



Faye Gleisser

## *Kate Horsfield: The Early Years of the Video Data Bank and On Art and Artists*

Faye Gleisser: Can you recall your first exposure to video as a medium?

Kate Horsfield: My first exposure was in graduate school in 1974. The School of the Art Institute (SAIC) had one of the first video departments, and I was a graduate in the department from 1974 through 1976. The first Portapak was released by the Sony Corporation in 1965 and was a really big deal. It was industrial—not for artists—but it was the first time individuals had access to the technology and equipment that would allow them to make their own recordings. Nam June Paik made his first video piece in 1965, and artists became aware of the art potential of the medium immediately.

FG: How did you and Lyn meet?

KH: I lived in Chicago, and a few doors down from Lyn for a few years before we became friends. We met in Colorado in 1973, and got interested in getting to know one another better upon returning to Chicago. At the time, Lyn was driving a taxi to make money, and I was illustrating children's books. I would be drawing and Lyn would stop by and chat.

FG: How did the Video Data Bank begin?

KH: Phil Morton, the first chair of the video department at SAIC, created the Video Data Bank in about 1973. The purpose was to collect video for educational use in the new department to help train students studying

video art. The collection was mostly student works mixed with a few visiting artist and scholars' lectures, recorded by students, and art works given by artists. This collection of videotapes was named, by Morton, the "video data bank," a name taken from a column in Radical Software which referred to collecting video that reflected the interests of the counterculture.

After graduate school, Lyn and I spent the summer of 1976 in Los Angeles. We set up the video program for the Women's Building, a radical feminist school established in 1973. When we returned to Chicago, the Dean of the SAIC wanted to hire someone to catalog the approximately 110 video tapes in the Video Data Bank and move the collection to the school library. They hired us.

The first year we evaluated the collection, then separated one of a kind master tapes from screening copies, therefore making two collections. We made a catalog and set up conditions for use of the tapes throughout the school and in a screening room in the library. Simultaneously we were working on our own video interviews with artists.

FG: How did you and Lyn start making video interviews?

KH: Lyn had saved up money to buy a Portapak. We weren't sure what we wanted to do with it, but we knew we wanted to work together. Artemisia Gallery invited

Marcia Tucker, who at the time was a curator at the Whitney Museum, to Chicago to make a slide presentation of emerging women's work. We taped [a small interview with Tucker](#) after her presentation in 1974. A few months later, and after seeing the interview, Tucker recommended we tape [Joan Mitchell](#) and [Ree Morton](#) who were both showing at the Whitney Museum. This was the beginning of our project. This series of interviews was initially called the "Horsfield/Blumenthal Interviews" [which would become one of the major parts of the collection known more generally as [On Art and Artists](#) (OAA)]. This project began with a feminist agenda. We interviewed women artists, and eventually when the tapes began to be screened in other schools we began to interview men as well.

FG: Did you consider the artist interview tapes as part of your artistic practice during graduate school? After?

KH: No. These tapes were not our art, but we were making them all through graduate school. I was painting and Lyn was making site-specific installations and drawings. The video department hated the interview tapes. They weren't experimental; they were too conservative, too much like documentary work. The video department was interested in the work of video artists like Bill Viola and Paik. Because the video department wasn't impressed, our audience was the painting department. We did screenings of

the interviews, accompanied by slides of the artists' work, for painting students.

FG: To the video department you weren't experimental enough; however, what you and Lyn were doing was quite radical because you were disrupting and challenging the one-sidedness of television. Was that your opinion of the enterprise?

KH: Our work was considered conservative, but in comparison to the hegemonic influence of television—controlled by corporations or the government—any video—either experimental or documentary—made outside that framework was radical. It was an alternative voice and a challenge to the mainstream.

FG: Were you at all interested in the kinds of interviews happening on talk shows on television like the *Phil Donahue Show*? Did you see the tapes you were producing in relation to that format? Opposed to it?

KH: No, we didn't think of what we were doing in terms of talk shows at all. Our practice was oppositional to television. We positioned ourselves with the counterculture. We were aligned with people documenting demonstrations and Woodstock, and a project like Andy Mann's *One-Eyed Bum* (1974), a subject talking about their life in real time.

FG: What did the concept of the "data bank" mean to you during the '70s?

KH: The concept of the data bank, coined by *Radical Software*, came from the counterculture's need to keep a record of its activities and values; to provide a library and an alternative history of the counterculture (i.e. experimental video art, civil rights, demonstrations, feminism, and later AIDS activism).

FG: Can you say more about your experience of interviewing Joan Mitchell?

KH: Mitchell was part of a generation of artists who rarely, if ever, spoke in public or gave artist talks in college art departments.



Marcia Tucker 1974: *An Interview*, 1974

The plan had been that Lyn would interview her and I would videotape it, but right before we began Lyn pulled me aside and said she couldn't do it. "Joan doesn't like me!" She was afraid. Intimidated. I was less intimidated by her, but wasn't happy that I had to give the interview without preparing! It's very hard for me to watch. At that point we had no idea what we were doing.

FG: From watching that interview, you can really sense Mitchell's distrust for the interview format. There are moments when you see her censor lift, and others when it comes crashing down.

KH: Oh yes, it was a very unusual interview situation. She didn't like it at all.

FG: Were you inspired by, or aware of, others making video tapes of artist interview when you began the OAA series?

KH: The Archives of American Art had been making audio records of artists since the 1950s, but no, we didn't know of anyone doing artist interviews on videotape at that time. I'm sure they were out there doing it, but I don't know who they were.

FG: Who is the target viewer of the interviews?

KH: The ideal viewer is the art student. We wanted them to "get" the complexity and dedication of being an artist. After interviewing Mitchell and Morton in New York and [Agnes Martin](#) in New Mexico in 1974, we understood how to frame the interviews—as profiles of the different methods and intentions of each individual artist. We wanted artists to speak from the heart while talking about the development of their work.

FG: What was the major challenge of producing of the OAA series?

KH: We had an ongoing VDB program of taping almost all the Visiting Artists who were invited to the school to lecture. We were totally dependent on graduate students to tape the interviews and the VDB had a very small budget for equipment. The early interviews had many technical flaws. We began in the 1970's working on the 1/2-inch tape format, which was impossible to edit. The equipment produced black and white footage, and then early color cameras had very bad color. There were sound problems. Most of all the VDB never had the staff or equipment to edit tapes. And by the time Final Cut Pro was released around 2000 we had already made close to 400 interviews! Many interviews remain unedited.



Joan Mitchell 1974: *An Interview*, 1974

Lyn and I made interviews out in the field as a continuation of our original project. By the mid-80s we had produced 75 interviews, and supervised the making of all the VDB interviews. Lyn died in 1988 and many years later the Lyn Blumenthal Memorial Fund for Independent Video paid to have the 75 interviews Lyn and I originally made edited. Blithe Riley edited many of the interviews.

FG: What was it like to view the interview tapes and edit them, two decades after they were produced?

KH: I edited several of the interviews myself. Going through the footage after so many years I was amazed. I was really impressed with several of them, particularly the interview with art critic [Craig Owens](#). I mean, the image was poor, but the information and the context was very, very interesting as a record of art criticism of the '80s. It was shot in 1984. And the interview had to be stripped of color like several others because the quality of the color was so poor because we could only afford a cheap camera.

FG: Can you say more about the experience of producing the interviews and maintaining the OAA series?

KH: We started the interviews before graduate school and really we were just kids talking to very well-known artists from older generations. But people were kind to us for the most part. We only got three rejections, out of all the artists we approached.

We personally interviewed artists in New York, Chicago, and California, and we went to New Mexico to interview Agnes Martin. We never had any money, so that limited where we could go and how many interviews we could do. The SAIC paid our salaries to maintain the VDB, and the internal interview project, but that was it.

After about two years we created a pilot project in which interview tapes were sent to other teaching institutions around the country for evaluation. We chose 12 schools and sent the same 12 interview tapes to each, and asked teachers to screen the interviews and evaluate their students' responses. There was a lot of positive feedback. We used the evaluations to apply for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1978. We were very successful at getting grants for the interviews, and we reapplied annually for NEA grants to support both the making of tapes and the educational distribution

network system. Later we received many other grants including ongoing support from the Illinois Arts Council. This funding became the foundation from which we built all other VDB programs and services.

FG: Are there specific interviews that stand out to you now?

KH: It was exciting to interview up-and-coming artists, like [Louise Fishman](#) and [Pat Steir](#), artists who were close to us in age. It was a very big deal to speak with important artists of the earlier generation, like Louise Nevelson, [Lee Krasner](#) and [Buckminster Fuller](#). Robert Storr, a fellow graduate student, was the interviewer on Buckminster Fuller and several other interviews. He is now Dean of the Yale University School of Art.

FG: What inspired the initiation of *Profile*<sup>1</sup> in 1981?

KH: We saw the publication of *Profile* as a written teaching tool. The publication was surprisingly popular! We had 700 subscribers. I can't remember how many volumes we made. What killed *Profile* was the Video Drive-In, an outdoor screening of experimental video art in Chicago's Grant Park in 1984. By then the VDB was getting much bigger; we had many more tapes; we had started distributing video art in 1983 and we were busy. We only had four staff members and two were part-time so it quickly became too much work. We were interviewing artists, running a distribution program, and producing *Profile*, and when the Illinois Arts Council gave us a grant to put on the Video Drive-In in Grant Park, it took up huge amounts of time and energy. We were responsible for everything—curating the video programs, researching and renting projection equipment that would project on a large scale; designing and building the scaffolding, etc. It was all crazy. 8,000 people attended the two nights of the Video Drive-In. [The program travelled in subsequent years to the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, Portugal, to the

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1 A printed magazine that reproduced and circulated the transcripts of select OAA interviews with accompanying images.



Agnes Martin 1976: *An Interview*, 1976

Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno Centre Julio Gonzalez in Valencia, Spain, and to the Center for North American Studies in Barcelona, Spain in 1989, before appearing in Central Park's *Summerstage Program* in New York City in 1990. A final iteration of the Video Drive-In was staged in Grant Park in 1992.]

FG: Michael Shamburg published the *Guerrilla Television* manual in 1971. What did you think about the term 'guerrilla' being applied to artistic practice and video subculture? And the change within the term 'guerilla' that occurred when 'guerrilla marketing' was popularized in the '80s?

KH: Guerilla meant a small band of fighters fighting against a much larger network of forces. You could say that the early video art pioneers were 'guerilla fighters' working against mainstream television and its restrictions, lack of creativity and omissions of non-mainstream groups and individual voices.

FG: As technology has advanced, allowing for a wider viewership at greater speeds, concerns about security and privacy have accrued greater fervor. How has the idea of owning ones own image shifted?

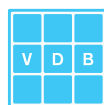
KH: Owning your own image in the '70s was just unheard of. Security surrounding images and their circulation was much more lax. We didn't have an awareness then of how the media could ruin your life.

Before the '70s, artists didn't speak publicly about their work. In the '70s, the NEA began supporting visiting artist programs. Mitchell and Agnes Martin were of an earlier generation, so it was important to record them, since their voices hadn't been heard otherwise (and wouldn't be heard otherwise).

I'm sure artists and students are finding ways to make themselves heard today, probably on the Internet, I'm just not aware of it.

FG: You've stated elsewhere that the interviews you did with Agnes Martin were the most influential for you personally. Can you say more about that?

KH: Agnes Martin was *heroic* to me. In the '70s we still clung to an idealistic notion of what it meant to be an artist and Martin embodied the values of dedication, perseverance and sacrifice. She made no compromises; had extreme purity of vision and lived it through her art. She left New York behind when she was getting famous, and gave up the New York art world and all its temptations to move to the desert. I wasn't aware of how important her interview would be to me at the time; that is a thing I've realized in retrospect.



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