

The Experimental Women: An Introduction

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Experimental cinema, video art, and new media art have always been fields in which the presence of women has proven significant. It took Feminist Film Theory¹ to make us clearly understand that experimental audio-visual practices represent a privileged space for female action where, in the absence of the economic constraints and censorship typical of the cinema industry, greater freedom for research and production has been allowed. It is in fact in the porous area where independent and experimental cinema encounter art practices that women have managed to move the boundaries of (self-)representation and build an active laboratory to experiment and explore their subjectivities. We can't also forget that, between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, many of the female presences linked to electronic art began, with great vigour, to carry out their creative activity in parallel with the demands promoted by the second wave of feminism. Nonetheless, feminist momentum and perspective, both in a creative and theoretical sense, are just some of the threads that, over the years, help us to read and interpret an experimental female audiovisual production that has been growing, becoming enriched and diversified thanks to the evolution of technologies and the hybridization of the intermedia process.

Over the past several decades, scholars have addressed the history of women working in experimental cinema and video in a similarly rich variety of ways. What seems most consistent about the output of both critical and creative work by women in experimental film and video is the same thing that makes it difficult to characterize as a whole. That is, it tends toward particularity, diversity, and multiplicity, with the work of a single filmmaker in this realm often plumbing the depths of her own specific experience, expertise, and ambitions. While the same might be said of any filmmaker/artist, for reasons not entirely transparent,

¹ See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6–18; Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't. Feminism Semiotics Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror. The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Theories and Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993); Veronica Pravadelli, 'Feminist/Gender Studies e storia del cinema', in *We want cinema. Sguardi di donne nel cinema italiano*, ed. by Laura Buffoni (Venezia: Marsilio, 2018).

this individuation is neither made of quite the same stuff as the cult of the genius artist/auteur, nor conversely is it cause to conclude that there are no common threads or trends across women's film and video work at all. Of the former, scholars have identified in feminist artists the strategy of '[refuting] the EuroWestern ideal of the individual artist, expressed not least in the idea of the cinematic auteur', as So Mayer puts it, which allows an unsettling of usual social and artistic hierarchies.² And of the latter, several writers locate constellations of interests across experimental work, such as artists who are linked in their pet themes, types of genre-bending, or stylistic tendencies, for instance in the loose groupings provided by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman's collection of writing about female experimental filmmakers or in Mathilde Roman's studies.³ Amid the usual ways of configuring trends for media studies, women pose a special case, and a kaleidoscopic view of their work rather than an auteurist or movement-oriented programme is more honest to the nature of that work.

One of the ambitions of this special issue was to provide a more legible map of this work with a wider international scope, the better to track both creative and scholarly work and to link avant-garde films with contemporary video-based practices. We aimed to trace — and to fill in the areas we traced with details — with a view to understanding women's experimental audio-visual production framed in historical and theoretical terms. By virtue of the nature of the works under consideration, that aim has been elusive, both in the multiplicity of work that we might call 'experimental' and in the approaches to that work. Indeed, the dyad of creative work and theory about it for women's experimental media tends to focus on a panoply of forms or genres, types of imagery, notions about subjectivity, undercurrents of theories in political and popular culture, and constructions of gender and sexuality. Our call cast a wide net, in some ways increasing the challenge from the beginning to create a unified, universal version of a history of experimental women's work. As part of the process, however, we came to appreciate that maybe we do not need a whole new map, exactly, so much as a new set of eyes for understanding how to read the maps that are already there. Like the creative work we seek to locate, it has been harder to *read* these maps because they don't look or act quite like the ones we are used to. Often figures or films we might study are (and this is not a bad thing) treated like individual stars, for instance in Robin Blaetz's essential collection of essays on women's experimental cinema, even while with a slight adjustment of our lens, it is possible to see these stars constitute a grouping like, let's say, the Pleiades.⁴

² Sophie Mayer, 'To::For::By::About::With::From::Towards Solid Women: On (Not) Being Addressed by Tracey Moffatt's Moodeitj Yorgas', in *Female Authorship and the Documentary Image: Theory, Practice, and Aesthetics*, ed. by Boel Ulfsdotter and Anna Backman Rogers (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 164.

³ *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, ed. by Virginia Wright Wexman and Jean Petrolle (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Mathilde Roman, *Art Vidéo et mise en scène de soi*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

⁴ Robin Blaetz, *Women's Experimental Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

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If we aim to navigate what is more like the night sky than what is immediately visible by the light of day, the darker, less intelligible contours of an eclectic set of practices may better be viewed from certain angles and at the right time in order for them to come together, surprisingly, into constellations of all manner into figures of mythical proportions. In any case, Trinh T. Minh-ha, among others, rightly cautions against the universalizing impulse of art for feminist art, arguing that adopting a hegemonic artistic language in a bid for being taken more seriously, women gain a kind of universality but lose their individual voices and real power as artists.⁵ To make an art that is readily legible *as* art might well simply mean that it hews in some way to a norm to which feminist and experimental artists ought not force their unique views to conform.

Part of the work of scholars dealing with experimental work must be to show the connections — the lines between the stars that make the figures clear. We take seriously the need for reconstituting the history of the avant-garde cinema to include and give greater attention to more women, many of whom have been outshone by brighter but not more important lights; at the same time, we also need to highlight the contexts in which these women's work has emerged. As a recent essay by Jennifer Peterson on Barbara Hammer's film *Jane Brakhage* (1974) has shown, the forgotten or undertheorized histories of women's work, both artistic and otherwise, make them ripe for revisitation: Peterson tidily brings the two sides of a single familial coin into dual relief to show how experimental work by women might be taken out of the shadow cast by the giants — in this case Jane's husband and, in a certain sense, collaborator, Stan Brakhage — of experimental cinema.⁶ Comfort with the idea of variety is paramount even to identifying this kind of work; variety is also characteristic of the mode through which women's subjectivity has found a cinematic means of expression. Experimental women like Barbara Hammer — but also Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, Agnès Varda, or Minh-ha to name only a very few examples — frequently work in ways that look very different both from each other and even from their own existing bodies of work. The experimental quality even of the search for an appropriate form among these artists qualifies them as experimentalists in the best (and most expansive) sense of the word.

Studying women's experimental cinema over its history has been complicated by but also enhanced by its borderless, timeless qualities. It doesn't belong in one specific national context; nor does it belong to one single time period. While its many contexts (where/when it was made, who made it, under what conditions) are essential for better understanding it, to study (or, certainly, to create) such work also requires an expansive mode of thinking out of time. So although, of course, creative and critical/theoretical work from the 1970s has been crucial to

⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 27.

⁶ Jennifer Peterson, 'Barbara Hammer's *Jane Brakhage*: Feminism, Nature, and 1970s Experimental Film', *Feminist Media Histories*, 6.2 (2020), 67–94.

the serious and sanctioned study of women artists in that this moment intersects with the establishment of university programs in women and gender studies as well as film studies, making that fact the center of understanding it may be most useful simply for understanding certain biases of history. The intersection of institutional programs with creative work has historically biased the ways experimental women have been understood, categorized, or positioned — both within the academy and beyond it. As Laura Mulvey — whose essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ from 1975 is still going strong and has spurred untold numbers of amateur and professional reflections on the nature of women working in and on films — has reminded us, perhaps the radical work of feminists became absorbed into the academy in a way that was ‘rather too abrupt’.⁷ Indeed, feminist film theory and women’s experimental film practice have not always been amenable to each other, though their close position to each other in academic circles might give another impression. Thinking about the temporality of the emergence of ideas on feminism and film, Mulvey notes: ‘it is more rewarding to think about time, and a period that has now become history, as a confusion of temporalities than as a linear succession in which decades and eras follow each other in chronological order’.⁸ Keeping in mind that connections might be rendered in a more poetic sense through allusion, rhythm, or an emphasis on sensation rather than in terms of causality, chronology, or principles of continuity — such that we might say, in a vertical vs. a horizontal way⁹ — might keep us closer to the spirit of experimental work.

Similarly, audio-visual experimental practices have been a privileged site for bringing women’s agency and other concerns from the province of women’s experience/s to light, as the domains of experimental media practice have frequently offered far greater liberty compared to the economic exigencies of the cinema industry. In this sense, women’s experimental works have acted as a laboratory for new forms of women subjectivities. By drawing contours of these new subjectivities, all of which are expressions of what the Italian feminist theoretician and activist Carla Lonzi called the ‘Unexpected Subject’,¹⁰ we observe that these works are a privileged field for learning a new vocabulary

⁷ Laura Mulvey, ‘Introduction: 1970s Feminist Film Theory and the Obsolescent Object’, in *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, ed. by Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), p. 17.

⁸ Ivi, p. 18.

⁹ Maya Deren compared a ‘horizontal’ (causal, chronological, narrative) mode with a ‘vertical’ mode, the latter of which, rather than progressing forward in linear, narrative, chronological or causal terms delved into the heights and depths of any given moment, investigating it poetically, as ‘an approach to experience’ adopting and expressing a ‘different point of view’ (pp. 173–74). Here and elsewhere, she considered these terms as a way of describing her own experimental film art (as vertical rather than horizontal). See ‘Poetry and the Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler. Chairman, Willard Maas. Organized by Amos Vogel’, in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. by P. Adam Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), pp. 171–86.

¹⁰ The term is coined by Lonzi in her essay *Sputiamo su Hegel* [Let’s spit on Hegel] (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1970).

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of audiovisual experience, involving both the artists and the spectators as new active subjects of moving image construction. This clearly emerges by reading the essays collected in this issue, which appear as a veritable constellation of meanings and symbols with consistent references.

The inquiry of the body as a new language is present in all of the artists analyzed: the body is the centre of a new haptic, synesthetic experience which challenges the priority of sight and becomes an instrument to know, think, and express the world. This is true from the very beginning of women film experimentations, as Rebecca Sheehan points out: her essay on Maya Deren, Marie Menken, and Sara Arledge focuses on the forms of the somatic camera and the tactile gaze as a means to build a new dynamic relationship between the body in movement, the machine, and the world. In the same wake, Shana MacDonald's inquiry about the performing body of Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer demonstrates how both artists challenged, through the proximity of a relationship between artists and spectators, the artist's authority and the related modernist concept of authorship. The body becomes the very measure of the world in the analysis of Oksana Chefranova on Ana Mendieta and Ana Vaz, where a circular and layered concept of time intertwines with a landscape perceived as a space of traces, connections, memories. Memories are likewise at the centre of Ivelise Perniola's and John Powers' essays: the former explores Marguerite Duras' cinema as an act of iconoclasm, where the gaze is rooted in memories grounded in loss, grief, and absence; the latter rediscovers the still little known figure of Caroline Avery and her aesthetics of emotional memories and artisanal practices. Anita Trivelli investigates the contemporary scene of Italian documentary filmmakers by pointing out their revolutionary and transgressive *flânerie*, which brings them to explore with their bodies territories traditionally denied to women and to redefine them as spaces of relationship and exchange between the individual and the community. Community as a network of bodies and their stories is also at the centre of Polina Golovátina-Mora's, Ana María López Carmona's and Bridget Sheridan's investigation. They analyze the South American indigenous communities and the concept of *warmipura*, meaning 'among women', demonstrating a weave of practices based on a circular transmission of knowledge where the body is still at the centre of an intimate relationship with landscape and nature.

Across these multiple modes of expression of a subjectivity outside the norm, experimental women's film practice and scholarship looks to other horizons for meaning, to which this issue seeks to draw a beginning.