

Sadie Benning
by Linda Yablonsky



All images: Stills from Sadie Benning's *It Wasn't Love*, black-and-white video with sound, 1992. Total running time: 20 minutes. Courtesy of Video Data Bank, Chicago.

Twenty-year-old Sadie Benning began making her artful, Peeping Tom-like short videos five years ago, when her father, filmmaker James Benning, gave her a toy Fisher-Price Pixelvision camera for Christmas. Since then she's become one of the most sought after young artists in the country, producing over a dozen tapes that unabashedly reveal, in ways both visually and emotionally impossible to ignore, a world previously untouched by the mainstream media—that of a teenage lesbian.

Benning grew up in Milwaukee with her mother, a massage therapist, and “a gay man who dressed like Dolly Parton.” (Her parents were divorced before she was born.) Until recently, she worked almost entirely within the confines of her bedroom and the tiny on-screen pixelvision frame, compulsively shooting new footage and formulating scenarios only in the process of editing. On her voice-over narratives she sounds at times like Lily Tomlin's Edith-Ann, equally wise and appealing, but more confrontational.

In the last year, Sadie received a Rockefeller Foundation grant and saw her 20-minute tape, *It Wasn't Love (But It Was Something)*, previously shown only in gay and lesbian film festivals, featured in the Whitney Biennial. We talked a few minutes before the Academy Awards show. Photographer Nan Goldin joined us for part of the conversation.

Linda Yablonsky Have you ever had a hostile audience?

Sadie Benning I did have a weird experience in Amsterdam. The book explaining the festival painted the tape as this flowery lesbian coming out story. And people got there and I didn't prepare them, I didn't say that this was on a Pixelvision camera, which is a 40 dollar scratchy, grainy . . . I just kind of said hello and then I left. And then they left four minutes later.

LY Which tape were they looking at?

SB The very first tape, *A New Year*, which is the most deteriorated because it's the oldest. But it really bothered me that they didn't even try to get anything out of it.

LY But wasn't it a gay audience?

SB Yes, it was a gay festival. I've never had any problems with hostility toward the content, only toward the medium I use.

LY Can you see yourself working with a slicker look? You've told me that you want to mix film and video in *Girl Power*.

SB Right now it's a matter of economics. I really respect video as an art form. It's cheap it's immediate it doesn't make you wait. You can tape and look at it right away.

LY Your party videos deal with your developing a sexual identity. Who saw them first?

SB My dad gave me the camera so he was like, "I'm really expecting to see what you've been doing." The first time I showed was to his class of 30 at Cal Arts.

LY How old were you?

SB I was 17 or 16. That was also another scary thing. My mom knew, my family knew, my friends knew, but it was a really weird thing dealing with strangers. It was like a magnifying glass over in my sexuality, and I had to introduce people to this part of me, which now I'm really comfortable with. But then it was weird to have these strangers looking at something that was very fragile. At that time, it was really important to have acceptance, not just for my sexuality, but for my art, for people to reaffirm that they liked what I was doing.

Nan Goldin Showing your work is a very important part of being an artist. I have friends who've been working for years and haven't shared their work with anyone. They get really fucked up in other ways from not showing. It was really brave of you to do that. What did your father say first off?

SB He was really impressed by what I had done.

LY How many tapes had you made?

SB The first four that I actually show now are what I showed there.

LY *If Every Girl Had A Diary* and *Jollies*, were they among them?

SB No, this is like, *early*, all edited in the camera, one shot after the next, no editing at all. They all last four minutes because that's how long the tape is, that's all it took me to make them, not much planning.

LY You said on the phone that traveling inspired you, and yet you made all the videos in your bedroom.

SB I guess it's because the world's not safe, my bedroom is. It's my space and all my things are mine, and there's no one there, passing judgment. Out in the world I see a lot of things and can be influenced.

LY What do you do to bring it inside?

SB When you're out there, you're sucking up experiences in your soul. Your experiences become embedded in you. It's not like the life outside is left at your door. It comes in with you.

LY A lot of people do leave it at their door. They don't absorb, they deflect or avoid.



SB Well, I can't. It's just how I live. It affects me how people are treated, how I'm treated.

LY Have you made any movies in your new bedroom in Buffalo?

SB Well, I shoot all the time. Actually, I made *Girl Power* there. Did you see that?

LY Yes, that's really good. That's what you're going to spin off into a feature this summer?

SB Yeah. I'm working on it. I'm gonna pick up all my shit and store it at my Mom's, and just travel with my girlfriend. I have a lot of friends in bands.

LY Like Bikini Kill?

SB Yeah, and we're going to follow them on tour. I'm going to shoot all summer and I think I'll know what I want to do by September because I'll have a body of footage, but right now it's hard to speculate what I'm going to come up with.

LY So you'll have a big cast? All female?

SB It's been a slow transition from me filming myself to filming other people. It starts with me filming my friends, my cousins, my godchild. People who are still close and intimate, so it doesn't feel so alienating to go out and be filming actors and all these people I don't have a connection with. It's people who I live with who affect me the most and also inspire everything I do. I could go hire actors to play my friends, but why do that when I can have the real thing?

LY But do you direct them?

SB Yeah, sometimes. Recently, when I was in Milwaukee, me and my girlfriend went to all these thrift stores and bought tons and tons of weird costumes and props—roller skates, stuffed animals, all kinds of weird shit, helmets and weird clothes—and then we went out and filmed with these props. I bought tons of candy and got my godchild totally hyper and took her out and filmed her.

LY How old is she?

SB She's seven. I got her candy necklaces and cigarettes.

LY Do you smoke?

SB No.

LY You've taken drugs though? I read that somewhere.

SB Yes, so did my grandma.

LY Is that finished for you?

SB Using drugs? I don't know. Right now I'm not that interested.

LY But did they influence your vision at all?

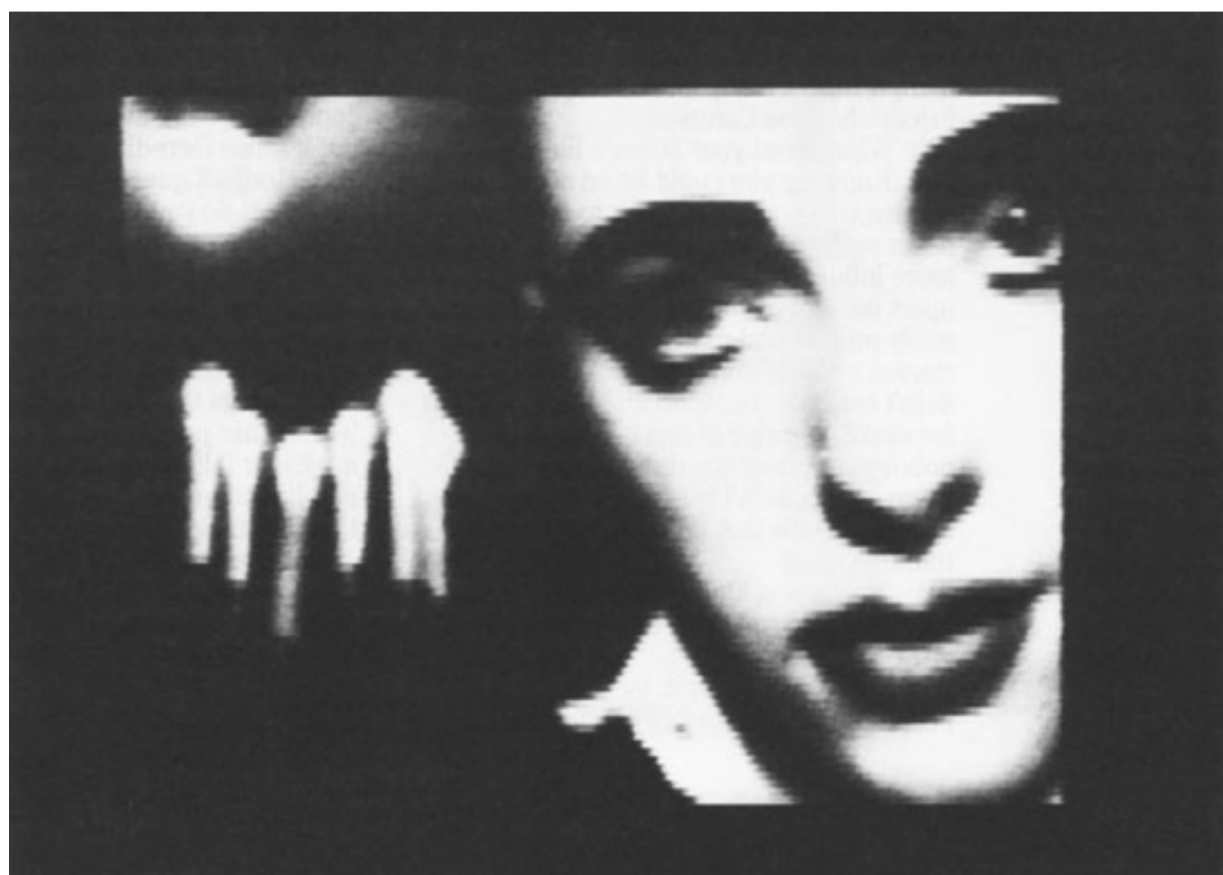
SB No, not really. I've watched a lot of people destroy themselves just trying to feel some kind of stimulation, something that will help them to feel. It hurts to watch people crumble and fall apart in front of you and know how incredible they are. It makes me want to really be whole and fill myself up from the inside because these other stimulants and distractions just aren't going to do it.

LY I want to read you something that you wrote: "When I started making videotapes, I didn't realize their importance. I'd been taught all my life that because I was young, a woman and queer, what I thought and felt was not valuable so I was embarrassed by my creations." What do you mean? It seems like you got a different message from your family.

SB I was getting a different message at home but that doesn't mean that you don't get bombarded by the chaos outside—what you see on TV, what you see in magazines, all around you. It still makes you feel not understood. I respect my mother immensely, and she accepted me. But that didn't make it any safer out in the world. It didn't make it any less scary outside. That's what I meant. I don't see my images on TV. That means I'm not valuable. That means my sexuality doesn't sell beer. Even if you're straight, the representation of women and minorities is just completely warped and constructed to entertain and oppress you.

LY Who are the women you admire or would like to emulate?

SB There's hundreds. Millions.



LY No one or two?

SB Well, definitely my mother. Women in my family, just because they've had the most direct impact in how I'm living. And then there's . . . just people I see on the street, people I come in contact with everyday or artists all over. There's so many who are really incredible. Sue Friedrich. Jane Campion.

LY What about your father's films?

SB Knowing you could be an artist and survive was really important to me, but I never really saw many of his films. I was more influenced by images that really upset me and by not feeling like anybody really understood me. I think that's why I started making work. Unconsciously. I didn't realize at the time that I couldn't wait for somebody else to represent me; that nobody could say the things that I wanted to say. But I didn't realize it was art.

LY You know that now. What were you thinking then?

SB That it was kind of fun.

LY How did you grow into knowing it was art?

SB By talking about it, by sharing it with people, by screening it, realizing that there was a community that valued it and needed to see it. Now I also really realize that I need to do it for myself. You know I dropped out of high school at 15. I hated it.

LY Really? And that's when you started making these tapes?

SB That's also when I had a girlfriend. We met at this park in Milwaukee where there was a girl's softball league. It was, you know, the dyke hangout.

LY How old was she?

SB 28.

LY Are there bars for girls in Buffalo?

SB Oh, yeah, right. HA.

LY Well, there are in Cleveland, there must be in Buffalo.

SB No, there's like one dyke bar and it's the scariest thing. There's like two people there doing karaoke, singing Julio Iglesias, *To All the Girls I've Loved Before*.

NG Oh, cute. And what was it like aesthetically?

SB Oh, God, it was totally early '80s, pink with really disgusting mirrors all over.

LY Are you enjoying all this traveling?

SB I really try to. I love when you happen to find a girl working a Hardee's in the middle of Indiana who's a total dyke. What's it like for them to be there? It's much more impressive that they're surviving. I always think about their lives when I see them.

LY Do you think people expect a lot from you?

SB Sometimes I'm jealous of my girlfriend because she works at this health food store where I used to work and it's easy. I still have six shows to do: Colgate, Syracuse, Vassar, Bard and this woman wrote a grant so that I could come out to Montana and tour. I really appreciate being able to live as an artist, but it's also incredibly draining.

LY One last question, Sadie. In what situations do you feel the most vulnerable, or what makes you angriest? What do you feel most impassioned by?

SB There's a million things that make me angry.

LY What can you do about it?

SB Things that bother me the most are when other people are trying to control my life or telling me how I can live, or passing judgment over me. The best way to fight that kind of anger is to continue to create work and voice myself. That's when I'm happy. The most revolutionary thing is to just love yourself and love what you do. You can't do anything more than that.

—Linda Yablonsky is a New York writer and creative director of NightLight Readings at the Performance Garage.

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