

The Feminism Factor: Video and its Relation to Feminism

MARTHA GEVER

Large tracts of the common ground currently occupied by feminism and art were delineated in two essays that circulated widely in the 1970s. In keeping with feminist investigations into the implications of gender for all cultural forms, the titles of both articles were framed as questions: "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?"¹ and "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?"² The former was written by art historian Linda Nochlin and published in a 1971 anthology of feminist writings surveying a variety of social institutions—from the law and the family to literature and advertising. Although Nochlin agrees with the verdict that there have been no "great" women artists—even though there may have been some very good ones—she indicts the arrogance and prejudice that inform the question posed as a "problem" by established bourgeois art historians and critics. Not only does Nochlin point out the disadvantages faced by aspiring female artists in terms of education, social expectations, and critical reception, but she extends her argument to challenge one of the concepts at the heart of Western art: artistic genius. In the process, she exposes the convergence of the values associated with artistic genius and with conventional masculinity—and thus the advantages accorded men in pursuing the career of Great Artist. And, rather than providing an answer to her title's interrogation, she suggests that feminist art historians and critics research and write histories of art institutions, not histories based on accounts of individual successes and unexamined concepts of what constitutes artistic success.

Sylvia Bovenschen's 1976 essay "Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?" published in *New German Critique* in 1977 and reprinted later that year in the feminist art magazine *Heresies*, examines the proposition that women possess a distinct "feminine sensibility." Not afraid to generalize about women, Bovenschen nevertheless found that "no formal criteria for 'feminist art' can be definitively laid down." She concludes by restating her original question: "Is there a feminine aesthetic? Certainly there is, if one is talking about *aesthetic awareness* and *modes of sensory perception*. Certainly not, if one is talking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstakingly constructed theory of art." Like many other feminist intellectuals, she favors materialist, historical methods in her analysis of the conditions within which art is produced.

In recalling these two examples of cultural criticism, I want to acknowledge several points of departure for my discussion of feminism, women artists, and video in the United States, which includes neither announcements of any

Great Women (video) Artists or a search for a feminine aesthetic operating in videotapes made by women. Rather, my approach here will be akin to those recommended by Nochlin and Bovenschen, adapted to the specific productions and different historical circumstances of the late 1980s. My emphasis will be on social institutions—rather than individual careers—and the ways in which these have been incorporated or addressed in videotapes by women. By means of this method, I hope to chart the intersections of this work with feminist debates about the meaning of gender in our culture. Previously, I have covered similar territory. In one article, four feminist documentary videotapes made in the 1970s formed the basis for my analysis of parallel developments in alternative media production and feminist-defined issues like female sexuality, wife abuse, the cult of beauty, and the politics of housework. A second article was written as a sort of sequel that traced interest in myths of feminine passivity and masochism among women making videotapes about women in the early 1980s. This article, then, will pick up some of the threads from those earlier pieces while allowing me to take yet another look at the tentative, contingent relationship between video, the work of women artists, and feminism.

All of the videotapes discussed here are works that have sustained my interest in the relationships between feminism and video—relationships that are not intrinsic, or often readily apparent, in most videotapes made by women. All were made during the mid to late 1980s. I have further confined the topic within the national boundaries of the United States, because, to a large degree, the conditions of production and distribution of noncommercial, unconventional video are determined by national policies—whether policies regulating telecommunications or those governing arts funding. Interestingly, all of the tapes—even the most overtly personal—examine intersections of identity, U.S. culture, and often, national politics. Aside from this and female authorship—although not always without male participation—these tapes do not fit within one topical or stylistic category. Still, there are other connections of interest to a feminist critic, and these provide the structure of as well as the subjects for this survey.

Looking back at the events of the two decades, the social climate and political culture in this country seem to have changed profoundly since Nochlin's and Bovenschen's essays first appeared. Starting in the late 1960s and gaining momentum throughout the 1970s, feminism in the United States attempted to effect a sweeping upheaval of the power relations between men and women. Organized feminism, popularly known during that period as the Women's Liberation Movement, provoked strong reactions against, as well as impassioned defenses for, numerous political programs designed to improve the social situations of women. Necessarily, the process of undoing entrenched prejudices was revealed to be much more complicated and its achievement less immediately

attainable than what was implied in the manifestos and broadsides published by advocates of women's rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s. From a different perspective, the feminist movement in this country has also been hampered by the controlling positions assumed by white, middle-class, often homophobic women and their political strategies. But, despite the consequences of this domination, their definitions of feminism have been repeatedly challenged by women of color, lesbians, and others.³

With those limitations and biases, and depending on the context where it has taken root, the political agenda of feminism in the late twentieth century has met with varying degrees of acceptance and has been transformed accordingly. Feminist campaigns against institutionalized sexism continue to alter myriad aspects of the public and private lives of people in this country. Although reactionary attacks on women's reproductive rights have been successful recently, such issues as comparable worth and affordable day care are supported by large sectors of the populace, and changes in social practices continue to occur. At the same time, in this decade the "feminization of poverty" has increased dramatically and right-wing backlash against every minor shift in power achieved by feminists persists, often with the support of the highest government officials.

Thus, feminism in the United States at the end of the 1980s presents a contradictory scenario where women of color, lesbians, working-class women, and others with a profound commitment to women's rights and a feminist critique of political power inject feminism into radical or progressive projects not necessarily concerned with traditional "feminine" interests. However, for those concerned solely with attaining the goals of white, heterosexual, middle-class feminism—increasing the number of women working in professions like business, law, and medicine, for example—the challenges presented by feminists aligned with anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, antiracist, and/or antihomophobic politics are frequently ignored or discounted. On the other hand, feminist theory has become a key component in literary and cultural studies conducted by intellectuals working in the liberal academy (also largely white, straight, and middle-class), even if some of its proponents remain embattled within their academic institutions. On yet another hand, in the art world (likewise white, straight, and middle-class) feminism and feminists, if not aspects of feminist theories, are considered passé, an attitude signaled by the recurring use of the stylish adjective "postfeminist" in the art press.

Insofar as any critique of video in the United States must be linked to the institutions of art (and mass media, the other primary institutional affiliate of video), the present coolness toward feminism in most quarters of the art world might indicate that a study of recent videotapes made by women could easily forego any discussion of feminism. Indeed, in the late 1980s, the celebrated "superstars" of the art world are still entirely male and white, and it may seem

that feminism has left little imprint on art institutions or those who participate in them. Feminism survives, however, in the domain of progressive or left-wing art criticism, where there is increased interest in what has become designated "feminist theory." No doubt feminist, both in its sources and its emphasis, this brand of cultural theory is, nevertheless, limited to elaborations of the psychic construction of "sexual difference."⁴ Cloaked entirely in the language of psychoanalytic literature, the feminism most frequently articulated in art institutions concentrates on the unconscious processes that inform the formations of gender identity of individual subjects, establishing the problems of "femininity" and "feminine representation," as well as "female spectatorship" as the central issue for feminism. The importance of psychoanalytic theory for feminists is that it recognizes the power of the unconscious structures that uphold oppressive standards of masculinity and femininity. A major drawback, in the context of art criticism, is its foundation in heterosexual, Western, bourgeois models of psycho-sexual relations, a model that seems inadequate to account for cultural factors apart from gender identity.⁵ Additionally, this kind of feminist theory—restricted to the psychic constitution of sexual difference and devoid of materialist or overtly political contextualization—frequently runs aground because of its inability to displace men, white and straight, of course, from their central position.

Although the influence of psychoanalytic theory on contemporary feminist criticism may be the most striking features of its recent development, the distance between this approach and the materialist criticism recommended by Nochlin and Bovenschen is not as great as it might sometimes seem. For instance, questions about a "feminine aesthetic" continue to be raised by work that posits a relationship between voyeuristic pleasure and gender. Nochlin's suggestion, too, that explaining the absence of women from the ranks of great artists requires more than an introduction of talented but forgotten women into the annals of art history is echoed in discussions about works by contemporary women artists that expose the masculinity embedded in the concept of the "masterpiece" and the "great artist."⁶

Despite such similarities, sexual politics has not remained a static field. Likewise, the video work done by women in the 1980s looks quite distinct from that made in the 1970s. Low-cost, portable video production equipment was introduced in the United States at approximately the same time that feminism reactivated a large-scale women's movement in this country. The kinds of equipment that became available in the 1980s—cheaper, more versatile, extremely light-weight, more reliable, easier to operate—in short, more accessible than the hardware on the market throughout most of the previous decade—allow much greater flexibility for videomakers. Thanks to the economic success of the home video industry, videomaking by individuals and groups not affiliated with broadcast television has become relatively ordinary, no

longer esoteric like in the era of half-inch, reel-to-reel portapaks. Video practitioners now work in an environment where the production and distribution of small-format tapes is part of the social landscape. The greater economy of video production, as opposed to film, also recommends this medium for women, since the collective economic status of women in this country has barely improved in this period in spite of increased participation by women in the waged and salaried work force.

The most significant differences between the videotapes from the women's liberation era and those made in the 1980s, however, have little to do with the greater availability of the means of production or improved technical quality of images. Many of the earlier feminist tapes were documentaries that mixed techniques of *cinéma-verité* with television journalism.⁷ But during these same years—while feminists established a grass-roots movement that could be translated into a formidable political lobby—many women artists recognized that the project of counteracting descriptions of “reality” that routinely objectified women would not be effective if the concept of “reality” itself was not overhauled. That meant initiating a thorough and specific examination of the ways in which “real” events and people were represented. The challenge to ideas of a universal, unchanging, “true” or “natural” relationship between men and women—such as the “truth” that women “naturally” aspire to marriage and motherhood and those who do not achieve both are failures—seemed to require modes of representation that unsettle perceptions of reality rather than confirm its inevitability.

Recognition of the artificiality entailed in documentary representations made this form doubly suspect: First, it falsely claimed to reproduce reality without distortion, free from the ideological baggage that comes with processes of mediation; second, it perpetuated the positivist ideology of empiricism, which has been regularly enlisted to rationalize systematic violence directed against social groups deemed inferior. Ideas and topics related to women that might have seemed apt subjects for documentary realism in the 1970s have been treated with some level of stylization, dramatization, or other devices that indicate awareness of these issues in more recent work.⁸ None of these problems originated in or were limited to feminist uses of video. But the association of video with television, together with television's social function as the most popular source and interpreter of information and entertainment, provides a particular constellation of techniques, histories, and reference points for women artists working with this material. And those works that deal with women can then contribute to feminist debates about the connections between systems of representation and gender identity, between representations of sexuality and sexual politics.

One of the striking features of the seven tapes discussed here is a sus-

tained attention to problems of performance, just as performance has remained a form at the heart of much feminist art practice. Indeed *Fuego de Tierra* (1987), by Nereyda Garcia-Ferraz and Kate Horsfield, in collaboration with Branda Miller, chronicles the life of Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta, whose work mainly consisted of performances and sculptural earthworks that often entailed elements that can be considered performance. Mendieta, who died in 1985 at the age of thirty-six, was a dedicated feminist as well as an accomplished artist. During the 1970s and early 1980s she executed a number of site-specific sculptural pieces using indigenous, natural materials that she worked into shapes abstracted from female body forms. Documentation functioned as an integral part of her art, and—in addition to interviews with Mendieta's various friends, relatives, and professional colleagues—*Fuego de Tierra* includes Mendieta's film footage of dramatic interactions between several of these sculpted forms and elements like flammable powder or tidal seawater that she staged and then recorded.

Just as Mendieta's films provide visual evidence of her ephemeral projects and thus illustrate aspects of her artistic development, the various people interviewed provide information about her life and confirm her expressive engagement with natural forms and environments. Many of them also relate Mendieta's intense involvement with these materials and settings to events in her adolescence, when she and her sister were sent to live in the United States by parents fearful of the influence Communism might have on their vulnerable young minds. Brief moments from newsreels show scenes from the early years of the Cuban Revolution, while dozens of snapshots supply visual referents for the reminiscences concerning Mendieta's life—from childhood to shortly before her death. The long takes of silhouettes of female bodies smoldering in the earth or flaming against a night sky in Mendieta's footage, however, repeatedly interrupt and redirect the flow of retrospection in the tape. Unlike archival materials introduced in order to invoke an irretrievable past, these records of Mendieta's art do not refer to an implicit narrative. The interviews and photographs that supply the tape's documentary information augment but never fully explain Mendieta's performances. Her dramatic images of transformations of energy defined or contained by material female forms—often enacted in relation to her identity as an uprooted Cuban—suggest numerous metaphors linking social relations and questions of national identity with acts of representation. The striking images produced by Mendieta's performance pieces propose a blurring of the boundaries between what's taken for granted as natural and thus immutable and what's regarded as subject to change.

The story of Mendieta's life, nevertheless, dominates *Fuego de Tierra* and accordingly the tape adheres to narrative documentary structures. In this regard, the work attests to Mendieta's artistic contribution by making her the subject of a detailed biographical study. But there are wrinkles in its narrative

fabric—disconcerting extreme close-ups of several interviewees and musical elements that refuse to remain in the background, for example—that serve to underscore the unorthodoxy of such a project. This aspect of *Fuego de Tierra* allies Garcia and Horsfield's tape with media projects where techniques that stress theatricality have been used to denaturalize—and thus politicize—accepted social arrangements. Ayoka Chenzira's *Secret Sounds Screaming* (1986) stands out as another hybrid documentary that exhibits some of these traits. In the half-hour tape, producer/director Chenzira combines interviews with various individuals and scenes of actual events with moody slow-motion shots accompanied by discordant, ominous music and material that is clearly staged or labeled as reenactments.

Chenzira's subject—the sexual abuse of children—and the description of the social dimensions of this problem in the tape could easily have become an appeal for state intervention on behalf of “social purity.” Instead, she avoids concessions to campaigns for a normative morality and concomitant attempts to legislate virtuous behavior by consistently working against clichés. For example, early on in the tape a rape counselor explains that the belief that abuse occurs more frequently in black and Latino families is false. This, she emphasizes, is a problem that affects all socioeconomic groups, rich as well as poor, white as often as black. Thus the actress who recounts a story of molestation and terrorization by her father, her pregnancy in fifth grade, and the subsequent criminal prosecution of her father could be repeating the words of myriad women living in communities across the country while simultaneously conveying the dramatic intensity of a first-person voice.

Similar to feminists' analysis of rape and wife battering as forms of sexist social control, sexual abuse of children is presented here as a consequence of unequal and exploitable relations of power between adults and children. Just as feminists in the 1970s refuted the guilt attributed to victims of rape or battered women—who, it was frequently said, provoked attacks because they secretly want to be raped and beaten—*Secret Sounds Screaming* both reveals similar commonly held ideas about children's sexual provocations and refutes their veracity through dramatizations of children's subjective experiences. Gender is also introduced as an important factor, since patterns of abuse almost always involve male adults or older male children (most frequently brothers) who make sexual approaches to and/or rape younger girls and boys. A central moment in the tape occurs when a young man first tells how his mother's male friend raped him and how he then tried to obviate his anger by raping his younger brother. In order to prevent such rape, another boy's voice explains, he quickly mastered the gestures and costume associated with macho behavior.

Secrecy about intimate relationships governed by socially sanctioned abuses of power and the attendant ignorance—fostered by institutions, not merely guilty individuals—are Chenzira's identified culprits, which she repeat-

edly counters metaphorically as well as with demystifying information. Like the open secret of sexual abuse of children, she disguises the identity of speakers à la *Sixty Minutes*—even when they are played by actors. Her method visually as well as verbally underscores the need for anonymity stemming from the combination of shame and guilt that plagues anyone who is subjected to sexual abuse. Moreover, Chenzira's strategy of maintaining a realist style interrupted by passages that exaggerate that style to the point of confusion effectively underlines the anxiety bred in children who have been abused. By employing such techniques, she stretches the conventions of realist video documentary to encompass a political analysis of subjective experiences and support a position of political advocacy that the mass media would never allow—one that counsels active resistance to unwanted sexual involvements and refusal of masculine assertions of privilege.

Chenzira's tape bears structural and stylistic resemblances to public affairs documentaries found on mainstream, mass-media television, but her social perspective on the topic and the aspects of her approach just outlined are probably better situated in relation to other independent productions broadcast only in the independent video slots programmed by a few local public television stations or in subsidized series of independent media on cable, if shown in such venues at all.⁹ *Secret Sounds Screaming* translates what are perceived as isolated personal traumas into the idioms of social documentary in order to cast a political light on one area where sexuality and power meet. In contrast, Vanalyne Green's *Trick or Drink* (1985) turns inward to stitch together intimate autobiographical details of her childhood relationship with her alcoholic parents and the connections between their compulsive drinking and her own obsession with eating and dieting.

Yet there are significant overlaps between Chenzira's exposé of the social irresponsibility toward abused children and Green's personal account of her unhappy childhood and adolescence. Most prominently, both tapes dissect pathological dynamics common to the twentieth-century Western nuclear family. In *Trick or Drink*—after a recitation of entries from a diary she kept as a thirteen-year-old in 1962, illustrated by snapshots and illustrations from the same era—Green's voice explains the project: to make sense of “the emotional inheritance of my parents.” She continues, “Had I known there were other children like myself for whom no one intervened, other children who saw things that should never have been seen, perhaps my life would be different.” What follows is a synopsis of how her parents' alcoholism profoundly shaped her life, presented in short sections, each employing different devices to elicit meaning from scraps of memories. In one section, she pronounces lists of words and associated images from her childhood—“whiskey,” “ice,” “smoke,” “television,” “vomit,” “urine”—while the camera picks out details of illustrations picturing white, middle-class, Mom-Dad-and-the-two-kids at home among all the trap-

pings of the idyllic American Dream circa 1960. These storybook illustrations alternate with gritty black-and-white photos of the interior of Green's family home littered with booze bottles. She employs the very different mode of anecdotal presentation in a later section, when she appears on-camera and narrates episodes from her history as an adult "binge eater."

Green's conscription of different dramatic strategies to trace different facets of her emotional odyssey in *Trick or Drink* exhibits an interest in performance similar to Chenzira's in *Secret Sounds Screaming*. In each, personal recollections of individual family histories are central to the tape's purpose, but such statements are bracketed by signs of their invention. Since neither tape seems overly concerned with exploring the fiction of autobiography, but rather with describing and analyzing distinct social phenomena, these signs can be read as connections between the emotional content of individual stories and larger social configurations of power. In employing this method, both tapes recall many of the feminist performance artworks that appeared and flourished in this country during the 1970s and that frequently used the body of the performer as an emblem of both particular and general social effects—Mendieta's work, for example. (Green's artistic career includes performance work, and an earlier film by Chenzira is about a dancer.) Since the connotations of femininity and images of the mute compliant female body go hand in hand in Western culture, the female performer who presents herself simultaneously as speaker and as spectacle has afforded feminism a metaphor for opposition to such sexist representations as well as a foundation for alternative modes of representation.

Performances by two women, one a dancer, also figure prominently in Linda Gibson's multilayered *Flag* (1989). Although mediated by elaborate camerawork and editing, these scenes demonstrate an interest in recording performance similar to that seen in *Fuego de Tierra*. But Gibson also employs autobiographical material akin to that in Green's tape—family snapshots, diary entries—intercut with typical Americana-like pictures of the national monuments in Washington, D.C., and the patriotic texts of the Declaration of Independence, the Girl Scout oath, and the Pledge of Allegiance. As her title indicates, the U.S. flag is the tape's central motif. Its image, lore, and symbolic functions are used to highlight the points of intersection and disparity between the formation of a personal identity and the ideal of U.S. national identity. Although no less emotional than the parental betrayal described in *Trick or Drink*, Gibson sketches a process of disillusionment that occurs not as a product of malignant family dynamics but as unexamined patriotism giving way to a more ambivalent relationship with citizenship. The sound track names public, historical reference points like President Kennedy's assassination and the 1965 uprisings in Newark (Gibson's home), as well as a memorable personal

incident when two white boys chased her and yelled, "Fucking nigger, get out." In the same naive tone she uses to remark upon her crush on a boy in her class, she confides to her diary. "At first I was scared, but later I wanted to kill them."

Three different flags serve as central props in the performance scenes Gibson interweaves in the *Flag*. At the same time, the role assumed by each of the two performers remains constant: the white woman makes the flags; the black woman dances with them. The first flag is the traditional banner composed of carefully sewn strips of red, white, and blue fabric with appliqué stars, mounted on a pole and swung about with pseudo-military movements. As the political chronicle embedded in Gibson's autobiography hints at a more troubled relationship between the state and the individual, a batik flag is dyed in a symbolic "melting pot" of color and displayed more as an idiosyncratic garment than as an object of uniform design and nationalistic reverence. The third flag is a crude, ragged burlap construction, with the white areas created with bleach. This metaphor, like others in the tape can be read for multiple meanings: the impoverishment of the symbol of national unity, the production of U.S. national identity by removing color, and so on. Toward the tape's conclusion, the two women abandon their separate roles mediated by pieces of cloth when they cover their own and each other's bodies with red, white, and blue paint. This act once again relates national identity with skin color while it concurrently offers a visual metaphor for the identification of individuals with the body politic.

In addition to such gestural maneuvers, Gibson also employs an elaborate electronic pallet to construct her collage. For instance, she uses a circle wipe to replace Marilyn Monroe's face with her own school graduation portrait. Later, she repeats the move, but with Angela Davis assuming the place previously occupied by Monroe. Superimpositions, too, and intricately edited sequences form montages—both within frames and sequentially—which constitute visual rhetorical structures allowing Gibson to articulate the contradictions between the ideals of U.S. citizenship and her awareness of the depths of racism in U.S. culture.

"Average American family"—a prosaic phrase indicating the mythical site where rigid rules governing gender divisions prevail and the meanings of those divisions are persistently reproduced—acts as the centerpiece of Sherry Millner's *Scenes from the Micro-war* (1985). As in all the tapes cited here, Millner's work is constructed as a textual collage, in this case a combination of political imagery from popular culture—war movies, toys, and comics; a speech by Ronald Reagan—and scenarios based on the mundane events of everyday life—eating, bathing, lovemaking. Staged as a series of tableaux and vignettes but

claiming to be a narrative—the story of one family's "battle to survive"—the tape presents a dramatization of unsettling correspondences between official proclamations about the endangered institution of the nuclear, biological family and public diction about "national security."

All of this is played for satiric effect in Millner's tape. Many of the short episodes are shot and edited in a style that mimics the tension-inducing protocols of television action dramas, sometimes accompanied by a deadpan off-screen narration reminiscent of film noir: Fred McMurray's commentary in *Double Indemnity* or William Holden's in *Sunset Boulevard*. But Millner invariably includes elements that render absurd the assertions made in the tape's text. The first indication that the reality depicted in *Scenes from the Micro-war* might be exaggerated appears in the first scene. A man's voice introduces the cast of characters: "the wife and I, and the two kids." When the family walks toward the camera, however, it becomes evident that the "son" is a mannequin.

The most elaborate visual/verbal pun in the tape, however, revolves around the green, brown, and beige motif of military camouflage. Immediately following the titles, the narration continues, "We could be any family, living in any town U.S.A.—just blending right in." Then the bizarre family group gets into a car painted in a spotty camouflage pattern, which quickly becomes the ever-present emblem of the family's dedication to a regime of military preparedness. Their clothing, their faces, their TV set, and other items in their home, including their shower curtain are camouflaged. While the man (played by Ernest Larsen, who coauthored the script with Millner) takes a shower wearing a gas mask, Millner (who plays the wife) observes off-camera, "Camouflage as a way of life differs only in degree from the way people already live." Instead of enlisting camouflage as a method of concealment, however, every reference in the tape—a camouflage outfit for the Cabbage Patch Kid, camouflage cake boxes, camouflage condoms—underscores its deceptive purpose and, by analogy, the deceptions used to engender the patriotic sentiments that ensure popular support for military programs.

Since World War II, the mythical nuclear family has become the preeminent unit of consumption in this country. Millner recognizes the importance of gender in the domestic economy by locating her burlesque "micro-war" in the home of a hyperpatriotic, monomaniacal American family. While she covers a cake with army-green-colored icing and then decorates it with six-penny nails, her voice intones, "Oh, yes, a man's home is his castle. That's an idea as strong as the country itself. But wherever you look—whether it was on the old one-family farm or out on the prairie when the pioneers were out there with the twenty-mule team—I ask you, what was always the true last frontier? Why, it was the home. And who keeps the home fires burning? Why, it's the woman." Millner rapidly turns this hyperbolic reiteration of women's privi-

leged relationship to domesticity—the mainstay of right-wing antifeminist and "pro-family" arguments such as those advanced by Phyllis Schlafly and her anti-ERA Eagle Forum—into an unambiguous feminist critique. Proudly displaying her repulsive, olive drab, nail-studded "land mine cake," with half of her face smeared with camouflage makeup, Millner presents a perverse image of the domestic division of labor along gender lines married to ideas of nationalist, imperialist power mongering.

Although the positions taken by the actors and speakers—and, by implication, spectators—in *Scenes from the Micro-war* are varied and sometimes contradictory, all parts are played by Millner, Larsen, and their three-year-old daughter Nadja Millner-Larsen. The tone changes markedly, however, in the penultimate scene, when an electronically distorted recording of Millner's voice recounts her daughter's confusion about participating in the tape. She recounts how their adoption of fake military gear and militaristic behavior led Nadja to ask, "Are we bad people now, Mommy?" Tentatively, Millner answers with her own question: "Can you pretend something so that the something never happens, sketch out the implications of that something before it becomes real?" In other words, is it possible to counter the fantasies produced by dominant ideology with a critical fantasy? And, Millner wonders, "Does even entering into that discourse alone make us bad people?"

These questions about the relationship between culture and cultural criticism, are also suggested by the investigation into the popular appeal of television melodrama enacted by Joan Braderman in *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986).¹⁰ After illustrating and interpreting the ideological and economic interests at work in the TV series, Braderman comments, "I confess my unreconstructed *Dynasty* delectation, though I have the intellectual tools to deconstruct its odious subtext. Does this tell you anything? Is deconstructing it merely a new way to love it? . . . This is what we want to know as feminists in the eighties." Again the institution of the family—in this case the extended family dynasty of Carringtons—provides the ideological and emotional frame for a critique of contemporary culture. And, like Millner, Braderman assumes a comic stance—augmented by a few costumes and props—to probe the political significance of and personal fascination with the characters and plots of *Dynasty*.

Although Braderman might qualify for membership in the *Dynasty* fan club, her cutting, humorous analysis is performed as an idiosyncratic, electronically choreographed monologue, enacted within scenes from actual *Dynasty* episodes. In some instances, holes revealing only her eyes, nose, and mouth appear to be cut as a mask from the TV frame itself. Peering through these chroma-key constructions, Braderman seems to hover above the goings-on of Alexis and company while she interjects her commentary. In other segments shot in front of chroma-keyed backdrops, her body appears at an angle within the perspective of the frame seen from above or below, so that she seems to lie



Joan Braderman, *Joan Does Dynasty*, 1986.

suspended in or towering over the action. Elsewhere, she speaks from the edges of the frame as if occupying a ringside seat. The various uses of this device—whereby Braderman pastes her own animate image onto scenarios from the prime-time soap opera—enable her to produce what she describes as “stand-up theory,” featuring herself in the role of “TV infiltrator, media counterspy, and image cop.” As a result, her images occupy a plane separate from that of the *Dynasty* sets and thus graphically emphasize the two-dimensional, stilted representations of the standard TV *mise-en-scène* even as she engages with it.

As her remark about her own ambivalent status as a politically astute critic who is, nevertheless, a *Dynasty* devotee indicates, Braderman doesn't shy away from the areas where political understanding and voyeuristic enjoyment clash. Commenting on a beauty parlor confrontation between Alexis and Krystal, providing an example of “one of our favorite *Dynastic* motifs: the cat fight,” Braderman says, “As an aging feminist, I've got to ask myself, why do I love these things so much?” One of the refreshing effects of *Joan Does Dynasty* resides in its refusal to make premature pronouncements about the ideological complexities entailed in gender identity while tracing the show's continual

elision of family relationships and corporate power. Joan Collins/Alexis Carrington Colby's central role in this configuration is, as Braderman notes, “pseudo-progressive.” That is, Alexis's recurrent grabs for power depend on her personification as “*the phallic woman*,” which places her as the “center of power and desire in this show.”

Many of the premises Braderman brings to her analysis of *Dynasty* are based in feminist, socialist, and anarchist cultural theories, although she avoids adopting a singular theoretical posture. Instead, she collages theories in a manner analogous to Millner's collage of modes of address or Gibson and Green's *mélanges* of associative imagery. And Braderman's entertaining delivery does not dilute the tape's didactic function as an exemplary exercise in honing critical consciousness in relation to mass media. Information about the practical side of *Dynasty*'s production is uttered alongside speculations on the significance of various narrative currents. She knowledgeably describes sociological aspects of the program—its syndication in seventy-eight countries, some of the titles it has been given abroad, the number of viewers worldwide, and so forth. At other moments, she unravels the myriad psycho-sexual dynamics that are best explained in the psychoanalytic language of unconscious desire. Throughout she sprinkles references to theories of commodity fetishism and the relationship between commodities, style, and power so important to *Dynasty*'s popular appeal. By performing her on-screen, variegated interpretation of *Dynasty*, Braderman both enacts and embodies the participation of the spectator in producing meaning, the spectator's role as consumer of media representations, and the ability of the spectator to think critically about what's on the screen. The tape ends with a shot of Alexis in jail, screaming from behind bars, “Let me out of here!” Standing next to Alexis, Braderman addresses the audience: “We're the spectators. We're outside the box. She's inside. Indeed, the question of our times, ladies and gentlemen, is, who's in the box? Because that's where power lives. . . . She *says* she wants to get out. . . . The problem is we *need* to get in.”

The “we” addressed in *Joan Does Dynasty* is clearly defined as feminist. Not only does Braderman's analysis draw upon and elaborate feminist studies of melodramatic fiction,¹¹ but she employs the vocabulary of feminist theory throughout the tape. In contrast, Martha Rosler's *A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night* (1983) does not concentrate on feminist texts or problems understood in terms of feminist theory. Even so, her tape poses a set of questions that cannot be fully considered without an awareness of the inflections of gender within the field of political theory. This is signaled early in the tape, when the camera scans a cover of the June 7, 1982, issue of *Newsweek* featuring a painting of a bare-breasted woman—William Bailey's *Portrait of S*—accompanied by the headline, “Art Imitates Life: The Revival of Realism.” Here feminist arguments about realist modes of representation and sexist objectification—including traditional portrayals of the nude female figure—are brought up to date. But Rosler also presents the magazine cover as the outer wrapping

of the work's central text: a polemic supporting the use of torture, written by City College of New York philosophy professor Michael Levin, published in a column entitled "My Turn."

Rosler's multilayered dissection and refutation of Levin's defense of torture is formulated as a montage of visual and audio material from a variety of sources: newspaper clippings, television ads, radio interviews, news reports, and the like. The relevance of feminist thinking to this project could be described in language similar to that Rosler used to explain the significance of gender in an earlier videotape, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977): "[I]t isn't a 'work about women'; it is a work about women, but it is also not a work about women. It's a work about personhood, and intrusive violation."¹² In *A Simple Case for Torture*, the converse can be said—that it is not a work about women, but it also is a work about women, insofar as the social position of women vis-à-vis the state differs from that of men. In a passage detailing the correlation between repressive police activities abroad and U.S. police training, for example, a radio reporter describes specific cases of Latin American death squads' systematic use of rape to intimidate women suspected of subversive activities. Elsewhere, Rosler builds a sequence of newspaper and magazine articles and pictures—from a *Time* magazine cover featuring Patty Hearst/Tania, superseded by an ad for *Time* featuring a photo of a woman headlined "Fear" to a full-page photo of Nancy Reagan overlaid with a magazine photo captioned, "Mother with photographs of her missing children in San Salvador." While this series of images occupies the screen a voice describes death squad organizations and the same radio reporter recounts another woman's story of rape and torture.

This inundation with mass-media fragments occurs immediately following a section of the tape where off-screen voices and on-screen texts describe a procedure Rosler calls "leveling": the eradication of "the difference between public and private . . . between the individual and the state." Later she adds another important distinction applicable to feminist political theory: "When we confuse the individual with the state we eradicate all notions of politics. The social 'we' seems to be just a swarm, a random mass, and one can imagine that public decisions, like private ones, are made on the basis of desire. But terrorist acts are political acts, and the state's response is the result of political policy in the exercise of power." By scrutinizing just one item from a mountain of mass-media products, Rosler then marshals a seemingly endless set of clippings and quotes to chart the intersections between the fault lines that criss-cross political discourse in this country. And, insofar as political power informs the textual operations of the mass media—and vice versa—she reassembles her collection of text fragments to reveal how this exchange works. Particularly germane to a feminist analysis of these issues, *A Simple Case for Torture* never overlooks nor underestimates the key role played by the female body in ideolo-

gies of domination and the repercussions of these ideologies on actual, living women. At the same time, Rosler complicates what is sometimes imagined to be an easy equation between the personal and the political.

No matter how elusive definitions of a "feminine aesthetic" may be, to discuss a collection of works by women artists without inventing one may be even trickier. Still, none of the connections between the tapes mentioned here is aesthetic. Surely, formal relationships may be noted, but the political meanings of such features often govern their use. Rosler's attention to the policies of state terrorism, mass-media representations of political relations, and crucial differences between individuals and the state in *A Simple Case for Torture* resonates with a number of similar concerns in *Flag* and *Scenes from the Micro-war*. Chenzira's investigation of the links between sexual aggression and domination in *Secret Sounds Screaming* can also be read in relation to *A Simple Case for Torture*. The similar autobiographical components of *Flag* and *Trick or Drink* have already been pointed out, as has the attention given to problems of performance in all of these tapes.

Thirteen years after Sylvia Bovenschen published her provocative essay on feminine aesthetics, it may be possible—and necessary—to contradict her conclusions while crediting her contribution to feminist criticism. Not only are there no aesthetic principles common to artworks by women, but women's "aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception" cannot be categorized either. Indeed, the tapes discussed in this essay exhibit no formal characteristics whatsoever that can be isolated as specifically feminine. But there is, perhaps, a set of critical terms that may be said to be feminist—terms that are historical and inseparable from other political discourses. Conceptions of public and private spheres, the nuclear family, racial identity, national identity, consumer culture, corporate power—none of these are strictly feminist concerns, but a cogent analysis of any of these topics must contain a feminist component, although few feminists will define the questions at stake in identical terms. Feminists may agree on one question, however. As this video work suggests, inquiries about whether there have been—or ever will be—any "great women artists" have been effectively displaced by the critical voices of feminism.