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The subject matter of 1970s feminist performance video was personal, often articulated in the direct address of an artist performing alone. Autobiography, identity, relation of self to others, questioning of female stereotypes, and expansion of self through personae were recurrent themes. This article traces the intersection of three movements especially active in the 1970s—feminism, performance art, and video—specifically as they were manifest in the new genre of feminist performance video.¹

The question of what was gained by performance art in its adoption of video is central to this discussion. Of equal significance is the way certain works incorporated video to help establish and maintain women artists as speaking subjects. Since women are generally denied equal social and linguistic status with men, it is not surprising that feminist artworks exhibit numerous strategies toward gaining this equality. The following analysis of several videotapes will demonstrate that such linguistic concerns are related to issues of sanity, sexuality, social roles, and taboos. Because 70s feminism challenged the assumed incompatibility between art and communication, I think it appropriate to employ speech act theory and discourse theory in this analysis—looking specifically at the works of Mary Louise Pratt, William Labov, and Emile Benveniste. Diverse works within this genre of video shared a basic level of content summarized by the statement "I am" and, furthermore, they demand the legitimacy of such content by framing it in the performative statement "I say." Video technology helped to establish this frame.

From a substantial body of '70s feminist performance video,² I have chosen to discuss five tapes:

Nun and Deviant by Nancy Angelo and Candace Compton (20 min., black and white, mono, 1976). In this tape, performance artists Angelo and Compton, as nun and deviant respectively, address the camera/viewer with three monologues each, which progressively dismantle assumptions about themselves and their roles.

Take Off by Susan Mogul (10 min., black and white, mono, 1974). Mogul works in live performance as well as in video. Her early works were done while she was a member of the Feminist Art Workshop led by Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville, and Arlene Raven. Mogul has stated that this environment had a very liberating effect on her and encouraged acts of assertion and confrontation. In *Take Off*, Mogul sits at a table and discusses the history of her vibrator; occasionally she interrupts her story to make use of the vibrator under the table. *Take Off* was made after Mogul viewed Vito Acconci's tape *Undertone* (1972) and is a direct parody of it.³ In *Undertone*, Acconci masturbates under the table where he sits, telling the audience his fantasies.

Why Would I Throw Eggs at You, Liz? by Aysha Quinn (4 min., black and white, mono, 1977). Quinn presently works as both performance artist and video artist. Much of her work is done in collaboration with John Sturgeon and examines the quintessential problems of male-female relationships. *Why Would I Throw Eggs at You, Liz?* is the closest of these video performance examples to theater. The role-playing of Quinn and Sturgeon borders on acting, a minimal plot is played out, and a cause-and-effect enigma is foregrounded—specifically, Who is throwing eggs at Quinn? It is the tape's negotiation between performance art and theatrical discourses that most interests me here.

Hey! Baby Chickiey (10 min., black and white, mono, 1978) and *Chicken on Foot, Version II* (8 min., black and white, mono, 1979), both by Nina Sobel. These two works share a similar theme and style; both were enacted alone by Sobel in her home and involve Sobel's use of "play" with a cooking chicken. Once a sculptor, Sobel now describes herself as a behavioralist video artist. She is interested in the effect of a video camera/monitor on people's communications and actions. Her earlier video works (*Selected Works*, 1972-74) suggest both sculpture and body art. For example, in *Breaking Glass*, Sobel smashes glass plates with a hammer while not wearing goggles. The primary image constructed by this activity for video is not the pile of glass pieces but her facial expression while producing them.⁴

Though specific production aspects of tapes in this genre vary considerably, these five tapes are typical of '70s feminist performance video. They exhibit a "low-tech" style—made with inexpensive video equipment, often half inch, black and white, portable cameras and decks. Generally they were made without a production crew. Consisting mostly of long takes and single-track sync sound, the final works reflect few or single camera set-ups, little or no camera movement, and minimal post-production work.

In *Why Would I Throw Eggs at You, Liz?*, numerous evaluative devices are evident including contradictions, questions, denials, expressive phonology, and gestures. At the level of filmic syntax, the close shots of Quinn's face, as eggs splatter on it, as well as the repetition of this action, serve as intensifiers.

It is important to note that expressions of equivalence need not be explicit verbal statements but can be accomplished thematically and symbolically. Nancy Angelo says "I am a nun" not only verbally, but by wearing a nun's habit. Though

Nun and Deviant is the only one of these tapes that uses the specific words "I am" with this particular significance, the other tapes are thematically constructed on this statement in that their subject matter explores and reveals the self. *Take Off* can be read as saying, "I am a sexual being which is not to be understood through double standards." *Why Would I Throw Eggs at You, Liz?* can be read as saying, "My experiences and perceptions are valid though they are constantly challenged."

I SAY I AM: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s

These works, then, are derived from the context of a particular decade—the '70s, with its concerns of a changing art world, the theory and practice of performance art, the influence of feminism on art and the wider society, and the establishment of a new artist's medium, video. Video was introduced as a technology available to independents in the '60s. During the '70s improved technology and wider accessibility allowed an impressive diversity of video works. The portability of equipment, simple production needs, and relatively inexpensive tape stock made video practical for individual expression as well as for collective projects.

Immediately a close connection developed between video and performance art. This is usually understood from the perspective of the video artist; simultaneous playback provided the artist with a mirror as well as a palette, so body and process were foregrounded as raw materials. From the performance artist's perspective, however, this connection between video and performance art raises other questions. Videotaping negates the most basic aesthetic of performance—its live element. In performing for video, the performance artist is choosing to relinquish the power of immediacy, that mode of confrontation, involvement, and sincerity produced by direct contact with an audience. The ability to distribute or broadcast video and therefore reach larger audiences, possibly outside the art world, is often suggested as the reason performance artists turned to video. However, the works I'm investigating were not distributed widely, were not broadcast, and are even now seen mainly for art historical purposes within institutional video and art departments. More significant reasons for working in video include the ability to work alone (not to face the audience in real time and space), the ability to edit and therefore control the final performance piece, and the ability to repeat the performance without the artist's physical presence.

Why Would I Throw Eggs at You, Liz? can be read as a questioning of subjective reality, ending in ambiguity. Its overall form implies a loop: it begins and ends with Quinn at her kitchen counter, making a salad and greeting her male friend as he enters the space off camera. One difference between beginning and ending is that at the end Quinn has egg in her hair, implying that what we have witnessed (i.e., eggs splattering in her face) indeed actually happened. Direct address is enacted visually in five close shots and one medium shot in which Quinn looks at the camera/us. In these, Quinn's face is hit with raw eggs coming from outside the frame, behind the camera, i.e., the source of the eggs is someone other than Quinn or us—although, until her friend appears from behind the camera, it appears Quinn's spoken accusations are directed at us. She accuses her friend of being the source. He denies this verbally, and his denial is momentarily confirmed visually during a second medium-long shot in which Quinn herself cracks an egg over her head and says, "You think I am

doing this to myself!" However, two brief shots early in the tape show close-up a hand taking eggs out of the refrigerator; since we also see the person's rolled-up shirt sleeves, while Quinn is wearing a sleeveless dress, we assume this action is not hers.

Within the theatrical space, the woman character's sanity is questioned. However, by employing video discourse in a nontheatrical mode which allows the performance artist's direct visual address to the camera/viewer, Quinn has complicated the dualism of sane/insane with contradictions regarding access to speaking authority and particularly with a contest between scripted and nonscripted existence. These contradictions testify to the problems encountered by a woman in the position of speaking subject. This tape exhibits a problematic version of our primary speech act, which can be symbolized by adding a question mark, making the particular expression here "I say I am?" It suggests that when the speech act "I say" is subverted, the assertion "I am" is more vulnerable to questioning.

Quinn's negotiation of performance art and theatrical modes in this tape is most interesting. If we understand her direct visual address (eye contact with us during six shots in which eggs are thrown in her face) as a form of suture seeming to bypass the camera, these shots can be read as an attempt to insert *discours* into *histoire*. In addition to the role of juror who observes/hears the reenactment/recounting of a prior scene via a necessarily fictional space, the viewer is alternately positioned in the relative role of witness. In this light, it becomes significant that when Quinn splatters an egg on herself she does not make eye contact with the audience but confines her glance to the fictional space. In contrast, in all other shots of eggs splattering against her face in which the eggs are from a source other than herself, an eye line match connects her (across time and space) with us.



Top and right: frames from *Why Would I Throw Eggs at You, Liz?* (1977), by Aysha Quinn.



Particularly important to the woman performance artist is the ability through video to create time and space, which she then controls. No doubt it is relevant that this recently established art form had no history of excluding women.⁵ While performance opportunities in the gallery establishment were not always available to women, video technology was accessible through schools and newly founded cooperatives. With this technological discourse, women artists created a new performance "place," securing the potential for a future audience, also to be "created" in the extra-gallery realm. Most importantly, video time and space allowed the woman artist to acknowledge her own voice without interruption.

In my view, the works discussed in this article constitute important early examples of these efforts. This genre's style of direct verbal address, direct visual address, and assertive performance presence was followed in the '80s by a preponderance of female voice-overs in women's video artworks as diverse as Martha Rosler's *Secrets From the Street: No Disclosure* (11 min., color, 1980), Cecelia Condit's *Beneath the Skin* (12 min., color, 1981), Jeanine Mellinger's *Nightmare* (15 min., color, 1981), Max Almy's *Perfect Leader* (4 min., color, 1983), and Irene Segalove's *More TV Stories* (14 min., color, 1985). As women video artists turned their cameras away from themselves to pursue the outside world, they retained the strategic position of speaking subject by using first-person voice-over narration. Traditionally, this authority position of disembodied voice-over also has been denied to women.⁶ With video art now turning rapidly toward the "objective" point of view and the voice of high-tech post-production, the challenge to engage in new styles without silencing women's voices gives linguistic concerns continuing relevance.

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