

## **I Say I Am: Women's Performance Video from the 1970s**

by **Maria Troy**

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 the expansion of self through personae were recurrent themes.—Chris Straayer<sup>1</sup>

Culled from the collection of the Video Data Bank, these video performances by eleven women artists, made from 1972 to 1980, sketch a time when feminism was a new and powerful liberatory movement, when video was a relatively new invention, and when social institutions, including the art world, were undergoing radical reevaluation.

The videotapes in *I Say I Am* are remarkable for their elegance and transgressive content; they distill complex taboos, intricate social relations, and personal reality to lasting images of beauty and intensity. Moving through an array of visual and performative strategies, these video artworks form a lingering meditation on how bodies are made to appear and signify. They complicate the personal and the political, and assert this intersection as a negotiation that remains fundamental to the formation of a subject in social space.

### **Background**

The feminist movement, with its drive to problematize female subjectivity, validate personal history, and change the position of women in society had a profound effect on the artwork women produced during the 1970s. Finding themselves excluded from traditional art circles, women artists formed collective production and exhibition organizations including galleries, festivals, publications and workshops.<sup>2</sup> While women artists worked in all mediums, performance art and video art were perhaps especially appealing because the new mediums had no history of excluding women.<sup>3</sup>

Performance art in the 1970s was also significant for women artists as a challenge to formalism. It presented a means to negate the division between art and life, to explore relational dynamics between artist and audience and to understand art as social and experiential. This had special meaning for women artists whose role in art history had been as model not maker, muse not master.<sup>4</sup> Reconceptualizing their role as artists in part by controlling the presentation of their bodies on stage, women's body art had "particular potential to destabilize the structure of conventional art history and criticism."<sup>5</sup>

Video extended the impact of performance, adding the possibility of remote and future audiences for a one-time presentation. Through video, the performance could become endlessly present, always enacted for the first time. The video camera also changed the nature of performance, enabling an intimacy in which artists would do things in front of a camera that they may not do in the presence of live audiences. When incorporated as an element in live performance, video equipment altered the experience of theatrical space by disrupting spatial continuity and adding a layer of technologically mediated presence and reception. Both male and female artists such as Willoughby Sharp, Lynda Benglis, Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas utilized this distance/intimacy to explore a range of psychosocial and psychosexual relations.

As a widely-heralded "revolutionary" medium, women looked to video to advance their own liberatory agenda through video.

Particularly important to the woman performance artist is the ability through video to create time and space, which she then controls...While performance opportunities in the gallery establishment were not always available to women, video technology was

accessible through schools and newly founded cooperatives. Within this technological discourse, women artists created a new performance 'place'...Most importantly, video time and space allowed the woman artist to acknowledge her own voice without interruption.<sup>6</sup>

Consumer-grade portable video equipment was simple enough to be operated without technical training and light enough for most women to handle. Portable broadcast television production, which required more specialized equipment and knowledge, was and still is largely a male-dominated realm.

The tapes collected in *I Say I Am* share certain aesthetic qualities which are derived from the practical limitations of early video technology—long takes, little or no editing, little or no camera movement, and direct address of the viewer. These common characteristics served as formal elements that positioned early video in opposition to television, as an art form concerned with duration, perception and artistic process. Early video art owed more to Minimalism and Conceptualism than to Madison Avenue or Hollywood. And compared to commercial mass media, these tapes are difficult to watch. They are too slow, too private, too confrontational on the level of viewer expectations and attentional time; they are too opposed to what David Antin called television's "money metric", the rigid fragmentation of television time into 15, 30, and 60 second slices.<sup>7</sup>

### **Desire and the Home: Program 1**

Challenging the dominant ways of making and critiquing art, feminist art practice in the 1970s stressed personal connections to materials and immediacy of context over formal abstraction. For many women, the home was a natural subject of artistic production as a highly charged site of rampantly contradictory meanings. As Lucy Lippard noted, "[women artists] work from such [household] imagery because it's there, because it's what they know best, because they can't escape it."<sup>8</sup> In *Desire and the Home: Program 1*, the artists explore domestic issues such as motherhood, sexuality, death, familial relationships, control of physical space and the preparation and consumption of food.

In *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* (14:00, 1978), Suzanne Lacy depicts how "gourmet carnivore tastes [can] take on a cannibalistic edge. This parody of a Julia Child cooking lesson collapses the roles of consumer and consumed; Lacy instructs us in the proper butcher's terms for cuts of meat by pointing them out on her body."<sup>9</sup> As Lacy mounts the lamb carcass, she literalizes the way women's bodies are traditionally dissected through objectification and fetishization and through this linkage between food, sex, and death, raises the taboo of cannibalism.

Nina Sobell evokes the same taboo in *Hey! Baby! Chickey!* (9:50, 1978) when she dances with a plucked chicken carcass pressed to her naked body. Bordering on the grotesque and unthinkable (if this woman plays with the chicken as a child, does that mean she would cook and eat her infant?) Sobell kisses, fondles, and dresses the chicken while making absurd faces at the camera. Appearing nude with the chicken, Sobell obscures the imaginary distinction between woman as mother/cook and woman as sexual object. In *Chicken on Foot* (:55, 1978), Sobell bounces a chicken on her foot as one would a child, periodically crushing eggs (a stand-in for fetal chickens?) on her knee. Her foot is stuck inside the carcass of the chicken. These two works by Sobell are a statement of the displacement of sexual desire on food and women's bodies and an expression of female ambivalence about motherhood.

In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (5:30, 1975), Martha Rosler "shows and tells" the ingredients of the housewife's day, the ABCs of kitchen gadgets, with movements more samurai-like than suburban. The kitchen is the "woman's place", that is, a woman is presumed to understand the signs of the kitchen, to know her tools and how to use them. Rosler's barely disguised hostility indicates that she indeed knows how to use her tools, but not

for the prescribed end—the preparation of scrumptious meals—but instead, toward realization of her own desires.

In the vein of personal narratives, Barbara Latham's *Feathers: An Introduction* (28:00, 1978) is a self-portrait centered on the story of her grandmother's comforter which, now worn, is spewing feathers everywhere. Displaying an arresting stage presence, Latham addresses the viewer as a potential friend/lover, speaking in a soft-spoken near-whisper and gingerly touching and kissing the camera lens and monitor. Then almost mocking the tape's intimacy, Latham gives us close-ups of herself chewing a sandwich and shaving her armpits, heightening the sense that she has been playing cat and mouse with the viewer all along. Despite the tape's casual and playful tone, and the use of familiar domestic props and settings, *Feathers* is carefully structured to keep the audience at a distance.

Janice Tanaka's *Beaver Valley* (7:00, 1980) is an early example of what was to become a popular strategy for women video makers, namely the appropriation (and subversion) of mass media images to critique representations of women's bodies and women's lives. By the end of the decade, as television as furniture was entrenched in nearly every American home, many feminist artists were recognizing media images as a political text with tremendous social influence. Here, television commercials in which women appear as one-dimensional sexy sirens (in one a woman's rear end in tight jeans is shown with a yellow racing car speeding toward her crotch) are balanced with original black and white scenes exploring conflicting emotions related to sexuality and motherhood.

## **Facing the Self: Program 2**

Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and [Vito] Acconci, with his less romantic image and pimply back, is an artist.—Lucy Lippard<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s considerable debate in art critical circles centered around Body Art practices, especially when it involved women artists using their bodies publicly. Women's body-centered art was seen, by some, as reclaiming the female form which had been traditionally appropriated by male artists. Others, including feminists and male critics, viewed this work as needlessly essentializing or purely narcissistic.<sup>11</sup>

The tapes in Facing the Self: Program 2 are organized around the appearance of the female form, particularly the face. Using at times elaborate but more often very limited visual means and divergent visual and theatrical strategies, each tape explores, asserts, withholds, and/or claims power over the representation of the artist's body, its appearance and experiences. Focusing on the problematic relationship of power between the artist and her audience, the artist bodily appears on screen but keeps herself somehow unavailable to the viewer. As the audience, we are a sometimes unwelcome, but always distant, viewer.

In Hermine Freed's *Two Faces* (7:30, 1972, silent), the artist focuses inwardly as she confronts, pets and French kisses her own reflection created by multiple cameras and a switcher that creates a split screen and overlapping images. The two faces in the title both belong to Freed. In the ghostly black and white of 1/2" open reel video, Freed consciously plays with the structure of the image, moving her body to create illusionistic folds in a playful, onanistic exercise.

Throughout this tape, Lynda Benglis asks "Now?" and "Do you wish to direct me?" and repeats commands like "I said start the camera." and "Start recording." She makes faces and sounds in reply to her prerecorded image on a monitor, and at one point appears to kiss herself. *Now* (11:40, 1973) continues Benglis' investigation of layered recording,

drawing attention to the multiple levels of time and work involved in constructing a media image. Benglis' insistent voice is alternately demanding and compliant, pointing to the relationships of power with others (technicians, etc.) who do not appear on screen but are intrinsically involved in the work.

Steina Vasulka's *Let It Be* (4:00, 1972) features an extreme close-up of the artist's mouth as she sings the Beatles anthem. Removing the song from its usual context, the piece takes on vicious overtones as Steina sings along slightly out of sync, her teeth bared and face twitching. Appearing grotesque and vaguely threatening, the artist's teeth, which are edged with metal, seem to chew and spit out the familiar words in a sinister and uncanny way.

In another work of simple means that seems vaguely threatening, *Mitchell's Death* by Linda Montano (22:00, 1978) moves slowly from a blur into a tight focus on the artist's face pierced by acupuncture needles. As the audio slips in and out of sync with the image, Montano intones the sometimes harrowing, sometimes oddly banal and comforting details of the death of her ex-husband from a gun accident. Despite the gruesome facts of the event being recalled, the tape is surprisingly free of sentimentality and emotion. Shot as one continuous long take, with no camera movement, the tape forces the viewer to concentrate on Montano's monotone chanting as it becomes an exorcism of pain, sorrow, guilt, mourning, and memory.

*Take Off* by Susan Mogul (10:00, 1974) is a direct response to *Undertone* by Vito Acconci, an early video classic in which Acconci sits at the end of a table and expounds a masturbatory fantasy about a girl under the table touching him. With tongue in cheek, Mogul mimics the set up of Acconci's tape to take charge of her sexuality, she matter-of-factly retelling the history of her favorite vibrator and occasionally demonstrating its use. As a member of the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles, Mogul has stated that she was writing an essay at the time comparing male artist's representations of their sexuality with female artists'.

Playing with clichéd feminine personae, Eleanor Antin in *Adventures of a Nurse* (15:00 excerpt, 1976) manipulates cut-out paper dolls to tell the story of innocent Nurse Eleanor who meets one gorgeous, intriguing and available man after another. Nurse Eleanor is the fantasy creation of Antin who herself is costumed as a nurse. Staged on a bedspread and acted by a cast of one, *Adventures of a Nurse* moves through successive layers of irony to unravel a childlike, self-enclosed fantasy of a young woman's life.

\*Please note that the distorted colors, dropout, striping and break up are either deliberate or results of irreversible damage to the tape.

1. Chris Straayer, "I Say I Am," p.8.
2. On history of feminism and women's art movement, see *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement* (in Britain) Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, eds. and intro. (NY: Pandora, 1987); *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (NY: Harper & Row, 1982); *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, eds. Broude and Garrard (NY: Harper Collins, 1992); and Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (NY: New Press, 1995).
3. This point is made in Straayer's article, in Amelia Jones' *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, and by JoAnn Hanley in her catalog essay for "The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75."
4. See Linda Nochlin, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" *Art News* (vol. 69, January 1971). Reprinted in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (NY: Harper & Row, 1988).
5. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, p.5.
6. Straayer, p.8.

7. David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," p.155-6. "The work is 'boring' as Les Levine remarked, 'if you demand that it be something else.'" Antin's main point is that video art is compared to broadcast television and judged boring.
8. Lippard, *Pink Glass Swan*, p. 62.
9. Micki McGee, *Unacceptable Appetites* (New York: Artist's Space).
10. Lippard quoted in McGee "Narcissism, Feminism and Video Art," p. 90.
11. See Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *Video Culture*, p.179-180; Amelia Jones, *Performing the Subject*, chapter 1 and 2; and McGee "Narcissism, Feminism and Video Art," p. 89.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Straayer "I Say I Am", p.8

<sup>2</sup> on history of feminism and women's art movement see *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement* (in Britain). Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, eds. and intro. NY: Pandora, 1987; *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard eds., NY: Harper & Row, 1982; *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, Broude and Garrard eds., NY: Harper Collins, 1992; *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* by Lucy Lippard. NY: New Press, 1995

<sup>3</sup> This point is made in Straayer's article, in Amelia Jones' *Body Art: Performing the Subject* as well as by JoAnn Hanley in her catalog essay for "The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75."

<sup>4</sup> See Linda Nochlin "Why are there no Great Women Artists?" *Art News* (vol. 69, January 1971). Reprinted in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*. NY: Harper & Row, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Amelia Jones *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, p.5

<sup>6</sup> Straayer, p.8

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155. "The work is 'boring' as Les Levine remarked, 'if you demand that it be something else.'" Antin's main point is that it is compared to broadcast television that video art is judged boring.

<sup>8</sup> Lippard, *Pink Glass Swan*, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Micki McGee, *Unacceptable Appetites*, New York: Artist's Space,

<sup>10</sup> Lippard quoted in McGee "Narcissism, Feminism and Video Art" p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> See Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" in *Video Culture* p179-180, as well as Amelia Jones *Performing the Subject*, chapter 1 and 2, and McGee "Narcissism, Feminism and Video Art", p. 89.