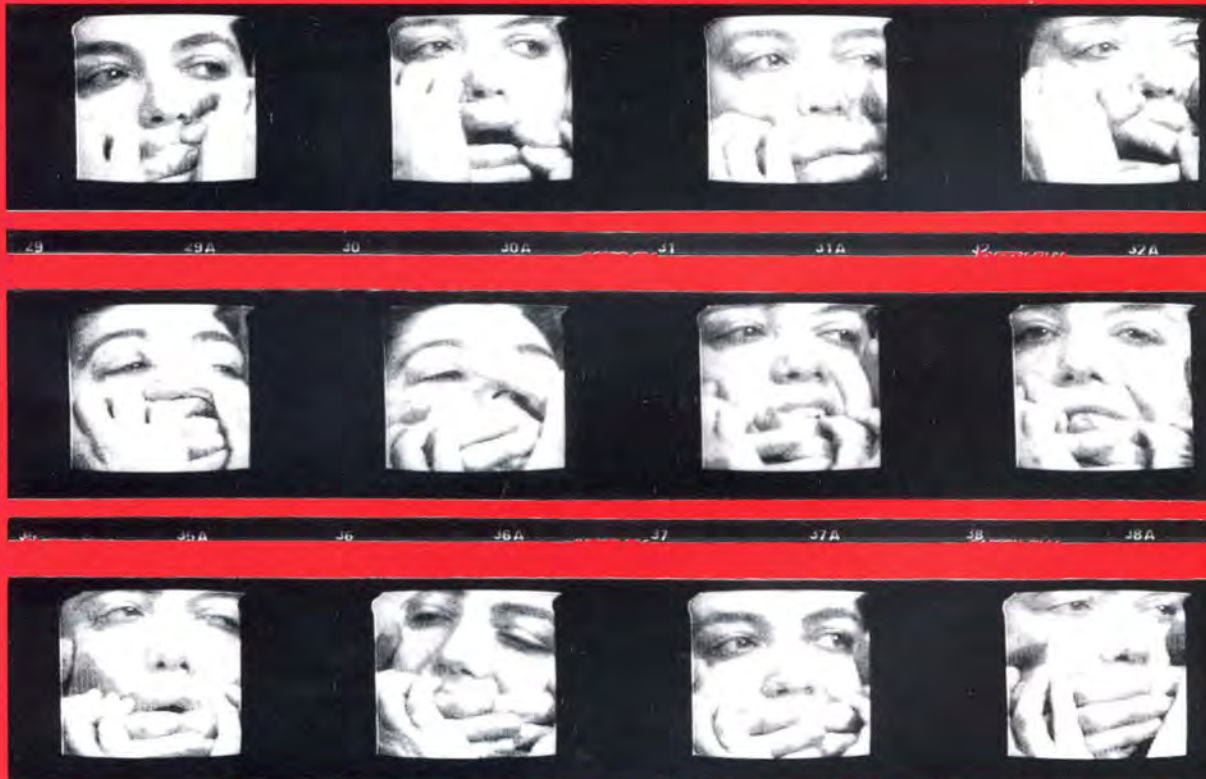


Female Identity and Power

The recent history of independent film and video testifies to the significant contributions of women in the field and highlights their role in defining an identity for film and video outside the dominant industry, predominantly a male territory. Far from associating production qualities with the different genders, which may lead to superficial - often misleading - conclusions such as describing women's work as sensitive, political, feminine, the question is better posed when it designates the artist's relation to power.

Not long ago, Lebanese filmmaker Danielle Arbid¹ started working on a video documentary project on Lebanese fighters during the war. Her research and idea were guided by the powerful image of her cousin who joined a Christian militia active in the late seventies, and who later died in a military incident when Arbid was seven years old. She remembers when he used to take her on his motorbike to buy hamburger. She recalls him as a rebellious man with long hair wearing a medal around his neck. At the same time she remembers this very peculiar image of him sitting on his bed, half-naked on a hot summer afternoon, with two girls sitting around him. With very precise descrip-

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Mona Hatoum
So Much I Want to Say, 1988
Video work, 5 min,
black and white.
A Western Front Video
Production, Vancouver.



Relations

tion, she recalls that no one noticed her presence as she squeezed herself in between the door and the wooden closet. She cannot remember what happened afterwards, nor can she tell how she made it into his room. This image marked her memory, though she can no longer determine if it really happened, or whether it was a mere creation of her mind. Nevertheless, it was an image that probed a series of interviews Arbid conducted with former militiamen on their war experience, despite the fact that the imaginary dominates her representation of war. Heroism and survival through the most violent atrocities become almost imaginary and mythical.

The representation of war in Lebanon was for some time the sole preoccupation of documentary films produced in the seventies. Since Nabih Loutfi's coverage of the siege of *Tal el Za'ar*, women filmmakers have been active producing militant works such as the early films of Randa Chahal, Heiny Srour, Jocelyne Saab, and later Mai Masri. In the late eighties, Palestinian/Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum² produced a remarkable video piece based on letters she had received from her mother in Beirut. Hatoum successfully merged pictures she took of her mother's body while

taking a bath, with audio recordings of conversations with her on issues of sexuality and marriage. "**Measures of Distance**," as the video was called, presented a personal story to illustrate the impact of war on a relationship. Yet this relationship of mother and daughter in an Arab context is determined by social factors that create friction between the intimacy generated by the work and the public. Hatoum challenges the personal by dragging it into the public arena.

Hatoum's earlier video work in 1983 was a transmission from a Toronto gallery to another gallery in Vienna. "**So Much I want to Say**" was made of still frames that featured the artist herself being gagged when she was repeatedly uttering the phrase "so much I want to say". The piece is a reflection on the state of global communication, where transmission is becoming a large network monopoly and where individual voices have no place.

The power of an artist lies in his/her ability to formulate and communicate a particular stance with respect to the dominant culture, official discourse, and official history. It is this power that provides the artist with the possibility of struggling to introduce social change. Women have been for long excluded from the dominant industry, (maybe for the best) which may be a reason why many women have finally managed to carve their way in opposition to the official, dominant culture. However, resistance is not restricted to one gender. It is not a matter of being male or female. What counts is the relationship to power, to the dominant norms, and traditions. What counts is the ability to interrogate and pose questions.



ENDNOTES

1. Director of **Demolition (Raddem)** a short 16 mm film, 15 mins, 1998.
2. Director of **Measures of Distance** and "So much I want to say" (a video installation that was later edited as an independent video piece).