



# WOMEN IN VIDEO

**T**here is a phenomenon afoot, unprecedented in the annals of media: the large proportion of women in one of its multifarious areas, that of small-format video. Women continue to enter most fields in increasing numbers, but in small-format video the percentage is unusually high—about 40 percent.

In an attempt to explore this fact, I talked with many women involved in various aspects of small-format production. The women mentioned here are only some of those making important contributions to the current video scene.

Despite the generalness of the topic, “women in video,” one cannot reduce these producers to either common denominator, womanhood or video. Nor should their work be dissected and put into categories or diminished by tiresome generalizations. Rather, each work must be examined and appreciated as the individual vision it is.

In the world of video, women abound . . . not only at the production level but in key video-related administrative positions. In Seattle, the *and/or* gallery is run by Ann Focke with Norie Sato as video director. In the New York City area the main video centers have women in top positions: At Electronic Arts Intermix the technical director is Doreen Hyman, at Anthology Film Archives the video curator is Shigeko Kubota, the Kitchen’s video director is Carlota Schoolman, the associate director of Global Village is Julie Gustafson, and the assistant director of the WNET/TV Lab is Carol Brandenburg. At the New York State Council on the Arts, TV/Media Associate Lydia Silman has been instrumental from the early days of small-format video in the financial perpetuation of the movement.

As New York video artist Steina Vasulka assesses the situation, “the women control the scene.”

Why have so many women chosen to work in video?

One reason is the availability of the equipment. During the late 1960’s and early 1970’s when the 1/2-inch black-and-white portapak was being popularized, the notion existed that small-format video would democratize (and, in turn, revolutionize) television. Public access became a hot item, and equipment centers were set up and open to the public—and this public included women. The video movement coincided with the women’s movement, and in many ways is analogous. Video was a new field, as wide open to women as it was to men. Unlike film, it lacked an aesthetic context and the constraints of a male-oriented historical tradition. As Washington video artist Pat Molella explains, “Men and women were introduced to video at exactly the same time, so they’re on an equal basis.”

In addition to its newness, video has about it an unknown element which many find intriguing. As Washington videomaker Gerry Wurzburg says, “Rear projected images have emotionally a very different impact on you than front projected images. [They] enter you on the same kind of electrical pathway as your dreams travel.”

While some filmmakers complain that video is “cold,” Ms. Wurzburg, who works in both film and video, finds video “Tactile, affectionate, and warm—and that’s how it portrays people. In video you have a kind of intimacy to fulfill.”

Washington videomaker Vicki Costello agrees: “There’s a very intense power in the imagery that video produces because of the spontaneity. It brings up a forced intimacy between the producer and subject, and I think women are very competent to handle that intimacy.”

Ms. Wurzburg finds video’s instant replay capability especially conducive to her style of documentary making. In the course of shooting a documentary, she makes



Woody Vasulka.

Steina Vasulka: "the women control the scene."

scores of short, funny "play pieces" of "feed back" to her subjects. She explains, "When you do a documentary you can't just walk in and do it and walk out and come out with one piece. You've got to have the play pieces to give something back immediately, to show the people how you love them."

Anyone working successfully in video must know, understand, and respect the equipment involved. The videomaker must recognize and accept the limitations of the equipment while pushing those limits to their outer most parameters. Women working in video are proving that the concept of female technical ineptness is a myth.

Women as well as men are getting the high technical performance they demand from small-format equipment. Jayne Adair is the producer of *Studio See*, the first national series done on 3/4-inch video. Says Ms. Adair, "Video is now out of the stage where you can call yourself experimenting with video and use that as an excuse." Of *Studio See* she says, "We want it to be good video with the highest production techniques that we can possibly put into it, both audio and video."

Steina Vasulka, on the other hand, feels otherwise about the technology and its appeal to women: "Video is underpaid, it's technologically inferior, it's an underdog. Men aspire toward 1-inch or 2-inch and toward the

technology. Women are perfectly happy to stay in an inferior medium if they can express themselves."

Learning the technology is, of course, only the first step. Most important is its application.

Maxi Cohen, a New York videomaker, says, "The thing that interests me is being able to take that technology and push it a step further, and be able to do something. My interest happens to be in human behavior and people." Ms. Cohen sees video in socio-political terms and uses it to instigate social interaction.

Jayne Adair has higher objectives than just keeping the *Studio See* audience entertained: "We try to encourage [the audience] to some sort of activity in the interest of knowing who they are and discovering themselves and giving them a positive image." Ms. Adair strives to present positive role models for women. She is concerned with "showing women who are in very respected positions among their peers." She does this not only in the show but on her production crews. Each crew is overseen by a female field producer who represents a positive female image to the children with whom they come in contact.

Sherry Rabinowitz, an independent video artist, wants to incorporate the characteristics of satellite technology into her plans to "push the concept of communication to another level." She foresees using satellites as interfaces between world cultures, to help realize McLuhan's concept of "global village."

Women bring a certain sensitivity to their subject matter which complements the intimacy of video. Their approach to personal topics and subject matter is bold and unparalleled.

Julie Gustafson's tape *The Politics of Intimacy* exemplifies these characteristics. Straightforward and unpretentious, the tape consists of interviews with women who talk frankly about the agonies and the ecstasies of their sexuality.

Ms. Gustafson, like many women, approaches a production in a personal way. Her work is usually concerned with something that is critical and important to her own life while the work is in progress. At the time of working on *Politics of Intimacy* she was concerned with her own sexuality in a way that she had never been before. Similarly, *Giving Birth: Four Portraits*, her most recent work was produced just after the birth of her first child.

She now works with her husband, John Reilly, and has this to say about the making of *Giving Birth: Four Portraits*: "[Making the tape] was a continuation of

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Pat Molella



Act Two Photography

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the whole process of having the baby, and it was something we approached in a mutual way. It was part of our life, part of the whole thing of making a family, part of being together and working together."

The husband and wife production team syndrome is not uncommon in video. Other video couples include Steina and Woody Vasulka, Alan and Susan Raymond, and Phil and Gunilla Mallory-Jones. On working together, Ms. Gustafson comments, "We two complement each other's skills, temperament, and work habits. John brings to the partnership more than ten years of experience in documentary film and video. He has a flair for analysis and a concern for style. I was responsible for the day-to-day process, making arrangements,

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*Gerry Wurzburg: Video is "Tactile, affectionate, and warm—and that's how it plays people."*

and dealing with most of the production elements, the camera, the equipment, and the relationship with the couples."

Most successful professional women identify strongly with their careers, and video producers are no exception. Says Jerry Wurzburg, "Doing a documentary where you spend time with people, it's got to affect you. It's my life and blood. It's like a life force. It's overpowering"

Often their concept of self is inseparable from their career, and they have integratee their femininity into their work. Jayne Adair is not unwilling to wield her wiles: "Women are just good con-artists. I'm not afraid to use that particular ability."

There are, of course, conflicts faced by all professional

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*Jayne Adair: Her concern is "showing women who are in very respected positions among their peers."*

women. One in particular is the question of whether a career precludes a family. Suzanne Tedesco, a Seattle videomaker, addresses this issue: "I want to experience it all. I want to explore it all. In a way the nice thing about working in media is that it gives you a chance to catapult yourself to experience a situation that you normally would have no access to. That, for me, is a lot of the appeal of doing documentaries. The curiosity of seeing how other people live and what I can learn from that. And I have the same feeling about having a child, that that's really a primal experience, that if I go

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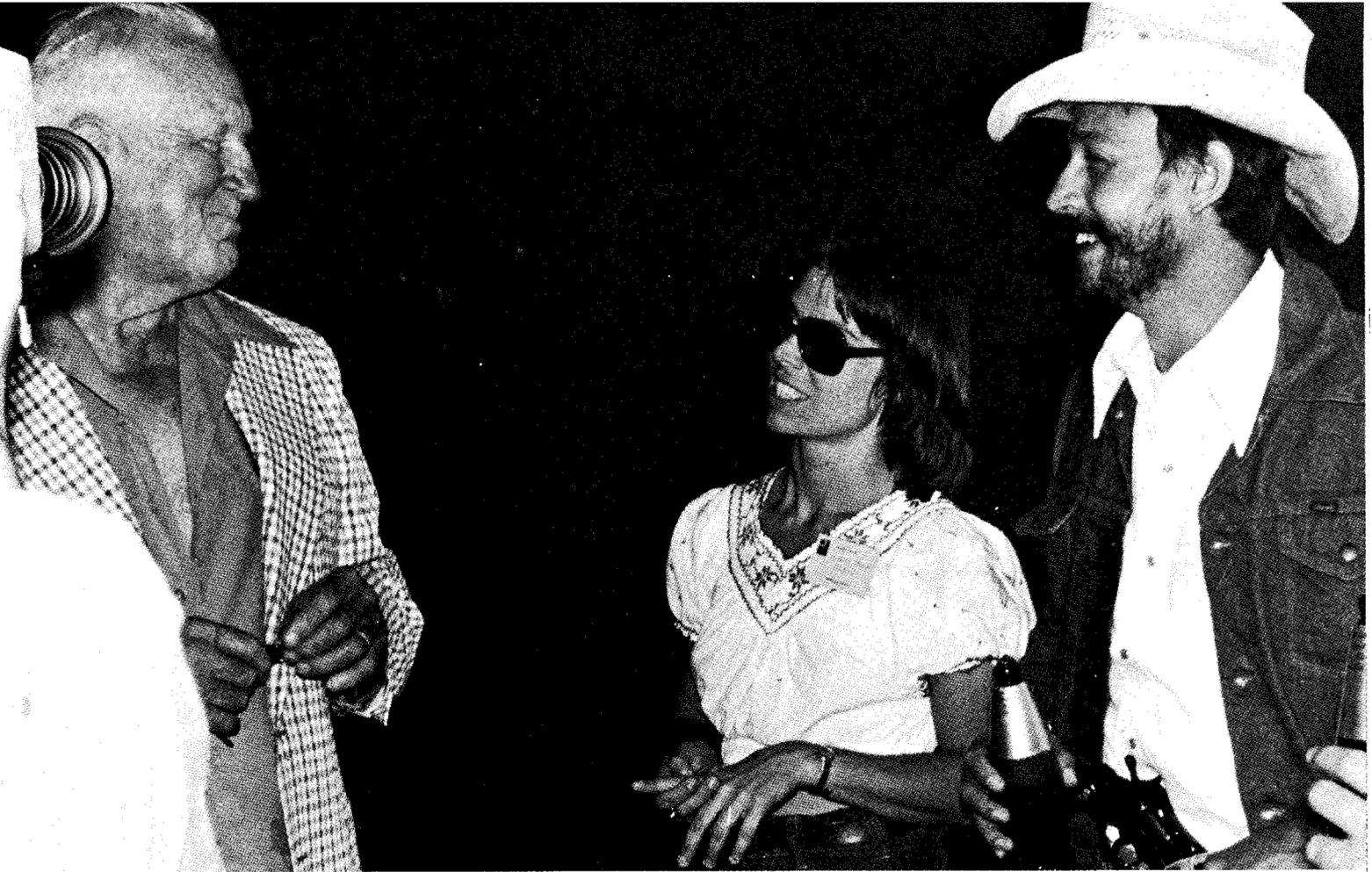
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through life without experiencing that, that I've really sacrificed something."

Jayne Adair expresses the same ambiguity: "It's a problem for a woman, especially for women who begin to realize how much work can mean. It can mean everything. It can make you feel just so good about who you are. And that's something more and more women are beginning to find out."

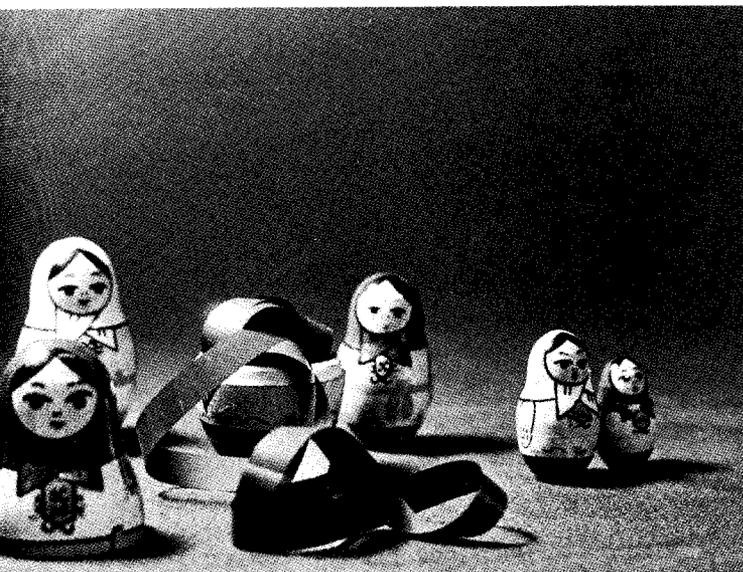
In the last ten years small-format video has (1) begun, and (2) begun to be taken seriously. In the last

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Anita Belson

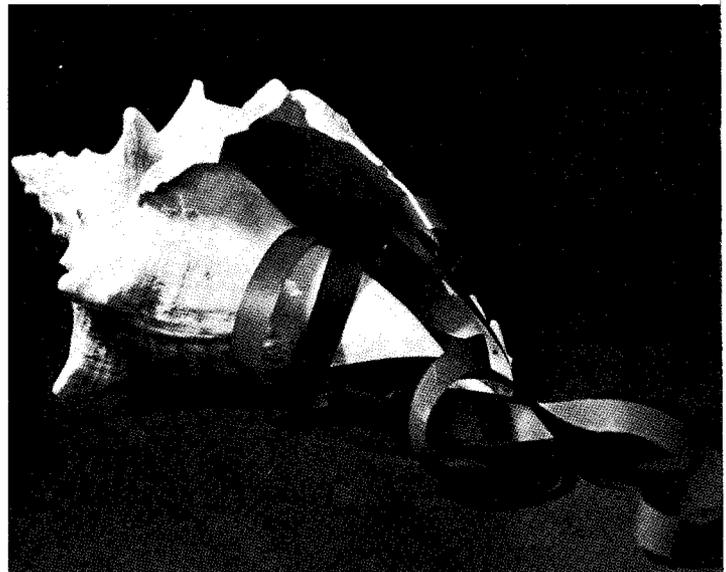
*Suzanne Tedesco: I want to experience it all . . . And I have the same feeling about having a child . . . that if I go through life without experiencing that, then I've really sacrificed something.*



*Photograph by Anita Konig - 1374 Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn, New York 11230*

ten years more women have begun go take their lives seriously.

Today women are galvanizing small-format video in much the same way as small-format video is galvanizing television. It follows logically (but in real time much moe slowly) that women are galvanizing tele-



*Photograph by Anita Konig - 1374 Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn, New York 11230*

vision. With the exception of Jayne Adair and a few others, this is not yet happening. As television continues to take on the challenge of small-format video, women will play an increasingly influential role in determining the texture of the American psyche. ■ ■ ■