

Suzie Silver

Professional and Teaching Statement

My career as an artist extends over two decades, during which I have experimented with a range of media, including photography, video, performance, sound and interactive technologies. My work has exhibited and screened widely nationally and internationally at venues including: The Whitney Museum of Art, The New Museum, Documenta, ICA Boston, ICA London, Pacific Film Archives, Anthology Film Archives, London Film Festival, Seoul Film Festival, and Gay and Lesbian Film/Video Festivals all over the world including Melbourne, London, Tel Aviv, San Francisco, Chicago, NYC, Sao Paulo, Auckland and many more. My well-known early videos, *Freebird* and *A Spy* emerged from my involvement with the cabaret performance art scene in Chicago in the late 1980's and early 1990s.

The experiences with collaboration, creating community and embracing queerness that emerged in this period have continued to shape all of my projects. A technophile and fan of electronic arts, my later projects use digital manipulation to meld together appropriated images and sound, recorded performance and animated sequences into irreverent celebrations of exoticism, ecstasy and camp. I have often worked closely with other artists, as a presenter, collaborator, and teacher, including ongoing collaborations with Hilary Harp and Eric Moe. All of my work alludes to the capacity for desire to disrupt social boundaries and imagine new worlds. For the purposes of this statement I will focus on works produced since I received tenure at Carnegie Mellon University in 2006: *Nebula* (2006), *Fruit Machine* (2008-2010), *Jozaphine Freedom* (2010-2011), *Strange Attractors* (2012), *Gutai Beach Party!* (2012), and *Trans-Q Television* (2012-present). Three approaches have been fundamental to all of my activities as both a teacher and an artist: collaboration, challenging social boundaries, and imagining new worlds.

I began collaborating almost as soon as I began making art as an undergraduate at the University of California, San Diego. In 1986 I moved to Chicago to pursue my MFA at The School of the Art Institute in Chicago, remaining in the Windy City until 1993. The vibrant Chicago art community of the period established my expectations for the relationship between art making and community building. During that period I was on the Time Arts Committee at Randolph St. Gallery and I performed and programmed events at Club Lower Links. These spaces were incubators for important innovations in the performance art of that period. Through my participation in these communities, I was able to nurture the work of other artists even as my own work drew inspiration, energy and assistance in return. For me the process of creation is inextricably linked to the pleasure and challenges of social exchange.

Until recently, I usually collaborated with just one other person. Since 2003, I have created three major projects with Hilary Harp: *The Happiest Day/Untitled Landscapes* (2003-2004), *Nebula* (2006), and *Fruit Machine* (2008-2010). Most recently we collaborated on a video for *Strange Attractors, The Obligate Symbionts of Colubus Grand* (2012). I have worked on two major projects with composer Eric Moe: *Tri-Stan* and *Jozaphine Freedom*. The collaborations with Harp took place in the context of our

romantic partnership, developing out of constant dialog, shared research and idea-generation. By contrast, in the collaborations with Moe, I developed visuals for his original compositions. As different as these collaborative processes were, both provided opportunities to expand my vision and approach technically and conceptually, resulting in works that would have been impossible for either collaborator to conceive or produce independently.

In recent projects, I have begun collaborating with larger groups of people. In *Strange Attractors* and *Trans-Q Television*, I work closely with a core group but invite a wide spectrum of participants to collectively develop a theme. My role is that of both artist and instigator in these projects. At times, especially with *Pop Cabaret*, *Trans-Q Television*, and *Gutai Beach Party!*, the boundaries between teaching and research have relaxed and students have become full-fledged collaborators, as classes have become workshops for the production of major projects. The blending of two (or multiple) distinct visions into a new, shared vision is a generative process that has repeatedly pushed my work and the work of those close to me in new directions.

As I became aware that I am a Lesbian during my adolescence and early adulthood, before I became an artist myself, I found that typical responses to this aspect of my identity were too often misrepresentations. The images that I saw, in the mass media especially, pathologized, caricatured, demeaned, or flat-out ignored my experiences. At the time, there were few representations of lesbians (or gay men, for that matter) that I could identify with, or that I could turn to for affirmation. I turned to art - to photography and later to video - as a way to fill my world with images that I wanted to see. As I began to develop my skills and to create short narrative videos, I became aware that these expressions were of interest to others as well. Beginning with my early queer video works, *Peccatum Mutum* (1988), *A Spy* (1992), *Freebird* (1993), and *The Look of Love* (1998), I have been committed to challenging social boundaries and expanding the parameters of what can be represented, not only in my work but in my life as well. Questioning all aspects of gender normativity from appearance, aspiration, sexuality and desire has been a core motivation for all of my creative endeavors. In recent projects such as *Strange Attractors* and *Trans-Q Television*, the very notion of gender dimorphism and binary thoughts around sexuality are shattered in humorous and playful, yet serious ways.

Throughout my career, I have also championed the work of other artists who challenge social boundaries and expand the visible. As a member of the Time Arts Committee at Randolph St. Gallery I was instrumental in presenting the works of such artists as Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, the Shrimps, Vaginal Davis and Tim Miller. In recent projects like *Strange Attractors* and *Trans-Q Television* I have again created a forum for the presentation of boundary-breaking visions of identity, sexuality and desire.

Integral to challenging social boundaries is the act of imagining whole new worlds in which familiar rules do not apply. Using the tools of collage, appropriation, digital compositing and cabaret/variety performance, I have continually invented both social and visual spaces. Whether I am creating a world where women can be stars of their own fantasies, an exploratory journey through psychedelic outer/inner space, or a utopian

variety show that celebrates sexuality and gender play, I deploy the powerful tool of imagination to displace the known. An avid reader of science fiction, I have seen in the work of writers like Ray Bradbury, Samuel Delaney, and James Tiptree Jr./Alice Sheldon, the power of imagined worlds to unbind our cognitive associations. The influence of science fiction has been evident in most of my recent projects, but comes to its fullest fruition in *Strange Attractors*, which challenged participants to “go beyond male and female, beyond queer, beyond any notion of gender, beyond the anthropomorphic to erotic possibilities as vastly varied as the universe itself.” The value of exercises like imagining non-humanoid sexualities lies in their ability to make visible our presumptions and allow new subjectivities to emerge and recognize themselves in unrecognizable new worlds.

Nebula (2006)

In July 2005, while Harp and I were at the Djerassi Resident Artist Program in California, we began to research a new project. *Nebula* emerged from investigations into historical forms of Visual Music and the mutual influences that flowed between modernist abstraction and “space age” visual culture. In my previous collaboration with Harp, *The Happiest Day*, we had used digital compositing and sculptural collage to create hybrids of “real” and “imaginary” space. With *Nebula* we would extend this approach by experimenting with abstraction. Harp had received a \$40,000 grant from the Heinz Foundation, which enabled her to work with a master glass blower during a residency at the Pittsburgh Glass Center (PGC) in 2006. The grant and residency resulted in an exhibition at the PGC that combined sculptures, photographic light-boxes and projected video. For the sculptures, Harp created a series of mold-blown glass forms based on asteroid images drawn from science fiction illustrations. In developing the video, we captured the glass asteroids using stop motion animation, yielding mesmerizing undulating liquid effects. We also animated sculptures made of craft materials such as glitter, iridescent fabric and tulle. These animations were digitally manipulated and combined with purely digital abstractions to create a 25-minute looping video for the installation. The final video mimicked the effects of computer-generated animation, however, the incorporation of real physical objects, animated through stop-motion, brought a visceral richness not found in similar videos. A series of 10 photographic light-boxes, presented studio shots of luminous fantasy spacescapes as though seen out a spaceship porthole.

Nebula was reviewed positively in national journals devoted to glass art, and in numerous local papers. The shorter, screening version of the video from the installation, also titled *Nebula* has been included in two travelling festivals of Abstract Cinema. The first, Boston’s Visual Music Marathon (VMM), travelled to Seoul South Korea, Huddersfield, England, The School of Visual Arts in New York and was included in SIGGRAPH, 2008. The Visual Music Marathon was also the subject of lengthy reviews in *The Computer Music Journal* and in *Animation World Magazine*. *Nebula* is among 21 videos selected from over 300 in the VMM for inclusion in these travelling exhibitions and in “Digital Eyes” a DVD compilation of festival highlights. *Nebula* was also included in *Abstracta*, a screening curated by Massimo Pistone, which debuted in Rome, Italy and

travelled to the University of Vienna in Austria and to Bangkok's *Festival Fresh*. *Nebula* is distributed by the Video Data Bank and has continued to screen internationally.

Fruit Machine (2008-2010)

My next collaboration with Hilary Harp was *Fruit Machine*, an hour-long media spectacle that put a camp spin on interactive performance. Supported by grants from the Arizona Commission on the Arts and Carnegie Mellon University's Berkman Faculty Fund, the project was designed to be modular and changed continuously over the three years that we performed it live. Each version followed a similar format: five live acts, interspersed with five single channel music videos. Using Arduino microcontrollers and Max/MSP/Jitter we created a series of sculptural controllers that allowed live performers to control a changing audiovisual display.

"Fruit Machine" was a name given to a Canadian device designed during the Cold War to ferret out homosexuals from the civil service and the military. The subjects were made to view pornography, and the device measured the pupils of the eyes, perspiration, and pulse for a supposed erotic response. The word "fruit" in our title referred to both a quirky, eccentric or queer individual and to the fecund sex organs of plants. "Machine" referenced the rather technical engineering of the lurid and antic images. Camp codes of high artifice and excess, and camp's self-conscious celebration of exotica were all at work here. *Fruit Machine* occupied a unique place at the juncture between technically sophisticated interactive media and a humble and carnivalesque aesthetics reminiscent of a folk ritual or a school play.

The full hour-long version of *Fruit Machine* was performed in five venues nationally. The piece was included in the 2008 Pittsburgh Biennial and was selected as the VIP premier performance during the *Phoenix Fringe Festival* in 2009. A tour of University stages included the University of California, San Diego; the University of New Mexico's Rodey Theater; Alfred University; and the University of Arizona. In 2010 two performances of *Fruit Machine* served as the first ever collaboration between the theater and visual arts programs at Old Dominion University in Virginia. Sections of the project were performed in Chicago's *Round the Coyote Festival*, and Washington DC's Transformer Gallery. Two of the music videos produced for *Fruit Machine: Eric Moe's Idyll* and *Robot Love*, have screened internationally at galleries and festivals and are distributed by the Video Data Bank.

Jozaphine Freedom (2010-2011)

In 2010 I created a live video score for Eric Moe's JOZAPHINE FREEDOM, with a libretto by Denise Duhamel. JOZAPHINE FREEDOM is an exploration of celebrity culture in the form of a one-woman "entertainment", combining features of opera with cabaret and art song. Using found footage, compositing and motion graphics I created a wide variety of short clips that formed the basis of an exuberant collage portraying a uniquely American spin on celebrity culture. The piece had its premiere at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts in Davis, CA in April 2010 and in September 2011 it was performed at Merkin Hall in New York City.

Strange Attractors (2009-present)

In 2009 I began work on one of my most ambitious projects to date, *Strange Attractors: Investigations in Non-Humanoid Extraterrestrial Sexualities*, a 288 page, full color, book and 120 minute DVD encompassing art, writing and film. *Strange Attractors* includes the work of 70 artists, writers and filmmakers from all over the U.S. who have created remarkable explorations of possible extraterrestrial life forms and their multifarious sexual desires. A joint publication of Encyclopedia Destructica and The Institute of Extraterrestrial Sexuality, *Strange Attractors* straddles the line between speculative scientific exploration and artistic imagination. Contributors include: Amy Gerstler, David Horvitz, Shana Moulton, Anselm Berrigan, Peggy Ahwesh, Thomas Scioli, Suzanne Wright, Jacob Ciocci and many more. My co-editors/co-curators for *Strange Attractors* are Jasdeep Khaira and Christopher Kardambikis of the community-based artist-book publisher Encyclopedia Destructica. I pitched the idea for the project to Jasdeep and Christopher over Thai food in early fall 2009. We solicited work from friends, acquaintances and friends of friends. We raised the funds to have the book offset print in Singapore through grants from The Heinz Foundation and the Berkman Faculty Development Fund at Carnegie Mellon University, as well as through a successful \$10,000 Kickstarter campaign.

Since publication during the summer of 2012, Jasdeep, Christopher and I have been all over the country with screenings, readings, book fairs and other events to promote the project and provide exposure for all of the participants. In the past year we have had readings/screenings and related events at Anthology Film Archives, NYC; Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY; LA Art Book Fair at the Geffen Contemporary, MOCA; Diverseworks, Houston; Space 4 Art, San Diego; Printed Matter, NYC; Center for Sex and Culture, San Francisco; and Pittsburgh Filmmakers; among others. We anticipate promoting the book for another year or so. *Strange Attractors* is distributed by the Video Data Bank, Printed Matter and is available in a number of bookstores around the country.

In addition to writing a short story for *Strange Attractors* called *Donkey Show*, I created a short video with Hilary Harp. We call it *The Obligate Symbionts of Colubus Grand*. The video combines many of the elements we've used in earlier works: live action, stop-motion animation, compositing and visual effects. We constructed elaborate costumes and masks to create characters for an elaborate cosmic ritual of transformation.

Gutai Beach Party! (2012)

Gutai Beach Party was a collaborative project created with a group of students and Swiss artist Tobias Madison for Project Lido, curated by Amanda Donnan. Beginning with a prompt by Tobias we created a structure and live performance/sound score for 60 minutes of footage documenting historical Gutai events. During the live event each of the four performers (Scott Andrew, Harrison Apple, Stephanie Ross and Suzie Silver) wore chest mounted GoPro video cameras. The four-way POV video is the final outcome of this project and was exhibited at Night Gallery in Tempe AZ in late 2012.

Pop Cabaret/Trans-Q Television (2011-present)

Coming out of *Fruit Machine* and *Strange Attractors* are two courses/projects that engage students in collaborations with institutions, participants and audiences outside of the university. Ben Harrison, Curator of Performing Arts at the Andy Warhol Museum invited me to teach a performance class at the museum. I jumped at the chance and began to develop Pop Cabaret: Performance Art at the Andy Warhol Museum, which I've taught twice over the last two years (Fall 2011 and Spring 2013). Using the theater at the Andy Warhol Museum as playground and performance space, students create short solo and group performances and I function as producer and director, facilitating the emergence of their vision. Some themes and strategies we utilize include: Camp, Lo-Fi Glamour, Neo-Burlesque, Expanded Cinema of the Mind, Alien Vaudeville, Spectacles of Failure, Stand-Up Tragedy, New-Age Jesters, Cosmic Troubadours, Psychedelic Bards, Beautiful Noise, Imploding Vinyl Escapable, Exotic Masquerade and much, much more.

Just about anything is possible in this semester long class, which takes students off campus every Friday and molds them into a performance art troupe within the uninhibited, boundary-busting walls of The Warhol. The experience culminates in two public performances. I often perform with the students hosting the evening as some sort of drag character, so far these have included, Sonny Topaz, Pan D. Monium and Harry Ballz.

In 2012, I applied for and received a Media Initiative grant from The Center for the Arts in Society at Carnegie Mellon for an initiative called Gender/Media/Sexuality. The main focus of this three-year investigation is *Trans-Q Television*, a web based video variety show exploring gender and sexuality developed in part in an undergraduate course with the same name. *Trans-Q Television* is a playful and provocative video variety show reveling in the fluidity of gender and sexuality. Collaborating with a wide range of talent we produce programs that include stand-up theory, micro-documentaries, interviews, video art, animation, literary presentations, performance art, music, and much more. We concoct a Dadaist Variety Show for the 21st Century; a truly twisted mix of Sonny and Cher, Sesame Street, Andy Warhol's TV, Ernie Kovacs, Flip Wilson, Carol Burnett, Wigstock and Pee Wee's Playhouse.

Trans-Q Television has created an opportunity for students to work with a wide variety of gender illusionists, performers, video artists and queer theorists, shooting original performances, and interviews for inclusion in this on-going video variety show. Participants include LE1F, Narcissister, Pyuupiru, Vaginal Davis, Christeene, Shana Moulton/Nick Hallett, Alaska Thunderfuck, SSION, Zachary Drucker/ Rhys Ernst, Pat Loud and many more. Upcoming shoots include Jack Halberstam, Genesis P-Orridge, Carletta Sue Kay, and Jinkx Monsoon. Some of the students have also developed their own original works for inclusion in this video variety show that will exist as an online series.

Pop Cabaret and *Trans-Q Television* are the latest versions in an approach to teaching that has always emphasized the same approaches of collaboration, challenging social boundaries and imagining new worlds that I have pursued in my art.

I began teaching as an adjunct professor almost 20 years ago at the University of California, San Diego in the fall of 1996, and was appointed to my position at Carnegie Mellon in the fall of 1999. My work as a professor and my work as an artist have always been closely interwoven. The themes and techniques covered in my classes have emerged from my research and I have often developed classes focused on collaborative public presentations. I have maintained close ties with many of my former students as friends, colleagues and most importantly as collaborators.

Part of the joy of learning to produce video and performance projects is the necessity of collaboration. Over the years I have learned to focus on community building and strategies for collaboration as one of the cornerstones of my approach to teaching video, sound and performance. In my classes I encourage collaboration by challenging students to produce projects that exceed one individual's capacity. Students form working relationships in my classes that extend well beyond school. In many of my classes including *Video and Performance*, *Media Performance*, *Music Video/Visual Music*, and *Radio Play* as well as *Pop Cabaret* and *Trans-Q Television* one of the strategies that has been most successful has been working together towards public presentations. In *Radio Play* students produced a weekly radio show for WRCT, the campus station. One of the productions created for this class won a national college radio award.

Part of the reason that I am able to build such strong collaborative groups in my classes is that I foster an atmosphere of acceptance and questioning of social conventions. By emphasizing an introduction to historical artworks that have challenged social boundaries and by encouraging students to fully express their own quirks, fears, and extreme personality traits, students blossom into visionary artists. This process of emergence is a shared one in which an ethos of both challenge and support is fostered. By sharing these important lessons, students build life-long connections and go on to embody this value of challenging social boundaries in their work as professors and artists.

Out of collaborative efforts to challenge social boundaries, new worlds are inevitably imagined. New worlds sometimes require new technologies and I have found that the layered realities that I am able to create through digital compositing, hybrid media and new tools for digital audio have also helped my students realize their visions of worlds not previously imagined. The influence of this approach is apparent in many of the works of former students included in *Strange Attractors*. Of the 70 participants in the book/DVD, more than half were former students of mine from every school I've taught at including, UCSD, CMU and Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College.

The legacy of my teaching can be found both in the wide recognition received by many of my students including Shana Moulton, Jacob Ciocci, Darrin Martin, P. J. Raval, Nicholas Wiley, and Abigail Satinsky and by the communities of artists throughout the country, especially in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Pittsburgh, that have arisen

around groups of my former students. Many of my undergraduate students have gone on to prestigious graduate schools including UCLA, UCSD, SAIC, CCA, and Stanford. Many of my former students have pursued teaching careers. Among the tenured and/or tenure track professors are Ryan Murray, Darrin Martin, Brooke Singer, Mark Dixon, Ruth Stanford and Matt Barton.