



Figure 1. Jennifer Gilmour, left, and Marusya Bociurkiw, right, of Emma Productions, 1985

Big Affect: The Ephemeral Archive of Second-Wave Feminist Video Collectives in Canada

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One cold winter day in 2007, I received a phone call that initiated a long and winding journey into the half-forgotten history of Canada's feminist media collectives. The caller was a woman I had interviewed years earlier for the labor documentary *No Small Change: The Story of the Eaton's Strike* (Canada, 1984), directed by Harriet Hume, Ruth Bishop, and myself under the collective name Emma Productions. The woman, a former salesclerk at the Eaton's department store makeup counter, had tracked me down using the phone book. She wanted a copy of the video to show her children. I hauled a cardboard box from my unheated storage room and looked at the old VHS tape for the first time in decades. I was shocked, not just by the way the images had degraded, but also by the explicitness of our activism, the joyful, grandiose gestures of our occupations, and the expansiveness of our coalition work.

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My students often look to the 1960s for examples of feminist collectivity, but the 1980s were *my* 1960s: demonstrations, occupations, big hair, and affect. Big affect. Embodied feeling that produced chills down my spine as I stood behind my camera at anti-nuclear demonstrations. Pride and pleasure in the gender-bending act of shouldering a heavy video camera and striding into a crowd, what Stéphanie Jeanjean calls “a gesture of disobedience and emancipation.”¹ Bad feelings, too. A kind of shame that makes me blush as I play grainy, decaying tapes of labor demonstrations and earnest cultural critique to a new generation of activist-scholars. Pride and remorse. Affect that is contradictory and contagious, enduring across physical and temporal distance.

Between 1972 and the early 1990s, across Canada and around the world, women’s media collectives with utopian names like Reelfeelings, Reel Women, Women Alive, and Les Femmes S’Amusent (Women Are Having Fun) attempted to realize a McLuhanesque vision of a global feminist village.² Groups sprang up in Canada in Vancouver, Igloolik, Alert Bay, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal, Québec, Moncton, and Halifax. While Canadians were consuming US television programs like never before, the artists and activists involved in women’s collectives were creating social-issue documentaries, experimental works, and sometimes cable television series that archived a vibrant era of political and social change. The videos covered topics like feminist deconstruction of soap operas, as seen in *Ceci est un message de l’idéologie dominante* (*This Is a Message from the Dominant Ideology*, Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Canada, 1975); the occupation of Canada’s Department of Indian Affairs (now known as Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada) by Aboriginal women, which is documented in *100 Aboriginal Women* (Amelia Productions, Canada, 1981); a major strike by women retail workers in Ontario (*No Small Change*); and women’s mastery of seal-oil lamp technology, shown in *Qulliq (Oil Lamp)*, Arnait Video Productions, Canada, 1993).

Thirty-five years since the formation of the first women’s video collective in Canada, the primary record of this work—the videos themselves—is rapidly disintegrating and, with it, a piece of the intersecting histories of Canadian broadcasting, media art, and

the second-wave women's movement. Archiving and restoration have been haphazard at best. In Canada, a handful of artist-run, government-subsidized distributors have maintained and in some instances have digitized select works, but this has not been part of a proactive project. The videomakers themselves are responsible for initiating and in some cases even paying for preservation, which is impossible for videomakers who cannot afford to do so or have passed away. Other work is held privately by individual members of the video collectives in a variety of increasingly obsolete media formats, including DVD, VHS, and 3/4 inch videotape. Some work is located in university libraries or the National Archives of Canada. In my research, the only near-complete body of work I could access was that of Arnait Video Productions, streaming online.³

While some distributors allow scholarly research access to the videos, this significant body of feminist media work is largely unknown and unavailable to the general public, not to mention students, teachers, activists, curators, and a new generation of feminists. In addition, there exists almost no secondary record of second-wave feminist media activism in Canada (or, indeed, in the US). These factors represent a significant gap in historical memory—the forgetting of a moment when technology, public broadcasting, and feminist collectivism merged. Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith remind us that such forgetting is deeply cultural, “intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony and thus with gender.”⁴ Thus far, this has been an archive without archivists, an era without a publicist, a history without a memory.

In the absence of a complete visual record and a permanent dwelling for the history of Canadian feminist video collectives, the passionate sites of embodied feeling experienced, remembered, and misremembered by the subjects of this history (including myself) become a way to reenter and reinscribe this history. Employing interviews with members of Amelia Productions, Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Isis Collective, Reelfeelings Collective, Women's Media Collective, and Women Artists in Video, as well as using autoethnographic and scholarly research, I argue for the use of affect theory as a different way to do and undo feminist media history. Affect theory, with its emphasis on change and relationality, explains the

desire to produce counternarratives of belonging. Ann Cvetkovich's work, for instance, speaks of an "archive of feelings," a way to enter the unspoken, traumatized epistemologies of gendered and queered bodies.⁵ Affect theory can shift archival study away from the mourning of a lost material object and toward a greater awareness of the relational and processual aspects of alternative feminist media.

As affect theory enters the field of media studies, so does the messy realm of contradictory or inadmissible feelings. As Heather K. Love writes, "There is something to be said about living with those bad attachments, identifying through loss and allowing ourselves to be haunted."⁶ A decade of right-wing regulation in Canada has intensified the need to remember activist histories. Affectively reconstituting this archive is also a way to pass on strategies to communities that are just beginning their political journeys. Indeed, the memories and stories are contradictory, the affects circuitous. But despite the hardships and rancor, the work of feminist media activist collectives was also, to borrow Sara Ahmed's formulation, a counterpractice of nationhood, what she has described as "the labor of love, of working to find [a] better way of inhabiting the world with others."⁷

Media Collectives and the Nation

Critiques of nationalism often coexist with a desire to belong. Collective media work represented, even in its implicit critique of the state, a longing for a nation, however utopian, that could include communality in its notion of citizenship. What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described as critical theory's paranoia—its discovery of conspiracy and violence everywhere—was warded off by the experience, however temporary, of solidarity and its affects, including excitement, anger, interest, and sometimes even love.⁸ It's no accident that the history of these collectives is shaped by the vagaries of sexual attraction and lesbian relationality. As Nomi Kaplan, a former member of the Vancouver-based Reelfeelings Collective, describes in an interview, collective affect provided a means of survival: "I joined Reelfeelings just after I'd separated from my

husband. It was about 1971. I was learning how to be independent, which also meant how to be poor. I had to figure out where my next meal was coming from. So I learned how to live well as a poor person from other artists. Like potluck parties—everybody brings something! Back then, that was amazing to me.”⁹ Even in its most idealistic and seemingly least productive moments (like at a potluck), the very presence of other feminists and of a shared goal (like ending patriarchy), however impossible to reach, provided collective members with a sense of what it meant to be a different kind of national subject. Alexandra Juhasz claims that this was what feminist collectives did best—produce a subjectivity that was able to formulate counterrepresentations of “women as complex, worthy selves.” She argues that “relations of mutuality,” collectivity itself, can create a new documentary aesthetic.¹⁰

Feminist video collectives emerged in Canada in the early 1970s, during the nationalist era of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, often considered to be the golden age of Canadian culture. Many of the collective members I interviewed concurred. As Kaplan explains, “Pierre Trudeau was helping groups to do things. . . . There were all kinds of cultural activities all over Canada. It was a very invigorating time.”¹¹ Canada was experienced by activists and artists as a civic-minded mosaic of multiple identities whose expression was subsidized by the state but unencumbered by regulation.¹² But it is also true that publicly funded culture was a way of improving Canada’s image internationally in the face of internal dissent like the Québec separatist movement.¹³ At the same moment that the Sony Portapak emerged as a democratizing tool for artists/activists in the 1970s, the federal government was making use of the same video technology to monitor citizens via the emergency suspension of civil liberties authorized by the 1970 War Measures Act.¹⁴

This context caused videomaking to emerge as the predominant practice for media activists.¹⁵ Sara Diamond argues that artists responded to the video camera’s panoptic origins by making the Portapak camera more personal. She writes, “This approach to video ironically inverts the institutional use of the medium as a means of surveillance.”¹⁶ Events like the passing of the 1970 War Measures Act or, more recently, the mass arrests at the 2010 G20

Summit in Toronto redefined social and bodily space for activists in Canada. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta use the term *moral shock* to describe the induction of moral outrage that causes a move toward social action, which creates “a visceral, bodily feeling, on a par with vertigo or nausea.”¹⁷ Feminist video collective members felt this shock through one another, and trauma coexisted easily and uneasily with anger and love.

Collective Trauma and Healing

Moral shock also occurred within the everyday, as feminism’s critique of marriage and compulsory heterosexuality collided with the status quo. One of the earliest works to emerge from feminist video collectives in Canada focused on the personal affects surrounding marriage. *So Where’s My Prince Already* (Reelfeelings, Canada, 1974), a video about a woman who does absolutely everything, from housework to sex, while wearing her wedding veil is one of the few examples of experimental work emerging from the early collectives. It addresses an era when marriage rates were peaking in Canada and the 1968 Divorce Act had not yet been amended to make it easier for couples to separate.¹⁸ Embedded in the ironic stance of this video is an archive of trauma: a stylized document of pain and anger responding to marriage’s performative speech act—what Judith Butler has called “the painful resources by which a resignifying practice is wrought”—which serves to enforce heteronormativity.¹⁹ In one scene, the “bride” lies awake in bed while her husband snores beside her. She says, “Every couple has their problems. And of course, we’ve had a few too. Like, [whispers] I’ve never had an orgasm! At least, I don’t think I have. But these are only minor problems and we’re working them out.” She continues, now waving a dildo forcefully, “When you really love someone you work these things out!” “Isn’t that right, dear? Dear?” she calls out, as the camera pans to her snoring husband.

If anger and rebelliousness in relation to the nation were hallmarks of collective affect, so too was a sense of healing in relation to the self. As my interviews indicate, trauma produced con-

nections between politics, ethics, and feeling, moving feminist theory into the site of the social. Mo Simpson, who cofounded Isis Collective, a Vancouver-based media collective that existed from 1972 to 1974, describes collective filmmaking as a factor in her personal recovery process: “My mother was an alcoholic. Addiction is a big theme in my work. Challenge for Change influenced us a lot. Someone from the National Film Board told me I could change the world through film. I stopped taking drugs and started making films.”

Simpson describes Isis’s process as “immersive and experimental.”²⁰ Influenced by the documentaries of Frederick Wiseman, the collective’s members consciously merged life and art. For example, before beginning shooting a film about addiction (*Turnaround*, Isis Collective, Canada, 1984), Simpson lived in a treatment center for a month as part of her research. For another work, *Emigrante* (Isis Collective, Canada, 1979), Isis members attended a Sikh temple for a year. Like many of the collectives, Isis’s work spanned a range of topics besides women’s issues. They produced work about gentrification, racism, and the immigrant experience. Some of their work was simply about what was going on in their working-class neighborhood, like when they placed their video equipment in a red wagon and went along the street interviewing people.

The members of Arnait Video Productions, the Inuit women’s video collective that began in 1991, describe their work as a means to create “a bridge between generations, a tool for education, to preserve and carry on the culture.”²¹ Here, the healing begins at home with storytelling practices meant to sustain a community. The collective’s official website reveals a cohesive body of work, including *Qulliq*, a video that explains and celebrates the technology of the seal-oil lamp, and the more recent film *Of Ravens and Children* (Arnait Video Productions, Canada, 2015). The latter video juxtaposes older women telling traditional stories with panoramic shots of the Arctic landscape and also incorporates inset shots of Inuit children. The film is deeply maternal in its affect, presenting a rich, good-humored perspective on a northern Aboriginal culture usually represented in mainstream media as tragic, dying, and in need of rescue.



Figure 2. Photo from the set of *Before Tomorrow* (dir. Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu, Canada, 2008), a video produced by Arnait Video Productions. Appearing from left to right facing the camera: actress Mary Qulitalik, co-director Marie-Hélène Cousineau, and assistant director Carol Kunnuk. Photo by Oana Spinu. © Arnait Video Productions

Many of Arnait's works have been broadcast on Television Northern Canada and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Women's art is often remembered, or misremembered, as being isolationist, Luddite, and opposed to the corporate-funded technology of the small or large screen. But Arnait's history shows that some of the most explicit and radical expressions of activist and feminist media in Canada were first seen on cable TV, a relatively new platform at the time of Arnait's founding in 1991.

Media Activism Meets Community Cable

The era of community cable TV began on film, not videotape, with the National Film Board of Canada's (NFB) Challenge for Change program in the 1960s. Initially a kind of ethnographic film project focusing on low-income people, the program became

participatory quite by accident, when interviewees in one film, *The Things I Cannot Change* (dir. Tanya Ballantyne, Canada, 1967), suffered ridicule for their intimate revelations. In subsequent Challenge for Change documentaries, subjects were allowed to provide input during editing.²² In the case of the NFB's *The Fogo Island Project* (Canada, 1967), which examines poverty in Newfoundland, a series of collectively produced videos finally swayed the federal government to create a cooperative fish-processing plant that had been long demanded by island residents.²³

Two NFB filmmakers, Bonnie Klein and Dorothy Henaut, decided to merge this participatory "Fogo process," as it became known, with cable television. They worked with community groups, had them identify issues of importance, trained them in Portapak video technology, and then worked with cable stations to get the programs on the air. As Michael Lithgow writes, the cable companies "had discovered that people liked seeing their neighbors, their families and themselves on television. . . . Community access programming was inadvertently helping cable companies to sell cable."²⁴

In 1975, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) made it mandatory for large cable companies to allocate 10 percent of gross revenues to community programming. This was a gift with strings attached. Community television encouraged cable companies to include Canadian content while justifying corporate control of television to critics and the public.²⁵ Nonetheless, this legislation became a model for the US, which followed suit with its own community cable access mandates in 1977.²⁶

Whatever the motives, the CRTC ruling opened up the doors to community television. Recalls Simpson, "We thought TV was a big deal. If it got onto TV it would be watched."²⁷ While Isis Collective made use of the NFB and its women's section (Studio D) for equipment and training, Amelia Productions, Women in Focus, Emma Productions, Women's Media Alliance, Women Artists in Video, and several other groups utilized a patchwork of equipment, training, and broadcasting resources that included artist-run centers, trade unions, and community cable programs. In the 1970s

and even the early 1980s, opportunities for women in technology were limited. The vanguard medium of video, and the exhibition window that community cable provided, allowed women around the world to enter into a new world of technology that could be adapted to a nonhierarchical, organically socialist and feminist environment.

Beginnings and Endings:

The Case of Amelia Productions and Emma Productions

The exact dates of feminist media collectives' births and deaths are generally unrecorded and often disputed. Ellen Frank describes the genesis of the Vancouver-based collective Amelia Productions as serendipitous, resulting from a sudden discovery: "I don't remember there ever being a decision to form Amelia. We were just there. . . . One of us walked into Cable 10 on Commercial Drive one day and realized they had all this equipment."²⁸ But Amelia Productions was actually following in the footsteps of two predecessors, Women Alive and Reelfeelings, which had been airing their tapes on a weekly feminist television series on Vancouver's Cable 10 since 1975. Women Alive produced a series of sixty videos on women's issues following an interview format, like *Women and Rape* (1977) and *Women in the Arts* (1978).²⁹

By the time Amelia Productions produced their first video, *Mother's Day* (1990), there was already an established audience for feminist TV. Frank explains, "We always assumed people were watching. . . . People would talk to us [about our programming] on the street. They knew to watch for it. There was a women's movement out there, so we knew there was an audience."³⁰ Amelia Productions lasted eighteen months and produced an astonishing oeuvre of fourteen videos, including a series they ironically dubbed "occupational videos," covering events like the occupation of British Columbia Telephone Company's offices by striking telephone operators (*TWUTel*, 1981). Amelia's members thrived in their role as citizen journalists, able to access events that mainstream newscasters could only shoot from afar. For example, Frank describes the events that spurred the group's production of *100 Aboriginal Women*:

I was driving downtown, and I heard on the radio that a hundred Aboriginal women were occupying the Department of Indian Affairs [DIA]. I turned the car around and went over there [to the DIA]. I was up there with two kids and no equipment. I started making phone calls—"Get all the equipment you can, and get over here!" And then Billie [Carroll] and Sarah [Davidson] arrived. We were allowed in, and the other media weren't. It was one of the funnest things I ever did.³¹

Frank, Sarah Davidson, and Billie Carroll spent several days sequestered in the offices of the DIA with the Aboriginal women acting as citizen journalists embedded in an occupation. *100 Aboriginal Women* was produced as a result, and the video portrays the occupation by the First Nations women and their subsequent arrest. The video, initially running several hours, in part depicts the Aboriginal women passing around a talking stick. One by one, they describe their atrocious living conditions, the increased rate of suicide, sexual and alcohol abuse, their abuse by priests and nuns, the sterilization of young women, and the lack of employment opportunities for First Nations people. They claim that the DIA's control over resources is driving them off their land. At the end of the video, we see footage of the women, including elders, being dragged away by police, while the rest of the women chant. In this scene, we see the occupation from the point of view of a participant, the bodies of the women sometimes obscuring the frame. The camera is not any more or less important than the women themselves.

Official national narratives strive to represent a nation without pain through the use of public healing gestures like official apologies, but this tape, deteriorated as it is, places us in direct contact with an archive of trauma. Curator (and former Reelfeelings member) Renee Baert recalls, "This was an incident that might have been a thirty-second item in a newscast, but the members of Amelia expanded this to several hours. They would then rush it over to the cable station and show footage of the occupation while it was still happening, occupying the frame of the TV set with mostly unedited, real-time footage—this was very powerful TV."³² The occupation of the DIA had a profound effect on feminist organizing in Vancouver during the 1980s. Many white feminists

got involved in organizing around First Nations community issues under the leadership of the Aboriginal women. After the occupation ended, white women continued to help out at rallies and fund-raisers for the Aboriginal women who had been arrested and charged. Amelia's video anticipated this early model of solidarity.

Despite the video's low production values and evident degeneration, *100 Aboriginal Women* is still visceral enough that contemporary audiences are often moved to tears when I screen the film. The video's graininess is its own archive, revealing to audiences the frailty and ephemerality of these documents. Indeed, most of these tapes were not intended for preservation. Shawn Preus, a former member of the Vancouver-based Women's Media Collective, explains, "You'd film something that day and go to a community meeting that night to show it. We didn't really consider ourselves artists. It was all about the instant playback. But there was a beauty in all that crudeness."³³ In this sense, the early days of video activism were not unlike current uses of YouTube and Facebook, which provide modes of instant playback and allow users to share everything from footage of police violence during the G20 Summit in 2010 to images of Ukrainian activists protesting government corruption in 2014. These images become proof of our own and others' activism; they perform simultaneously as activist home movies and as political testimony. Many Amelia tapes were produced for cablecast and then recorded over. Videotape was expensive in those days, and preserving or even distributing the work seemed pretentious and not within the purview of activism. The end product was less important than the moment of production and of witnessing. The very presence of the camera (at a time when most people didn't own video cameras) could bring importance and historical significance to an event.³⁴

When I asked Frank why the group folded, she couldn't remember the precise reason. Yet she ruefully surmised that the fact that the members all had been sleeping with one another might have had something to do with it.³⁵ It seemed there was no definitive ending, in that collective media making was just one form their activism took, and at some point the members moved on to other projects, which in British Columbia included organizing against

the new right-wing Social Credit government. Diamond offers a complementary reason for the group's demise: "The insistence on positive images and a polemical social critique seemed to restrain the imagination. Perhaps the collective production spurred the need for individual ego gratification through individual authorship."³⁶ Kaplan echoes this sentiment in recounting her involvement in Reelfeelings, explaining that "you always had to do things in a group. If you had a personality that was imaginative or creative, you had to stifle it in order to be part of the group."³⁷

I cofounded Emma Productions with Ruth Bishop in Toronto in 1983, the year before Brian Mulroney's conservative government was elected to power in Canada and four years after Ronald Reagan's inauguration as US president. The beginnings of neoliberalism in Canada, which included a host of free-trade agreements, signaled the demise of many social and cultural programs. Millions of federal and provincial dollars were cut from Aboriginal and women's groups in the 1980s. Censorship, which had not been well received by cultural communities, was reinstated by what I then called "policies of economic silencing."³⁸ It didn't stop our organizing and our cultural production, however. In fact, this was an era when grassroots community organizing proliferated in Canada. But changes to the political landscape made activism much more difficult.

In the introduction to the first Emma Productions video, *Stronger Than Before: A Video about Resistance* (Canada, 1983), we hear a rather earnest, self-reflexive voice-over (my own voice) describing the affective conditions of being both inside and outside the women's movement, as feminists and as videographers. This voice-over is accompanied by visceral, handheld footage of women enacting civil disobedience (jumping over wire fences and confronting police) at Litton Systems Canada, then producers of the guidance system for nuclear cruise missiles. As the voice-over explains:

We were there as video support, to keep our cameras aimed at interactions between the police and the women protesting, with the idea that the police would behave less violently under our surveillance. The day was colorful and exciting but also emotionally draining. I

watched women I knew being dragged into paddy wagons or being frisked by police. The camera was, for me, a protective shield behind which I felt safe—but which also required from me an emotional distance I was, as a political person, unaccustomed to.

I remember a lot of crying that day. Our Shaw Cable systems Portapak video camera recorded women getting arrested and tearfully asking cops to think about the effects of nuclear war on their children. I recall feeling a strange queasiness, not unlike the moral shock that Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta describe, a sense of being both inside and outside my skin. Our newly formed collective had just been trained to use the equipment the day before. It's not quite true that we were simply there as a kind of video police for the people. We actually had gone through considerable trouble to get permission to go inside Litton Systems, which had received a multimillion-dollar government contract to produce the nuclear missile guidance system. I recall that we had dressed up a little bit in secondhand blazers and our best corduroy pants, posing as journalists from the Shaw cable network. We interviewed the public relations staffer for Litton Systems, and his bumbling and often revealing statements are in the tape alongside footage of the women demonstrating. We were documenting, we were witnessing, we were performing ourselves both as video-makers and as activists, we were play-acting. As Marina Roy writes of second-wave feminist video collectives, "For one of the first times in history, women found an alternative space to that of the home where they could live and work as artists. . . . Collaboration meant the cooperation of bodies performing within a communal space."³⁹ By physically being there with our cameras, we placed our filmmaking practice in a circuit of contagious feeling and response, rather than simply in opposition to dominance.

Emma Productions emerged just as community cable was in its demise. We initially made use of Shaw cable equipment and training facilities, but our work was shown in art galleries, union halls, and universities rather than on TV. Our tapes are in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada and those of several universities, and they are passively distributed and (to some

extent) preserved by artist-run distributors like VTape in Toronto. We never lacked for an audience. But like most of the collectives, we folded after three or four years—really, at the height of our success.

I have always felt some shame at the internal discord that seemed to precipitate Emma Productions' dissolution. I wonder whether similar affective experiences have prevented former video collective members from documenting or preserving this era and the work they produced. Such shame obscures historical realities, for the decline of both Amelia Productions and Emma Productions coincide with structural changes to broadcast and arts funding policy in Canada and around the world, as the notion of broadcasting as a public sphere activity was eroded by privatization and neoliberalism. Nancy Shaw describes the radically altered social climate of the mid-1980s that delegitimized activist and collective artwork. As Shaw explains, certain cable broadcasters, like Rogers Cable, began demanding the copyright for artists' and collectives' work.⁴⁰ In Vancouver, Rogers Cable began censoring sexually explicit material.⁴¹ At the same time, arts organizations were being forced to institutionalize and bureaucratize. Competition for dwindling arts council funds placed artists in an increasingly competitive role. Although Canadian government policy in the 1980s expressed strong support for access channels as a tool for community action and social change, the actual policies governing this access became more lenient as the decade progressed. The mandatory 10 percent community access revenue dropped to 5 percent. Cable companies were becoming the corporate czars of broadcasting, and governments were increasingly less inclined to intervene. In 1996, the CRTC made allocations for community cable voluntary, which resulted in the cancellation of many community-produced programs across the country. Dot Tuer has evocatively, if pessimistically, described this as "the end of the nation-state as a means for a citizenship to negotiate a terrain for its own collective self-determination."⁴²

The aesthetic economy had also changed by the end of the 1980s. To get funding for video, you had to justify it as a work of art, so many activist videomakers (including myself) moved out of documentary—at the time, an increasingly delegitimized genre—

into drama or experimental work. To obtain a wider audience, many of us also moved into 16 mm film. As for the cable companies, they were no longer as desperate for audiences or content. And so, much of community producers' energy was directed toward lobbying cable companies to restore funding and increase access, echoing our current concerns with fair dealing and access on the Internet.

By the mid- to late eighties, solidarity work had begun to preoccupy the women's movement, the Left, and the arts community. Artists and feminists had become seriously involved in the South African antiapartheid movement, and the Left was aligned with movements for liberation in Latin America. Under the auspices of Emma Productions, I went on a coffee-picking brigade to Nicaragua. My trip resulted in the video *Bullets for a Revolution* (dir. Marusya Bociurkiw, Emma Productions, Canada, 1988), which was coproduced with Canadian Action for Nicaragua.

In Vancouver, Women in Focus, which at that point was curating gallery exhibits alongside its production and distribution arms, sponsored a groundbreaking show, *Women, Art, and the Periphery/Mujer, Arte y Periferia*, exhibiting thirteen women Chilean artists' multimedia works. The catalog acknowledgments reveal an informal coalition of former feminist video collective members, including Diamond and Kaplan. The catalog essay by guest curator Nelly Richard shows the influence of postcolonial theories of hybridity, which were changing the discourse of feminism into one of multiple identities. The videos themselves were experimental—avant-garde, even—which anticipated the movement away from social documentary in Canadian media arts.⁴³ Not long after this show, the then-director of Women in Focus, Zainub Verjee, went on to organize InVisible Colours in 1989, the first women-of-color film festival in Canada.

Some of the later collectives like Emma Productions and Women Artists in Video began to experiment with both form and authorship. I wrote and directed the feature-length experimental drama *Playing with Fire* (Canada, 1986) as a single-authored work, with Emma Productions named as producer. Winnipeg-based Women Artists in Video also emerged at this time, operating as a

collective but producing only short, single-authored works, all of them experimental, featuring a hybrid punk-feminist poetic style. Founding member Hope Peterson explains, “It was a postfeminist time, but there were no services for women. There were no women with technical skills who could produce for themselves. So there was a kind of goal that people [in the group] pick up professional skills. There was [also] a social-use element to the work—you saw that art could have a use in the real world.”⁴⁴

The videos produced by Women Artists in Video have a raw, handmade feel with tough, ambiguous story lines. In *Stain* (dir. Hope Peterson, Canada, 1988), a woman on a crowded bus deals with the everyday harassment of being rubbed up against by male fellow travelers. The camera freezes on her face, a mask of pain. Later, she drinks a glass of bleach and washes her dress, which leaks blood. This work, like others by the collective, received much local acclaim. In turn, Women Artists in Video members developed aesthetic and technical skills that would allow them to support themselves for decades to come. As Peterson explains, the group folded in the early 1990s because of a “lack of momentum,” funding cuts, and “an idea that people should grow up and become independent producers.”⁴⁵ However, in the year after the mass shooting of fourteen young female engineering students at Montreal’s École Polytechnique in 1989, Women Artists in Video’s members had also received a series of death threats. Peterson notes of this period, “There was an atmosphere that speaking out or taking up space would bring about violence.”⁴⁶

By 1990, the era of feminist video collectives outside Québec and Nunavut was coming to a close. Feminism had become mainstreamed; consumer cameras were entering the market, making everyone a potential artist or citizen journalist; and severe government cutbacks had decimated women’s and artists’ communities. The 1989 exhibit *Rebel Girls: A Survey of Canadian Feminist Videotapes 1974–1988*, curated by Su Ditta at the National Gallery of Canada, book-marks this era. This show placed feminist video on a seemingly level playing field with the canon of Canadian art. I recall taking my immigrant father to the gallery and proudly showing him *No Small Change* exhibited in the newly constructed building adjacent to Par-

liament Hill. But this exhibit also signaled the institutionalization and hierarchal organization that were becoming part of the feminist project. The videos by Emma Productions were among only a few works shown that had been produced in a collective. None of Emma Productions' members were invited to the lavish opening attended by the other women artists featured in the show. Collective work was in its demise, and the era of the feminist art star was about to commence.

At the time of writing, only the collectives in Québec and Nunavut have survived. These include Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Video Femmes, and the lesbian separatist video collective Réseau Vidé-Elle (Women's Video Network, roughly translated), all based in Québec. Arnait Video Productions—based both in Montreal, Québec, and Igloolik, Nunavut—is thriving, with yearly productions, awards, and a lively Facebook page. Their most recent feature documentary, *Sol* (dir. Susan Avingaq and Marie-Hélène Cousineau, Canada, 2014), won the 2016 Canadian Screen Award for best documentary program. Coincidentally or not, Québec was the only province to provide direct funding for community cable access projects, and provincial arts funding in Québec is also among the strongest in Canada.

Affective Labor

There may be an affective reason for the Québec groups' survival, in that they share a francophone culture that privileges extended mealtimes and the merging of work and socializing. Anne Golden, who has worked with Groupe Intervention Vidéo since 1989, in musing on the group's longevity, notes, "There were the long lunches, yes. There is the fact that we're all friends. It's not a nine-to-five job. You work with someone, and then you end up going out with them."⁴⁷ But Groupe Intervention Vidéo has also received funding from three levels of government for many years, which has allowed members to be paid while also allowing flexibility of hours and job descriptions. Tuer comments on the volunteer structure of community cable outside Québec: "Many individuals and groups burnt out quickly. Groups with specific agendas that



Figure 3. *Stain*
(dir. Hope Peterson,
Canada, 1988), a
video produced by
Women Artists in
Video

had little to do with community input overtook local facilities.”⁴⁸ Frank recalls that she was a single mother on welfare while she was a member of Amelia Productions, and that the work of shooting and editing one program per week “took forever.” More and more community demands were being placed on Amelia’s members. She laughingly recounts that when Amelia Productions was invited by a group of Aboriginal women to document their trip to England, where they planned to present their concerns to the Queen, no one in the collective could afford to go.⁴⁹

Very few of the collectives paid their members, and if they did, pay was irregular and based on the occasional grant windfall. Members did freelance work, seasonal film industry gigs, telephone marketing, or substitute teaching, or lived on welfare or unemployment insurance. Our alienated labor was different from classical Marxism’s formulation. We overinvested, not in leisure pursuits or consumption, but in the affective labor of political work. Our movement, owing to its very affectivity, was directly exploitable by capital. Like the affective laborers of the present day, the earliest media collectives helped to produce capital—that is, content for cable TV. But Michael Hardt acknowledges the potential of affective labor and its important function within feminist communities as a labor of caring and community building: “On the one hand, affective labor, the production and reproduction of life, has become firmly embedded as a necessary foundation for capitalist accumulation and patriarchal order. On the other hand, however, the production of affects, subjectivities and forms of life present

an enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorization and perhaps for liberation.”⁵⁰

Affective labor, I would argue, had mixed meanings for feminist video collectives at the time. There was real, if genteel, poverty. (I can recall Dumpster diving with roommates and sharing a candlelit meal composed of our gleanings.) There was couch-surfing, there were appalling housing conditions, and there were humiliating sessions with welfare workers. Queer media activists also experienced abandonment by their biological families. But there was also the creation of alternative kinship structures and of humane working conditions with the potential to produce new forms of sociality and culture. Second-wave feminism, then at its height, was in a position to offer forms of labor that might have, with enduring social support, become sustainable and affectively satisfying.

Inadequate funding eventually led to unsustainable living and working conditions, producing mistrust, confrontation, suspicion, and sometimes betrayal. If the video collectives were aware of one another, then they were also usually in competition or in conflict. As Preus explains, “I got disillusioned by the competitiveness.”⁵¹ “That was the sad thing,” concurs Kaplan of Reelfeelings, “all these different groups didn’t want to work with one another.”⁵² Dark stories and maudlin rumors underpin many of the collectives’ histories. Money was stolen, accusations were made. The money was returned, or it wasn’t. The stories spin into myth and melodrama. Memory is shaky, blurred, like the outtakes of a video. I still have feelings of loss, shame, and resentment from the demise of Emma Productions, but I can’t recall the exact details. Little was documented, but the bad affects remain, a stain that won’t disappear no matter how much you scrub. It is by doing this research that I am finally able to see the positive affects, to recall joy, passionate interest, fun, and love.

Archive as Precedent: The Digital Era

As academic and artistic interest in the archive proliferates, connections can and must be made with current forms of social-media

activism so that feminist archival work endures not just as memory but as precedent or antecedent. Digital initiatives, like Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn's Digital Indigenous Democracy/Isuma TV—a kind of YouTube channel for northern Canada—are a heartening alternative. Operating using the same principles as community cable, Isuma TV is adapted to high bandwidth, with locally produced programs on everything from building a seal-skin boat to discussions about climate change, not unlike the work of the Women Alive collective three decades earlier.⁵³ The waves of protest across Europe and the Middle East bring together a social body in its intersections with technology—Facebook, blogs, e-mail, Twitter. Much like the stance of second-wave feminist media collectives, global movements like Occupy and the Ukrainian media activist group Babylon '13 eschew standard media and create their own media networks and channels.⁵⁴ This kind of digital media activism is reinvigorating discussions of televisual community access. In 2001, owing to public outcry, the CRTC reasserted Canadian cable companies' obligations to provide community channels that encourage access, training, and meaningful volunteer opportunities. Since then, though, such resources have shrunk considerably. Access is now highly controlled, and *community* is very loosely defined. At the time of writing, even this diminished allotment is under review by the CRTC, and it may be subject to further reductions.⁵⁵

We are all, now, content providers for the new applications of social media. Following Marshall McLuhan, a platform like YouTube echoes and channels earlier platforms, whether it's a collectively produced feminist video from the 1970s or an avant-garde performance piece from the 1980s. As Evelin Stermitz argues, early twentieth-century feminist photographic collage is the precursor to second-wave feminist video art, which in turn anticipates feminist digital remix of the twenty-first century.⁵⁶ The ephemeral archive of Amelia Productions, Emma Productions, and Reelfeelings allows us to remember this work as an act of intervention and witness, reimagining the ways in which both broadcast and Internet platforms can reshape and reinform the public sphere.

Conclusion:

Intergenerational Affect in the Company of Ghosts

If, as I have argued, affect theory provides us with a different way to enact feminist media history, I'd like to think that these positive affects, sutured into every shot and edit of these videos, could be passed along to the current generation of feminists. I often ask my students how they feel after I've shown them a clip from *100 Aboriginal Women* or *No Small Change*. I was bemused when one student responded, "I feel comforted that these women were doing this work so long ago." Susan James points out that the affects will be different: "Other people's affects do not enter into our bodies. Instead, our senses and imagination enable each of us to respond to them by generating affects of our own."⁵⁷

When screening tapes to students, I'm often apologetic, even deprecatory, about the raw look of the work. Golden comments wryly on the aesthetic decisions made by Groupe Intervention Vidéo:

When you're in a collective you have a different sense of form and content. We wanted people to say what *they* wanted to say. We weren't going to chop them. . . . I can't look at videotape *Les Autres* [*The Others*, dir. Anne Golden/Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Canada, 1991] now. It's thirty-one minutes long. Why thirty-one? Fifteen minutes, that would have been great. So many mistakes! It was shot on Video8. It looks like it was shot through cheesecloth!⁵⁸

New curatorial and pedagogical initiatives surrounding this work will need to provide a strong contextual frame. Roy explains of videos from this period, "Content was quite often privileged over form. A raw aesthetic certainly conveyed its own message—'this is not TV; this may even be critical of TV; this is presenting something that TV would never show you.'"⁵⁹ Diamond reminds us that many feminist media activists, including herself, including me, were also artists.⁶⁰ At the same time that we opposed conceptualism, we were also working against the sentimental, nationalist, and consumerist turn of television. Not unlike Cuban revolutionary filmmakers or feminist filmmakers of the French New Wave,

we recorded small moments on the street or in the home. What's aesthetically important about this early video work, writes Diamond, is precisely what made it a poor cousin in the art world: "Its low-quality image, ironic stance, clear signs of authorship, and its consistent, if often unconscious, reversal of realism. This very lack of authority . . . suggested that the audience might be able to form opinions in response to a video documentary more readily than it could to a big-screen film."⁶¹ The "small moments"—like an Eaton's department store striker shyly but proudly talking about her first feminist march—spoke to large political aspirations. The strike, though it achieved little for the workers, raised national awareness of the plight of part-time female workers. *No Small Change*, screened in union halls, universities, and art galleries, was an important part of this political process.

As I screen the tapes at universities across Canada, I notice that their meaning, and thus their affect, has changed. They become less about their explicit themes—labor strikes, the peace movement, Latin American solidarity—and serve more as a document of a time gone by. In *No Small Change*, a pirated news clip from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation describes the occupation of the flagship Eaton's store in Toronto on International Women's Day in 1983 not as a criminal act or in terms of the loss of capital (as contemporary strikes are routinely framed in standard media accounts) but as "a victory for the women's movement." I see audiences of all ages marveling at a second-wave women's movement that was (though we didn't appreciate it then) a force to be reckoned with, that wielded enormous influence on government policies, media content, and art-world aesthetics.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida encourages us "to learn to live with ghosts . . . to live otherwise, and better."⁶² Indeed, the images in these tapes—of the women and of our audacity—all seem spectral to me now. I can't decide whether I love or hate these ghosts: they represent the dull grind of poverty mixed with a fierce sense of purpose and camaraderie. Derrida argues that official archives incite "the annihilation of memory" because they exclude as much as they include, yet give the illusion of a complete history.⁶³ Perhaps, then, the incompleteness of the archive of second-wave

feminist video activism can be seen as productive. Had these works and the stories that surround them been officially remembered, I might never have been drawn to reexamine them. As Frank incredulously confided to me, “We thought we could change the world. We thought what we did mattered. We thought that every day.”⁶⁴

Notes

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Figure 4. Harriet Hume, left, and Marusya Bociurkiw, right, taping *No Small Change* (Emma Productions, Canada, 1984), 1983