

Reinventing the World with Video

Helen Rezanowich

ABSTRACT

A videomaker and a group of women organic farmers trace the creation of Outstanding in Her Field. They developed a cooperative, feminist approach unusual in the world of video production.

RÉSUMÉ

Une vidéaste et un groupe de fermières n'utilisant que des produits organiques retracent la création de Outstanding in Her Field (<<Fermière hors pair dans son champ>>). Elles ont exploité une coopérative, démarche féministe inhabituelle dans le monde de la vidéo.

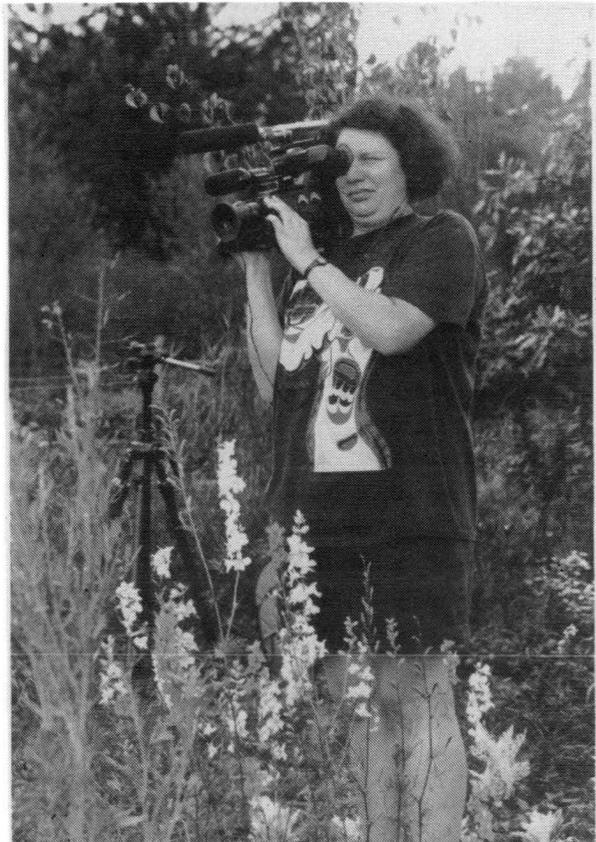
Where do I go to find

Images of woman woman-made?

--Sheila Chandra, from her song "La Sagesse," on the RealWorld cd, Zen Kiss

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a feminist collaborative process that resulted in the low budget, award-winning documentary video Outstanding in Her Field. I share this story here for two reasons: first, because the video and its creators were so well-received when we facilitated a workshop at the Praxis♀Nexus conference; and second, because the process of making this video illustrates some truths about creating videos with women and, I believe, about women's particular genius in the creative process. It is also the story of a creation taking on a life of its own, and a reflection on the power of video to change perceptions and lives.



Helen Rezanowich making Outstanding in Her Field.

Photo by Sheila Tsai Whincup.

In September 1993, Karen MacKenzie, a Women's Studies student, introduced me to a group of women organic farmers on southern Vancouver Island in British Columbia. Farmers Tina Fraser, Mary Alice Johnson and Marti Martin-Wood wanted to make a video about their chosen lifestyle, as a way of reaching out to others and drawing more people into sustainable agriculture. Karen wanted to do research on women and organic farming for course credit. None of them had sufficient video expertise to undertake such a production. I am a professional videomaker, interested in working with groups of women, and knew nothing about organic farming. It was a perfect match.

With most mainstream/malestream video productions, there is a lengthy planning, proposal writing, fundraising, and scripting period (pre-production), followed by a short and intense production phase when the images and sound are captured, and, finally, a post-production period (editing visuals, audio and music) which brings the video to completion. Often, there is a pressing deadline to be met. The roles and duties of cast and crew members are clearly defined and differentiated, and there is a hierarchy of relationships, with the director and producer at the top. I've made many videos using this method, but decided that, in working with this group, I would depart from the usual structure and routine. Together, we invented our own more cooperative and organic approach to video making.

When the farmers, Karen and I first met in mid-September, 1993, we had no time to 'waste' on pre-production and budget-finding: Marti Martin-Wood was leaving for Ethiopia less than two weeks later

to meet with farmers there, and she wanted to take along video greetings from women organic farmers in the Victoria area. I have my own Hi-8mm camera equipment, so we plunged right in and started gathering footage. My ignorance about organic farming was actually an advantage; I had to let the farmers shape their own stories, and they in turn had to let me know what was important to communicate. Tina, Mary Alice, Marti and the other farmers in the video are very articulate women, and this led to an early decision that I was happy to make: the video would have no narrator, so that the women's voices would emerge clearly, and they would be perceived as the experts they are. This decision pushed me as the videomaker to look beyond an externally imposed structure - a narrated voiceover - to find the internal rhythm and meaning of the women as a group, and allow these elements to shape the video and set its pace: the final result is that it dances to its own tune. The video's final voiceover was unscripted, woven together from interviews and recorded rambling conversations with the farmers: the hesitations, searching for words, and uneven pacing make the speakers more accessible to the viewer. This method allowed the farmers to see themselves on the screen as the subjects of their own story, one that communicates the significance of what they are doing and why they have made these choices.

Mary Alice Johnson: *You got to know us, and we got to know you, but not quite the same way. We got to know you as observing us, or actually, what you expressed back in your video of us. We got to see how you saw us. That was quite amazing, because you saw us in a very beautiful way, quite complimentary, and*

it was wonderful.



Mary Alice Johnson. Photo by Paul Rouleau.

Tina Fraser: *There are two very distinct views in the world, and one is theory and one is practice. Rarely do I see them coming together as in this farming community process, this organic farming, and the way the film portrays it....The film shows that, it shows a philosophy, it shows actual work, it shows people doing it, and people making a living*

doing it, and it's a very valuable tool in that respect.

Shooting without a script, budget or timeline was a radical departure from the norm, and this beginning shaped the rest of the production process. It was challenging in the extreme: footage was shot over a period of 13 months, on 30 separate occasions, and editing was a nightmare, as we had about 24 hours of raw footage, much of it very good, and no script to use as an organizing principle in cutting the video down to less than half an hour. The editing had to go through a process of evolution and emergence. We were never able to script the production from start to finish. As each scene was edited, the one that had to follow became evident.

Mary Alice Johnson: *I had pictured that you would do a video of us just talking, kind of a little bit what we did at the market....It was only later, as we began to see more and more footage of interaction between us and actual doing of things out in the field, I began to get a sense that it could convey so much more than a talking head that happened to be at a farm, talking about farming. We could capture that feeling of the beauty of the farming.*

Certain themes, such as access to land, and the spiritual connection felt by these women, had to be included. During the two year period that we worked together, our understanding and relationships grew. We created a bond between us, a space of trust in which the video sprouted and evolved.

Rebecca Jehn: *Working on the video was fantastic. Getting to know all the women who were involved was just a wonderful experience - it has changed my life, my circle of friends, all of it....There's definitely pride and a sense of worth that maybe farmers don't often get to*

experience because they're so taken for granted as a profession.

Tina Fraser: *The process of making the video for me has solidified a sense of community with the women that I know. Community can mean different things: it can be your neighbour next door, but in this case it's women growers who I'm associated with, and it has created a camaraderie that warms my heart.*

A video groups together disparate parts into a cohesive whole and presents a package of selected visual and audio/narrative elements that have been arranged to make a powerful statement. I have found that it is crucial that all members of the video group agree on the purpose of making the video, so that the finished production closely represents the views and voices of its subjects. Questions that I ask women who want to make a video, and myself as a videomaker, are: Why are we doing this? Who do we want to reach? It's essential to reach consensus and clarity, because the answers to these questions will define the message of the video, and shape its form.

Mary Alice Johnson: *Our main hope was that it would inspire other people, other women, to become farmers, and my older sister just bought a 35 acre piece of land in Colorado. She said, "After seeing your video, I want to become a farmer." I mean, my sister! She's been up to my farm before, and she loves my farm, but that video was the thing that kicked her over the hump with it.*

Rebecca Jehn: *I have an 8 year old apprentice and that came out of that movie. First, hearing through the movie about the apprenticeship program, and then seeing Morgan working with Marti, I think helped her*

a lot to think, "Maybe I could do this." And so I have, all this year since February, worked with an 8 year old apprentice who wants to be a farmer some day. It's fabulous.

The subtitle of Outstanding in Her Field is A Video By and About Women in Sustainable Agriculture. In this project, I was successful in making a video with the other women, as well as about them. One of my measures of a video's success is the degree of ownership felt by the people who are portrayed in it: this ensures that it will have a life and a usefulness that continue on after the production process is completed.

Tina Fraser: *And from this video, we've given lots of power to our LLAFF [Linking Land and Future Farmers] program, and our SIOPA [South Island Organic Producers Association] is growing - it's the fastest growing chapter in Canada, and part of it is because of the active women who participated in this video. And the video plays a part in it too: it makes us more high profile, it helps people understand what we're doing...it touches a lot of people, especially young women....A lot of things have come from it, and it lives on - it's not lying quietly anywhere. That's for sure.*

Video has the power to reflect our images and words back to us. Making documentary videos with women creates opportunities to develop relationships with each other and with ourselves. For me, this process is also about informing, networking, sharing knowledge and support - with other women, known and unknown. Video can show women what other women are up to, halfway around the globe. The farmers involved in Outstanding in Her Field experienced the power of video to make

visible, and to define, legitimize, empower and affirm.

Mary Alice Johnson: *It's captured what we love the most and imprinted it in our minds. It's reinforced for us what we're doing and why we're doing it. It's difficult, because it is so hard to make a living farming. But we've made such a commitment to it, and the video has reinforced that commitment.*

Marti Martin-Wood: *I keep on thinking that it's just what we do and not a big deal, but when I mention [organic farming], people are really enthused and, "Definitely, bring the video, we want to see it," and when I do show it, "Can we see it again?" and there's so much positive stuff around it....The other thing that I really like - life after video - is that I'll be working at the market and young women will come up and say, "Oh, I saw you in the video!" and that's really a kick.*

Tina Fraser: *In verbalizing and talking about the process and what you do, it helps me hear what I'm doing and talking about it makes it real and it creates momentum....I watched myself over a stretch of two years when it was being made, and the difference from the beginning to the end is quite dramatic, in my ability to speak to the public, to present my ideas more clearly and concisely in a way that other people understand, who perhaps know nothing about farming or my processes.*

Since its completion in November, 1995, Outstanding in Her Field has been invited into classes, meetings, conferences and homes in over a dozen countries. I think that part of the video's appeal is its usefulness as a political instrument: it documents women's resistance to agribusiness farming, and their conscious choice to use sustainable means. The feedback we have received from viewers

from the South is that the video affirms and strengthens their resolve to continue farming in traditional ways, when they see farmers in the North readopting those methods.

Marti Martin-Wood: *I felt all along from the beginning that this sort of thing is what women in other countries do all along, and the feeling of connectedness with women globally. Generations of women have grown and sown and sold their vegetables at a market similar to ours, and this has always been a really important thing for me....We've just gone back to the original way of doing things. I'm quite proud of that.*

Tina Fraser: *You know, the opening bit of the video, with me spreading the seeds - I took one look at it and was so moved by seeing that, I said, "I have to farm for the rest of my life!"*

Copies of Outstanding in Her Field may be obtained by contacting Helen Rezanowich by e-mail at WSTUDIES@POP.UVIC.CA or fax at (250) 721-7210. Or write to her at Women's Studies Department, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 3045, Victoria, B.C. V8W 3P4, Canada.