a film by IRENE LUSZTIG

PRESS KIT

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68 Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin Forum

YOURS in SISTERHOOD

WMM A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

101 minutes | HD Video
screening format DCP | English and ASL with English subtitles

SYNOPSIS

What might be revealed in the process of inviting strangers to act out and respond to 1970s feminism today? Between 2015 and 2017, hundreds of strangers in communities all over the US were invited to read aloud and respond to letters from the 70s sent to the editor of *Ms.* Magazine–the first mainstream feminist magazine in the US. The intimate, provocative, and sometimes heartbreaking conversations that emerge from these spontaneous performances make us think critically about the past, present, and future of feminism. Newly urgent in the aftermath of the 2016 election, YOURS IN SISTERHOOD is a collective portrait of feminism now and forty years ago–a project about time travel, embodied listening, empathy, public discourse, and the lost art of letter writing.

Director's Statement

An angry woman in Atlanta talks about the harassment she experiences in public space. An aspiring police woman complains that the police station in her small Iowa town refuses to hire qualified women. A sixteen-year-old girl haltingly comes out as a lesbian for the first time. These are just a few of the thousands of fascinating letters to the editor–far too many to publish–that arrived at the *Ms.* magazine office in the 70s. These letters were written by women, men, and children of all ages, from all over the country, and from across the spectrum of sexual orientation, religious, racial, and ethnic background, physical ability, and political viewpoint. Spanning deeply personal accounts of individual problems, revelations, and political struggles, these 70s letters are a powerful invocation of the second-wave feminist slogan "the personal is political."

I spent the summer of 2014 in the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America reading boxes containing thousands of these mostly-unpublished letters to the editor. What was most striking during my archival research is that the issues covered by these letters are still the same big issues that women and gender-nonconforming people are facing today–sexual harassment, violence, and assault, access to abortion and birth control, body image, workplace discrimination, gender and sexuality, race, class, and inclusivity.

Inspired by these incredible letters, in the summer of 2015, I set off on a journey to share these letters with ordinary people all over the US. I wanted to know if this rich collective archive of everyday feminist history and experience could be a catalyst for a new kind of national conversation about feminism today. Between 2015 and 2017, I filmed over 300 readings with volunteers in 32 different US states. Each project participant was carefully matched with a 70s letter sent from their own city or town and invited to read aloud and respond to their letter. I've filmed readings with people of all ages, gender identities, shapes, colors, and backgrounds on both coasts, in the Midwest, the Rockies, and the South, in remote rural areas and major cities. Filming these conversations with strangers alongside the election, its aftermath, the #metoo movement and much more, this project has felt increasingly timely and resonant–the stakes for how we create conversations about feminism right now feel higher and more urgent than ever.

I've also thought deeply about diversity and intersectionality throughout the making of this project, and it has been important to me to make sure my project reflects a very diverse range of current-day voices about feminism. Most of the letters that I have selected for the project were never published, which means that the project also creates an opportunity to give voice to many letters that didn't get a public voice in the 70s (and to create an "alternative" history of 70s feminist conversation), including letters from transgendered and gender-

nonconforming readers, readers of color, working class readers, disabled readers, and other communities that may have felt marginalized by mainstream 70s feminism.

This project is about conversation, about making new connections across time and space, and about thinking of new and more inclusive ways for us to talk to each other–onscreen, online, and in person at screening events. Feminists have always understood that speaking up, listening carefully, and making space for others to speak is the most powerful way to start to build real change.

January 2018

friends Jen and Char do a reading together in Madison, Wisconsin

BIOGRAPHY

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 current 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) and the ongoing web-based *Worry Box Project* (2011).

Born in England to Romanian parents, Irene grew up in Boston and has lived in France, Italy, Romania, China, and Russia. 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, RIDM Montréal, Hot Docs, AFI Docs, and BFI London Film Festival and on television in the US, Europe, and Taiwan. She has received grants from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, Massachusetts Cultural Council, LEF Foundation, New York State Council for the Arts, and Sustainable Arts Foundation and has been awarded fellowships at the MacDowell Colony, the Flaherty Film Seminar, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and Harvard's Film Study Center. She is the 2016-17 recipient of a Rydell Visual Arts Fellowship and a Fulbright Fellowship in Portugal. She teaches filmmaking at UC Santa Cruz where she is Associate Professor of Film and Digital Media; she lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

photo: R. Ron Jones dress: Irene Lusztig

YOURS IN SISTERHOOD

DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

2018	*Yours in Sisterhood* / feature-length performative documentary / HD video / 101 min.
2016	*Forty Years* / single channel video / HD video / 12 min.
2014	*Maternity Test* / gallery loop and single channel video / HD video / 14 min.
2013	*The Motherhood Archives* / feature-length archival cine-essay / 16mm, HD video, archival materials / 90 min. video / distributed by Women Make Movies
2011- ongoing	*The Worry Box Project* / participatory web-based interactive art work and 3-screen installation project URL: www.worryboxproject.net
2005	*The Samantha Smith Project* / DV, Super 8, archival materials / 51 min. video
2001	*Reconstruction* / DV, super 8, archival / 90 min. video / distributed by Women Make Movies
1997	*For Beijing with Love and Squalor* / Hi8 video / 58 min.

SELECTED SCREENINGS AND BROADCASTS

2018	Berlinale Forum, Berlin Germany, Teddy Award nominee for Best Documentary Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, Toronto, Canada Art of the Real, Lincoln Center Film Society, New York City, NY AFI Docs, Washington, D.C. Melbourne International Film Festival, Melbourne Australia BFI London Film Festival, London UK DocLisboa, Lisbon, Portugal Frameline, San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival, San Francisco, CA Camden International Film Festival, Camden, ME Inside Out, Toronto LGBT Film Festival, Toronto, Canada; nominated for Inside Out Special Award for Innovation Out on Film, Atlanta GA All Genders, Lifestyles, and Identities Film Festival, Austin, TX Dokfilmwoche, Berlin Germany Documenta Madrid, Spain

Cork Film Festival, Ireland
Docaviv, Tel Aviv International Documentary Film Festival, Tel Aviv, Israel
Antenna Documentary Film Festival, Sydney, Australia
Pink Apple Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Zurich, Madrid
Olhar de Cinema, Curitiba, Brazil
New Horizons International Film Festival, Wrocław, Poland
Demakijaż Women's Film Festival, Lublin, Poland
Terre de Femmes, Tuebingen, Germany
Remake, a Women's Film Festival, Frankfurt, Germany
DCTV, New York City, NY
Dallas VideoFest, Dallas, TX
Kreivės / Vilnius Queer Film Festival, Vilnius, Lithuania
Hamburg International Queer Film Festival, Hamburg, Germany
Syracuse University, Syracuse NY
Emory University, Atlanta, GA
Cinema Saver, Endicott, NY
For the Record Documentary Series, Columbia, SC
American Anthropological Assn. Visual Anthropology Film Festival, San Jose, CA
Montréal Feminist Film Festival, Montréal, Canada
Worldwide Women's Film Festival, Scottsdale, AZ
The Women's Film Festival, Philadelphia, PA
Northwest Film Forum, Seattle, WA
Boathouse Microcinema, Portland, OR
ATA, San Fransciso, CA
Echo Park Film Center, Los Angeles, CA
UC Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA
Headroom Presents NOW! Journal of Urgent Praxis, Iowa City, IA

2017

NOW! Journal of Urgent Praxis showcase, Dikeou Pop-Up Space, Denver, CO
Mothernisms Symposium, Royal Danish Academy of Art, Copenhagen, Denmark
Grrl Haus Cinema short film showcase, Brattle Theater, Cambridge, MA
Poetics and Politics of Documentary Research Symposium, University of Sussex, UK
Women Media Arts and Film Festival, Sydney, Australia
Cure Park: The Art of Care, Amsterdam
Mothers in Arts Residency program in Amsterdam
Other Cinema, San Francisco
Experimental Response Cinema, Austin TX
ICS University of Lisbon, Portugal
LIPA Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra Portugal

Miami University, Oxford, OH
Indiana University Bloomington, Directed by Women screening event

2016
Ambulante Documentary Film Festival, Mexico
Exploded View Microcinema and Gallery, Tucson, AZ
Creative Push Exhibition, Opening Screening, Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ, gallery screening
Mapping Maternal Ecologies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada
Bethel College, Newton, KS, academic screening
Vertical Cinema, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA
NOW! Journal Presents: Shut it Down! An evening of radical cinema; Interference Archive, Brooklyn NY

2015
Flaherty NYC, Anthology Film Archive, closing film, Winter program
Women Media Arts and Film Festival, Sydney, Australia
Drac Magic International Women's Film Festival, Barcelona, Spain
Veggie Cloud, Los Angeles CA
"Motherhood" exhibit, Lviv Art Palace, Ukraine
"Pregnancy and Childbirth Reframed: Anthropological Perspectives from Portugal" conference screening, Center for Research and Studies in Sociology, Lisbon, Portugal
"Maternity" exhibition, closing film, Visual Culture Research Centre, Kiev, Ukraine
Poetics and Politics: a Documentary Symposium, UC Santa Cruz
MIA / Moving Image Art, The Armory, Pasadena, CA
Logan Square International Film Series, Comfort Station, Chicago
Big Muddy Film Festival, Carbondale, IL
Athens International Film + Video Festival, Athens OH
Serbian Arts Festival, Belgrade

2014
RIDM Montréal International Documentary Festival
Concordia University, Montreal
International Midwifery and Birth Film Festival at the annual Canadian Association of Midwives conference, Saskatoon
Echo Park Film Center, Los Angeles "Experimental Medicine" Marvelous Movie Mondays series
Clinton Street Theater, Portland, Oregon, cinema screening
FemCine Muestra Magallanes, Puerto Natale, Chile, exhibition screening
Cambridge University, Cambridge UK, academic screening
University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, academic screening
King's College, London, academic screening
FemCine Festival Cine de Mujeres, Santiago, Chile
The Little Theater, repertory screening, Rochester, NY

	Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, academic screening, Portugal
	Other Cinema, ATA, San Francisco, CA
	Big Muddy Film Festival, festival screening, Carbondale, IL
	New Parkway Theater, repertory screening, Oakland, CA
	Mother Strike! conference screening, Vilnius, Lithuania
2013	Women and Media Arts Film Festival, Sydney, Australia
	London and Porto Underground Film Festivals (Cine-Rebis), London, UK and Porto, Portugal
	Santa Cruz Film Festival, Santa Cruz, CA
	Antimatter Film Festival, Victoria, BC
	The Photographers Gallery, London, UK; Home Truths show
	UCSC Center for Documentary Arts and Research and Anthropology Department co-sponsored screening of The Motherhood Archives
	Capilano University, Women's Studies and Film Departments, Vancouver, Canada
	Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America Film Series
	San Francisco State University, Department of Women and Gender Studies
	Bowdoin College, Gender and Women's Studies Department
	Colby College, inaugural event in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies
	Reimagining Birth Symposium, University College Dublin, Ireland
2010	Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA
	Romanian Cultural Institute, Bucharest, Romania
2009	reWIND 1989 film series, Romanian Cultural Institute, Stockholm, Sweden
	Romanian Cultural Institute Film Festival, Stockholm, Sweden
2008	The Jewish Channel, cable TV broadcast
2007	Free Speech TV (Satellite Broadcast)
	The Tank, New York, NYC
	Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
2006	Chicago Underground Film Festival
	New European Film Festival, Vitoria, Spain
	Pioneer Theater, New York City (repertory / theatrical screening)
	New Haven Women in Film Festival, New Haven, CT
	Brooklyn Underground Film Festival
	Maine Women and Girls Film Festival
	New York Underground Film Festival
	Puffin Foundation Cultural Forum, Teaneck, NJ
	Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
2005	IDFA Amsterdam International Documentary Festival, Silver Wolf Competition

2004	ARTE (France and Germany) public television international broadcast
2003	Haifa International Film Festival Berlin Jewish Film Festival Toronto Jewish Film Festival Independent Film Festival of Boston Fribourg International Film Festival, Switzerland Wisconsin Film Festival, Madison, WI Cleveland International Film Festival Boston University Non-fiction Film Festival Director's View Film Festival, Norwalk, Connecticut
2002	MoMA Documentary Fortnight, New York Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival National Council of Jewish Women Jewish Women's Film Festival Vancouver International Film Festival Atlanta Film Festival Jerusalem Cinemateque Repertory Screening Singapore International Film Festival It's All True Documentary Film Festival, Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro Docaviv Documentary Festival, Tel Aviv
2001	IDFA Amsterdam International Documentary Festival, FIPRESCI nomination Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1999	WYBE Philadelphia broadcast, "Through the Lens" documentary series Berlin Ethno Filmfest
1998	PTS Taiwan Public Television broadcast Boston Museum of Fine Arts Ovarvideo, Portugal Taiwan International Documentary Festival Singapore International Film Festival
1997	Merit Certificate, Chicago International Film Festival

YOURS IN SISTERHOOD

CAST AND CREDITS

LETTER READERS:

Maya Dijkstra
Miranda Stearns
Nat Savage
Tia-Simone Gardner
Chanel Craft Tanner
Bess Higgins
Isis Starr
Kate Miller
Marilyn Boyd
Cecelia Ponzini
Yvonne Pepin-Wakefield
Rebecca Welhouse
Pat Brock
PJS
Madeline Van Ert
Eileen C. Cherry Chandler
Claudia E. Stallman
Isabella Tate
Cai Steele
Katrina Montgomery
Kathleen T. Leuschen
Littisha Bates
Trisha Pritikin
Jenny Joy Wrenn
Carla Tilghman
Deena Metzger
Brittany James

PROJECT CONCEPT / CASTING/ CAMERA EDITING:
Irene Lusztig

PRODUCED BY:
Komsomol Films / Irene Lusztig

SOUND DESIGN / TUNING FORKS:
Maile Colbert

RE-RECORDING MIXER
Jeremiah Moore

COLOR GRADING
Gary Coates

SOUND RECORDING AND PRODUCTION ASSISTANTS:
Emily Chao (Los Angeles, Pacific Northwest, Southwest)
Francesca Enzler (Bay Area)
Anisa Hosseinnezhad (New England, Southeast, Rust Belt states, Midatlantic)
Victoria Chan & Tate Nova (New York)
Deborah Libby (Midwest)
Laura Conway & Anna Winter (Colorado / Rockies)

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
Yael Taqqu

ADDITIONAL SOUND RECORDING:
Jeny Amaya
Debra Bilodeau
Paris McGarry
Michelle Nakashima
Megan Needels
Courtney Faye Powell

RESEARCH ASSISTANCE
Jeny Amaya
Debra Bilodeau
Megan Needels

ASSISTANT EDITING
Jeny Amaya
Debra Bilodeau
Ana Valdez

TRANSCRIPTION and TELEPROMPTER SCRIPTS
Debra Bilodeau
Megan Needels

ASL INTERPRETER
Courtney Petri

FUNDRAISING COORDINATOR
Francesca Enzler

LEGAL COUNSEL
Karen Shatzkin

DCP
Cinematiq

PARTIALLY FUNDED BY: Rydell Visual Arts Fellowship, Arts Research Institute - UC Santa Cruz, Arts Dean's Excellence Fund - UC Santa Cruz, Committee on Research - UC Santa Cruz, Arts Council Santa Cruz County, Joan R. Challinor Award, Schlesinger Library, Indiegogo Backers

Yours in Sisterhood

Irene Lusztig
2018

21.02. 18:45 Ger. subtitles Delphi Filmpalast
22.02. 14:00 Ger. subtitles Akademie der Künste
23.02. 16:30 Ger. subtitles CineStar 8
25.02. 13:00 Ger. subtitles Zoo Palast 2

101 min. English.

A petrol station at an Atlanta intersection. A private estate in Bowling Green, Kentucky, complete with a perfect lawn. The front yard of a family home in Connecticut. At first glance, the places Irene Lusztig chose to visit on her two-year journey through the United States seem unremarkable. At each stop, Lusztig had local women read out and comment on letters from the archive of liberal feminist magazine "Ms.". These letters were originally sent around 40 years ago in response to articles in the magazine, serving also as outlets for their writers, mainly women, to share their personal stories – with intimacy and candour, at times full of relief, at other rage. The letters recount experiences of abortions or lesbian affairs with married women and rail against the magazine's ignorance of what real life meant for black women.
Irene Lusztig's documentary set-up succeeds in bringing a wealth of experiences from an earlier generation of the feminist movement into a complex dialogue with the present. The written word only appears to be at the fore, beyond it, there lies a whole universe of feminism for the viewer to discover, which **YOURS IN SISTERHOOD** makes accessible on many levels. (Anke Leweke)

Irene Lusztig was born in Coventry, the United Kingdom, in 1974. In the scope of her work as a filmmaker, visual artist, and archival researcher, she has made, among other things, the Internet project "Worry Box Project" (2011). Irene Lusztig is an associate professor of Film and Digital Media at the University of California Santa Cruz. She lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Feminism then and now

An angry woman in Atlanta talks about the harassment she experiences in public spaces. An aspiring policewoman complains that the police station in her small Iowa town refuses to hire qualified women. A sixteen-year-old girl haltingly comes out as a lesbian for the first time. These are just a few of the thousands of fascinating letters to the editor – far too many to publish – that arrived at the "Ms." magazine [US feminist magazine founded in 1972 –Ed.] office in the 1970s. These letters were written by women, men, and children of all ages, from all over the country, and from across the spectrum of sexual orientation, religious, racial, and ethnic background, physical ability, and political viewpoint. Spanning deeply personal accounts of individual problems, revelations, and political struggles, these

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forum info

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main program
special screenings
a pink tribute to keiko sato
directors

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14 apples
afrique, la pensée en mouvement part 1
aggregat | amiko
an elephant sitting still
apatride | aufbruch | la cama
la casa lobo | casanovagen
classical period | con el viento
los débiles | den' pobedy
die tomorrow | djamilia | drvo
l'empire de la perfection
fotbal infinit | grass
the green fog | interchange
jahilya
kaotični život nade kadić
last child | madeline's madeline
maki'la | mariphasa
minatomachi
notes on an appearance
old love | our house
our madness

Seventies letters are a powerful invocation of the second-wave feminist slogan 'the personal is political'. I spent the summer of 2014 in the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America reading boxes containing thousands of these mostly-unpublished letters to the editor. What was most striking during my archival research is that the issues covered by these letters are still the same big issues that women and gender-nonconforming people are facing today – sexual harassment, violence and assault, access to abortion and birth control, body image, workplace discrimination, gender and sexuality, race, class, and inclusivity.

Inspired by these incredible letters, in the summer of 2015, I set off on a journey to share these letters with ordinary people all over the US. I wanted to know if this rich collective archive of everyday feminist history and experience could be a catalyst for a new kind of national conversation about feminism today. Between 2015 and 2017, I filmed more than 300 readings with volunteers in thirty-two different US states. Each project participant was carefully matched with a Seventies letter sent from their own city or town and invited to read aloud and respond to their letter. I've filmed readings with people of all ages, gender identities, shapes, colours, and backgrounds on both coasts, in the Midwest, the Rockies, and the South, in remote rural areas and major cities. Filming these conversations with strangers alongside the election, its aftermath, the #metoo movement and much more, this project has felt increasingly timely and resonant – the stakes for how we create conversations about feminism right now feel higher and more urgent than ever.

I've also thought deeply about diversity and intersectionality throughout the making of this project, and it has been important to me to make sure my project reflects a very diverse range of current-day voices about feminism. Most of the letters that I have selected for the project were never published, which means that the project also creates an opportunity to give voice to many kinds of letters that didn't get a voice in the Seventies (and to create an 'alternative' history of Seventies feminist conversation).

This project is about conversation, about making new connections across time and space, and about thinking of new and more inclusive ways for us to talk to each other – onscreen, online, and in person at screening events. Feminists have always understood that speaking up, listening carefully, and making space for others to speak is the most powerful way to start to build real change. (Irene Lusztig, January 2018)

Conversation with Irene Lusztig: "We reject our mothers' feminism, start all over again"

Jennifer Shearman: What interests you specifically in archives?

Irene Lusztig: When I was a teenager in the pre-Internet late Eighties/early Nineties, any process of self-educating about underground cultures involved spending time getting your hands dirty, rummaging, and touching old objects – I spent a lot of time when I was younger in vintage clothing and used record shops looking for hidden or forgotten treasures, and I'm kind of a forager by nature. So when I first found myself in an archive it felt immediately exciting and familiar to be in a place full of piles of ephemeral things that hadn't been thought about in a long time and were waiting to be found. There's a sense of possibility and discovery in archival work that has always been really exciting to me – opening a box or a film can and finding a life, a gesture, words, documents, or moments that haven't been considered in a long time. I love spending time with found artefacts and images – not exactly as a historian, but as an artist – with a kind of expansive and open looking where there is lots of freedom to think about what feels moving, uncanny, beautiful, poetic, or urgent.

Thinking about the past is also always a way of thinking about the present political moment. The past is continuously shifting and changing in relation to where we are standing right now when we look at it. So that complicated relationship compels me as well: usually when I am working with archival materials I am thinking about the past, but also working through something about the present.

Why are archives and archival research important to feminism?

A million reasons! One of the enduring problems in feminist history (since the beginning of feminism) is forgetting the work done by previous generations. The whole 'waves' model for understanding feminism gets at this issue very directly – with each generation, we reject our mothers' feminism, start all over again, and in the process forget or abandon all the work that our own feminism is indebted to. I work with college students and spend a lot of my time with twenty-year-olds contemplating this problem: even though many of my students identify as feminists, they've never heard of "Ms." magazine or consciousness-raising or Carolee Schneemann or the Women's Building in LA or Mother Art or a million other historical things that are all incredibly important forebears that have made today's feminism possible. My students don't have to like or agree with the ideologies of all of these things (certainly intersectional feminist conversations about race and gender are in a very different place now than forty years ago), but they should know that this work was done and that they are standing on the shoulders of this work in many ways.

I've recently started teaching a feminist filmmaking course, and it's been really interesting to try to think through how to teach Seventies feminism to younger feminist students. At the beginning of the course I showed a bunch of Seventies documentary work (like WOMANHOUSE, 1974, by Johanna Demetrakas) and my students hated it – all of them wrote about how the work was essentialist and overly preoccupied with unimportant questions about reproduction and domesticity. One of my former students, who worked on **YOURS IN SISTERHOOD** as a research assistant, once told me that she rejected everything that Seventies (i.e., white and middle-class) feminism stands for. I pointed out that the Seventies letters to "Ms." included letter after letter from women who weren't allowed to wear trousers to work or get bank accounts in their own name. If you're wearing trousers and have a bank account right now, you can't just reject Seventies feminism. You have to do the much messier, more complicated work of acknowledging those histories and building on top of them and tearing them down to build new, better, more inclusive feminisms all at the same time. It's hard but really necessary work. And, of course, at the same time that young feminists reject and forget the work of older feminists, the

premières armes
premières solitudes
spk komplex | syn
teatro de guerra | tuzdan kaide
unas preguntas
waldheims walzer
wieża. jasny dzień.
wild relatives
yours in sisterhood

rest of the world is also continuously erasing the accomplishments and cultural production of feminist makers and thinkers. Feminist work is chronically underfunded, undervalued, inaccessible, marginalised, and relegated to archives. So part of doing feminist cultural work – for me – has always been to do the specific work of finding feminist or women's histories that are buried, forgotten, neglected, or ignored – whether it's my own grandmother (the subject of my first feature, RECONSTRUCTION), a discarded educational film for women (the materials of my last feature, THE MOTHERHOOD ARCHIVES, from 2013), or a letter from a queer teen in 1976 that never got published and got filed away in a box.

(Interview: Jennifer Shearman. www.dispatchfmi.com/single-post/2018/01/21/INTERVIEW-IRENE-LUSZTIG)

Production Irene Lusztig. **Production company** Komsomol Films (Ben Lomond, USA). **Director** Irene Lusztig. **Director of photography** Irene Lusztig. **Editing** Irene Lusztig. **Sound design** Maile Colbert.

Films

1997: For Beijing with Love and Squalor (58 min.). 2001: Reconstruction (90 min.). 2005: The Samantha Smith Project (51 min.). 2013: The Motherhood Archives (90 min.). 2014: Maternity Test (14 min., loop, single channel video). 2016: Forty Years (12 min.). 2018: Yours in Sisterhood.

CINEVUE

BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL PATRICK GAMBLE

Berlin 2018: Yours in Sisterhood review

CINE VUE 21/02/2018

★★★☆☆

A series of provocative and often heartbreaking conversations between the past and the present, Irene Lusztig's Yours in Sisterhood**, is a collective portrait of feminism, and a beautiful paean to the lost art of letter writing.**

Beginning as an insert in New York Magazine, before becoming the first ever mainstream feminist magazine in the US, Ms. Magazine provided a space for feminism within the public, commercial realm of the 1970s. The magazine made history in 1972, when it published the names of women admitting to having had abortions when the procedure was still illegal. It would go on to give a platform for intelligent, considered debate about the marginalisation of women in society for years to come.

Between 2015 and 2017, Lusztig decided to gather over 300 strangers from across the US to read aloud letters written in the 1970s to the editor of Ms. Magazine. These submissions, the majority of which went unpublished at the time, provide a ground floor window to experiences of those living through the woman liberation movement. But all windows provide a faint reflection, and Lusztig encourages her volunteers to engage with the letters they're reading.

Each woman is filmed in the same way, positioned in the centre of meticulously composed frames as they talk directly into the camera. It's a relatively simple way to convey the information with maximum clarity and transparency, but it doesn't stop some of the women from being uncomfortable camera. However, there are some who enthusiastically deliver their letters with a fire in their bellies, whilst others disagree vehemently, highlighting the impasse between equality and identity politics as one of the greatest threats to contemporary movement struggles.

"There is more than one way to be a feminist." states one writer from Rochester, articulating the clash between the personal and the political evidenced in many of these letters. Yours in Sisterhood doesn't strive to eradicate these divides but instead reinvigorate and build upon conversations surrounding identity politics. Covering a broad range of topics; from the expectations to achieve impossible standards of beauty, to the lack of civil rights afforded to incarcerated women, Lusztig combines all these accounts together to move the conversation away from listing personal privileges and disadvantages, and show the politics of identity as one of positionality: a recognition of our different locations within intersecting systems of oppression.

Clocking in at 101 minutes, Yours in Sisterhood could certainly do with some abbreviating but, if the emergence of the #MeToo movement has taught us anything, it's that the film's lengthy runtime is merely a reflection of just how little progress has been made. But as one writer from Cincinnati puts it; "Feminism has had, and will continue to have its crisis, but let's embrace them with inclusivity."

The Berlin Film Festival runs from 15-25 February. Follow our coverage here.

Patrick Gamble | @PatrickJGamble

ELENA LAZIC / MARCH 14, 2018

Irene Lusztig: 'To me, conflict is as important as empathy'

Irene Lusztig discusses making Yours in Sisterhood, a documentary that allows for a respectful dialogue between different perspectives and feminisms.

Premiering in Berlin this year, Irene Lusztig's *Yours in Sisterhood* is a documentary with a

deceptively simple concept: facing the camera, contemporary women from across the United States read letters that were sent to Ms. Magazine in the 1970s but never published. In these letters, readers from 40 years ago recount their experience with care. They describe the sexism they face, complain to the magazine for ignoring their perspective, or simply ask for help. With this simple setup, Lusztig draws our attention to both how different things are today and how much they've remained the same.

The film's profoundly calming aesthetic — there is no music, camera movements, or any other distractions from what is being read — creates a rare space where we have the time and the patience to truly listen to the full stories of both the women who wrote the letters and the women reading them, on their own terms, and at their own tempo. Although they may disagree about their own definition of freedom and feminism, they read each other's letters, and we find ourselves engaged in the same process of quiet, respectful consideration.

We talked to Irene Lusztig in Berlin about her curation process, the "timeliness" of the project, and creating a forum for different feminisms.

Seventh Row (7R): Could you tell me about the genesis of the project?

Irene Lusztig (IL): I work a lot with archives, so most of my projects begin in some way with an archival collection, or a question about history — some kind of historical problem that feels resonant in the present. I knew about that particular collection of unpublished letters. It was in a library where I had done some work for a previous project, and I was curious about it. I'd also been thinking for a number of years, and across a few different projects, about the idea of feminist conversation, and about what kind of spaces we have for feminist conversation — what those spaces felt like in the 1970s and what they feel like now.
I'm also trying to think of ways of taking things out of the archive and inviting people to engage with them in the present in different ways. So the idea of having people read the letters felt like a very direct and simple way to invite people to engage with me in these questions.

> 'I think history is always changing depending on where we are in the present.'
>
> CLICK TO TWEET

7R: Why did you choose to make this film now?

IL: I had the idea for a long time. Actually, it's very funny to have all these meetings with sales agents who tell me that the film is "so timely!" It's amazing for the project, and it's exciting to be finishing it in a moment where a lot of people are thinking and talking about feminism. But it's also very ironic, because the film is really making an argument about how long this has been going on, how much unfinished business there is, and how many things haven't changed in 40 years. It's not a new idea for me, and it's not a film that I designed to make in a moment where feminism is kind of coming back or becoming more public.

In fact, the film really came out of a lot of frustration — feeling like we don't have good spaces for public feminism in the U.S. now, and that a lot of these histories, that feel very important to me, seem very invisible or forgotten now. A lot of the work of the film has been to recuperate, bring back, or reanimate histories that I felt weren't being talked about enough. But then, of course, I've been making the film alongside the 2016 election. Already in 2016, the second year of shooting, it felt like there was this growing momentum around speaking about women's issues and feminism. There's been a real energy. And that's been surprising and good for the project, but not what I expected at the beginning of working on it, where I thought my film would be quite obscure!

7R: Did you know about the magazine before working on this project?

IL: Yes, the magazine was very well-known in the US, for a time. People my age, in their forties or older, usually know about it, but younger people might not — I find that my students have never heard of it. It was launched in 1972, and through the 1980s, it was an incredibly mainstream publication. Although it was founded by

second-wave feminists, and was very much a feminist magazine writing about women's issues, it was not at all a marginal publication. In the 1970s and '80s, you could find it in drugstores, supermarkets, newstands. It circulated all over the US. It was very well-known and a very significant publication because of that. I don't think there's an equivalent of that in the US today.

Then, in the late '80s/early '90s, it became a non-profit. The publication received a lot of angry letters from readers complaining about the types of advertising that were in the magazine. These ads were considered sexist, promoting makeup, or razors to shave your legs… So the magazine quit all of its advertising and became a non-profit. As a result, it became smaller. It was published only four times a years, and it didn't have this impact as a feminist publication the way it did when it was widely circulated. But that's a common thing… So much of feminist history gets erased over time. That's part of a bigger phenomenon.

7R: Did you contact Ms. Magazine for this project?

IL: I didn't contact them until it was finished. In the U.S., I think 70s feminism is now remembered as very white and very middle-class, and I think that's complicated. Part of that is true, and definitely, feminist conversation around inclusion and race is in a really different place now than it was in the 1970s. But I also think a lot of stuff that '70s feminism did is a little forgotten and misremembered. Because of that, there's even a complicated politics around making a project about 70s feminism. And it felt important to me, while I was making the film, that I was just myself and not working for someone else — that I didn't recognise or represent any particular feminist politics, group, or organisation. People asked me these questions a lot when I was shooting, which has never happened to me: "who's funding your film?" "Do you work for Ms.?"

Certainly, a lot of African-American women didn't read Ms., or felt like Ms. wasn't a publication that spoke to them, and they would have felt differently about being in my project if I was making it for Ms. or in collaboration with Ms.

Transgender people have a complicated history with second wave feminism in the U.S., where they often felt not invited to be part of the feminist places in the 1970s. So I had long conversations with transgender readers about what my politics were and what it meant to me to make a film about '70s feminism, why I was inviting a transgender person to read. All of that also mattered. So I waited to contact Ms. partly to feel like I was working in a free way with people.

> 'You can make feel-good, nostalgic films about '70s feminism, but I definitely didn't want to make a comfortable film like that.'
>
> CLICK TO TWEET

7R: How did you select the letters?

IL: I read a lot of them — probably 2000. I read every day for four weeks. I would just go to the library and read all day. Then, I made a shorter selection of letters I thought it would be interesting to shoot for the project. It was still 800 letters. I selected both letters that felt typical — many letters were about the same issue, so I picked some that would be good examples of that type of letter — and letters which felt extraordinary and unique. Some of those are in the film. For example, I only found one letter out of these 2000 that was from a sex worker, who was describing her work.

7R: And it wasn't published!

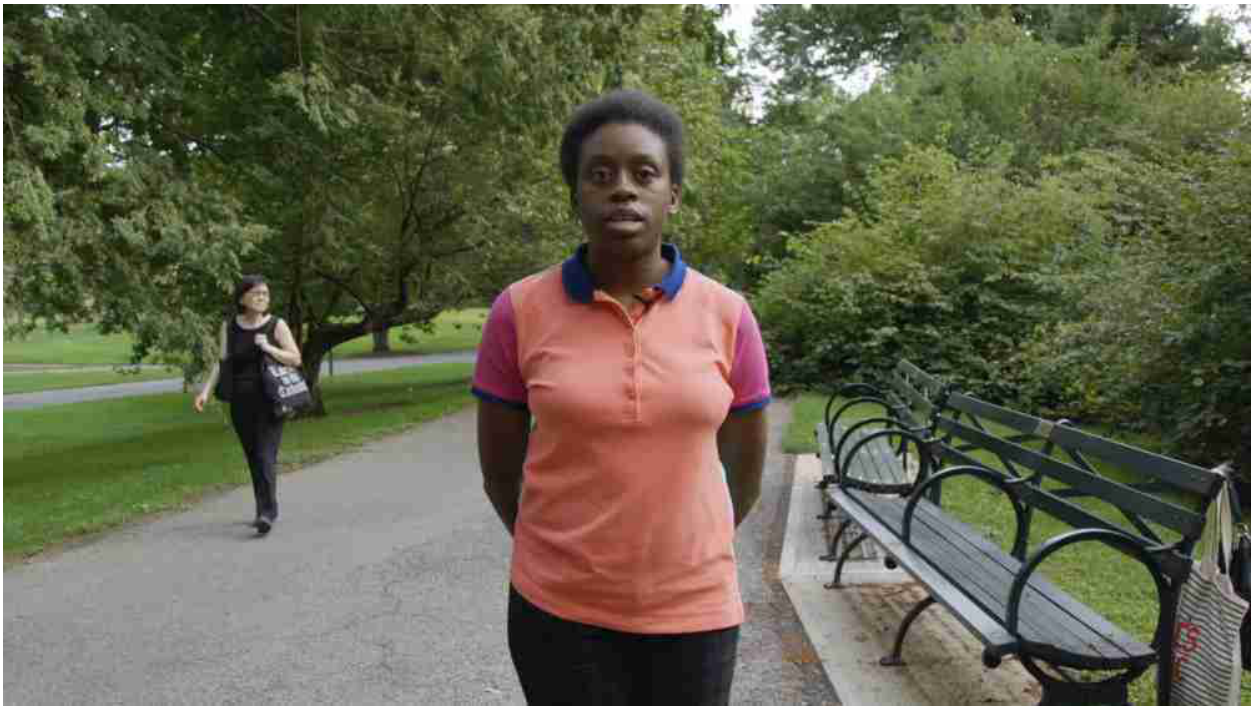
IL: It wasn't published, so that letter felt atypical yet super important. The film ends with a letter from a woman who's in prison — there are a few prison letters, but mostly not by women. That was the only letter from an incarcerated woman that actually speaks about being a woman in prison.

I was also doing a very contemporary curation, thinking about what felt important to me for feminism now. I was definitely prioritising letters from women of colour, from transgender readers — which there were very few of in the archive, maybe four or five.

7R: Were there many letters from women of colour in the archive?

IL:. There weren't many letters from women who were identifying themselves as women of colour, or who were trying to think of feminism and race together. I shot almost all the ones I found. They constitute a much bigger percentage of my movie than they do of the archive.

I knew I wanted to film all over the US, so I made sure that I had letters from all over the country. When I was planning trips to shoot, I would go back and re-read all the letters region by region. At different moments, different letters would seem more important. For example, there's this letter from North Carolina, from a woman who's in an interracial relationship. She talks about the presence of the KKK and the Nazi Party in North Carolina. The first time I read that letter, it just seemed very



specific and not that significant. When I reread it after the election, there was this very public resurgence of right-wing activity in the US, so the letter suddenly felt very resonant and haunting. I think history is always changing depending on where we are in the present.

7R: We often perceive feminism in the 1970s as unified behind a set of clear goals, certainly compared to feminism today. I was struck by how the film showed that there wasn't actually that much unity: every single person had a different opinion. Did you ever have an impulse to show a more unified feminism?

IL: As a filmmaker, I'm always interested in complexity. You can make feel-good, nostalgic films about '70s feminism, but I definitely didn't want to make a comfortable film like that. The idea of the project is to make a maybe messy and complicated space that invites people to listen to all of those possible feminisms together, a kind of space that invites you to think across all of those different perspectives. I don't want to tell you what feminism is.

At the heart of the film is a politics around listening — the ethics of listening, and the idea of listening across differences. The idea of feminisms rather than feminism felt very important to me. I wanted to make a space that could also include quite conservative women, like the woman in the gun range, or the factory worker in West Virginia — feminism for her is about getting a certain kind of job in a factory, and that's quite different from what a woman of colour in the Bronx might have to say about race and feminism.

The woman in West Virginia, working at the factory: I think she's a woman who's quite active in union politics, and she's a person who's certainly interested in women in the workplace and women's rights in the context of what kind of factory job you have, how much it pays, and the working conditions. I think it's important to acknowledge that this is also a feminist politics, even though she isn't able to identity with the woman whose letter she's read. It shows the limitations of these feminisms — there are blind spots, things we can or cannot see across depending

on where we're standing and our life experiences. Something interesting happened in that reading, and it didn't happen that often. She's quite hard on the woman whose letter she reads, saying "she didn't have any ambition," "she could have gotten a job in the factory if she really wanted a job."

There were a lot of disagreements among the people who wrote letters in the 1970s, especially about whether the magazine was radical enough or not. There were readers who were angry at the magazine for writing about lesbians or about LGBTQ issues, kind of saying, "We think feminism means equal pay and having the same kind of jobs as men, but we don't want to read about lesbians because that's not what feminism is for." On the other side, you had much more radical people accusing the magazine of being bourgeois. But I think conflict and disagreement are as important to me as empathy and identification. I don't think there was one single feminism in the 70s, either.

7R: You ask some of the people reading the letters to say what they think about them, which adds another level of disagreement or agreement to what is being read. How did you choose who would read which letter?

IL: I filmed 306 people for the project, so when it came to editing the film, I picked the readings where I thought something interesting or transformative had happened. But the ways that I associated people with the letters were quite precise. It wasn't always about matching people exactly, but about creating some kind of resonance, or even some sort of conflict. I was thinking differently for each letter about who might read it, and what may happen. Sometimes nothing would happen, and sometimes I would be totally surprised by what someone would find or respond to in a letter.

For example, there's a letter from the archive that was from a lesbian reader — quite a short letter criticising the magazine for not having enough content for lesbian readers. It was about representation and about feeling marginalised. There's more mainstream representation for queer women now, so I didn't ask a lesbian woman to

read the letter, but a transgender man who was also deaf — thus speaking from a more contemporary space, where he was thinking about disability and transgender issues. I thought that was an interesting way of getting at that idea of not feeling represented, or feeling marginalised.

When I first imagined the project, I thought that the first time the person would read the letter would be the most interesting — before they had the time to think about it. But actually, what I found in shooting was that people needed three or four takes to get used to reading from a teleprompter and get used to the setup. It was often at the third or fourth time that I would feel something was happening in that person as they were reading. So I think there is something about simply repeating something, putting someone's words into your body enough times that you start to actually feel different.

7R: It's striking to hear about these Ms. Magazine readers actually reaching out to communicate with each other. Do you feel like this sort of communication is even a part of any mainstream feminism today?

IL: It's really different now, and I'm very interested in that difference. Even beginning with what the act of writing a letter means — it takes a lot of care, labour, and time. In the archive, even looking at the materiality of what those letters look and feel like — people wrote on beautiful stationery, sometimes there are drawings on them, some people are handwriting, others using a typewriter… You can really feel the time and care that it took to sit down and write a letter to a magazine, and then, the time and care it took the editors to read all of the letters.

Actually, until 1975, the editors would write a letter back to every person who wrote, even if they didn't publish their letter. There's this incredible space of just paying attention, and listening, and reading carefully. All of that feels really important. And I think the spaces we have now are quite different. We talk to each other on the internet, and our communities of conversation are much more fragmented and isolated. In the U.S., that's the thing everyone has been talking about since the election — our diminished capacity to listen to each other across socio-economic and geographical differences.

And when you make a comment on an Internet message board, you can reach a very big audience very quickly, but it's also very ephemeral, and what you say can get buried under other comments. You don't have to think as hard, you don't have to spend a lot of time writing it, you don't have to spend a lot of time reading it. So I think there is something maybe impoverished about the space that we have right now for speaking to each other.

That's why it felt very important that I go to those places myself, that I meet everyone myself, that I write to everyone myself — I didn't have a casting director

or a producer communicating with people for me. Affording the care and the time of going to a small town in West Virginia or Ohio and spending an hour with someone, talking to them before, during, and after the shoot. Making a space where slow listening and attention can happen felt very different from the way that we usually talk to each other now.

7R: Women talk this way on Twitter now…

IL: That's the thing: there are many, many spaces now, including for feminist conversations, but it's a much more fragmented landscape. People are in much more specific groups, with like-minded people. What was interesting about Ms. was that it was read by people from so many different places and with really different experiences. It was a space for people to come together, and the letters feel like a space where people could communicate across very big geographical, ideological, and racial differences.

7R: Watching the film, it feels like there isn't that much emphasis on the big cities, which I imagine were in fact the places where most of the letters came from.

IL: I probably over-represent the middle of the country. Statistically, a majority of the letters were from New York and California. Those were the two states, with Massachusetts and Washington D.C. just behind. Ms. was based in NYC. I do have one reading from NYC in the film.

But yes, when you watch the film, it does feel like it spends more time in other parts of the country. Especially during the [2016] election, and after the election, it became so obvious that we're not good at listening to each other in the U.S., and that the issues and concerns of people in different parts of the country are really, really different.

I could feel that in the archive also, actually. For the first day or two when reading the letters, I thought I would do the whole project on a big city like New York. But

pretty quickly, as I was reading, I felt like for someone in a very small town in the midwest, who has no other access to feminist media, and just finds this magazine in a store or something, what this encounter with Ms. means may be a lot more significant than what it might mean for someone who has access to lots of feminist organisations, lots of different groups and lots of publications. So I wanted to include both of those things.

I think that a lot of people seeing the film have a strong response to just how empty it looks. Public spaces are very empty in the U.S. That's just an American thing. We're bad at public space, we're just not interested in it.

7R: What is your next project?

IL: The next thing I want to do is an archive internet project that would be the second part of Yours in Sisterhood and would include a lot more of the readings. When I was reading the letters and during shooting, I thought so much about how to make this really inclusive, big space, with all these different kinds of people talking to each other.

But I was also thinking about how to make it a feature film that anyone would watch, and that would be only 100 minutes long. A feature film allowed me to truly create a quiet and still space where viewers would really take the time to listen — something that is virtually impossible to do online, because people are really bad viewers on the Internet and don't watch things for a long time.

But I had to cut so many people out for the film. It's a very curated selection of 27 videos out of 306. And each time I made the decision to take someone out, I felt very aware of silencing this person — of maybe reproducing the problem of the magazine that just published ten letters out of a hundred. It feels important to me to also make a space where more of these readings can be seen.

LA RB LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Handmade Feminism: Irene Lusztig's "Yours in Sisterhood"

Megan Moodie interviews Irene Lusztig

MAY 11, 2018

IN THE 1970s, my mother made all my baby clothes by hand on a heavy Sears sewing machine. Potted plants in macramé hammocks hung around our dinner table, and the

RELATED

closet was stacked with several thick afghans crafted by my grandmother. Somewhere, put away in drawers, were a set of lace-edged handkerchiefs, lovingly crocheted on tiny needles by my Finnish great-grandmother, who learned the technique from her own mother. The trailing end of a matriline of textile artists, I picked up some of them by osmosis, but most women of my generation did not. What would be the point, when everything can be bought more cheaply and no one has the time? Handmade fiber arts (contemporary hipster crafter movements notwithstanding), are a pastime — or a necessity — left behind by our foremothers, and so much the better. They were stuck in maternity-driven scripts of domesticity that kept them trapped at home, needle in hand. Or, if they weren't privileged enough to be stuck at home, then who would want to go back there anyway? Right?

There are many things that I love about writer-director-producer Irene Lusztig's new feature-length documentary, Yours in Sisterhood, *which premiered at the Berlinale in February. As does much of Lusztig's work, it raises questions about how we relate to pasts — ideas, objects, and social practices — that are always with us whether we care to notice their stratigraphy in our current landscape or not. In this case, the archive that Lusztig has taken on is a set of letters to the editor of* Ms. Magazine *dating from 1972 to 1980 and housed in the Schlesinger Library at Harvard. Most of the letters were never published, simply because their sheer volume made it impossible. These objects, committed to paper that was often carefully chosen personal stationery, seem to belong to a world that is, like latch hook rugs, now properly seen only as history. An exhibit we might want to see in a museum, but certainly not objects that we want to touch, to let touch us, to see their relevance for our own world, and to learn how to make. And this, above all, is what I love about the film: its crafting, the skills and effort and willingness to try something new that brought it into being, are a central part of the story that unfolds, with care and subtlety, for viewers.*

After reading hundreds of letters from women all over the country and recognizing that many of the issues with which they were concerned have not been overcome but perhaps only packed away from public discourse, Lusztig wanted viewers to try to handle them, too. A self-confessed thrift-store rummager and talented seamstress who sews all her own clothes on a heavy Pfaff machine, Lusztig handles history materially and viscerally. She asks us not to simply admire or condemn and thereby distance ourselves from what she found in this feminist archive, but to engage with the ongoing violence, discrimination, and, sometimes, loneliness and isolation described by the letters, as they happen right now, today. The film

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asks, in powerful ways, about our relationship to the legacy of our mothers and grandmothers and what skills we may have lost for the struggle — even as it continually keeps in view some of the central problems with 1970s feminism, including and especially the exclusion of women of color, working-class women, and trans and gender-non-conforming people.

To bring the relationship between past and present to life on screen, Lusztig curated a selection of the Ms. Magazine *letters and over the course of three years traveled to the location from which each letter was originally sent. From New York and Los Angeles to small-town Iowa and Alabama, she cast local readers — none of them actors — to present the original letter on screen via a teleprompter. She then invited the readers to reflect on what they read while she kept the camera rolling. The result is simple and staggering, as letter readers relate to, or argue against, or reconsider issues raised by letter writers: the history of public feminism is restaged so as to create a new kind of contemporary public feminism. One that is intentional, intersectional, face-to-face, and handmade.*

I got to have several conversations about Yours in Sisterhood *with Lusztig (she hand-hemmed while I knitted socks) that continued over email. The daughter of refugees from Ceauşescu's Romania, she has long been attracted to times and places undergoing dramatic political change; much of her earlier work (Lusztig has been the solo writer-director-producer of five long-form documentary films) was animated by pressing concerns about the end of the Cold War. The issues — and possibilities — raised by this new work have a similar urgency.* Yours in Sisterhood *had its North American debut at Hot Docs and its US premiere at the Art of the Real showcase at Lincoln Center in New York City. I believe that the film will teach viewers something important about how public feminism might change for the better through their experience as its audience. After all, the next step after learning how to appreciate an art is learning how to do it. What happens if we take to the pen instead of the keyboard? Sit together, facing one another, with needle and thread? If we make, rather than post?*

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MEGAN MOODIE: Why was it so important for you to travel all over the country to film with a teleprompter?

IRENE LUSZTIG: This idea came very directly out of my experience reading letters in the archive. Initially my vision for the project was that I would choose a single large, diverse city, like New York, and shoot the whole project in a quick, concentrated way in a single place. But very quickly as I read letters in the archive, I felt the powerful importance of place and geography. Many of the letters were from the kinds of places I imagined to be hubs of feminist

By Gabriel Schivone

Hells Angels and Other Role Models: Robert Anthony Siegel's "Criminals"
By Pete Tosiello

conversation in the 1970s, like New York City, Washington, DC, Boston, Los Angeles, or Chicago. But an almost equal number were from surprising and remote places, and many of those were the letters I found myself wondering about at the end of each research day: who was the sassy female bartender in Bronson, Kansas — a town with a bar, a library, one restaurant, and two churches — who found a copy of *Ms.* and took the time to write about her snappy comebacks for deflecting rowdy bar patrons? Who was the woman who left home to live on a feminist farm commune in mid-Coast Maine? Or the queer, closeted woman in remote, upper-peninsula Michigan who was reaching out for support? And who might their counterparts be in these same small towns today? I felt especially moved by the isolation, urgency, and desire for feminist community I felt in these small-town letters, and this made me start thinking in new ways about the relationship between geography and access to spaces of feminist activism — both in the '70s and now.

And is this attention to location also part of how you grappled with troubling questions about race, class, sexuality, and ability that necessarily arise around this archive? I thought it was interesting to know that there may have been more diversity in the letters to the editor than we would have expected, given *Ms. Magazine*'s largely white, middle-class readership.

You know, since the election we've been hearing a lot about how bad we've become at communicating across geographical, socioeconomic, and other differences. So I was also interested on a personal level in the idea of meeting people in places where I didn't know anyone or might not otherwise have reason to visit. So many of the encounters felt transformative to me — the whole experience of filming shifted my perspective again and again.

I was especially moved by many of the readings I filmed with black women, especially with Katrina, the reader in the Bronx botanical garden; Littisha, the reader in Cincinnati; and Eileen, the reader in Bowling Green, Ohio. All three women use their letters to talk back to the '70s and to speak with extraordinary eloquence about race in the United States then and now. Most of the things they said were not surprising to me, but at a moment when many people of color are talking about the labor and fatigue that comes with educating white Americans about racism, I was stunned by the generosity of these women who spoke so graciously and at such length about difficult subjects. It feels transformative to me think about the potential that this kind of one-on-one encounter can have.

You've mentioned in several interviews the emotional response you had to the

letters themselves, as objects. Can you talk more about that and how it relates to your process as a writer-director-producer?

I often have emotional relationships with objects from the past, and have made a lot of projects that begin with a process of touching and looking at old things. The letters were amazing to spend time with. There is so much evocative visual information in each letter: Who picked out special stationery? Whose handwriting is urgent and agitated? Who has so much to say that they are squeezing words into every corner of the aerogram? Who is pressing really hard with their pen? The editors at *Ms.* also made their own notes, writing directly on the letters — sometimes they wrote notes to each other in the margins or commented on the letters they found moving, funny, or troubling. In the beginning, the staffers actually answered each letter, which is also remarkable, as is the effort that went into preserving the archive itself.

When I met with Jenny, the former sex worker who reads her own 1980 letter to *Ms.* for the project, there was an amazing moment when she saw an editor's margin note added to her letter (which I had scanned in the archive and brought back to her) and she realized for the first time that, even though it hadn't been published, her letter had been opened and seen. Writing a letter is an act of making oneself visible, and I love that the object can physically manifest that.

If the letters-as-objects are so central to your process with this film, why don't we ever see them?

A few people who saw the film as a work in progress encouraged me to show images of the old letters on-screen in the film, but — even though I love the letters — I actually felt strongly about not doing that. I've made a lot of projects that show archival images and objects, but for this project it felt important to insist on staying in the visual present. The drama of the film is in the present and in the ways that readers negotiate with the past in the real time. Showing the past through letters and archival images would have felt nostalgic in the wrong way — it would allow us to feel like the past is aestheticized and far away — seeing the past can ironically create a space where we don't have to engage with it. I wanted to make an urgent film about history in the present tense, and to do that I think I needed to commit to staying in the visual now.

You and I are of the same generation — born when *Ms.* was at its height in the mid-'70s and often called Generation X because no one knew what we would do or care about. I started thinking that maybe *Yours in Sisterhood* is also a kind of

generational statement. I wonder if you think we have anything particular or special to say to debates about public feminism because we remember having real pen pals but are raising children who do not know a world before Facebook. Is this also a message to us about how to make politically relevant art with a foot in each generation?

This is an interesting way to frame the project that I hadn't thought of. I did actually have a childhood pen pal in Sri Lanka! Our epistolary friendship was arranged through an international pen pal matchmaking company. I was also part of a high school exchange program in Moscow during the last year of the Soviet Union. My classmates and I had a heady sense that we were personally ending the Cold War through forging these one-on-one friendships with Soviet peers. I guess these were formative lessons in the political power of small-scale interpersonal efforts. It's true that I am standing in a generationally specific place when I make a project like this that looks at the feminism of my mom's generation (even though my own mom wasn't involved with feminist politics in the '70s). I also think a lot about intergenerational feminism in my work in the classroom, which I take very seriously. I spend a lot of time with young women who are interested in feminism but who sometimes have a very ahistorical sense of where feminism comes from. I am definitely conscious of trying to reach across the time of these three generations.

I know you make most of your own clothes. How does your everyday relationship to the handmade come through in the film? Are you trying to say something larger about feminist practice?

Yes, I think I do have something to say about the handmade and the politics of slow form. First of all, feminist work has always been DIY, low budget, handmade, small run, and scrappy. Feminist artists are rarely given the institutional support and budget to make work any other way; this has a long history, going all the way back to quilting and textile arts.

I think about time a lot when I make work — the span of history, the time it takes to make a work that is contemplative and thoughtfully made, the time it takes to work through a series of ideas, the time it takes to look at something (or to listen to someone speaking) slowly in real time, the time it takes to make something by hand, the notion of time travel. With this film I was thinking about how to make a form that could contain the temporality of an urgency that is not emergent. Our news cycles move very quickly, jumping from one emergency or crisis to the next; increasingly a lot of documentary work feels like it's also expected to move at the same quick, emergent pace (sometimes the

two are literally conflated as newspapers now commission "current events" documentary strands). I'm interested in resisting that speed — it's necessary to resist that speed if you want to think about the accumulated urgency of 40 years or 100 years of history instead of about the emergency that happened five minutes ago. Maybe hand-making is one way to move outside of the time scale of the digital world.

As a sidenote, it's funny to me to think of my work as "handmade" filmmaking when there are still many experimental filmmakers who hand-process their own film stock and work in a much more tactile way than I am able to. I haven't hand-made my films in that literal sense since I switched to editing digitally and working primarily with video in the '90s. I use a lot of complicated machines to make work — digital cameras and computers — and I regret that a lot of my "making" time is spent in front of a screen. I used to be a painter in college, and before that I spent my whole childhood drawing, so making things slowly by hand has always been part of my everyday life.

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HYPERALLERGIC

FILM

A Movie Uncovers Unpublished Letters Written to *Ms.* Magazine in the 1970s

Yours in Sisterhood has people reading the letters aloud, musing on feminism now versus in the 1970s.

Dan Schindel September 14, 2018

Nat in Oakland, California (courtesy Women Make Movies)

The conceit of the movie *Yours in Sisterhood* is simple: People read unpublished letters written to *Ms.* magazine between 1972 and 1980. These people live in the same towns from which the letters were originally sent. Information on the original senders beyond that postmark is unknown both to them and us. Sometimes the performers simply read their letters; other times they muse on or respond to the words. Director Irene Lusztig arranged for and filmed over 300 such readings in 32 states, and then winnowed them down to around two dozen. Within the parameters she's established, the documentary, screening this weekend at the Camden International Film Festival (CIFF), finds many different ways to prod at and muse on feminism now versus in the 1970s.

Bess in Middletown, Connecticut (courtesy Women Make Movies)

Ms., with its pivotal role in second-wave feminism, exists here more as a symbol and jumping-off point. While some letters refer to specific articles in the magazine, we don't hear their names or edition dates. Removed from that context, we have the conversations from various years instead of their referents, and those conversations are then mixed into today's discourse around feminism. In those meetings there are alternately affirmative

demonstrations of how far society has come, dispiriting examples of how much some things haven't changed, and striking contrasts in how the terms of certain issues have shifted.

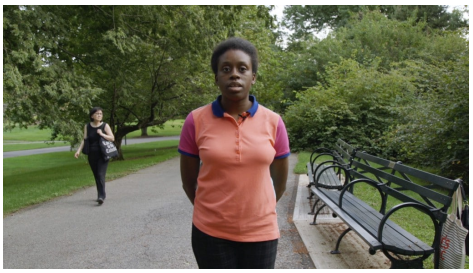
Lusztig finds various ways to play with the relationship between reader and writer. In one scene, a 13-year-old girl reads a letter from a 13-year-old girl who talks about how she was laughed at for asserting she wanted to be president when she grew up. The girl today then gets to consider this in light of Hillary Clinton's then-current run for president. Sometimes the reader can highlight a societal change — a trans woman reads a letter in which the writer suggests a new gender-neutral pronoun, "ahon," and then speaks about her own experiences trying to get people to use her correct pronouns. The final section is filmed outside a prison in Indianapolis, with an inmate reading her letter over the phone in voiceover. She follows up by talking about how bad things still are for incarcerated people.


Eileen in Bowling Green, Ohio (courtesy Women Make Movies)

In a few instances, the movie actually gets the original writers of the letters to read them, creating a dialogue between the present and past. Its most touching scene sees a woman, Claudia, reading a letter she wrote when she was a teenager, expressing her anxiety over being closeted and her fears that she wouldn't be able to have a family or normal life. She then gets to talk about how, though life did indeed turn out to be tumultuous for her at times, she went on to marry a woman and have a family.

The most interesting, pointed parts of the film come when the readers grapple with their texts. One black woman reads a letter calling for generic unity among feminists and stressing the need to "agree to disagree," and guesses that the writer was white because of her dismissal of intersectional issues. Many of the messages criticize *Ms.* for not doing enough to represent or speak to various groups, whether they be people of color, queer people, or, in one instance, Christian women who "don't hate men."

Yours in Sisterhood is wholly sincere, but the title is tinged with some irony given the ideological frisson that emerges throughout. The concept of "sisterhood" is the one that most gets discussed, both in the letters and by the readers. Besides the wider advancement toward equality, feminism has also offered a community for many different people, often marginalized ones. Debate over how best to get these disparate elements to work in concert will continue for a long time. In making a work about the conversation itself, Lusztig makes us consider the wider flow of history. Who knows what a version of this film made 40 years from now would look like.



Katrina in New York City, New York (courtesy Women Make Movies)

Yours in Sisterhood *by Irene Lusztig is screening at the Camden International Film Festival on Sunday, September 16 at the Rockport Opera House (6 Central St, Rockport, Maine).*

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC

(https://criterioncast.com)

APRIL 26, 2018

8 FILMS TO SEE AT ART OF THE REAL 2018

by Joshua Brunsting(https://criterioncast.com/author/joshua)

Now in its fifth edition, The Film Society Of Lincoln Center's annual festival of nonfiction and hybrid filmmaking, The Art Of The Real, is finally set to return on April 26. Running until May 6, the series features one world premiere, eight North American premieres and seven US premieres, bringing together the latest and greatest in films that attempt to change what we cinephiles see as "the cinema of the real." From beloved auteurs to up and coming filmmakers, this series is routinely one of the most interesting festivals on the festival calendar, and this year's lineup is absolutely no different. And to help you make your way through the lineup, here are eight of the best films that Art of the Real 2018 has to offer:

8. Braguino

Starting off this list is one of the festival's shorter outings, yet also one of its most visceral. Braguino comes from Neither Heaven Nor Earth helmer Clement Cogitore, and tells the story of two feuding families and the generation of children trying to end the conflict, all while poachers set upon their land. Set in

the Siberian forest, Braguino plays narratively like a captivating piece of ethnographic filmmaking, but similar to a film like El mar la mar, there is a stylized poetry that elevates every frame. Culminating in a final series of shots that play like the most terrifying found footage horror film you'll ever see, this is an impressionistic piece of filmmaking that's both thought provoking and breathlessly claustrophobic. Similar to Cogitore's last feature outing, this experimentation in tone and atmosphere turn this meditation on existential conflict into a mood piece par excellence.

7. Victory Day

Another new Work from an established name comes from Sergey Loznitsa. His second film already this year (with a third set to debut in competition at Cannes), Victory Day sees the auteur working in similar territory as his superlative Austerlitz from 2017, setting the viewer in the presence of the Soviet Memorial in Berlin's Treptower Park. A monument commemorating Russian victory over the Nazis in WWII, the film centers around events on May 9, the anniversary of the said victory, from dawn to dusk. Dry in the way most Loznitsa documentaries are, this film is a blunt and static look at a group of people as they look back onto history and battle with it in the present. A film about shard histories, there's a timeless urgency to each confrontation, and it's look at our relationship to the recording of history, specifically through monuments, is of a specific prescience today.

6. Milford Graves: Full Mantis

Taking a decidedly original spin on the biographical documentary, Milford Graves Full Mantis takes an intimate and ultimately quite moving look into the life, work and most clearly the philosophies of one of jazz music's great percussionists. An icon in the free jazz scene, Graves is the focus of documentarians Jake Meginsky and Neil Young and these two directors are more than just superficially interested in the history of this artist. Fully embracing the unpredictable and otherworldly aesthetic that makes Graves' music so incredible, the pair are able to not only do justice to a musician's work, but also breathe life into the words of a performer that's as interested in the music he makes as he is the world he puts it out into. Drawing its title from Graves' interest in martial arts, the film has a swing to it that's both unpredictable and incredibly hypnotic, from the stones that adorn his home in Jamaica, New York to the rare archival materials that add context to the larger narrative. It's simply a biography unlike any you'll see this year.

5. The Image You Missed

From biography to the autobiography, The Image You Missed is a triumph of the autobiography documentary. Director Donal Foreman blends various bits of archival materials to not only dig into his own life, but particularly the life of his infamous father, Arthur MacCaig, and their relationship. A rather famous leftist filmmaker, the life of MacCaig is an interesting, if troubled one, and Foreman's profoundly moving dissection of his father's life is one that's as captivating as it is stylistically inspired. Foreman also edits the film, giving the proceedings a certain intimacy and urgency, and seeing his father's film work in relation to Foreman's own work is jarring and allows for much thought to be provoked. A genuinely thrilling piece of familial investigative journalism, there's a certain poetry to the film, and from the film's opening letter, it plays as almost an exorcism. Similar to this year's Paternal Rites, The Image You Missed is a deeply personal film that feels as though its director had to put this out into the world, with no other option. Again, there's an urgency there that's both therapeutic and quite intense.

4. Yours In Sisterhood

Another formally inventive and deeply moving documentary is Yours In Sisterhood. A simplistic film structurally, Sisterhood comes from director Irene Lusztig and collects letters written to the editor of legendary feminist magazine Ms. in the '70s, and has them read aloud by a wide range of women in the present moment. A simple premise, the film becomes transcendent in its actualization, with Lusztig's camera being a window into modern day feminism and all of its meanings, seeing this film reach its greatest heights not in the reading of the letters specifically but the dialogue each of them cause in the aftermath of the reading. This dialogue of generations is genuinely thrilling, particularly in an age where nuance is seemingly of a bygone era. Critical thinking is at the forefront of the film, and while that could make for a rather dry and almost scholastic viewing experience, there's a beauty to each static shot and an epic scope that turns each letter into something genuinely more than just a reading you'd see in the middle of a college 101 course. A near masterpiece, this film.

3. Fail To Appear

Coming in at number three is another short-ish entry into this year's slate, the roughly 70-minute Fail To Appear. Truly showing the extent to which this series is willing to question what it means to be "real" in cinematic language, Fail To Appear stars Deragh Campbell as Isolde, a young woman looking to get her start in the world of social work in Toronto. One of her earliest cases is that of Eric (Nathan Roder), and director Antoine Bourges crafts a compelling story of isolation and human interaction that perfectly blends what we see as classically

fiction and non-fiction. Think Frederick Wiseman by way of the Romanian New Wave. Bourges' eye is squarely on modern social and governmental structures in a similar way to Wiseman's canon, but Bourges sees the impact of these structures as one of increasing dehumanization. The film is a deft, if arguably too short, study on the way the modern judicial system slowly dehumanizes those enacting and effected by its policies, as seen through the eyes of two people who want to help or grow so badly, yet have no ability to transcend there lot in life. A real discovery.

2. Infinite Football

Directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, Infinite Football is, like the best films in this series, a simple premise elevated to true profundity by a filmmaker at the height of their powers. Porumboiu shines his light on Laurentiu Ginghina, a mild-mannered government bureaucrat who instead of visions of grandeur in the world of politics, his greatest dream would be to forever change the world of soccer. Following a childhood injury that would forever change his life, Ginghina's life's work has been to move the sport forward, into a safer, more modern era. Now, that sounds like an admittedly dry and lifeless premise, but thanks to Porumboiu's own deep interest in this man's story, the film becomes a restrained and compelling look at life in modern day Romania. At just 70 minutes, Football is one of Porumboiu's smaller works, but it's also one of his best.

1. John McEnroe: In The Realm of Perfection

Rounding out this list is the festival's opening night film, director Julien Faraut's brilliant John McEnroe: In The Realm of Perfection. Opening on a discussion of instructional films, Faraut's documentary is narrated by Mathieu Amalric and looks at McEnroe's run at the 1984 French Open. As much an essay about McEnroe as a man and an athlete as it is about the relationship between sports and cinema, the film's central thesis is that of Jean Luc-Godard, "Cinema lies, sports doesn't." Taking as inspiration an athlete who was as imperfect a person as he was perfect a sportsman, Faraut's film becomes much more than a simple sports documentary, evolving into a picture that's as much about McEnroe's status as a world star in the abstract as it is how sports is what cinema was born into existence to capture. The tennis sequences are genuinely thrilling, and Faraut's dissection of these moments is captivating, but what makes this picture truly special is the director's sense of cinema's relationship to the human body and vice versa. They couldn't have picked a better film to launch this year's slate.

DOCUMENTARY, FESTIVALS, FILMS, INTERVIEWS, WOMEN DIRECTORS

Hot Docs 2018 Women Directors: Meet Irene Lusztig– "Yours in Sisterhood"

"Yours in Sisterhood"

BY Beandrea July April 27, 2018

Irene Lusztig is a filmmaker whose work has been screened around the world, including at the Berlinale and MoMA, and on television in Europe, Taiwan, and the U.S. Her credits include her feature-length debut "Reconstruction," "The Motherhood Archives," and "The Samantha Smith Project." She teaches filmmaking at UC Santa Cruz where she is Associate Professor of Film and Digital Media.

"Yours in Sisterhood" will premiere at the 2018 Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival on April 28.

W&H: Describe the film for us in your own words.

IL: "Yours in Sisterhood" is based on the thousands of letters that were sent to the editor of Ms. Magazine—the first mainstream feminist magazine in the U.S.—in the 1970s. I spent a summer reading this amazing archive of '70s feminist voices. The letters are about an incredibly diverse range of issues and were written by an equally diverse range of writers of all ages backgrounds from across the U.S.

I spent two and a half years traveling around the U.S. inviting strangers in 32 states to participate in the project by reading aloud and responding to the letters sent from their hometown. The film that has emerged from this process is a kind of collective portrait of feminist conversation in the U.S. from forty years ago and today.

W&H: What drew you to this story?

IL: The film holds a multitude of stories, people, places, ideas, and feminisms, and this richness is precisely what drew me to both the original archive of letters and to the methods I developed for making the project.

As a filmmaker, I'm interested in the complex and messy. I rarely set out to tell a straightforward story with a beginning, middle, and end, but instead I aim to create an open space where a viewer can spend time thinking, questioning, and exploring.

That said, I did feel very drawn to thinking about '70s feminism in all of its messy complexity, to the energy that I felt reading all of those letters in the archive, and to the amazing ways that feminist organizers were able to create radical spaces of conversation.

W&H: What do you want people to think about when they are leaving the theater?

IL: I hope people are thinking hard about lots of big ideas: intergenerational feminism, the meaning and potential of intimate conversation and public discourse, the shifting relationship between history and the present, the importance of listening across difference to perspectives that diverge from your own, time travel, space, geography, landscape, embodiment, and empathy.

My favorite films are films that take days or weeks to digest—where I am still drawing out new meanings and connections a long time afterwards.

W&H: What was the biggest challenge in making the film?

IL: It was a huge challenge to make this film with almost no significant funding. When you get funding it makes you feel confident and it gives you permission to keep following your vision—you know you have the support of institutions that trust you and your ideas. I struggled with rejection after rejection, and really had to make my own network of support to keep moving forward with the project.

Ultimately, though, I felt incredibly supported and trusted by the hundreds of strangers who volunteered to participate in the project. The more people I met and filmed with, the more I had a powerful sense of belief in the work that we were doing together and in the incredible urgency of having these conversations about feminism right now, and that energy is what carried the project forward.

W&H: How did you get your film funded? Share some insights into how you got the film made.

IL: It was extremely difficult and discouraging to find any funding as I was making the project. The film got rejected by every major grant in the U.S. Feminist work and work that centers women's voices is always very difficult to fund. And feminist work that is also stylistically unconventional, formally challenging, or that doesn't tell an easy-to-digest story with a single main character is even harder to fund.

For most of the four years of making the project, I cobbled together tiny amounts of research funding from the university where I teach—just a few thousand dollars a year—plus a couple of very local artist grants. I produced, researched, operated the camera, and edited the project myself. I worked with a tiny crew—just one other person at the time—and hired my recent students.

I'm fortunate to have a full-time university teaching job, so I didn't need to raise money to pay myself. The whole project was made for a fraction of what a normal budget would look like for a feature length film with 120 shooting days and a full year of editing.

I did have to do an emergency crowdfunding campaign at the very end of my project. I found out the film had gotten into Berlin just as I got rejected from the final two grants I had applied for. I was completely out of money, and I did need a bigger chunk of money for the final round of finishing post-production that I wasn't able to do by myself. I raised this money literally during the final few weeks, as I was also finishing and mastering the film for Berlin.

W&H: What does it mean for you to have your film play at Hot Docs?

IL: I made this film with very little help in a very scrappy, intimate, DIY, and small-scale way. So I expected the film to also be very difficult to screen and to ultimately screen in intimate, small, alternative venues. So it's been such an amazing surprise to be invited to show this film at top international festivals like the Berlinale and Hot Docs.

W&H: What's the best and worst advice you've received?

IL: Worst advice: One of my undergrad film teachers once told me that I needed to be less respectful and to worry less about being ethical if I ever wanted to become an interesting filmmaker. I think that was bad advice.

Best advice: A friend told me recently to always ask for something three times. I'm naturally shy and a bad self-promoter, so I like having a rule that gives me permission to ask again even when the first answer is a no or silence.

W&H: What advice do you have for other female directors?

IL: To find or create a supportive community of friends, peers, and like-minded filmmakers who take your ambitions seriously even when the rest of the world doesn't. And also to be really active in taking or making the space for the kinds of conversations that feel important to you: organize meetings, start a microcinema, film collective or reading group, be a programmer/filmmaker, create the context for the dialogue that you want to see in the world.

Don't wait to be discovered or to get invited to show your work!

W&H: Name your favorite woman-directed film and why.

IL: I can list films by women that I love for days; I teach entire courses where I mostly show films by women. An older woman-directed film that I love and that was a big influence on this project is the collectively-produced 1971 film "The Woman's Film," by the San Francisco Newsreel Collective. It's a political, feminist film that still feels incredibly radical and fresh today. It's hard to believe it was made almost fifty years ago.

Like "Yours in Sisterhood," it's a film that is all about women talking to other women. It comes out of the methods of consciousness raising groups, and in fact much of it was filmed in consciousness raising groups. It's an amazing film.

W&H: Hollywood and the global film industry are in the midst of undergoing a major transformation. Many women—and some men—in the industry are speaking publicly about their experiences being assaulted and harassed. What are your thoughts on the #TimesUp movement and the push for equality in the film business?

IL: It's long overdue. While it's of course exciting that these conversation are taking such a big, public forum, women have been talking among themselves about these issues for so many years. Women were talking about the exact same issues in the '70s in the letters they sent to Ms. Magazine. It's frustrating that these problems have endured for such a long time despite the incredible organizing and visibility work done by feminist activists in the '70s.

I think that reveals the profoundly structural nature of the inequality that is threaded through all of our institutions and industries—firing a few powerful men and handing a microphone to a few powerful Hollywood actresses is just barely the beginning of the conversation we actually need to have.

And that conversation is not just about women—it's about people of color, it's about disability and illness, it's about gender nonconforming people and much more. It's important to build coalitions across marginalized identities rather than to push forward the visibility of one group at the expense of others.

I would love to see much more radical change around who is given resources to make work, what voices, stories, and visual forms are onscreen, and how we teach filmmaking in schools, as film schools play a huge role in perpetuating gender disparities in the film industry.

I hope that one day we no longer need women's film blogs, "focus on women" festival sidebars, women's film festivals, screening series, and female filmmaker funding initiatives because women and women's issues will simply have equal representation and support in all of our cultural spaces.

HIGHLIGHTS

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WOMEN

Modern Women Bring Voice To '70s Letters In An Inventive Documentary, Fusing Past With Present

In "Yours In Sisterhood," filmmaker Irene Lusztig unearths letters sent to Ms. magazine during the feminist movement. Many could have been written today.

By Marina Fang

06/18/2018 09:04 am ET | **Updated** Jul 11, 2018

"I think all men are chauvinistic pigs now. I'd like to know what to do about that," a young woman reads into the camera, one of 27 vignettes in "Yours in Sisterhood," an unconventional

and provocative documentary featuring women in the present day reading and discussing letters sent by women in the 1970s to the editors of Ms. magazine.

In developing the project, filmmaker Irene Lusztig read thousands of archived letters to the magazine, founded by feminist icon Gloria Steinem, most of which were unpublished. Then, from 2015 to 2017, she traveled to 32 states and filmed women reading selected letters.

What resulted was a film, which screened at this year's AFI Docs Festival in Washington last week, that inventively fuses the past with the present — and reminds viewers how, in many ways, little has changed for women in America. The letters, which encompass topics such as sexual harassment and assault, and racism and white supremacy, instantaneously bring to mind parallels to the current day.

"Everything that was happening constantly felt like it was in conversation with [the film]," Lusztig said in an interview.

Working on the film during the 2016 election and its aftermath, when issues of gender and race were never far from view, Lusztig said that her approach to the film evolved, as it increasingly took on a new relevance.

She began asking the contemporary women how it felt to read the letters or what they thought of the writers, creating a conversation between past and present.

After one reader in the film, Kathleen, reads a letter from a North Carolina woman who describes being in an interracial relationship and her fears about local Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups, she summarizes a sentiment recurring throughout the documentary.

"It just reminds me that time isn't naturally progressive," she says of the letter. "I think people just assume that as the years go by, things get better and better. And that's just not the case. It's just not the case at all."

Aside from its relevance, the film is also a fascinating experiment in space and performance. In some ways, the concept is simple, with every reader standing in front of the camera, reading the letter from a teleprompter. Yet each letter turns into an intimate snapshot, revealing details about both the writer and the reader. The backdrop — sometimes a town square, or a parking lot, or the front yard of the reader's home — can also take on significance when interpreting the letters.

Occasionally, Lusztig found the letter writers themselves, who poignantly reflect on their younger selves, 40 years later.

When pairing the old letters with present-day readers, Lusztig was interested in what she called "matchmaking." In some cases, she sought specific commonalities, like finding a female police

officer to read a letter from an aspiring police officer in the 1970s, who writes of being told that "we don't hire women."

In other cases, the connections between writer and reader were merely coincidental. Often, they were not hard to find.

For instance, with letters about body image or sexual harassment, "every woman has had that experience, it turns out," Lusztig said. "Almost any woman in the whole world would be able to read and have something to say about it."

> **History isn't static. It's constantly moving and changing and looking different, depending on where you are."**
>
> —Irene Lusztig, director of "Yours In Sisterhood"

In selecting which letters to use in the film, Lusztig said that she strove to capture diversity in race, sexual orientation and geography, trying not to replicate Ms. magazine's mostly white and "New York and California" readership.

"I wanted to make a project about the U.S.," she said. "Through the letters, you really feel the difference between someone in a small town in Nebraska, and it is about what someone's isolation is, or what it means to encounter Ms. in a drugstore, or a pharmacy, or an airport, or a supermarket, when you're not in a community where you have a lot of access to feminist political organizing or activism."

She also chose some letters that represented different ideologies, showing how feminism can take on various forms, and reflecting the public discourse — both then and now — about who feels included in social movements, and who is not.

In the film, a woman at a shooting range in upstate New York defends her gun rights, and a Minnesota woman writes that she is deeply religious and opposes abortion.

"There's more than one way to be a feminist," her letter reads, also emphasizing that she is "not a man-hater."

But the project also captures tension between past and present. Some of the readers point out objections and criticisms to the letters that they are tasked with reading. According to Lusztig,

she sometimes looked for pairings that were not as literal or direct, illustrating "what it feels like to not just listen to, but embody a voice that is different from yours," she said.

"Yours In Sisterhood" will appear at several other film festivals around the country this summer. Lusztig said she also plans to show the film at colleges, and in the next year or two, release an online archive of all of the letter readings.

After filming more than 300 letters, Lusztig painstakingly selected 27 for the final film, which she hopes is representative of the range of letter writers and readers. Yet she still fell short in some ways — for example, she said that she regrets not including more women with disabilities.

"I hope the film is diverse enough that for any viewer, there's at least one or two readers who don't represent their views, or feel challenging to listen to," she said.

In addition to encapsulating the importance of listening to different voices, the film and the unearthing of the letters also personify how the past can be reinterpreted and reconceived in new contexts.

"History isn't static," she said. "It's constantly moving and changing and looking different, depending on where you are."

Marina Fang
Reporter, HuffPost

Suggest a correction

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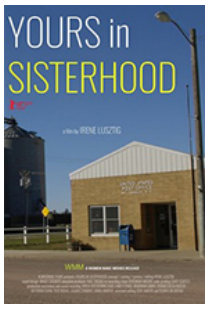
YOURS IN SISTERHOOD

Dear, Ms.

by Christopher Llewellyn Reed June 27, 2018 0



(The 2018 AFI Docs Film Festival ran June 13-17 in Washington D.C. Hammer to Nail lead critic Chris Reed, who also hosts a killer podcast on documentary filmmaking called The Fog of Truth, is at the fest and will be providing his usual excellent reviews and interviews.)

From director Irene Lusztig (The Motherhood Archives) comes a vibrant new documentary, Yours in Sisterhood, about the early days of Ms. Magazine, the pioneering feminist publication founded in 1971 by Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes. Actually, it's about a lot more than that, but takes as its departure point some of the many unpublished letters to the editor written during the magazine's first decade, using them to examine America's fraught relationship to women's rights at that time (when has that relationship not been fraught?). This was the period of second-wave feminism, and Ms. spoke to a lot of women struggling to find their agency as independent individuals. As such, the movie is a powerful exploration of female empowerment in our society, using the past to meditate on our present.

Why the unpublished letters? It's a form of anthropological excavation, revealing a heretofore hidden archive of 40-year-old thoughts, like a time capsule bursting with ancient treasures. And yet, not so ancient: while Lusztig's method mostly consists of having women other than the letter writers – though from the same towns as those writers – read the pieces, in four cases she has tracked down the original authors and asked them to revisit their old opinions. These present-day women are still relatively young, so it reminds us of how recently the creation of a feminist magazine seemed so radical. Then again, given the deeply misogynistic pushback to Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, and the ongoing catharsis of the #MeToo movement, we have definitely not come such a long way (to paraphrase a slogan of the same time period). Perhaps it wasn't radical enough …

I love how Lusztig films her subjects. With a few establishing shots to set the location, she frames the readers, standing or sitting, often center frame in medium shots (give or take), and lets them proceed at their own pace, sometimes confident, sometimes halting. At first she moves quickly from reader to reader, but then, a few scenes in, pauses post-reading to ask a 14-year-old girl what she thinks of the letter. It's hear the movie really comes alive, as each woman cogitates with great deliberation, expressing how the letter does (or doesn't) feel relevant today. Not all letters – and not all readers – come from an expressly feminist point of view, but as a collective whole, by virtue of representing a full array of ideas across a wide spectrum of ideologies, they lend voice to women before now unheard, making the act of speaking a magnificent feminist act, in and of itself.

Though uniquely its own marvelous thing, Yours in Sisterhood recalls, in part, two other documentaries with similar aesthetics and goals. The first is Heddy Honigmann's beautiful 1996 O Amor Natural, in which the director asks ordinary Brazilians (specifically, people in their sixties, seventies and eighties) to read the erotic poetry of their great national laureate Carlos Drummond de Andrade and then talk about their own sex lives. The result is a deeply humanistic celebration of the joy of life (and yes, of sex). The second is Kathlyn Horan's 2016 The If Project, where women in prison take a creative writing class as a way to explore the choices that led them down the wrong path. In both movies, we encounter people all too infrequently ignored, hear their thoughts on the human condition, and learn from them. Like those films, Lusztig's Yours in Sisterhood honors the underrepresented, creating a work of bold, original cinema that is bracing, entertaining and vital.

– Christopher Llewellyn Reed (@ChrisReedFilm)

Explore the Site. **#metoo**, **2018 AFI Docs**, **doc**, **Documentary**, **Dorothy Pitman Hughes**, **feminism**, **Gloria Steinem**, **Heddy Honigmann**, **Hilary Clinton**, **Irene Lusztig**, **Kathlyn Horan**, **Ms. Magazine**, **O Amor Natural**, **The If Project**, **The Motherhood Archives)**, **Yours in Sisterhood**

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She asked me what I was going to be when I grew up and I said, the President. She thought that was a riot.

Irene Lusztig

Near Ms.

In the first interview in *Yours in Sisterhood*, filmed in 2016, a thirteen-year-old in Quincy, Massachusetts, reads a letter written by a thirteen-year-old from her town in 1973, to *Ms.* magazine. In it, the writer describes a bus journey in which she talked to the elderly woman sitting next to her, who can't believe the future that this young woman imagines for herself.

After all, it had only been a year since *Ms.* put out its first full issue, featuring the headline WONDER WOMAN FOR PRESIDENT, and since Shirley Chisholm—the first African American congresswoman—had announced her candidacy for the President of the United States. She didn't succeed, but when Irene Lusztig started shooting

Yours in Sisterhood in 2015, it looked like Hillary Rodham Clinton might. The young reader of the letter says:

"Now there's a woman President. Well, there's a woman President running, and I think she has a chance."

What a near Ms., from the perspective of 2017, as Lusztig is completing the film begun in a moment of hope, researching the archive of unpublished letters held at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, at Radcliffe College. The film bridges the moments of expectation and—with a reading by a woman in an interracial relationship in North Carolina, who tries to contain her emotions while describing a KKK parade that followed the 2016 election—devastation.

The opening interview is poignant as well as bitterly ironic, because its multiple lines of possibility are familiar from another kind of 1970s American feminism: its rich legacy of science fiction. What thus emerges from the film is feminism's commitment—to paraphrase Emily Dickinson—to "dwell[ing] in possibility." A near Ms. gets close, asks us to be open.

It's particularly poignant to be finishing this essay so soon after the death of Sheila Michaels, the campaigner who popularized the honorific "Ms." In 1969, she gave an interview to WBAI Radio, 99.5FM, in New York that caught the ear of Gloria Steinem, searching for a name for her proposed magazine. *Yours in Sisterhood* restores to the letters that which the word Ms. offers: a feminist address, a way of being heard.

Particularly for voices that remain marginalized: a young African American woman who says "I want to be behind the camera, I want to be in the writers' rooms;" an ASL speaker who animates a letter from an "angry but loving lesbian" feeling unrepresented by *Ms*; and a Lakota elder who links colonial-era violence to that faced by the water protectors at Standing Rock.

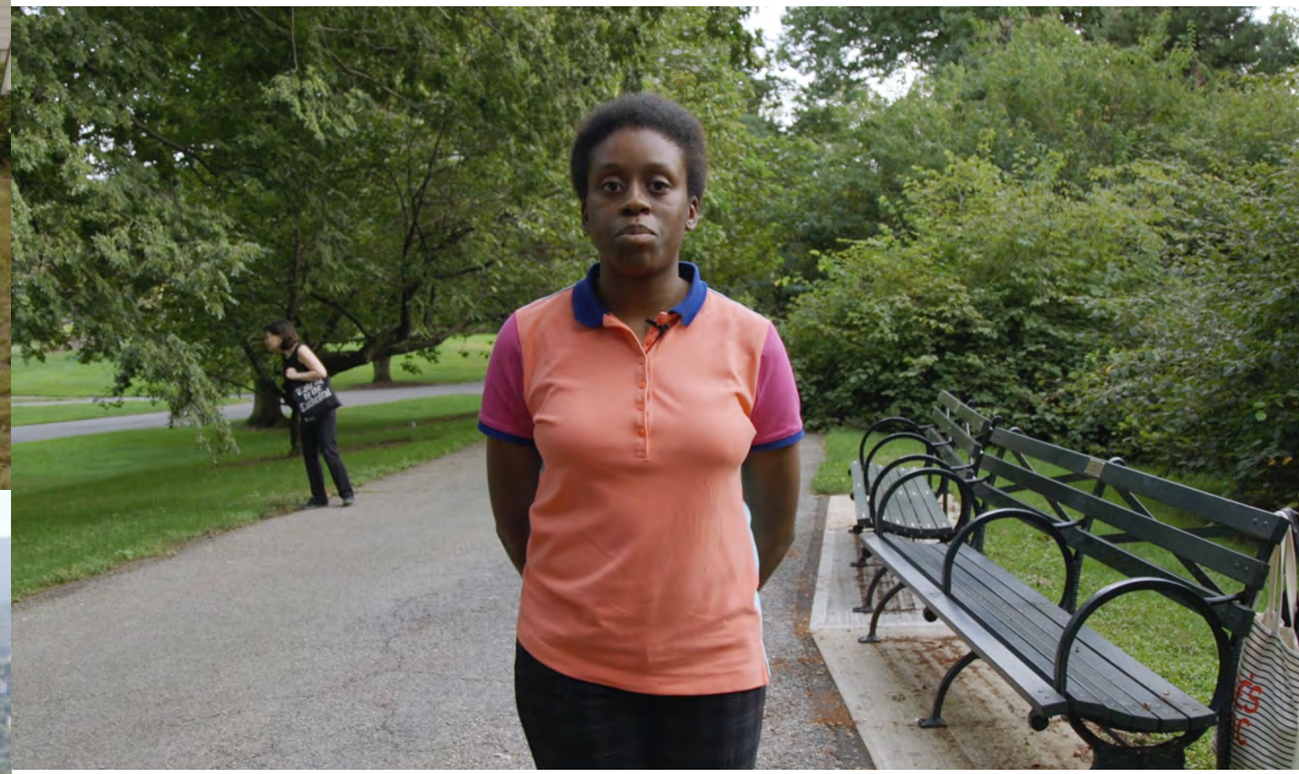
In the gallery, *Yours in Sisterhood* will play on a loop, its form emphasizing this sense of repetitions—not only in the recurrent issues, but also in reappearing bodies. Claudia Stallman, reading her own coming-out letter to *Ms.*, says "I like that the letter is in my own handwriting. I sat down at my desk—I can see where."

The word Ms. is also a work of science fiction in itself: a new word recognizing a new state of being. One letter-writer asks the magazine to support the gender-neutral pronoun they have coined: ahon (a, her/she, him, one). The contemporary reader in Emporia, Kansas—who uses female pronouns but finds that others may not use them for her—looks back to this letter from 1975 and comments, "It's almost eerie."

"A new word," she concludes, "why not? If we can invent bae, why not ahon?" *Yours in Sisterhood* delves into the archive and renews the word, bringing neglected letters into the circulation they sought, and changing their unpublished pasts into public futures where their voices are heard. It uses the letter as a form of time travel, and even teleportation.

This is science fiction of the highest order: moving non-linearly through time and space, beaming us from past to future and back again, transforming bodies into other bodies through quantum connections. A film that could have been a valuable but static time capsule becomes instead a spaceship searching for its own lost futures, to activate them: in the bodies of us, its viewers, whom it also calls (knowing that some of us might prefer ahon, or they, or he; or be pleased with the recognition), to whom it also gives the responsibility of being or becoming, Sister.

Sophie Mayer
Author of *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema*



Pages 46–55, all images from:
***Irene Lusztig,* Yours in Sisterhood,** 2017
Frames from single channel HD video loop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Kaine
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UNITED STATES
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AMANA RECOMMENDS
SARAN WRAP BECAUSE IT
GOES BOTH WAYS.


Do-B's
Burgers · Philly's
& Po Boys
SO GOOD
IT SHOULD BE
ILLEGAL
MPORIA

Yours in Sisterhood: The Film Connecting Feminists Through Vintage Letters to *Ms.*

January 18, 2018 by Carmen Rios | 1 Comment

Inside the boxes, Irene Lusztig found secrets and stories kept safe for forty years. Inside each envelope was the voice of a woman she had never met, yet in their midst she felt solidarity and sisterhood. Nearly a half-century after they were sent, she opened and read thousands of letters sent by readers to *Ms.* during its first decade on newsstands—and discovered, in the process, how interconnected feminists could remain across long stretches of time.

Among the correspondence was a 1973 letter from an angry woman forbidden to wear a pantsuit to work, a 1975 letter from a woman who left her family life behind to find herself and a 1976 letter from a teenager wherein she comes out for the very first time. "Collectively," Lusztig wrote on the film's website, "the letters feel like an encyclopedia of both the 70s and the women's movement–an almost literal invocation of the second-wave feminist slogan 'the personal is political.'"

Lusztig, an award-winning feminist filmmaker, archival researcher and professor, used the mostly-unpublished letters, stored at the Schlesinger Library, to connect over 300 women from across the country to their feminist co-conspirators across generations. The film for which that process gave way, *Yours in Sisterhood,* is a collective portrait of feminism across four decades—built uniquely through time travel and postage stamps.

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For the project, Lusztig took the letters on the road and took them home—traveling for over two years to 32 states with a camera and portable teleprompter to return to the cities where they were written and record a belated response from a feminist stranger. Participants in each city read a letter from their hometown sent nearly a half-century earlier on camera and then engaged in a dialogue with the original sender in a response recorded live.

Lusztig also found five of the original letter writers—women who had the rare opportunity to see correspondence long since surrendered to the postal service decades earlier and in a much different world. In the film, one woman named Yvonne revisits her first-ever letter to *Ms.*, which sparked years of correspondence between her and *Ms.* editor Valerie Monroe. In her initial letter, Yvonne declared her intentions to build a cabin and live mostly alone in the forest. Forty years later, she read that letter on the steps of her cabin.

Forty years later, Lusztig has finally located the feminist communities and counterparts *Ms.* readers sought and fostered in their letters to editors and staff. Four decades after the launch of a magazine that finally gave voice to the women's movement, the stories and struggles of *Ms.* readers are now building bridges between feminist history and the feminist future.

"I've filmed readings with people of all ages, gender identities, shapes, colors and backgrounds on both coasts, in the Midwest, the Rockies and the South, in remote rural areas and major cities," Lusztig wrote to supporters. "Along the way, I've built an incredible network of readers and supporters. Filming these conversations with strangers alongside the election, its aftermath, the #MeToo movement and much more, this project has felt increasingly timely and resonant—the stakes for how we create conversations about feminism right now are higher and more urgent than ever."

Rachel Montpelier Follow
News Editor at Women and Hollywood
Jan 18 · 2 min read

"Yours in Sisterhood" Doc Brings '70s Era Ms. Magazine Letters to Life

"Yours in Sisterhood"

A lot has changed since Ms. magazine launched in 1971—and a lot hasn't. This ironic truth is something Irene Lusztig explores in her performative documentary, "Yours in Sisterhood." The project, the culmination of four years of work, sees contemporary women reading letters written to Ms. during the '70s. And many of Lusztig's modern-day subjects recognize parallels between the letters' contents and their own lives.

"There's always a need for feminism, there's always a need for anti-racist action. But [reading the letters] is really resonant," one woman observes in the project's trailer. "It reminds me that we're kind of moving backwards," another woman says, tearfully.

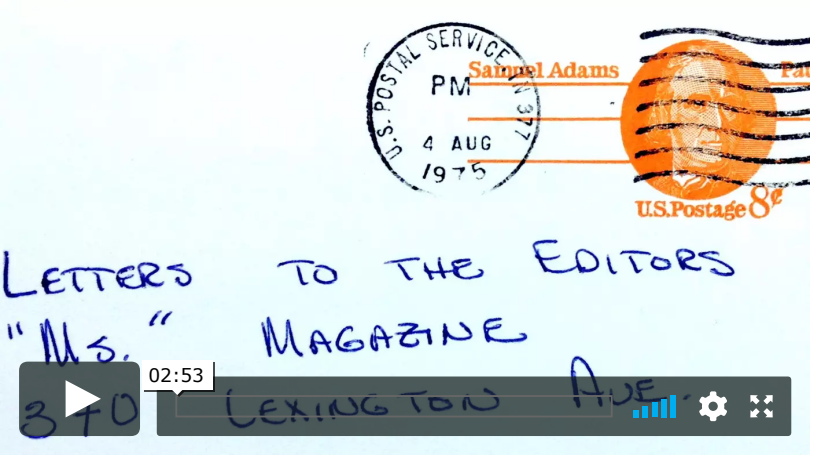
"Each project participant was carefully matched with a '70s letter sent from their own city or town and invited to read aloud and respond to their letter," Lusztig explains on the project's Indiegogo page. "I've filmed readings with people of all ages, gender identities, shapes, colors, and backgrounds." Since wrapping up the interviews, Lusztig has found that "Yours in Sisterhood's" relevance has only grown.

"Filming these conversations with strangers alongside the election, its aftermath, the #MeToo movement, and much more, this project has felt increasingly timely and resonant—the stakes for how we create conversations about feminism right now are higher and more urgent than ever."

Now in post-production, "Yours in Sisterhood" will hopefully make the festival circuit rounds and receive distribution from Women Make Movies. In order to meet these goals, Lusztig and her team launched a crowdfunding campaign this week. Contributions will go towards getting the film festival-ready and other expenses like sound, color correction, and marketing.

Lusztig previously directed the feature length archival film essay "The Motherhood Archives" and the doc "Reconstruction," among other projects. She has also worked as an editor and cinematographer.

Check out the trailer for "Yours in Sisterhood" below. If you're interested in donating to the project, go to its Indiegogo campaign.



DISPATCH

FEMINIST MOVING IMAGE

THE LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL: LSFF PREVIEW
JANUARY 10, 2018

INTERVIEW: IRENE LUSZTIG

Irene Lusztig is feminist filmmaker, archival researcher, and film professor at UC Santa Cruz. For the past four years Lusztig has been working on a feature length film project *Yours in Sisterhood*. The project is based on her research on an archival collection of thousands of (mostly unpublished) letters to the editor sent from readers all over the country to Ms. Magazine in the 70s. The film project brings to the fore questions around how we start conversations about feminism more broadly, and resonates with contemporary movements such as #MeToo. We recently spoke to Lusztig about the importance of archives in feminism and her project *Yours in Sisterhood*.

Jennifer Shearman: How did you get into filmmaking?

Irene Lusztig: I started making films in college in the 90s. I was a painter in high school and early college, so always a visual thinker and hands-on maker. I stumbled into a filmmaking class by accident–I didn't like my drawing and painting teachers in my first year of college and decided to try out something else in the art department and got incredibly lucky with finding an amazing film program. I had never seen experimental, artisanal, or handmade films before and it had never really occurred to me that making a film was a thing a regular person, working on their own without a million dollar budget and a 200 person crew, might do. Nowadays the idea that anyone can can make a film with everyday tools seems quite ordinary, but I remember going to a student screening for the first time, seeing 16mm film projected, and feeling like it was completely magical that someone my age–someone like me–could make something so extraordinary. Once I started taking film classes and watched lots of American avant-garde cinema (Brakhage, Peter Hutton, and many other men!) I quickly realized that there was this whole rich history of intimate, small scale, and single-authored filmmaking, and the idea of a medium that could use images, writing, thinking, observing the world, and scissors all at the same time felt really exciting and like the obvious thing that I wanted to do.

JS: What interests you specifically in archives?

IL: When I was a teenager in the pre-Internet late 80s / early 90s, any process of self-educating about underground cultures involved spending time getting your hands dirty, rummaging, and touching old objects–I spent of lot time when I was younger in vintage clothing and used record shops looking for hidden or forgotten treasures, and I'm kind of a forager by nature. So when I first found myself in an archive it felt immediately exciting and familiar to be in a place full of piles of ephemeral things that hadn't been thought about in a long time and were waiting to be found. There's a sense of possibility and discovery in archival work that has always been really exciting to me–opening a box or a film can and finding a life, a gesture, words, documents, or moments that haven't been considered in a long time. I love spending time with found artifacts and images–not exactly as a historian, but as an artist–with a kind of expansive and open looking where there is lots of freedom to think about what feels moving, uncanny, beautiful, poetic, or urgent.

Thinking about the past is also always a way of thinking about the present political moment. The past is continuously shifting and changing in relation to where we are standing right now when we look at it. So that complicated relationship compels me as well: usually when I am working with archival materials I am thinking about the past, but also working through something about the present.

JS: Why are archives and archival research important to feminism?

IL: A million reasons! One of the enduring problems in feminist history (since the beginning of feminism) is forgetting the work done by previous generations. The whole "waves" model for understanding feminism gets at this issue very directly–with each generation, we reject our mothers' feminism, start all over again, and in the process forget or abandon all the work that our own feminism is indebted to. I work with college students and spend a lot of my time with 20 year olds contemplating this problem: even though many of my students identify as feminists, they've never heard of *Ms.* Magazine or consciousness raising or Carolee Schneemann or the Women's Building in L.A. or Mother Art or a million other historical things that are all incredibly important forebears that have made today's feminism possible. My students don't have to like or agree with the ideologies of all of these things (certainly intersectional feminist conversations about race and gender are in a very different place now than forty years ago), but they should know that this work was done and that they are standing on the shoulders of this work in many ways. I've recently started teaching a feminist filmmaking course, and it's been really interesting to try to think through how to teach 70s feminism to younger feminist students. At the beginning of the course I showed a bunch of 70s documentary work (like *Womanhouse*) and my students hated it–all of them wrote about how the work was essentialist and overly preoccupied with unimportant questions about reproduction and domesticity. One of my former students, who worked on *Yours in Sisterhood* as a research assistant, once told me that she rejected everything 70s (i.e. white and middle class) feminism stands for. I pointed out that the 70s letters to Ms. included letter after letter from women who weren't allowed to wear pants to work or get bank accounts in their own name. If you're wearing pants and have a bank account right now, you can't just reject 70s feminism. You have to do the much messier, more complicated work of acknowledging those histories and building on top of them *and* tearing them down to build new, better, more inclusive feminisms all at the same time. It's hard but really necessary work.

And, of course, at the same time that young feminists reject and forget the work of older feminists, the rest of the world is also continuously erasing the accomplishments and cultural production of feminist makers and thinkers. Feminist work is chronically underfunded, undervalued, inaccessible, marginalized, and relegated to archives. So part of doing feminist cultural work–for me–has always been to do the specific work of finding feminist or women's histories that are buried, forgotten, neglected, or ignored–whether it's my own grandmother (the subject of my first feature *Reconstruction*), a discarded educational film for women (the materials of my last feature *The Motherhood Archives*), or a letter from a queer teen in 1976 that never got published and got filed away in a box.

JS: Can you tell us a little about your upcoming film Yours in Sisterhood?

IL: Four years ago, I spent the summer in the Schlesinger Library (the women's history library at Radcliffe) reading boxes of thousands of mostly-unpublished letters sent to *Ms.* Magazine in the 70s. Written by an incredibly diverse cross section of people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds, the letters are full of moving narratives of divorce, abortion, rape, and discrimination (alongside lighter but equally heartfelt debates on topics like masturbation and what do about female body hair). Collectively, the letters feel like an encyclopedia of both the 70s and the women's movement–an almost literal invocation of the second-wave feminist slogan "the

personal is political." I wanted to know if this rich collective archive of everyday feminist history and experience could be a catalyst for a new kind of national conversation about feminism today. So in 2015 I began traveling around the US with a camera and portable teleprompter, inviting people (mostly but not only women) to be filmed reading and responding to original letters from their own towns. Over two and a half years of traveling, I filmed over 300 people in 32 states reading 70s letters.

The feature film that is premiering soon, *Yours in Sisterhood*, shows 27 of these performative readings and is the first stage of a larger project. The second stage will be an interactive archive of the readings I have collected that will be able to include many more readings than I can fit into a film. The feature film is able to think about things like time, silence, stillness, and duration in ways that are hard to do on the web; but it can only represent a small number of the voices in the project, so it has been important to me all along to imagine this project as both a film and a capacious archive.

JS: What does the reperformance of these letters bring to the table?

IL: I think that's a complicated question and not the same answer for each performer and each letter in the project. My hope is that the reperformance does some of the work I talked about earlier of engaging with history, empathizing with history, conversing intimately with history. I thought a lot about casting as a critical space in the project–so the letter-readings are not only about the performance, but also about a very careful process of pairing up individual strangers today with strangers 40 years ago… sort of like time travel pen pals. I think when readers engage with their letters something profound can happen in the process of doing that sort of embodied listening across time–the process of literally putting someone else's words in their body and then considering carefully what that feels like.

Many of the people who did readings for the project were really moved by their letters and identified strongly with what they read. The most common response people had to reading was that things really haven't changed or improved (for women, people of color, LGBTQ people, etc) over the past forty years. But some people disagreed with their letters and even had complicated arguments with the letter-writer they were paired with– I think that space for negotiation and conflict is as important to the project as making a space of empathy.

I've also thought deeply about diversity and intersectionality throughout the making of this project, and it has been important to me to make sure my project reflects a very diverse range of current-day voices about feminism. Most of the letters that I selected for the project were never published, which means that the project creates an opportunity to give voice to many kinds of letters that didn't get a voice in the 70s, including letters from transgendered and gender-nonconforming readers, readers of color, working class readers, disabled readers, and other communities that may have felt marginalized by mainstream 70s feminism. So in that sense the reperformance can create an alternative or new history of 70s conversation that maybe wasn't really heard at the time.

JS: And finally, why do you think we need a feminist conversation now more than ever?

IL: What was most striking during my archival research is that the issues covered by these letters are still the same big issues that we are facing today–sexual harassment, violence, and assault, access to abortion and birth control, body image, workplace discrimination, gender and sexuality, race, class, and inclusivity. So, obviously feminist work is far from done and feminist conversation is still incredibly necessary.

I should also say that when I started thinking about these questions four years ago it was well before the 2016 US election, the Women's March, the #metoo movement, and all of the many huge public conversations about feminism that are happening right now. When I started the project it definitely felt like public feminism had become quite invisible. Now, obviously, that has shifted a lot.

One of my starting points for the project was a lot of thinking about public feminism and feminist conversation–what did that look like in the 70s, at a moment in the US where everyone who had anything to say about feminism was writing to a single national magazine to try to have a big, messy, complicated conversation about feminism? And what does it look like now, at a moment where feminist conversation feels much more fragmented and more often takes place online in small echo chambers of like-minded people? What is the difference between having a conversation in a consciousness raising group with your neighbors vs. having a conversation online in the comments section of a newspaper or on Twitter (where your comments are weirdly extremely ephemeral and extremely permanent at the same time)? When I started the project I was really trying to think through the relationships between the kinds of spaces we make for conversation and listening, and the kind of visibility and power that feminist movements have in the world. I was

really curious to find out what would happen if I tried to restage a 70s conversation in the present–what might it bring up or do differently from our usual ways of talking to each other? I was also really compelled–in reading the archival letters–by the sense that people in the 70s were attempting to speak to each other across vast ideological, geographical, and identity differences. Because there were fewer big national spaces where a conversation about feminism could happen, people were trying much harder to speak across significant divides. I found letters from conservative and Christian *Ms.* readers who were really trying to parse which aspects of mainstream feminism did and did not speak to them… and letters from readers of color and gender-nonconforming readers who were also trying to do the same thing. I think the ethics of listening–and specifically of listening across difference–is a very central idea of the project for me.

Yours in Sisterhood will premier at the Berlinale next month. To help support the film and bring it to screens globally donate here: https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/yours-in-sisterhood-history-feminism#/

INTERVIEW: IRENE LUSZTIG

JANUARY 21, 2018

THE LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL: LSFF PREVIEW

JANUARY 10, 2018

CONTACT: INFO@DISPATCHFMI.CO.UK

LONDON - EDINBURGH

Wrong On All Counts: One Woman's Reflections on Her 1976 Coming Out Letter to *Ms.*

January 30, 2018 by Francesca Enzler | Leave a Comment

In 1976, Claudia Stallman wrote a letter to *Ms.* detailing her revelation about being a lesbian. 40 years later, Stallman, now the project director for the Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project at Binghamton University, once more held her letter in her hands—and read it out loud.

"I am a 16-year-old high school senior engaged in what I will call an important self-discovery period," Stallman wrote to *Ms.* "Right now, it seems more than likely that I will lead the life of a lesbian. I am sure that I have not come to grips with the socially-imposed hardship which will be involved in existing in such a lifestyle—if indeed I should end up doing so. At this point, I have a somewhat idealistic attitude towards my warmth for women and towards the prospect of a gay life for myself. However, in light of the volatile nature of the whole subject of homosexuality, I am forced to swallow some of my idealism and to submit to some of society's oppression in order to protect myself."

Stallman's is one of many letters to *Ms.* in its first decade in print—and stories within them—that serve as the basis for Irene Lusztig's film *Yours in Sisterhood*, but she is only one of a handful of original letter writers who appear in the film reading their own words from decades before. Francesca Enzler, fundraising coordinator for *Yours in Sisterhood*, talked to Stallman about her letter—and how much has changed in the years since she first came out to *Ms.*

I was thinking we could start off the interview with some general information about who you are.

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I am wife of Christine. Daughter of Danny and Ada. "Ima"—Hebrew for mom—of son Ben, age 21, and daughter Noemi, 12. I live in upstate New York and work as project director for the Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project/Pride and Joy Families, a small non-profit housed at Binghamton University and funded by the New York state Department of Health. Since 2000, we have been providing programs and services to LGBTQ families in upstate New York.

I love my work and I love my family.

How did you hear about *Yours in Sisterhood?* How did you get involved?

Irene emailed me, introduced herself and informed me that in her research she had discovered two letters I had written to Ms. magazine back in 1976. It was a bolt out of the blue for me. She asked if I was willing to be included in the project. And of course I said "yes!"

Oh yes, your letter is one of a few where Irene got in touch with their original writer! What was it like to read your 16-year-old words 40 years later?

Seeing my letter—and my 16-year-old handwriting!—was very moving for me. Touching and emotional. A glimpse into that time in my life when I was figuring out that I was a lesbian. Essential information that explained so much about me.

Reading the letter transported me back to my desk in my bedroom in Queens. I remembered the favorite pen I used. I remembered that my bedspread was yellow. I remembered that it was scary and wonderful.

I love that you have such a vivid memory of the space, both physical and emotional, where you wrote the letter! Why did you choose to send this letter to *Ms.*? What meaning did or does it hold for you?

I was learning very important information about myself. At the same time I knew it could be dangerous. I had to be very careful about who I revealed it to. Only a couple close friends. Not my parents for sure. (I did not come out to my mother for another year plus.)

Hiding was hard. Maybe I figured that the folks—women! feminists!—who read my letter at Ms. would find it, and me, acceptable. Grown-ups who would read and listen and hear me. I knew for sure that Ms. was a safe audience and would respect my wanting my name withheld from publication.

So *Ms.* felt like a safe space for you to express yourself?

Yes. Absolutely. A safe space—women, gay and straight, I imagined, making room in the world for girls and young women like me.

In your letter you express both warmth and idealism for your prospective life and also a feeling of needing to hide, not being able to reveal yourself. Now that you've lived many years of that prospective life, how were things different from what you expected then? Was anything the same?

When I came out as a lesbian at the age of 16, I knew these things for sure: that I could never tell my parents or be found acceptable to them, that I would never be in a long

> *term relationship—and definitely not married—and that I would certainly never become a parent myself. I was wrong on all counts, happily. I have my community and our allies to thank for that.*

Looking ahead another 40 years, do you have a sense of what may change for you? For our society? (Or what you hope will change?)

> *The future is definitely feminist!*

Click here to support Yours in Sisterhood ***and help cover costs of production. Donations will be accepted through the month.***

Francesca Enzler *is a filmmaker, writer and seamstress splitting her time between California and Vermont. Her work lives online at memorycarefilms.com. She is currently the fundraising coordinator for* Yours in Sisterhood, *learning Japanese and preparing to grow a garden.*

agnès films supporting women and feminist filmmakers

Interview with Irene Lusztig, Director of *Yours in Sisterhood*

January 31, 2018 Cheyenne Nutlouis Interviews with Women Filmmakers

Interview by Shewonda Leger

Copy editing and posting by Cheyenne Nutlouis

Irene Lusztig, Director of *Yours in Sisterhood*

In your documentary *Yours in Sisterhood,* you ask women to perform letters that were written to *Ms. Magazine* in the 1970s. How did you come across those letters, and, as you read through them, when did you know that this

documentary would be the right project to carry on the work of *Ms. Magazine*?

The letters used in my project are all from the "Ms. Letters, 1972-80" collection in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe. There are some other collections of letters to *Ms.*, including some that were donated later to Smith College, but this is the first big collection that *Ms.* donated to a library in the 80s. I had spent time doing research at the Schlesinger while working on my previous film *The Motherhood Archives*. So I knew about this collection at the library, and I had a feeling that these boxes of letters would be interesting. I had already been thinking for some time (and across a number of projects) about the idea of feminist conversation, and I'm always interested in history and archives, so the letters seemed like they would be up my alley. I spent about a month in the summer of 2014 reading letters every day. The letters are completely amazing, and I was struck immediately by the uncanny resonance of '70s language that described incredibly contemporary problems and issues. I knew right away that I wanted to make a project with people reading the letters aloud.

The project definitely evolved a lot over time and through trying different things. It became a lot bigger and more interesting than I expected as I traveled to more places and as my network of project volunteers grew to the point where I was mostly meeting complete strangers, instead of the friends of friends who were my earliest readers. I don't think I had a sense of the full scope of the project at all when I got started. Actually, I thought it might be a quick, short project that I filmed in New York or some other big city over a few days. But the more I filmed, the more interested I felt in the connections that seemed to be coming up as I paired strangers today with strangers from the past, and the more I invested I became in filming all over the country.

Behind the scenes in Madison, Wisconsin.

I'm not sure I necessarily think I'm carrying on the work of *Ms. Magazine*. I guess, in a sense, by making a space for a certain kind of big, loose, geographically expansive conversation I am doing something similar to what *Ms.* did in the '70s–certainly, *Ms.* was a hub for all kinds of feminist discussions. And I definitely felt a kind of energy around '70s feminism from my immersive time in the archive: I felt really curious to know whether bringing the letters out of the archive to share them with other people might be a way of recapturing that energy. But I don't think my work is just celebratory of *Ms.* or nostalgic about the '70s. I also thought really hard about how to intervene, open up, or expand on our historical narratives about the '70s–and I thought a lot about who is part of the feminist conversation we should be having right now.

The women who perform the letters are current residents of the same places the original letters were written from. As you read the letters, you probably imagined voices, faces, and bodies to help bring life to them to life in your mind. From what you imagined, how did you decide who would perform which letter?

Over a few years of presenting this project as a work-in-progress, I've developed a term, "critical casting," for the way I approached pairing up strangers today with strangers from forty years ago. My method of making pairings was incredibly complicated: I thought carefully about each and every letter, and in many ways, the casting process was the most significant intellectual labor of the project.

Many of the readers are people who saw my project on social media and volunteered by filling in a short online survey (that I revised, rewrote, and refined many times over the first few months of the project). People often ended up sharing really personal things about themselves when they filled in the survey, and reading all of this writing by strangers was very moving in itself. Sometimes something would spark for me in reading the survey responses and I would get intuitions about interesting ways to match people up with letters. In some cases, the match was based on noticing something in common with an original letter-writer—like someone who wrote in the survey about struggling with body image and weight could be a good reader for a letter about body image from the archive. But other times I was interested in using casting to interrogate, contradict, or expand on something about the original letter. For instance, I invited Cai, a Deaf and transgender reader to perform a '70s letter written by a lesbian who felt excluded and under-represented by *Ms.* For that letter I was interested in the idea of feeling marginalized or excluded rather than a more literal casting idea—a lesbian woman today might feel like there is a lot more mainstream representation for queer women than there used to be, but I thought Cai might have something more interesting to say about whether he feels well-represented by mainstream media.

In addition to using social media and the survey, I also did a ton of additional outreach. The people who signed up for my project overwhelmingly self-identified as white and educated (and many were old enough to remember *Ms.*)—which makes total sense in terms of mapping onto a demographic that would naturally gravitate towards a project about '70s feminism and *Ms.* So for many of the shooting trips I worked hard to find additional readers to make sure I was including people of color, younger readers, and socioeconomically diverse readers. And sometimes I was looking for a very specific kind of reader—a female firefighter in Portsmouth NH to reflect on a '70s letter from a female firefighter, for instance, or a reader in a very small town. So for the letters, I also had to do local research and outreach to find people. Sometimes I spent a really long time

working on a single reader if the letter felt important enough. For example, finding the formerly incarcerated reader who reads the prison letter from the '70s that ends the film was a process that took a few months.

So, my short explanation of how I chose readers is that it happened somewhere at the intersection of social media, project magic, and relentless detective work!

Production still from *Yours in Sisterhood*, featuring Eileen.

What personal experiences have influenced the way you describe sisterhood? And, how are you a sister to those who need one in the current social and political climate?

That's an interesting question! I do have a younger sister, so I have literally been a sister for most of my life. But, more than sisterhood, I've actually done a lot of thinking, writing, and speaking about feminism in the context of motherhood: while I've always been a feminist, the experience of becoming a mother and making creative work about maternity definitely put a lot of my ideas about feminism into sharp focus. So, in thinking about this project as a kind of next step after a long period of creative work that centers maternal subjects, I've often framed this project as a move from thinking about embodied maternity to thinking about broader, less biologically determined ways of thinking about an ethics of maternal care. A lot of the values that are central to the method I developed for *Yours in Sisterhood* (thinking about care labor, empathy, listening carefully, and making space for other people to speak) are values that I personally came to through the experience of mothering. But sisterhood is also a great framework for thinking about a project that is making connections across time, space, and different communities of people. Many of the '70s letter-writers signed their letters "in sisterhood," and that phrase is a lovely way to think about feminist solidarity. I guess perhaps my project takes up that '70s ideas of sisterhood but tries to think more expansively (and less biologically) about who gets to be a sister!

Filming in St. Louis, Missouri.

You are currently running a fundraising campaign for *Yours in Sisterhood*. What will the campaign cover? How will it allow you to complete the film?

The film will have its premiere screening next month at the Berlinale—it's an incredible opportunity for the work to get significant international visibility and a true surprise to be selected! (With my last film *The Motherhood Archives* I heard again and again from programmers that feminism is a "niche" topic and not interesting to a general film festival audience. I hope this is a sign that programmers are rethinking some of these assumptions). So, that's been amazing news, but it has also meant that I have had to hugely accelerate my finishing schedule. Until now I've been able to work with a really tiny budget by doing everything (shooting, editing, research, producing) myself in a really DIY way, and by hiring my former students to help me out. But right at the end of a film things get really expensive—there's a sound mix, color grading, making a festival master and tons of other big expenses and things I can't do myself. It's been very intense to try to fundraise and finish the film at the same time, but I need this last piece of funding to get the film festival-ready.

How would you start your own letter if you were to write one today?

That feels like a hard question because it's been years since I last sat down and wrote a proper letter–letter-writing used to be a big part of my life through the end of college, which overlapped with the beginning of email. It's hard to fit that kind of slow, meditative practice into my life right now, and I miss it a lot. I think own letter-nostalgia is definitely part of this project—seeing all the different handwriting, typewriters, '70s

stationery, aerograms, and things that people crossed out and rewrote in the archive was very moving to me. I definitely want people who watch the film to think about the meaning of writing a letter and to think about their own relationship to letter-writing. I think the ways that we express ourselves to a public have changed so much in forty years. Most of our public discourse now takes place online, where it feels like everyone is yelling about their opinions, and not spending much time picking out stationery or carefully considering how to say things—so I guess maybe nowadays I find myself more interested in talking to people in person, one on one rather than trying to address a public the way the writers of those '70s letters hoped to do.

Shooting in Oxford, Ohio.

All of the letters are performed outside. What was the significance of choosing to do it that way instead of in their homes or places of work?

First of all, it felt really important to place the readings in public spaces. The letter to the editor is a form of civic engagement and public discourse (as opposed to a diary entry or a letter to a friend), so I was interested in thinking about visual spaces that might be in conversation with that idea of public address. I think my use of the teleprompter for the readings maybe works in a similar way–it's a technology that we see most often in a broadcast or public address context, and I like the idea of inviting regular people to read off a prompter, it feels a little stagey and awkward, and I think that technology also does something interesting with the idea of public voice.

Also, geography is central to my project. The letters in the archive contain an incredibly expansive sense of US geography, and a letter from a farming woman in Nebraska feels completely different from a letter from a *Ms.* reader in the Bronx. The idea of filming all over the US came out of the letters themselves and the way that regional difference (and different levels of access to feminist media in different places) feels profoundly important across the collection. So filming outside was also a way of thinking about place and framing people inside of visually distinct regional landscapes: New Orleans looks different from Coastal Maine. But, at the same time, many of us in the US live in pretty anonymous and visually indistinct suburban environments. Lots of readers wanted to meet at their local park, and all the parks looked the same, down to the playground structures. Filming outside is a way of making visual space to think about both what is different and what is the same all over the US.

Still from *Yours in Sisterhood*, featuring Yvonne.

You mention that *Yours In Sisterhood* is a performative, participatory documentary project. For those who are unfamiliar with that documentary genre, would you be able to explain the genre and why you choose it for the film?

I'm not so attached to those terms as genre-defining categories—in fact, if anything, I am interested in working across genres and without categories. Many of my favorite films are hybrid in their approach and hard to pin down—maybe they are documentaries that use performance, or narrative films that use non-actors, improvisation, and documentary methods, or essay films, or archival films, or films that mix all of the above together in new and thoughtful ways. So, I guess my own use of these terms is less about staking out a specific genre space and more to signal to other people (funders, programmers, or people who haven't seen a lot of formally expansive art cinema) that I'm doing something a little bit different from a mainstream documen
There are lots of other examples of films that play with similar ideas—recent films like *The Act of Killing* and *The Arbor* are amazing examples of documentaries that use performative methods, and I am also influenced by Peter

Watkins' work with historical re-enactment and the reflexive participatory interview methods used in *Chronicle of a Summer* (even though I feel weird praising *Chronicle of a Summer* after reading the recent #MeToo exposé of Jean Rouch!).

At the same time, I think that ideas about performance and participation are part of all documentary work—everyone performs some version of themselves when a camera is brought out, and most people in a documentary are active participants whose onscreen appearance has been negotiated in some way. So I don't think of performance and participation as unusual attributes, but maybe I am differently foregrounding these things that are always inherent to documentary. It also feels like a more consensual way of working with film subjects when you are filming someone who has volunteered as a performer—I like that.

Filming wind turbines in Iowa.

How do you see *Yours in Sisterhood* creating space for audiences to reassess the status of public feminism today?

The issues covered by these letters haven't changed very much–we are still struggling with sexual harassment, violence, and assault, access to abortion and birth control, body image, workplace discrimination, gender and sexuality, race, class, and inclusivity. Feminism is still incredibly necessary. But when I started thinking about these questions four years ago, before the election, the Women's March, the #metoo movement, and all of the very public conversations about feminism that are happening right now, it felt like public feminism had be[illegible] quite invisible. Recently that has been shifting, and it's exciting to be finishing this project at a moment wh[illegible]

many people are talking about feminism. I hope this project can be part of the broader conversation that is happening right now about how much we still need feminism.

So far, this film has allowed you to work with a diverse group of women and children. What do you enjoy the most about working with such a group and what have you learned from them?
I have learned so much from talking to people all over the US—I never would have had an excuse to talk to a factory worker in West Virginia, a former sex worker in Long Beach, a farmer in Iowa, a female magician in NYC, an American Indian activist in South Dakota, or a recent Miss Minnesota, to name just a few of the interesting people I've gotten to spend time with over the past couple of years. The longer I worked on the project, the more I pushed myself to seek out people I might never encounter in my everyday life. And that process made me think really hard about how narrow and homogenous our self-selected social environments tend to be. Even though social media makes it possible to interact with anyone anywhere, it ironically seems to reinforce that narrowness.

It's hard to begin to summarize everything I've learned, but maybe the short version is about how important it is to listen to many different kinds of people. This is definitely something we've all been talking about more since the 2016 election. It's actually unusual to get a real opportunity to listen to people from so many kinds of communities, places, and backgrounds. I feel incredibly grateful to all the people who have talked to me about their lives!

Behind the scenes of filming in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

You have worked for close to three years on this film and now it's an official selection of the Berlin Film Fe
That must be an amazing feeling. What advice do you have for artists launching on their own feminist projects?

Actually, it's been almost four years! I'm also a teacher and I take mentoring young filmmakers really seriously, so these are questions I think about a lot. I think the biggest advice I give to younger/newer filmmakers is to try to maintain a sense of self-belief. When you are starting out (and especially when you are not a white man), the world really does not make space for you to be an artist or creative person, so all the work of taking your own ambitions and ideas seriously is on you. And that work can be exhausting, discouraging, and hard to keep up over time–it's a continuous act of imagination to wake up every morning and tell yourself that you are making important creative work that matters. But it's what you have to do to get work made. So it's crucial to figure out what helps you sustain that sense of self-belief—whether it's surrounding yourself with peers who are also ambitious and take your ambitions seriously, or finding good mentors, or having feminist role models.

To donate to Irene's fundraising go here, or to learn more about the *Yours in Sisterhood* project go here or visit its Facebook! To find out more about Irene, you can visit her website.

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