it’s about time:  
film time, living in time, viewing time, the times we live in, time passing,  
time & the end of irony, “because irony is no good at this time.”  
— Joyce Wieland

The timeframe for the film works on Volume 2, 1967-69, is within a period of incredibly rich production of artwork for Wieland, and falls within the time (1962-71) that she was living in New York with her artist husband Michael Snow.

In 1971 she returned to Canada and mounted a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada, True Patriot Love. In the show’s catalogue, she comments on the end of irony in her work, along with the desire to return to Canada. New directions were appearing in her work, including the movement into feature film (The Far Shore), performance and performative elements, and multi-faceted installations of her visual art exhibitions. Her artwork continued to be characterized by her ability to do many things, not just one thing; not just one focus, not just one medium, but many. This strategy, a kind of détournement, created a new trajectory —confounding, complex, humourous, and entirely serious:

I don’t think there’s that much irony in my work now as there was in the past... because irony is no good at this time... too frivolous... To do the work that I want to do, I have to be in Canada (Theberge n. pag.).

Within her art practice, Joyce Wieland made: films; perfume; prints; performances; paintings; quilts; drawings; sculptural assemblages (including cake as a material as well as fabric, wood, plastic); and a catalogue that was an artist’s book. Within her films, she created a nuanced language that makes a commentary on the world we live in, worldly matters, within a filmic articulation where the form and the material of the work become matter: formal concerns, material matters, sight and sound shaped as brush-strokes through her editing and camerawork. She extends her concern outward, centred in the domestic, but with “home” moving out to the world at large, within an intimate take, a close-up, for the viewer, imbued with an abundance of sentiments and absence of sentimentality.

With this breadth of work—an enormous embrace of what matters, to her, and to us as viewers—she constructs a point of view without being didactic. She treats film time as sculpturally shaped moments, coming out of the real but lifted, cut, revolved, punctuated so that the viewer follows, is surprised, is taken along with her process of being and thinking, seeing and hearing. Speaking of her intentions in making artwork, she says, “There should not have to be sensual deprivation. There should always be a giving to the senses and the enrichment of the soul. Most political works are very puritanical, very angry... it’s a way to tell the truth
but it’s also a way to open vision, how to see. It’s not just jamming down a message” (Field 6).

The six films in this volume—*Sailboat* (1967), *Cat Food* (1967), *1933* (1967), *Handtinting* (1967-68), *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), and *Dripping Water* (with Michael Snow, 1969)—give a glimmer of the range of Joyce Wieland’s work in film, along with her other preoccupations as an artist that embed themselves in her film work:

- Her humour (wry in *Cat Food*, cheeky and sharp-witted in the allegory *Rat Life and Diet in North America*);
- Her attention to women’s crafts (the use of printing and dying processes, along with the choice of sewing needles to punch holes in the film stock of *Handtinting*, and the use of embroidery in the LISTEN text panel in *Rat Life and Diet in North America*);
- Her sense of materials, the surface of the film itself, along with the plainness of the recording, pointing our attention as viewers to the passage of time (*Cat Food, 1933, Dripping Water*);
- Her play across painting and film animation, cross-referencing animation in the painting, the painting in the film (*Sailboat*);
- Her play of the senses, the filmic eye and ear brought together with the sense of touch, into an embodied cinema. For example: the use of the cut to draw the viewers’ attention to the missing soundtrack in *Handtinting*; in *1933*, the use of apparent silence as the sound and sight of the white film leader moving through a projector, between takes, punctuate the frenetically paced image-track and soundtrack of Wieland on mouth organ and piano; the appropriation of the pop song in *Rat Life and Diet in North America* to invoke within this fable the freedom, danger and confusion of the time (in particular, the anti-Vietnam war protests in the United States and Canada, along with combined student and worker protests in 1968 in the United States, Canada, Mexico and France);
- Her work as a cinematographer, with small, personal and hand-made films (although later she would make a longer work, *Reason Over Passion*, and a feature film, *The Far Shore*).

During the making of these six films, Wieland lived in New York with her husband, artist Michael Snow, where these films were shot. Some include references to the exterior (Chambers Street above their studio for *1933*), the harbour (*Sailboat*), the studio (the kitchen sink for *Dripping Water* and *Rat Life and Diet in North America*), and the kitchen table that was very much her studio (*Cat Food, Rat Life and Diet in North America*). In interviews taking place in 1979-80 with film critic Lauren Rabinovitz, she speaks about this New York of cold-water flats: “We found a loft on Greenwich Street—way, way down. The loft was really ancient, and we just used a coal stove. The windows were broken, and we were freezing to death that winter” (Rabinovitz 8). Her kitchen table was her studio: “The kitchen table has been the core of all my art since I was a child… The table was in… *Rat Life and Diet in North America*, and it continues to be in my films…. It is like a kind of altar—the housewife’s—which always has flowers on it…. I was trying to make a point about the housewife art and wife art and women’s art” (Frampton & Wieland 172).
Viewed through the passage of time, Wieland’s art practice continues to be contemporary, extending from filmmaking, painting, drawing and printmaking to soft sculpture with a wide-range of materials and forms (which was decades ago viewed not as art but as part of the domestic or craft realm). In addition to paint, wood, plastic and fabric as materials, she constructed quilts as paintings, and used embroidery as a medium, cake as sculptural material, and perfume as a form. She used sewing needles and fabric dyes with the film Handtinting, for instance. She brought collaboration into her work, whether it was with craftspeople, a chef, technicians or other artists. Her live performances brought forth her passion for re-making the larger narratives of Canada; one performance, as historical figure Laura Secord, played off the (then and prior) tensions in American-Canadian political relations. Her political actions included participation with her artist colleagues in the Canadian Artists’ Representation (CAR) collective and with the larger community addressing the James Bay Hydro project in solidarity with the Aboriginal peoples. Her catalogue for her exhibition at the National Gallery became an artist book, the work an overlay of a series of layers: drawings and collage from the exhibition True Patriot Love melding with the appropriated Federal government bulletin, Illustrated Flora and Fauna of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago; the catalogue, in turn, became the working process and notes towards the feature film, The Far Shore (which had the earlier working title True Patriot Love).

Speaking about her work, Wieland expressed her sense of the body—a link of the eye, what is seen, is embraced, a join of the processes of observing, feeling and thinking, towards a proprioceptive language she was developing as an artist: “The need to see the country in its entirety was through love, through loving it, wanting to hold it in your arms. It’s like making it well, holding it together... And so I embrace it. I think it’s more like an embrace, that you take it all in through your eyes” (Field 7). Her visual art work, characterized by a movement across media, extends from the observing “I” to that which is outside the self, with an intimacy and tenderness, a concern she names “love.” In her films, the sense of sight plays off and with the sense of hearing; her practice combined the sense of touch, the embodied gesture, with the movement of the eye, the ear, and the hand, brought together with the senses and sensual processing of the heart and the head through the technology of the camera, film and editing equipment. Hollis Frampton, a filmmaker and artist with whom Wieland collaborated, spoke of “the jumpy kind of articulation that Rat Life and Diet has—its sense of being joined, of being built up out of pieces” (Frampton 164). Her filmic portraits give an intimate sense of place, with a love and appreciation of the local, the hand-made, the homemade. The home space, intimately conveyed with her way of looking and listening, was attuned as well to the larger picture: a portrait of a country and its people. Her gestures work towards a political vision, extending beyond the people of a place, to the land, the animals: the cake with a dead polar bear (Arctic Passion Cake, 1971); the beaver sculpture suckling Canada (The Spirit of Canada Suckles the French and English Beavers, 1970); the rats (played by her pet gerbils) and the cats in the films Rat Life and Diet in North America and Cat Food; and the water (The Water Quilt, 1970-71).

Her art works become a proposal for another way of being, for being at the heart of what matters. Poet Daphne Marlatt writes eloquently about language as matter,
about perceiving through the body, proprioceptively:

What matters? What is the matter? Or what is the matter with you? .., It took me a while to junk the last two words & arrive at the necessity of asking the first. & so to be present, to a place I could take on as home (with the response-abilities that implies), in a language I share with others—engaged, as definitive, and as quick, as the bodies we touch each other in. of such matters, a celebration, that we are here, together, at all (Marlatt preface).

The introduction of “love” for Wieland does not negate the intellectual rigour and material concern of her work; she was always researching, both materials as well as histories: art, politics, the economy, food. With Wieland’s death, I had a sense of loss—and an appreciation of both how much knowledge she had accumulated over a lifetime, and how a person contains worlds, is a living “archive”—so that when they are gone, what remains are the traces; in her case, an extensive body of artworks, but no longer that sense of possibility of being, together—in conversation, in process, questions answered.

Her films range from an emphasis on work that appears to function primarily in terms of its material concern, an absence of “narrative” or story and, instead, an attentiveness and a pointed direction to the passage of time (Dripping Water, 1933, Sailboat) to portraits with implied telling, an accounting built through the attention to detail in time passing, resisting plot, but playing with time. In the film portraits conveyed in Cat Food, Handtinting and Rat Life and Diet in North America there is a build of narrative, along with the refusal of conventional story (by rupturing and puncturing the material of the film itself in Handtinting, to the use of the cut as a brushstroke to draw our attention back to her visceral treatment of the film material in Rat Life and Diet in North America) and the appearance and disappearance of sound.

Speaking of the making of Rat Life and Diet, she indicates: “[the gerbils] were haunted little characters, little prisoners, little victims no matter how nicely they were treated, they were wild creatures and after photographing them for several months, I started to see what the film was about: their escape to freedom” (Field 6). Her collaborative practice came from her observation of the domestic space, and the portraits of animals through this observation determined the arc of the story. In Rat Life and Diet, the gerbils were the actors, along with the cats. Her observing eye, and hand (with its many tiny cuts), give us the mythology of our larger world, “our home and native land”—the signs of Canada in the anthem “O Canada,” and the flag, from the small sense of home to the larger, both spaces contained and comforted, and finally, threatened. The film ends badly; Canada is invaded.

Her portraits too range from the immediacy of the home to the vastness of nation —portraits of “a cat or of Canada” [Conversation, Sujir & Wieland, 1987]. The portrait of her cat, Dwight, in Cat Food, filmed at the time of the Vietnam war while Wieland was living in New York, is reminiscent of Chardin’s still-life paintings in which the domestic scene is conveyed with simplicity and directness. In Cat Food,
though, Wieland shows us a moving domestic scene with a difference: what is outside of the American home scene, the war, is brought home—one species is eating another. The subject here is consumption: eating and being eaten. Wieland’s camera eye doesn’t look away, but continues to record the eating that is unrelenting. The cuts in time through the continuous eating give us a ferociously delicate look at the everyday counterpointed with the sensuous lolling of the cat, while the eating gives way to a white tablecloth, blood-stained. In the soundtrack, the roar of the ocean gives reference to another home (for the fish), the sea, curiously displacing the image of cat, fish and tablecloth.

Her vision of Canada can be seen through the various works she made, including *Rat Life and Diet in North America*, which she completed before she returned from almost a decade of living in New York. Speaking of her search for the larger narrative of Canada, she connects the filmic work and her visual art work: “It’s the same search that occurred in the National Gallery show [True Patriot Love, 1971], which was for the icons, the things we recognize together like the beaver, flags. Very much like A...B...C... A collection of images that connect us, that we recognize, that we feel we belong to. All during my period of growing up those symbols were very important and they have got less so. But I decided that they were important. People were laughing at the flag, and I kind of laughed at it too, but then twenty years later I think: that flag looks great” (Field 7). She translates those passions into gestures, textures of particular mixes of sound and moving image, startling overlays of text or, in *Rat Life and Diet*, the red cross-hairs that appear to be seen through a gun—its sights. For her, “true patriot love” means serving the country and its people, not with national defense but with “love.”

This shift in focus away from pure structuralism (a term later used to define, primarily, the films made by men working alongside her in Jonas Mekas’ Anthology Film Archives collection) had consequences for her art career. She also felt that once she made bigger (that is, longer) films, she was no longer allowed to be part of the grouping of male artists: “[I] was made to feel in no uncertain terms by a few male filmmakers that I had overstepped my place, that in New York my place was making little films” (Field 7). Complicating this picture of the canon formation, and the exclusion of Wieland from that canon, was her movement outside of the concerns of the structural film—with the introduction of narrative, humour, and political sensibility into her films, embodying various social movements taking shape, particularly around rights and equality: for women, for the environment, for civil rights, for peace, for the local against globalization (to name just a few).

Wieland’s trajectory, while isolating, was also groundbreaking; she was taking on forms and strategies that are familiar to viewers of early video art. Video was a medium outside of the apparatus of cinema, where women became active practitioners drawn to its portability, its potential as a diary, a mirror towards an archeology exploring narrative(s) of the self/selves (Baert). Within the ever-changing terrain of the art world, the structural filmmakers’ attempt to shape an experimental film canon in the late 1960s and 1970s also came into conflict with the art movements of the 1970s that continued into the 1980s with an emphasis on identities and discovery of new audiences and new ways of shaping art work. The ebullient *WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution* exhibition, curated by Connie Butler and touring in
2007-2008 to four venues in the USA and Canada, gave an overview of the range of work of the 1970s decade. The Vancouver iteration of the exhibition included Wieland's quilt *Reason Over Passion* (although the earlier parts of the travelling exhibition, regretfully, did not include Wieland's work from that period [email from Kathleen Ritter]). This exhibition presented work that was characterized by process, messy not pristine, and polemical as well as formal, beautiful and raw. Wieland's work refuses categories, resists us as viewers, surprises us, remains “timely.”

LEILA SUJIR

WORKS CITED


Ritter, Kathleen. Email Correspondence about WACK! Exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Winter 2011.


QUESTIONS

1. The quality of the unexpected was important to Wieland. As you view:
   • What do you see (expect to see), giving rise to the unexpected?
   • What do you hear (expect to hear), again, giving rise to the unexpected?

2. Wieland used particular fonts and graphics to layer the work with “memory”—not just her own, but a collective experience of children’s books, the experience of learning to read, and the experience of silent films. What do the floating letters (in 1933, *Sailboat, Rat Life and Diet*) propose or suggest to you?

3. Note the use of close-ups. What is the effect of the close-ups? How do the shots create worlds?

4. How does the editing in *Handtinting* work to bring “sound” to this silent film?

5. How does Wieland indicate and draw attention to the passage of time in the films *Dripping Water, 1933, Sailboat and Cat Food*?

6. In what ways (beyond just subject matter) do Wieland’s visual art works relate to her films? Consider in particular her paintings of sailboats, boats and planes\(^1\) and her assemblages.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Including: *Sailboat Tragedy and Spare Part* (1963); *Flick Pics #4* (1963); *Boat Tragedy* (1964); *The First Integrated Film with a Short on Sailing* (1963); *Boat (Homage to W.J. Griffiths)* (1963); *Sailboat Sinking* (1965); and *Double Crash* (1966).

\(^2\) Including: *Cooling Room I* (1964); *Cooling Room II* (1964); *Passengers* (1965); *Stuffed Movie* (1966); and *Home Movie* (1966).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


FURTHER VIEWING


*R69 (unfinished)*. Dir. Charles Gagnon. Canada. 1969-


ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Leila Sujir is an artist and a professor at Concordia University in the Intermedia / Cyberarts BFA program and Open Media MFA program in the Studio Arts Department. Based in Montreal, Quebec now, Sujir was born in Hyderabad, India, travelled with her family to Canada at the age of five (first living in Mont Joli, Quebec), and then later moved to Alberta where she grew up.

She has a twenty-seven-year practice as a media artist working with video projections, installations, and single-channel works. A solo exhibition that has toured Canada, Luminous Stories, initiated by the Art Gallery of Peterborough, covered ten years of her video production 1989-1999. Her video works have been shown in group shows at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, U.K., as well as galleries and festivals all over the world. Her video works are in a number of collections, including the National Gallery of Canada. She wrote on Joyce Wieland’s work for Wieland’s retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1987 and at Canada House in 1988.

Studio XX interview, in their on-line journal, Chronicle in the Studio:
http://dpi.studioxx.org/demo/?q=fr/no/13/chronicle-in-the-studio-chantal-dumas