

1 Edward Street
San Francisco, California
94118
December 18, 1976

Dear Laura Gilpin;

We received your letter on Friday the 14th and, of course, we were a bit dismayed by the tone of it. We want to clear up some of the issues as soon as possible so that the project will come to fruition.

First, when we received our grant, it was not because we were experts in the field of video, but because we presented the California Arts Council with an idea for a historical project which we felt was very necessary...and they agreed. We are primarily a photographer and a writer with historical and educational interests and years of teaching experience. Prior to your tape we had produced our pilot for the state. We recognize that there are technical problems in the tape which can be corrected to some extent. We spent a good deal of time editing this project. The audio interference at Helen Johnson's house caused much of the information gathered there to be unusable. Further technical problems with equipment in Santa Fe caused us to delete other material, some of which would have added technical information to the tape. The function of this tape, however, as we perceive it within the scope of the entire project, is not technical in nature, but rather, personal and historical. The tape is meant as an oral history with the information being the artist's view of her life and work and the material he/she presents to the viewer. If, however, you believe that there are technical aspects of your work that you feel are essential to be covered, we would be happy to include them. We did not have that impression at the time we were working with you. If, for example, students of photography hear you speaking about printing platinum, they can easily refer to texts on the subject, to your film, or to their own instructors.

We are embarrassed about misspelling your name. We had begun spelling it Laura, when we were informed, somewhat emphatically, by someone who shall remain nameless, that you preferred the other spelling. We never questioned it further. Our titles can be changed, especially as we now have a better way of projecting them so that they are visually more acceptable.

We are also fond of the Ann Noggle section. It adds a change of pace which is visually appreciated by the viewer.

December 18, 1976
Page 2

As to the issue of sequence within the tape; the basic structural mode we are using here is chronological. We begin with your father's work, move to your discussion of your early remembrances of photography and then on to school, New York, and back to the West and into your more recent works, ending with plans for the newest book. We interspace these occasionally with smaller pieces and anecdotes, such as the Ms. story. It is true that there are no explanations of the time sequence, but viewers of contemporary television can deal with a chronology that flows, rather than one that is spelled out bit by bit. Of course, it is not easy to recognize that seventy or more years are covered within one and one-half hours. One possible way to delineate this would be a general discussion of chronology on the tape. Another method might be narration, but we have found this to be obtrusive.

In video there are some problems which are not encountered in audio history interviews. If we discuss an aspect of your work and then attempt to visually match that with photographs from the same period, the two must match to the second. We have had a desire, throughout the entire project, to attempt to fit both aspects together without destroying the integrity of either. Because we taped your show at Helen Johnson's gallery, not knowing what you would talk about on those subjects in Santa Fe, the problems of matching audio and video became compounded. Timed segments of voice, especially to match with the platinum prints, would alleviate some of the problems in matching. We placed the hand-trambling story there with some hesitation and would be happy to change it. It was placed there to deal with aspects of your relationship with the Navajo rather than the work itself.

On repetition...it is nearly impossible to cut out words or statements in the midst of a longer idea. Therefore, when you spoke of the Clarence White school at Mrs. Johnsons and then at your home we did decide to use both because of the slightly different nature of each discussion. We have already edited our segments from Santa Fe on the topic and really cut the San Francisco segment quite severely although it may not appear evident in the version we sent you. In areas where the historical information is of high value to the field we would rather err on the side of repetition.

You have also hit upon another of the prime problems in video on location when you object to repetitious panning. Our video equipment (in fact all portapak half or three-quarter inch equipment) has an automatic (non-overrideable) light metering system. It averages all light in the screen and exposes accordingly to maintain an overall adequate exposure.

December 18, 1976

Page 3

When we tape photographic images this becomes a problem. Your photographs are almost all mounted on white board. Further, they are often vertical images. Therefore, the horizontal camera image of the video camera necessarily takes in a good deal of white mount in any shot which includes all borders of your photograph. The meter sees white board as well as richer dark tones in the piece. It averages the overall result and then the shot is too overbalanced to see the image properly. The overall design can be seen, but not the details, which, in most cases, tell a lion's share of the story of the print. So we start on a long shot to see the design and then pan in to see the details, to scan the image, thereby picking up detail and the tonalities of the print. Any time you change the focal length of these zoom lenses you lose the focus and have to refocus. Two cameras might alleviate some of this problem, but not all of it. This method of reading the print, is used in most educational television and low budget documentary work which uses one camera. We realize that images are not seen perfectly... but we also know that the tv screen, with its four zone capability, is a poor excuse for the real silver or platinum print. We cannot give the viewer the real thing, but we can indicate the visual concerns by showing design and content, if not print quality and surface.

Our equipment is from a shared pool and is not of the highest order, but our grant does not cover hardware and we have been lent the equipment we use for the project. We sometimes rent equipment, and if we continue to have problems, we will rent more, as our budget allows. We also prefer not to use too much equipment when we enter an artist's home, as it would upset the environment we are trying to capture. This brings us to perhaps a most important consideration. Our tendency is to greatly respect the home and time of the artist to such an extent that we try not to stay long. We were well aware that we were interrupting your schedule when we were in Santa Fe even though the total output of tape was only two hours. Our technical problems with equipment didn't leave us much excess tape to work with when we were in the editing room. But, we didn't feel it fair to you at the time to disrupt your schedule further. We are well aware that the final project could be improved with more shooting and more material and we both agree that we would love to work further with you to add this material. We would look forward to another chance to add to the tape that information and transitional material which would smooth the nature of the presentation out. Our desire is not for slickness, but for a smooth tape which would represent the information in an acceptable way. We want the tape to give an insight to your work to the photographic student who is not aware of your work, or who has heard of you but has been unable to see your shows or gather only one or two of your books.

December 18, 1976

Page 4

Lately, when we watch tv, we notice that small, locally produced shows of the most simple variety, employ at least 20 people...researchers, cameramen, grips, lighting people, editors, soundmen, title people, etc. In this project, the two of us perform all functions, plus communications, logistics, supplies, public relations, funding and clerical work. We are to make seven tapes this year on an \$8000.00 budget. This is to cover all expenses for the project and our own income and the support of a child. We also continue to produce in our own artistic areas of photography and poetry, along with teaching part time and doing advanced degree work. We are therefore in a very tight financial situation, unable to travel long distances to location time after time. We strive to do this project because it is terribly important to us as historical work, and we are willing and eager to correct the problems with the tape by returning to Santa Fe for additional material and by reworking what we have in editing. We could return in February of next year if we can fund the trip. Is this period acceptable to you? Please let us know your thoughts.

One last thought. People expect a certain type of product from the television medium...the fast cut, the cinematic slickness that you get from huge production, from many cameras. We don't have that kind of facility and we really do not appreciate that kind of approach to the documentary. We expect these tapes to be used intimately by a class or an individual student in a library video carrel... they are resource material, not entertainment. Toward these ends, we are happy to do whatever is necessary to complete this tape to our mutual satisfaction. We have no intention to produce something that you have hesitation about. So, please return the tape that we sent and we will begin to plan our trip to Santa Fe and the additional editing necessary to produce a new final version.

We hope that these problems can be handled amicably between us and that you are agreeable to a return visit, perhaps in February. Your work means a great deal to us or we would not have begun the project in the first place.

Sincerely,

Arthur Ollman
Rosella Felsenfeld
1 Edward Street
San Francisco, California 94118