



# ARDELE LISTER'S DIVINE IRONY

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In *It Happens to the Best of Us* (1989) Ardele Lister revisits Susy James, the mercurial runaway teen she interviewed eight years earlier in *Split*, now a married housewife with a baby. The title summarizes the crushed hopes of people who settle for their lot in this world. Susy is framed squarely in a long shot that takes in the yellowish house where she lives, the backyard pavement, her folding chair, the empty beers on the table. A glaucous light evenly fills the shot. The younger Susy's insect-like intensity is nowhere to be found in this bland, plump, ageless woman whose very posture reflects diminished expectations. Off camera, Lister asks fundamental life questions, and Susy crushes each one in responses that seem calculated for maximum mediocrity. What qualities attracted her to her husband? "Sven grew on me...I don't think he affected my life too much, he was just a lot of work." What's the best thing about having a kid? "I don't know, it's just instinct I guess." If she won a lot of money in the lottery? "I'd buy a nice house in Kitsilano [a comfortable neighborhood in Vancouver]....I wouldn't mind going to Mexico." Susy reveals that she's started doing crafts, like making a Raggedy Ann doll for the baby. "It took three nights to make the Raggedy Ann doll hair.... I don't know what else I like to do." Lister continues to probe the source of meaning in Susy's life. Does she like art ("Never"), reading, music? "I like quiet, when nobody's home. Relax after my house is spotless, watch a show on TV." Lister's insistence makes me crazy. Can't she tell this is going nowhere?

Susy's "meaningless" life resembles the Daoist "fasting of the mind" recommended by Zhuangzi in the late fourth century BCE, in which one learns to discard preoccupations, including one's own identity.<sup>1</sup> Directly contradicting the statement by his contemporary Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth

TOP Ardele Lister, *Split* (1981), frame enlargement.

BOTTOM Ardele Lister, *It Happens to the Best of Us* (1989), frame enlargement.

All images courtesy the artist.

living, Zhuangzi asserts that letting go of your identity is the way to peace and freedom. Susy's description of her life lingers on extended unexamined periods: growing to tolerate her spouse, raising a child by instinct, relaxing in her spotless home, making the doll's woolen hair. What really goes on during these periods remains a mystery.

Then at the end, something changes. Lisa Steele describes it this way, in the 1992 Images Festival catalogue:

The camera stays on as equipment is being put away and Susy, shedding her character as The Good Mother, smokes a cigarette and chats with the technician. As she rambles about getting her hair striped and what's normal and acceptable or not to her parents, and on and on, her façade is thinning. Off-camera, Lister spots what's going on: it's all been an act.

Lister: So you're under cover now?

Susy: I can't reveal my true self on camera.

Lister: Uh oh... (Lister is excited now; she can see the Susy who used to be; there could be some fireworks.)

Susy: I have to be very careful what I say... very careful... (and here Susy approaches the camera, à la Kathy Bates in *Misery*, all moon-faced and dangerously unbalanced, then smiles demonically and orders the camera off—"Right Now!").

Beneath Susy's practiced mediocrity, a fuse is burning. Whether it leads to combustion or powers a life to come, we do not know yet.

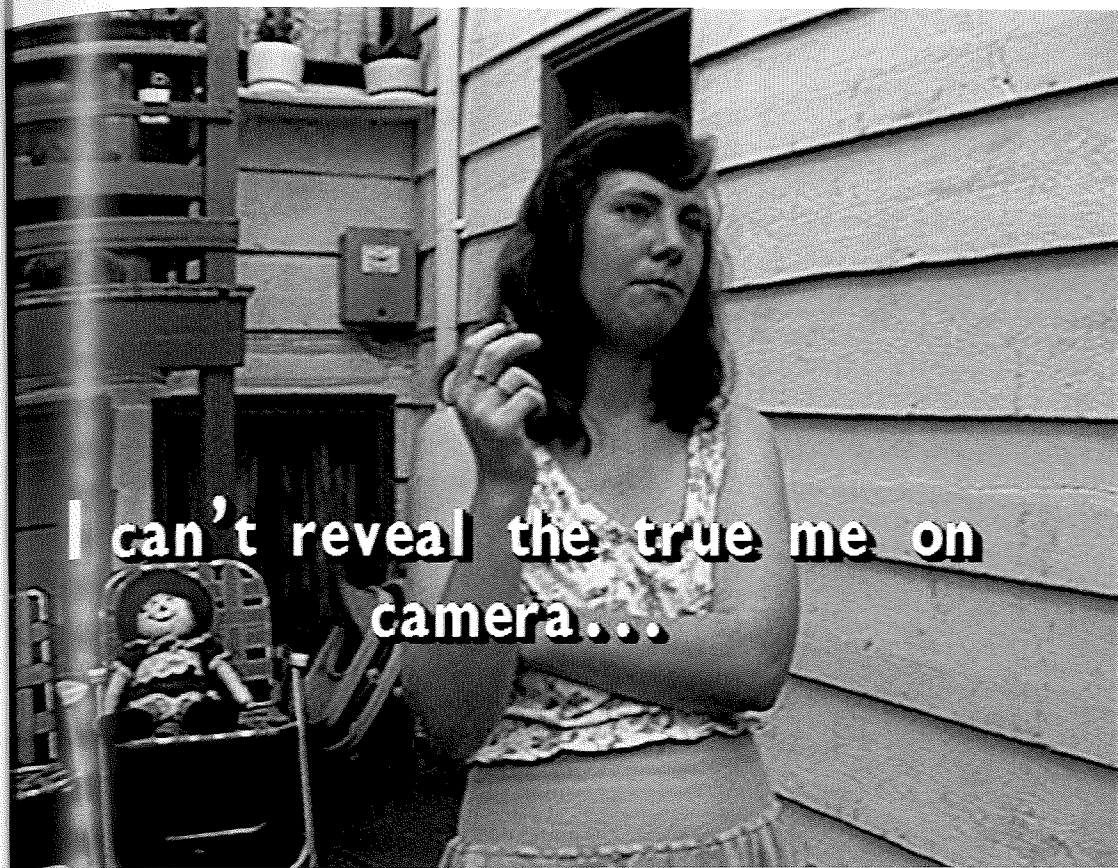
Such a flash of life in the midst of seeming death is one of the distinctive elements of Ardele Lister's work. Lister's work gives us a mental fast from cheerful platitudes. Patient as a heron, persevering in her questions, unconcerned to put a bright face on things, she is rewarded again and again with signs of life. This grounds what I see as a spiritual practice in her work, creating "reasons to believe in the world," as Deleuze wrote. I call her style

divine irony: an immanent spirituality that, interwoven with strands of skepticism, creates a luxurious texture throughout her oeuvre.

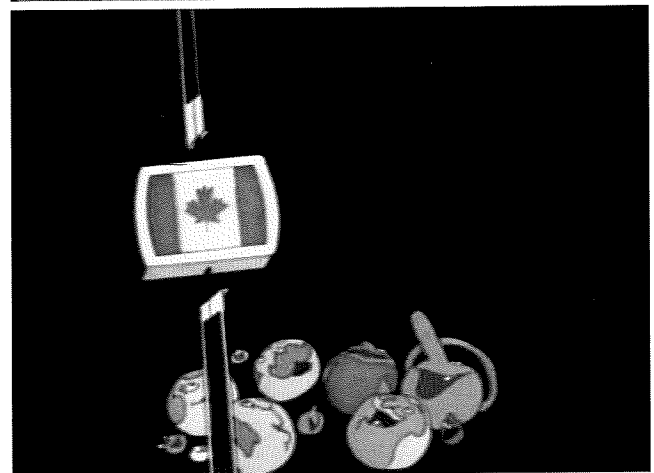
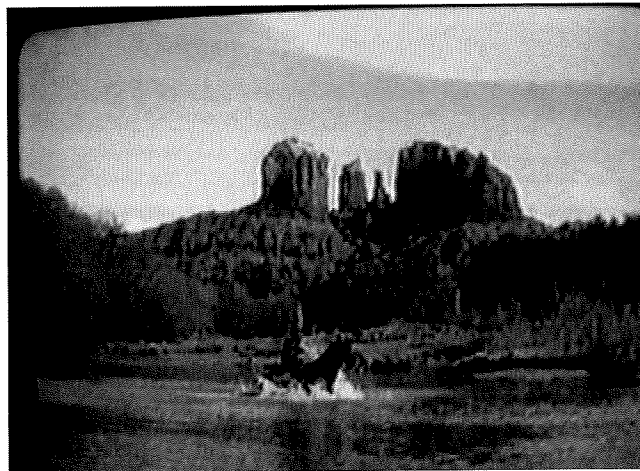
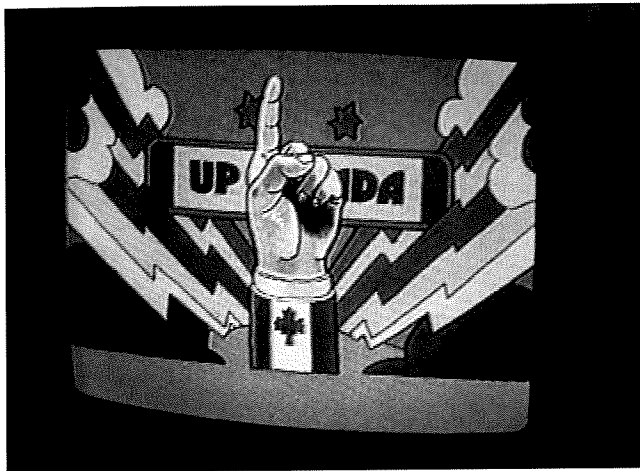
Feminism is the most abiding of Lister's skeptical methods, and Jewish skepticism resonates in the title of her jaunty, bitingly funny *So Where's My Prince Already?* (1976), made with the Reel Feelings film collective she co-founded in Vancouver. The film's starry-eyed bride supports her whiny spouse through grad school, gets pregnant without ever having had an orgasm, and postpones her desires indefinitely, never doffing her increasingly bedraggled wedding veil. Svetlana Zyl'in's goofy, Olive-Oyl-like persona encourages us to root for this benighted little lady even as her story gets dangerously dark, and rhymed ditties cheer her on her hapless way. *So Where's My Prince Already?* converts feminist rage into life-saving humor.

Lister's skeptical silver bullet is being Canadian. Living in the shadow of the world's superpower, suffering from a national culture that differs only slightly from the United States (except for Quebec!), lacking a unifying national narrative, Canadians are uniquely immune to ideology. Yet we<sup>2</sup> rarely convert this minority awareness into action. Instead we nurture *ressentiment*, Nietzsche's term for the "imaginary revenge" that the weak harbor against the strong. Indeed Glenn Wilmott argues that Canadian *ressentiment* is this country's defining mythology.<sup>3</sup> Lister reveals this attitude in the Canadian negative self-definitions she pulls from her interviewees in *Conditional Love* (*See Under Nationalism: Canada*) (1997) like "not overly aggressive," "not as harsh as the U.S.," "We don't have to advertise our empire."

*Conditional Love* was spurred by two events of national disintegration: the 1988 Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement and the Meech Lake Accord, which failed in 1990 when Québec refused to ratify the Canadian constitution. Plunging into the audiovisual archive, Lister discovers a deep history of national self-sabotage. *Conditional Love* begins with a film made by the National Film Board of Canada: *Helicopter Canada* (1966, Eugene Boyko). This aerial survey of Canada,



TOP Ardele Lister, *It Happens to the Best of Us* (1989), frame enlargement.  
BOTTOM Ardele Lister, *So Where's My Prince Already?* (1976), frame enlargements.



commemorating the nation's centennial, contains nary a statement of unmitigated national pride. The voice-over takes a self-deprecating and maddeningly twee tone, such as this one over a shot of bathers in Georgian Bay: "These are Canadian natives. See how happy they are to receive visitors. Their land is very rich, and as you can see they have fun playing in it." Another scene makes fun of the people whose job it is to count migratory birds.

Weirdest of all, *Helicopter Canada* begins and ends with the little craft descending to an inexplicable sound track of yodeling. Why? What nation would sum up its identity with a yodeling helicopter? Is this abject montage the depth of self-abnegation? Is it following Zhuangzi's practice of letting go of one's own identity in order to find freedom? Is it a brilliant act of ink-fishing, to confuse predators? Maybe the latter, for after all some of Canada's greatest filmmakers worked at the National Film Board, pouring their creative energies into nonfiction and experimental shorts.

The low level of national culture is not some Canadian existential malaise but the aesthetic superstructure of an economic base. Lister explains that in 1948, Canada's Liberal government

and the Motion Picture Association of America signed the Canadian Cooperation Project (1948-1958), according to which U.S. films would not be taxed in Canada and Canada would not compete with the U.S. fiction film industry. In exchange for this enormous economic and cultural sacrifice, Hollywood movies would mention Canada favorably in order to boost tourism.<sup>4</sup> The agreement effectively choked Anglo-Canadian fiction filmmaking to death. It is why Canadian cinema is best known for Francophone, documentary, and experimental films, and why generations of Canadians have little national self-knowledge. Lister recounts this over a home movie of her child self learning to walk, a cute brown-eyed toddler who would grow up missing a piece of her identity.

And those "mentions" of Canada? Insulting at best, like the cowboy movie *Bend of the River* (Anthony Mann, 1952) where Jimmy Stewart tries to impress Julie Adams with his bird knowledge. "They're, uh, red wing orioles—from Canada." She listens and rejoins, "They're sort of plaintive."



LEFT Ardele Lister, *Conditional Love* (1997), frame enlargements.  
 ABOVE Ardele Lister, *Sugardaddy* (1980), frame enlargement.

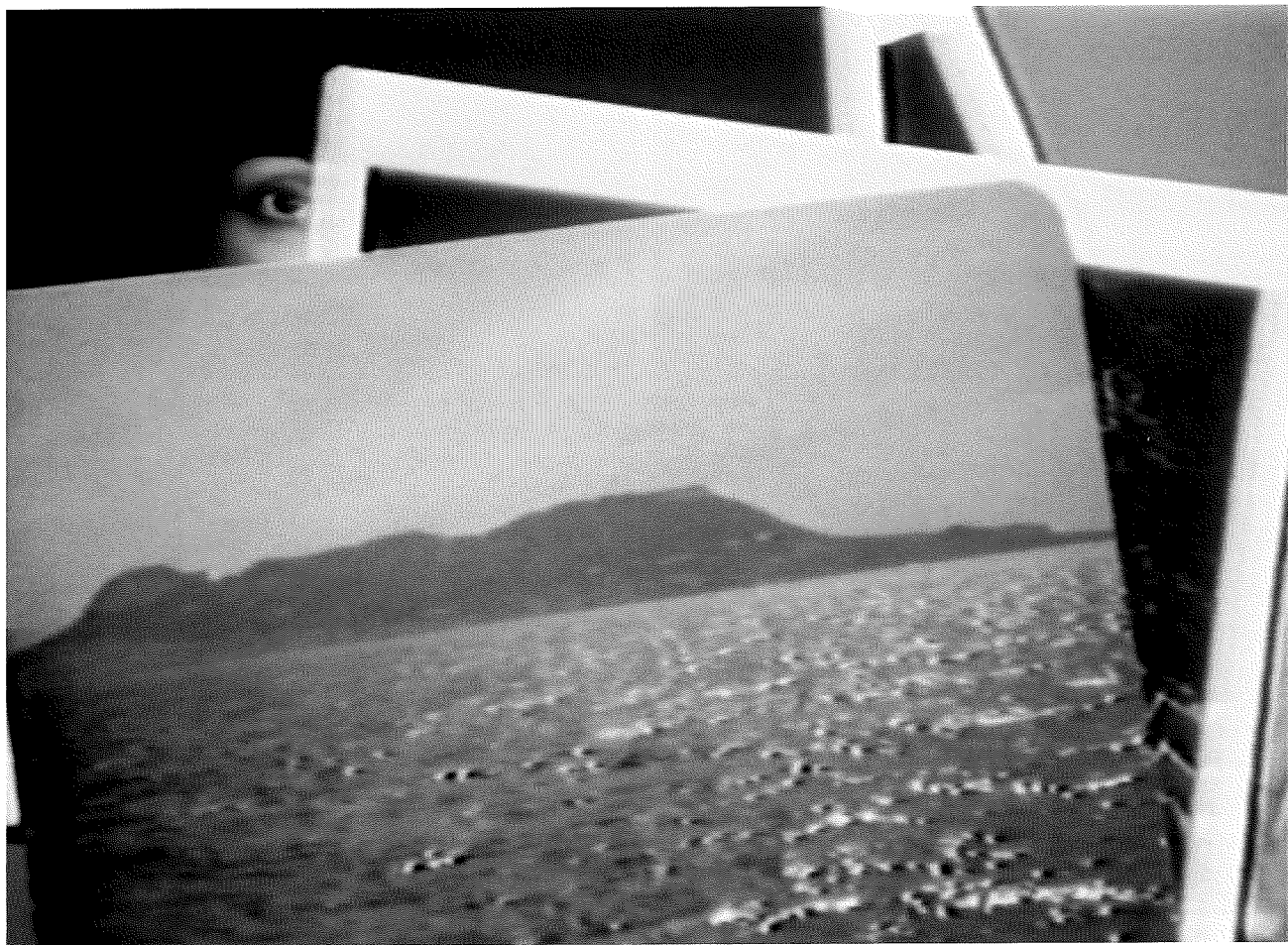
While U.S. American culture is able to full-throatedly occupy identity positions, even bad ones, *Conditional Love* confirms that Canadian culture is always a little bit “off”—quirky, a little too specific, always just missing the mark. Not a rampant lion but a yodeling helicopter. Lister excerpts a charming animation about Canada titled, without apparent irony, *Who Are We?* (Zlatko Grgich and Don Arioli, 1974). Like *Helicopter Canada*, *Who Are We?* replaces identity with singularity, as when a Mountie and horse, instead of the famous Musical Ride, perform a Russian folk dance. Focusing on such details, Lister toys with that Nietzschean “imaginary revenge” of the weak—and converts resentment to the seditious laughter of the underdog.

Indeed throughout her oeuvre, Lister works to turn *ressentiment* into humor, creativity, and hope, using transductive methods to release blocked energy. Divine irony begins with Lister’s arch, velvety voice. Exaggerating for the pleasure of it, bitchy yet wise, speaking in audible quotation marks in order to tell the truth, Lister’s manner of speech draws in something from both queer and Jewish vocal performances. (Maybe she has given

us a Canadian voice!) It is a voice that can be simultaneously sarcastic and ingenuous, as when Lister recounts her interview with NFB producer Peter Jones. “I asked him why the NFB made more films with fish in them than women. He said there *were* more fish than women.”

I see Lister’s earliest spiritual act in *Sugar Daddy* (1980), a life-saving feminist talisman. As we look over old family photos and scattered audio cassettes, Lister explains that for 20 years her father had a mistress, Eva M.: a warm and generous woman whom the child Ardele knew and loved, and a prostitute. In a remarkable breach of patriarchal rules, the two stayed in touch throughout the affair, and Eva’s confidence in Lister was such that she sent her audio recordings in the hope that she would write her biography.

What follows is an uncanny reenactment. A gorgeous woman, naked but for her shimmery eyeshadow, is finishing her bath, skin pink from the heat. It is Lister in a short curly wig, performing Eva. She towels off and dons a slinky leopard nightgown, sings a little to herself, and begins to address the



Ardele Lister, *Sugardaddy* (1980), frame enlargements.

camera. This is Eva, speaking to Ardele, her erstwhile biographer, while she waits for the man of hour to arrive. Lister modulates her voice to a seductive drawl and adopts the self-conscious poses of the “oversexed” (Eva says) woman whose purpose in life is to make men need and desire her—the figure of female *ressentiment*.

Making coffee, Lister/Eva confides to the camera, “If a man holds me I feel complete.” She lists all the men she loves, and it’s a long list: the weak one, the rotten SOB who taught her to be tough, the one who always had a few hundred dollars, the one from Colorado “who gave me money not to be bad,” the young pimp. But we also hear a poem of desolation from one of Eva’s cassettes. “I had more men in my body than the sky has a cloud. I had more disappointment in my life than the tree has a dead leaves.”

Lister/Eva describes the mutual seduction in Lister’s father’s fur store, where he’s offered her a job. It’s all about textures: “I was wearing a very tight pale yellow skirt with a kick pleat, matching soft angora sweater, high heels.... He puts the mink on me and closes his arms around me. Just little old me in my angora sweater, wrapped around by the mink coat and the businessman.” The camera moves in as Lister/Eva addresses it directly. “Inside I kinda feel like I scored a touchdown.... Believe me Ardele, if it hadn’t been me who grabbed him it would have been someone else.”

A viewer can question how much of a sugar daddy Mr. Lister was, since we learn that Eva’s earnings paid for Lister family vacations. Despite the self-image she performs, by her own account Eva is no indolent lady of the night. She works four jobs—a dry cleaner’s, Mr. Lister’s fur shop, working as a

prostitute, and raising her own children, one of whom is sick and needs expensive medicine. Eva is like the hard-working bride in *So Where's My Prince Already?*, except that she enjoys sex.

As she continues to wait for the man, "Eva" switches from coffee to Smirnoff's and quickly gets drunk. "I hate Franco. I hate George. I hate Frank. I hate every last one of you," she slurs. "Sometimes I think maybe it would be better to be dead for a change...for two weeks, then wake up and see how I feel." We sense she is plunging, the bottom of her life fallen out, no illusions or mink coats to catch her. "None of you ever done anything for me and all my life I did everything for you. I'm such a sucker. Ardele, can you hear me?" she slurs. "Ardele—Ardele." She rolls off the sofa in a drunken faint.

There is a cut, and Lister removes the curly wig and gazes into camera, grave, exhausted.

In a kind of sympathetic magic—touching and playing Eva's cassettes, embodying her manner, performing her words—Lister allows herself to become the other woman. This possession is dangerous because Eva desperately needs Lister: to witness her, to understand and absolve her—and there's a sense that Lister might not get herself back. It is also risky because Lister herself is beautiful and sexy. *Sugar Daddy* is a feminist pharmakon, as Lister willfully ingests the poison of the male-identified woman. It is an exorcism, not only of Eva but of the female tendency to give too much, to build our lives around men, to identify with their desire of us. *Sugar Daddy* succeeds thrillingly in converting female *ressentiment* into healing, creative power.

A couple of years ago Lister explained to me the thoroughly earthly mysticism of the Jewish Renewal movement, in which "preparing for the life to come" means not doing good deeds to





go to heaven, but preparing for life in this world, in the future. *Tikkun Olam*, repair the world, for the generations (and perhaps species) that will outlive us. This spirit animates her recent works in the form of intellectual portraits.

In Lister's current project, a documentary on pioneering cultural historian Jean Franco, who introduced Anglophones to modern Latin American writing and to the bloody histories of U.S. (and earlier) imperialism in whose soil these literary flowers grew. The tales of darkness and cruelty Lister documents contrast starkly with the vital, confident voices of the women telling them. The interviews abound with Franco's accounts of the deep history of femicide behind the women murdered in epidemic numbers in Ciudad Juarez since the 1990s, who she terms "sacrificed on the altar of modernity." In her home, Franco shows Lister a painting depicting three naked figures. "That's the Afro-Cuban god Shangol. He's the really murderous god, right—he's the one who killed the husband and is screwing the wife. Ah yes!", Franco continues cheerfully. "A common story." Yet the scholar attributes a formidable resilience to these women. Macarena Gomez Barris explains Franco's analysis of the Aztec earth goddess Coatlicue, a fearsome deity with a face full of fangs, as a story of submerged histories of Mexico and violence against Indigenous peoples. "The colonizers buried her figure because it was too ugly. Buried—but that's back to the womb, the primal condition. She returns." Franco, it seems to me, shares with Lister a capacity to unflinchingly face what is darkest in the world in order to seek hints of light.

The earthy tale of Coatlicue leads me to *flower/power* (2010), in which scholar Ed Cohen, working in his garden, explains to Lister why Foucault is his favorite thinker. A triptych of screens, *flower/power* calls to mind a predella, the series of small narrative images that run under a Renaissance religious painting. The predella form has a modesty appropriate to this subject: it's a spiritual preparation for some bigger event that goes unpictured, resonating with the concept of *Tikkun Olam*. Beautiful images of the garden in process flash on the screens: Cohen's rake pulling debris, red tulips blooming but upside down, a bowl of water, a cute dog the same chocolate color as the rich soil. Cohen explains the divergent paths of philosophy and spirituality that Foucault

traces back to the ancients. Philosophy assumes that if you use the right method, you will be able to attain the truth, "whereas the path of spirituality in this model is one in which you have to change yourself...to become truth worthy." He presses some bulbs into a depression in the soil. "What I really like about [Foucault] is, the point of thinking is to change yourself." Cohen stands, smiling; next to him a tangle of blue-flowering plants fills two screens.

*flower/power* places two modes of thought on equal footing: philosophy and gardening. Thought for Foucault is *cultivation*, of a self capable of thinking. Raking last year's dead leaves, Cohen demonstrates how to carefully remove debris, like habitual thought. The carefully tied stems of climbing plants parallel the way thought needs to be nurtured in order to flourish. "As for what motivated me," he says, "it was curiosity." We hear silvery chimes as a slug stretches across all three screens, slowly extending its antennae.

Inviting her viewers to take a mental fast from easy answers, Lister gives us a taste of life's injustice, cruelty, and stupidity and teaches resilience. With her three-fold skepticism, she sabotages banal and deathly institutions like patriarchy and the capitalist state. And then with divine irony—a flash of comic timing, a phrase in that inimitable voice—she converts sad feelings into humor and pleasure, reasons to care for the world, and energy to carry on.

1 Zhuangzi, "Man in the World, Associated with Other Men," in *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon and Delhi: M. Banarsidass, 1891). I thank Siy-ing Duan for introducing me to this tale.

2 I am a US-Canadian dual citizen.

3 See Glenn Willmott, "Canadian Ressentiment," *New Literary History* 32:1 (Winter 2001), 133-156.

4 Ted Madger, Piers Handling, and Peter Morris, "History of the Canadian Film Industry," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-history-of-film-in-canada>. Published January 10, 2012.



Ardele Lister, *Flower Power* (2010), frame enlargements.