



UNCONDITIONAL COMPLICITY: ON THE EARLY FILMS OF JANIS COLE & HOLLY DALE BY JON DAVIES

"It is eye-opening to think about the media works created in the inventive and exhilarating first decade after gay liberation as *performative documentaries*. The way the term suggests that play-acting (performance) leads to reality (documentary) brings attention to the "realizing" aspects of gay and lesbian film performances: the way that the archive of queer subjects acting up on film in the 1970s has so much to tell us about who queer people in fact were at the time, but also the way that, through performance for film, queer people sought and at times succeeded in realizing new selves." — Greg Youmans, *Performing Essentialism*

Janis Cole and Holly Dale were a couple of working-class Toronto girls who decided to study art at Sheridan College in nearby suburban Oakville in the mid-1970s. While Dale was interested in art history and animation, and Cole in computer programming and video, they ended up making non-fiction 16mm films together that were wildly different than those being produced by their fellow students. Their subjects were their friends downtown: sex workers and entertainers of every conceivable gender and sexuality, the young people who hustled and hung out on the legendary Yonge Street strip, back when it was home to a smorgasbord

of adult entertainment from strip clubs to drag revues, body-rub parlors to gay bars.

Cole and Dale went on to make two pioneering, radically feminist-humanist documentaries: *P4W: Prison for Women* (1981), which ventured inside the notorious Kingston Prison for Women, and *Hookers on Davie* (1984), which saw them mic-ing a diverse and rowdy group of sex workers in the tenderloin district of Vancouver, including memorable trans heroine, Michelle. Here, though, I want to focus on the first two shorts that the couple made together while Sheridan students in their early twenties, *Cream Soda* (1975) and *Minimum Charge, No Cover* (1976), because they contain the seeds not only for Cole and Dale's remarkable oeuvre, but also lay the groundwork for a profoundly ethical and anti-moralistic queer *verité* filmmaking.

In *The Romance of Transgression in Canada*, his encyclopedic tome on Canadian queer cinema, scholar Thomas Waugh aptly names Cole and Dale's relationship with their often-marginalized subjects as "unconditional identification." Is it possible that what makes their rapport with their subjects so compelling and distinctive — unique even now, four decades later — is, quite simply, love? The intense identification, emotional intimacy and political solidarity that Cole and Dale show in all their films would arguably be impossible without their deep concern and affection for "our people", an alternative family of folks who had essentially been cast away from their biological parents and cut loose from the safety net of mainstream Canadian society: street kids and drug users, prostitutes and prisoners, women and queers of all kinds.

When I recently spoke to Cole on a frosty Toronto night, she declared: "film is sex." With its rich, jewel-like colors and its sensual grain, feel and look, 16mm film was arguably the perfect medium to document the denizens of Toronto's seedy '70s nightlife (even though Sheridan was also rife with video Portapacks for the taking). It is impossible to imagine the garish flashing signs lighting up Yonge Street; the glittering drag costumes; or the iconic image of bathing beauty Victoria in the artificially blue bathwater in *Minimum Charge, No Cover* — perfectly juxtaposed with graphic-print towels and wallpaper — being shot in video despite the medium's ascendant popularity. A materialist portrait of women working at the French Connection, an Elm Street body-rub parlor, Cole and Dale's first film *Cream*

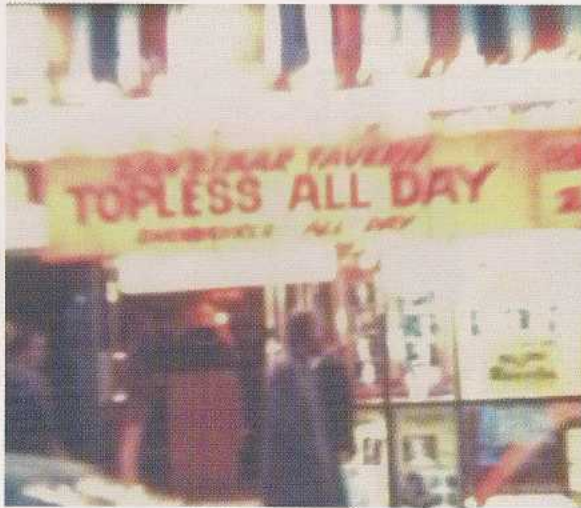
Soda is about the fine art of the hustle. The filmmakers were given full access to the premises as the owner owed Dale some money; the resulting film shows how, through body and talk, one can seduce a client into a sale. Beginning with hands counting \$20 bills, the 13-minute film captures the private and public spaces of the bawdy house in great detail, all achieved via wiretaps in the rooms. (Dale claimed in a 1982 interview that when any guys noticed her filming them, one of the working girls would say, "Oh, she's just my little sister; she's going to film school, don't pay any attention to her" — gender and youth working in her favor to get full coverage). The unvarnished, flesh-and-blood women whom we meet are everyday people, a far cry from the gussied-up fantasy that they represent to their johns. This distinction between backstage dressing room — where the women gossip while applying their makeup and donning their outfits — and the reception area where the women meet their clients (complete with an alcove of dirty magazines to get the men in the mood) is sharply delineated, a nod to all the labor that goes on behind the performance of gender and sexuality.



Cole and Dale's irreverence is tangible not just in their candid and matter-of-fact visual documentation of this sexual space and discussions with the women about how they work, what it's like and how Canada's prostitution laws impact them — one memorable line is: "I put their sperm in a tissue and throw it in the wastebasket" — but in witty details like the sound of a man reciting the cloying children's song "Jesus Loves Me" while being dominated, next to what would seem to be more fitting tunes like "Big Spender." As critic Kay Armatage has suggested, there is a claustrophobic quality to the

film too: its world is confined to this dark, mercantile establishment; its narrative is closed and circular. (Another critic, Joyce Nelson, noted a similar circular repetition in *Hookers on Davie*, which returns to the workers' same stroll and the same tavern night after night.)

The fact that the conversations with the women in *Cream Soda* often aren't synced to the footage lends the film a dynamic energy and gritty, direct-cinema realism that is a far cry from the staid talking-head format favored by institutional producers like the National Film Board of Canada, which strives to authoritatively tie voice to face in a confessional tableau of pure authenticity. Instead, with words floating freely over images in Cole and Dale's work, the possibility of artifice and fabulation is left open, acknowledging the insufficiency of documentary "truth" in capturing an environment that is all about trafficking in a carefully stage-managed fantasy. "Queers" or "prisoners" or "sex workers" do not get profiled and analyzed as subcultural communi-



Page 56-59: Janis Cole and Holly Dale, still from *Minimum Charge No Cover*, 1976, 16mm film, 11 min. Distributed by CFMDC.

ties in their films because Cole and Dale are focused on the idiosyncrasies of the individual and their intense relationships to one another, which add up to a community. Up-close-and-personal, these portraits boldly fly in the face of the most destructive and dehumanizing stereotypes and prejudices.

While only their first short film, *Cream Soda* was highly accomplished for two student filmmakers and

a perfect training ground for their follow-up *Minimum Charge, No Cover*, which takes the eclectic polyphony of *Cream Soda* to its zenith. As Armatage describes it, their second short film is an open-ended, improvisatory collage that offers us no formal introduction or context for the memorable people we meet. Here the friends Cole and Dale observe and interview are from all over the strip, from Zanzibar to Le Coq d'Or, rather than a single business, and we get to know them through shots that are dynamically edited together in a free-wheeling collision of diverse opinions, lifestyles, genders, and sexualities. Together they ask the question of what is normal, and, of course, whether the very idea of "normality" is of any value anymore. We are given access to a 1970s, queer *avant-la-lettre* society where identity is blissfully unmoored from biology — a dazzling origin for my own queer Toronto of the 2010s.

The 11-minute film feels like a spontaneous "these are the people in your neighborhood" snapshot of the denizens of Yonge Street, most of whom were Cole and Dale's friends, acquaintances or friends of friends. This is the chosen family who bought them groceries or gave them clothes when they couldn't afford any, who supported them while they were in school for three years, bleeding money they didn't have (and which they weren't particularly interested in having) with their ambitious 16mm film projects. Cole was one of few women driving a taxi to support herself while they were enrolled at Sheridan, a period of intense hardship for them. The films were produced out of poverty and with an aesthetic of poverty, and Cole doubts that neither Dale nor herself would have survived were they not in it together. When one didn't feel like she could continue, the other rallied her to go on. The total lack of moralizing or sanctimony in the films and their refreshingly frank points-of-view are the tangible evidence of their having been made by two street-involved filmmakers who had seen the rough stuff and endured the hard times themselves, and could jump in and say "that's life and you don't give up on people." There is no naïve hope that the system or The Man will improve their conditions. *Minimum Charge, No Cover* begins with an almost abstract shot of the lights of Yonge Street reflecting off a car door as a seductive woman gets out, and the sound of a prostitute and john arguing about money on the soundtrack. We first meet Victoria — a familiar face from *Cream Soda* — the beautiful ivory-skinned woman



in the bathtub, who we find out over the course of the film is trans; a sex worker dressed in businesswoman attire carving a giant roast beef for dinner with her young son; three black drag queens who appear both on and off stage; a man named Michael, who identifies as a “faggot” rather than as “gay;” and myriad go-go boys, “queens, dykes and hookers” that you would be likely to meet on any given Yonge Street corner in the mid-70s. The idea of “normality” is playfully shredded in favor of complexity and nuance: trans Victoria looks every bit the “normal” woman-born-woman — and being nude in the bath adds to her authenticity, as if she’s saying “I have nothing to hide, I’m coming clean” — while the roast beef dinner is highly stylized and stagey, much like every family dinner is a performance of an idealized image of domestic bliss. Already in 1976, homosexuality has come and gone as “the next big thing” among Michael’s sophisticated set, and all the subjects seem to know that other bodies, identities, practices, and affiliations are possible, even if they don’t have names for

them quite just yet. The film actually began as a feature about Victoria, but she had to abandon the project part-way through; its current fragmentary state broadens the canvas into a collective portrait, and it is all the more thrilling for its expanded scope. Like Cole and Dale’s later documentaries, it expertly intermingles observational scenes — à la Frederick Wiseman, one of their stated influences — with interviews and more explicitly performative moments, such as the musical numbers in both shorts: the drag routine to the disco-soul song “I Wouldn’t Give You Up” that closes *Minimum Charge, No Cover* and the extended sequence set to “Big Spender” in *Cream Soda*.

Cole and Dale’s questions to their subjects are earnest, fueled by a genuine and engaged curiosity, and range from the yes-or-no variety (like “do you go to church?” or “do you see your parents any more”) to more penetrating inquiries that allow their subjects to complicate their own performed self-representations. For example, when they ask Victoria, “when you were



Above and Right: Janis Cole and Holly Dale, still from *Cream Soda*, 1975, 16mm film, 13 min. Distributed by CFMDC.

a little boy, what did you want to be when you grew up?" she corrects them and clarifies that while she may have been born male, she never felt like a "little boy." She suggests they rephrase to, "when I was little, what did I want to be?" Later they ask a group of black drag queens (in their street clothes) about being homosexuals, and all resist the labeling. One beautifully sums up his philosophy as: "I enjoy living, I like girls and guys, and I'm me." It's important to note that Cole and Dale's films about sex work and sexual outlaws were not consciously forays into the feminist sex wars of the '70s and '80s. Their politics were experiential rather than rhetorical; polemics were of no interest when compared to representing with deep feeling their friends' personalities on celluloid, the stories of people who had shared troubled upbringings, and who forged their bonds — and their strong sense of justice, self-worth and care — on the streets. Cole told me that their imagined audience consisted of she and Dale, their mothers and those on camera. If anyone else wanted to join

then they were welcome, but on the makers' and subjects' terms. One critic noted, "they make films to fill the needs of their own search for truth" while another underlines the fact that they're not "social workers or anthropologists." The young duo were not even conscious of their difference from the mainstream until they showed their films to their classmates — who most definitely *were*n't living the "downtown lifestyle" — and at film festivals, where they were being exposed to audiences and critics for whom the subjects of their films were completely "other" rather than near and dear. (The shorts were widely viewed, traveling quite extensively for student films.) Cole and Dale's queer everyday became the object of voyeuristic fascination for the mainstream.

Cole and Dale's short films were also made immediately before the notorious Emmanuel Jacques case of summer 1977, when Jacques — a twelve-year-old shoeshine boy — was brutally raped and murdered after being lured by a man into an apartment above a



Yonge Street body-rub parlor. The crime and resulting scandal presented a terrifying, demonic spectre of queer sexuality, and sparked a mass movement that successfully cleaned up the infamous pleasure district. In addition to memorializing a lost era of public sexual self-performance, Cole and Dale's short films each also stand as monuments to their many subjects who died way too young: of AIDS, of overdoses, of suicide; of neglect, powerlessness, imprisonment. Both of Cole and Dale's student films make you realize what a gift it is for someone to allow the camera into their lives; there is a palpable sense of generosity suffusing the director/subject relationship in both directions, as if to say: "in exchange for you opening up to me, I am going to represent you in the most honest way possible, with love and respect." It was not about a person of privilege shining the light of visibility from a safe distance onto an invisible other lurking in the shadows, but a cinema of absolute *complicity*. Cole told me that "production is a privilege,"

and that when they began making films about strangers rather than their social circle, they became friends during the shoot, as if the films would be unthinkable without camaraderie and loyalty. Or as Dale once put it: "In our first two films, our friends were our subjects, now our subjects become our friends."

The author apologizes for the poor quality of the digital stills taken from the films. Janis Cole and Holly Dale's films are distributed through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre cfmnc.org