

**H**istories of film production in Los Angeles, typically constructed as stories of “great men” responsible for innovations in studio management, formal techniques, and audio-visual technologies, frequently overlook the accomplishments of the city’s independent cinema community. This marginalization of non-commercial experimentation is, perhaps, not merely a reflection of the industry’s bias toward classical narrative, but also symptomatic of the ways in which traditional historiography in general writes out the contributions of women. Such an oversight is indefensible in any chronicle of artistic production in

## Susan Mogul: A “Work-in-Progress”



Southern California, where female film, video, and performance artists have not only initiated the avant-garde movement in this country, but continue to redefine and test its conceptual boundaries. The pioneering work of filmmakers such as Maya Deren (*Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943), Sara Arledge (*What Is a Man?*, 1958), and Chick Strand (*Soft Fiction*, 1979) illustrate the underlying content of much of women’s cinema: the exploration of identity in relation to the self, the other, and art. These themes have come to preoccupy the avant-garde community itself (men included), and over the last 20 years, have been inflected and reinvigorated by the feminist movement.

This second generation of women filmmakers has also been centered in and around Los Angeles, where institutions of higher education have produced some of the country’s seminal media programs and working artists: Judy Chicago (CalArts Feminist Art Program), Julie Dash (UCLA Ethnocommunications), Laura Ho (UCLA Asian American Studies Center), and Ilene Segalove (UC Santa Barbara), are only a handful of examples. At a time when women’s libera-

tion expanded consciousness, questioned feminine stereotypes, and celebrated female sexuality, younger artists turned to more intimate interrogations of self—to autobiography, the body, and family history. The colloquial, the everyday, and the diaristic thus became dominant modes of expression well-suited to the concerns of women’s work, domestic ideology, and non-canonical aesthetic production.

Like many artists working in this quotidian vernacular, home movies have had a pivotal influence on the work of Susan Mogul, if not an uncanny prescience. As the story goes, at age six, during the celebration of a 35th wedding anniversary party for her grandparents, a spry and eager young Susan began dancing with her mother, who handed the family’s Super 8 camera to her husband to capture this most typical home movie attraction. No sooner had mother and daughter adopted the smiling poses proper for their sex, did Susan boldly lift her dress, drop her panties, and expose her crotch to dad’s paternal gaze. As Susan so fondly remembers this notorious episode, her mother deeply blushed, while the artist-in-the-rough laughed hysterically.

Appropriately, Mogul introduces a video sampler of her work with this home movie interlude, and it functions as a witty, ironic allegory for the trajectory of her career over the last 20 years. From the past to the present, Mogul’s provocative response to the camera and her love of performance have mediated her life and her art, at times blurring the distinction. Her self-exposure, the impulse of every autobiographical artist, has resulted in a necessary exhibitionism of the most private parts of her experience to the public eye. Yet unlike the home movie’s paternal gaze so typical of the ’50s during which it was shot, Mogul’s own video self-portraits and ethnographies illustrate her feminist reappropriation of the apparatus as an act of self-determination. It is no coincidence, too, that Mrs. Mogul’s figure looms so large above her dancing daughter: Susan’s exploration of her self-identity as woman and artist has been a process of both maternal identification and separation. Finally, Susan’s “innocent” striptease, so impertinently matter-of-fact, foreshadows the deadpan, sometimes vulgar humor that colors all of the artist’s work.

Ironically, it was not until she had moved to the West Coast that Mogul was able to achieve the aesthetic and literal distance she needed to investigate her New York, Jewish, and female identities against the liberating relief of the Los Angeles art scene. Growing up in the middle class suburbs of Long Island, she had never consciously identified herself as an artist. After enrolling at the University of Wisconsin in 1967, where she dabbled for two years in journalism and political activism, as well as drawing and design, Mogul transferred to the Museum School in Boston, earning a BFA degree and a desire to explore photography, video, and performance.

Coming to Los Angeles, Mogul finally found her artistic voice. Enrolling in the germinal and influential Feminist Art Workshop at CalArts under the tutelage of Judy Chicago, Mogul began to develop her unique sensibility. Although not particularly influenced by the works of her colleagues, she absorbed the climate of openness and support that this environment fostered. Encouraged to explore her female identity and sexuality, liberated from her family, and reborn as an artist, Mogul recognized her new achievements through a most quintessential Los Angeles ritual: the acquisition of her first driver's license. Having suffered a near fatal automobile accident years earlier, in which her young lover was killed and after which she developed a fear of driving, Mogul picked up the pieces of her past and pasted them together on a postcard collage in which she and her car fly effortlessly above the Hollywood freeways under the announcement, "Mogul is Mobile."

The postcard itself, like the home movie, functions as yet another allegory of the artist's progress, and illustrates the narrative impulse behind both the work of the autobiographical artist and the scholar writing about her. Yet, whereas the latter seeks critical closure and analytical fixity, the former, by definition, is always in process, open-ended, incomplete, unfinished.<sup>1</sup> Each tells the same story, but in a different language. Mogul, in fact, describes herself as a "work-in-progress," which translated in academic jargon, can be conceptualized as an artistic accretion of an ever-changing subjectivity and history with the potential for "a mobile and continual process of knowledge and its inscription."<sup>2</sup>

**"I" Am Woman:**

**Video Self-Portraits and Mother-Rites**

Mogul's first video works, influenced by the performance elements of Allan Kaprow's Happenings in the early '70s, are best classified as feminist "self-portraits." *Dressing Up* (1973) and *Take Off* (1974) are distinguished from the classic autobiography by an absence of Aristotelian narrative structure and from the pure diary in their adoption of the

matic types, or dramatic personae, who allow Mogul to reveal selective aspects of her experiences in an imaginary first person. These alter egos serve a double function: they simultaneously act as protagonists and narrators, performing the monologues they deliver. And while both tapes are intensely personal, Mogul's surrogate selves conceal as they reveal, blurring distinctions between Mogul the artist and Mogul the person and fusing the difference into a single "I," a unified subject who speaks, performs, and controls her enunciation.<sup>3</sup> Because these early works question female stereotypes and parody male sexuality, such disguises represent subtle feminist strategies that enable individual self-expansion and public social criticism without the one-to-one correspondence of confessional art or the risk of personal attack.

*Dressing Up* is a reverse striptease. Appearing naked from behind a curtain, Mogul ventures, in the tradition of the unruly woman, to deconstruct patriarchal images of femininity, defetishize the voyeuristic gaze associated with the nude female form, and de-eroticize the spectacle of women's fashion. Alternately chomping on cornnuts and talking a blue streak, she addresses the audience, and proceeds to display and describe individual articles of clothing as part of an ensemble that she dons, piece by piece, before the camera. Providing a detailed history of her shoes, blouse, skirt, bra, and panties—their time and place of purchase, retail and sales prices, work and leisure uses—Mogul's mundane monologue inflects the clothing with commodity status, debunking their potential as sexual fetish. Her choices are sly: a "Lady Suzanne" bra bought for two bucks in the bargain basement; a pair of imported, French shoes from Saks Fifth Avenue picked up in an after-Christmas sale for waiting on tables; a pair of sheer underpants, on-sale three for 99 cents. Like the outlet dealers who "cut out the labels" in order to mark down "designer brands," Mogul's utilitarian recital defuses the erotic charge and highfalutin pretensions of *haute couture*. Abruptly, without showing off the remaining items, she tires of dressing up

and walks off frame.

This anti-climax perfectly caps Mogul's anti-spectacular performance as a character so obsessed with shopping, eating, talking, and her mother that any prospect of visual pleasure is denied the male viewer.<sup>4</sup> In Mogul's impertinent fashion, the traditional take off is merely a put on.

The following year, Mogul put on a *Take Off* of another sort. In this piece she parodies *Undertone* (1972), Vito Acconci's



serious and mystical self-presentation of masculine sexuality, in which he questions the viewer's faith in his statements that he is masturbating under a table. Mogul's parody pushes the issue of credibility to another level, as she substitutes Acconci's hidden penis with a visible vibrator, a gift from her friends, which she alternately raises for the viewer's surveillance and lowers beneath her own table, supposedly to penetrate her thighs and stimulate her clitoris. We may see the vibrator as a referential signifier of her honesty, but we cannot verify if its hum or her limpid expressions are indexical signs of real pleasure. The ability of women to fake it successfully is here given a new twist. Mogul's play with the tensions between the inscription of private experience and its exhibition for public display is central to the diary mode. At one point, the vibrator breaks down, as does Mogul's credibility, when she is forced to admit that, because the gift vibrator makes so little noise, she has opted to buy a stunt double with a louder hum for greater audio effect.

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Opposite page: *News from Home*, photo by Eric Blum  
Everyday Echo Street: *A Summer Diary*, photo by Jeff Li



Susan Mogul *continued*

Replacing the fake with the real, Mogul affirms that "Now I'm telling you the truth," but her verification sounds bogus, as yet another level of "truth" shifts on a slippery scale where acts of scripted performance, apparent improvisation, and bona fide experience slide more obviously under each other than they do between Mogul's legs.

Like most other feminist performance videos of the '70s, both *Dressing Up* and *Take Off* put formal considerations in the service of content. Low-tech, black and white, and shot in a single take with no camera movement and minimal post-production effects, the *mise-en-scene* in each work defers to the presence of the artist alone and her exploration of self rather than her medium. In the sense that Mogul imagines the camera, not as a mirror, but as an unspecified individual or, like the telephone, as a conduit of communication to the outside world, these videos are not solipsistic exercises in narcissism. Always thinking of an audience, even if in vague and amorphous terms, Mogul's personae recall Howarth's description of the dramatic autobiographer, who conceives of life as an opportunity to stage and perform her innate skills comically, unpretentiously, conversationally.<sup>5</sup>

By the next decade, Mogul had taken another risk, beginning to stage performance pieces before a live audience. In 1987, she videotaped the final performance of what is arguably her last strictly "feminist" work, *News From Home*, an eclectic composition that foregrounds typically "feminine" characteristics of the diary mode.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by Rhoda Mogul, the artist's mother, Mogul alternately honors and parodies this maternal "Muse" in a process of sorting out and claiming her own independent identity. By parading Rhoda's fashions of the '50s and '60s, reading aloud her stinging letters, looking back at old family photos, and reminiscing about how she remembered mama, Mogul explores the young woman's typical, contradictory fears about being not enough or too

much like her mother. Dramatizing this ambivalent relationship by identifying with Rhoda's body and voice while comically critiquing them from the daughter's position, Mogul subtly analyzes her maturation process shaped by the fluctuations of symbiosis and separation that split her mother as both good and bad object.<sup>7</sup> This position shifts in Mogul's later work in which a dispersed subjectivity reflects the mother's position, a position which Mogul, while never a biological parent, has nevertheless been able to re-identify and from which she has been empowered to speak.

#### "Hollywood Mogul": Waiting at the Soda Fountain

The power of the independent woman is something altogether different from the power of the independent artist, particularly one living in the shadow of the Hollywood Hills but working far from the studio gates. Outside the mainstream, Mogul jokingly calls herself a "co-dependent filmmaker" at the mercy of private donations and government grants. The lure of "big time" success in the world capital of commercial entertainment and the desire for recognition by the established art world haunts much of Mogul's work, but in the guise of a friendly ghost rather than a Faustian demon. Mogul's fantasies of success have always a comic, congenial twist, at times literally, as in *Big Tip/Back Up/Shut Out* (1976), where in she dreams of a career as a stand-up comedian in case she fails as an artist.

One of Mogul's wittiest works in this vein is *Dear Dennis* (1987), a video letter to Dennis Hopper inspired by her discovery that they share the same dentist. The central irony of the piece is that, despite Hopper's masquerade as an innovative, sub-cultural filmmaker and performer, the actual distance between his so-called "independent" films financed by the studios and Mogul's truly experimental, non-commercial videos prevents Mogul from finding any common ground from which to address Hopper other than the subject of dental work.

In the first scene, for example, Mogul brushes her teeth to the tune of "C.C.

Rider," a play on *Easy Rider*, Hopper's claim to alternative fame, and opens wide to show the camera her cracked tooth that needs a root canal and a \$500 gold crown. The third and best segment introduces Mogul reading in bed, hidden behind the pages of the *L.A. Weekly*, whose cover story about gang warfare is counterposed to Streisand's rendition of "Something's Comin'" from *West Side Story*, playing in the background. Mogul eventually lowers the paper to address the camera, and reveals a bruised and swollen face. She tells Hopper that she recently saw his feature, *Colors*, in her east side neighborhood, and while she never offers her opinion of the film *per se*, she does imply that the riot which ensued during the screening ultimately saved her an expensive dental bill, as the problem tooth, which she raises for his inspection, has been conveniently knocked from her head. By putting *Colors* in a context juxtaposing a journalistic account of real city gangs with a pop song that romanticizes gang warfare as a musical fantasy; and by suggesting that the film's worth can best be measured in terms of its exchange value, Mogul subtly implies that Hopper's work yet again neutralizes sub-cultural practices and renews their potential as Hollywood commodities.

In the work's final segment, set to a German rendition of "Mack the Knife," Mogul presents to Hopper a necklace made from her own teeth, a ludicrous piece of folk art that oddly is designed to attract Hopper's attention in the probable absence of his interest in her video. The entire premise is ridiculous, but Mogul's deadpan panache gives the work an ingenuous urgency that creates drama out of the mundane. And unlike the man whom her letter addresses, Mogul never sells out her integrity as an artist (or as a woman) in her efforts to earn recognition. The video retains her episodic, low-tech, unpretentious signature style and avoids trying to impress Hopper with flash and glamour. As in *Dressing Up*, she presents an image of herself at her least appealing: brushing her teeth, spitting out foam, waking up in bed, beat up and bruised. That Hopper has never

responded to Mogul's letter is telling in itself; as a video whose diaristic vernacular resists cinematic appropriation and whose seduction denies sex, *Dear Dennis* exposes little that the man can sink his teeth into.

The ways in which women have had to present and even degrade themselves in order to impress men, gain attention, and succeed in Hollywood are lampooned in Mogul's performance video, *Waiting at the Soda Fountain* (1980). Set at the Columbia Coffee Shop, the piece parodies the rags to riches fantasy of Lana Turner, who, as the legend goes, walked up to a Hollywood soda fountain, ordered a chocolate malted, and became a star. Dressed in a beret and a bad attitude, Mogul masquerades as a "male" movie director who callously evaluates the auditions of the women in attendance, discarding those who fail to meet "his" stereotypical image of who they should be rather than who they are. The "wannabes" in the tape are all well-known personalities associated with West Coast feminist art, including Arlene Raven, Cheri Gaulke, and Nancy Angelo. As performance artists dealing with personal concerns, they have already developed recognizable ways of presenting themselves, but in the tape, they are pretending to be actresses who are pretending to be someone else. Forced to attend to hair and makeup, take dictatorial direction, conform to type, and enact humiliating scenarios, they give over-the-top performances which poke fun at women's traditional passivity.

Her first public performance, Mogul directed the affair as a three-hour on-location happening, providing scripted scenarios but calling for unscripted responses. This balance of structure and improvisation, these layers of reality and artifice, here exploited primarily for comic effect, find a more profound and mature expression in her later work. Her parodic impersonation of the movie director, while debunking the sexist imperatives associated with his power, disguises Mogul's ambition, partially fulfilled only recently, to move beyond the video diary to the feature film. This desire finds its

concrete expression in the photo collage she designed for the coffee shop, entitled "*Wandering Moguls Colonize the Promised Land.*" Reduplicated *en masse*, the artist is featured as conqueror of Hollywood: reigning from skyscrapers, demolishing the Capital Records building, and taking over tinsel town. The poignant irony, of course, is that Mogul herself has taken over only a tiny soda fountain, now torn down, and remains waiting to this day.

**Diary Essays:  
Everyday Echoes and Prosaic Portraits**

Since the completion of *Prosaic Portraits, Ironies, and Other Intimacies* (1991) and *Everyday Echo Street: A Summer Diary* (1993), personal video essays commissioned as ethnographic studies, Mogul has become more firmly identified as a "diary filmmaker," a problematic categorization ignoring that the artist works entirely in video and rarely in a purely diaristic mode. In contrast to the strategies of Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, and Michael Auder, who operate the camera apparatus as an immediate extension of their subjective interaction with the environment, whose cinematic techniques strive to document time and place without the imposition of a supplementary consciousness, and whose footage privileges the present instant of composition over post-production manipulation, Mogul's strategies have always reassembled the heterogeneous moments of shooting in the service of prearranged scenarios or thematic concepts. If, according to the precise distinction offered by David James, the film diary privileges author, process, and production, while the diary film privileges audience, product, and exhibition, then Mogul's work falls squarely in the second camp.<sup>8</sup>

Mogul resists the literal mandates of autobiographical "truth to life." Her biography is her palette, whose colors she chooses according to the mood, effect, or idea she has in mind. All art that draws on raw experience, in her philosophy, is by definition a reconstruction, a tension between spontaneity and intentionality, "a way to figure things out in my personal life, or personal issues, or personal conflicts. It gives me a structure to look

at my life, things, people."<sup>9</sup> Mogul's diaries are meant to be published, communicated, received. Gregarious, her recollections turn outward, exploring personal identity and social relationships as mutually constitutive. Her latest work most notably registers this documentary impulse: "an outward gaze upon the world—with an equally forceful reflex of self-interrogation."<sup>10</sup>

In *Prosaic Portraits*, a video "travelogue" to Eastern Europe, Mogul's point-of-view wavers between objective documentation and subjective involvement, evoking the problematic position of an ethnographer who has become attached to her group under observation. Mogul's search for home culminates in *Everyday Echo Street*, the artist's most recent, mature, and successful work, in which she synthesizes her recurring themes in an elegant formal structure quite moving in its gradual progress from isolation, fear, and loss to social integration and hope for the future. While retaining elements of the diaristic vernacular—digression, impression, intimacy, revelation—Mogul's use of a cameraman, the precision of her compositions, and a discernible narrative thread point more in the direction of the artist's future ambitions: the autobiographical feature. Her previous experiments with scripted improvisation reach a new level of sophistication as she frames the presentation of non-actors within a narrative that endows them with double signification: at once real people in her neighborhood and figures of her poetic design. Their representation is not, therefore, a process of editing out, but editing in: the stories Mogul constructs around her everyday meetings with ordinary folks inscribe their public appearances in her personal anecdotes, transforming the most mundane behavior as the stuff of private fantasy.

In this way, Mogul is able to uphold the ethnographer's integrity by presenting her neighbors as they really are, but of course only as she can see them. By framing their stories within her own

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scenarios about family, friendship, loneliness, and love, the particular becomes universal. Latinos and Jews, men and women, old and young are different, but somehow the same, refracted and refocused through Mogul's camera lens. Shot in Highland Park, a neighborhood primarily of Mexicans-Americans, the video premiered at Armando's, a local restaurant, gathering together people from inside and outside the neighborhood for a slice of life in the city missing from popular media. As a magnet drawing together a fractured Los Angeles, Mogul's work refreshingly demonstrates video's potential as a medium of social, rather than commercial exchange.

After living in the area for 12 years, the artist herself comes to know its inhabitants more intimately through the creative process. Mogul dramatizes her discoveries by formally dividing her piece in roughly equal halves, the first representing her initial isolation, and the second, her re-inte-

gration. A single, Jewish, middle class artist living in a Latino, working class neighborhood of closely knit families, Mogul introduces herself once again as the outsider, thousands of miles from home, family, and friends. Memories of loss haunt her: the young lover who died in a car wreck; the sale of the house on Long Island in which she grew up; the week at Grandma Sonia's on Long Island where, abandoned by her parents during their vacation, she did nothing but look out the window. Now 40 years later, Mogul continues to look out windows in Highland Park. The impulse to film from her window, she confesses, began when a man she was dating went off to Italy for a month, but never returned. In the meantime she watches pigeons making love on her roof, self-conscious of her loneliness. Even when Mogul and her camera leave her apartment window and move about the community, we see the neighborhood primarily from her first person point of view, one with which we identify and whose effect causes a radical separation: "our" self looking out upon the other. Mogul's

presence is marked only by her absence in the scene, as her disembodied voice foregrounds our awareness of the camera between her and her subjects.

The video's second half, however, registers a subtle but perceptible change, largely in part because Mogul more frequently begins to appear in front of the camera, which she has handed to a hired assistant. Her presence in the frame thus splits our identification between her and the viewfinder, so that rather than watching with her from the outside, we now join her as a member of the community, her invited guest. We follow her to the local grocery store, post office, gas station, and restaurant, where soon we grow to understand that Mogul's minor exchanges—the greetings, courtesies, jokes, and small talk—make up the fabric of her everyday life.

The echoes of home have reverberated full circle, as Mogul recognizes that what she's been missing has been out on the

street all along. Setting her sights beyond her apartment window, she pursues the neighborhood men, transformed by her camera's aggressive gaze into objects of her desire. Visited by Grace, an aging, unmarried friend content to live alone, Mogul can face a similar prospect with equanimity. Bumping into Mark, an amateur photographer and Polish survivor of World War II, she discovers that she's not the only Jew living in Highland Park. Documenting her neighborhood, she achieves her finest mode of self-expression and unwittingly finds a home. As a woman, a Jew, and an artist, with *Everyday Echo Street*, Susan Mogul seems to have settled on just the right address.

### Notes

- 1 James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction," *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980) 25.
- 2 Paul Smith, "Autobiography," *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 106.

- 3 Chris Straayer, "I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s," *Afterimage* 13. 4 (1985): 9.
- 4 See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18.
- 5 William L. Howarth, "Some Principles of Autobiography," *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980) 97-8.
- 6 See Rebecca Hogan's insightful essay, "Engendered Autobiographies," for an analysis of the diary's cultural affiliation with "feminine" genres and writing styles; in *Prose Studies* 14.2 (1991): 95-107.
- 7 For examples of feminist literature and theory exploring the mother-daughter relationship from which my analysis has benefited, see Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1976); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Routledge, 1988), especially chapters 12 and 14; and Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- 8 David E. James, "Film Diary/Diary Film: Practice and Product in Walden," *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, NH: Princeton University Press, 1992) 145-179.
- 9 Susan Mogul, personal interview, 19 Nov. 1993.
- 10 Michael Renov, "The Subject in History: The New Autobiography in Film and Video," *Afterimage* 17.1 (1989): 4.