

Femme Experimentale Interviews with Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Chick Strand

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Preface

Femme Experimentale is interview-based, focuses exclusively on three artists, and is naturally limited in scope. I want to acknowledge these limitations to encourage others to pursue research in this area. There is sexually explicit work that is not addressed, such as Anne Sevrerson's *Near the Big Chakra* (1973), which, along with Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* (1963), deserves much more analysis than I have given. There are debates, in terms of artmaking and feminist scholarship, that are not touched upon in this project but which were present in the sixties and are significant in contemporary academic dialogue. One such absence is the lack of an overt discussion of racial stereotypes and their impact on sexually explicit images and concepts of femininity.

The introduction of *Femme Experimentale* positions the artists historically and examines the critical context in which the films were initially circulated. I analyze the films in terms of cinematic form, feminist film scholarship, and sexually explicit content to contribute to this critical debate. I am not proposing that the formal techniques used by these filmmakers are the singularly "correct" models for a feminist practice. Intelligent artistic practice relies on invention [End Page 1] rather than formula. Artists clearly exist in dialogue together, and it is debate rather than agreement that captivates, excites, and enraptures. While there is clearly a pleasure in looking at and discussing these works, they are specific examples and not prescriptions. These films and the discussion of them are meant to stimulate, encourage, and provoke other films and other analyses.

Completing this project, I realized that one essential aspect of *Femme Experimental* is the creation of voice. In the interview process, the usually mobile and transient act of speech becomes fossilized. Through transcription the interview becomes stabilized, but the words, the sentences, do not assume the structure of a singularly authored, written piece. The interview process produces a written structure that is uniquely contingent on the dynamic between two people and is cooperatively authored. I see and recognize my own voice as distinct yet changing in the three discussions. Other interviews with these same women reveal a different tone, a different person. I invited Caroline Koebel, Dina Ciraulo, and Irina Leimbacher to participate in this project because I wanted to hear other women filmmakers respond to this work. All three writers, like myself, are practicing artists and have been educated in film theory during the late eighties and early nineties; they are my academic peers. It is my desire that the cumulative effect of the seven different authors together mimics a discussion rather than a monolithic text. Its pedagogy should be in the discrepancies, the fissures, the subtle coincidences that readers discover, rather than in any single perspective.

Femme Experimentale is a historical document. It proposes that the voice--with its clearly subjective authorship--is a valid mode of historical analysis. The interview, a consciously produced historical document, relies on the act of conversation--ruptures, fragments, temporal shifts, memory, loss of memory--to produce its authenticity. This type of analysis trusts that the speakers are "truthful" while acknowledging the limitations of personal storytelling. It is a very active, living, and fictitious history stimulating the reader to be both faithful and imaginative. I hope that scholars, historians, and artists will find this to be a useful and engaging resource and will add to this discussion. **[End Page 2]**

Introduction

Femme Experimentale consists of interviews with three ground-breaking women experimental filmmakers of the nineteen-sixties and seventies--Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Chick Strand. These interviews cover a wide range of issues surrounding feminism and the arts, and were inspired by an interest in the ways--visually, conceptually, sonically--women experimental filmmakers portrayed female sexuality during the second wave of the Women's Movement. These interviews are portraits of the artists considering specific questions about the development of their careers, their relationship to feminism, their artistic process, their opinions about the incorporation of their work in the history of experimental film, and their motives in making explicit images of female sexuality. The interviews also recount the historical and social context in which the films were produced and distributed, and raise such questions as what was the critical reception of the work? who attended? what types of discussions revolved around the films? and how did feminism influence their work?

One of the intrinsic pleasures of these interviews is their performative nature. This interview process was structured to evoke the public character and personae-as-artists of these filmmakers. While an interview is subject to the same truth tests involved in any form of representation, the intention was to ask these artists to present themselves, their careers, and their work as they want to be seen; a perspective which, in the case of women filmmakers, is all too rare. ¹ Throughout the interviews, the artists activated history from their own experience and moved freely between the past and the present. The interview became a particular framework from which the filmmakers speak: the memory of the speaker is temporally captured, like a snapshot. Chick Strand comments on this in her interview: "What you are finding out now is what I think influenced me then--today. And for some reason that is where I am today. Tomorrow it could be different." ² In this way, the interview becomes a co-operative portrait, a picture created through dialogue. It is also a privileged conversation engaging the historical vision and contemporary concerns of artists whose careers directly correspond to the popular rise of the Women's Movement in the United States and the significant questions this political discussion raised concerning representation, feminism, and sexuality. ³ **[End Page 3]**

As the Women's Movement developed, women's sexuality became a complicated part of the political paradigm of feminism. Issues ranging from abortion rights to domestic violence to lesbian relationships were debated in women's consciousness-raising groups. Challenges arose around the representation of women's bodies and sexuality. Confronted by the growth of the pornography industry and a history of art dependent on female nudes, artists ⁴ had to conceive of ways to present women's sexuality that were distinct from a visual legacy identified as patriarchal

and objectifying. Before these debates became solidified in the Women's Movement, women artists made sexually explicit work. Sexually explicit films contain a direct reference to sexual activity either through image or verbal description. Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1964-67) and Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* (1962)⁵, a dual projection film, are both sexually explicit. When Barbara Hammer finished *Dyketactics* (1974), the Women's Movement was already established in popular culture. Although *Dyketactics* is often credited with being the first film of lesbian love-making by a lesbian, Barbara Hammer points to a film by Coni Beeson, *Holding*, which predates *Dyketactics* and was made by a woman who identified herself as bisexual.

While *Fuses* stands at the beginning of the Women's Movement as a graphic exploration of heterosexuality, and *Dyketactics* opened the door to explicit and celebratory lesbian representation, *Soft Fiction* (1979), Chick Strand's experimental documentary, approaches women's sexual experience through verbal representation and personal storytelling. All of these works reconfigure documentary and narrative modes. Feminist theory from the seventies onward became increasingly interested in practices which manipulated the canonical forms of documentary and narrative film. Both Schneemann and Hammer attempt to formally construct a new way of looking by sharing the camera and its powers of narrativity with their sexual partners. Hammer's shared camera work is particularly effective in *Double Strength* (1978) where she emphasizes a notion of lesbian doubling and bodily confusion with her partner Terry Sendgraff. *Fuses* and *Double Strength* not only reverse the traditional subject/object split; they refuse the distinction.

Where *Fuses* and *Double Strength* focus on the recontextualization of the female **[End Page 4]** body in the visual narrative, *Soft Fiction* creates an enigmatic female body by coupling aural description of sexual experience with tight framing and fragmented body parts. In contrast to Hollywood's convention of locating sexual agency in the body of a character, Strand produces a visually incomplete female sexual protagonist who is simultaneously omnipresent and anonymous. Through formal techniques, each filmmaker reworks narrative: Schneemann collapses the image to signify changing points of view; Hammer infuses the image with a sense of intimacy and personal physicality; and Strand employs a highly developed sense of framing and cutting. The films' experimental structures articulate the sexual agency of their female characters.

Fuses, *Dyketactics*, and *Soft Fiction* serve as catalogs of women's sexual experience and share many documentary conventions, such as: first person testimonial, non-actors, improvisation, the connotation of an "authentic" or non-rehearsed scene, the implication that the film is being dictated by "real" rather than fictional events, the idea that the audience is sharing the filmmaker's/actor's personal experience. Yet, these films also disrupt the visual codes of documentary film through their experimental techniques. Schneemann's layering of imagery, Strand's poetic transitions between narrators, and Hammer's clear involvement in the filmmaking process all interject a distinct mark of authorship into the films; the objectivity associated with documentary practice is transformed and complicated by a more subjective mode of filmmaking. While these films point to the desire to "document" women's experience, they thwart the traditional patriarchal affiliations often associated with ethnographic and documentary films.

Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Chick Strand are all internationally recognized artists who have sustained long and prolific professional careers. However, all three artists have

been systematically left out of both feminist and avant-garde film histories. Schneemann and Strand are particularly notable in this way. Two recent comments about their work suggest the disturbing significance of their absence:

This presentation of Carolee Schneemann's work, more than three decades after her leap to the forefront of the cultural establishment's awareness with **[End Page 5]** the watershed performance work *Meat Joy* (1964), is inspired by the need to meaningfully assess the influence her work has had and continues to have on artists who have emerged during the present decade. The urgency of this need is perhaps an authentic example of those rare occasions in art history when an artistic development that challenges accepted practice and has thereby been deliberately and systematically confined to the margins of collective discourse is suddenly rushed to the forefront...⁶

Since the mid-60's, the Los Angeles-based filmmaker Chick Strand has been making experimental shorts that have been all but ignored by the keepers of avant-garde cinema's official history.... Despite her importance to avant-garde film in general, and despite her output (18 titles are listed in the sixth Canyon Cinema catalog), Strand is (not surprisingly) nowhere to be found in P. Adams Sitney's authoritative *Visionary Film*. (Adding insult to injury, Sitney gives sole credit for *Canyon Cinema News* to filmmaker Bruce Baillie, who established Canyon Cinema.) More surprisingly, however, Strand is also conspicuously absent in various feminist film histories, including the nominally comprehensive *Women in Film: An International Guide*.⁷

Barbara Hammer, a filmmaker with over forty short films to her name, holds a prominent place within the recent academic discipline of Queer Studies.⁸ Some of Hammer's work falls outside of the time period that P. Adams Sitney considers in his canonical work, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*⁹--which may explain her absence--but Schneemann and Strand had clearly made significant contributions by that time. While Sitney notes that Schneemann was an actor in Stan Brakhage's *Loving* (1957), he fails to mention Schneemann's own controversial film *Fuses*. The censorship swirling around *Fuses* surely speaks to profound issues affecting the sixties avant-garde. An open letter of August 1968 by Adrienne Mancina on Museum of Modern Art Film Department letterhead discusses censorship problems that surrounded the exhibition of *Fuses*.¹⁰ As censorship was a hotly debated topic of the sixties, one would assume that the censorship of *Fuses* would have been noted by experimental film historians of that period.¹¹

In P. Adams Sitney's history, Strand is inexplicably absent as one of founding partners of Canyon Cinema (one of the first experimental film cooperatives and vital institutions of the American avant-garde), and as a contributor to *Canyon Cinema News*. Her omission from *Visionary Film* as a filmmaker is also **[End Page 6]** notable. By 1974, three major works by Strand, *Angel Blue Sweet Wings* (1966) (which was one of the rare instances of an experimental film being shown on network television), *Anselmo* (1967), and *Mosori Monika* (1970) had been released and exhibited at independent venues. Though these works have a subject matter more aligned with documentary filmmaking, their visual style certainly maintains the subjective and personal vision that Sitney associates with experimental film.

The marginalized historical positions of these artists, nevertheless, in no way diminishes their impact on filmmaking and feminist art practice. With contemporary exhibitions of Schneemann's, Hammer's, and Strand's work, it becomes clear that these artists will not remain in the margins of

history. Acknowledging their former absences from canonical histories promotes both a discussion of their works and of the challenges they pose for both feminist and film historians. The re-examination of sexually explicit work by Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and Chick Strand pulls their practice back into a history and a dialogue which had previously excluded them. Discussing their work in tandem with the prevailing academic theory of the nineteen seventies reveals that both critical frameworks and artistic practices are historically contingent. Theoretical writing and art-making are responsive forms. Within a sexist culture, one can expect canonical histories of experimental film to ignore the contributions of women artists; however, the absence of experimental work in feminist film scholarship is more problematic. By looking at the theoretical paradigms which influenced academic feminism, such as Marxism and psychoanalysis, we can see why sexually explicit work by women was intellectually criticized and historically neglected.

As the production, circulation, and reception of representations of the female body have been a central concern for feminists in general ¹² and of film theorists in particular, ¹³ it is remarkable that *Fuses* has not been widely discussed in dialogue with Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Much of feminist film scholarship is indebted to Laura Mulvey's famous essay on the gaze and narrative cinema, and is therefore dedicated to the gender politics of Hollywood films; consequently, experimental works by women have not been adequately addressed. ¹⁴ However, *Fuses* predates "Visual Pleasure [End Page 7] and Narrative Cinema" and offers a narrative structure that elides the subject relationships Mulvey cites as fundamental to Hollywood's sexist cinema. It is arguable that scholars had difficulty addressing the film's sexually explicit content rather than its form. As representation of female sexuality remains controversial but crucial territory for feminist artists to explore, a new analysis of these works, such as *Fuses*, is necessary. ¹⁵

Several issues are raised when discussing the relationship of feminist film scholarship to the problematics of representation of female sexuality by women artists. During the seventies, scholars began to rethink the relationship of fine art to popular culture. The role of art and its ability to provide a critical impact on culture was seriously questioned by Marxist and structuralist scholarship. The ideological role of art and the artist was under interrogation; art history was conceptualized as a byproduct of bourgeois culture and the art world was positioned as system which reified rather than revolutionized the status quo. This conceptual shift was especially relevant to feminist art historians who examined both historical and contemporary images of the female nude. John Berger ¹⁶ made the argument that the conventions of the nude in painting are simply transposed to the female body in advertising and pornography. When the artist was theorized as a logical extension of dominant ideology, rather than a unique practitioner providing critical discourse, all images of the female nude became increasingly suspect. This enabled Griselda Pollock to draw a relationship between vaginal centered imagery made by an artist and photographs with a similar content in *Penthouse*:

However, that the radical potential of this kind of feminist imagery can easily be re-appropriated can be seen if one looks beyond the petit bourgeois ideology of the art establishment to the major conveyors of bourgeois patriarchal imagery in the big selling sex magazines where a profoundly disturbing development has taken place... vaginal imagery appears in all its force and decorative glamour, liberated from the traditional coyness of such magazines' sexual invitations by a directness. ¹⁷

The skepticism expressed by Pollock regarding explicit sexual imagery had a direct impact on the exhibition, circulation, and reception of Carolee Schneemann's work: **[End Page 8]**

Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967) was excluded from the First International Festival of Women's Films even though the film is an autobiographical diary. The film, which graphically details the filmmaker's sexual relationship with her male lover as well as female genitalia, domesticity, and sensuous landscapes, had been critically positioned within the aesthetics and social outrages of the New York avant-garde cinema of the late 1960s.... Her (Schneemann's) self-proclaimed interest in creating "sensory arenas" and her detailed, graphic depiction of various sexual acts seemed to keep her outside of critical discourse and practice being built-up around groups of feminist filmmakers in the early 1970s. ¹⁸

Although Schneemann writes directly about her incorporation of the female body into performance (and her motivation for integrating sexuality into representations of femininity), *Fuses* did not screen at the Women's Film Festival. The tensions between the various conceptual forms of feminism are evident when reading Schneemann in dialogue with the previous Pollock quote:

Somehow the tremendously repressive culture around me had not effected a separation between my creative energies and my erotic energies.... In the early sixties, I felt quite alone in my insistence on the integrity of my own sexuality and creativity.... I didn't stand naked in front of 300 people because I wanted to be fucked; but because my sex and my work were harmoniously experienced I could have the audacity, or courage to show the body as a source of varying emotive power, poignant, funny, beautiful, functional, plastic, concrete, 'abstract;'... In some ways I made a gift of my body to other women; giving our bodies back to ourselves. ¹⁹

Schneemann was clearly aware of the nude's importance to art history and the politics of representation. When Schneemann speaks specifically about her desire to get the nude off the canvas via her own body, she is directly addressing the visual paradigms of fine art and commercial art practice: the two traditions which systematically use the female body to signify male desire and consumptive power. Schneemann's direct confrontation of the audience with her own body was a strategy to undermine the nude's signifying effect of patriarchal authority. In her performances as well as in her films, the artist and model, the author and text, become one; she is the subject, the literal body, of her work. Yet, Schneemann's authorship is distinct from her physical body. The work is not a self-portrait. Instead she imbibes the historical text of the nude with her own agency creating an autonomous work of art from her own **[End Page 9]** body. In these works, Schneemann confuses and complicates the categories of artist, model, author, and subject pointing to the poignant histories and implications of these terms. Historically Schneemann's practice corresponds to the political beginnings of the nineteen-sixties Women's Movement and could be viewed as a response to a changing social order. Schneemann's radical use of her own body suggests these important cultural and political changes.

With the infusion of psychoanalysis into feminist theory, the notion of gender difference registered through castration and lack make any direct representation of the female body problematic; there was much debate around the abilities of women to represent their own bodies outside of pre-existing visual and social codes. As the image of the woman, in psychoanalytic

terms, signifies lack and therefore a difference which supports patriarchal order, the image of the female body could simply re-enforce this unconscious logic:

For, within their Freudian/Lacanian model, any presentation or representation of the female body necessarily participates in the phallogocentric dynamic of fetishism, whereby the female body can only be seen (and the regime is visual) as "lacking" in relation to the mythical plenitude represented by the phallus. ²⁰

The debates between the role of art and the representation of women's bodies can clearly be seen in the following excerpts. Their authors all rely, to varying degrees, on the assumption that *any* presentation of the female body reinforces dominant (i.e. patriarchal, consumerist) ideologies. For these feminists, the political and critical potential of art relies on a practice that divorces itself from both the female body and the traditional notion of the artist.

(W)hen the image of the woman is used in a work of art, that is, when her body or person is given as a signifier, it becomes extremely problematic. Most women artists who have presented themselves in some way, visibly, in the work have been unable to find the kind of distancing devices which would cut across the predominant representations of woman as object of the look, or question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity... ²¹

Mary Kelly, 1982

[End Page 10]

The appropriation of the woman as body in all forms of representation has spawned within the Women's Movement a consistent attempt to decolonize the female body, a tendency which walks a tightrope between subversion and re-appropriation, and often serves rather to consolidate the potency to the signification rather than actually rupture it. Much of this attempt has focused on a kind of body imagery and an affirmative exposure of female sexuality through celebratory imagery of the female genitals.... ²²

Griselda Pollock, 1977

I would argue the absolute insufficiency of the notion current in the Women's Movement, which suggests that women artists can create alternative imagery outside existing ideological forms; for not only is vaginal imagery recuperable but in that process the more sinister implications of sexual difference in ideological representations are exposed. ²³

Griselda Pollock, 1977

It is a subtle abyss that separates the men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult... ²⁴

Lucy Lippard, 1976

These quotes recall the struggle over where to locate feminist cultural production, and what effect explicit images would have once they were produced and circulated. Certainly these critics did not hold an essentialist belief that *any* image produced by a woman would counteract the prevailing patriarchal visual discourse. Instead, they analyzed images in terms of cultural context, such as capitalism, and through exploring the relationship between psychoanalytic models, visual forms, and narrative structures. By placing experimental modes of production and alternative forms of circulation in allegiance with dominant visual codes, critics did not leave any avenues available for sexually explicit representations of women's bodies by women.

The absence of such representation poses a new set of problems. If the sexually active female body is a traditional site of cultural and legal oppression of women, and only represented by dominant and potentially misogynist modes, women's sexuality always remains a product of patriarchal imagination. Without full integration of the sexual into the sign of the female body, feminine sexuality is not equated with female agency and subjectivity. **[End Page 11]**

Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," allows several ways for experimental works to enter into these questions of sexually explicit representation. First it acknowledges the importance of non-commercial cinema: "The alternative cinema provides a space for a cinema to be born which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of mainstream film."²⁵ With this statement, Mulvey identified independent cinema as a valid form of critique. As a filmmaker herself, Mulvey's investment and analysis of the avant-garde would be influenced by her own practice. Another aspect of noncommercial cinema is its availability to women both in terms of finances and technology: "Low investments of money and 'professionalism' has meant that avant-garde cinema has historically been much more open than the film industry to women."²⁶

Secondly, Mulvey directs her argument towards the form of narrative and how it structures the spectator's pleasure in watching. Two key elements of this visual pleasure rely on the masking of the basic, material elements of the film: the camera and the audience. Mulvey writes: "Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness, and truth."²⁷ As experimental works draw attention to both the camera and audience simply through their deviance of classic structure and inability to mimic Hollywood "realism," they inherently problematize this relationship.

Thirdly, she outlines the narrative contradiction and necessity of the female protagonist in traditional Hollywood film: "The presence of the woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation." Mulvey then goes on to quote Budd Boetticher, "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance."²⁸ By theorizing the narrative form and how that positions the woman as a catalyst for the male protagonist/spectator, Mulvey offers some methods for looking at how sexually explicit work made by women interrupts the Hollywood narrative formula. **[End Page 12]**

Mulvey's analysis of form allows differentiation between experimental, artist driven works and programmatic, commercial works. In experimental works, the production process is integral, allowing for a distinct form of authorship to arise. The point of view offered in traditional Hollywood cinema provides a voyeuristic account of the narrative, where the viewer can enact both the scopophilic pleasures and ego identification that Mulvey defines. Experimental film does not privilege the audience through formulaic camera work and editing. It often promotes a personal rather than omnipresent use of camera angles. In the films discussed, a clear protagonist does not emerge from the narrative. Consequently, experimental cinema offers a mode of looking which can possibly provide one of the psychic effects Mulvey describes, but not both. For instance, a viewer might get scopophilic pleasure from watching people have sex, but it would be hard for them to identify, as in a Hollywood film, with a particular protagonist whom they follow through a narrative thread.

One of the pleasures of *Fuses* or *Dyketactics* is the orgiastic viewing experience. The spectator is submerged in visual activity that is not ordered by narrative. In these films, the viewer is not watching/identifying with a character; the audience is never told who the people are, where exactly the scene takes place, what happened before the scene, or what happened after. The image is primary; *Fuses* is silent and *Dyketactics* has a musical score. While this distinction is quite obvious, it is important to make these artists' works and modes of production distinct from Hollywood cinema.

In her interview Barbara Hammer describes the difference between her mode of production and commercial cinema:

It's breaking down the subject/object relationship. It's nonexploitative. It's a willingness to be as vulnerable as the person I ask to be filming.

In *Sync-Touch* (1981-1982), I have an image of me caressing the camera in bed. I take the camera to the most intimate places and then share it with a partner.

I had the camera and then gave it to her. We never brought in an outsider to shoot. We had intimacy in the cinema. You still might be confused with whose body is whose. Who is the performer and who is the voyeur so to [End Page 13] speak. Those two positions are interchangeable in a way that is so balanced the trapeze is almost a metaphor for that balance.

The physicality does collapse--it collapses the preplanning which is what sets up that distance. That's why it's so difficult for me to work with a script, because it's all preplanned. I really probably wouldn't know what I would do until I'm physically in the space with the actors. Then we would find a way.

When you look at auteur cinema, you're going to get the personality and characteristics of the cinematographer, the film maker, the director--that whole person who is making the work reflected in the film. So I think that you are seeing me. My attitude towards life. ²⁹

The contrasts between Hammer's filmmaking process and a studio based film are numerous and intrinsic to the final form(s) of her films: sharing the camera; including the director in the film with the camera as an act of intimacy rather than self-reflexivity; a mode of production that does not adhere to the Hollywood studio system's division of labor; a shooting schedule that is dictated by the specifics of a location rather than a script; the collecting of disparate images that reveal

their physical discrepancies (different film stocks, lighting conditions, processing) rather than images which are made to form a seamless, narrative sequence; the collapsing of characters so that they are no longer distinct protagonists with individual aims; and the notion that the image is a personal story authored by the filmmaker reflecting an individual, subjective viewpoint rather than a naturalistic scene taking place before the audience where codes of authorship are found in the cinematic conventions of masking. Hammer's mode of filmmaking is radically different from commercial production, and does not formally reproduce the narrative forms Mulvey cites. In her cinematic practice, Hammer discards the conventions of Hollywood cinema promoting an alternative visual structuring of and relationship to the image of female sexuality.

As Hammer locates herself as the author, she also locates her sexuality within the filmic representation. Her sexual desires and activities are not part of a narrative sequence, but rather part of the film's personal portrait. This non-narrative form of sexuality is also found in Schneemann's *Fuses*. Unlike the female characters Mulvey points to in Hollywood films who might serve as catalysts for plot points, the women portrayed in *Fuses*, *Dyketactis*, or *Soft Fictions* [End Page 14] do not promote any particular sequence of events. Schneemann and Strand speak of the desire to locate the sexual experience in the "everyday." Schneemann includes domestic space, as does Strand, when she highlights the sequence of a woman cooking eggs in the nude. Barbara Hammer often intercuts household scenes of dish washing and close interior spaces with sexual activity. In these films, the erotic and sexual experience are not part of a linear progression, instead they appear as continual expression of individual desire. Sexuality, then, is not represented as an activity dependent on a specific set of activities or a designated cast of characters, which is Hollywood protocol. Women's sexual experience within these films functions rather autonomously disrupting the traditional portrayal of a women's sexual experience as something dependent and rarefied, reserved for special occasions or ulterior motives.

Sexually explicit work by women appeared during a political moment when the social roles of women were being re-evaluated. Instead of being cast aside as essentialist or politically retrograde works, such explosive films must be seen as a necessary corollary to the political changes and social controversies of that time period. In these films, women represented their sexuality as an integral part of their experience in a manner that defies both the conventions of the nude, and Hollywood cinema. This new practice adhered to the formal aspirations of the avant-garde and feminist concerns over the potential of the image to signify cultural change; yet, these sexually explicit works were embraced by neither group. In the seventies, such works and the explicit representation of female sexuality were left outside of feminist discourse, potentially leaving a fundamental aspect of women's experience to be negotiated through forms of visual culture which were, if not misogynist, certainly limited in their formal and aesthetic structures.

Significantly, artists continue working with the female body and sexuality. Many emerging, experimental media makers of the eighties and nineties such as Caroline Koebel, Jocelyn Taylor, Shu Lea Cheang, Maria Beatty, and Sadie Benning seek to incorporate sexual identity into their work. While the work may or may not be sexually explicit and expresses a different notion of identity than the work of the sixties and seventies, the sexual agency of the female body is crucial to the pieces. The interest in creating and depicting--whether [End Page 15] through voice-over as in Sadie Benning or image as in Shu Lea Chang--sexual activity underscores both the importance of and the questions around sexually explicit work by women. If women artists

stopped incorporating sexual agency and activity into their work, the cultural production of sex would be solely masculine: men would literally create the signs of sex.

While no singular visual model or theoretical framework will satisfy the changes which a critical art practice demands, the consistent engagement with the question of representing women's sexuality is necessary. In her interview, Carolee Schneemann comments on the fact that she has only sold two pieces of work in America. She asks, "Was I just a little too early? Or is it because my body of work explores a self-contained, self-defined, pleased, female-identified erotic integration?"³⁰ In hindsight it would be simple to say "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second. Obviously it is not that easy to answer. The relevance of Schneemann's question remains significant: why are representations of the erotically integrated female body produced and then ignored? To extend Schneemann's comment, one could ask: when will a sexually active woman signify a particular, autonomous, physical, and intellectual experience rather than a ubiquitous visual code? While the answers to Schneemann's query are debated, the question is clear. **[End Page 16]**

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[*Kate Haug*](#) is a filmmaker and scholar. Among her films are *Pass* and *The Booby Trap*.

Notes

[1.](#) After the initial transcription was completed, the filmmakers were also asked to edit the interviews to clarify the content but not to alter the conversational tone. The interviews represent most but not all of these changes.

[2.](#) Kate Haug, "Interview with Chick Strand," 1997.

[3.](#) In this discussion, the Women's Movement refers to the feminist movement of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. There were many popular feminist movements in the United States prior to this time period. Other historical accounts of this period call it "The Second Wave."

[4.](#) In this sentence, I do not make the term "artist" gender specific, because I have not conducted research on how feminism influenced the work of male artists and cannot conclude that only the practice of female artists was effected.

[5.](#) Rubin, associated with Warhol's factory, left the art world to practice orthodox Judaism. She died at an early age during childbirth. Because of her personal history and the projection demands of *Christmas on Earth*, this beautifully complex film is rarely seen and does not have the international and historical circulation of *Fuses*.

[6.](#) Dan Cameron, "In the Flesh," in *Carolee Schneemann: Up To and Including Her Limits* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 7.

[7.](#) Manohla Dargis, "Chick Strand," *L.A. Weekly*, April 25 - May 1, 1997, p. 62.

[8.](#) For instance Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[9.](#) P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974)

[10.](#) The letter, located in Schneemann's file at the Museum of Modern Art, dated August 1968 reads:

To Whom It May Concern:

I sincerely regret that Carolee Schneemann's film, FUSES, is confronted with problems of censorship. FUSES is a personal statement by a young artist which expresses the joy of heterosexual love. It is a lyrical work of love which utilizes artistic means to convey its mood. Even if one accepts the premise of censorship, it should be clear that this is not a film made for exploitation or commercial reasons but for artistic necessity. Freedom of artistic and personal expression is, I believe, one of the basic tenets of a democratic society.

Sincerely,
Andrienne Mancia

[11.](#) The obscenity trials of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964) would be one such example.

- [12.](#) The popular discussion and ensuing legal debates concerning pornography.
- [13.](#) Several journals and academic collectives chart this history, such as the British journal *Screen*, and the American journal *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory*.
- [14.](#) In this discussion the work of Schneemann, Hammer, and Strand is seen as distinct from the work of the feminist avant-garde that responded to Mulvey's article by producing experimental works which specially employed distantiation as a strategy for disrupting the structure of pleasure described in "Visual Pleasures." These artists do not base the structure of their film work on psychoanalytic theory.
- [15.](#) While the work of many lesbian media-makers contains explicit sexuality, the representation of heterosexual women's sexuality remains relatively unexplored. Theoretically inspired films that address female sensuality such as Trinh T. Minh-ha's *A Tale of Love* (1995) tend to avoid the image of sex altogether. The continuing controversies over *Fuses*, such as its 1989 censorship in Moscow, demonstrate that this form of explicit representation is still contested.
- [16.](#) John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1977).
- [17.](#) Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong with 'Images of Women'?" in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 140-41.
- [18.](#) Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, and Politics in the New Work Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 192.
- [19.](#) Carolee Schneemann, "Istory of a Girl Pornographer," in *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter* (New Paltz: Tresspass Press, 1975), 24. Bold typeface is my emphasis. This quote is used to describe Schneemann's performance work, but its content applies to *Fuses*.
- [20.](#) Amelia Jones, "Feminist Heresies: 'Cunt Art' and the Female Body in Representation," in Jorge Luis Marzo, ed., *Herejias/Heresies: Critica de los Mecanismos* (Canary Islands: Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, 1995), 633.
- [21.](#) Mary Kelly, "No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith," *Parachute* 37, no. 26 (Spring 1982): 32. Original citation from Jones, op cit.
- [22.](#) Pollock, 140
- [23.](#) Pollock, 142.
- [24.](#) Lucy Lippard, "Body Art," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 125.
- [25.](#) Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 23.

[26.](#) Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 185.

[27.](#) Mulvey, op. cit., pp. 33.

[28.](#) Mulvey, op. cit., pp. 27.

[29.](#) Kate Haug, "Interview with Barbara Hammer," 1997.

[30.](#) Kate Haug, "Interview with Carolee Schneemann," 1997."