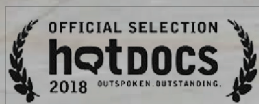


a film by IRENE LUSZTIG



PRESS KIT

<http://yoursinsisterhood.net/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/yoursinsisterhood/>  
[irene@komsomolfilms.com](mailto:irene@komsomolfilms.com)

YOURS in

SISTERHOOD

WMM A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

101 minutes | HD Video  
screening format DCP | English and ASL with English subtitles



## SYNOPSIS

What might be revealed in the process of inviting strangers to act out and respond to 1970s feminism forty years later? Between 2015 and 2017, hundreds of strangers in communities all over the US were invited to read aloud and respond to letters from the 70s sent to the editor of *Ms. Magazine*—the first mainstream feminist magazine in the US. The intimate, provocative, and sometimes heartbreaking conversations that emerge from these spontaneous performances make us think critically about the past, present, and future of feminism. *YOURS IN SISTERHOOD* is a collective portrait of feminism now and forty years ago that is newly urgent in the aftermath of the 2016 election—a project about time travel, embodied listening, empathy, public discourse, and the lost art of letter writing.



## Director's Statement

An angry woman in Atlanta talks about the harassment she experiences in public space. An aspiring police woman complains that the police station in her small Iowa town refuses to hire qualified women. A sixteen-year-old girl haltingly comes out as a lesbian for the first time. These are just a few of the thousands of fascinating letters to the editor—far too many to publish—that arrived at the *Ms.* magazine office in the 70s. These letters were written by women, men, and children of all ages, from all over the country, and from across the spectrum of sexual orientation, religious, racial, and ethnic background, physical ability, and political viewpoint. Spanning deeply personal accounts of individual problems, revelations, and political struggles, these 70s letters are a powerful invocation of the second-wave feminist slogan “the personal is political.”

I spent the summer of 2014 in the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America reading boxes containing thousands of these mostly-unpublished letters to the editor. What was most striking during my archival research is that the issues covered by these letters are still the same big issues that women and gender-nonconforming people are facing today—sexual harassment, violence, and assault, access to abortion and birth control, body image, workplace discrimination, gender and sexuality, race, class, and inclusivity.

Inspired by these incredible letters, in the summer of 2015, I set off on a journey to share these letters with ordinary people all over the US. I wanted to know if this rich collective archive of everyday feminist history and experience could be a catalyst for a new kind of national conversation about feminism today. Between 2015 and 2017, I filmed over 300 readings with volunteers in 32 different US states. Each project participant was carefully matched with a 70s letter sent from their own city or town and invited to read aloud and respond to their letter. I've filmed readings with people of all ages, gender identities, shapes, colors, and backgrounds on both coasts, in the Midwest, the Rockies, and the South, in remote rural areas and major cities. Filming these conversations with strangers alongside the election, its aftermath, the #metoo movement and much more, this project has felt increasingly timely and resonant—the stakes for how we create conversations about feminism right now feel higher and more urgent than ever.

I've also thought deeply about diversity and intersectionality throughout the making of this project, and it has been important to me to make sure my project reflects a very diverse range of current-day voices about feminism. Most of the letters that I have selected for the project were never published, which means that the project also creates an opportunity to give voice to many kinds of letters that didn't get a voice in the 70s (and to create an “alternative” history of 70s feminist conversation), including letters from transgendered and gender-

nonconforming readers, readers of color, working class readers, disabled readers, and other communities that may have felt marginalized by mainstream 70s feminism.

This project is about conversation, about making new connections across time and space, and about thinking of new and more inclusive ways for us to talk to each other—onscreen, online, and in person at screening events. Feminists have always understood that speaking up, listening carefully, and making space for others to speak is the most powerful way to start to build real change.

January 2018



*friends Jen and Char do a reading together in Madison, Wisconsin*



# BIOGRAPHY

IRENE LUSZTIG is a filmmaker, visual artist, archival researcher, and amateur seamstress. Her film and video work mines old images and technologies for new meanings in order to reframe, recuperate, and reanimate forgotten and neglected histories. Often beginning with rigorous research in archives, her work brings historical materials into conversation with the present day, inviting viewers to explore historical spaces as a way to contemplate larger questions of politics, ideology, and the production of personal, collective, and national memories. Much of her current work is centered on public feminism, language, and histories of women and women's bodies, including her debut feature *Reconstruction* (2001) the feature length archival film essay *The Motherhood Archives* (2013) and the ongoing web-based *Worry Box Project* (2011).

Born in England to Romanian parents, Irene grew up in Boston and has lived in France, Italy, Romania, China, and Russia. Her work has been screened around the world, including at the Berlinale, MoMA, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Anthology Film Archives, Pacific Film Archive, Flaherty NYC, IDFA Amsterdam, RIDM Montréal, Ambulante, and on television in the US, Europe, and Taiwan. She has received grants from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, Massachusetts Cultural Council, LEF Foundation, New York State Council for the Arts, and Sustainable Arts Foundation and has been awarded fellowships at the MacDowell Colony, the Flaherty Film Seminar, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and Harvard's Film Study Center. She is the 2016-17 recipient of a Rydell Visual Arts Fellowship and a Fulbright Fellowship in Portugal. She teaches filmmaking at UC Santa Cruz where she is Associate Professor of Film and Digital Media; she lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

photo: R. Ron Jones    dress: Irene Lusztig

# YOURS IN SISTERHOOD

## DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

- 2018 *Yours in Sisterhood* / feature-length performative documentary / HD video / 100 min.
- 2016 *Forty Years* / single channel video / HD video / 12 min.
- 2014 *Maternity Test* / gallery loop and single channel video / HD video / 14 min.
- 2013 *The Motherhood Archives* / feature-length archival cine-essay / 16mm, HD video, archival materials / 90 min. video / distributed by Women Make Movies
- 2011- ongoing *The Worry Box Project* / participatory web-based interactive art work and 3-screen installation project URL: [www.worryboxproject.net](http://www.worryboxproject.net)
- 2005 *The Samantha Smith Project* / DV, Super 8, archival materials / 51 min. video
- 2001 *Reconstruction* / DV, super 8, archival / 90 min. video / distributed by Women Make Movies
- 1997 *For Beijing with Love and Squalor* / Hi8 video / 58 min.

## SELECTED SCREENINGS AND BROADCASTS

- 2018  
Berlinale Forum, Berlin Germany  
Art of the Real, Lincoln Center Film Society, New York City, NY  
Worldwide Women's Film Festival, Scottsdale, AZ
- 2017  
NOW! Journal of Urgent Praxis showcase, Dikeou Pop-Up Space, Denver, CO  
Motherisms Symposium, Royal Danish Academy of Art, Copenhagen, Denmark  
Grrl Haus Cinema short film showcase, Brattle Theater, Cambridge, MA  
Poetics and Politics of Documentary Research Symposium, University of Sussex, UK  
Women Media Arts and Film Festival, Sydney, Australia  
Cure Park: The Art of Care, Amsterdam  
Mothers in Arts Residency program in Amsterdam  
Other Cinema, San Francisco  
Experimental Response Cinema, Austin TX

ICS University of Lisbon, Portugal  
LIPA Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra Portugal  
Miami University, Oxford, OH  
Indiana University Bloomington, Directed by Women screening event

2016  
Ambulante Documentary Film Festival, Mexico  
Exploded View Microcinema and Gallery, Tucson, AZ  
Creative Push Exhibition, Opening Screening, Arizona State University,  
Phoenix, AZ, gallery screening  
Mapping Maternal Ecologies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada  
Bethel College, Newton, KS, academic screening  
Vertical Cinema, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA  
NOW! Journal Presents: Shut it Down! An evening of radical cinema;  
Interference Archive, Brooklyn NY

2015  
Flaherty NYC, Anthology Film Archive, closing film, Winter program  
Women Media Arts and Film Festival, Sydney, Australia  
Drac Magic International Women's Film Festival, Barcelona, Spain  
Veggie Cloud, Los Angeles CA  
"Motherhood" exhibit, Lviv Art Palace, Ukraine  
"Pregnancy and Childbirth Reframed: Anthropological Perspectives from  
Portugal" conference screening, Center for Research and Studies in  
Sociology, Lisbon, Portugal  
"Maternity" exhibition, closing film, Visual Culture Research Centre, Kiev,  
Ukraine  
Poetics and Politics: a Documentary Symposium, UC Santa Cruz  
MIA / Moving Image Art, The Armory, Pasadena, CA  
Logan Square International Film Series, Comfort Station, Chicago  
Big Muddy Film Festival, Carbondale, IL  
Athens International Film + Video Festival, Athens OH  
Serbian Arts Festival, Belgrade

2014  
RIDM Montréal International Documentary Festival  
Concordia University, Montreal  
International Midwifery and Birth Film Festival at the annual Canadian Association of  
Midwives conference, Saskatoon  
Echo Park Film Center, Los Angeles "Experimental Medicine" Marvelous Movie Mondays  
series  
Clinton Street Theater, Portland, Oregon, cinema screening  
FemCine Muestra Magallanes, Puerto Natales, Chile, exhibition screening  
Cambridge University, Cambridge UK, academic screening  
University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, academic screening  
King's College, London, academic screening

FemCine Festival Cine de Mujeres, Santiago, Chile  
 The Little Theater, repertory screening, Rochester, NY  
 Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon, academic screening, Portugal  
 Other Cinema, ATA, San Francisco, CA  
 Big Muddy Film Festival, festival screening, Carbondale, IL  
 New Parkway Theater, repertory screening, Oakland, CA  
 Mother Strike! conference screening, Vilnius, Lithuania

2013  
 Women and Media Arts Film Festival, Sydney, Australia  
 London and Porto Underground Film Festivals (Cine-Rebis), London, UK and Porto, Portugal  
 Santa Cruz Film Festival, Santa Cruz, CA  
 Antimatter Film Festival, Victoria, BC  
 The Photographers Gallery, London, UK; Home Truths show  
 UCSC Center for Documentary Arts and Research and Anthropology Department co-sponsored  
 screening of The Motherhood Archives  
 Capilano University, Women's Studies and Film Departments, Vancouver, Canada  
 Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America Film Series  
 San Francisco State University, Department of Women and Gender Studies  
 Bowdoin College, Gender and Women's Studies Department  
 Colby College, inaugural event in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies  
 Reimagining Birth Symposium, University College Dublin, Ireland

2010  
 Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA  
 Romanian Cultural Institute, Bucharest, Romania

2009  
 reWIND 1989 film series, Romanian Cultural Institute, Stockholm, Sweden  
 Romanian Cultural Institute Film Festival, Stockholm, Sweden

2008  
 The Jewish Channel, cable TV broadcast

2007  
 Free Speech TV (Satellite Broadcast)  
 The Tank, New York, NYC  
 Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

2006  
 Chicago Underground Film Festival  
 New European Film Festival, Vitoria, Spain  
 Pioneer Theater, New York City (repertory / theatrical screening)  
 New Haven Women in Film Festival, New Haven, CT  
 Brooklyn Underground Film Festival  
 Maine Women and Girls Film Festival  
 New York Underground Film Festival  
 Puffin Foundation Cultural Forum, Teaneck, NJ  
 Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA



2005	IDFA Amsterdam International Documentary Festival, Silver Wolf Competition
2004	ARTE (France and Germany) public television international broadcast
2003	Haifa International Film Festival Berlin Jewish Film Festival Toronto Jewish Film Festival Independent Film Festival of Boston Fribourg International Film Festival, Switzerland Wisconsin Film Festival, Madison, WI Cleveland International Film Festival Boston University Non-fiction Film Festival Director's View Film Festival, Norwalk, Connecticut
2002	MoMA Documentary Fortnight, New York Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival National Council of Jewish Women Jewish Women's Film Festival Vancouver International Film Festival Atlanta Film Festival Jerusalem Cinemateque Repertory Screening Singapore International Film Festival It's All True Documentary Film Festival, Sao Paolo and Rio de Janeiro Docaviv Documentary Festival, Tel Aviv
2001	IDFA Amsterdam International Documentary Festival, FIPRESCI nomination Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1999	WYBE Philadelphia broadcast, "Through the Lens" documentary series Berlin Ethno Filmfest
1998	PTS Taiwan Public Television broadcast Boston Museum of Fine Arts Ovarvideo, Portugal Taiwan International Documentary Festival Singapore International Film Festival
1997	Merit Certificate, Chicago International Film Festival

# YOURS IN **SISTERHOOD**

CAST AND CREDITS

## **LETTER READERS:**

Maya Dijkstra  
Miranda Stearns  
Nat Savage  
Tia-Simone Gardner  
Chanel Craft Tanner  
Bess Higgins  
Isis Starr  
Kate Miller  
Marilyn Boyd  
Cecelia Ponzini  
Yvonne Pepin-Wakefield  
Rebecca Welhouse  
Pat Brock  
PJS

Madeline Van Ert  
Eileen C. Cherry Chandler  
Claudia E. Stallman  
Isabella Tate  
Cai Steele  
Katrina Montgomery  
Kathleen T. Leuschen  
Littisha Bates  
Trisha Pritikin  
Jenny Joy Wrenn  
Carla Tilghman  
Deena Metzger  
Brittany James

## **PROJECT CONCEPT / CASTING/ CAMERA EDITING:**

Irene Lusztig

## **PRODUCED BY:**

Komsomol Films / Irene Lusztig

## **SOUND DESIGN / TUNING FORKS:**

Maile Colbert

## **RE-RECORDING MIXER**

Jeremiah Moore

## **COLOR GRADING**

Gary Coates

**SOUND RECORDING AND PRODUCTION ASSISTANTS:**

Emily Chao (Los Angeles, Pacific Northwest, Southwest)

Francesca Enzler (Bay Area)

Anisa Hosseinnzhad (New England, Southeast, Rust Belt states, Midatlantic)

Victoria Chan & Tate Nova (New York)

Deborah Libby (Midwest)

Laura Conway & Anna Winter (Colorado / Rockies)

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Yael Taquu

**ADDITIONAL SOUND RECORDING:**

Jeny Amaya

Debra Bilodeau

Paris McGarry

Michelle Nakashima

Megan Needels

Courtney Faye Powell

**RESEARCH ASSISTANCE**

Jeny Amaya

Debra Bilodeau

Megan Needels

**ASSISTANT EDITING**

Jeny Amaya

Debra Bilodeau

Ana Valdez

**TRANSCRIPTION and TELEPROMPTER SCRIPTS**

Debra Bilodeau

Megan Needels

**ASL INTERPRETER**

Courtney Petri

**FUNDRAISING COORDINATOR**

Francesca Enzler

**LEGAL COUNSEL**

Karen Shatzkin

**DCP**

Cinematiq

**PARTIALLY FUNDED BY:** Rydell Visual Arts Fellowship, Arts Research Institute - UC Santa Cruz, Arts Dean's Excellence Fund - UC Santa Cruz, Committee on Research - UC Santa Cruz, Arts Council Santa Cruz County, Joan R. Challinor Award, Schlesinger Library, Indiegogo Backers

She asked me what I was going to be when I grew up and I said, the President. She thought that was a riot.

# Irene Lusztig

**Near Ms.** In the first interview in *Yours in Sisterhood*, filmed in 2016, a thirteen-year-old in Quincy, Massachusetts, reads a letter written by a thirteen-year-old from her town in 1973, to *Ms.* magazine. In it, the writer describes a bus journey in which she talked to the elderly woman sitting next to her, who can't believe the future that this young woman imagines for herself.

After all, it had only been a year since *Ms.* put out its first full issue, featuring the headline **WONDER WOMAN FOR PRESIDENT**, and since Shirley Chisholm—the first African American congresswoman—had announced her candidacy for the President of the United States. She didn't succeed, but when Irene Lusztig started shooting



*Yours in Sisterhood* in 2015, it looked like Hillary Rodham Clinton might. The young reader of the letter says:

“Now there’s a woman President. Well, there’s a woman President running, and I think she has a chance.”

What a near *Ms.*, from the perspective of 2017, as Lusztig is completing the film begun in a moment of hope, researching the archive of unpublished letters held at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, at Radcliffe College. The film bridges the moments of expectation and—with a reading by a woman in an interracial relationship in North Carolina, who tries to contain her emotions while describing a KKK parade that followed the 2016 election—devastation.

The opening interview is poignant as well as bitterly ironic, because its multiple lines of possibility are familiar from another kind of 1970s American feminism: its rich legacy of science fiction. What thus emerges from the film is feminism’s commitment—to paraphrase Emily

Dickinson—to “dwell[ing] in possibility.” A near *Ms.* gets close, asks us to be open.

It’s particularly poignant to be finishing this essay so soon after the death of Sheila Michaels, the campaigner who popularized the honorific “*Ms.*” In 1969, she gave an interview to WBAL Radio, 99.5FM, in New York that caught the ear of Gloria Steinem, searching for a name for her proposed magazine. *Yours in Sisterhood* restores to the letters that which the word *Ms.* offers: a feminist address, a way of being heard.

Particularly for voices that remain marginalized: a young African American woman who says “I want to be behind the camera, I want to be in the writers’ rooms;” an ASL speaker who animates a letter from an “angry but loving lesbian” feeling unrepresented by *Ms.*; and a Lakota elder who links colonial-era violence to that faced by the water protectors at Standing Rock.

In the gallery, *Yours in Sisterhood* will play on a loop, its form emphasizing this sense of repetitions—not only in the recurrent issues, but also in reappearing bodies. Claudia Stallman,

reading her own coming-out letter to *Ms.*, says “I like that the letter is in my own handwriting. I sat down at my desk—I can see where.”

The word *Ms.* is also a work of science fiction in itself: a new word recognizing a new state of being. One letter-writer asks the magazine to support the gender-neutral pronoun they have coined: *ahon* (a, her/she, him, one). The contemporary reader in Emporia, Kansas—who uses female pronouns but finds that others may not use them for her—looks back to this letter from 1975 and comments, “It’s almost eerie.”

“A new word,” she concludes, “why not? If we can invent *bae*, why not *ahon*?” *Yours in Sisterhood* delves into the archive and renews the word, bringing neglected letters into the circulation they sought, and changing their unpublished pasts into public futures where their voices are heard. It uses the letter as a form of time travel, and even teleportation.

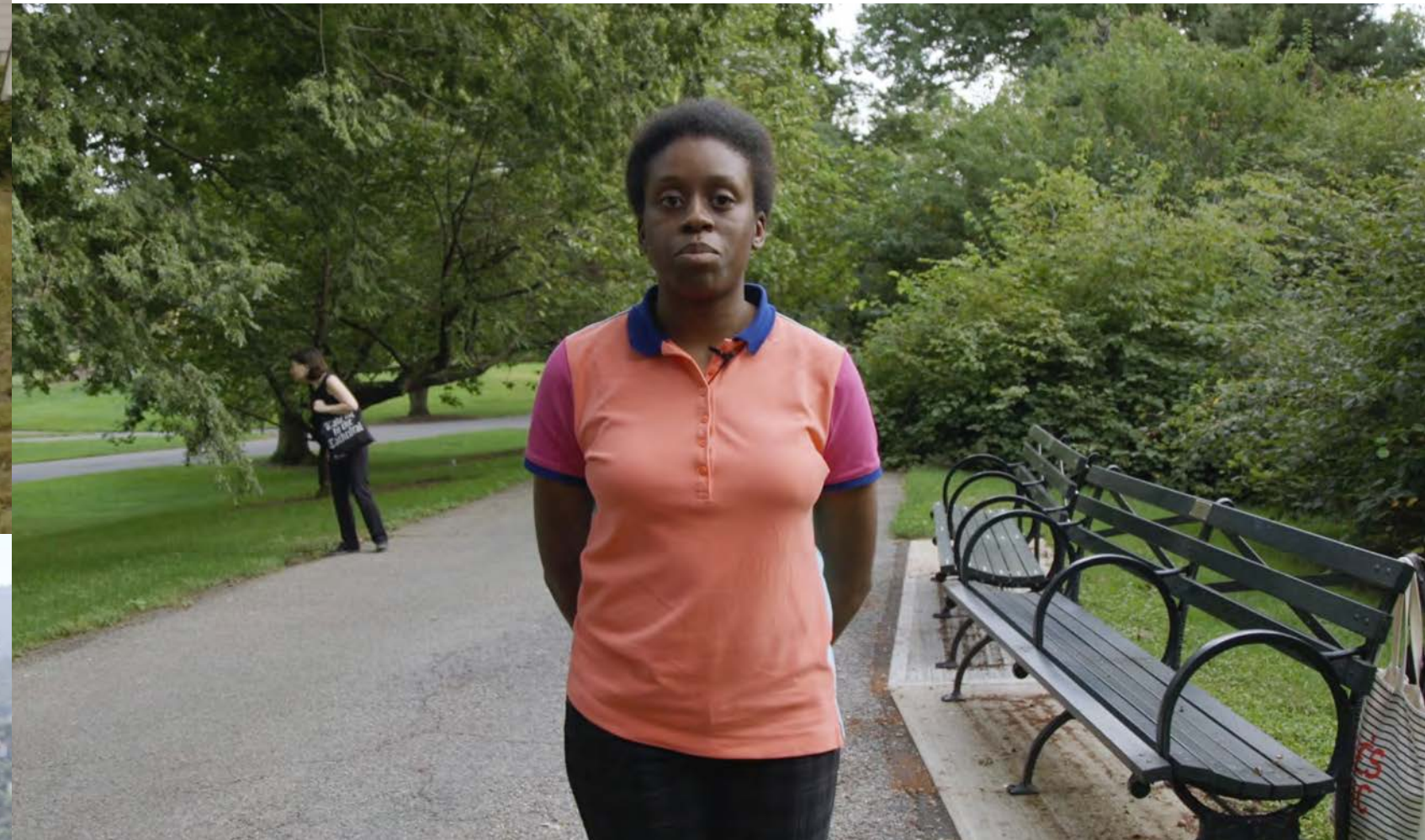
This is science fiction of the highest order: moving non-linearly through time and space, beaming us from past to future and back again,

transforming bodies into other bodies through quantum connections. A film that could have been a valuable but static time capsule becomes instead a spaceship searching for its own lost futures, to activate them: in the bodies of us, its viewers, whom it also calls (knowing that some of us might prefer *ahon*, or *they*, or *he*; or be pleased with the recognition), to whom it also gives the responsibility of being or becoming, *Sister*.

### **Sophie Mayer**

Author of *Political Animals*:

*The New Feminist Cinema*



Pages 46–55, all images from:  
*Irene Lusztiq, Yours in Sisterhood, 2017*  
Frames from single channel HD video loop









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## Yours in Sisterhood: The Film Connecting Feminists Through Vintage Letters to Ms.

January 18, 2018 by [Carmen Rios](#) | [1 Comment](#)



Inside the boxes, Irene Lusztig found secrets and stories kept safe for forty years. Inside each envelope was the voice of a woman she had never met, yet in their midst she felt solidarity and sisterhood. Nearly a half-century after they were sent, she opened and read thousands of letters sent by readers to *Ms.* during its first decade on newsstands—and discovered, in the process, how interconnected feminists could remain across long stretches of time.



Among the correspondence was a 1973 letter from an angry woman forbidden to wear a pantsuit to work, a 1975 letter from a woman who left her family life behind to find herself and a 1976 letter from a teenager wherein she comes out for the very first time. “Collectively,” [Lusztig wrote on the film’s website](#), “the letters feel like an encyclopedia of both the 70s and the women’s movement—an almost literal invocation of the second-wave feminist slogan ‘the personal is political.’”

Lusztig, an award-winning feminist filmmaker, archival researcher and professor, used the mostly-unpublished letters, stored at the Schlesinger Library, to connect over 300 women from across the country to their feminist co-conspirators across generations. The film for which that process gave way, *Yours in Sisterhood*, is a collective portrait of feminism across four decades—built uniquely through time travel and postage stamps.

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### ARCHIVES

Archives

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For the project, Lusztig took the letters on the road and took them home—traveling for over two years to 32 states with a camera and portable teleprompter to return to the cities where they were written and record a belated response from a feminist stranger. Participants in each city read a letter from their hometown sent nearly a half-century earlier on camera and then engaged in a dialogue with the original sender in a response recorded live.

Lusztig also found five of the original letter writers—women who had the rare opportunity to see correspondence long since surrendered to the postal service decades earlier and in a much different world. In the film, one woman named Yvonne revisits her first-ever letter to *Ms.*, which sparked years of correspondence between her and *Ms.* editor Valerie Monroe. In her initial letter, Yvonne declared her intentions to build a cabin and live mostly alone in the forest. Forty years later, she read that letter on the steps of her cabin.



Forty years later, Lusztig has finally located the feminist communities and counterparts *Ms.* readers sought and fostered in their letters to editors and staff. Four decades after the launch of a magazine that finally gave voice to the women's movement, the stories and struggles of *Ms.* readers are now building bridges between feminist history and the feminist future.

"I've filmed readings with people of all ages, gender identities, shapes, colors and backgrounds on both coasts, in the Midwest, the Rockies and the South, in remote rural areas and major cities," Lusztig wrote to supporters. "Along the way, I've built an incredible network of readers and supporters. Filming these conversations with strangers alongside the election, its aftermath, the #MeToo movement and much more, this project has felt increasingly timely and resonant—the stakes for how we create conversations about feminism right now are higher and more urgent than ever."



Rachel Montpelier

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News Editor at Women and Hollywood

Jan 18 · 2 min read

## "Yours in Sisterhood" Doc Brings '70s Era Ms. Magazine Letters to Life



"Yours in Sisterhood"

**A** lot has changed since Ms. magazine launched in 1971—and a lot hasn't. This ironic truth is something Irene Lusztig explores in her performative documentary, "Yours in Sisterhood." The project, the culmination of four years of work, sees contemporary women reading letters written to Ms. during the '70s. And many of Lusztig's modern-day subjects recognize parallels between the letters' contents and their own lives.

"There's always a need for feminism, there's always a need for anti-racist action. But [reading the letters] is really resonant," one woman observes in the project's trailer. "It reminds me that we're kind of moving backwards," another woman says, tearfully.

"Each project participant was carefully matched with a '70s letter sent from their own city or town and invited to read aloud and respond to their letter," Lusztig explains on the project's Indiegogo page. "I've filmed readings with people of all ages, gender identities, shapes, colors, and backgrounds." Since wrapping up the interviews, Lusztig has found that "Yours in Sisterhood's" relevance has only grown.

"Filming these conversations with strangers alongside the election, its aftermath, the #MeToo movement, and much more, this project has felt increasingly timely and resonant—the stakes for how we create conversations about feminism right now are higher and more urgent than ever."

Now in post-production, "Yours in Sisterhood" will hopefully make the festival circuit rounds and receive distribution from Women Make Movies. In order to meet these goals, Lusztig and her team launched a crowdfunding campaign this week. Contributions will go towards getting the film festival-ready and other expenses like sound, color correction, and marketing.

Lusztig previously directed the feature length archival film essay "The Motherhood Archives" and the doc "Reconstruction," among other projects. She has also worked as an editor and cinematographer.

Check out the trailer for "Yours in Sisterhood" below. If you're interested in donating to the project, go to its Indiegogo campaign.





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# DISPATCH

## FEMINIST MOVING IMAGE



**THE LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL: LSFF PREVIEW**  
JANUARY 10, 2018

### INTERVIEW: IRENE LUSZTIG



Irene Lusztig is feminist filmmaker, archival researcher, and film professor at UC Santa Cruz. For the past four years Lusztig has been working on a feature length film project *Yours in Sisterhood*. The project is based on her research on an archival collection of thousands of (mostly unpublished) letters to the editor sent from readers all over the country to Ms. Magazine in the 70s. The film project brings to the fore questions around how we start conversations about feminism more broadly, and resonates with contemporary movements such as #MeToo. We recently spoke to Lusztig about the importance of archives in feminism and her project *Yours in Sisterhood*.

Jennifer Shearman: How did you get into filmmaking?

Irene Lusztig: I started making films in college in the 90s. I was a painter in high school and early college, so always a visual thinker and hands-on maker. I stumbled into a filmmaking class by accident—I didn't like my drawing and painting teachers in my first year of college and decided to try out something else in the art department and got incredibly lucky with finding an amazing film program. I had never seen experimental, artisanal, or handmade films before and it had never really occurred to me that making a film was a thing a regular person, working on their own without a million dollar budget and a 200 person crew, might do. Nowadays the idea that anyone can make a film with everyday tools seems quite ordinary, but I remember going to a student screening for the first time, seeing 16mm film projected, and feeling like it was completely magical that someone my age—someone like me—could make something so extraordinary. Once I started taking film classes and watched lots of American avant-garde cinema (Brakhage, Peter Hutton, and many other men!) I quickly realized that there was this whole rich history of intimate, small scale, and single-authored filmmaking, and the idea of a medium that could use images, writing, thinking, observing the world, and scissors all at the same time felt really exciting and like the obvious thing that I wanted to do.

JS: What interests you specifically in archives?

IL: When I was a teenager in the pre-Internet late 80s / early 90s, any process of self-educating about underground cultures involved spending time getting your hands dirty, rummaging, and touching old objects—I spent a lot of time when I was younger in vintage clothing and used record shops looking for hidden or forgotten treasures, and I'm kind of a forager by nature. So when I first found myself in an archive it felt immediately exciting and familiar to be in a place full of piles of ephemeral things that hadn't been thought about in a long time and were waiting to be found. There's a sense of possibility and discovery in archival work that has always been really exciting to me—opening a box or a film can and finding a life, a gesture, words, documents, or moments that haven't been considered in a long time. I love spending time with found artifacts and images—not exactly as a historian, but as an artist—with a kind of expansive and open looking where there is lots of freedom to think about what feels moving, uncanny, beautiful, poetic, or urgent.

Thinking about the past is also always a way of thinking about the present political moment. The past is continuously shifting and changing in relation to where we are standing right now when we look at it. So that complicated relationship compels me as well: usually when I am working with archival materials I am thinking about the past, but also working through something about the present.



JS: Why are archives and archival research important to feminism?

IL: A million reasons! One of the enduring problems in feminist history (since the beginning of feminism) is forgetting the work done by previous generations. The whole “waves” model for understanding feminism gets at this issue very directly—with each generation, we reject our mothers’ feminism, start all over again, and in the process forget or abandon all the work that our own feminism is indebted to. I work with college students and spend a lot of my time with 20 year olds contemplating this problem: even though many of my students identify as feminists, they’ve never heard of *Ms. Magazine* or consciousness raising or Carolee Schneemann or the Women’s Building in L.A. or Mother Art or a million other historical things that are all incredibly important forebears that have made today’s feminism possible. My students don’t have to like or agree with the ideologies of all of these things (certainly intersectional feminist conversations about race and gender are in a very different place now than forty years ago), but they should know that this work was done and that they are standing on the shoulders of this work in many ways. I’ve recently started teaching a feminist filmmaking course, and it’s been really interesting to try to think through how to teach 70s feminism to younger feminist students. At the beginning of the course I showed a bunch of 70s documentary work (like *Womanhouse*) and my students hated it—all of them wrote about how the work was essentialist and overly preoccupied with unimportant questions about reproduction and domesticity. One of my former students, who worked on *Yours in Sisterhood* as a research assistant, once told me that she rejected everything 70s (i.e. white and middle class) feminism stands for. I pointed out that the 70s letters to *Ms.* included letter after letter from women who weren’t allowed to wear pants to work or get bank accounts in their own name. If you’re wearing pants and have a bank account right now, you can’t just reject 70s feminism. You have to do the much messier, more complicated work of acknowledging those histories and building on top of them *and* tearing them down to build new, better, more inclusive feminisms all at the same time. It’s hard but really necessary work.

And, of course, at the same time that young feminists reject and forget the work of older feminists, the rest of the world is also continuously erasing the accomplishments and cultural production of feminist makers and thinkers. Feminist work is chronically underfunded, undervalued, inaccessible, marginalized, and relegated to archives. So part of doing feminist cultural work—for me—has always been to do the specific work of finding feminist or women’s histories that are buried, forgotten, neglected, or ignored—whether it’s my own grandmother (the subject of my first feature *Reconstruction*), a discarded educational film for women (the materials of my last feature *The Motherhood Archives*), or a letter from a queer teen in 1976 that never got published and got filed away in a box.



JS: Can you tell us a little about your upcoming film *Yours in Sisterhood*?

IL: Four years ago, I spent the summer in the Schlesinger Library (the women's history library at Radcliffe) reading boxes of thousands of mostly-unpublished letters sent to *Ms. Magazine* in the 70s. Written by an incredibly diverse cross section of people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds, the letters are full of moving narratives of divorce, abortion, rape, and discrimination (alongside lighter but equally heartfelt debates on topics like masturbation and what do about female body hair). Collectively, the letters feel like an encyclopedia of both the 70s and the women's movement—an almost literal invocation of the second-wave feminist slogan "the

personal is political." I wanted to know if this rich collective archive of everyday feminist history and experience could be a catalyst for a new kind of national conversation about feminism today. So in 2015 I began traveling around the US with a camera and portable teleprompter, inviting people (mostly but not only women) to be filmed reading and responding to original letters from their own towns. Over two and a half years of traveling, I filmed over 300 people in 32 states reading 70s letters.

The feature film that is premiering soon, *Yours in Sisterhood*, shows 27 of these performative readings and is the first stage of a larger project. The second stage will be an interactive archive of the readings I have collected that will be able to include many more readings than I can fit into a film. The feature film is able to think about things like time, silence, stillness, and duration in ways that are hard to do on the web; but it can only represent a small number of the voices in the project, so it has been important to me all along to imagine this project as both a film and a capacious archive.



JS: What does the reperformance of these letters bring to the table?

IL: I think that's a complicated question and not the same answer for each performer and each letter in the project. My hope is that the reperformance does some of the work I talked about earlier of engaging with history, empathizing with history, conversing intimately with history. I thought a lot about casting as a critical space in the project—so the letter-readings are not only about the performance, but also about a very careful process of pairing up individual strangers today with strangers 40 years ago... sort of like time travel pen pals. I think when readers engage with their letters something profound can happen in the process of doing that sort of embodied listening across time—the process of literally putting someone else's words in their body and then considering carefully what that feels like.

Many of the people who did readings for the project were really moved by their letters and identified strongly with what they read. The most common response people had to reading was that things really haven't changed or improved (for women, people of color, LGBTQ people, etc) over the past forty years. But some people disagreed with their letters and even had complicated arguments with the letter-writer they were paired with—I think that space for negotiation and conflict is as important to the project as making a space of empathy.

I've also thought deeply about diversity and intersectionality throughout the making of this project, and it has been important to me to make sure my project reflects a very diverse range of current-day voices about feminism. Most of the letters that I selected for the project were never published, which means that the project creates an opportunity to give voice to many kinds of letters that didn't get a voice in the 70s, including letters from transgendered and gender-nonconforming readers, readers of color, working class readers, disabled readers, and other communities that may have felt marginalized by mainstream 70s feminism. So in that sense the reperformance can create an alternative or new history of 70s conversation that maybe wasn't really heard at the time.

JS: And finally, why do you think we need a feminist conversation now more than ever?

IL: What was most striking during my archival research is that the issues covered by these letters are still the same big issues that we are facing today—sexual harassment, violence, and assault, access to abortion and birth control, body image, workplace discrimination, gender and sexuality, race, class, and inclusivity. So, obviously feminist work is far from done and feminist conversation is still incredibly necessary.

I should also say that when I started thinking about these questions four years ago it was well before the 2016 US election, the Women's March, the #metoo movement, and all of the many huge public conversations about feminism that are happening right now. When I started the project it definitely felt like public feminism had become quite invisible. Now, obviously, that has shifted a lot.

One of my starting points for the project was a lot of thinking about public feminism and feminist conversation—what did that look like in the 70s, at a moment in the US where everyone who had anything to say about feminism was writing to a single national magazine to try to have a big, messy, complicated conversation about feminism? And what does it look like now, at a moment where feminist conversation feels much more fragmented and more often takes place online in small echo chambers of like-minded people? What is the difference between having a conversation in a consciousness raising group with your neighbors vs. having a conversation online in the comments section of a newspaper or on Twitter (where your comments are weirdly extremely ephemeral and extremely permanent at the same time)? When I started the project I was really trying to think through the relationships between the kinds of spaces we make for conversation and listening, and the kind of visibility and power that feminist movements have in the world. I was

really curious to find out what would happen if I tried to restage a 70s conversation in the present—what might it bring up or do differently from our usual ways of talking to each other? I was also really compelled—in reading the archival letters—by the sense that people in the 70s were attempting to speak to each other across vast ideological, geographical, and identity differences. Because there were fewer big national spaces where a conversation about feminism could happen, people were trying much harder to speak across significant divides. I found letters from conservative and Christian *Ms.* readers who were really trying to parse which aspects of mainstream feminism did and did not speak to them... and letters from readers of color and gender-nonconforming readers who were also trying to do the same thing. I think the ethics of listening—and specifically of listening across difference—is a very central idea of the project for me.

*Yours in Sisterhood* will premier at the [Berlinale](#) next month. To help support the film and bring it to screens globally donate here: <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/yours-in-sisterhood-history-feminism/>



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## INTERVIEW: IRENE LUSZTIG

JANUARY 21, 2018



## THE LONDON SHORT FILM FESTIVAL: LSFF PREVIEW

JANUARY 10, 2018



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## Wrong On All Counts: One Woman's Reflections on Her 1976 Coming Out Letter to *Ms.*

January 30, 2018 by [Francesca Enzler](#) | [Leave a Comment](#)



In 1976, Claudia Stallman wrote a letter to *Ms.* detailing her revelation about being a lesbian. 40 years later, Stallman, now the project director for the Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project at Binghamton University, once more held her letter in her hands—and read it out loud.



"I am a 16-year-old high school senior engaged in what I will call an important self-discovery period," Stallman wrote to *Ms.* "Right now, it seems more than likely that I will lead the life of a lesbian. I am sure that I have not come to grips with the socially-imposed hardship which will be involved in existing in such a lifestyle—if indeed I should end up doing so. At this point, I have a somewhat idealistic attitude towards my warmth for women and towards the prospect of a gay life for myself. However, in light of the volatile nature of the whole subject of homosexuality, I am forced to swallow some of my idealism and to submit to some of society's oppression in order to protect myself."

Stallman's is one of many letters to *Ms.* in its first decade in print—and stories within them—that serve as the basis for Irene Lusztig's film *Yours in Sisterhood*, but she is only one of a handful of original letter writers who appear in the film reading their own words from decades before. Francesca Enzler, fundraising coordinator for *Yours in Sisterhood*, talked to Stallman about her letter—and how much has changed in the years since she first came out to *Ms.*

**I was thinking we could start off the interview with some general information about who you are.**

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*I am wife of Christine. Daughter of Danny and Ada. "Ima"—Hebrew for mom—of son Ben, age 21, and daughter Noemi, 12. I live in upstate New York and work as project director for the Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project/Pride and Joy Families, a small non-profit housed at Binghamton University and funded by the New York state Department of Health. Since 2000, we have been providing programs and services to LGBTQ families in upstate New York.*

*I love my work and I love my family.*

**How did you hear about *Yours in Sisterhood*? How did you get involved?**

*Irene emailed me, introduced herself and informed me that in her research she had discovered two letters I had written to Ms. magazine back in 1976. It was a bolt out of the blue for me. She asked if I was willing to be included in the project. And of course I said "yes!"*

**Oh yes, your letter is one of a few where Irene got in touch with their original writer! What was it like to read your 16-year-old words 40 years later?**

*Seeing my letter—and my 16-year-old handwriting!—was very moving for me. Touching and emotional. A glimpse into that time in my life when I was figuring out that I was a lesbian. Essential information that explained so much about me.*

*Reading the letter transported me back to my desk in my bedroom in Queens. I remembered the favorite pen I used. I remembered that my bedspread was yellow. I remembered that it was scary and wonderful.*

**I love that you have such a vivid memory of the space, both physical and emotional, where you wrote the letter! Why did you choose to send this letter to *Ms.*? What meaning did or does it hold for you?**

*I was learning very important information about myself. At the same time I knew it could be dangerous. I had to be very careful about who I revealed it to. Only a couple close friends. Not my parents for sure. (I did not come out to my mother for another year plus.)*

*Hiding was hard. Maybe I figured that the folks—women! feminists!—who read my letter at Ms. would find it, and me, acceptable. Grown-ups who would read and listen and hear me. I knew for sure that Ms. was a safe audience and would respect my wanting my name withheld from publication.*

**So *Ms.* felt like a safe space for you to express yourself?**

*Yes. Absolutely. A safe space—women, gay and straight, I imagined, making room in the world for girls and young women like me.*

**In your letter you express both warmth and idealism for your prospective life and also a feeling of needing to hide, not being able to reveal yourself. Now that you've lived many years of that prospective life, how were things different from what you expected then? Was anything the same?**

*When I came out as a lesbian at the age of 16, I knew these things for sure: that I could never tell my parents or be found acceptable to them, that I would never be in a long*

*term relationship—and definitely not married—and that I would certainly never become a parent myself. I was wrong on all counts, happily. I have my community and our allies to thank for that.*

**Looking ahead another 40 years, do you have a sense of what may change for you? For our society? (Or what you hope will change?)**

*The future is definitely feminist!*

***Click here to support Yours in Sisterhood and help cover costs of production. Donations will be accepted through the month.***

***Francesca Enzler*** is a filmmaker, writer and seamstress splitting her time between California and Vermont. Her work lives online at [memorycarefilms.com](http://memorycarefilms.com). She is currently the fundraising coordinator for Yours in Sisterhood, learning Japanese and preparing to grow a garden.





supporting women and feminist filmmakers

# Interview with Irene Lusztig, Director of *Yours in Sisterhood*

January 31, 2018   Cheyenne Nutlouis   Interviews with Women Filmmakers

Interview by **Shewonda Leger**

Copy editing and posting by **Cheyenne Nutlouis**



Irene Lusztig, Director of *Yours in Sisterhood*

In your documentary *Yours in Sisterhood*, you ask women to perform letters that were written to *Ms. Magazine* in the 1970s. How did you come across those letters, and, as you read through them, when did you know that this

**documentary would be the right project to carry on the work of *Ms. Magazine*?**

The letters used in my project are all from the “Ms. Letters, 1972-80” collection in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe. There are some other collections of letters to *Ms.*, including some that were donated later to Smith College, but this is the first big collection that *Ms.* donated to a library in the 80s. I had spent time doing research at the Schlesinger while working on my previous film *The Motherhood Archives*. So I knew about this collection at the library, and I had a feeling that these boxes of letters would be interesting. I had already been thinking for some time (and across a number of projects) about the idea of feminist conversation, and I’m always interested in history and archives, so the letters seemed like they would be up my alley. I spent about a month in the summer of 2014 reading letters every day. The letters are completely amazing, and I was struck immediately by the uncanny resonance of ‘70s language that described incredibly contemporary problems and issues. I knew right away that I wanted to make a project with people reading the letters aloud.

The project definitely evolved a lot over time and through trying different things. It became a lot bigger and more interesting than I expected as I traveled to more places and as my network of project volunteers grew to the point where I was mostly meeting complete strangers, instead of the friends of friends who were my earliest readers. I don’t think I had a sense of the full scope of the project at all when I got started. Actually, I thought it might be a quick, short project that I filmed in New York or some other big city over a few days. But the more I filmed, the more interested I felt in the connections that seemed to be coming up as I paired strangers today with strangers from the past, and the more I invested I became in filming all over the country.



Behind the scenes in Madison, Wisconsin.

I'm not sure I necessarily think I'm carrying on the work of *Ms. Magazine*. I guess, in a sense, by making a space for a certain kind of big, loose, geographically expansive conversation I am doing something similar to what *Ms.* did in the '70s—certainly, *Ms.* was a hub for all kinds of feminist discussions. And I definitely felt a kind of energy around '70s feminism from my immersive time in the archive: I felt really curious to know whether bringing the letters out of the archive to share them with other people might be a way of recapturing that energy. But I don't think my work is just celebratory of *Ms.* or nostalgic about the '70s. I also thought really hard about how to intervene, open up, or expand on our historical narratives about the '70s—and I thought a lot about who is part of the feminist conversation we should be having right now.

**The women who perform the letters are current residents of the same places the original letters were written from. As you read the letters, you probably imagined voices, faces, and bodies to help bring life to them to life in your mind. From what you imagined, how did you decide who would perform which letter?**

Over a few years of presenting this project as a work-in-progress, I've developed a term, "critical casting," for the way I approached pairing up strangers today with strangers from forty years ago. My method of making pairings was incredibly complicated: I thought carefully about each and every letter, and in many ways, the casting process was the most significant intellectual labor of the project.

Many of the readers are people who saw my project on social media and volunteered by filling in a short online survey (that I revised, rewrote, and refined many times over the first few months of the project). People often ended up sharing really personal things about themselves when they filled in the survey, and reading all of this writing by strangers was very moving in itself. Sometimes something would spark for me in reading the survey responses and I would get intuitions about interesting ways to match people up with letters. In some cases, the match was based on noticing something in common with an original letter-writer—like someone who wrote in the survey about struggling with body image and weight could be a good reader for a letter about body image from the archive. But other times I was interested in using casting to interrogate, contradict, or expand on something about the original letter. For instance, I invited Cai, a Deaf and transgender reader to perform a '70s letter written by a lesbian who felt excluded and under-represented by *Ms.* For that letter I was interested in the idea of feeling marginalized or excluded rather than a more literal casting idea—a lesbian woman today might feel like there is a lot more mainstream representation for queer women than there used to be, but I thought Cai might have something more interesting to say about whether he feels well-represented by mainstream media.

In addition to using social media and the survey, I also did a ton of additional outreach. The people who signed up for my project overwhelmingly self-identified as white and educated (and many were old enough to remember *Ms.*)—which makes total sense in terms of mapping onto a demographic that would naturally gravitate towards a project about '70s feminism and *Ms.* So for many of the shooting trips I worked hard to find additional readers to make sure I was including people of color, younger readers, and socioeconomically diverse readers. And sometimes I was looking for a very specific kind of reader—a female firefighter in Portsmouth NH to reflect on a '70s letter from a female firefighter, for instance, or a reader in a very small town. So for the letters, I also had to do local research and outreach to find people. Sometimes I spent a really long time



working on a single reader if the letter felt important enough. For example, finding the formerly incarcerated reader who reads the prison letter from the '70s that ends the film was a process that took a few months.

So, my short explanation of how I chose readers is that it happened somewhere at the intersection of social media, project magic, and relentless detective work!



Production still from *Yours in Sisterhood*, featuring Eileen.

**What personal experiences have influenced the way you describe sisterhood? And, how are you a sister to those who need one in the current social and political climate?**

That's an interesting question! I do have a younger sister, so I have literally been a sister for most of my life. But, more than sisterhood, I've actually done a lot of thinking, writing, and speaking about feminism in the context of motherhood: while I've always been a feminist, the experience of becoming a mother and making creative work about maternity definitely put a lot of my ideas about feminism into sharp focus. So, in thinking about this project as a kind of next step after a long period of creative work that centers maternal subjects, I've often framed this project as a move from thinking about embodied maternity to thinking about broader, less biologically determined ways of thinking about an ethics of maternal care. A lot of the values that are central to the method I developed for *Yours in Sisterhood* (thinking about care labor, empathy, listening carefully, and making space for other people to speak) are values that I personally came to through the experience of mothering. But sisterhood is also a great framework for thinking about a project that is making connections across time, space, and different communities of people. Many of the '70s letter-writers signed their letters "in sisterhood," and that phrase is a lovely way to think about feminist solidarity. I guess perhaps my project takes up that '70s ideas of sisterhood but tries to think more expansively (and less biologically) about who gets to be a sister!





Filming in St. Louis, Missouri.

**You are currently running a fundraising campaign for *Yours in Sisterhood*. What will the campaign cover? How will it allow you to complete the film?**

The film will have its premiere screening next month at the Berlinale—it's an incredible opportunity for the work to get significant international visibility and a true surprise to be selected! (With my last film *The Motherhood Archives* I heard again and again from programmers that feminism is a “niche” topic and not interesting to a general film festival audience. I hope this is a sign that programmers are rethinking some of these assumptions). So, that's been amazing news, but it has also meant that I have had to hugely accelerate my finishing schedule. Until now I've been able to work with a really tiny budget by doing everything (shooting, editing, research, producing) myself in a really DIY way, and by hiring my former students to help me out. But right at the end of a film things get really expensive—there's a sound mix, color grading, making a festival master and tons of other big expenses and things I can't do myself. It's been very intense to try to fundraise and finish the film at the same time, but I need this last piece of funding to get the film festival-ready.

**How would you start your own letter if you were to write one today?**

That feels like a hard question because it's been years since I last sat down and wrote a proper letter—letter-writing used to be a big part of my life through the end of college, which overlapped with the beginning of email. It's hard to fit that kind of slow, meditative practice into my life right now, and I miss it a lot. I think my own letter-nostalgia is definitely part of this project—seeing all the different handwriting, typewriters, '70s

stationery, aerograms, and things that people crossed out and rewrote in the archive was very moving to me. I definitely want people who watch the film to think about the meaning of writing a letter and to think about their own relationship to letter-writing. I think the ways that we express ourselves to a public have changed so much in forty years. Most of our public discourse now takes place online, where it feels like everyone is yelling about their opinions, and not spending much time picking out stationery or carefully considering how to say things—so I guess maybe nowadays I find myself more interested in talking to people in person, one on one rather than trying to address a public the way the writers of those '70s letters hoped to do.



Shooting in Oxford, Ohio.

**All of the letters are performed outside. What was the significance of choosing to do it that way instead of in their homes or places of work?**

First of all, it felt really important to place the readings in public spaces. The letter to the editor is a form of civic engagement and public discourse (as opposed to a diary entry or a letter to a friend), so I was interested in thinking about visual spaces that might be in conversation with that idea of public address. I think my use of the teleprompter for the readings maybe works in a similar way—it's a technology that we see most often in a broadcast or public address context, and I like the idea of inviting regular people to read off a prompter, it feels a little stagey and awkward, and I think that technology also does something interesting with the idea of public voice.




Also, geography is central to my project. The letters in the archive contain an incredibly expansive sense of US geography, and a letter from a farming woman in Nebraska feels completely different from a letter from a *Ms.* reader in the Bronx. The idea of filming all over the US came out of the letters themselves and the way that regional difference (and different levels of access to feminist media in different places) feels profoundly important across the collection. So filming outside was also a way of thinking about place and framing people inside of visually distinct regional landscapes: New Orleans looks different from Coastal Maine. But, at the same time, many of us in the US live in pretty anonymous and visually indistinct suburban environments. Lots of readers wanted to meet at their local park, and all the parks looked the same, down to the playground structures. Filming outside is a way of making visual space to think about both what is different and what is the same all over the US.



Still from *Yours in Sisterhood*, featuring Yvonne.

**You mention that *Yours In Sisterhood* is a performative, participatory documentary project. For those who are unfamiliar with that documentary genre, would you be able to explain the genre and why you choose it for the film?**

I'm not so attached to those terms as genre-defining categories—in fact, if anything, I am interested in working across genres and without categories. Many of my favorite films are hybrid in their approach and hard to pin down—maybe they are documentaries that use performance, or narrative films that use non-actors, improvisation, and documentary methods, or essay films, or archival films, or films that mix all of the above together in new and thoughtful ways. So, I guess my own use of these terms is less about staking out a specific genre space and more to signal to other people (funders, programmers, or people who haven't seen a lot of formally expansive art cinema) that I'm doing something a little bit different from a mainstream document  There are lots of other examples of films that play with similar ideas—recent films like *The Act of Killing* and *One* *Arbor* are amazing examples of documentaries that use performative methods, and I am also influenced by Peter

Watkins' work with historical re-enactment and the reflexive participatory interview methods used in *Chronicle of a Summer* (even though I feel weird praising *Chronicle of a Summer* after reading the recent #MeToo exposé of Jean Rouch!).

At the same time, I think that ideas about performance and participation are part of all documentary work—everyone performs some version of themselves when a camera is brought out, and most people in a documentary are active participants whose onscreen appearance has been negotiated in some way. So I don't think of performance and participation as unusual attributes, but maybe I am differently foregrounding these things that are always inherent to documentary. It also feels like a more consensual way of working with film subjects when you are filming someone who has volunteered as a performer—I like that.



Filming wind turbines in Iowa.

**How do you see *Yours in Sisterhood* creating space for audiences to reassess the status of public feminism today?**

The issues covered by these letters haven't changed very much—we are still struggling with sexual harassment, violence, and assault, access to abortion and birth control, body image, workplace discrimination, gender and sexuality, race, class, and inclusivity. Feminism is still incredibly necessary. But when I started thinking about these questions four years ago, before the election, the Women's March, the #metoo movement, and all of the very public conversations about feminism that are happening right now, it felt like public feminism had been quite invisible. Recently that has been shifting, and it's exciting to be finishing this project at a moment w

many people are talking about feminism. I hope this project can be part of the broader conversation that is happening right now about how much we still need feminism.

**So far, this film has allowed you to work with a diverse group of women and children. What do you enjoy the most about working with such a group and what have you learned from them?**

I have learned so much from talking to people all over the US—I never would have had an excuse to talk to a factory worker in West Virginia, a former sex worker in Long Beach, a farmer in Iowa, a female magician in NYC, an American Indian activist in South Dakota, or a recent Miss Minnesota, to name just a few of the interesting people I've gotten to spend time with over the past couple of years. The longer I worked on the project, the more I pushed myself to seek out people I might never encounter in my everyday life. And that process made me think really hard about how narrow and homogenous our self-selected social environments tend to be. Even though social media makes it possible to interact with anyone anywhere, it ironically seems to reinforce that narrowness.

It's hard to begin to summarize everything I've learned, but maybe the short version is about how important it is to listen to many different kinds of people. This is definitely something we've all been talking about more since the 2016 election. It's actually unusual to get a real opportunity to listen to people from so many kinds of communities, places, and backgrounds. I feel incredibly grateful to all the people who have talked to me about their lives!



Behind the scenes of filming in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

**You have worked for close to three years on this film and now it's an official selection of the Berlin Film Festival. That must be an amazing feeling. What advice do you have for artists launching on their own feminist projects?**

Actually, it's been almost four years! I'm also a teacher and I take mentoring young filmmakers really seriously, so these are questions I think about a lot. I think the biggest advice I give to younger/newer filmmakers is to try to maintain a sense of self-belief. When you are starting out (and especially when you are not a white man), the world really does not make space for you to be an artist or creative person, so all the work of taking your own ambitions and ideas seriously is on you. And that work can be exhausting, discouraging, and hard to keep up over time—it's a continuous act of imagination to wake up every morning and tell yourself that you are making important creative work that matters. But it's what you have to do to get work made. So it's crucial to figure out what helps you sustain that sense of self-belief—whether it's surrounding yourself with peers who are also ambitious and take your ambitions seriously, or finding good mentors, or having feminist role models.

To donate to Irene's fundraising go [here](#), or to learn more about the *Yours in Sisterhood* project go [here](#) or visit its [Facebook!](#) To find out more about Irene, you can visit her [website](#).

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# The New York Times

## 5 Film Series to Catch in NYC This Weekend

By **BEN KENIGSBURG** APRIL 26, 2018



A scene from “Yours In Sisterhood,” one of the films that will be showing at Art of the Real at the Film Society of Lincoln Center through May 6. Credit Irene Lusztig

**ART OF THE REAL** at the Film Society of Lincoln Center (through May 6). This annual series is committed to showing work that operates at the edges of traditional nonfiction cinema. This year, it includes “Yours in Sisterhood” (on Wednesday), in which contemporary women recite and comment on unpublished letters sent to Ms. Magazine in the 1970s, creating a kind of living time capsule and putting the past into a dialogue with the present. [filmlinc.org](http://filmlinc.org)





# CRITERION CAST

## 8 FILMS TO SEE AT ART OF THE REAL 2018

APRIL 26, 2018

by Joshua Brunsting

*Now in its fifth edition, The Film Society Of Lincoln Center's annual festival of nonfiction and hybrid filmmaking, The Art Of The Real, is finally set to return on April 26. Running until May 6, the series features one world premiere, eight North American premieres and seven US premieres, bringing together the latest and greatest in films that attempt to change what we cinephiles see as "the cinema of the real." From beloved auteurs to up and coming filmmakers, this series is routinely one of the most interesting festivals on the festival calendar, and this year's lineup is absolutely no different. And to help you make your way through the lineup, here are eight of the best films that Art of the Real 2018 has to offer:*

### **Yours In Sisterhood**

Another formally inventive and deeply moving documentary is **Yours In Sisterhood**. A simplistic film structurally, **Sisterhood** comes from director Irene Lusztig and collects letters written to the editor of legendary feminist magazine Ms. in the '70s, and has them read aloud by a wide range of women in the present moment. A simple premise, the film becomes transcendent in its actualization, with Lusztig's camera being a window into modern day feminism and all of its meanings, seeing this film reach its greatest heights not in the reading of the letters specifically but the dialogue each of them cause in the aftermath of the reading. This dialogue of generations is genuinely thrilling, particularly in an age where nuance is seemingly of a bygone era. Critical thinking is at the forefront of the film, and while that could make for a rather dry and almost scholastic viewing experience, there's a beauty to each static shot and an epic scope that turns each letter into something genuinely more than just a reading you'd see in the middle of a college 101 course. **A near masterpiece, this film.**



WOMEN

## Modern Women Bring Voice To '70s Letters In An Inventive Documentary, Fusing Past With Present

In "Yours In Sisterhood," filmmaker Irene Lusztig unearths letters sent to Ms. magazine during the feminist movement. Many could have been written today.

**By Marina Fang**

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"I think all men are chauvinistic pigs now. I'd like to know what to do about that," a young woman reads into the camera, one of 27 vignettes in "[Yours in Sisterhood](#)," an unconventional and provocative documentary featuring women in the present day reading and discussing letters sent by women in the 1970s to the editors of Ms. magazine.

In developing the project, filmmaker Irene Lusztig read thousands of archived letters to the magazine, founded by feminist icon Gloria Steinem, most of which were unpublished. Then, from 2015 to 2017, she traveled to 32 states and filmed women reading selected letters.

What resulted was a film, which screened at this year's AFI Docs Festival in Washington last week, that inventively fuses the past with the present — and reminds viewers how, in many ways, little has changed for women in America. The letters, which encompass topics such as sexual harassment and assault, and racism and white supremacy, instantaneously bring to mind parallels to the current day.

"Everything that was happening constantly felt like it was in conversation with [the film]," Lusztig said in an interview.

Working on the film during the 2016 election and its aftermath, when issues of gender and race were never far from view, Lusztig said that her approach to the film evolved, as it increasingly took on a new relevance.

She began asking the contemporary women how it felt to read the letters or what they thought of the writers, creating a conversation between past and present.

After one reader in the film, Kathleen, reads a letter from a North Carolina woman who describes being in an interracial relationship and her fears about local Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups, she summarizes a sentiment recurring throughout the documentary.

“It just reminds me that time isn’t naturally progressive,” she says of the letter. “I think people just assume that as the years go by, things get better and better. And that’s just not the case. It’s just not the case at all.”

Aside from its relevance, the film is also a fascinating experiment in space and performance. In some ways, the concept is simple, with every reader standing in front of the camera, reading the letter from a teleprompter. Yet each letter turns into an intimate snapshot, revealing details about both the writer and the reader. The backdrop — sometimes a town square, or a parking lot, or the front yard of the reader’s home — can also take on significance when interpreting the letters.

Occasionally, Lusztig found the letter writers themselves, who poignantly reflect on their younger selves, 40 years later.

When pairing the old letters with present-day readers, Lusztig was interested in what she called “matchmaking.” In some cases, she sought specific commonalities, like finding a female police officer to read a letter from an aspiring police officer in the 1970s, who writes of being told that “we don’t hire women.”

In other cases, the connections between writer and reader were merely coincidental. Often, they were not hard to find.

For instance, with letters about body image or sexual harassment, “every woman has had that experience, it turns out,” Lusztig said. “Almost any woman in the whole world would be able to read and have something to say about it.”

**History isn’t static. It’s constantly moving and changing and looking different, depending on where you are.”**Irene Lusztig, director of “Yours In Sisterhood”

In selecting which letters to use in the film, Lusztig said that she strove to capture diversity in race, sexual orientation and geography, trying not to replicate Ms. magazine’s mostly white and “New York and California” readership.

“I wanted to make a project about the U.S.,” she said. “Through the letters, you really feel the difference between someone in a small town in Nebraska, and it is about what someone’s isolation is, or what it means to encounter *Ms.* in a drugstore, or a pharmacy, or an airport, or a supermarket, when you’re not in a community where you have a lot of access to feminist political organizing or activism.”

She also chose some letters that represented different ideologies, showing how feminism can take on various forms, and reflecting the public discourse — both then and now — about who feels included in social movements, and who is not.

In the film, a woman at a shooting range in upstate New York defends her gun rights, and a Minnesota woman writes that she is deeply religious and opposes abortion.

“There’s more than one way to be a feminist,” her letter reads, also emphasizing that she is “not a man-hater.”

But the project also captures tension between past and present. Some of the readers point out objections and criticisms to the letters that they are tasked with reading. According to Lusztig, she sometimes looked for pairings that were not as literal or direct, illustrating “what it feels like to not just listen to, but embody a voice that is different from yours,” she said.

“Yours In Sisterhood” will appear at several other film festivals around the country this summer. Lusztig said she also plans to show the film at colleges, and in the next year or two, release an online archive of all of the letter readings.

After filming more than 300 letters, Lusztig painstakingly selected 27 for the final film, which she hopes is representative of the range of letter writers and readers. Yet she still fell short in some ways — for example, she said that she regrets not including more women with disabilities.

“I hope the film is diverse enough that for any viewer, there’s at least one or two readers who don’t represent their views, or feel challenging to listen to,” she said.

In addition to encapsulating the importance of listening to different voices, the film and the unearthing of the letters also personify how the past can be reinterpreted and reconceived in new contexts.

“History isn’t static,” she said. “It’s constantly moving and changing and looking different, depending on where you are.”