



**Interrogating the Boundaries of Women's Art:
New Work in Video by Four Women**

Lots of ink has been spilled in the past few issues of *High Performance* and elsewhere on the changing definitions of women's art. Particularly on the West Coast, for instance, critics have pitted "essentialist" body art against "deconstructionist" postmodern art as two opposing practices. Yet alongside this conflict there is a group of young women in San Francisco, many of whom emerged out of the punk movement, whose work departs from the codified territories of these feminist critical models. For the most part they choose not to directly counter structures of power through criticism, protest or deconstruction. Instead, their work attempts to expand the stances available to women, creating a space for activity by engaging in diverse aesthetic, social and representational practices.

Such work represents a contemporary challenge to the terms and strategies of feminist art. By aestheticizing violence, abandoning discourses of subjectivity, sexuality or identity, or refusing to assume an identifiable political stance, it explicitly defies previous assumptions of women's art. We can see this emerge on several levels: the re-working of performance practice and representation of the body, coupled with an interrogation of the very category of "women's art"; a changing relationship with popular cultural forms and movements; and the problematic status of emerging artists in an institutionalizing field.

San Francisco-based artist Leslie Singer's food-oriented performance video art presents a particular challenge to critics. Some have misread her work as a form of satire and cultural critique similar to the pop culture work coming out of New York in the early '80s by artists like Cindy Sherman, Eric Fischl and Laurie Simmons. A superficial similarity involving the use of popular culture images and materials masks deeper conflicts. Where these artists use high art strategies—irony, distanciation, critical reframing—to undermine the viewing conventions of the appropriated pop materials, Singer uses popular cultural forms, particularly music, as a leverage to displace high art presentation and viewing conventions. This makes her work particularly impervious to conventional forms of criticism. One might argue that the works of artists like Sherman and others owe part of their popularity to the fact that they could be easily and productively incorporated into the dominant art critical models of the early '80s, focused on mechanisms of simulation and the whole discourse of post-modern appropriation. In contrast, the attitude in Singer's works—less hierarchical, more celebratory, and more expansive—

comes out of a post-punk sensibility whose impact has been much stronger in popular music than in the visual arts.

Born in Washington D.C., Singer moved to San Francisco at 19 to get involved in the local punk scene. Inspired by New York's landmark "Times Square Show" (1980), which she saw as an impetus to bring the energy of rock and roll into art, Singer began prolifically making Super-8 movies, sometimes one a month. To date she has completed 29 short films and 28 videos, and shown her work in the San Francisco Bay Area at Artists' Television Access, the San Francisco Cinematheque, New American Makers and the Lab. She has recently begun exhibiting drawings and visual art (featured as backdrops in her current tapes) and is planning a joint show with visual artists Raegan Kelly and Julie Murray for ATA in February, 1990.

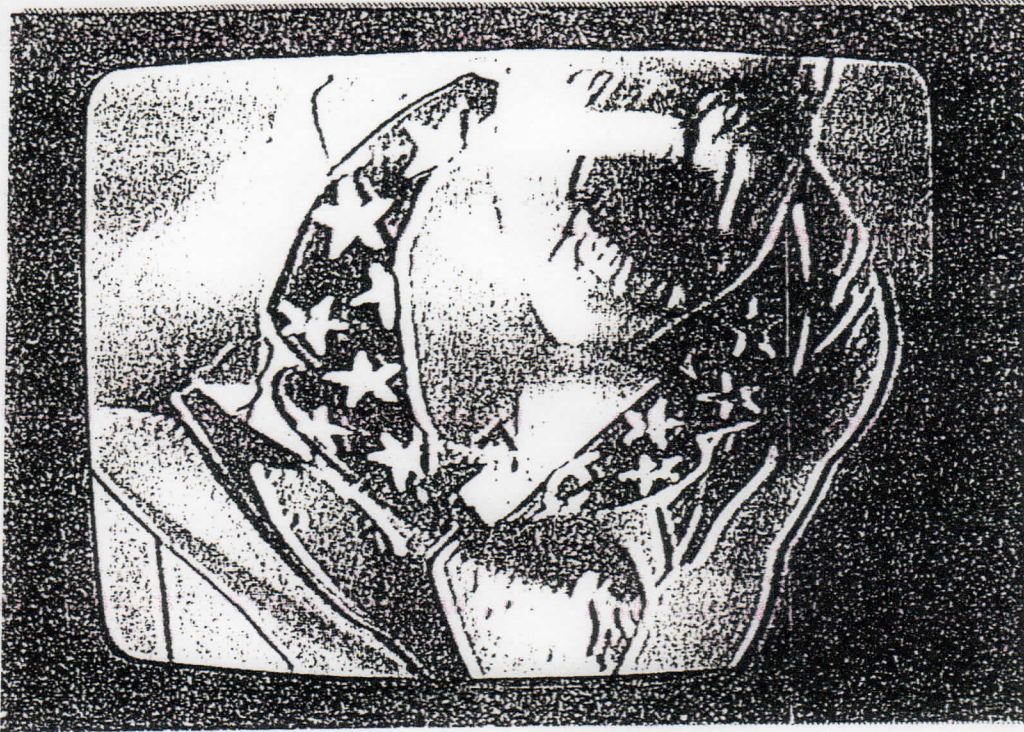
Singer's silent super-8 films played with narrative by stripping it down to the barest elements of character and plot, employing inanimate objects—vegetables, pieces of toast—as characters, with stories told through intertitles. Adopting a pop song format, most of the films were no more than three minutes long. Often the images and titles would appear completely disjunctive. For instance, *How to Fuck Friends and Keep Them* features a plastic hand that fist-fucks cheese-whiz in a glass vase.

As Singer turned to performing in her works, she started working in half-inch video. In *Refried Broccoli* (1985), part of the "Freud's Snack Bar" series, Singer, wearing a bra and underpants, writes "fat" on her body while singing along to a Jesse Colter song. The other work—all tightly organized into three-minute single-take segments structured around re-mixed pop songs—feature Singer in a variety of costumes smearing, breaking and stomping food over her body.

The next series of tapes worked with celebrity impersonations. In *Laurie Sings Iggy* (1987), Singer appears in Laurie Anderson costume, imitating her tightly-controlled gestures and mannerisms while singing the rude and obscene lyrics to Iggy Pop's "Rich Bitch." Yet the tape is *not* a parody. It embraces two sets of subcultural models and sexual identities, counterposing the icy androgyny and self-control of Anderson with the proto-punk aggression and transvestitism of Iggy and the Stooges. Working to harness and reposition the energy of popular cultural models, other videos in the series include *The Madonna Series* (1987), *My Life as a Godard Film* by *Whitney Houston* (1988), and *Priscilla*

Azian Nurudin *Nancy's Nightmare*

By Liz Kotz



Leslie Singer *Hot Dog Fat*

Presley's Bathroom (1988). Her more recent videos, *Hot Rox* (1989) and *Smokie: Portrait of a Glitter Babe* (1989), offer an odd reworking of '70s revisionism. The first is a 40-minute epic of junk food and props, done with a Rabelais-meets-the-Rolling-Stones kind of energy, the second a 10-minute disco portrait talking straight to camera.

To give thumbnail sketches of these works necessarily reduces them to their most obvious elements—a series of actions and tableaux. It is this across-the-board leveling that Singer's work performs: disparate cultural elements, occupying unequal positions in a still more-or-less vertically stratified cultural hierarchy, are brought to the same plane. Funny and yet also quite disturbing, these displacements preclude a certain kind of critical distance, allowing images, artifacts and materials to rush through at a dizzying speed, bringing out the crude and unmediated connections between things.

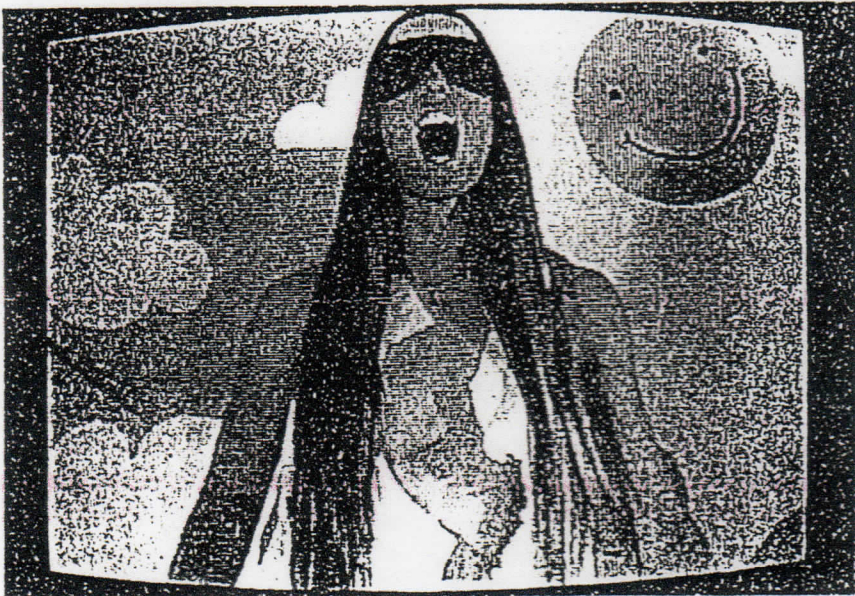
Like Singer, Malaysian-born and Moslem-raised video artist Azian Nurudin was inspired by the early '80s punk and music scenes. Both came to video from Super-8, and worked together during the mid-'80s, producing a joint show at San Francisco's Media gallery in 1987. A graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute in film, Nurudin's early videos "Malaysian Series 1-6" (1986-87) present a succession of brief performances. In each, Nurudin, dressed in a black leather jacket and print sarong, alternately whips and beats various small appliances. Like Singer's "Freud's Snack Bar" (1985),

The Sigmund Freud Story (A Video Opera, 1986) and "The Madonna Series" (1987), the videos work through repetition and accumulation of elements that in themselves are quite banal. Nurudin's work, in particular, marks an attempt to hybridize post-punk aesthetics and Third World experiences. Throughout her videos, cars, toaster ovens and assorted products of Western technology are dismantled and destroyed. Bodies, represented by blow-up dolls, are hung and beaten.

In *Self-Immolation as an Anachronism* (1988) and the pseudo-ethnographic *Head Hunters of Borneo* (1989), First World/Third World encounters are probed more directly. In the former, cultural and religious atrocities against women are played out with dolls and props. In *Head Hunters*, a seemingly familiar ethnographic video featuring b&w photos with voice-over dissolves into a whimsical tale of urban life, as the modern headhunter, played by Nurudin, drives her new pick-up around San Francisco. Other works include the oddly-stagy lesbian S&M video *Nancy's Nightmare* (featuring Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots are Made for Walking" and Megadeth's cover version of the song) and *Automobile Clean-up Expediency*, a taped series of encounters with urban bureaucracy featuring industrial music by Skinny Puppy and Front 242. (The other videos feature original music by Nurudin.) As with her 16mm film, *Bitter Staarke*, incommensurable conflicts reveal an erotic dimension; sexuality infuses an industrial landscape. Nurudin's works integrate violence on a number of contradictory levels: the rather routine aestheticization and eroticization of violence present in punk/industrial culture, the pervasive social violence against women in First and Third World cultures, and the theatricalization of violence of S&M.

While both Nurudin's and Singer's videos employ oblique strategies to treat their "serious" subjects, I hesitate to call their work metaphoric. Metaphor requires a tighter sense of alignment between worlds, a sense that one element can "be like" or "stand for" another. Here the random and conflicting series of allusions function with a perpetual sense of disalignment. Clearly feminist and yet not "feminist," these post-punk works probe how to construct a position while avoiding the available vocabulary of politics or dissent. In their place is an odd kind of silence, a *dis*-articulation of positions.

Cecilia Dougherty's videos offer a different trajectory through aesthetic and political positions. Dougherty came from a background in painting to do her Master's in performance/video at the San Francisco Art

Cecilia Dougherty *Grapefruit*

Institute. Her early works addressed marginal and stigmatized aspects of lesbian experience. *Gay Tape: Butch and Femme* (1985) and *Sick* (1986) use interview-based documentary formats to disassemble then-prevalent models for lesbian identities and experiences. Uncomfortable with the naturalist, utopian iconography of women's bodies adopted in many feminist representations, Dougherty subtly exposes the mechanisms of power underneath these idealized images. Concerned with developing a language to represent lesbian experiences, her more recent works, *Claudia* (1987) and *Kathy* (1988), integrate sexual acts into mundane urban and domestic scenes. Banal, anti-exotic and yet tightly structured and deeply self-conscious, these videos culminate a project of demythification and self-definition.

Dougherty's most recent video *Grapefruit* (1989) represents a departure from a direct mode of confrontation. Whimsical, deadpan and also very funny, the 39-minute piece features an all-women cast reenacting Yoko



Valerie Soe *New Year Part I*

Ono's tale of life with John Lennon and the Beatles. Like Singer's *Hot Rox*, it reworks '70s icons and our nostalgia for them. With the inspired casting of Susie Bright—Susie Sexpert of *On Our Backs*—as Lennon (and Azian Nurudin as George Harrison) *Grapefruit* plays with the boredom and utter banality of an increasingly romanticized past. It is '70s philosophy played for farce, reconstructing John and Yoko's obsessive rituals of self-display as a B-movie soap opera. Mapping the lesbian subculture onto the heterosexual mass culture, *Grapefruit* works on many levels to re-open and reposition a tale from modern mythology, a boys' story played by '80s girls in mod drag. Unlike *Claudia* and *Kathy*, where Dougherty establishes a tightly controlled context for lesbian sexuality in order to stake out a separate cultural territory, *Grapefruit* works from within, creating a dialog with popular cultural forms and with a nostalgia that is both pleasurable and repressive.

This oblique questioning of dominant cultural attitudes is developed in the work of Valerie Soe. A Chinese-American woman raised in white suburbia, Soe's work explores the growing space between cultural identities in an increasingly multicultural U.S. society. Like a number of younger Asian-American artists—Gregg Araki and Jon Moritsugu come to mind—Soe's works engage with the edges between cultural traditions, from political issues of racism to the aesthetic legacy of punk. Her early short *ALL ORIENTALS LOOK THE SAME* (1986) challenges the racist premise implied in the video's title by offering a visual display of the incredible diversity of Asian ethnicities. The video installation *New Year, Parts I & II* (1987) offers a more personal series of reflections on cultural isolation. Situated in the recreated domestic space of her family's living room, the two-monitor installation juxtaposes found footage of racist depictions of Asians with storybook drawings and childhood stories about cultural dislocation. In search of good schools and a "nice" neighborhood, her parents unintentionally instilled in their children "the sense that 'good' meant white, 'nice' meant non-ethnic." Suspended between her own cultural identities, Soe explores their conflicting expectations and, in particular, the alienating position constructed for her as an Asian woman in American society.

A more quirky and less political work, *Scratch Video* (1987) presents Soe's body as she fiercely scratches her skin, leaving a criss-cross of red lines across her back. A text describes the recurring dry skin condition that

in childhood left her feeling painfully uncomfortable. The tightly-composed and un-cut image of her back raked by fingernails, graphically accompanied by the harsh sound of scratching, provokes an almost visceral sense of identification in the viewer. Disturbing and yet also quite funny, the tape probes a personal and bodily alienation that is politically unrelated to issues of gender or race.

Throughout these very different works, Soe seeks to engage with various kinds of experience, sometimes explicitly addressing her heritage as a Chinese-American woman in a white patriarchal culture, and sometimes not. Her work cuts across the definitions of political, experimental and documentary genres that profoundly constrict artists of color as well as women artists.

While working in very different styles, all of these artists are expanding the territory and strategies of contemporary feminist art practice. Their work raises the question of what is "feminist" in a given work. While most critics recognize certain themes and approaches as feminist—sexuality, family, the body, autobiographical work—these artists self-consciously depart from this well-charted terrain, adopting visual language and aesthetic strategies that have been outside of or at the margins of women's art practices. This represents not so much a rupture with the feminist art movements of the '70s and '80s as an effort to expand its scope and impact. Abandoning an increasingly codified oppositional or alternative stance, they embrace a range of mass cultural and subcultural discourses and materials.

This abandonment of recognizably oppositional political strategies has, of course, been highly contested. Yet these emerging artists' stance should not be read as apolitical or accommodating, but as an inevitable response to the current commodification of feminist discourses within art world and academic circuits. In what some young artists term "the Barbara Kruger syndrome," what pretends to be oppositional is in fact quite expected, serving the valued function of "legitimizing dissent" to the culturally privileged and politically neutral art sector in the United States. In addition, the pervasive moralism of much feminist art and criticism has had the effect, perhaps unintentionally, of reinforcing rather than challenging the divisions among women. At its worst, this promotes a situation in which the discourses of a self-appointed feminist community are used to exclude women working from different aesthetic or representational traditions. By contrast, the works of Singer, Nurudin, Dougherty and Soe, though widely diverse

in their strategies and influences, abandon conventional female roles without constructing alternate feminist models.

This growing challenge to women's art practices must be put into a larger context that encompasses the lack of support offered to emerging artists and the increasing hierarchies within the video art community. At this moment, there seems to be a movement to constitute the field by closing ranks. This can be seen on several fronts. For instance, recent video art has consolidated around professional technical formats, with the consequent exclusion of half-inch work from many festivals and venues, and pursued public visibility and artistic legitimacy through the construction of a video star system. Of course, these tendencies are not monolithic. While some sectors of the video community institutionalize around museum and art world structures, others are opening to new practices and populations. Witness the growing number of minority producers and the exploding activity of video on cable access television and in public high school systems. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the proliferation of low-end video technology, video art as a field increasingly constitutes itself as a fine art/high art discourse. Ironically, this mobilizes the rhetoric of an institutionalized avant garde to police its borders against the multitude of commercial, vernacular and non-art video practices.

Yet while one part of the video community tends towards the theory-driven models of the 1980s art world, another segment has turned towards rock, punk and popular music as models for artistic practice. These divergent tendencies underlie much of the current debate about feminist practices. They represent attempts to engage not only with other non-art representational and aesthetic traditions, but with other audiences and other relationships between artist and public as well.

We must ask ourselves: Is it critically productive, in 1989, to talk about a feminine or feminist aesthetic? Or even, for that matter, to talk about women's art? What is the meaning—and, more importantly, the impact—of these categories? Many of these terms have long since outlived their usefulness as the very temporary and historically-specific unity of practice they were once built on has since collapsed. How can we expand this debate to incorporate the very different strategies employed by younger and emerging video makers, or by the vast numbers of women artists working outside white artworld contexts? How does such an inclusion challenge or shift the terms and agendas of this debate? ■

Liz Kotz is a San Francisco based writer and film/video critic. She teaches video aesthetics at New College of California and is president of the Board of Directors of Artists' Television Access.