

FILM REVIEWS

REVIEWS OF SHORT FILMS

Jill Johnston, October '75

d: Lydia Wazana, Kay Armatage, **asst. d:** Michele Moses, **ph:** Joan Churchill, Carol Betts, **asst. ph:** Ruth Hope, **Lights:** Barbara Mathiesen, **ed:** Helen Prince Buchsbaum, Allan Collins, Ruth Hope, **sd:** Susanne Depoe, **m:** Rough Trade, Cindy Moseley, **p:** Kay Armatage, Lydia Wazana, **p.c.:** K & L and Premier Operating Production (1975). **col:** 16mm., 35 minutes.



Jill Johnston, as she was, in 1975.

Jill Johnston flew up from the States to attend the premiere showing of *Jill Johnston, October '75*. In one sense, she lobbed a bombshell into the proceedings and ended up pretty well upstaging the film. In another sense, though, the film about Jill Johnston and Jill Johnston in person combined to form a totality – an Event, in fact, of such startling inner coherence that it deserves to stand as a cultural artifact in its own right.

The Innis College "Town Hall" was packed. Women from all the various allegiances and cross-allegiances of Toronto's women's movement had turned out in force. After the applause for the film had died down, the guest of honor came down to the front of the hall to speak. There was a conflict of interests between herself and the filmmakers, she announced. She couldn't relate to the film, thought that the image it created would harm her aspirations as a serious writer, and wouldn't sign a release for its sale or showing outside Canada.

The dialogue that followed between Johnston and the audience as some of its members urged the film's release while others spoke up in her defence was fast, funny and very revealing. It took on, at times, the sense of some monster therapy session. What did she object to in the film, people wanted to know. "I feel it's like someone not taking herself se-

riously", she said. It laid undue stress on the flipped-out lesbian, the performing-seal commando when this was the very skin she had almost completed the arduous process of shedding at the time the film was made. Now, she was no longer angry, no longer interested in the political side of the women's movement, period. Her primary concern was with her credibility as a writer and thinker, and the serious critical examination of her work it had been lacking for twenty years. The "media junkie" had finally dried-out.

Maybe. Or maybe "Once a junkie, always a junkie". Because what kept coming through loud and clear was that she didn't object to the film so much because it misrepresented her, but because it didn't portray her as she *wanted* to be seen. One of the scenes she thought should have been cut, for instance, because she didn't "feel that way anymore", showed her exploding in rage at a man in a public meeting, and threatening to kick him "in the balls" if he didn't leave immediately. She approved, on the other hand, of an interview sequence with Reiner Schwartz because she liked the "laid-back" self that came across, the "cool, low-key" manner in which she deflected his attempts to label her. Her notorious public stunts and previous film appearances – in 3 of Warhol's "home movies" – had been,

she explained, essentially modes of camouflage. The thing that had troubled her from the start about the Toronto filming was the lack of a "director or conversational foil", a script or any clear-cut direction. The reason for her discomfort on this score was implicit in everything she said: the straight-out documentary style in which the film was conceived left her little room for hiding-out or masquerade, little leverage for shaping a Jill Johnston *persona*. It all came down to a question of "control" – control of her life, control of her media image.

Only it was difficult to see how the film *could* harm her interests as a "serious" writer. For those of us who had come to the screening with only the vaguest notion of Jill Johnston as the *Village Voice* – lesbian-feminist-columnist, the lady we saw in the film was a revelation. Though the context of the filming was a fleeting visit she paid to Toronto, her commitment to her writing emerged inescapably as the central fact on her existence. Again and again, through her own voice-over reflections, through scenes of a public reading she gave from unpublished works, through the words of the woman she shared her life with, it was Jill Johnston as writer and thinker that was stressed.

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Tantalizing fragments of her mythology of female individuation are provided; and the personal psychological dynamic from which it springs - Johnston's quest for the missing father-principle in her own life - is, with some intelligence, reflected in the film's structure. We move from the metaphorical search contained in her writings to the realization that she has come to Toronto to visit her real father, the carillonneur at Hart House. The actual encounter between father and daughter never pans out in the film, perhaps because its drama exists only in the symbolic world of Johnston's imagination. The filmmakers manage to cover their tracks quite well, through a montage of Johnston and her lover in the bell-tower that merges literal and symbolic aspects of her quest. No amount of skilful editing, however, can disguise the thinness of what actually happened up there - better to have abandoned documentary altogether at this point for outright symbolic reconstruction and left the father missing.

Overall, though, I liked the film. I liked the modesty of its ambitions. In an interview toward the end, Johnston states that once she was gripped by politics but that now she is gripped by something else. "I guess I'll just go from grip to grip," she comments. Everything in the film, from the title to the rapidity of its pace to the closing scene of Johnston quipping with her interviewer proclaims its subject to be the Jill Johnston of one brief and somewhat artificial situation, a Jill Johnston caught in motion and in transition. I liked the refusal of the film's makers, in what must have been truly a high-pressure situation, to impose any more of a pattern on their material than was compatible with its somewhat ragged, open-ended nature. I liked the film's honesty. Even the "sensational" bits Johnston disliked so much, like the scene that had her partying with some local women to the raunchy sounds of Carol Pope, came through in their mixture of defiant theatricality and the awkwardness of instant feminist intimacy. Deadly accurate.

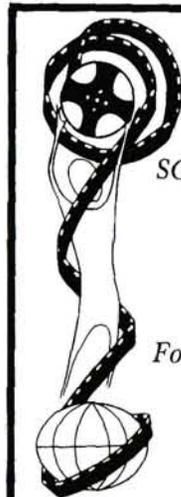
Accurate. Despite all the changes she had been through since the film was made, despite the wholesale cleaning-up-of-her-act she had conducted in her life and in her work, the woman who addressed us from the front of the auditorium was recognizably continuous with the one in the

film. That's what freaked Jill Johnston out. "Watching my own self-consciousness", she admitted, "was awful." The documentary footage was too painful and incontrovertible a reminder of what she had been, and what, to some extent, she unavoidably still was - without the redeeming clasp of a controlling structure. And this had to be the largest irony of the whole Event; that it was the film that supplied the very terms to make Johnston's rejection of it comprehensible: her hunger for the validation provided by "masculine" values - seriousness, control, limits. Too bad the makers of the film had to tangle with a veteran feminist motivated by such radical mistrust of her own "outrageous" femaleness. Too bad Jill Johnston doesn't realize how impressive she was, in all the rawness of her self-consciousness, to the rest of us.

Katherine Gilday

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