

kunsthalle wien



DEFIANT MUSES

DELPHINE SEYRIG

AND THE FEMINIST VIDEO COLLECTIVES

OF 1970S AND 1980S FRANCE

Micha Dell-Prane, Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder holding a camera during a demonstration, 1976 • COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, © MICHA DELL-PRANE

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Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig and Maria Schneider during the tour of *Sois belle et tais-toi!*
[Be Pretty and Shut Up!], 1975 • COURTESY SEYRIG ARCHIVES

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The Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez & Giovanna Zapperi
in conversation with Nicole Fernández Ferrer,
Director of the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir



Ulrike Ottinger, *The Feast of the Persecuted Scientists and Artists* (Delphine Seyrig, Wieland Speck, Alf Bold, Wilhelm D. Siebert,



Ulla Stöckl, Peter Gente a.o.). Context: *Freak Orlando*, Baerwaldbad Berlin, 1981 • COURTESY THE ARTIST, © ULRIKE OTTINGER



The exhibition **Defiant Muses**, curated by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Giovanna Zapperi, is named after the feminist collective formed in the 1970s by Delphine Seyrig, Carole Roussopoulos, and Ioana Wieder, who together dedicated their work to producing videos and movies to be used as a tool of emancipation and political activism. In collaboration with Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart and Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir after a first iteration at LaM Lille Métropole and a second one at Museo Reina Sofía, we are delighted to present **Defiant Muses** at kunsthalle wien.

The exhibition is a departure from the common perception of Delphine Seyrig as the incarnation of feminine beauty; thirty years after her death, she is better known as a glamorous actress than as the fearless activist that she was. It is first of all the domination of Seyrig the diva actress over that of Seyrig the activist that this exhibition deconstructs.

Seyrig attained international popularity in the 1960s with appearances in films by prestigious directors such as Alain Resnais, Joseph Losey, François Truffaut, and Luis Buñuel. It goes without saying that these films are artistically important, nevertheless they helped to perpetuate a stereotyped vision of gender roles. Seyrig soon rebelled against her own image and decided in the 1970s and 1980s to only accept complex roles that resonated with her fight for female emancipation. Therefore, she started working with radical female filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, Marguerite Duras, and Ulrike Ottinger.

Videomaker Carole Roussopoulos introduced Seyrig to video, and together with another militant feminist, Ioana Wieder, they cofounded Les Insoumuses (Defiant Muses) — a video-activist collective that produced a series of films in the second half of the 1970s on themes such as abortion, female sexual autonomy, sex workers' and LGBTQIA+ rights.

As a collective, Les Insoumuses situated their political engagement within an internationalist framework, arguing that the feminist struggle is a common one, and that in order to achieve change alliances must be sought in solidarity with other oppressed collectives across the globe. Even if they never managed to rid themselves entirely of a certain Eurocentric vision, the plight of migrant and racialized populations also took on a crucial role in the work of the collective.

At kunsthalle wien, we are interested in the methodologies used by Les Insoumuses to reflect on the political potential of feminism and its concrete paradigm shifts within different moments in history. Each struggle demands that we acknowledge the specific historical and geographic context in which it was inscribed. In fact, this exhibition invites us to reread the history of the women's liberation movement at the critical crossroad of the 1970s and 1980s in order to reflect on our current fight of dismantling the patriarchal logic that continues to determine the conditions of our existence.

Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig and Viva during the shooting of *Sois belle et tais-toi!* [Be Pretty and Shut Up!], 1975 • COURTESY SEYRIG ARCHIVES, © ALEXANDRA & GÉRONIMO ROUSSOPOULOS

what, how & for whom / whw
ARTISTIC DIRECTORS KUNSTHALLE WIEN



Cathy Bernheim, Delphine Seyrig holding a camera in the shooting of *Où est-ce qu'on se "mai"?* [Where should we go (to stand up for our rights)?], filmed during the May 1 demonstration in Paris, 1976 (detail) • COURTESY CATHY BERNHEIM



So, at the heart of it, your feminism consists of what precisely?

In my communication with other women, this is the first thing. Listen to other women, talk with them... I could not live if I didn't have this.

— Delphine Seyrig, 1986

Defiant Muses: An Introduction



Micha Dell-Prane, Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder holding a camera during a demonstration, 1976 •
COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, © MICHA DELL-PRANE

Since cinema's inception, actresses have played a crucial role in the production and reproduction of gender ideology and stereotypes. **Delphine Seyrig** is no exception to this rule. Her name might convey the sophistication and mannerism typically connected to the female figure in French auteur cinema. The role she played in **Alain Resnais'** *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* [Last Year at Marienbad] (1961), which was so crucial for her career and celebrity, is exemplary of this process in which the actress' femininity is produced as a divine apparition. **Seyrig's** initials, D.S., thus became synonymous with *déesse*, French for goddess.

Despite being known primarily as one of the leading actresses of 1960s and 1970s French cinema, acting was not **Seyrig's** sole activity. During the 1970s she became a media and feminist activist working collaboratively within the framework of the women's liberation movement. She became interested in the possibilities provided by new portable video technologies to explore women's experiences and struggles, as well as the material conditions of their lives, while at the same time questioning her own profession in transformative ways. **Seyrig** openly addressed the power structures in which she felt trapped as a woman and as an actress, for in her view the two mostly coincided. Hence, our venture into the complexities of exhibiting **Seyrig's** activities and networks was marked by the need to circulate between different modes and categories of media history in relation to the history of feminism in France, and to travel across the continuum **Seyrig** inhabited: from the auteur cinema in which she was actress and muse to the disobedient practices in which she was video maker, actress, and activist.

Seyrig's trajectory resonates with the recent upheaval, in Hollywood and across the globe, of innumerable women* speaking out against the structural sexism that sustains the film industry and the arts in general, as well as other fields of work. The feminist movement that has emerged in recent years prompts a return to some of the questions **Seyrig** addressed in the 1970s as part of a collective struggle. Her trajectory, for all its uniqueness, is also a striking exemplar of the 1970s feminist slogan, "the personal is political." The continuum between actress and activist that **Seyrig** embodied throughout her life, and especially in her career, points to the core of feminist politics, then and now: the entwinement of life and politics. **Seyrig** was not merely an actress who used her celebrity and privilege to promote a



political cause but someone who continually tried to handle the complex entanglement of art, work, personal life, and politics. For **Seyrig**, creative expression was constantly intersected with a meditation on personal becoming, involving the attempt to transform both life and work via political activism. In her view, politics entailed self-determination, alliances with other women, efforts to create spaces and opportunities for immediate action, and an emphasis on relationships in opposition to competitive patriarchal structures.

Seyrig's significance lies not only in film history but in the histories of militant video and feminism. As film scholar **Grace An** observes, through **Seyrig** we can tell the history of 1970s feminism as a media history to which she contributed both as a producer of video works and in documenting the struggles of her time with the founding of the **Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir** in Paris. Whereas the history of feminism in France often tends to be contained within established polemical labels such as "MLF" (Mouvement de libération des femmes) or "French feminism," the materials collected for this exhibition open up the possibility for a revision of this history. As opposed to a legacy centered on a theoretical body of work involving the fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, and writing (the "écriture féminine"), the exhibition focuses on an alternative history in which media practices, activism, and visual culture take the leading role. **Seyrig's** collaborative work, most notably with fellow feminists **Carole Roussopoulos** and **Ioana Wieder**, is exemplary of an emancipatory use of video as part of a shared political agenda. The radical potential of their productions lies in their ability to combine humor, social critique, and the construction of a feminist gaze.

Seyrig started to use the camera around 1974 after participating in training sessions organized by activist filmmaker **Roussopoulos**, who taught cinema at the newly founded Université de Vincennes à Saint-Denis in Paris. Along with **Jean-Luc Godard**, **Roussopoulos** was one of the first to own the Portapak video system designed by Sony in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s, she and her husband, **Paul**, founded the first militant video collective, **Vidéo Out**, which gave voice to oppressed and socially excluded citizens. In the mid-1970s, **Wieder** and **Seyrig**, together with **Claude Lefèvre-Jourde**, **Monique Duriez**, and **Josée Constantin**, organized the collective **Les Muses s'amuse** (The Muses Have Fun). **Wieder**, **Seyrig**, and **Roussopoulos** later transformed it into **Les Insoumuses** (a play on words that

combines *insoumise*—unruly or disobedient— and *muse*; it can be translated as “Disobedient Muses” or “Defiant Muses”). The collective’s video productions show how visual and media practices emanating from the experiences of the women’s movement allow for a rethinking of the image and the gaze in the context of a struggle for autonomy. Visual pleasure is thus replaced by the invention of new forms of collective agency and media critique. As **Anne-Marie Duguet** points out, these productions participate in a context in which new portable video technologies were largely appropriated by women in a gesture of disobedience and emancipation.

The videos produced by **Les Insoumuses** and its circle resonate with a large set of questions concerning art and politics today: the exploration of gendered roles, the feminine gaze, the body as a place of conflict and resistance, which are just some of the topics we explore in this exhibition. **Les Insoumuses’** strategic appropriation of the audiovisual medium crosses paths with several of the issues **Seyrig** was involved in, such as the struggle for women’s reproductive rights and abortion, the rights of sex workers and political prisoners, engagements against torture and the Vietnam War, the anti-psychiatric movement, and a general, ongoing commitment to human rights. Although the exhibition focuses on **Seyrig’s** multiple activities and her path to activism, its aim is not to provide a biographical profile or simply pay homage to an important historical figure. Rather, in revisiting **Seyrig’s** collaborations, we seek to map a network of her political and creative alliances and intersections, including such significant figures as filmmakers **Chantal Akerman**, **Marguerite Duras**, **Liliane de Kermadec**, **Ulrike Ottinger**, **Agnès Varda**, artist and cinematographer **Babette Mangolte**, writer and painter **Etel Adnan**, actress **Jane Fonda**, and fellow **Insoumuses** **Roussopoulos** and **Wieder**. Through this network of feminist figures involved in the field of visual culture, the exhibition seeks to reactivate the history of video and cinema in France at the critical juncture of the 1970s from a gendered and feminist perspective. Videos, artworks, photographs, archival documents, and films are associated in nonchronological order within thematic sections that convey the multiple political issues that women were raising at this precise historical moment.

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Giovanna Zapperi
CURATORS

UNDOING THE DIVA



Delphine Seyrig, *Sois belle et tais-toi!* [Be Pretty and Shut Up!], 1976, film stills • COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR



Delphine Seyrig's profession as an actress is the point of departure for a critical reflection on the construction of femininity and the emancipation of a female gaze through audiovisual media. Throughout her career, Seyrig unpacked her own image as a diva by using recitation as a site for exploring female identity. During the 1970s and 1980s, work with women filmmakers became a way for Seyrig to rethink her work in light of her growing feminist awareness and to delve into the complexities of women's experiences. The roles she played in films directed by Marguerite Duras (*India Song*, 1975) and Ulrike Ottinger (*Freak Orlando*, 1981; *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse* [Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press], 1984; and *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, 1989) challenged the passivity in which the female star is usually trapped.

Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* [About Jeanne

Dielmann] (1975) remains one of Seyrig's most emblematic roles. The transformation of acting into political endeavor is paralleled by Seyrig's use of video as a way to express an autonomous voice. Her *Sois belle et tais-toi!* [Be Pretty and Shut Up!] (1976) is an inquiry into the film industry's prejudice against women. The film stitches together the testimonies of twenty-four actresses Seyrig interviewed in France and the United States. The actresses share—often for the first time—their thoughts and experiences about the material conditions and gender hierarchies that define their work. The shared awareness of the structural inequalities within which they act becomes a desire for change and a call for solidarity that strongly resonates with the present moment. ●



Anonymous, Delphine Seyrig and Maria Schneider during the tour of *Sois belle et tais-toi!* [Be Pretty and Shut Up!], 1975 •
COURTESY SEYRIG ARCHIVES, © ALEXANDRA & GÉRONIMO ROUSSOPOULOS



I usually take interest in the form or style of the films I act in, yet I realize that as an actress, I have been expressing things that are not my own, but others'. I feel a much greater involvement in this film [*About Jeanne Dielmann*]. It's not a coincidence that Chantal [Akerman] asked me to do it. It's not just being an actress, but acting within a context that means something to me personally. This never happened to me before. In the past I was always able to bring something I liked to the part I was playing, something between the lines. But now I feel I don't have to hide behind a mask, I can be my own size. It changes acting into action, what it was meant to be.

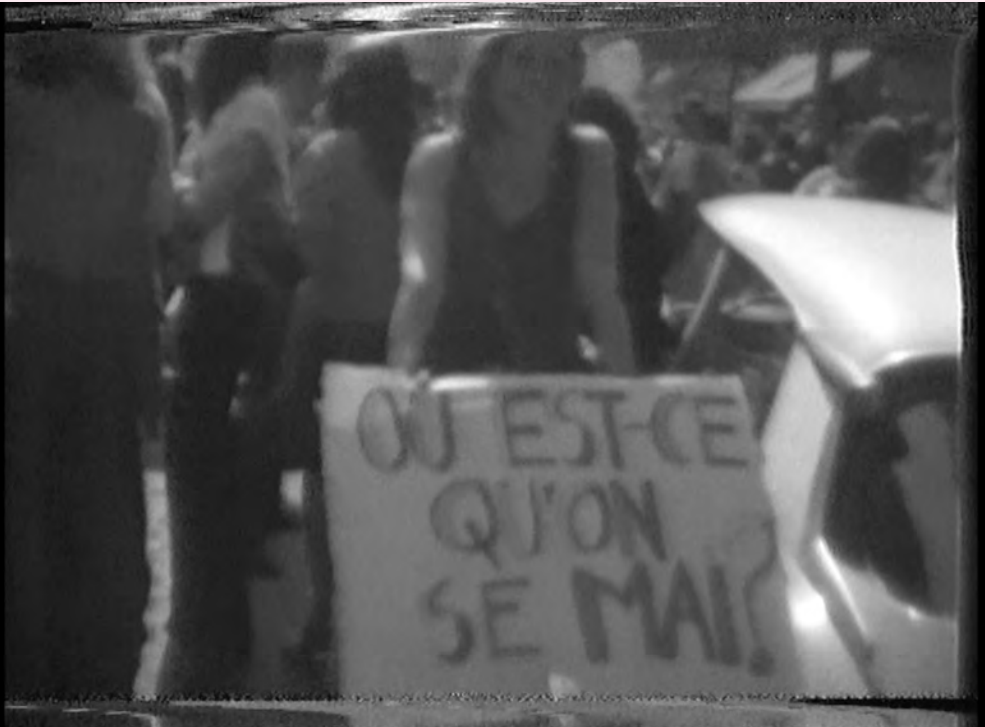
—Delphine Seyrig, 1977

Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig and Viva during the shooting of *Sois belle et tais-toi!* [Be Pretty and Shut Up!], 1975 • COURTESY SEYRIG ARCHIVES / © ALEXANDRA & GÉRONIMO ROUSSOPOULOS





FEMINIST MEDIA APPROPRIATION



Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder, *Les Insoumuses* (producer), *Où est-ce qu'on se "mai"?* [Where should we go (to stand up for our

Seyrig started to use the camera around 1974 after participating in training sessions organized by activist filmmaker Carole Roussopoulos, who was one of the first to use Sony's Portapak video system, which became available in France in the late 1960s. With her husband, Paul, Roussopoulos had founded the activist collective Vidéo Out before joining forces with Seyrig and Ioana Wieder as Les Insoumuses, which in English can be translated as "Defiant Muses". The collective's video productions show how visual and media practices emanating from the experiences of the women's movement allow for a rethinking of the image and the gaze in the context of a struggle for autonomy. While the feminist movement was gaining momentum, the three women took to the street to document feminist mass demonstrations or to question the role of women within male political orga-

nizations and unions (Ioana Wieder, *Où est-ce qu'on se "mai"?* [Where should we go (to stand up for our rights)?], 1976). They were also vocal in denouncing what they saw as a lack of solidarity within other feminist organizations, such as *Éditions des femmes* (*Il ne fait pas chaud* [It isn't hot], 1977).

Les Insoumuses' videos participate in a context in which new portable video technologies were largely appropriated by women in a gesture of disobedience and emancipation. One of the most remarkable outcomes of their interventions within the field of media is *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* [Maso and Miso go boating] (1976, in collaboration with Nadja Ringart), in which humor and social critique are brought together. This video hijacks a television broadcast featuring Françoise Giroud, the French governmental Secretary



rights)?], film stills, 1977 • COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR





Les Insoumuses (Delphine Seyrig, Nadja Ringart, Carole Roussopoulos, Ioana Wieder), *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* [Maso and Miso go boating], film stills, 1976 • COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

of State assigned to the “woman’s condition.” “Maso” and “Miso” stand for “masochist” and “misogynist” and refer to Giroud’s attitude: in order to secure her position, she engages with men in sexist jokes. The video, in which the show’s misogynistic monologue is interrupted, exposed, and deconstructed, is particularly effective in enacting a form of parody and disturbance. *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* emphasizes the contradictions that entrap women when they agree to play by male rules of power. ●

For me, video meant the chance to make cinema without having to ask anyone for anything, and without a technician. [...] I found it fantastic that I, an actress, had suddenly become a director. [...] It was a revelation, an enormous pleasure, an incomparable revenge for being summoned at six in the morning to have my hair done, get made up, and start filming [...].
— Delphine Seyrig, 1983

COUNTERING NORMATIVITY



Delphine Seyrig and Carole Roussopoulos, Les Insoumuses (producer), *SCUM Manifesto*, 1976, film still •
CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

In 1976, Carole Roussopoulos and Delphine Seyrig directed *SCUM Manifesto*, a video manifesto based on a reading of Valerie Solanas' 1967 text of the same name. The French translation of Solanas' text was already out of print, and the initial idea was to make it available again. Mostly known for shooting Andy Warhol in 1968, Solanas was not involved in any feminist collective and spent much of her adult life in jail or psychiatric institutions. However, her *SCUM Manifesto* plays a distinctive role in the history of feminism: its uncompromising radicality, its dystopian overtones, and its position outside the liberation movements of the time correspond to a sense of isolation, disempowerment, and marginalization.

While paying homage to Solanas' revolutionary stance, the video primarily is about Les Insoumuses' approach to technology. Seyrig and Roussopoulos sit across a table from each other in a domestic setting, while a television monitor broadcasts news focusing on a set of contemporary conflicts generated by men. Seyrig dictates as Roussopoulos types on a typewriter, but eventually Roussopoulos refuses to carry on this typically gendered work. The video invites a reading of Solanas' dissidence from a political perspective, all the while connecting it to the mass media and male violence that shape the world. In 1977, Solanas became aware of the video's existence and wrote a series of short letters to Seyrig. ●

I thought video was the most suitable medium for the kind of work I wanted to do because one can immediately replay the image. The people that I'm filming can see the sequence a number of times. It allows them to have control over their image and statement. If they are unhappy with the result, we can erase it and start all over again. This medium enables a true collaborative work.

— Carole Roussopoulos, 1997

DISOBEDIENT PRACTICES



Vidéa (Catherine Lahourcade, Anne-Marie Faure-Fraisse, Syn Guérin), *Kate Millet parle de la prostitution avec des féministes*
[Kate Millet speaks about prostitution with feminists], film still, 1975 • COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

During the 1970s, Les Insoumuses and other video collectives were involved in feminist struggles and political alliances. These primarily involved questions of women's sexual autonomy, reproductive labor, sex work, and the emergence of the lesbian and gay liberation movement in France. Delphine Seyrig was committed to several public initiatives demanding legal abortion, such as the "Manifesto of the 343" signed in April 1971 by women who declared they had had an abortion, and she actively supported women who sought help to end unwanted pregnancies. Also in 1971, Carole Roussopoulos documented self-organized abortions, a widespread practice within the women's movement in France (*Y'a qu'à pas baiser* [Just Avoid Sex], 1971).

Les Insoumuses' videos, while producing counter-information on subjects that were too controversial for public television, also foregrounded the importance of women taking care of women and of communication among women. Close collaboration with the subjects of feminist struggle was a crucial dimension of the video collective's "ethics of filming": the footage they produced belonged to the filmed persons as much as to the video makers themselves. Roussopoulos's *Les prostituées de Lyon parlent* [The Prostitutes of Lyon Speak Out] (1975), for example, is groundbreaking for its intimate portrayal of sex workers defining their struggle in their own terms. Here the camera is turned into a listening device, and the women who speak take advantage of the possibility provided by portable video technologies to communicate in an autonomous way. This relational dimension can be equally observed in Roussopoulos's *Le FHAR* [The FHAR] (1971), which documents the activities of the Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire [Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action], and in Ioana Wieder's *Accouche!* [Give Birth!] (1977), which proposes a critique of gynecological violence via an account of women's lived experiences. ●





Carole Roussopoulos, *Y'a qu'à pas baiser* [Just Avoid Sex], film still, 1971 • COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

What struck me was that the people directly affected never had a say. Somebody else always spoke for them: specialists who spoke on their behalf, trade-unionists and so on. Many people, especially women, never spoke for themselves.

— Carole Roussopoulos



My hands tremble and I'm uneasy because I've got too much to say, I'm full to overflowing. A lot of women have that brimful sensation in them. That's precisely what proves their life isn't what it ought to be. And I think it's very important to say it, because it's what I'm suffering right at this moment, and because I find that being a woman, I'd like it to be known that I'm aware of it and I know a lot of women share it with me.

— Delphine Seyrig, 1972

TRANSNATIONAL STRUGGLES



Françoise Dasques, *La Conférence des Femmes – Nairobi 85* [The Women's Conference – Nairobi 85], film still, 1985 •
COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Delphine Seyrig and Les Insoumuses were part of the emergence of a transnational feminist network during an era marked by decolonization. Some of the videos produced by their circle present a cartography of women's struggles in different areas of the world: against the Vietnam War; in support of political prisoners in Spain under Francisco Franco, the Palestinian cause, or the Black Panther Party; or against the practice of torture in Latin American dictatorships. Since the early 1970s, Carole Roussopoulos and her husband, Paul, had been involved in transnational networks and alliances. They were friends with the French writer Jean Genet, whom they filmed reading a statement in support of Angela Davis (*Genet parle d'Angela Davis* [Genet talks about Angela Davis], 1970) and accompanied on a trip to Palestinian camps in Jordan during the Black September conflict in 1971. Carole Roussopoulos became close to members of the Black Panther Party, sharing her technical knowledge about film and video with them in Algeria and Congo. Seyrig was one of the few personalities to actively support the *Coordination des femmes noires* (Coordination of Black Women), a group of migrant women who had immigrated to France from West Africa and the Caribbean and were mobilized against racism and colonialist politics in France in the late 1970s. Thus some of the struggles involving migrant populations in France were documented, a commitment that was later taken over by the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir.

During the 1980s, the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir commissioned several videos that raised issues of transnational feminism and made demands for intersectionality, such as *La Conférence des Femmes—Nairobi 85* [The Women's Conference—Nairobi 85] (1985) by Françoise Dasques, an exceptional documentary depicting the forum of worldwide nongovernmental women's groups that gathered in Nairobi in July 1985, in parallel to the third World Conference on Women, to debate race, class, and sexual orientation.

Seyrig's first video, *Inês* (1974), is a call for the liberation of Brazilian political opponent Inês Etienne Romeu via a painful reenactment of the torture she endured during her incarceration. In France, the issue of torture is inevitably connected to the Algerian War of Independence. In 1963, Seyrig had played the leading role in Alain Resnais' film *Muriel* about the catastrophic effects of torture on a French military veteran. As part of her ongoing commitment to human rights, Seyrig also traveled to the Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart, where members of the RAF (Red Army Faction) were being incarcerated and deprived of basic human rights. This section of the exhibition also presents Jane Fonda's slide montage *Femmes au Vietnam* [Women from Vietnam] (1969/1973), comprising pictures she took during her journey to Vietnam and accompanied by a sound recording made in collaboration with Seyrig and her partner, actor Sami Frey. ●



Delphine Seyrig, *Inès*, film stills, 1974 • COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR



Carole Roussopoulos, *Genet parle d'Angela Davis* [Genet talks about Angela Davis], film still, 1970 •
COURTESY CENTRE AUDIOVISUEL SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

I'm not a militant. I loathe militancy. I find it has the word "military" inside it. It sounds artificial to me. It means you give yourself over to a cause you have no stake in. It's a murky form of devotion, and I'm terribly mistrustful of it. I think you can only fight personally for something that benefits you personally. And in that case, one shouldn't talk about sacrifice.

— Delphine Seyrig, 1974

RESEARCH INTO THE ANTI- PSYCHIATRY MOVEMENT

Aloïse Corbaz,
*Général Guisan sous le
 bouquet final* [General
 Guisan under the
 final bouquet], recto,
 1951-1960 • COLLECTION
 HANNAH RIEGER



In 1975, Delphine Seyrig starred in Liliane de Kermadec's *Aloïse*, playing the role of painter and outsider art figure Aloïse Corbaz, who spent several decades in a psychiatric hospital. The film played an important role in Seyrig's trajectory, initiating the actress' long-term interest in and commitment to the anti-psychiatry movement, which challenges traditional treatments of mental health. The expression of a nonconformist subjectivity, which was at the center of Kermadec's film, becomes the point of departure for an inquiry into the relation between madness and creativity, particularly from a women's perspective. In 1986, Seyrig organized a meeting with Mary Barnes, a painter and author of the book *Two Accounts of a Journey through Madness*, written in 1971 with psychiatrist Joseph Berke. Barnes had

been treated in 1965 under the supervision of renowned psychiatrist R.D. Laing and discovered her talent for art at that time. Abraham Ségál's film *Couleurs folie* [The Colors of Madness] (1986) documents the encounter between the two women, during which Barnes painted *Life*, which is presented in the exhibition along with works by Aloïse Corbaz. In 1986/1987, in collaboration with the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, the transverse collective, and filmmaker Ségál, Seyrig organized "Films et Folies" [Films and Madness], a film festival that sought to rethink the relation between culture, madness, and society. The public discussions and meetings that accompanied the film program featured such important figures as R.D. Laing, Mary Barnes, and Félix Guattari. ●



AN UNFINISHED HISTORY



Babette Mangolte, *Calamity Jane & Delphine Seyrig: A Story*, film still, 2020 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ARSENAL, BERLIN

In the 1980s, Seyrig was particularly occupied with two unfinished projects: a film about the letters allegedly written by the American frontierswoman **Calamity Jane** (**Martha Canary**) to her daughter, and the creation, with **Carole Roussopoulos** and **Ioana Wieder**, of the **Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir** in Paris, a pioneering project intended to archive, distribute, and preserve the audiovisual work of the Women's Liberation Movement. Together, these two initiatives invoke the subject of the past and the possibility of a feminist perspective on history.

Seyrig's film about **Calamity Jane** was never completed, but the script and the storyboard she prepared in 1982 in collaboration with **Danièle Bordes** and her son, **Duncan Youngerman**, describe all of the film's scenes in detail with drawings accompanied by text. Seyrig imagined a black-and-white silent movie in which she would interpret the role of **Calamity Jane** and her niece the role of **Calamity's** daughter. She invited **Sacha Vierny**, the cinematographer for **Alain Resnais' *L'année dernière à Marienbad*** [Last Year at Marienbad], to join her team, and in 1983 she traveled to Billings, Montana, with **Babette Mangolte**. There **Mangolte** filmed Seyrig's encounters with some of the women who had known **Jean Hickok McCormick**—the supposed daughter of the historic persona **Calamity Jane**. The film proposal did not receive the expected financial support, and Seyrig temporarily abandoned it, only to revive it from 1985 to 1987 by teaming up with other writers to create a scenario. One of these was the poet and painter **Etel Adnan**, whom Seyrig had met at a rehearsal for **Robert Wilson's** musical piece the *CIVIL wars*. In addition to various documents relating to the **Calamity Jane** project, this part of the exhibition presents a newly commissioned work by **Mangolte** based on the sequences she filmed in Montana.

An examination of **Les Insoumuses'** legacy and the question of feminism's audiovisual memory highlights the importance of women's genealogies and feminist archives. In asking **Simone de Beauvoir** to give her name to the **Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir**, Seyrig, Roussopoulos, and Wieder wanted to emphasize continuity among generations and the ongoing significance of previous generations' struggles for the present. Seyrig's video *Pour mémoire* [In Memory of] (1986), filmed one year after **de Beauvoir** passed away, is a gesture of remembrance and an homage to a woman who had meant so much both to Seyrig's personal becoming and to women's liberation movements across the globe. Seyrig's and **Les Insoumuses'** essential contribution in constituting a visual archive of feminist movements taken over by the **Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir** can today be considered a political legacy in and beyond France. ●



Babette Mangolte, *Calamity Jane & Delphine Seyrig: A Story*, film still, 2020 • COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ARSENAL, BERLIN

But besides the archive, there's also production [...]. Maybe someone [at the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir] will one day also make different films, fictional ones, although it's



never really fiction for women. Actually, it isn't for men, either.
I don't know what they call fiction.

— Delphine Seyrig, 1983

The Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris

Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez & Giovanna Zapperi
in conversation with **Nicole Fernández Ferrer**,
Director of the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir

NATAŠA PETREŠIN-BACHELEZ & GIOVANNA ZAPPERI: How did the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir come into existence?

NICOLE FERNÁNDEZ FERRER: The center's statutes were registered in January 1982 by two organizations, Les Muses s'amusement (made up of Delphine Seyrig, Carole Roussopoulos, and Ioana Wieder) and Les Griffonnes, which consisted of documentalists and archivists. The Left was in power in 1982, so it was the right time to ask the government for help so they could collect everything they'd filmed. In the late 1960s, feminists had discovered the Portapak, a lightweight video camera that enabled them to film women's struggles and strikes. The organization Les Muses s'amusement, which was dedicated to activist video, was founded in 1974. It was thanks to the initiative of Delphine Seyrig, an actress, human rights activist, and video maker; Carole Roussopoulos, the first woman to use a Portapak; and Ioana Wieder, a translator and very close friend of Delphine that the center opened its doors in Paris in June 1982 at 32 rue Maurice Ripoché, a little side street off the Avenue du Maine. Photographs by Martine Franck show the three founders in the three-story house. There were activities on every floor: editing in the basement, public access and screenings on the ground floor, offices on the second, and another cutting room on the third. Les Griffonnes left the project just a few days before the opening, and the center was opened by Les Muses s'amusement alone. So I was hired to compensate for the lack of archivists and documentalists.

NPB & GZ: To create a center concerned with the future of these archives and technical supports was groundbreaking.

NFF: It was certainly groundbreaking to think about conserving these videotapes and transferring them to new medium so that nothing would be lost. The center's founders

were interested in archiving as well as in continuing to produce; the two were closely linked.

NPB & GZ: The center is named after Simone de Beauvoir. How was she contacted, and how did she react to the request to use her name?

NFF: Delphine approached Simone de Beauvoir with that request, and she said yes right away. She came to the center often and always offered her support, including with fundraising. She continued to attend the screenings and discussions right up to her death in 1986.

NPB & GZ: What were your initial impressions of Carole Roussopoulos and Delphine Seyrig? What was it like to work with them?

NFF: They both had strong personalities. I had seen Delphine on stage and in films. I really liked what she was doing, and I was quite awed to be working with her. It was as if she had stepped right off the screen. From Carole I learned video editing, she was in charge of production. Delphine spent her time outside the center representing and supporting it, raising money, persuading people to come, et cetera. As for Ioana, she was also quite active and in charge of administering the project.

NPB & GZ: Why was it politically important to film women's demonstrations and strikes? Was there a conscious awareness of the need to share, to leave traces?

NFF: Yes, to preserve traces and to make the struggles more widely known. The videos circulated in France as well as in Europe. They were shared by women who participated in the actions, who didn't film the activists like insects in a jar but as companions in the struggle. We had screened videos by Carole and Delphine in Rouen. As a lesbian feminist activist, I was aware of the existence of the

Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire.¹

When I saw the video *Le FHAR*, I didn't make the connection with Carole. I thought, "It's great that Greeks came to France to film the gay and lesbian movement. Why didn't the French do it?" In fact, both Carole and her husband Paul were already living in France. I was also familiar with the work of two other video collectives, Vidéa and Vidéo oo. It was easy to stay informed, since there had been articles in the feminist press. In 1978, I had attended a video program at the Action République movie theater in Paris called "Une bande de femmes présente des bandes de femmes" [A Group of Women Presents Videos by Women].

NPB & GZ: What was the overall landscape of activist video like when the center was formed? What had changed since 1975/1976?

NFF: In terms of technology, the film and equipment were more advanced; it was the early days of color. In terms of distribution, the center took over a portion of the distribution that had previously been overseen by the distributor *Mon œil*. In terms of politics, the feminist movement was entering a phase of institutionalization. The Ministry of Culture, the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma), and the Ministry of Women's Rights, which was led by Yvette Roudy at the time, provided us with the funds to do our filming and archiving. That altered the activists' relationship with the state. The films reflect that change, since they often deal with the new laws regarding women's rights. They also dealt with things that hadn't changed, like sexual violence. From the point of view of government support for women's initiatives, the situation in France at the time was different from that which existed, for example, in the United

States or the United Kingdom, where the Right was in power.

NPB & GZ: What was the public life of the center like in the 1980s?

NFF: In 1983, Ioana Wieder launched regular screenings, "Les Bonnes soirées," and the ground floor hall at 32 rue Maurice Ripoche was always full. Simone de Beauvoir was often there, and we had discussions after the screenings. The audience was made up primarily of feminists. The Internet didn't exist at the time, but a group of feminists that called itself *Les Répondeuses* (The Responders) set up a telephone answering machine for everything connected with feminism in France and elsewhere. Our screenings were announced on that network. The audience was quite diverse, but it must be admitted that most of the women were from intellectual backgrounds, and the center suffered from an elitist image. In terms of production and distribution, there was a barter system with the women who submitted their films; in exchange, they were allowed to use the cameras and editing equipment. It was a very good idea. There were always a lot of people at the center, people who had come to submit their films, to look for films, or to view them ... it was very lively.

NPB & GZ: What happened at the center after Delphine's death in 1990? The center closed for a number of years, so its existence was not always easy. We have heard of a conflict, and conflict is certainly part of the history of feminism.

NFF: Beginning in 1985/1986, the team gradually dwindled from seven people to two, and the center, which was also in debt, closed its doors in 1993. The CNC, which subsidized the center, then took over the collection, which made it possible to salvage the videos. Everything was put in boxes and stored at the film archives in Bois-d'Arcy. In 1997, when I

¹ Le FHAR, or Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front), is a radical gay and lesbian movement founded in Paris in 1971.

began to work on the history of the feminist movement with Carole for her film *Debout! Une histoire du mouvement de libération des femmes* [Stand up! A history of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes], we felt it was really a shame that films were no longer circulating. It took us six or seven years to launch the project of reopening the center and recovering the films. New statutes were registered in 2003, and the center reopened in 2004 with the consent of its two surviving founders, Carole and Ioana.

NPB & GZ: Let's go back in time a bit—Delphine was no longer making videos in the 1980s.

NFF: That's right. She was making movies and acting quite a bit in the theater. She also devoted her efforts to raising money for the center and attempted to solve organizational problems. I remember—at least when I was there—that she was very available whenever there was something to be done, despite her professional commitments.

NPB & GZ: In the exhibition, we seek to understand how French feminism can be reread, particularly in connection with the problems confronting transnational feminism today. We think of the film made in Nairobi.² Wasn't there a certain lack of awareness of what was happening outside France or to the problems raised by women with an immigration background or from the former colonies?

NFF: There was a genuine interest in what was happening in the international feminist movements. At the demonstrations, among the people protesting with us, were women from the West Indies, Réunion, and the former colonies, but more often than not they were rendered invisible. In the 1970s, specific groups were created, such as the

Groupe des femmes latino-américaines, the Cercle des femmes brésiliennes, the Coordination des femmes noires, La Kahina ... Then in the 1980s there were MODEFEN (Mouvement des femmes noires), which Delphine supported; the Femini'autres; Les Nanas beurs; the AFAIF (Association des Femmes Arabes Immigrées en France); et cetera. Carole filmed some of these groups (the films are available for viewing at the center). The film I made in 1987 with two friends, Debbab Houria and Houria Ouad, one of whom was French-Algerian and the other French-Moroccan, *Des femmes maghrébines créent des emplois* [North African women create jobs], was a way of showing the work and entrepreneurial spirit of North African women in response to virulent racism, since there was nothing on the subject.

NPB & GZ: So even at the center the founders became aware of their identity as affluent "white" women somewhat belatedly.

NFF: It's a little more complicated than that, since as early as 1970, Carole, together with Jean Genet, filmed Palestinian combatants and then supported the Black Panthers, particularly by teaching them how to make videos. Delphine became an active opponent of the Vietnam War and also defended Inês Etienne Romeu, a Brazilian activist and opponent of the dictatorship who was kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured. In the context of French institutions and the government of the time, women and men from the West Indies or from Réunion were virtually unrepresented, and immigrants weren't represented at all.

NPB & GZ: How did Seyrig and Roussopoulos position themselves with respect to these divisions? Were they aware of them? Was it a question they asked? Perhaps they didn't have an answer. I imagine it must have been very complicated for women of their social background.

² Françoise Dasques, *La Conférence des Femmes—Nairobi 85* [The Women's Conference – Nairobi 85], 1985, 60 min.

NFF: I don't think it was a matter of social background, since Carole filmed with everyone. One has to remember that the French universalist conception of society carried a great deal of weight. Yes, the feminist movement was implicitly "white." There was in fact a lack of self-critical awareness.

NPB & GZ: And yet there were a number of racialized women's collectives. We found a document that delineates all the groups. There were about twenty.

NFF: That's right—for example, there was the *Coordination des femmes noires*, as I mentioned earlier. We knew them, because we had friends who belonged to them. Women from all these groups came to the center, and that's how Carole ended up shooting with them.

NPB & GZ: The center's history shows how important images were for the feminist struggles. The videos that could be shown right away to the women who took part in those struggles made an enormous contribution to the history of feminism. Would you agree with that idea?

NFF: Yes, not only were these images filmed by people involved in the struggles; they also served to propagate the struggles and discuss them. These weren't videos taken, edited, and shown in order to then be stored in a closet. They served as a basis for reflection and discussion. On the other hand, Carole was in the habit of showing a preliminary cut to see if the people filmed were comfortable having their speeches preserved as is, et cetera. There are very few cuts in the editing in order to give the ideas the chance to develop, which is very important and makes for very interesting things in relation to the writings of the time. In the videos, you have a living body of material. You can also see the hesitations of the people filmed, the way they look at each other and how they position

themselves. It's an invaluable resource. That's something we're able to confirm on a daily basis: the center is frequented by researchers, activists, and journalists who come to draw on images of the 1970s and 1980s. Because the center was closed from 1992 to 2004, we have a gap in that filmed feminist history, but the missing material can certainly be found elsewhere.

NPB & GZ: How does the center function today? What are your activities? You mentioned research, but you also have activities like screenings, training programs in prisons, et cetera.

NFF: When we reopened the center in 2004, we wanted to continue to pursue the missions of the founders as well as develop new projects, like visual literacy education, that appeal to a younger audience. That mission has been enriched by analyses of gender clichés and stereotypes in the audiovisual realm with the *Genrimages* website and workshops.³ We have also added another activity that I had already been engaged in for several years: work in prisons, particularly with women inmates, with screenings followed by discussions with the filmmakers. In these programs, we propose more nuanced images of women, strong women, heroines, particularly in auteur cinema. We also lead film programming and image analysis workshops. These activities, which we have been engaged in for about fifteen years now, have come to play an important role at the center. At the same time, we have also developed a research project together with the group *Travelling Féministe*, which is made up of women academics, museum and exhibition curators, as well as art historians and critics, with assistance from the Fondation de France. This group arose from the need to think deeply about the archive and make it available to artists and researchers in order to encourage

³ See www.genrimages.org.

its “reuse.” Research and study seminars were created. The *Defiant Muses* exhibition was born of this project. The core of our work is constituted by the archives, their distribution and digitization, and the promotion and acquisition of new international films. The creation of *Travelling Féministe* has fostered better coordination between activist video and art or critical thinking. Recently, for example, we acquired Laura Mulvey’s film *Riddles of the Sphinx* for distribution. We are also part of the European project *Wom@rts*, on women and art. ●

This is an abridged and lightly edited version of an interview that first appeared in the catalogue published in 2019 to coincide with the exhibition *Defiant Muses: Delphine Seyrig and the Feminist Video Collectives in France in the 1970s and 1980s*; the exhibition was organized by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in collaboration with LaM (Lille Métropole Musée d’art moderne, d’art contemporain et d’art brut) and the Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir and was on view from September 25, 2019 to March 23, 2020.



Ulrike Ottinger, *Superbia*, context: *Superbia - The Pride*, 1986 • COURTESY THE ARTIST, © ULRIKE OTTINGER



Public program

Together with the curators **Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez** and **Giovanna Zapperi**, **kunsthalle wien**'s team is developing a public program that will critically respond to and accompany the exhibition and its context. Among other things, it will revolve around histories of queer feminist and activist cinema.

Berlin-based filmmaker and photographer **Ulrike Ottinger** (b. 1942, Konstanz, Germany) will have a retrospective at **Austrian Film Museum** in May 2022. Since **Ottinger** has worked closely with **Delphine Seyrig**, her retrospective resonates strongly with the exhibition. As part of our program series *My View*, **Ottinger** will give a guided tour through the exhibition *Defiant Muses*. For more information about the filmmaker's retrospective, please visit www.filmmuseum.at.

Please also visit our website www.kunsthallewien.at and our social media channels to learn more about events on-site and free guided tours as well as our digital program. ●

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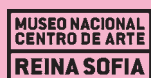
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