

SEDUCED AND CAPTURED, IN THE BOOTH WITH EMILY ARMSTRONG AND PAT IVERS Carole Ann Klonarides

For a generation of women born in the middle of the 20th Century, the end of the 70s and beginning of the 80s was definitely a time to reinvent oneself. Like other women who chose video as their creative medium, there was slim chance of entering the mainstream establishment either through the television and film industry, or through galleries and museums. As one of a new wave of artists drawn to alternative methods of expression such as photography, performance, video art, experimental film, and music, I turned increasingly to finding or creating new contexts in which to explore and share ideas. We frequented The Lower Manhattan Ocean Club and Tier 3. Video art and experimental film were shown at places like The Kitchen, Anthology Film Archives, MOMA and the Donnell Library Center across the street. Occasionally video art was shown in commercial galleries, but video was generally exhibited as a sidebar to the artists' other works, not the main event. As these venues and platforms became more commercial, artists increasingly turned to the downtown club scene. At this time, the New York club scene contained the crosscurrents of art and culture—a commingling of high and low in a unique interplay of mainstream pop, art and film history, performance, no wave music, and television.

There were just a handful of female video jocks back in the mid 70s to early 80s in New York, some came out of filmmaking, others the visual arts, but all were seeking new frontiers unencumbered by the biases of gender, class, or history. The year 1979 was a pivotal for clubs as venues for performance and visual artists and musicians. The Pyramid Club and Club 57 opened in the East Village and Danceteria on West 37th Street. In my mind, the most infamous female video jockeys were video artists Pat Ivers and Emily Armstrong, who designed the first Danceteria Video Lounge, and programmed an eclectic mix of found material, video art, and videos of downtown musicians they shot in the club, as well as artist-produced early music videos. They presented some of the best video programming I ever experienced. I felt part of a unique community that was on the cutting edge of something in the process of being defined. The Video Lounge became a place for VIPs in the downtown scene, and in many ways, was like the control booth of a broadcast newsroom—everything that was happening, happened there. It was very empowering for the programmers/VJs, especially if you were a woman for the first time in the power seat, controlling the crowd.

The clubs created this space of intimacy, exclusivity, and empowerment—this is where I imagine Armstrong and Ivers conceived the *Alone At Last* project back in 1981. They invited artists, musicians, and locals to enact what desire, romance, and even manipulation meant to them, while imaging the seduction of an unknown voyeur, much like being in a now obsolete Times Square peep show or within any screen. Declaring themselves pro-sex feminists when pornography was, as they put it, “a hot-button issue in the women’s movement,” they saw the work as a video installation that explores issues of gender and fantasy, at a time when traditional views of sexuality were not just challenged but overturned. The final work has 52 seducers, who initially played it to Armstrong and Ivers behind the camera, and now as a multi-channel interactive installation, where the viewing public can chose—for pleasure (or pain)—their seducer/seductress.

Alone At Last has its antecedents in *The Love Tapes*, a collection of over 800 videos shot by artist Wendy Clarke starting in 1972 of people speaking for three minutes about love in an effort to encourage and reveal “people’s need to communicate very personal feelings.” The artist and filmmaker Lynn Hershman later explored the playful sense of intimacy between the viewer, the subject, and the artist in *Deep Contact* (1984) where a touch screen allowed the viewer to “touch” parts of a woman’s body, and *Room of One’s Own* (1990-93) in which a seductive protagonist and privatized viewing conditions mimic the scopoc economy of the peep show. It also brings to mind Marcel Duchamp’s last work *Étant donnés*, a seminal artwork that functions as a peep show made in secret over a 20-year period (from 1946 to 1966), which the Philadelphia Museum of Art calls the very first example of installation art. Experts say it is a statement on voyeurism in art as well as a sexual metaphor. It may also be a homage to three women Duchamp loved. Perhaps towards the end of his life he reflected that he could only be a voyeur as an artist and a lover, and never physically be part of it again. In this final work, Duchamp forced viewers to become aware of the act of looking and their physical presence with the gallery space.

Interestingly, *Alone At Last* functions as another contained space of intimacy, now as a time capsule containing videos that, as stated by the artists, capture a time of wide-open freedom of expression and pursuit of pleasure that characterized Lower Manhattan before the AIDS epidemic changed things forever. It also reveals how a generation yearned for connectivity to each other and beyond, decades before the Internet became a reality. ■