WOMEN OF VISION
HISTORIES IN FEMINIST FILM AND VIDEO

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editor

[14] *Victoria Vesna*

Victoria Vesna is important to this study because she undertakes her feminist work in a new medium. She is a feminist computer artist who has an extensive art practice in digital imaging, dynamic Web design, online multiuser environments, CD-ROM production, video production, installation, and performance. Vesna is one of a handful of women who is self- and formally educated in both the hands-on (programming) and theoretical aspects of this still "male" field. She is currently completing a Ph.D. in Interactive Arts with a dissertation titled "Online Public Places," and she serves as the chair of the Design Department at UCLA. She has been making feminist projects on the Web since 1995, video installation since 1986, and single-channel video since 1982 (video that plays exclusively on a television monitor without an associated, constructed, artistic environment to house it). In computer-based interactive installations like Another Day in Paradise *(1992, 1995) and* Virtual Concrete *(1995) she investigates the relations between feminism, art, science, and technology as she juxtaposes computers and video screens against "natural" objects like trees, cigars, or women's bodies. "That became my interest," she explains. "How to combine the tactile with the electronic, how the two worlds connect, and how the body connects to the intangible." With World Wide Web interactive installations like* Datamining Bodies *(2000),* Dublin Bodies *(1998), and* Bodies© INCorporated *(1997), Vesna moves her practice fully into cyberspace and stakes a feminist presence in this enormous and virtually uncharted cultural arena.*

Vesna entered the feminist art world in the '80s, after the peak of the women's movement and feminist art. Her art education was in Yugoslavia in a high-powered, high-art tradition. When she arrived in the United States, she immediately entered into the performance/video scene in New York City. At this time, the very idea of being a woman artist—singer, videomaker,

computer artist—was not the anomaly it had seemed only ten years previously to an earlier generation. Because of mentoring by feminist teachers and colleagues, Vesna's early art career seemed a legitimate possibility. Although her art school education in Yugoslavia had been structured through the same kind of male-centered elitism that defines art education in the United States, Vesna also acknowledges that whenever she sought female role models, she found them, including Carolee Schneemann, who became a colleague and friend after a chance meeting in the '80s. Vesna's video portrait of Schneemann, Vesper's Stampede to My Holy Mouth, *is the result of collaboration between them.*

I found it interesting, in the process of doing these interviews, that while one woman understands her life and career—no matter the actual number of successes, prizes, conquests or failures—as a narrative of obstacles, disappointments, and inequities, another, like Vesna, may look at a similar landscape and relate her movement through it as a steady, difficult, but rewarding journey. Certainly to some extent a matter of personal temperament as well as self-presentation, this attitude is also clearly dependent on where, when, and under what conditions a woman engages in her career in the media. The significant majority of the women whose careers began in the '80s or later narrated their life stories with little emphasis placed on the difficulty of claiming the role of feminist artist, or finding the necessary resources (educational, institutional, interpersonal) to do so. Although younger women had some level of self-consciousness about how the relative ease of their experiences had been enabled in part by the women before them (all of the younger women have at least one mentor whom they acknowledge in their interviews), they seemed to be less self-conscious about how their experiences differed *from those of the women who came before them. I observed that women from the '70s and before claimed their very careers with pride and difficulty, whereas for post-'70s artists like Vesna, this one claim, at least, could be taken for granted.*

The relative ease of Vesna's early career—one that seemed to have had its gears greased in part by the previous generation—enables her to move boldly into a field completely dominated by men. There, she insists on founding a feminist practice and pedagogy with the plan of greasing the wheels so that younger women can follow her into the world of computers. In her interview, this notion raises a related contradiction: she herself feels enabled to work in this "male" field in part because of her feminist teachers, and yet she has difficulty passing this confidence on to her female students. The pattern that I identified above—that the work of one generation eases the struggle for the next—does not seem to hold true, at least for this new

medium. Vesna argues that this has more to do with women's relationship to technology, a new and different hurdle, than with women's relationship to their own professionalism. Yet she also identifies (as do many other interviewees) a postfeminist backlash demonstrated in the unexpected guise of a generation of students less radical, less active, less angry than the one before them. Even so, in her work as feminist scholar, artist, and teacher, Vesna remembers how women facilitated her career, and she remains committed to enabling the careers of other women: "As a feminist and an artist, I have a strong feeling of responsibility. As I progress and become more active and visible, it's important that I be conscious of myself as a role model and not forget how hard it is to get there, and actually help others. . . . In my head, artist equals responsibility." While this credo is admirable, Vesna discusses how hard it can be to fulfill.

A Career as an Artist

Can you narrate your career?

The narrative of my career probably starts when an elementary schoolteacher told me I should go to art school. I came to New York from Yugoslavia and went to the High School of Art and Design, and I got into fashion design right away. After New York, we went back to Belgrade, where I was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts. It was a tough school to get into. Out of three thousand candidates, maybe three hundred are screened, and then thirty finally get in.

In a class of thirteen, there were twelve men and myself. I was sixteen, and the youngest person after me was twenty-eight. They all had beards. On the first day of class, the main professor, who was around ninety years old, came in and looked around and said, "Only one of you will be a real artist." I knew it would be me because I was the only woman. The school was actually an excellent, very European academy with years of anatomy and the technology of painting. It was a five-year school, and after three years I'd had enough. I wanted to forget about art. I rebelled big time. I actually went to the dean and signed out. It was the most radical moment that I'd experienced, leaving a school that was so hard to get into. I went to New York and within a year formed an experimental band. It was experimental, and my idea was that it was antiart. I never went to galleries; they were horrendous to me. I have to admit that I still don't relate well to the art establishment. I'm repelled by gallery openings, art circles. That's why I'm in the media I'm in. I feel so much more at home with intangible, interdisciplinary work.

But I was doing art, in a way, doing performance with my band, experimenting with slide shows, and we cut a few records. I decided in 1981, in the East Village of New York City, to produce a video for the band. I went to my friend's house to do a music video, and that was the second important moment. I was so impressed with the speed with which we edited that tape—which was probably amplified because he was on coke—but, anyway, I was impressed. I took the tape, it was called *4 Minutes to Midnight,* and ran off to Danceteria, where we had played a few times, went straight to the deejay and said, "Here's my tape." He said, knowing how unpredictable we were, "Wait until it clears out a little bit." At 4 A.M., we put in the tape that I had just finished that night on this huge screen, one of the first huge, high-res screens in a dance club.

Seeing what we did a few hours ago up on that screen, I decided, "This is it. This is what I want to do." I very quickly dissolved the band and went back to Yugoslavia to finish my degree at the art academy. I was readmitted to the school because my professor, who happened to be a woman, really wanted me to complete my studies. She came up to me at one point and said, "Look, I don't understand at all what you're doing, but I believe in you and I want you to finish this. So you'll have a huge studio, you can do whatever you want—just finish. You'll need a diploma." I'm very grateful to her, and also to my mother, who really wanted me to finish. Obviously, I wouldn't be teaching today if I didn't do what she said.

At that time, I fell immediately into video, performance, and a whole wonderfully active atmosphere that existed in Europe. Another mentor appeared—Biljana Tomic. She really helped me understand my place and purpose in the art context. Biljana included my work in many important shows. From then on, it's been very active. I haven't had too much trouble with showing. I've been quite lucky. I attribute some of that to the fact that I don't like the art world, so they accept me. It's a very strange situation. Right out of school, I exhibited at the Museum of Twentieth Century Feminist Video Show. There was no transition. I never felt a struggle, so I can't say that I've had a problem with putting my work out. The problems were in different places, with doing the work, being accepted, and becoming part of the economy. But showing, getting tapped on the shoulder? No problem.

Money

Can you talk about your problems with becoming "part of the economy"?
I've pretty much figured out my own way of dealing with resources from the start. When I came back from Europe, the film supply house, Rafik,

where I had worked had become a video production place. I came back as they were setting up. I got hired again and worked for them during the day. At night I had access to the equipment and did my own tapes. After a while, I realized that I was actually editing, and one of the most empowering things for me was that I made an effort to learn hands-on and be independent in the production process. A lot of it happened by default because I was working and I learned little by little. I would probably have been intimidated if I had been told, "This is the equipment, and this is how you're going to do it."

In the beginning I never got grants. It's only recently that there's a certain established feeling about what I'm doing. For the first ten years I financed my own work through industry work, freelance work, and willpower. When I started working with computers and installations, I would go directly to a company and pitch a project and ask them to lend me equipment and give me access. I gave up on applying for grants at one point because my collection of refusals became too depressing, so I decided to just figure out a way around it, and I'm still doing that. Now, I get grants.

Influences

Are there role models or other women who succeeded before you whose examples allowed you to do your work?

There are always these little moments when something clicks. When I went back to school and started doing performance, I was looking at a book and saw this great picture of Carolee Schneemann with a snake on her belly. I zoomed in on it and thought, this is the kind of female power in which I'm interested, where you don't deny your sexuality, you don't deny the fact that you're erotic, that you're fabulous. When I returned to New York, I was a VJ for a cable program, *Videowaves,* with artists and musicians. I saw Carolee Schneemann talking at Donell Library. I was floored by her guts and the work she does and the way she could stand up there and be so articulate about it and so strong. I went to her and asked if she would do an interview. She was very gracious and asked, "What is your name?" and I gave her my card. She looked at the card and said, "You know, I'm doing a piece called Venus Vectors. Would you help me work on it?"

A really nice relationship developed, and we continue to have a special bond. When I first saw her photo, she was a mythic personality to me, and now she is a real person in my life. She's been so incredibly special as an artist and as a woman, an amazing, inspiring force. Carolee represents one of the women who has made a path possible for me. I have it easier, thanks to her.

I started to do the interview with her, and it became a portrait. We wound up collaborating on this piece about her. It became a strong feminist statement called *Vesper's Stampede to My Holy Mouth,* attacking a taboo that nobody touches: she kisses her cat and exhibits an erotic animal-human relationship. I was trying to figure out how to represent in half an hour a woman who has twenty-five' years worth of a huge body of work. She works so much with her dreams, and I don't usually, but while I was working with her, the dreams came to me. I learned a lot about her and about myself. In my dream I had the idea to represent her through the cat. We had long discussions about the taboo against even using the word *feminist,* about how it cuts off a huge audience because it's become such a negative word, and why. I also learned the importance of loving men, which is an unusual feminist approach. She feels very protective of feminist men and feels that it is critical to support them. This was an important lesson for me.

Feminist Art

Do you consider yourself a feminist artist? And, as you create your work and career, how does feminism matter to you?
By default of being a woman, if you're conscious of yourself, you're "a feminist." I don't take it so very seriously, but I am aware of what I am doing. I feel responsible to make a statement and to be strong about it as a woman. However, I feel the strongest statements are those in which you don't necessarily focus on feminism but manage to project that message through the work.

I do have occasions when I focus on it. For instance, I did a piece that took me about three years to complete called *Sometimes a Cigar Is Only a Cigar (Freud).* I had a studio in Soho in the basement of a cigar factory across the street from Castelli Gallery. When you walked in, it was as if you walked into the seventeenth century. The laborers were all women, paid maybe $3 or $4 an hour. They all smoke cigars in that musty, dark atmosphere with a boss who keeps track of what they're doing. I had to pass the cigar factory daily to get to my studio and eventually became obsessed with this space that existed in parallel with an elite art world right outside. I started making friends with the women there and began to think that I would do a documentary about the place. Instead, it became a piece about the feminine power of Latin women, and the matriarchs who helped the slaves in Cuba survive through rituals using cigars. The project became an installation that was exhibited at the alternative art space, PS 1, and an artist book. It consisted of six large objects: two triangles, one square, and

three pillars with video monitors embedded inside. The room smelled like tobacco, yet there was an electronic element to it. From that point on I explore how to combine the tactile with the electronic, how the two worlds connect, and how the body connects to the intangible.

Another Day in Paradise

I've had a fascination with computers since 1985, when I did one of my last music videos with a band. I had an opportunity to experiment with computer graphics, and it was a moment of epiphany, just as with my first video. I wanted to get my hands on it. In L.A., I found a mom-and-pop operation that wanted an artist to learn animation and computer graphics. I signed a deal with them that was actually pretty thankless. For each hour of learning, I owed ten hours of work. Because I was so hungry for knowledge, I did maybe fifty to sixty hours of study and had this huge amount of hours that I owed them. Finally, the woman in charge, Stephanie Slade, came up to me and said she had a wild idea of connecting artists from around the world by computer and having them work together on a kind of collage. I said, "I'll do that. I know artists from all over. That's how I'll pay off my hours." This experiment in 1992 had a profound effect on me. I was introduced to the networking technology and became fascinated with a network as a creative space.

At that stage, I met Kathy Brew and Sean Kilcoyne, with whom I started a project. Living in Irvine, I decided to do a piece with palm trees, *Another Day in Paradise.* When we landed at the John Wayne Airport in Irvine, I was confronted with a John Wayne statue surrounded by palm trees, and I was absolutely fascinated by this Stalinistic image of him. It was like Eastern Europe, but completely right wing. I noticed that the trees look fake, look real, feel fake, feel real. I couldn't figure it out. I was scratching at one of the trees, and a woman who was a guard said, "You know, those trees are preserved with silicone." Here was this fabulous atrium, light pouring in, and they're preserving trees with silicone!

After doing some research, I tracked down the company in Carlsbad that made those trees and said to them, "I'll do a commercial promo for you, and in return I want you to build me three trees with video monitors inside." And they agreed. It was a nice subversive thing, but then it kind of turned on me because I really was promoting them as well as getting material for my own work. At the same time, I met this young Vietnamese man, Vi Vuong, at a computer lab who wanted me to be his mentor as an artist. He told me about the time he ran away from Vietnam on a boat and

how he finally landed at John Wayne Airport. Vi became the central character of this piece.

Of course, the project is about displacement of people and nature, and the silicone in our bodies. I thought of the silicone palm trees, housing developments, and how we already live in a virtual environment—we don't need to put on the goggles, it's here. So I created these three trees, one of which was shaped a little bit like a woman. That was the "video tree" in which you viewed the Irvine landscape, the development, and if you took the time to sit down and put earphones on, you heard the very tragic story of how this young man ran away from Vietnam. The second tree was a surveillance camera with about a quarter-inch lens, so you did not see it but yourself. My message there was about how we're all a part of this and you can't really separate yourself from this fake, simulated environment. The third tree had an interactive touch screen. That's where Sean Kilcoyne and Kathy Brew helped me with getting materials. Kathy provided material on Vietnam War widows, on both sides. Sean, as a Vietnam vet, dealt with the issue of reclaiming humanity after doing horrendous things. It's a kind of virtual palm tree place. If you go in, you find out what's swept under the rug, and it's not very pretty.

Virtual Concrete and Bodies© INCorporated

That tree project led me to think about silicon a lot. This was during the Northridge earthquake, when people were isolated and communicating through silicon. I realized that it is silicon as an element, silicon in concrete and in chips, that propels the information superhighway. So I was still investigating the idea of the virtual and the concrete, and also the body and the disembodied, how we relate to this duality we're brought up with. I decided to create a concrete path that you could walk on, on top of which were images of a male and a female body, eight feet long. I found out a way to take an electrostatic print and remove the paper so that only the paper is concrete. The digital becomes the concrete. But that didn't go far enough as a connection to the intangible, so I decided to put in a video camera looking at the path so that as you step on these bodies you're connected to the Internet and the rest of us can look at who's walking on the bodies. I had sensors on both sides of the concrete path with six channels.

Images of the bodies on concrete were thus captured in a photograph, converted into digits, manipulated, printed, and placed onto concrete. Once concretized, the bodies—now granted physicality—could be accepted by the art world and entered into the gallery or museum space, a space where

the object is usually considered sacred and untouchable. I wanted the audience to walk on the bodies in pure irreverence, to trespass as they moved on the piece that uncannily resembled the "sacred" fresco. I must confess that the concrete was also a tongue-in-cheek statement about the digital artist working within the confines of the museum.

The interactivity with the physical piece was successful: people walked, crawled on the concrete, sparked off sounds, and stared at the camera. On the Web, however, I felt that watching the activity of people in the gallery through the camera was not enough. Since the core idea of the project was that of a "real" and "virtual" body in cyberspace, I decided that a good way to extend the interactivity would be for the audience to create a body at a distance. Therefore, I put a simple questionnaire on the same page on which the video of the installation was being projected and asked participants to give us a name for their body, assign it a gender, and make a statement about what the body meant to them. To my surprise, there were more than a thousand bodies on order in two weeks—and before long, people were asking to "see" the bodies they had "ordered." This demand persisted and made me reconsider the meaning of online identity. So that's my latest work, dealing with the whole issue of the evidence of the body.

Bodies© INCorporated was conceived as a response to the need of the *Virtual Concrete* online audience to see their bodies, and it was informed by my research of MOOs, multiuser worlds, cyborgs, and avatars. I did not want to simply send back what was demanded but answer in a way that would prompt the audience to consider their relationship to the Internet and the meaning of online representation.

When I uploaded the questionnaire in *Virtual Concrete* asking the audience to "order" their imaginary body, it never crossed my mind to take it much further from the conceptual realm. But I was intrigued by the need to be represented graphically and further to have these bodies somehow enact a life of their own. This fantasy is one that could easily be manipulated into a convenient way to gather personal data for other purposes. And, in fact, large corporations do use this seemingly democratic space; as we become incorporated into it, we also enter a collective state that could mean the loss of identity. It is a marketplace; it is an imaginary space.

The title *Bodies© INCorporated* is a play on words. *Bodies* is accompanied by a copyright symbol and *INCorporated* draws on the *corpus* root while alluding to a corporation: bodies are incorporated into the Internet and their information is copyrighted. The logo of the project is a bronze head with a copyright sign on its third eye, signifying the inherent contradiction of efforts to control information flow. Once the participants enter the project, they click through a series of legal notifications. My goal was to

create a controlling space where the signing of legal documents and inputting of personal data become an emotional experience. These legal announcements were taken from the Disney Web site and edited to suit our needs. The assumption is that no one is reading these documents, despite the fact that they take away all rights—a tactic designed to alert participants about the legal issues attached to their navigation through information space.

Upon entering the main site, participants are invited to create their own bodies and become "members." They have a choice of twelve textures with attached meanings, which are a combination of alchemical properties and marketing strategies. The body parts are female, male, and infantile, left and right legs and arms, torso and head. The bodies themselves are wire frames that were donated by Viewpoint Datalabs, three-dimensional scans that are used for medical imaging. It is fascinating to track how people play with gender and to notice that most decide to be their opposite, or transgendered.

Women in Technology

In several of the pieces you described, silicone is an important compound. Can you talk about that and also the issue of feminist production on the Internet?

My initial connection to silicone is with implants, particularly with how it's put into the breasts of women. It's mostly women who wind up with silicone inside them. I believe that the treatment of nature runs parallel to the treatment of women.

I'm very keenly aware that there are so few women in technology. It's very sad. I find myself working with only men all the time. I don't mind working with men—I have nothing against men—but I have a problem with the situation. So it's my responsibility to try to change it. I deal with issues of women and technology, as an educator, on a daily basis. On the Internet there's now a pretty good percentage of women, so there's also real hope. Nonlinear thinking is easy for us. So even though the technology, from hardware to software, is foreign to us, as it becomes more user-friendly, we can work well with it.

As an educator, I try to pass on my knowledge. It's difficult. As we get to an advanced level, women start dropping out. It's hard to pull them back in, to have them go against their nature. In order to be effective in this medium, you have to be able to work with it deeply, not just on the surface level with the software. You have to go inside and program. This is foreign territory to us; we're not conditioned to do this work. Physically, spatially, we're not programmed to think this way. What I have to tell them is, "You're

a feminist, you *have* to go against your nature just to survive in the world we're in and try to make a difference." We're living in an age of anomaly. Hundreds of years from now people will look back at us and say, "They did try, at one point." But it's pretty grim, if you look at it realistically. I look at who's in power, at how many men are really in the top echelons making decisions. It's really their world more than our world.

I'm afraid of the Bill Viola syndrome in which one person becomes representative of the entire field.[1] All the women who have been working in video since the beginning have been submerged. Who knows where they are? I'm afraid this will happen with digital technology. Right now, there's a window. There's nothing established in the field, particularly in the art world. But the art world is very similar to the computer industry. It's 90 percent male. And once art and industry merge, our survival will be questionable.

I am grateful to all of the women who have allowed me to have this feeling of self-confidence and power. I'm also careful and conscious of the young women coming up now who are actually becoming backward about feminism, and I'm trying to bring them up-to-date. I don't know where it's coming from, but that backward turn is very prevalent—it's like they're living in the '50s. It's a strange time because many women who are more progressive are actually older, and often it's younger women who are more conservative. It will be interesting to see how these ideological oppositions are resolved.

Artist Equals Responsibility

How do you see your role as an academic combining with your role as an artist?

It is crucial for women to learn this technology, especially hands-on. I started out thinking that I was a role model, but this was clearly not enough. So I decided that I really have to pay attention to the fact that women do get intimidated by this technology. So, obviously, knowledge is power. If I'm in a position to pass on the knowledge and create this power in women, I have the ability to perform a very important task. Connecting academia with industry is important to me because in my field women may end up in industry rather than the art world, and I want them to be conscious of their role and power there.

Where do you see your place in the history of feminist film and video?

I'm hoping that I'm in the generation of women who can break through the glass ceiling. In my work with technology, I find myself working more

and more with industry. Also, I'm in a university setting that, like the computer industry, has its own hierarchy that needs to be redefined. I am a kind of bridge between two worlds and each has that ceiling. My hope is to use the small window of opportunity that is given with this new medium to pass through the crack and create more space for other women to fully participate. We haven't done it yet, but it's possible and I'm hopeful. I hope I can be one of the women who can reach the top and not forget to create opportunities for the women who come after.

Please talk about being an artist. Why, since you hate art, are you an artist, and what does it mean to you to be a feminist artist?
I have a love-hate relationship with the idea of myself as an artist. It's a matter of established ideas of what an artist is. I'm repelled by it and have to find the will to destroy that idea and create another image. The guy with a beret in front of an easel: that's not me. As a feminist and an artist, I have a strong feeling of responsibility. As I progress and become more active and visible, it's important that I be conscious of myself as a role model and not forget how hard it is to get there and actually help others. The people who have helped me were largely women. I don't want to forget that or start believing press releases and hype. I want to be in a place within the art world where I can help to redefine what it stands for and what the image of an artist is. In my head, artist equals responsibility.

Media Work

1982	*Four Minutes to Midnight,* video
1984, 1985	*Red Angel,* performance and video/environmental installation
1984, 1985	*Thunderbolt,* performance and video
1986, 1987	*Sictransitgloriamundi,* installation/performance
1989	*Crnica,* Installation
1990	*Sometimes a Cigar Is Only a Cigar (Freud),* performance-image
1992	*Vesper's Stampede to My Holy Mouth,* ¾" video (with Carolee Schneemann)
1992, 1995	*Another Day in Paradise,* interactive installation
1995	*Virtual Concrete,* networked installation
1997	*Bodies© INCorporated,* WWW interactive installation
1997	*Life in the Universe with Stephen Hawking,* CD-ROM/WWW
1998	*Dublin Bodies,* WWW interactive installation
1999	*ZKM Bodies,* WWW interactive installation
2000	*Datamining Bodies,* WWW interactive installation

Distribution and Contact information

Work available from the artist's Web site: http://vv.arts.ucla.edu