



Kristin MacDonough

## **Wendy Clarke:** *Love is All Around*

Interview with Wendy Clarke  
January 13, 2025



*Love Tapes: Chapter One, Wendy Clarke, 1977*

**Kristin MacDonough: Can you talk about your first experiences making moving images and videos?**

**Wendy Clarke:** I was twenty-six, it may have been 1969 or something like that. My mother [Shirley Clarke] received a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. They gave four filmmakers video equipment. The Portapak had just come out and they wanted to see what these filmmakers would do with it. My mother started experimenting with it and formed the TeePee Videospace Troupe. She offered me a Portapak, but she said, "I'll only give it to you if you devote your life to it." That was too extreme for me. I said, "No, thank you." It was just too intense and insane for me at that moment.

It was 1971, we'd been filming with the Videofreex on the roof of Westbeth in New York. I don't remember what the video was,

but I just remember that we were there all day. Then we came back to my mother's rooftop apartment in the Chelsea Hotel. My mother was fed up with everybody so she went upstairs to be by herself. Later I went upstairs to see what she was doing. She was making herself up to look and walk like Groucho Marx and videoing. Then she set the camera on the tripod and I went and I sat down next to her in front of the monitor and camera. I started making myself up with white pancake makeup and drew black henna designs on my face. I was looking at myself on the monitor while I was making myself up. Then my mother got behind the camera and she put a prism on the lens and started moving it around. It was so amazing looking. It was the first time I had seen that you could watch yourself and work with what the image was. And a light bulb went off for me and I said, "Okay, I'll take the Portapak."

So that was my first little creative moment with my mother. (*Magic Makeup* became a short video I made of this experience.)

In all the videos I've done, seeing yourself on the monitor has been an essential part of my work. I had made a little film a few years earlier with my mother (*Butterfly*), and I had also worked on *The Cool World* all the way from the casting through the editing. But film wasn't for me. As an artist, at that point, I was painting and involved in theater. Video has been my thing ever since. I'm very lucky that I started in the beginning when artists first got their hands on that equipment, the Portapak.

**Kristin: You've noted in your *Love Tapes* compilations that the *Love Tapes* emerged from your practice of making video diaries. How did that come about?**



*Love Tapes: Miami, Wendy Clarke, 1983*

**Wendy:** The first thing I did when I got the Portapak was set up the camera in my apartment in New York and I started keeping a video diary. I would always sit in front of the camera and monitor and talk about whatever was going on in my life. I did that for many years. It wasn't really therapy, but it sort of had that quality. It was just for myself. I was never going to show the diary. I also did other things with it. I tried experiments, which then later turned into interactive video installations. I also invited friends to my apartment and we played with the video, just trying different things out to see some of the potential of the medium. I also joined the Tee Pee Videospace Troupe and we gave workshops around the country.

For the *Love Tapes*, in 1977, I bought a bag full of used videos. They were half-inch reel to reel. I bought them from some company that was reselling used tape. Actually, what is funny is what was underneath the tape I used. There used to be video dating services. You would go

and you'd make a tape, and then somebody else would watch it and the company would put people together. That's what was under my videos! So what I decided to do was to lock myself up in my loft and just talk about love. I wasn't going to talk about anything else and I would go for as long as I wanted to. That's why I had a whole bag full of tapes.

I got through the first half hour and I watched it back and I got through the second half hour and I watched it back and then to the third half hour and watched it back. I had nothing more to say after that. I was sort of shocked that it was over, but that was it. I had nothing more to say.

I knew that there was something about that experience. I didn't know where it was going to lead, but I knew it was the start of something and I just had to wait till I understood where it was going to go. I showed that tape to my mother. I showed it to my therapist. I showed it to a good friend of mine, Martine Barrat, who was a video artist in New

York, because I wanted to know if it was too weird for me to show it publicly and because it was embarrassing to me personally. It was a very vulnerable experience to have other people see it. But they all said that it was fine and I decided that the middle half hour was what I wanted to show. I called it *Chapter One* because I knew something else was going to come from it. I didn't know what it was, but I knew something would develop. I had an exhibition of my work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, an installation called *Interactive Video* that I later brought to the Mandaville Art gallery at the University of California in San Diego. I had the installation and I also had a small room that played *Chapter One*. I had a guest book and I noticed that people had written long, well, kind of essays about their own feelings on love. They were very deep and very vulnerable, as much as mine was.

Then I got back to Los Angeles and my mother was teaching at UCLA in the graduate film school. I gave a workshop to her students, where I showed my tape, *Chapter One*. I had each of [the students] sit by themselves in a room looking at themselves on the monitor. We went to the library and just picked out the record, "I'm In The Mood For Love." It was three minutes long and we put that on for each person. I think there were five students. And then we watched the tapes play back together and they were amazing. They were so deep and so beautiful and very different from each other. One person talked about how love was the smell of baby powder on her granddaughter's bottom. Another talked about how she had never found love and hoped that she would find love in college, but that she was

not sexy and would never be sexy. I remember coming back to where I was staying and saying, "If I could get every person on the planet to make a Love Tape, we'd really know what it's like to be human." I also had a show in a gallery in Los Angeles where I had the *Interactive Video* installation. I had a room where I showed *Chapter One* and I think there were sixty people who made *Love Tapes* after seeing mine.

Then I retired my tape and started using the LA tapes when I got back to New York. I showed different groups of people the LA tapes. Then I started using the new tapes that were made to show to more diverse groups. It has just unfolded and grown and keeps growing and it's still growing.

**Kristin: You mentioned the experience of seeing yourself on the monitor and reacting to yourself. In several of the *Love Tapes*, people reference seeing themselves on a monitor. What was the decision behind participants being able to watch themselves during the recording instead of after?**

**Wendy:** Right. Because video is the only way you can do that. You can't do that with film. Maybe you can do it by looking in the mirror, but you can't watch it back. What excited me about using video was that it has its own properties. It has things that it can do that other formats can't do. Now it seems much more common because we've got Zoom, everybody has their phone. But back then it wasn't like that, so I really wanted to have it be an experience that you could only have because of video. That's what interested me, because it

was a new medium. I didn't want to use it like a documentary, which would be much more like film. That didn't interest me.

**Kristin: There's this wonderful moment in *Chapter One* when you decide to turn on the music. Can you speak more about the role of music in the recordings and allowing people to select their music?**

**Wendy:** Well, the music is about three minutes long and it times the video. It has a beginning and then it ends. So it gives the video a structure, and I think makes the videos a much more of a completed piece. The music also makes it much easier to talk too, it fills in the blanks. If you can't think of what to say, it fills the silence in and it also gives a rhythm. In some of the videos, the people talk to the beats of the music. It's not true for everybody, but it's true for a number of people. And I love when that happens.

**Kristin: Do you think the music choice affected the response people gave?**

**Wendy:** I don't know. For most of the people that made the tapes, it was spontaneous, they haven't practiced it before. They haven't written it down. A few people have done that but it doesn't work as well. I think the music always adds to the emotion. Music is very emotional. I don't know that it would change what people are saying.

**Kristin: After LA, you went back to New York and showed the LA tapes and from there it grew. Going forward, how did you select where the tapes would be recorded and where installations would take place?**

**Wendy:** I wanted to try making the *Love Tapes* with all different kinds of people in different situations. I got grants to do this, thank God. I went to some private homes of people that I knew, and they would invite their friends. There was the lobby of the World Trade Center. We had a booth there for three weeks. Then in a van on the streets of Chicago, a Disabled in Action group came to my house—Staten Island teenagers, prison inmates. I just



*Love Tapes: Two Museums, Wendy Clarke,*

kept thinking, "What other group can we do? What other situation can we do?" The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut. So it was just a matter of thinking, where do you go next? And it's still kind of like that. We're having a sort of resurgence of that happening now. We'll be doing a lot of Love Tapes this year, in 2025, all over the United Kingdom. And again, we'll be showing the American tapes to the United Kingdom people and then using their tapes to show others, then just mixing it up. I'm going to the University of California in Santa Cruz, and I'm going to be teaching graduate students there who come from other countries to do the *Love Tapes*. They'll be going back to their countries of origin and taking the American tapes there. Hopefully it can go on for however long it goes on for. I don't need to be around anymore.

**Kristin: People would see the *Love Tapes* in the installation, before they would go in to record. Were the videos shown**

**anywhere else? And how was participation promoted?**

**Wendy:** When we had the booth at the World Trade Center, that was in 1980, and we showed them the night before the installation opened on Channel 13 WNET in New York on *Independent Lens*. About forty-five minutes of the tapes played, and at the end there was an invitation for people to come to the World Trade Center to make a tape and we got a lot of people that way, too. That was really good. I like that way of doing it.

**Kristin: When you would do a day of recording at a booth, how much would you be able to capture within a day?**

**Wendy:** Well, it would vary upon the size of the group. When I went to Esther's apartment in Spanish Harlem she invited her friends, I think maybe she had six friends, so I just made the tapes with them. It was a wonderful day.

For the World Trade Center, I made a 30 minute edit every day to show on Manhattan Cable TV, but there were more

than that made each day. I just selected thirty minutes worth. It really varies. At the World Trade Center, I had about eight facilitators, and we kept rotating who was making a tape with a person and then showing the videos outside on the monitors. It takes maybe fifteen or twenty minutes per person. About 370 people made a *Love Tape* there. This is really important: I don't ask anybody to sign a release before they make their video. I want them to watch it after they've made it and decide whether or not they want to add it to the collection. And if not, we erase it, so it can't be seen by anybody. That's really critical because I don't want to have that control, I want the control of that to go to the person making the video. So it just depends. At the Museum of Modern Art, we were there making new *Love Tapes* with visitors. At MoMA we made new *Love Tapes* for several days, but showed a four hour *Retrospective of Love Tape* series over a much longer period of time.

**Kristin: And that's a practice you continue today?**

**Wendy:** Yeah, it's very important. I think it's also very important for the person, once they made their video and signed the release, to watch it alongside other people who've gone through the process because if you don't do that, you can walk away feeling odd, like maybe there's something not right. There is a sort of self doubt. Whereas when you watch it with other people and you see their tapes and your tape along with their tapes, it feels really good. Even if the video was a really sad one, it still feels good because not everybody makes a happy tape. I care very, very much about the



*The Love Tapes: World Trade Center, Wendy Clarke, 1980*

process and I want people to have as good an experience as possible. That matters to me.

**Kristin: What else about the earliest years of making the *Love Tapes* still stands out to you?**

**Wendy:** The tapes, I think, can vary in how people talk about love depending upon their cultural background and their age. That was all very interesting to me because I didn't know that to begin with. My initial tape was very much about romantic love and that shifted as I went to different groups and I found that amazing. It really helped me grow as a human being to have that experience. [They were] about friendship, mothers, children, nature, all the different kinds of love. I only ask people to talk about their own feelings and experience with love; I don't say talk about your boyfriend or girlfriend or your husband or wife or whatever. I don't want to limit.

**Kristin: It is striking how much the *Love Tapes* go beyond a video valentine, which I know is a little on point for a VDB TV program in February. What else have you learned about people and love over the course of the project and how has it shaped your feelings about love or your perception of it?**

**Wendy:** It seems to me whenever love is talked about, it's really deeply important and it encompasses so much of who we are as human beings. There is a lot of pain but I know also that it's capturing a moment in somebody's life. It's not that they're going to stay that way forever. I've heard people say this, and I know from my experience as well, it can be a very cathartic experience to go



*Love Tapes: Miami, Wendy Clarke, 1983*

through and then you can move on. It's very healing in that way, and that's also true by watching other people's love

tape. Because I'm much older now, the kind of love that matters to me is completely different from what it was like for me when I was in my thirties when I started the project. I've seen this with other people in their videos as well. For me, romantic love, it's like I'm over it. It's not necessarily this way for everybody else. I'm eighty now and romantic love just doesn't somehow work for me. I'm not good at it, but I'm very good at other kinds of love and that's what matters to me now.

**Kristin: Have you seen any shift over the years in how people express love?**

**Wendy:** I don't know why, but I haven't. I think that love is a feeling that is so human and universal that it doesn't matter that it's been forty eight years since I started the project.

The difference I see is maybe in hairstyles or clothing, but otherwise I don't really see it. It doesn't have to do with time somehow. It's not about time. I couldn't have done this a

hundred years ago, right? The women's movement has been going on the whole time that I've been doing the project, and is not resolved. I just haven't noticed time with it yet. If somebody else could show me that there is a difference, I'd love to see that, but I just haven't seen it.

**Kristin: So how people express love hasn't changed, but technology has. You started with using half-inch open reel and later, different tape and digital formats. Did you make any aesthetic decisions when switching formats, or how did you incorporate or adjust the technology over time?**

**Wendy:** I keep misusing the word—I keep saying "tape" and of course, there's no tape now.

A wonderful thing, I remember when the Sony Nuvecon camera came out, which was a low light camera. That was terrific because I didn't want to add a lot of lights. I wanted people to feel really comfortable, so I didn't want to splash light on them. That was a great invention.

I don't think the technology really changed in terms of the process all that much, honestly. Of course I began with black and white and then came color, that was a huge change. I think the first videos that I did in color were in Miami, which was perfect because Miami is very colorful and by that time I also decided people could choose their own backdrops. We made really fun backdrops in Miami and then in the Santa Monica Place Mall, there was also color and there were backdrops. Of course, now everything is all color. So that was a big shift in how they looked. I liked the black and white, honestly. To me, it was more like a photograph, like a black and white still which I think, as portraits, are really much more beautiful than color ones. So, aesthetically, I wish it could have stayed forever in black and white. It's just not that way now. That's how the times have changed. It just feels more in the present to have it be in color.

**Kristin: I'd like to talk about the preservation of the tapes too. In April 2023, the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research received a grant from the NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] to preserve your collection of physical tapes. The numbers they noted were 863 tapes across thirteen videotape formats. How did this project come about?**



*Prison Love Tapes, Wendy Clarke, 1979*

**Wendy:** My videos were in the UCLA archives. I went with Dennis Doros, who is distributing my mother's films, to [Madison] Wisconsin to look at her collection together. I showed some *Love Tapes* at a screening in the university theater. After I showed the *Love Tapes*, the

archivist people came and said that they would like to have my archive there as well. I was really happy because UCLA hadn't done anything with my collection, it was just sitting there. So I had all of the videos moved from UCLA to Wisconsin. They came up with the idea of applying to the NEH. They applied three times and got it the third time, and it was the most thrilling thing that could happen. All of my work would be preserved, and in such a good archive. It was really amazing. It was also wonderful that my work and my mother's work would live on and be preserved together!

**Kristin: What was it like to revisit many of these tapes?**

**Wendy:** I hadn't seen a lot of the prison work in a really long time and I hadn't seen a lot of the *Love Tapes* in a long time. I still haven't seen my video diary. I'd like to see if there's anything I can do with my diary, for myself.

It's been wonderful. I've gotten to re-edit some videos and edit some things that I never had a chance to and give them to you [VDB], which is also spectacular because I really hope that people will find it interesting to see them, especially educationally. I think there's a lot of value in the work.

**Kristin: Absolutely. Something you touched on earlier is how video was still a new technology when you started working with it, so your usage of it as a medium for self-expression was really at the**

**forefront of that technology, with the novelty of being able to see yourself immediately on a monitor. But now video, as an avenue for sharing personal reflections, is ubiquitous. Almost everyone can do it at any time. What is it like to continue making the *Love Tapes* in this environment?**

**Wendy:** Well, I choose to ignore the environment in a way. Art needs to have form and a structure. It's not the same as anybody doing what they want whenever they want. The *Love Tapes* have a lot of form and process limits. And I think that's different than what's going on now. Though I don't really see that much of what's going on now. I love Zoom. I love that we can do this.

When I moved to New Mexico (I moved here in 2005), I had basically put the *Love Tapes* to rest, not forever, but for a time. The next thing I wanted to do with the *Love Tapes* was to do it globally. I had tried before I moved here, to get funding to do it globally but I wasn't able to. I decided I'm going to have the project rest until some other future time. There are lots of other things that I love to do. I love to spin wool, I love to draw, I love to make wearable art clothing from my animals. Taos is a wonderful and interesting place to live. I have animals: donkeys, llamas, alpacas, goats, sheep, dogs, cats. I'm just living out my childhood dream, and I've been here for a long time doing all these other art forms.

Then COVID hit and it wasn't a problem for me to be home and be isolated because I'm very isolated here where I live. Because of the internet and

Zoom, I was able to connect with people. I realized, oh, I can do the *Love Tapes*. I don't have to go anywhere. I can just stay home and play with all my animals and have other people do the *Love Tapes* in other countries. I can teach them how to do it. I've done that before. I had done it a couple of times, taught people how to facilitate the *Love Tapes* and it worked really well. So that's how it started up again.

There is a young woman, Kim Coleman, who had done her Ph.D thesis on me. She is an artist living in London. She was asked to show some of the *Love Tapes* by a friend who has a small film festival *Losing the Plot*. They asked if she could make the *Love Tapes* at the festival. I said sure, and I taught her how to do it, explained the process and sent her a starter tape of a compilation of *Love Tapes* made in America. A visitor who came to a screening asked us to write a grant to do it all over the United Kingdom. What we decided to do, which I feel really good about—and I hope it works—is to write a manual that will teach people exactly how to make *Love Tapes*: equipment needed, space needed, how to edit and upload them and add them to my collection at WCFTR. We call it the *Endless Love Tapes* so it can go on for generations. We're going to publish the manual and we'll see what happens. In a way, it doesn't really need me anymore, if that's possible. I know that it doesn't because I've seen it, because I've taught a few people how to do it, and it's worked really well. That's the plan.

**Kristin: And in Santa Cruz, you'll be teaching international students who will have access**

**to this manual. What is your hope for it?**

**Wendy:** Irene Lusztig, filmmaker and professor at UCSC, invited me to use the new manual with her international graduate students and hopefully, when they go back home during the summer, they can make the videos in their countries of origin. The project is starting to grow again. I don't know exactly where it's going to go. I'll follow it and see what happens. It's not like I really believe that every single person on the planet will actually make a *Love Tape*, but I would love to see *Love Tapes* from all different cultures, all over the globe, from all continents, all languages, all religions, all everything, all ages, and maybe that will happen. That's my dream. We'll see.

**Kristin: It seems like a part of the story of the *Love Tapes* is that the events build on each other, someone encounters it and wants to take it somewhere else and so on.**

**Wendy:** It still happens. It's like when I did the first *Love Tape* exhibition, L.A.I.C.A., a curator from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut happened to come to that show, and invited me to come to Hartford and do it there. One thing leads to the next, and leads to the next. It's about being open to seeing where it goes and following it. There's a lot of work involved. We have to write a lot of grants and do all of the footwork, but it's still kind of amazing. It's nice because I've been very quiet since I moved here, I haven't been involved with video for a while now. It feels really great to get back to it. I'm very happy.

**Kristin: What are your other video projects apart from *Love Tapes*?**

**Wendy:** I also want to talk about my *One-on-One* series of videos.

I received a grant to work as the Artist-in-Residence inside the California Institution for Men, a prison in Chino, California. I developed *One-on-One* to use the medium of video as a means for forming relationships between people who would otherwise never get a chance to communicate with each other. This was in 1987, before the technology we have today. As in my other works, the *Love Tapes* and *Interactive Video*, I envisioned my role as an artist in terms of planning, facilitating, directing, and synthesizing interactive situations. I provided both a base structure and a video format from which the art experience was created through subject-medium interaction.

I asked the inmates who took my video workshop to make a videotape in which they introduced themselves to a stranger on the outside. Members of the Church in Ocean Park in Santa Monica and business owners in the Crenshaw area of Los Angeles were asked to make a video response. I showed the videos to the inmates and asked each of them to make a response to the people on the outside. I went back and forth between the prison and the outside communities, making and showing these tapes... and so the dialogues developed.

The one rule we had was that this dialogue was *only* to be held on video. Each person was to be in contact through video



*Love Tapes: Chapter One, Wendy Clarke, 1977*

and *never* in person or by letter. I did this because I wanted the relationships to be a pure video experience, one that was bound by the essence of the medium.

Over the next year, fifteen pairs of people communicated in this inside/outside video process. Each person knew that their tape might be seen publicly and gave their approval for its release. The dialogues became very personal and emotionally revealing, as the pairs developed caring and meaningful relationships that could only have happened because of these video exchanges.

I also edited some of the other work I did on the HIV/AIDS unit at the California Institution for Men in Chino and with young women at the California Youth Authority. There's still one more video from that group that I want to edit. And I do want to take a look at my diary and see if there's anything there.

There's nothing new that I want to do here. I'm not interested in new work. I want to complete my old work. But there is a video,

before Zoom, I think this was like 1976: I was on the phone with my mother and we both videotaped ourselves. I would love to see what the hell we were talking about and see if I could put that together, because it might be really funny. I don't know. That's something I still want to see. There's more video and photography and writings that's in the archives that I would like to work with.

Also I had gone back to school when I moved to California and got my Master's and my PhD in psychology and I did a lot of art therapy. There's a book that I want to write about my art therapy process. For ten years here [Taos], I worked at the Community Against Violence, a shelter for battered women. I did art therapy with the women there. I also did art therapy with men in the HIV/AIDS unit of the California Institution for Men, in Chino, California. We'll see if I get it together to do that. And I'm still spinning wool.