

Exhibition September 25, 2019 – July 27, 2020

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

Defiant Muses:

Delphine Seyrig and the Feminist Video Collectives in France in the 1970s and 1980s



Micha Dell-Prane. Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder holding a camera during a demonstration, 1976.
Courtesy Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir

The exhibition *Defiant Muses: Delphine Seyrig and the Feminist Video Collectives in France in the 1970s and 1980s* explores the intersection of cinema, video, and feminism in France through the legacy of Delphine Seyrig (1932–1990). Focusing on the emergence of video collectives in the 1970s, it proposes to reconsider the history of the feminist movement in France through various media practices while looking at a constellation of creative alliances that emerged in a time of political turmoil. Seyrig’s troubled positions in between aesthetics (cinema, video), politics, work (profession, industry), and the private sphere are marked by a continuum of subject positions that range from actress to activist to actor, thus reminding us of the ongoing significance of the 1970s feminist slogan, “the personal is political.”

The show opens with an introductory space focusing on the intersection between politics and acting, as Seyrig’s activism emanated from her reflection on the power structures in which she felt trapped as a woman *and* as an actress. Seyrig is best known for the roles she played in French auteur cinema, most notably in Alain Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), where she became the symbol of an idealized femininity. “Acting” was not merely a profession for Seyrig: from the early 1970s onward, she became an activist working collaboratively within the framework of the feminist movement. Throughout her career, Seyrig unpacked her own image as a diva and initiated a collective meditation on the film industry’s structural bias against women with her video *Sois belle et tais-toi!* (Be pretty and shut up, 1976). At the same time, working with women filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, and Ulrike Ottinger became a way to rethink her work in light of her growing feminist awareness.

Most important, new portable video technologies propelled Seyrig’s transformation into a militant filmmaker. Around 1975, together with the activist video maker Carole Roussopoulos and translator Ioana Wieder, Seyrig produced a series of videos under the collective name “Les Insoumuses” (Defiant Muses). The characteristic irreverence of the collective’s video productions show how media practices emanating from the experiences of the women’s liberation movement allowed for a rethinking of the image and the gaze in the context of a struggle for autonomy. With *SCUM Manifesto* (1976) and *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (Maso and Miso go boating, 1976), possibly the two most widely viewed videos of the 1970s French feminist movement, video became an emancipatory tool and an agent of political activism. In providing a sharp critique of state television via editing, inserts, and performance, they are exemplary of a media practice in which humor and social critique are brought together. While the feminist movement was gaining momentum, Les Insoumuses took to the street and documented an array of feminist demonstrations and struggles, primarily involving questions of women’s sexual autonomy, abortion and reproductive labor, sex work, and the emergence of the lesbian and gay liberation movement in France, as well as the situation of immigrant women workers. In addition, Les Insoumuses’ videos foregrounded the importance of taking care and of communicating between women, while producing counterinformation on subjects that were too controversial for public television, such as the 1975 sex worker’s strike in Lyon, which is the subject of Roussopoulos’s *Les prostituées de Lyon parlent* (The prostitutes of Lyon speak out, 1975).



Babette Mangolte. Film frame of *Calamity Jane and Delphine Seyrig: A Story*, 2019.
© 2019, Babette Mangolte

For Seyrig and Les Insoumuses, feminism was a transnational endeavor, and the videos produced in their circle draw a cartography of the struggles involving women in numerous areas of the world: against the Vietnam War; in support of political prisoners in Spain, Germany, the United States, and Brazil; the Palestinian cause; the Black Panther Party; and against the torture of political prisoners in Latin America. Seyrig’s first video, *Inês* (1974), calls for the liberation of Brazilian political opponent Inês Etienne Romeu by painfully reenacting the torture she endured during her incarceration. Several videos presented in the exhibition document struggles involving migrant populations in France, a commitment that would later be taken over by the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir. Furthermore, the video *La Conférence des femmes—Nairobi 85* (The Women’s Conference—Nairobi 85, 1985) by Françoise Dasques, an exceptional documentary depicting the proceedings of the 1985 NGO forum that was commissioned by the Centre, raises issues of transnational feminism and demands for intersectionality.

Following her role as Aloïse Corbaz in Liliane de Kermadec’s 1975 film *Aloïse*, in the 1980s Seyrig became interested in the relation between creativity and madness and the antipsychiatry movement, most notably through her encounter with the painter, author, and patient Mary Barnes. During the 1980s the significance of women’s genealogies and the constitution of a feminist archive became Les Insoumuses’ crucial concern. Seyrig’s uncompleted project on Calamity Jane’s alleged letters to her daughter provides insight into her views on the history of cinema and her interest in the relations between generations of women. Seyrig worked on the scenario throughout the 1980s and traveled to Montana with Babette Mangolte, whose recent film *Calamity Jane and Delphine Seyrig: A Story*, based on the footage she had shot on that occasion, is presented in the exhibition.

Throughout the exhibition Seyrig, her friend and fellow actress Jane Fonda, cinematographer Babette Mangolte, poet and painter Etel Adnan, writer and activist Kate Millett, filmmaker Liliane de Kermadec, and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, among others, appear as nodes knit into a wider, plural, transnational fabric.

In 1982, Seyrig, Roussopoulos, and Wieder founded the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris, an unprecedented audiovisual archive of the struggles of the time, which constitutes the core of the exhibition. The exhibition’s last room traces the history of the Centre, one of several women’s initiatives established and granted public funding in 1980s France. In asking Simone de Beauvoir to give her name to the Centre, Seyrig, Roussopoulos, and Wieder wanted to emphasize continuity among generations and the ongoing significance of previous generations’ struggles for the present. The political legacy of the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir can be seen throughout the exhibition, thus helping to capture Les Insoumuses’ essential contribution in constituting a visual archive of the feminist movements in and beyond France.