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Access to the information superhighway: An interview with artist Sara Diamond

In her writing and her art, Sara Diamond has developed a strong critique of the impact of technological change on jobs - how some people are working endless hours and others are unemployed. As Director of the Television and Video Program at the Banff Centre for the Arts, she has been exploring the positive potential of the new technologies.

"There has to be a way of bringing these technologies into the workplace, and into our daily lives and culture, which reflects human, appropriate and positive use. Cultural producers have a really important role to play in that process," she said. Diamond has been producing videos since the late 1970s.

Her work combines documentary and fiction, much of it grounded in oral history stories about the work women do. She studied social history and communications at Simon Fraser University, but labour history is more than an academic interest - when she worked as a clerical worker in Toronto, she campaigned with other workers against having to serve coffee; later, as a clerical worker in Vancouver, she participated in a feminist union.

With the Women's Labour History Project, Diamond has written, produced and directed many dramatic and documentary videos exploring the rich histories of women and working people, including *On to Ottawa* (1992), *The Lull Before the Storm* (1991), *Ten Dollars or Nothing* (1989) and *Keeping the Home Fires Burning* (1988). Her videos have been acclaimed by critics, winning awards at festivals in North America and Europe.

In *The Influences of My Mother* (1982), Diamond explored the mother-daughter relationship; in *Paternity* (1991) she examined the father-daughter relationship and the shifting nature of storytelling through gender, generations and technological change. *Paternity* is an installation piece furnished with eight ceiling-hung video screens and sofas upholstered in fabric printed with a map of New York City, where Diamond was born. The video screens project studio interviews of her father Jerome Diamond, shots of the New York urban landscape where he lived for many years, footage of Sara Diamond's imitative gestures, and texts by contemporary critical thinkers. When *Paternity* was shown at the National Gallery in 1992, the *Ottawa Citizen* review concluded that: "Sara Diamond's art puts visitors on an undefined ground where nothing is quite what it seems."

During the past few years, Diamond has been busy writing about the impact of the new technologies on artists and cultural production. Soon to be published is an article that evaluates new technologies "in terms of trying to find a critical space between a luddite, negative position and a McLuhanist completely pro-technology position."

"As these technologies get higher tech and require more capital, and therefore become more controlled by money, access becomes a fundamental issue. We need to look at ways for members of disenfranchised groups to have a legitimate space in that evolving culture."

"There are possibilities for virtual conferences or online discussions or exchanges, networked spaces where people can be there in real time but not as a physical presence. That has some interesting potential. I've been in discussions that are like cocktail parties, and that's maybe not so great, but over time you can develop that virtual community and exchange," she said.

Diamond noted that computer networking is a communication akin to letter-writing. "Writing letters is wonderful; it always has been. It's the kind of communication where you can have extended written conversations with people," she said, adding that eventually, online communication will allow not only written but also oral and visual conversations with people, and being able to engage with people at a distance and become intimate.

Computer communication lends itself to "distributed authoring," in which any number of people can write together, exchange information, and work on projects together online. "Distributed authoring allows for the spectator to actually change the content, or add to the content, to be a part of the process," Diamond explained. "In some ways, that can be a false situation where you say that anybody can be creative; we know that, but somebody has to set the context. One of the things that's been said about information and creativity is that creativity is really embedded in how information gets organised and accessed, so there's still a creative role to play."

When she speaks of the new technologies, Diamond projects her enthusiasm for the current creative climate. "This is a particular kind of moment - when technologies first come onstream, there's a kind of access for creative people and artists that disappears quite quickly, as people become capitalised and want ownership. We're still in this phase that things are relatively open-ended. And that's really exciting."