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## *Make Believe, It's Just Like the Truth Clings to It: In Conversation with the Work of Cecilia Dougherty*



*Gone*, Cecilia Dougherty, 2001

Cecilia Dougherty got her start as a video artist in an unconventional way, fitting for her experimental body of work. As an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles, Dougherty was a painter. However, in her last semester of college, she took a video production class, changing the course of her education and career permanently. Dougherty fell in love with video art, and was inspired to singularly pursue the medium. Using the one video she made for that class, Dougherty applied to the Performance and Video MFA program at the San Francisco Institute of Art in the late '80s, and the rest was history. Prior to this, she had very little knowledge about the history of video art, let alone the process of making it. Additionally, during this time period Dougherty was grappling with her identity as a lesbian in a heteronormative society, working to "find an adequate expression of it as a place to exist inside the social realm sexually, politically, and personally." She was simultaneously breaking ground in new territory as an artist, and that territory for lesbian expression was

in no way near established for video art. Combining this aspect of her life with her practice, Dougherty created the following works included in this program: *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (1992), *My Failure to Assimilate* (1995), *The dream and the waking* (1997), and *Gone* (2001).

Focusing on this early era of her practice, I specifically chose these works to reflect Dougherty's catalog as a whole, as well as a mediation on my own relationship with her work. When I started my graduate studies in Modern and Contemporary Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I embarked on a similar path to Dougherty's. I had not taken a single course on the history of video art in my undergraduate career, and had yet to take a class covering the topic as I began my Master's degree either. However, getting a position as the Graduate Distribution Assistant here at the Video Data Bank, home to Dougherty's work, changed the trajectory of my study in the same way that Dougherty's class did for her. I too fell in love with video art and experimental film, and have

since written numerous papers on the subject. As I continue my academic journey engaging with the history of video, Dougherty's work never ceases to stand out in my research. Furthermore, as with Dougherty, I was well into my own struggle with my identity as a lesbian, but unlike her, I do not have an artistic practice to channel my thoughts and feelings into. Immediately upon viewing her work, however, I found solace amidst the never-ending confusion of queerness. Spurred by this passion, I aim to share this VDB TV program to both reflect on my personal relationship with her work, and to open up the world of Cecilia Dougherty to an ever-growing audience.

Dougherty's work reckons with her life and identity as a lesbian, and I immediately found myself both at home and represented by her pieces. The home I found though, was fraught, full of confusion, simultaneously merciful and cruel. However, this is not a bad thing, but simply akin to lived reality. Nothing is so straightforward in

understanding Dougherty's work, nor is it in understanding queerness. In her own words, Cecilia Dougherty "lives in a world of confusion," and her work invites you in to join—but only if you are already in the know. When talking to Dougherty, I questioned if there was an intended audience for her work, and whether or not she thought that outsiders (i.e., non-queer non-women) could fully understand her art. Without hesitation, Dougherty said "I'd say no, but I might be wrong," in regards to both parts of the question that I posed. Rather than create work *for* a perspective, Dougherty makes work *from* a perspective (that perspective being her own), and she finds that this is where the experimental aspect comes into play. Harnessing experimentation, Dougherty takes the subjectivity of her own life and realities that she is interested in and creates such works like the videos included in this program.

From there, her process and resulting videos could be described as unconventional, even for experimental film. Connecting back to her unconventional start, Dougherty learned to make video art on the fly; the process largely influenced her, and not the other way around. The more she filmed, the more intentional she became with the camera, as she learned from it and grew from it. This is apparent when watching her catalog in chronological order. With her earliest pieces, such as *Gay Tape: Butch and Femme* and *Grapefruit*, the actors are filmed straight on, as if they are standing on a stage presenting the piece. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, and the formal techniques do contribute to the overall understanding of the videos, Dougherty went on to expand her repertoire far beyond that. As she became more at home behind the camera, her technique and stylistic choices became increasingly diverse and experimental.

For example, her 2001 video *Gone* is presented as a split screen two channel installation, and within each screen the camera work is wildly varied, including shots from many perspectives, different editing techniques, and the usage of both black and white and color. Exploring Dougherty's long-time interest in both queerness and pop culture, and specifically where lesbianism fits into pop culture (which, according to her, it doesn't), *Gone* reimagines the second episode of *An American Family* — the landmark PBS verité documentary about the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California. In this episode, closeted son Lance is visited by his mother in his new home of New York City. Dougherty reimagines Lance's life in New York and what his mother's visit was like, but she replaces the cast with essentially all women, adding (at least) a second layer of queerness to the drama. As in all of her work, the piece is unscripted and includes her friends and collaborators as the actors. Dougherty grants a breadth of creative freedom to the cast, trusting that their performances will take the video where it needs to go. This experimental process thus allows the story to form itself, with Dougherty overseeing and shaping the process, camera in hand.

When watching this piece, I was on edge and filled with anxiety, especially while observing the interactions between Lance and his mother. My reaction partially had to do with the storyline itself, as Lance and his mother's exchanges are often full of dread and secrets, but was also a result of Dougherty's technical and stylistic choices. When talking to Dougherty, she said that she originally had the idea to start each screen at a different moment, so that the videos did not exactly line up with each other, creating an even stronger sense of dissonance between the two (which is already there, and is there intentionally). Watching this work gets exhausting at times, but so does living as a queer person in a heteronormative society. This complex interplay is what is so intriguing about Dougherty's investigation into queerness. Even when the work is based on a specific moment in pop culture, there are deeper levels to excavate with every watch, hidden amidst the layers of experimentation.

As I continued to explore my kindred feelings for Dougherty, I realized that I had experienced a similar journey to her artistic one regarding my foray into video art whilst watching



*Gone*, Cecilia Dougherty, 2001



*The dream and the waking*, Cecilia Dougherty, 1997

her videos. When I first started learning about and working with video art, I felt like an outsider looking in on a long tradition that I had been largely unaware of. However, even in the early days of my studies, watching Dougherty's videos was an immediate breath of fresh air. In the midst of my struggles both academically and with my queer identity, her work made perfect sense to me—but not in a way that aligned with the traditional art historical methodology that I was familiar with. Like queerness, my understanding of her work was more implicit than explicit, and often the more I watched the more questions I had. This is, however, a perfect reflection of her work. It is not about unambiguously understanding what is happening in the videos, and one cannot deduce their true "meaning." In fact, they do not have one. Again, much like queerness, the videos exist as a journey. According to Dougherty herself, "the only thing that matters is that you keep on allowing thoughts and experiences; to interact with what's already there," which I gladly did with a new found sense of understanding and comfort. Even when she confronted me with profoundly uncomfortable subjects that I had previously resisted unpacking, I found myself

yearning to dive deeper. A testament to her work, I finally felt like I was starting to belong and find my place. Dougherty made me feel understood amidst the inability to fully understand, both in relation to the meaning of the pieces and to the meaning of identifying as a lesbian in a heteronormative, patriarchal world.

This sense of exploration and interaction with the now, especially when it is disquieting, is what Dougherty's 1997 piece *The dream and the waking* investigates. It is a documentation of her commute from her home in New York to her job in Boston by train, which she did every week for almost a year. She wanted to portray not only the physical hardships of the commute, but the mental ones as well. Consisting of video footage of city and land passing by overlain with the text of Dougherty's internal monologue, it reads like a stream of consciousness journal entry into the inner life of Dougherty during this intense time. Not only was this period of Dougherty's life one of the most difficult, it is also one of the most difficult pieces to watch. The text scrolls across the screen at an alarming rate, requiring the viewer's undivided attention, while simultaneously trying to watch

the scenery quickly passing by as Dougherty is riding the train. This combination of reading, watching, and listening produces a cacophony of senses inside the viewer's head, supplanting them into that of Dougherty, as she continues to use her formal and experimental choices as mirrors for the content in her videos vis-a-vis the content of her life and experiences. Much of this work is ephemeral, dream-like, and the mood changes rapidly, though at the same time it retains a sense of melancholy and isolation throughout. Deeply personal in content, but also universal in feeling, Dougherty connects her commute to a broader state of being.

Often, concepts in her work feel just out of reach, as does figuring out their meanings, and thus determining how they relate to one's own experience does as well. This is the case in the aforementioned *The dream and the waking*, as well as in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. In this piece, Dougherty quickly cuts back and forth between short clips, alternating between someone directly addressing the camera, women being sexually intimate, and grainy abstractions that may be people or may not be. The images have an edited overlay adding static and discoloration to the screen, further producing a sense of confusion. At times, it is hard to understand what Dougherty is exactly filming, but through the experimental nature of the work the general feeling and thought behind the piece is successfully conveyed. And that thought, that confusion, is vital to the work. Nothing is concrete here, neither identity nor intimacy, sexuality nor self. However, even when I cannot explain or articulate my thoughts about the piece precisely, I still feel an overall sense of understanding. I still know what I am watching and relating to, even if someone else would not. Like the women portrayed in the video, I am





*The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Cecilia Dougherty, 1992

searching for my own sense of self amidst queerness and relationships and intimacy and art. I grasp her work in my body, through the bodies portrayed on the screen. And that is the mood and goal of Dougherty's work—though goal is the wrong word, because she does not have an explicit goal in the traditional sense for her art. She told me that when watching her videos, "you do not have to come to the definition. There is no goal in this. That the search is actually it, if you're doing that, you're there." And that resonated with me deeply. In watching her work and trying to understand the concept of queer identity that she unearths (and as it related to my own personal struggle with both video art and lesbian identity), I realized that I had inadvertently found a home within the search. The unknown and the questions are the point. The not knowing is the knowing.

To "understand" Dougherty's work, and to understand queerness, the trappings of both traditional art historical study and traditional societal norms must be done away with. Dougherty explained to me that her work is not grounded in or influenced by queer theory, in part

because she came of age before the discipline was established. However, once it was fully underway, she remained unconvinced of its merits, as she believes that artists and writers have already explored what queer theory academicizes in the creation of their art. The Artist, herself included, works through and with queerness tangibly, molding it into (in this case) an experimental video about personal experience. In her own words, Dougherty makes work about her own queer experience because above all things, she is an expert on herself. Thus, finding one true meaning does not matter—as if the work could even have one true meaning in the first place. It is the search for the meaning, and the search to understand the work that is most fruitful. The search itself, the experimentation itself, is the point. And, as Dougherty said to me, that may make her work inaccessible to certain people. However, I posit that this is not a bad thing. Different people will understand her work to different extents, but there are those people, myself included, that do possess the greatest ability of comprehension. This division is important, though on the surface

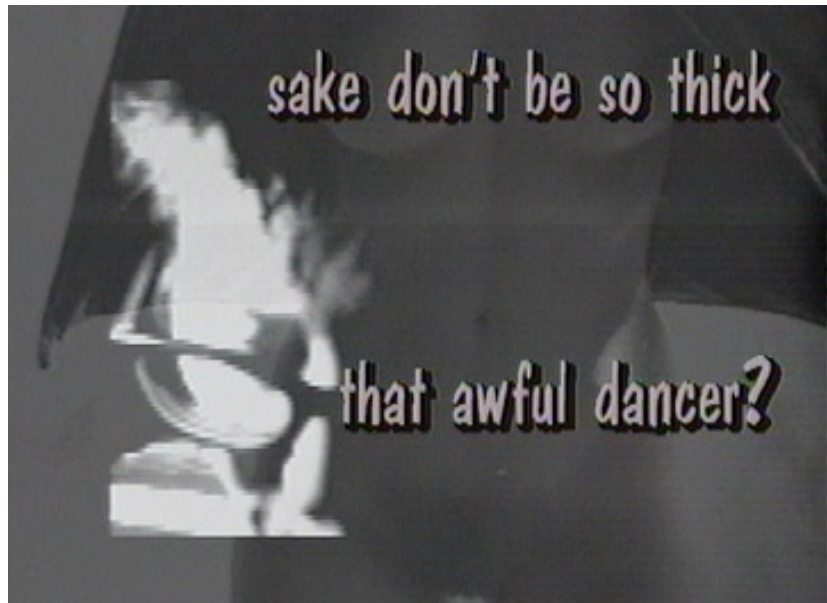
level it may seem exclusionary. Yet it is exclusionary to the people that society has not already excluded, and inclusive to those that have been excluded and cast aside by the mainstream.

This sentiment is apparent in her work *My Failure to Assimilate*. In this video from 1995, Dougherty builds a home, albeit one full of strife and struggle, for those that may feel as if they have been lacking one this entire time, even if they had yet to realize it until watching her work, as I did. Full of her friends in the queer and artistic community, the piece is an amalgamation of both different ideas Dougherty is thinking through as well as different styles and formal techniques as she continues to build upon her practice. Divided into three parts, *Schizophrenia*, *Alienation*, and *True Self*, she attempts to parse through the melancholy that sets in at the end of a relationship through the usage of collage, poetry, music, interviews, and storytelling. However, beyond exploring relationships and the aftermath of their downfall, the video also deals with the broader question of identity and how one comes to see themselves in relation to others, the world, and one's own corporeal form. Sifting through topics such as mental health, lesbianism and internalized homophobia, addiction, and loneliness, Dougherty is able to open up about her own struggles to those going through similar ones. Akin to her other videos, no clear definitions or resolutions are reached, and an open-ended search is what dominates the piece once again.

This struggle is compounded by the visual and stylistic elements of the work. Dougherty uses a variety of techniques, including the usage of both black and white and color, static overlay, images layered on top of images, quick cuts, and abrupt zoom-ins, amongst others. These

These elements create a disorienting effect throughout the video, mirroring the disorienting thoughts that go through one's mind when grappling with the presented themes. Dougherty uses both her own expertise on herself alongside the experiences of her collaborators to construct a video that the knowing can live inside of (myself included). Watching this work both comforted me and disturbed me. Remembering that others feel the same as I often do regarding queerness, alienation, and isolation was encouraging, but combined with the experimental style and the difficulty of ideas lacking a resolution, I was also left feeling disillusioned without consolation. However, this is neither a good nor a bad thing—rather, it is a mediation on identity and the never-ending struggle people go through to find their place in the world. And, as Dougherty graciously told me, this is what art and real life are all about.

Though these works were made during a specific time period of Dougherty's life while she was living through specific experiences, the videos still resonate today, 30 years later. This endurance was what struck me most when reflecting on her body of work as a whole. From the very first time I watched one of her videos (which is also the first one that she made), to interviewing her, rewatching, and analyzing the entirety of her work, I felt a profound sense of the present in these pieces, though they date back to the 1990s and early 2000s. I immediately saw myself in them, and saw their relevancy to the broader issues of today. When asking Dougherty about this lasting resonance, she agreed on multiple levels. While the works are deeply personal, they also grapple with political and social issues such as homophobia, sexism, bodily autonomy, mental health crises, and disillusionment with society. Unfortunately, as Dougherty



*My Failure to Assimilate*, Cecilia Dougherty, 1995

and I discussed in our conversation, not much progress has been made in these arenas as of late, and if anything, the country has been taking maddening steps backwards.

(All quotes attributed to Cecilia Dougherty from the author's interview with Dougherty on July 15th, 2022)

These issues do not have easy solutions, and Dougherty ruminated on how progress can take generations to emerge. She expressed to me that this is just the nature of things, and therefore she hopes that her work can "help people figure out their own costumes, and put their own stories into words," as she does for herself in her art. Just as everything is constantly moving and shifting in the world, it is in her work as well, due in part to the experimental nature of her practice. This open-endedness, this room for growth and change even within a fixed entity such as a piece of video art from 1995, is what makes the work of Cecilia Dougherty so everlasting. While both I and the world may never come into a solidified state of being, I do know that both I and the world can always turn to Dougherty's work to find representation, a body, and a voice.