

## Feminist Visions in Video Art: from Wonder Woman to Miss Universe

**Liselotte Winka**

Konstfack / University College of Arts, Crafts & Design, Stockholm, Sweden.

E-mail address: liselotte.winka@konstfack.se



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### Abstract:

*This paper discusses the influence of feminism on three video works from the 1960s and 1970s in the USA and one in Sweden during the 1990s. For women artists one of the main issues was to be able to describe their own reality and to document it. New subjects and themes were explored in art. Humour and irony were often used in the struggle for women's rights, female representation and a critique of academy and society.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Video Art, The United States of America (1960s & 1970s), Sweden (1990s).

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### Introduction

Video art is a relatively young art form. One dates its birth to the 1960s with a boom in the 1970s. The technical development made the video camera more easily accessible and in its youth video art was heavily influenced by the aesthetics and the documentary qualities of the TV-medium. The radical 1960s also made way for alternative art forms, as for example Conceptual art, Happenings and Performance, which also had a strong impact on video art.<sup>1</sup>

A parallel movement to video art in the 1960s and the 1970s was the second wave of feminism. There were two directions of women's issues at the time: radical feminism and socialist feminism. The latter meant that women's liberation would come as an effect of the class struggle and the consequent revolution. For this reason, women's work life and production conditions were in focus. The radical feminists, on the other hand, put women's private lives and their own experiences first on the political agenda. "The Personal is Political" was one of the slogans at the time as well as "the Future is Female", a utopia built on sisterhood instead of the patriarchate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Liljefors, Max: *Videokonsten: en introduktion* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Gemzöe, Lena: *Feminism* (2015), p. 49, 55.

For women artists one of the main issues was to be able to describe their own reality and to try and document it. New subjects and themes were explored in art. The feminist agenda included for example reproductive rights, female representation and a critique of academy and society. There was not yet a male canon in video art, as for example in modernist painting, so women artists were free to experiment and find their own way.

The documentary qualities of the TV-medium and journalist methods were important in describing their own experience of reality. But there were also women artists working on more self-biographical ideas, where the body and identity issues became important in a deconstruction of femininity and female representation.

In *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (2005), Catherine Elwes writes that feminist art contributed to a political awareness and inspired to activism. But feminist art not only encouraged activism but also “embarked on a redefinition of femininity itself at the level of representation”.<sup>3</sup>

The etymology of the Latin word video means 'I see'. In video art women artists found new possibilities to speak, to see and to become visible to an audience. According to Catherine Elwes, “Video, /.../, enabled women video-makers to shift their conventional position as objects of the gaze, to bearers of the look, of the unblinking stare and ordering eye of the beholder”.<sup>4</sup>

### **Gunvor Nelson & Dorothy Wiley: *Schmeerguntz* (1966)**

Gunvor Nelson was born as Gunvor Grundel in 1931 in Stockholm, Sweden. After having studied painting at Konstfack, she moved to California in the early 1950s. She received a master degree in painting and art history from the Mills College in Oakland. She also studied one year at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she met the filmmaker and her husband to be, Robert Nelson. From 1970 to 1992 she was a film teacher and professor at the San Francisco Art Institute. In the early 1990s, she moved back to Sweden and started to work with video art, but she is most well known for her many experimental films.<sup>5</sup>

Gunvor and Robert Nelson settled down in the Bay Area of San Francisco in the 1960s, where they built themselves a house. Dorothy and William Wiley were their neighbours and Dorothy and Gunvor collaborated on several films. At the time, Dorothy was pregnant and they both had small children. Gunvor had worked with film editing before, but not film shooting so she asked her husband for a quick introduction to the camera work. After one year, Gunvor and Dorothy had made their first 16 mm film: *Schmeerguntz* (1966, 15 mins.).<sup>6</sup>

The film changes quickly between pictures of women in television and media, from beauty queens to pregnant women who are feeling sick. It shows the prosaic everyday life of being a mother with small children, with left-overs and dirty diapers in the messy home. The contrast between the superficial image of women in consumer culture and the stern reality of a pregnant woman with small children gives the film its absurd and humorous tone.

In a review from *Film Quarterly* (Summer 1966), Ernest Callenbach wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> Elwes, Catherine, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (2005), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Sundholm, John (ed.), *Gunvor Nelson: still moving: i ljud och bild*, (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Link to film excerpt of *Schmeerguntz* <https://vimeo.com/123619166> (2017-08-14). (Nelson, Gunvor, *Departures*, [DVD], Paris: Re:voir, 2011).

“Its elements are unprepossessing – in fact revolting. Random items from the public, sanitized, ad-glamorized American scene are thrown rapid-fire against homey shots of the unmentionable side of the Home: the guck in the kitchen sink, the dirty clothes mountain, the squalling infants, the filthy rump, the used kotex. Even Motherhood gets its knocks: after an organ prelude with shots of the moon, an incredibly distended belly and a funny problem with dressing, followed by doleful pregnancy exercises and recurrent urps in the toilet.”<sup>7</sup>

But Callenbach realized that Gunvor Nelson & Dorothy Wiley had created something new. He finishes off his review by stating that: “A society which hides its animal functions beneath a shiny public surface deserves to have such films as *Schmeerguntz* shown everywhere...”<sup>8</sup> The film was a success and won several prizes at film festivals in the USA. It is now considered to be one of the first feminist films, although Gunvor Nelson herself is not an outspoken feminist. She prefers to describe her experimental films as “personal films”.

### **Martha Rosler: *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)**

Martha Rosler was born in 1943 in New York, USA. She studied at Brooklyn College in New York and at University of California in San Diego, where she received a master degree in art. She is a well-known artist and critic and has published widely on issues related to art and society. Her video film *Semiotics of the Kitchen* from 1975 (6:30 mins.) is regarded as a feminist classic.

It is a kitchen story from A to Z where the artist demonstrates kitchen utensils with a neutral voice at a slow pace. But her gestures become more and more uncontrolled with sudden outbursts of anger. She bangs the kitchen utensils on the table and stabs the fork and knife into the air. The film is a mix of humour and irony. Martha Rosler has described it as a parody of a cooking programme: “An anti-Julia Child replaces the domesticated ‘meaning’ of tools with a lexicon of rage and frustration”.<sup>9</sup>

Martha Rosler’s video film is a visual projection of the meaningless message to housewives and their limited life circumstances. It is a critique of female representation in media as well as the production and reproduction of ideology in the private and public sphere.

### **Dara Birnbaum: *Technology / Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79)**

Dara Birnbaum is another famous female artist who has worked with video art since the late 1970s. She was born in 1946 in New York and was educated as an architect in Pittsburgh. In the early 1970s, she moved to California, where she worked as a designer and studied painting at the San Francisco Art Institute.<sup>10</sup>

*Technology / Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978-79, 5 min.) is an appropriation of the TV-series with Lynda Carter playing the part of Wonder Woman.<sup>11</sup> The video film opens with loud explosions of fire, when the actress transforms into Wonder Woman by spinning

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<sup>7</sup> Callenbach, Ernest, “Schmeerguntz”, *Film Quarterly*, (Vol. 19, No. 4, Summer 1966), p. 67. (Link to article in full text: <http://fq.ucpress.edu/content/19/4/67.1>) (2017-08-14).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Electronic Arts Intermix: <http://www.eai.org/titles/semiotics-of-the-kitchen>. Link to excerpt at Video Data Bank: <http://www.vdb.org/titles/semiotics-kitchen>. (The videofilm is also available at Ubuweb: [http://www.ubu.com/film/rosler\\_semiotics.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/rosler_semiotics.html)) (2017-08-14)

<sup>10</sup> Pobric, Pac, “True confessions of a video art pioneer”, *The Art Newspaper*, (Dec. 6, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Link to excerpt at Electronic Arts Intermix: <http://www.eai.org/titles/technology-transformation-wonder-woman/video-low-rez-excerpt> (2017-08-18)

around several times with her arms stretched out. The ordinary secretary has become the superhero Wonder Woman, dressed in a minimal body suit in the same colours as the American flag, as well as boots and a tiara. With her golden bracelets and lasso of truth, she has the power to stop bullets and save men in need.

Dara Birnbaum often works with found footage or “ready-mades” – works that “manipulate a medium which is itself highly manipulative”.<sup>12</sup> By slowing down the scenes and by using fragmentation and repetition, Birnbaum creates a critical distance to the objectification of women and the female stereotype in the TV-medium.

In an interview, Birnbaum states: “The abbreviated narrative – running, spinning, saving a man – allows the underlying theme to surface: psychological transformation versus television product. Real becomes Wonder in order to “do good” (be moral) in an (a) or (im)moral society.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Catti Brandelius alias Miss Universe: *An Ordinary Day* (1996)**

Video art in Sweden also took its beginning in the 1960s. But it was for a long time an underground or experimental art form. There had been a lack of production and distribution possibilities, so it was not until the 1990s that video art became a specialty in art schools. When video art became an established part of the contemporary art scene in Sweden, it also coincided with the third wave of feminism.<sup>14</sup>

Catti Brandelius was born in 1971 in Gävle, but lives in Stockholm. She has been a student both at Konstfack (1997-2000) and the Royal Academy of Fine arts (2007-2009). She started out as a singer in the pop band Doktor Kosmos, but took up performance and video art at Konstfack.<sup>15</sup> She left her studies in a protest against the lack of female professors. Dressed in a light blue morning gown and a plastic tiara, she proclaimed herself Miss Universe.<sup>16</sup>

When Catti Brandelius went on an exchange to Chelsea College of Art and Design in 2000, she made a new introduction to her first video film about Miss Universe: *An Ordinary Day* (1996, 5 mins.)<sup>17</sup>

With her alter ego Catti Brandelius challenges taboos and creates her own norms. Miss Universum does not want to please the world, she wants to change the world so it pleases her.

Here is her statement: “Miss Universe, you’re the best!”, some people say and they are OK. They get it. Other people maybe believe more in God, Bill Gates or Barack Obama. They are still a bit behind.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Horsfield, Kate & Hilderbrand, Lucas (ed.), *Feedback: the Video Data Bank Catalog of Video Art and Artist Interviews* (2006), p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Electronic Arts Intermix: <http://www.eai.org/titles/technology-transformation-wonder-woman> (The videofilm is also available at Ubuweb: [http://www.ubu.com/film/birnbaum\\_technology.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/birnbaum_technology.html)) (2017-08-16)

<sup>14</sup> Pettersson, Gunnel & Wrangé, Måns, “Videokonst i Sverige: från alternativ till institution”, In: Söderbergh Widding, Astrid (ed.), *Konst som rörlig bild: från Diagonalsymfonin till Whiteout* (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Brandelius, Catti: *Miss Universum: samlade texter och bilder 1997-2005* (2005).

<sup>16</sup> Nyström, Anna et al. (ed), *Konstfeminism: strategier och effekter i Sverige från 1970-talet till idag* (2005).

<sup>17</sup> Brandelius, Catti, *An Ordinary Day* (1996) <https://vimeo.com/15186971> (DVD available from Filmform in Stockholm)

<sup>18</sup> Brandelius, Catti, website: [http://www.cattibrandelius.se/?page\\_id=4](http://www.cattibrandelius.se/?page_id=4) (2017-08-16)

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