Revising ‘Re-vision’: Documenting 1970s Feminisms and the Queer Potentiality of Digital Feminist Archives

Roxanne Samer

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. –Adrienne Rich

In 1972, Adrienne Rich wrote an essay that would both profoundly shape feminist approaches to women’s history in the decades to come and go on to inform feminists’ own self-archiving practices. ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ paints a provocative portrait of contemporary women as ‘sleepwalkers’ awakening together to reject the history and tradition of male thinkers and name themselves as authors in their own right (Rich, 1972: 18). The essay initially reads as an attempt to encourage female writers of fiction and poetry; however, its call to ‘re-vision’ women’s histories provoked responses from myriad feminists across scholarly and artistic spectrums. They pursued this project of self-knowledge with the sincere belief that in reimagining women’s pasts, they could better know themselves in the present, and guarantee the survival of women and the continuation of women’s creative and intellectual work in the future. Like Rich, they considered their victimization and anger to be birthing pains and thought of themselves as “bearing [them]selves” through their creations (Rich, 1972: 25). In 1979, the visual artist Judy Chicago created The Dinner Party, a giant triangular dining table installation with thirty-nine vulva-like place settings, so that women from across time—from ‘the primordial goddess’ to Sappho to Georgia O’Keefe—might sit together in conversation. Those who viewed the work, including early audiences and those to visit it since its permanent instillation at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007, would become participants in this cross-temporal feminist communion. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist historians also set about to uncover the secret lives of women, famous and forgotten, across the centuries. Their histories generally served as celebrations of these women’s pasts and drew connections between their lives and those of women in the present. In Surpassing the Love of Men, Lillian Faderman, for example, ultimately claimed various ‘romantic friendships’ from across the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries to
be early iterations of lesbian feminism (Faderman, 1981: 20). Feminist film theorists, meanwhile, contended that they had to ‘re-vision’ much of film history—including not only its objects and approaches but its structures of vision as well—before an authentic women’s cinema could emerge (Doane, Mellencamp, Williams, 1984: 2, 14-15). Though the particular stakes of each of their disciplines and media varied, these assorted feminist projects from the 1970s and 1980s agreed with Rich that knowledge of women’s history as their own history was imperative for women, as self-actualized creatures, to survive.

For many feminists today, ‘re-vision’ prevails as an approach to historiography and as an argument for archiving. And as the women who first developed its methodologies age, a number of them have moved on from documenting the lives of women before them to preparing for the preservation of their own lives as history. How current and future feminist historians, including those who study what is typically known as ‘the second wave,’ might approach such archives becomes an important question. Contrary to Susan Faludi’s claim that American feminism’s ‘inability to conceive of a succession has crippled women’s progress’ (2010: 29), I argue that the emphasis on the ‘self’ in much ‘re-vision’ work has caused feminism to think succession in such an obsessive manner that any other form of temporal relation outside of teleological ‘waves,’ ‘generations,’ ‘inheritance,’ and ‘descent’ has become practically unimaginable. This becomes a problem because, though documenting the lives of those marginalized in the past remains a commendable practice, for many how and why they might go about doing so are no longer the same as they were in the 1970s. Due to the developments of woman-of-color feminisms in the 1970s and 1980s, and deconstructive feminism and queer theory in the 1990s, the ahistorical and essentialist conception of ‘woman’ that much ‘re-vision’ work depends upon has been called into question. [1] More recently, queer, postcolonial, and media studies scholars—often building off Michel Foucault’s scholarship on archeology and genealogy—have begun to destabilize traditional understandings of temporality and historiography. [2] Together these bodies of scholarship raise questions about whether ‘survival’ (as well as ‘survival for whom’) should continue to be the operative framework for feminist historiography. With the continued emergence of 1970s feminist archives, feminist historians need to ask how they might receive them and whether they might do so such that they do not iterate re-vision’s assumptions of sameness across time. Here, I survey two sets of such archives—documentary films about 1970s feminisms and attendant as well as related digital feminist archives—and propose a way of receiving them that revises ‘re-vision’ while nonetheless engaging with its past.
In doing so, I join a number of recent scholars of feminism, who claim that women born during and after the 1970s have in fact demonstrated an ongoing interest in feminist history, though it may have taken forms that went unrecognized or unappreciated by older feminists. In *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (2013), Kate Eichhorn describes the institutionalization of feminist archives as potential sites for queer cross-temporal feminist discourse, as they bring together both texts from different times (such as 1970s and 1990s feminist underground publications) as well as people from different times (researchers and the researched). Building off such claims, I am interested in how online access to original feminist materials and interviews could potentially enable cross-temporal encounters alternative to those of traditional feminist historical logics. Feminist activists, bloggers, and scholars are interested in feminist pasts, and now, thanks to the digital nature of a number of recent feminist archives, much of feminism—past and present—coexists in the close proximity of online space. For those, such as myself, who are interested in writing or otherwise conceptualizing feminist histories but did not live through the 1970s, many of these pasts are now at our fingertips, and as they reach out, beckoning the attention of those of us in the present, we are at theirs. I propose we think feminism together, not as mothers and daughters but as cross-temporal peers, co-conspirators, and even perhaps lovers of sorts, as we come together in the process of imagining possible futures, in which, if we are lucky, none of us will survive.

**The Films**

In addition to the many physical feminist archives at academic institutions—such as the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard University, the Sophia Smith Collection Women’s History Archives at Smith College, and the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture at Duke University—which are largely only accessible to scholars and/or those who are able to travel to their locations, 1970s feminists have been branching out into film and new media with the explicit goal of bringing their histories to wider and younger audiences. Despite this goal, most of these documentary films do little to complicate how the meanings of ‘woman’ or ‘self’ in re-vision’s ‘drive to self-knowledge’ may change across time and thus presume a relevancy that might not in fact meet their viewers’ understanding of feminist history’s relation to themselves in the present. *Women Art Revolution* (2010) and *Makers: Women Who Make America* (2013) are two such films; however,
their narratives are supplemented online by digital archives that extend their original footage and grant these histories the potential to be taken up in ways previously unimaginable.

Lynn Hershman Leeson’s 2010 film /Women Art Revolution (/WAR) offers a history of the Feminist Art Movement in the United States. Though the film screened at Sundance, Toronto, and Berlin International Film Festivals to critical acclaim and documents the lives and art of some of the latter half of the twentieth century’s most recognized artists, the primary story it tells is one of lack—namely, censorship and non-recognition. It wields a ‘re-vision’ argument for self-knowledge in the face of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society but does so without complicating the purely negative terms by which this oppression is presumed to work. And while the film includes women of color, it does not account for any disparities in the admission of different women into art institutions or the art historical canon. Instead, the film provides an overview that keeps ‘women’ and ‘men’ diametrically opposed by chronologically recounting some of the Feminist Art Movement’s most pivotal moments—from the 1968 Miss America Pageant protest to Congress’ censoring of The Dinner Party to Ana Mendieta’s suspicious death—through the cutting together of documentary footage and dozens of interviews that Hersham Leeson shot over the course of nearly forty years.

Two minutes into the film, ‘slides’ of 1970s feminist artists’ art works flicker on screen against a black background, the accompanying ‘clicker’ sounds replicating the effect of what it would be like to see them in an art history lecture, as Hersham Leeson tells viewers in a voice-over, ‘This film is peppered with images, which for years you were prevented from seeing, because there was no access to them. This film is the remains of an insistent history that refuses to wait any longer to be told.’ By opening the film, Hersham Leeson presumes that others were seeking out this history of 1970s feminist art in the U.S. but could not find it, a claim that recalls the histories of women before then that 1970s feminists themselves once sought out. For this reason, she suggests, they see themselves as needing to serve as their own historians. It is a suggestion that minimizes the differences between the historical circumstances of women before them and their own. The paradoxical nature of this suggestion becomes ever the more apparent in the New York Times review of the film, which quotes Hersham Leeson before describing the institutionalization of her own artwork: ‘’We’re not talking about a piece of history that had been erased. It hadn’t been written about in the first place,’’ said Ms. Hersham Leeson, whose works are in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others’ (Veltam, 2011). I point this out not to make the postfeminist
claim that equality has been achieved (it hasn’t) such that 1970s feminists ought to ‘let it go’ (they shouldn’t) but to point to the ways in which, with this film, feminist ahistorical claims of sameness across time have been extended into the present. The film becomes a self-memorialization of sorts. It even concludes with an Academy Awards style tribute to its deceased subjects: Arlene Raven, Nancy Spero, Hannah Wilke, Marcia Tucker, Sylvia Sleigh and Ana Mendieta. The physical ‘survival’ of much of these women’s artwork in museums as well as the intellectual preservation of their contributions in art history courses and textbooks (even if exemplary of tokenism at times) is elided such that viewers are asked to make little more of their artwork and activism other than remember them as history.

Dyllan McGee, Betsy West, and Peter Kunhardt’s 2013 film *Makers: Women Who Make America* takes a slightly different approach to its subject matter. Rather than focus on any particular sector of feminism, such as the Feminist Art Movement, *Makers* tells the more general story of how ‘second wave feminism’ changed the lives of American citizens for the better. In doing so, it largely focuses on legal change and has a liberal feminist bias but, having learned from past critiques of feminist historiographical exclusionism, includes the perspectives and anecdotes of more radical feminists, Black feminists, and Chicana feminists and touches on non-legal feminist battles as well. Like *WAR, Makers* moves chronologically (starting with Betty Friedan’s 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* and extending into concerns of American women in the present). It is also structured largely around talking head interviews, strung together with voiceover narration, though this time the narration is not voiced in first person by one or more of the filmmakers but in third person by the actress Meryl Streep. The documentary culls from dozens of archives for its documentary film footage, newspaper headlines, and still photographs, however, like *WAR*, it contributes original interviews, in this case all conducted relatively recently. In approaching this past by way of women in the present, the viewer witnesses how feminism lives on in contemporary culture and politics. The inheritance is apparent.

Due to the film’s generally uncontroversial thesis that 1970s U.S. feminisms changed American women’s lives for the better and its respectable initial airing on PBS, the filmmakers were able to solicit the participation of hundreds of women, notable for their contributions to women’s lives, whether in politics, organizing, or culture/entertainment, including Gloria Steinem, Alix Kates Shulman, Rita Mae Brown, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Ellen Degeneres, and Oprah Winfrey. As this list suggests, *Makers*, unlike *WAR*, insists on the continued recognition of feminists’
contributes to American political and cultural spheres. It posits its younger interviewees as direct beneficiaries of its older interviewees’ achievements and establishes a clear temporal line of descent from past to present. However, in order to make this argument, the film finds itself needing to perform a fair amount of rhetorical gymnastics at its conclusion, as it attempts to address the ‘postfeminism’ that supposedly characterizes women’s attitudes today. The last half hour of the film cuts together previously identified ‘second wave’ interviewees delineating their hopes for younger generations of women as well as what they see as their own movement’s failures—the unratified Equal Rights Amendment and the dissolution of many 1970s feminist organizations in the 1980s—with a set of new interviewees, including the grown biological daughter of one of the second wavers, speaking to their disinterest in the kinds of activism that the generation before them initiated while also recognizing how their choices were made possible by them. The tension is for the most part resolved in the film’s last few minutes, as it builds to a more hopeful finale, complete with an unabashed swelling score, suggesting that the movement did not fail so much as remains unfinished. However, the film does little to account for how feminism itself might need to change in order to survive, and it refuses to consider any possible relationships between past and present feminisms other than that of the mother and daughter who may or may not work their problems out.

The Digital Archives

While it might sound like I am asking a lot of these two documentaries, both /WAR and Makers actually offer alternatives to their own narrative arcs in that neither claims to be a self-contained text. Instead, they have both made substantial portions of their original footage available to interested viewers online. In doing so, these projects open up the ways in which those on the receiving end of 1970s feminist history could possibly engage with their content. Put another way, the archives exceed the teleological claims of their original sources. Though not especially innovative as far as new media platforms are concerned, these interview-based archives are remarkable for offering flexibility, dynamism, and reciprocity in the approach to this history.

Stanford University provides online access to the raw footage and transcripts of the interviews conducted for /WAR as part of its digital collections. Rather than receiving the interviews piecemeal through a few second excerpts woven together in the film around particular events, on
the Stanford site viewers can watch entire interviews with the film’s interviewees, which are typically between twenty minutes and an hour long, or download and read PDFs of the transcripts of these interviews. Interestingly, when watching these full interviews, the viewer is also privy to the construction of documentary content, as some interviewees, such as B. Ruby Rich, can be seen and heard asking to start the articulation of an idea or memory over again and others, such as the Guerrilla Girls, can be seen and heard being asked to provide answers in complete sentences. The viewers-turned-researchers are thus provided with less mediated engagement with each of the artists and critics that is replete with greater detail and nuance than they were as mere viewers. For a while, there was also a growing ‘community-curated archive’ of women’s artworks on a different !WAR site, but while a couple years ago there were over four hundred contributions there now appear to be only one hundred and twelve, suggesting that the site has not only stalled but for some reason decreased its activity.

For the release of Makers, PBS partnered with AOL, and together they built a supplementary ongoing collection of thousands of interviews online, most of which are not part of the three and a half hour film itself. These interviews are not currently available in their entirety, but each instead serves as a mini-documentary of sorts, which in two to ten minutes allows a single interviewee to tell one or many stories related to their experiences as a feminist (activist, organizer, politician, author, entrepreneur, comedian, actress, etc.). Viewers can build playlists and watch as many of these mini-documentaries in a sitting as they wish. And, in visiting the site, they are directed toward more ways to interact with its content and related content through blog posts, Twitter feeds, and other new media components. One such new media opportunity that Makers provided was a forty minute Twitter chat with screenwriter and director Callie Khouri on September 17th, 2013. As a Twitter follower of @MAKERSwomen who was online at the appointed time, I was able to witness and participate (though my question about writing as a feminist for network-as opposed to premium-cable television went unanswered). Since then, they have held a number of such #MAKERSchat events. The viewers or spectators become interactive participants, able to pick and choose what they watch and in what order as well as extend their engagements across time. With both of these digital archives, narratives pivoting on descent or survival (and the presumptions of sameness of each) are likely less dominant, as chronology itself gets rearranged.

Though unique as documentaries of 1970s feminisms with extensive online supplements, the !WAR and Makers projects are in fact but two recent additions to a growing body of digital
feminist archives easily accessible to the public online. Simpler in format but no less rich in content, a number of original feminist journals have been digitized and are now available to read and/or download online. Among these are the socialist feminist film journal Jump Cut (1974-present), the feminist art journal Heresies (1977-1993), the Canadian feminist newspaper Broadside (1979-1989), and the feminist science fiction fanzine Janus (later Aurora) (1975-1990). Unlike the documentary films and their online interviews, these journal issues are offered up with little narrative framing other than a few paragraphs on each of their histories. This is also the case for other original source digital feminist archives, such as Duke University’s ‘Documents from the Women’s Liberation Movement’ online archival collection and the Lesbian Herstory Archives’ ‘Herstories: A Digital Collection.’ The former accumulates plain text transcriptions of hundreds of the U.S. Women’s Liberation Movement’s most iconic written documents, including Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” and Radicalesbians’ “The Woman Identified Woman.” The latter, meanwhile, houses a series of ten video interviews about the formation and impact of the organization the Daughters of Bilitis as well as one hundred and thirty digitized audio recordings of lesbian and lesbian feminist interviews, talks, readings, and panels from the 1970s and 1980s, including the interviews that Madeline D. Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy conducted for their ethnography of the 1930s-1960s working class Buffalo lesbian bar scene, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold (1993), dozens of Audre Lorde’s speeches and poetry readings (often with Adrienne Rich), and a recording of the 1977 MLA panel on ‘Lesbians and Literature,’ featuring Julia (Penelope) Stanley, Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, Judith McDaniel, and Adrienne Rich.

With only brief factual information accompanying these audio recordings, they are simply there awaiting our listening. Just as one might stream a news or entertainment podcast as one prepares dinner or gets ready for bed, one can listen to Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich read lesbian feminist poetry to rooms of dozens, if not hundreds, of women in the past and then the Q&A from afterwards. Furthermore, one can fast-forward, pause, rewind, and repeat any of these recordings, and, in a way, learn the ins and outs of their events in a more thorough fashion than perhaps those who were originally involved. The affect of their work alters. One can hear Lorde or Rich working through ideas that they would later publish as essays, and, for me at least, the weight of their written words are more often than not affirmed in the sobriety of their voices. Meanwhile, in Mary Daly’s prose, one can hear a sense of humor that would most likely otherwise go unnoticed when reading her theological tomes. In general, the opportunity to listen
and watch as well as read one’s way through this lesbian, feminist, and lesbian feminist history and to easily access entire runs of print journals from the comfort of one’s home or local library (depending on where one has internet access) profoundly changes the experience of engaging with ‘the second wave.’ And one can only wonder how this engagement would change even further if it employed the digital tools of gifs, memes, sampling, and vids. The potentiality, however, is suggested by projects such as Danielle Henderson’s Feminist Ryan Gosling and Lila Futuransky’s critical fanvid Black Steel, both of which rework feminist texts from the 1970s and 1980s (theory in the first case and film in the second) to make arguments about politics in the present.

**Conclusion**

Both Susan Faludi and the !WAR and Makers filmmakers would suggest that younger feminists would not be interested in such materials (despite the films’ clear attempts to reach out to them nonetheless). The popular narrative of ‘feminism’s ritual matricide,’ as Faludi names it, remains quite strong. However, online reviews of Makers refuse such conclusions. Erica K. Landau at Bitch Media claims the archival site to be a necessity as feminism is too big for a three-hour documentary and still ongoing. Jill Filipovic at The Guardian, meanwhile, expresses gratefulness for the project and its women before asking where today’s digital feminists are and requesting readers comment upon which contemporary feminists they would have liked to see included in the film. This does not mean, however, that present day feminists understand these archives’ preservations in the same light that their archivists do or initially did. Their politics are usually not the same, and they often refuse to consider themselves extensions or continuations of the women’s movement. However, that need not mean that their interest in past feminisms wanes. In fact, as Kate Eichhorn points out, many women—especially queer women—born during or since the 1970s have learned from older feminists’ archival impulses and because of this have been sure to archive their own work while also collecting and preserving radical feminist writings and art from before their time. In doing so, their private collections become meeting grounds of multiple feminist times, producing a temporal collage effect in which similarities as well as differences get highlighted. Furthermore, Eichhorn is correct to point out that many volunteer-run feminist archives, such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, have depended upon recruiting young volunteers to help keep their organizations afloat. They have
been able to survive not by blindly clinging to their original principles of lesbian separatism and/or radical feminism but by augmenting such principles with those of their younger supporters. For example, the Lesbian Herstory Archives has, due to the prompting of its younger volunteers, ‘made an effort to adapt to changing understandings of gender and sexuality (for example, by working to accommodate and accept the place of transgender women who identify as lesbians and transgender men who once identified as butch dykes’) (Eichorn, 2013: 48-49).

As archives of the 1970s grow increasingly digital, there is a lot that younger feminists could contribute to the process, which could make it even more of a cross-temporal affair, rather than an appeal for self-recognition from one time to another. I, for one, devoted many hours of my summer two years ago to scanning the Janus/Aurora fanzines for their editor Jeanne Gomoll upon learning that this work was something she had been meaning to do but had not gotten around to yet. I did this not because I agreed with everything written within their pages (in fact, the many voices within them often do not agree with each other), but because I believed that the negotiations therein ought to be available to more than the few who still had stashes of these fanzines in their basements (and those of us persistent enough to seek them out and borrow copies). Janus/Aurora documents the exciting attempts of 1970s and 1980s feminists to imagine entirely other worlds where life might one day be substantially different, an activity that I would argue continues to motivate not just feminists but many queer and otherwise oppressed people who live, love, organize, and create together.\[4\]

While the mother/daughter narratives might still dominate the popular imagination of cross-temporal feminist relations and the ‘wave’ metaphor, which for the most part keeps teleological historiographical logics in line, has been cemented by the establishment of ‘first wave’ and ‘second wave’ as topical categories by the Library of Congress (Hewitt, 2010: 8), those of us interested in continuing feminist history writing need not do so in a manner that continues the self-(mis)recognition on which each of these traditions rely. As Alexandra Juhasz points out in a recent essay on Woman’s Building videos now housed in the Getty Archives, we are not who they imagined us to be (Juhasz, 2011: 109). I would add to this that, should gender, sexuality, and desire be completely restructured in a feminist and queer future, the surviving subjects will not be us either. However, if we understand that we have allies in 1970s feminisms in this process of imagination, we can begin to revise ‘re-vision’ and read, watch, and listen to this history differently. With an eye and ear to potentiality and a queer commitment to repurposing, feminist historiography becomes no longer a matter of self-knowledge, self-birth or self-
awakening but more a collective un-becoming, as what was and what is—both of which are imperfect and historically limited—think together what could be.

References