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From the father's house: Women's video and feminism's struggle with difference

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FROM THE FATHER'S HOUSE

WOMEN'S VIDEO AND
FEMINISM'S STRUGGLE
WITH DIFFERENCE.

by Dot Tuer

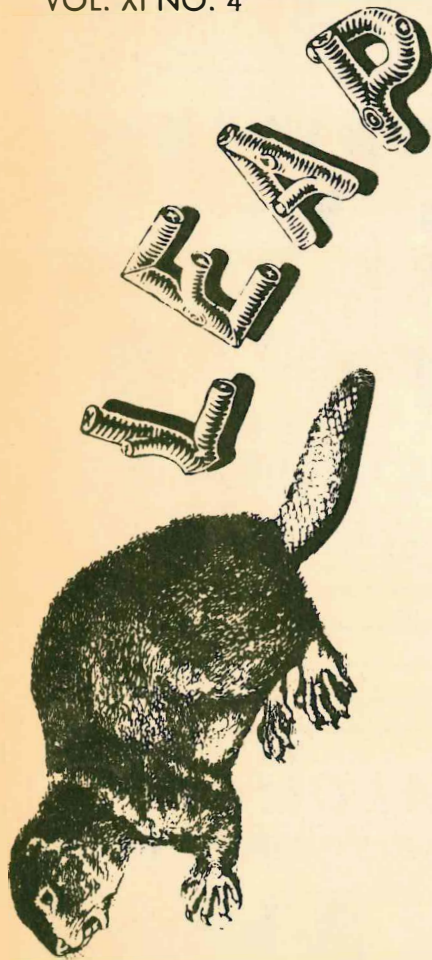
BLACK BRITISH FILM • INDUSTRIAL IMAGES • NEW THEATRE
FREE TRADE • THIRD CINEMA • ART & FEMINISM • MUSIC

FUSE

MAGAZINE

WINTER 87•88
VOL. XI NO. 4

COVER ARTWORK: from *My Mother is a Dangerous Woman*, a video tape by b.h. Yael.



(SEE PAGE 46)

CONTENTS

4 Late Night with FUSE

COVER

17 **FROM THE FATHER'S HOUSE**
by DOT TUER
*Women's Video and Feminism's Struggle
with Difference*

FEATURES & REVIEWS

- 25 **Eyes on Black Britain** by RICHARD FUNG
An Interview with filmmaker Isaac Julien
- 29 **Shoot from the Lipp** by MARVA JACKSON
New independent music
- 30 **Sex in Venice** by ROWLEY MOSSOP
A review of John Greyson's The Ads Epidemic
- 31 **Three Women Speak** by GAIL BOURGEOIS,
BEATRICE BAILEY & LESLEY TURNER
Responses to Feminism and Art: A Conference
- 34 **Hand It Over** by CLIFTON JOSEPH
Demanding Black music's due at the Junos
- 35 **Despair** by SHONAGH ADELMAN
& BRYAN GEE
WORK: a videotape by Phillips & Shea
- 36 **Retro Retch** by SU RYNARD
A critique of Tragedy of Manners
- 37 **Artropolis** by SARA DIAMOND
Vancouver's installation extravaganza
- 41 **Delinquents with a Difference**
by CHRIS MARTIN
J.D.s: Putting the gay back in punk
- 42 **Against the Grain** by CAMERON BAILEY
A film festival of subversion: Third Cinema
- 45 **Scenes of History** by BEVERLY YHAP
First Chinese-Canadian play at Passe Muraille

NEWS & REPORTS

- 6 Video News
- 8 **High Tech Soft Touch • Tightly Strapped
No Support • Whose History
Bacon & Eggs**

COLUMNS

- 13 **Coastal Lines** by SARA DIAMOND
Post-Industrial Perspectives
- 46 **Lessons from the Free Trade Agreement**
by LEO PANITCH
Fear, Greed & Dependency

FROM THE FATHER'S HOUSE:

*Women's Video and Feminism's
Struggle with Difference*

by **Dot Tuer**

PART ONE:

Fragments Towards A Context

A QUOTE

"We had gone to the International Women's Day Coalition and brought up the issue of women's poverty. Until last year there wasn't a lot of interest. Well, this is Canada. This is Capitalism. Women who are part of the organized women's movement also work for social services. They deal with us all day long in paid work...so they don't exactly think of us as their friends — or that they can learn from us...We've got things to learn from them and they've got things to learn from us...We've got things to say and if you listen to us your whole movement will be different because you've got missing pieces."

Excerpts from an interview with a member of Regent Park Sole Support Mothers Group
You Can't Keep Us Down, 1985
Regent Park Video Workshop & Dixon Hall

A STORY

It is early in November, 1987. Sylvia Frazer is reading at the McGill Club from her autobiography, *My Father's House*. With the passion of the first person, she speaks her unspeakable experience of "incest and of healing." Her pain hovers below the words she recites. The audience, all women, all white, all middle-class, is in tears. She tells us she began to write the book at the age of forty-seven when memories of an incestuous relationship with her father began to surface. She tells of her crumbling resistance as a child to her father's advances when he threatened her with the knowledge that "everything in this house belongs to me ... your mother will do what I say."¹ At the age of seven, she decides to repress all memories of sexual contact. In order to do so, she creates a secret accomplice: another self who will continue sexual relations with her father without her conscious knowledge until she leaves home at the age of eighteen. She names this condition a split personality.

It is a condition in which survival is predicated upon forgetting; in which complicity is refused a place within the conscious construction of identity. It is also a condition where the psychic walls of women's sexuality as virgin/whore; pure/dirty; innocence/knowledge intersect with social and economic edifices which house the father's authority. Through Frazer's eyes, it has become an autobiography about silences and speaking, about amnesia and remembering. It is also, in her own words, "a middle-class story with built-in loopholes and rescue stations and options and timelocks and safeguards."² It is a story where "I was given the poison and the antidote at the same time and by the same people. Specifically, I was of the first generation of my family to receive the education and the social resources and the personal support to fight back."³

A CLIPPING

It is late in November, 1987. The days are shorter, the nights are colder, and everywhere there are people living on the streets as the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless draws to a close. Privatization schemes proliferate. Buildings grow taller. The suburbs grow bleaker. Black Monday offers a momentary confirmation of an economic squeeze only to vanish from the television screen like one more engineered spectacle. In *The Globe and Mail* June Callwood's series of articles chronicle the housing crisis of Canada's poor. In Halifax, a young mother on welfare tells her that "if I had known what it would have been like, I think I might have stayed with my husband and taken the beatings. He was violent only every second day. Poverty like this is violence every day."⁴

TWO PAINTINGS

In October, 1987, two large figurative paintings by Beatrice Bailey and Grace Channer were installed on the far wall of the Parkdale Library as part of the *A Space Women on Site* exhibition. They are still hanging there; a visual testament to the writings, histories and stories by women of colour which the library has showcased under glass; a visual empowerment of Black women's struggles.

Tender Mercies, by Beatrice Bailey, foregrounds a woman washing the window of an office building. She and her two older children have their backs to the viewer, but face a glass wall of bureaucracy, a clouded vista which obscures the activities of the social planners but reveals an unemployment training file marked Confidential lying on a table. The smallest child, crouching and sucking her thumb, stares back at us. She does not give the impression that the view is less occluded from her perspective. The family is positioned within a boxing ring, perched upon a precarious scaffold which places them at eye level with the social workers who do not see them. Faced with the glass edifices of a socio-economic

structure where implicit racism and explicit sexism are intertwined, the woman has wiped a tiny corner of the window clean. She has begun to speak her story, define the parameters of her struggle. Hers is a story without loopholes or safeguards. Her father's house is not a two-story dwelling on a shady suburban street, but the indifferent façade of government resources where the racism and class oppression of our society are re-produced by the social servants of the state apparatus.

Grace Channer's painting called *Black Women's Work* is a huge sprawling mural of bold figures; of Black women serving, cleaning, exhausted, picketing, detained, shopping, hugging, talking. The texts which are painted right onto the canvas leave no ambiguity about who owns the father's house and who works as servants within his walls. The texts are a condemnation of oppression. The images are an affirmation of struggle. Together, they challenge the amnesty of privilege that isolates gender from class from race. Channer writes along the bottom of the mural, "There will never be enough money when you follow what is right/purposefully underdeveloped to produce the world's working class." Across the top, in a zigzag fashion, a parallel text reads:

**WOMEN
HALF THE WORLD
ONE THIRD OF THE LABOUR FORCE
DO TWO-THIRDS WORLD WORK HOURS
RECEIVE ONE-TENTH WORLD INCOME
OWN LESS THAN ONE-HUNDREDTH
WORLD PROPERTY
RUN 52% WORLD'S HOUSEHOLDS ALONE
BLACK WOMEN
LAST HIRED
FIRST FIRED
PROVIDE CHEAPEST DOMESTIC LABOUR
THROUGH IMMIGRATION AND SLAVERY
POLICIES
WORK 80% OF AFRICAN AGRICULTURE
EARN 40-90% LESS THAN ANYONE ELSE
RUN 82% OF CARIBBEAN HOUSEHOLDS
ALONE
BUT WHO CARES EXCEPT BLACK WOMEN.**

A PHOTOGRAPH

It is my mother who has invited me to Sylvia Frazer's talk. After the reading, she buys *The Father's House* for me and has Sylvia autograph it. On the cover is a photograph of Sylvia Frazer at the age of three or four holding a doll. The photograph is severed in half. Another woman glances at the book and says, "that's strange, I already have a copy but it has a different picture on the front." She shows us her book, in which the torn photograph is of Sylvia at the age of fifteen or sixteen. For some reason this bothers me. Perhaps it is easier to identi-

fy with the innocence of a golden-haired child than to understand the complicity of an adolescent. Over coffee my mother inquires, "you didn't like your father very much, did you?" "No," I reply, "but then I don't have many memories of when he was alive."

Later, I leaf through old journals, sorting scraps of paper collected over the years. It seems that I am searching for memories, for a subjectivity, an identity that will challenge the inheritance of my father's house. I, like Sylvia, have been given the tools to survive in my father's world. But perhaps it is these very tools which protect me from recognizing my own complicity in the building of the glass walls I strain against. Perhaps it is these very tools which have created the paradigms and the language which trap my voice into a structure where speaking is built upon silences. The poison which is also the antidote is difficult to pinpoint. It is subtle, unacknowledged, but ever-present in the intersection of sexuality, class, gender, and race which weaves a web of differences into hierarchies. And while it allows those of us with privilege to exist within the walls of the father's house, it does not guarantee our safety.

PART TWO: The Challenges of Difference

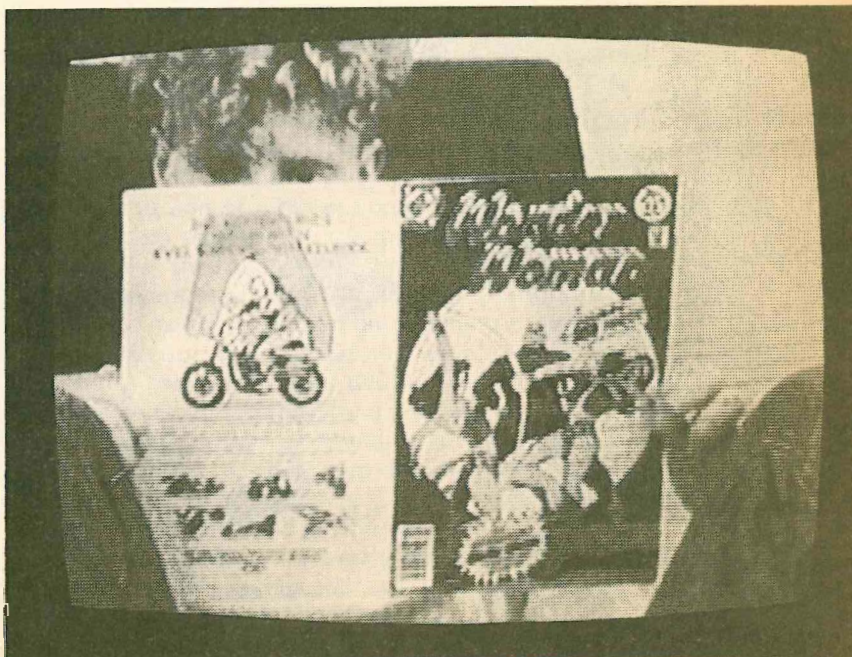
Once upon a time, or so the story goes, there was a Golden Age of feminism. In those halcyon days of consciousness-raising and consensus-building, gender was the dividing line of the struggle. Radical feminists fought to tear down the edifices of our father's house. A call went forth for the end of the nuclear family and a dismantling of the patriarchy. Father was the Enemy. Mother was the Monster. It was a clean break with the past and collaborators were not to be tolerated. Feminism in process, however, was never as clear-cut or as purely oppositional as its rhetorical imaginary. For as ideologies and socio-economic conditions and political events intersected with the lived experience of women, the struggle to dismantle the father's house produced a labyrinth of contradictions. Women's Studies, Women's Presses, Women's Bookstores institutionalized feminism on the margins of power. But with the establishment of infrastructures came the complicity of power. Abortion rights, alternative health care, midwifery, rape crisis centres, battered women's shelters became the sites of organized political interventions. But with the establishment of organized strategies came cooperation with the rulers of the castles.

The struggles of questioning language and structures, of interpreting experience and reclaiming history, gave rise to conflicting paradigms. Positive imaging of women clashed with deconstructionist and conceptual approaches to dismantling cultural stereotypes. In the heady clouds of theoretical



Still from *Frankly, Shirley* by Marg Moores, 10:34 min., 1987.

Still from *The Bisexual Kingdom* by Elizabeth Schroder, 22 min., 1987.



Still's courtesy of Vtape



**Still from *Twins*
by Chris Martin, 3
min., 1987**

**Still from *Influences of
My Mother* by Sara
Diamond, 24 min.,
1981-82.**



Stills courtesy of Vtape

practice, the construction of identity and gender became a focus of intense debate. Biology squared off against culture, with the translation of the French feminists giving the unconscious an uneasy North American debut. "Woman" became a discursive and representational site of debate between psycho-analytical and essentialist and constructivist positions.⁵ As intellectual paradigms became more complex and activists became more entrenched, theory and practice were estranged. With the empowerment of speech came the silencing of others. With the proliferation of voices came the fracturing of consensus. The collectives which had formed in passion often disbanded in heated disagreement. As women pried open the doors to the father's houses, they failed to hear voices still without shelter. The victim as Other became a fetishization of the margins. The fervour of an oppositional politic had splintered into acrimonious divisions, revealing hierarchies within the ranks. It seemed that feminism's tools for dismantling the father's house had only succeeded in building a spare bedroom.

As women began to speak of differences between them, to define the shifting grounds of a struggle against oppression, their words did not always fall neatly into a narrative of the victim written by others on their behalf. Lesbians spoke out against an explicit homophobia on the part of heterosexual women who sought to sweep homosexuality under the carpet in their strategy to give feminism a public face. They struggled against an implicit homophobia, an ever-present but subtle evasion of their attempts to articulate a female desire. Working-class and welfare women began to voice their frustration at a feminism which presumed to speak for them, which excluded their experience by assuming certain commonalities of a cultural and social conditioning. Sex workers began to speak out against a patronizing moralism. The anti-pornography struggles ran head on into a struggle to articulate deviance and eroticism within female sexuality. Black women confronted feminism with the racist implications of white women's struggles and strategies and assumptions. They pointed to Black women's exclusion from feminist organizations, their absence from feminist representations, from feminist histories of women's liberation. Hispanic women, Native Indian women, East Indian women, West Indian women also levelled their analysis against a feminist politic, bringing as Black women had, the specificity of a critique based on socio-economic, cultural and racial oppressions.

With the articulation of these differences, the Golden Age of a purely gendered oppression was over, contextually fractured beyond its own utopian mis-recognition. The appeal of its oppositional logic, however, lingered. In face of the difficult questions posed by the relationship of privilege to oppression, of speaking to silence, of power to marginalization, women clung tena-

ciously to the concept of the Other. The dialectic of slave/master, outside/inside, us/them, was turned inwards as the enemy became each other. Hierarchies within the ranks became inverted as a hierarchy of oppressions. There was no longer one feminism, but feminisms, each radiating from a different intersection of privilege and oppression. From this vantage point of dis-integration, a complex interstice of disavowal and recognition, of silencing and listening emerged. Some women chose to excise difference, making their feminism an exclusionary club of commonalities. Others became paralyzed by the dissimilitude of voices and retreated to an individualist isolation. Still others attempted to bridge the chasms which had frequented unity only to discover the depth of their own internalized racism and class biases. All was not well on the Western front. Feminism(s) had become messy, disheveled, no longer a rallying point of unity against a ubiquitous patriarchy.

PART THREE: For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Audre Lorde)

Listening to the fragments of voices which speak of oppressions outside our own autobiographies; faced with the silences revealed within feminism's universalizing claims of gender; it seems that the Golden Age antidote of articulating experience is in danger of becoming our contemporary poison. Yet it is the very challenge of understanding the heterogeneity of experience and oppression which is feminism's strength, not its weakness. Difference is not a sign of disunity but a recognition that there is no one Other, no one infrastructure of oppression and liberation, no longer the privilege of the imaginary outsider. In its contradictory and often bitter accusations, difference radically challenges the isolation of oppression from a complex diffusion of social, economic and cultural vectors which draft the architectural blueprint of the master's house. Difference calls for an acknowledgement of absences, for an understanding of how speaking and silencing are intertwined. It asks for a radical evaluation of the master's tools we have utilized in our struggle: the conceptual paradigms of an oppositional politic which collapses difference into the one and only Other or a liberal pluralism which tolerates difference within the individual victim.

For underneath the master's roof we discover many father's houses. The windows of each are cloudy, obscured, like the window of Beatrice Bailey's painting. Isolated from each other, we can maintain a construction of our own experience as the oppression of the master. We can become blinded by his gaze, seduced by our mas-

tery of his tools. Difference does not ask us to abandon the struggles which are fought on this terrain, but to recognize that a battle won within a father's house does not dismantle the master's Winter Palace. For the master's house is not an edifice which can be stormed, but one to be worn down through an understanding of how speaking and silencing are interlocked with privilege. We can afford neither the romanticization of an outside nor the security of an inside. We must step from our father's houses while continuing the struggle within. We must understand not only our oppressions but our complicity. For it is not the master's tools which will dismantle patriarchy, but our own abilities to recognize complicity, to acknowledge absences, to link our small renovations within glass walls to others' voices and others' struggles.

If we are to accept difference's challenges, we must begin to occupy a position which understands feminism, not as fragmentation, but as a theory and a practice strategized simultaneously on many fronts. We cannot turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to contradictions by homogenizing oppression, but must recognize an inside/outside construction where specific experience can both illuminate and mask the hierarchies of power. There are as many strategies of confrontation, co-operation, intervention, and alignments to be considered as there are father's houses to occupy. Feminism's radicality lies not only in the insistence that the "personal is political" but in the recognition that the "political is personal." For in accepting the challenge of difference's heterogeneity, we have the tools not only to survive within our father's houses, but the possibility of challenging its foundations.

PART FOUR: Video in the Borderlands

To enter the father's house of art of the late eighties is to enter a mirrored hall of images where nothing is quite what it seems, where double-speak and co-option reign supreme. At odds with the notion of a direct voice, contemporary art criticism emphasizes the mediated nature of experience, the role of artistic practice in critiquing dominant structures of the "real." Particular emphasis has been placed on deconstructing or reconstructing representations which veil oppressions inherent in the relation between the sexes. Men cite feminism as instrumental in the break from a modernist obsession with the meaning inherent to the object. In the same breath as post-modernism, they thank us for drawing their attention to social and psychical oppressions implicit in the identity constructions of subject/object, of male/female, of self and Other. Yet when one produces images which are outside the grasp of a white heterosexual male construction of the

subject, they are somehow ignored, eclipsed. Grace Channer and Beatrice Bailey's paintings are, after all, hanging in the Parkdale Library and not in the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Binary oppositions tend to reproduce the dominant on the margins, to double back difference as a reflection of the self. It is as if the art world fractured a mirror, and looking at the splintered image of itself imagined it had caught the site of difference. For beneath the homages to radicality evoked at every turn, and the sweeping declarations which declare an end to master narratives, the institutionalized art world seems particularly adept at maintaining a homogeneity of power. Faced with the challenge of differences which would clarify the complicity of art with the dominant systems of oppression, the claims of art's heterogeneity somehow end up as issues of form and style. Absences, steadfastly denied, slip between the cracks of gender, race and class.

Video, within the institutionalized world of museums and councils and galleries and magazines, occupies an ambivalent position. Its formal properties and mediated images support the art world's notions of heterogeneity within a self-proclaimed simulacrum. Its status as a non-material object with a non-traditional history is more uncertain within the marriage of art to a state marriage of dominant ideologies and market forces. For video, like feminism, also had an imagined Golden Age as the oppositional Other. In this utopian past, conceptualized in an era before Reagan and Thatcher ascended to conservative economic thrones, and well before Mulroney and Chirac were elected in the pendulum swings of democratic politics, video was to become a medium of socialist and populist dimensions. Envisioned as a tool which would allow artists to critique dominant culture outside of High Art's object-orientated and capitalist structures, guerilla video would provide alternative windows to the world. Community-controlled cable stations and public TV would replace the mass-media's images with a culturally diverse democracy of representation.

Not only do the master's tools not dismantle the master's house, but sometimes access to them at all is a prohibitive aspiration. Thus despite the optimistic fervour of a satellite revolution, the development of video's technology remained embedded in the demands of a capitalist infrastructure. And the distribution of time-based images remained subject to the control of the political and economic broadcasting elites. Faced with the difficulty of dismantling the fortifications of mass-media and the global networks of television, artists in Canada chose to strategize around the establishment of non-profit centres for the production, distribution and viewing of videotapes. Trading one father's house for another, video artists found themselves in a hybrid

world, inside the father's house but on the margins of its institutions, outside of television but cognizant of its cultural domination.⁷

For women, video's hybrid context within a dominant art seemed to offer an advantageous site of intervention. As a new medium it was unfettered by a constraining history of do's and don'ts enforced by the male-dominated infrastructure of schools, museums and galleries that had traditionally excluded female artists. The medium provided an instant feedback system where live performance could be intercut with prerecorded images. A conceptual space was created where the limitations of narrative could be challenged or dominant genres such as soap-opera re-invented. Autobiography blurred the boundaries between fiction and documentary. Addressing the audience directly, or utilizing voice-overs, women were able to articulate the context and the critique of their representational strategies. The mechanisms of voyeurism were called into question. The historical objectification and passive positioning of the female was challenged through an alternative framing of female identity and subjectivity. Gender oppressions were cross-examined through the appropriation and deconstruction of mass-media images. Representations that were specific to a female imaginary were envisioned. The implicit and explicit structures of sexism were under seige.

The utopian hopes for a gender-inspired revolution within the video medium, however, soon became entangled in the same contradictions which had confronted feminism in general. For as video became absorbed into the institutions of the art world, its site as a medium for feminist intervention became circumscribed. Taught within colleges as a time-based art, video presented the difficulties of any technical trade where the mechanics of the language are mystified and denied by the boys in control. The "tech" department of the Ontario College of Art, as street rumours would have it, being a case in point. A network of festival and gallery screenings and museum acquisitions ensured video's survival but began to homogenize the parameters of its interventions. Video's technological imperative interlocked with an art world's fetishization of formal issues where style was privileged over content. This, in turn, translated itself to the community standards applied by the arts councils for the funding of independent work. And as everyone knows, the bottom line in any medium is access to the resources and time and money to produce.

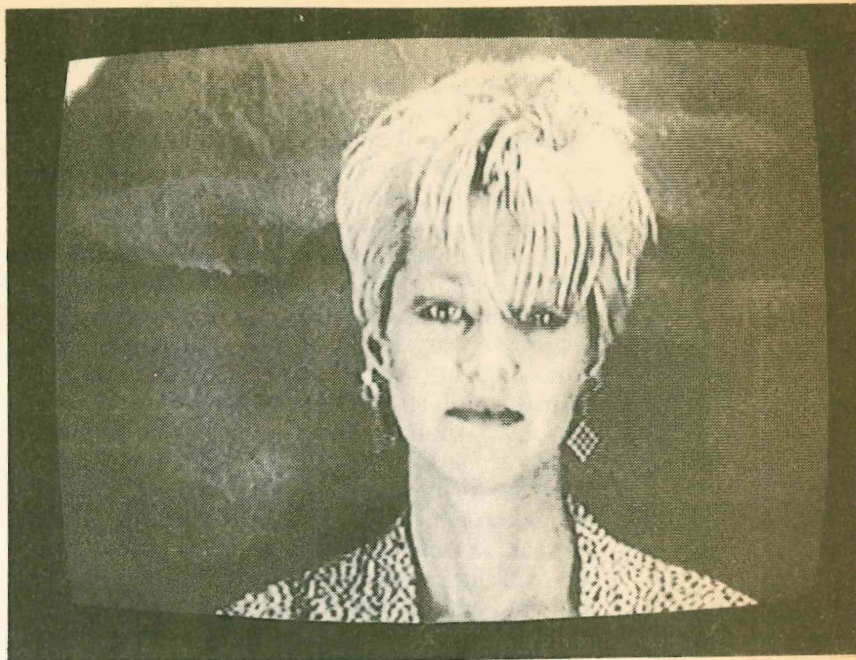
For women video artists, the consequences of this shifting terrain were double-edged. Struggles fought on a platform of gender oppression had insured their inclusion as video became contained by the infrastructures and expectations of the dominant art world. On the other hand, women's video could no longer be claimed as a site of categorical opposition. For in taking up con-

temporary feminism's challenge of differences engendered between class and race and sexuality, the limitations of strategies framed by gender as the dividing line of oppression became evident. What was the radical outside in the 1970s became an inside reflection of a dominant 80's imaginary. Images framed within a heterosexual economy of difference were doubled back into the hall of mirrors, re-producing an homogenous Other. The use of genre irony and camp became questionable strategies, as easily reinforcing as dismantling stereotypes. Appropriations from mass-media ended up re-presenting women as white, rich, and glamorous. Formal innovations and sophisticated technology to express the internalization of oppression did not lead from the father's house to the self-absorbed altar of his simulacrum. For the voracious appetite of the dominant culture quickly swallowed innovations produced on the margins, turning electronic tricks into the pabulum of rock videos.

Confronted by a context where the use of the master's tools has helped to renovate the exterior façade of the father's house but left the interior structures intact, feminists within the video community have begun to question their position within the father's house. The articulation of female sexuality as a desire between women and the exploration of mother/daughter relationships have begun to challenge the oppositional construction of the Other that folds difference back into compulsory heterosexuality. The examination of theories and structures of representation have deconstructed/reconstructed the underlying assumptions of women as Other. Video has been utilized as a documentary tool to give women the opportunity to voice differences of class and race, to articulate their struggles. These strategies are a beginning, but only a beginning, in taking up the challenge of difference's heterogeneity. For there are still complicities to be examined, questions to be asked, absences to acknowledge.

We must begin to re-evaluate the privilege of our oppositional convictions, to be conscious of silences while we speak, to examine our own participation within a structure of galleries and funding agencies which reproduce these silences. We must begin to ask why there are no women of colour actively producing as video artists, why the articulation of old women's, poor women's, immigrant women's and women of colour's experiences are so rare. We must begin to be accountable not only to visible oppressions, but to those rendered invisible by their exile. We must begin to question when our strategies present differences as a narrative of the victim, as a window-glimpse of oppression, rather than as the articulation of voices we can learn from. For difference is not asking us to add token representations to a collection of images, nor to abandon

Still courtesy of Vitape



Still from *I Am An Artist, My Name is...*
by Elizabeth MacKenzie
and Judith Schwartz,
3 hrs 40 min., 1985.

Still from *It Depends* by
Paulette Phillips, 29
min, 1984.



our own articulation of experience and oppression, but to examine our own complicity within the father's house, to no longer fear our own contradictions nor fear that our "own truths are not good enough."

In return, the challenge of difference points the way from the father's house. It offers the possibility of claiming video as a borderland medium where women's images can exist both inside and outside of master narratives. It charts a path from the simulacrum of social inaction towards a place where the deconstruction/construction of representation will create a heterogeneous culture of alignments and empowerment between women. Understanding difference as it interlocks across the vectors of race, class and sexuality, will begin to free our blinkered vision. Amnesias constructed within the father's house will become uncovered, memories recovered. Voices and images will emerge as we begin to heal the split personalities which have enabled us to survive through sensory deprivation. For in turning a deaf ear and blind eye to each other's oppressions, we have ended up building walls instead of dismantling the barriers of the father's house which lie between us.

POSTSCRIPT:

The Mestiza Way (Gloria Anzaldúa)

"Her first step is to take inventory. *Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja*. Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back — which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which baggage from the Spanish father, which baggage from the Anglo?

Pero es difícil differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*. She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. *Luego bota lo que no vale, los desmientos, los desencuentos, el embrutecimiento. Aguarda el juicio, hondo y enraizado, de la gente antigua*. This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She transforms the small "I" into the total Self. *Se hace moldeadora de su alma. Según la concepción que tiene de si misma, así será.*"⁴ ●

DOT TUER is a writer living in Toronto. Her most recent publication was "PLEASURE IN THE DARK: Sexual Difference and Erotic Deviance in the Articulation of a Female Desire" in *Cineaction* No. 10, October 1987.

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FOOTNOTES

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