

Helen DeMichiel, *Consider Anything, Only Don't Cry*, 1988.

Significant Others:

Social Documentary as Personal Portraiture in Women's Video of the 1980s

CHRISTINE TAMBLYN

Omnivorously, or even cannibalistically, the video medium seems to be capable of accommodating any synthetic aesthetic strategy, production method, or format that artists have managed to devise. Several factors have fostered the development of hybrid genres in video. Often trained in a variety of pragmatic and academic disciplines, video producers bring complex skills and aspirations to the operation of technologically sophisticated equipment. Unlike the film image, the video image never stabilizes; this electronic capriciousness may account for the eclectic range of its discursive applications. Video's lack of an established tradition undoubtedly promotes experimentation, and its capacity for multichannel sound and image transcription predisposes artists to produce layered works. Perhaps the ubiquitous domination of television as a vehicle for propagating popular culture concomitantly privileges video as the quintessential postmodern apparatus for reformulating aspects of the old as the new.

When video portapacks were initially marketed in the late 1960s, these tools seemed so easy to use that an illusory belief in the transparency of the representations they produced was fostered. The notions of documentation and truth were inextricably linked in the ideology of grass-roots "guerrilla television," with its self-proclaimed adversarial relationship to the broadcast networks. During the two decades that have elapsed since then, the theoretical premises underlying such an unproblematic attitude toward representational veracity have been invalidated. Abandoning any pretenses of objectivity, some video artists have recently contributed to the burgeoning hybridization of genres by grafting documentary formats onto other expressive modes.

In this article, I will focus on work by six artists who conflate the genres of portraiture and social documentary. Paradoxically, these artists utilize video as a vehicle for reflecting on the world in a manner that also renders an image of themselves; by "looking out," they are able to "look in." The six artists whose videotapes I will examine are all women: Nancy Buchanan, Cecilia Condit, Helen DeMichiel, Jeanne C. Finley, Laura Kipnis, and Sherry Millner. Although some of these artists present themselves as feminists, others do not. Nevertheless, feminist theory and the history of feminist performance video seem relevant to the concerns they address in their work.

One of the many insights gleaned from feminist consciousness-raising

techniques of the 1970s was the dictum "The personal is political." In the performance video that was influenced by these consciousness-raising methods, autobiographical themes, including the exorcism of constraining female stereotypes in confessional monologues or the expansion of self-potential through projective role-playing predominated. Women's inferior social and economic status had been linked by feminist theorists to their linguistic inequality; women were not afforded the same opportunities to attain a mastery of language as were men. By exercising their right to function as speaking subjects, the feminist artists who made autobiographical videotapes were thus using the medium for both aesthetic and political purposes.

Low-tech production values characterized the emergent feminist video art of this era: long, unedited takes, minimal camera angles or movements, and a reliance on sync sound were among its consistent stylistic features. This work therefore falls under the rubric of "narcissistic" video that Rosalind Krauss identified in her influential 1976 article, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism."¹ Krauss's theory of narcissism as the medium of video was derived from an analysis of tapes and installations that had been produced primarily by male conceptual or body artists like Richard Serra or Vito Acconci. However, the model seems equally applicable to 1970s feminist performance video, even though the artists' intentions were quite different.

In narcissistic video, according to Krauss, "The electronic equipment and its capabilities have become merely an appurtenance. And instead, video's real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self."² Because video technology enables the image to be simultaneously recorded and displayed, the performer can use the video monitor as a mirror. The video camera and the monitor form a "parenthesis" that surrounds the body of the performer, who is thereby "self-encapsulated" in a continually renewed feedback loop.

Feminist performance video was usually produced in an intimate setting: either in the artist's home or while the artist was alone in a production facility. This privatized space, along with the uncompromising focus on the artist's own body as both the subject and object of her gaze, made these tapes intrinsically narcissistic, in the sense in which Krauss defined this psychologically loaded term. Although Krauss did not seem to intend her attribution of narcissism to be interpreted pejoratively, it is difficult not to see the situation she described as an entropic cul-de-sac. Fortunately, Krauss concluded her essay by citing examples of works that prefigure other alternatives for video: tapes that adopt a critical stance toward the medium itself or tapes that interfere with the psychological hold of the video mechanism through a physical disruption, such as Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* (1972).

What Krauss could not have foreseen are the radical innovations that have

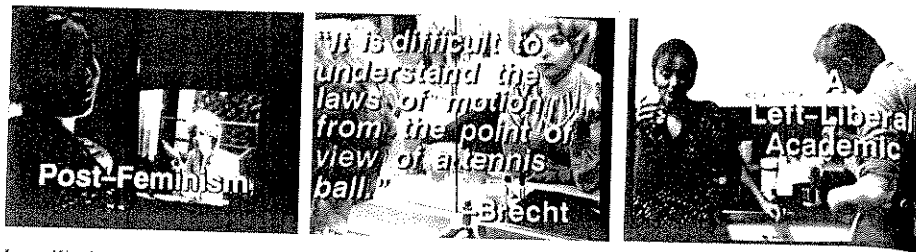
altered the video apparatus itself, permitting artists to work in ways that were not possible previously. Most notably, improvements in the quality and portability of cameras now allow video artists to explore the world outside of the studio on a par with filmmakers. And elaborate postproduction equipment facilitates decisive retrospective interventions in the presentation of sounds and images. A critical deconstruction of the material the artist has collected can be effected by overlaying multiple audio or visual tracks on the original footage.

The six artists whose work I will discuss in this article have invested external objects with libido, rather than transforming object libido into ego libido in the closed circuit of narcissism. Krauss offered a concise description of the psychoanalytical transaction that "cures" the narcissistic fixation: "The analytic project is then one in which the patient disengages from the 'statue' of his reflected self, and through a method of reflexivity, rediscovers the real time of his own history."³ Video still functions as a mirror, or a "method of reflexivity" for the artists who employ it to combine portraiture and social documentary. However, their self-portraits are achieved by using video as a wedge that can be inserted between their lived subjectivity and their fantasy projections on objects. Instead of employing the video mechanism of camera/monitor to encapsulate their bodies, these artists employ it to calibrate the gap between their egos and the representations of the external world in which they have a libidinal investment.

The particular subjects these artists have chosen to document are varied. Nancy Buchanan begins *Sightlines* (1988) by translating a first-person narrative by a woman who was unjustifiably arrested and tortured in El Salvador. In Cecilia Condit's *Beneath the Skin* (1981), the "other" into whom the narrator (played by Condit) projects herself is her boyfriend's former girlfriend. The narrator recounts her discovery that her boyfriend has been implicated in the murder of this woman. For Sherry Millner, the "other" is her young daughter, Nadja. *Out of the Mouth of Babes* (1987), a collaboration between Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen, explores the connection between Nadja's acquisition of language and a network of power relations that extends from the family to the United States's involvement in Central American politics.

Because Helen DeMichiel, Laura Kipnis, and Jeanne Finley do not appear in their respective tapes, their work may be more readily classified as portraiture than self-portraiture. However, each artist focuses on a central protagonist or metonymic device to constellate a biographical subject or stand-in. *Consider Anything, Only Don't Cry* (1988), DeMichiel's paean to video's capacity to serve as an external memory system, returns obsessively to the figure of an unnamed woman and the voice of a female narrator. Although the woman's image and this voice are rarely presented simultaneously, they remain closely identified.

Kipnis's *A Man's Woman* (1988) surveys the career of a fictional antifeminist writer and politician, Clovis Kingsley, in a postmortem evaluation that



Laura Kipnis, *A Man's Woman*, 1988.

takes Kingsley's assassination as its point of departure. A series of silhouetted male figures narrate Finley's *Common Mistakes* (1986). Instead of organizing her tape around a central presence, Finley utilizes a unifying imagistic trope; she shrouds her informants in darkness as they relate instances of human fallibility that range from the administration of lobotomies to treat mental illness to the nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island.

Postproduction plays a crucial part in the fabrication of all of the tapes I have mentioned. Material collected in the field or found footage is combined with patently set-up studio shots to produce a densely fabricated tapestry of the natural and the artificial. This conflation of "truth" with fiction more closely corroborates current poststructuralist theoretical work on the status of representation than the confessional mode earlier feminist artists employed to unproblematically assert themselves. The space of nonresemblance between the signifier and the signified alleged by numerous poststructuralist writers from Jacques Lacan to Jacques Derrida may be demarcated, even if it cannot be represented, by the gaps and slippages the six artists I have mentioned have interlaced into the imbroglia of their portraits.

The temporal concurrence of the artist and the medium that produces a claustrophobically collapsed present in Krauss's model of narcissistic video dissolves in the temporal displacements of the editing process. Editing ipso facto unravels the bond that linked the artist to her material like an umbilical cord; her retrospective labor shapes the material she has accumulated into a newly differentiated corpus.

One of the examples of narcissistic video that Krauss analyzed is Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1974). In this tape, Nancy Holt hears her own words fed back to her over headphones after they have been electronically delayed. Krauss explained, "Holt is severed not only from the prior words she has spoken, but also from the way language connects her both to her own past and to a world of objects."⁴ But the historicizing function of language to which Krauss was alluding is not preempted in the work of the six artists under consideration here. They all make extensive use of prefabricated texts, both by inscribing

texts over images and by enunciating scripts or directing their iteration on the soundtracks of their tapes.

In an interview conducted by Micki McGee for *Afterimage*, Sherry Millner discussed her attitude toward the incorporation of texts into her tapes:

I was trying to figure out how to make meaning, to engage, invert, or refuse a world of references. For me the big change came when I realized that I wanted to deal with language—both language and juxtaposition—to actually bring a specificity to my images instead of a kind of vague generalized reading. Of course images with text elicit more than one meaning, even a range of possible meanings, and even the possibility of layering differing social and aesthetic representations.⁵

The connection between linguistic competence and personal and social efficacy is iconized in *Out of the Mouth of Babes*, since language is a key element of the tape's content and its formal construction. Midway through the tape, Millner intones in a voice-over ostensibly addressed to her child: "Words are physical things for you now, more evocative than the place names on a map. But they are slowly beginning to become a way for you to gain control over your environment." The image that accompanies this text is a shot of Millner's daughter playing with an inflatable globe in the grass. A drawing of a circle is inscribed over the round shape of the globe, and the word "ball" is Chroma-keyed into this circle. Then "ball" is crossed out and replaced by "map" to coincide with Millner's pronunciation of this word. Finally, "map" disappears and the "x" that negates "ball" is removed. Thus, the images that Millner generates serve as playful demonstrations of aspects of becoming fluent in a language. Mastery of the abstracting function of language enables the speaker to construct the metonymic chain of globe/ball/map, and to manipulate all three signifiers to interchangeably designate the same referent.

Millner is acutely conscious of the methods by which the human subject is inscribed through language. One of the most cogent images in *Out of the Mouth of Babes* is a superimposition of Millner's entire head over Nadja's mouth that revitalizes the clichéd phrase quoted in the tape's title. On the soundtrack, Millner's voice queries, "Is it always a version of my words coming out of your mouth?" A series of analogous diagrams of hierarchical power relations are intercut with vignettes of Nadja resisting her mother's attempts to set up the scene as she has envisioned it. The power relations that are named in hand-written digitized titles include "daughter/mother," "worker/boss," "3rd World/1st World," and "private/general." In each case, the first word is inscribed above the second, with arrows pointing to the upward or downward directions of the two appellations that constitute each complementary pair.

By examining the parallels between her everyday life and more far-reaching political conflicts, Millner has imbued the feminist slogan about the

personal being political with renewed significance. Her focus occasions a reversal of the terms of equivalence in the equation; she investigates the personal implications of political issues, rather than using her personal experiences as political templates. In the interview cited above, Millner clarified her position:

As a feminist, it seemed important to insist that daily life is as much a site for art making as all the other apparently exalted realms, that the mundane is no less significant a subject matter than the metaphysical. But I'm not so much interested in individual psychology or in starting from autobiography in its narrowly psychological basis, but rather from my material life as a representation of social—sexual, emotional—contradictions.⁶

The reciprocity of the public and the private realms is analogous to the collision of documentary and fictional modes in *Out of the Mouth of Babes*. Without abrogating their real identities, the people who appear in the tape enact fictional tableaux. As Millner indicates in an audio voice-over, Nadja is incapable of following a script because she can't read yet. Nevertheless, she participates in the creation of a Brechtian distancing effect by gleefully jumping on a trampoline covered with a map of Central America. Her imperviousness to the intricacies of the symbolic corresponds to the unwitting culpability of U.S. citizens who ignore their government's interference in Central American affairs.

In *Sightlines*, Nancy Buchanan implicates herself as a witness to human atrocities, both in Central America and the United States. The tape is organized around the faculty of sight, in both a literal and metaphorical sense. Shots of a massacre of civilians by soldiers on a Central American street are Chroma-keyed into the iris of an eye framed in a close-up. Male and female voices on the soundtrack recite truisms about vision while an array of postproduction effects are used to enhance or synthesize juxtaposed images of eyes. Some of the images are surreal or humorous: dough being kneaded in a bowl is studded with plastic eyes, and a hand closes to capture an eye that is electronically imprinted on its palm. Associations between sight and vulnerability dovetail with connections between insight and wisdom.

If Millner and Larsen's tape extends the feminist preoccupation with women having the right to a discourse of their own, Buchanan's piece updates their corollary insistence on having a look of their own. *Sightlines* concludes with Buchanan narrating the story of her exchange of looks with a vagrant she encounters on the street. Her audiotaped voice-over speaks of noticing a man who is collecting cans in a plastic garbage bag as she sits in her car waiting for a red light to change. Rather than averting her eyes from his, she meets his gaze in an acknowledgment of their shared humanity; his eyes afford her a momentary glimpse of his soul.

Intertwined with Buchanan's stated and reenacted interpretation of this

scene, traces of a deeper motivation can be discerned. By meeting the eyes of the man who gazes at her, Buchanan resists being transformed into a passive objective of controlling surveillance. *Sightlines* is structured as a montage of eyes searching for ocular engagement with the viewer. Their aggressive gazes transfix the viewer with the same active regard that Buchanan turns on the vagrant, subverting the traditional fetishistic relationship of the camera to the female subject.

By addressing the topics of international relations and homelessness, Millner/Larsen and Buchanan bring a feminist perspective to issues that extend beyond the domestic sphere or the scope of specifically women-identified issues like rape, pornography, and abortion. In an article titled "Women and the Media: A Decade of New Video," William Olander contended that recent feminist video productions have begun to address the arena of culture and the consciousness industries at large. He elaborated on the theoretical basis of this shift in emphasis:

Second generation feminist artists have resisted specifically the creation of "woman as sign," or woman constructed as a commodity, of which, obviously, there is no lack in Western society. Rather, their aim has been to investigate the means by which a female subject is produced and to effect the "ruin of representation," precisely on the grounds of what has been excluded, of the unrepresentable object, creating a significance out of its absence.⁷

The content of the work of the documentary portraitists I am concerned with here does not invariably encompass overtly feminist concerns. However, I would argue that they use feminist strategies to devise alternatives to dominant patriarchal modes of discourse. The impact of feminist theory on their work can be discerned in their hybridization of heterogeneous genres to convey their ideas.

As even male poststructuralist thinkers have recently discovered, a feminist perspective offers insights into areas that have remained unacknowledged in Western conceptual systems. Feminists have tended to valorize difference rather than homogeneity, fragmentation instead of wholeness, and fiction versus abstract discourse. Current anxiety over the decline of paternal authority has occasioned a complementary repudiation of dialectical thought buttressed by reinterpretations of Freud, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. A decentering of the polarities proliferating from the basic opposition of male/female (i.e., mind/body, culture/nature, same/other) has replaced the stabilized model of a centrifugal structure.

Poststructuralist philosophy has consequently afforded the insight that the inferior social and political position of women has been reinforced by the logical processes through which meaning is produced. As long as dichotomies gov-

ern conceptual processes, one term will inevitably be privileged over its opposite. Attempts to reverse the positive and negative poles will have no effect on the maintenance of a hierarchy of oppression. As Nietzsche observed, no matter how often masters trade places with their slaves, the institution of slavery itself will continue to be perpetuated.

The crisis in legitimization between discourse and reality is a major theme of Jeanne Finley's *Common Mistakes*. Although Finley has not been directly influenced by poststructuralist theory, her indictment of institutionalized foibles exhibits a comparable skepticism about authoritative mastery. *Common Mistakes* opens with a slow-motion sequence of a hand opening a refrigerator, removing a carton of milk, and dropping it on the floor. As if hyperbolizing the old adage about not crying over spilled milk, amplified noises of a thunderstorm occur on the soundtrack. This sonorous punctuation is followed by an excerpt from a grainy black-and-white 1950s educational film on accident prevention. A cautionary scenario depicts a boy being injured after his companion encourages him to jump from a roof. The definition of *fallacy* appears as a text superimposed over the film: "a mistaken idea derived from incorrect or illogical reasoning."

Like Millner and Buchanan, Finley makes extensive use of found footage in her tapes. By collaging home movies with excerpts from narrative feature films, Millner and Larsen conjoin private and public information. Buchanan enfolds her documentary source material in layers of electronic processing; her images fissure and cohere in a bricolage of truth and fiction. Static pictures and diagrams are juxtaposed with the instructional film clips Finley has included in *Common Mistakes*. For example, photographs from the Carlisle Indian School accompany a verbal narration about this disastrous experiment. The Carlisle Indian School was founded in 1879 by Richard Henry Pratt, who believed that American Indians should be seamlessly assimilated into white culture. Thus, he forced his students to wear Anglo clothes, forbade them to speak their native language, and insisted they cut their hair. A factual recitation of the oppressive practices of this colonizing institution precedes a fictionalized tableau performed by a silhouetted figure who represents an American Indian. Although his testimony is intended to be blatantly inauthentic, he discusses how he was affected by his participation in the experiment.

The nonspecificity of the identities of the series of shadowy personages who provide first-person accounts of the institutional abuses they have supposedly suffered or perpetuated in *Common Mistakes* operates as a concrete demonstration of poststructuralist notions about the decentered author. Roland Barthes postulated in "The Death of the Author" that the author's text creates him or her just as much as he or she creates it.⁸ Feminist semiotician Kaja Silverman provided a concise formulation of Barthes's theories in *The Acoustic Mirror*, her treatise on the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema:

The author is here subjected to a double displacement: First, the "voices" of culture replace him as the speaking agency behind the text, and as a consequence unitary meaning gives way to discursive heterogeneity and contestation. Second, because this plurality is achieved only and "in" the reader, he or she supplants the author as the site at which the text comes together."

In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Silverman catalogued various techniques feminist filmmakers have employed to subvert theories of subjectivity constructed by vision. Commenting that synchronous representations of the female body and voice subject women to the constraining power of the male gaze, Silverman adduced that filmmakers like Yvonne Rainer and Bette Gordon tend to separate the soundtrack from the image track. In their films, the voice is multiplied, temporally distanced or otherwise displaced from the site of enunciation. Intervals of silence alternate with a reliance on voice-overs and intertitles. The voice-over plays a crucial role, since it represents the power to contextualize images from an indeterminate location, permitting the speaker to be heard without being seen, and thereby disrupts the specular regime of dominant cinema.

Although they work in video rather than film, the six artists I have alluded to likewise avoid the synchronization of images and sound. The voice-over narrator of Cecilia Condit's *Beneath the Skin* never appears on camera. Like Millner and Buchanan, Condit uses her own voice. By speaking in the first person, she raises doubts about the authorial provenance of the tape. Her story is so implausible that it is difficult to credit her pretense of autobiographical genuineness. Nevertheless, her discursive manner is so guilelessly lacking in professional polish that it is also impossible to entirely discount the veracity of the uncanny tale she tells.

Oscillating precariously between a feminist confessional monologue and a lurid tabloid exposé, Condit's account of the murder of a young woman dwells on the disposition of the body, which was decapitated and hidden in a closet. Although they are gruesomely graphic, the images she uses to illustrate her tale are obviously reconstructions. Photographs of mummies and documentary film footage of epileptic fits are inserted as quasi-subliminal flashes into a montage of shots of beautiful women sleeping or frolicking in a dreamy landscape. A densely layered effect is achieved by videotaping projected film; the layers function as veils that simultaneously hide and reveal. Condit manipulates the viewer's contradictory desires to look and not look at the tape's unspeakable forensic evidence by adding or subtracting these optically superimposed veils.

The narrator of *Beneath the Skin* manifests symptoms of a narcissistic identification with the murder victim. Not only were they both romantically involved with the same man, but the narrator admits she has also courted sexual violence. The tape ends with the narrator's allusion to a dream she had in

which it turned out to be her who had been killed instead of the other woman. Visual motifs of doubling occur throughout the tape; one woman's face is often projected over another's, and close-ups of a living woman's smile are edited with shots of the teeth of a grinning skull. However, the tape serves to sever the bond between the narrator and the dead woman. It operates as a therapeutic exorcism that liberates the narrator from the neurotic repetitions of her story by increasing her self-knowledge. The videotaped representations the narrator has purportedly fashioned open up a gap between her own subjectivity and the experience of the other woman. This gap consists of the narrator's realization that she cannot depict her own death, unless she is dreaming.

Such acknowledgment of the slippage between the signifier and the signified subverts accepted patriarchal modes of discourse in the manner theorized by poststructuralist writers like Jacques Derrida. *Glas*, Derrida's philosophical reverie about Hegel and Genet, contains this self-reflexive passage on his own methodology:

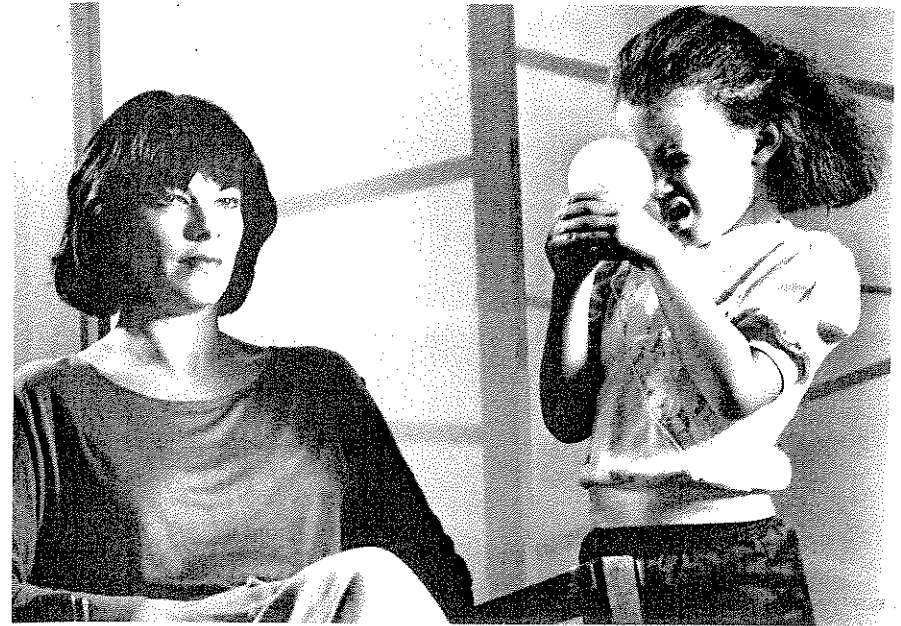
*The art of this text is the air that circulates among its partitions. The links are invisible, all appears improvised or juxtaposed. It induces by agglutinating rather than by demonstrating, by placing things side by side or by prying them apart rather than by exhibiting the continuous, and analogous, teachy, suffocating necessity of discursive rhetoric.*¹⁰

Helen DeMichiel's *Consider Anything, Only Don't Cry* exhibits a comparably open, agglutinating structure. The tape is an intricately patched electronic quilt comprised of fragments of both personal and collective memories. In the voice-over narration, De Michiel outlines her compositional techniques:

I rob the image bank compulsively. I cut up, rearrange, collage, montage, decompose, rearrange, subvert, recontextualize, deconstruct, reconstruct, debunk, rethink, recombine, sort out, untangle, and give back the pictures, the meanings, the sounds, the music, that are taken from us in every moment of our days and nights.

The woman who vocalizes DeMichiel's text serves as a surrogate authorial presence; she is often portrayed in the act of writing or editing videotape. She is also shown teaching her skills in operating video equipment to several prepubescent girls. Together, they explore various representational formats ranging from Victorian photographs to home movies and old magazine advertisements. These diverse sources constitute the image bank DeMichiel refers to. "External" mechanical and electronic reproductions vie with the characters' "internal" memories, just as public myths intermingle with private daydreams. In a humorous monologue that accompanies shots of a train station, the tape's protagonist concocts a helter-skelter melange of mass media-induced fantasies that veers from marrying Son of Sam to being pregnant with the Son of God.

The title of *Consider Anything, Only Don't Cry* is derived from advice Alice



Helen DeMichiel, *Consider Anything, Only Don't Cry*, 1988.

receives in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Near the beginning of the tape, a passage from this book is cited in which the queen attempts to distract Alice from her homesickness by listing other thoughts she ought to entertain instead. Concomitantly, the tape itself might be interpreted as a pastiche of simulations constructed to evade the nostalgia that accompanies the loss of the real. The tape resists closure, circling back instead to a sing-song litany based on repetitions of the word *keeping*: "Keeping my looks, keeping my money, keeping my heart and keeping my man." This litany, which goes on to encompass functional objects, mementos and plants and animals may be conceived as a list of objects that have been invested with libidinal energy. DeMichiel utilizes the video medium to inventory this collection of narcissistic displacements.

The plurality of both quoted and enunciated voices on the sound track of *Consider Anything, Only Don't Cry* erodes certainty by obviating the possibility of a totalizing interpretation of the tape's significance. This sort of fragmentation of univocal authority is characteristic of much contemporary film and video. The valuation of difference is also a feature of recent feminist political discourse. The purview of feminism has expanded to encompass racial, economic, and cultural differences among women. Laura Kipnis's *A Man's Woman*

exemplifies this new theoretical stance by analyzing the behavior of a self-professed antifeminist ideologue from a feminist perspective.

Although Clovis Kingsley, the protagonist of Kipnis's tape, is a fictional construct, Kipnis adopts a pseudo-documentary format to convey her life story. A television news reporter has supposedly been assigned to interview Kingsley's friends, family, and associates. The interviews dissolve into flashbacks that show Kingsley at crucial public and private turning points. The paradoxical gap between her own successful career and her advocacy of restricted domestic roles for women is explored.

In a statement she wrote about the tape, Kipnis addressed the political contradictions that stem from Kingsley's assertion that women can achieve power only by being obsequious to men:

It may be that a leader like Clovis Kingsley is socially effective because she has feminist recognitions of the way men in power work and has formulated a strategy to deal with that reality, even while refusing a feminist politics that would disrupt the deployment of that power. All women have to have a strategy, and what looks simply like self-limiting behavior to those who would view a woman like Clovis with a certain feminist horror, might effectively be understood as a limited strategy of empowerment, and thus a common ground between right-wing women and feminists.¹¹

As this statement indicates, Kipnis eschews the didacticism of some earlier feminist rhetoric. *A Man's Woman* raises sticky issues about whether profamily women have been excluded from the feminist orthodoxy. The tape daringly focuses on a woman who is not a positive role model, presenting her antifeminist position in a manner that is both empathetic and ironic. From Kingsley's perspective, feminism can be interpreted as another index of female failure. Her alternative, outlined in a book titled *The Power of Total Submission*, is to counsel wives about how to engage in kinky sex while continuing to uphold traditional Christian values. In one humorous scene, Kingsley demonstrates her practice of greeting her husband at the door of their house wearing nothing but saran wrap, and then suggesting that they pray together.

Parody figures prominently in *A Man's Woman*, as it does in *Out of the Mouth of Babes*, *Common Mistakes*, and *Beneath the Skin*. Millner speculates in the *Afterimage* interview cited earlier that humor can work subversively by suggesting that accepted hierarchies may be controvertible. Humor is one of the rhetorical strategies the artists I have mentioned use to make their work more accessible. Adopting popular culture formats as Kipnis does when she emulates the conventions of the television documentary is another method these artists have employed to reach larger audiences.

In their messages and modes of address, these artists inscribe themselves in the discourse of the other. Kipnis ferrets out the feminist aspects of an antifeminist theoretical position. Buchanan implicates herself as a witness to politi-

cal atrocities, just as Millner acknowledges the ways in which her own family relationships replicate oppressive patterns of hegemony. Finley stockpiles bits of evidence to undermine the legitimacy of institutionalized practices of education, medicine, politics, and the mass media. She couches her critique of the credibility of official discourse in rhetorical modes that undercut their own veracity. Condit violates the taboos that separate the living from the dead by merging the identities of *Beneath the Skin*'s narrator and her slain counterpart. DeMichiel fuses public and private memories in a lyrical tribute to the nostalgic potency of historical documentation.

Video seems ideally suited to serve as a vehicle for the heterogenous discursive practices of contemporary women artists. Its capacity for accommodating hybrid expressive modes facilitates the feminist project of constructing alternatives to the dominant dichotomous patriarchal world view. Modernist-inspired attempts to identify intrinsic properties of the video medium failed not only because of the medium's fluidity, but also because technological advances are continuously altering its physical apparatus. By taking advantage of video's potential to function as a palimpsest for the inscription of multiple messages, the artists I have mentioned here have forged a new hybrid of the genres of social documentary and portraiture. Since video is used to broadcast public information within the private environment of the home, it serves as an appropriate medium for investigating the imbrications of the personal and the political in our increasingly regulated society.