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Sadie Benning or the Secret Annex



Bill Horrigan

Sadie Benning is one of the handful of North American independent video producers of the last ten years to have attracted sustained critical notice outside the circuits typically open to noncommercially minded media artists. She is fully aware of this. Speaking to a *Washington Post* "Style"-section reporter who was writing a "profile" of her, Benning was asked to consider if

she could be a fad. "I'm young, I'm gay. . . . I'm everything that's kind of hot in the art world now," she acknowledges. "I got scared that's why people liked me." But she has an artist's confidence. "I have a powerful way of putting images together," she says simply. She's about to direct her first feature film.¹

That was 1992, when Benning was nineteen. During the course of the previous two years, Benning had already shown her videotapes at the Sundance Institute, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and in the media programs of virtually every distinguished arts center in this country, as well as in venues as far afield as Australia, Finland, and Austria. In 1993 she was included in the Whitney Biennial and caught the notice of the *New York Times's* Roberta Smith: "One of the show's real discoveries is Sadie Benning, a 20-year-old video artist whose wonderfully offhand 20-minute tape, *It Wasn't Love* [fig. 1], (shot primarily in the artist's bedroom) recasts a film noir road romance with lesbian lovers."² Her renown was charted in journals as diverse as *Artforum* and the *Advocate*, *Frieze* and *QW*.³

For those unfamiliar with the miseries and pleasures of independent media exhibition, be assured that this level of notice and ascent remains profoundly anomalous. In terms of the visibility of video art within any generally recognized culture at large, it's still exactly as artist Steve Fagin assessed it in 1986: "To be a success is to be a whisper, to be a great success is to be a rumor, to be great art is to be gossip, and video has not yet even risen to the level of gossip. The highest level available in video is rumor."⁴ Critical commentary on the vast majority of nonmainstream media hence remains relegated to specialized journals within the field, except when a longer or feature-length work issuing from that sector manages to find its way, if just barely, into the mainstream. Even so, in such cases the logic of the attention

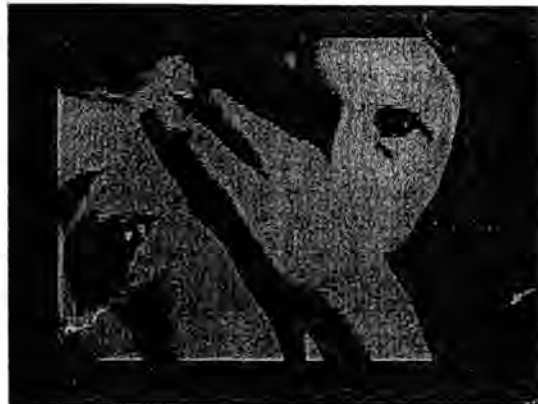


FIG. 1 Sadie Benning, *It Wasn't Love*, 1992, black-and-white video, 20 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.

usually comes less from the qualities of the work than from its precipitation of some manner of cultural scandal (e.g., the late Marlon Riggs being denounced in Congress during one of its periodic displays of sexual panic) or from the mainstream's momentary acceptance of a cultural trend (e.g., the recent and now somewhat muted moment of "lesbian chic," as well as the related but distinct cult of "girl power," the latter of which Benning vociferously advocates).

To a limited extent Benning's work participates in and profits from (if also prefigures) the lesbian chic and the girl

power cachets. Which is simply to say that independent video distribution in this country has finally come to understand the strategies of niche marketing, and the currency of Benning's work is such that Chicago's Video Data Bank (VDB)—certainly this country's most aggressive distributor of challenging videowork—has positioned her as one of its franchise offerings (as it did in similar fashion several years ago with its *Video against AIDS* compilation). That is, the entirety of Benning's videowork, which runs at this point under two hours, is available from VDB on two VHS tapes, available for the home, festival, library, and classroom markets. It is, all of it, all nine titles, explicitly premised on the autobiographical experiences of a postadolescent lesbian girl.

Clearly, this makes market sense, and if it runs the risk of turning Benning into a commodity, that's nowhere apparent in the evolution of the work itself. Despite the breathless announcement by the *Washington Post* reporter quoted above—"She's about to direct her first feature film"—Benning has evidently retrenched. Viewed from the outside, it appears that perhaps one of the more damaging commonplaces within the independent media world—namely, that any given short work is a stillborn feature and that anyone with any sense would naturally ascend into feature production—was examined and rejected. There could, of course, be other reasons entirely why the vaunted feature has yet to come into being, but according to a variously reliable word-of-mouth roundel, that aspiration seems to have been momentarily retired. Instead, since 1992, the date of Benning's last signature work, her only released piece is *German Song* (1995), a music video for the band Come, which concludes with the title "Directed by S. Benning," rather than with her full name as it appears in her other videotapes.

German Song is notable not simply for being Benning's latest work, nor for the change in signature. Benning's previous nine videoworks, produced between 1989 and 1992 and forming her canon, were all distinguished by their having been shot with a Fisher-Price Pixelvision 2000 toy camera. (The exception is *Welcome to Normal*, 1990, a color film, which I have not seen and is not included in her released compilations.) Among video producers, the Fisher-Price toy camera enjoys a cult status not unlike that of the Diana still-photo camera among photographers. Introduced by Fisher-Price in the mid-1980s and pretty much withdrawn by about 1990, the camera was soundly rejected in the marketplace by kids; unlike other consumer-grade camcorders, the toy camera uses audiotape cassettes as tape stock, has a fixed focus, and produces an extremely grainy black-and-white image, set within a black box border. The image looks like primitive television and hence lacks all reference or resonance to anyone whose earliest experience of television was in crisp colors. A 1990 touring exhibition *Big Pixel Theory*, curated by Los Angeles-based Eric Saks, drew together over ninety minutes of Pixelvision work produced by artists, teenagers, and even young children.



FIG. 2 Sadie Benning, *Me and Rubyfruit*, 1989, black-and-white video, 4 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.

Other video artists have interspersed Pixelvision sequences in their work (most notably, Julie Zando in *Let's Play Prisoners*, 1988, and Steve Fagin in *The Machine That Killed Bad People*, 1990), but Benning's entire output has become wholly identified with it, even though she, too, at first, was skeptical when her father, filmmaker James Benning, presented her with it as a Christmas gift. As she told the *Washington Post*, "I thought, 'This is a piece of [expletive]. It's black-and-white. It's for kids. He'd told me I was getting this surprise. I was expecting a camcorder.'"⁵

Living with her mother in inner-city Milwaukee, Benning had been a somewhat solitary teenager, prone to confessing her feelings to her written diary. At first uninterested in the Fisher-Price camera, she one day picked it up and decided to use it for the kind of diaristic expression for which she had up until then been using only words (written words still proliferate in Benning's videowork). The result, *A New Year* (1989), made when she was fifteen, is a four-minute documentation of what it must feel like to be a girl who is different and receives most of her information from looking out the window or at television. As Benning would go on to produce more and more ambitious Pixelvision works, the sensation of the bedroom as the only haven from a malevolent social-sector world never quite recedes, an effect enforced in part by the extraordinary intimacy of the camera's technological limitations; indeed, a typical Benning shot is an extreme close-up of her eyes that she shoots by holding the camera a few inches away as she talks to it about what's she's thinking at that moment (*fig. 2*).

The teenage isolation she charts is of course nothing new. What is new is the record Benning's work provides of the very process of coming out as a teenage lesbian as it's happening. Benning dropped out of high school at sixteen, principally, as she recalls, due to the homophobic environment. As she told the *Advocate* in 1991:



FIG. 3 Sadie Benning, *It Wasn't Love*, 1992, black-and-white video, 20 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.

*Everybody called each other "fag" and "queer," and the teachers would joke about gay people. I just didn't want to be put through that abuse. . . . if anybody knew I was gay, I would totally get tormented. . . . To be that age anyway is tough, but to be gay is just hell.*⁶

Benning's coming out on videotape was gradual, the tape of no return being her third piece, *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989), inspired by Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and in which Benning explicitly articulates her romantic and erotic feelings for other girls. As in all of Benning's work, there is a sustained tension between a palpable fascination with her own corporeal self (her eyes, as always, but also parts of her body, particularly her hands) with an equally palpable fear of self-exposure. Again, the bedroom becomes designated the privileged site, cast not as a romantic chamber but as the teenage girl's unbreachable safe zone, with the real admitted only as it takes the form of television images and written texts. Jonathan Rosenbaum described this effect as "a kind of narcissism-in-hiding, a paradoxical retreat through exposure that precisely matches the emotional tone of these tapes,

which continually seek to strike an uneasy balance between secrecy and candor, shyness and angry assertion."⁷

Benning's subsequent Pixelvision works—*If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990), *Jollies* (1990), *A Place Called Lovely* (1991), *It Wasn't Love* (1992), and *Girl Power* (1992)—all manage to retain the freshness of the first works, gaining self-confidence and often a sense of self-amused irony along the way. Using the most limited means imaginable to fill the visual field (her own image, written words, bedroom and household objects as props, blurry images abducted from the television screen), Benning has become increasingly adept at masterful sound editing, with her sound tracks acquiring a texture and a frame of reference that's strikingly beyond her years. Possibly her most complex tape thus far, *It Wasn't Love* has as one of its set pieces a brilliantly constructed montage using Prince's libidinal "I Want To Be Your Lover" to reconceive a sequence from Hollywood's *Bad Seed* (1956), in which the demonic girl Rhoda caresses her horrified mother with all the moves of an accomplished femme (fig. 3).

As noted at the outset, Benning's case—her becoming, within the very limited and certainly nonremunerative terms of this field, something like a celebrity—is highly unusual. For that reason alone it's natural that this status might be viewed with suspicion or cynicism, as one would with the performance of any kind of prodigy, however guileless. But as has been known to happen occasionally in the art world, the intensity of critical attention is here massively corroborated by the complexity of the achievement. Whether subsequent assessments alter this for the worse does not



FIG. 4 Sadie Benning, *German Song*, 1995, black-and-white Super-8 film, 5:49 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.



FIG. 5 Sadie Benning, *German Song*, 1995, black-and-white Super-8 film, 5:49 minutes. Distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago.

matter at this moment. It's an honest pleasure to see aesthetically and ethically pleasurable work being exalted in whatever forums that are open to it. In advance of writing this, I viewed all of Benning's videotapes in sequence a number of times, and every time was pleased and astonished by the sophistication of the editing, the wit of the sound mixing, and the natural gift for telling a story.

Her stylistically least typical work, *German Song*, became for me the most deeply provocative piece, despite its abandonment of the trademark Pixelvision effects. Coming out of a three-year silence, it offers no clear autobiographical intent. Unlike her past works, this one does not foreground her own presence; to reinvoké the structuralist film motto, this film is not about its maker. And yet, clearly, in the black-and-white world it depicts one young girl simply making her way amid the unwelcoming urban landscape. It's hard not to view this as Benning's movement beyond the purely diaristic into something like fiction, regardless of whatever actual significance she bears to the young girl and to the captured urban scene. That significance is inevitably speculative and to that extent idle, yet the strength of Benning's previous personal tapes is such as to position *German Song* as a personal work rendered from a slight remove, and hence as a work simultaneously welcoming a reading as fiction and as a diary. It's that dual achievement that seems to me promising.

Copyrighted by both the director and the Midwestern band Come, the clip, shot in Super-8 film, is a low-key series of black-and-white images of a teenage grunge girl (fig. 4) in an urban setting: roller-skating, wandering around with a suitcase, shooting a plaster female mannequin. Interspersed are random shots of lone dogs, of two elderly African American women walking down a street arm in arm, and repeated atmospheric shots of a rundown-looking amusement park (evoking Bruce Springsteen's *Atlantic City* clip). The song itself is a hypnotic murmur, sounding to my ear like My

Bloody Valentine or Sonic Youth when fiddling in a low-energy key. Very briefly, toward the middle, there's a dropped-in shot, taken from a monitor, of the old Pixelvision Benning kissing another girl in closeup (fig. 5). Is this the same girl in *German Song*? Is this a personal work? Is it in some fashion an act of communication between Benning and the girl? Or is it, as fiction, a simple work for hire?

A minor curse likely to become attached to Benning's work from now on is the viewer's desire to insist on an autobiographical context even if the usual textual invitations to such reading are withheld. But the work that's made Benning famous has spoiled those of us who value it. We want to see her story continued, even though, in a real sense, this is an ongoing narrative addressed only secondarily to us. The urgency of the personal issues at stake in her work—the passionate desire to be understood and to be accepted and to be loved—indicates that her primary audience are those people she would recognize as her peers, who are young people of a certain age in general, and young gay and lesbian people in particular, all of whom, at any given point in time, find themselves starving for validating, ennobling images of themselves. These are not so much positive images as they are honest and faith keeping with the (at least) adolescent birthright of insecurity and doubt. Benning's work provides balm to those souls—to all the kids who find solace only behind the closed bedroom door.

For the rest of us, it often feels like eavesdropping. The way Benning's work stands now, we're all left with the summary image from *German Song*, catching the wing of a jet from a passenger's window as the plane ascends with purpose into a monochromatic sky, destination unknown.

Notes

Thanks to my friend Bruce Jenkins (Walker Art Center) for sharing his research with me.

1. Kim Masters, "Auteur of Adolescence," *Washington Post*, October 17, 1992, D7.
2. Roberta Smith, "A Whitney Biennial with a Social Conscience," *New York Times*, March 5, 1993, B6.
3. Collier Schorr, "Media Kids," *Artforum* 30, no. 8 (April 1992): 15; Ellen Spiro, "Shooting Star," *Advocate*, March 1991, 68–69; Cherry Smith, "Girls, Videos and Everything (after Sarah Schulman)," *Frieze*, January/February 1993, 21–23; Elise Harris, "Baby Butch Video," *QW*, November 15, 1992, 22–23, 33, 63.
4. Steve Fagin, "Virtual Play," *Cinematograph*, no. 2 (1986): 11.
5. Masters, "Auteur of Adolescence," D7.
6. Spiro, "Shooting Star," 69.
7. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Girl with a Camera," *Chicago Reader*, November 1991, 36.

BILL HERRIGAN, *Media Arts curator at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, recently curated Chris Marker: Silent Movie and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto: Three Installations.*