



# radical LIGHT

Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000

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## REMINISCENCE

# Ripe Grapefruit: Ten Years of Video Art in San Francisco, 1985-1995

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I migrated to San Francisco in the mid-1970s, like thousands of other lesbians and gay men, to join the rapidly growing queer community. By the mid-1980s we had a little political clout but were socially and culturally segregated. When I stepped out of the protective circle of the gay community and took up video, the art scene I stepped into seemed to have only a superficial awareness of queer politics and feminism, which were my passion. It was difficult, for example, to find anyone among my straight artist friends who had ever attended the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival—a ten-day feast of films and videos in every imaginable genre.

The cultural gap was bridged by the influence of identity politics, which had already been a strong ideological thread within liberal arts and critical theory and was beginning to saturate the visual arts as well. The course of political discovery that began with dialogues within the lesbian community about every aspect of life became clear when I started to work in video, and in my ten years of videomaking in San Francisco the two remained inseparable elements of the same long-term project.

I had been a self-taught painter, influenced stylistically by a mixture of Andy Warhol's screen prints and San Francisco's Mission District murals. I desperately needed the company of artists to give my work a little context and wanted to create imagery of things I actually knew about. So by



the early 1980s I was a painting student at UC Berkeley. At the time my work-study job was as cashier/usher at the Pacific Film Archive, arguably the best student job in the world. After selling tickets and seating the audience, I was paid to watch two programs per night of top-rate films from all over the world. It makes sense that a sponge like me realized that the camera is quicker than the paintbrush, providing an image that not only moves but can talk as well! In my final semester I made my first videotape, a twenty-eight-minute diatribe about the problems one has with girlfriends, called *Gay Tape: Butch and Femme* (1985).

*Gay Tape* is a documentary about some of the regulars at Ollie's Bar, a lesbian dive on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland. The 1970s sartorial statement of flannel shirts, 501s, and Frye boots was passé and at odds with the new eighties aesthetic—tons of makeup, big hair, and complicated lingerie. Along with the new aesthetic came the reemergence of good old-fashioned butch-femme role-playing. While the femmes pranced around like Stevie Nicks, their butch girlfriends reverted to an earlier role model, acting out the fifties- and sixties-style tough girl with brilliant aplomb. I asked some of the women from Ollie's to talk on camera about role-playing.

The camera instantly gave me too much control over content, so I tried to balance it by providing a platform for the women to speak on the butch-femme issue without overtly directing them. I relinquished authorship in favor of revelation and avoided coming to conclusions; the speakers were experts as well as subjects and could say whatever occurred to them. They spoke extemporaneously about their lovers, the details of their sexual identities, and their fantasies. My girlfriend at the time was one of the subjects. As her story unfolded I realized from my privileged position behind the lens that the lover she was describing in detail was not me. So much for the power of the gaze!

*Gay Tape* was also my ticket to graduate school in the performance/video department at the San Francisco Art Institute. The faculty was inspiring. Doug Hall, Paul Kos, Howard Fried, Sharon Grace, and visiting artists such as Valie Export, Dara Birnbaum, and David Ireland insisted by example that students proceed outward in all directions, past the limits of what might be familiar or marketable. Strangely enough, my feminist ideology fit in well with the anarchy, chaos, and antiaesthetic of the pedagogy at the Art Institute. Christine Tamblyn's graduate seminar in postmodernism brought it all together and gave me the green light to explore every question of my own life in terms of art, situation, and politics. To top it off, Steve Anker, who was running the Cinematheque, made the venue available to new film- and videomakers, even us students, by scheduling screenings of our work. His practice of inviting the makers to talk to the audience made it clear to us that audiences mattered. Dialogue was not to be only internal, nor was it chiefly theoretical in nature. Our most salient conversations would be with the people in the seats—our audience.

Feminism was nonetheless the project I was working on, and for me it was always about bodies and sexuality and how sexual difference constructs a different psychological and political space around the subject. In 1987 I made *Claudia*, a video that explored the space around lesbian sex. I set up the camera on a tripod at the foot of my bed and pressed "record" as my girlfriend and I had sex. We created sexual imagery that was free

of camerawork, metaphor, romance, erotica, and pornography. How far from the mainstream were my own libidinal impulses? I wanted to look objectively at the single activity that put us in a different place. I intercut sex scenes with shots of my Potrero Hill neighborhood to provide the everyday context of sex and used plenty of jump cuts to create an essay rather than a story. Real sex replaced the traditional nude of art and the erotic object of pornography. *Claudia* turns the subversive into the artistic as I locate myself, however humbly, in the center of the discussion, refusing altogether to speak from the sidelines. In my imagination the "Claudia" of the title is the viewer.

Storytelling was the next step, and in 1988 I began to work on *Grapefruit*. I chose the story of John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and the Beatles because it was a specific popular tale that would always constitute the same story, even if it were subject to reinterpretation or misinterpretation. The casting was more or less intuitive. Susie Bright, the "sexpert" editor of *On Our Backs*, was my choice for John Lennon. I recruited the performance and video artist Azian Nurudin to play George Harrison and the musician and videomaker Jill Garellick to play Paul McCartney. Kate Aragon, singer and bassist for a rock band, the She Devils, plays Ringo Starr, and the performance artist Shelley Cook took on the role of Yoko Ono. Cook's interpretation of Yoko was the strongest, and it became apparent that she was the main character. The title and some of the spoken exercises come from Ono's 1964 Fluxus anthology, *Grapefruit*.

I asked the cast to play their characters and act out the story as they remembered it in order to create a narrative from the blend of their reconstructions. Toward the end of the tape the setting changes from the studio, which had allowed for an aesthetic of pop-ish artifice, to my apartment in Bernal Heights, where I was then shooting a home movie demonstrating the demise of the story and the death of the subject. *Grapefruit* was released in 1989 and introduced me to the world of international film festivals, exhibitions, and distributors.

Once *Grapefruit* made it clear that subject and content were inseparable from the process, I was free to create video narrative as I desired—and also free to use linearity, chronology, and sequence in my storytelling. In 1990 I began shooting *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, based on my own family history, the family that I ran from in the first place to come to San Francisco. I wanted a story that was already written, and I felt, however mistakenly, that my own family would provide an easy, ready-made narrative. Re-creating real events meant I could avoid the pitfalls of contrivance and plot and the insertion of obvious messages or morals. It was still a conceptual project, plotless and unrehearsed, but the narrative ultimately became too compelling. Conceptualist conceits were trampled and abandoned in favor of a new psychological quagmire.

I shot *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* as though it were a documentary. Craig Gilbert's *An American Family*, the public television series that ran in the mid-1970s and is often termed the first reality television series, was an enormous influence. I had been obsessed with that series for years, and the obsession finally found an outlet. My actors—Leslie Singer, Kevin Killian, Didi Dunphy, Glen Helfand, Amanda Hendricks, Valerie Soe, Ramon Charruca, Claire Trepanier, and Clancy Cavnar—keyed in to the notion of



unrehearsed documentary with a vigorous sense of commitment to the project. When we looked at the raw footage at the end of the day we saw a real family. The tape was released in 1991.

In the early 1990s the lesbian and gay film festival scene began to swing away from experimental work and toward films with bigger budgets, professional actors, large crews, and boring scripts. The gay festival circuit was becoming mainstream and appealed to audiences with more mainstream concepts of entertainment. The normalization of being queer was on the rise, and activism and challenges to the status quo were on the trash heap. Oppositional gay culture became difficult to sustain as audiences forgot their politics when it came time to go to the movies, preferring a formulaic love story and a bucket of popcorn.

*Coal Miner's Granddaughter* had a midnight screening at the Roxie Theater as part of the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 1991. During the first fifteen minutes of the screening, about twenty audience members walked out of the theater. But as the tape played on, the remaining diehards became enthusiastic, talking back to the screen, hissing whenever Kevin Killian's character had a close-up—he was perceived as the villain of the story—and creating an atmosphere of fun and hilarity. It was one of my favorite screenings.

Regardless of the mainstreaming of queerness, most of what lay beneath my work at this time was the creative climate of an oppositional San Francisco. I had stepped into San Francisco's art and intellectual community, and its influences entered my work. Content became more circumstantial, more private, and established a connection between everyday life and creative exploration in almost subterranean ways. For example, the simple yet complicated fact of falling in love with your cast can bring a sense of urgency to production and postproduction, easily influencing everything from camerawork to jump cuts. I cast my characters believing, unquestioningly, that we all understood what we were working toward: a defining expression of our specific relationships to our time and place. I thought our individual projects, including films, videos, performances, and written work, would infuse our reality directly into the work. It was idealistic to function in this way, but it worked, enabling each piece to manifest aspects of the sympathetic varieties of perspectives floating around the city at the time. It also challenged the concept of authorship and the need for uniqueness or originality.

Just after finishing *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, I was given a copy of Alice Miller's book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, and I used it to make a short tape of the same title, picking up the psychological thread from the previous work. This tape is about the transference phenomenon, narcissism, and the desire to live up to the expectations of parents and peers. My themes were sexual love, uncertainty, pedagogy, self-help, power within personal relationships, separation, and reunion—all in just over five minutes. The editing is more fluid and the logic more intuitive than in earlier work, and I use the camera, music, and special effects in a relaxed and uninhibited way. The freed image, the relaxed approach, and the intuitive logic of *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1992) represented a small breakthrough for me, as the process and the image were finally inseparable from the content, and the video image became beautiful.

In the meantime the film- and videomaker, punk musician, and performance artist Leslie Singer was writing a script for a tape we would make together called *Joe-Joe* (1993). *Joe-Joe* merges unlikely scenarios with impossible psychologies. The psychological theme floats under the surface, transformed by camp and caricature. Leslie and I play the same character, the 1960s bad-boy playwright Joe Orton; we also play lovers, sisters, and collaborators. We were to some extent faithful to Orton, our muse, as well as to Stephen Frears's 1983 film, *Prick Up Your Ears*, which we satirized. With nods to Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean Genet, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and Brad Davis, we created a lesbian Narcissus to reflect creativity, self-promotion, and celebrity as though in a cracked mirror.

Leslie's script was fun to direct, though I did not always understand where certain scenes or lines originated until I recognized bits of our own daily banter in it. She included conversations overheard on the street as well, and reworded them into mannered and cryptic dialogue, itself a comment on drama and acting. The collaboration ensured that the work could not become overdetermined, that enigma was present, and that we would create something together that neither of us would have made on our own.

Leslie and I made several video journals during this period. These were private works with titles such as *The Temptation of Jane*, *The Brain That Could Not Die*, and *Meet Me in St. Louis, Fuck Me in Kansas City*. They were like unselfconscious notebooks that collapsed the personae of artist and subject and got us inside the medium more directly than stories, essays, documentaries, and scripted work could ever do.

While editing *Joe-Joe*, I began shooting *My Failure to Assimilate*, a twenty-minute documentary that took two years to finish. *My Failure to Assimilate* (1995) is about the failure of feminist ideology to have any appreciable, lasting, or functional effect on the lives of women as a class, regardless of how correct a feminist analysis of any particular situation may be. Personal alienation and the end of a relationship led me to use psychological theory as a structuring device in the work for presenting the real content of my personal failure and loss. As I was editing I saw my thesis going in a downward spiral into nothingness. Before the close of the tape the content springs back out of the darkness, however, and becomes new content, that which exists even beyond failure.

*My Failure to Assimilate* is a very personal expression rather than an experiment or investigation, and it draws conclusions about feminism, love, situation, and sex. It completes a particular body of work within feminist ideology that began in 1985 with *Gay Tape: Butch and Femme*, finally allowing me to experience catharsis and to say that my ten-year project was over. I was in my early twenties when I escaped to San Francisco, but it always seems to me that I had grown up there. I had at least learned about life there, beginning early on with gay liberation and leading up to a project that, in 1995, finally pointed me in a new direction, outward.