Deconstructing the Image of Woman: Video Portraiture and Women's Performance for the Camera 1972-1980

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Deconstructing the Image of Woman: Video Portraiture and Women’s Performance for the Camera 1972-1980

by

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December 14, 2018
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Signature

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments  ii
List of Illustrations  iii
Introduction: Through the Looking Glass: Interrogating the Image of Woman  1
Chapter One: I’ll Be Your Mirror: Video Portraiture and the Camera/Monitor as Mirror  18
Chapter Two: Evidencing the Mask: Masquerade as Critique  32
Chapter Three: Disrupting the Gaze: De-eroticizing the Image of Woman  45
Conclusion  60
Bibliography  65
Illustrations  70
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List of Illustrations

Hannah Wilke, *Gestures*, 1974, 35:30 min, b&w, sound, p. 70.


Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy*, 1972, 17:24 min, b&w, sound, p. 73


Introduction

Through the Looking Glass: Interrogating the Image of Woman

“And historically, there has always been a certain imbrication of the cinematic image and the representation of the woman. The woman’s relation to the camera and the scopic regime is quite different from that of the male.” Mary Anne Doane

“For from evolution, with consciousness, hopefully there would be Revolution: how one challenges dominant structures and methodologies of technology, its subsequent statements, ideologies, and forms of representation.” Dara Birnbaum

The camera clicks on, the screen adjusts, a woman is presented in black and white. Just her face, bare, staring directly at the lens of the camera. She pulls and prods at her face over the next half hour as she obsessively, ritualistically enacts various gestures and expressions. She stares at the camera, as if staring at herself in the mirror, kneading her face into a smile. The camera shuts off, then on again; the woman is shown from the shoulders up, like a bust, and slowly transitions from a smile, to a solemn stare, to a flirtatious slide glance. Hannah Wilke recorded the video, *Gestures*, in 1974 (fig. 1). The tape is one of a series she has described as her “performalist self portraits,” which she began producing in the 1970s. It is just one of many videos by women in the 1970s in which the artist herself is both the subject and object of the work. Wilke and other female artists, some of whom will be further considered in this thesis, made direct-for-camera performance-based videos in the 1970s, almost exclusively. Many of the

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1 Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* is exemplary of allegorical literature that puts forth a non-linear narrative of self-discovery and knowledge with a female protagonist.
artists who, like Wilke, began to experiment with the burgeoning field of video art, had been working in sculpture and performance and took up video as a new technology with which to continue exploring methods of performance and bodily expression. The questions this thesis poses are: what are the aesthetic categories of this type of work, or rather, which artistic modes did female artists explore in order to deconstruct the image of woman? What was it that made video an appealing apparatus for performing self-portraiture specifically for women? And further, how did women use video as a tool for critical self-reflection and deconstruction of the male gaze?

By the end of the 1960s, film was long established as the dominant visual mode of mass culture, and television, its domestic counterpart, also rose to prominence as nearly every household in America owned a television set. Video, the electronic output of the moving-image, became the lingua franca of the American image culture. By the mid-1960s consumer grade video cameras entered the market, and by the end of the decade, cameras like the Sony Portapak became widely accessible to middle-class consumers. Artists such as those considered in this thesis were among the first the produce independent video for screenings and exhibitions completely outside of the realms of corporate film and television.

Up until video cameras entered the consumer market, there was not an affordable alternative to film equipment. Film as a medium required a more laborious process of editing and distributing and was in the late 1960s an almost exclusively male dominated field. The introduction of affordable, portable, and fairly easy to use video equipment led to the development of self-produced video tapes. The Sony Portapak, a battery operated handheld

7 Carolee Schneemann, Yvonne Rainer, Shirley Clark, Maya Deren among other women were actively making film, though outside of the mainstream Hollywood circuit.
camera, retailed in 1968 for $2,000, a twentieth of the cost of equipment used in commercial film and television studios.\(^8\) Though electronic video equipment, as opposed to the photographic method of film, had been used in corporate television network studios, the distribution of lower cost video cameras opened the field of video to a much larger population of private individuals, as opposed to companies, to produce their own content. By the end of the decade, cameras like the Portapak had the capability to record, playback, rewind, and fast-forward, allowing for a freer use of the technology as it did not require a full camera studio to edit and produce. Early on cameras such as the Portapak were advertised to women as a gesture to emphasize the easy use of the technology.\(^9\)

Artists were among the first to explore the new potentials of self-produced videos for artistic and political purposes. There was an optimism that the video camera could undo the power structures of the media landscape when used independently, and could potentially undermine the politics and norms of mass culture. As stated by curator Glenn Phillips, “The promise held by video, that it could create ‘personal media,’ that normal people could control the production of video imagery and bypass tightly controlled corporate structure of commercial media, seemed like a revolutionary and democratic advance.”\(^10\) Video appeared to some as a tool for taking control of the images produced and consumed by the majority of the population. This desire to create new images was for female artists particularly poignant, as this impulse aligned with a feminist belief that creating alternative images of women and oneself was a political act working against media stereotypes that so often promoted sexist imagery.

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During the same decade, the Women’s Liberation Movement burgeoned in the United States as one of the major socio-political movements of the decade. Video, with its near immediate capability of recording and displaying, became a viable tool for making art under the urgent demand for new images of women. Laura Cottingham describes the rise of Second Wave feminism as an “image protest,” citing the “No More Miss America!” Protest in Atlantic City on September 7th, 1968. Organized by the New York Radical Women, the protest, as Cottingham remarks, was an impetus for a national movement pushing for equal rights for women. The press release for the protest stated, “We will protest the image of Miss America, an image that oppresses women in every area in which it purports to represent us.” The recognition that it was an image culture which held power in place and seemingly controlled women’s actions, behaviors, and socio-political condition was foregrounded in the collective actions which brought the Women’s Liberation Movement into public dialogue. As such, videos capacity to produce images in the very medium of the dominant cultural form (television), made sense as an appropriate tool for critiquing dominant modes of representation especially as pertaining to images of women.

In the 1950s, when television became a popular form of home entertainment, women were relegated back to the domestic sphere after having stepped into the workforce during World War II. As Laura Mulvey writes in her 1986 essay Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home, “The 1950s saw a swing to domesticity that complemented the US economy’s expansion in production. And then, as Rosie the Riveter has evoked too vividly, American women were being tempted and dragooned back into the home to readjust the unsettling effects of the Second World

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War on the division of labour between the sexes.”¹³ Domestic technology boomed in the postwar era, largely in an effort to mechanize the home and keep women busy. Television technology was often marketed toward women and catered to a domestic sphere. Cecilia Tichi writes about this, “And in the women’s sphere, the problems of intrusive masculine technology were also solved by disguising the TV—or rather, transcending it by changing the terms of its presentations from machine to aesthetic object.”¹⁴ From early on TV began to become an aestheticized object, much like the female body, making it a ripe site for feminist examination.

This critique of the media, via creating new methods for self-representation, was more specifically accessible to white women than it was to women of color. White women, whose values and freedoms were the central focus of the Women’s Liberation Movement, were empowered by protests like the Miss America Pageant, and texts, such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which centralized middle-class white women’s political and cultural conditions. Further, the movement's spokespersons, certainly those most often represented in the media, and even alternative media (for example *Ms. Magazine*), were white middle class women such as Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Considering the influence of media culture and the images of middle-class white women circulating in patriarchal media culture in their roles as housewives, mothers, and sexual objects, it is not surprising that white women felt empowered to speak back to their own images. Not only did the feminist movement of the 1970s lack visibility for women of color, but the media at the time also rendered women of color essentially invisible and hardly acknowledged their status as women whatsoever. At the beginning of the 1970s, as noted by David Joselit, “Whereas the values and traumas of the white middle-class are endlessly dramatized in commercial television programming, African Americans and other ethnic

minorities were barely represented in 1971.”

Representation was one of the major political points of the cultural revolution demanded by the Civil Rights Movement as well as the Women’s Liberation Movement. However, white women did not share the same lack of media visibility as women of color, which may be one of the many reasons that contributed to the lack of women of color producing this type of work in the 1970s.

In light of middle-class white women’s particular position, it is no surprise that video portraiture is a genre that is almost exclusively relegated to the purview of white female artists in the 1970s. This also has to do with circuits of access to the technology itself, as many of the women considered in this thesis had access to video equipment through networks supported by university and college systems (for example, Cynthia Maughan, who began making videos in graduate school at CSU Long Beach) or through networks of artist friends, one of which had the financial means to procure a video camera (like Dara Birnbaum, who was lent a Portapak by a friend in New York, after being inspired by video works she saw during a trip to Florence).

It is through various economic networks that white middle-class women were able to access the new portable media technology to create works of art. However, it is not that there were not women of color making film and video during the decade or working within their own networks to produce feminist art, but there is not the same mushrooming of direct for camera performance

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16 Joselit positions the Black Panthers as an example of image-conscious minority radicals, who demanded access to media and community control of television, Feedback: Television Against Democracy, 88.
17 Ana Mendieta did make similar works to the artists considered in this thesis, though she worked exclusively in film and dealt with themes of violence. Also notable is Howardena Pindell’s video Free, White, and 21 whose title refers to a common adage in classic Hollywood film, she uses some similar aesthetic constraints I will discuss such as directly speaking to the camera and masquerading (as a white woman), but with concerns separate from her white peers discussing the racial micro and macro aggressions she and her mother face as well as discrimination in the art world.
work, which in itself speaks to the different political and cultural urgencies felt by different groups of women.\textsuperscript{19}

Out of the myriad ways in which video art was employed, what has previously been described as performance-based\textsuperscript{20} or performance video\textsuperscript{21}, and what will be described here as video portraiture, emerged as an experimental practice. Works such as Hannah Wilke’s \textit{Gestures} use video technology as a device for creating self-portraiture in which the artist performs for the camera, foregrounding her body, appearance, and psychic space. Through the video portrait of the artist performing for the camera, the artist demonstrates methods of self-consciousness not dissimilar from feminist methods of consciousness-raising, in order to deconstruct and alternatively represent the “image of woman” by turning the camera on herself.

Performance art and its subgenre, body art, were also developing at the time and similarly placed an emphasis on the shifting nature of the subject. For example, Cindy Nemser wrote in her article “Subject – Object: Body Art” in 1971 about the framework and categories of body art. Naming only male artists in her essay, Nemser defines the goals of body art as navigating “man’s simultaneously subjective-objective existence.”\textsuperscript{22} Focusing on perceptual experience and phenomenology (and not mentioning gender), Nemser foregrounds body art, using one’s body as the primary material, as a “logical outgrowth” of developments in twentieth-century art, citing Pollock’s action paintings, Kaprow’s Happenings, Minimalism, and the performances of Bruce

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item For example, the artist group Where We At was a group of black women artists who came together in the 1970s to address their mutual concerns as black women artists, for further research on this topic see “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985: A Source Book” (Duke University Press, 2017). Also see Cheryl Dunye’s essay “Possessed” in the 1994 exhibition catalog for the “Bad Girls” exhibition at the New Museum which she curated the video programming for.
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Nauman and Richard Serra. The body, as Nemser establishes in her essay, had become a prevalent subject and material through which to explore physical and psychological experience. Subjectivity and authorship, two major concerns of the art of the 1970s, also presented a fruitful topic for artists working with video as the use of portable consumer video cameras brought with it a heightened awareness of one’s subjectivity and gaze. Video had a particular relationship to the body and body-oriented work such as performance art because of its ability to document directly and provide immediate feedback without having to develop film or print images. Further, video was culturally and politically loaded because of its relationship to forms of mass media like television and cinema. Women’s video portraits, like Wilke’s *Gestures*, use the body as material to enact a subject position that is specifically female, sometimes exaggerating ascribed feminine attributes and appearances to the point of absurdity. By creating works specifically to be displayed on the monitor, female artists making video portraiture spoke directly to portrayals of women in mass media.

Recording one’s own body is inherently subjective. This is because when the artist-subject (in the case of the works considered here) intentionally records herself, there is an acknowledgement of being looked at which generates a performative affectation. By simultaneously being the director, producer, and performer, the artists making video portraits are in complete control of the creation of their image and the performance of their various subjective positions. Artists working in the video portrait mode foreground their gaze and exemplify Laura Cottingham’s argument that, “The primary aesthetic contribution of the feminist art movement was its insistence on centralizing female subjectivity…” 23 These works display a heightened recognition of female subjectivity, by focusing on the artist and her body/image/visage; they push forth the significant recognition of female subjectivity, which is described by Patricia Cottingham, *Seeing through the Seventies*, 167.
Mellencamp as, “...a shift from being a desirable, supportive object to becoming a speaking subject, artist, or writer.” Representing female subjectivity was, as such, a feminist approach, reinstating the self and gendered social positions as valid artistic subject matter.

The acknowledgement of the subjective positions in relation to gender counters the notion that recorded images are neutral or that the camera is objective, emphasizing the effects of a particular gaze. When portable video cameras first entered the market, academics in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology used the camera to record groups of people to then replay as a behavioral study tool. As Dan Graham describes in his essay “Video in Relation to Architecture,” under the subtitle Video as a Social-Psychological Model, “Video replay enabled social scientists to discern the way in which their own ‘objective’ observations actually reflected their ‘subjective’ observation point and position as an interacting participant.” The instant replay of video appeared to present a reality that was before unattainable to fully witness, watching oneself and acknowledging the gap between one’s inner psyche and exterior presentation. Video’s use as a behavioral study tool emphasizes the use of video feedback, or replay, as a learning tool, and more importantly, demonstrates the way in which video is able to lay bare the relationship between individuals “self-perceptions to their mental states.” For Graham, this is particularly because of the temporal quality of video and its ability to capture an image that is not static.

The temporal nature of video can then be seen as an effective tool for releasing a static image of women and introducing a dynamic and shifting representation of the female form. The moving-image medium thus appeared to be a tool that could push back against static, stagnant

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24 Patricia Mellencamp, Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, and Feminism, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), xi.
26 Dan Graham, “Video in Relation to Architecture,” 185.
images of women. The art inspired by the dialogue Second Wave feminism spurred was working against a long tradition in Western art history in which the female form is depicted as a decorative object, a muse, a symbol of love and male desire. There was an urgency to create new content in which women were depicted not as politically subjugated, inert, or decorative. Speaking from a younger generation in the 1990s, Nicole Eisenman has said about her approach to employing the body in art, “since we are ‘burdened’ with female bodies, we have to deal with representing ourselves within the history of female objectification. We need to have an ironic and critical view of the body to turn mainstream traditional narratives on their heads.”27 The burst of video made by women in the 1970s, and in particular in the video portrait method, is but one example of the various ways in which female artists tackled the issue at hand: how to represent the female body in an a critical and productive way? The performance-based video work by women in the 1970s explored the expressive potential of the body through a myriad of approaches in efforts to attempt an solution to this issue.

Video also presented itself as a new medium that women could pioneer. Due to the long history of male dominance in Western art, more established methods of art making such as painting and sculpture were burdened with a male-centric tradition to reckon with. Accessible video technology was also introduced at a moment in which the aesthetics of High Modernism promulgated by figures such as Clement Greenberg were being critiqued. Laura Cottingham writes about this shift, “Beginning in the seventies and into the eighties, art that visibly critiqued high modernism and asserted social difference began to emerge from practitioners outside of the historically valuated class.”28 Women, being one such category of historically undervalued population, were crucial to critiquing such a codified movement in American art history. Lucy

27 Conversation with Lynne Tillman from Nicole Eisenman, ed. Beatrix Ruf (Zurich: JRP/Ringier: 2011), 18
28 Laura Cottingham, Seeing through the Seventies, 54.
Lippard wrote of feminist art in 1980, “Feminism’s greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its lack of contribution to modernism.” Rather, as Lippard goes on to argue, the goals and successes of feminism as it pertained to art were to “change the character of art” by opening up the field to embrace female artists and the female experience in a multitude of forms. High Modernism, which promoted purely formalist work and argued for ideas of a universal human experience as expressed in purely formal terms and assuming formal language as universal, had left little to no room for non-male, non-white artists to express their experiences. In an anti-modernist spirit, new methods of art-making promoted by feminist artists, video artists, and those who intersected both positions, reintroduced content, autobiography, and new materials as valid artistic concepts.

In this upheaval, there was a desire to change the course of artistic hierarchies, and the acknowledgement of a female experience was seen as one way to radically shift the trajectory of art. Painting and sculpture which had remained the most lauded mediums throughout Modernism, heralded by critics like Clement Greenberg, were reconsidered beginning in the 1960s for the ways in which hierarchies of form similarly upheld gender biases. Artists pushed the boundaries of medium specificity in efforts to reckon with the authority of painting and sculpture, leading them to new mediums all together such as video and performance. A similar dialogue was also happening in relation to film and mass culture, as articulated by theorists such as Laura Mulvey in her famous 1975 essay “The Visual Pleasure of Narrative Cinema,” in which she analyzes the gendered nature of viewing, describing the way spectatorship operates in classic Hollywood films as masculine. Mary Anne Doane, who wrote her widely known text “Film and

the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator” in 1982, urged the reader to consider why it is difficult to theorize around the female spectator. For Doane, who uses theories of French feminists such as Luce Irigaray to drive her point, it is because of the close relationship women have to their own image; it is an issue of proximity. As she writes, “And it is the absence of this crucial distance or gap which also, simultaneously, specifies both the hieroglyphic and the female. This is precisely why Freud evicted the woman from his lecture on femininity. Too close to herself, entangled in her own enigma, she could not step back, could not achieve the necessary distance of a second look.”

As opposed to film, video technology, because of its ability to provide feedback, and nearly instantaneously at that, thus gave women a tool to enact distance and take a critical look at the making of their image. These texts, which were being written and disseminated within the same decade, reflect the larger dialogue happening around sexual difference and moving-image culture. Exploring sexual difference, particularly in the art world, and the status of women in structures of society was a topic that art historians, like Linda Nochlin, and artists were analyzing.

Texts such as Mulvey’s and Doane’s reflect a heightened awareness of the authoritative gaze of the camera. The dominant gaze of pictorial media culture was (and arguably is still) gendered male and aligned with patriarchal beliefs. The power dynamic structured to reflect gendered power dynamics, established in the institution of mass media, could thus be shifted by offering alternative perspectives, such as a female perspective. For female artists using video, this meant recording one’s own gaze/visage. Being both in front of and behind the camera (as either director or producer, or both), female artists could be in complete control of the construction of their own image. Video portrait works are but one set of several approaches to shifting the gaze of the camera. For artists making video portraits, the main aim was to use the

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31 Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 75–76.
camera as a tool to analyze the relationship between sexual difference, the gaze, and representations of femininity—the image of woman.

As such these works critique images of women circulated in mass culture by offering alternative images presented through the apparatus of mass media, the video camera. Using their own bodies, artists examine images of themselves and culturally formed stereotypes of femininity as normalized by film, television, and advertising. Through self-reflection, at the literal and metaphorical level, coming face-to-face with one’s own image, artists making video portraits foreground a subjective position, and a distinctly female perspective, analyzing the construction of their image and its representation. These works are, as such, experimental, meaning they seek to create a new dialogue around images of femininity through the use of a new medium. Yvonne Spielmann writes about these performance-based experimental works of the 1970s, “Altogether, the thematic spectrum of self-reflexive video praxis takes in the cornerstones of an intent to criticize the media: an artistic-aesthetic concern and the experiment in image technology.”\(^{32}\) Works, which Spielmann didactically describes as “self-reflexive video performance”\(^ {33}\) and what here is described as video portrait, reflect the desire to create new images and are examples of a utopian outlook that video technology had potential to infiltrate alternative images and effect societal change. Video portrait, as it is defined in this thesis, is refers to video tapes made in the 1970s with consumer grade video cameras to produce works of art in which the artists performs for the camera, foregrounding their image as the subject and object of the work.

In the following pages, I will discuss selected examples of video works that exemplify the defining characteristics of video portraiture in order to identify specific aesthetic and

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\(^{33}\) Spielmann, *Video the Reflexive Medium*, 101.
theoretical tendencies that align with postmodern and feminist approaches to art-making. The goal of this thesis is to identify and analyze certain theoretical and socio-historical conditions that inform these early video works as well as to discern the formal qualities of specific examples and how these aesthetic categories align with goals of feminist art and theory. Video portrait is a term used here to define the act of recording oneself as self-portraiture and the formal and structural constraints of the video camera as a mirror and tool used to deconstruct one's image. The videos addressed in this thesis as video portraits are all self-portraits of the artist, recording herself performing for the lens of the camera using it as vehicle through which to probe and dissect their recorded image as it relates specifically to the apparatus of the video camera and the monitor as well as the self-reflexive nature of feminist art in the 1970s. When creating a self-portrait, the artist enacts the phenomenological experience of seeing and being seen; it is in this self-reflexive practice that a particular ontological state is performed. Through self-reflection, the artist uses the medium of video to summon a pictorial representation of herself in order to examine her image, rendering herself as other, and bringing to existence the gap necessary to create distance from her own image in order to critically analyze it. These works thus undermine the assumed neutrality of the video camera, the apparatus of media, and simultaneously underscore the false idea that there is a naturalized order of femininity by revealing the construction of the image of woman. The key aesthetic and theoretical categories that define video portraiture will be explicated through formative video works by several artists working in this mode.

The mirror concept, or mirroring in the psychological sense, is foremost as the video camera when turned on oneself can record the intimate act of self-examination. The mirror effect of video portraiture will be demonstrated through two videos, Lynda Benglis’s Now (1973) (fig
2.) and Dara Birnbaum’s *Mirroring* (1975) (fig. 3). The first category for analysis will be the psychological space created when performing for the camera, using the camera and monitor as a mirror. In *Now*, Benglis performs in front of a previously recorded image of herself, foregrounding the self-reflexive potentials of video and the use of the camera as mirror. In *Mirroring*, Birnbaum performs between the video camera and an actual mirror. Through these two approaches both works demonstrate a desire to interrogate the mirror effect of video, largely influenced by psychoanalytic theories of mirroring and the mirror stage of self-identification, namely those of Jacques Lacan.\(^{34}\)

The second aesthetic and theoretical category of video portraiture to be considered is that of gender performativity as masquerade. Often exaggerated by a persona, character, or costume, masquerade is utilized to probe the conditioning of femininity to reveal its construction. Joan Jonas’s *Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy* (1972) (fig. 4), in which Jonas performs for the camera as her persona “Organic Honey” based off her live performances, and Cynthia Maughan’s *Zebra Skin Clutch* (1977–78) (fig. 5), a more directly satirical short video in which Maughan, wearing sunglasses and a sunhat, recalls the physical appearance of a beautiful woman and in a straight-faced manner diaristically describes her for the viewer. Gender performativity is emphasized by foregrounding what Mary Anne Doane describes as “masquerade,” the flaunting of femininity in order to create distance between the female self and the image of woman. The works demonstrate two different approaches to deconstructing the image of woman through techniques related to theories of the masquerade and gender performativity via the use of feminized props.

The final aspect of video portraiture I will address is that of de-eroticizing the image of woman to disrupt the male gaze and demystify the image of woman. The works used to demonstrate this particular quality are Hannah Wilke’s *Gestures* (1974), in which Wilke probes her visage and performs a variety of poses for the camera, and Joan Jonas’s *Good Morning, Good Night* (1976) (fig. 6), in which Jonas uses the camera as a calendar, recording to document her daily routine as self-portraiture. These tapes use repetition and duration as formal qualities to undo and make evident the construction of oneself as image and to present themselves as they are, embracing the routine and ordinary aspects of the everyday. The repetition is also in part due to the capabilities of the technology; to create longer length videos, the artists spliced together recorded segments into a durational whole. Both of these works utilize temporality and duration to de-eroticize the female body, working against the male gaze. Focusing on her subject position, artists making video portrait attempted to de-eroticize their image through foregrounding the mundane in experimental ways and undermining the fetishistic gaze of the camera. The mundane is underscored by presenting oneself as unadorned, negating the usual spectacle of women’s bodies on camera, and by enacting ritualistic actions repetitiously in order to strip their gestures of an overtly sexualized nature by making themselves monotonous. Just as feminist film theorists and filmmakers explored the goals and techniques of women’s cinema, female artists similarly explored the capabilities of video as a tool to work against the oppressive male gaze.

Through these three chapters, I will argue that the various approaches and conceptual and aesthetic conditions of video portraiture were specific to the decade and had specific aesthetic and political concerns for female artists. The women whose work I am addressing made these discreet video works almost exclusively during the 1970s, later moving on to different

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35 In this thesis, female artist specifically refers to cis-gendered women, who were the focus of the Women’s Liberation Movement.
approaches to video art or abandoning it all together. The selection of these videos is meant to provide examples of particular aesthetic tendencies to better understand the history of women’s performance for the camera. This genre, whose legacy extends into our current “selfie” age, sheds light upon a desire for self-reflection and video’s unique capability as a tool for self-representation. Video portraiture has a significant impact on the trajectory of video art, especially for artists such as Sadie Benning who continued this practice as a young artist in the 1990s, looking back at the 1970s. Benning stated about their early video works, “I got started partly because I needed different images and I never wanted to wait for someone to do it for me.” Benning’s statement reflects the impulse to use video to create images of one’s self, an impulse which has its roots in the video portraiture of the 1970s.

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Chapter One

I’ll Be Your Mirror: Video Portraiture and the Camera/Monitor as Mirror

“It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it.”
Laura Mulvey

“Men become what they imagine they are. So do—and will—women.”
Douglas Davis

Almost immediately upon the emergence of home video cameras into the consumer market, artists explored the potential of video to perform self-reflection, using the camera and monitor as a mirror. When artists like Lynda Benglis began to create video-specific works in the 1970s, the video camera and the television monitor became the sole apparatus of the work. The immediacy of single channel video work allowed for direct recording and monitoring of one’s own image on the screen. This new phenomenon lead to a plethora of experimental video work that explicitly examined this condition. Video portraiture of women is one of several

38 Douglas Davis, “The Invisible Woman is Visible,” Newsweek, November 15, 1971, 131. Davis’s article is a write-up on five young female up-and-coming artists, including Lynda Benglis.
39 Scholars Yvonne Spielmann and David Joselit have written about this specific condition of video in their respective publications, Video the Reflexive Medium and Feedback: Television Against Democracy. Both authors raise the self-reflexive urge in early single-channel video tapes, however neither discusses this phenomenon at length as a specifically female tendency in the wake of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the United States. Spielman raises this trend in her section “Video Cultures” in which she connects what she calls “self-reflexive video praxis” to a general urge to criticize the media as “an artistic-aesthetic concern and the experiment in image technology,” briefly recognizing female artists’ point of reference as specifically influenced by second wave feminism’s criticism of media image culture’s depiction of women, (114–16). Joselit brings up a similar point, though not directly tied to feminism’s influence, in his chapter “Avatars,” discussing the work of Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas as examples of “identity as process.” (153–63).
41 A precursor to this work could be Andy Warhol’s 1965 video Outer and Inner Space which he made with Edie Sedgwick who performs for the camera in front of a pre-recorded projection of herself, for further research on this video see Callie Angell’s “Doubling the Screen: Andy Warhol’s Outer and Inner Space” Millennium Film Journal, 38 (2002).
possible new genres of moving-image based work to come out of this moment and in direct
response to the technical parameters of the medium.

Lynda Benglis created her video portrait *Now* in the fall of 1973. This is a twelve-minute
long work in color in which she appears in profile, set against a pre-recorded image of herself on
a television monitor, mimicking her recorded double’s speech, gestures, and movements. Benglis
taped this video at Hunter College in 1973, with the technical assistance of Tony Vlatkovich.42
Most of Benglis’s tapes were in black and white, as was typical of the period, but here the
oversaturated color of the video along with the low quality of the video and static feedback from
recording the monitor render the work disorienting. The title, *Now*, as Anne Wagner points out,
is, “an explicitly ironic acknowledgment of a present collapsed and deferred when confronted by
its recorded past.”43 Benglis’s “mirroring” of her past recorded self and “present” recorded self
further disorients the viewer, who is left to question which is the “real” Benglis. In this gesture,
Benglis raises questions of video’s immediacy and ability to capture the real. Her repetition of
the phrases “Now” “Now?” “Is it now?” further prompts consideration of the gap between the
real time of viewing video art and the recorded past, and in Benglis’s case the distance between
her prerecorded self and herself performing in front of the recording. Benglis creates a condition,
via mirroring, in which she is both the subject and object. In Benglis’s video, she mirrors her
own image, but it is a blurred and inaccurate mirror, the function of which is mainly to create a
condition in which she can hold her own image and speak to it. She says of her own image in the
video, “This image here, good.”

42 Benglis produced three video tapes at Hunter College with the assistance of Tony Vlatkovich, *Now, Collage*, and
*Female Sensibility*. *Now* is Benglis’s first color tape. Considering that her previous black and white videotapes were
produced in her studio, it is a strong possibility that Benglis sought out the specific resources at Hunter College to
produce a color videotape. Benglis had taught at Hunter College spring the spring and fall of 1972. In 1973, Benglis
taught at CalArts where she then took a filmmaking course in the summer. Benglis then returned to Hunter to teach
in the fall of 1973, where she then taped *Now*. For a complete timeline see the chronology in Susan Krane’s *Lynda
Benglis: Dual Natures*.

Primarily known as a sculptor, Benglis made fifteen videos, the majority of which were created in the 1970s. Benglis came to video during a period of her career in which she more directly addressed issues raised by feminism, reconsidering the content of her work rather than just formal concerns. As Susan Krane acknowledged of Benglis’s videos, the content of the video work is distinctly different from that of her sculpture; working in a new medium, Benglis, as Krane expounds, was able to explore issues of “identity, control, androgyny, and sexual ambiguity”—all more politically oriented and theoretical issues which she wanted to keep out of her sculptural practice. Video thus presented itself as a completely separate realm in which she could explore the urgent political issue of female representation. In this work, Benglis faces her mirror image, creating a double portrait, which is representational of the act of looking at oneself in an actual mirror. Benglis mirrors her own image and mimics her previously recorded gestures and statements, literally echoing herself. Krauss deemed this self-reflexive gesture narcissistic in her essay “Video and the Aesthetics of Narcissism,” although Krauss did not address the specific gendered politics of male versus female subjects on the screen. Similar to a work Benglis executed a year prior, *On Screen*, in which Benglis performs in front of her image on the monitor as well, in *Now* Benglis sets herself against her pre-recorded image rather than standing in front of it coming in even closer proximity to her recorded image and creating a scenario in which it becomes more difficult to determine the difference between the two. Coming face-to-face with her recorded double, Benglis foregrounds the experience of self-reflection, examining the relationship between her inner self, or psyche, and her exterior self, the body. This exploration of the relationship between one’s inner and outer states is, in this tape, explicated by the act of mirroring.

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In *Now*, Benglis appears in profile on the screen against the static of a television monitor. Benglis’s profile fills a full half of the screen, as her recorded image appears to occupy the opposite half. Benglis faces her digital image and speaks back to it, repeating the phrases like “Now” “Is it Now?” “Start Recording” and “Do you wish to direct me?” Benglis presents herself as the director of her own image, and she takes full erotic command of her pre-recorded image, appearing to kiss it. In this autoerotic moment, Benglis critically mocks concepts of the gaze and fetish purported by psychoanalytic theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Benglis specifically conjures theories of subjectivity and objectivity, specifically those of Freud, who put forth a dichotomy between the male and female conditions, male being an active subject and female being a passive object. In Benglis’s autoerotic moment, she takes her pre-recorded image as object and makes explicit the erotic nature of viewing, which will two years later be the subject of Laura Mulvey’s influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

Benglis renders her image an object through the use of video feedback. In her 1976 essay “Video and the Aesthetics of Narcissism,” Rosalind Krauss writes on Benglis’s *Now*, “Rather it is a displacement of the self that has the effect ... of transforming the performer’s subjectivity into another, mirror, object.”45 Here Krauss refers specifically to the “substitution” of oneself with a mirrored double, which Benglis presents as her pre-recorded image on the monitor. The instant feedback of video is underscored here, to the point of literalization, and confrontationally analyzes notions of the subject-object dichotomy, sexual difference, and narcissism as put forth by Freud, and later critically reexamined by Lacan.

As Lacan offered in his 1949 lecture “The Mirror Stage as Formative to the I Function as Revealed Psypoanalytic Experience,” the mirror stage, in which an infant recognizes their external self (as in a mirror reflection), or *imago*, is a formative stage of self-identification, the

forming of an “I” in which one recognizes their reflected self as image/object. For Lacan, this moment of recognition signifies a crucial moment of self-perception in which the ego is split between subjectivity and one's image (imago, the ego ideal). He argues it is at this moment that one begins to understand their self in relation to external objects and others. He writes, “It suffices to understand the mirror stage…as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely the transformation that takes places in the subject when he assumes…an image…” Lacan saw the formation of ego as founded on the basis of a false relationship between one’s self (ego) and one’s image (image). For women the discordance between how one sees themselves and how their image is socially constructed is especially fraught because in the identification of a split between ego and image there is also a confrontation with how ones image is socially constricted and defined. It is in the mirror stage that the splitting of the ego is developed into a symbolic order of perception and self-awareness, the genesis of a relationship with ones image of self. Benglis, throughout her videotape, enacts the mirror stage by mirroring her image as reflected on the television monitor, and by recording herself further renders her image as object, that is to create distance between herself and her image. Acting as both subject and object in this video, Benglis is able to assume the role of the male spectator, which has been traditionally the governing role in terms of spectatorship, as well as that of the eroticized object of the male gaze, the female subject. But, there is confusion here, because, as Laura Hoptman has previously pointed out, Benglis does not perform a “visual masquerade” using props or costumes to act out her different roles; instead she confuses the viewer by simply being her

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46 In “The Mirror Stage,” Lacan describes an infant leaning forward to view his image “in order to fix it in his mind” thus rendering it an object of the gaze (94).
48 Susane Krane similarly describes this act of Benglis as assuming the “stock male and female roles.” Krane, Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures, 37.
unadorned self. Benglis confronts her image (imago) in this tape and in a sense “regresses” back to the mirror stage in order to examine her image, to de-construct it in order to re-present it.

In creating her image as object, and literally displaying it as in object on the screen in close-up, Benglis also presents a convention of Hollywood cinema—the close-up of a woman’s body. Laura Mulvey, whose work will be considered in more detail in chapter three, extrapolates on this filmic convention, “...close-ups of legs... or a face... integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives a flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than a verisimilitude, to the screen.” By cropping her image, so that the viewer can only see her profile, Benglis simultaneously mocks and makes visible the lack of depth, which, as Mulvey argues, inscribes the woman as erotic image. Benglis has said about her approach to video, “I wanted to examine the camera’s and the monitor’s relationship to the body, the dialogue back and forth, and the process of making a video in relationship to the material; the equipment and the image.” Benglis’s interest in video, as revealed by her statement, was spurred by an interest in the technologies’ relationship to the body and image making, and the possibilities of bodily experience through the process of taping.

Benglis’s video playfully prods at the fetishization of women on screen through mirroring the experience of which is captured by the time-based nature of the medium that is able to play back the act of mirroring. By sexualizing her own image through the autoeroticism made possible by mirroring her own image, she attempts to subvert the male gaze. In the act of self-reflection, Benglis enacts what Mulvey would describe as the masculinization of

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49 Laura Hoptman, “For the Amusement of A Goddess,” in Lynda Benglis, eds. Franck Gautherot, Caroline Hancock, Seungduk Kim, (Dijon, France: Le presses du réel, 2009), 230.
51 Interview with Priscilla Pitts, quoted in Lynda Benglis: From the Furnace, (Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1993), 24.
spectatorship, which she analyzes through the lens of Hollywood film that traditionally places the male as the protagonist and controller of the point of view or gaze. The male gaze of cinema, and the dominant gaze of television in Benglis’s and Mulvey’s time, positioned the woman as a “form displayed for his enjoyment” which he could control and possess. In *Now*, Benglis uses the monitor of the television screen to mirror her own image and the device of the video camera to fix it as an object, while simultaneously exploring the act of self-directing by using her pre-recorded image to dictate her performance.

Interestingly, Benglis was one of few female artists in the moment to receive a substantial amount of critical attention early in her career, exhibiting frequently and garnering attention of critics. From 1969 to 1974, for instance, she had fifteen solo exhibitions and her work was included in over fifty group shows. Her videos were even presented as a solo exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery in February of 1973, which traveled to the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, N.Y., that March. Though not involved in any sort of communal feminist organization, Benglis was acutely aware of her position as a female artist and the ways in which her image as such was digested and portrayed by the media. Consequently, she took up her public image as subject matter in her work, primarily in her videotapes and exhibition advertisements. Krane has said about her experiments in self-representation, “Public personae became a subject of her work, as she explored role-playing and the notion of inhabiting media formats: in the process, Benglis addressed the sexual self-consciousness of the time and the now prescient topic of masquerade.” Her work *Now* reflects the self-consciousness of Benglis and concern with the ways in which her image is portrayed, probably most notably in her provocative *Artforum* ad.

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54 Krane, 17.
which came out the year after making these videos. By mirroring her image, Benglis performs the act of self-consciousness, doubling herself in order to de-construct and examine her image.

Benglis’s Now also gained critical attention. Her work was one of several videos included in Rosalind Krauss’s aforementioned essay, “Video and the Aesthetics of Narcissism,” published in October magazine. Krauss was prompted to write her essay by the analogy of the video camera as a mirror and the boom of videos created by artists, in which the body was the subject and object of the work. For Krauss, this self-reflective act was performative of a narcissistic tendency, defining video as a more psychological rather than physical practice (distinguishing it from live performance), in which “the human psyche [is] used as a conduit.”

For Krauss, the psychological aspect of video, was unique to the medium, because of its ability to act like a mirror or object of self-reflection. The self-reflexivity is, as Krauss lays out, what creates a phenomenon of “illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object.”

In Now, Benglis collapses her “self,” herself as object and subject, gesturing in front of her recorded image in order to probe notions of selfhood and societal constructions of femininity. The split between subject and object is both created and collapsed by the doubling.

Thus, the immediate feedback of video provided artists like Benglis and Birnbaum a tool with which to directly record and reflect upon their images. This collapsing of the subject and object dichotomy, what Krauss sees as performative narcissism, is a performance of the artist’s (Benglis and Birnbaum) enacting a frustration with their image, specifically a psychological frustration stemming from the inability to see oneself as others see them. This frustration is linked directly to Lacan’s essay, “The Language of Self,” which Krauss cites to further demonstrate the psychological condition of video. As she writes, “the subject makes himself an

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56 Ibidem, 56–57.
object by striking a pose before the mirror, he could not possibly be satisfied with it, since even if he achieved the most perfect likeness in that image, it would still be the pleasure of the other that he would cause to be recognized in it.” Further, Krauss defines narcissism as, “a condition of a perpetual frustration” as in the myth of Narcissus, but also psychoanalytically for the subject in relation to their image. Benglis and other female artists were frustrated with their image as projected by the media, becoming more pointedly aware of the gap between their lived subjectivity and inner self-identification versus their exterior life and projections of their identity in society. Moving the frustration from that of the psychological to that of the sociological, they were considering how images and perception have ramifications beyond the scope of the individual. A frustration with the overly sexualized and domesticated image of the mainly middle-class white women, which predominated in television and film, is latent in video portrait works, as artists like Benglis and Birnbaum summon their own image to inspect themselves against what mass culture purports as the image of woman.

Although Dara Birnbaum is better known for her videos using imagery appropriated from corporate television, in her earliest videos, a series of seven works taped in 1975, she is the sole subject. Of these seven works, Mirroring most directly engages with the act of using the camera as a mode of self-reflection and literalizes the analogy between a mirror and monitor. In the six-minute long black-and-white video, Birnbaum films herself walking back and forth between the monitor and an actual mirror. The frame of the camera is focused on the upper half of her body and face and there is no other information in the video in terms of her environment; instead Birnbaum narrows in on her image and reflection. Birnbaum forces the viewer to focus

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58 One exception is Pivot: Turning Around Suppositions from 1976.
on her image, as does she when she turns around to inspect her own reflected image, simultaneously mirroring herself and what the viewer sees.

Birnbaum came to video after seeing works by artists such as Vito Acconci in an exhibition presented by Maria Gloria Bicocchi at Centro Diffusione Grafica in Florence, where she lived in 1975.\textsuperscript{59} Seeing video presented as an artistic medium in its own right was inspiring and Bicocchi prompted Birnbaum to try to make a videotape herself.\textsuperscript{60} The works of Vito Acconci caught her attention, and she was interested in the way they depicted psychological space. Birnbaum, however, was concerned with making videos that presented a female perspective: “I had observed that with Acconci’s work the woman was basically used, entrapped, seduced. It did interest me that [his] seductions were directed out toward an anonymous viewer, who in fact could almost always be assumed as female. That’s probably why, as a woman, I went for a position of self-inquiry.”\textsuperscript{61} Here Birnbaum is referring to works by Acconci such as *Undertone* (1972) in which he sexualizes the relationship between the viewer and performer, directly speaking to the viewer about his fantasies of a woman rubbing his legs under the table he is seated at. Birnbaum was interested in the psychological implications and possibilities of video as presented by artists like Acconci, however, she was also interested in what they (the male artists) could not present, which was a distinctly female position. This gendered position, as Birnbaum makes clear, is one of self-inquiry in exploring what constitutes a specifically female perspective, how might a woman represent herself. This question of representation was of course

\textsuperscript{59} Maria Gloria Bicocchi founded art/tapes/22 with the financial support of her husband in 1972 in Florence where she supported artists in producing, exhibiting, and distributing artists’ videos until 1977. Art/tapes/22 was the subject of an exhibition curated by Alice Hutchinson in 2008 at the University Art Museum in Long Beach. For further research see the exhibition catalog: *art/tapes/22* eds. M. G. Bicocchi, A. Hutchinson, A. Bonito Oliva, D. A. Ross, B. Viola, (Long Beach, CA: UAM Publication, 2009).


\textsuperscript{61} Birnbaum quoted in *Dara Birnbaum: The Dark Matter of Media Light*, 11.
also one of the primary questions of Second Wave feminism of the 1970s. Her early videos, such as *Mirroring*, are thus records of Birnbaum’s experimentation with self-representation.

Video, for Birnbaum, was exciting because it presented a new method, separate from the aura of established mediums of painting and sculpture, to explore representation. In a 2002 interview Birnbaum stated, “What the Portapak brought was a high level of self-awareness.... There was a sense of amazement towards that apparatus that, unlike film, could reveal oneself in real time, or in slightly delayed time. Many pieces were diaristic and confined to a secure or isolated environment.” Birnbaum’s own amazement with the immediate feedback and reflexive properties of the new technology is evident in her experimental early video portraits, in which she records herself in a “secure” and “isolated” environment, using the camera and monitor as a mirror to inspect and reflect upon her own image.

Birnbaum’s *Mirroring* was influenced by psychoanalysis, particularly the writings of Lacan, which explore the forming of subject and identity. In her self-interrogation of her reflected and recorded image, Birnbaum enacts the mirror stage, what Lacan says is the beginning stage of forming one’s ego. Birnbaum represents this by use of a mirror as well as the narrow focus on the upper half of her body, the domain of the head which represents the ego and the self in the modern conception of individuality. The close-up evokes a physicality but also evokes the psychic space of one’s ego, the split between one’s inner self and their image. In her essay, “Performance, Video, and Trouble in the Home,” Kathy O’Dell argues that the video camera is used in early performance-based video works as a tool to continue the mirror stage, that is to re-enact the splitting between ones ego and imago and perform identification with one’s

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image. O’Dell describes this practice as liberating because it gives one agency to revisit the process of self-identification and reflection and ultimately, “provides the possibility of reflecting back new imaginings or identities.” Video, a symbolic mirror, thus aids artists like Benglis and Birnbaum with the chance to be self-reflexive in order to rediscover and digest one’s image to better understand it and to potentially transform it.

This exercise, a return to the mirror stage that Birnbaum enacts, also emphasizes the experimental nature of home video cameras. As Birnbaum describes, upon her return from Italy in 1975, “When I went back to New York, someone lent me a Portapak, and I just got started. I was very naive and very open, and that can be a good thing.” The openness of exploration and freedom to experiment, however naively, with a new medium led Birnbaum to probe the possibilities of self-representation as well as her capabilities of handling a video camera. However, her interest in the moving image would quickly shift to a direct response to television, leading to well-known works such as *Technology Transformation Wonder Woman* (1978–79).

These early tapes, which stand out from the rest of Birnbaum’s oeuvre, were recovered by a grant from Electronic Arts Intermix to preserve them, though at one point Birnbaum had actually wanted them to be destroyed. It was not until the occasion of Birnbaum’s 2009 retrospective *The Dark Matter of Media Light*, that her early video works were revisited in a scholarly manner. Sigrid Adorf notes that, “Although they might appear to be sketches, early screenings of some of these works demonstrate that they were intended for public view—for example, on the occasion of an open screening in 1975 at Anthology Film Archives in New York and at the Second Annual Video Festival in New York in 1976.” However, the lack of

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67 Ibidem, 30.
68 Ibidem, 100
sustained critical attention, common to video art in general, and the risk of nearly losing the videos altogether, also raises the issue of the value placed on the medium itself, especially low quality video tapes of the 1970s.

Access to the technology of media, as evidenced by Birnbaum and the other women who made self-representational videos in the decade, creates a new relationship between the production and consumption of images in an ever-expanding media landscape. Video portraits, like Now and Mirroring exemplify an impulse to re-examine one’s self-image through self-representation. As Lori Zippay puts it “video is a looking glass that reflects and re-envisions both personal and cultural identities.” It is through the televisual mirror of the camera and monitor that Birnbaum experimented with how to present and explore her own image. Previous interpretations of Mirroring, in the catalog essays in The Dark Matter of Media Light by Marianne Brouwer, Johanna Burton, and Sigrid Adorf, focused primarily on the psychological states Birnbaum investigated in her early videos rather than her interest in the problem of representation itself. The presence of herself, the self as subject, in these works is most directly putting forth representation as subject matter. Birnbaum has previously stated about her work, “I’ve always been interested in the representation of Woman, because it brings me closer to an experience of my own voice.” Though Birnbaum was directly influenced by psychoanalytic thought, her early works, are experiments in self-representation. This is a crucial distinction between video portraiture by women of this period and other burgeoning forms of video art that foreground the body. For Benglis, Birnbaum, and the other artists considered in this thesis, the act of self-reflection, though nodding to the mirror stage, furthers the crisis between one’s image [imago] and the ego from a private experience and pushes it forward into the social realm. Video

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portraiture is used as a tool of self-reflection to critically analyze gender politics along the lines of the individual and representation.

The act of mirroring one’s own image, and recording the mirrored image of one’s self, in both Benglis and Birnbaum’s videos demonstrates the pivotal point of representation in the 1970s. Self-representation as enacted in these video portraits was a tool used to explore how the tools of the media, video cameras and television monitors, presented images of women and how these presentations could be deconstructed and depicted in new ways. The newly prolific handheld video camera thus allowed female artists like Benglis and Birnbaum, and the other artists mentioned in this thesis (and countless more), the chance to represent themselves, not according to the styles and standards of femininity as represented in society at large as evidenced in television and film. Instead the video portrait, and its self-reflexive nature, as stressed by the act of mirroring, allows for alternative modes of representation and depictions of a female psychic space and perspective. Video’s immediate feedback and unique ability to be used as both a recording device and mirror simultaneously encouraged women like Benglis and Birnbaum to make works in which they themselves were the subject and object, creating new image making possibilities and examining the boundaries of the new medium as it related to both their own image and the larger issue of representing women as equals.
Chapter Two

Evidencing the Mask: Masquerade as Critique

“...The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed.”

Mary Anne Doane

“In exploring the possibilities of female imagery, thinking always of a magic show, I attempted to fashion a dialogue between my different disguises and the fantasies they suggested. I always kept my eye on the small monitor in the performance area in order to control the image making.”

Joan Jonas

Many female artists experimented with the construction of their own image, using costumes, makeup, etc. to play with their appearances as a way to explore feminist politics of identity and representation. Masquerading provided artists exploring video portraiture another critical tool for alternative modes of self-representation, and in a serious but humorous approach used accessories to don different representations of femininity. Mary Anne Doane’s influential essay “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” explains masquerade as a strategy that flaunts femininity in order to destabilize the image of woman. Not dissimilar or completely disconnected from the act of mirroring, or performing the mirror stage, masquerade also enacts a doubling which Doane describes, “The masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity.” For Doane, masquerade is an exaggeration, a doubling, or excess of the signs of femininity (makeup, hair, dress, etc.) that signify the female. This practice of doubling acts as a tool through which women, especially in

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71 Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 81.
73 Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 82.
performance, photography, or performance-based video, could exaggerate and thus make evident the construction of the image of woman, revealing the condition of femininity as a learned and cultivated, rather than natural or innate, position.

Masquerade, a term which had previously been used in Joan Riviere’s 1929 essay “Womanliness as Masquerade,” foregrounds the act of wearing a mask to perform or embody an alter ego. By playing a character, or another version of one’s self an exaggeration of gender performativity is put forth in order to assert the construction of gender identity. Artists embodying different identities through exterior accoutrements, like a mask, makeup, or costume, engage with masquerade to dramatize their exterior appearance as a deconstructivist tool, laying bare the manner in which gender is constructed through appearance, mannerisms, and behaviors. In line with Second Wave feminism’s heightened awareness of the ways in which women’s bodies are fetishized, and the resistance to upholding traditional standards of femininity (i.e., bra burning, throwing out makeup, not shaving body hair), masquerading the feminine became a transgressive method through which to expose the construction of a homogenous image of femininity. Catherine Morris and Ingrid Schafner have described this new politics of representation, “Starting in the 1970s, women artists turned the lady-like application of makeup and dress into an aggressive form of masquerade, to perform and invent new identities, from the super-feminine to the quasi-masculine. They represented themselves through the definitively male eyes and voice of the media to command its authority and retool its message.”⁷⁴ The performativity of gender, and gender as a subject matter, thus became a newly politically charged subject which female artists explored through various methods of representation, including video.

Joan Jonas’s alter ego Organic Honey, which she describes as an “erotic seductress,” exemplifies the use of masquerade in video portraiture. Beginning in 1968, Jonas started to develop performance as a central aspect of her artistic practice which would embrace video technologies. After a trip to Japan in 1970, where she purchased a Sony Portapak, video became another tool through which Jonas could integrate methods of representation into her performance practice which focused on transforming space and perception and on using mirrors and projections to destabilize one’s vision. Jonas, who is a film fanatic, has said she wanted a Portapak as soon as she heard about them; though she had experimented with Super 8, she found the immediacy and ease of video much less complicated and thus more appropriate for spontaneous work and exploring new forms. Throughout the 1970s Jonas made fourteen videotapes, some of which documented her performances, but many of which were created as autonomous works. Her videos, though performance-based, were unique from her live performances, as Jonas has claimed “video takes you to a space you wouldn’t otherwise be in.”

One of these performances, done specifically for the video camera, is her 1972 tape, Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy, based on her 1972 performance at Leo Castelli gallery, Organic Honey’s Vertical Roll. The 1972 performance was Jonas’s first performance incorporating video, and the subsequent tape is her first standalone video work.

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77 Conversation with Ingrid Schaffner, from They Come To Us Without a Word, ed. Jane Farver (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2015), 121.
79 Jonas’s other video tapes in which she presents herself as herself, rather than an alter ego, also explore mirroring exclusively such as in Duet (1972) and Left Side, Right Side (1972).
the work to be feminine but said “I had no idea what that meant.” It was through examining her own reflection in the mirror and in the monitor that Jonas came to the idea of an alter ego. Jonas, who was involved in feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s, has described her works with Organic Honey as “poetic approaches” to “exploring whether there could be a female art.” Masquerade thus functioned as an experimental method through which Jonas could explore her particular relationship to feminism.

In this tape, Jonas enters the camera frame, plain-faced, and begins to put on her costume, becoming Organic Honey before the viewer’s eyes. She first puts on a mask, the mask of a doll face which she purchased at a sex shop in Times Square, foregrounding the erotic object of woman. She then puts on a large feathered headdress, evoking notions of masquerade balls and showgirls, furthering the erotic charge of her character. These two props over-exaggerate the stereotypically erotic image of women, masquerading the feminine in excess. She then approaches the camera, tilting her masked visage left and right, lingering in front of the camera. Jonas as Honey puts on a bejeweled top and raises a mirror to her face, tilted at an angle so that the camera can also capture her reflection, as she enacts female narcissism, meditating on the image of her “television persona;” Jonas’s description of her character as directly related to television foregrounds her recognition of the eroticization of women in media as part of her thought process.

Throughout the tape, Jonas mocks filmic tropes of femininity, at one point standing in front of the camera, with a fan not shown, her hair blowing in the wind as she sways back and forth.

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80 Quote from Joan Jonas in Carla Liss, “Show me your dances…: Joan Jonas and Simone Forti Talk with Carla Liss.” *Art and Artists* 8, no. 7 (October 1973), 142.
forth. She plays with her image, placing a large water jug in front of the camera and leaning in front of it in order to distort her reflection. Throughout the tape, Jonas experiments with the making of her image, using multiple reflective surfaces. At one point she records her reflection, plain-faced in a mirror, and uses a hammer to break her image. Just after this act of self-erasure, Jonas as Honey approaches a triangular mirror, inspecting herself, then lifting the mirror to reveal an identical one behind it, presenting the same reflection.

Siona Wilson has described a similar performance by Jonas, Organic Honey’s Vertical Roll, as a clash between Narcissus and Echo, referencing the formal use of repetition, repeatedly hitting the mirror, as a nod to the Echo’s fate in the Greek myth. In this video, Jonas uses mirrors as a device to disturb her own image and render it unstable. Jonas has said about the function of mirrors, “In addition to creating space, a mirror also disturbs space, suggesting another reality through the looking glass. To see the reflection of Narcissus; to be a voyeur. To see one’s self as the other…” Through these gestures, Jonas suggests the breaking and remaking of her identity and image. In breaking her image, Jonas literalizes the control she has over her own image’s fate. Her image, or moving image, is never stable and as such resists the patriarchal desire to own or fix a singular image of woman.

The erotics and spectacle of women’s role in film was also a critical topic of feminist discourse at the time Jonas began making videos. Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking feminist critique of the representation of women in Hollywood film, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” was first written in 1973 and published in Screen magazine in 1975. Her essay

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86 This unstable nature is what Douglas Crimp coined as “de-synchronization” in Jonas’s practice.
heralded the intersection of feminism, psychoanalysis, and film theory, which arguably had been burgeoning for years since the germination of the Women’s Liberation Movement.\textsuperscript{87} In her essay, Mulvey claims to use theories of psychoanalysis put forth by Freud and Lacan, those same theorists who influenced artists like the ones considered in this thesis, as a “political weapon” “appropriated” in order to “demonstrate the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.”\textsuperscript{88} Mulvey’s analysis focuses on the way in which women in film are depicted as submissive and passive rather than as active protagonists. She writes, “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.”\textsuperscript{89} As Mulvey puts forth, it is by reversing this order and destroying the patriarchal norms of visual pleasure, that she suggests a radical cultural shift can occur by dismantling patriarchal control over the image of woman in film. As Jonas, and the other female artists making film and video, taking up the camera to represent oneself as an active maker of meaning, a valid singular subject and creator of the gaze, could potentially destroy the oppressive traditions of patriarchal culture.

Videos, like Organic Honey’s \textit{Visual Telepathy}, are thus evidence of female artists’ investigation into the potentials of film and video as a political and artistic tool, as Mulvey’s essay argues the moving image can be.

Alter egos like Organic Honey are one such tool in reversing the patriarchal gaze; in this case, as it presents itself in moving image culture. Jonas’s persona allowed her to enact the

\textsuperscript{87} From early on, the Women’s Movement called attention to the political significance of culture: to women’s absence from the creation of dominant art and literature as an integral aspect of oppression.” Laura Mulvey, “Film, Feminism, and the Avant Garde,” in \textit{Visual and Other Pleasures}, (Basingstoke, U.K.; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 115.

\textsuperscript{88} Mulvey, \textit{Visual and Other Pleasures}, 14.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibidem, 15.
critical distance necessary, as argued by Doane, and based off her reading of primarily French feminism, for a woman to be a spectator. Doane argues “Masquerade… involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image.”

The distancing of oneself from one’s image is key to the gendered politics of spectatorship and is a direct response to Freud’s argument that the lack, lack of a phallus and lack of distance from one’s image or over-identification with one’s image, is the nature of the female and the reason why she (supposedly) cannot enact the fetishizing position; she is inhibited (by not experiencing the threat of castration) from moving away from her primary narcissism to linguistic substitution and symbolic order. Since fetishism is rooted in representation, as one object stands for another, then masquerade opens up the possibilities of representational space as fiction. Masquerade is thus a method via which women are able to destabilize their supposedly “natural” passive viewing position and reclaim an active role in the making of their image.

Masquerade, as a distancing device, further upends the gendered power dynamics present in systems of viewing. Women such as Jonas, who alternatively represent themselves through masquerading, deliberately destabilize patriarchal systems of viewing that uphold the male gaze. Jonas says of her Organic Honey performances, “In 1970 I began using the Portapak video system, which altered my manner of performing. I began to perform for the camera. I didn’t want to recognize myself, so I wore masks, I dressed up, I played with disguise. I developed imaginary characters or states of mind, alter egos.” By donning the garb of Organic Honey, Jonas distances herself emotionally from the audience, which was a significant stance to take in the

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90 Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 82.
91 Ibidem, 79.
early 1970s in the context of feminist thought developing around the constructions of female identity in the age of mass media, shifting the female body from object to subject. Artists, along the same lines as theorists like Mulvey and Doane, sought to locate a female gaze and subjectivity in their work. Establishing the female gaze and validation of the female spectator, was necessary to dislocate the phallic order of the media-scape, or what Doane describes as “the scopic regime.” As Doane puts it, “And the growing insistence upon the elaboration of a theory of female spectatorship is indicative of the crucial necessity of understanding that position in order to dislocate it.”93 In her video, Jonas uses an alter ego to theatrically enact female spectatorship, inspecting her own image and the making of an alternate image.94 The development of this persona, whose name comes from that of a honey jar, came out of experiments with her newly acquired video camera.95 Jonas says she found herself investigating her own image with the new device, fascinated with her image as reflected in the monitor of the television.96 The theatricality of representation, and new methods presented by video technology inspired Jonas to explore the construction and representation of herself and experiment with an image of femininity. This exploration would continue until the end of the decade as new technologies arrived, introducing color and more of a focus on narrative in her works.

Working on the opposite coast, Los Angeles artist Cynthia Maughan made over 300 videos from 1973 to 1978.97 While in graduate school at Cal State Long Beach, Maughan was introduced to video art by William Wegman who was teaching as an adjunct while a tenured

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93 Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 87.
94 This act is what Krauss would deem as narcissism, however she missed the politically oriented act of these works and the influence of feminist thought on female artists.
95 Lilly Wei, “Scenes and Variations: An Interview with Joan Jonas,” Art in America 7 (September 2004), 103. (quote from Joan Simon, “Scenes and Variations: An Interview with Joan Jonas,” Art in America (July 1995), 74.).
97 A complete list of Cynthia Maughan’s video works is listed on page 14 of California Video: Artists and Histories, the exhibition catalogue.
professor was on sabbatical.\(^9\) In this serendipitous situation, Maughan and her then husband purchased Wegman’s used camera.\(^9\) In 1973, Maughan began making videos, which she would continue to produce almost weekly for the next five years. As she recounts in a 2007 interview with Glenn Phillips, she would plan out her videos during the week and ritualistically record them on Sundays.\(^1\) Her works are relatively short, averaging about two to three minutes in length. Of the artists considered in this thesis Maughan is likely the least well-known, as she became more involved with punk music in the 1980s, abandoning video altogether. However, toward the end of her short but prolific video production, Maughan was included in the 1975 exhibition “Southland Video Anthology” at the Long Beach Museum of Art, a survey of artists’ video in Southern California, as well as Documenta 6 in 1977, which also included Jonas’s work.\(^1\) She also screened her works at the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, a hub for experimental feminist art production and community from 1973–91.\(^1\) Maughan’s work received local and international attention in the 1970s, which was then revived in 2008 when she was included in “California Video” at the Getty Center.

Like Jonas, many of Maughan’s videos dealt with tropes of femininity, and are often described as being influenced by archetypes of Hollywood cinema and television.\(^1\)

Characterized by their short length and deadpan humor, Maughan acts in many of her videos in a

\(^{9}\) Interview with Glenn Phillips, *California Video: Artists and Histories*, 163.

\(^{9}\) However, she does not remember if she used this camera for her first videos. Phillips, *California Video: Artists and Histories*, 163.

\(^{1}\) Sundays were ideal as she notes because there was less traffic and noise pollution at her home in Pasadena, Phillips, *California Video: Artists and Histories*, 163.

\(^{1}\) Southland Video Anthology was organized by David A. Ross, the Deputy Director of the Long Beach Museum. Ross supported video art avidly through collecting, producing, and exhibiting video art from 1974 through the 1990s at the museum. The museum donated its video collection and archives to the Getty Research Institute in 2005. Documenta 6, organized by Manfred Schneckenberger, presented the most video art of any previous Documenta, including Joan Jonas’s *Vertical Roll* and Cynthia Maughan’s *Suicide, Putting on Nail Polish, Drinking Blood, Burn Masks*, and *Golden Altars*.


\(^{1}\) For example, see Maughan’s biography on the Electronic Arts Intermix website, accessed October 22, 2018. https://www.eai.org/artists/cynthia-maughan/biography or *California Video*, 162–65.
variety of characters, using homemade makeup and props. Masquerade presents itself in Maughan’s works such as *Zebra Skin Clutch* (1977–78), a video in which Maughan, wearing a wide-brimmed sunhat and sunglasses, describes an “overwhelmingly stylish” woman. In the two minute video, Maughan, who acts as a narrator, ironically describes in detail the tall platinum blonde woman, focusing on her hair, clothing, and makeup. Electronic Arts Intermix, which distributes Maughan’s works, describes her practice as “Absorbing Hollywood's beguiling superficiality.” This superficiality, the focus on one’s exterior appearance, is parodied in Maughan’s video, the punchline of which is that the stylish woman, with her zebra skin gloves, shoes, and clutch is haunted by the soul of the dead zebra who follows her around a cocktail party “like a decorative phantom.” In Maughan’s cinematic description, in which she focuses on the anonymous woman’s image, the viewer only sees Maughan’s upper half, which is largely covered up by her hat and shades, and stands comically in front of floating sheets that have a zebra pattern drawn on them while a melodic tropicalia tune plays in the background. Here Maughan mocks the conventions of Hollywood cinema without showing them; rather, she narrates the masquerade of femininity, conjuring an image of woman in the viewer’s mind.

Maughan’s *Zebra Skin Clutch* is an example of one of her hundreds of personas that she used to parody tropes of Hollywood and television. Of her work in the 1970s Maughan has said, “I am always concerned with the visual qualities of a theme as well as the concept of the political implications of an idea as well as its poetic history.” Referring back to Mulvey’s influential feminist critique of Hollywood cinema, Maughan similarly recognizes the conventions of cinema

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105 Cynthia Maughan, *Zebra Skin Clutch* (1977–78), video script (as transcribed by myself).
106 Maughan has mentioned using Martin Denny’s music in many of her works, as she found records mainly in thrift stores to use. Denny is known as the father of “exotica” lounge music, and his songs have appeared in both film and television. Hellberg, “Artists at Work: Cynthia Maughan.”
that enjoin female characters to be described but not heard. In her video, the zebra skin clutch woman is defined by her appearance, the description of which foregrounds the erotic spectacle of woman as Maughan exaggeratedly describes her as “overwhelmingly stylish” with “lips painted a rich flame red, hot, but creamy looking.” However, she undermines all of this with her punchline at the end, describing the woman as “oblivious” to the ghost of the dead zebra whose skin provided her with such style. This simple, but poignant moment is the very point in which the mask of femininity is symbolically taken off. Maughan uses humor in her videos in order to transgress reality into fiction and play with our accepted definitions and descriptions of women—the signifiers of femininity.

Maughan uses the video camera as a two-way mirror in order to act out and narrate various personas and alter egos. In Zebra, Maughan is a mysterious and anonymous narrator, covered up, nearly masked, by her large hat and sunglasses. She takes up the traditionally male role of the narrator in film, retooling the role in order to mock rather than inscribe the conventions of women in film. She removes the “pleasure in looking,” the scopophilia that Laura Mulvey argues is key to the system of representation in film, in order to expose viewers’ expectations. In Maughan’s videos, she pokes fun at the ways in which femininity and sexual difference are inscribed in cinema and how women are so often symbolically bound to their physical appearance. Thus Maughan’s works align with a belief that image production and creating alternative representations of women was a political act. Her videos are interrogations of patriarchal ideals in mass media; she makes fun of conventions in order to expose them. Maughan’s works like Zebra Skin Clutch reflect on stereotypes and act out clichés, which are, just like Jonas’s Organic Honey mask, part of an oppressive regime of gender normativity.

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108 Video script as translated by the author
Maughan describes her approach as “lazy anarchism” referencing her low production quality and short performances.\textsuperscript{110} She always taped when she was alone at home so that she could have full control of the “world” she was constructing in her videos.\textsuperscript{111} Her influence, which she has admitted was primarily the movies and television programs she consumed growing up, as opposed to other artists, thus lent itself naturally to the video camera, which she could use to direct her own inner processing and imagination of an alternate televisual or cinematic reality. For Maughan, having the ability to self-direct, to be completely in control and have the freedom to “pretend to be anywhere and anyone” was exciting and, as evidenced by her immense output, creatively stimulating.\textsuperscript{112}

Similarly to Jonas’s desire to take up alternate personas and alter egos, to render herself unrecognizable, Maughan also has said that she does not “think I was ever entirely ‘myself’ in any of the pieces.”\textsuperscript{113} Again, the use of masquerade, taking up a different look or persona, is used to perform the critical distance necessary to examine the image of woman. The subversive qualities of both Jonas’s and Maughan’s works, via masquerade, are used in order to expose the previously unquestioned (before feminist critique) power structures of visual language and the moving-image as it related to reinforcing gender difference, and thus gender hierarchies. Thus, masquerade, like the act of mirroring, as exemplified by the examples in this chapter, was a useful tool for critically probing representations of women and performative femininity on the television monitor. Masquerade, similarly to mirroring, created a necessary distance from one’s own gendered image in order to more critically examine and deconstruct the ways in which the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{110} Full quote: “I would say I was, and am, a rather radical feminist, though being somewhat cynical and having anarchistic tendencies—perhaps more like a non-violent, lazy anarchist.” Hellberg, “Artists at Work: Cynthia Maughan.”
\textsuperscript{111} Hellberg, “Artists at Work: Cynthia Maughan.”
\textsuperscript{112} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibidem.
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feminine is often represented in film and television through signifiers such as makeup, accessories, and dress.
Chapter Three
Disrupting the Gaze: De-eroticizing the Image of Woman

“The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.”
Laura Mulvey

“Once an oppressed group becomes aware of its cultural as well as political oppression, and identifies oppressive myths and stereotypes—and in the case of women, female images that simply express male fantasies—it becomes the concern of that group to expose the oppression of such images and replace their falsity, lies, and escapist illusions with reality and the truth.”
Christine Gledhill

With the rise of video art and other alternative forms of cinema arts in the 1970s (avant-garde film, artists films and videos, guerilla documentary, etc.) a heightened awareness of the politics and norms inscribed in television programming and movies that corporate television and Hollywood films upheld, grew among artists. Laura Mulvey’s criticism, and that of other feminist film theorists of her generation, pointed out Hollywood’s patriarchal gaze, using female actresses in an exploitative manner to eroticize their image and promote stereotypes of women. For Mulvey, and other feminist theorists, psychoanalytic theory, semiotics, and structuralism provided ways to understand and analyze the fantasies of the male gaze and eroticized representations of women as reflected in the structures of Hollywood cinema. Mulvey has said that theory “...opened up the possibility of understanding the mechanics of popular mythology

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115 Christine Gledhill, “Developments in Feminist Film Criticism,” in Re-Vision, Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), 20–21.
and its materials: images of sexual difference, instincts and their vicissitudes, primal fantasy.”¹¹⁶

Key to Mulvey’s analysis is the recognition that hierarchical patriarchal structures are constructed and reproduced in film and television. Mulvey’s analysis of narrative cinema makes clear, as in the quote above, that female characters function in film as objects of fetishistic scopophilia for the male gaze rather than as characters actively moving the narrative forward. Instead, women are present as signifiers of male desire as “erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator…” through cinematic devices such as the close-up.¹¹⁷ Feminist analysis became a useful dialogue to demystify signs and stereotypes of femininity which are imposed on us, the viewers, as natural.

Video portraiture similarly uses the device of the close-up against the male gaze in order to deconstruct it; women in the works considered in this thesis present themselves in close relationship to the camera, isolated—not as secondary subject/objects, but as the sole focus of the camera’s gaze. Rather than as “isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized,” these women break the hegemonic male gaze by presenting themselves in deadpan, mundane, and/or in ironic ways. In these works, the artist-performers directly acknowledge the camera recording them, negating the usual voyeuristic (male) gaze of the camera. In confronting the camera’s gaze, the artist is able to reclaim control over their image and the viewers gaze, removing the expected erotic circumstances of viewing pleasure as Mulvey outlines it in her essay. This furthers a demand for women to occupy the same space as men on camera. As Mulvey says of male characters in film, they “demand a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition”¹¹⁸ as opposed to female characters who when presented in close-up or isolated “destroys the

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, 21.
Renaissance space…gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon,” 119 not a fully formed figure who can control the viewer’s gaze and replicate conditions of human perception. As will be analyzed below, female artists working in video portraiture present themselves in intimate relationship to the camera, using it as a mirror to reclaim their equally human conditions of perception, and asserting a female gaze as a valid subject on its own without the inclusion of a male protagonist.

For Mulvey, and artists similarly engaged in feminism, feminist thought and consciousness-raising provided an entry into the critique of dominant social structures as they related to gender and power dynamics. Film was a crucial aspect of Mulvey’s critique, not only as a filmmaker, but because film, as she has said, “neatly combines spectacle and narrative,”—woman being a key component of film’s spectacular nature and the anchor of viewing pleasure. 120 Acknowledging and analyzing the ways in which women are used in film to signify pleasure, male pleasure in particular, led to a raised consciousness of mass media’s perpetuation of woman as symbol, representative of the male gaze but not whole in herself. This condition, perpetuated by mass media, came to the fore as a major concern of feminist discourse around representation. Artists concerned with providing new possibilities for representing women began to analyze the ways in which woman as image was used as an object rather than valid subject in mainstream media culture, and aimed to explore the possibilities of a female subject position, reversing the status quo of the male gaze.

Feminism placed an emphasis on representation and image culture, focusing on the way images function in society, particularly the over-sexualization and objectification of women in media. The artists considered in this thesis similarly concerned themselves with representation,

120 Ibidem, 19.
in this case self-representation, as a powerful method for critiquing the male gaze and exploring new possibilities of representing a female perspective and femininity in general. Before new possibilities could be determined, one had to first begin to break down, analyze, and destroy a homogenous representation of woman and instead, as in the case of artists working in video portraiture, present decidedly mundane representations of themselves as women to de-eroticize their image. De-familiarizing the image of woman by working against the logic of the male gaze led to a critical shift from being a passive erotic object to an active subject. To show themselves as they are, plainly and unadorned, in a deadpan and confrontational relationship to the camera’s gaze was a radical departure from the conventional presentation of women in film and television.

As Mulvey argues, there is a “split between spectacle and narrative” in film; male characters move the narrative along while female characters function as erotic objects. Female characters stood as icons of the male gaze combining both the gaze of the spectator and of the male character. Woman as signifier of both male desire and sexual difference in normal narrative structures asserts what Mulvey describes as the “active/passive heterosexual division of labor.” Thus normative narrative structures enact the ideals of patriarchal society by holding up standards of gendered labor systems and ruling ideologies of woman as spectacle, as an image to be looked at and displayed for erotic pleasure. Woman, as bearer of the gaze, is thus relegated to a secondary, passive role in narrative cinema, mimicking what Second Wave feminists would describe as women’s second class citizen status in society. This repetition of

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122 Ibidem.
123 Mulvey traces the lineage of woman as erotic object in film to both pin-ups and striptease, in which women as erotic spectacle “connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 19.
124 A key example of feminist film is Barbara Loden’s 1971 film Wanda which takes as its subject an unconventional woman, Wanda, a woman who leaves her family and wanders between different jobs and men, directionless. The film was noted for its realism using documentary methods such as the handheld camera leading to an intimacy akin to cinema verité styles.
gender inequality in film plays to patriarchal desires, taking pleasure in the objectified position and erotic spectacle of woman as object/icon/image.

For feminist film theorists and video artists, the task at hand then became that of deconstructing stereotypes of femininity and of women’s function in the larger image-culture-economy. For Mulvey, analyzing film to reveal its constructions and structures can destroy the pleasure of the gaze in film. As Mulvey puts it, this analysis “gets us [women] nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings closer the articulation of the problem…”¹²⁵ The question is essentially, how does one challenge socially established dynamics of sexual difference while still living in a patriarchal society, or how can one destroy the system from within the system? For video artists working within feminist concerns, the question more pointedly was how can the very tool used to objectify and eroticize the image of woman be used to deconstruct and re-present femininity? Mulvey, a filmmaker herself, only partially answered this question in her essay briefly discussing how the growing accessibility of film (16mm film) was making it possible for alternative cinema, which she states can challenge mainstream cinema but may only exist as a counterpoint, relegated to avant-garde circuits rather than mainstream ones.¹²⁶ Video artists, on the other hand, worked in a completely new terrain of the moving-image, both tied to but separate from its predecessor: film. Video, both apart from Hollywood films’ economy and new to the economy of fine arts, functioned as a tool for female artists to create in a new medium that had not yet been claimed by patriarchal systems of production.

For Hannah Wilke, video entered her artistic output through her performance-based practice. Working in both sculpture and performance, Wilke foregrounded bodily experience and subjectivity as her primary concerns. Wilke is known for her live performances and vaginal

¹²⁶ Ibidem, 15–16.
sculptures made out of unconventional materials such as gum, kneaded erasers, and ceramic, often presented in series gesturing to her interest in repetition as form. Her interest in repetitive gestures and forms also presents itself in her performance work as well as the photographic documentation of her performances. Using her own body became central to Wilke’s practice early on, as she was interested in the expressive quality of bodily gestures. As she said of her work in 1976, “Since 1960 I have been concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female, a new language that fuses the mind and body into erotic objects that are nameable and at the same time quite abstract. Its content has always related to my own body and feelings…”

Though Wilke did not necessarily claim to be a feminist, her self-referential work participated in the feminist discourse, namely the aim to explore female subject matter and make female subjects widely accepted as valid artistic subjects. For Wilke, using her own body was a method to explore a “female experiential space.”

Wilke’s first video work, Gestures (1974), is a 35:30 minute long video in black and white with sound. The video consists of four separately recorded segments which were then combined to form a singular work. As she has said in a 1978 interview about the impetus for her work of this period, “Innovation was the most important idea to me at the time; what could I do that thousands of male artists hadn’t done already? They just weren’t women.” In the spirit of innovation and an embrace of unconventional materials, Wilke used her own body to create “performalist self portraits” and “living sculpture” such as in Gestures, her first and only

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128 In California Video: Artists and Histories, Phillips refers to Hannah Wilke as not considering herself a feminist or participating in the feminist art movement in a pointed manner (156).
129 Wilke et al, Hannah Wilke, A Retrospective, foreword.
performance made exclusively for the camera.\textsuperscript{131} Throughout each segment, Wilke, in close-up, faces the camera directly so that the frame of the camera focuses on her visage as she molds her face as if it were a malleable sculptural material and then transitions into performing a series of exaggerated gestures—smiling, grimacing, etc. Wilke does not speak in the video, instead she uses her gestures and expressions to perform for the camera. Through the duration of the video, Wilke presents the same gestures over and over, mimicking the stereotypical poses of women in mass media repetitively to excess in an effort to attract the male gaze and then repel it. Wilke’s self-presentation relates to Mulvey’s observations of women in film: she is isolated, shown in close up, but she is not eroticized, rather she is self-reflexive. There is no “illusion of voyeuristic separation” necessary to give the viewer the sensation of observing a private moment as in a Peeping Tom (imbued with an erotic charge). In direct contrast, Wilke presents herself fully aware of herself being recorded and performs for the camera, confronting and thus controlling the gaze. Wilke uses repetition as an aesthetic device to underscore the performative quality of her expressions and gestures, begging the question of where one may locate the “real” Wilke, without providing an answer. Wilke instead uses repetition to demystify her own image by exposing its construction.

Wilke’s video, which has no narrative arc, strips the aura of conventional cinematic pleasure expected from viewing a woman in close-up. Echoing a similar aim of feminist films to show “women as women” what Christine Gledhill calls “radical representation,” Wilke presents herself unadorned and plain-faced and silent.\textsuperscript{132} In her act of repeating gestures, exaggerating expressions, Wilke confronts the viewer with the construction of her image. Rather than presenting a singular image of herself, Wilke displays herself as a mutable form. She poses for

\textsuperscript{131} Wilke, \textit{Hannah Wilke, A Retrospective}, foreword and \textit{Hannah Wilke: Gestures}, 10.

\textsuperscript{132} Gledhill “Developments in Feminist Film Criticism” 20.
the camera, as if to fix her image, but because she sits before the video camera the viewer becomes witness to the fabrication of each pose. Staring at the camera as if inspecting herself in the mirror, Wilke painstakingly enacts each pose and expression, making the viewer hyperaware of the construction of her posturing. She meditates on both her erotic and anti-erotic capabilities, looking seductively into the camera at times and hooking her fingers into the sides of her mouth in a grotesque expression. The fluctuation between erotically charged expressions and anti-erotic poses removes the aspect of spectacle generally expected of images of women. Wilke inflects a poignancy into her poses, and the analysis of her own image conjures the conflicted status of women being both a subject and object. As Susan Douglas explained, “In works like Gestures... Wilke demonstrated that for her conflict was a way of life, as it is for most women in western society. Despite heightened feminist consciousness, women continue to be concerned with their appearance and their desirability to men.”133 Wilke enacts this internal conflict, molding herself into various postures and expressions as if searching for a desirable self-image, or rather begging the viewer to see her as more than a singular static image and instead as a dynamic and dimensional sentient being.

Wilke went on to develop more performance-based works using her own body, often nude or semi-nude, to more directly encode overt eroticisms. Using titles such as I Object or Hello Boys, Wilke continued to directly engage with and confront the male gaze. Gestures is located at the precipice of Wilke’s dive into exploring the possibilities of self-representation and time-based work. Rather than her public performances, Wilke acknowledged the unique intimacy of her videotapes which act as “private performances, with just the cameraman there or alone.”134 In this private performance, Wilke performs for the male gaze in an exaggerated manner in order to

133 Wilke et al., A Retrospective, 26.
subvert the erotics of male-centric viewing pleasure. Speaking of the reception of this work when it was first shown at Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1974, Wilke recalled, “Ree Morton told me that she almost cried when she saw my first video tape, *Greetings*, 1974. It was wonderful that she has the courage to tell me that. I exposed myself by posing, and she saw past it; she saw the pathos past the posing.”

In making herself vulnerable, presenting an intimacy to the camera and extending to the viewer, Wilke charged her video with a politics of representation, navigating the subject and object paradox and negating the spectacle of the female body on camera, working against the oppressive male gaze.

Joan Jonas similarly introduced a deadpan approach to the camera’s gaze as evident in her three-part video *Good Night, Good Morning* (1976, 11:38 min, black and white with sound). In *Good Night, Good Morning* Jonas continues to probe the phenomenological properties of video while pointedly speaking directly to the camera, directly addressing its gaze. In the nearly twelve-minute-long video, Jonas uses the camera in a diaristic manner, documenting herself before going to sleep and directly upon waking up. In each of the seconds-long shots compiled together, Jonas faces the camera and speaks directly to its lens saying either “good night” or “good morning”, sometimes repetitiously. Jonas shot the video in three one-week-long segments, the first of which took place in May of 1976 in her loft in New York City, a second while in Nova Scotia, and the third back in New York. While recording this video Jonas had the camera placed next to a monitor in order to survey her position in the frame. The video was shot with the camera on its side with the intention of showing it on a vertical monitor.

Jonas had been experimenting with video for about six years, having bought a Portapak in 1970, but this video differs from her more widely known Organic Honey works. In *Good

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136 Jonas’s 1976 video *May Windows* was also made to be displayed on a vertical monitor. See *Castelli-Sonnabend Videotapes and Films 1976–77 Supplement*, ss17.
Night, Good Morning, she strips herself of the usual props and costumes that were central to her theatrical repertoire and focuses instead on the durational nature of video, documenting the passing of time through the filmic method of montage. De-contextualizing the passing of time, Jonas collapses three weeks into a twelve-minute video. There is little suggestion in each shot that time is passing at all besides shifts in light, setting, and dress. Because of this it is difficult to distinguish between each of the three segments, though in the first segment Jonas varies her position, manner of speech, and camera angle in each shot, in the second part she attempts to keep the same angle, and in the third she introduces music to vary the mood. The video thus reads as a repetitive loop, with slight variation, documenting Jonas’s everyday routine in a self-reflexive meditation. There are no overt erotics present; instead, as in Wilke’s video, Jonas uses repetition as a device to make herself dull, working against the spectacle of woman as image. It is a purposefully un-cohesive video that utilizes simple systemic constraints to reflect on Jonas’s self-reflexive investigation into her own image as the days progress. Through this repetitious ritual, Jonas subverts a diegetic male desire for a homogenized image of woman, as Jonas performs the same action over and over, walking up to the camera saying “good night” or “good morning” and walking away. It is in the reoccurrence of this purposefully unspectacular act that Jonas presents a video portrait of herself that works against the patriarchal standards of woman on camera.

Rather than glamorizing, as so many Hollywood films do, the daily rituals of women (putting on makeup, getting dressed, cooking, other domestic activities), Jonas presents herself plainly and directly addresses the camera as if it were a sentient being. In her direct address, Jonas also switches the normative dynamic between the cameras (male) gaze and the woman on screen. Rather than the camera observing and surveying the woman without being
acknowledged, the crux of Jonas’s tape is acknowledging the camera and its documentary qualities. Jonas, influenced by cinema verité styles, directly addresses the camera, speaking to the lens in order to foreground her own awareness of being recorded as well as making the viewer aware of the act of looking. Further, in accordance with the rest of her early work, Jonas’s tape does not have one center of focus; instead there is a “multiplicity of centers of focus” that she produces by constantly shifting the camera angle and frame, devices she uses to negate the fetishistic scopophilia of the male gaze. The rhythmic cuts between frames appear, for example, in contrast to the lingering close-up shots. The 1976–77 Castelli-Sonnabend video and film directory describes Jonas’s tape as “…a way for Jonas to observe herself over periods of time: as the tape progressed, her behavior (her expressions, her dress, her tone) became more self-aware, consciously controlled. Within this structure, nothing could be rejected or retaped, like a journal.”

Jonas’s tape toes the line of realism, what is performed and what is reality, referring back to a central question of feminist art of the decade how can one represent women as they “really” are. Focusing on a crucial aspect of one’s daily routine, Jonas de-familiarizes this normal activity through repetition and performativity. However, there is still an element of the “real” Jonas present, as she presents herself plain-faced and in fact does tape herself each day and night ritualistically. Jonas’s tape purposefully holds these two seemingly contradictory states, de-familiarizing the familiar, as a strategy to denaturalize and interrogate male gaze of the camera in order to suggest the possibility of a different gaze.

The ritual aspect of Jonas’ performance is a method she uses to probe the boundaries of subjectivity and objectivity. As Lori Zippay has described Jonas’s early practice, “Her investigation of subjectivity and objectivity is articulated through an idiosyncratic, personal

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vocabulary of ritualized gesture and self-examination.”¹³⁹ Good Night, Good Morning uses a simple “quotidian ritual” to video-journal the passing of time evolving into what Zippay describes as a “self-portrait that is at once distanced and intimate, public and private.”¹⁴⁰ Jonas uses her tape to create a simple structure, an essential daily routine, as a system to monitor herself. In recording her routine ritualistically, Zippay further argues that Jonas “observes herself and the viewer observes her,” and thus/thereby provokes a heightened self-awareness on her part and on the part of the viewer.¹⁴¹ This heightened awareness removes the conditions necessary for erotic viewing pleasure as Mulvey defines it; there is not an “illusion of voyeuristic separation” and in this way Jonas breaks the fourth wall.¹⁴²

In this series of shots, Jonas experiments with the different ways she can frame herself doing essentially the same thing but with slight differences. By splicing together these multiple sequences, Jonas exposes the myriad different images the camera can present based on slight shifts in angle, pose, and inflection. Jonas, through this visual experiment, probes her interest in how the camera can present an image so different from what one sees in real time, partially inspired by the following anecdote; “I remember a remark I had read by someone watching Marilyn Monroe as she was sitting in front of a camera being filmed, about the discrepancy between this image and what the camera saw. I thought about showing this to an audience.”¹⁴³ Jonas, in this private performance, looked at her image in the monitor before recording it as a method to control the image, but also recognizing this as a somewhat futile effort as the camera would inevitably alter certain elements.

¹⁴⁰ Ibidem, 116.
¹⁴¹ Ibidem, 116.
Jonas has recalled about her recording set up, “The camera also connected to a small monitor that I continuously referred to in order to control the image making.”\textsuperscript{144} As her quote makes clear, for Jonas, authority over her image was crucial to her project as she explored the possibilities of representing herself or her alter ego as in \textit{Organic Honey}. In both cases she is in control of the cameras gaze. Also, similarly to \textit{Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy}, Jonas presents herself both “factually” and “poetically” as a method to explore representation of her body as subject and object—but instead of using an alter ego, Jonas presents herself plainly as a performer.\textsuperscript{145} As she repeats her routine of waking up and going to sleep in a ritualistic manner, Jonas also presents to the viewer a myriad of self-authored images of herself, each one different than the next. Though an intimate performance, Jonas does not reveal anything about herself that one could hold on to. Unlike Marilyn Monroe, who was reduced to a red lip, birthmark, and blonde coiffure, Jonas does not present to the viewer any sort of static trademark or feminine signifier. Instead she works against such operations of stereotyping the feminine. A notebook of hers from around 1976 reveals her interest in interrogating “aspects of my own being” and “archetypes of women” at the same time as displacing the audience through creating performances with “no logical connection” “no beginning no end.”\textsuperscript{146} Counter to normative media conventions in film and television, Jonas is not a character, trope, or singular image; there is no overtly eroticized presentation of sexual difference for viewing pleasure. Instead Jonas’s tape is decidedly mundane and overall dull, intentionally removing the spectacle of the image of woman from the narrative.

\textsuperscript{144} Jonas, “Film and Video,” 375.
\textsuperscript{145} Joan Simon describes Jonas’s early performance work, describing the transition from her Mirror Check performances to Organic Honey performances in her essay “Migration, Translation, Reanimation,” in \textit{In The Shadow a Shadow}, 94.
\textsuperscript{146} Simon, “Migration, Translation, Reanimation,” 101.
Simultaneously, the viewer is made aware of their voyeurism and denied the usual erotic pleasure of the viewing experience. Jonas speaks directly to the camera and purposefully addresses her audience, implicating them in her interrogation of the pleasure or displeasure of looking. Douglas Crimp has written about this: “In this same performance, an analogous doubling of Jonas’s own persona occurred in a beautiful videotape in which she constantly repeated “good morning” and “good night,” one quickly became aware of watching, in the enforced voyeurism of seeing the moment of awakening and the moment before going to bed…”. For Crimp, there is a present difference between the “good night” and “good morning” Jonas as the repetitive and circular nature of the video creates a looped dialogue. Jonas’s video directly acknowledges the voyeuristic nature of the camera repetitiously and in doing so confronts the male gaze and its condition of scopophilia.

*Good Night, Good Morning,* is one of Jonas’s final black and white single channel videos. After 1976, as Jonas’s practice shifted to exploring fairy tales rather than self-representation, she also moved away from video. She has said about this departure, “At the end of 1976, I stopped using video in my performances for a few years. I felt I had explored the variations in the relationships of camera to monitor to projection to live action….I also began to look outside instead of in.” Jonas’s work of the 1970s, as so many of the women working in single channel video, thus remains specific to the decade. The impulse toward self-reflexive modes of making was generated by and because of an interest in the capabilities of the Portapak. After 1976 Jonas moved on to more sophisticated cameras and technologies as they became accessible.

Wilke’s and Jonas’s works provide examples, among many possibilities, of strategies to work against the male gaze in experimental video practices. For them, as women, creating new possibilities for the gaze of the camera was particularly poignant because of the conventions of women on the screen in both Hollywood film and television. Where Wilke provides an excess of exaggerated poses and expression, Jonas constrains herself to sparse aesthetic parameters. In both of these contained works, Wilke and Jonas control the gaze of the camera, and present durational images of themselves that directly confront the gaze of the camera in order to reveal its construction and to deconstruct the male gaze. As Mulvey states in her essay, “It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it.” Similarly Wilke and Jonas confront the gaze of the camera directly, denying the voyeuristic pleasure of viewing and analytically destroying the symbolic order of woman as signifier of male viewing pleasure. Both videos exist as important examples of female artists examining their own representation on screen and the possibilities of expression through the moving image medium. Wilke and Jonas’ works are forays into displaying new images of the female experience and possibilities of a female gaze, but also oppose a monolithic solution for how to represent oneself as a woman in the wake of the Women’s Liberation Movement.
Conclusion

“...we, as women, by virtue of being raised to be so self-conscious, are making movies all the time in our heads as we move through the world.”\textsuperscript{149}

-Miranda July

As I have attempted to outline in this thesis, the array of videos produced by women in the 1970s shared mutual concerns of exploring new methods of self-representation to reckon with the image of woman upheld by a patriarchal mass media. Artists accomplished this through various aesthetic strategies; mirroring, masquerade, and disrupting the male gaze. These concerns were couched in a larger dialogue of feminist activists and critics that pertained directly to visual culture regarding the way women were represented in advertisements, television, film, etc. As feminist film theorist Christine Gledhill referred to it, the politics of “radical representation” called for women to be shown as women, that is woman as they saw themselves, not as patriarchal culture wishes them to be seen.\textsuperscript{150} Similarly, in the fine arts, feminist concerns promoted the forming of alternative methods of art-making and viewing, but most importantly a self-reflexive practice that sought to answer questions about the potential of depicting a female gaze, perspective, and aesthetic.

Under the looming history of women’s representation in art as a muse, an erotic object, a symbol of pleasure, women in the 1970s began to deconstruct signifiers of femininity through, in this case, self-representation. As Christine Delphy stated in an interview, “When people, when


\textsuperscript{150} Gledhill, “Developments in Feminist Film Criticism,” p. 20
women, want to undermine representation we must first repeat that representation.”¹⁵¹ The works considered here are examples of a method of portraiture that female artists explored in order to confront with their condition of being both a subject (the primary subject matter of an artwork) and an object (stereotypically depicted via the camera’s gaze as a signifier of male desire). Taking up intimate and personal subject matter (self-reflection), the artists working in video portraiture worked within a similar set of goals to foreground an interrogation of woman as image (stereotypical representations of women) and concurrently the unique position of being simultaneously a subject and an object.

The above quote from filmmaker, author, and artist Miranda July was a crucial point of departure in the early stages of my foray into critically thinking about the history and legacies of feminist video art. July, of a younger generation than the women considered in this thesis, began a project in 1995 called Joanie 4 Jackie. The “chain letter” of self-proclaimed feminist video art, called for submissions of video and film by women inspired by the boom of do-it-yourself methods of the Riot Grrrl scene in Portland.¹⁵² For July this meant every submission was to be accepted as a gesture toward honoring each woman’s own “private definition of success,” thus subverting the normal juried submission process of mainstream film festivals.¹⁵³ Her own project, The Missing Movie Report (1996), in which July walked around Portland with a video camera asking women what kind of movie they would make if given the opportunity, further explores July’s interest in what we do not see represented in the commercially oriented capitalist/patriarchal circuit of media. Happening some twenty years after many of the women

who first took up consumer grade video cameras produced their own short videos, July’s project is a testament to the ongoing desire for alternative modes of production and representation in media arts. That video could still be seen as a useful tool for feminist art production in the 1990s speaks to the technology’s significance in the larger history of feminist art.

Considering July’s project and looking back at the boom of feminist video and film production in the 1970s, the plethora of women and film conferences, articles and journals, as well as screenings of both film and video produced by women that concern the politics of representation of the “image of woman,” it is evident that there was and arguably still is a desire and necessity for alternative forms of representation concerning gender. It could be argued that the goals of feminist art and film were only partially successful, as there still exist gender-specific discrepancies in terms of representation in both mainstream media and, for example, museum collections. For instance, the New York Film Academy’s 2017 report on gender inequality in film stated that in films made between 2007–16, only 30.5% of speaking roles were female characters and only 12% of films had a balanced cast with at least half of the characters being female—all this considering that women purchase half of movie tickets sold in the United States.  

A recent report from the Guerilla Girls and the National Museum of Women in the Arts published this year reported that only 5% of work on display in major museums are by women artists and only 3–5% of artworks in permanent collections of major U.S. museums are those of female artists.  

Certainly, the legacy of feminist art and film criticism from the 1970s is still crucial to continuing a dialogue around issues of representation and gender inequality in our

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larger cultural sphere. Undoubtedly major museums and the Hollywood movie industry continue to uphold and promote the narratives and aesthetics put forth by mainly white cis-gendered men.

As Laura Mulvey so stated in her influential essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema in 1975,” “A politically and aesthetically avant-garde cinema is now possible, but it can still only exist as a counterpoint.”¹⁵⁶ That is, Mulvey recognized early on that feminist and other alternative forms of media and cultural production continue to be relegated to circuits outside of mainstream arenas, such as Hollywood film and commercial television. Feminist film for instance exists in independent cinema and theaters or arthouses such as Anthology Film Archives, but rarely is presented in mainstream contexts.

The ongoing efforts to institutionalize feminist media art, such as July’s donation of the *Joanie 4 Jackie* archive to the Getty Research Institute, is only one example of an array of continuing efforts to sustain the politics of feminism and representation in the realms of visual culture. For the generation of women considered in this thesis, exploring the possibilities of new forms of representation of themselves was invigorated by a larger cultural dialogue being pushed forth by feminist activists, thinkers, and cultural producers motivated by the Women’s Liberation Movement.

What I call here video portraiture, is one example of female artists’ attempts to provide a counterpoint to historical forms of self-representation as well as explorations of the possibilities of a female perspective and aesthetic. The key strategies I have identified are methods through which artists deconstructed their own image to gain control of it and examine the ways in which images of women had been represented by mass media to perpetuate patriarchal ideals. These efforts aligned with the larger goals of the Women’s Liberation Movement and critiques of

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Second Wave feminism which aimed to create and present different representations and perspectives of women.
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Illustrations

Figure 1: Hannah Wilke, *Gestures*, 1974, 35:30 min, b&w, sound
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Figure 2:
Lynda Benglis, *Now*, 1973, 12 min, color, sound
Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.
Figure 3:
Dara Birnbaum, *Mirroring*, 1975, 6:01 min, b&w, silent
Courtesy of Dara Birnbaum and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.
Figure 4: 
Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy*, 1972, 17:24 min, b&w, sound 
Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.
Figure 5: Cynthia Maughan, *Zebra Skin Clutch*, 1977-1978, 2:03 min, b&w, sound
Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.
Figure 6: Joan Jonas, *Good Night, Good Morning*, 1976, 11:38 min, b&w, sound. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.