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Interviewing About Interviewing – Irene Lusztig & Julie Wyman



Irene Lusztig and Julie Wyman are both feminist filmmakers and educators. Together with their film students at UC Santa Cruz and UC Davis, they co-created the [FEMEXFILM Archive](#), an ongoing, collectively produced online archive of interviews with feminist experimental filmmakers. Using Google Chat, they interviewed each other about interviewing in their documentary practice and pedagogy.

Julie Wyman: So, as I recall, we were going to interview each other about interviewing.

Irene Lusztig: I was just thinking about how I am more interested in ideas about listening lately.

JW: Interesting. Well, listening is key to interviewing.

IL: People tend to think primarily about talking, more than listening, when they talk about the interview as a form.

JW: Right: like it's two people talking... or like you're going in to mine for sound bites or profound statements.

IL: I've also been thinking about listening vs. talking in my classes. There is always a "participation grade" that becomes a way to

recognize or praise people for talking a lot. I'm trying to figure out how to also recognize people who listen carefully to others in class. It's an equally important space of intellectual labor.

JW: That's a great point. How do we measure listening in the space of a classroom? Usually it's someone's responses or questions that show they are listening... but there are certainly many times when I find myself surprised by students who've been quiet or seemed tuned out making insightful comments that show they've really been listening.

IL: Maybe it's hard because we haven't spent enough time thinking about how to measure listening. I always know which students do all the talking. But then as I think about how gendered public speaking can be and who feels comfortable taking up space in discussions, I start to wonder about whether we should be recognizing making space for others to talk as much as, or more than, actual talking.

JW: Yes. One reason teaching interviewing feels loaded is the larger importance of these skills of listening and the way they tie to interpersonal communication: how important it is to really attend to one another.

IL: How do you use / think about / resist / work with interview conventions in your own work?

JW: I have changed my mind a lot about interviewing in the course of my work. When I started my first doc, [A Boy Named Sue](#) in the early 1990s, interviewing was the whole project: to regularly interview Theo and chosen family, comprised of his partner and lesbian/ gay friends. These were super intriguing conversations about gender, sexuality and identity, and I absolutely loved the act of listening to how charged the process of Theo becoming a man was for each of them. I noticed that it usually took about 30 minutes for the conversation to really get good.

When I started ***STRONG!*** I made a vow to NOT interview because I really wanted to observe / engage rather than prompt statements. So for three years I filmed Cheryl without any real interviews, and every work sample I made resulted in audience members saying "I don't get her," "why should I care?" So I started interviewing. And sure enough – because Cheryl is super verbal and articulate – her "character" came through in a whole different way. But also, those talks really built a form of even deeper trust between us. I think that gets at the listening element. For the subject, the act of participating can be an act of being heard. And I've felt very empowered in being able to offer that to my subjects!



IL: Do you work with interviews in your current projects?

JW: Yes I do. In spite of my earlier resistance, interviewing is really key in terms of process: building a two-way relationship with my subjects... I am interested in what ways there are to use that material I record other than the obvious (accompaniment to illustrative B roll). But I still find the act of speaking and listening very key to my researching and filmmaking process. So what about you? Tell me about how you use or resist the interview? And how you thought about it, say, with [Yours in Sisterhood](#)?

IL: I've also had some shifting around in my relationship to the interview as a cinematic form. I was taught that interviews are bad and not cinematic that it is not a visual form, that it is telling without showing, and that real filmmakers don't need talking to engage with the visual world. I think there's been a long moment in the world of art documentary / experimental documentary (which is more or less where my work sits) that has been very scornful of the interview and of talking more generally. Over the past ten years or maybe longer there's been a lot of privileging of silent, visual, observational films. Maybe in part it's a long response against the earlier hegemony of the PBS-format talking heads documentary.

For a long time I was pushing myself to move away from the un-cinematic, anti-visual "bad" interview. I really regretted that my first film, [Reconstruction](#), relied so much on interviews (and quite visually conventional sit-down interviews where people are in their living

rooms looking like talking heads). I had a big revelation about ten years ago when I started watching 70s feminist documentaries like *Growing up Female* and *The Woman's Film*. Have you seen these?

JW: No! I don't think so – what are they?

IL: There's a bunch of US 70s feminist documentaries that are under-screened and a little bit under-remembered – the two I mentioned, *Joyce at 34*, *Janie's Janie*, *Betty Tells Her Story*, and a bunch of others. Many of them are collectively made and come pretty directly out of consciousness-raising group methods and politics. They are very talky films. Like, just people talking for the whole film. And they are shot on 16mm and quite visually beautiful. I realized when I saw these films that it actually can be visually interesting to look at people speaking, to see their pauses and hesitations and rhythms and expressions, to observe the act of someone coming to language or articulating something new for the first time... so long as the film proposes a kind of patient listening rather than a ruthlessly "useful" sound bite.

When I discovered these films, I was amazed by how cinematic these films felt – how compelled I was by watching people's faces speaking in black and white 16mm. I think those films made me rethink what the interview might be beyond a headshot or a useful soundbite or an anti-visual exposition or explanation. I think what those films understand, and what I've become interested in too, is the idea that making a space of talking and listening can be a way of making a space of political action. I think that's what consciousness raising tried to do in the 70s, and I'm interested in how the interview can be rethought in that kind of context right now.

JW: Right – wow that is all so interesting... I was wondering if we could unpack why interviews are “bad.” What you said / explained about your training perfectly articulates my own resistance to the interview...

IL: Yes, why are they bad? I think, honestly, some of that is also gendered! Like, it feels like cheating to just put a camera on a tripod and point it at someone's face. "Good" documentary shooting involves risk and the machismo of hand-held camera acrobatics and something visually spectacular. The quiet, still image of someone's face while they are gathering their thoughts before speaking is never thought of as visually spectacular.

JW: Is it the same forces that make interviewing “bad” that made the form of CR groups necessary in the first place?

IL: Yes, I think so!

JW: So when you said that you wonder if interviews can be rethought now, what popped into my mind is the kergillions of hours of webcam testimony that live on YouTube.

IL: That proliferation also means no one is listening carefully to those hours of testimony.

JW: Yes, so while doc aesthetics have criminalized the look of the talking head, there is also the problem of speaking into a void... Maybe it's not the *form* of the talking head, but its context that matters, i.e., how it's produced literally so that the subjects are being listened to. Did *they* have a sense of actually being heard when they were interviewed? And does the final film that is produced and circulated *complete* that communication circle? Is the subject HEARD beyond a simple sound bite... and is the effort / importance of enunciating part of the equation?

IL: Yes, these are all things I think so much about! I think interview is interesting as a process more than as a result or piece of information; like, how long does it take someone, in real time, to figure out what they really mean, how they are really responding to something, and put that into words?

JW: That's what I love about *Yours in Sisterhood* – the way that you are both giving voice / reviving and inviting a new form of enunciation of the forgotten archive of letters AND the way you make space for those speakers / “performers” to speak about the experience of re-speaking...

IL: Right. There is also kind of a double listening in *Yours in Sisterhood* – the people who read letters are spending immersive time listening to the voice of someone from 40 years ago (by putting it into their body several times in a row over several takes), and then I listen / make space for their contemporary response. I also have a lot of rules – I tried to say as little as possible in these “interviews,” sometimes beyond the point of a long, awkward silence. Almost the only questions I asked most project participants were some variation on “how does this make you feel?” People have been calling them interviews because we don't have a great range of language for different forms of extended, direct address speaking on camera. I'm not sure I think they are interviews at all.

JW: Do you have a word for what those moments were?? Observation?? Listening?

IL: I've been calling them readings, but maybe that's not the most expressive term either! But I do like using some other word that feels less like an already known form (and less aesthetically loaded) than “interview.”

JW: I wanted to return to your question, “how long does it take someone, in real time, to figure out what they really mean...”? Do you mean that it takes time to articulate? I think that's definitely true.

IL: Yes. But the process of arriving there can be interesting. And cinematic.

JW: So does cinematic mean “spectacular,” or “worthy of visibility”? Or does it mean that it is worthy of or befitting the time-based, immersive, large-scale format of the theater screen? ... In any case, I like that *Yours in Sisterhood* is asserting / insisting on the value of conversation and exchange between then and now and between any two people who are making an effort to communicate.

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Irene Lusztig is a filmmaker, visual artist, archival researcher, and amateur seamstress. Her film and video work mines old images and technologies for new meanings in order to reframe, recuperate, and reanimate forgotten and neglected histories. Often beginning with rigorous research in archives, her work brings historical materials into conversation with the present day, inviting viewers to explore historical spaces as a way to contemplate larger questions of politics, ideology, and the production of personal, collective, and national memories. Much of her work is centered on public feminism, language, and histories of women and women's bodies, including her debut feature *Reconstruction* (2001), the feature length archival film essay *The Motherhood Archives* (2013), the ongoing web-based *Worry Box Project* (2011), and her newest performative documentary feature *Yours in Sisterhood* (2018). Her work has been screened around the world, including at the Berlinale, MoMA, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Anthology Film Archives, Pacific Film Archive, Flaherty NYC, IDFA Amsterdam, and RIDM Montréal. She teaches filmmaking at UC Santa Cruz where she is Associate Professor of Film and Digital Media.

Julie Wyman is a filmmaker and performer whose work aims to challenge and expand our culture's narrow range of represented bodies. Her documentary films engage issues of embodiment, body image, gender, and the politics, possibilities, and problematics of media spectatorship. Her 2012 documentary *STRONG!* about Cheryl Haworth premiered at AFI Silverdocs, screened in theaters nationally, and was broadcast nationally as the closing film of the 10th season of PBS's Emmy award winning series, *Independent Lens*, where it won the series' Audience Award. Wyman's work has received support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's Independent Television Service and the Creative Capital Foundation. Her participatory workshops, which have been featured events at universities, academic conferences, art galleries, and at community centers nationally, draw on her experience as professor, writer, and performer. Her films, including *Buoyant* (2005) and *A Boy Named Sue* (2000), have aired on Showtime, MTV's LOGO-TV, and have been exhibited at New York's MoMA, London's National Film Theater, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the Wexner Art Center, the Walker Art Center, and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Wyman holds an MFA from UC San Diego's Visual Arts program. She currently an Associate Professor in the Cinema and Digital Media Program at UC Davis.

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