

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Program of Works by Women of Color Challenges the Status Quo

HELEN LEE

They called it vertical integration in Hollywood's heyday. This industrial designation for the unification of production, distribution, and exhibition under one roof—the collusion of the whole system—fostered a hermetic, enduring model for the creation and consumption of commercial media. Ironically, the fragmented and provisional development of independent and especially feminist film and video as an economically viable proposition seems to be striving for integration along the same lines, but with altogether different aims and effects.

Consider the Changing the Subject film and video series sponsored by Women Make Movies and held at Anthology Film Archives in New

(read initiated by white-run organizations as part of official "race relations" imperatives, i.e., continued financial subsidies) versus events from "the community" (and all its quaint, equally homogeneous formulations), it's important to examine other forces behind how such work by women of color is positioned and viewed.

One of the more ridiculous sentiments imbedded in the multiculturalism debate is the idea that ethnic, community-based production is incompatible with innovation or formal experimentation. Hence the polite "race relations" documentary on TV. True to the letter, much of what's allowed to be produced under state-sanctioned multiculturalism such as PBS's *The American Experience* conforms to convention. This becomes truly damaging for any claims that producers or, more pertinently, would-be producers of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds could have for future support. From the evidence at hand, feminist media producers—particularly women of color and lesbians—distributors, and exhibitors must make the first move toward garnering broad-based support for getting the work seen as well as made.

Both critically and for the actual audiences in question, the works exhibited in Changing the Subject—12 films and two videotapes in all—show major changes in the offing. The decision to mount the series at Anthology, long the bastion of high modernism, is a bold, decidedly political move for Women Make Movies (WMM)—and Anthology. A national, New York City-based feminist distribution organization founded in 1972 as a production collective, WMM regularly initiates such exhibition arrangements with museums, public libraries, and other institutions. And now, the spiritual home of Stan Brakhage lies open to, say, a critique of postcolonialism from an Aboriginal woman's perspective, presented in Tracey Moffet's *Nice Colored Girls* (1987), or an Indo-British poet's love letter to her lesbian mate, featured in Pratibha Parmar's *Flesh and Paper* (1990).

What's goin' on? Truth be told, media centers both marginal and mainstream need such work to balance the books—and to attract new audiences as well as respond to alerted regulars. Just in the past few months, Anthology has hosted a mini-fest of contemporary features from the Philippines and a week of video and film about the media-ization of the Amazon rain forests, among other events, suggesting that the venue's persis-

In the experimental video *Measures of Distance*, British producer Mona Hatoum layers correspondence with her Palestinian mother over her mother's image.

All photos courtesy Women Make Movies



York City last March. The sponsor, venue, locale, and series itself—all are significant. Its billing as "an international exhibition of work by Black, Asian and Latin Women from Australia, Canada, Britain and the United States" was a real mouthful, yes, but an eyeful too, and the task ambitious. In concrete terms, the event demonstrated how recent work by women of color can be instrumental in changing the aesthetic norms and social mandate of independent production as well as the usual distribution circuits and exhibition sites.

Any current account of feminist video and film production is woefully incomplete without considering the particularities of how that work is initially conceived, funded, and produced; how it is disseminated; where and how it shows; and who sees it. From the sketchy, problematic past of multicultural exhibition, here in the US and elsewhere, we all know that. But in addition questioning overtaxed terms such as "multiculturalism"

Changing the Subject showcased films and videos by women of color from around the world, including Pam Tom's *Two Lies*. In Tom's short narrative *Sala Iwamatsu* plays an adolescent trying to forge a sense of self while living with a mother who underwent plastic surgery to anglocize her eyelids and a younger sister obsessed with Indian pueblos.



tent reputation as a monolithic white male, avant-gardist institution may be due for a reappraisal. At the same time, the recent work by producers such as British-based Palestinian performance and video artist Mona Hatoum, Japanese-Canadian filmmaker Midi Onodera, and African-American writer and filmmaker Zeinabu Davis, shown in *Changing the Subject*, fit right into the avant-garde paradigm, and then some.

Call it a new aesthetics or whatever, but the stuff of *Changing the Subject* makes a strong argument for eradicating the age-old partitions of form and content or First World aesthetics versus Third World activism (as Coco Fusco aptly put it in her monograph *Young, British and Black*, which describes the related fruits and labors of Sankofa and the Black Audio Film Collective). One note of caution, however: The selections in *Changing the Subject* may share common themes and topics, such as anti-racism, cultural identity, sexuality, and revisionist histories, but the works exhibited are exceptional in their diversity and the multivalent expressions of a range of political and aesthetic positions.

Entitled by a phrase with psychoanalytic inflections as well as suggesting a purposeful call for a fresh agenda, *Changing the Subject's* four-night showcase (spanning two weekends, including International Women's Day) was generally well attended. With a single feature included in the lot—Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989)—the program became a deft exercise in mounting the short form for a theatrical audience, as is often the case with feminist work. (Another similar, continuing venture by WMM, which consists of pitching feature-length packages of shorts to media centers and other public outlets, has met with mixed success.) While a length of 30 minutes or less is de rigeur for the educational market, the movie screen demands the 90-minute feature, or so it seems. One might ask, does this reflect a structurally ingrained industrial need, an aesthetic bias, or just the remnants of bourgeois notions of auteurism and entertainment—the play, the novel, the feature film? Although some programmers say it isn't financially feasible to show a short film (never mind video)

before the main attraction, why not entire screenings devoted to shorts on a regular basis?

Like a short story, the video and film short is an art in itself. These works engender a different relationship between viewer and medium, if only because the work has to be that much more concise. Shorn of sub-plots but meticulous in period detail, a pioneering effort like Julie Dash's *Illusions* (1982) manages to layer an alternative rendering of the World War II era through the characterization of two different black women, with allusions to the woman's picture, war propaganda, melodrama, and the musical—in just over 30 minutes.

Oddly enough, the other three American filmmakers sharing the bill on the series roster with Dash—Davis, Pam Tom, and Hiroko Yamazaki, friends at UCLA who've worked on each other's films—reportedly hadn't seen the earlier film by Dash, who also attended UCLA's film school. Davis' intimate, Africanist meditation on menstruation, *Cycles* (1989), and Yamazaki's *Juxta* (1989), the story of two children of US servicemen (one black, one white) and their Japanese war-bride mothers, stretch the terms of the narrative form to different degrees. The stylistic exuberance of Davis' imagistic, impressionistic study follows traditions in experimentation, while the flashback structure of *Juxta* is clearly narrative in inspiration. But outside of their differing lineages, both works are hybrids, taking strength from documentary ideas, fictional plot devices, and a brave new style.

The voiceover, which has played an important function in feminist critiques of realism, assumes a somewhat different meaning for those from diasporic backgrounds. In addition to the economic and technical exigencies of having to shoot MOS or non-sync footage, such producers as Laleen Jayamanne (*A Song of Ceylon*) and Marilu Mallet (*Unfinished Diary*) use this device to foreground notions of voice, sexual identity, and cultural displacement. For instance, Mallet, a white Chilean living in Montreal, documents the filmmaking process as it affects her tumultuous marriage to National Film Board veteran Michael Rubbo—ironically, one of Canada's first proponents of the sterilized "race relations" documen-

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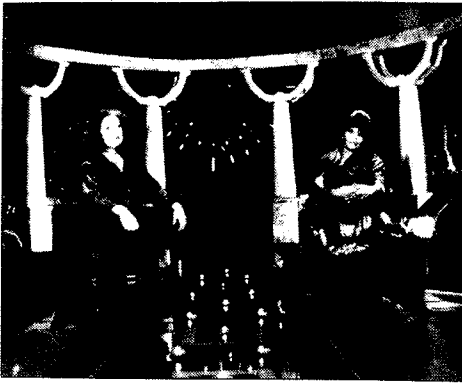
Indo-British writer/poet Sunita Namjoshi (right) recites a love letter to her lesbian mate in *Flesh and Paper*, by Pratibha Parmar.

tary. In *Unfinished Diary*, language—speech, really—is laden with significance: Mallet speaks to Rubbo in French, he responds in English; Spanish remains the absent core around which domestic and political tension is structured. Even more complex is Jayamanne's treatment of the female body as both subject (or agent) and object (text) of a Sri Lankan exorcism interpreted in the context of the filmmaker's adoptive country, Australia. Grappling with issues of translation, transvestism, and problems with the exotic and maternal domain of performance, the approach taken in *A Song of Ceylon*, like in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, is one of play and experimentation.

Back to the US scene, it is Pam Tom's *Two Lies* that really takes up where *Illusions* left off. Part calling card, part portrayal of adolescent angst, but mostly a vivid personal vision brought to screen, the film is a polished, iconoclastic treatment of Asian American femininity. Told from the perspective of a Chinese American teenage girl whose mother's eye operation and younger sister's passion for Indian pueblos calls up a flurry of interethnic, intergenerational humor and conflict, *Two Lies* makes an eloquent argument for engaging with narrative forms and overturning feminist suspicions of narrative in general—dating from 1970s British feminist film theory. The programmers of New Directors, New Films were canny enough to pick up the film for their festival the following month, and it received laudatory reviews in the mainstream press. Not surprisingly, Tom is now planning a feature, as are Dash, Onodera, and Moffet.

What is most interesting about the works shown at *Changing the Subject* is their versatility (one exception was the dearth of Latina work, certainly uncharacteristic of the WMM collection). Like the strongest independent media, much of this work is open to a variety of readings and can play to several audiences, and the inventive distributor or innovative programmer can exploit this unique feature of video and independent film. Crossing or "mixing" perceivably different constituencies, scheduling speakers or discussions around the screening, or boosting the "event" status of certain showings in other ways are all familiar tactics in opening access to alternative media. The challenge of a broadened notion of audience becomes that much easier when the work lends itself to the task.

The long road of experimenting with exhibition strategies is, of course, the more arduous path. Indicative of some of the difficulties entailed was the handful of Asian women who attended the screening of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* at Anthology. Still, *Changing the Subject* provided a



crucial context for considering Trinh's latest film alongside other productions by women of color who are dealing with confluences of race, sexuality, ethnicity, and gender in rigorous formal terms. As a group, these films and tapes may overlap, cohere, conflict, and diverge, but, all together, these works comprise a critical dialogue.

One of the goals of well-funded conferences such as last fall's Show the Right Thing and Vancouver's In Visible Colours, an international meeting in Vancouver of women of color, immigrant, Third World, and First Nations women and their work—like any conference—is to meet like-minded folk. But, as WMM's administrative director Debra Zimmerman points out, the need to sustain the momentum generated by these wonderful gatherings is extremely acute. After years of performing unrecognized labor, there's the temptation to adopt a celebratory mode, the danger of meetings melting into back-patting sessions instead of a chance to regroup for the impending changes for cultural workers in the nineties. Changing the Subject, however, is exactly the kind of program such conferences were meant to produce. The timing couldn't be better. Countering myths about ethnic/feminist media and offering an example of an astute, specific strategy designed to reach different constituencies, this program proposed ways with which alliances can be redrawn at the point where the eye meets the screen.

Coming out of art school, film school, critical studies, or other media training, the women whose work was included in Changing the Subject clearly challenge the limitations of the current ways in which we view their films and tapes, both critically and in public spaces, like art houses and institutions geared to a "general" audience—whatever that means these days. More important, since much of the work in the series is formative, including several first efforts, it is crucial to realize that the experimentation used in the films and tapes should be matched by extra initiatives and the joint efforts of distributors and exhibitors intent on building new audiences for new work. Changing the Subject went a step further, encouraging viewers to read the work as a dynamic *body* that speaks directly to questions of similarity and diversity.

Helen Lee is a graduate student in Cinema Studies at New York University.

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