

Greg Youmans
**Living on the
Edge: Recent
Queer Film and
Video in the San
Francisco Bay
Area**

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This past December, I made a short video with my boyfriend and collaborator Chris Vargas about the relationship in the early 1970s between San Francisco’s hippie drag troupe the Cockettes and future disco diva Sylvester. On New Year’s Eve 1969, the Cockettes danced into the spotlight with a rambunctious, drug-fueled stage performance as part of the “Nocturnal Dream Show,” Steven Arnold’s midnight experimental-film program at the Palace Theater in North Beach. More performances followed and the group gained prominence with write-ups in countercultural rags like *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice*. In 1971, the Cockettes were invited to take the ragtag show that they had invented in a lawless town on the Western edge of the world all the way across the continent to New York City, the center of art and civilization. They were scheduled for a series of performances at the Anderson Theater, and Sylvester, a peripheral member of the troupe who aspired to bigger things, was booked as their opening act. The singer took a more ambitious and committed approach to his art than other members of the group, placing more value, for instance, on practice and rehearsals. Apparently his commitment paid off, because New York audiences and critics responded well to his act. The Cockettes, by contrast, were a complete flop in New York. As they bombed night after night, Sylvester distanced himself in order to avoid getting dragged down with them. At one point he even trashed their show from the stage before they came out.¹

Chris and I felt that this chapter from queer art history was indicative of a perennial tension between San Francisco and New York art, as well as of the difficulties – and difficult trade-offs – San Francisco queer artists face when they try to break out beyond their “provincial” roots. In the video, I embody an artist in the tradition of the Cockettes and Chris embodies one in the tradition of Sylvester, and we argue over how we’re going to restage that historic show so that “this time, things are going to go right.” Will we spotlight a solo performer or rush the stage with a big motley crew? Will we present an elegantly pared-down set or a thrift-store hodgepodge?

The video was a chance for Chris and me to riff on some of the things that both appeal to us and frustrate us about Bay Area art: the pull toward loose improvisation over scripting and rehearsal, the regular admixture of performers and nonperformers on stage or in front of the camera, the customary refusal of polish or professionalism, and the way that brilliantly inventive preproduction of sets and costumes often gets paired with half-assed production values when it comes to shooting and performance (and vice versa). Our own ongoing

video collaboration evinces these same qualities, which is doubtless why we felt compelled to make the piece. It was also a chance for us to wrestle with definitions of quality and professionalism that, we often feel, do not come down to us from any local source but instead from foreign capitals of “the art world,” like New York.

In fact, we made the video for a New York audience. It was part of a program of holiday-themed performances and videos organized by Bradford Nordeen, the director of *Dirty Looks*, a monthly showcase of queer experimental film and video that has been running since January 2011.² Nordeen presented the holiday special in collaboration with E.S.P. TV, a project that enhances art and music performances with live greenscreening, signal manipulation, and analog video-mixing as it records them to VHS, and then airs them as a monthly show on Manhattan Neighborhood Network public television.³

The line-up for the holiday special included live performances by many queer and art-world celebrities, such as *Dynasty Handbag* and *Justin Bond*. Our piece, beamed in from the opposite coast, was one of a handful of “Video Christmas Cards” thrown into the mix. As such, it lacked the liveness, and the live effects, that marked the

rest of the show. Chris and I also weren’t there to see how the audience responded. Perhaps we fell flat like the *Cockettes* did in 1971. Maybe today’s version of *Angela Lansbury* stood up and walked out. Maybe someone in the audience cried out in desperation for today’s equivalent of *Jackie Curtis* to save the show.

Nordeen hosted the special as *Mary Boom!*, a drag persona that he has modeled on former porn star and veteran cable-access host *Robin Byrd*.⁴ As I watched the special online,⁵ I was struck that it was clearly an instance – and I say this affectionately, with a San Francisco mindset – of “bad drag.” Nordeen was building on a long tradition in which drag queens and other queer performers gloriously inhabit and engage with the low-budget, long-tedium format of cable access, with perhaps the most famous case being *The American Music Show*, which ran on Atlanta public-access TV from 1981 to 2005.⁶ Face to face with *Mary Boom!*, after having just made a video about how “bad” queer art is indigenous to the Bay Area and doesn’t fly in New York, I was forced to rethink my position. Perhaps, ultimately, “bad” queer art is not that different in San Francisco and New York, except that in the former it tends to be presented with childlike naiveté and exuberance, and in the

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The Cockettes, date unknown.

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Gearing up for collective absurdist action in Barbara Hammer's *Menses* (1974).

latter it's often cloaked in irony, *Weltschmerz*, and jaded asides. And, of course, the drugs – or at least the drug references – are different on the two coasts. But is there a deeper distinction? Watching the holiday special made me more curious about the specificity of queer art made in the Bay Area, and what it is, if anything, that makes our local productions distinct.

I want to use this essay to think about why so many queer artists *choose* styles and approaches that read – from the outside, and even sometimes to other queer people – like failure. I present this analysis specifically in relation to film and video work made over the last decade in the San Francisco Bay Area, in an effort to think about the specificity of that place, though without meaning to preclude the possibility that what I say might also apply elsewhere. I believe Bay Area queer film- and videomaking is animated by particular understandings of queer individuality and queer community, understandings that in turn shape both the production histories of the works and the final forms they take. This analysis develops first from my embedded experience as a participant in this culture and then moves into analysis based on interviews with film and videomakers whose work I have not been directly involved in.⁷

It Takes Two to Make a Thing Go Wrong

Since 2008, Chris and I have collaborated on a video series called *Falling in Love...with Chris and Greg*⁸. It's a scripted, comedy-based project that is loosely based on our own relationship and designed to address a number of issues in queer life and politics: everything from gay marriage to trans embodiment and from open relationships to financial precarity. We often fight during our shoots because I want to do multiple takes while he'd rather do just one or two. I've come to realize that we have this conflict because we take two distinct approaches to performing our video alter egos, which relate in turn to two distinct currents in the history of queer film and performance. On the one hand, there are the many film and video projects in which "ordinary" people, like me, are transformed through performance for the camera and the ritual of the shoot. And, on the other hand, there are the many projects in which already "extraordinary" people are given a stage in which to be their already-extraordinary queer selves.

Barbara Hammer's mid-1970s films, made in the Bay Area, are early examples of the first current. She made *Menses* (1974) and *Superdyke* (1975) collaboratively with large groups of women. In each film, onscreen performers engage collectively in absurdist, disruptive actions in urban space (e.g., dressing up as

Amazon warriors and running around Dolores Park, or pushing shopping carts overflowing with tampons through a Payless Drugstore parking lot) and then they move to the countryside for equally collective, and in some cases equally absurdist, nude rituals. Hammer devised a loose script for each action in *Superdyke*, while for *Menses* she organized a pre-shoot slumber party with the women in the film in order to collaborate in designing the performances, e.g., a ceremonial drinking of menstrual blood and the partaking of a codeine eucharist, or the wrapping of a body in toilet paper until it resembled a huge tampon.

Watching the brave but often sweetly tentative performances of the women onscreen, one has the sense that *Superdyke* and *Menses* were not designed as showcases for already-extraordinary queer subjects but instead as projects to enable and record the becoming-extraordinary of "ordinary" people. The film projects were designed to catalyze the performers to become more than they are in everyday life: more erotically liberated and more out and proud about their identities as lesbians and/or feminists. Moreover, inscribed on celluloid, the performances endure, spurring each woman to continue being the queerer person that they became during the shoot.⁹

As for the second current, any of a number of Andy Warhol's films, for instance *Camp* (1965), could serve as the historical example. He assembled a "cast" of already gloriously non-normative queer people – people who could never assimilate, even if the world were kind – and then he turned on the camera and off they went. Or, perhaps more accurately: there they were.

In the films of this second current we encounter the dynamic that José E. Muñoz talks about at the end of his book *Cruising Utopia*, where "failure" and "virtuosity" are intimately bound together.¹⁰ Queer films in this tradition perform the balancing act of presenting a performer who succeeds at doing something amazingly well, even if it is simply at being their own indelible selves, while simultaneously presenting that performer failing to be normal, professional, or mass-audience-ready. Both must be inscribed in the film. To have one without the other would be to create a work of art that is merely good or bad, but never queerly sublime.

It strikes me that multiple takes are antithetical to both of these currents within queer filmmaking. In relation to the first, magical spells don't get do-overs: the "ordinary" person must commit one hundred percent to the ritual transformation; they must take the risk and make the leap. And in relation to the second, already magical people shouldn't require them.

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A gathering of river creatures in Sarolta Jane Cump's *The Gold Fish* (forthcoming 2014).

In other words, the need for multiple takes calls into question the validity of either the word, in the first instance, or the spirit, in the second. And in both instances, when a viewer gets the impression while watching a film that there were multiple takes, it drains the project of its documentary charge, the sense that queerness existed here. It renders it instead pure fiction, made by people who played it safe.

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Film still from Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983).

Interstitial Modes of Production

Chris is also working on a project with another collaborator, Eric Stanley. Their movie *Criminal Queers* is a feature-length experimental narrative video that explores the intersection of radical queer politics and prison abolitionism.¹¹ I was asked to play the role of a normatively gay jury foreman who condemns one of the leads to a life behind bars for sabotaging a gay wedding. I prepared the character, scripted the monologue, shopped for props, memorized my lines, and practiced the performance on my own before the day of the shoot. But when I got to the set, there was barely any rehearsal with the rest of the cast before the camera was turned on. Then, after one take, Chris and Eric began to move the tripod for the next shot, as if that was it: one take was all they needed.

In the case of *Criminal Queers*, the refusal of multiple takes cannot be linked to a drive to get the video finished as quickly and efficiently as possible. We shot that scene back in 2008, and as I write this in 2013 the movie is still in production. I honestly don't know why it has taken them so long to get the thing made but I know that they have both been profoundly inspired by Lizzie Borden's 1983 film *Born in Flames*, which famously took five years to pull together. *Born in Flames* is set in America ten years after a socialist revolution has failed to transform the lives of women and other marginalized people. Across the film, we witness a diverse group of feminists in New York City struggling to put aside differences of race, class, and ideology and fight together for revolutionary

change. The film's mode of production parallels its onscreen content: it is an outsider film made at the margins of a hostile society by inventive activists who have cobbled together time, resources, and community. It makes sense that *Criminal Queers*, having drawn inspiration from the form and content of *Born in Flames*, would also emulate the way that it was made.¹²

Homages to *Born In Flames* can also be found in Gary Fembot's *AIDS Camp* (2009), where a character is shown obsessively watching the film, and Sarolta Jane Cump's *California is an Island* (2009), where the Amazon Queen Califa broadcasts her message over the radio. *Criminal Queers* is also not the only Bay Area project to take a long, long time to get made. Cary Cronenwett's *Maggots and Men* (2009) also took five years. But beyond these explicit parallels to Borden's film, what is striking is that all of these Bay Area queer films and videos, and many more beside, likewise deploy an interstitial and community-based mode of production. It is evident in Cump's forthcoming video about water politics called *The Gold Fish*¹³ (scheduled for release in spring 2014), Michelle Tea and Hilary Goldberg's omnibus *Valencia: The Movie/s*¹⁴ (premiering June 2013), the many performance videos made since 2008 by Lovewarz (Siobhan Alluvalot and Sara Thustra), Luke Woodward's bicycle porn *Tour de Pants* (2008), and other recent projects by Cronenwett, Fembot, Stanley, and Vargas. Living in the Bay Area, it seems like everyone invariably knows at least someone who is involved in each of these films and videos. In this way, the larger community is able to keep abreast of the status and progress of each one. Moreover, it is not necessary to play six degrees of separation to tie them all together. One can connect them through a handful of shared performers and crew members: for instance, performance artist Annie Danger has contributed her talents to almost every title mentioned above.

Obviously, a lengthy production can result when a filmmaker with a minimal to nonexistent budget is compelled to organize shooting around the commitments of busy and unpaid friends and loved ones. (The budgets of the above films and videos run from \$500 to \$60,000, though at the higher end this includes about half as in-kind donations.) Likewise, one-take performances can result because, in such circumstances, the filmmaker must shoot quickly, before attrition or, worse, mutiny ensues. But even when friends and lovers are apparently willing, patient, and available, Bay Area queer filmmakers seem to favor ways of working that will ensure that the seams of the production remain visible onscreen: the edges of handmade sets, the half-memorization of lines, the rushed quality of

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certain performances, and, in general, the hazy border between the diegetic space of the film and the straight-documentary space of the “real world” that the makers have infiltrated or ambushed to get their shots.

I suspect that for most of these recent queer films and videos, an interstitial mode of production was as much elected as it was compelled. Recent Bay Area queer film and video projects have embraced amateurism, often eschewed multiple takes, and set up challenges of scheduling and other production tasks as a way of ensuring that indexical signs of an alternative mode of production, another way of doing things, end up inscribed in every shot. Also, by foregrounding the scene of production, these approaches help to prevent communities from morphing into “casts.”

Prefigurative Filmmaking and Melancholy Utopianism

Gary Fembot told me he makes his films in part because he lives alone. It is a way for him to bring people together and see what his friends are up to. In the past he organized large brunches for this purpose, and filmmaking isn’t so different: he still gets stressed out and sometimes bossy. Fembot, who was a zine editor and a musician before becoming a filmmaker in the mid-2000s, also told me that his film projects often begin with visions of scenes involving many people, and he then makes the films to bring those visions to life. With *AIDS Camp*, he pictured a riot scene with a stampeding crowd, like the scenes he remembered from old B-movies, and for his more recent film *Together People* (2012) he envisioned a New Wave op-art pie fight.

A prodigious vision of community also animated Cronenwett’s *Maggots and Men*. The film reimagines the 1921 Kronstadt rebellion, when a group of anarchist sailors stood up to the Bolshevik government late in the course of the Russian Civil War, and it famously features a large cast of trans men in most of the roles. Cronenwett remembers that when people came together to make the film, it was a very affirming experience. The widely-publicized shoots were a chance for trans men (and others) hailing from far and wide and from diverse communities to meet each other, and, as he pointed out to me, they did so in a context that was not a support group but instead an art project based on non-trans history. In addition to the many days of filming, the production included group rehearsals as well as work parties for building the sets and making the costumes. These last took place every Sunday night in San Francisco when there wasn’t a shoot. Cronenwett and the other filmmakers, including Director of Photography Ilona Berger and co-Art Directors

Flo McGarrell and Zeph Fishlyn, also organized a fundraiser every year at which bands performed and things made at the work parties were sold, such as anchor patches sewn onto beanies bought at the Dollar Store.

There is a strong connection between the people involved in these projects and activist networks. Many of the filmmakers are also activist organizers, and in making their films they apply their skills in organizing people and in building a prefigurative community, which is to say a community already rooted in the values that, as activists, its members are trying to instill in broader society. Sarolta Jane Cump pointed out to me that virtually all of the makers and many of the participants in the films and videos discussed in this article were involved to some degree in Gay Shame in the early 2000s. The group, which still exists, forged a radical alternative to gay normativity and targeted, among other actions, the corporate-sponsored Gay Pride celebrations held in the city each June. The sets and props for *The Gold Fish*, *Maggots and Men*, and *Criminal Queers* are reminiscent of the cardboard and papier-mâché props used by Gay Shame in its protests and street theater, and which were likewise built in work parties. Cronenwett and Cump were both careful to point out to me that their film projects do not draw upon and seek to build exclusively queer activist networks and communities: punk and environmentalist networks are also key. Cronenwett named Punks Against War and Art and Revolution as two other influences on *Maggots and Men*, and Cump’s film is developing as part of the Bay Area-based art/science/performance intervention *The Water Underground*.¹⁵

Although they often motivate each other, prefiguration is a different project than utopianism. The former is about making the world one needs in the here and now, while the latter is about imagining the world one wants in a future elsewhere. It is striking that *Born in Flames*, which is filmed in the crumbling infrastructure of Reagan-era Manhattan, is a key reference for so many recent Bay Area projects. The urban setting of Borden’s film is a world away from the rural, wide-open spaces that inspired many of the queer political and filmic visions associated with the Bay Area in the 1960s and 1970s, from hippie communalism to Faerie land to lesbian separatism, from the films of James Broughton to those of Barbara Hammer. In those projects, natural spaces are presented as being impossibly free of the shadows, margins, and social divisions that define life in the corrupt, civilized city. In many ways, today’s queer Bay Area filmmakers are operating with a different mindset, in a different era, and in a

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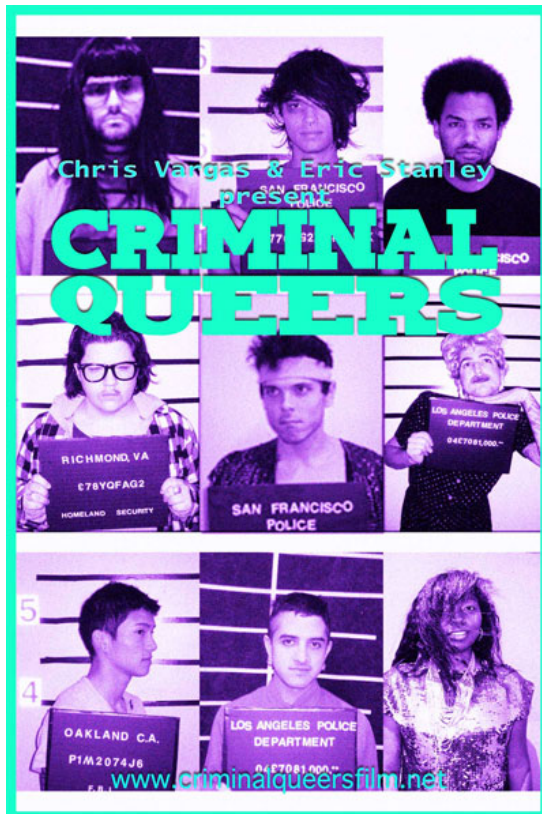
different Bay Area than the ones that gave us the Summer of Love, back-to-the-land feminism, and the freewheeling Cockettes.

This is not to say that utopian impulses and wide-open spaces have disappeared from the new crop of films, but when they appear there is often a strong sense of melancholy around them. Fembot's *AIDS Camp* plays with the tension between urban punk bricolage and rural hippie utopianism. Between San Francisco, where the slutty hero lives and works at the beginning of the film, and the rural hillside where an intentional community of feminist psychics resides, there is the AIDS Camp, an outdoor prison under a freeway overpass where people with HIV and AIDS are quarantined in large pens. The film connects the US government's creation of AIDS (a theory expressed by characters in the film) to corporate greed, wealth disparity, gentrification, and urban displacement. Although the revolutionaries of the hillside eventually liberate the prisoners, the film ends with an ambivalent image at the border of hope and aimlessness. Fembot is drawn to public art dating from the late 1960s and early 1970s because he feels it was actually made for people instead of as a corporate afterthought. During the film's final credits, Fembot wanders alone

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around the tiered, concrete landscape of the Fort Worth Water Gardens, a downtown public park built in 1974 that is also featured in the 1976 dystopian science-fiction film *Logan's Run*.

Maggots and Men is similarly ambivalent in its vision of utopia. Cronenwett had originally planned on making a more erotic film, along the lines of his 2002 short *Phineas Slipped*. He wanted to make a homoerotic sailor movie and to set it in a time and place other than the contemporary US, where romance could flourish uncorrupted by US militarism and imperialism. A friend of his had a boyfriend who was an anarchist with a penchant for wearing sailor suits and who was obsessed with a little-known chapter from history about "an island of anarchist sailors." Cronenwett put the words into Google and found out about the Kronstadt rebellion. As the project developed, sexual content became less important and the anarchist history, which he also found sexy, took center stage. The Kronstadt sailors are the same group that was involved in the 1905 uprising depicted in Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Potemkin*. Cronenwett hadn't seen *Potemkin* when he began working on *Maggots and Men*, though it grew to be a major influence on his film's politics and aesthetics, as did theater



Poster for the movie *Criminal Queers*, directed by Eric A. Stanley & Chris Vargas.

groups of the period like the Blue Blouse agitprop troupe, which appears in the film to help guide viewers through the history.

In this circuitous way, Cronenwett's project ended up being about the challenges of building and maintaining an intentional, anarchist community in the shadow of a hostile state, just like *Born in Flames* and a number of the other Bay Area films and videos discussed in this essay. But, unlike those other works, the film is set in the past – not the present, the future, or an alternate present – and, moreover, it recounts a historical chapter that ends badly: the Kronstadt rebellion was violently repressed by the Bolshevik army. Cronenwett's film was shot half on 16mm and half on Super 8, whereas the other projects discussed in this essay were shot entirely on video or Super 8 or a combination of the two. Choosing to shoot on 16mm necessitates a more considered approach to virtually every aspect of the filmmaking process, and it is therefore not surprising that *Maggots and Men* features, in the main, more aesthetically beautiful imagery and more polished performances than the other Bay Area films and videos discussed here. Combined with the film's historically removed subject matter and the choice of a Russian-language voiceover, its polished form creates a distancing effect that contributes to the produced feeling, at least for me as a viewer, of melancholy utopianism.

Criminal Queers, *The Gold Fish*, *Tour de Pants*, and the other Bay Area projects are animated by the feeling of a new society flowering in the margins of a dehumanizing present. This feeling is present too in *Maggots and Men*, provided one is able to watch it with an eye to its production history and with an awareness of the revolutionary trans community that was both enabled and recorded by the film. But in this layered viewing, we are also taught the hard lesson that, on its own, queer liberation is never enough.

When the Edge Becomes the Center, What Happens to the Margins?

Rebecca Solnit has written about San Francisco's historical identity as a city at the end of the world, far removed from what was happening on the East Coast, including its sophisticated art market. Today though, as Solnit notes, San Francisco must contend with its new identity as the center of the world, or, more accurately, its identity as a bedroom community for people who work in the center of the world forty miles to the south in the Silicon Valley.¹⁶ As the city suffers from the same rapacious forces of development and neoliberal reform that destroyed Manhattan, only lagging behind a few years, it will be interesting to see how the films

and videos of Bay Area queer artists continue to mine and reinvigorate local traditions and values while, inevitably, also forging connections elsewhere.

Although all of the film and video projects discussed in this article take a DIY approach to production, many of the makers have become remarkably savvy, even professional, when it comes to funding postproduction and distributing their final projects. The Sylvester in me of course wants makers to know how to get their work made and seen within a system that offers little support to independent artists. At the same time, the Cockette in me worries that this professional savvy in funding and distribution will influence the preproduction and production phases of these makers' future projects, as they get a better sense of what granters like to fund, colleges like to teach, galleries like to show, and festivals like to screen. Will the next generation of Bay Area queer film and videomakers – or this current generation as it gets older – continue to build ragtag communities and make flowers grow in the margins of the city? Or will there be no margins left? Or, perhaps, no artists left who can afford to live in them?

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1
This history is presented in Bill Weber and David Weissman's documentary *The Cockettes* (2002) as well as Joshua Gamson's book *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco* (New York: Henry Holt/Picador, 2005).

2
See <http://www.dirtylooksnyc.org/>.

3
See <http://www.esptvny.com/>.

4
Rachel Mason, interview with Bradford Nordeen, *Bad at Sports* blog (Nov. 4, 2011). See <http://badatsports.com/2011/bradford-nordeen-and-dirty-looks/>.

5
See <http://www.esptvny.com/E-S-P-TV-25>.

6
Clips from *The American Music Show* can be found on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL015B4AC6F62DBDC5>. Thank you to Ricardo Montez for introducing me to the show.

7
I interviewed Sarolta Jane Cump by phone on March 13, 2013, and Cary Cronenwett and Gary Gregerson (aka Gary Fembot) by phone on March 14, 2013.

8
See <http://fallinginlovewithchrisandgreg.com/>.

9
The ideas in this paragraph are developed in Greg Youmans, "Performing Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer's Films of the 1970s," *Camera Obscura* 81 (2012): 100–135.

10
José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). See also Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

11
See <http://homotopiafilm.net/>.

12
For Borden's account of the production history of *Born in Flames*, see her interview with Jan Oxenberg and Lucy Winer, *The Independent* (Nov. 1983): 16–18. A special issue of *Women and Performance* dedicated to the topic of the film's significance is due out later this year, edited by Dean Spade and Craig Willse.

13
See <http://saroltajanecump.com/goldfish.htm>.

14
See <http://www.radarproducts.org/press/valencia-the-movies/>.

15

See <http://waterunderground.wordpress.com/>.

16
Rebecca Solnit, "Image Dissectors," in *Radical Light: Alternative Film and Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945–2000*, eds. Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 16–18. See also Rebecca Solnit, "Diary," *London Review of Books* 35.3 (Feb. 7, 2013): 34–35, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n03/rebecca-solnit/diary>.