationships of the gaze was published as "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18. Such discussions of the female body as object of the male gaze were widespread in the mid-1970s.

camera (and that was commonly exploited by her friend and fellow video artist, Mary Lucier.) When a camera was directed toward an intense light source, the light would actually cause a permanent burn on the vidicon tube inside. As the camera panned across a sky, for instance, the sun would burn a trail onto the vidicon tube inside, causing permanent damage to the camera. Possibly, the destructiveness of this act could be seen as an aggressive, almost violently critical response to media representations of the female body as it was habitually framed in sexual terms. That criticism came in the form of using the apparatus of the medium against itself, and inflicting a burn that would permanently alter any images that would be recorded through that camera in the future.

Kubota referred to this technique of destruction in her *Video Poem*, but in fact, she never actually employed vidicon burn in her own work. The artist who experimented most prolifically with this manipulation was Kubota's colleague and friend, Mary Lucier. Lucier and Kubota had joined forces to create the women's collective, *Red, White, Yellow, and Black*, along with Cecilia Sandoval and Charlotte Warren between 1972 and 1973.¹⁵ One could say this burning was a type of feedback made possible because of the specific properties of video itself, but such a modernist approach was actually counter to Lucier's concepts. As she wrote in an essay describing her 1975 installation, *Fire Writing* (fig. 38), "Applying the methodology of writing to camera technique was a means by which I sought to extend video's referents beyond its own limited history. I was interested in the displacement that occurs when one tool is assigned the function of another, the result being to infuse or enrich one set of aesthetic practices with those of

¹⁵Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," 297-316.

another system commonly thought to be incompatible.”¹⁶ Lucier noted a perceived mystification of the video medium as an “advanced technology” and she countered this by drawing a parallel between the camera and a pencil, both serving as “conduits” to “transpose images and ideas.”¹⁷ Lucier goes on, however, to describe how the permanent damage to the tube, the “scars” on the damaged phosphors, remain as a reminder on every subsequent image recorded by that camera, and in this way the burn becomes self-reflexive to the medium itself. “It forces the viewer to investigate the technology, making us conscious of its boundaries and compelling us to ask questions about how a medium composes and decomposes itself.”¹⁸ Lucier aligned the disintegrating effects of light to Monet’s studies of the effects of light on Rouen Cathedral and to a primal human desire to achieve physical union with the sun, manifested in the myths of Icarus and Prometheus. She continued to explore Monet’s perception of light and color in order to reflect on an ancestral connection with light and landscape in Ohio at Giverny, tying video to processes of memory. Therefore, light functioned to both record sites of memory and destroy them. As I see it, the decomposition of the medium which interested Lucier and Kubota was not just an investigation of modernist notions of medium specificity, but it was about questioning perceptual processes. In the context of an early video community whose discourse centered on dismantling one-way information structures, the camera itself as both artistic and media tool was subject to critical re-evaluation.

Kubota and Lucier’s participation in *Red, White, Yellow, and Black* was an explicitly feminist engagement, with each artist composing performances that dealt with

¹⁶ Mary Lucier, “Light and Death,” in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture Foundation in association with Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), 458.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 458-459.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 460.

challenges that were specific to female subjectivities. As Melinda Barlow argued in her essay documenting the works in the two performances by this collective, all four participants were joined by a common experience of being “outsiders.” Lucier and Kubota shared a sense of being outside what Barlow called a “good old boy” network within the avant-garde.¹⁹ In addition, Kubota has commented many times that she came to the United States to escape a male-dominated Japanese art scene and limited opportunities for female artists in Japan. Sandoval’s artistic contributions to *Red, White, Yellow and Black* dealt with the theme of growing up bi-racial in a patriarchal, Navajo family and Warren’s work was heavily influenced by her experiences as a middle-class, black, American woman during the civil rights era.²⁰

It was during her participation with *Red, White, Yellow, and Black*, that Kubota produced *Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky* in 1973. The footage was shot when Lucier and Kubota visited Cecilia Sandoval and her family at the Navajo reservation at Chinle, Arizona in the summer of 1973. The tape would become a part of Kubota’s ongoing *Video Diary* and it blended documentary footage of the Sandoval family’s daily life with Kubota’s personal narrative linking aspects of Navajo culture with her own biography as a Japanese woman. Lucier and Kubota had become close friends with Cecilia Sandoval’s cousin, Douglas Sandoval, when he was Visiting Artist in American Indian Music at Wesleyan College in 1970. The grandson of a famous Navajo Blessingway singer, Frank Mitchell, Douglas, or “Doogie,” struck up a friendship with

¹⁹ Lucier and Kubota were both married to avant-garde composers involved in the electronic music scene, Lucier to Alvin Lucier, and Kubota to David Behrman. Lucier and Kubota first met in 1964, and were reacquainted when Behrman and Alvin Lucier became members of the group Sonic Arts Union in 1966. Barlow has asserted that *Red, White, Yellow, and Black* was in part modeled after Sonic Arts Union. Melinda Barlow, ed. *Mary Lucier, Art + Performance*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 12.

²⁰ Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow, and Black: Women, Multiculturalism, and Video History," 299.

Lucier and Kubota, and even considered Kubota a “distant cousin.” After Doogie unexpectedly died in December, 1972, Cecilia Sandoval took his place at Wesleyan.²¹ When Kubota visited the Sandoval family, they found many similarities between words in Japanese and Navajo. As Kubota related in *Video Girls...*, the Sandoval family told her that “Shigeko” meant “sister-in-law” in Navajo and that she then, was sister-in-law of the Navajo people.²² Additionally the Navajo word for “hello” means “Love me” in Japanese, and these affinities helped Kubota establish a familial bond with the Sandovals. For her it also implied a distant and ancient bond between Japanese and Navajo people, forged when ancestors crossed the ancient land bridge from Asia to the North American continent.

Kubota’s footage captured various aspects of Navajo life, but particularly focused on the activities of women and children. She followed members of the Sandoval family as they traveled in wagons to collect water from a well, then recorded several women butchering a sheep. At one point in the tape, Kubota alternated images of a young girl smiling before the camera with shots of several young people, male and female, dancing at a pow-wow. The effect was that of a sampling of life on the reservation, but the viewer was always reminded that they were seeing the documentary through the eyes of Kubota, who constantly drew parallels to her own life, both as a child in Japan and as an adult in New York. At the beginning of the tape, while traveling with the water train to the well, Kubota recounted how after returning to New York from Chinle, she was waiting on 3rd Avenue for a bus, when she happened to meet a friend; the friend went into a deli to buy

²¹ Ibid., 310-311.

²² In Barlow’s article, she quotes Kubota as saying “daughter-in-law” while in the videotape, Kubota says both “sister-in-law” and “brother-in-law”.

a mineral water, and Kubota experienced a culture shock following her recent experience of the scarceness of water at the reservation.

The use of personal narrative in documentary film has been identified by Vietnamese-American filmmaker Trinh T. Min-ha as a powerful, but at times problematic, feminist strategy.²³ To overlap the images of the reservation at Chinle with her own visage was to reiterate the narrative as her own and to blur the lines between two subjectivities, the Navajo and the Japanese (fig. 39). Kubota's documentary did not claim to educate its audience about "all Navajo" or to provide anthropological explanations for traditional rituals. Rather, this is footage taken from the artist's visit with a friend's family, a tourist's souvenir much like *Europe on ½ inch a Day*. But instead of recording the most emblematic features of a place, those that might fulfill Anglo expectations of a glimpse of Navajo traditions, she recorded very banal scenes of contemporary life. Image manipulation tools were used to complicate the narrative in a way that also recalls Trinh's critique of clarity. Trinh associates the notion of clarity and craftsmanship with "functional" writing that aims to communicate rhetorically an "unambiguous message" that, she said, reinforces the division between the writer and the masses.²⁴ In contrast, Kubota's reminders of her subjectivity within the documentary are not totalizing, for her announcement of her own identity is one that is partial and constituted not just by her individual self, but also by those around her. By overlaying her narration and talking about her personal perceptions and interactions with the Sandoval family, Kubota shows both identities as contingent upon the other.

²³ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box" *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 15-44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

As Trinh described: “The image is that of a mirror capturing only the reflections of other mirrors. When I say ‘I see myself seeing myself,’ I/i am not alluding to the illusory relation of subject to subject (or object) but to the play of mirrors that defers to infinity the real subject and subverts the notion of an original ‘I.’”²⁵ For Trinh, to write from the perspective of a whole and unproblematic “I” is to employ an authoritarian stance. It follows that to use the first-person narrative device of the diary--“Broken Diary” is the name of the series of which Kubota’s *Video Girls...* is a part--could risk slipping into a narcissistic solipsism where the speaking subject becomes the only valid conduit of information.²⁶ Describing this use of personal narrative as a “feminine” kind of writing, Trinh points to this as a risky enterprise, since the speaking subject mimics patriarchal structures of authority: “The writer is necessarily either God or Priest. As long as the belief in the sacred origin of writing and the religious principle of hidden meanings prevail, there will be a need for ‘veracious’ interpretation and commentary. The Priest’s role is to transcribe and/or explain as truthfully as possible God’s confiding voice.”²⁷ Yet, at the same time, Trinh also pointed out that to write “objectively” without reference to one’s self or to write “genderless” was the prerogative of male writers, or women who could successfully dodge their identity.²⁸ Trinh invokes the writing of H  l  ne Cixous

²⁵ Ibid., 22.

²⁶ Yet, even that positioning of narcissism as solipsistic has been called into question with regards to video. Rosalind Krauss analyzed narcissism as the condition of all video when she described the process of recording and transmitting an image through a live feed as “bracketing” the self between the camera and the monitor. The performer, who sees him or herself on the monitor, experiences a split identity as both subject and object. To Krauss, this condition in video enacts a psychological drama that serves a critical function. She was describing works by Richard Serra, Lynda Benglis, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, and Peter Campus and limited her discussion to works that used a live feed, or “instant feedback”. Although Kubota did not deploy video’s instantaneity, she does appear to collapse distinctions between the self and other. Rosalind Krauss, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, 43-64 (New York: I.P. Dutton, 1978).

²⁷ Trinh, “Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box,” 29.

²⁸ Trinh quotes Margaret Atwood on the “Lady Painter Syndrome”, “When she’s good, we call her a painter; when she’s bad, we call her a lady painter.” page 27, n. 35.

through her mandate for women writers to inject their texts with a specifically female subjectivity. In Cixous' iconic 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," she declared: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement."²⁹

The section of *Video Girls* that records the slaughter of sheep is a particularly visceral section where women demonstrate their skill at this grisly, but necessary task. Here an old matriarch, Rose Mitchell, grandmother of Cecilia Sandoval and wife of Frank Mitchell, cuts the throat of the sheep, drains its blood, skins, and eviscerates it. Blood sprays and flows onto the dirt floor of the Mitchell-Sandoval home. Since this is in black and white, it is perhaps not as vivid as one might expect, but the women's actions come across as strong and sure. The grandmother laughs a throaty laugh and speaks in Navajo as she works. As she finishes, her words are translated by another female speaker (perhaps Cecilia Sandoval) as she talks about how tired she is now and how strenuous was the labor (fig. 40). Women's labor is represented by Kubota as intensely physical and even violent. She resists essentialist or stereotypical notions of woman as gentle nurturer for an image of woman as brutal and physical, working to the point of exhaustion. Yet humor defuses the violence of the moment, and the women's laughing suggests that they know that their actions will shock an urban audience used to purchasing meat wrapped aesthetically in sterile packages in the market. Hélène Cixous wrote of the need to articulate a language of women writing their bodies, and Trinh later invoked this idea as

²⁹ ²⁹ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*, Hilary Robinson, ed. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001 orig. 1975): 627.

way for the fragmented, visceral body to become a meeting point for women, as subjects, to conquer the divide between subject and object.

Helene Cixous insists, '[Women] must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes.' Touch me and let me touch you, for the private is political. Language wavers with desire. It is 'the language of my entrail,' a skin with which I caress and feel the other, a body capable of receiving as well as giving: nurturing and procreating.³⁰

Others have criticized film and video practices that were too narrowly autobiographical for upholding outmoded notions of authorship and individual genius. For Sally Potter, video's narcissism reaffirmed those systems of privilege when artworks ignored video's capability for collective action. She criticized the notion that any art made by women is feminist, "...when the attention narrows to the privileged tinkering with, or attention to one's solely private sphere, divorced from any collective struggle...and simply names the personal practice as political. For art this can mean doing art that looks like art has always looked, that challenges little, but about which one asserts that it is valid because it was done by a woman."³¹ On the contrary, in *Video Girls...*, Kubota used image processing tools to create a complex visual narrative that wove a personal, idiosyncratic point of view with documentary footage representing women on the Chinle reservation. The experimental techniques were not experiments for their own sake, but interpretive choices made by Kubota, elements of the personal that served to interrupt deceptively transparent codes of realism upon which documentaries often depended.

³⁰ Trinh, "Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box," 37.

³¹ Catherine Elwes, "In Video Veritas: A Feminist Perspective on Women's Video Across Two Decades," *Make* (Sept/Nov 1998) 810. Potter's statement was made at a conference in 1980.

Kubota employed colorizing synthesizers to add layers of bright, almost psychedelic colors to her early videotapes, including her self-portrait in *Video Poem*, *Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky*, and to the imagery of Duchamp's grave taken from footage for *Europe on 1/2 inch a Day* that was re-edited into *Marcel Duchamp's Grave*, (1972-1975) as part of the Duchampiana series. Colorizing black and white videotape was initially the only solution for artists who were limited to black and white portapak cameras until color equipment became widely available in the mid-late 1970s. As Shamberg articulated in the *Guerrilla Television* book, however, colorizing was also seen as a way to manipulate the image to resist broadcast norms and the limitations of the commercially available equipment.³² In *Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky*, Kubota used color in a non-naturalistic way that countered codes of the documentary "naturalism" and highlighted the work's identity as instead an artistic interpretation of a culture. These first colorized images made by Kubota used the new Paik/Abe Synthesizer, to which (as stated in chapter two) Kubota gained access in 1970 while in California with Paik.

The Paik/Abe synthesizer took imagery from multiple inputs (such as live imagery through the camera, or pre-recorded imagery on tape) and could assign each input an individual color, up to seven inputs. Those images could then be mixed together, producing layered and intermediate colors. In addition, the camera could be placed in proximity to the recorder in order to produce feedback, which resulted in linear patterns and shadow effects.³³ Paik was said to have developed the synthesizer so that artists

³² Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 26.

³³ Mary Ann Kearns, "The Role of Technology in the Art of Nam June Paik: The Social Implications of Television," *Experimental Television Center* 1988, available at

would have access to a low-cost version of expensive broadcast machinery that produced mainstream media productions. On the other hand, the synthesizer would allow artists to manipulate the image in ways that television engineers deemed unacceptable for broadcast. By combining a colorizer with a scan modulator, Paik could not only distort colors, but alter the shape of the image on the television screen.³⁴ He valued the expressive use of the machine by individual artists, but at the same time promoted a communal spirit by making drawings for the machine widely available, and he produced multiple models for use in television labs across the country.³⁵ He also planned exhibitions of the machine whereby visitors could come in from off the street to the studio, experiment with the machines, and produce their own imagery. As was the case with nearly every other video artist or group who built video synthesizers, a professional engineer (Abe) was brought in to complete the technical aspects of building the machine, but the collaboration between engineer and artist allowed the artists' ideas to be translated into workable solutions. Although in the synthesizer's history only Paik's and Abe's contributions have been noted, it can be presumed that Kubota also took part in this free exchange of ideas and the participatory atmosphere of the synthesizer's creation, since she was there throughout its creation and was herself interested in video. Paik and Kubota were both present during the development of the synthesizer, and

<http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history/people/ptext.php3?id=49&page=1>, Internet, accessed 23 October 2005.

³⁴ George Fifield, "The Paik/Abe Synthesizer-from Not Still Art Festival 2000 Catalog" Experimental Television Center 2000, available at

<http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history/people/ptext.php3?id=49&page=1>, Internet, accessed 23 October 2005.

³⁵ Kearns, "The Role of Technology in the Art of Nam June Paik," np.

experimentation with such tools was seen by them as liberating the artist from the power structures and limitations of broadcast media.³⁶

As can be seen in stills from *Video Girls...* published in the 1991 catalog of Kubota's work from the American Museum of the Moving Image, the artist used the Paik/Abe synthesizer to apply color liberally on top of images, so that a layer of color acted like a screen over the documentary footage (fig. 41). To do this, she often keyed one image that had been colorized over an underlying image from the reservation, as in figure 39, where the artist's face is keyed in cyan over a shot of people at the water pump. Further, this overlying image has been subjected to tonal reversals, so that Kubota's face appears in white negative, floating in a blue-green field of color. The colors that were possible through the Paik/Abe synthesizer were limited to intense hues of red, blue, green, magenta, yellow, and cyan, and their combinations. Most often, rather than try to apply these colors to objects naturalistically within the image, artists more often washed large fields in these bright tones which were reminiscent of pop art (such as Warhol's photo silkscreens). In addition to interrupting a straight narrative about a Navajo family on a reservation--by reminding viewers they are seeing images literally through the screens of the artist's viewpoint--these colors and their fanciful evocation of pop art

³⁶ The first Paik/Abe synthesizer was built while Paik was an artist in residence at the public television station WGBH in Boston. For him, it was also important that these manipulations could happen in real time, with the camera hooked into the synthesizer, displaying the images live over broadcast television. Paik saw this as an artistic dialogue with the television medium. As Susan Dowling, a director of the New Television Workshop said of one of Paik's broadcasts called *Video Commune*, "All the images on the show...were transmogrified by the Synthesizer at the very moment of broadcast: 'live' television at its most unexpected." George Fifield, "The Paik/Abe Synthesizer-from Not Still Art Festival 2000 Catalog," np. Kubota never worked this directly with broadcast projects, preferring to produce more intimate tapes for her *Broken Diary*, or integrating footage into her video sculptures. So, while her concerns were perhaps more private and traditionally artistic, in terms of her orientation to the gallery context, the nature of video was such that viewers were always invited to respond to the video image as part television, part art, and in this way most video artists were effectively critiquing the broadcast medium.

remind the viewer of video's simultaneous existence within the contexts of popular culture (television) and experimental art.

The notion of feedback as a two-way communication system that involves both the speaking subject and the interpreting viewer, is also relevant to Kubota's relationship to Duchamp. As stated earlier, Kubota's *Duchampiana* series is often discussed in the literature as constituting her dialogue with her artistic father, so feedback in that context may become a way of critiquing power structures such as artistic filiation. In choosing Duchamp as her "artistic father," Kubota constructed a patrilineage for her work that was commonly invoked by other artists in the 1960s and 70s. According to Mira Schor, Duchamp was the optimal "mega-father" during this period, and an established link would be cherished.³⁷ Kubota is also of a generation for which there were very few artistic "mothers," since most art students were not educated in a history of women artists until after the establishment of programs and classes like the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts (1973), or Linda Nochlin's Women and Art classes of the early 70s. Despite a reliance on this patrilineage, Kubota's work also provided an opportunity for feedback from a feminist perspective.

Here, the second definition of feedback as it appears in Webster's New World Dictionary proves useful, "2 a) a process in which the factors that produce a result are themselves modified, corrected, strengthened, etc. by that result b) a response, as one that sets such a process in motion."³⁸ In *Duchampiana: Nude Descending a Staircase* (1976), Kubota remade and modified Duchamp's 1912 painting by making the movements implied in the cubist painting literal through the use of video. Four monitors were

³⁷ Mira Schor, "Patrilineage," *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action* Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven, eds. (New York: Harper Collins, 1994): 43.

³⁸ *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 3rd college edition, s.v. "feedback."

installed into a plywood staircase that displayed footage of a nude woman walking up and down a staircase (fig. 42). The four monitors show different angles and moments in the sequence, so that the event happens in a non-linear sequence, and this effect is amplified by the use of color-synthesized images that add patterned distortions to the image (fig. 43). This piece incorporated imagery that was filmed in color, as well as color-synthesized effects, and some color Super-8 film transferred to video. Therefore, parts of the imagery--particularly the form of the female nude--are much more lushly detailed than some of Kubota's earlier work.³⁹ In a catalog text written by Kubota about this piece, she pointed out that video expressed the movement that Duchamp had wanted implied in his painting, but that because video inherently entailed this fourth dimension of time and movement, it was able to work outside the boundaries imposed by painting. In a text borrowed from her earlier *Video Poem* that she included on the wall next to the staircase structure, Kubota wrote: Video is Vacant Apartment./video is Vacation of Art./Viva Video." Like Duchamp, Kubota claimed a place for her work outside the received, serious structures of art, invoking an attitude of play, leisure, and even emptiness of meaning with the words "vacant" and "vacation".⁴⁰

Moira Roth pointed out that the use of a female participant, filmmaker Sheila McClaughlin, to perform the action of walking down the stairs coupled with the fact that a female artist directs the piece, shifts the work into "a dialogue about female subjectivity

³⁹ The images that are reprinted in the AMMI catalog, as Brooks Adams points out, are from a re-edited version of *Nude Descending a Staircase* where Kubota added more white feedback effects and "green ghost shapes" in 1983 after the Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired the video sculpture. Adams attributes these changes to "the Neo-Expressionist mood pervading much early 1980s painting" and a desire on the part of Kubota to reflect these richly expressionistic styles. Adams, "Kubota's Video Sculpture: A Biographical Perspective," 9. This sculpture, as well as *Three Mountains* (1979), and *River* (1983) were viewed in person by this writer at the exhibition, Shigeko Kubota at the Whitney Museum of American Art June 19-August 25, 1996. The version of *Nude Descending a Staircase* in that exhibition was, no doubt, the re-edited version.

⁴⁰Jacob, *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture*, 28.

and its relationship to the conventional female objects of Western art.”⁴¹ Issues of gender in relation to Duchamp’s legacy are not to be taken lightly. Of all the artistic “fathers” for a feminist to choose to revise, Duchamp is one whose relationship to gender is particularly complex. Amelia Jones wrote that many theorists want to see Duchamp as the anti-masculinist father of postmodernism given that, in the 1960s he embodied the character of the dandy in a way that corroborated the youth movement’s embrace of the sexual revolution and the disruption of traditional gender roles by women’s and gay rights groups.⁴² But Jones went on to argue that these versions of the postmodern Duchamp depended again on suppressing, rather than revealing, contradictions of gender within his work, by consistently framing him as the “feminized other.” In fact, Jones argues, Duchamp often reinforced traditional notions of bourgeois femininity and denied true female subjectivity through his treatment of the female body as fetish in works such as *Etant Donnés* or in his 1963 chess game with a naked woman in Pasadena. Kubota never openly criticized Duchamp and, in fact, her revisions of his work are more in the spirit of homage. Nonetheless, the assertion of her subjectivity, and her open embrace of the sexual puns and play that were a part of his work, reframe Duchamp’s humor from a woman’s perspective.

The disruption of conventional gender codes had also been anticipated in Kubota’s single-channel videotapes. In *Europe on ½ inch a day*, Kubota constructed a travelogue with the countercultural underground as her focus. Included in the tape is footage shot at a gay Burlesque show in Brussels and at a Hermann Nitsch action at The Kitchen in New York. Each of these scenes depends on the performance of an abject

⁴¹ Roth, “The Voice of Shigeeko Kubota: ‘A Fusion of Art and Life, Asia and America...’,” 80.

⁴² Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994): 30.

sexuality that could be said to interrupt received narratives of masculinity. The two scenes from the drag show in Brussels include exotically dressed dancers acting out sexual acts on stage. Filmed in the murky darkness of the theater, there are tantalizing and teasing images of oral and anal sex, along with sounds of moaning. In my own initial screening of the videotape, it was not immediately clear to me that the performers were gay men. In fact, reading this through my own lens of heterosexual, female experience, it seemed to be a record of feminine pleasure. Only after reading more accounts of the videotape that identified the scene as that of a “gay theater” did I re-assess the scene as a drag performance.

The Hermann Nitsch scene showed Nitsch lying down before an audience in a gallery setting, while a rope was tied around his genitals.⁴³ While flashbulbs popped from cameras around the room, Nitsch lay under an animal carcass and animal organs were placed on his genitals. Blood dripped down on his body and a high pitched string instrument played along, ending with the sounds of crashing cymbals. The scene is comparable to those by Vito Acconci or Bob Flanagan described by Amelia Jones in her article “Dis/Playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities.” In this essay, Jones looks at case studies of male artists who perform their masculinity in vulnerable positions of instability. Jones argues that Bob Flanagan exposed the male penis as penis, rather than recoding it as phallus that might substitute for a lack.⁴⁴ Kubota’s camera might be said to operate in a similar way, even if Nitsch’s masochistic performance could

⁴³ Moira Roth wrote that this footage was included in *Europe on ½ inch a Day* even though it took place in New York because of Nitsch’s “European connection.” The phrase “European connection” is regrettably vague, and I can only presume that Roth is referring to Nitsch’s Austrian identity.

⁴⁴ Amelia Jones, “Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities,” *Art History* 17 (December 1994): 575.

be said to reinscribe notions of machismo through the endurance of pain: Kubota edits the tape in such a way that Nitsch's performance is juxtaposed with drag theater, and these scenes are juxtaposed with a street performer/beggar who depends on others for survival. Arguably, these figures all represent emasculated males, and Kubota has effectively destabilized traditional codes of masculinity. Intercut with these scenes are images that show protest signs and other scenes of the funky, offbeat, energetic and youthful milieu of counter-cultural Europe. Kubota situates herself as the guide in this travelogue, unabashedly watching and participating in these visceral exploits.

Kubota's playful incorporation of the body, sexuality, and love dated back to her first Fluxus event instructions from 1963 which were written in Tokyo. The intimacy of her event scores were similar to those by Yoko Ono, who was in Japan between 1962 and 1964, and who was friends during that time with Kubota. Midori Yoshimoto published three of these event scores by Kubota that were sent to George Maciunas in New York. *A Beehive 1 and 2* were directions to fill a room with love letters for the performer, while *A Drop of Water* involved having a dinner where only a white flower is served and then sealing a drop of water from the performer's lips into a pipe after dinner. The romance of the first piece and the corporeality of the second, it could be argued, incorporated gestures that were often coded as "feminine." The third event score read as follows:

A blue love, 1.

Prick your lips yourself. Kiss a man who has mustache [sic] in audience.

A blue love 2.

Prick your all [sic] pores of skin which you can touch yourself with a needle.

A blue love 3.

Stop your ears.

Confess your 1st love, 2nd love...

A blue love 4.

Tell a love with 3 breasts which are two man's.⁴⁵

As Yoshimoto observed, Kubota's directions seem to assume the participants in her events would be women (and not gay men), since, "kissing was always seen as a heterosexual action in Japanese culture."⁴⁶ What was notable and completely unconventional was the assumption of women as subjects within the performance and men as observers within the audience.⁴⁷ At the same time, Kubota's directions suggested romantic and sensual love, but also elements of violence. The invitation card to her first solo exhibition, *1st Love, 2nd Love...*, included directions, "Skin your lips by yourself. Kiss a man who has a mustache in the audience."⁴⁸ The masochistic nature of these directions, as Yoshimoto points out, also disrupted gender conventions by framing this romantic love in somewhat violent terms. The performer suggested by Kubota's texts, then, is flirtatious and uninhibited, sensual and unpredictable, but also masochistic. There is a "bad girl" quality to her in that she takes her sexuality into her own hands; she has multiple lovers ("confess your 1st love, 2nd love..."); she is perhaps a little narcissistic (surrounding herself with love letters); and she inflicts pain on herself in order to draw bodily fluids that she will then mix with those of her male lovers. She is anything but a passive object of male desire, in short.

Kubota has been fairly open to including biographical information about her romantic relationships with men as background to discussions of her artwork. Her relationships with musical composers Takehisa Kosugi and David Behrman, as well as

⁴⁵ Original scores are located in George Maciunas' notes in the Jean Brown Collection, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Quoted in Midori, "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," 234-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

with Nam June Paik have been well-documented. In interviews about her transition from Japan to the United States, she has recounted the story several times of leaving her then-boyfriend, Kosugui, to pursue her career in New York. Kosugi was an avant-garde composer and member of Group Ongaku, a Japanese musical group, when Kubota met him in 1960.⁴⁹ This relationship brought Kubota close to the experimental music scene in Tokyo, so that when American musical groups came to perform in the early 60s, Kubota had access to them. Kubota was present in 1962 when John Cage and David Tudor performed in Tokyo and in 1963 when Nam June Paik, then a Fluxus artist, visited Tokyo and met members of Group Ongaku.⁵⁰ Kubota recycled the zippered bag from Kosugi's installation called *Chamber Music* that he submitted to the Yomiuri Independent exhibition in Tokyo in 1963. This exhibition encouraged members of Group Ongaku to push the boundaries between music and art and Kosugi submitted this bag, which at times hung on the wall like a painting, and at other times became a prop for a performance in which Kosugi wore the bag and took his clothes off inside, pushing them out the zippered holes.⁵¹

In 1983, Kubota recounted the story of how she acquired Kosugi's bag and used it in her *Video Poem*, and the story is revealing about expected roles for women and Kubota's own thoughts on marriage and her career in its early stages:

I used to support him a lot because I had a teaching job in Japan and he was jobless of course, artists are jobless. Then I used to support him—we almost got married. But I told you, he said, let's get married in New York. So I came to New York. And he said, let's go back to Tokyo and let's get married. Then I said, no, you are too much. Then, you see, he gave me that chamber music. And I said, OK, goodbye. I kept it for how many years? Twenty years maybe and finally I said this is a pretty piece. I can put

⁴⁹ Ibid., 233.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 234.

⁵¹ Ibid., 236.

monitor in and earphone to make it like sleeping bag and I only showed my face in the mirror all covered with see-through—blue cheap cloth framed it, like you know, tent. And he used many zippers so I opened one zipper. That was my collaboration with him but he hasn't thought about it. I kept it for twenty because I couldn't stand him.⁵²

Clearly Kubota struggled with negotiating her relationship and her career goals.

Interestingly, when she spoke of supporting Kosugi, she said she was a teacher but that Kosugi, who was an artist was, “of course” jobless. Like many other women artists, her own identity as an artist was much more tenuous than her male peers'. She did what it took to earn money to support herself and her boyfriend, teaching in Japan, waitressing in New York, but did not afford herself the luxury of being a jobless “artist” until later. In *Video Poem*, Kubota combined text with video and the sculptural element of the bag, and it seems clear that the aggressive text is meant to turn Kosugi's bag into her own artwork, which will resist and even annihilate past conventions of the submissive woman. “Video is Vengeance of Vagina/Video is Victory of Vagina... Viva Video.” These are the words of a triumphant woman artist in control of her own agency. Video is actually aligned with the vagina, and this vagina is also active, as is video.

Although Kubota's relationship with David Behrman is not brought in explicitly in the subject matter of her artwork from the period during their marriage, their relationship does provide a context for the early Duchampiana series. As recounted in chapter two, Kubota was attending performances in which Behrman was involved through his work with John Cage when she had her two encounters with Marcel Duchamp. The trip to Buffalo that was rerouted because of a snowstorm over Niagara Falls was a trip to attend a Merce Cunningham concert in which Cage and Behrman were

⁵² Kubota, “On Art and Artists: Shigeko Kubota,” 21.

involved, and the second meeting was at the *Reunion* concert with Cage and Duchamp that incorporated Behrman's composition. Kubota was not only being supportive of her husband by attending these performances, but she was on assignment writing and taking photographs for the Japanese art magazine, *Bijutsu Techo*.⁵³ Kubota's photographs became the primary visual documents of the *Reunion* concert and are widely reproduced.⁵⁴ Most importantly, however, these two meetings with Duchamp proved particularly influential on Kubota's career. Kubota was able to use these opportunities to network with important artistic and musical figures to enrich her own work. Kubota had met David Behrman in 1966 through the Sonic Arts Union, which consisted of Behrman, Robert Ashley, Alvin Lucier, and Gordon Mumma. As Yoshimoto suggested, the women companions, to each of these composers deserved to be documented and are identified as Kubota, Mary Ashley, Mary Lucier, and Barbara Lloyd. Some, including Kubota, are known to have participated in their partners' work as singers and performers and it was through Sonic Arts Union that Kubota befriended Lucier.⁵⁵

Kubota's longest personal partnership has been with fellow video artist, Nam June Paik. The two have been married since 1977, but their romantic relationship goes back at least to 1970, and their professional relationship to 1963, when they met in Japan. As Martha Gever has pointed out, Paik's status as father of artistic video has continually been reinforced by institutions that have granted him more one-man exhibitions and official recognition than any other video artist.⁵⁶ His work has been the subject of two

⁵⁴ See, for example, her photographs which illustrate the article by Cross, "Reunion: John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Electronic Music and Chess," 35-42.

⁵⁵ Midori, "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," 248; Barlow, "Red, White, Yellow and Black," 300.

⁵⁶ Martha Gever, "Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik," *Afterimage* (October 1982), 13.

major retrospective exhibitions in New York, at the Whitney Museum in 1982, and at the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum in 2000, both curated by John Hanhardt.⁵⁷ Gever questioned the positioning of Paik as “unique, creative genius” by recounting the artist’s collaborative relationships and by criticizing the Whitney’s installations for repressing Paik’s institutional critique and the interactivity of his work in favor of static installations in the rarefied museum space.⁵⁸ She also suggested that Paik rejected much of the political meaning and social critique of his early work after 1972, when his work began to resemble the commercial techniques he supposedly criticized.

Critics and historians who have dealt with Kubota’s work have done an admirable job of separating her career from that of her more famous husband, but at the same time that division has served to deny any artistic influence that Kubota might have had on Paik. Both artists recycle footage from early videotapes to be re-edited and used in later tapes or installations. Paik’s oft-cited *Global Groove*, originally from 1973, has been re-installed using slightly different imagery in many contexts. Gever’s review of the Whitney show mentions *Global Groove, Lake Placid ’80* (1980) which contained a soundtrack that included “Allen Ginsberg chanting, a Navaho woman chanting and drumming, alternating with the compelling rock and roll beat of *Devil with a Blue Dress On* and *Good Golly Miss Molly*.”⁵⁹ The footage of the Navajo drumming and chanting is of Cecilia Sandoval, Kubota’s colleague from *Red, White, Yellow, and Black*, who Paik would have met through Kubota.⁶⁰ Kubota does receive credit for her collaboration on at

⁵⁷ Hanhardt curated a one-person exhibition of Kubota’s work at the Whitney Museum of American Art which was on-view June 19-August 25, 1996.

⁵⁸ Martha Gever, "Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik," 13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁰ Nam June Paik, *Global Groove 2004* (exh. cat., Deutsche Guggenheim) (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2004), 40.

least two tapes attributed to Paik. The first is *Merce by Merce by Paik*, 1978, which is a two-part experimental documentary on Merce Cunningham. Part one is a collaboration between Merce Cunningham and Charles Atlas and is a dance performance choreographed specifically for video. The second part is a collaboration between Kubota and Paik called “Merce-Marcel” and focuses on the relationship between Marcel Duchamp and the choreographer’s use of chance techniques. Certainly, Kubota’s ongoing dialogue with Duchamp was highly influential here. The second collaboration was for the tape, *Allan ‘n’ Allen’s Complaint*, 1982, a documentary shot by Paik and Kubota on Allen Ginsberg and his father, which is credited to Paik “in collaboration with Shigeo Kubota.”⁶¹ Kubota, in turn, honored Paik in two later installments of her Video Diary, namely the tape *Sexual Healing*, (1998), and *April is the Cruellest Month* (1999), described as a “tribute to Paik,” which combines historical footage with contemporary footage of the two in Florida, where they spend their winters. Like the earlier videotape made in homage to her own father, called *My Father* (1973-1975), these tapes made in honor of Paik are highly emotional and stress the close bond between Paik and Kubota and the deep affection she holds for him.

Paik spoke of wanting to “humanize” technology by combining the video apparatus with the human body. As someone who was intensely aware of Marshall McLuhan’s theories about the electronic medium being an extension of “man” (as discussed in chapter two,) we can understand the social implications of finding parallels between electronic media and the human nervous system. This idea was most notoriously deployed for Paik’s 1969 *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* in which cellist Charlotte

⁶¹John Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*, (exh. cat.) (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2000), 270.

Moorman wore a brassiere constructed of two television monitors playing broadcast television footage, a work which was premiered at the *TV as a Creative Medium* exhibition at the Wise gallery. As Gever pointed out, however, in this work as well as many others, Paik depended on the spectacle of female flesh to “humanize” technology and thus his project is limited by his voyeuristic and objectifying positioning of the female body.⁶² The 2000 catalog for Paik’s retrospective at the Guggenheim museum lists a performance of a work entitled, *TV Penis* on June 29, 1972 at The Kitchen. It is possible this was an attempt on Paik’s part to render his humanizing efforts on a male body, but this seems to have been a rather isolated occasion and nothing he pursued consistently.⁶³

So the question remains, what kind of counterpoint might Kubota’s work provide to Paik’s objectification of the female body? In the next section, I will examine Kubota’s association of video with a visceral corporeality and the assertion of an active, sexually-charged subjectivity. It has already been pointed out that Kubota embraced sexuality as a theme, using anti-masculinist models.⁶⁴ In addition, her participation in Fluxus events of the 1960s is perhaps most notoriously represented by her performance of *Vagina Painting*, (1965) where the artist attached a paintbrush dipped in red paint to her underpants before squatting over a large piece of paper and maneuvering her body to create an abstract composition produced ostensibly by that part of her body so commonly

⁶² Martha Gever, "Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik", 14. Later, Paik extended his project to “humanize” technology by combining technology with nature. As Midori Yoshimoto points out, it is likely that Kubota had some influence on Paik’s incorporation of plants and other organic materials into his installations. This has only been confirmed in very recent examples, notably the waterfall that was installed in Paik’s exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum in 2000 which was suggested by Kubota. Midori, " Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," 266, n. 59.

⁶³ Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik*, 267.

⁶⁴ Midori Yoshimoto also identified this as a strong current in Kubota’s work. Midori, " Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," 246.

used to define her gender. Even Kubota's video sculptures that used landscape motifs have been identified as marked by "lubricious connotations" by curator Brooks Adams who, I believe correctly, recognized phallic and vaginal associations in the installation called *River*, 1979-81 (fig. 44).⁶⁵ In this installation, Kubota hung three monitors displaying color-synthesized images of hearts, stars, abstract electronic feedback, and shots of Kubota swimming in the Snake River in Wyoming over a trough lined with mirrors and filled with water (fig. 45). The viewer watched the reflected images flash and move through the water, which was subjected to a wave machine, rather than viewing the images directly on the monitor screens. Adams suggested a sensuality to the work supported by the wetness of the installation, the vaginal aspect of the open trough, and the phallic shape of the trough, meant to evoke the image of a Japanese river boat. Kubota's own text accompanying the reproduction in the AMMI catalog provides much contextual information relating rivers and water to her Japanese homeland and Buddhist family, for whom the role of water was great.⁶⁶ In a related sketch called *River of Blood* (1980), also reproduced in this catalog, Kubota drew a series of heavy black marks diagonally across a page, roughly mimicking the direction and motion of the water inside the trough in the video installation. (fig. 46). The fluidity of this acrylic and sumi ink drawing and the dark, saturated color suggest a stain of menstrual blood on cloth. This seems supported by Kubota's statement from *Video Poem* where she said she "bled in half-inch...3M or Sony...ten thousand feet every month" and by her use of menstrual metaphors for *Vagina Painting*.

⁶⁵ Adams, "Kubota's Video Sculpture: A Biographical Perspective," 11.

⁶⁶ Midori Yoshimoto draws connections between water and Kubota's familial and spiritual background in her dissertation, Midori, "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," 255-257. She also reiterated Kubota's conception of video as an organic medium.

Kubota equated water's reflective properties and fluidity with video's capability for feedback in a statement she made about an earlier installation created for a Red, White, Yellow and Black concert at The Kitchen in 1972. She saw water as carrying information, capable of transmitting information and building upon itself over time.

At the center of Buddhism is always river, running water, Buddha, the stone Buddha is always washed by rain. A drop of rain becomes a brook, a brook becomes a river. The role of water in nature is comparable to the function of video in our life. A river is replicated in video in its physical/temporal properties and in its information-carrying and reflective, "mirror" qualities.⁶⁷

Rather than relating video to machine technology, Kubota consistently drew connections with the organic world that went in both directions, identifying water as a medium through which to transmit information and identifying video as a fluid medium that is also reflective. As recounted in chapter two, one of Kubota's contributions to the theorization of the video medium was to complicate the binaristic split between the body and the machine by aligning video with female reproductive systems. Water becomes an analogue for menstrual blood since Kubota related both to the running of videotape.

Kubota continued to propose video's corporeality by describing biographical elements in her work that often referenced her own sexuality and that of her friends. *Adam and Eve* (1989-91), a video sculpture that chronologically falls outside the scope of my dissertation, is nonetheless another important example of the way Kubota layered biography, sexuality, spirituality, and death as themes. The installation consisted of two wooden sculptures that were constructed to look like robots, but were actually simple wooden figures that were frameworks for television monitors (fig. 47). Each figure contained four monitors of varying sizes inside its face and torso, and the couple revolved

⁶⁷ Midori, "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," 255.

on a motorized dais. The sculpture was dedicated to Al Robbins, Kubota's friend and the carpenter with whom she collaborated on her video sculptures from 1975 until his unexpected death of a heart attack in 1987.⁶⁸ Robbins' biography is told through the voice of Kubota in the AMMI catalog description of *Adam and Eve*.⁶⁹ Kubota's portrayal of Robbins characterized him simultaneously as a genius, a hobo, and a sexual subject and object all at once. As an architectural student, Robbins had studied at Harvard and in Chicago with Buckminster Fuller, but he apparently dropped out of school. Kubota relayed that it was boredom that drove Robbins out of both the university system and his high-paying job in a Manhattan architectural firm. She first met him through video artist Ira Schneider, for whom Robbins had done some carpentry work for an installation at the Kitchen. In the text of her tribute, Kubota certainly celebrates the quality of craftsmanship and beauty that Robbins achieved in her sculptures, but she also spends time creating a picture of a mysterious and eccentrically beautiful man. Robbins seemed to come in and out of Kubota's life, sometimes disappearing from a job for weeks or months at a time. In Kubota's narrative, Robbins was always hiding away at a girlfriend's home and she expressed wonder at his unconventional appearance and what she called his "wild beauty". Robbins even died in the apartment of a new girlfriend he had met only a few weeks before. Kubota compared him to Clark Gable and expressed some regret herself at never having turned their relationship from a professional one to a personal one. She recounted, "The first reaction I had when I heard the news was 'why

⁶⁸ Mary Jane Jacob, ed., *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture* (New York: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), 66. *Adam and Eve* were also incorporated into an installation version of *Sexual Healing*, exhibited at the Lance Fung Gallery in 2000. In this context, the figures seemed to have stood in for Paik and Kubota, standing before a projection of the single-channel version of *Sexual Healing* discussed above. For a particularly sensitive review of this installation, see Susan Valdés-Dapena's "Shigeko Kubota at Lance Fung Gallery" *Sculpture* (September 2000): 65-66.

⁶⁹ Jacob, ed., *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture*, 67-68.

hadn't I forced him into bed with me. Damn, I always had an opportunity with him. We were always together.' But, alas now his flesh went back to the earth."⁷⁰

The association of Robbins with the figure of Adam came by way of Duchamp, who had performed as Adam in the 1924 ballet *Relâche*. So Robbins, in this video sculpture, reprised Duchamp's role, and once again stood in for the powerful male figure in Kubota's life. The monitors in the belly of the Adam figure replayed footage Kubota had shot of Robbins over the years. The figure of Eve, however, did not contain images of Kubota, but rather footage of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, Japan. The images from Japan served a self-referential purpose to an extent, but Kubota focused more on the image of the Pavilion as a symbol of pure, sublime, and resilient beauty. Again, these were qualities that Kubota associated with Robbins. She recounted how, "The Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto was destroyed by arson, by a demented acolyte priest. But it rose again, finished in gold. That's my Eve. The purity of a nun who has shaved her head."⁷¹ Thus the couple represents not so much Kubota and Robbins as multiple incarnations of Robbins. Kubota also said that the Pavilion "transcends the gender," suggesting that this Eve figure plays not just the female counterpart to Adam, but contains attributes of Robbins. Robbins too, transcended gender, playing the roles of strong carpenter, sexually active playmate, but also the pure and sublime beauty of the "nun". Like Duchamp, Robbins performed roles that transgressed gender, at least in Kubota's eyes, and he also performed as an object of her own desire. Reading these sculptures through Kubota's biography of Robbins, the figure of Adam and Eve share qualities of both Kubota and her friend. If Robbins is Adam and Kubota Eve, she is able

⁷⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁷¹ Ibid.

to enact the relationship as sexual partners that she missed in life. But the Adam figure could just as likely reference Kubota because it is her behind the camera who captured Robbins' face through the years in these highly personal and subjective views. In Robbins' guise as Eve, he exhibits the qualities of purity and a resilient beauty she associated with the Golden Pavilion, a building Robbins never knew in life but which was a part of Kubota's visual vocabulary. Once again, Kubota has blurred distinctions between subject and object, a tactic employed in her early single-channel tapes that continued into her later video sculptures.

Articles that have considered the origins of video art over the past thirty-five years tend to cite Paik, Frank Gillette, and the Vasulkas as the major pioneers of the video medium as such. Kubota is often given credit for developing the potential of video sculpture, and for turning this medium into three-dimensional works that enter into a dialogue with art history in the traditional museum setting. This has been curator John Hanhardt's assessment of her career and of her contribution to the history of video art, as evidenced in his catalog essay for Kubota's retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1996.⁷² Hanhardt asserts that the reconstruction of video into three-dimensional sculpture "became integral to the contribution video made to a variety of art historical movements, including Conceptual, Fluxus, Process, Body, and Performance Art."⁷³ On the one hand, there were works that commented upon issues of broadcast television through image-processing and "experimental narrative," but on the other hand there were video installations such as Kubota's which Hanhardt said were responsible for redefining our

⁷² John G. Hanhardt, *Shigeko Kubota* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

understanding of sculpture.⁷⁴ Kubota herself reinforced this reading of her career, often emphasizing her video sculptures as a way of defining the singularity of her work, and distinguishing herself from the multitude of artists exploring the unique properties of the video medium as distinct from traditional art forms. In a 1983 interview, she said, “I don’t count my career as single channel video artist. So many. You don’t need so many single channel artists. But you need special, like video installation artists or video sculptors. More challenging.”⁷⁵ In the same interview, Kubota also rejected the idea of working collaboratively; despite her intensive collaboration with Al Robbins or even Paik, she preferred the institutional framework of the museum and gallery exhibition that credited a single author, responsible for an autonomous work of art. However, Kubota was fully aware of that video community that worked with ad hoc methods, sharing equipment, and producing single channel tapes, and although she disavowed her single-channel work, it remains a part of her oeuvre. With so many video artists making their careers based on a discourse about defining the medium in terms of broadcast versus experimentation with the electronic properties, it would seem that Kubota made the prudent decision to define her career differently. Considering how many of the so-called electronic pioneers were men, she might have felt doubly pressured to make herself more visible by finding her own niche.

One of the historically important moments in the early history of video was the exhibition, *TV as a Creative Medium* at the Howard Wise gallery in May, 1969. In this exhibition (which was briefly discussed in chapter two), all of the artists who contributed work were men, and many have been cited as making important technical and theoretical

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁵ Kubota, “On Art and Artists: Shigeko Kubota,” 3-4.

contributions to the medium. This included Paik, Frank Gillette, Ira Schneider, Eric Siegel, and Paul Ryan. But Kubota was at the exhibition as well, covering the show for *Bijutsu Techo*, the Japanese journal which had earlier printed her coverage of the Cage/Duchamp concert (1968).⁷⁶ Kubota's review of *TV as a Creative Medium* was six pages with color reproductions. Midori Yoshimoto suggests it was at this exhibition that Kubota found inspiration for using video monitors to incorporate sound and movement into her sculptural work.⁷⁷ She also suggests it was at this time that Paik and Kubota's professional and personal relationship grew closer. Another writer also found inspiration in this exhibition for a career change that would investigate the uses of this new electronic medium. That was Michael Shamberg, future member of Raindance, who at the time reviewed the exhibition for *Time* magazine.⁷⁸ Steina, too, recalled seeing Eric Siegel's, *Einstein*, a color-processed single-channel tape and being inspired to use video. "I went in there and saw *Einstein* blasting out, and it quite blew my mind."⁷⁹ So between 1969 and 1974, when Kubota exhibited her first video sculpture, *Marcel Duchamp's Grave*, she was immersed in this community of experimental video artists. The Howard Wise show provided a site of origin for many of these artists in a way that was different from the later Kitchen. The Kitchen was a space open for any artist to come, experiment, and receive feedback from an audience. *TV as Creative Medium* served a more authoritative role in that it claimed to exhibit the most recent and most important experiments with video. It is credited with helping video to gain recognition as an art medium, by giving it legitimacy in a gallery setting. As Joseph Schwartz wrote in *The*

⁷⁶ Midori, "Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York, 1955-1975," 251.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Marita Sturken, "TV As a Creative Medium: Howard Wise and Video Art," *Afterimage* (May 1984), 8.

⁷⁹ Furlong, "Notes Toward a History of Image-Processed Video: Steina and Woody Vasulka," 13.

Jersey Journal on June 12, 1969, “I think it can be said without too much doubt that this exhibit is as important to the use of the medium as an aesthetic expansion as the 1913 Armory Exhibit was to modern painting and sculpture.”⁸⁰ Wise’s gallery had become known through the 1960s for exhibiting art made with new technologies such as light, kinetic, and cybernetic art. Certainly, this work had a reputation as being fresh and associated with youth, but Wise’s gallery probably gave it some institutional weight. Thus, *TV as Creative Medium* could be said to be an originary event (with all its gendered connotations,) that became a target for Kubota’s own feedback.

The fact that Kubota was immersed in an environment that constructed a certain approach to technology and some practitioners as the progenitors of the medium (its “old masters,”) is important to arguing that her deployment of the video technology was a particularly feminist stand in a still-male dominated field. Yes, many women video artists felt a sense of freedom in picking up the video camera because it did not have historical associations with a patriarchal visual order, but as Canadian video artist Nell Tenhaaf pointed out in 1992, “The philosophy of technology...has been articulated entirely from a masculinist perspective in terms that metaphorize and marginalize the feminine.”⁸¹ Kubota’s theorizing of the video medium as analogous to the feminine—comparing it to a vagina, menstrual blood, or to baby carriers worn on the back—must be seen against a backdrop where Frank Gillette is lauded as the most theoretically-engaged video artist and the Paik-Abe synthesizer is recognized as one of the most important image-

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸¹ Nell Tenhaaf, “Of Monitors and Men and Other Unsolved Feminist Mysteries: Video Technology and the Feminine,” *Parallogramme* 18 no. 3 (1992) 24-34, in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 377-8.

processing tools of the early generation. No one was looking to women artists as theoretical or technical pioneers.

Tenhaaf's article draws an effective parallel between the modernist constructions of the "bachelor machine" and a technological theory that has marginalized the "feminine." She then provides examples of some Canadian women video artists from the 1970s who resisted this bias by making tapes from an explicitly feminine perspective. Her examples all rely on works that use the camera to examine intimately women's bodies, and such body-based work was also commonly produced by feminist artists in New York during this period, as evidenced by the discussion of the Women's Video Festivals at the Kitchen (discussed in chapter one). But perhaps more provocative is Tenhaaf's proposal of a theoretical approach to the medium that would privilege a historical connection between women and video that pre-dates patriarchal appropriation of the machine. Initially, Tenhaaf discusses how bachelor machines became instruments for male desire and uses Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* as her primary example. For Tenhaaf, Duchamp's project proposes an auto-erotic apparatus that enforces a binary separation of the genders and ultimately makes the frustrated male bachelors the tragic figures.⁸² However, Tenhaaf uses Luce Irigaray to re-frame such auto-eroticism in terms of the feminine. "Thus a woman 'thinking through the body' and arousing herself is both multiple and complicated, not a reductivist proposition, overturning rather than reinforcing the legacy of dualistic thought."⁸³ Kubota's use of her own body in metaphoric terms is, in a sense, a way of turning the video apparatus into a "bachelorette" machine. Likewise, her interest in using sexuality as a theme, training the

⁸² Unlike Amelia Jones, Tenhaaf ignores Duchamp's irony and the autonomy of the Bride, elements of the work that have been celebrated as gender-bending or Postmodernist.

⁸³ Tenhaaf, "Of Monitors and Men," 381.

camera on performed sex acts as in *Europe on ½ inch a Day* or referring to sexuality through *Adam and Eve* or sexual friskiness as a sign of health in *Sexual Healing*, also reverses the stereotypical use of the bachelor machine in that her female voice, in written or aural form, signals the feminine as speaking subject. Her voice is high-pitched, usually posing questions to those in front of the camera, and disarming in its lack of authoritativeness. The listener can tell that when Kubota asks a question, she has to raise her voice purposely so as to be clearly understood. The intensity of her effort is apparent, but complicated by the fact that when her voice is heard in a U.S. context, her broken English reinforces her identity as an Asian woman. U.S. audiences have been trained to hear Asian women's voices as innocent, unthreatening and weak in comparison to brash and "robust" American voices.

To support her reclamation of the video apparatus for female subjectivity, Tenhaaf also draws comparisons between the concave shape of the television monitor, specifically older monitors which used cathode ray tube technology, and the cervical opening onto the womb. She describes the monitor surface as a threshold between darkness and light, and likens video transmission to the process of giving birth. As did Kubota, Tenhaaf is one of the only critics or artists to use an essentialist strategy to propose feminine characteristics for the medium. Certainly, one can refute both Tenhaaf's and Kubota's arguments on the basis that they assume a natural affinity among women based on the biological factors of menstruation and childbearing. But both projects are attempts to assert women artists' authority in relation to the technology, and both women identified video as in danger of becoming masculinized realms.

The second point that Tenhaaf makes regarding the re-appropriation of the video medium for the female subject has to do with the metaphoric use of light in video. The medium through which the viewer sees video is the transmission of light through the video monitor. In a cathode ray tube, as discussed in chapter two, electron beams spray the interior of the monitor screen that has been coated with phosphor, charging the phosphor so that it glows, producing the image that the viewer sees on the outside of the screen. Tenhaaf gives a historical account of how through western mythology, the metaphor of light, once the domain of goddesses such as Hestia, keeper of fire, was translated in patriarchal culture into the Promethean tale of the male hero stealing fire from the ancient gods and giving it to humans. In this revision, female anti-heroines such as Pandora become the bearers of evil who punish such heroes.⁸⁴ Tenhaaf proposes, then, a multi-layered argument for aligning video with the feminine--though not only with the female body, but with women's historically ancient role as guardian of fire or light. Kubota and, more explicitly, her friend Mary Lucier, re-enacted this role when they used the vidicon burn, or even simple feedback, as a way to use light as fire which self-reflexively burned the video apparatus. Of course, neither Kubota nor Lucier explicitly invoked ancient goddesses when they used the light of the cameras in this way. Notwithstanding the embrace of goddess cultures by numerous Western feminists in the 1970s, in Kubota's case it is possible that she did not identify with western goddesses such as Hestia because of her Japanese origins.

It could be said of all of the women artists included in this dissertation that they took part in a project of "feedback" in that they used the video medium in some way as a commentary on itself. I have argued that all of them were also responding to patriarchal

⁸⁴ Tenhaaf, "Of Monitors and Men," 382.

structures within the community of video artists, as well as within the broadcast medium, by providing alternative structures, or by inserting their subjectivities into a supposedly gender neutral artistic approach, even when they did not do so explicitly. But this chapter has more specifically examined Shigeeko Kubota's attempts to interfere with a technology that threatened to become subsumed into patriarchy. I would now like to point to further studies that could be done in relation to a woman video artist who worked in New York during the 1970s whose artistic career has gone largely undocumented, although her writing on video art is well-respected. The artist is Hermine Freed (b. 1940), who unfortunately died of leukemia in 1998, and whose work is not well-preserved. Freed is most well-known for her 1974 tape *Art Herstory*, in which she dressed up as various women from canonical paintings throughout western art history (fig. 48). Her humorous commentary about women's roles throughout art history engaged a dialogue about the subject that took place throughout the 1970s, initiated most famously by Linda Nochlin's 1971 article "Why Have there Been No Great Women Artists?"⁸⁵ *Art Herstory* is most easily accessible today through an excerpt included in the anthology "Surveying the First Decade" distributed by Video Data Bank.⁸⁶ As an explicitly feminist statement, this tape gets cited most often as an example of feminist critique and/or performance since Freed herself dresses up and plays out the role of female model. She performs in costume, with simple backdrops and props that re-enact the painting's subjects, but there is very little formal experimentation.

Art Herstory seems quite different from descriptions of other works described in Freed's submission to the *Video Art* anthology of 1976, especially *Two Faces, Me-You*,

⁸⁵ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *Artnews* (January 1971): 22-39 and 67-71.

⁸⁶ Viewed by this writer at Norlin Library, University of Colorado, Boulder.

360°, and 360° x ∞.⁸⁷ These last four videotapes, all of which are undated, seem to have complicated the video imagery using mirrors or keying to layer multiple images on one screen. In *Two Faces*, (fig. 49), the artist superimposed mirrored images of herself, such that in the representative shot that appeared in *Video Art*, the artist appeared to be kissing herself. Freed called this a “psycho-feedback event, possible only with video” and also referred to narcissism, a common theme in video performance and one which was previously discussed in relation to Bill and Louise Etra’s *Narcissicon* in chapter two. Both tapes used the female figure to act out a fantasy of desire in which the electronic medium is required to successfully fulfill it. As feedback, this seems a clear example of the human subject as a system that repeats itself, mirrors itself, plays itself back, and performs an action upon itself. Her image is suggestive of a loop, and a narcissistic one at that. Freed’s text, accompanying her images, stated that she was very aware of the technology’s capabilities, both through practice and through the studying of other artists’ work. But she was also conscious of strong autobiographical threads in her work that were suggested by the theme of mirroring and by the act of viewing herself on screen.

I think that everything I do, no matter how spontaneous, is calculated to fit the models of my ideas about art and video. But, especially when I look back at old work, I am also aware of the particulars of my own life that have made me do whatever I have done, however unconscious I may have been about those particulars when I made the tapes. I take for granted aspects of video psycho-feedback. The objectification of the self which takes place with video is a fact, but the fact that I have paid particular attention to it has everything to do with me.⁸⁸

Freed also played with the separation of subject and object in *Me-You*, (fig. 50), in which she layered two separate shots, one of a woman (perhaps Freed?), the other of a

⁸⁷ Schneider and Korot, eds. *Video Art: An Anthology*, 50.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

man. She called this tape a “psychodrama” in which the interactions between the actors happen through the monitor. For her, the tape also suggested “the impossibility of objectively describing a space or a situation,” and this impossibility of objectivity seems particularly interesting for the topic of feedback.⁸⁹ The theoretical ramifications of this shift between the subject and object goes beyond video and relates to a contemporary interest in questioning fixed notions of subjectivity.⁹⁰ A confusion between subject and object could be expressed very effectively through video because of three factors. Video was able to record in real time which eliminated the need for editing and could signify a perception of presence. Secondly, the video camera tended to flatten space, making it difficult to distinguish between objects. Finally, because of its portability and accessibility, it was perfect for very personal explorations by artists. The image representing Freed’s *Me-You* suggests that she and a male collaborator were recorded simultaneously. Their images were combined on the monitor through keying and the effect is as if they are intertwined, due to the flattening effect. The setting is an interior space, and it is possible Freed and her friend are the only two in the room, besides a

⁸⁹ Schneider and Korot, *Video Art: An Anthology*, 50-51.

⁹⁰ Poststructuralists have depended on Jacques Lacan’s analysis of subjectivity formation, known as the “mirror stage,” in which the infant child learns to distinguish itself from others. The child sees its reflection in the mirror (or identifies with another figure,) and sees that reflection as simultaneously its “self” and an “other.” The image of the other appears as an ideal version of the self, over which the child appears to have more mastery and control than it does over its actual body, since its intellect at this stage is more advanced than its motor skills. Thus, the self is based fundamentally on a misrecognition of the image, where self and object are actually contingent. The clear distinction between self and object is constructed through language, in order to compensate for an experience of the self as fractured and alienated. This analysis has been particularly influential in film theory and is used as a foundation for the notion of a constructed subjectivity. Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. Ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 286-89;. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974; Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” *Ecrits*, (Paris, 1966), in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

photographer shooting the still, since it was fairly easy to set up two cameras and perform in front of one of them.

Rosalind Krauss noted a similar confusion of subject and object in Vito Acconci's *Airtime* (1973) which became the basis for her argument about shifters and empty signs in "Notes on the Index, Part 1."⁹¹ What both *Airtime* and *Me-You* point out is the linguistic lesson that the pronouns, "I," "You," and "Me" refer to a constantly shifting signified, depending on who it is that articulates them. The only way that the signified can be pinned down is by using the index, realized through photographic or other means, to literally point to whoever is standing in for the referent at any given moment.⁹² Freed seems to keep this relationship shifting by combining two equally transparent images, neither one more physically solid than the other, and by emphasizing the camera's inability to display an "objective" point of view. Of course, these observations depend only on seeing the one still photograph reproduced in the *Video Art* book, since unfortunately no record of this tape seems to exist in museum or public databases.

Finally, *360°* (fig. 51) and *360° x ∞* (fig. 52) also employ spatial ambiguity to question the possibility for obtaining objective knowledge through perception. Freed's use of fractured and layered spaces, as well as textual references to simultaneity in the image captions, suggest an Orphic Cubist influence, but she also referred to childhood fantasies of teleportation and of being able to move simultaneously between two spaces. The instantaneous playback of information across vast spaces was one of the celebrated capabilities of video articulated in the pages of video publications of the early 1970s, like *Radical Software* and *Guerrilla Television*. Freed wrote,

⁹¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index, Part 1," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), 197.

⁹² Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* 8 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58).

The two video fantasies I have (one difficult to achieve, the other, so far as I know, impossible) are two sets of monitor banks, say 20-36 monitors each. One would have 20-36 places in the world played back live simultaneously, the other would have the same place 20-36 times, played back from different times in history, simultaneously.⁹³

In this statement, Freed fantasizes about the multiplicity of viewpoints that would be possible through such systems, and in these fantasies her studio explorations of space and simultaneity reach a global scale.

In 360° and $360^\circ \times \infty$, Freed suggests the constantly shifting notion of presence, the way physical space becomes intangible through the multiple reflections in the mirrors. This is similar to the way a camera set up to record a monitor would also devolve into that vertiginous warping of space known as feedback. Freed also compared video's structuring of time to Futurist concerns in an article for *Arts Magazine* in 1975 where she identified instantaneity as a key quality of contemporary life.⁹⁴ Listing cultural indicators of this instantaneity, Freed wrote of "instant global communications, instant memory banks, instant computations, instant replay, instant foods," which she compared with the dramatic shifts in understanding about time and space occurring in the 1910s that were also the result of technological changes.

The paradigm shift that Freed mentions in this article prompted her to consider how history occurs and is written, and how memories are interpreted in the present, themes she also apparently pursued in other writings and in a tape called *Family Album*, in which she incorporated childhood photographs. She wrote,

Once, when asked to write an essay about my work for a catalogue, I found myself writing about my relationship to my father. His strong will, his sense of absolute right and wrong, has had more to do with shaping my personality than anything else I know about....I always looked for

⁹³ Schneider and Korot, eds., *Video Art: An Anthology*, 51.

⁹⁴ Hermine Freed, "In Time, Of Time," *Arts Magazine* 49, no.10 (June 1975): 82.

alternatives, multiple viewpoints which manifested itself in role playing and , in my work, in looking at the world from a multiplicity of viewpoints (saying that the camera is not a tool devised to record objective reality).⁹⁵

Family Album punctuates Freed's representative pages in Video Art, appearing at the end of a series of reproductions that serve as a portfolio of her work. Preceded by the other tapes I discussed, *Two Faces*, *Me-You*, *360°*, *360° x ∞*, and others, Freed charts a path where she explored simultaneity to ultimately critique the unilateralism of patriarchal authority.

The experiments on the above-mentioned tapes are not completely unique, as evidenced by similar concerns with space and subjectivity evident in work completed by Acconci, Joan Jonas, and others. But Freed's work has been woefully unpreserved and, given her untimely death, seems likely to fall into obscurity unless more tapes can be found or, at the least, exhibition records and critical analysis unearthed. In addition, her concerns with subjectivity and perception seem informed by a particularly feminist viewpoint that is different from Acconci's. Some of Freed's tapes have been occasionally screened, and *Art Herstory* seems relatively safe since it is included in the Video Data Bank anthology. However, more work needs to be done to find and preserve any tapes that might remain in museum collections.⁹⁶ When asked about her memories of Hermine

⁹⁵ Schneider and Korot, *Video Art: An Anthology*, 51.

⁹⁶ The Everson Museum in Syracuse holds several of Freed's tapes in their collection. Karen Convertino, Registrar, was unable to confirm whether the condition of the tapes and whether they were viewable. The tapes are: *Art Herstory* (1974, ½ inch videotape), *Two Faces*, *Water Glasses*, and *360°* (1973, ½ inch videotape), *New Reel* (1977, Umatic, ¾ inch cassette). Her tape *New Reel* was screened in the 1979 Everson Video Revue, curated by Richard Simmons and a short description appears in that catalog. Freed's *360° No. 1* (1973) and *Art Herstory* (1974) both were screened at the 1975 Whitney Biennial. Later, *Art Herstory* and *Water Glasses* (1973) were included in the *First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-1975* exhibition of 1993-1995, curated by JoAnn Hanley. *Water Glasses* appeared courtesy of the artist, while *Art Herstory* appeared courtesy of the Video Data Bank.

Freed from editing *Video Art*, Beryl Korot recalled that she was a brilliant writer, and someone who should have been an important video historian.⁹⁷

Although the notion of feedback was discussed frequently in the 1970s as an important attribute of video art, both theoretically and technically, it has never been discussed specifically in terms of its potential for feminist critique. Hermine Freed and Shigeko Kubota are but two examples of women artists who used technical distortions to interrupt the electronic signal of the video medium in order to complicate received or simplistic notions of narrative, subjectivity, documentary, sexuality, and the politics of vision. On the theoretical side, Kubota conceived of the camera as helping her resist “man’s” gaze, directing the light captured through the lens back onto itself, “vidicon... flaming in overexposure.” She used image-processing techniques to disrupt the narrative of documentaries such as *Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky* and *Europe on ½ Inch a Day*, keying colorized images of her own face over the footage of the Navajo reservation or using abrupt cuts and dizzying movement to suggest a very personal and idiosyncratic interpretation of Europe through the eyes of a stranger. Kubota’s biography intersected her documentary footage and her artistic homage to Marcel Duchamp. Through this, she inserted her feminine subjectivity into a narrative of patrimony, normally reserved for male artists. Stories of origin, cultural histories, and personal relationships were revised and playfully critiqued through technical distortions such as feedback. Kubota united aspects of her life in work that was technically proficient

⁹⁷ Beryl Korot, interview by author, 29 April 2003, New York City, tape recording. Freed included Korot’s *Dachau 1974* in the article discussed above, using Korot’s multi-channel installation as an example of the theme of simultaneity in video. Freed’s writing included several articles exploring the artistic implications of the video medium, relationships between video art and historical styles such as Abstract Expressionism and the aforementioned Futurism, and exhibition reviews, including one of the Nam June Paik Retrospective of 1982.

and inflected with personal references. She drew from her relationships with men such as Kosugi, Behrman, Paik, Duchamp, and Robbins, but she retained her subjectivity in all of these relationships. She sometimes used the relationships to forge important professional connections. At other times, she used the raw emotional pain from loss and regret to motivate her work, and she sometimes used her camera to reflect on and nurture her very close relationships such as that with Paik.

Freed also used her camera and her writing to engage history critically and to question notions of gender, subjectivity, and perception through space and time. Personal relationships, such as that with her father, also informed her thinking about issues such as memory and its record through history, especially as recorded through photography and video.⁹⁸ Through examining the construction of memory through the photograph and video camera, she refutes the idea of the camera's objective gaze, and this provides a concrete example of feedback which interrogates how information is supplied by mainstream media in a unidirectional flow.

Although male writers and artists, such as Michael Shamberg, articulated the social and political motivations for video artists to work actively to "decentralize" media, women artists, such as Kubota and Freed, showed what was specifically at stake for women in critiquing media structures. Both of these artists periodically articulated strong feminist stances and demonstrated a strong interest in narratives about history and memory. They were well aware of how historical narratives are constructed, and they interceded in those deceptively neutral structures with their own highly subjective voices.

⁹⁸ Schneider and Korot, *Video Art: An Anthology*, 51.

CHAPTER 4

WOMEN WORKING COLLECTIVELY

Much has been made of video's portability and accessibility for artists since the introduction of the Sony Portapak in 1968.¹ Its introduction meant that individuals could work with video cameras without the costly and cumbersome use of large crews, as were required for film. Nonetheless, many groups formed from the late sixties through the mid-seventies in order to produce tapes collectively, to develop a theory and praxis of video built on shared ideas, and to purchase and share equipment. In New York, many video collectives formed whose members had differing and sometimes conflicting motivations. This chapter examines the structure and makeup of several of those video collectives based in New York during the period from 1968 to 1980.

It is noteworthy that many collectives were formed with names that were overtly feminist or which indicated strictly female membership. A survey of the names of authors listed in programs for the Women's Video Festivals in New York reveals several of these groups, but very few of them have been discussed in the literature and indeed, many

¹ As I mentioned in the introduction, Nam June Paik famously acquired an early version of the portapak, the Sony Video Rover, in October, 1965 and recorded the arrival of Pope Paul VI in New York, but it was the generation of portapaks called the Sony CV, released in 1968 that were most commonly distributed among artists, and which Michael Shamberg called the first "truly portable" systems. Between 1965 and 68, a few artists used the portapak for recording theatrical performances, but I use the more common date of 1968 as the date when most artists began working with the portable video camera. Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4. For a discussion of whether the Portapak was necessary to the formation of a video art, see Jon Burris, "Did the Portapak Cause Video Art? Notes on the Formation of a New Medium" *Millennium Film Journal* 29 (Fall 1996) available at <http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/people/ptext.php3?id=9&page=1>, Internet, accessed 17 July 2005.

practitioners themselves have forgotten that the groups even existed.² The 1972 festival included the following groups whose names suggest they came from a feminist perspective: West Side Women's Video Collective, Women's Video Collective, and Women's Video News Service.³ The 1973 program documents the following feminist-sounding collectives: Women's Television Project (part of Portable Channel in Rochester, NY), Ann Arbor Women's Video Workshop, Dexter, Michigan, Women's Video News Service, L.O.V.E. Group, and Vulva Video.⁴ In the 1975 program, Joan Giummo of the Feminist Video Collective screened an interview with Lolly and Jean Hirsch, described as "Radical Feminists...working for a gynecological self-help movement among women."⁵ Finally, the 1976 program lists Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective, LO.V.E., and Spectra Video Media. The Whitney Museum of American Art screened a tape by Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective in their 1992 exhibition, "From Object to Subject: Documents and Documentaries from the Women's Movement" called "The Amazon Festival" from 1973-77. The brochure from that exhibition lists Anne Irving, Che Sandoval, and Pam Springer as members of that collective.⁶

In the accompanying catalog to the 1976 festival, there are biographies of each of the artists or groups. L.O.V.E. is there identified as Lesbians Organized for Video Experience. None of the members of this group are identified by name, but the biography says that they formed in February of 1973 "to record the reality and lifestyles of

² Melinda Barlow lists several of the women's collectives' names in her article on the Women's Video Festivals. Her article is the first historical treatment of those events and draws from the valuable interviews she conducted with organizer Susan Milano, artist Mary Lucier, and others. Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972-1980," 14-15.

³ Program for Women's Video Festival, 1972, Courtesy Vasulka archive

⁴ Program for Women's Video Festival September 28-October 14, 1973. Courtesy Lynda Rodolitz archive

⁵ Program for Women's Video Festival April 10-24, 1975. Courtesy Lynda Rodolitz archive.

⁶ Lucinda Furlong, "From Object to Subject: Documents and Documentaries from the Women's Movement" Whitney Museum of American Art, New American Film and Video Series 60, January 7-26, 1992. My thanks to Wendy Apple for sharing this brochure with me.

Lesbians.” Since their work does not seem to be recorded anywhere else in the literature on video art, it is worth reprinting the rest of their biographical entry here:

‘By showing ourselves to ourselves we seek to overcome the invisibility imposed upon Lesbians in this society by the media.’ The LOVE group produced some of the first videotape documentation of the spirit of militancy among radical Lesbians. While some members continue to work in ½” others are now studying film production here in New York City.⁷

L.O.V.E. screened two tapes, one from 1974 called, *Snapshots: Doris and the Firemen* which was described as an exchange between members of the Firefighter’s union who protested the temporary passage of a Gay Civil Rights bill in the New York City Council, and a lesbian counter-protestor. The second tape was called, *Snapshot: Florynce Kennedy* from 1975 and was a recording of the Feminist Party founder speaking at a Lesbian Feminist Liberation program. A shot of Flo Kennedy (Fig. 53) was published next to this catalog entry. Spectra Feminist Media is also described in the catalog, although none of the individual members’ names are given. Their stated goal was to “develop feminist media and teach women to use it as a tool for power. Currently involved in a three-part series on Women and Criminal Justice, the group also gives video workshops for women and provides production services to other organizations.”⁸ Spectra’s tape, *Forest of Canes* from 1975 was described as a “tape about the former Chinese practice of foot binding [that] comments on the physical and psychological oppression of contemporary women.” An image accompanying this catalog entry (fig. 54) appears to be a shot of a woman’s foot injured by binding.

In the examples above, the subject matter clearly is related to the women’s liberation movement and social justice projects by women’s groups. Collectives were

⁷ Catalog for Women’s Video Festival, 1976, unpaginated.

⁸ Ibid.

formed for a variety of reasons, however, and it is instructive to examine the structures of both mixed-gender and all-women collectives to study how gender issues were negotiated in the early 1970s. The all-women video collectives Women's Video News Service and Women's Video Collective are the subject of a closer examination later in this chapter. I also discuss the careers and experiences of women members of mixed-gender collectives in order to broaden the historical record and to determine whether their gender had an impact on the work they produced.

In order to begin to analyze work by collectives, it is necessary to define what was meant by the term "video collective" in the early 1970s. Collectives and communes were alternative groups organized according to structures at odds with capitalist structures. Feminist collectives such as *Heresies* formed in the 1970s to work on projects in ways that would not repeat patriarchal structures. In the "Collective Editorial Statement" published in a special issue on film and video, the editors of the issue relayed that their collective approach to labor was consciously nonhierarchical. They went on to write, "One works for *Heresies* to experience collective process, to contribute to a magazine committed to change, or to network with other feminists; but it is also possible that one might participate to gain recognition in the artworld."⁹ In very general terms, most of the collectives who are the subject of this study ultimately were formed in order for the members to make videotapes. There were not many places for video to be seen or distributed, but the New York State Council on the Arts would give grants to video groups. Additionally, some collectives formed in order to share living and work space and pool financial resources. Finally, at least one group (Women's Video News Service)

⁹ Diana Agosta, et al., "Collective Editorial Statement," *Heresies* 4 no.4 i16 (1983): 1.

formed in order to provide production opportunities to women who were largely excluded from the film business.

The most comprehensive source to date on video collectives remains Deirdre Boyle's book, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*.¹⁰ This book mostly chronicles the collective TVTV (Top Value Television), a group formed in 1972 by Michael Shamberg and others. Along the way, Boyle discusses several other collectives, including Videofreex, Raindance and People's Video Theater whose memberships overlapped with TVTV's.¹¹ All of these groups included both men and women, but most discussions of individual roles within the groups angled towards the men. Shamberg's leadership, for instance, garners the most attention in Boyle's book. What I aim to investigate are the particular contributions of the female members and how they negotiated their identity as women in light of contemporaneous feminist movements. In addition, some of these women in the mixed-gender groups were also involved with women-only collectives or they made tapes independently that dealt with feminist issues. For instance, Jodie Sibert and Megan Williams of Raindance screened a tape called "I Am a Woman" on October 6 and 13 at the 1976 Women's Video Festival at the Kitchen in New York.¹² Lynda Rodolitz, who was a juror for the Women's Video Festivals, worked off and on with members of Videofreex, Women's Video News Service, April Video Collective and Amazing Grace Media.¹³ Wendy Apple was an active member in

¹⁰ Boyle, *Subject to Change*.

¹¹ For contemporary coverage on the video collectives included in Boyle's designation as "guerrilla television", see Chloe Aaron, "The Alternate-Media Guerrillas," *New York Magazine*, October 19, 1970, 50-53; "Guerrilla Television," *Newsweek*, (December 7, 1970): 57-58; Chloe Aaron, "The Video Underground," *Art in America* (May-June 1971): 74-79.

¹² Women's Video Festival program, 1976.

¹³ Lynda Rodolitz, interview by the author, 25 June 2003, Santa Fe, New Mexico, tape recording.

Women's Video News Service who later joined TVTV. These women's careers provide case studies of women's participation in video collectives.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a collective as “a number of individuals taken or acting together.”¹⁴ It opposes this term with the idea of working individually. Within the history of video art, the term gets used to refer to groups who formed in the early period for one or both of the following reasons: to make tapes together or to share resources in order to produce video work. However, the term has been applied to groups with wide ranging goals and working styles, and the use of the term “collective” tends to shift within the literature. In the context of the late 1960s and early 1970s counter-cultural politics, the term tends to suggest a social agenda in keeping with video makers' statements about democratizing the media. The word collective, along with the term “commune,” invoked associations with communist-style governments in opposition to American capitalism. As video maker Wendy Apple said, “we were all Socialists...or something...not really, but that was the organizing principle. We were reading Mao and Lenin.”¹⁵ However, as Apple's statement indicates by its ambiguity, the specific political goals were rather loosely defined. Working collectively had both practical and ideological implications which were not always rooted in social justice. Apple later also asserted that there was a strong influence from Dadaism and described Amazing Grace Media as more anarchistic than Socialist.¹⁶

The term “collective” usually gets used to refer to video groups that largely made documentaries. Deirdre Boyle made distinctions between grassroots groups and guerrilla groups. Both types of groups aimed to gain access to local cable and broadcast television

¹⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed. Vol. III, s.v. “collective”.

¹⁵ Wendy Apple, telephone interview by the author, 12 April 2005, tape recording.

¹⁶ Wendy Apple, telephone interview by the author, 20 April 2005, tape recording.

in order to air mostly non-fiction tapes. Grassroots groups were committed to social change within a community and, as such, were largely political and often stressed process over final product. As Boyle stated, “Guerrilla television producers professed an interest in community video, but they were generally far more interested in developing the video medium and getting tapes aired than in serving a localized constituency.”¹⁷ Shamberg tended to lump these groups together in his book, *Guerrilla Television*, which Boyle says served to confuse groups whose motivations were different. Additionally, some practitioners joined collectives or formed groups in part to get government sponsored grants for their own, independent, artistic practice (as the Vasulkas had done with their group Perceptions, discussed in chapter one.) Hence, Beryl Korot tends to disassociate herself from the community-oriented work in Raindance because she preferred to work as an independent artist pursuing aesthetic rather than political concerns. Parry Teasdale, on the other hand, described Videofreex as a collective stressing that the group lived and worked in a shared space and pooled their money to produce work together, each individually drawing small weekly salaries. He drew parallels with the communes of the period, although the group tended to shy away from that label in part due to its exotic connotations of free love and cultish group dynamics.¹⁸ Videofreex members were also sometimes called artists, a term that Teasdale considered too “pompous,” but that others considered fitting given their funding from arts organizations and expanding definitions of artistic media.¹⁹

¹⁷Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 34.

¹⁸ Parry D. Teasdale, *Videofreex: America's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective That Turned It On* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press Corp., 1999), 42.

¹⁹ Teasdale also tried on the term “techno-kibbutz,” but rejected the term as the Videofreex shared no common spirituality. *Ibid.*, 47.

Raindance

Raindance and Videofreex are probably the two most well-known video collectives working in New York State in the early 1970s.²⁰ Both groups were founded in 1969 and each had members who had worked together a year before in what was likely the first video group to work collectively, a group called Commediation.²¹ The name combined the words “Community,” “Media” and “Mediation” and was founded by David Cort, Ken Marsh, Frank Gillette, and Howard Gustadt.²² Cort would go on to help found Videofreex, and Gillette would be one of the founders of Raindance.²³ As Boyle documents, “Commediation lasted a scant three months in late 1968 and produced, as far as anyone can recall, very little except for a documentary on the famous school decentralization crisis in New York City, centering on the Oceanhill-Brownsville school district.”²⁴ Even before that project, Cort and Marsh had started a community video project in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood where they raised funds to purchase portable video equipment, trained children in the community to use the equipment, and then transferred the project to a local community group. This followed their goal of

²⁰ Deirdre Boyle states the best known group is TVTV, or Top Value Television. This “guerrilla television” group, as she calls it, is the major subject of her study. Boyle, *Subject to Change*, xiv. TVTV, however, was an outgrowth of both Raindance and Videofreex and most of the women artists I interviewed discussed the two earlier collectives rather than TVTV.

²¹ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 5.

²² Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 5. *The Video History Project*, kept by Sherry Miller Hocking at Experimental Television Center, also cites a member named Harvey Simon. Available at: <http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/search/search.php3?id=221&base=events>, Internet, Accessed 31 March 2005.

²³ Gustadt went on to join People’s Video Theater and Survival Arts Media (1972). *The Video History Project*, Experimental Television Center, available at: <http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/search/search.php3>. accessed 31 March 2005. Marsh, as mentioned in chapter 1, founded Woodstock Community Video in 1972. *Video History Project*, Experimental Television Center, available at: <http://www.experimentalvcenter.org/history/search/search.php3?id=323&base=events>, Internet, Accessed 17 July 2005.

²⁴ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 5.

empowering a community to make their own media productions. This project in turn had its foundation in an outreach program called “Operation Discovery” that Cort started at Brooklyn Children’s Museum in 1967. Cort’s collaboration with Ken Marsh, who had been a documentary film editor, on these community projects introduced him to standards and styles of cinema vérité that would have included the lack of narration, synchronized sound, and loose, hand-held camera images. During this time, Marsh and Cort also met Eric Siegel, who introduced them to video equipment, although it was broadcast-quality equipment, not the Sony Portapak.²⁵ Despite this, Cort recalled being impressed with the equipment’s portability, “I was overwhelmed by the lightness of the video camera, the intimacy of it, the way you could talk from behind the camera to people and they could talk to you looking at you.”²⁶ It was also important to Cort that interviewees get to look at themselves on the monitor while they were being taped, an example of instant feedback, so that they would know immediately how they were being represented and could have some control over their own image. These experiences with community-based video would be important conceptual foundations for many video groups of the early 1970s, including Raindance and Videofreex.

Versions of Raindance’s formation are told in Boyle’s *Subject to Change* and in the pages of *Radical Software*, but the most comprehensive history of Raindance is on the recent website devoted to *Radical Software*.²⁷ I include a brief overview of its formation here. In 1968, Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette independently began using the Portapak

²⁵ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 6. Siegel was also mentioned in relation to the group “Perceptions” formed in 1971 by the Vasulkas and Frank Gillette in chapter one of this paper.

²⁶ Johanna Gill, *Video: State of the Art* (New York: Rockefeller Foundation, 1976), 7-8.

²⁷ Davidson Gigliotti, “A Brief History of RainDance,” *Radical Software*, 2003, available at <http://www.radicalsoftware.org/e/history.html>, Internet, accessed 5 January 2005. Gigliotti was a member of Videofreex and a friend of Ira Schneider’s, one of Raindance’s founders.

and exploring the video medium. Gillette, during the spring of 1968 had taken a course on McLuhan at the Free University in New York City, and had also met Paul Ryan, a graduate student who was working as a research assistant to McLuhan at Fordham University and applying his concepts to video. Ryan loaned Gillette equipment with which Gillette experimented throughout the summer. Between the summer and fall of 1968, Gillette also met David Cort and, with Howard Simon, Gustadt, and Marsh formed Commediation. In December of 1968, Gillette met Ira Schneider, a filmmaker, and the two of them collaborated on several projects, including the video installation *Wipe Cycle*, that was in the exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium* of 1969 at the Howard Wise Gallery, mentioned in chapter two. In 1969, Gillette also met Michael Shamberg, then a reporter for *Time* magazine who had read McLuhan and become interested in video as a medium. A young investor named Louis Jaffe also befriended Gillette and Schneider at this time. Gillette came up with a name for a group, and Gillette, Shamberg, Jaffe, and Gillette's friend the writer Marco Vassi officially began Raindance Corporation in October, 1969. Schneider did not officially join the group until December. The name Raindance was a joke on the Rand Corporation, a conservative think tank. Shamberg wrote of the name "Raindance" as evolving from the idea of "R&D" or "research and development".²⁸ This would be an alternative, counter-cultural think-tank, which would develop a media approach that might dismantle, or at least critique, the ideologies coming out of the Rand Corporation. "Raindance" also connotes a ritualistic gathering of natural forces which might bring about a drastic climatic change.

As stated in chapter two, Beryl Korot joined Raindance through her affiliation with Ira Schneider. Korot was aware of the burgeoning video movement and, as a writer,

²⁸ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 11.

was interested in publishing a magazine that would be a clearinghouse of information about the medium. Korot had earned her undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin, where she had met Schneider. She was working as a writer, and had a part time job at the *New York Review of Books* in 1969. She and Schneider had been discussing the idea of a magazine devoted to video, and Schneider introduced her to Phyllis Gershuny, who would become co-editor of the first issues of *Radical Software*. When Schneider joined Raindance, Korot and Gershuny came along as editors of the magazine, *Radical Software*, which would be published by Raindance.²⁹ Korot recently recalled that Raindance was the only organization forming in New York at that time that was not devoted entirely to either video art or community action, but that was investigating both, examining what the impact of the new medium would be, how it might actually alter society through its accessible structure.³⁰ Although she was not always personally engaged in the theorizing of the medium, it was notable to her that this group was analyzing the impact of the medium on society and was not just engaged in making videotapes.³¹ Those investigations would be played out on the pages of *Radical Software*. In Korot's assessment, Frank Gillette was the strongest theoretician of the group at its inception, although Gillette would leave Raindance in 1972.³² Raindance became a non-profit group in June, 1971 and changed its name to Raindance Foundation. Shamberg formed TVTV in 1972 and he and Megan Williams, his then-girlfriend, moved to San Francisco at that time. In the Spring of 1972, Schneider and Korot were effectively

²⁹ Gigliotti notes in his history of Raindance that Gershuny was never asked to join Raindance, despite her work on the first three issues of *Radical Software*. She left *Radical Software* after the third issue, published in Spring, 1971.

³⁰ Korot, Interview by the author, 28 April 2003.

³¹ Gigliotti, "A Brief History of RainDance," np.

³² Korot, Interview by the author, 28 April 2003.

the Editors-in-Chief of *Radical Software* and the only active members of Raindance. They lived together in a house in the upstate New York town of Ruby, where they worked on individual projects and also collaborated on community video projects. They continued to have an apartment in New York City as well.³³ The last issue of *Radical Software* was in the Spring of 1974. According to Gigliotti, Raindance continued as an “umbrella” under which many of the individual members worked, but it was permanently dissolved in 1993 when Schneider moved to Germany.

Korot’s role in Raindance was a very practical one with concrete objectives and deadlines. Her understanding of the importance of the video medium was very informed by attitudes that were prevalent among all the members of the collective, namely that decentralizing the medium and putting it in the hands of artists and individuals would serve the goal of transforming and critiquing society. She played a large role in disseminating these attitudes by organizing and editing the contributions to *Radical Software*. Although in recent literature, she is almost always credited for her important role in the group, her work was apparently not always recognized in the 1970s. When Shamberg wrote his version of the formation of the video community as of 1971 in *Guerrilla Television*, his initial draft failed to mention the female members of Raindance or their contribution as editors of the journal. The “Official Manual” section of the book reproduced a handwritten letter which was from Korot to Shamberg criticizing his omission.

Upon reading history section again I find it an insult that parallel to many of those make a fast buck profit “male” orgs which you describe, no mention was made of two women who were putting together a paper in order to get these disparate factions intercommunicating to form a network....In your obvious omission you betray the threat to yourself and

³³ Gigliotti, "A Brief History of RainDance," np.

enact your role as “male chauvinist pig.” If I have dealt ineffectively with you it is because it had and has been my good fortune throughout my life to work with men with deep mutual respect and non-competitively. I do not like to assert the “political” nature of male/female relations but in your case it has been blatant.³⁴

To Shamberg’s credit, the letter in its entirety was included in the book, although the reproduction is very small and nearly impossible to read and thus easily overlooked. (Shamberg did include a few sentences identifying Korot and Phyllis Gershuny as editors of *Radical Software* presumably after Korot criticized his early draft.) Korot’s letter is provocative also because she suggested that there was a history of tension between herself and Shamberg based on a failure on his part to deal with her on equal terms. In later interviews, Korot indicated that many of their differences were rooted as well in their conflicting uses of the video medium. Shamberg went on, after *Raindance*, to have a very successful career as a film producer.³⁵ Before *Raindance*, he had worked as a journalist for *Time*. Korot always considered his interests to be largely commercial, whereas Shamberg called her an “artist” in a derogatory tone. Finally, while the male members of the group often discussed theoretical concerns in long sessions, Korot and Gershuny were actively engaged in producing the group’s journal. Women were not included in as many of the theoretical discussions as the male members. Based on an interview with Megan Williams, Boyle wrote, “Women were allowed to serve the tea and granola bars but were asked to give up their chairs to the ‘guys’ when seating ran short.”³⁶ Korot recalled Shamberg often saying of her, “Oh it’s fantastic working with

³⁴ Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television*, 13.

³⁵ Shamberg is a partner in Jersey Films, and produced such well-known films as *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *The Big Chill* (1983) and *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988).

³⁶ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 11.

Beryl, she'll do all the dirty work.”³⁷ Such roles repeated the historical condition of associating women with concrete work and men with abstract thinking. Sherry Turkle has discussed this socially ingrained way of gendering theory in relation to how women entered, or did not enter, the field of computer programming.³⁸ As relayed in chapter two, Korot was certainly aware of media theory and articulated her own version of it, but while Ira Schneider, Michael Shamberg, Paul Ryan, and Frank Gillette were discussing theory and writing for journals, Korot and Gershuny were conducting the “dirty work” of producing the journal. Although Shamberg did not always credit women participants, several women members did exist, and through their participation, an alternative media theory was formulated.

Jodie Sibert also contributed to the theorization of video in a way through the graphic designs she made for Raindance members' publications. She was responsible for several illustrations in the pages of *Radical Software* and in Paul Ryan's book, *Birth and Death and Cybernation* (1973). Sibert's illustrations consisted of either photomontages or abstract line drawings. Several of the line drawings accompany a chapter in Ryan's book called “Other Probes and Pieces” in which Ryan described projects where video was used by himself or by small groups to mime one another's movements. Ryan suggests that a deep understanding and connection with another person is possible through viewing and mimicking one another using the feedback of the recorded movement displayed on the monitor. Discussing the effect this exercise had on his mind and perception, Ryan said, “What was even more extraordinary was when I woke up the next morning. I felt like I

³⁷ Korot, Interview by the author, 28 April 2003.

³⁸ Sherry Turkle, “The Triumph of Tinkering” *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 56.

was wearing his body. That I had it on.”³⁹ Rather than providing photographs of these sessions, Sibert’s drawings suggest a fluid melding of forms (fig. 55). The organic, biomorphic qualities of the line drawings (fig. 56) are in keeping with Ryan’s text, which is heavily influenced not only by Marshall McLuhan, but by Claude Levi-Strauss. In developing a theory of video that combined technology with an anthropological and sociological function, Ryan relied on Levi-Strauss’ structural language for many of his ideas about finding the sacred in a secular, information age. Ryan’s essays often described projects in which he used the video camera with children or other community groups. His chapter titled “Cable TV” was subtitled, “The Raw and the Overcooked” in homage to Levi-Strauss’ immensely popular book, *The Raw and the Cooked* (published in English in 1969). In his day, Levi-Strauss was widely celebrated for tracing the structures of cultures to their mythologies, but he was later criticized for his use of racist stereotypes and for primitivizing language that reinforced received notions of savagery and barbarism among tribal peoples. Ryan borrowed the anthropologist’s language to make points about using videotape for communication across cultures and as a way of bypassing the authoritative educational system. In one section, he suggested a tape exchange between children in the U.S. and Japan, “High level cultural exchange is possible via videotape-between blacks and whites, for instance. What about a direct exchange by tape between a group of Montessori kids in the U.S. and a group of Suzuki kids in Japan. Live on tape, tribe to tribe, three-year-olds may make the best ambassadors.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Ryan, *Birth and Death*, 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

Sibert's photomontages also suggest structural links between humans and their environments made possible through communications.⁴¹ Seen through the lens of McLuhan, electronic media becomes the way of transmitting Levi-Strauss' concepts of mythology. The image by Sibert that appeared at the end of the chapter entitled, "Guerrilla Strategy and Cybernetic Theory" (fig. 57) showed a nearly-nude male, bent on four limbs, pulling an enormous weight. This photograph, perhaps taken from an ethnographic or anthropological journal, is superimposed onto a chart of the constellations. The relationship to the text is ambiguous, although a fragment of Ryan's text on the opposite page reads:

Q. Who are the enemy?

A. All conspiring with entropy

Q. Who are allies?

A. All who are developing self-referencing modes of sharing life on planet earth.⁴²

The constellation chart amplifies Ryan's idea that video has global implications, and links the social (represented by the figure) with the ecological, in that the stars put all of this in the larger context of the planet and the universe.

More work needs to be done documenting Sibert's and Williams' roles in Raindance. Korot had very little memory of their participation. Ryan credits Sibert and Megan Williams with the mechanical production of his book.⁴³ But documenting their very presence in Raindance is an important first step. Williams and Shamberg moved to San Francisco in 1972 and joined with members of a collective there named Ant Farm

⁴¹ A thorough interpretation and analysis of the photographs requires a study of Sibert's sources and artistic education. Although Sibert was unavailable at this time for an interview, I fully intend to conduct one at a later time in an attempt to more thoroughly analyze the photomontages and her experiences inside Raindance and other organizations. This and an analysis on the basis of extant videotapes, if they exist in her archives, remain for future work.

⁴² Ryan, *Birth and Death*, 64.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xiv.

before forming TVTV in April, 1972.⁴⁴ The couple married and had children, but divorced in the early 90s.⁴⁵

Videofreex

The second well-known mixed-gender collective in New York was Videofreex. Videofreex was a collective that was formed in 1969 and lasted in various guises into the early 1980s.⁴⁶ Between 1971 and 1977, they were based in Lanesville, New York and from 1972 to 1977 they broadcast once a week on a pirate cable channel their home-grown local program, Lanesville T.V. In 1977, Lanesville T.V. ended and Parry Teasdale and Carol Vontobel moved Videofreex to Woodstock, New York. At the time of its largest membership, the group was made up of Parry Teasdale, David Cort, Curtis Ratcliff, Nancy Cain, Carol Vontobel, Chuck Kennedy, Ann Woodward, Davidson Gigliotti, Skip Blumberg, and Bart Friedman. By 1975, several members, including Ann Woodward, Davidson Gigliotti, David Cort, and Curtis Ratcliff had left. A version of this collective's history has been published by one of its founding members, Parry D. Teasdale, who wrote *Videofreex: American's First Pirate TV Station and the Catskills Collective That Turned It On* in 1999.⁴⁷ Teasdale focuses on the period when Videofreex was in Lanesville, breezing over the period when the collective was based in New York City, between 1969 and 1971. Nonetheless, the basic facts of Videofreex' formation in

⁴⁴ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 37.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 187. Williams appears in sporadic photographs of TVTV projects in Deirdre Boyle's book.

⁴⁶ Videofreex officially changed its name to Media Bus when the members applied for non-profit status in 1971 in order to get grants from the New York State Council on the Arts; they thereafter applied for funding under that name. See Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 21. However, they continued to be known more commonly by their original name, Videofreex, which I use here.

⁴⁷ A document based on Teasdale's private recollections, this book is of limited value in terms of analyzing concerns or experiences specific to the women members of the collective. Teasdale also tends to focus on Lanesville TV, the pirate cable television program that Videofreex produced from Lanesville, NY between 1972 and 77.

Teasdale's book are consistent with other accounts.⁴⁸ The women who were involved with Videofreex during the collective's most active years were Nancy Cain (b. 1940), Carol Vontobel (b. 1943), Curtis Ratcliff (b. 1942), and Ann Woodward (b. 1947). In this section, I document these women's involvement with Videofreex based on my individual interviews with them and examine how gender affected their careers while in Videofreex.

Curtis Ratcliff, whose full name is Mary Curtis Ratcliff, was the only woman associated with Videofreex from the very beginning, and thus her story begins with the formation of the group. She was officially one of the founders of Videofreex and signed the papers when the group incorporated. Like several members of Videofreex, both male and female, she did not plan to join the group initially but rather became involved through a personal relationship. Ratcliff was living in a loft in New York City with David Cort, who had been filming tapes with a group of youths in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Cort met Parry Teasdale, another person who had independently begun working with videotape, when they both showed up at Woodstock in August, 1969 to shoot the music festival.⁴⁹ Out of that meeting, Cort invited Teasdale to move into the loft. Teasdale and Cort decided to start a video group and asked Ratcliff if she would like to join, which she did. Ratcliff, a sculptor, had attended Rhode Island School of Design. She had made photographs since she was a child and her father had been an amateur photographer with a darkroom in the home. Ratcliff began doing much of the camerawork from 1969 until she left the group in 1972.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The story of Videofreex's formation is also told in Boyle's *Subject to Change* and was recounted to me by Curtis Ratcliff in my interview with her.

Ira Schneider was also at Woodstock, and had contact with Cort there, according to Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 15. Cort made tapes that were played back for audience members at the festival with the aim to help them cope with "survival" issues that weekend. These included tapes on administering first aid and digging latrines.

⁵⁰ Mary Curtis Ratcliff, telephone interview by the author, 19 November 2004, tape recording.

Soon after making the Woodstock tapes, Videofreex showed them to a producer of CBS' news program, *60 Minutes*, and later another young producer at the network named Don West enlisted the group to work on what he named, "The Now Project." This project would be a view into what Carol Vontobel called the "alternate culture," or youth culture, and would have a decidedly loose format and a subjective documentary style that was counter to the structured studio production of shows like *60 Minutes*. Videofreex' ad-hoc visual style and the perceived immediacy of the video format were initially viewed as assets. Over the course of its conception, The Now Project was at times planned as a musical/comedy variety show aimed at youth, and at other times as a glimpse into youth culture across the United States shot in this subjective documentary style. It was slated to replace "The Smothers Brothers" on Sunday evenings after that show began to receive criticism for anti-war statements. The fact that this show was supposed to replace a wildly popular television program that had been subject to censorship over political statements demonstrates perhaps that the prospect of any real political critique was not part of CBS' plans for its commissioned snapshot of youth or the counterculture. Eventually, Videofreex was responsible for completing a pilot renamed "Subject to Change," which aired on December 17, 1969. Although the pilot was a failure in terms of network expectations, the group's collaboration with CBS allowed them to purchase some of the best equipment available to private individuals at the time and the collaboration also necessitated enlarging the group's ranks by expanding membership.⁵¹

As this group evolved and formalized itself, its members shared a sense of affinity with one another as advocates for the new medium. In 1970 they applied for funding from the New York State Council on the Arts (henceforth, NYSCA), and at this time, like

⁵¹ This project for CBS is recounted in more depth in both Boyle's and Teasdale's books.

other groups applying for funds, they articulated goals and a self-identity based on a spirit of collaboration. The idea of working as a group was initiated out of two separate goals which were sometimes in conflict. First, as discussed in previous chapters, it was easier for groups to secure public funding than individual artists. Some Videofreex members were strongly identified as individual artists, especially David Cort and Davidson Gigliotti, but for most of the members, their identity as a group had political connotations related to the principles animating collectives and communes forming throughout the U.S. youth culture in the early 1970s. Group planning, group living, group ownership of equipment was complicated, however, by the fact that this group included strong, individual personalities who kept meetings impassioned and sometimes volatile. As Carol Vontobel recalled, the working out of issues related to living and working was important politically, as it represented a model of community living that could potentially be extended to the larger society.⁵² The use of video also had important political implications, and although some other collectives or video documentarians alternated between film and video, Videofreex had an allegiance to video because of its portability and its accessibility by artists who were not trained in film school. Videofreex' documentary approach stressed the subjectivity of the recording process. As will be demonstrated later, it was important to members that they not hide the fact that they were behind the camera, and the questions they directed to their subjects often appear in final, edited videotapes. They recognized that the videographer's presence changes a situation, and wanted that acknowledged in their tapes.⁵³

⁵² Carol Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005, tape recording.

⁵³ Ibid. This strategy of announcing the videographer's presence was in contradiction to prevailing documentary film conventions at the time, which were called "direct cinema." Direct cinema was beginning to be countered by filmmakers, for example, by Barbara Kopple in *Harlan County, USA*, (1976).

Nancy Cain had been hired at CBS by Don West as a production assistant.⁵⁴ Cain, however, became more interested in working with Videofreex and remained with the collective, rather than with CBS, after “The Now Project” dissolved. Cain had come to New York from Detroit to be an actress and singer, and had wound up working in radio and then television. At CBS, Cain hired her roommate, Carol Vontobel, as an office assistant in Don West’s office, despite Vontobel’s lack of experience in that area. Vontobel worked on the administrative side of production throughout Videofreex’ relationship with CBS, and only started making videotapes after CBS severed its relationship with the collective, whereupon Vontobel joined Cain and her group. During the editing of “Subject to Change,” Vontobel had spent a lot of time with Parry Teasdale and they became a couple, so that Vontobel’s relationship with the group grew out of close personal relationships with Cain and Teasdale both.⁵⁵ Cain later brought another member, Bart Friedman, to Videofreex. Cain had briefly known Friedman years earlier, and they met again through mutual acquaintances in 1970. They began dating once again and he began making videotapes along with the rest of the group.⁵⁶ Vontobel brought Skip Blumberg to the group while they were working on the “Subject to Change” pilot.

In Direct Cinema, the cameraperson aims to be invisible, and allows the camera to record action while avoiding altering the scene in any way. Kopple’s voice, alternatively, can be heard asking questions, breaking the illusory aspect of the film. She also edited her own documentary footage with comparable archival material using montage as social critique. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 583-4. I am grateful to Melinda Barlow for bringing Kopple’s work to my attention.

⁵⁴ According to the account in Deirdre Boyle’s book, West hired Cain after hearing her on a satirical radio show on WBAI called, “It’s Your World and You Can Have It.” West envisioned Cain as “the girl” who would co-host the Now Project along with two other hosts, the “old man” and a “young guy.” This format, as Boyle points out, would become stock for magazine-style news programs. However, by Cain’s own account, the radio program in question was in 1965-66, long before she ever worked for CBS and she maintains that West never heard the program. Rather, she was recommended to West by comedy writers who originally worked on “The Now Project,” and they knew of Cain’s radio show (Nancy Cain, email to the author, 21 March 2005.)

⁵⁵ Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

Blumberg had been a teacher at the elementary school where Vontobel had also worked, and he brought with him some experience and knowledge of financial management, initially taking on the duties of managing the group's financial matters.⁵⁷ Blumberg eventually became listed as the President of Media Bus on the non-profit paperwork, and all of the other members were listed as members of the Board of Directors.

Cain also worked on a project filming the Democratic National Convention and the Republican National Convention with the group TVTV in 1972. TVTV, an acronym for Top Value Television, was created by Michael Shamberg of Raindance to cover these conventions. Shamberg enlisted several video makers, including Cain, but according to Cain the core members of the TVTV group had different ambitions from hers, centering on getting into television and then film as a business.⁵⁸ From its beginnings, TVTV secured full press credentials. Cain also worked on *Gerald Ford's America* with TVTV in 1974, a four-part documentary that was initially supposed to cover the anticipated impeachment of Richard Nixon, but which instead documented behind-the-scenes Washington after Nixon's resignation. Cain can be seen in several photographs documenting TVTV's activities during this period, which are reproduced in Deirdre Boyle's study (figures 58 and 59). Cain's work with TVTV gained her access to political events as a member of the press, and she was able to provide an alternate narrative about current events from the broadcast network stations. Videographers working for TVTV also were finding ways to creatively engage politics.

⁵⁷ Boyle, *Subject to Change*, 21; Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 50.

⁵⁸ Nancy Cain, Email to the author, 19 January 2005. Deirdre Boyle published a photograph of TVTV in Miami during the conventions in 1972. The photograph includes Skip Blumberg and Chuck Kennedy from Videofreex, and Ira Schneider from Raindance.

Carol Vontobel, who must have developed some administrative skills while at CBS, initially did the accounting for Videofreex.⁵⁹ She also actively produced videotapes, and though her role in the collective was fairly stable, she, like Cain, had to actively demand an equal place within the group. In the beginning, she conducted many of the interviews for Videofreex videotapes, but as she recalled, “to be a member of Videofreex you had to do video, so I did video.”⁶⁰ Vontobel recounts that she never was interested in the medium as an artistic or creative medium, but as a tool for communication, and in the idea of the portapak as allowing “people [to have] the power over their own media.”⁶¹ Her interests were, by her own account, strictly political, and consistent with her early studies of sociology and her work in the welfare system in New York City as well as in education. Her training on the equipment was largely received on the fly, as Vontobel, like others, learned to use the equipment in the field, by reading the manuals, and by asking others to show her how things worked.⁶² Chuck Kennedy, the resident technician, would also have short workshops showing all of the members how to do things such as editing, or he often taught Parry Teasdale to use the tools and Teasdale showed others, eventually writing a manual that was published under the name *The Spaghetti City Video Manual* (discussed below).

Soon after moving to Lanesville in 1972, Vontobel became pregnant and her and Teasdale’s daughter became a regular fixture in the Videofreex environment.⁶³ Vontobel certainly had to negotiate and balance her responsibilities to the child with her work in

⁵⁹ Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 49.

⁶⁰ Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Teasdale and Vontobel married in November, 1972. Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 74.

the collective, but those responsibilities were fairly equally shared with Teasdale.⁶⁴ During this time, the second-wave of feminism was generating intense discussion across the United States about, among other things, women's roles in the domestic and professional spheres. Vontobel identified herself as a liberal feminist, one who considered equal rights to be the major issue for feminism, but who stopped short of radical feminist positions which criticized social structures in the United States as inherently patriarchal.⁶⁵ Vontobel felt an affinity with other feminists who were strong advocates of abortion rights and who demanded equal roles in the workplace. Despite the Videofreex collective's strongly liberal politics, the male members of the group generally held the same assumptions about women as men in most other leftist groups, namely that the women would play supportive roles but not necessarily take an active part in the group. Vontobel recalled observing men in the "movement" (left, anti-war, youth, and countercultural movements) who took advantage of women at the same time that they espoused revolution against the establishment: "I watched the movement, and I watched all the guys who, if they got you in the kitchen they touched your breasts, and I also noticed that the women did the cooking, they did the typing, they were the handmaidens to the revolutionary movement, and I thought, 'oh no!'"⁶⁶ Vontobel described how she

⁶⁴ Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005.

This did not, apparently, come without some turbulence. By Vontobel's recollection, there was an assumption that she would be the primary caregiver, but she immediately resisted this by handing the newborn over to a surprised Teasdale from the beginning.

⁶⁵ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 3.

⁶⁶ Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005.

Incidents of sexism within New Left organizations have been cited often in feminist histories of the period. For example, one male member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee made the comment in 1964 that "the only position for women in SNCC is prone." Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay, 1975), 57, quoted in Mary D. Garrard, "Feminist Politics: Networks and Organizations" in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* ed. By Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 90.

negotiated her own power base within the group by alternately pretending not to have the secretarial skills that the men assumed she would have, like typing, and by confronting the male members of the group and telling them outright that she would not take a backseat. According to her, the men had to be “educated,” but did not exert a tremendous resistance to her and Cain’s participation. By several accounts, this acquiescence was greatly assisted by Cain’s and Vontobel’s strong personalities, and female participants who were not as outspoken had a more difficult time establishing themselves within the group.⁶⁷

Beyond the core members of Videofreex, there were other extended guests who were *de facto* members, if only temporarily. Frances Wyatt joined Videofreex while a companion of Davidson Gigliotti. She was a poet and edited the newsletter published by Videofreex called *Maple Tree Farm Report*.⁶⁸ When Videofreex moved from New York City to Lanesville, Wyatt arrived with Gigliotti, without consultation of the other members. Reading between the lines in Teasdale’s book, there was apparently tension between Wyatt and other members, and Wyatt was eventually asked to leave by Teasdale. One reason given was that Wyatt did not make videotapes and, after her relationship with Gigliotti ended, she no longer “fit in.”⁶⁹ Wyatt never made tapes, preferring to use her writing skills toward publishing the newsletter, although Teasdale relates that she had the kind of outspoken personality that was required to become involved in making tapes in the group. Wyatt’s historical contribution is substantial,

⁶⁷ Teasdale, Vontobel, and Woodward and Ratcliff have all discussed this either in interviews or in Teasdale’s book.

⁶⁸ Wyatt is mentioned on p. 51 and 64, of Teasdale’s *Videofreex*. Only two issues of the *Maple Tree Farm Report* were published. Although copies probably exist in former member’s personal collections, the only issues available in collections in the United States are at the University of Connecticut and the University of Kansas at Lawrence in the Kenneth Spencer Research Libraries.

⁶⁹ Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 73.

considering that the *Maple Tree Farm Report* remains one of the few written documents of Videofreex' work, since the group's videotapes remain largely undocumented and unpreserved.⁷⁰ In addition to editing the newsletter, she contributed a cartoon in the second and final issue which is of interest in a study of the intersections between video and feminism.⁷¹ The cartoon (fig. 60) told the story of "Velvet Vidicon" who transforms herself, by taking up the video camera, into "Video Velvet," feminist superhero, accompanied by her faithful, swearing dog, Coax. The protagonist, Velvet Vidicon, is admonished by a long-haired man holding a portapak that media is "man's work." Velvet then spontaneously transforms into a powerful figure sporting a cape, a "V" on her chest, and a Portapak on her shoulder. She vows to bring video to the "people," rehearsing the belief espoused in Guerrilla Television and elsewhere that, with access, those people will find a way of fighting a myriad of social ills, including male chauvinism, ("there must be a way of fighting those pigs!"). The heroine is pictured in a way that highlights aspects of her body that reaffirm stereotypically ideal feminine traits: a slender waist, large, firm breasts and long hair. The fact that Video Velvet retained those attributes somewhat deflates her goals, and perhaps points to the naiveté of a project which purported to change society by merely providing access to the media without actually dismantling oppressive structures of representation. On the other hand, it also ironically demonstrates how a patriarchal culture continuously tries to absorb feminism by objectifying and ridiculing its adherents, as when Coax comments on Velvet's breasts at the end of the cartoon.

⁷⁰ Video Data Bank in Chicago is currently working with former members of Videofreex to produce a compilation of the collective's work, but it is not yet available.

⁷¹ The cartoon is mentioned briefly by Teasdale in *Videofreex*, 64.

Ann Woodward did not produce tapes while with Videofreex. She contributed to the collective with her drawings, which illustrated written publications by the Videofreex, including Teasdale's *Spaghetti City Video Manual*. She also hand-lettered credits for the tapes, and she was the primary cook for other members of the collective when it was based in Lanesville. She had come to the group as the girlfriend of Chuck Kennedy, the technician of the group.⁷² By her own account, she was not particularly outspoken and did not demand a part in the production of videotapes.⁷³ Woodward's example is noteworthy for her important record of the movement contained within her drawings and through analysis of her interactions with the group. Somewhat shy and one of the less outspoken members (at least in the early 1970s), Woodward says she did not stand up for herself, and it is through her experiences that we can see how much effort the women members of Videofreex had to exert in order to be recognized as equals.

Woodward had been trained as a painter, and had attended school at Boston University, transferring to nearby Brandeis University in 1968. From 1968 until after she graduated in 1970, she worked as Assistant Curator for Russell Connor at Brandeis' Rose Art Gallery. There, she worked on the exhibition, *Vision and Television*, held at Brandeis in January-February, 1970. Several of the artists participating in the exhibition visited Boston, including members of Videofreex. It was on this occasion that Woodward met the group, several members of whom stayed at her off-campus apartment.

Several months later, after dating Chuck Kennedy long distance, Woodward moved to New York City and lived with Kennedy in the Prince Street loft along with some of the other Videofreex. She and Kennedy then moved, with the rest of the group,

⁷² Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 201

⁷³ Ann Woodward, telephone interview with the author, 11 March 2005. This is also how Teasdale describes her involvement in *Videofreex*,. 64.

to Lanesville. Woodward was an active part of the collective, especially in terms of contributing to the practical, day-to-day domestic activities, if not the video production. She looked forward to living upstate, where she could develop a large garden that provided a substantial portion of the food for the entire group. She was very concerned with living close to the land as an alternative lifestyle. She began to apply her skills as an artist to doing the lettering of credits for Videofreex' videotapes and when Teasdale began work on his video manual, *The Spaghetti City Video Manual: A Guide to Use, Repair, and Maintenance*, she drew all of the illustrations for the book.⁷⁴ This book, published in 1973, was an attempt by Parry Teasdale to translate the mechanics of the video medium into a jargon-free, easy to understand technical manual. His approach once again stressed access to the medium by demystifying the technology, and Woodward's illustrations enhanced that aim with their light-hearted characters and cartoon style. Much of the technical information originated with Chuck Kennedy, the technical wizard of the group, but it was Teasdale and Woodward who translated that knowledge into practical, how-to directions.

Woodward's illustrations consisted of technical drawings that illustrated the mechanics of the equipment and cartoons that injected humor into the text. She animated a Video Tape Recorder (VTR), also known as the deck, and a monitor, giving these objects friendly smiles and dancing limbs (fig. 61). The message was that the equipment was on a human scale, not alien, and that it was essentially benevolent. When something went wrong, the equipment was pictured as "sick" and in need of the reader's care and concern (fig. 62). Diagnosing problems is pictured as the user playing doctor and

⁷⁴ Videofreex, *The Spaghetti City Video Manual: A Guide to Use, Repair, and Maintenance*, (New York and Washington: Praeger Publishers, 1973).

listening to the VTR's heart with a stethoscope (fig. 63). Woodward's winking monitor (fig. 64) has been described by Woodward as having become a kind of signature for Videofreex, suggesting it was reproduced on other literature published by the group.⁷⁵ These images convey an approach to the medium that is in keeping with Videofreex' reputation: grassroots, humorous, hand-built, and friendly.

Woodward's technical drawings demonstrated principles of editing, mixing, maintenance and repair that were meant to be used in conjunction with user manuals sold with the equipment. The book and pictures were to assist users who might need extra help in interpreting the directions or using the equipment in more flexible ways than the manufacturers intended. One drawing, (fig. 65) illustrates the set-up of a Gen-lock system, which allowed video artists to mix signals from a pre-recorded tape with the signal from a live video feed. Since each of these components had their own sync signal, those signals had to be unified so that they would not interfere with each other. Woodward's illustration shows the basic connections and, in conjunction with Teasdale's text, explains a term to the uninitiated that was used often by artists and engineers. The manual was intended as a supplement to the manufacturer's instructions, and its illustrations would have been useful for introducing a novice to the medium, although Teasdale wrote that the best way to learn the equipment was by trial and error. "Two things are true of the answers to 'how' and 'why' questions about video—first, the longer you work with the equipment, the clearer the answers and explanations become and,

⁷⁵ Woodward, "The Spaghetti City Video Manual (1973) and 'JungletownTV On-the-Air' (1975)" in Melinda Barlow, "Studio as Study" *Performing Arts Journal* 71 (2002): 8.

second, no few-page explanation is ever entirely sufficient for most of these complex phenomena and processes.”⁷⁶

Woodward also made drawings for a story written by Skip Blumberg in 1975 titled, “Jungletown TV On-the-Air”.⁷⁷ This story substituted animals for the Videofreex members themselves in a tale about a group who starts a pirate television station.

Woodward’s illustrations for this story used animals as characters learning to use the video equipment and using it in ways that mirrored the Videofreex group’s own use of the medium. In one particularly engaging drawing, Woodward shows a group of birds sitting on a chair watching a program on a television monitor about cheetahs (fig. 66). The lines on the monitor point to the medium, suggesting scan lines and a fuzzy quality typical of a pirated video signal. In the context of the story, it is clear that these animals are watching footage shot on portable video equipment, and in a sense, they are watching themselves. It is a wonderful illustration of the idea of feedback. The animal kingdom has generated their own stories, stories which are meaningful to them, and has thereby usurped power over the media, filming their own lives. It is an example of decentralized media in the animal world—work by and for the animals!

Woodward and Kennedy split in the Fall of 1974 after the first few years in Lanesville. Despite this, Woodward stayed at Maple Tree Farm until the Spring of 1975.⁷⁸ It was during this time that she would have been making the drawings for Blumberg’s book. She left Videofreex in 1975 and returned to New York City. She assisted Mary Lucier who was managing editor for the *Video Art* book compiled by Beryl

⁷⁶ Videofreex, *The Spaghetti City Video Manual*, 1.

⁷⁷ Woodward, “The Spaghetti City Video Manual (1973) and ‘JungletownTV On-the-Air’ (1975),” 8-9.

⁷⁸ Woodward, telephone interview by the author, 11 March 2005.

Korot and Ira Schneider, which was published in 1976. Woodward then had a lengthy career as an editor in television, despite the fact that she had never been interested in making tapes for Videofreex. According to Woodward, she had picked up editing skills by watching Kennedy, Teasdale, and Cort. It is clear from reading *The Spaghetti City Video Manual* that Woodward would have had to acquire a strong basic understanding of editing principles in order to make clear technical drawings. From 1976-1978, Woodward again worked for Russell Connor who was Director of the Cable Arts Foundation, planning, producing, and eventually editing programs. From there she was able to work in editing for an experimental video program on WNET/Thirteen, and then a production company called Nexus Productions in 1979-1981. She worked as a freelance editor from 1983-1990, during which time she won awards and was nominated for two Primetime Emmy Awards for editing Barbara Walters specials.

It was in her role as a professional editor that Woodward experienced the most blatant forms of sexism, rather than in the collective. In the period that she was working for Connor, Woodward observed that the only woman she knew working as an editor was Edie Brownstein at Channel 13, who had earned a degree in engineering and a license from the FCC, which was required at the time. Brownstein was so extremely competent, according to Woodward, she could not have been refused a job. Although women have a long history as editors in film, their numbers were very small in video editing. Perhaps this is due to the more technical requirements for video editing during the 1970s and 80s. Film editing was done at that time largely through cutting and pasting film. Video required setting up reel-to-reel decks and aligning all of the heads as well as syncing signals. As Woodward described it, the machines required long hours of maintenance,

including soldering circuit boards, before the editing could even begin. Although it was certainly physically possible for women to accomplish these tasks, as we have established in chapter two, women were socially conditioned away from such jobs and the engineering educations that prepared them. Woodward took steps in the beginning of her career to earn an FCC license, but licensing requirements changed and she could soon become an editor without licensure. So when Woodward first expressed interest in editing, she encountered strong reactions from colleagues who discouraged her because she was a woman.⁷⁹

This general assumption of women's discomfort and physical incapacity to work with technology was pervasive in the professional world, and although it had changed by the time Woodward left Videofreex, she observed that those same assumptions were more subtly in place in the collective in the very early years. She attributes the change to Cain and Vontobel's work in the group, and their demands for fair treatment. Woodward, who was younger and perhaps less confident than either Cain or Vontobel, never asserted her strength or demonstrated her technical skills while in the collective, but she certainly overcame obstacles of sexism and achieved great success in her later career.⁸⁰ During her years with Videofreex, she had a passing interest in using the soldering iron to build circuit boards and was fascinated by transistors and boards as objects, a fascination focused on their visual form. She listened and learned from conversations between Kennedy, Cort, and Teasdale about editing, but claimed to have been more interested in her garden at the farm in Lanesville. As a young woman, it is not particularly surprising

⁷⁹ Woodward, telephone interview by the author, 11 March 2005.

⁸⁰ Woodward stopped working as an editor in 1990 and completed a degree in nursing. She worked full time as a nurse from 1992 until 2002 and since then only part-time. She has returned to painting, and has exhibited in several small galleries in New York from 2002 to 2005.

that she never broke out of the social roles that were constructed for women. Curtis Ratcliff had fought for inclusion and shot much of the Videofreex tape, but eventually left for California. It would be up to Nancy Cain and Carol Vontobel to break through the stereotype of the male techie.

While in New York, Vontobel and Cain had jobs in addition to their work with Videofreex, which supported the activities of the male members of Videofreex.⁸¹ However, when Videofreex moved to Lanesville in June, 1971, and had a lower cost of living, Vontobel and Cain were able to participate on an equal footing with other members. Teasdale indicates that there was competition for the use of the equipment, and that members had to be assertive enough to take initiative when it came to making tapes, something that was also discussed by Vontobel.⁸² Teasdale refers obliquely to Curtis Ratcliff having the “roughest time” establishing her role in the group after the CBS project. As Teasdale put it, Ratcliff took time off from video and left town, and when she returned was “temperamentally ill-equipped to fight for a position of her own.” Ratcliff described the conflict in terms that indicate her growing consciousness as a feminist was putting her at odds with the male members of the group. This may have something to do with Teasdale’s memory that “Videofreex men, on the other hand, behaved like macho knuckle-draggers, assuming our chicks would naturally take subservient roles, letting us make tapes while they typed and helped out when we needed them.”⁸³

Ratcliff’s primary recollections are from the period when Videofreex was in New York City, located at the Prince Street loft. Her memory is of being the only woman in a

⁸¹ Cain worked at the ASCAP, while Vontobel taught at an elementary school in Harlem. Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 200.

⁸² Since Teasdale and Vontobel are still a couple, it is likely that many of their memories reflect conversations they have held with one another over the course of the years since they lived in Lanesville.

⁸³ Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 201.

group of men and of being ignored while trying to participate in a discussion about the future of the group.⁸⁴ This would have been in early 1970, and from the chronology above, it is apparent that in fact, Ratcliff was not the only woman member of the group at this time, but it is possible that since Vontobel and Cain had other jobs while in New York City, Ratcliff indeed did find herself the only woman actively involved in some of the Videofreex meetings. Feeling isolated as a female member of Videofreex contributed to her break with the group.

Ratcliff had traveled in 1969 with Cort and Teasdale to California and during this time of unhappiness and exclusion, she found herself fantasizing and hatching a plan, what she called her “escape route” to California, which she considered to be more open and perhaps a more welcome environment. When they returned to New York, Ratcliff remained with Videofreex and living at the loft on Prince Street.⁸⁵ In 1972, she lived for four months in San Francisco and intended to move there permanently. She again returned to New York, as she said, to gather her things and joined Videofreex in Lanesville soon after its move. While there, she met Cyril Griffin, a fellow video artist who was working near Lanesville. Ratcliff and Griffin were married in a ceremony at the Maple Tree Farmhouse that is described in Teasdale’s book as part happening, part housewarming celebration attended by assorted videomakers and artists, including Shirley Clarke who made her own version of a Marx-brothers movie using Videofreex members as actors.⁸⁶ Ratcliff was married to Griffin for a year but another instance of sexism marked the end of that relationship. Griffin mounted an exhibition at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, most likely in early 1973, and, although Ratcliff was instrumental

⁸⁴ Mary Curtis Ratcliff, telephone interview with the author, 19 November 2004, tape recording.

⁸⁵ Ratcliff broke with Cort sometime between May, 1971 and 1972.

⁸⁶ Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 34-36.

to the installation of that project, only Griffin's son received credit for his role in the installation.⁸⁷ Although it is probable other factors contributed to the dissolution of the marriage, it is noteworthy that again Ratcliff cites an awareness of her own alienation as a woman and her unequal status when recalling the end of that relationship. Finally, in 1973, Ratcliff moved permanently to California. At that time, she left video, returning to sculpture, and joined a feminist consciousness-raising therapy group. She continues to work as an artist at the present time. In approximately 1998 or '99, she began working two-dimensionally with collage using painting, drawing and photo-transfers. She has also worked sporadically teaching art to children.⁸⁸

Videofreex was more committed to the idea of a decentralized media than to any other specific political agenda, including feminism. Although other female members of Videofreex did not recall marching in demonstrations or being very actively involved in the feminist movement, Ratcliff says she marched in rallies with Cain and Vontobel. Six tapes titled "Women's Lib" appear in a catalog of all known Videofreex tapes.⁸⁹ This was out of a total 525 videotapes. I have related individual negotiations with patriarchal attitudes and structures within the group, but even though Cain, Vontobel, and Ratcliff used various strategies to demand power and autonomy, feminist politics were not a major subject of the videotapes. It would have been nearly impossible not to attend at least some feminist marches and meetings if one was involved in recording contemporary society at all in the early 1970s, but Vontobel indicated that there were other political

⁸⁷ The exhibition was historical in nature and called "Daze of Syracuse". Ratcliff cites a refusal to acknowledge her work on the part of both Griffith and the museum's staff, with the exception of David Ross, who was an early advocate of video art.

⁸⁸ Ratcliff, telephone interview with the author, 19 November 2004.

⁸⁹ Entry #78-80 out of 525 tapes have the titles "Women's Lib #1, 2, and 3-Burning Theater and Alternate U." Entry #81-83 are titled, "Women's Lib Rally #1, 2, and 3". Available <http://www.vasulka.org>, Internet, accessed 19 November 2004.

issues that were more compelling to her than feminism, resulting in few feminist tapes. For her, some of the more urgent matters were getting Richard Nixon out of the White House and investigating COINTELPRO and other FBI abuses of power.⁹⁰ From Vontobel's perspective, she was personally committed to establishing her own power on a daily basis, and she seems to have been successful in earning the recognition that she wanted within the group. She and Cain were not particularly compelled to taking more action in concert with feminist groups, because they did not have a lot personally at stake. Her perception of the feminist movement was that it was often "whiney" rather than active, and she was not interested in consciousness-raising groups that worked to identify patriarchal social structures. Her support of feminist goals was "limited" to the project of ensuring political and professional equality, admittedly a major project in itself, and this was the goal which directly correlated with her experiences in Videofreex. Personally, she was in a committed relationship with a man, one in which she did not identify any oppression, and no one in her immediate environment was strongly feminist or, in her perception, particularly oppressed. Thus, there was not a lot to motivate her or Cain to join a feminist movement whose public demonstrations focused on critique. Additionally, Vontobel perceived the feminist movement as having restrictions against certain social conventions she enjoyed, such as marriage and cosmetics.⁹¹ It seems noteworthy,

⁹⁰ Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005. COINTELPRO was an acronym for the Counter Intelligence Program operated by the FBI from 1956-71 which worked to disrupt first the American Communist Party and then the Ku Klux Klan, Black Panther Party, American Indian Movement, and several leftist organizations throughout the 1960s. It was exposed when the Citizen's Commission to Investigate the FBI broke into their offices and leaked information to news agencies, leading to investigations by the Church Committee who criticized the program for preventing the exercise of the First Amendment. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COINTELPRO>, s.v. "COINTELPRO," internet, accessed 28 June 2005.

⁹¹ Vontobel recalled a screening of Lanesville TV at a women's video festival in which the audience booed when she and Cain showed a tape of a young bride leaving her home and getting married. To Vontobel, it

however, that the two women who were not in monogamous relationships within the group, Ratcliff and Wyatt, who had come to the group as girlfriends of male members, but whose relationships ended or were more fluid, eventually left.⁹² Ratcliff identifies one of the reasons she left the collective as a lack of support within a largely male group, and Wyatt, who left a strong record of the gender politics within the video community in her cartoon, was asked to leave for not contributing as a video-maker. Of course personal relationships entered into the members' satisfaction within the group, and gender relations affected that. As happens so often, those relations go unspoken, and perhaps it wasn't the dominant theme in the work, but it did affect history.

Since Videofreex tended to collectively identify their tapes, it is hard to identify who actually made them. Attributions tend to be dependent on the members' recollections. Additionally, there are very few tapes by the Videofreex that are still available in current formats. For the purposes of this study, I examined *May Day Realtime*, a tape made in 1971 about demonstrations that occurred over that holiday weekend. Videofreex members formed the May Day Video Collective in order to film the anti-war demonstrations planned for May 1, 1971 in Washington D.C.⁹³ Teasdale only speaks about himself, Kennedy, Gigliotti, and Cort, particularly focusing on his and Kennedy's attempts to broadcast the tapes made that weekend to the protestors themselves using a makeshift live feed developed by Kennedy. The tapes were later edited as the Videofreex were preparing to leave New York city for upstate Lanesville. A

seemed the female audience was booing the bride for entering into marriage, and Vontobel did not identify with what she called their angry reaction. Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005.

⁹² Ratcliff and Wyatt both lived on a floor that was occupied by single people, including Cort and Gigliotti, while Vontobel and Teasdale, and Cain and Friedman lived on the "couples" floor. Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 53.

⁹³ Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 30-32. Why this offshoot was formed separately from Videofreex, I have been unable to determine.

ten minute excerpt of *May Day Realtime*, credited to David Cort and Curtis Ratcliffe (sic) is available on Video Data Bank's *Surveying the First Decade* anthology.⁹⁴ Although Ratcliff is credited, she does not appear on camera, nor can her voice be heard on the tape. At one point, a man standing next to the camera gives the camera person direction, referring to the operator as "David" and telling him to shoot down the street. Ratcliff recalls mostly working behind the camera as the photographer on this shoot, but it is inconclusive whether she shot any of the footage included in the excerpt.⁹⁵

The *Mayday Realtime* excerpt is unnarrated and contains shots of demonstrators laying down in front of cars on the streets of Washington D.C., a short interview of bystanders watching and criticizing the protestors, demonstrators dispersing after being exposed to tear gas, and military helicopters landing in a field, presumably bringing National Guard troops. The camera is shaky, but certainly the shots are legible and in several places demonstrators or authorities directly address the camera. During the interview, a male voice (most likely Cort's) asks questions, directly challenging the onlookers who criticize the protestors. The onlookers, a small group of men of varying ages and of varying ethnicities, look warily toward the camera or defiantly ignore it. Only one man speaks to the interviewer, taking it upon himself to speak for the group (fig. 67). He carries on an exchange with the interviewer, criticizing the disorderly conduct of the demonstrators. He is asked, "What do you think about stopping the war?" and responds that he supports an end to the war, but believes it will come about through government

⁹⁴ Viewed at University of Colorado, Norlin Library.

⁹⁵ Although Ratcliff does not remember whether she shot any of this footage, she does remember that she was there, and would have had input on what events to shoot throughout the trip to Washington, D.C. One shot she vividly remembers shooting herself, that was not included in this excerpt, was of children playing on a playground, which she saw in marked contrast to the tension of the demonstrations throughout the city. Ratcliff, telephone interview with the author, 25 March 2005.

policy. The interviewer addresses the entire group and pans back and forth across the crowd, “Do you support the president’s action and the president’s position in the war?” No one answers. Rather the men look at one another and smile or pointedly turn away from the camera (fig. 68). The interviewer continues, “Guess you all do.” The talkative man again speaks up, “You know what they say about silence, don’t you? It speaks consent.” Unwittingly or not, the speaker paraphrases Antonio Gramsci’s critical theory on hegemony and the culture of consent.⁹⁶ The interviewer agrees with an “mmm hmm” and continues, “What do you guys do?” The speaker answers, “Just hard working stiff, that’s all. We don’t have time to demonstrate. We’re too busy trying to pay bills.” The interviewer concludes before cutting, “Mmm hmm. That’s what they’ve got you doing.” The inclusion of the interviewer’s own point of view, and his open refusal of anything resembling a distanced perspective, was in conscious opposition to mainstream standards of objective reporting. Vontobel commented on this as something the Videofreex members all shared, a desire to make the perspectives of the media makers apparent rather than cloaking their documentaries in an illusion of objectivity. This put the group in conflict with some contemporary documentary practitioners.⁹⁷

Cain and Vontobel screened several videotapes at the Women’s Video Festivals in New York. A tape called *Lanesville TV/off-air Sept. 18, ’73*, credited to Cain/Vontobel

⁹⁶ Antonio Gramsci’s writings from the 1920s and 30s readdressed Marxism to counter notions of a passive mass by theorizing a cultural process of hegemony, where ideologies masquerade as “commonsense” and are negotiated by various classes as strategies of power. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers and London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). Gramsci’s ideas were particularly influential in the late 1960s and early 1970s among critics like Louis Althusser, Noam Chomsky, and Edward Said. I am indebted to Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) for my introduction to Gramsci.

⁹⁷ This was the source of disagreements between members of Videofreex and a German film crew who came to Lanesville in November, 1971 to film a documentary about the collective. Videofreex members repeatedly talked to the crew while they were being filmed, despite directions not to do so. For the collective, torturing the film crew became a playful and unifying preoccupation throughout the project. Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005; Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 44-45.

was screened at the 1976 festival.⁹⁸ Two separate entries are listed in the program for the 1975 Women's Video Festival. *Harriet*, a tape from 1973 credited to Nancy Cain was screened on Thursday evenings, and *Portapak Conversation*, also from 1973 and credited to Carol Vontobel was screened on Fridays.⁹⁹ Although these tapes were credited to Cain and Vontobel individually, it was the more usual practice, according to recent interviews, for tapes to be credited generally to the Videofreex. Neither artist can recall exactly why the decision was made to credit them individually, but both presume that they thought at the time it was a requirement to submit tapes to a Women's Video Festival that tapes be produced by women.¹⁰⁰ "Videofreex" appeared after the title for Lanesville TV, but Cain's name is listed first. In fact, it seems not to have been a requirement that all tapes be produced only by women, since there were several entries credited to the Vasulkas. Vontobel's entry into the 1973 Women's Video Festival was *Conversations with a Portapak*, which the artist has recently identified as a collaboration with David Cort.¹⁰¹ The tape, which was a conversation between two cameras, a studio camera and a Portapak, was planned and directed by Cort, but Vontobel played a large role performing in it. Cort's and Vontobel's heads were superimposed on top of the two cameras, anthropomorphizing the equipment. This type of manipulation or camera "trick" was typical of Cort, who learned to use keying equipment in order to create fantastic scenarios, rather than straight documentaries. Although Cort would have exploited the video tools which were relatively easy to use, this is not unlike the kind of matte

⁹⁸ Poster for Second Annual Women's Video Festival, September 28-October 14, 1976.

⁹⁹ *Portapak Conversation* was also screened at the 1976 festival, according to the festival brochure.

¹⁰⁰ Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005, Cain, via email, 24 January 2005.

¹⁰¹ This tape was not viewed by the author. Although it may be among the tapes in the personal archives of Skip Blumberg or other Videofreex members, it was not accessible during this study.

processing effects used in cinema during its formative years.¹⁰² Vontobel has indicated that the conversation between film and video cameras, which would have celebrated the smaller camera's portability and accessibility, was typical of conversations she had with Cort on a daily basis about the nature of the medium. Such accounts demonstrate her active involvement in the theorization and implementation of the medium.¹⁰³

Harriet (1973) is a tape that combined inventive drama with documentary. Cain taped her neighbor in Lanesville, Harriet Benjamin, who lived in a trailer with her husband and five children. In the tape, Cain recorded a view of Harriet's daily life which included sending children off to school, cleaning the tiny home, doing laundry, and caring for a toddler (fig. 69). She fixed the mid-day meal for her husband, Bobby and another man, then fixed two separate suppers for the children and her husband at night.¹⁰⁴ Scenes of Harriet's domestic chores were intercut with a fantasy narrative of Harriet throwing a suitcase into her car, exuberantly yelling "Goodbye, Lanesville!" and speeding off down the road, running gleefully away from home (fig. 70). The longest scene of this getaway is at the end of the twelve-minute tape, and during this sequence there are two instances where Harriet looks into the camera and acknowledges Cain's presence and direction (fig. 71). Harriet's performance is playful and certainly amateurish, but she takes obvious delight in singing loudly as she speeds down the mountain road leading out of Lanesville. She turns toward the camera and laughs maniacally as she grips the steering wheel in her energetic hands. This image of

¹⁰² In matte shots, two strips of film are combined during printing. This effect process was used widely for special effects to superimpose objects against a background, to simulate flight, and to combine live-action with animation. The effect was used notoriously by early French filmmaker Georges Méliès in *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 24-25.

¹⁰³ Vontobel, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2005.

¹⁰⁴ The other man is most likely Harriet's father-in-law, Willie. Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 133.

liberation and laughter is in striking contrast to the woman who earlier yelled at her teenage children to stop fighting or who swept through the trailer from task to task. The camera shoots out the front window as the road stretches out before the car, pulling the viewer ever further out of Lanesville. Throughout the tape, there are several references to media, as Cain trains the camera on the television, which seems to be playing in the background throughout the tape. In another section, Harriet sits and reads the headlines from that day's newspaper. This makes viewers conscious that they are also watching and taking part in a media product, but one that is proposed as an alternative to the one-way broadcast media. Since *Harriet* was broadcast several times on Lanesville TV, this subject matter was of pointedly local interest, even as it responded to national feminist agendas. Lanesville was a small town and Harriet and her family were well-known. Viewers who tuned in to the weekly pirate broadcast would have seen their neighbor simultaneously revealing the tedium, frustration and joys of her everyday life and playacting a dramatic escape on the screen. Harriet herself was particularly close to Cain since both women were something of outsiders in the Lanesville community. Harriet had married into the Benjamin family, who had long-established roots in Lanesville and this marginalized her status. Cain and the other Videofreex members cultivated an image as simultaneously part of the community (through establishing community media) and as outside visitors who remained tied to the New York art community¹⁰⁵ Harriet's fantasy escape from the town mirrored Cain's own resistance to what the videomaker perceived as a static, rural community stuck in stereotypical social structures.

Although Cain was working in the comparatively secluded location of Lanesville and the rather insular medium of video, *Harriet* has strong ties with other feminist

¹⁰⁵ Teasdale, *Videofreex*, 179.

artworks of the 1970s that focused on documenting women's labor. It shares affinities with Mary Kelly's project, *Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labor in Industry* (1975), for instance, in that it takes a blue-collar woman as a subject and lays bare the enormous burden of domestic labor. In the end, however, in Cain's project Harriet experiences a release, if only in fantasy form. And her humorous performance gave her a brief escape from the daily tasks, an escape that extended into small tours when she accompanied Cain to screenings at festivals.

Another tape credited solely to Cain which has been preserved is *Sharon*. *Sharon* was called a "video portrait" by Cain, a portrait that consisted of a 37 minute interview with Sharon Briggs, a resident of Jamestown, New York in 1977.¹⁰⁶ Most of the tape is taken up by Sharon's tale of her adult life, a candid narrative about marrying at age 19, living through domestic abuse, poverty, sexual harassment, and the forced removal of her children. The interview takes place in Sharon's home with her either seated on her living room couch or watering plants in front of a large window (fig. 72). Her small daughter can be heard playing and talking in the background throughout the interview. In a few instances, Cain's voice can be heard asking a question or responding to something that Sharon says, but the majority of the tape is simply Sharon's storytelling. The style is typical of video collectives in that the operator's presence is apparent and there is no attempt to mask the technical apparatus. At the same time, the apparatus itself is relatively simple, and the camera is left on for long shots. The cheapness of videotape is part of what allows Sharon to narrate her own story without a lot of interference from the

¹⁰⁶ *Sharon* was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art, New York and New York Public Library. It is currently available for viewing at the Donnell Media Center. A copy was made available to me by the artist.

interviewer. This approach was also utilized by the Women's Video Collective, as discussed below.

Cain continued to work with Videofreex/Media Bus after they moved from Lanesville to Woodstock in 1977, although the group essentially disbanded shortly thereafter. In Woodstock, she ran a production and editing facility and programmed the local cable channel. She moved to Venice Beach, California in 1984 where she worked in television and, later, writing. While she was working in Woodstock, one of the shows that Cain produced was "Night Owl Show" which was described by Dee Dee Halleck in 1983 as often dealing with issues specific to women's experience as well as providing programs by women. Consistent with the way Cain often worked, "Night Owl Show" was not intentionally targeting a female audience, but according to Halleck it included this type of programming much more often than the networks did. "Selections from a recent program include a docu-drama exploring the Cinderella myth that was staged in the ladies' room of a local restaurant; performing artist Linda Montano, dressed as a nun, giving instructions of teeth brushing; and biker/feminist/poet Teresa Costa belting out her punk poetry to the accompaniment of shattering glass."¹⁰⁷ From 1992-94, she co-produced CamNet, "the Camcorder Network" with Judith Binder, an outlet that broadcast videos shot by international videographers twenty-four hours a day on eight cable channels throughout the United States. This project recalled the "guerrilla" style video and the goals for an alternative media that had begun with her work in Videofreex. Since then, Cain has mostly actively been involved as a writer, of both fiction and non-fiction.

Women's Video News Service

¹⁰⁷ DeeDee Halleck, "Ladies Home Channels," *Heresies* 4 no. 4 i16 (1983): 28-29.

There were several other video collectives whose work has been preserved either in videotape or at least on paper. In California, the two most well-known were Ant Farm and Optic Nerve. In upstate New York, Amazing Grace Media was based in Bearsville and April Video Collective was based in Downsville. These all had memberships that were mixed-gender. From 1972-1975, Shamberg's TVTV brought together many of these videographers and some who were unaffiliated to work on documentaries such as *Gerald Ford's America* and *Four More Years*. Some of the women in TVTV were drawn from separate women-only groups. Wendy Apple was one of the videographers who worked with TVTV, Amazing Grace Media, and Women's Video News Service.¹⁰⁸ Apple's ground-breaking work building alternative professional structures for women in television production and her relationship with other women using video for consciousness-raising, warrants in-depth examination here.

Wendy Apple attended NYU Film School through the early 1970s. Her interest in film and video had its foundation in childhood, when she wholeheartedly embraced television. "That tube produced a glow and a pulse from which I warmed, desensitized, and educated myself....It gave me a universal language: everyone could talk about Lucy, Sid, Roy, and Uncle Milty."¹⁰⁹ As she was growing up in the wealthy, suburban environment of Great Neck, New York, the television in many ways substituted for the attention and warmth that Apple missed from her parents. Despite its reassuring familiarity, Apple later grew to critique television as a "one-way communications system controlled by 'media professionals,' unions, and businesspeople who have a vested

¹⁰⁸ Apple's name is often spelled Appel in early documents. She has spelled her name both ways, and currently prefers Apple. Following her preference, I use this spelling throughout this dissertation, unless quoting directly from those early documents. Apple, interview with the author, 12 April, 2005.

¹⁰⁹ Wendy Appel, "How to Use Video for Art, Politics, and Sex," *Ms.* (April, 1975) 103.

interest in preserving old myths.”¹¹⁰ Similar to what Shenberg expressed in *Guerrilla Television*, Apple believed that democratizing the media would be a way to present alternative viewpoints or provide more creative, imaginative programming. She decided there were three kinds of people in the world: “those who watched television, those who were on television, and those who made television. It was the people who made television who had all the power.”¹¹¹ Apple was interested in creating mass communication, and unlike most other students in the film program at NYU, she was less interested in becoming an auteur film director than she was in the mass medium of television.

While at NYU, she was one of only three women in the program, out of a total of 40-50 students.¹¹² It was clear through her professional training that opportunities for women in film were limited and role models for women directors were nearly nonexistent. Because of this, Apple joined the Women’s Video News Service, a collective whose membership included Rita Ogden, Mary Feldbauer, Susan Kleckner, Carolyn Kreski, and Pat de Pew.¹¹³ Women’s Video News Service was an outlet for women video producers. Influenced by New Journalism, Apple’s involvement in video came out of her critique that broadcast journalism dispensed information from an authoritative, powerful, one-way narrative from the networks. Until portable video, it was nearly impossible for alternative points of view to be broadcast. “There was no counter-narrative on television. There was always the voice of God-narrator, or an anchor, to make news serious. Obviously a lot of other stories, women’s stories, subjective stories,

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Apple, telephone interview by the author, 24 March 2003.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Furlong, “From Object to Subject: Documents and Documentaries from the Women’s Movement” np. Apple also cited Suzanne Tedesko and Jodie Sibert as members. Apple, telephone interview by the author, 12 April 2005.

diaries, personal histories, other political points of view, art, were not on television.”¹¹⁴

Portable video allowed people who had been marginalized in film to have a strong presence in the medium and develop alternative points of view.¹¹⁵

A comparison of two photographs of Apple demonstrates the different relationship apparent between women and the two media. In figure 73, most likely shot while Apple was in film school, we see the artist behind an Arriflex 16mm camera, clearly engaged and proficient with her tools. She poses as if in action, looking through the camera which is positioned high enough on its tripod that Apple appears to stretch to look through the viewfinder. This young, slender woman has positioned herself in an active stance as artistic subject, not the object of the camera’s gaze. However, in comparison to a later photograph of Apple with Rita Ogden in 1972 (fig. 74), the woman in the first photograph appears small and overwhelmed by her camera. In the first photograph, it is as if Apple has incongruously injected herself into the role of auteur, a domain typically reserved for male directors. In the second photograph, Apple holds the much lighter Sony AV-3400 easily in one hand, adjusting the focus with the other, and she does not have to stretch to control the equipment. Apple herself looks more mature and comfortable in her stance and expression. There is a sense of camaraderie and intimacy with Ogden looking back at Apple nearby. On the right, another woman (probably Suzanne Tedesko, see below) holds a microphone toward an unseen speaker,

¹¹⁴ Apple, telephone interview by the author, 12 April 2005.

¹¹⁵ The inclusion of women in university film departments remains a problem. As only one of many possible examples, Melinda Barlow cites statistics from the University of Colorado Film Studies program, where only one to two female students out of a total of fifteen are enrolled each semester in senior film seminars. That number has worsened since 1996, perhaps indicating a general decline in enrollment in the program by women. Perhaps more worrisome, Barlow’s female students report feelings of alienation and inferiority amongst their male peers. “...filmmaking seems to be an exclusively male domain; the male students are proprietary if not on occasion ‘superior’ about their knowledge about and ease with the equipment...” Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972-1980," 26.

but the general point is that Apple appears completely at ease and in control, a far cry from the young girl who could barely reach the film camera perched high on its tripod.

Women's Video News Service produced a documentary called *Another Look: The Democratic Convention* in 1972.¹¹⁶ Shot at the Democratic Convention in Miami in 1972, the tape documented the convention from a perspective that would be self-consciously juxtaposed with coverage by network news agencies.¹¹⁷ It was screened at the Women's Video Festivals in New York in 1972 and 1973. This was reviewed at some length by Maryse Holder in the article cited in chapter one. From Holder's description, it is clear that *Another Look* pointedly asserted an alternative gaze at the political process, one that focused more than conventional media on women participants in politics, including Shirley Chisholm, who was running for Vice-President, and Feminist Party founder, Flo Kennedy. According to one member's recollections, it was Flo Kennedy who in fact invited the group.¹¹⁸ Other subjects included women from diverse backgrounds who attended the convention. As Holder said, "We are restored to our female history, our endlessly interesting fellow women." Women's Video News Service did not simply document the famous candidates, but rather focused more on the audience members and themselves as renegade journalists. The women incorporated their own bodies and voices in the tape to announce their presence and to make the video apparatus apparent within their documentary. What could be seen of the video makers also provided a counter-narrative to stereotypical representations of women in the media. At a time when women

¹¹⁶ Apple has not been able to recall the titles of any other tapes made by Women's Video News Service.

¹¹⁷ Apple has not been able to locate a copy of *Another Look* in her own archives. It was screened at the Whitney Museum of American Art as a part of the exhibition *Documents and Documentaries from the Women's Movement* January 7-26, 1992, curated by Lucinda Furlong, but Furlong and staff at the Whitney Museum have been unable to locate loan records for the exhibition. Descriptions are based on my interview with Apple, 12 April 2005.

¹¹⁸ Rita Ogdan, telephone interview by the author, 8 June 2005.

anchors were extremely rare, these video makers were outspoken, sexually emancipated, and intelligent. Holder commented that they became “rock stars” whose own personalities were injected into the tapes. “The women doing the taping included themselves as characters and the image they projected was that of tough-talking, rock-star-like women, who alluded to ‘star-fucking’ (taping luminaries) and whose collective editing was a sexy jam session. It was nice to see women glamorizing themselves and giving off sexual vibes to each other.”¹¹⁹

Jodie Sibert, who worked intermittently with Raindance, Women’s Video News Service, TVTV and Amazing Grace Media, recalled that as women behind the camera, she and her peers had an enhanced ability to disarm their interviewees because they did not seem to pose a threat to their subjects. The videographers were all young women with long hair and untraditional clothing and they were not completely taken seriously by their subjects. This worked in their favor since the interviewees let down their guard and were more revealing than they would have been for a network anchor.¹²⁰ The video medium was also fundamental to Sibert’s own self-awareness and her feminist consciousness. It was through the video camera that she began recording herself, and studying her public persona as it appeared on the video screen. Sibert had been socialized as what she called a typical “fifties woman” following standards of dress and manners that were coded as highly feminine. Having grown up in Cuba (her father was a U.S. executive for a film studio), she recalled “We showed up at the revolution with our pumps and gloves.” When she began recording her own image during private interactions with the camera, she saw herself as “painfully artificial.” This was an incredibly profound and traumatic

¹¹⁹ Maryse Holder, “Women’s Video Festival” *Off Our Backs* (October 1972): 18.

¹²⁰ Sibert’s recollections were shared with Wendy Apple who, in turn, related them to me in a telephone interview on 20 April 2005.

realization. She began crying and stroking the monitor as if to stroke herself and reclaim herself, in order to reclaim her “essential being” from that artificial construct and to dismantle it, using a medium that had once served to reinforce that artificial image. The real time feedback was a very important part of this process. Private interactions with the video medium like this were common, but not often publicly exhibited. Sibert and Megan Williams, also of Raindance collective and later TVTV, submitted a tape called *I am a Woman* to the 1972 Women’s Video Festival. Sibert also recalled a tape called *Little Red Riding Hood* that considered the story as an example of mythology from a modern perspective.

Though the members of Women’s Video News Service enjoyed a heightened sense of power as documentary producers through *Another Look*, this project did not necessarily lead to more that were specifically feminist in subject matter. Generally, the group continued making politically-motivated videotapes, though not oriented around gender-specific issues. Rita Ogden (b. 1944) participated in Women’s Video News Service and helped film *Another Look*. Afterwards, while Apple and Tedesko edited the tapes, Ogden and Mary Feldbauer were funded by a democratic group to accompany the Motorvoter drives, an effort that was organized to generate and capture the youth vote. According to Ogden’s recollections, the idea was to interview youth across the country about the issues that concerned them and then show the tapes to the youth as a demonstration that they were able to take over the media and have their voices heard. In reality, without distribution these were probably of limited value, although Ogden and Feldbauer tried to make their tapes of Green County Alabama, where the youth vote enabled one of the first black leaders to be elected, into a documentary that would

demonstrate to others that their vote did make a difference. Ogden's experience was at turns exhilarating and harrowing, as when they were marching in a parade in Atlanta when one youth saw their camera and set himself on fire in front of them in protest of the war in Vietnam.¹²¹

Amazing Grace Media

Several of the women who formed Women's Video News Service were also involved in a collective based in Bearsville, New York called Amazing Grace Media. Although this was a mixed-gender group, the women artists had an extremely strong presence and in fact they were sometimes perceived as still being an all-female collective.¹²² Amazing Grace Media was a group who lived and worked together in Bearsville, New York from 1971 to 1973.¹²³ Members lived in a house owned by video artist Ann Arlen, who, after her divorce from television critic Michael Arlen in 1971 and her attendance at a video conference at Rutgers, wanted to turn the house in Bearsville into a "video house."¹²⁴ Woodstock was still very much in people's memories, and Bearsville was not very far from New York City, so many participants saw having this video facility in a small upstate town as advantageous, a place where one could go to work outside of the city and outside of traditional models for communications media, but close enough to the city to facilitate working paying jobs there. It is difficult to

¹²¹ Rita Ogden, telephone interview by the author, 8 June 2005.

¹²² Recently Wendy Apple spoke with Nancy Cain and asked Cain what she had thought of Amazing Grace Media and Cain replied that she thought it was a "women's video collective with a lot of men hanging around." Apple, telephone interview by the author, 20 April 05.

¹²³ A small group of core members met in California in April, 2005 to reconstruct the facts of Amazing Grace Media's formation. This group included John Keeler, Jodie Sibert, and Wendy Apple. They recalled that the group formed either at the end of 1971 or early 1972 and was over by the end of 1973 or early 1974. Lynda Rodolitz, a more peripheral member, recalled separately that the group established its name, Amazing Grace Media, during the summer, 1972, as recounted below.

¹²⁴ Suzanne Tedesko, interview by the author, 22 June 2005, tape recording. Ann Arlen's videotape *Ex-Attica Conversations* was screened at the first Women's Video Festival (1972).

reconstruct the membership of Amazing Grace. Individual videographers came and went at the house, and sometimes members from Videofreex in Lanesville, or April Video Collective in Downsville stayed or collaborated on projects. Recently, a small group of former members organized by Wendy Apple sat down in California and tried to recall the names of all of the members. According to them, the central core of the membership consisted of John Keeler, Paula Frankel, Ann Arlen, Jodie Sibert, Elon Soltes, Richard Schroeder and Wendy Apple.¹²⁵ These were the members who lived at the house over a longer period of time. Arlen organized the house so that a person could either purchase a share, meaning they had their own room, or they could buy a half-share, which meant they did not live there regularly, but could store their possessions and be assured of an extra couch or bed somewhere in the house on which to sleep.¹²⁶ Some of these half-share or periphery members included Dean and Dudley Everson, Susan Kleckner, Rita Ogden, Pat Depew, Donald Blank, Suzanne Tedesko and Michael Arlen.¹²⁷ Most of the members were practicing video artists before they arrived in Bearsville, and they continued to

¹²⁵ Apple, telephone interview by the author, 12 April 2005.

¹²⁶ Suzanne Tedesko, interview by the author, 22 June 2005, tape recording.

¹²⁷ According to Tedesko, Dean and Dudley Everson started the group called April Video Cooperative in Downsville. Elon Soltes was also a member of April Video Collective, according to records on the Experimental Video Center website and in issues of *Dumping Place*, the journal published by April Video Cooperative. Maxi Cohen spent some time with the group in Downsville, but returned to New York City in 1972 to run the Video Access Center. Cohen, like other members of April Video Cooperative, was independently making video documentaries. Between 1971 and 1972, she made a series of tapes about issues relevant to her childhood hometown of Cape May, New Jersey. During this time, she also began a successful community television project for Cape May residents who had no local voice on broadcast media. Residents, who were largely African-American, made a tape revealing and criticizing living conditions at area housing projects. According to Cohen, this was one action that led citizens of Cape May to eventually elect the first democratic mayor in one hundred years, demonstrating the concrete effects that access to media could produce. This community project was one of several projects included on the tape *Cape May Composite* (1972), which was screened at the first Women's Video Festival at the Kitchen in 1972. Cohen's community video projects led to her work as the only paid staff member for the Video Access Center, a community access project run under the aegis of George Stoney's Alternate Media Center in Manhattan. The Cape May tapes have not been preserved in museum collections or video libraries, so it is my intention to view those that remain in Cohen's archives and publish more information about her work with the Video Access Center in an expanded version of this study at a later date. Public access centers are an important topic related to the collectives, but in the interest of space, are not discussed here. Maxi Cohen, telephone interview with the author, 13 July 2005, tape recording.

make individual tapes while they lived at the house. Festival programs list tapes by members of this collective, such as Ann Arlen's *Ex-Attica* in the Women's Video Festival, but one tends not to find references to *Amazing Grace* on those programs.

In addition to her work with collectives, Apple did produce fictional videotapes as well as documentaries, and this demonstrates once again that videographers traversed between genres and did not limit themselves to only one use of video. Apple screened a tape called *Mary* (1973) at the 1976 Women's Video Festival, a tape which combined melodrama and satire with non-linear narrative and stylized characters acting out erratic behaviors. The editing and story were rather sophisticated compared to many other videotapes of the period, which points both to Apple's training in film school and the fact that she produced this work under the auspices of a CAPS (Creative Artists Public Service) grant, the New York State Council on the Art's granting program for individual artists. The tape begins with Mary, a woman in her mid-late 30s, dancing to a recording of *South Pacific's* "I'm gonna wash that man right outta my hair...", a lighthearted anthem which likely resonated for audiences who viewed it at the Women's Video Festival. Mary affectionately caresses a doll, speaking to it in a saccharine-sweet voice, a caricature of a mother saying good-bye to her baby. Throughout the twelve-minute tape, Mary periodically returns to the doll, maniacally dancing with it, chastising it, and kissing it (fig. 75). These shots are interspersed with others of her moving slowly through the halls of the apartment, filmed from behind through a fish-eye lens so that the interior appears warped and curving at the edges, giving a suspenseful effect like that of a thriller movie. Two other characters move through the apartment, a heavysset man in his briefs and a hat, and another woman, who often appears nude accompanied by a voice-over

commenting on her sexuality. All three characters at times appear in masks and move throughout the apartment as human/animal hybrids. The relationships are creepy, sometimes erotic, and often ritualistic. In several scenes, the man carries around a second doll, interacting with it in ways that are at times menacing and verging on the sadistic. In other scenes, figures dressed in animal masks are revealed engaging in mock sexual intercourse behind closet doors (fig. 76). The piece is filled with a kind of black humor and its irreverence is refreshing. Apple shuns traditional adult/child relationships and injects the safety of the domestic sphere with dark overtones. Although her tape was apparently not reviewed by critics, Apple's biography in the 1976 WVF program states that she was interested in combining "elements of fantasy and reality on videotape." *Mary* was also described as a "strangely humorous video comic strip."¹²⁸

Apple recalls that she got involved in video collectives first by acting in a fictional film about one. Joanna and Jack Milton, who started in filmmaking and remained interested in video throughout the 1970s, titled their first full-length film *Please Stand By* (fig.77). Wendy Apple and David Peel appeared as the protagonists who, along with a group of friends, hijack a broadcast news truck and begin a pirate television group who interrupt the signal of mainstream programming with short, humorous commercials that make a social critique.¹²⁹ Members of the group eventually are arrested and the group disbands under the weight of their own internal bickering. Although the film is fictional, it was described by the Miltons and by Apple as mirroring actual events, and it bears a striking resemblance to descriptions of daily interactions by members of Videofreex.

Apple appeared in this film in 1971 while on a break from film school, and after

¹²⁸ Women's Video Festival catalog, 1976, unpaginated.

¹²⁹ *Please Stand By* was made available to the author by Wendy Apple. It is also described in a review by Geraldine Fabrikant, "Hijacking the Video Van" *The Village Voice* (December 21, 1972) n.p.

appearing in the film she became interested in joining collectives like Amazing Grace. The film adopted the conventions of a documentary, and since Apple was the only one with any acting experience, the dialogue often sounded slightly forced, as if this crew was being followed by cameras capturing the daily debates as the group struggled to maintain its solidarity.

The challenge of living communally, in addition to ideological debates about the direction of the groups, often placed a strain on video collectives like the one at Bearsville. Similar to other collectives during the time, the group tried to share some domestic duties, including a garden, but Apple's time was divided between the work in Bearsville and her day jobs working in the film and television industries in New York City, which sometimes caused her to participate less in the communal atmosphere.¹³⁰ The Amazing Grace group solved some of the issues of sharing duties by hiring a maid, Ginny Newsome.¹³¹ To work collectively for this group meant that they shared their equipment, they assisted one another on projects, and they lived cheaply by sharing the cost of living. Apple moved away from Amazing Grace Media when she joined Michael Shamberg's group TVTV and moved out to California at the end of 1973 or early 1974.

Lynda Rodolitz was also briefly involved with Amazing Grace Media in 1972. She was invited to join the Women's Video News Service filming *Another Look* in Miami during that summer, but set out on her own trip across the country instead with another set of friends.¹³² Her intention had been to go across the country and record truck

¹³⁰ Apple, interview by the author, 12 April 2005.

¹³¹ The irony of a collective hiring a maid was not lost on Wendy Apple during our interview. As Apple recounted, Newsome was the only one to go on working actively toward social revolution after Amazing Grace disbanded by traveling to Nicaragua and fighting with the Sandinistas. Apple, telephone interview, 12 April 2005.

¹³² Lynda Rodolitz, interview by the author, 25 June 2003, Santa Fe, New Mexico, tape recording.

stops, focused on Americana. Her group got into an accident about 150 miles outside of New York in Millville, Pennsylvania. After a harrowing week of living out of their broken car inside of a junkyard, Rodolitz was “rescued” by friends and returned to New York, but not before making a tape called *Millville Bi-Centennial Parade* which was screened that Fall at the 1972 Women’s Video Festival. After returning to New York, Rodolitz was contacted by Pat Depew who was living with the group at the house in Bearsville, and she invited Rodolitz to come to Bearsville and edit her tapes. While Rodolitz was there, another group was editing a film of a folk music festival that contained footage of a musician singing “Amazing Grace.” Rodolitz’ tape of the Millville Bi-Centennial parade also featured bagpipers playing the same song. A third videographer had another tape with someone singing “Amazing Grace.” This was the group that renamed themselves Amazing Grace Media.¹³³

Rodolitz’ engagement with video was simultaneous with her politicization and growing feminist consciousness. Prior to 1969, Rodolitz had been a biology teacher in New York City. The Oceanhill-Brownsville school strikes of 1968 politicized her, when she worked closely with parents and students to keep her school open while some teachers walked off the job.¹³⁴ Rodolitz saw the community-based initiatives to provide structure and security for the students simultaneous with new approaches to curriculum that would inspire and be relevant for them, as a grassroots educational effort. When the strike ended and the school system went back to its rigid and formal structures that divided faculty, administrators and students, Rodolitz became frustrated and alienated and left teaching altogether. She reassessed her career and explored alternative

¹³³ Pat DePew and Susan Kluckner were among the members, according to Rodolitz.

¹³⁴ Rodolitz, interview by the author, 25 June 2003.

possibilities. She had been interested in film and had worked with a filmmaker named Pablo Ferro in 1969 who had also experimented with videotape. She worked as a “Gal Friday,” running errands, but she was struck by the experience of working with an artist. In 1970, her parents died and left her a small inheritance. This allowed Rodolitz to spend time considering career options without working, and she purchased a Portapak. As Rodolitz recounted, she purchased the equipment from “Lui,” the Canal Street vendor who sold Portapaks to most of the artists in New York at that time.¹³⁵ This put her in the center of the video scene. “If you go to Lui’s, you’re in the community.”¹³⁶

During this time, Rodolitz was also involved in a women’s consciousness raising group where she was exposed to attitudes that stressed the freedom for women to do anything they could imagine rather than following conventional roles. She saw that portable video, in contrast with film, did not require large amounts of money because it was non-commercial and it welcomed women because, as Rodolitz said, it welcomed everyone.¹³⁷ Video was being celebrated because of its accessibility, and with a generation of women artists who also felt entitled to everything, there were no barriers to their access to video.¹³⁸ Learning video involved taking the portapak out and trying things with it. Colleagues would exchange information about discoveries they had made in a spirit of free exchange, which was different from the often guarded attitudes of filmmakers. The experience and action of making tapes was of much more interest to

¹³⁵ Also known as “CTLui,” Chi Tien Lui still runs CTL Electronics. CTL Electronics also published a manual called *Video Tools*, edited by Cy Griffin, the video artist who was briefly married to Curtis Ratcliff. Davidson Gigliotti, “Early Video Books” *The Early Video Project* 2000 available at <http://208.55.137.252/index.html>, Internet, accessed: 28 June 2005. My thanks to Nancy Cain and Wendy Apple who pointed this citation out to me.

¹³⁶ Rodolitz, interview by the author, 25 June 2003.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ According to Rodolitz’ recollections, when video began being exhibited more in galleries, the community grew more competitive.

Rodolitz than theoretical concerns about video as a medium. She compared her own practice and engagement with video with members of Raindance such as Paul Ryan, for instance, who she considered to have a “different energy,” one that was perhaps more competitive, more strident in its goals, and more focused on relating to McLuhan and Gregory Bateson’s media theories. “Just being in that scene was so much fun...It’s not like I had this ambition that I was going to connect to McLuhan and build a cybernetic...etc.” In a recent interview, she laughingly remembers the way Ryan was reading and writing about McLuhan and her desire to avoid the tedium of reading those long texts. The openness of living as an artist was much more attractive to Rodolitz than doing research.¹³⁹

In 1971, Rodolitz began working with Jim Pasternack. He was hired by Twyla Tharp to make a videotape about her company. When Pasternack was unable to attend the tapings with Rodolitz, Tharp asked Rodolitz to work on a regular basis as her company’s videographer.¹⁴⁰ This became Rodolitz’ main paying job for the next four years.

Rodolitz’ friendship with members of Amazing Grace Media led to her involvement with the Women’s Video Festival. When Susan Kluckner called Rodolitz to tell her that the women at Bearsville were all submitting tapes to the 1972 festival at the Kitchen, she encouraged Rodolitz to submit *Millville Bi-Centennial Parade*. Through this initiative, Rodolitz met Susan Milano who asked Rodolitz to be a juror for the second such festival in 1973. Her two-channel installation, *The Hundreds*, was included in the

¹³⁹ Rodolitz, telephone interview by the author, 23 June 2005.

¹⁴⁰ Four years later, Rodolitz was replaced by Joel Gold, who had a more established reputation and who could also work with film.

1975 Women's Video Festival.¹⁴¹ She also conducted periodic workshops in video, especially about taping dance.¹⁴²

Rodolitz was also represented in a two-page spread in *Video Art*, the book edited by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot from 1976, previously mentioned in Chapter 2. Rather than submitting an artist's statement, Rodolitz composed a photograph of herself playfully interacting with video equipment, reclining on a set of three television monitors which bear the message: "Compliments of a Friend" (fig. 78). Rodolitz surrounded herself with flowers and videotapes, wore a garland of stars and was framed by shining, lit candles. During the photo shoot, she trained a video camera on herself using a live feed, so her image was repeated in the central monitor screen. That image, subsequently, displays yet another image of her reclining figure, so that her body, and especially her enormous grin, get repeated endlessly through the center of the photograph. By rehearsing the centuries-old reclining female figure motif using the new mass medium of video, she appeared to recuperate television for a subversive environment that was in many ways gendered feminine. Rodolitz wears a long dress and what appear to be her tap shoes while the garland humorously elevates her status to that of a goddess. Her idea for this photograph was to mimic photographs from high school yearbooks, to commemorate a potent and exuberant time when there was a tremendous amount of activity and youthful experiment with this medium. Like everyone who was invited to submit material for this book, Rodolitz was sent a blank page and was free to do whatever she wanted to

¹⁴¹ *The Hundreds* was made in collaboration with Tharp's dance company. The dance consisted of 100 seven-second movements. In three separate sections, one dancer performs all one-hundred, two dancers perform fifty each, and then 100 volunteer dancers did one each. This footage was combined with documentary footage about its making. Most likely, the only copy still extant is in Rodolitz' collection, and as of this writing, it has not yet been unearthed. Email to the author, 28 June 2005.

¹⁴² Susan Milano organized several workshops, purposely aimed at working class and young women. Rodolitz, interview by the author, 25 June 2003. Rodolitz offered "Video for Choreographers and Dancers" in May of 1979. Flier in Rodolitz archives.

with that page. She saw the book as a kind of yearbook documenting everyone in the tightly-knit video community, a scrapbook preserving the memories of the participants.¹⁴³ During the photo-shoot, video cameras were trained on Rodolitz and transmitted her image in a live feed through the central monitor as described above. She could see herself in the monitors and later described this in terms of both performance in front of the camera and a kind of live feedback situation. Both of these modes of working, performance and feedback, were important to the formation of the theories of the medium, although Rodolitz is careful to emphasize her playful experimentation rather than being involved in formal theorizing during the 1970s. This reiterates the earlier point that she associated the theoretical aspects of video with Paul Ryan and other male artists' penchant for writing long texts relating video to the work of McLuhan and communications theory, while she was more interested in the freedom afforded to the artist working with video.

Although Rodolitz has described her involvement in the video scene of the 1970s as on the "periphery," her varied projects and fluid movement between groups was actually quite typical in the New York scene which was constantly in flux. Through the mid-70s, she continued to make tapes on her own, to work for Twyla Tharp, and she participated in filmmaker Shirley Clark's TP Videospace Troupe . Although none of her tapes are extant, her name appears on a few documents from the period, including programs and issues of *Radical Software* that chart her collaboration with people like Shirley Clarke and Videofreex' David Cort. Clarke, who had become widely known in experimental film communities for her cinema verité style in films such as *The Cool World* (1963), acquired a video camera in the late 1960s and used it through the mid '70s.

¹⁴³ Rodolitz, interview by the author, 25 June 2003.

She surrounded herself with friends while living at the Chelsea Hotel and filmed this entourage as they lived their daily lives and performed impromptu skits and acts in front of the camera. Clarke's project is often discussed in terms of video performance and her loosely-organized collective, known as either TP or TeePee Video Space Troupe was theatrical in concept. Although Clarke seems not to have been concerned with the electronic aspects of the medium, the video camera certainly provided her a flexibility and intimacy that was not typical in film at the time. The fact that her work crossed paths with many video practitioners who were strongly involved in articulating the properties of the medium, such as Nancy Cain and David Cort, in addition to Rodolitz, warrants at least passing interest. One of TP Videospace Troupe's projects, *Yesterday's Papers*, was presented at Anthology Film Archives on May 31 and June 1, 1975, the flier featuring a childhood photograph of Rodolitz with her mother (fig 79). Once again, Rodolitz documented a video action within the domestic realm of the maternal and the family album.

Rodolitz also worked with David Cort while he was at Maple Tree Farm on a project called *Videophones and Videomirrors* which combined performance and technique.¹⁴⁴ This involved a lot of blue screen effects combining parts of performers' bodies in humorous combinations. "I was tap dancing on everything, I tap danced on Skip [Blumberg's] teeth, I tap danced in a tree, I tap danced along a fence in Lanesville. It was just playing, on the most amateurish level, but at the time it was revolutionary. No one had access to the equipment [before this]." Eventually, when Rodolitz stopped working in video, she became an actress and some of her first theatrical performances were at the

¹⁴⁴ Pre-production outline from Rodolitz archives.

Women's Interart Center. Rodolitz currently works as a photographer and lives in New York City.

Women's Video Collective

In addition to the Women's Video News Service, there were several all-women's video groups that brought the medium into women's consciousness-raising groups. Several women who were associated with Wendy Apple and the Amazing Grace Collective in Bearsville were also members of these consciousness-raising groups, but there were at least two different consciousness-raising video groups that formed in New York City. Although neither has been documented extensively, there was one called Women's Video Collective that was probably formed, at least in part, by Lee Ferguson and that included Rita Ogden and Cabell Smith.¹⁴⁵ Another, separate group, which may also have gone by the name Women's Video Collective, had Suzanne Tedesko (b. 1945) as a member. As far as Tedesko can remember, her group was short-lived, but perhaps in existence earlier than Ogden and Smith's. The earlier group limited their membership and when it reached capacity, the other group was formed.¹⁴⁶ Both groups were made up of women who worked in film and video and who discussed issues related to gender in front of the camera for their own viewing. The idea was that women would be in power behind the camera, running sound and other equipment, and also speaking for themselves in front of the camera. Tedesko recalls that some of the subjects discussed included

¹⁴⁵ Lee Ferguson's name appears in the Video History database on the Experimental Television Center website as co-founder of both Open Channel and as a representative of Women's Video Collective (where her name is spelled Fergueson) *Experimental Television Center*, available at <http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/history/search>, Internet, accessed 22 June 2005. No other information about the Women's Video Collective appears on this site. Ferguson was mentioned by Suzanne Tedesko, Rita Ogden and Cabell Smith, who said her name would have changed after she got married. I have not made contact with Ferguson and all of the women I interviewed are now out of touch with her.

¹⁴⁶ Tedesko, telephone interview by the author, 22 June 2005.

patriarchal models of work based on competition (and thus the collective spirit of the consciousness-raising group was an important antithesis), notions of bonding through camaraderie and “sisterhood,” and self-reflection and exploration, including the examination of their own bodies through the video camera.

It is very likely that the Women’s Video Collective that included Ogden, Ferguson, Smith, and Mary Feldbauer screened a tape at the Women’s Video Festival in 1972 called, *Women on Sex: A Conversation*. Cabell Smith (b. 1943) described her involvement in the Women’s Video Collective as beginning after a phone call from Lee Ferguson inviting her to join a consciousness-raising group that would specifically integrate the use of video into their project.¹⁴⁷ Smith at that time was a member of Women Make Movies and had been a filmmaker since starting a very small production company with her then-husband.¹⁴⁸ When she split from her husband, Smith knew she wanted to work in sound, but it was very difficult, as indicated by Apple’s experience, to get into the business as a woman. Joining Women Make Movies gave her more access to jobs and equipment, and Smith indicated that this all-woman environment was supportive because there was less fear and intimidation.¹⁴⁹ Later, in 1974, as a Production Sound Mixer, Smith was the first woman in her local union, and the first female film technician in a network news team (NBC).¹⁵⁰ Clearly, it required a tremendous amount of effort to break into this male-dominated field, and consciousness-raising and supportive environments such as Women Make Movies facilitated that. At the same time, working in

¹⁴⁷ Ferguson’s collective was supported by a NYSCA grant, which indicates how important video was to this group’s project.

¹⁴⁸ Smith was not able to give precise dates on these activities, but according to their website, Women Make Movies was established in 1972. She worked for NBC beginning in 1973, and would not have had time to be involved in Women Make Movies once she became established there, though she may have remained in the Women’s Video Collective for some time after that.

¹⁴⁹ Cabell Smith, telephone interview with the author, 20 June 2005, tape recording.

¹⁵⁰ Cabell Smith email to the author, 7 June 2005.

the middle of what had been a male-dominated world and being successful at it was exhilarating. When asked about her experiences as a woman on crews shooting stories in New York City for NBC in 1973, Smith described it as a powerful and positive feeling, knowing she was changing her male colleagues' perceptions about women's roles, that they began to say "maybe my sister could do this, maybe my aunt could do this."¹⁵¹

Smith also tread lightly among these colleagues, and refrained from outspoken political rhetoric when it came to feminism, which some could argue betrayed the movement, but which she described as a successful stratagem for becoming integrated into her field.

Smith's Women's Video Collective held regular meetings in which they discussed early relationships with men, relationships with parents, early experiences that formed their identities and socialization as women. Using the video cameras to record these sessions empowered the women who considered themselves to be in charge of the communications medium. Conceptually they were telling their own stories, in a sense, for the first time, rather than having the substance of female experience dictated to them by mainstream, male-dominated media. The sense of intimacy that came through discussing these issues with a close group of women, coupled with that sense of strength and empowerment, had a profound impact on the individuals in the group. Looking at the tapes or showing them in public groups was of relatively little importance, despite their participation in the Women's Video Festival. What was crucial was the process of using the tools to record their experiences. One area in which viewing was important, however, was in the sessions where the women explored their bodies. A common technique used in women's consciousness-raising groups throughout this period, Smith indicated, entailed

¹⁵¹ Smith, telephone interview with the author, 20 June 2005.

viewing areas of women's bodies that were not represented in traditional media. Because of the dearth of information about women's sexuality, the women cherished this information and the opportunity to explore their own anatomy by viewing the tapes later.¹⁵² All of the women were involved in talking and all of them were likewise involved in filming. To Smith and the others in the group, this was a revolutionary experience, although it would become quite regular among other consciousness-raising groups throughout the '70s.¹⁵³ Through her work with the collective, Smith was close with other women working with video in New York during the early 1970s, and her relationship with Ogden and Feldbauer also brought her in contact with Tedesko and Apple. Smith visited Amazing Grace Media in Bearsville, but never officially joined that group or the Women's Video News Service. A study of the careers of each of these women in the video consciousness-raising group illustrates the importance collective activities had on their work professionally and creatively.

Suzanne Tedesko's background was in film, although she did not receive formal training in the medium. In 1967, she graduated from college with a degree in philosophy and then spent time on a trip across the U.S. visiting friends involved in social projects such as Americorps and VISTA. During this time, Tedesko decided that "the answer to the problem of poverty was education and film was the medium."¹⁵⁴ She secured a job with the educational subsidiary of Universal Pictures as a researcher, although in the professional environment of that time, her duties were more along the lines of a

¹⁵² Smith, telephone interview with the author, 20 June 2005.

¹⁵³ While working at NBC later, Smith was asked to be a part of a crew interviewing another women's consciousness-raising group doing similar work examining their bodies, indicating that by 1974 and 75, this practice had become common enough to be documented in the mainstream press.

¹⁵⁴ Smith was a member of Local #52, The International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees of New York City (IATSE). Smith, telephone interview with the author, 20 June 2005.

secretary.¹⁵⁵ (Cabell Smith had a similar experience, namely that, despite a college education, most women in the professional world were assumed to have secretarial skills.) In 1968, Tedesko left Universal to work as an apprentice to documentary filmmaker Richard Slote. Through putting together film crews and contacts she made in Slote's production office, Tedesko met some of the few other women working in film and it was with them that the Women's Video Collective was formed.¹⁵⁶ Tedesko did not work on the technical side of film production very often, and her role was usually as producer, researcher, or with the concept. Interestingly, she describes herself as having been a "technophobe," and although she may not have recognized it at the time, that self-perception seems in keeping with gendered stereotypes about technology prevalent in the 1960s. Nonetheless, during this time (1968-1971), she did become interested in video as an alternative to film, primarily because video was so cost-effective. Tedesko was primarily interested in cultural documentaries, and because film had been so expensive, interviews were conducted in a piecemeal fashion to make the most efficient use of film. With video, she could just let the tape roll while holding a comfortable conversation with someone. Tedesko preferred to allow her interviewees to "tell their own stories" and to interject questions as little as possible.¹⁵⁷ In her work with the consciousness-raising groups, members of the group watched the tapes immediately after they were made, or watched what was happening live over the monitor. For these women, the process of speaking for themselves, of being in control of the camera and the feedback situation of

¹⁵⁵ Mary Feldbauer, who would later become a member of the Women's Video News Service and the second Women's Video Collective, was also hired to work in the same office. Tedesko, telephone interview with the author, 22 June 2005.

¹⁵⁶ Tedesko could only recall the name of one other member, Sharon Sachs, and someone whose first name was Samantha. Hopefully, future researchers can fill in this information.

¹⁵⁷ Tedesko, telephone interview by the author, 22 June 2005.

watching their own stories on tape, was the important thing. No one in the group was particularly concerned with making lasting documents that would be distributed to a mass audience or preserved in an archive, much less with making artworks.¹⁵⁸

Between 1968 and 1971, Tedesko would have been working in documentary film and video, and met many people in the field in the New York region. It was sometime between 1970 and '71 that her Women's Video Collective formed. She also attended the conference at Rutgers in 1971 that inspired Arlen to form the collective in Bearsville. She did not live at Bearsville, but continued to work in documentary film in New York. From her recollection, several of the women involved in the consciousness-raising groups went on to join Amazing Grace and April Video. Thus, the women's collectives and strategies used in those groups continued in the mixed-group collectives. Tedesko went to Bearsville often on the weekends, and described the scene as thriving, self-reflective, and fluid. John Keller, who was editing in New York for a producer of some Smithsonian films, brought the editing equipment up to Bearsville, and through this connection, Tedesko eventually worked on a major project in Spokane for the Smithsonian. She moved there temporarily in 1973, returned to New York between 1973 and '75 to work on freelance projects, often with Wendy Apple and TVTV, until she moved permanently to Seattle in 1975. Figure 80 shows Apple (left) and Tedesko (right) filming a section of TVTV's *The Good Times are Killing Me* (1975), a tape about Cajun culture in Louisiana. In this view, Tedesko can be seen interviewing the subject and monitoring the sound

¹⁵⁸ Subsequently, these tapes were not saved and to my knowledge, are no longer extant. Tedesko recently threw hers away. Another videographer, Julie Gustafson, produced a videotape of a women's consciousness-raising meeting in 1974 called *The Politics of Intimacy* where women's sexuality was discussed with a female doctor and nine women. Gustafson was not part of Women's Video Collective, and to my knowledge, did not consistently tape consciousness-raising groups. An excerpt of this tape appears on the *Surveying the First Decade* anthology available through Video Data Bank, Chicago.

through headphones while the male subject relates a story as he holds Mardi Gras beads.¹⁵⁹ Another scene in this tape which calls for further analysis, is a scene in a beauty parlor, shot by Apple and Tedesko, in which the clients discuss topics that would be taboo in the company of their husbands, particularly sexuality and pleasure. According to descriptions by Apple, the frank and playful discussions were only possible due to the crew being female.¹⁶⁰

Figure 81 demonstrates what this all-female crew would have looked like to observers. Rita Ogden holds the camera while Tedesko carries the recording deck in the foreground. Wendy Apple is conducting the interview at the Culpepper Bluegrass Festival in Warrenton, Virginia in June, 1972.¹⁶¹ This project is typical of Tedesko's interest in folk culture, and the kind of cultural documentary she continued to make throughout the 1970s.¹⁶² The videographers are posed as if in mid-interview, their smiles (although perhaps performed for the camera) suggest a non-threatening, good natured rapport with their subjects. As a group, they demonstrate that their brand of documentary is accessible in the sense that the equipment is manageable, easy-to-use, and easily transportable. In addition, their body language does not suggest a separation between themselves and their subjects. They are in the midst of a conversation. All three women are looking at the interviewee, and although Apple is poised in mid-question, their expressions are encouraging the interviewee to speak while they simply record what happens. Their focus appears to be on creating a space in which the "folk" gain a voice.

¹⁵⁹ This tape is available through Electronic Arts Intermix.

¹⁶⁰ Apple, telephone interview by the author, 20 April 2005.

¹⁶¹ Tedesko, telephone interview with the author, 22 June 2005.

¹⁶² This tape is no longer extant.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the myriad ways women negotiated gender stereotypes within collective environments which were largely documentary or commercial. The equipment allowed flexibility, spontaneity, and yet still required users who could creatively problem-solve. Anyone who was working with the newly available ½ inch portapak equipment had to be knowledgeable and creative about performing on-the-fly maintenance and repair out in the field. While none of the artists discussed here had engineering degrees or knew the complex intricacies of the electronic signal on the level of Chuck Kennedy of Videofreex, they all knew enough to patch together tape decks, cameras, lighting, and sound equipment and to play tape back, sometimes in multi-channel or edited final tapes. In the case of Ann Woodward and Cabell Smith, their experiences led them to professional careers in editing or sound. Their generation broke barriers against women in these technical fields and, while they worked in what was sometimes a highly masculinized environment, they complicated those situations with feminized interventions. As Carol Vontobel of Videofreex related about a trip she and Nancy Cain took to record a women's liberation conference in Rochester in the Spring of 1972, when her deck didn't work, she took the cover off and hit the jammed component with an eyebrow pencil. "And that's when I thought, aha, see, makeup comes in handy! I was glad that I could fix it without Chuck being there."¹⁶³ There was a sense of accomplishment that came out of the women mastering their tools. The video collectives in New York in the early 1970s were formed sometimes out of practical reasons (funding from the NYSCA could only go to groups) and sometimes out of a desire for alternative

¹⁶³ Vontobel, telephone interview by the author, 15 January 2005.

structures for living and working influenced by the youth movement. All-woman collectives formed for these reasons and to provide financial, professional, and personal support to women who were historically marginalized within the communications field and who, in the days of the still-nascent second-wave feminist movement, still encountered impediments based on their gender. The video medium enabled these women to take action and participate in media and the visual arts on a footing that was more or less equal to their male counterparts and to change the very makeup of those fields.

CONCLUSION

This study has ended up taking a rather broad approach to the issue of women working with video technology during the medium's early period. I have examined aspects of several artists' video projects, namely those by Steina, Beryl Korot, and Shigeo Kubota, particularly focusing on their engagement with the modernist question of video's properties as an electronic medium. I have also examined women's roles in the video collectives, groups that embraced video's capability for immediate feedback to create grassroots documentary and community-based videotapes. This required a consideration of mixed-gender collectives and all-women's collectives, to determine what drove a separatist stance on the part of some women videographers during the early 1970s. Throughout my research, I was introduced to the work of numerous lesser-known artists whose efforts were in some way tied to my subject and whose obscurity warranted the redress of historical treatment, though this treatment was at times brief and provisional. At times, these neglected figures served to expand this study in directions that veered from my original thesis, but I have tried throughout to keep in the foreground the question of whether and how these artists' gender affected their access, not only to equipment, but to the theoretical and critical issues debated in the period.

In the beginning of my research, my working thesis was that women were involved in video practices that engaged the defining of the electronic medium, but that they were somehow alienated from groups that formulated the medium's theorization; or, I theorized, they substituted alternative theories based on feminist structures. What I found was that the video community in general deployed communications theory only in

certain circumstances and that Marshall McLuhan's ideas about the global transmission of information through the electronic signal, while providing an organizing principle, were in no way thoroughly understood or adopted by all video practitioners. His theories were reinterpreted and reformulated by writer/videographers like Paul Ryan, Michael Shamberg, and Nam June Paik, whose treatises and videotapes celebrated McLuhan's idea about electronic media as a natural extension of the human consciousness in a global network as being universally accepted by the entire video community. These male writers shared an assumption that video images would be legible and relevant for viewers across varying cultures.

In at least one instance in this study, Korot's *Dachau, 1974*, that notion was criticized through work that stressed distance and ambivalence. Nina Sobell used electronic media in interactive environments that alternately embraced video's sense of distance and presence in order to communicate something about the nature of human interactions. Sobell's work did tend to carry on McLuhan's optimistic tone in her belief that the technology would enable better communication. In *Video Voyeur*, for example, viewers took over the installation through the video phones which linked participants on opposite sides of a gallery window, with the distance between performing strangers enhancing the viewers' willingness to participate. In the *Brainwave Drawings*, Sobell expanded the tools of artists' video by hooking participants to EKG sensors measuring electronic brain waves and displaying them on a video monitor. In this example, McLuhan's expectation that electronic signals were a viable way of imaging and linking human consciousness did play out when participants were able to alter each others' thought patterns in a non-verbal communication of Lissajous patterns. Despite the fact

that she did not heavily engage McLuhanesque theories, Sobell's project did apply his ideas about video being an extension of signals that begin in the human body. As an artist who was actively engaged in feminism and in performance art, Sobell complicated McLuhan's humanist, gender-neutral terms with her own positioning of her work in terms culturally coded as feminist.

Women were actually quite integrated into the video community between 1965 and 1985, a fact that has been celebrated in recent exhibitions and writings focused on work grounded in performance and overt feminist stances. There were also female video artists who combined examinations of the electronic medium with, variously, performance, installation, video, sculpture, documentaries, and community work. They were not only accepted into the video community, but they helped build that community, defining many of the issues at hand. Despite their integration, however, gender was often an issue. Although most of the video artists of this period championed the medium as a democratizing force, it did not naturally follow that male practitioners automatically broke with cultural stereotypes about women's roles. As the women members of Videofreex, among others, have revealed, their male peers needed to be educated about gender stereotypes, and women artists who did not actively claim their rightful status in the groups tended to be alienated. Many of the artists in my study found the collectives and the art world generally relatively progressive, however, once the women made their positions clear. Those who also worked in the commercial realm of film and television experienced professional barriers there that took more time to dismantle than those in place in the art world.

I also examined, in chapter four, some all-female collectives whose formation was a result of women's limited access to opportunities in filmmaking or in response to women's consciousness-raising groups. These all-female collectives did not form in response to problems in mixed-gender video collectives, (contrary to my expectations), and the women's groups dissipated sooner than the others. The results provided by the specific groups I analyzed are limited, however, and should not be taken to represent all women's collectives. Amazing Grace Media and April Video Collective had many female members whose individual visions were supported. It is noteworthy that none of these groups had representatives who identified as gay or lesbian. The programs of the Women's Video Festivals document the existence of several lesbian groups such as L.O.V.E. or Queer Blue Light Video. It is likely that these were formed to address issues that were not being addressed in either the mixed-gender collectives or the two women's collectives studied here. An examination of those lesbian groups remains to be done.

In chapter one I studied the work and careers of Steina and Barbara Buckner, two artists who were very much respected within the video community in the 1970s. As artists who were thoroughly engaged in the technology of the medium itself, and who did not make work in other media during this period, their names are not part of the general art canon by any means. Buckner is no longer working in video, but Steina remains an important figure in the field, which has now expanded to include digital media. The fact that these artists are not known to the general art world reflects the critical turning away from issues of medium specificity since the 1970s. Nonetheless, these women had successes and are still recognized within the community as pioneering in the use of image processing tools to make video art. In reality, although Steina was well-versed in the use

of image processors and used them in some of her early work, through the late 1970s and into the 1980s she was more interested in the mechanics of the camera and in altering the image to allow the machine to demonstrate the phenomenology of vision. Steina made liberal use of a variety of tools at her disposal. These were tools that she had helped to develop and certainly took part in demonstrating their use for other artists. She embraced their use as these tools enabled her to propose a video practice that disrupted notions of an all-powerful human gaze through the substitution of a “machine vision.” Her experimental approach is also rooted in her background as a musician, a background which helps to define her work in terms independent of her husband and collaborator, Woody Vasulka.

As a regular visiting artist at the Experimental Television Center and the TVLab, Barbara Buckner also had access to large image-processors that would generate abstract and altered images. Buckner’s technical manipulations were often discussed more than her spiritual content in articles and reviews in the late 1970s and early 1980s, creating a perception that her work privileged formal experiments over content. This false divide has been asserted by critics and curators since the 1980s, such as curator Kathy Rae Huffman, who rejected such work in her assessment of what she called, “the boring, conceptual process works...that everybody who watched video in the early days either fell in love with or hated. I have a bias...against high-tech, low-intellect, non-narrative works. They’re like wallpaper.”¹ It was very important to both Steina and Buckner that they were dealing with an electronic medium, a new tool that had ties to science, television, music, communication, but was none of these things. For both of them, video

¹ quoted in Lewis MacAdams, “Guts and Fortitude: Kathy Huffman & Artist Video Put the Long Beach Museum on the Map,” *High Performance* 25 (1984): 42.

was more accessible than film had been, though they worked in lab and collaborative environments when the tools were too expensive. More importantly, video's compositional strategies were different. For Buckner, the colors and space were different and for Steina, the machines could be tuned like an instrument or attached to mechanical apparatuses.

Buckner and Steina were not working in ways that were unique within the video community. In fact, their methods placed them squarely within the mainstream of video art in the 1970s. Buckner worked alongside her male colleagues, such as Gary Hill and David Jones, at Woodstock Community Video and ETC, and Steina's knowledge and abilities have been generally recognized. In fact, she has enjoyed tremendous respect for co-founding one of the most important venues for video art of the 1970s. Some feminist critics of a later period, such as an editorial board at *Heresies* in 1983, might suggest these two artists wielded power because of their adoption of "technocratic" means historically controlled by men through patriarchal systems.² Steina alluded to this criticism in her interview with me, and I pointed to it in this chapter's title. Neither of the artists deployed overtly feminist strategies by addressing, for instance, matriarchal religions, or domestic abuse, or female sexuality. Did the technology serve as a mask behind which they, as women, could pass without challenge through the video community? To write their contribution off in such a way would be a disservice, I believe, because their success was an important benchmark for women artists. They were not invisible in their communities and, in subtle ways, their gender was indeed an issue. Despite this, they became successful examples of video artists who were also women and broke ground for a younger generation.

² Diana Agosta et al., "Collective Editorial Statement," *Heresies* 4 no. 16 (1983): 1.

In chapter three, I approached the work of an artist, Shigeko Kubota, who has been recognized in both the video community and the larger art world. In the past, her contribution has mostly been measured in terms of her work in video sculpture, a way of working that fits nicely into the gallery and museum structure. I have found it necessary to retrace her connection with the rest of the video community and to discuss two of her single-channel works and the image processing effects which were not specific to the sculptures. I did this so that I could demonstrate how her works functioned as “feedback” on histories that were both personal and professional. She combined techniques of abstraction and distortion with references to her own position as a speaking subject, and a subject that was adamantly female, sexual, and transnational. At the same time, she reflected on the medium that she used, and brought its properties into the content of her work. In her installations she combined statements about video with autobiographical elements that caused viewers to consider always that they were dealing with the electronic video medium. This was a medium in which images moved; they flowed, much like water or blood. It was also a medium whose electronic signals could be made to cause interference, rupturing narratives in much the same way that Kubota’s voice also ruptured the visual scene, so that her documentaries never followed conventions calling for seamlessness or objectivity. It was a medium that linked her with women in other cultures, a medium that was laborious and heavy, like carrying a baby on one’s back, as she said. She commented on the medium itself in a way that was often gendered female, and this provided feedback on a technology that had been coded masculine in Japan and the US, especially prior to the 1970s. She was one artist who was aware of, and commented on, electronic technology’s history as a masculinized field. For all of these

reasons, her work deserved re-examination in the context of gender and technology, and the video principle known as “feedback.”

Many women video artists could have been discussed in terms of the feedback they provided in the 1970s. Kubota’s was a particularly relevant example because of the language she used that framed video as “feminine” rather than “masculine.” History and memory played a large part in Kubota’s work, as it did in the work of a lesser-known video artist, Hermine Freed. Freed’s reputation is largely based on her overtly feminist tape, *Art Herstory*, but reproductions of other tapes suggest a deep engagement with the structure and properties of video itself. In several of these images, we see evidence that Freed used the camera to alter perceptions of space that might incorporate notions of movement, speed, and instantaneity. Texts she wrote referred specifically to the desire to use video to show multiple and alternative points of view in reaction to the limited vision of her father. These statements recall others made by video artists of the period celebrating the potential for video to make a larger cultural critique that was in keeping with the countercultural movement.

My hope is that this study has enriched the discussion of the social and aesthetic concerns of video artists in the pioneering generation through a consideration of gender, even where gender was not an overt theme of the artists’ work. Art historical consideration of video work from the 1970s that engaged theoretical questions on the nature of the medium, has been sorely lacking. What has been done on such work tended not to consider gender as an issue, and writings from the period often ignored women’s contributions altogether. By examining how women artists participated in a community that was defining itself in terms of a new electronic technology, we can draw connections

with a contemporary art world that often articulates similar rhetoric about the potential of digital media.

APPENDIX

List of Artists Interviewed

Artist interviewed (conducted in person or via telephone and documented with audio tape)	Group	Date
Beryl Korot	Raindance	4-28-03, 4-29-03
Steina		6-24-03, 6-25-03
Carol Vontobel	Videofreex	1-15-05
Ann Woodward	Videofreex	3-11-05
Curtis Ratcliff	Videofreex	11-19-04
Lynda Rodolitz	Amazing Grace Media	6-25-03
Wendy Apple	Women's Video News Service	4-12-05, 4-20-05
	Amazing Grace Media	
Cabell Smith	Women's Video Collective	6-20-05
Suzanne Tedesko	Women's Video News Service	6-21-05
	Amazing Grace Media	
Louise Ledeen (Etra)		8-28-05
Artist interviewed (conducted via telephone or email without audio tape)	Group	Date
Nina Sobell		12-15-03
Barbara Buckner		2-11-04, 2-15-04
Rita Ogden	Women's Video News Service	6-8-05
	Women's Video Collective	
Nancy Cain	Videofreex	1-17-05, 1-22-05, 3-21-05
Maxi Cohen		7-13-05
Wendy Apple (initial contact)	Women's Video News Service	3-24-05
	Amazing Grace Media	
Lynda Rodolitz (follow-up)	Amazing Grace Media	6-23-05

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