

Susan Mogul is a Los Angeles videomaker whose twenty-five years of artistic production evidence an unyielding fascination about the video camera as a tool for deciphering herself, her world, and those around her. In her autobiographical, experimental documentaries, Mogul wages an investigation into the everyday world of regular people (including herself), an artistic preoccupation originally introduced to her by her professors at the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts in the '70s. The idea that lived experience was the stuff of art, already prominent in the art world through "movements" like Fluxus, performance art, happenings, process art, conceptual art, and earthworks, was enriched and expanded by a feminist analysis that also found beauty, meaning, and politics in personal experience. Theories and strategies from the women's movement coincided with the changing focus in the art world to allow for a distinct amalgam of form, content, and process in feminist video that has had lasting effects on art. Ann-Sargent Wooster writes about early feminist video art: "The innovations in subject matter introduced by women artists—language and personal narrative, discussion of the self, sexuality, women's experience in the world, and the presence of everyday life—have now become part of general art practice. These videotapes by women are the fulcrum between modernism and post-modernism."¹

The video camera, newly available to consumers, provided these developing feminist artists with the perfect tool with which to document everyday spaces and activities with a depth, openness, and immediacy that the overly expensive, overly technological, less-mobile, and more-distancing film camera could never permit. Says Mogul, "There was so much going on that was about developing relationships with the camera, with colleagues, with people in the everyday world. I was learning all those ways of working—performing and observing and self-examination, which is what consciousness-raising was about—that have all stayed with me."

Mogul's early work, shot on a portapak and unedited, displays herself enacting "private" performances to and for the camera. In *Dressing Up* (1973) she performs a reverse striptease, starting naked and dressing in clothes that she and her mother bought while bargain shopping. *Take Off* (1974) records Mogul discussing how she learned to use a vibrator, here making intimate acts into public performance. In the '80s, in videos like *The Last Jew in America* (1984), Mogul continued to use her own life as her subject, always combining humor with the pathos of day-to-day existence. In two videotapes from the '90s—*Everyday Echo Street: A Summer Diary* (1993) and *I Stare at You and Dream* (1997)—Mogul began to experiment with new video technologies in her continuing pursuit of personal exploration. With a light(er), cheap(er), and professional-quality Hi-8 camera, Mogul's work adapted into a series of narrative-diary documentaries.

While Mogul still finds the possibility of an inexpensive and approachable artistic medium intoxicating, video did not maintain its position as darling of the art world for long, perhaps because so many women found their voice and position through this medium. Although there remains a tradition of art video within an art-world context (most commonly as video installation but sometimes as single-channel video sidebars to thematic shows), the medium is now most commonly perceived as an illegitimate stepchild to high or avant-garde art. This shift in status over its very brief history has everything to do with the very qualities of the medium that initially made it so exciting and that still connect it to feminism: its accessibility, its inability to be commodified, its close likeness to the mass art of television.

Mogul and others in this study have been directly affected by video's precarious position in the art world. Since there is little money or status to be made through video (there are only a few distributors of art tapes—Video Data Bank, Electronic Arts Intermix, V-Tape, Artcom—and the market is almost exclusively to academics like myself), its makers must choose to make financial and other kinds of sacrifices to continue at this work. In her interview, Mogul discusses an economically tenuous existence that is standard for most women artists, especially those, like Mogul, who do not gain the economic stability of full-time teaching. While Mogul has sought employment as a teacher, she believes that her work does not fit academia's rigid set of theoretical or political prescriptions. In the past few years, however, she has found some financial stability through a reconceptualization of her audience, namely, to that of public television. Enabled by the even more accessible technology of Hi-8 video (first available to consumers in the 1990s), well funded by ITVS (Independent Television Service), then

aired on public television, Mogul's work shifted from the rarefied gallery and museum into the "real world" (of television) that has always been her subject. As "art," her work had a limited viewership and an even more limited earning power; as "television" her video—for 1995 at least—serves to support itself and Mogul.

Equally significant to Mogul's sense of her work and life (as is true for every woman discussed thus far) is the contradiction of two related experiences: living through the heady, exuberant, communal, interactive spirit of the women's movement in the early-to-mid-'70s, and then living through the almost entire absence of such spirit in the following decades. In some ways, Mogul represents the stereotypical artist: a person who has to make her art at whatever cost: "Art comes out of a need. I know it sounds so romantic." But she is not just any run-of-the-mill, romantic artist, but perhaps more like one version of the classic feminist artist—trained in, focused on, and motivated by feminism, even as feminism changes.

One's Career/One's Work

Please narrate to us your career in video.

I believe that there's a distinction between one's career and making work. A career has to do with shows, recognition, teaching, credentials—all those things that one puts on the résumé. Certain things are good: getting a grant furthers your career. It's prestigious to be able to say you've gotten a grant to do a project because that affords you the chance to fund another project. Or if you have taught at one place, it affords you the opportunity to teach elsewhere. If someone bought a piece of your work for his or her collection, that has to do with prestige. All those things make up your career, your professional record. Then there's your body of work. It's part of your career, but it's something more discrete. That's why you're an artist to begin with: to make that work.

I don't see them as so distinct, because your "career" allows you to make your work.

But someone might say, "Well, my work is going well right now, but my career sucks, because I can't get a job."

I've learned that this history is as much a history of the career as of the work. The hard part is making the career: getting the necessary grants, getting the necessary shows. I see the history of the career and its work being a social, economic, and political history.

An Artist Doing Videotapes

I consider myself very lucky because I was trained as an artist. I still think of myself as an artist, and the way that has evolved is that I'm now an artist doing videotapes. I come from a history of doing live performances, video, documentary photography, and some installation and the through-line in my work has always been autobiographical.

I started college in the late '60s. Ten weeks after I got to Madison, Wisconsin, I was demonstrating in the streets against Dow Chemical being on campus. Then a few years later, I was living in Boston, going to Boston Museum School, and I was involved with the women's movement there. I was already very committed to being an artist. That seemed to be the thing I did well. I had feminist friends, but feminism and art seemed to be very separate.

I found out about the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts because there was an article in *Time* or *Newsweek* about Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro's WomanHouse. So I thought, "Oh! Feminist art!" I was lucky when I came to Los Angeles to go to Cal Arts because of the Feminist Art Program. People were just starting to make video with portapak. There was a blossoming feminist art movement. The personal was political. Women's diaries were being celebrated; the everyday, the mundane was being celebrated. Also, storytelling was something I had never before realized that I liked to do and had a flair for. Lynda Bengalis was a visiting instructor; she thought everyone should make videotapes. Judy Chicago was my mentor, and she thought that everyone should divulge his or her private life to her. Alan Kaprow was at Cal Arts; he saw the everyday as performance. We had a performance class in which performances were done without an audience. They were more conceptually based, focused on the everyday, little things that one doesn't usually think about.

These things all came together for me. A year or so later, David Ross became the video curator at the Long Beach Museum, where we're filming this. He created a show called Southland Video Anthology, which was very democratic. It had big artists like John Baldessari and Eleanor Antin and baby artists like me. I was twenty-three, twenty-four years old at the time. This was a medium that a lot of people were getting into for the first time. There weren't those hierarchies of the more experienced ones and the lesser ones. I was lucky. Soon after making my first tapes, I was getting them shown, and that was exciting.

My early works, like Valerie Soe's, only cost a few dollars to make. One work that got a lot of attention, which was called *Take Off* and is now

known more commonly as the *Vibrator Tape*, is a satire on a Vito Acconci piece, *Undertone* (1973). It's now part of the history of video art and is included in feminist studies. It's probably shown more now in the '90s than when it was made in '74. *Take Off* is a ten-minute videotape that shows me talking about my vibrator. At that time Acconci was showing quite a bit and was quite well known as an artist. *Undertone* is a tape of him masturbating under a table. I wanted to respond to him because I liked his work a lot. I liked his weird sense of poetry. My work is autobiographical, and a lot of it is in response to others. Responding to *Undertone* was a way for me to talk about learning to masturbate with a vibrator. I used Acconci's format and structure to also comment on how a man dealt with his masturbatory experiences. I was able to reveal something of myself while revealing some of my ideas about the male artist.

Feminist Art Education

When I think about video at the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Women's Building, mostly I remember the place as a whole. There were a lot of conferences. We had a design conference and a performance conference. We had a summer arts program, run by the people who were students in the winter. I taught in that. We designed a whole program and solicited students from all over the country. There was a film and video conference. We used to go out and lecture. That was the other thing that Judy Chicago was so good at doing. She would say, "Okay, I'll do this speaking engagement if two of my students can present their work, too." During one of the years in which I was at the Women's Building, I wrote to an art school back East and told them, "I can give a lecture for you about the women's movement on the West Coast, and I'll charge you \$250," and they wrote back and said, "Yes!" I was in shock. I was twenty-four and giving my first lecture. I put together a whole slide show. We were encouraged to be very public. There wasn't this concept of waiting until you were ready when your work was polished. Being in the Feminist Studio Workshop was all about moving out into the world.

The first video that I made while I was at Cal Arts and that got a certain amount of attention was a piece called *Dressing Up* in which I do a reverse striptease. I start naked and wind up putting on clothes. But there's a reason for it. I'm not trying to titillate you: I'm doing it as a way to talk subversively about my mother. I talk about each item of clothing in terms of the bargains that "we" got. It's this repetitive activity of talking about bargains and munching on corn nuts. It's about this obsession that my mother passed to

me. So I'm eating these corn nuts as an "undertone"—the name of that Vito Acconci piece. And I'm just talking to the camera. It was an unedited piece. Much to my surprise, people thought I was funny. I had never thought of myself as funny, or having a sense of humor, or being a storyteller. These were things that I discovered through the camera and through being part of this movement.

Another meaningful thing about being in the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts was that everyone else drove and I didn't. When I came here in 1973, all these women were driving and they said, "We're tired of picking you up and driving you around," because we were a very close-knit group that was collaborating and doing stuff together. And one of them volunteered to teach me to drive. And I said, "Okay, you can teach me, but I'm going to pay you because I want you to be committed." And so, after six months in Los Angeles, I got my driver's license. Going home that summer to my family and being able to say "I'm a driver" symbolized the beginning of my work. I was able to create a new identity in the Los Angeles landscape. So I made this postcard that I sent to everyone, including my driver's ed teacher. It says: "Mogul is Mobile." The visual image is of me flying over Los Angeles. This work begins to set the tone for the body of my work that followed. My work has always been about "Where and how do I fit in?" It's been about myself as an individual and my relationship to my culture, my family, identity, about beginning again, and using my name.

I was doing work at that time, between January and June of 1973, that set the stage for all my work that followed. I was doing a photo essay on a beauty parlor in Newhall, and that was about observation of everyday activity and about female community. I was also part of another female community that was the Feminist Art Program itself. I was both observing and performing for the camera. I was in consciousness-raising groups. There was so much going on that was about developing relationships with the camera, with colleagues, with people in the everyday world. I was learning all those ways of working—performing and observing and self-examination, which is what consciousness-raising was about—that have all stayed with me.

The other thing about the Feminist Art Program was the way we were a tight group and very supportive of one another. There was a sense of excitement and exploration. We were finding something new. For the first time, a teacher, other than my high school chemistry teacher who liked me even though I wasn't good at chemistry, said, "I can identify with you." Judy Chicago said, "I can understand you." When she was telling me that, she was sitting on one toilet in the basement of Cal Arts in the ladies' room and I was on another. Tears were streaming down my face. Now, that's not an exact quote, but there was something very powerful about an instructor

ten years my senior saying that she identified with me. It was extremely moving, overwhelming.

There were other people who thought I was special, like Sheila de Bretteville, who was a graphic designer at the Women's Building. She took an interest in me. Here I am twenty-three, twenty-four years old, a young adult, and it's the first time I feel as though my mentors and instructors really value me. I don't think I had a horribly low self-image, but I never had a teacher think I had something special to offer. That was probably one of the most significant things about the feminist movement: there were people who said, "You're talented, you're unique." I had never thought of myself that way.

It took a three-thousand-mile trip to learn how to drive and find all these things out about myself. So I identify with the personal is political. I think politics is important. But you have to start from yourself. I try to do that when I teach. I try to network for my students like Judy Chicago did for me. She was the one who said to David Ross, "You have to see Susan Mogul's work." I never identified much with Judy's work, but what I appreciated about her is the fact that she was always trying to network people together. She would say, "You and Suzanne Lacy should be doing a project together. Do it!"

It's such a different way to relate, a way of assuming the best of you. That ought to be how any educational situation is. That's where I get my strongest marks in teaching. I get bad marks because I digress too much, or I'm weird, or I'm odd. But I'm enthusiastic, and there's a certain amount of caring. I learned how important it is to be encouraged and supported.

Feminist Art

How, or does, being a woman and a feminist nuance your experience as an artist?

My work comes out of my life. I'm odd. I live alone. I've never been married, never lived with a man. I don't have children. That's weird. There are many, many women in this country who live without a man, but they're mothers. It's strange for a woman not to be a mother. Without trying, I'm coming from a different perspective. I'm engaged in asking, "Why am I like this? Why have I chosen this path?" So the work is, by default, probably having some feminist perspective.²

People have never known quite what to do with me. I never fit neatly into definitions of a feminist artist, but I'm not neatly defined as a mainstream artist either. I've been hurt because in the late '70s and early '80s,

people were beginning to write books about feminist art, and I wasn't getting included. I decided that I wouldn't be a feminist artist anymore, because the definition had become very small. One's work had to be strictly political. People were no longer seeing how documenting women's mundane experiences could be feminist.

What had been exciting about the women's movement when I first came here was its expansiveness. I guess what happens to any movement is that in the beginning it's very open, anything goes, and then people want to codify it, make it more narrow. At Cal Arts, the Feminist Art Program was in the basement. That reflected the attitude at school about the Feminist Art Program. It was like the fourth floor in high school—that's where the slow kids went, where they hid people away. If you were in the Feminist Art Program, you were considered an incompetent artist. You didn't fit into the cool John Baldessari, David Salle set. So it's funny to me that now, in the '80s and '90s, feminist theory has been codified and has an academic cache. The work of certain feminist artists is being shown in fancy galleries. That doesn't really affect me, though.

What do you mean, it doesn't affect you?

Right now, I'm starting to show my work on public television. I make tapes that are hybrids: narrative-diary documentaries. They're not made for galleries, but for screenings or to be shown on TV. The gallery scene doesn't really have any bearing on my work.

Everyday Echo Street

Why that shift from the gallery to the television? And can you give an example of a piece that reflects that shift?

I didn't expect my last piece to get on television. I was very lucky to get a commission from Peter Sellars's Los Angeles Festival in 1993. They were looking for artists to do community-specific projects. I had already done such work. For a year, I was an artist-in-residence, teaching photography at a home for abused children. I had also worked with children in a hospital [*Five East*, 1990, video portraits of seriously ill children]. I decided that it was time for me to do something in my own neighborhood. I had lived in a working-class, Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles for fourteen years. The work was constructed around asking questions like, "Why am I here, living alone, in this neighborhood?" The tape [*Everyday Echo Street*] was made in the neighborhood, and it premiered in a neighborhood restaurant.

A year later Claire Aguilar saw it and wanted to show it on KCET. I had never shown anything on television before. It's a phenomenal thing. Claire told me, "We're going to show it at 10:30 on Monday night. I hope you get a good rating." I called her up afterward and asked how the rating was. She said, "Oh, Susan, it was only a Share 1." I asked what that meant. She said, "Only thirty thousand people saw your piece last night." I laughed. I told her, "Only thirty thousand people? In my whole career, thirty thousand people have not seen my work!" I got fan letters. Strangers were calling me on the phone because it was shown in Los Angeles and people could tell from the piece that I live in L.A. I had no sense of what it would mean to be on television. Because of that one show, I started getting recognized on the street outside of my neighborhood. I got some very touching responses. Men were calling me trying to get a date. Women were calling because they could identify.

Everyday Echo Street was the first piece I made that had popular appeal. Because my work is humorous and not theoretical and because it deals with everyday stuff, a lot of people are able to enjoy it. However, in the past it was shown in art spaces like LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions]. The KCET airing was the first time my work was shown to a more general audience. I have had work shown in local libraries and high schools, but this was the first time that I'd had a piece shown under circumstances that enabled a working-class Latino to respond to it for his set of reasons while, across town, a middle-aged, white woman responded to it for hers.

Money

How do you support yourself?

This year, from September of '95 to September of '96, was the first year in my life in which I made a middle-class salary. I'm forty-six, and don't think I don't have guilt. [Laughter.] I have a middle-class background, but after all these years I developed a poverty mentality.

Luckily, I haven't had a shit job since '87. Since then, I've been juggling stuff, like artist-in-residence grants, semesters teaching, collecting unemployment, and selling a few tapes to Michael Renov at USC. Usually, I make \$15,000 a year. I pay \$400 a month for my place. I live frugally. Ninety-four was a really, really bad year. But this year [1995], I have a production agreement from ITVS. So this is a good year.

What do you get in return for giving up middle-class wages?

I make the rules. I get to examine my life and other people's lives. I keep learning. That's why I make work. It's a combination of the satisfaction in making something and the process. Making *Echo Street* was a process of discovery. I learned more about myself, and in turn the people I filmed felt validated. They got to be on TV, too. Rosie Sanchez, from Armando's Restaurant, and I become closer friends, and now she's in a new piece I'm making called *I Stare at You and Dream*. Now I'm able to pay her for being in the work. I'm focusing on her life. In the process of validating my life, I validate her life and her family's. I'm learning more about myself through her, and she's learning more about herself through me.

For me, making art is a process of discovery about yourself and other people and how things work. I would love to make a fictional piece, but I don't think that I ever will, because I don't like that idea of knowing how something's going to turn out ahead of time. I'm engaged by this process, this examination of myself and others. That's what feeds me and makes me feel sane. There's this constant fascination with how people cope, how people fit in, and how people survive. The other people who are central characters in this new work are all working class. It's about how different people overcome or compensate for their past, or their generosity. Why are people the way they are?

I liked what Valerie Soe said about making work. Now that I have the funding, I may have a broadcast-quality piece, but I've been making work for twenty years. If you want to use your own voice, then you find a way to do it. I have a hard time with people who are "waiting for their funding." Especially now, when you can buy a cheap camera. When I was coming up I knew an artist who sold a car in order to buy a portapak.

ELAYNE ZALIS [Long Beach Museum of Art Video Annex]: *Could you talk about the Long Beach Museum of Art's Video Annex [where the interview is being shot]?*³

Echo Street was on-lined here, at the Video Annex. It was shot on Hi-8, and it was on-lined here on Betacam SP.⁴ I would not have been able to finish my work if it wasn't for the Video Annex. Money and/or access do allow you to do certain things. I did not have funds to do an on-line in a Hollywood postproduction place. I could do it here. Not only was I able to afford the facilities, Joe Leonardi was the editor, and he was also great with sound so the quality of the piece was quite extraordinary. People have remarked about it. Also, the Long Beach Museum has all along shown and collected my work. They even agreed to make copies of all my work, so if there's an

earthquake that damages my place, the annex will have copies. It's great to have a supportive institution. I don't take that lightly.

Making Art

Making art comes out of a real, core need for me. That's why I'm willing to live in a frugal manner. I don't crave a lot of things. I would like to have a bigger apartment. But art comes out of a need. I know it sounds so romantic. I wasn't one of those people who had a desire to be an artist when I was young. I wanted to be an actress. [Laughter.] You can imagine the parts I would have gotten. I would have been a real neurotic. Worse than this. Making work makes me feel balanced and more a part of society, even though, as an artist, you're an outsider, observing.

You've been making video for a long time. You've been an artist since 1973. What do we owe you for your work? What have you given us?
[Laughter.] I'm too hard on myself. I don't think anyone owes me anything. What have I given? Anything I might say in response to that question would seem self-serving.

It's meant to be self-celebrating, not self-serving.
All artists want to be recognized for their work. I feel lucky this year because I'm being fully supported. This is unusual. I don't know what will happen next year. What do you think? What have I given and what do you owe me?

I think that this project comes out of a sense that we owe a lot to the women who came before us. We don't value the lives of these extraordinary people, making difficult choices and struggling so that the generation that follows doesn't have the same struggles around the same things. We owe them a recording of their voices; we owe them the maintenance of their legacy; we owe them thanks for holding a space in society, so that it's available for us. Your invention of a life for yourself as a woman artist, as an unmarried woman who doesn't have children, creates a space for the next woman who decides to do that.

I try to get people to appreciate the beauty of ordinary people and to celebrate the everyday, the humor and pathos you can see right outside your window. And to be aware of how rich people's lives are, including those people whom you might not think have interesting lives.