



# Susan Mogul

The path to Self Inspiration

Los Angeles based artist and filmmaker Susan Mogul talks to Rebecca LaMarre about her inspirations, the challenges and rewards of taking a feminist approach to her work, and getting people to take her art seriously.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** Your work spans video, collage, stand-up comedy, workshops, interventions, documentary... What haven't you done?

**Susan Mogul:** Well, I don't paint. I don't make sculpture. I don't do lithographs. I came up at a time when things were being done outside traditional media. I didn't come to filmmaking through a traditional film school. I came to it from going to art school and getting a Masters, coming up in a time of conceptual art, performance art, feminist art, doing things outside of the gallery – a time where things were being done in alternative ways. I guess in the late '80s, early '90s I started what I do now: making personal documentaries with people in my life.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** If you're working in ways that aren't recognized in a gallery context, then what connects all the different works? It seems like the connection is humour and parody?

**Susan Mogul:** I was not the class clown, and much to my chagrin in my senior year in high school I was voted the most talkative girl. Nobody ever applauds you for being the most talkative, especially if you're a woman. It's usually seen as obnoxious. So when I was at Cal Arts and there was video equipment and I was in the Feminist Art Program under Judy Chicago's tutelage, there was an emphasis on making art out of your personal life.

In fact, it was a kind of levelling; you had New York artists using it, you had John Baldessari using it, you had young feminists using it. I discovered through making my early videotapes that I was funny. I never thought of myself that way. The first clip that you see on my website is called *Dressing Up* (1973). I start out naked. I get dressed and I talk about shopping with my mother while eating corn nuts. It turned out to be this humorous piece and everyone was laughing. That was a discovery for me.

The nudity came from the early days of the feminist art movement. Everybody was taking off their clothes, so I didn't even think I was being radical. I had just come from the East Coast in 1973 to be in the Cal Arts program. I was taken to see a show at the Women's Space Gallery, and the theme was menstruation.

I was like, "Oh my God, my mother wouldn't even let my brother hand me a box of menstrual pads." Everything was open for change. Everything was about turning the tables, doing the opposite of what a good girl was supposed to do. So if it was supposed to be humiliating to do a strip tease, why not flip that over? On one hand I'm talking about being the 'good girl' and shopping with my mother, being a good middle-class Jewish girl. On the other hand, undercutting that by eating corn nuts not exactly being ladylike. I was finally able to take the talking-too-much and find a way to frame it and become a storyteller.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** It was interesting because it seems like the

early videos were a midway point between Barbara Hammer and Martha Rosler.

**Susan Mogul:** What do you mean by that?

**Rebecca Lamarre:** You have Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). It's also humorous – but in a dark way – austere, authoritative and somehow conservative. Then you have Barbara Hammer, which seems very West Coast. She's saying "WOAH, emancipation! Video! It's a blockbuster!" It's not funny at all. It's very earnest. At least that's how I see it now, watching her films for the first time much later than when they were made.

**Susan Mogul:** I know Martha. Our work was shown in an exhibition called Southland Video Anthology at the Long Beach Museum of Art. That was one of the first significant video shows in the US, in 1975. But, with *Dressing Up*, I couldn't get it shown at the Whitney [Museum], for example. John Hanhardt at the Whitney told me over the phone that my work was problematic.

It was a question of work that was perceived as intellectual versus work that was seen as only entertaining. There was something about humorous or entertaining work where it wasn't taken as seriously. I can't talk about that in the present. I don't know if that's true now, but it's not an applicable question anymore because the work I've done is now considered historical. It's being looked at from a different vantage point.

I'm making a few points. One is, in the early days of the feminist art movement, it wasn't theory based. It was about making art out of your own experience. 'Talk about your mother' was always the first thing you did in a Consciousness Raising session. That allowed me to start to discover – although I didn't know it at the time – certain characteristics that were inherent to my practice that I would go on to develop: ideas around relationships, family, humour. The reason I think my work is humorous is that it's part of my nature. It's a way I deal with life. My work is always in response to something. Some people need a blank page. I need something to respond to.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** The way you use the camera is similar to the way you're using humour. It's evident that the artwork is about you processing information. All the reviews of your work say it's about intimacy and being close to the people you're filming. Video, photography, the gaze – all of these things are supposed to be tools that create distance between you and the thing that is happening. So I was wondering if you felt that creates tension in your work.

**Susan Mogul:** Did you read the review in the *LA Weekly* about *Driving Men* (2008)? The writer says the piece is about the challenge of crafting a life, which I found very moving because she really got what I was trying to do, which was to fold my early autobiographical work into these different men I was filming. She understood the way I was using my relationship to the camera, their story, my relationship to my dad. Anyway, the reason I brought up the article was that it does reflect what you're saying about the camera, and the writer does quote one of the guys in the film who makes a comment about how I use the camera. He says something to the effect of, "It's a way to get to know people."



I always film people I know, or that I know a little bit. I find with the camera I become a better listener. When I film people, most of my interviewing is informal and is like a conversation, where the most interesting things that emerge are unplanned. Things get revealed almost by accident.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** You don't find that the camera gets in the way?

**Susan Mogul:** When you put the camera on a person, it gives you courage. Like with a family member, it gives me courage to ask them things I wouldn't normally ask them. While with an acquaintance or a colleague there's just not that fear there. It allows me to create a space to see if we have common ground.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** When I was watching the earlier videos, I realised that I grew up in a generation with things like *Live Journal*.

**Susan Mogul:** I don't even know what that is! [laughs]

**Rebecca Lamarre:** Things like *Facebook* or *MySpace*, Internet forums where people are disclosing personal information, and that's considered normal. It's a way of performing. "This is me. Here it is for everyone to look at." I was thinking about how that would have been totally unimaginable when you were making those videos and saying similar things.

Having grown up that way, the more information I put out for others, the more videos I make about myself, the more it seems like there's a self that disappears, or doesn't exist. It becomes a fiction. I know that in writer's circles they talk about the fictional aspect of autobiography. Do you look at filmmaking as fiction, like narration? Or do you look at it as something other than that?

**Susan Mogul:** I agree. Everything that's going on *Facebook* would have been unimaginable in the early '70s. I don't know if you're familiar with the video equipment 'port-a-pack', but at the time it was very expensive. A lot of artists who used it did not own it. It wasn't like you could hold your iPhone all the time and turn on your computer and film yourself. It wasn't ubiquitous. There wasn't constant access.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** Does the amount of effort and time required to make a film allow the intimacy to be created?

**Susan Mogul:** I don't think that intimacy is instant. The important thing in my work is that process of self-discovery, of connecting to others, and it's something that happens slowly over time.

*Facebook* is just constantly putting information out, rather than digesting it and allowing it to resonate. If I had something upsetting happen, like a family argument – what does it mean if I post that on *Facebook*? But if I use the argument to examine my life, or use it as a framework to ask questions like, "Why do I always have this argument? Where does it

come from?" Then you start to muse about it, and create a way to understand it, so it's not just spilling your guts.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** Would you say the video camera is a tool for engaging in that process?

**Susan Mogul:** Absolutely. The reason I'm working on this new project – *Mamma's Girls*, about a mother/daughter relationship – is that my mom is an amateur photographer. I grew up with a darkroom in the house. So there's a way in which she had an impact on me being an artist, although she never told me or expected me to be one. I started to think about when I would talk about being an artist, and I would talk about the Feminist Art Program, and some of the mentors who had an influence on me. But why was I interested in being an artist in the first place? So I'm trying to go back to the source. It's



coming from my one particular experience and seeing how it connects to all these other women, which goes back to the tenant of Consciousness Raising. We would all sit around and the first subject would always be our mother! I don't remember why, but I suspect it was because we wanted to figure out female identity and how to be different from our mothers and have a different role.

**Rebecca Lamarre:** I think what you're also saying is that the relationship the camera sets up for you gets extended to the viewer of the video, so the viewer is able to undergo that process as well.

**Susan Mogul:** Where they can identify. You asked about fiction, and I agree with what you were saying. I think that work based in autobiography definitely has fictional aspects to it. That's what makes it interesting. That's another difference between putting things on *Facebook* and making a personal film. When you're taking the time to make a film, there's a process of editing. Intrinsicly, it's fictional because you're not telling everything, and frankly, it's not that interesting to know everything.

