

K8 Hardy's *Outfitumentary*

Wednesday, April 25, 2018 at 7pm — The Roxie Theater

Presented in association with Frameline and the Roxie Theater

I discovered video art through punk rock and riot Grrrl, and through artists and bands that were making videos in that scene. Video was the easiest way for me to make my own statement, to represent myself as a young angry woman, and to get the work out there. I had previously been making small zines and mailing them all over the states. I had a drive to tell my own story. Outfitumentary was a step beyond. Video was also a way for me to express my queer identity and articulate my thoughts of gender as performance. I was connecting the sexual politics with the experiential. And I was connecting an experimental process with queer politics. This is a Gesamtkunstwerk.

— K8 Hardy

For ten years, beginning in 2001, artist and filmmaker K8 Hardy documented her daily outfits on video according to a very simple set of self-imposed rules. Over an eleven-year period, until the camera broke, she captured these outfits—and outfitting—on a fairly consistent, if not daily basis, using the same “shitty” mini-DV camera, filming in an ever-changing series living spaces and art studios in New York. The result of this disciplined process is the fascinating *Outfitumentary* (2016), a thrilling evolutionary document of life and living, fashion and persona in 21st Century New York; an episodic first-person account of a young, lesbian feminist dressed and styled in her “coming of age;” and an examination of coded fashion statements and subcultural communication in the pre-instagram era. (Steve Polta, San Francisco Cinematheque)

Outfitumentary (2001-2011/2015) by K8 Hardy; digital video, color, sound, 90 minutes, exhibition file from the maker

K8 Hardy: The main rule was to get one head-to-toe shot of my look as often as I could or felt like it. I also wanted to do a spin in the beginning, but that requirement faded. I just had this moment where I thought everything that’s happening is interesting and what we’re wearing is interesting and weird and I should just document it for ten years. That was my plan from the very beginning, “I’m going to do this for ten years.”

Elisabeth Subrin: Wow, I didn’t know that ten years was the plan from the get-go.

KH: Yeah. I remember thinking it would only be interesting if I did it for a really long time, to see what happened over time and to capture my prime. I didn’t think what I was wearing in the moment was hugely relevant, but I had already noticed how much my style had changed and knew it would continue to evolve.

[...]

KH: I really just wanted to do it for myself when I started shooting. I didn’t know if there was going to be an audience for it or if it would just be in some archive. Four or five years into it I had the sense, thinking about the footage that had accumulated, that it could be interesting as an artwork one day. I just wanted to get the shot. I think the head-to-toe thing and the distance from the camera gives it this structure that is more practical and not about my best angle or whatever.

You do see me get more comfortable with the camera over time. At first I feel giggly and that it’s kind of funny, then I get really super comfortable and confident. I try out poses but that’s exactly what you see, that I’m trying them and not holding them. I guess there’s an awareness that I’m just copying poses, which is what posing is. And then I get bored with it.

ES: There is this amazing relationship to your body over ten years. Your body moves a lot less at the beginning. As we watch your lifestyle change and we witness you working in your bedroom, then in your

apartment and then having your studio—the first one's the Whitney ISP Program, right? Then by the end you're in a studio that has huge photographs that you're working on. Simultaneous to this portrait of what it's like to become an artist, there's also this sense of what it's like to grow up in your body.

KH: Yeah you end up seeing where I'm working, where I have the camera. It starts in my bedroom, and moves from apartment to apartment, and eventually travels into my studio. I would just shoot it based on logistics and having my video camera, I didn't think the location was very relevant, except that I needed enough space to get a full body shot. So it ends up showing where I'm working at the time. And of course it also ends up that the locations tell my story as much, if not more, than what I am wearing.

ES: There's something so beautiful and intriguing about that and the fact that you chose not to have other people in it. Now and then we hear the presence of a friend, but you're always alone. That's what you have to do when you're an artist, is be alone.

There's this sense of embodiment specifically as an artist. We don't know what relationships you're in. We don't know what's going on in your life. We just get this visceral, emotional affect that's very subtle. Over the course of ninety minutes you start to notice very minute differences in your mood.

Sometimes I feel like with art the best work is when you trust your instinct and have absolutely no idea if anybody will understand it.

KH: I guess that was another parameter, that it was just me in the shot and no one else. There had to be some kind of consistency in the project. I wanted it to be a focused document and at first I really thought I was just capturing my outfit. As I became a better performer, I was more aware of the mood that I was capturing. Then it evolves into something very real and I'm able to be myself in front of the camera without any effort of performance. Sometimes I would indulge in a mood, but I always tried to bring myself back to my original intentions and the structural parameters I had set up.

[...]

KH: I think it was really a feminist instinct to make this document. I didn't know what my life was going to be like as a lesbian and an artist. There were only one or two generations before me, the trailblazers, and I would have liked to see more of their lives. It's like saying, "Hey, I exist." It's also like saying, "Our lives are important!"

And it was a difficult time to figure out how to live, where to live, how to make work, how to pay the bills, and how to fucking survive in New York. I went through a lot of stuff, as everyone does, but I was always psyched to have been actually surviving. That's definitely in it.

[...]

KH: It's totally commentary. It's also practical because if you are thrifting, you have to stay ahead of the cycles and figure out what old pieces or patterns or cuts could be interesting. You can't be Now from second-hand. I was also playing with identity and was part of a queer subculture that had its own codes that I wanted to document. There was a specific underground queer-scene look and that is how we recognized each other. We had to do a lot of messaging in real life at that time. We weren't on Apps and phones with our sexualities. So that was part of my motivation. The secret and not-so-secret flagging, what happens in the everyday. I'm not a walking art piece but I wanted to capture this and be in control of it. ("Clothes Encounter: K8 Hardy talks to Elisabeth Subrin about her *Outfitumentary*. *ArtForum*. May 24, 2015. <https://www.artforum.com/slant/k8-hardy-talks-to-elisabeth-subrin-about-her-outfitumentary-50920>)