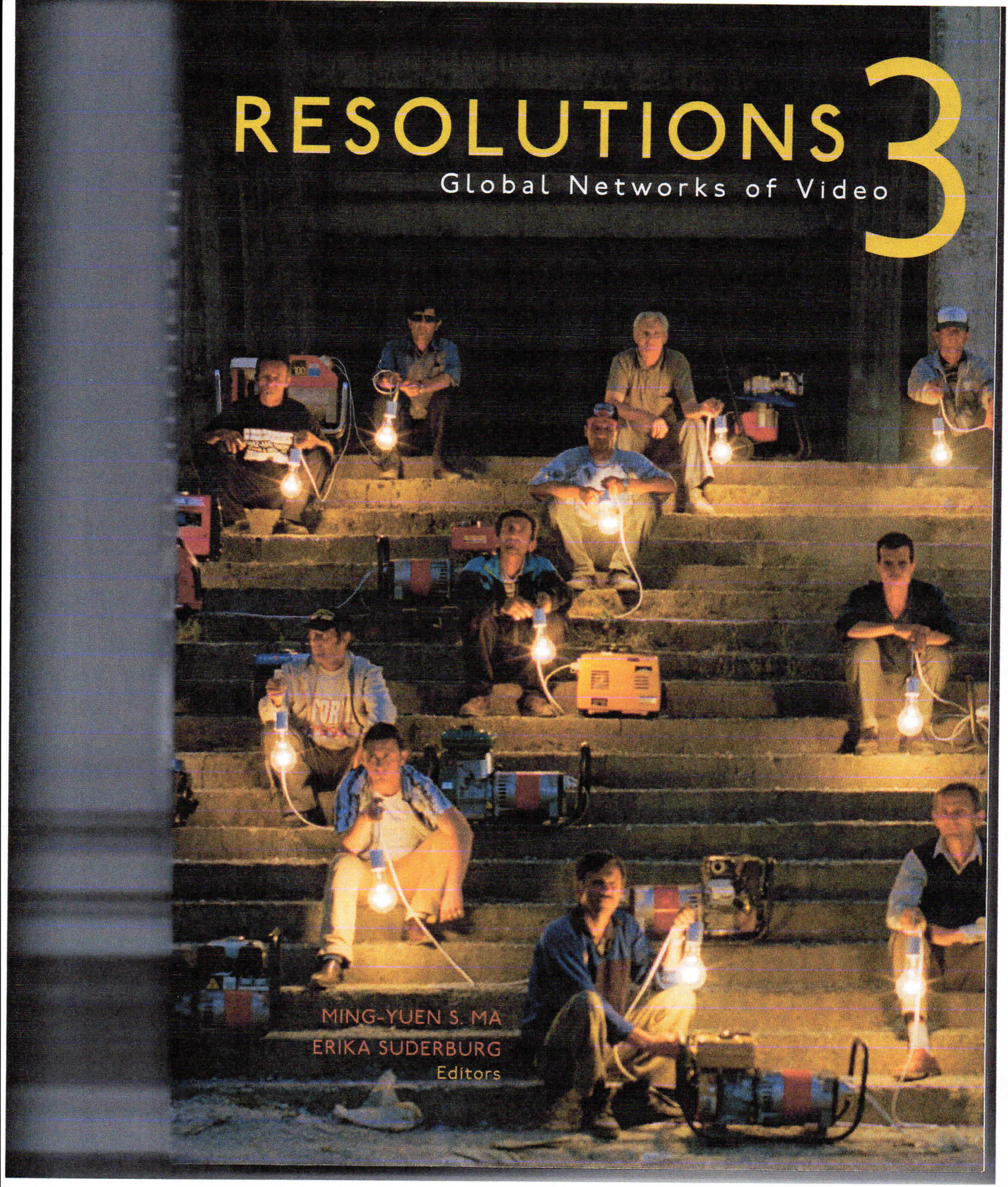
RESOLUTIONS 3

Global Networks of Video



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19 You Dropped a Bomb on Me

Jessica Lawless

I'm looking for the new video revolution. Where is the video camera mediating radical social change? It's hard to find it in the video-saturated consumer cultural landscape of the early twenty-first century, but not impossible. In fact, if the frame is shifted 45 degrees so that it is slightly askew, what comes into focus is quite queer. Through two different experiences, one from behind the camera and one as a viewer, I found something new when the camera intersected with real-time gender queering. More visually stealthy than gender transgressions that operate across 180 degrees, 45 degrees is a deceptively quieter upheaval. It is also a more difficult shift to identify than some other, more explosive moments in the ongoing video revolution.

At the turn of the century, the revolution was easier to spot. Signs were visible, such as the shot of the sticker that read "Resistance is Fertile" in *Showdown in Seattle*, the Deep Dish video compilation of the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization. Something revolutionary was in the air during those heady days of protest on the cusp between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. A lasting legacy of those protests has been the Indy Media Centers (IMCs), a decentralized transnational network of local DIY media outlets. As Ana Nogueira writes in her essay "The Birth and Promise of the Indymedia Revolution":

> From Seattle to Sydney, Chiapas to the Congo, the Indymedia phenomena has indeed spread like wildfire, recklessly endangering the corporate media's monopoly on expression and intellectual property . . . [evolving] into a hopeful vision that a new media landscape is on the horizon.[1]

The IMCs' contribution to a new media landscape is vast, with more than 150 sites around the world reporting on grassroots protests and local issues that rarely make it into mainstream news. The IMCs model fiercely democratic production methods and editorial policies. It can be even argued that these methods model a radical form of democracy. Unfortunately, though the IMCs represent a deep scratch on the surface of corporate media's monopoly, they have not endangered corporate media's dominance. Nogueira's hopefulness in the potential

IMCs represented is indicative of activist thinking in the late 1990s, which saw the Internet as a great equalizer, a radically democratizing force that "empowered citizens to reclaim and redefine the public sphere."[2] That view is a contemporary extension of Walter Benjamin's early twentieth-century essay arguing that the age of mechanical reproduction would democratize the arts by dismantling uniqueness as the determining factor in cultural and monetary value.[3] For both Nogueira and Benjamin, the public sphere becomes a place for the cacophony of the multitudes, where each opinion is of equal value to the next.

Yeah, right. The marketplace of ideas in the early twenty-first century, even as we are sifting through the ruins of a recession, is still a marketplace. In this late stage of the game, producers are, equally and always, still consumers—like my eleven-year-old niece Paulie and her friend Frankie. Paulie and Frankie recently asked me to help them make a video. "We want to be on YouTube," they told me. Paulie and Frankie's desire for their ten minutes of fame (it's been reduced since Warhol's time) and ability to make it happen can be read as a positive result of the vast changes in video production and distribution over the past decade or so. These two young people have access to cameras, computers, software, and video hosting platforms on the Internet that facilitate putting their voices into the public sphere in a way that was not conceivable for my friends and myself a generation earlier. Paulie and Frankie choreographed a dance sequence, crafted a homemade clapper to mark scenes, and ran through take after take until their rendition of the song "You're the One that I Want" from the musical *Grease* was caught on tape, edited, uploaded, and ready for an opening-night celebration. A marker of technological and cultural shifts, Paulie and Frankie's video was not a Molotov cocktail lobbed at the stranglehold of corporate media. YouTube is owned by Google and has partnerships with CBS, BBC, Sony, and Warner Music groups, among others, and, of course, has an iPhone app.[4] Paulie and Frankie's desire to be on YouTube was, through one frame, a desire to be at the center of corporate consumer culture. But if I shift the focus, if I reframe how I look at Paulie and Frankie's video, I can see it much less cynically. More than an example of the inescapable confines of corporate media, Paulie and Frankie's video can be read in the context of 1980s- and 1990s-style identity politics.

Ensuring their own visibility as young girls, as mixed-race mestiza kids born and raised in Los Angeles, and as self-described "not girly-girls," Paulie and Frankie re-created a classically heteronormative musical number to fit their vision of selves. They created that moment of emergence, as Pratibha Parmar calls it, inserting their minoritized voices into a very dominant public sphere.[5] Here, I can find the politicized narrative through which to read their version of "You're the One That I Want": young girls of color using video to have a voice, queering a musical number into their own vision. At eleven, however, Paulie and Frankie are not (yet?) expressing a queer sexual orientation. Even if that were

the case, even if the video were a we're-here-and-we're-queer moment, the singular goal of putting it up on YouTube diminishes the possibility of the camera mediating a radical politic. It is melding into rather than speaking against that corporate-controlled sphere. The significance of putting the means of production in the hands of marginalized and minoritized peoples is not what's diminished. This remains an important and radical practice as evidenced by, for one example, the Chiapas Media Project, a significant part of the Zapatista movement, which shares a genealogy with and has influenced the IMCs. But in the context of twenty-first-century consumerist capitalism, the politics of visibility is often reduced to simply being seen by as many as possible, a less-than-radical proposition when facilitated by corporate-owned platforms such as YouTube.

As Rosemary Hennessy points out in her essay *Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture,* "Politically, the aim of queer visibility actions is not to include queers in the cultural dominant but to continually pressure and disclose the heteronormative."[6] Once a video is uploaded to YouTube, it enters a literal marketplace of images where viewers consume a little of this and a little of that. Videos become commodities assigned worth by how many hits, or views, they get—the higher the number, the higher the value, a decidedly capitalist concept. When the larger context or community for making meaning is gone, the image or video is easily fetishized, an exotic, ahistorical artifact. The potential for oppositional meaning, to disrupt business as usual, is lost. Yet it is difficult not to impose a queer read on Paulie and Frankie's video. The quintessential summer romance between Danny and Sandy in *Grease* has been transformed into something different, something potentially queer. This point of transformation is generally where we look for oppositional strategies, whether they are intentional or excavated from the text. Hennessey suggests that "as a political practice, critique acknowledges the importance of 'reading' to political activism. . . . Although they often go unacknowledged, modes of reading are necessary to political activism. . . ."[7] Moving from critique to radical change occurs, according to Hennessey, not just when the commodified object changes form but when there is a demand to make the invisible social relations that produce the object visible. What makes Paulie and Frankie's video new, something to contend with in the here and now, is not the potential for 1990s-style identity politics to be read into it but, instead, the moments where the invisible becomes visible.

Frankie, who performs the role of Danny, looks like she could be Danny. Frankie wears only boys' clothing and is often misrecognized as a boy. While we were taping, two teenage girls watching the action asked if Paulie and Frankie were brother and sister. Paulie laughed and "corrected" the older girls, saying Frankie was a she. Talking about this later, Frankie expressed frustration at such moments. Frankie would rather Paulie let others think she was a boy. Frankie doesn't use male pronouns but does prefer to use a gender-neutral nickname.

When Paulie and Frankie decided to make a video to put on YouTube, it was Frankie who stayed up for days choreographing the dance sequence that allowed Frankie to be Danny. Again, these two young people, at eleven, are not actively expressing queer identities. In fact, they often giggle about crushes on boys. But assuming these crushes are an expression of heterosexuality makes no more sense than assuming their insistence on not being girly-girls means they are lesbians. Either interpretation is premature and simplistic. Paulie and Frankie's video may have caught two young people on the cusp of puberty who will develop into a bisexual tomboy and a gay transman or a femme dyke and an androgynous soccer mom or many other configurations of gender and sexuality that are not simply straight or gay. In his essay *Queering the Binaries: Transituated Identities, Bodies, and Sexualities,* Jason Cromwell writes:

> Transituated discourses are produced by transpeople whose identities, bodies and sexual desires fall outside of the dominant discourses and even outside of the available lesbian and gay discourses. . . . Transituated discourses reverse ontological premises . . . [and] begin the process of reordering the order of things (Foucault 1970). . . . The possibilities open in unexpected and multiple ways. For many within the mainstream of society, the reordering of things and the expression of that reordering in transituated discourses are threatening and subversive.[8]

Paulie and Frankie's video is not an attack on the corporate stranglehold of dominant media practices or an intentional queering of *Grease.* Rather, Paulie and Frankie's video is a production by two young people who transgress their assigned gender roles by simply being themselves. Their simply being reorders a viewer's assumptions of what they are seeing. It is a transituated discourse through visual means and a fundamentally profound shift in how video mediates marginalized and underrepresented voices.

To be clear, simply being is not an essentializing move. I am not suggesting that the profound use of the camera is that it captures an essential core of these two young people. It captures something that is seen but not yet named. Whether this is nature or nurture, something one is born with or something one becomes, is not the point. As José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Disidentifications* notes, "The use-value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructionist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self is especially exhausted."[9] What is exciting here is that the video camera moves from being a tool that gives voice to those excluded from mainstream media productions to also being a tool that captures the changing landscape of gender and sexuality *as it is shifting.* In Paulie and Frankie's video, the camera makes visible the conditions of possibility for configurations

of gender and sexual identity outside of hetero- and homonormative playing fields. Reviewing the tape after the shoot, the camera was paused on a frame of Frankie wearing dark sunglasses, leaning jauntily against a jungle gym with arms folded. Frankie looked at the shot and laughed giddily. Frankie asked to rewind to that frame several times, looking and grinning at a self that was both familiar and unknown. The misrecognition of Frankie as a boy that frequently happens is also a recognition of a part of Frankie's gender that does indeed exist. There is a twist in this transituated discourse that shifts the threatening and subversive into a low-flying stealth bomber. There is no transition going on. Frankie is not crossing boundaries or borders. Frankie just is, as is Paulie for that matter. They transgress and traverse multiple identities, including multiple femininities and masculinities. But this transgression cannot be seen, or recognized, until it is misrecognized for something else. It's a tricky proposition. How can we recognize something different if it isn't evidently different? It's something like gaydar, but more finely tuned. As Robbin VanNewkirk points out in her essay "'Gee, I Didn't Get That Vibe from You': Articulating My Own Version of a Femme Lesbian Existence," gaydar is less than accurate. VanNewkirk writes, "If I do not register on the gaydar then the technology is broken by its very rigidness and inability to register complexity."[10]

The technology needed to misrecognize something we actually know is not a technology to serve the machinations of passing—i.e., LGBTQI folks who intentionally pass for straight, as well as assimilationist LGBTQI folks. The technology is closer to the knowledge one in the know employs with trans folks who live stealth, undetected as transgender in dominant hetero- and homonormative cultures. One in the know may not always identify as a stealth FTM or MTF; the misrecognition of a trans person as cisgendered is likely even if in the know. But being in the know allows for the possibility of the interplay between misrecognition and recognition, exactly what the video camera mediates for Frankie. This interplay is the technology that not only changes the form of what we are seeing (straight to gay, cisgendered to transgendered) but also makes visible the social relations that produce the subject. The point is to blow up the shield of invisibility, not hide behind it. The technology, or the camera, is not meant to detect what is stealth; it is meant to detect the stealth bomber—in this case, the queer identity that does not invert. In Kami Chisholm and Elizabeth Stark's documentary *FtF: Female to Femme*, Cornell English professor Masha Raskolnikov explains:

> The fact that femme is so hard to read, the fact that femme in the culture is almost always invisible, except to countercultural insiders somewhat means that the criteria that [Judith] Butler talks about . . . you have to iterate to be real, you perform and in the performance reality is what happens to you, femme is almost that that is not real. . . . In the wider

> culture we get female wrong enough that the thing we really are is not even visible, it is not actually real. Our femaleness is, we're playing the game right enough that we are not some abjected thing outside the magic circle of the real, but our specific thing, the thing we intend, is not . . . seen . . . so my colleagues can't see what thing I'm doing even if you [the directors] can. And so the fact that I am only real to [you] is an effect of a kind of failed iteration.[11]

Moving away from the potentially troubling location of preadolescents, queer femme identity allows for a deeper exploration of the interplay between misrecognition and recognition. VanNewkirk writes, "I have had my sexuality challenged because I don't think I was *born gay* and I didn't *come out* through some momentous definitive move. In many ways, the challenge of my version of sexuality and gender requires (re)identification and *coming out* every day" (emphasis hers).[12]

Elizabeth Stark, the director of *FtF,* suggests there is a social misunderstanding of the queer femme body similar to ways trans bodies are misunderstood. For Stark, transitioning is a relational process where "gender as a transition is going to have to transition society, it's going to have to be a revolution."[13] As writer and activist Jewelle Gomez declares in the documentary, "To be a femme is to be a guerrilla in the warfare for a feminist world."[14] These calls to arms can be heard as a demand for recognition and representation and to be seen. But because queer femme is that which cannot be seen, either in or out of queer space, recognizing her is not always possible. At times there is a relational context where she can be seen by those not in the know: if she is with a butch, a masculine female, or a non-passing transman. But this relation is insufficient since she is who she is regardless of proximate masculinity. Chole Brushwood Rose and Anna Camillieri write in the introduction to the anthology *Brazen Femme,* "What cannot be seen, what cannot be held or pinned down, is where femme is."[15] Through this frame Stark and Gomez's demands are not a call to be seen but a call to become conscious of the power of being both misrecognized and recognized. Here, we can employ the technology of the frame—literally and as a methodology of critique.

This moment occurred when Frankie looked at the video frame and saw what others misrecognized. It also happened when I saw a banner hanging over Olympic boulevard in Los Angeles advertising a video exhibition at the Getty Museum. The image on the banner was of a pretty white woman with long flowing hair wearing sunglasses and a sundress and looking out over the LA landscape in a pose to be looked at. At least that's what I thought the first several times I saw it. I passed the banners often, glancing out of the corner of my eye as I drove by. Each time I thought, with frustration, Why is the Getty using the same tired cliché to sell the video exhibit, the same sexist use of an image of a woman floating over the streets of LA that sells beer, cars, jeans, you name it?

But there was something about this particular image, and every time I saw it I had an internal dialog about beauty standards, hegemonic definitions of "woman," and the visual reinscription of beauty standards in Los Angeles—white/light skin, thin, long hair, normative femininity. Though I often have this inner dialogue while driving the billboard-laden streets of LA, this particular banner got under my skin. It was the woman in the image. She iterated certain hegemonic tropes of femininity, and she also did not. Her hair was thick, curly, and unruly. There was a tattoo just above the crook of her arm, a place one gets a tattoo for the symbol or because the tattoo artist is a friend, not because they are enhancing a particularly feminine curve. Her dress and sunglasses looked like they could have come from a thrift store rather than a Beverly Hills boutique. She had a slight smirk on her face, like she knew something the one looking at her could never know. She didn't look "available." She looked occupied with her own task, her gaze focused just beyond the viewer, making it clear they weren't a part of her world or a factor in her being seen, her being real.

Rebecca Ann Rugg in her essay "How Does She Look?" describes the picture of queer femme performer Lois Weaver on the cover of the book *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*:

> She looks straight . . . but she doesn't look like lesbian chic as seen on the cover of *Newsweek* . . . she doesn't have the shiny gloss of the rich. That she is beautiful even without that gloss pushes at the conventions of beauty. She looks at the unseen screen rather than at the viewer who sees her . . . she does not look (like a lesbian, rich, directly at the camera). . . . In order not to read her as straight, one must know of her, so her status as femme dyke depends on extratextual knowledge.[16]

After visiting the Getty exhibition, I realized I knew the woman on the banner, and I was in the know that she, at least in some contexts, identified as a queer femme.[17] The image was a video still from *Whacker* by Stanya Kahn and Harry Dodge, and the woman was Kahn. That an aspect of Kahn's identity was queer femme wasn't information on the didactic panel accompanying the video in the exhibition. It was a piece of knowledge I had from being in similar communities and art circles with Kahn for several years. Realizing that piece of knowledge gave the banners a completely new meaning. They no longer simply reproduced modes of consumption where art images and exhibitions are devoured as glibly as other products in LA's vast consumer landscape. The banners became another example of how the video camera mediates the interplay between misrecognition and recognition, helping to recklessly endanger (to borrow Noguira's term about the IMCs) hetero- and homonormative iterations of gender.

What was interesting was that I became "one in the know," able to read the

image through a queer counterveillance, even though I already was "one in the know." Though I didn't recognize Kahn on the banner, I knew her in another context. In context, I also identify as queer femme. I was in the know without knowing, that strange proposition I suggest of not being able to recognize transgression until it is misrecognized. I return to José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications* to make sense of this. Muñoz borrows the term "identity in difference" from radical Chicana feminist writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga and the idea of "differential consciousness" from Chela Sandoval. Muñoz argues that there are ideological restrictions in place that prevent queers of color from completely fulfilling the identification process at a particular site of emergence. He writes, "Identities in difference emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere. Their emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counter public sphere."[18]

The movement from not recognizing and then recognizing a larger-than-life image of a queer femme was an interrupted moment of emergence. I needed to literally return to the site over and over, a continual failed interpellation of both Kahn and myself, until the extratextual knowledge filtered through and allowed for the streets of LA to shift into a counterpublic sphere that encompassed us both. The examples of disidentification in Muñoz's book are literal staged performances for an audience. Some include a camera; some don't. In the video stills of Frankie in *You're the One that I Want* and Kahn in *Whacker,* these are performances intentionally mediated by a camera for an audience. In these cases the camera captures invisible social relations and mediates a subversive action through a pact that occurs between the performer and the viewer—once the viewer realizes they are in the know.

How can this radical use of the camera translate into concrete political activism that effects social change? Especially when neither of these stills are from videos that are explicitly political? Paulie and Frankie's video is a fun summer project for two young people who want their ten YouTube minutes of fame. Kahn and Dodge's videos engage with social and political issues but are not "political art." They have been described as being too surreal to be overtly political[19] and as having oblique politics "responding to a sociopolitical situation without holding a protest sign."[20] Filmmaker Barbara Hammer writes in her essay "The Politics of Abstraction," "Radical content deserves radical form," and abstract images present "a more amorphous work which allows the maker and the viewer the *pleasure of discovery*" (her emphasis).[21] I agree. I want art to be expansive and have space for the pleasures *and* discomforts of discovery. To visually express the process of misrecognition / recognition, abstract and conceptual language is necessary. At the same time, I want to place the video practice involved in mediating this process in a genealogy that includes the IMCs and all

the fantastic and empowering videos that give voice to marginalized and minoritized peoples. These are the roots of the misrecognition/recognition practice.

A way to do this is to stop confining the definition of political art to protest art and, conversely, to recognize the sublime in openly political artworks. It is also necessary to shift the concept of *oblique* to *stealth*. Oblique is a cop-out; stealth is intentional. Oblique can be likened to passing, whereas stealth, if one is being conscious and strategic, can contribute to the dismantling of normative gender and sexuality in explosive ways. This isn't just a rhetorical move. It's queering an approach to video making, queering how one looks through the camera, and queering how one sees what is captured. To be queer, one must become conscious of one's location. Queering one's approach to making video is not to become queer in one's sexual practices but to become conscious of looking 45 degrees off center, askew and somewhat bent.

Similarly, from a queer perspective nuances in naming carry concrete significance. Queer naming is a mode for making invisible social relations not only visible but also productive. This is the other side of the coin to Hennessey's modes of reading and equally important to political activism. Sitting in a bar, lesbian or straight, I may not be read as queer in either. If I consciously name myself a tranny-chasing queer femme, all sorts of invisible social relations become visible, ensuring passing is not the operative mode. Naming myself something other than lesbian queers my location in both hetero- and homonormative spaces. What is significant is that the radical action is more than just naming and visibility: it is the intent to blow up normative social relations. Certainly, this happened when I realized the woman on the banner was Kahn. The frame shifted, halting my ruminations on sexist advertising practices. My engagement with gender, in theory and embodied, became more nuanced and more tangible. I was standing on shifting grounds, in movement, rather than entrenched in an old battle. I was standing in the center of the bull's-eye, *and* I was the stealth bomber. The camera, from either side, was the weapon. I found the revolution, and without realizing it, I was already signed up for the battle.

NOTES

1. Ana Nogueira, "The Birth and Promise of the Indymedia Revolution," in *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, eds. Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (London: Verso, 2002), 294.

2. Ibid., 291.

3. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Marxists Internet Archive, marxists.org, http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm.

4. "YouTube," CrunchBase website, http://www.crunchbase.com/company/YouTube.

5. Pratibha Parmar, "That Moment of Emergence," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian*

and Gay Film and Video, eds. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

6. Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique,* no. 29 (Winter 1994–95): 36, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354421.

7. Ibid., 70–71.

8. Jason Cromwell, "Queering the Binaries: Transituated Identities, Bodies, and Sexualities," in *The Transgender Studies Reader,* eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 519.

9. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

10. Robbin VanNewkirk, "'Gee, I Didn't Get That Vibe from You': Articulating My Own Version of a Femme Lesbian Existence," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 10, nos. 1–2 (2006): 81.

11. Kami Chisholm and Elizabeth Stark, *FtF: Female to Femme* (San Francisco: Frameline, 2006), DVD.

12. VanNewkirk, "'Gee, I Didn't Get That Vibe from You,'" 76.

13. Chisholm and Stark, *FtF: Female to Femme.*

14. Ibid.

15. Chloe Brushwood Rose and Anna Camillieri, *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 11.

16. Rebecca Ann Rugg, "How Does She Look?," in *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls,* eds. Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker (New York: Routledge, 1997), 177–78.

17. I first learned of Kahn from her role in *By Hook or by Crook* (2001), directed by Harry Dodge and Silas Howard. Kahn wrote the dialogue for her character, Billie, a queer femme. I was at a screening of the film shortly after it was released where Dodge and Howard spoke. They described the main characters (which included Billie) as being who they are, "butches who love femmes." Howard and I have also had private conversations about the character of Billie, Kahn's portrayal and dialogue, and queer femme representation. Ironically, it was from Howard and Dodge, two butches, that I first gained insight into Kahn's identifying as a femme.

18. Muñoz, *Disidentifications,* 7.

19. Howard Halle, "An Artist Duo Puts the Id in Idiocy," *Time Out New York,* July 17, 2008, http://newyork.timeout.com/articles/art/39161/harry-dodge-and-stanya-kahn.

20. Jori Finkle, "Unsettling, in a Funny Sort of Way," *New York Times,* March 2, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/arts/design/02fink.html.

21. Barbara Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," in *Queer Looks,* eds. Gever, Greyson, and Parmar, 70–73.