

The newsletter of Film Arts Foundation, the Bay Area organization of independent film and videomakers.

Release Print



Vol. XII No. 3

April 1989

Auto Obsession. Chip Lord's feature-length video, *Motorist*, premieres April 2 at Pacific Film Archive, and screens again on April 11 at New American Makers at Opera Plaza Cinemas. See page 6.



Inside: Report From the U.S., Berlin Film Fests, page 3 • Interview with Chip Lord, page 6 • Local Spotlight, page 8

Plus: News Briefs, page 3 • The Information Pages: *Festivals, Funding, Opportunities, Notices & Classifieds*, page 18

FAF Calendar Highlights

Super-8 Sound, April 8 & 9 • Optical Printer As A Tool of Personal Expression, April 10-May 8 • Demystifying Distribution Series, April 11-May 9 • Sound Intensive I, April 15 & 16 • Ken Valentine's Screenwriting Weekend Seminar, April 21-23 • Your Film, Video Discs & the Mac, April 27 • Making of *The Color of Honor*, April 29 • A & B Rolling, April 29 • Friday Open Screen, May 5 • Sound Intensive II, May 6 & 7 • & More!

An Interview with Chip Lord

Motoring Through America and Beyond

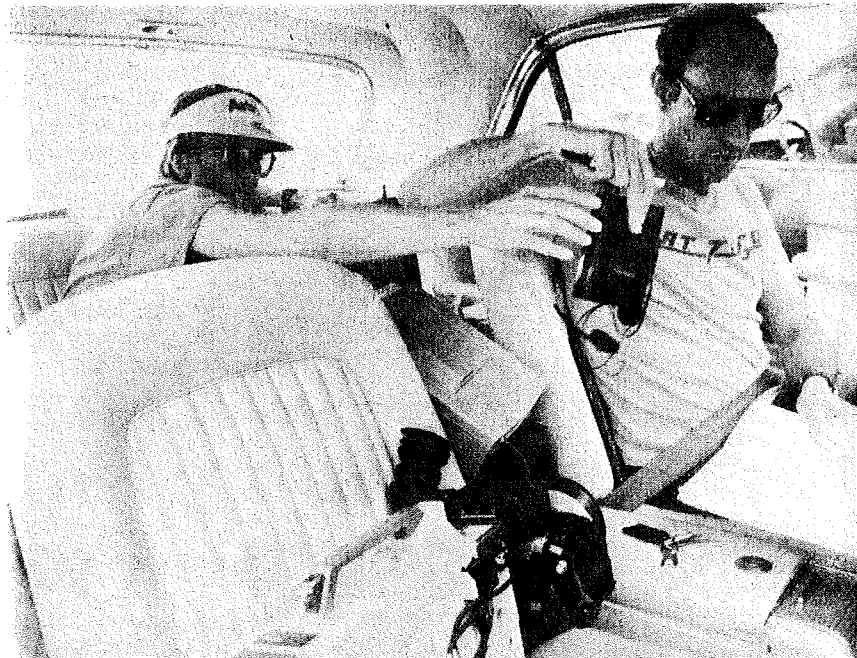
In 1968, fresh out of Tulane with an architecture degree, Chip Lord co-founded, with Doug Michels, an "art and architecture" group that quickly evolved into the multi-disciplinary, iconoclastic video collective, Ant Farm. Over the next ten years, Ant Farm (also including Curtis Schreier and Hudson Marquez) created some of the most durable images to come out of video art's anarchic, formative years: For Cadillac Ranch in 1974, the group buried ten Cadillacs nose down alongside Interstate 40 (the old Route 66) outside Amarillo, Texas. In 1975, Ant Farm staged Media Burn, an event, video tape and finally a famous postcard, in which a 1959 Cadillac was driven through a wall of burning TVs. In 1976, they collaborated with another collective, T.R. Uthco (including Doug Hall, Jody Procter and Diane Hall) to reenact and "re-shoot" in Dallas the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination in *The Eternal Frame*. Ant Farm's creations were prankishly, even aggressively critical of not only the contents—quickly becoming pure iconography—of American life as represented in "the media," but also of the form of the video medium itself as it had evolved in relation to those icons. As in so much oppositional art of the period, there was a visible ambivalence: a nostalgia for the images and objects subverted, and even a fondness for the very falsity generated by the media's processing of imagery.

Since Ant Farm broke up in 1978, Lord has pursued, often in collaboration with others, his preoccupations with the forms and meanings of automobiles, television and other fetishized technologies. Recently, he has been turning more to narrative experiments. His latest, and first feature-length work, *Motorist*, premieres April 2 (7:30 p.m.) at Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, and screens again on April 11 (7 p.m.) at the Opera Plaza Cinemas in San Francisco as part of the *New American Makers* series.

Liz Kotz talked with Lord for RP in mid-March. -Ed.

by Liz Kotz

Let's talk about your newest piece, *Motorist*...how it came out of your past concerns with automobiles as icons, but also how this tape is different from your previous work.



Chip Lord and Richard Marcus on the road during the shooting of *Motorist*.

It's different in a number of ways. It's the longest thing I've done. It's sort of B-grade, feature-length at 69 minutes. I like the fact it's not a 90 minute thing. *Motorist* also draws on other things I've done, as research...or my whole experience going back to growing up with the cars. It was a challenging process to put that work into a narrative format. Beginning four years ago with *Easy Living* I got interested in narrative. I think of *Easy Living* as being a kind of primer of the conventions of narrativity. It uses many conventions of transition, cutting style, but never delivers a story or plot *per se*. Hopefully there's room for the viewer to complete the plot, which I see people doing when I show it. Then I did the piece *Ballplayer* which was initially designed as an installation and was much more about storytelling and trying to recreate a one-on-one, intimate storytelling situation between the actor and the audience. Again, it was kind of a fragment, not really complete, in its narrative construction.

The narrative links things together spatially rather than ordering them in time.

I think of it as being about mental space...being on the highway and driving alone and the ways we entertain ourselves in inherently boring situations. I think about all the trips I've taken, various driving trips, and some of them become instantly forgettable and some of them become very memorable because of that mental construction and the images stay with me. So it can be a very creative time or it can be just downtime. I was trying to create that sense of the highway space and that becomes a convenient structure because you're always moving forward, towards the destination. It can be read as he's talking to himself, or he's talking to an imaginary person, but mostly he's talking to entertain himself.

It's a challenge to recreate that sense of boredom and yet keep engaging the viewer.

It tries to do that visually, be interesting visually rather than simply relying on the narrative as the structuring device.

Can you talk about your use of actors?

It's obviously an autobiographical piece. I had the realization that I had such a

limited range as an actor that I had to make a transition to having somebody else play that part. I guess it reached a crisis for me in terms of doing alternative performance work where I was performing basically autobiographical material and I couldn't really establish the distance of stepping back and looking at it. At that point it made sense to switch over to using an actor to deliver those lines. Richard Marcus [who was also in *Ballplayer*-Ed.] brings some experience and a lot to it in addition. In fact, with *Motorist* there are improvised lines so it keeps going back and forth between what was scripted and what was improvised. I think [using an actor] also offers the possibility of a more critical commentary as well because I could have the critical distance to direct it.

It's interesting when you use yourself as a sort of icon or archetype. The tape seems to revolve around the experience of a certain generation and of maleness...it's very isolated and solitary.

The structure of the piece reflects that in a couple of scenes shot with the actors not even being present, being separate. The gas station attendant is shot without Richard being there to play his part...that, of course, created immense technical problems dropping the voice in later. You're right, they almost don't connect...

They're very disjointed encounters.

Yeah. I think it has the effect of keeping you in his mental space of being on the road. They're very tangential encounters. There's a singularity of purpose there, keep going. And a self-chosen isolation in the sense of choosing to make that trip alone and, you know, your automobile is your castle.

It seems there was a shift in your work, the previous being more abstract and this one dealing more with the personal attachments people have to things. The narrative form focuses it more psychologically on the use of cars and the development of stories around them.

There's also a lot of ambivalence in this character in terms of attitude towards social issues, which in many ways goes back throughout the work. Certainly, in *Cadillac Ranch* there's a love of the automobile as icon as well as a critique and here he's basically implicated in the selling of culture, of historical, nostalgic culture.

It seemed much less celebratory, more deeply ambivalent. Maybe the timing and the pace, it's a lot cooler.

I think it's more introspective and is designed to create more empathy with the character, the individual, as opposed to the icon as object, as signifier of all these things. You get a set of issues reflected through this person's experience of them and enhanced by his recounting of those experiences in this isolated situation. It's by necessity and intention more personal, intimate and, well, a car is a very intimate space within which to communicate. It stays mostly within the car. There are shots of exteriors...but for the most part the idea was to keep the camera right there inside the car and to keep in touch with his space, both psychologically and physically.

On the one hand the character expresses nostalgia but in the way he talks there's sarcasm underneath it.

Cynicism. Well, on one level he feels violated because these icons which he experienced, and which had very special meaning to him from his personal history, have now become such broad signifiers of exactly that, formerly happy times. Through music and other advertising forms they've really become button pushers for, actually, a new generation of kids who didn't have any of that experience...who see it in a much more one dimensional way. They see a '57 Chevy and it's total icon because there's no experience of it. I think he resents that, the superficiality of the way those images get used.

There's also something weird about the nostalgia...not so much for the past but for a certain way the past imagined how the present would be.

It was kind of a utopian moment in capitalism, the 50s. Because it embodies the realization of the vision of the 30s of what the future would be like...those beautiful illustrations out of *Popular Mechanics* or *Mechanics Illustrated* in the 30s of the future and then the 1939 World's Fair which basically prophesied the interstate highway system, the super highways. Then there was the interruption of the war and everything got put off. When it was finally realized, it came out in a sort of absurdist way, got overdone in terms of design. That's why it's such a loaded period because it does really embody those aspirations and dreams that

go back to our parents' generations and growing up in the 30s and the Depression and seeing these images of how the future would be and everything would be convenient and streamlined.

The open-ended future, affluence.

Right, and then even during the 50s...well the Cold War certainly introduced some doubt of the utopian nature of that but it was pretty optimistic on most levels.

The tape reminds me of Ballplayer in terms of the loss and failure of dreams and hopes. It seems to mark the end of a trajectory, uncertain as to what comes next.

In terms of having dealt with the icons and issues for a long time, it did seem like if I was going to do some feature-length work then this should be the wrap up. I guess I have an ambivalence myself about being identified as a one-image artist or continually reusing that material. I do think that this tape uses it in a different way and gets to a different place with it. It's hard to know whether it will be a completion, though.

Lord, continued on page 15

SUPER
VHS
**CAMCORDER
RENTALS
EDITING
CLASSES**
415-843-3699
MEDIA CENTER
2054 UNIVERSITY AVENUE, SUITE 203
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94704

Lord, continued from page 7

Maybe you could talk about how you position yourself in relation to video or video art as a field. What works are you inspired by? What work do you see yourself in dialogue with?

It has been a little more than ten years. The first years after the demise of Ant Farm was very much an exploration of my own identity. It's much easier to talk about that work in retrospect than it is to talk about work I'm in the middle of right now. Although I wasn't really aware of it at the time, all those pieces are about establishing identity. *The Executive Air Traveller*, making a talk show parody where I play the celebrity author. Even *The Amarillo News Tape*...assuming the identities of the newscasters as a way to be critical but also to embrace it. It took a few years to work through that and to establish an identity which enabled me maybe to be able to explore other issues in my work. Inspirations? Work I'm in dialogue with? One influence has been teaching...in the sense that teaching video art and the history of video art, especially to undergraduates in major California universities, kids coming right out of the suburbs with a fairly limited world view...that made me feel like I had to expand the base of what working in video meant to the whole history of filmmaking, image making, photography. I had to educate myself about those things since I studied architecture and everybody in the early 70s just went out and bought a Portapak and began shooting and that's how you learned. We never studied it. That had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were very naive but original activities done and recorded on video. The disadvantages were that an awareness of the language of image making was rather slowly learned and cinema vérité was rediscovered in video without any awareness that it had been done before. "Hey, we're making really radical stuff." I tempered that and now I feel more comfortable teaching a much broader practice that doesn't really separate film or video. Actually at Santa Cruz they're combined so that has fit in with my views...that it's a broader definition of image making as a practice which has various traditions and subgenres in it. It's less of a ghetto and there should be fluidity between various areas.

In my teaching I've discovered that video writing is so bad I've given my students film aesthetics. So much video criticism seems to know art history but not film history.

You still hear the occasional statement that video through its tools is inventing a new language of image making...which I don't buy at all because any potential audience is working from an experience of the history of film as a language. That kind of self-congratulation that was rampant in the first generation of video activity seems to be still lurking out there occasionally. One more thing...video art came primarily out of the art world experience of the 60s and the non-object, anti-gallery feeling. Now, you have all these programs that teach video art and institutionalization at that level...we're producing all these video artists and where are they going to show their work? Unless there becomes an even larger institutional network somehow buoyed up by grants and other granting agencies...I think it's a really unrealistic activity. So I guess I feel more comfortable in a program that is a film/video program where they have to make that initial discovery themselves.

What does the narrative, feature-length format offer you and what drawbacks are there?

The thing that it offers is maybe an expanded audience because of the willingness to accept the narrative convention. I also find it very challenging. It's in some ways more challenging to fit into this thing which has a 100 year history than it is to be reinventing it every time. But the same advantages are also limitations because of that huge gap between narrative fictional work and distributable commercial narrative, the business of commercial filmmaking. In terms of *Motorist*, by the conventions of narrative filmmaking, it's rather experimental or radical in that it doesn't define its narrative structure, it keeps shifting. You're not sure whether it's from an omniscient point of view. Basically it puts the audience in the passenger's seat but the character never really acknowledges the camera. It's ambiguous. That's kind of risky yet it's also exciting because within the structure of narrative convention, well...how far can you push it? At what point does it become too difficult for the audience to understand? This piece keeps going back and forth, being rather conventional and then stepping out of it. Here's one example. Some of it is shot on 8mm video, the majority is shot on Betacam. I struggled with the issue of how prominent the camera should be. He's the character in the story, he's telling the story, he's also carrying the camera and shooting a few scenes which you see from his point of view. Now, the convention should be you shoot with the Betacam, he's standing there, the camera is up to his eye, then you cut to the point of view of the camera, you've established that transition. And I thought that the whole nature of the small format camera is so pervasive that I'm going to just leave that step out and go right to what he's seeing. You do hear him talking from behind the camera but there's no acknowledged statement that now we're switching over to that subjective, participatory camera. I think it was the right decision, it goes by much faster, you don't have the obtrusiveness of making that transition. In a way it's giving the audience the credit to be able to make that leap.

Breathless does the same thing, of course it was radical at that point...just leaving steps out and jumping to the next thing. It's very interesting because I showed *Breathless* in a filmmaking class I'm teaching this quarter and they had a couple of articles to read and I knew most of the people in the class had not read them. I thought, well, the thing to do is show the opening of *Breathless* and have them write about it, what traditions, rules are being broken here. Most of them said, well, it's a rather traditional editing style, moves from point A to point B and da, da, da. So they didn't understand what was going on.

Or these people are brought up on such a different set of materials that editing conventions don't...I think if you're brought up on TV and MTV you don't respond to that as breaking conventions. In the past you have mentioned the work of Paul Virilio and the concerns he raises about rewriting politics, language, seeing. Your work seems to deal with them, about space. . .

And time. On the one hand, there's so much of his work I don't even understand, it's so abstract and theoretical but there are several things in *Pure War* and *Speed and Politics* that I really connected with. It became a way of viewing work I had done. For example, *The Executive Air Traveller* was a piece that was always kind of amorphous and I could never really get a handle on how to present it...but when he talks about how we've become this society in transit, that we really live in transportation more than we live in any fixed place, I realized that *The Executive Air Traveller* is a kind of visualization of that statement.

Motorist deals with the identity and mobility.

And feeling, in a way, most at home with yourself when you're moving. It's not just the automobile here either because it translates into any form of movement. In *Motorist* we see the boat at the end and there's this transition suddenly...and the lyrics to the song are about driving out of L.A. but you're seeing it on a boat and it's a container on a boat, the most depersonalized method of transit imaginable. Hopefully that takes it beyond the on-the-road level of auto mobility.

There is the idea of the American open space and social mobility, and the ideas of Virilio about societies in transition and they seem to come together. At the end of the tape you feel you've come to the end of the line.

Well, certainly if you drive a car in Tokyo your mobility is very limited. Rather than being opened up, it gets constricted. That's one issue...of Tokyo being a symbol of the city of the future, it's sort of taken over from more American versions. Then there's another reading with how similar Tokyo looks to New York or to an American city. It's a little more intensified. You see all the neon and the signs and they're just like American signs but turned up a level.

The spaces become transnational. In the tape the myth of being American is sort of disintegrating.

Something is being lost in the process. It's hard to talk about it at this stage in some respects.

The politics of your tape are not obvious, but there's something going on there.

One issue is the individual against the mass institutionalization of society. I guess that's at the heart of it because of his feelings about the way these icons, which were experiences, are now becoming transnational, multinational symbols used in advertising. That's one level. He feels powerless and by being isolated he is powerless. He can't make any changes. Although it doesn't really state it, he's more or less buying his isolation. That is going to be a subtext. That's something you become aware of and it's maybe a little bit uncomfortable or too personal. But then his way of reclaiming power is by becoming a commentator, having an opinion about everything. He kind of rewrites the assessment of Edsel Ford, "Well, Henry Ford is the one in the history books but maybe Edsel Ford is a better person. Maybe by being the patron of the Diego Rivera murals he made a more important contribution than Henry Ford did."

It seems that narrative experiences historical change only as loss...just the threat Japan presents to Americans' identity.

He sort of welcomes it, by participating in it without raising that question, at least in a direct fashion. But for the audience to observe his activity is another thing. They're another generation away...they can be aware that he's making a mistake. Then maybe that's a critical comment.

There's a dissolving of beliefs that leaves an emptiness at the end of the tape, which could be reactionary or progressive, politically it's very wide open.

You're saying it can be read both ways...there is this whole

chronic, anti-Japanese thing, this echo of racism from 30 years ago, and at the same time there are people who are embracing it, the Japanese way of doing business. "Let's look at that, it's succeeding and shouldn't we adopt it. Oh, the Japanese are buying all the banks and real estate."

Now the U.S. is on the other end of the dynamic.

That's clearly what I was thinking about...the irony of being the plundered culture, the Cezanne sunflowers behind bulletproof glass in a Japanese bank. Which is why I used the Terry Allen song about Cortez coming into Mexico which is the other side of conquest. In the history of the U.S. it's the first time we've been on that side of the fence. Maybe we're not really there but metaphorically we are. It's an interesting issue, how we deal with it. Reagan's approach was to try to ignore it and rebuild the nationalist self-image. I don't think that's very honest.

There's something funny about the London Bridge thing, the dislocation of culture.

The London Bridge is dripping with irony. It's out there in this place where...and here's the most superficial kind of developer's greed, or Barnum and Bailey merges with golf course developers...the idea that if we can bring the London Bridge here and there's nothing here now, we can build a town. And they did it. It really worked. Now there's sort of a working class version of Palm Springs all around it. On one hand I'm fascinated by that just as a curiosity and as an extreme manifestation or symbol of the capitalist impulse. On the other hand I do think of it as a cultural loss.

It also addresses the idea of artificial community. At times transplanted cultural practices can ground a community and other times remain out of place.

L.A. may be the largest displaced community in terms of its culture. It's the new melting pot. And the melting pot is another two sided issue of the hopefulness and loss of American identity.

The narrative inhabits the space of dispersal and that makes it so weird, that it's so placeless.

The classic narrative would stay with the protagonist at the end and in this case we go with the car instead of him. We see Toshi driving the car instead of Richard and there's no clue as to where Richard went after that. He just disappears. He is totally placeless at that moment. End of piece.

Your recent work seems to connect more with your background in architecture.

It's funny because on the one hand I feel like I keep getting further and further away from architecture, and I do in the sense of the physicality. I almost feel like I want to get back to it and maybe I have in another way. I've always thought video was the opposite of architecture because the small screen is so limited in its ability to portray three dimensional space or landscape or scale of landscape or any kind of complex spatial relationship. So maybe that's what I'm always trying to do, trying to figure out how you can do that through the limitations of the medium.

In a way Motorist is a landscape piece, the uninhabited American open space. There's the polarization of the compact space and the open space.

A lot of landscape you see is through his windshield or beyond the car in the foreground. There are some beautiful shots of the mountains moving slowly past in the distance. I think it is a landscape piece. The landscape show at the S.F. Museum [of Modern Art] reiterated, for me, the limitations of video's ability to portray landscape. So it's interesting you say that. I find that flattering because how do you portray landscape through video? You've got to frame it, you've got to use these framing devices.

The tape is about shifts in relationships of many kinds. The character's commentary seems to make him evaporate rather than become powerful.

Also the thing that's going on is he's becoming more animated, a little more crazed and more of a commentator as he gets to L.A. He's coming forward but you're right, at the same time his feet are being pulled out from under him. As soon as he gives up the car he's gone. Somehow he's given up his identity with the car.

There's the cliché of a character going on a journey and having a transformation but here there's no transformation.

But the evaporation of the character is a huge transformation, which traditionally happens through a bullet, a fusillade of bullets striking him down if it's a tragedy. Here, he's sort of among the disappeared by the end.

Another thing the tape seems to be about is experiencing a familiar landscape as if it's science fiction, as alienating, threatening.

Yeah, and how to do that...in a way that's subtle yet realistic. How do you create that experience that a lot of us have had when you do one of those freeway drives into L.A. and it's rush hour and the sun is starting to go down, it's really thick smog and you start to get a headache? How do you do that without it becoming too overdone and too broad? That was the hardest thing to shoot...coming into L.A. and being on the freeway. We had to do it three days running during rush hour. It had to be that late afternoon sort of light. We were very lucky to get it the first time...it was that completely overcast smog, actually with fog mixed in, and that held...pretty much for the three days of shooting. That was the most nerve wracking. Two o'clock in the afternoon we'd get in the car and drive out to West Covina and drive back in. There was a point when I thought it might be interesting to shoot part of it against a blue screen and part of it out there on location and mix them up. I discarded that for the realism of location shooting.

Another influence I started thinking about was Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*, but really more than that was *Alice in the Cities* where this German reporter is totally blocked in America and constantly on the move also.

Your tape reminds me of the way Europeans perceive America. Trying to view it with a sense of alienation.

Or with a heightened awareness. As I said earlier, when you make those drives, probably most people are going to just turn off because they know they're going to spend 12 hours in the car and it's going to be monotonous. The European on that same trip is going to be amazed by all the space and the details. I've had that experience even though I'm not European...of rather than dulling out, raising the level of awareness and perception.

In the last few years there's been such a reexamination of the suburbs and if you grew up there you may be critical but still have the attachment.

In Eric Fischl's work there is that same kind of critique but also obvious identification with those suburban scenes. They're all alienated but at the same time there some fondness there too.

The work wouldn't work if there wasn't that fondness in addition to the alienation. The landscape is really interesting.

Maybe I haven't exhausted it then. But the difficulty then is dealing with the same material that's been dealt with so much on MTV. How many times have you seen a '59 Cadillac tailfin in an ad or a music video? Is it possible to bring anything new to it in this stage of the game?

Your work seems to take as a given the power of media yet you have a relationship with these cars that isn't totally taken over by the MTV representation.

Well, I think that's true and it's connected to [that representation], rather than reinventing it...yes, there is that media landscape out there, it's a commonality from which we begin. I really believe that people are much more sophisticated than networks believe or Hollywood studios believe. I have an obligation to acknowledge that sophistication or awareness or media literacy that most people have.

What about distribution?

Obviously I have to work from the strength I have, how other work has been distributed, but ultimately working toward a larger audience. So that's the PBS outlets but I haven't heard from them. Then of course it's an odd length. It's not a 58 minute tape, it's a 67 minute tape. I would love to get it distributed in Germany and Japan where I think it would play well. In Japan more than Germany in some respects. And Channel 4 in Great Britain. But I'm going to be approaching it as an art video, that network. I think it does have the potential to cross over to a more film-oriented, experimental narrative film arena. Δ

Liz Kotz is a San Francisco-based writer, producer and curator. She teaches video aesthetics at New College of California.

FAF ANNOUNCEMENTS

RP Deadlines: editorial deadline for the May-June double issue of *Release Print* is Wednesday, April 5; the deadline for classified advertising is Monday, April 3; for display advertising, Monday, April 10.

A special thank you to the family and friends of FAF member Robin Whitman, who died last month, for donating her Bolex camera to the Editing Facility, putting it back into the filmmaking community of which Robin was such a vital part.

More thanks for donations to Ralph Ackerman for a Minolta Super-8 projector, to Katrina Charmatz for video tapes, and to Irving Saraf for magazines for the library.

Many thanks for help in the office to Chien-ei Yu, Erica Marcus, Jennifer Seaman, Jan Ankerson, and Lois Haggerty; for assistance at seminars to Stefanie Wasserman, Karil Daniels,