

Jon Davies
Our People:
Janis Cole and
Holly Dale
in the 1970s

Janis Cole and Holly Dale were a couple of working-class Toronto girls who decided to study art at Sheridan College in suburban Oakville in the mid-1970s. There, they made non-fiction 16 mm films together, works that were wildly different from those produced by their fellow students. Their subjects were their friends downtown: sex workers and entertainers of every conceivable gender and sexuality, and other young people who hustled and hung out on the legendary Yonge Street strip back when it was home to a smorgasbord of adult entertainment, from strip clubs to drag revues, body-rub parlours to gay bars.

Cole and Dale went on to make two landmark feminist-humanist documentary features: *P4W: Prison for Women* (1981), which ventured inside the notorious Kingston Prison for Women, and *Hookers on Davie* (1984), focusing on a diverse group of sex workers in Vancouver. Here, though, I want to focus on the first two shorts they made together as Sheridan students in their early twenties: *Cream Soda* (1975) and *Minimum Charge No Cover* (1976). (Both can be booked through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.)

The intense identification, emotional intimacy, and political solidarity that Cole and Dale show in these films would be impossible without a deep concern and affection for 'our people' – an alternative family of folks: street kids and drug users, prostitutes and prisoners, women and queers of all kinds – who had essentially been cast away from their biological parents and cut loose from the safety net of mainstream Canadian society.

A materialist portrait of women working at the French Connection, an Elm Street body-rub parlour, Cole and Dale's first short film, *Cream Soda*, is about the fine art of the hustle. The filmmakers were given full access to the premises, as the owner owed Dale some money. The resulting film shows how, through body and talk, one can seduce a client into a sale. Beginning with hands counting twenty-dollar bills, the thirteen-minute film captures the private and public spaces of the bawdy house in great detail, all achieved via wiretaps in the rooms. The unvarnished, flesh-and-blood women we meet are a far cry from the gussied-up fantasy they represent to their johns. This distinction between backstage dressing room, where the women gossip while applying their makeup and donning their outfits, and the reception area, where they meet their clients (complete with an alcove of dirty magazines to get the men in the mood), is sharply delineated, a nod to all the labour that goes on behind the performance of gender and sexuality.

Cole and Dale's irreverence is tangible in their candid and matter-of-fact visual documentation of this sexual space and discussions with the women about how they work, what it's like, and how Canada's prostitution laws impact them. 'I put their sperm in a tissue,' one says, 'and throw it in the wastebasket.' But the film also includes witty details, like a man reciting the cloying children's song 'Jesus Loves



Victoria in *Cream Soda* (1975, 13 minutes).

Me' while being dominated to what would seem to be more fitting tunes like 'Big Spender.' As critic Kay Armatage has suggested, there is a claustrophobic quality to the film, too: its world is confined to this dark, mercantile establishment.

The fact that the conversations with the women in *Cream Soda* often aren't synced to the footage lends the film a dynamic energy and gritty, direct-cinema realism that is a far cry from the staid talking-head format favoured by institutional producers like the National Film Board of Canada. With words floating freely over images in Cole and Dale's work, the possibility of artifice and fabulation is left open, acknowledging the insufficiency of documentary authenticity, or 'truth,' in capturing an environment that is all about trafficking in a carefully stage-managed fantasy.

In their follow-up film, *Minimum Charge No Cover*, the friends Cole and Dale observe and interview are from all over the Yonge strip, from the Zanzibar to Le Coq d'Or, and we come to know them through a freewheeling collage of various opinions, lifestyles, genders, and sexualities. The eleven-minute film feels like a spontaneous 'these are the people in your neighbourhood' snapshot of the denizens of Yonge Street, most of whom were Cole's and Dale's friends, or friends of friends. This is the chosen family that supported them in making films and simply surviving. Street-involved themselves, Cole and Dale do not abide any trace of moralizing or sanctimony in their blissfully frank and open-hearted films.

Minimum Charge No Cover begins with an almost abstract shot of the lights of Yonge reflecting off a car door as a seductive woman gets out, the sounds of a prostitute and john arguing about money on the soundtrack. We first meet a familiar face from *Cream Soda* – Victoria, the beautiful pale woman in the bathtub, who we find out over the course of the film is trans.

We are also introduced to a sex worker dressed in businesswoman attire carving a giant roast beef for dinner with her young son; three black drag queens who appear both onstage and offstage; a man named Michael who identifies as a ‘faggot’ rather than as ‘gay’; and myriad go-go boys, ‘queens, dykes, and hookers’ that you would likely have met on any given Yonge Street corner in the mid-1970s.

In *Minimum Charge No Cover*, the idea of ‘normality’ is playfully shredded in favour of complexity and nuance: trans Victoria looks every bit the ‘normal’ cis-gendered woman. Being nude in the bath adds to her authenticity, as if she’s saying, ‘I have nothing to hide, I’m coming clean.’ The roast beef dinner, in turn, is highly stylized and stagy, much like every family dinner is a performance of an idealized image of domestic bliss. Already in 1976, homosexuality has come and gone as ‘the next big thing’ among Michael’s sophisticated set, and all the subjects are in on the fact that other bodies, identities, practices, and affiliations are possible, if yet unnamed.

In addition to memorializing the lost era of public sexual self-performance that flourished on Yonge Street in the 1970s, Cole and Dale’s short films also stand as monuments to subjects who died way too young: of AIDS, overdose, and suicide, of neglect and imprisonment. Cole noted that ‘production is a privilege.’ When they began making films about strangers, as opposed to their own social circle, they quickly became friends during the shoot. Or, as Dale said in 1984, ‘In our first two films, our friends were our subjects; now our subjects become our friends.’