

BY ARDELE LISTER

I lived in a place (Calgary, Canada) and in a family where art had no value. When in sixth grade I won a prize for my pastel paintings that had been exhibited in the equivalent of a county fair, Mrs. Leeds, a neighbor and a teacher, suggested I take art classes. I could barely believe my good fortune when a short time after I found myself on a bus to some unfamiliar neighborhood to learn art from a teacher recommended by Mrs. Leeds. That

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Rotation I: Persistence of Vision*

neighborhood might as well have been bohemian Paris for the excitement it engendered, this small reaching beyond the familiar/familial constraints. The arrangement, carefully worked out for safety concerns, was that the art teacher's teenage son would meet me at the bus and walk me to the class, and afterwards, walk me back to the bus stop and wait with me until the bus came. I can't remember when it first started to happen that he sexually accosted me on these walks but I remember the terrible feeling that if I told my parents, it would surely be the end of these lessons. Conflicted and isolated, I had to handle this situation on my own in order to continue art classes. Eventually I stopped going and stopped making art.

Years later, in the university, having declared myself an anthropology major, I was drawn to the art department, and began taking studio and art history classes. I changed my major and spent years devoted to the study of art, in particular early Northern Renaissance art, Neoplatonism, and film. Nothing in between. In my studio class I was adventurous, questioning and unconventional but not in ways that the professor rewarded. I took it personally and there was no one to defend any of my choices. Young men I worked with, themselves bold and unconventional, never took it personally. They persisted as artists. I wanted to retreat.

* Persistence of vision — Perceptual phenomenon that creates the illusion of motion in a movie.

In 1973 I was asked to write about the International Festival of Women's Films for a big art magazine. To make a long story short, in three days I saw 150 films made by women. I'd been studying film for over four years and had seen two films made by women. To coin an old term, my mind was blown. All those years at school and I never knew about women making films because they were not in the canon. (This coincided with the beginnings, for me, of feminist deconstruction in reading John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, as I was supposed to be writing a thesis on film aesthetics.)

Shortly thereafter I became, along with some of the festival organizers, a cofounder of REELFEELINGS, a feminist film

and video collective dedicated to training ourselves in making our own moving pictures with as many dimensions, roles and personalities as we saw fit. By 1976 our first big film, a 16 mm, 20-minute color film called *So Where's My Prince Already?*, had been selected for the Second International Festival of Women's Films, in New York.

Still there wasn't much support for our film, it being a pretty caustic and hilarious tragi-comedy about marriage, featuring a husband for whom almost anything was "such a hassle" and a wife who kept shifting her dream so as not to have to reexamine their union or her place in it. Men didn't like it, neither did most women, or so it seemed. Bolstering oneself after that was difficult, given the years that went into making it, and the belief, not to mention the raucous laughter, that we who made it shared.

So what is it that persists, when even after making *Sugar Daddy* (1980), and no curators wanted to show it, and an audience at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design booed me and expressed their disgust at what was judged to be my revelling in the revelation by creating work about real life pain (god forbid), that pushed me to do more work in an atmosphere of so little support? Or had this always been the way, *upstream* without a paddle?

Looking back I now know that a work has a life of

its own, that tapes booed in 1980 get celebrated in 1990, that people who hated something in '85 commend me for it in '93 and most of all, what really counts is how I feel about a work. If I like works that move and carry meaning on many different levels, does this work do that? Is it good enough for me?

When I first began to immerse myself in *Dante's Inferno*, which later became a tape called *Hell* (completed in 1985), I was so struck by the inclusion of Art in the canto on violence. Violence against God, Nature and Art is what constituted the sin of violence. The belief that Art could be equivalently spoken of with God and Nature was so striking I deliberated on it for years. And no doubt the search for faith that Dante delineates in his trilogy was a search I committed to without at first knowing why, but being drawn to the imagery of his poetry and his imagination of unknowable worlds. And then, I must admit, there was a fascination with the chutzpah of his placing himself in the heart of those worlds.

Canto XI trans. by Mark Musa

From Art and Nature man was meant to take his daily bread to live — if you recall the book of Genesis near the beginning;

but the usurer, adopting other means, scorns Nature in herself and in her pupil, Art — he invests his hope in something else.

Being an artist requires faith over time. The world we live in is far from valuing art as an activity of importance not only for those who practice it but for the society as a whole. Being a video artist in an art world that doesn't even support video (subject of future writing) is the ultimate test of one's faith, flying as it does in the face of convention, outside even what for other mediums would be inside the art world's awareness. My friend Ron Wolin, a cartoonist and activist, said to me from his bed as he battled lymphoma, "Ardele, it's not winning the war that's important, it's living long enough to pass the torch..." It's an important task, and one that requires the acknowledgment of its fragility. ■