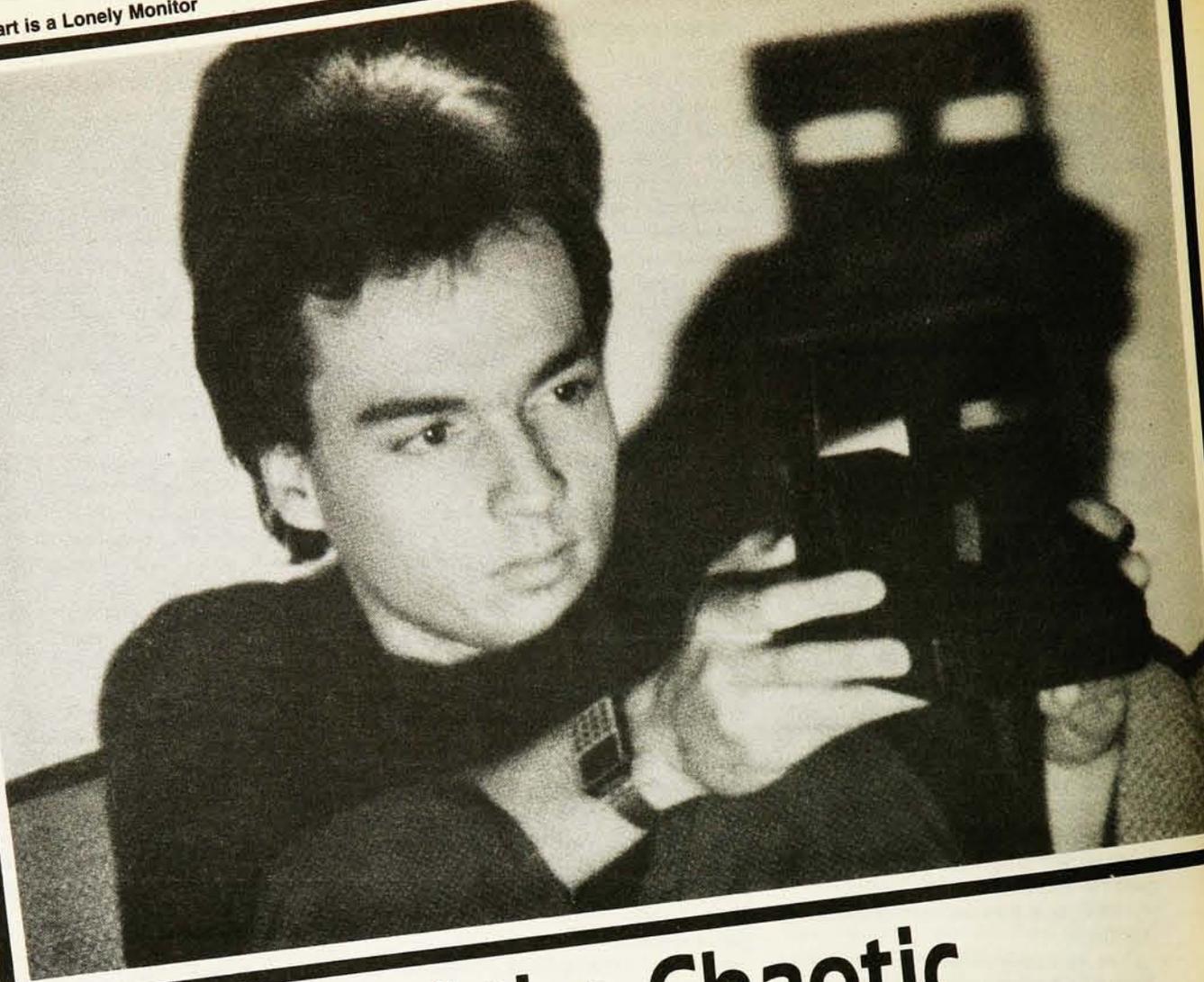


• The Heart is a Lonely Monitor

photo: Patrick Aull



# Feminism and Art Conference

## An Admiration of the Chaotic

by Joyce Mason

On the weekend of September 24-27, The Women's Art Resource Centre hosted the first, of what participants hope to make a biennial, Feminism and Art Conference in Toronto. The weekend consisted largely of panels and workshops on "practical and theoretical issues of concern to women and feminist artists" with national representation of artists, educators, and women's art organisations.<sup>1</sup> Also included were: an evening of performances by Toronto women performance artists, ongoing slide shows of work by Canadian women, two evenings of video screenings and three programs of films.

The film screenings, unlike the video and performance events, took place at the conference site, in the main building of the Ontario College of Art, in less than ideal screening conditions. The first two programs were presented in the O.C.A. auditorium where the sound system made adequate soundtracks sound hollow and muffled and ensured that any sound subtleties would be virtually eradicated. The location for the final film program took us from bad to worse

— into a classroom, with the only working projector whirring noisily right alongside us (except, of course, during tedious pauses for reel changes). Under this range of conditions viewers were presented an eclectic sampling of 15 films by 15 women (plus two men, as co-directors) produced over the last 14 years.

The most intriguing and perhaps least evident aspect of this program of films was the selection criteria. The program spanned 14 years, six provinces and a wide range of genres, aesthetics and politics available in women's filmmaking in Canada. The program notes were minimal and almost purely descriptive.

Instead of a direct, written introduction or personally committed program notes which would explain the criteria for selection and provide an informed context for the film presentations, programmers Leslie Harbinson and Kathleen Maitland Carter circulated a four-page transcription of a rambling conversation about the series. From this transcribed conversation one could surmise that there was a conscious consideration of regional and cultural representation and an apparent admiration for the chaotic. It was this latter proclivity that was most evident.

It appears that contemporary feminist and socialist analyses of how curatorial and critical criteria have functioned as an integral part of a system which excludes women, Native North Americans, Blacks, immigrants, the working class and others from the dominant com-

munications systems of North America (mass circulation press, TV, commercial cinema and radio) has led some programmers to abdicate the standard responsibilities of the 'critical' role even while fulfilling its function. And although the eclecticism of the program was what I most appreciated about the selection, I am certain that most of the films would have benefitted from a more informed context for their screening.

Although the issue of race is never alluded to in the transcribed interview, some non-white as well as a studied regional representation was evidenced in the program. But, although criteria for selection was for the most part unexplained, the program really was a smattering of the historic (**Hearts in Harmony**, **Jill Johnston: October 1975** and **Journal inachevé**) and the new (**Home to Buxton** the only film in the program made in 1987), the experimental (**The Wake**), straight narrative (**City Survival**), what I have come to think of as the 'art student angst' narrative (**The Heart is a Lonely Monitor** and **Two for Tea**), the animated (**The Birdfeeder**) documentaries (**Burning Bridges**, **Home to Buxton** and **C'est comme une peine d'amour**) and the women's community film (**The X Spot**).

While certainly not the 'hit' of the series, the highlight, for me, was also the 'oldest' film in the program, **Hearts in Harmony** (Judy Steed, 80 min., colour). Many films in one, **Harmony** utilizes various styles of experimental and documentary (in sequence and intercut) to present the rich, dynamic and

multifaceted self-image/world view of Judy Steed, in 1973. Beginning with the reprocessed driver training film and soap opera soundtrack, the film presents a series of simultaneously disjointed and interconnected sound and image combinations, ignoring boundaries of stylistic consistency or integrity in a manner that is by turns confusing, intriguing, frustrating and delightful. **Hearts in Harmony** includes a rambling personal travelogue; multiscreen images which shrink, grow and overlap; abstracted and processed images; home movies; bouncing, jerking, zooming and shaking camera movements; eccentrically framed interview footage; slow close-up scans of newspaper clippings; landscapes; advertisements; newscasts; projected slides of 'personal' or 'snapshot' variety (some 'readable', some obscure); a racist, sexist joke on a radio call-in show; an interview with Pierre Vallières; a slide lecture about James Bay; Dare strike demonstration footage and more...

The program description said, "The filmmaker records her transition from a romantic and poetic perspective to a politicized one." It is also a bundle of films in one, insistently reflecting a multifaceted personal history and expression. I say insistently, because of Steed's refusal to be contained by the miscellaneous film conventions which she adopts and drops moment by moment. I had a sense here of raw energy unleashed — simultaneously expressive, committed and personal — a film and a filmmaker saying whatever she wants, however she wants and not about to be told how to do it!

For me, Steed's film was the most sur-

prising and challenging piece of work in the program and was also an exciting discovery from our collective filmic past. If it was, admittedly for me, a bit of a trip down a personal, political and aesthetic memory lane, it also suffered most from the lack of contextualisation. Whether or not the admiration of the film is peculiar to those of us who were conscious adults during the early '70s may be a moot point.

Some other highlights of the program were also 'historical' films; it was good to have the opportunity to re-view some films from the past, including **Jill Johnston: October 1975**, the first film made by filmmaker, professor and programmer Kay Armatage, co-directed with Lydia Wazana. **Jill** is 'stream-of-consciousness' *cinéma vérité* and an important historic document in Canadian feminist film history. **Journal inachevé** (1982), an experimental and personal documentarised narrative made by Marilu Mallet in 1982; **The X Spot** (1983) by Margaret Moores and **City Survival** (1982) by Lulu Keating remain interesting, provocative and even delightful films.

The only new film in the program, **Home to Buxton**, was a straightforward and competent documentary, bringing

to light some of southern Ontario's Black history – both living and archival – centering around the Labour Day homecoming reunion of Blacks who have roots in the southern Ontario town of Buxton.

The relatively recent 'experimental' evocation entitled **The Wake** (1986, 14 min. colour), by Carolyn McLuskie held some beautiful images. The film, through its presentation of "landscape as solace, a comfort, a metaphor for one woman's struggle with grief,"<sup>2</sup> succeeded, for me, in evoking a consideration of film itself as metaphoric landscape for meditation, solace and comfort.

Suzanne Guy's **C'est comme une peine d'amour** (1985, 80 min.), by contrast, proved to be a very painful viewing experience. The subject matter, abortion, is grueling enough; but the entire first reel was out of sync – adding a level of discomfort which was certainly unintended by the filmmaker. The film pictured a large number of women and men recounting their feelings around the experience of abortion: why the decision was made, how they went about it, how it affected their relationship. The film also shows one woman undergoing an abortion in a clinic.

**Peine d'amour** is an important, if somewhat long, documentary that provides an important personal dimension to the understanding of abortion – which is necessarily politicized, given the current angry polarisations, demonstrations and lobbying, but nevertheless too dominantly perceived as a political issue and concept. **Peine d'amour** revives the personal and human dimensions and provides clear and painful documentation of the physical and psychic experience of the abortion procedure itself. Thus although the screening conditions were unfavourable, the out-of-sync first reel aggravating and the film's cinematography often too pretty and clichéd for my tastes or my sense of the subject – one interview looked like it was shot by David Hamilton – **Peine d'amour** is definitely an important document of a profound and disturbing aspect of women's experience.

Unfortunately, aside from these above mentioned points of interest, the program consisted of some nice, useful, but unremarkable films. It may be that the programmers did not have enough time to search out really interesting work from all areas of the country; but they did allow the opportunity, in a very com-

pact film program of only seven-and-a-half hours over three days, to view a remarkably eclectic sampling of the variety of film work available from Canadian women filmmakers. Even without admiring all of the films, I did admire the breadth, the historic range and even the slightly chaotic sense which the programmers appear to have been aiming for: "chaotic in a sense... extremely experiential and I think many of the films which we've chosen, like **The Wake** and **Prairie Motorcycle** function in this way" (Leslie Harbinson, transcribed conversation circulated to audience at film screenings).

My only true sense of lack was, as I have pointed out earlier, in relation to the programmers' wish to shy away from open and written responsibility for the program (through on-site introductions and written statements of intention). I would like to encourage them to take this on more directly in the future, and to point out that the transcribed interview may obscure more than it reveals of the 'curatorial process', by virtue of its focus on the personality and conversational quirks of the speakers. ●

<sup>1</sup> According to the conference program cover.

<sup>2</sup> Film program notes.

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