

# The Spanish Lesbian Collective LSD: A Closer Look to Their Video-Essay *Retroalimentación* (1998)

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**The Spanish lesbian collective LSD: A closer look to their video-essay *Retroalimentación* (1998)**

Esther Pérez Nieto

**1. Introduction. Birth of LSD**

In 1993, the group LSD (Lesbianas sin duda / Lesbians without a doubt) was created in Madrid, in the downtown neighbourhood of Lavapiés. The main purpose of the collective can be summed up by the testimony of one of its most committed members, Fefa Vila:

Our idea was above all to address everything that seemed normative, imposing, oppressive, without thinking that we were going to have immediate effects both in terms of uniting people, in our group, and in terms of a "revolutionary effect" in the medium or short term; we wanted to tell our own story and intervene in space and politics from very local positions<sup>1</sup>.

It was a heterogeneous group of artists who wanted to make an impact on society with their art. The network of young women who broadly constituted LSD included Itziar Okariz, Virginia Villaplana, Fefa Vila, Azucena Vietes, Marisa Maza, Liliana Couso, María José Belbel, Carmen Navarrete, Beatriz Preciado, Carmela García, Helena Cabello and Ana Carceller, among others.

In the same year as LSD's birth, another collective committed to the struggle for LGBT+ rights emerged in the Spanish capital under the name of La Radical Gai (Radical Gay), with which they maintained a close relationship. This group, together with LSD, led the first demonstrations for LGTB+ rights in Spain.

## **2. Object of analysis: *Retroalimentación* (1998)**

*Retroalimentación*<sup>2</sup> (*Feedback*, 1998) is a video essay directed by Virginia Villaplana, in collaboration with Liliana Couso. It was part of a collaborative project by LSD in an exhibition entitled *Transgénic@s*, by Koldo Michelena, at the Koldo Michelena cultural centre, in Gipuzkoa, Basque Country<sup>3</sup>. We have selected the video essay *Retroalimentación* as the object of study because it is one of the most comprehensive works of the LSD collective, as it brings together their photographic works, alongside their plastic works of collage and illustration. These acquire new significant links when they are used as filmic materials.

Our starting point was an insight into the catalogue *Apología/Antología: recorridos por el vídeo en el contexto español* (*Apology/Anthology: journeys through video in the Spanish context*), by the film distributor Hamaca<sup>4</sup>. In 2015 a compilation of 85 videos in DVD format and 250 works freely accessible on the Internet was released. They were articulated in five thematic routes delimited by the curators Gonzalo de Pedro, Eugeni Bonet, Fito Rodríguez, Neus Miró and Aimar Arriola. Among the titles of the sections were (*Ecografías de lo político: vídeo, movidas y post-poéticas* / *Ultrasounds of the Political: Video, troubles, and post-poetics*) and *Edición carnal: producción cuerpo-sexo-género en el vídeo* / *Carnal editing: body-sex-gender production on video*). The video essay *Retroalimentación* was selected to be part of the latter, curated by Aimar Arriola. The web interface of the project establishes transversal connections between the routes thanks to several search tools, including a classification of titles in twenty different categories. Some of them are body, self-portrait, feminisms, appropriation, audiovisual essay, genre, and performance.

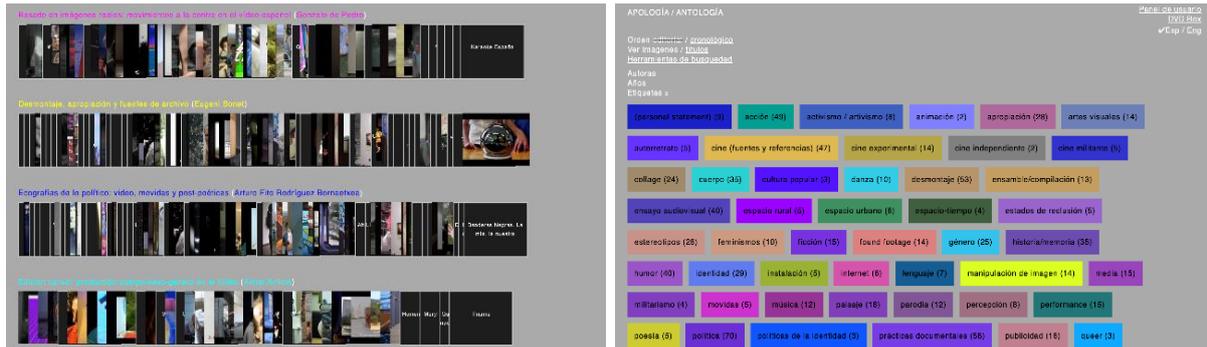


Figure 1. Film search interface in the Apology/Anthology catalogue. Source: *Apología/Antología*. Hamaca.

The piece *Retroalimentación* has a duration of 5 minutes, and together with another piece by the author entitled *Escenario Doble*<sup>5</sup> (*Double Stage*, 2004), which was codirected with Angelika Levi, make up a diptych entitled "Escenario doble, género, DIY y feminismo" (*Double Stage, gender, DIY and feminism*). The aim of both essays is to contribute to feminist and queer activism by questioning traditional filmic forms so that cinema becomes a thinking vehicle.

### 3. Video as a feminist tool

The 1990s in Spain witnessed an artistic explosion in the field of video art. The confluence of technical and ideological factors, which had taken place in Europe two decades earlier, triggered a burgeoning feminist artistic action. New film formats like 16mm and Super-8, and then the spreading use of video cameras allowed women to get small equipment with which to make self-produced films. This led to the emergence of feminist video collectives. One of those that gained a certain international recognition was the group called Les Insoumuses, an active contributor to the MLF (*Mouvement de Libération des Femmes- Women's Liberation Movement*). The collective was formed by the filmmaker Carole Roussopoulos, the acclaimed actress Delphine Seyrig, the sociologist Nadja Ringart and the translator Ioana Wieder<sup>6</sup>.

Together they conveyed their political-aesthetic commitment via documentary films and experimental pieces like *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (1976).<sup>7</sup>

The video format has been acknowledged as a useful tool for social intervention. “[E]ven as video now serves numerous interests and needs, its long-presumed public function remains significant for human rights activism”<sup>8</sup>. Sandra Ristovska identifies four key values in video activism, which are considered to be characteristic of feminist struggles, then and now. First, its intervention in the public dialogue regarding cultural and environmental issues, or the economy and the urgency of new social policies. Secondly, video activism assumes open and collective forms in its production. According to the author, its strength lies in collectives using video for a purpose, be it to create a sense of community, to embrace identities or to promote the adoption of a committed citizenship. Thirdly, video allows alternative visions and voices to reach the population. Thirdly, video allows alternative visions and voices to reach the population, since, as explained above, its production is more accessible to agents that do not have significant funding, whether public or private. Finally, video activism has proven useful in recognising the importance of the emotional realm within struggles for democratic engagement.

Cinema considered as feminist, especially since the outbreak of the Second Wave in the 1970s, was characterized not only by questioning the role of traditional female characters, but also by a shift towards the relationship with the female audience. In the words of Julia Lesage, its role became that of revealing “a picture of the ordinary details of women's lives, their thoughts — told directly by the protagonists to the camera— and their frustrated but sometimes successful attempts to enter and deal with the public world of work and power”<sup>9</sup>. This meant a shift in the paradigms of women's representation on screen.

#### **4. A brief overview on the LSD's main works**

The LSD group was characterised by the adoption of satirical language for self-designation, sometimes turning insult and lesbophobia into playful creativity. Among their criticisms were the capitalist system and the political strategies of militarisation and war. They were also notable for maintaining a pro-sex discourse while at the same time supporting responsible AIDS prevention measures. One of their main activities was the self-publishing of fanzines, in which the members wrote critical texts on art and politics, as well as publishing their photographs, illustrations and collages. They created four different fanzines from 1994 to around 1998, including *Non Grata* and *Bollozine* (Lesbian cinema)<sup>10</sup>. They were dedicated to film, music, photography, and the Spanish queer art scene overall. In addition, between 1994 and 1995 they carried out two photographic projects that are already part of the national lesbian imaginary: *Es-Cultura lesbiana* (It's / or ES (España) / lesbian culture) and *Menstruosidades* (Monstrosities). They also played with the acronyms of their name: *lesbianas sexo diferente* (lesbians different sex), *lesbianas sediciosas deliciosas* (lesbians seditious delicious), *lesbianas sin dinero* (lesbians with no money), *lesbianas sudando deseo* (lesbians sweating desire), *lesbianas sin dios* (lesbians no god), *lesbianas son divinas* (lesbians are divine). This collective, which uses artistic channels for activism, takes a model of a community that is no longer a conqueror of rights (liberalism) but rather a destroyer of all aspects of a hierarchical society.

Queer activism is located at the margins of representation, understood as “an abject margin full of monsters, in which race, class and sex are mixed, ready to come to light and destabilize the dominant discourses”<sup>11</sup>. Violence is no longer understood individually but within a social structure. Some of these artists later continued their careers with video actions and performances in public places, exposing their bodies and thus problematising their gender and

sexual orientation, as several of them contributed to the visibility of lesbians in Spain at the turn of the century.

### **5. *Retroalimentación* (1998), by Virginia Villaplana and Liliana Couso**

In this piece, directed by two members of the LSD group, the filmmakers pay homage to its artistic and combative work and, at the same time, propose the cinematographic device as a means for artistic expression against hegemonic aesthetics. *Retroalimentación* has been described as an experimental editing exercise, but also as an essayistic documentary. This is because it has become a document of queer activism through art, that in turn was in the 1990s an autobiographical portrait of LSD artists as lesbian women.

#### **5.1. Form cracking**

This video essay is an attempt to unite form and content by conveying a disruptive message through a montage that could be described as abrupt, shocking, even aggressive<sup>12</sup>. It opens with a rapidly spinning vortex, which, like a black hole, transports us inside the audiovisual work, as if absorbing the spectator. Then images of the collective's photographic work begin to follow one after the other. The most interesting aspect of their display is that they are cut off. The fact that the image is out of frame contributes to transmitting a sense of confusion for a few seconds, as it is not possible to distinguish what the images represent.

Thirty seconds in, it becomes possible to read on the screen the letters of the photographic project *Es-Cultura Lesbiana*, which were written on the legs of several of its members and then photographed. This is a clear reference to the subject of this video essay. From here on, parts of women's bodies begin to appear, again cut up. The bodies of the protagonists never appear complete. Once again, the spatial vortex reappears, which, in the form of a frenetic marker,

separates the first minute of this audiovisual work. In the next thirty seconds, again separated by a vortex, the women's bodies are already put into context: they are members of a lesbian community. Although they still appear fragmented, their body parts are recognisable. Their portraits are no longer only photographic, but also captured on video. These are coloured images, in contrast with the black-and-white or desaturated photographs, bringing the tactile sensation of bare skin closer to the audience. We can see breasts, genitals, and lips, in a clear celebration of lesbian sexuality. At minute 1:30, two dolls dressed in old swimming costumes appear kissing. Seconds later, in a very similar shot, two women kiss in the underground. The camera takes long shots and then close-ups, just like it does with the dolls. A comic touch is introduced with a brief shot of a civil guard officer gesturing a refusal with his hand as if to say: you cannot kiss in public. The structure of the vortex that enters every fifteen to thirty seconds is repeated throughout the piece. Black and white film footage of women walking down the streets of a city will also appear several times, alternating with recent colour images of other women acting accordingly. A new swirl will mark the end of the video essay's montage sequences to give way to the credits. In them there is a first acknowledgement to the LSD collective, followed by the credit to the music composed by Flo Krouchi and the surnames of the filmmakers at the end. Once again, a vortex appears, which this time seems to pull us out of the universe of *Retroalimentación* and back in the real world.





Figure 2. Stills from *Retroalimentación* (1998), by Virginia Villaplana and Liliana Couso. Source: *Apología/Antología*. Hamaca

The aesthetic of *Retroalimentación* is reminiscent of the psychedelic music videos that emerged in the 1980s, giving it a fresh and youthful feel, which is related to queer discourses during the AIDS crisis. With the threat of death ever present and facing the loss of multiple partners, friends and family members, the queer community battled the state's neglect with artistic initiatives outside the museums, street rallies and protests, and big parties where non-normative identities were welcome. One of the features that Fredric Jameson attributed to the artistic interest of postmodernity was the fragmentation of the subject. This was related to a new model of superficiality that came to dominate both aesthetics and thought. However, according to the author, it did not mean that cultural products were devoid of feelings, but that such feelings were to be referred to, using the terminology of J. F. Lyotard, as intensities, which tended to be dominated by a peculiar euphoria"<sup>13</sup>. This language was also adopted by the LGBTQ+ community.

## **5.2. An autobiographical portrait of the lesbian community**

In her classic work “Women's Pictures. Feminism and Cinema” ([1982] 1994) Annette Kuhn argues that this way of making films adopted the working methods of the direct cinema movement. However, feminist documentaries did not seek objectivity anymore. These women filmmakers transformed the non-intervention style of direct cinema due to a political positioning. Kuhn explains that “[i]f there is any structural principle governing the organisation of feminist documentary film, it is that provided by autobiographical discourse”<sup>14</sup>. This piece corroborates the autobiographical character of the LSD collective's works, which put together constitute a self-portrait not only of some of its members who posed for the photographs, but also of their theoretical approaches to art. The second half of the essay features vintage images of women walking down the street and looking at the camera. There are brief shots of foreground texts interwoven with them, which function as the key words of a scientific text. Among them we can find: “language play”, “slowly” and “look at”. During the third minute block, it shows the photograph and name of a Spanish poet who was an anarchist and feminist militant, as well as openly lesbian amongst her friends: Lucía Sánchez Saornil. As a poet, painter, and feminist advocate, among her actions she was co-founder of the organization *Mujeres Libres*, of which she was national secretary. She became one of the first testimonies of affirmation of female homosexuality in Spain. (Miguel, Rostichelli and Lemos Silva, [1935-39] 2016, 13-28). This shows that the portrait through the moving image goes beyond the artists who have participated in the production of this audiovisual piece but is also a tribute to the lesbian women who have preceded and inspired them. In her acclaimed essay “The Uses of Anger,” Audre Lorde focused on racism toward black women, at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference in 1981. In the text she examined different situations faced by other lesbian and coloured women like herself and acknowledged in first person that “if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their

oppressions but also to my own, and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment."<sup>15</sup>

## **6. Conclusion**

Two main observations can be noted from the piece *Retroalimentación*. First, its content works as a tribute to activism through an artistic action that a group of women led at the turn of the century. LSD fought for LGBT+ rights, but also against economic and political injustices in the Spanish context.

Second, with regard to its filmic form, it is a piece that incorporates many of the features attributed to the audiovisual essay by several studies that had been conducted in recent years (Mínguez and Manzano Espinosa 2020; Català 2014; Rascaroli 2017; Corrigan 2011)<sup>16</sup>. Most notably, *Retroalimentación* has a didactic/epistemological vocation because it is presented to the author as a helpful way to learn about a subject and at the same time to make it available to the public. In addition, another aspect that characterizes this type of work is its indeterminacy and ambiguous character. This is how Josep Maria Català approaches it when referring to the main features of the audiovisual essay, since it acts "thus clearly inverting the procedure of classical dialectics, which prefers the closure of the synthesis to the disconcerting space that unfolds between the thesis and its antithesis"<sup>17</sup> (Own translation). For the artistic and audiovisual work of the LSD collective, it was vital to have the means of image production at their disposal, such as photography and video. The video essay has proven its suitability as a tool for politicised artistic action, due to its permeability to experimentation, its easy reach and its adaptation to the non-normative discourse of the LGBT+ community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fefa Vila, “Fefa Vila: LSD. Extracts transcription”. Interviews by Gracia Trujillo and Marcelo Expósito. (Madrid-Barcelona: Archivo 69. MACBA Collection, 2004) (Own translation from Spanish). [https://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito\\_lsd.pdf](https://marceloexposito.net/pdf/exposito_lsd.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Retroalimentación* (1998). Virginia Villaplana & Liliana Couso. [Short video essay]. Spain: LSD.

<sup>3</sup> Vila, “Fefa Vila: LSD. Extracts transcription”, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> Hamaca, *Apología/Antología: recorridos por el vídeo en el contexto español* (Apology/Anthology: journeys through video in the Spanish context). (Hamaca, Tabacalera, University of the Basque Country, AC/E, Cameo, Hangar, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> *Escenario Doble* (2004). Virginia Villaplana & Angelika Levi, Angelika. *Spain: International University of Andalucía, Arte y Pensamiento, BNV Producciones*.

<sup>6</sup> Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Giovanna Zapperi (eds.), “Musas insumisas: una introducción,” in *Musas insumisas. Delphine Seyrig y los colectivos de vídeo feminista en Francia en los 70 y 80*, [Exhibition catalogue]. N. Petrešin-Bachelez y G. Zapperi (Curators) (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía / Reina Sofia National Art Center Museum, 2019), p. 12-73.

<sup>7</sup> *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (1976). Les Insoumuses: Paris: Carole Roussopoulos, Ioana Wieder, Delphine Seyrig, Nadja Ringart.

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Ristovska, *Seeing Human Rights. Video Activism as a Proxy Profession*. (Cambridge, EE. UU. – Londres, Reino Unido: The MIT Press, 2021), p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Lesage, “The political aesthetics of the feminist documentary film”. *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 4 (1978): p. 507.

<sup>10</sup> In Spanish the word bollera comes from the person who makes and/or sells buns. This word is used in slang language with the meaning of vulva. In Latin America, it is also compared to food. In Mexico lesbians are called tortilleras, in Colombia areperas and in Venezuela cachaperas.

Another etymological origin of Bollera comes from the woman who in ancient Greek civilisation drove the oxen and had a leading role in some orgiastic rites between women. The fact that the function of driving oxen was attributed to men is also connected to the references to masculinised professions to name, usually derogatorily, lesbian women, such as truck driver, welder or lumberjack.

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Verónica Font, “¿‘Bollera’ o ‘Boyera’?”, *Revista Mirales*. (18 February, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Daniel J. García. *Rara Avis: Una teoría queer impolítica* (Sta. Cruz de Tenerife, Spain: Melusina, 2016), p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> The essay is in line with one of the seminal texts that initiated the so-called Feminist Film Studies: Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema,” in *Notes on Women’s Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston. Screen Pamphlet 2. (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), p. 24-31.

<sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Teoría de la postmodernidad*. (Madrid: Trotta Ed, 2020), 36. [Originally published in 1991, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham, EE. UU.: Duke University Press)].

<sup>14</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures. Feminism and Cinema (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. (London-Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, [1982] 1994). [Originally published in 1982, London-Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul], p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger”. *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 9 (3) (fall, 1981): p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Norberto Mínguez, & Cristina Manzano Espinosa, “The essay in Spanish contemporary audiovisual media: definition, production and trends”, *Communication & Society*, 33(3) (2020): 17-32.

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<sup>17</sup> Josep Maria Català, *Estética del ensayo. La forma ensayo, de Montaigne a Godard*. (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de Valencia, 2014), p. 288.

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