AFTERIMAGE 37.4
REPORT

Festival events this year included “Snipping Away at the Celluloid Ceiling,” a forum on women filmmakers featuring producers Jan Chapman, Lisa Cortés, and Finola Dwyer, along with filmmakers Xiaolu Guo and Lindy Heymann. While well intentioned, the moderator led the discussion down the familiar feminist garden path of trying to identify “female aesthetics,” which in turn elicited a string of cringe-worthy generalizations about women and cinema. Such an inquiry into female aesthetics forgets that the establishment of a women’s cinema in the 1970s amounted to more of a straitjacket than a sustaining political stance. The diverse works represented by the panel, as well as other films included in the festival, point more to the urgent need for an updated feminist politics than a codified female aesthetics. Guo’s She, a Chinese (2009), for example, traces the journey of a peasant girl to the big city and then to London. Along the way, she experiences the downside of transnational mobility: Chinese villagers living off mountains of Europe’s recycled products, sweatshop labor conditions, and prostitution; a marriage of convenience and rootlessness as she moves from one scenario of entrapment to another. She, a Chinese can be compared with Ken Wardrop’s His & Hers (2009), a talking-head documentary that uses interviews with Irish women of increasing ages. Several dozen discuss their lives, which are invariably tied to the family and domesticity. The film then begs the question, are these the only options for women today? Another meaningful film, Precious (2009, directed by Lee Daniels) is a redemption story of an impoverished, obese, and abused African American teenage. A documentary about women inmates’ participation in prison rodeo, Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo (2009, directed by Bradley Beesley) alerts viewers to Oklahoma’s rate of female incarceration—the highest in the United States. Interviews introduce some inmates with long sentences on drug charges, usually committed with or for their male partners. This film also presents difficult scenarios, such as the impregnation of an inmate on prison grounds. Iranian American Shirin Neshat’s Women Without Men (2009) is an exercise in maintaining the delicate balance between one’s artistic practice and his or her politics. The tension in Neshat’s magical-realist film about four women against the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution lies precisely at this juncture. Instead of relying on female aesthetics as a point of analytical departure, one might pose a more productive and provocative question about the politics of an artist’s film practice, regardless of his or her gender.

SHARON LIN TAY is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Middlesex University in the United Kingdom and the author of Women on the Edge: Twelve Political Film Practices (2009). With Dale Hudson, she co-curates “Map Open Space,” the digital arts exhibition of the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival in Ithaca, New York (see www.ithaca.edu/fleff).

Where else but at MIX could one see so much heady formal innovation, sexual themes, and gender play, and meet bona fide pornographers, social activists, and seasoned filmmakers? MIX, the love child of writer Sarah Schulman and experimental filmmaker Jim Hubbard, has become an important event on New York’s annual arts calendar with its focus on installation and performance. In its twenty-second year, the festival continues to serve as a bridge between queer communities and art scenes, as evident in its most recent edition.

MIX’s exhibition site, or “factory,” has varied for the last few years as it depends on fluctuations in the real estate market and the generosity of property owners. While the 2008 edition of the festival occupied the former flagship Liz Claiborne store at the South Street Seaport, this year’s festival took over a storefront space in a new luxury Chelsea condominium co-op. The commercial space passed for a typical art gallery with its high ceilings, concrete floors and walls, and horseshoe layout: performances and installations took place on either side, while film and video programs were streamed in a curtained-off back area.

MIX 22 screened more than eighty films and videos and exhibited more than a dozen installations and performances. Noam Gonick and Luis Jacob’s installation “Wildflowers of Manitoba” (2007), which includes performance, stood out, due in part to its majestic Buckminster Fuller-esque geodesic dome that inhabited the space. Moving images of wildflowers and four young men frolicking in a meadow were projected onto the inside of the dome, which also housed a young long-haired man on a mattress, surrounded by burning incense, vinyl records, and other signifiers of an intimate space. The mattress motif also surfaced in Adriana Varella’s meditative installation “Meeting God” (2009), which included the projection of innumerable fornicating couples in black outline on a white background onto a mattress resting on the floor. On the wall there was a separate projection of verdant images of a forest.

Hector Canonge’s installation-performance “Schema CorpoReal” (2009) left an impression that lasted throughout the festival. The artist stood nearly naked with bar codes fixed to different parts of...
his body and struck various poses as each participant guided the sensor over a bar code to trigger the projection of a narrative fragment onto a large screen behind the artist.

On the theme of impeded vision, Daniel Barrow’s mesmerizing live animation performance *Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry* (2008) gently wove together narrative strands from Helen Keller’s life and the artist’s own pseudo-autobiography. While Barrow’s mellifluous voice provided an intimate anchor for the story, hand-drawn images on acetates were expertly moved through the overhead projector, recalling early magic lanterns, slide shows, and other nearly obsolete storytelling devices.

John Greyson’s brilliantly layered and contrapuntal video opera *Fig Trees* (2009), about AIDS activists Tim McCaskell of Canada and Zackie Achmat of South Africa, held a special place in the festival. “HIV Positive” t-shirts from the South African Treatment Action Campaign were reprinted and given to all members of the audience and Greyson was present for a lively discussion after the screening.

Perhaps one of the most ambitious films of the festival was *Maggots and Men* (2009), by Cary Cronenwett and Ilona Berger, two young filmmakers from California. The title refers to a sequence in Sergei Eisenstein’s * Battleship Potemkin* (1925) (in parodic homage) but the film actually tells the story of the 1921 Kronstadt Uprising (of Soviet soldiers, sailors, and civilians against communists) with a cast of over one hundred transgender actors. The filmmakers, in fact, “transed” Eisenstein’s film and the early Soviet Union through their appropriation of his style and redirection of heroic revolutionary masculinity to another utopic end.

Gay historian Jeffrey Escoffier gave a clip-show lecture on innovation in gay pornographic films, which was followed by a discussion with 1970s pioneers Bob Alvarez, Joe Gage, and Wakefield Poole, regarding the place of their work in the heritage of underground gay cinema. Other notable programs included Vanessa Renwick’s somber and insightful *Portrait #3: House of Sound* (2009) on the razing of an important record shop and jazz clubs at the heart of black Portland, Oregon, and two daring video performances of endurance: Dominic Johnson’s *Transmission* (2009) and Zackary Drucker’s *The Inability to Be Looked at and the Horror of Nothing to See* (2009). Several presentations addressed an exciting range of work on female sexuality, particularly *Pop* (2009) by Heather Wodrich and Sadie Lune, which takes on Warhol.

“I want to go into the closet . . . with you,” a voice purrs in the festival trailer, appropriately representing this year’s edition and its ludic, sexual, and community dimensions. MIX 22 definitely brought sexy back through its careful selection of work, and provided the ingredients to generate that unique vibe of a successful festival, including parties, open bars, and a relaxed lounge atmosphere, suggesting an intimate Warholian factory. The programming was very strong this year, raising expectations for the next edition.

**GER ZIELINSKI** is a postdoctoral fellow at New York University researching post-underground experimental film scenes in New York City.

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*Above*

Still from *Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry* (2008) by Daniel Barrow; courtesy of the artist