

THE FEMININE BODY: JOYCE WIELAND'S *WATER SARK*

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Kay Armatage soutient qu'en tant qu'artiste, Joyce Wieland a recherché le féminin comme site d'images demeurées inexplorées par ses collègues masculins, pour construire une esthétique basée sur une tradition qu'elle voit comme appartenant aux femmes.

Armatage analyse un de ses premiers films, Water Sark (1964), dans lequel se voit sa "découverte" du "corps féminin," et elle élucide les liens intrigants entre les stratégies textuelles originales de la cinéaste, et "l'écriture féminine."

Preliminaries/Categories

Joyce Wieland's work can be loosely divided into categories which separate those films which feature the rural, urban or domestic landscape, (*Reason Over Passion*, 1933, *Sailboat*, *Dripping Water*) from those which feature animals (*Rat Life and Diet in North America*, *Catfood*, *Birds At Sunrise*) and humans (*Patriotism*, *Peggy's Blue Skylight*, *Pierre Vallieres*, *Solidarity*, *Hand-Tinting*, *A and B In Ontario*, and *Water Sark*.) Those categories of course overlap to some degree. *Reason Over Passion* contains two important human sequences: the central section in which images of Trudeau supplant the Ontario landscape, and the more crucial sequence in which Wieland silently sings "O Canada" as she films her own reflection. *Water Sark* (1964) also centrally concerns the domestic landscape, the element of the film which Wieland herself emphasized in her description of it as ecstatic housewifery, and which Lauren Rabinovitz described as creating the kitchen table as "domestic altar."¹ There is some sense to this topology: these divisions indicate categories which persist in her works in other media as well, and they provide useful entries to Wieland's political aesthetic.

Critical Method

In a recent article about *Hand-Tinting*, Kass Banning argued that the film constructs an unspeakable excess, a space of contradiction, an inscription of difference, through the rhythmic play not only of the female forms which

shape the image but of the rhythmic oscillation of the film material itself through lateral flips of the image which vary the areas of dense emulsion from side to side. The symmetrical enclosure which is produced thereby constructs an elsewhere, an outside of the film, but encloses it in the centre of the image. Banning defined this textual activity as a subversion, a construction of a terrain of potentially avant-garde practice marked by a heterogeneous elsewhere, difference – a feminine site of utopian possibility. She was at pains to point out, however, that in her considerations of a feminine excess in the text, she was not searching for feminine motifs as a radical content to counter phallic motifs. Her effort was to trace a textual activity "as a practice of difference, of difference inscribed."²

Although I concur with Banning's reluctance to participate in a critical practice which has become identified with a sociologizing and phenomenological approach which has little apparent strategical value as a feminist activity, I find it difficult to make such sharp distinctions in relation to Wieland's work. As an artist Wieland has consistently and consciously sought out the feminine precisely as a site of potential images which have remained unexplored by her male counterparts, and in which she could construct an aesthetic based upon a tradition which she saw as belonging to women. The trace of the feminine in her work is not simply a textual practise, but the insistence on the feminine body as the subject of playful dilation constitutes yet another excess.

The Discovery of the Body

Although Wieland's filmography lists six films as predating *Water Sark*, until recently only two were available. *Larry's Recent Behaviour* (1963) and *Patriotism II* (1964) both feature men in more or less grotesque and comic behaviour. *Patriotism* in particular links the eponymous attitude with a parodied phallogocentrism, as hot dogs and American flags are animated in sexual assaults on the apparently nude man in bed. Although rarely seen due to ownership disputes with Warren Collins, *Assault in the Park* (1959) also dealt comically

with rapacious male sexuality, again using stop motion to construct a tragicomical melodrama. Works in other media as well dealt – usually comically – with male sexuality: the painting entitled "Balling" (1961) represents an orgasmic phallus in extreme close-up with a series of pastel circles accompanied by arrows pointing up and down, and in another early work a flower miraculously transmogrifies into a penis. These are only a few examples of an approach to sexuality which is clearly pre-feminist, particularly in its absorption with phallic pleasure, but which nevertheless Lauren Rabinovitz is able to argue springs from "a woman's point-of-view" and a satiric linking of sexual and political power which, Rabinovitz claims, "sparked a new direction in [Wieland's] work" (p. 133).

Although Wieland's work had from the early part of her career been concerned with sex and sexuality, including considerable attention to phallic sexuality, in *Water Sark* one can see in process her "discovery" of the feminine body. This "feminine body" is traced upon the female body in much of her work, but it also becomes a practice of image construction through which she is able to operate the feminine over the male body in a very literal displacement of the phallic. This tracing of the feminine body across the contours of the human body bears close links with and certainly shares the significance of what we have come to know as *l'écriture féminine*, and for this paper I will attempt to elucidate those links.

Her own house, her body itself

In *La Jeune Née*, Hélène Cixous writes of the "dark continent" which describes woman's mystery within man's economy. Cixous writes:

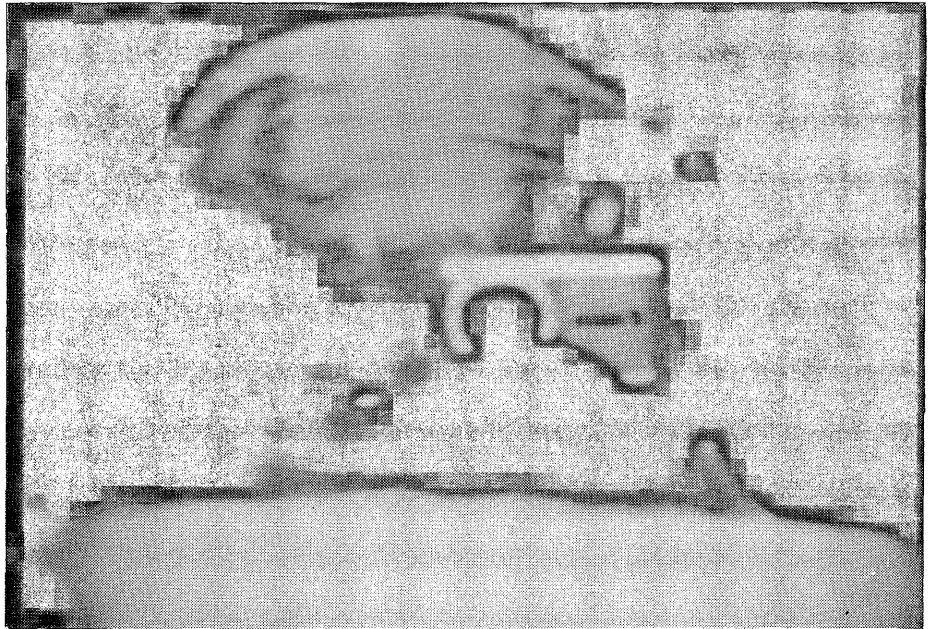
she has been kept at a distance from herself, she has been allowed to see (not-to-see) woman from the perspective of what man wants to see of her, i.e. almost nothing; she has been forbidden the possibility of the proud "inscription above my door" which stands at the threshold of The Joyful Wisdom. It is not she who could have exclaimed: "I inhabit my own house". Her "own" house, her body itself, she

has not been able to inhabit...She has had no eyes for herself. She has never explored her house...She has not dared to take pleasure in her body, which has been colonized.³

Water Sark can be read as a narrative of the discovery of Wieland's own "house". The film began consciously as a celebration of the closed domestic world: her intention was to simulate the vision of the shut-in, perhaps someone in a wheelchair (Interview, 20/5/86), to show that a film could be created from the elements of a very limited, closed world. At the time Wieland had no consciousness of the parallel with the housewife, but in retrospect she came to embrace that reading of the film as her own feminist politics developed through the sixties, and certainly this approach to the film has been taken up by Rabinovitz, who argues that Wieland's use of "home totems" was reshaping "traditional signs of domestic oppression into new political expressions" (p. 134). Certainly there was no consciousness, however, of a body of work in France which was being constructed on a very different framework, but which would bear a remarkable resemblance to the work that Wieland was producing. Through the course of *Water Sark* and the agency of the material elements of the domestic "house," Wieland would come to discover the "house" of which Cixous writes: her own body, the feminine body.

The Elements of the Image

Water Sark begins with the paper-cut-out titles apparently supered over the image of a white global Japanese paper lampshade: the "dark continent" of femininity in a male economy is replaced by the globe itself, lit from within. As the credits end, there is a cut to the image of the camera, blurred, in reflection, moving across the screen: the camera stylo. This "pen" was a brand new 8-mm camera which Wieland immediately embraced as offering "a precious relation of immediacy to creation"; it was as close as she could get to drawing, she said (Interview, 20/5/86), the most intimate relation to paper. The elements of the creation are summarized briefly in this opening shot: the camera; the "objects" to be filmed as a still life: pink plastic roses, green fern, purple teapot, old-fashioned bowl, glass with water; and finally the "author" herself, as the camera tilts up through blackness to find a full reflection of Wieland shooting. In this first sequence, Wie-



land's presence is more or less simply an authorial note: the camera returns immediately to the still life composition.

The next few minutes of the film are concerned solely with the exploration of these elements. Shooting through a glass of water so that colours are blurred and shapes distorted, pouring water into the frame to further disturb the image, camera moving in and out and around the elements which are in turn moved, jiggled, tipped, and variously disturbed, the mirror moved at various speeds and angles to reflect or refract light: the filmic elements of light, colour, shape and movement are manipulated in an almost Brakhagian moment of ecstatic vision in which all the senses concatenate together as it becomes virtually impossible to tell the limits of the movement of the objects, water, reflection, and camera.

Such kinaesthesia typically marks *l'écriture féminine*, as Josette Feral writes:

*Refusing the saturation of a sense already completely formed, appropriated, established outside of her, refusing equally to substitute a sense, a knowledge...her function will be rather that of maintaining the opening of possibilities in order that her pleasure never dies and that desire never vanishes.*⁴

As the kinaesthetic motion of the sequence reaches a frenzied ecstasy, the sense of Wieland's body as the palpable source of all is heightened immeasurably by the wild percussive babble of the soundtrack. Cixous:

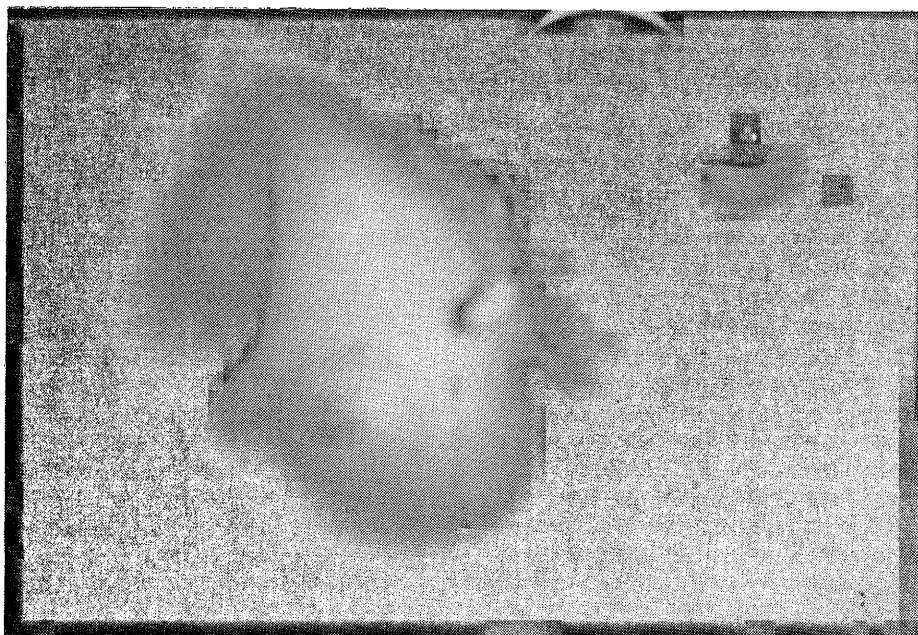
"Refusing to choose, she speaks no language, and all languages at once, she is nowhere and everywhere, enjoying the incessant passage from one place to another, from one form to another where she finds the sources an enrichment and a perpetual pleasure. She lets flow within her all possible languages"

— finding in this multiplicity itself the source of a constant renewal (p. 61).

The Breast

At this moment in the film, an additional layer is introduced into the image: a round, thick lens takes everything out of focus, so that the colours become softer, and shapes more liquid. Then Wieland's face, soft and blurry, looms gigantically into the frame. This is a central moment in the film. Wieland's body is here introduced as another of the objects under examination. Her breast and shoulder, now naked, and her head, covered in a sheet of clear plastic wrap, enter and exit the frame in various configurations. This shot has been interpreted as a moment of self-reflexivity, in which the filmmaker refers not only to herself and her own look, the camera and its look, and to the look of the audience as well (for the camera is pointed straight at the audience, through the agency of the mirror).

However, a close examination of the image suggests that simple self-reflexivity is the least of the concerns here. The image is orchestrated complexly. The mirror is splashed with water, the round lens is carefully placed within the frame, as is a jagged shard of broken



mirror, while the large mirror reflects Wieland shooting through a prism in the upper right area of the frame and the prism as shot by the camera is visible in the lower left corner of the frame. Although the image is engaged here with Wieland's own reflection, the overriding impression is of a deep concentration with the elements of the image, rather than with her own identity either as a woman or as an "author" of the film. The sequence could have been designed to illustrate this description of hysteria: "Without speech and without voice, disappropriated because of her sexuality and her body, she is driven to the gestural expression of the hysteric, where she finds, temporarily, an escape from this constraining world which imprisons her" (p. 55). Feral continues her discussion of hysteria, the temporary escape from the constraining world:

And the privileged ground of this flight is her body, a body that the dominant discourse has dislocated in representation, and of which it has dispossessed her, but of which she regains possession during privileged moments, when she is able to feel for the space of an instant its diversity and richness...a body that established structures have attempted to restrain but which unceasingly escapes to return at an unexpected time and place, taking her by surprise (p. 55).

This complex shot is brought to a close as the prism is moved up in the frame to obliterate all but an almost imperceptible reflection of Wieland's own eye, closing down temporarily upon its own knowledge.

On the cut, it is as if a sudden revelation has occurred. The eye which engaged itself through a glass darkly at the end of the last shot returns now unveiled: even the clear plastic wrap which transparently obscured her facial features has been torn away. The cut is to the same shot as before, slightly closer on the mirror, but Wieland is now holding the round lens in front of her nipple, playing with the reflection itself rather than using the lens to alter the image. She moves the lens in and out of the frame, shooting through it and then removing it to reveal her reflection fully clearly. Marking out the edge of the frame with the lens moving around its periphery, she finally disposes of the round lens to reveal a full shot of the very warmly tinted flesh of her shoulders, hands, and breasts. The discovery of her own body, the feminine body, has occurred.

Evasions, Detours

Although playful moments involving rubber gloves, toy boats, and the like, will intervene, the dominant movement of the film from this point onwards is towards what Irigaray calls the exploration of her own "catacombs." Indeed, these "detours" or "evasions," as Irigaray calls them, the playing with toys, carve out precisely the trajectory which Irigaray describes as the path towards recovery of her own otherness, her difference:

detour by strategy, tactics, praxis, at least the time to see, to know, to have herself, including in her very decentering. The 'subject' uses evasions

with truth, surveys it from the corner of her eye, edging obliquely in order to attempt appropriating what she cannot, what she can no longer, say (Feral, 57).

Such evasions and detours indeed shape the film throughout. The text is a series of fragments, literally without logical coherence, without the returns that so often constitute a structure in traditional fiction. They are fragments, as Duren writes of Cixous' texts, that are "expulsed, projected out, beyond the margins, and thus constantly decentralize the text."⁵ But at the centre of these fragments, as in Cixous, is the breast. The crucial ingredients of the film have become the breast and the mirror, both of which resonate enormously with the texts which constitute the body known as *l'écriture féminine*.

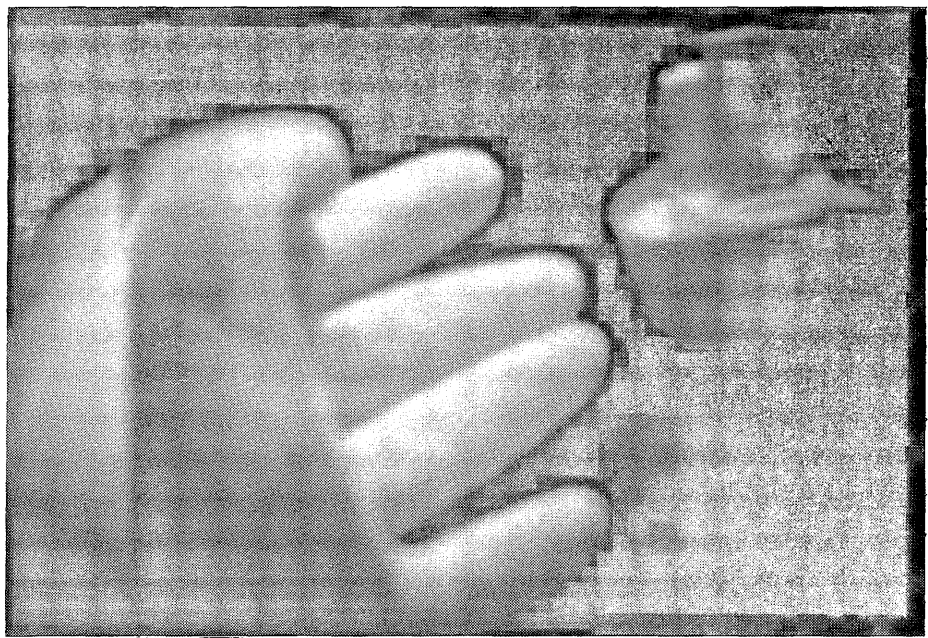
For Irigaray and for Cixous, it is in the woman's own body that she will find the models capable of realizing her difference. Both writers posit the woman's body as a model which counters the phallic hegemony, the unicity and identification of flat and linear representation. For Irigaray, the feminine body is neither open nor closed, but indefinite, infinite, and for its incompleteness, multiplicity, diversity and displacement she finds formal parallels in the unceasing transgression of the avant-garde, the constant exceeding of the limits of conventional signifying systems in the search for new and heterogeneous languages. Fragmentation, displacement, the play of difference will characterize "a style which shatters every solidly established form, figure, idea, concept," a style whose characteristics are simultaneity and fluidity (Feral, p. 13). Irigaray finds her model in the female genitals, the vulval lips which are "always at least two... joined in an embrace."⁶ And as in Wieland's film, the openness and fragmentariness of the structure characterize the only form in which any metamorphosis of the female self can occur.

For Cixous, on the other hand, although she also emphasizes multiplicity and displacement, the 100 heads of the medusa which when cut off grow 100 more, and for whom the feminine body is "exploded" (Feral, p. 60), nevertheless each part of the body is whole and part at once. The whole is composed of parts which are also wholes (Feral, p. 60), and the breast in Cixous' topology is the analogue to Irigaray's vulval lips. The word for breast which Cixous uses is the French *sein*, which also means

womb and centre, and in German *Sein* means being, existence, essence. The bosom, centre, core of being centers for Cixous on the breast, which, as the foremost stereotype among popular phantasms, must predicate everywhere an imagined need for bodily fulfillment, evoking, representing, the palpable object of desire. In Cixous' vocabulary, the breast is sensationally flat,⁷ and transgressive of institutionalized eroticism. For Wieland, the breast is full and voluptuous. Wieland encounters that breast through the looking glass at one moment, and directly (in one of the few such shots of the film) as precisely that object of fascination and desire.

In one of the most haunting shots of the film, because its perspective and limits are almost indecipherable, Wieland pursues the breast. At the bottom of the screen is the white tablecloth, and above it a dark bluish area which must be the mirror. Entering the frame from the right edge in a side view looms the breast, apparently intersecting the plane of the mirror and the look of the camera. The shot is buffered on either end with shots of blurred, reflected, distorted flesh, and it is almost immediately followed by another shot of the breast shot through a prism and in extreme close-up. This second shot, this time clearly a reflection through the mirror, is of a breast so giant that the décolletage appears as a black cavern intersecting the two large pink areas of the screen.

Together these two shots shape in many ways the most transgressive elements of the film. Let us not forget that this film was made in 1964, well before the generation which followed Wieland's bared their breasts for rock and roll, feminism, and – finally – motherhood. Historically, then, nudity had not arrived as a commonplace, especially in North America, although the artist's relation to nudity would admittedly be traditionally more benign. The contemplation of the breast by a woman also has connotations which are significantly transgressive in our culture even today. Wieland's examination of her own breast is at once distant, almost scientific in the equanimity of its contemplation, while at the same time the highly saturated colours, blurring of focus, and unconventional framing suggest an eroticism curiously without narcissism. The heterogeneity of qualities of the image would in itself fulfill a certain notion of transgression. And of course the apparent positing of the breast as "primary signifier" not only displaces the phallus, but calls into question the



entire cultural framework in relation to women.

The Mirror

The relation between feminine identity and image suggests immediately the mirror, used as a metaphor for the condition of woman for millenia in the history of western art. Virginia Woolf described women as a mirror reflecting man at twice his normal size, and countless others have waxed far more negatively about women's narcissistic relation to her own beautiful image. Since Lacan, the mirror has had rather different connotations for the development of the human subject, male or female, and with Metz, the relation of the cinema to the mirror has assumed portentous significance.

More recently, feminist avant-garde filmmakers in France have devised an aesthetic hinging on the film portrait as the fantasy of a mirror that conserves the feminine image rather than forgetting it, a human mirror that may become the revealer of the unconscious or stolen double through possession and dispossession of its own image. The mirror, that "constituting, terrifying, protecting and cruel object," is inscribed as a central ingredient of a process which brings women as subjects of their own representation, both looking at and being looked at, into a glide from "appearance to apparition," transcending the image of Lacan's "assumed body."⁸ As Dot Tuer has put it, the image of woman as seen by herself is a mirror

not only of herself but of her mother and of all women who came before her: as the image and body meet, the imaginary and specular become infused with pleasure, allowing us to glimpse, through the alternative mirrors of women representing women, a censored space which is lethal, erotic, unique.⁹

This conscious, self-consciously feminine, enterprise has been realized in the 1980s through textual strategies which Joyce Wieland developed in the early 1960s: many of the devices of structural avant-garde, as well as the fragmentation of the body, the play of images against reflecting surfaces, the invention of cinematic languages which emphasized diffusion, distortion, condensation, fragmentation, loss of perspective, and so on. For Wieland, in *Water Sark*, the mirror was central to such cinematic play: the shot in which she holds the mirror up beside her face as she shoots both mirror and her own image through a second mirror is axiomatic of the function of this constitutive element.

For Luce Irigaray, it was necessary to displace the image of the flat mirror as an element of traditional representations of women. The flat mirror places women on the other side, evanescent. Present and absent, she is absent in her presence and more absent because she is there. She is a presence signing her own absence, non-existent by herself, irremediably bound to the other. To supplant such an identification of woman and to realize the factor of displacement inscribed in her, Irigaray substitutes for the image of the flat mirror that of the speculum: the concave, deforming, exploding mirror where man, unable to

recognize himself, discovers that woman has substituted her own image in a text which speaks of and from her body (Feral, pp. 58-59).

Wieland has found a rather simpler substitution which achieves similar metaphorical ends: the mirror which she manipulates towards the discovery of her own body is broken. Although the mirror has been transformed into a dangerous, jagged shard, nevertheless she wields it in transgressive, joyful play.

The Transparent Veil

The last shot returns to the mysterious, nonsensical title of the film, *Water Sark*. For Wieland, "sark" was simply a word which she loved at the time, a nonsense word which she vaguely associated with an ancient word for boat, and which she playfully substituted for almost anything (Interview, 20/5/86). Water, the source of creativity and a metaphor for the unconscious, was for her then the central content of the film: hence the title water thing, water play, water sport, water sark. Now however, the Old Teutonic meaning of "sark" as a garment, a chemise or surplice worn next to the skin, has greater resonance. The title *Water Sark* recalls the light-reflecting and light-refracting transparent plastic veil which is used to cover the face, suggesting the relation of the unconscious and the body, the interface between feminine identity and image.

The denouement of the film, the final sequence, plays variations upon the elements that have accrued throughout the film. Replacing the prism and lens with a magnifying glass, Wieland progresses through a similar process of discovery of the body, fooling around first with objects – such as the boat – shot through the glass, and then finally coming to an ecstatic play with her own image, twirling the glass in front of the camera so that it distorts and then reveals her reflection. Most of this final sequence, whether manipulating the mirror, the magnifying glass, the transparent plastic material, or the toys, is connected centrally to Wieland's body, now released from contemplation into ecstatic play. Comic, lighthearted, the joyful result of her discovery of the body is summed up in the last shot of the film, a medium close-up of Wieland's fingers dabbling in water: an image of sensual pleasure at a peak of relaxed fulfillment.

¹ Lauren Rabinovitz, "The Development of Feminist Strategies in the Experimental Films of Joyce Wieland," *Film Reader*, no. 5 (1982), 133.

² Kass Banning, "Textual Excess in Joyce Wieland's *Hand-Tinting*," *Cine-Action*, No. 5 (May 1986), 14.

³ Hélène Cixous, "La Jeune Née: An Excerpt," *Diacritics*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 1977), 68.

⁴ Josette Feral, "Towards a Theory of Displacement," *Sub-Stance*, no. 32 (1981), 60; and "Antigone or the Irony of the Tribe," *Diacritics*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Sept. 1978).

⁵ Brian Duren, "Cixous' Exorbitant Texts," *Sub-Stance*, vol. 32 (1981), 48.

⁶ Carolyn Burke, "Irigaray Through the Looking Glass," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 1981), 289.

⁷ Verena Conley, "Missexual Mystery," *Diacritics*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 1977), 73.

⁸ Katerina Thomadaki, *Film Portraits of Women by Women* (Catalogue, The Funnel, 1986), p. 12.

⁹ Dot Tuer, "Mirages of Difference, Dreams of the Body," *Film Portraits of Women by Women* (Catalogue, The Funnel, 1986), pp. 17-18.



PENTHOUSE PHOTO-ESSAY (December 1984)

Put out your hand to touch
the taut breasts
of the treed women

strung up in rope cocoons—
a Japanese Art form, they say,
not pornography

kiss the cold drops from their
lips
these women in bondage
waiting

white teeth
closed over biting words
in silken mouths.

Pat Wheatley
Kingston, Ontario

THE FRAME

For Linda Pyke

Prisoner she writes.
writes a book of and
is herself contained.

Her poems barred
by the black outline

she is known by.
Photographers
shoot from waist up.

The way she describes
herself, blonde curls,
blue eyes, nose peeling
from the sun: true

But the centre she talks
of stops.

She is Irish oracular
laughter, tv's talking
head come to feast.

Sometimes she lets
her cheek flush, her
Elizabethan hand
flutter for another
cigarette.

"I have tunnel vision,"
she says. "That's how
I get where I want."

I dreamed last night
she was up and walking
along the lake
beside me
at heart level.

Penny Kemp
Toronto, Ontario