

TEAR SHEET NOT AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME.
BELOW IS TEXT of all mention of Rosenthal:

Deirdre Boyle, Sightlines

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"Video Playback: Less is More, and other Video Verities"

by Deirdre Boyle

While viewing the videotapes in this year's Global Village Video and Television Documentary Festival, I renewed my subscription to the "less is more" philosophy. Independent Video began by adhering to this aesthetic out of sheer necessity. With only half-inch black-and-white equipment and either no editing or only primitive systems available, a tape had to rely on the sheer intimacy and immediacy of the medium and on presenting people and topics one wouldn't ordinarily encounter on TV or in the movies. Today, 14 years after the first portapak was sold in the United States, just about everyone is trying to outstrip television with slick and gratuitous visuals, dizzying quick cuts, fancy computer graphics, living color (frequently out-of-registration!) heckling interviewers, and a crazy-quilt montage that serves more to confuse and distract viewers than to inform, inspire or delight them.

Few independents are courageous enough to let their subjects come across in the simple, direct way that was once video's hallmark. That's why it was so refreshing to discover, amid all the "televisionese" evident in this festival, HELEN WEBSTER: CANCER AND SELF-DISCOVERY by Barbara Rosenthal. Shot in black-and-white (probably on half-inch portapak), Rosenthal has let a marvelously articulate woman speak to us without embarrassment, with considerable laughter and occasional perplexity, about what it is like to live 15 years with cancer--"half-bald, with one breast, and a bag strapped to one side of my abdomen." With poems she's written and thoughts organized not to waste the viewer's time, Helen Webster is funny, moving and irresistible as she talks about sex, her fear of death, and thoughts about suicide.

Afficionados of standard TV-style might dismiss this tape for its monotonous, flat, poorly lit image and uneventful camerawork, yet this very "lack of style" is ideal here. Rosenthal's unobtrusiveness lets us come close. Her rapport with Webster is clear: One or two words and a happy laugh from behind her camera are the only audible traces of the sensitivity and warmth that encouraged Webster to share her intimate and at times painful thoughts. Rosenthal trusted her subject to convey -- through voice, gesture, facial expression and pregnant pause -- her many thoughts and feelings about her life. We watch without any sense of being voyeurs. We are friendly witnesses to her self-discovery. It is Rosenthal's trust in her subject and her own invisible presence that makes this a memorable tape -- far more successful than others with slick production values and no heart.

Real respect for the people one portrays and artful simplicity in presenting them sets aside "video art" from the hit-and-run style of TV interviews that merely scratch the surface and never reach beyond the producer's preconception. We need more tapes like HELEN WEBSTER: CANCER AND SELF-DISCOVERY, where simplicity lets the minds and hearts of other human beings shine through the electronic beam.

(Other individuals mentioned in separate sections of this article are Skip Blumberg, Philip Mallory Jones, Parker Auburn, Dan Reeves, Jerry Bass, and Maxi Cohen. For more information, contact ExperimentalTVCenter.org or eMediaLoft.org)