

Kerrie Welsh

**Lost in the Badlands:  
Cecelia Condit's Ephemeral Collection**

“Here, indeed, lies the whole miracle of collecting. For it is invariably *oneself* that one collects.” —Jean Baudrillard

“Collecting ... originates in the need to tell stories, but for which there are neither words nor other conventional modes.” —Mieke Bal/Susan Pearce

Mummies swing toward us. Gnarled hands caress smooth skin. A crow turns its head in surprise. “I have an identification with the crow, because it’s a scavenger,” Cecelia Condit tells me. She describes herself as a collector of images. “I’m driving down the road and I see a man digging a grave. So I stop and ask if I can film him. If they’re not my stories, they’re other people’s and I connect with them.”

Condit’s work can be unnerving. Her early video pieces, *Beneath the Skin*, *Possibly in Michigan*, *Not a Jealous Bone* and *Suburbs of Eden*, won critical acclaim cracking the boundaries between reality and fiction, artifice and documentary. But the reception was mixed: *Possibly in Michigan* was vilified on Pat Robertson’s *700 Club* and denounced as "lesbian and anti-male" in the congressional debates on the National Endowment for the Arts (Condit is a two-time award recipient).

What some condemn, others celebrate. Laura Kipnis, the culture and media critic, describes Condit as “the most serious practitioner of the grotesque in video art.”<sup>1</sup> Condit’s work is often positioned with a group of feminist media-makers, which includes Kipnis, Dara Birnbaum, Vanalyne Green and Jeanne C. Finley. If early feminist media is sometimes associated with austerity and theory, this postmodern group, engaged with popular culture and television conventions, is known for pastiche, ambiguity and pleasure. “I wasn’t trying to make a feminist statement,” Condit says, “I was just trying to figure out what I thought about the world. At that point few feminist pieces were being made, there were just pretty girls. I was trying to create a world that had more to do with what women really go through. It became feminist, and it was a surprise to me.”

In *Possibly in Michigan*, two women shop for perfume in a suburban mall. “Smells like mother’s crazy sister Kate,” asserts one of the women in sing-song. We see a frenetic 8-millimeter image of a mussy-haired woman running away from the camera on a snow-covered country road. It is the perfect picture of madness. But as the image recurs throughout the tape, its

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<sup>1</sup> "Female Transgression" in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* edited by Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg. University of Minnesota Press: 1995 p 342

meaning changes. As the women are chased out of the mall by a masked man, the clip appears again while the operatic soundtrack asks “Remember the time I kissed a guy who ate his women friends... is he following?” In this context, running away doesn’t seem so crazy.

This play with the signifier and signified runs through Condit’s work, connecting the early pieces to what CUE exhibition curator, Mary Lucier calls Condit’s “middle period.” In *Oh Rapunzel*, *Why Not a Sparrow*, *All About a Girl* and *Little Spirits*, collected visions of mummies, masks and Condit’s mother, Annie Lloyd, return again and again, taking on new meanings in new contexts. In *Oh Rapunzel*, a close-up of Annie Lloyd’s paralyzed foot is followed by a wide shot of a girl scurrying away with an unusual hobble. The edit echos the video’s theme that stories unfold throughout generations. In Condit’s work, stories also unfold throughout the ongoing collection. These recurring specters are embedded within Condit’s unsettling visual strategies of layering images (such as projections, images on TV, superimpositions); making still pictures appear uncannily alive either by turning or swinging the picture itself or by moving the camera; and using off angles. These motifs continue to shock and inspire as they generate new meanings.

*Annie Lloyd*, the latest in this body of visceral single-channel pieces, marks a departure from the tongue-in-cheek irony and barbaric glee of Condit’s earlier work. “The world is different, there’s a gentleness to it,” she says. “It opens up whole new doors.” The video begins with a field of golden wildflowers swaying dreamily in the breeze. Ghostly laughter surrounds us; we barely hear the faint echo of wind-chimes behind it. There’s a magical quality to this evocation of the wind—of forces we look at but cannot see. Soon Condit tells us in her characteristically intimate and unsettling voiceover “My mother collects leaves. I collect stories. Mother’s stories.” The last statement is offered with the teasing intonation of one who likes to open doors that others would prefer left closed.

On its translucent surface, *Annie Lloyd* is a portrait in which Condit and her mother collide in a dreamlike tapestry that confuses parent and child—a theme that runs throughout Condit’s work. It is also, like many of her videos, an exploration of “the space between when people are dead and alive.” Condit, whose mother describes herself as an artist who didn’t practice, asks, “Is it the provocativeness of knowing in 30 years I may look exactly like her?” When we see high contrast footage of a younger Annie Lloyd rolling toward the camera out of darkness, there’s a sense of déjà vu. For a moment we aren’t sure whether we are looking at the filmmaker or her mother. In either case, we are reminded of the Victorian girls and boys rolling in epileptic fits that first appear in *Beneath the Skin*. This 16-millimeter film footage of her mother rolling actually predates her ‘first’ video: Condit began collecting long before she began sharing her visions.

Condit worked in nursing homes throughout her 20s, accumulating stories that are retold in her films. During this period she was printing life-size photographs of people and placing them in landscapes. She met the American photographer William Larson, a pivotal figure in her life. “He encouraged me to go into film and video. He thought I might be a storyteller.” She bought a 16-millimeter camera and shot images of her parents turning and rolling, holding photographic masks up to their faces — a film she treasured, but never showed. “Mother is holding up her face as though her paper face might have more to say than the face she really wears.” Thirty years later, in *Annie Lloyd*, we are treated to glimpses of these paper bodies, so uncannily like the real bodies in Condit’s films.

Other influences include Leslie Thornton, whose *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, shares Condit’s hyper-real questioning of documentary truth; and Mary Lucier, whose “sense of the female body in the landscape” resonates with Condit’s own “longing for a personal landscape.” Condit says, “For me it was the woods. The woods are mysterious, frightening and oh so alluring.” Though she describes the forests in her work as “civilized, benign looking forests,” she points out that “there is that wildness just off the frame.” She tells a story of getting lost in the badlands of South Dakota:

“I thought I hadn't gone far. But when I had gotten the footage I wanted, I found I was surrounded by nothing ... there was to be a frost that night and all afternoon it was getting colder and colder. I found the road at dusk. There was one car in the distance with an older man and woman. It was a simple dirt road and I realized that this was my only chance. I wouldn't let them past. They were terrified actually. They thought I was MAD!”

It has all the elements of a traditional Condit tale: the mundane turned terrible, a quiet country road, the family triangle and, of course, madness. “It is an important story to me,” she says, “because nature became no longer just a beautiful thing to walk through... but a force that was extremely dangerous.”

In Condit’s deft hands, many seemingly beautiful things are revealed to be dangerous, while mundane moments in life are shown to be truly beautiful. *Annie Lloyd* is filled with provocative moments that, she says, “most people would walk right past.” Condit lingers on these moments-- sometimes agonizingly. We watch Annie Lloyd walk up the stairs. She looks young to us--she was only 60 back then. She carefully pulls herself up the three huge stone steps, taking them one by one as a child would. Her pigeon-toed, paralyzed foot drags heavily. We almost feel her shoes scraping the stone until she reaches the top. The image is simple and heartbreaking in

the best way— without one tinge of pity. The same image that in *Oh Rapunzel* whispered that wounds work their way through generations, now insists on people's resilience and dignity.

If in *Annie Lloyd*, "the demons are all gone" as Mary Lucier suggests in her curator's statement, they have been replaced by ghosts. Condit is an unyielding guide through such territory and is anything but lost.

Kerrie Welsh, Brooklyn, NY, July 2008

*All quotes are from interviews with the author.*

**Kerrie Welsh** is a Brooklyn-based multimedia artist and educator interested in rethinking genre, mixing mediums and practicing alternative production paradigms. Her work has shown in venues including *Performance Mix* at Joyce SoHo, New York, NY; *Raw Material* at Dance New Amsterdam, New York, NY; *Body Blend* at Dixon Place, New York, NY; Coney Island Film Festival, New York, NY; LadyFest East, New York, NY; Rehoboth Beach Film Society's sponsored Film Festival, Rehoboth, DE; the Inova Galleries, Milwaukee, WI; the Green Gallery's *Video Arcade*, Milwaukee, WI; and the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, Philadelphia, PA. Her current project, *Trace Decay*, was developed at the Swarthmore Project, a residency program sponsored by Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA. Kerrie holds an MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's experimental media program; an MA in Women Studies from The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH; and a BFA in film from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, where she developed and taught *Women in the Director's Chair* with the filmmaker Louise Tiranoff.

The mentor was **Michael Rush**, the Director of The Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, MA. A widely published author and critic, his books include *Video Art* (2004, fully revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2007) *New Media in Art* (2005), *New Media in Late 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* (2001), all published by Thames and Hudson. Other books include monographs on artists Marjetica Potrč, Gunther Brus, Steve Miller and Alexis Rockman. Since the early 1990s he has contributed regularly to numerous publications including *Art in America*, *Art on Paper*, *The New York Times*, *Artext*, *Bookforum*, and many others. His numerous award-winning curatorial projects have ranged from international exhibitions of video art to thematic exhibitions on performance and surveillance and the legacy of Surrealism.