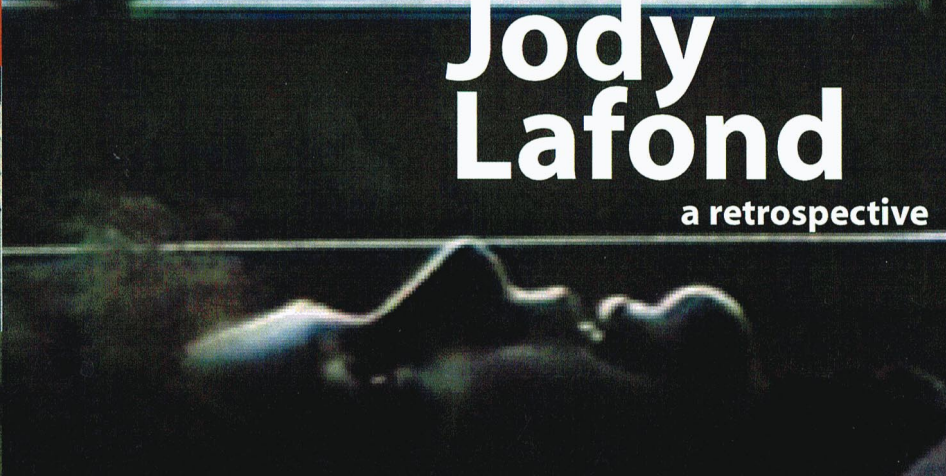


Jody Lafond

a retrospective



**Jody Lafond
A Retrospective**

Contributors

Ron Ehmke
Jody Lafond
Julie Zando

Design

Kelly Myers

Cover

Top to bottom: Stills from *Jaqueline nacaL*, *Beyond the Windowsill*, *He Left 4 Red Chairs* and *Eggs & Ham*
Center : Still from *Beyond the Windowsill*

Hallwalls' mission is to serve artists by supporting the creation and presentation of new work in the visual, media, performing, and literary arts, and to serve the public by making these works available to audiences. We are dedicated in particular to work by artists which challenges and extends the traditional boundaries of the various art forms, and which is critically engaged with current issues in the arts and in society.

Hallwalls
2495 Main Street
Buffalo, NY 14214

Phone 716.835.7362
Fax 716.835.7364

www.hallwalls.org

Contents

4 Artist's Statement

Sometimes A Banana Is Just a Banana by Jody Lafond

Essays

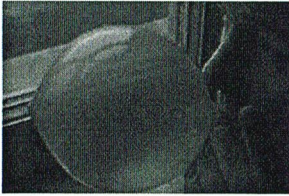
6 *The Poems of Our Climate* by Ron Ehmke

12 *The Butt of Her Jokes* by Julie Zando

16 Videography

18 Biography

20 Credits



Artist's Statement

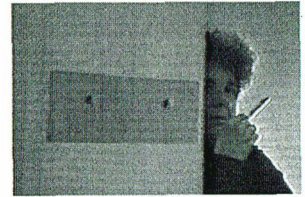
SOMETIMES A BANANA IS JUST A BANANA by Jody Lafond

At times, I take a perverse pleasure in being disparaging when others are analyzing my work. Obviously this might have something to do with a self-esteem problem, but maybe it is because I think of my work as being primarily funny and addressing other concerns peripherally or by accident. I like to hear the laughter. To be honest, this was not always true. Before I made *Jacqueline nacaL*, I grilled my Comparative Literature friends on Lacan for as much information as I needed: “so what’s this rubbish about the Father bringing Language to the family?” I was careful not to learn too much lest anyone accuse me of being theoretical.

How I happened to become a video artist was also an accident. For my History B.A., I needed numerous distribution credits, and Brian Henderson’s Film History class was worth five

credits instead of the usual three, so I took it and loved it. The next semester I enrolled in Beginning Video and Filmmaking and took to it like a duck to water. I had found my life. I have been *seeing* my life flash before me. In the course of the re-mastering of my video art pieces, I have had to watch and watch again work that I have not seen in some time. It has been a particular type of torment, not necessarily bad, but just this side of discomfort to see yourself and others age, change and sometimes vanish. I've been struck by how indebted I am to many, many people and organizations. Early on I worked and edited at the Center for Media Studies at the University of New York at Buffalo, where I formed many lasting relationships with other media-makers. When I left the university, I was fortunate to be in the same city as Hallwalls and Squeaky Wheel, two wonderful resources where a strong and vibrant media community has been able to produce and show work.

-Jody Lafond



Stills from *Eggs & Ham*, 1983



Essay

THE POEMS OF OUR CLIMATE

by Ron Ehmke

There is poetry aplenty in Jody Lafond's work, and I don't mean the haiku to Niagara Falls or the other delicious travesties she serves up in *Beyond the Curve of the Earth*, her parody of pretentious, inept confessional writing. No, I'm talking about the good stuff: concise, funny, poignant evocations of particular moments in time, whose deliberately simple images (folding chairs left behind by a former lover, endless pans of bread dough, a pond of doomed pollywogs) are rich with multiple layers of metaphor.

Watching the introspective early tape *Beyond the Windowsill* for the first time in years, for instance, I'm tempted to suggest an analogy to no less a figure than Emily Dickinson, who knew a thing or two herself about the worlds on both sides of a pane of glass. Of course, I feel a little silly dropping Dickinson's name here, given that Jody has beaten me to it in her satirical portrait of fictional European feminist theorist "Jaqueline nacaL." But in the nacaL saga (another of Lafond's trademark jabs at self-important pseudo-profundity), the Belle of Amherst is lumped in with a missing cat and a pot of leftover stew as a

mother and daughter debate the social responsibility of artists in a series of casual notes.

Even so, at the risk of generating more of the babble Jody so accurately mocks, I can't help hearing at least a faint trace of Dickinson's sensibility in *Windowsill*, particularly in the tape's melancholy tribute to "missed opportunities" and its narrator's admission that "You just have to sort of wait for things to happen ... I'm pretty good at waiting." Confined by choice in an isolation chamber of her own design, an unnamed woman imagines the untold stories of people she'll never meet and makes an uneasy peace with her alienation from these total strangers. Where Dickinson drew painful, often unexpected life lessons from the bees and blossoms and birds around her home, Lafond turns her camera in this and other tapes on such seemingly mundane sights as balloons, egg yolks, curly fries, and, above all, the faces of dogs, celebrating them all as sources of endless mystery and wonder.

Lest anyone get the idea that I'm classifying this particular individual as a Quiet Loner, however, allow me to point out an entirely different sort of poetry to be found elsewhere in her work: the kind which is commissioned to commemorate a particular event or occasion. The stuff a poet laureate is expected to produce for inaugura-



Stills from *Jaqueline nacal*, 1987

***You just have
to sort of wait
for things to
happen...I'm
pretty good
at waiting.***

tions, battles, weddings, funerals, and the like. Quite a few of the tapes in this retrospective originated as responses either to group-show themes (a night of intentionally bad art, an anthology of short tapes about love, an ambivalent salute to Buffalo) or to phenomena in the outside world (a trip to Japan, the Gulf War, *The Blair Witch Project*). These works are by nature ephemeral, in the best sense of the word: quick, sharp, and direct, with the spontaneous grace of journal entries and the unmannered wit of e-mail. They're also documents of the artist's public life: her connections to her colleagues, her hometown, her social circle.

As Jody notes in *In the Spring, after the war, I became a Socialist*, that circle expanded significantly in the late 1980s and early 1990s when she began devoting more of her time to various political and cultural organizations, including Buffalo United for Choice, the 8mm News Collective, and the Ladies of the Lake (the street-theater wing of Buffalo's pro-choice movement). While none of the collective projects she contributed to is included in the current retrospective, their connection to her individual output is clear and significant. Armed with a camcorder, Lafond ventures out into the world beyond her window to gather evidence—of friendships, lost loves, seized opportunities, and random absurdities—then takes up residence in a nearby editing suite

to make sense of it all.

Which brings me to yet a third poetic impulse I find in these tapes: Lafond's gift for creating a new, loosely narrative context for found documentary material, which she shares with any number of so-called language poets, who plunder the linguistic countryside for shards of overheard dialogue and cryptic signage. I should clarify: the footage she "finds" is usually her own, but often months or even years pass before it makes its way into a story she has woven around it. In this way a picnic in Western New York is transformed into a gathering of existentialists in the south of France; the spectators at a charity polo match become unwitting participants in a divorcee's self-styled Marxist diatribe. (As a side effect of this tendency to incorporate what are essentially home movies into more structured art pieces, Jody's tapes as excellent time capsules preserving images of countless members of Buffalo's thriving alternative media community as it has evolved over the course of several generations.)

The tweaks and twists to which Lafond subjects her recycled footage evoke the economy and resourcefulness of the most imaginative of directors from the 1940s/50s golden age of no-budget B-movies, but she makes no attempt to dupe anyone into falling for the illusion; instead, the artifice is part of the joke. Along the same lines, I'm



Still from *A Road Picture*, 1985

She makes no attempt to dupe anyone into falling for the illusion; instead, the artifice is part of the joke.

reminded of the way the most banal detritus of our waking lives assumes a spookier, more romantic shape in our dreams, long after the fact. Indeed, that's practically the premise of the tongue-in-cheek sci-fi exercise *From Time to Time*, in which a citizen of the future travels back through her own past, a journey which takes the form of split-second fragmentary flashes in seemingly random order, culminating in a comforting glimpse of the protagonist's past existence as a humble but happy reptile.

One thread which unites all three of these forms of video poetry is Lafond's voice—both literally and figuratively. While her visual aesthetic is unquestionably “poetic” on its own, it's the offscreen narration which often ties the loose ends together. Those voice-overs have grown more confident over the last decade and a half, even if the character they often portray retains her essential self-doubt. It's that eternal questioning which fuels the stories Jody tells, whether they've got a political dimension or a romantic one. (More often than not, affairs of state and affairs of the heart are intertwined in some of her most engaging works.) The narrator's voice makes sense of what might otherwise be a chaotic collage of arbitrary images, in the same way that every one of us sifts and sorts the events of our day into meaningful anecdotes we can tell our friends and tell ourselves.

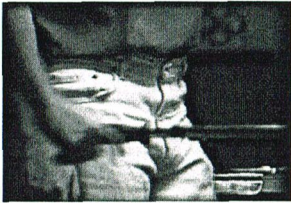
Then, of course, there are the stories we tell our pets. Surely my favorite moment in any J. J. Lafond videotape is the one (in *He Left Four Red Chairs*) in which Jody patiently attempts to explain to her dog Sara that the nice man who's been sharing their lives will no longer be around. The absurdity of the task in no way undermines the poignancy of the situation, and the expression on Sara's face—simultaneously oblivious and acutely attuned to her human companion's despair—is as tragic as it is hilarious.

And that, my friends, is poetry.



Stills from *Jacqueline nacaL*, 1987.

RON EHMKE is a writer and performer whose work has appeared in *Afterimage*, *Art Papers*, *The Buffalo News*, *CEPA Journal*, *The New Orleans Review*, *SonicNet*, and an ever-growing collection of other websites, magazines, newspapers, and performance spaces which no one in his immediate family has ever heard of. He is the editor of *Consider the Alternatives: 20 Years of Contemporary Art at Hallwalls* (available through Hallwalls) and co-author of a forthcoming book examining the life and work of singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco and critiquing the pop music industry from the perspective of DiFranco's independent label, Righteous Babe Records. His trilogy of interconnected autobiographical monologues, *The Dark Times*, has been presented by universities, theaters, and alternative art centers throughout the East Coast. Jody Lafond was a frequent and revered contributor to many events he produced when he was curator of Performance Art at Hallwalls (1986-94) and a regular guest on *Snap Judgements*, the cable access program he co-produced



Essay

THE BUTT OF HER JOKES

by Julie Zando

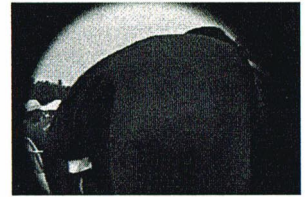
In a span of eighteen years, Jody Lafond has produced a body of video art notable for its wry stories of relationships between men and women. The smart, often autobiographical narratives are constructed from musings and ironic observations over footage shot when inside alone or alone and looking outside. Later work continues combining elements of solitude and surveillance but makes use of footage posing as what might appear to be outtakes from a separate project or the peripheral space around the video frame itself.

Perhaps the defining image of Jody Lafond's work is found in *Beyond the Curve of the Earth* (1995); two men, unaware of Lafond's focus, are intently playing Foosball. A close-up frames their forearms pushing and pulling rods in front of their groins while on the soundtrack Lafond reads an ironic appreciation of their "loins of steel." All of the men photographed in the tape, including polo players, yachtsmen, and roofers, are absorbed in male-identified activities. Together, they form a brotherhood that Lafond playfully satirizes. Her camera is positioned outside, looking in, desiring yet mocking. Lafond's critique of male privilege is never bitterly cynical, but rather smart and humorous political satire. Finally, Lafond trains her camera on the butt of her former boyfriend as he strides in front of her, as women often complain men do. On the soundtrack we hear her check her microphone during a simulated poetry reading -"Is this (pffffff) working?"-a test that defines

her relationship to men and the phallic objects which represent them. In *Beyond the Windowsill* (1986), Lafond tries to catch a passing man's attention by sending an oblong red balloon to him out the window. He has long since passed by. The title of her artist's statement, "*Sometimes a Banana is Just a Banana*" is ingenious- while her refusal of academic over-determination is sincere, she has a keen perception of how her direct style has amusing potential.

Windows, both literal and figurative, are prominent in Lafond's work. In *A Road Picture* (1985), she watches two men from a window as they shovel their car from a snow bank, while fantasizing that they might take her on a road trip so that she can escape her apartment. Feeling trapped by the harsh winter weather, she has "got to get out, got to get out" but admits that she doesn't like to shovel nor work too hard. Watching the men, she remarks "Boy that looks like hard work. Wow. I'm happy that's not my car. Look, look how hard they work. I hope that they'll take me with them when they go... That looks like fun. Well not really. It looks like work." The satire allows the women in her stories to transcend the cliché of lovelorn and trapped females in need of rescue. While admiring the agency and strength that men possess, she questions whether she would want to be one of them. As the men struggle, she comments "Whoa! Strong arms. Frostbitten toes. Work. Hmmm."

Lafond's approach in *He Left 4 Red Chairs* (1987) is more deliberately affected. Telling the story in a melodic voice of how a departed lover has left her behind, she satirizes the melodrama of the situation. Cloying violin music completes the set-up, clueing the audience in to its purposeful theatricality. She explains the absence of her



Still from *Beyond the Curve of the Earth*, 1995



Stills from *He Left 4 Red Chairs*,
1987

lover to her disinterested dog Sara, who plays and climbs around Jody's slumped over body. The dog plays the "straight man" to Jody's overdramatic despair. Later, Sara barks in the background as Jody plays a message from her lover over and over again on the answering machine. The voice on the machine reveals that he is indeed French and speaks with an accent, adding to her parody of soap operatic sentimentalism. Never merely about her own private drama, the work parodies romantic utopianism and the myth of the Latin Lover.

Academic fascination with French philosophy is spoofed in *Jacqueline nacaL* (1988). France is idealized as a place of genteel pleasures, where all dogs are well behaved. The fictionalized intellectual Jacqueline nacaL (played by Lafond but narrated by Rachel Weissman) lives a charmed life in a villa where she writes incomprehensible essays on language and gender:

"You see one day I was with my doggie Sara...and I realized that we have communication between the two of us, and is not *communication* language? So...if animals have language, perhaps we should look to things that make us different from doggies and other animals to see what makes us different in terms of gender."

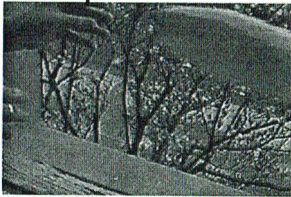
She pauses to pour more cream in her coffee before she continues to write about the love of her mother, the father who abandoned her, the men who control the canals, and her observations on the difference between men and women. Studying a home video of a picnic with her friends "Gustave Klemmer, a Finnish Nobel Prize winner in bio physics and his wife Maria, the equally famous opera diva" Jacqueline nacaL notes that Gustave appoints himself the fire builder, while his

wife collects the firewood. It's no accident that the man's name is "Gustave" -a Germanic word meaning "staff of God" -and that he is a scientist, while his wife is an artist. In still another home video, Gustave, now with his second wife, "Madeline, the Dutch actress," still has control over the fire. This is followed by an extraordinary scene of a man and a woman making sand castles on a beach, the man's being large and vertical, the woman's being smaller and round. Dryly noting the obvious discrepancy in size and ambition between the two, nacaL realizes that "men have control over water, fire, and earth" and concludes that "to the air- sisters and doggies."

To prepare for this significant retrospective, Hallwalls digitally re-mastered thirteen titles from the twenty-eight independent and collectively produced works in Lafond's portfolio. Video works were rescued from fragile, obsolete analog formats, audio was sweetened and mixed and the picture fortified. Special thanks to our patient and skilled editor, Christine Black, who became so intimate with the work that she began having dreams about it (and can't get that Japanese pop song from *Ticket to Tokyo* out of her head). Thanks also to Ron Ehmke, whose remarkable catalog essay articulates the great joy of what it means to know Jody and her works, and to Jody Lafond herself for these sweet, insightful and very funny stories.

Julie Zando is an artist and curator. In 1994, The American Film Institute awarded her the Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists. This recognition is "...to honor the accomplishments of artists who have made significant contributions to the field and whose visions have challenged and continue to redefine the art form." She has curated video and film programs at Artists Space (New York), New Langton Arts (San Francisco) and most recently, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center (Buffalo).

***Men have
control over
water, fire,
and earth...to
the air- sisters
and doggies.***



Videography

Jody Lafond and the Vicious Circle, 1982

Fruit-i-cide, 1983

Eggs and Ham, 1983

A Road Picture, 1985

My Little Dog Knows Me, 1985

Beyond the Windowsill, 1986

Joan Noir, 1986

He Left 4 Red Chairs, 1987

Jacqueline nacaL, 1987

Paranormal Dog, 1989

and what is the average depth of the ocean floor?, 1990

Squall Line, 1990

In the Spring, after the war, I became a Socialist, 1991

Ticket to Tokyo, 1992

Fingering Flowers, 1992

Beyond the Curve of the Earth, 1995

From Time To Time, 1997

Out of the Blue, Experimental Video, 1998

Why I Didn't See the Blair Witch Project, 1999

Ouch, for Joan of Arc, 1999

Sigh, 2000

The Buffalo Tape, 2000

Collaborative and Collective Work

News Diaries (with the 8mm News Collective), 1990

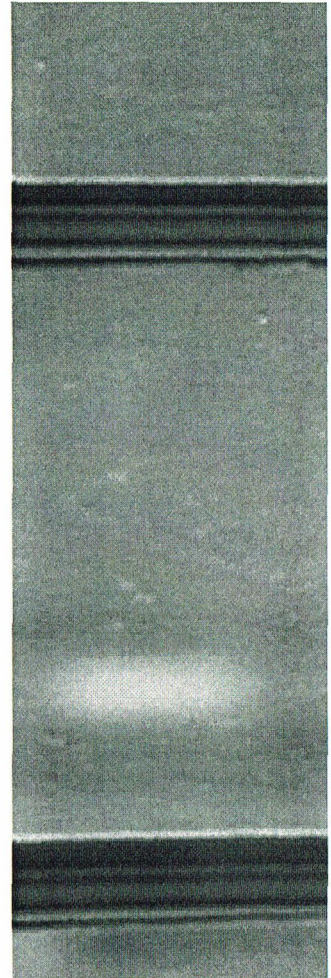
Please Mr. President (with the Ladies of the Lake), 1992

Morning in America (with the Ladies of the Lake), 1992

The Spring of Lies (with the Media Coalition for Reproductive Rights), 1992

3 PSA's About Welfare (with Susan Clements), 1995

Watching You, window installation (with Meg Knowles), 1998



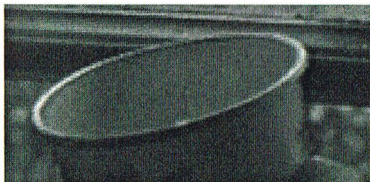


biography

Jody Lafond was born at the end of the baby boom in Buffalo, New York. Growing up in Tonawanda, New York, Jody was often able to watch from her bedroom window movies playing at the drive-in behind her house. When she was 12 they tore down the drive-in.

Jody Lafond lives in a gray house on a corner, drives a blue car and has a somewhat tenuous relationship with her black and white dog, but they'll probably work it out. After a failed career as a historian, she started making films and videos as a graduate student at the highly acclaimed Center for Media Studies at the University of Buffalo. Jody Lafond's internationally exhibited work includes numerous short experimental films and videos and activist documentaries, produced with such groups as the 8mm News Collective, the Media Coalition for Reproductive Rights and the feminist theatre troupe, Ladies of the Lake.

Ms. Lafond was the recipient of NYFA Artist Fellowships in 1988 and 1992 and a NYSCA Film Production Grant in 1987. In 1991, she traveled to Japan after being awarded first prize at the New York-based Luminous Video Competition. Her work has shown at venues in New York, including The Knitting Factory, Art in General and the New York Video Festival as well as the Images Video Festival in Toronto, the Albright Knox in Buffalo, Film Forum in Los Angeles and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC.



Clockwise from top left: *Beyond the Windowsill*, *Beyond the Curve of the Earth*, *Ticket to Tokyo*, and *Jaqueline nacaL*.

credits

This retrospective includes thirteen videos from Jody Lafond's portfolio which were digitally re-mastered by Christine Black of Avocado Productions. Christine is the co-founder, with Matthew George, of Avocado and has numerous awards, festival selections, and grants to her credit. Avocado's web site is www.digitalavocado.com.



State of the Arts



NYSCA

This was made possible by the Experimental Television Center's Presentation Funds, supported by the New York State Council on the Arts.

“About ten years ago, just after graduating from SUNY Purchase Film School, I attended the SUNY Student Film & Video Festival in Buffalo. Students from various schools showed work. It was here that I saw 2 or 3 short video pieces by Jody Lafond. It was some of the most interesting (and funny) video work I'd ever seen. I seem to remember actually reaching Jody Lafond- in the hallway outside a lecture hall- and telling her how much I liked her work.

-Hal Hartley ”