

# Screens of Resistance

## *Feminism and Video Art*

BY DOT TUER

**V**ideo is above all a medium of transmission, a screen which is both the source and receiver of images. As a source, video becomes a screen where images and consciousness interact, a self-reflexive art practice, an interior journey, an imaginary TV, a utopian Other. As receiver, video becomes a screen where consciousness and mediation overlap, where images are transmitted as cultural meanings, framed by the context of the world and the viewer. When the source and the receiver are separated as functions, video becomes an isolated practice. It functions as an art object without reference to the mass production of images, or a site of disjuncture where reception is the media persuasion of a passive viewer. But where the source and receiver meet, the screen doubles itself, becoming a two-way mirror of a cultural process.

It is through the process of this doubling of source and receiver that dialogue can replace monologue and the monopoly of production is challenged by access to the medium as a participatory right. Here, video not only functions as a register of consciousness but of *conscencia*, a term first used by Brazilian literacy theorist Paulo Freire to describe a process by which social, economic and political contradictions are perceived and action is taken against the oppressive elements of reality. As a screen of *conscencia*, the medium moves beyond self-reflection into a sphere of self-definition; documentation contains critique; strategies encompass the aesthetic of social transformation and the insistence of cultural autonomy. And it is as a screen of *conscencia*, I believe, that we can locate the history of women's video in Canada, finding in this practice a politicized satellite dish of images and imagination that not only catches the individual fragments of a dominant culture but reshapes these fragments into a collective process of self-determination.

Paulo Freire has said: "That which is utopian is not that which

is unattainable; it is not idealism; it is a dialectic process of denouncing and announcing — denouncing the dehumanizing structure and announcing the humanizing structure." I would argue that in the age of information manipulation and teleglobal communications, TV has become the heart of the dehumanizing structure, and video, as a hybrid of TV but outside its infrastructure, offers the possibility of humanizing this structure. In developed countries, mass communication has been analyzed as a one-way transmission, ensuring cultural conformity and a surveillance

of the environment — a bucket theory in which meanings and contents packaged as market-inspired creations are dumped onto a supposedly passive population. Women, who have experienced the cascading effects of this "dumping" exploitation not only in the form of mass media information, but in four thousand years' of history recorded without their consultation, have insisted in this country upon a cultural practice for the transmission of images and meanings where the "medium is not the message" but is re-envisioned as

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a process of art and communication.

In 1968, *Towards a Female Liberation Movement*, a manifesto written by Beverley Jones and Judith Brown, became the blueprint for many consciousness raising groups and women's organizations. Among other points, they called for the following demands:

1. *Women must resist pressure to enter into movement activities other than their own. There cannot be restructuring of this society until the relationships between the sexes are restructured. The inequalitarian relationships in the home are perhaps the basis of all evil. Men can commit any horror, or cowardly suffer any mutilation of their souls and retire to the home to be treated with respect, awe, and perhaps love. Men will never face their true identity or their real problems under these circumstances, nor will we....*

2. *Since women in great measure are ruled by fear of physical force they must learn to protect themselves.*

3. *We must force the media to a position of realism.*

4. *Women must share their experiences with each other until they understand, identify, and explicitly state the many psychological techniques of domination in and out of the home. These should be published and distributed widely until they are common knowledge. No woman should feel befuddled and helpless in an argument with her husband.*

5. *Somebody has to start designing communities in which women can be freed from their burdens long enough for them to experience humanity.*

6. *Women must learn from their own history because they have a history to be proud of and a history which will give pride to their daughters....*

*Courageous women brought us out of total bondage to our present improved position. We must not forsake them but learn from them and allow them to join the cause once more. The market is ripe for feminist literature, historic and otherwise. We must provide it.*

7. *Women who have any scientific competency at all ought to begin investigating the real temperamental and cognitive differences between the sexes....*

8. *Equal pay for equal work has been a project poo-pooed by the radicals but it should not be because it is an instrument of bondage.*

9. *In what is hardly an exhaustive list I must mention abortion laws.*

As we enter the 1990s, a decade within a North American infrastructure where post-feminism, post-history, post-politics, become a by-product of a marketing strategy and the catch-all phrases that substitute generalizations for analysis, women's video production in this country reminds us of the importance of these demands. For in many senses, women's independent video production has been formed by and is a witness to the ongoing struggle to realize these ideals. In the imaginary utopia of video's beginnings, in the era of guerilla TV and dematerialization of the object, the politicization of the art world and the insistence of these demands forwarded by an activist feminism coincided. Women turned to the "new" medium of video as a medium without a history, one which would document absences of women's concerns and expose media's manipulation/exploitation and, which as a *tabula rasa* within the traditional sites of art, would create a domain of exploration and aesthetic innovation.

Sharing and interaction are key concepts in examining feminist video in Canada. We discover in its images and in its site of reception as a horizontal network of community and artist-run spaces, the use of a medium where issues of access, dialogue and participation have been privileged. We discover in the examples of Emma Productions, Amelia Productions, Women in Focus, Video Femmes, Groupe Intervention Video and in the work of

countless individuals a commitment to the process of sharing information and resources. And while it is true that feminist video in this country has not gained access to mass media, the explanation for its exclusion is not a technical one, nor an artistic one. It is a political one.

Women's video in Canada demonstrates a high degree of awareness and critique of media's manipulation. And there is an unwritten rule in North American media which is enforced above all others — one cannot critique the media within its own infrastructure. Thus while independent video may be perceived as "marginal" in its dissemination, the impact of its vision cannot be underestimated. Video historically offers, and continues to suggest, the potential to unveil the mechanism behind mass media's empty promises and the art world's constructed prejudices. It is the site of practice and the enactment of ideas

circulating within feminism ranging from an embrace of positive images to psychoanalytical deconstruction to the issues of racism and class. Its use by women creates a strange anomaly in a technological continuum to which they traditionally have not had access. Yet women have recognized the potential of this medium to subvert and recreate an alternative cultural base of production. The intimacy of video production becomes not a marginalized activity but a political act. It has created a

collective memory and imagination of difference; created a dialectical relationship to reality that both records and alters strategies of social transformation, in which the producer and the receiver join in the making of a history, a polemic, and a manifesto for a yet uncanonized medium.

As a political act, video interfaces with another screen — the screen of a history forged from mass communication where the past blurs with propaganda and is rewritten by a technological empire's ever-more extensive determination to make the world over in its own image of *Dallas* and celebrity acts of charity. In this context, the history of video art, largely unrecorded, becomes the recording of women's history, a defiant space from which the ability of communities to produce a self-determination of images prevents an amnesia commonly referred to as post-feminism. Video art creates an alternative site of history, where images, disseminated as the electronic signals of closed-circuit screenings, are at once collectivized and underdeveloped. It is a history constructed through lateral rather than linear processes, a history which seeks to lay horizontal grids across some of the issues the women's movement has raised in the last fifteen years. It is a history which reveals the determination and work that in fifteen years has produced a video culture and a documentation of women's attempts at social, aesthetic and political interventions in Canada. And it is a history of grass-roots struggles, battles and influences largely ignored by the mass media and the art world traditions.

