EXPERIMENTS IN DOCUMENTARY

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Barbara Hammer, *Available Space* (1978-79)
PERFORMANCE AT NWAA, PORTLAND, 1979, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

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INTRODUCTION

EXPERIMENTS IN DOCUMENTARY: CONTRADICTION, UNCERTAINTY, CHANGE

LUCAS HILDERBRAND

At the center of the campus where I now teach is a verdant park with grassy hills, monumental trees, and eclectic fauna. Given its location in an arid part of Southern California, most of these plants are not indigenous and necessitate extensive irrigation. Although the plants are all living, they are not exactly natural, prompting a friend concerned with environmental sustainability to refer to this lush patch of land as "a beautiful lie." Indeed, it is. And yet, it's not. This park, from its inception, reveals another controversy. According to local folklore, the park, the logical place on campus for student congregations, was designed in the 1960s to facilitate the quick containment of any uprisings. Today, however, this park is the only area that could be called lovely, and it offers a retreat from the blight of the consistently beige architecture and concrete walks. The park is alive with contradictions.

Inherently, so is documentary. From the start, documentarians have wrestled with a central tension between reality and construction. John Grierson recognized this when he called the emergent mode of documentary the "creative treatment of actuality" in 1929.[1] Eight decades later, Jonathan Kahana revisited this assertion, remarking that this phrase "functions as a moment of origin for documentary precisely because it is ambivalent, or simply uncertain, about what the term 'documentary' stands for."[2] Typically, the concerns with the contradictions of documentary have spurred debates about truth, ideology, and power—important issues, no doubt, but not exhaustive. The "creative" part of the documentary equation at times gets lost, even though many key works of the documentary canon—and those most often claimed as part of its innovative edge—have not only made claims for truth but have also striven for beauty.

If documentary was first conceived as the "creative treatment of actuality," influential filmmakers of the American avant-garde, such as Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage, offered creative treatments

1 John Grierson, "Flaherty's Poetic Moana," reprinted in *The Documentary Tradition*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Norton, 1979), 25–26. Grierson subsequently insisted that documentary filmmaking is "creative work" with "different aesthetic issues." See Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary" (1932–34), reprinted in *Nonfiction Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Richard Meran Barsam (New York: Dutton, 1976), 21.

2 Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 7.

of experience. These works opened up alternatives to mainstream film that shifted focus from the state of the world to states of being. Because so much of this work is formally innovative and the subjective perspectives so interior, at times we forget to ponder how such films speak to the world at large.

At the intersection of documentary and experimental practices, the duality of actuality and creativity energizes artists to make work that is radically beautiful and fantastically true. Authenticity and analogy, indexicality and abstraction become symbiotic rather than oppositional principles. For the past decade or so, artists have created an explosion of moving image works that hybridize documentary and experimental, video art and essay modes; although rarely conceptualized as a coherent or prevalent mode, experimental documentary work screens widely in galleries, film festivals, classrooms, and at Flaherty seminars.[3] These artists challenge the way we see (and hear) documentary—and at the same time bring documentary back to its essence. Such artists explore issues that are central to documentary: how historical consciousness is mediated through documents, how individual subjectivity is interlaced with cultural heritage and political traumas, how we understand institutions and power, how to change the world. They have also changed the ways we see the world and its history, opening up new ways of examining how we understand both as they engage with images and institutions, ambiguity and revelation. This work is often self-reflexive, episodic, academic, and even impulsive. While visually and aurally innovative, these films, videos, and installations are also socially engaged, offering complicated cultural critiques that cannot be reduced to simple, specific agendas. Experimental documentary makers' investigation of their own subjectivities, the variability of truth, and the pursuit of efficacy reveal a complex search for an ethical way of being in the world, one that is explored and achieved through explorations in sound and image.

You could say that any documentary that is interesting is an exploration. And any experiment has the potential to reveal some truth. Some key experimental documentary works have been so extensively written about or taught that they suggest an already-established canon that precedes the recent wave of work:[4] Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955), Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1983), Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied* (1990), Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991), and Sadie Benning's video diaries (1989-93). Certainly, there are many ways to experiment with documentary: for instance, with playful reflexivity, which becomes a hall of mirrors (as in William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, Take One*, 1968) or with truth-based simulations, which stand in for events that cannot be documented firsthand (as in Jill Godmilow's *Far from Poland*, 1984).

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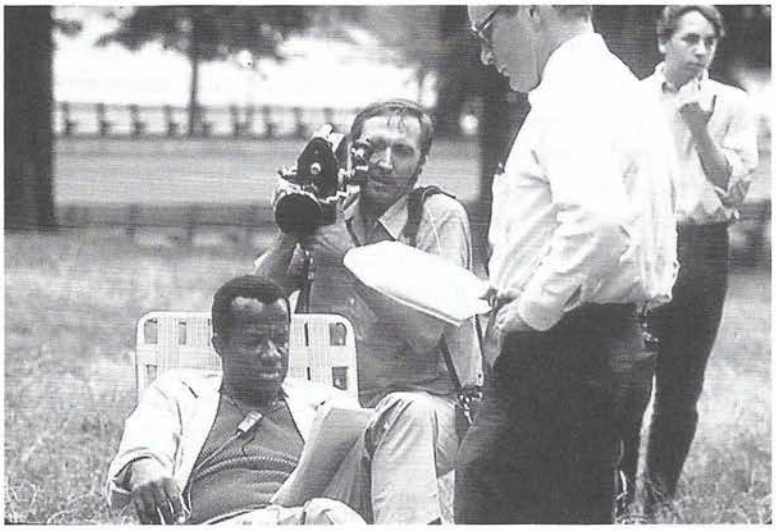
3 The boundaries between media and fine arts have largely broken down, with the increasing presence of video in galleries. Simultaneously, there has been a turn toward the document in installations. See, for instance, the exhibition and catalog *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, curated and edited by Okwui Enwezor (2007).

4 Scholars such as Catherine Russell, Laura Marks, Michael Renov, and Jeffrey Skoller have written at length about some of these and other works that easily fit within the realm of experimental documentary, though none of their books are explicitly framed within this rubric. See Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).



William Greaves, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, Take One* (1968)
PRODUCTION STILL, COURTESY OF WILLIAM GREAVES PRODUCTIONS.

There is also, often, a shift in register from the subjective to the subjunctive, suggesting the utopian what-might-be (as in the "film truth" or *kino pravda* that superseded human reality in Vertov's *Man*) or the retrospective what-might-have-been (as in the most mainstream of experimental documentaries, Errol Morris' investigative *The Thin Blue Line*, 1988). And, sometimes, the world is just so weird that it can only be represented creatively (as in Jean Painlevé's poetic aquatic science films *L'hippocampe*, 1934, and *Acera, or the Witches' Dance*, 1972). Works such as these—and many more could be listed—have become central to documentary history's shifts and transformations; they have also inspired generations of media practitioners.

As a term, "experimental documentary" is both ugly and vague. Many of the artists in this issue agree on this point, as do I. The "essay film" might be a more elegant term; for me, this concept suggests a process of working through, of making transparent the maker's processes of thought and discovery. In a useful exegesis of the essay film, Nora Alter writes, "The essay, [Georg Lukács] suggests, is 'criticism as a form of art.'... the essay is fragmentary, wandering, and does not seek to find absolute truths—as would, for instance, the documentary genre—but rather 'finds its unity in and through breaks and not by glossing them over.'"[5] This formulation might be called "critical subjectiveness," pervades the experimental documentary, a mode of non-fiction that is concerned with the personal or poetic interpretation of history and experience.

Offering a complementary analysis, Jörg Huber allows us to think through this critical subjectiveness as one that is highly self-conscious of the ways we can only understand

5 Nora M. Alter, "Translating the Essay into Film and Installation," *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (2007), 47.

events through individual perception and a personal relationship to the greater public:

> The essayistic exposes the process of subjective perception and associative thinking; it is involved in translation and transition; it focuses on the ambulatory character of imagination, far removed from any programmatic statements... Essayist video works are interesting exactly because of the way in which they take their point of departure... from a perception which marks the specific ways and opportunities of everyday experience, of being-in-the-world, of opening the world.[6]

6 Jörg Huber, "Video-Essayism: On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional," in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Bieman (Zurich: Springer, 2003), 93-94.

But this "being-in-the-world" is a process for the viewer as well as the artist, which complicates—and perhaps even makes possible—connections between the artist, the text, and the spectator. In the midst of the most thorough article attempting to survey and define the term "essay film," Laura Rascaoli suggests a process of personal address and communication between the work and the viewer:

> each spectator, as an individual and not as a member of an anonymous, collective audience, is called upon to engage in a dialogic relationship with the enunciator, to become active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the text... Humanism is, indeed, implicit in the essay structure—the assumption of a certain unity of the human experience, which allows two subjects to meet and communicate on the basis of this shared experience.[7]

7 Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," Framework 49, no. 2 (Fall 2008), 36-37. On the "essay film" see also Timothy Corrigan, "'The Forgotten Image Between Two Shots': Photos, Photograms, and the Essayistic" in *Still/Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 41-61; Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions," *Film Comment* (January/February 2003), 58-63; and Phillip Lopate, "The Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film," in *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 243-70. Using Bill Nichol's influential taxonomy, such work might also fit into the categories of "poetic" or "performative" documentary. See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 138.

This humanism is perhaps what most appeals to me about these works, and it would also seem to be at the root of any socially committed documentary endeavor. The experimental spin on traditional documentary comes when this humanism has been articulated through a kind of critical subjectiveness. Although I feel an affinity for the essay film form, I remain reluctant to apply the term full-stop for this special issue because it may not always apply: first, with "film" potentially excluding video and installation work, and second, with "essay" implying a specific emphasis on language, whether as text on screen or voice-over narration. As editors, Lynne Sachs and I choose not to limit our concerns to the essay film, nor to create a more eloquent moniker for "experimental documentary" because our investment in this special issue has not been to define categories and pin down definitions but to suggest and revel in the field's possibilities.

While clinging to the porosity of the concept of experimental documentary, I should, perhaps, offer some claims as to its more coherent shared attributes. The element of experimentation suggests, at the very least, a concern with form and mediation; the documentary suggests an engagement with the realities of history, politics, and

culture. While film has a form and comes out of a cultural context, there is something medium-specific and innovative in experimental documentary that relies upon visuality (cinematography that does not strive toward commercial production values, layered images, non-plot driven digital effects) and temporality (fragmented narrative structures, contrapuntal sounds, pensive silences). Such aesthetic elements are the means through which historical revision, contemporary politics, and alternative futures are explored. These artists' works might be described as reflexive interventions: critiques of power and social relations that are aware of their subjective positions and the politics of representation. In effect, these artists create alternative portraits of history and negotiate the complex reconciliation of their own experiences and ideologies with capital-H History.

My own investment in "experimental documentary" comes from the exhilaration I've felt in seeing work that was new, mobilizing, profound, challenging—that is, from the work itself rather than from my schooling in historiography or critical theory. The works that have been formative in shaping my own attention to this field of creative non-fiction have tended to be wildly imaginary—so much so that the term "documentary" hardly suffices, if it applies at all—yet so deeply humanist that they nonetheless suggest some kind of profundity that cannot be dismissed as mere fantasy. A few examples: Paul Chan's single-channel video *RE: The_Operation* (2003), an attempt at "radical empathy" that imagines the Bush cabinet on the front lines in Afghanistan, writing to loved ones, and expressing a philosophical depth they almost certainly lack. Chan's work was such an unexpected method of dissent: a disorientingly humanized vision of the war.[8] I first saw this video with a group of festival programmers, and there was a charge in the room that we had shared something that made us see the war in a new way without letting anyone off the hook. Steven Matheson's *Apple Grown in Wind Tunnel* (2000) presents an entirely fictional account that seems true in spite of its unlikely premise: an underground network of people exchange toxic homeopathic recipes via pirate radio frequencies and truck-stop bulletin boards. The video points to the breakdown of the U.S. healthcare system and the rise of environmental diseases, a world that is simultaneously liberating (people curing themselves) and terrifying (people poisoning themselves). Jacqueline Goss's *How to Fix the World* (2004) animates the accounts of cognitive sociology to demonstrate how logic, mediated by language, is culturally specific; enlightening and comic, the video is wholly both nonfiction and simulated. I could go on, talking about other favorites, such as Jorge Furtado's *Isle of Flowers* (1990), Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), Jem Cohen's *Lost Book Found* (1996), Allyson

8 Chan uses the phrase "radical empathy" in George Baker, "An Interview with Paul Chan," *October* 123 (Winter 2008): 210.

Mitchell's *My Life in Five Minutes* (2000), Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* (2000), Steve Reinke's *Sad Disco Fantasia* (2001), and Ben Russell's *Black and White Trypps Number Three* (2007)—not to mention work by the artists in this issue.

At the limits of documentary—and arguably, experimental documentary—are fantastic works that imagine or re-animate the real: works such as Travis Wilkerson's *An Injury to One* (2002), Omer Fast's *The Casting* (2007), and Walid Ra'ad's and The Atlas Group's various videos and installations of forged documents. Such radical documentary forgery has, of course, been explored before with such seminal works as *The Inextinguishable Fire* (Harun Farocki, 1969) and *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1979). One of the most productive sites for video and installation work has been the imagination of alternative realities or constructions that stand in for lost evidence. This form of work parallels Caroline A. Jones' suggestion that "Cultural history is *alter*-topia; its scholarly care in charting the past is part of a struggle to 'envision' other possible modes of being."[9] Perhaps this alter-topia is where Vertovian politics and Brakhagian phenomenological formalism intersect; it is also the place where we might "envision other possible modes" of documentary.

One might suggest that central to any conception of experimental documentary is that it breaks from a certain realist, objective, authentic tradition of non-fiction filmmaking.[10] Jeffrey Skoller recognizes a strain of avant-garde films that engages with questions of history and historiography:

> They work to undermine such gaps between past and present by using a range of cinematic strategies to consider elements of the past that are unseen, unspeakable, ephemeral, and defy representations not necessarily verifiable through the normal empirical means. At the same time, these films often foreground the constructed nature of narrative forms and the materiality of the film medium, both being integral parts of the meaning-making process. … their formal and aesthetic aspects are foregrounded to become the generative element that releases history as a force acting on the present.[11]

So many of our recent political crises have been in large part caused by short-term thinking, failures to learn from history or to think ahead and plan for a future beyond the immediate gratification of opinion polls or momentary profits. The "end of history" has been hailed by theorists for some time, and perhaps there is something to that. I find it striking, then, that one of the primary resistant gestures (resisting both our global political problems and the calcification of "documentary") of these experimental docs is a return to history: a break from the documentary tradition or the disastrous present by re-exploring

9 Caroline A. Jones, "The Mediated Sensorium," in *Sensorium*, ed. Jones (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 42.

10 Although the works described in this issue suggest alternatives to mainstream documentary practices and circuits of exhibition, I do not reject the importance of a more didactic leftist documentary tradition. To name a few recent examples, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), *Why We Fight* (2005), and *No End in Sight* (2007) are instructive in the best possible sense. Sometimes it's incredibly useful for filmmakers to make sense of history or examine a recent political quagmire that otherwise would seem irrational. (I even embrace Michael Moore.) But exploring and questioning is also important, which is the work I see so many of the artists in this issue doing.

11 Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards*, xv.

the past. These works are often explicitly concerned with re-rereading documents, the tensions between memory and what was, and the recog-nition that historiography is interpretive. Experimental documentaries allow for—maybe even necessitate—critical subjectiveness, humanist connections, recognition of historical wrongs, and speculation toward more progressive ways of being and representing.

* * *

Mapping a field of artistic practice and editing a journal issue about it both necessitate making choices. Certainly, as editors, Lynne and I have made many choices in exploring the boundaries of the category "experimental documentary." Perhaps the first of a series of choices was to conceive of the field as broadly as possible, to include artists primarily associated with the gallery scene, feature filmmakers who have achieved a degree of mainstream prominence, avant-garde filmmakers who prize the sanctity of celluloid, video artists who create idiosyncratic non-fiction explorations, and the numerous people in-between. Regardless of site, scale, or medium, all of these artists examine the truths and fictions at work in documents and the stakes of subjectively interpreting them. For us, another important and early choice was to let the artists express themselves, whether through personal statements or in dialogue with critics, about the categories they innovate, interrogate, or even reject. When we decided for this discussion about experimental documentary to take the form of a journal issue, the choice of venue was immediately obvious: *Millennium Film Journal.* Although it may make the journal administration blush for me to publish such a self-congratulatory statement in its own pages, *MFJ* seemed to us the right fit, as the journal has long been committed to both artists' writings and critical essays that actually communicate with the artists, programmers, and audiences that constitute the experimental media milieu.

The contributors to this issue are largely those doing the envisioning of other modes of documentary—in other words, artists. In late 2007, Lynne and I sent a questionnaire to dozens of artists; we cast a wide net, seeking a range of responses—from artists who created some of the seminal works in this field, from mid-career artists whose work is occasionally designated as "experimental documentary" or "essayistic" in program notes for screenings, and from emerging artists whose recent works have specifically excited us. Not everyone wrote responses (without naming names, many of these artists have been referenced in this introduction), but when so many of them did reply to my out-of-the-blue queries, I was delighted and even a bit star-struck. Those who participated reflected

upon their own work, agendas, and inspirations in relation to the category of experimental documentary.

For this issue, artists have also contributed a photo essay (New York-based artist Peggy Ahwesh), an artist's statement (a reflection on interactive activist performances by Buffalo/NYC artist Caroline Koebel), and documentation (photos of a performance and an email exchange with herself by Southern California artist Chie Yamayoshi). In addition, two insightful, rigorous dialogues between artists and scholars (Brooklyn film-maker Liza Johnson in dialogue with scholar Jonathan Kahana, Los Angeles-based collaborators Julia Meltzer and David Thorne in dialogue with scholar Tess Takahashi) productively open up questions of method, intention, and interpretation. This issue's critical writings include a manifesto-style essay that takes its structure from the film that inspired it (Konrad Steiner on Craig Baldwin's *RocketKitKongoKit*, 1986), a review of a certain tendency among films at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival (by Grahame Weinbren), and a personal examination (by Greg Youmans) of the form, politics, and affect of Chantal Akerman's *Là-bas* (2006) that frankly articulates how experimental documentary can stir up compelling, if difficult, resonances. Each of these critical writings, rather than being a distanced scholarly article about the work analyzed, actively mirrors or strives to make connections to the texts.[12]

Like the films, videos, and installations described in this special issue, this collection itself comes out of a specific historical period and political climate. It began in a place just as unnatural, and yet vibrant, as the aforementioned park: New York City. Lynne and I began discussing a publication on the seemingly under-explored intersections of documentary, experimental media, and progressive politics during the summer of 2004—a time of activism, art, and optimism. These talks were stimulated by both an excitement for recent films and videos that were not being written about and a sense of new forms of activist engagement. The scale and creativity of the mobilization against the then-local Republican National Convention, re-building and re-energizing from prior protests against the once-nascent war in Afghanistan and Iraq, were nothing short of extraordinary; it seemed unthinkable, for a moment, that John Kerry wouldn't defeat George W. Bush. However, Bush and the war carried on, and my collaboration with Lynne continued in ebbs and flows—though mostly ebbs (since, among other reasons, our collaboration became bicoastal). Disenchantment set in, and then renewal. In the interim, the question of art and artists' responses and responsibilities in the war on/of terror has become a recurring site of discussion.[13] I

12 Perhaps it would be closety not to acknowledge that I and many of the contributors to this issue are queer. I like to think that this issue's disproportionate response from queer artists and writers (most of whom do not write explicitly here about their sexualities or identities) reflects a position in the world of non-normativity and questioning the dominant frameworks.

13 A number of valuable publications have put artists in dialogue to discuss and strategize responses to the war, including Creative Time's *Who Cares* (2006) and A.R.T. Press's "Between Artists" series, including dialogues between Paul Chan and Martha Rosler, Silvia Kolbowski and Walid Raad, and Amy Sillman and Gregg Bordowitz. The issue of *October* 123 (Winter 2008) also features an artist questionnaire and interviews.

have written these introductory comments in the midst of another election cycle, one where slogans of "change" and "hope" became prominent rhetoric.

Experimental documentary is structured by possibility, marked by ambiguity. In preparing this introduction, I've thought of various ways to encapsulate the essence of these works without reducing them to a taxonomy. Among the phrases that seem suggestive are "the aesthetics of ambiguity" or "the aesthetics of ambivalence." Both seem to suggest the work's non-fixity and the fact that, after presenting the viewer with some evidence and a personal perspective, the work ultimately allows the audience to think and draw its own conclusions, rather than explicitly suggesting the "right" answer. If this introduction seems to propose varying definitions of experimental documentary, that both reflects my own shifting thoughts on the topic and perhaps appropriately reflects the work itself. There is a certain openness to this work, a resolute interpretability, despite the fact that the makers come from specific political positions. I can't decide which phrasing is more appropriate, ambiguity or ambivalence. And neither suggests what I really mean: that in searching, the artists often encounter the fundamental contradiction that the more one learns, the less one knows for sure. Perhaps this is why this work remains open-ended and insists that the viewer brings to the work his or her own process of interpreting. Some of the work that I find most exciting within this field is not only potentially mobilizing in a political sense but is also moving in an emotional way. Rather than cathartic, though, the work stirs up irresolvable feelings that I cannot articulate in words or explain away. In response to the exploratory quality and political questioning in so many recent documentaries, we have come to observe a pervasive aesthetic of uncertainty. This is not the defeatist description it might at first seem. Uncertainty is a precondition for change.

Experimental Documentary Questionnaire

Below is the original questionnaire that we sent to numerous film and video artists whose work crosses between experimental and documentary modes. The questionnaire was sent to a broad swath of media artists, including influential experimental filmmakers and documentarians, single-channel video artists and artists better known for their gallery installations, and various specific folks whose work we admired. As editors, we found it often productive when respondents abandoned the Q&A format altogether and expressed their ideas with their own structures—in the process, making this a dynamic interaction with varied formats. The responses that follow may not directly answer the questions and, in most cases, have been revised from their original versions.
- Lucas Hilderbrand and Lynne Sachs

This issue of Millennium Film Journal is about a broad category of work that we are calling "experimental documentary": essayistic, formal, researched, structural, episodic, self-reflexive, impressionistic, and/or personal films and videos that explore social issues. As part of this issue, we invite your responses (to any or all) questions—and encourage you to reply creatively.

I. Do you agree that "experimental documentary" is a valid category? How would you describe it? What are its aims and/or subjects?

II. How do artists who do the work of documentary—and yet are not primarily considered documentarians—challenge our conceptions of non-fiction cinema? What do you see as your relation to documentary?

III. Where does documentary meet the avant-garde?

IV. What role does political critique or activism play in your work? How are your politics communicated? How do politics and aesthetics inform each other?

V. What recent works or artists have inspired new ways of seeing the world? Have inspired new ways of thinking? Have inspired change?

■ Responses

Michelle Citron , *Daughter Rite* (1978)
FRAME ENLARGEMENTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

***What You Take For Granted...* (1983)**

MICHELLE CITRON

As a filmmaker and media artist whose work has been labeled experimental documentary, these are the questions I ponder...

- What mediums, structures, and styles are most appropriate for representing lived experience?
- How can I capture internal experience – moments that are felt, dreamt, inchoate – along with the non-physical and non-verbal textures of life?
- How can I express the ways in which the personal and psychological intersect with the social and the political?
- How can I create work that has fidelity to lives lived by the people who share their stories with me?
- Where is the line between lived experience and pure imagination?

Here are some strategies I've developed in my ongoing struggle to engage with these questions...

The Interview

In the early stages of creating a film or CD-ROM I interview people to discover and distill the "truth" of the idea I'm working on, be it mothers and daughters, women in the work place, the contractions of identity, or the immigrant experience. *Daughter Rite* was based on interviews with thirty-five women who spoke to me about their relationships with their mothers. The three fictional characters in *Daughter Rite* – Maggie and Stephanie in the faux cinema verité scenes and the narrator of the voice over – are compilations drawn from these interviews. No one character presents any one woman interviewed; each is a distillation of all the women who contributed to *Daughter Rite,* including myself. I used this same strategy to create the fictional talking-head interviews in *What You Take For Granted...* For *Mixed Greens*, where half of the stories focus on changing lesbian identities over time, I interviewed over twenty-five women. It was only through this research that I could portray the lives of lesbians from pre-Stonewall days through the 70s and into the 21st century. As with *Daughter Rite* and *What You Take For Granted...*, the characters in *Mixed Greens*'s fictional stories are composites drawn from the interviews I conducted. This begs the question: is it just fictional if it's based on stories told by social subjects? What does the phrase "based on a true story" mean?

Formal Play

In an effort to express internal experience, which always exists within the social, I've experimented with different aesthetic strategies. For *Daughter Rite,* I used a voice-over written in the form of diary, a medium that is culturally coded to represent our deepest thoughts, secrets, and feelings. Additionally for that film, I manipulated my family's home movies by using an optical printer to slow down and repeat movements. I wanted to express what I *felt* when I watched the home movies as an adult: a sense of claustrophobia and intrusiveness. For *Jewish Looks* and *Mixed Greens* I integrated text into the images. These texts represent my point of view as the artist and daughter. Additionally, text allows me to articulate political and historical issues with a different kind of logic than images allow.

Structure

How does one structure a story of lived experience? Stories told to me in interviews are never in a straight line. Memories are a narrative constructed from fragments at the moment of remembering; they are often associative, not linear. If our lives – personal, social, and political – involve a constant process of narrative construction, shouldn't the way we represent these lives make that process visible? *Jewish Looks* uses four family photographs that viewers/players navigate with a mouse, exploring individual photographs in depth, as well as thematic concerns across images. In this way, the piece blends and contrasts the personal with the historical, the psychological with the political, and the image with the text. *Mixed Greens* is composed of forty-eight scenes that present two narratives: four generations of my Irish-Jewish heritage played against four decades of lesbian life in America. Using both documentary and fiction, scenes are mixed and matched by the viewer/player to interrogate identity vs. assimilation, social vs. personal history, and discrimination vs. accommodation. In these web and CD-ROM narratives, the stories lie in fragments until constructed by the viewer through the action of clicking a mouse.

Exploring The Borders

I freely mix it up. I create faux documentary footage: the cinema verité scenes in *Daughter Rite*, the taking head interview scenes in *What You Take for Granted...,* the faux home move images in sections of *Mixed Greens.* In *Daughter Rite,* on the other hand, the home movies are authentic documents, though visually manipulated in a manner that moves them into the realm of experimental film. I often juxtapose fictional characters, based on interviews with social subjects, with traditional documentary footage. In *What You Take For Granted...,* these "fictional characters" are juxtaposed with authentic documentary footage of women working. In *Mixed Greens,* they are interwoven with authentic talking head documentary interviews. Additionally, in *Mixed Greens*, both the fictional and the documentary scenes have moments of textual intervention; descriptions of critical historical information best represented through language. The story of my Irish-Jewish family would not be fully comprehensible without an explanation, presented through text, of the Irish fight for independence from Great Britain at the beginning of the 20th century. I believe that borders are where contradictions flourish. The manipulated home movie images in *Daughter Rite* are at once experimental and documentary; they represent my POV toward my family while simultaneously preserving a trace of the authentic document. This layering suggests the contractions created by the competing "truths" of my father's and my images. In *Jewish Looks* and *Mixed Greens,* the texts often contradict memories and family myths

spoken by characters, both real and fictional. Borders create turbulence from which bits and pieces of insight rise. It is in the narrow current between fiction and lived experience that the truth breathes; it is at the border that we learn.

Documentaries have only a passing reference to lives lived; we can never fully capture lived experience. Thus, I could argue that all documentaries brush with the experimental: some by recycling well-known tropes (often in unexpected ways), others by inventing new ones. Whatever the strategy, we are all trying to represent that which resists representation: the contractions and paradoxes of living in the social world.

Works cited

Daughter Rite (1978, 55 min., film) An experimental narrative that explores the emotional landscape of mothers and daughters.

What You Take For Granted... (1983, 75 min., film) A fiction/documentary hybrid about women who work in traditionally male jobs, both working class and professional.

Jewish Looks (2002, web-based essay/artwork) An interactive meditation on identity, immigration, and the function of family photographs.
http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/cf/citron.htm

Mixed Greens (2004, CD-ROM, interactive narrative) A do-it-yourself movie about identity, belonging, and the things we desire.

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DONIGAN CUMMING

As "experimental" filmmakers of all stripes have often observed, the term is not the best. It suggests something tentative, a seeking for solutions, rather than a finished work of art or communication. It seems a category established by the establishment for everything that doesn't function quite the way the audience is used to or fit into the mainstream's broadcast slots. Applied to documentary filmmaking and videography, forms in which the delivery of information is paramount, categorization of a documentary work as "experimental" might lead to its dismissal as incomplete or inapplicable to the average person—or worse, as so imaginative as to verge on fiction. Since much of this filmmaking is intended to immerse the audience in a set of circumstances that can be felt, as much as observed, a better term might be "experiential" documentary – a cinematic experience that is also a life experience, which is knowledge of a different order.

Everything that I do is grounded in a socio-political context to which I am responding, sometimes very emotionally, and motivated by my own life-experiences. I live and work in Montreal, Quebec, having come to Canada in the summer of 1970 to resist the war in Vietnam. Though I had made my first "experimental" film in Florida in 1968, I was primarily a photographic artist, though I did very little personal work on first coming to Canada and what I did do was exhibited under three pseudonyms: C.D. Battey, Georgia Freeman and John Marlowe. In the early '80s, I began a cycle of black-and-white photographs designed as an attack on the conceits and mannerisms of documentary photography: *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (1986). My position at that time was that the whole edifice of social documentary photography needed to be torn down and rebuilt into a form

Donigan Cumming, *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography* (detail) (1986)

***May 3, 1989*, from the series *Pretty Ribbons* (1993)**
GELATIN SILVER PRINTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

that acknowledged reflexivity and admitted self-interest on the part of the maker. A lot of this work took the form of exaggerated visual quotations, and I drew from the whole exhausted repertoire of styles and tropes, including the Madonna and the old soldier. As an exile, I aimed much of this attack on American models, which, to my mind, evinced compassion and elicited empathy to no productive end. So the work was social—and taken as such in a Canadian context—but also political, lobbing images at the Satanic media mills south of the border. The work involved around 200 people who played versions of themselves as elderly, sick, and marginalized or young, robust, and prosperous. The unanticipated result was the creation of a real social community – people who came to know and care about each other through the making of the work. My own realization was that the work somehow extended my relationships with the kinds of people I had known all my life through the institutions inhabited by my older brother Julien who is intellectually and physically disabled.

At some point, I decided to continue with this community for the rest of my life. I made an extended photographic portrait of one of its elderly members, Nettie Harris, and after Nettie died in 1995, I made my first videotape, interweaving footage taken of Nettie in her last year and vivid memories of her held by other members of the community (who had or had not met her). This tape was called *A Prayer for Nettie*. My work with Nettie Harris aroused a certain degree of controversy that we both understood as social and political in nature. Nettie, who was neither promiscuous nor poor, acted out the sexual desires and material neglect of the elderly; she was very aware of the disturbing effect of our work on the middle class to which she belonged. *A Prayer for Nettie* was episodic in structure and

ended with a bit of absurd comic relief—in the form of a skit in which I performed, mostly off-camera (hand and reflection entering the frame).

Always working alone in an improvisatory mode that allowed things to happen in front of the camera and that also acknowledged my direction and participation, I kept up with the core group of the community in subsequent videos as we buried its members (*Cut the Parrot*) and dealt with the vicissitudes of living under the Canadian social welfare, legal, and medical systems (*After Brenda, Erratic Angel, if only I*). I sought to render a documentary vision of these people's lives, responding to the vulnerability of constanly changing circumstances and constant worry about shelter, medication, prosecution, loss of autonomy, and inability as Colin Kane complains, "to get organized." The tapes sometimes stumbled into crises and worked through them, presenting something close to the real truth: a steady state of gnawing uncertainty—a feeling that the avant-garde buzzword "indeterminacy" does not cover. My politics bleed through these works in camera-work—that is, as someone once said, "the right too close"—in long takes and repetitions that replicate something of the real-time pace of the everyday, in confessions and accusations that resemble the exchanges of long-term relationships, in flashpoints of self-doubt as the people I work with accuse me of bourgeois sentimentality, inconstancy, and selfishness.

One tape, in particular, brought politics to the fore: *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001). The main character of this work was another American exile, a retired teacher named Marty Corbin, who had a fascinating past as a labor activist and pacifist. I wanted to talk about his history and mine on tape, but his alcoholism and declining health overtook us. I kept visiting, talking to Marty, trying ineffectually to help, while recording relentlessly (toilet paper in one hand; camera in the other). Before he died, Marty saw

Donigan Cumming, *My Dinner with Weegee* (2001)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

a rough cut and pronounced it "a cautionary tale." It was his last radical act. My own, on the same tape, was to revisit my decision to come to Canada, an insignificant act on the great stage of American imperialism, now more than ever in action. There are many more things to say about the political implications of these tapes, and I have said them, in interview with Mike Hoolboom.[1]

Here I just want to summarize some of the socio-political threads that run through all my work. I have tried to look at people and circumstances that our societies prefer to put away in sterile containers or to junk, and I have tried to show both the physical and psychological conditions that are just a whisper away from everyone, rich or poor, healthy or sick. I have aimed to write these conditions large and to make them heard at a very high volume in theatrical prsentations and video projections, and I have defended these assaults on the spectator as mild "screen" versions of the subjects' lives. A recurrent theme in my work is the undercurrent of violence in Western society, whether through warfare, incest, self-abuse, or benign neglect. Another is the opiate and fanaticism of religion. These themes are the basis of two monumental collages with images drawn from my photographs and videotapes that I began to make after the United States' 2001 invasion of Afghanistan: *Prologue* and *Epilogue* (2005). People who see something of their own situation in my work seek me out to tell me that they find it comforting, even strengthening. The rage that sometimes breaks out in the work may be cathartic for some; I don't know. My own anger at the waste of human beings and the planet seems almost bottomless, which I suppose guarantees my employment as an activist artist and maker of experiential tapes. The irony of this last comment—from the maker of *Reality and Motive in Documentary Photography*—is intended.

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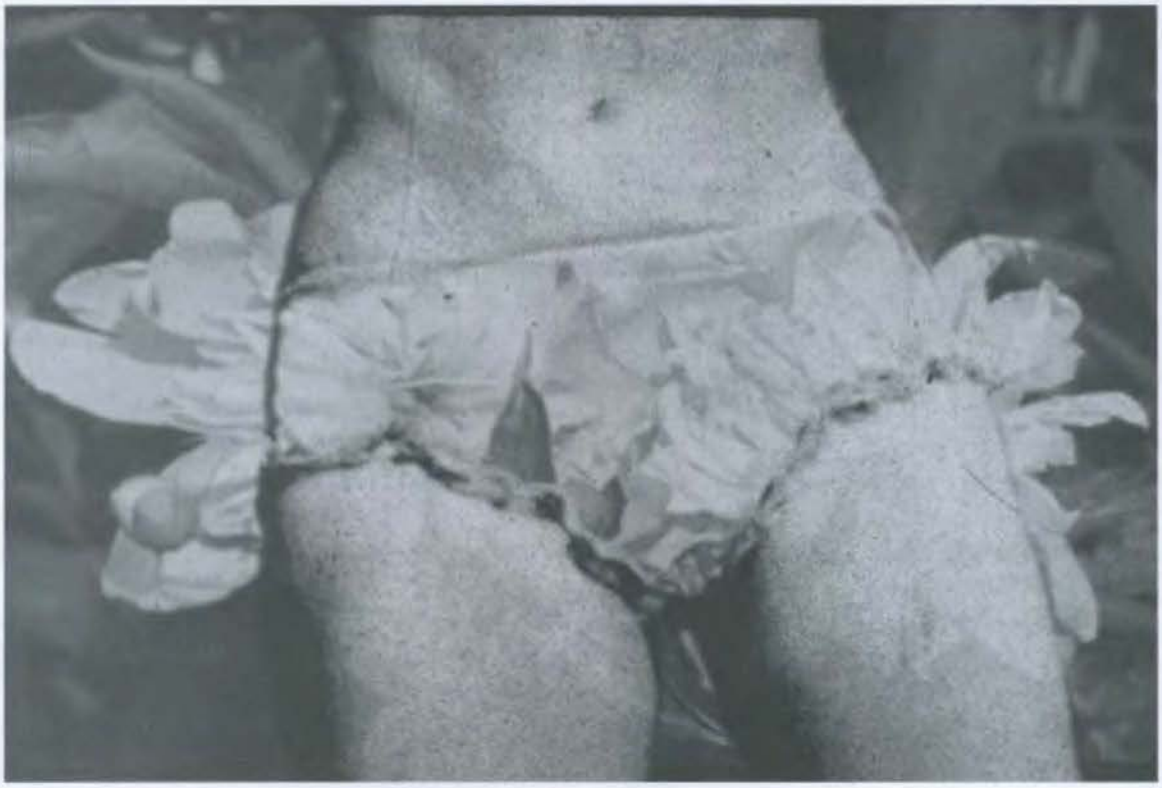
SASHA WATERS FREYER

"When I was young, my mother read me a story about a wicked little girl." So begins the 2005 novel *Veronica* by Mary Gaitskill. "... because I sat against my mother when she told this story, I did not hear it in words only. I felt it in her body."[2] I draw on this novel as way into thinking about strategies for articulating female subjectivity in non-fiction media production because I am inspired by Gaitskill's intense exploration of feminist themes—female desire, motherhood, daughterhood, friendship, and self-sacrifice.

In my recent short experimental films, Gaitskill (among other women) serves as a muse for the female artist to cut to the quick of women's experiences of subjectivity, to find a productive tension between the interior life of fantasy, memory, and projection and the actual world as it is refracted through these veils of experience. In 2005 and 2006, I completed two short films about sex and motherhood at middle-age. *The Waiting Time* (17 min.) is a diary-collage exploration of desire, conception, and the long waiting time of gestation. *Her Heart is Washed in Water and then Weighed* (13 min.) meditates on mortality and female mobility and takes its title from a procedure in human autopsy. *The Waiting Time* utilizes a wide range of archival materials culled from medical and educational films, home movies, burlesque, and television, and this playful blurring of the lines between the profilmic reality of my original footage and the various archival elements expresses a multi-layered, female

1 Mike Hoolboom, *Practical Dreamers: Conversations with Movie Artists* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2008); also on www.donnigancumming.com

2 Mary Gaitskill, *Veronica* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 3



Sasha Waters Freyer, *The Waiting Time* (2005)
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

subjectivity. This partial collage technique (intentionally) limits viewer identification with an individualized subjectivity and, hopefully, invites the viewer to think more broadly about motherhood as a social institution. *Her Heart is Washed in Water and then Weighed* brings together two voices a generation apart to tell very different stories about motherhood. Shifts in camera placement and point-of-view specifically create a visual conversation between the dual perspectives of mother/daughter, adult/child, interior/exterior, and domestic/public.

I came to filmmaking from photography first as a documentarian, yet it is in my personal-experimental work that I find it easiest to play, to discover alternatives to what filmaker Jill Godmilow calls the "synthetic intimacy" with "distressed social actors" of most U.S. mainstream documentary production. Godmilow, known for her radical deconstructive approach to non-fiction in such films as *Far From Poland* and *What Farocki Taught*, argues that the trouble with contemporary mass-market documentary is its inadequacy as a form, which on the one hand promises edification and enlightenment and on the other expects to deliver satisfaction and closure. The standard-issue "liberal documentary" is, in Godmilow's words, a "relatively useless cultural product, especially for political change. Its basic strategy is description, and it makes its argument by organizing visual evidence, expressive local testimony and sometimes expert technical testimony into a satisfying emotional form." This "soft form" of conventional documentary provides compassion and complacency instead of analysis and action—even when the stated goal of the documentarian is social change—because, she argues, it fails to implicate the class activities and identification of its largely privileged audience. The antidote that will allow us as makers and viewers to escape "the voyeurism and false

consciousness" of current documentary forms, Godmilow asserts, is for filmmakers to abandon "truth claims, intimacy, and satisfying forms."[3]

Truth claims, I have few. Satisfying forms I am willing to abandon. But give up intimacy? Personally, I struggle with Godmilow's critique because I confess an attachment to psychological realism in the literary sense and an attachment to compassion, meaning the notion that a human(ist?) connection through the cinema is possible—and perhaps most likely through experimental non-fiction forms that ask for a patient, thoughtful, and attentive viewer ... much like the qualities one would hope to find in a good friend or colleague. (Cinema as conversation, perhaps?) Nonetheless I do think it's important to recognize that in much of what passes for documentary realism, the process of the production of meaning is *not* seen, and the visible world presented in fact hides a vast web of social relations, technologies, and utterly constructed tropes of authenticity. Rather than a window or a mirror, this screen of the visible in the surveilled world of documentary is a masquerade, and my own current interest lies in exploiting this façade without defaulting necessarily into utter anti-realism and without abandoning narrative pleasure.

I like to get out of the house, to use the camera as an excuse to talk to new people, and I am not ready to just up and abandon the entire toolkit of standard documentary practice. Recently I discovered a film by Agnes Varda, the only female director associated with the French New Wave that appeals to me as a possible way out of the realism-anti-realism binary that shapes Godmilow's arguments and has informed so many discussions of feminist documentary filmmaking in the U.S. since the 1970s. This film, completed in 1975, is her documentary *Daguerrotypes,* a "collective portrait" of her neighbors on the rue Daguerre, a street in Paris she inhabited for more than forty years. By prioritizing both women characters and a diverse array of workers on the rue Daguerre—the barber, the driving instructor, the bakers, the perfumer, the butcher, the music teacher, the tailor—Varda composes a curious yet unpresumptuous and, at times, ironic spectacle that, like many of her films, "demands a certain kind of activity from its spectator ... the film exposes a situation [and] each spectator draws his or her own conclusion."[4] There is a strong de-emphasis throughout *Daguerrotypes* on individual characters or on character development or transformation. Rather, the subjects of the film and the implied/implicated viewers of the film are networked together via the physical space of the screen; along the geographic space of the rue Daguerre, the exchange of goods and services—or, labor for capital—is prominently exposed. In this way, Varda gives workers, the daily business of living, the dreams of middle-aged, middle-class 'anonymous' types, the mundane rites of capitalism—subjects usually invisible or at the margins of mainstream cinema—a position of value at the very heart of her film.

Gaitskill, Godmilow, Varda: a gifted trio of muses who together (in my mind I see them sharing a table in a café, at least one pining for a cigarette) bestow the outlines for a map that allows me to begin to explore how claims about truth, power, and subjective experience are articulated in non-fiction cinema, and guide me towards strategies of self-reflexivity that don't depend exclusively on first-person presence as *the* alternative to the positivist-realist axis of observational documentary.

My newest film, the hour-long *This American Gothic*, is both a return to and a departure from classical documentary—a return in that it ventures out into the world to tell the story of

3 Jill Godmilow, "What's Wrong with Liberal Documentary," (1999). http://www.nd.edu/~jgodmilo/liberal.html.

4 Varda on her film *La Bonheur*, as quoted in Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 233.

one of the most famous paintings in the world and the quirky, rural town that inspired it and a departure in that it, like Varda's *Daguerrotypes*, is preoccupied with questions of observation and staging, self-presentation, and representation in photography, history, and the documentary impulse itself. *This American Gothic* follows a handful of Eldon, IA (population 998) locals as they work toward their dream of building the American Gothic House Center to attract tourists and save their fading rural community. The film explores the irony of a rural America abandoned to economic hardship for decades (the town collectively laments the closing of the Rock Island Railroad in 1980) now trying to rebuild itself through tourism that glorifies a happier, but largely imaginary, country past. *This American Gothic* is a film about a painting in which we never see the original, only the translations, parodies, and permutations it inspires; it is a cinematic portrait of a painted portrait that periodically looks back at the viewer (camera) in a manner that echoes the direct gaze of the painting itself. Yet the film is also a portrait, unwittingly when I first began shooting, of four earnest, church-going, working-class women of the type who are rarely seen in films or television, except in parodic form. These women would never self-identify as feminists, yet I believe they are a living legacy of the activist feminism of the 1970s—a feminism that also shaped Gaitskill's, Varda's, Godmilow's and countless other women film artists' consciousnesses, and that continues to inspire me to tell stories from the margins of female culture and experience.

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SU FRIEDRICH

To the extent that I've always disliked (and tried to disavow) the term "experimental film," I feel the same way these days about the term "experimental documentary film." This is to say that I always thought the field of—what to call it? avant-garde?—cinema was ill-served by the term "experimental," and I think what everyone does these days that has a relatioship to documentary is ill-served by this new moniker.

Of course, I run into problems naming what I do when I do something that relates to documentary, so I (sometimes) use the term begrudgingly. I don't know whether anyone could ever coin a term that would be large enough to embrace the huge range of work made under this current name, but I still have to say I dislike and disavow it.

I never thought we were doing "experiments" when we were making non-narrative/non-documentary films, and I don't think we're doing "experiments" now if we use our cameras and language to record events in the real world. We're just making films that document something in a way that isn't prescribed by the tenets of conventional documentary practice.

Su Friedrich, *From the Ground Up* (2008)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Perhaps I should draw on a few examples from my own work. In the case of *The Ties That Bind* (1984), I documented my mother's experience in Germany during World War II. Rather than use talking heads interviews with her, I scratched text into the film to distinguish my own voice and questions,

Su Friedrich, *First Comes Love* (1991)
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

optically printed various images to highlight them, and did a range of other things that made it formally quite different than the standard doc. But, for me, this made it no less of a documentary; it told the story of a real person through her own words (in voiceover) and provided images and text to give her a context. A more tricky case, *First Comes Love* (1991) departs most radically (among my films) from the standard documentary but still, in its own way, documents the marriage rituals for heterosexual couples in New York City alongside the lack of access to such rituals for homosexual couples. Granted, all the film shows are images of four couples getting married, followed by a three-minute crawl that ticks off all the countries of the world that don't allow gay marriage; nevertheless, even without hearing talking heads discussing how the one ritual plays out and why the other isn't allowed or hearing a narrator describe the stages of a wedding, the viewer learns a lot about both those elements or experiences. Lastly, there's *From the Ground Up* (2008), in which I trace each stage in the process by which coffee goes from being a seedling in Guatemala to a hot drink in New York City without the use of interviews, narration, or facts and figures. It thoroughly documents the world of coffee but in a way that allows the viewer to experience it more directly and assess it in a subjective way, rather than being led to a predetermined assessment by the filmmaker, as so often happens with a more traditional format.

It would be far better if we called our work documentaries and let the traditionalists squirm in their seats (or coffins) at having something so "experimental" assert itself as, simply, a documentary. Why should they be the ones to dictate how one goes about documenting the world? Why are their works "documentaries" and ours "experimental documentaries"? That just serves to limit the field and to make people think in a limited or simplistic way about a huge body of films—as if some are "true" (proper, authentic) and others are efforts to undermine

Su Friedrich, *The Ties That Bind* (1984)
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

(or correct) the traditional ones—when, in fact, there are so many complicated ways to group, categorize and analyze the field.

It also seems to undermine or ignore history; an analogy would be if Germany before WWII was called "Germany" and after the war would be called "Experimental Germany" because it no longer operates under the same rules as it once did. The history of a country, people, art practice, business, etc, is always subject to change, redefinition, refinement, progress (or regression), major and minor tweakings. It goes without saying that time (history) yields change, but in other areas we don't constantly rename the original entity because we accept that evolution occurs. So why can't we think this way about documentary? Why do we need "experimental documentary" when what people are doing is simply revising, enlivening, challenging, having a dialogue with, and *therefore carrying on or contributing to* the evolution of those genres?

One significant experience for me has been attending the Flaherty Film Seminar, off and on, over the years. What I have witnessed there was a fierce battle between the group that held onto the traditions of documentary and those who wanted to open up the field. Sometimes it seemed like a tempest in a teapot, but what a tempest it was! And I found myself dragged into it, defending myself and my films against charges that I hadn't done things "the right way." (Not to exaggerate: I was also warmly received by others.) It's important to note that I'm not talking about legitimate criticism applied to the problems inherent in the film (e.g. it's too slow, vague, badly shot, superficial); any film can and should be criticized if it falls short of its intentions, whether on technical or aesthetic grounds. What I'm talking

about is looking at a film as if it should have been made according to the rules of the genre and then deeming it a failure if it didn't follow those rules. This I do not accept.

Traditionally, a documentary would have been filmed over a sufficient amount of time to follow the subject thoroughly, would be shot in sharp focus with good sound, would be edited for maximum clarity, and would in the broadest sense be seen as a truthful and comprehensive portrait of a people or place made from as neutral advantage point as possible. Obviously there have been massive attacks/revision made to these rules over the last 40-50 years (most notably the avoidance of the written and narrated voiceover in favor of the story being told by the subjects in on-camera scenes, even preferably without the interview format being used). Many great films have been made during this time, so in a sense we're already working in a much more liberated atmosphere than what prevailed before the 1960s. But the strictures are still in place if we still have to say that what we're doing is experimental. We still must feel that Those Guys make documentaries—albeit somewhat different than the most traditional ones—and consequently we don't see ourselves as part of the history, part of the community, but instead as outsiders busy with our experiments rather than in a dialogue with our peers.

It's much too late in the history of cinema to have these categories and/or divisions prevail. Viewers today are totally familiar with every "experimental" kind of shooting, sound, and editing. I think that continuing to call a documentary—something that records and analyzes events in the real world—"experimental" is to consign us to the dustbin, the back room, the orphanage. I don't think that's where we belong.

One of the lessons I learned many years ago as a young lesbian was that, if I spoke about myself as Other, I would be treated as such, whereas if I spoke of myself as just another human being, I would be treated that way. I think we should see ourselves as documentary filmmakers when we document the real world. The fact that we might be a one-person crew, install ourselves in the story, use nontraditional camerawork, and edit for multiple readings instead of a linear narrative doesn't mean we aren't making documentaries. Let others sweat if that makes them uncomfortable, but we shouldn't put ourselves outside of the history of documentary cinema because we are very much a part of it..

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RICHARD FUNG

On the subject of categories, I always ask myself what is at stake and for whom. Film/video genres are of greater import for funders, distributors, programmers, and scholars than for makers, except to the extent that funding, distribution, exhibition, and criticism limit or expand the possibilities of a work or a career. For most artists I know, the creative process does not involve trying to fit into the conventions of an established form for the sake of fitting in. But clearly there are real stakes for makers on how our work is categorized.

The concept of "experimental documentary" tries to function as a passport that eases movement between the established territories of experimental, documentary, and fiction modes. It doesn't necessarily challenge those categories in which there is a great deal invested by way of jobs and institutions. However, as the notion and the works themselves circulate more widely, it brings to the fore practices that are in fact longstanding: is Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) a "real" documentary or a "real" drama according to today's popular understandings of those categories?

Richard Fung, *Jehad in Motion* (2007)
REFORMATTED VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE , COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Perhaps because I came to independent production with some experience in criticism, distribution, and programming, I have always been aware of the systemic limitations and possibilities I've described above. I've also been conscious of the artistic and pedagogical potential afforded by different genres and languages of cinema: what kind of truths can be communicated better in documentary than in fiction—and vice versa?

Some of my work is therefore more documentary, some more experimental, though almost always non-fiction. I've worked only once using dramatic conventions, and with marginal success, though I'm about to shoot a collaborative video with documentarian Ali Kazimi and the polymorphously perverse John Greyson that centers on historiography and dramatic reenactment. One of my past projects (*Dirty Laundry,* 1996) and the current one both deal with sexuality in turn-of-the-last century western Canada.

Most of my work is politically motivated. This means that I am conscious about how the language I employ affects the potential to reach audiences, not just in numbers but also in connecting to the issues. Being committed to art and progressive politics while not being a populist means I search for ways to push aesthetics and political action and sophistication. For example, in my recent work *Jehad in Motion*, a 30 minute two-screen video installation, Palestinian-Canadian peace and social justice activist Jehad Aliweiwi is seen simultaneously in Toronto, where he currently lives, and in Hebron, where he grew up and to which he frequently returns. The two screens are edited to comment on each other so that, for instance, in the left image Jehad walks through the old market in Hebron where Palestinians have built a wire roof to protect themselves from the garbage and objects thrown down by Jewish settlers who have colonized the upper floors, while on the right he walks through a shopping mall in the Toronto neighborhood where he runs a center for newly arrived immigrants. In another scene, we see Jehad celebrating his sister's wedding at a feast for 1000 men in Hebron, while in Toronto he cooks at a Passover peace seder. He comments that in Hebron the only Jews he sees are soldiers and settlers, whereas in Toronto he has close Jewish friends.

From an artistic perspective, I was interested in seeing the documentary image spatialized as installation, but I also wanted to bring the documentary image into the gallery space. This formal strategy, which seems to melt time and distance, allowed me to comment on notions of diasporic subjectivity and to produce an intervention into the representation of Palestinians and Israel-Palestine in the North American context. If I can be trusted as a fair judge, the piece has popular appeal precisely because, not in spite, of its experimentation, as people were fascinated to observe where and how the two screens linked up and from which location Jehad was speaking at any particular point.

In response to the last question, I'm currently inspired by works by Christopher Chong, Harun Farocki, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and particular an amazing documentary installation I saw by Amar Kanwar at the 2007 Documenta at Kassel, Germany. This was an eight-screen video installation that uses documentary footage, drama, and text to discuss violence against women—and resistance against it—in the context of struggles around nation in India.

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Barbara Hammer, *Bamboo Xerox* (1983)
16MM FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

BARBARA HAMMER

During the past year I have been organizing both my film and paper archives. In shaking the archive, what has broken free is an understanding of how experimental filmmaking has been both a way of working through my personal experiences and a way to challenge the conventions of film as a way of changing society. This response is a retrospective gesture that reconsiders the meanings embodied by my archive and re-views a few of my films.

In addition to sniffing and examining my films for the fatal vinegar syndrome that marks film deterioration and organizing my papers into file crates by decade, I began reading about the ideology of archiving. Ann Cvetkovich writes of "films' and videos' archiving capacity to create fantasy and facilitate memory and mourning by aiming for affective power rather than factual truth." When sorting the film cans, I began revisiting my emotional and intellectual strategies for making this archive of 80-plus films and videos from 1968 to the present. Sometimes emotional states were the very basis and inspiration for my filmmaking: the relationship break-up in *Double Strength* (1978), the placement of my grandmother in a nursing home in *Optic Nerve* (1985), and now, my own experience of cancer and chemotherapy in my new digital experimental film *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor* (2008).

My work has challenged masculine dominance as well as produced tensions between under-represented identities and experimental film techniques. My first films were Super-8 expressions of living in the heterosexual community. With the dawn of my feminist consciousness, I made *Schizy* (1968) about the interior state of being a woman filmmaker living in a man's world. After coming out as a lesbian in 1970, I was even more excited about putting my newly-found physical, kinesthetic, and emotional sense of being on the screen. My strategy then and throughout the '70s was to put a "lesbian" body on the screen, to bring a lesbian subjectivity to film, to question heteronormative experimental film. This strategy worked for me but not always for lesbian audiences who hungered for representations with which they could identify in Hollywood-type narratives. Thus began my struggle to introduce an audience of newly emerged peoples with

Barbara Hammer, *Available Space* (1978-79)
FILM PERFORMANCE AT A SPACE, TORONTO, 1979, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

"out" lesbian identities to experimental film in the hopes that they would find a mirror to their own 'experimental lifestyles'.

I concluded that representations and complex juxtapositions were not enough to effect political change or to lead to acceptance and celebrations of difference. And so another strategy was born: I would *engage* with the audiences and bring new physicality to the projections that I hoped would move them into another space. In retrospect, I believe the goal of this work was to achieve an interactive populism where the audience would participate in creative social processes in what Nicolas Bourriaud has since called "relational aesthetics." Below I reflect upon my strategies in three films that literally strove to change the shapes of my cinema.

Available Space (1979)

In the '70s, I used 16 mm films, slides, and audiotape in performances that I created with Terry Sendgraff under the team name *Double Strength*. While living with Terry in a small one-bedroom Berkeley apartment, I had a dream "of Pyramid Lake, Nevada, of space, of freeing the rectangular film screen to a more liberated space, of escaping the confines of the frame, the 'domestic house.'"[5] I went to Pyramid Lake on my BMW motorcycle with a 16mm camera, tripod, and 30-foot cable release on the back rack. Once there, I began to film images of myself tethered to the camera but exploring whatever I could find within the cable's range. On the way back to California I saw several dilapidated houses that drew my attention. I went inside and filmed myself, pushing the edges of the frame in a metaphoric struggle to find some shape other than the proscriptive rectangle of the camera shutter and the screen.

The film is broken into eight segments to be projected on different surfaces. When I performed this film, it was projected from a mobile table that I could roll through the space, twirling and tilting the projector. I projected the film on the walls, floors, and ceilings. I projected onto a corrugated metal garage door across the street from the gallery at New Langton Arts in San Francisco and out the door onto a bank of snow at A Space in Toronto. The last section of the film was projected onto a paper scroll with an image of me cutting through it. Then, in performance, I actually did cut through the paper and walked toward the projector, absorbing the light with my body until no image or light could be seen.

My strategy with *Available Space* was to make the audience move their bodies while watching the film, presenting the idea that film could be more than a rectangle of projected light on a screen. The concept was that audience activity leads to political activity. By viewing outside the box, we might begin to see outside the box, to see other possibilities and to try something new ourselves. As we move, twist, and turn, to see the projection, there is more blood circulating, more oxygen pumping, more brain activity in our bodies. When art stimulates us internally, we can learn to make better political and social judgments in the external world.[6]

Bamboo Xerox (1983)

Behind my desire to "activate" the audience is a distaste for sutured, hegemonic cinema. By this, I mean a cinema dominated by both narrative and documentary traditions, cinema that hypnotizes its audience through invisible editing, illusionist sound, and 3D perspective. With *Bamboo Xerox*, I found another strategy to move my audience and break illusions. I photographed bamboo (my favorite grass) from my backyard and then xeroxed both sections of

5 Description from Canyon Cinema online catalogue: www.canyoncinema.com.

6 *With Moon Goddess* (with Gloria Churchman, 1976) and *Pond and Waterfall* (1980), I also made films to be projected on 12-foot inflated and suspended weather balloons. The audience would walk around or lie under the balloon, seeing curved and sometimes doubled images.

living bamboo and the photographic stills of the bamboo. After editing the film, I had the entire six-minute film blueprinted as a black and white scroll. I stretched the scroll horizontally around the theater space so that the audience could see the film frame by frame before they saw the projection. Perhaps the audience could break the illusionist ritual—or at the very least experience a different way of seeing a film. We live in a hetero-normative society where difference is more condemned than celebrated, and by showing the same film in two different ways (there could be many more ways, too!) I hoped the audience would embrace a multi-level view of the world.

Two decades later, I continued this project of printing the frames of film as a strip. This time I turned a six-inch piece of 16 mm film that I had hand painted, scratched, and treated with acids and salt crystals into a 2 x 23-foot scroll. With both of these scroll strips, I hoped to break down the mystique of film; I wanted the film to lose its "aura," the customary role, as Walter Benjamin tells us, wherein art plays a ritual function to legitimate traditional social formations.[7]

Sanctus (1990)

In *Sanctus*, I used an optical printer to refigure 1950s motion x-rays shot by Dr. James Sibley Watson and his colleagues in Rochester, NY. Again, I wanted the audience to be aware of their bodies while activating their minds. These precious x-ray images the doctors were watching with enthralled amazement were made by rays of light that damaged the body. I wanted the spectator to not only see our inner fragility as fluids and tissues swam together in hollow internal places but also to sense the danger involved in the process of making these pictures. Dr. Watson and the three men who worked with him all died of cancer.

The clinical x-rays shifted in meaning according to uses of the medical gaze, which shifted in 19th century to privilege pathological anatomy. Although the cineflurographic production of x-rays is not the result of any one man's work as is often thought, the manner in which the x-rays are "read" has been limited to a singular, rather than a multi-perceptual, approach. In reworking the footage through multiple passes in the optical printer and creating juxtapositions with varied (medical, scientific, philosophical) textual fragments within the image, I attempted to use a language of multiplicity to question the unitary concept of creation as well as the epistemology of scientific method.

My goal with each of these films has been to activate the cinema audience through physical movement (*Available Space*), contrasts between artifice and material reality (*Bamboo Xerox* and the film strips), and multilayered images that question unitary and problematic origins (*Sanctus*). By creating new physical projection systems or deconstructing the film projected on the screen, I hope my audiences will leave the theater invigorated enough to challenge the status quo in a polluted, violent and war-ravaged world that so desperately cries for salvation.

This essay has been expanded from *The Experimental Lecture,* which I presented and performed at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, November 16, 2007.

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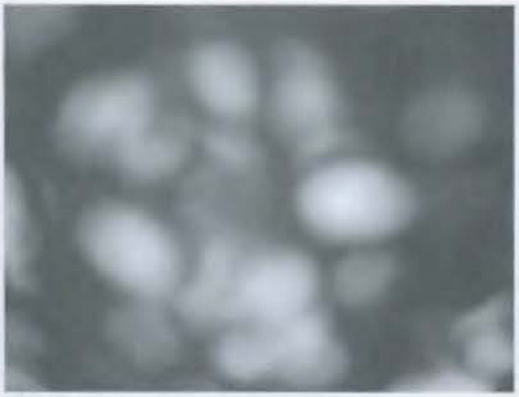
7 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-51.



Adele Horne, *The Image World* (2008)
FRAME ENLARGEMENTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

***15 Experiments on Peripheral Vision* (2008)**

ADELE HORNE

My film and video work consists of distinct but overlapping strands. Lately, I've worked on three projects in three different modes: observational, essayistic, and visual exploration around a concept. I consider all three projects to be documentary in nature because they are concerned with seeing the world around me and organizing my perceptions of it into film.

I like working in different modes; each mode is a tool in my belt, suited to a different purpose or situation and also to a different mood in me as the maker. Observational filming allows me to meet people, visit a place, and spend time out in the world as an observer. It allows me to tell stories about characters, situations, and political dynamics. Essay filmmaking allows me to plumb the complexities of a situation in a way that is not always possible when one is restricted to filming "what happened." It allows me to play with ideas and draw connections between things that may be distant in time and space but that mean something in relationship to one another. It is an incredibly flexible form, one that is rooted in the thinking, feeling "I" of the situated observer. Finally, making films that are visual explorations is a deep form of looking, a solitary and pleasurable act recorded to share with others.

One of the films I've recently finished is *15 Experiments on Peripheral Vision*, which explores peripheral vision through a series of short, discrete film experiments: attempts to film peripheral vision, perceptual experiments, and people describing what they see (at that moment) in their peripheral vision. This is an essayistic mode that is influenced by structuralist film experiments.

Another film, *The Image World*, is a sustained visual exploration of a simple optical phenomenon. When sunlight falls through the spaces between leaves on a tree, the "pinhole" apertures in the foliage create images of the sun on the ground below. This film records replicas of the sun as they appear and disappear in the dappled light under trees. What I find fascinating is the idea that these images of the sun are created by naturally occurring apertures. The film has abstract qualities (it consists primarily of rhythm and shape), but is really an observational film about a specific concept. I spent hours watching these proto-images take shape and disappear, and this film is a record of those observations.

My third project, *Playas*, is the most recognizably documentary in form and process. I spent several weeks filming observations and interviews in a New Mexico ghost town where local people are hired to play the parts of terrorists and victims in government-funded simulation training exercises. Then I worked with a theater artist to create and

Adele Horne, *Playas* (work in progress)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

film a theater workshop in which the local community acts out the history of their town as they see it. I think of this documentary as interventionist because it juxtaposes a type of play-acting that we originated with the existing play-acting of the government's training exercises. This film explores the transformation of public space and the curtailing of civil liberties that have taken place under the Bush administration. In that sense, this observational/interventionist/essayistic documentary is the most directly political of the films I'm currently making. But I strongly believe that the form of experimental filmmaking is political in itself, in that it creates little stoppages in the flow of corporate-produced images. Experimental forms asks viewer to see differently, to think, to question and puzzle things out, to meet an image rather than consume it. In a culture where images are so powerful and norm-enforcing, image-making is always political.

A few recent films and filmmakers that have inspired me are: Mercedes Alvarez's *El Cielo Gira/The Sky Turns*, Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda's *Czech Dream*, Agnes Varda, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Rithy Panh, Jeanne Liotta

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ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

Over the past twenty years, I have made experimental, personal, political documentaries about and within communities with which I engage: AIDS activists, media feminists, queer, feminist, and leftist families. My scholarly work on activist media has pushed me to pursue an ethical practice, veering from the tradition and tactics of the victim documentary

(taking pleasure in another's pain) and instead imagining community-bound, communally-produced feminist visions of radical political subjectivity. My politics—which are theoretically informed and consider the relations between power, subjectivity, community, and control of representation—are communicated through the way I organize the documents I produce about my collaborators' lived experiences and our ideas about the historical world. Aesthetics is one way to name the structure or organizing I contribute to this collaborative process; it is the mark of my hand—or mind—on the documents of the real world that form the primary material of what I call my femi-digi-praxis (the integration of media theory, digital production, and feminist politics in an historical context).

Below I offer a reinvention of Dziga Vertov's "WE: Variant of a Manifesto" (1922)[8] to (post)-modernize and feminize his foundational praxis.

I call myself MP:me (MediaPraxis:AlexandraJuhasz[9])—as opposed to "cinematographer," one of a herd of machomen doing rather well peddling slick clean wares.

I see no connection between true femi-digi-praxis and the cunning and calculation of the cine-profiteers.

I consider manipulated corporate reality television—weighed down with music and narrative and childhood games—an absurdity.

To the American victim documentary with its showy dynamism and power disparities and to YouTube's direct-to-camera dramatizations of so many individuals' personal pain or pleasure, this femi-digi-practioner says thanks for the return to real people, the hand-held look, and the close-up. Good … but disorderly, not based on a precise study of Media Praxis (the hundred year history of theoretical writing and related political media production). A cut above the psychological drama, but still lacking in foundation. A Cliché. A copy of a copy.

I proclaim the stuff of YouTube, all based on the slogan (pithy, precise, rousing calls to action or consumption, or action as consumption), to be leprous.

–Keep your mouse from them!

–Keep your eyes off those bite-sized wonders!

–They're morally dangerous!

–Contagious!

I affirm the future of digital art by hacking its present and learning from its past.[10]

I am MP:me. I build connections to history and theory and inter-relations between individuals and committed communities. With my small cheap camcorder, my laptop, and internet connection, I make messy, irregular feminist video committed to depth and complexity.[11]

"Cinematography," the earliest male tradition built on sizeable machines, stylish form, and solo cine-adventures must die so that the communal art of femi-digi-praxis may live.[12] I call for its death to be hastened.

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8 Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson. Trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 5-9.

9 See my blog, *Media Praxis*: www.aljean.wordpress.com.

10 See my course, *Learning from YouTube*, where we attempted to retool YouTube for educational and political purposes at: www.youtube.com/mediapraxisme.

11 My most recent documentary is *SCALE: Measuring Might in the Media Age* (2007), made with and about my sister Antonia, an anti-war activist and policy wonk, as she engaged in a "scale-shift"—leaving her grassroots community behind to pursue a corporate book-tour. We consider how the stress and connection between sisters mirror larger stories of power and intimacy. See: www.scalethedocumentary.com.

12 As an AIDS activist videomaker in New York in the late '80s and early '90s, I collaborated with other video makers and activists committed to re-imaging AIDS in making quick, low-budget videos seen and used by others in the community. While new access to machines enabled our work, it was our shared politics and communal processes that registered most radically in the work. See: http://kcet.org/explore-ca/web-stories/age-of-aids

I protest against the smooth operator and call for a rough synthesis of history, politics, theory, real people and their chaotic, mundane desires and knowledge.[13]

I invite you:

—to flee—

the sweet embrace of *America's Next Top Model*,

the poison of the commercial send-up,

the clutches of technophilia, the allure of boys' toys,

to turn your back on music, effects, gizmos,

—to flee—

out into the open with camcorder in hand, into four dimensions (history, politics, theory + practice), in search of your own material, from your own experiences, relationships and commitments to social justice.

Mp:me is made visible through a camcorder femi-digi-praxis: a small, hand-held, retro video aesthetic connected to a lengthy history of communal, low-budget, political and theoretical media production.

* * *

Leandro Katz, *Exhumación* (2007)
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

LEANDRO KATZ

I have always set my fiction and non-fiction work right in the middle of the "real" world, so that there is a documentary element moving between the background and the foreground, operating as a kind of meta-language of the work. I am interested in the real world; even

13 In *Video Remains*, (2005), I layer digital video of a queer youth AIDS education group, and a conversation with my hair stylist, on to 15-year old VHS footage of my best friend, Jim, as he performs a swan-song on the beach, in the late stages of AIDS. Present-day voices of lesbian AIDS video activists who were also active in the 1980s break the peace.

the most banal street scene appears interesting since for me, the real world seems like the diabolical invention of a mind gone mad. In my work, I follow my interest in specific "micro-historical events" that have affected me over the years. I do not look for these events, exactly; rather, they seem to find me or to have been on my mind all along. As a recent example, I became interested in the photographic rolls that the Bolivian military confiscated from the captured guerrilla fighters during the last Che Guevara campaign. It seemed that no one had questioned the idea that these photographs and other personal objects of the victims had become a profitable market for some of the members of the Bolivian military, and so this subject became an aspect of my recent *Exhumación* (2007). I do not think that documentary or avant-garde forms had anything to do with my interest in this event. The question floated up there, in space, like a wound. The work emerged from a very personal relationship with my own passage through this world. Politics and aesthetics are one and the same language for me. I prefer to call my work *film essays* rather than *documentaries*.

Leandro Katz, *Paradox* (2001)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

In my opinion, there has been a general transition from the classic avant-garde to the documentary essay. The work of most avant-garde filmmakers is, I think, a solitary work, very much like that of a writer. Now it is possible again to be the man with a movie camera—or the man/woman with a digital video camera—and to keep a reflexive approach without the interference of crews and cumbersome equipment. I was able to do this in *Paradox* (2001), a film shot in the banana plantations and archaeological sites of Southern Guatemala. I like working this way, setting up a direct and intimate relation with the subject. Even when the subject is a crowded factory, I have been able to become an invisible ghost, to move around almost unseen. I think this comes from being a documentary photographer, learning from the great photographer Grete Stern and her work with the Mataco tribes in the Argentine Chaco region in the late '50s.

As a photographer and a filmmaker in the '70s, I had made a distinction between hunting and farming images. Avoiding the hunting tradition, I decided never to go out with a camera in search of images. Instead, I had developed a rigorous set of themes that I would follow with a pre-structured idea that fell in the category of farming: not a script but a concept. For me, this was a good self-imposed learning process. In my first films, particularly in *Splits* (1976), which is a narrative film based on *Emma Zunz* by Jorge Luis Borges, I relocated a Buenos Aires story to the New York of the mid-'70s, making the city almost a character in the film. New York City is also very present in *The Visit* (1986, slide version a.k.a. *Foreign Particles*, 1980) and three observational time-lapse films: *The Shadow* (1976, a single-take film), *Paris Has Changed A Lot* (1977, a vertical film with the film projector turned sideways), and *Metropotamia* (1982, film for two projectors and a zigzag screen).

The wish to work with "the real" has become more intense in my recent works, especially when I have conducted research and to investigate historical events that had been veiled by deception and disinformation. Now I begin work with an extensive preliminary research period during which I concentrate on gathering information and images that will allow me to corroborate that information. The gathered material may become part of a photography/text installation or of a film essay. The hunting/farming analogy is still at work here. Since the information that I have collected appears to have a centrifugal force that needs to be contained, my main challenge in a film essay is to turn that force towards the center, to condense it without mercy so that the film becomes the essence of that information. I have tried to do this in my most recent works, *El Día Que Me Quieras* (1997, about the last photographs of the cadaver of Ernesto Che Guevara, shot in Bolivia with a small crew that included Mark Daniels, Caterina Borelli and Robert Taz), *Paradox* (about the relationship between exploitation and philanthropy, no crew), and *Exhumación* (about forensic anthropology and photography as a war trophy, no crew). These three projects also became photography and text installations. The approach and the materials gathered in the installations are entirely different from the films, but stem from the preliminary research. It takes me a long time to conceive a new work; it is almost like Zen archery, requiring concentration and timing.

After many decades of teaching (which I love) and faculty meetings (which I do not), I decided to leave New York (which I will always love) and to move to Buenos Aires (which I have always loved), with the thought that I should make room for the younger generations of avant-gardists looking for less affordable housing, and work from Argentina and deal directly with Latin American subjects.

I have been inspired by Chris Marker, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Charles Ludlam, Fernando Birri, Yvonne Rainer, Patricio Guzmán, Gillo Pontecorvo.

* * *

ERNIE LARSEN AND SHERRY MILLNER

"Political subjectivization is the enactment of equality—or the handling of a wrong—by people who are together to the extent that they are between. It is a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet-being." —Jacques Ranciere

By all means let us discover, uncover, or unmask experimental documentary as a valid, persistent, vital category of film practice/film history. This ought to bring new or additional light to who knows how many worthy and fantastic (and sometimes neglected) works. This will open up a blocked vein, refocus attention, sharpen critical discourse. It will even mix metaphors! However, we have learned to be wary of the fixative tendency of the categorical—a tendency with some odd consequences when we attempt, even despite ourselves, to encompass or consolidate the heretofore recalcitrant category of experimental documentary.

Bunuel's *Las Hurdes*—which, for argument's sake, we might consider to be the original experimental documentary—remains all these decades later as disturbing and unassimilated, as provoking and resistant as it was when it was made. Maybe this entitles us to believe that *Las Hurdes* will never succumb to its canonical status—that it will never be successfully consumed as an aesthetic object, will always stick in the craw of the

powers that be. The bitterly subversive ironies of its form and its content mutually and (it would seem) permanently unsettle, jostling against each other. In shaking off all attempts at classification, *Las Hurdes* remains oppositionally political and experimental, both at once. In other words, the (arguably) first true and undoubtedly "classic" experimental documentary doesn't quite fit in that elusive category, either. This contradiction should, we think, be embraced rather than elided. Those of us who make what we sometimes think of as experimental documentaries might do well to aspire to *Las Hurdes'* intransigence.

Sherry Millner, *Shoplifting: It's a Crime?* (1979)
16MM, FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Where, then, as a category does experimental documentary possibly fit—if anywhere? As a mixed form, it is capable of staking some claim to radical in-betweenness that Jacques Ranciere claims for the aspiration to radical democratic politics. Radical in-betweenness seems like a sufficiently awkward phrase for the indeterminate overlap between the experimental and the documentary. It is an impure area. But, then again, what isn't? We see this as a structural advantage: a stance decidedly suitable to representations of the mess that is "life."

One (perhaps ultimately inconsequential) risk undertaken by those who work in-between is that they don't fit smoothly enough into either of the affirmed, publicly sanctioned, and rewarded roles of professional documentarian or artist. Or, to flip this pancake, such image-makers manage to undermine two myths at once: the myth of (group) professionalism and the even more shopworn myth of (individual) imagination.

Recently, while developing the concepts and viewing many hours of work for two curatorial projects (*State of Emergency*, a window-projection series, and *Border-Crossers and Trouble-Makers*, a series of programs for the 2008 Oberhausen Film Festival), we have become more convinced than ever that experimentation—enriching and renewing the laboratory of both analytical and synthesizing techniques of representation for potential transformations—is all but indispensable for any serious investigation of social and historical reality. The most compelling films and videos we have seen adopt this approach reflexively (sans the agonies of the "theory" film). For better or worse, such a standard strikes an experimental match to the common definition (and perhaps more seriously the professionally objective ethics) of documentary. It is certainly some kind of anathema to the tradition of cinèma verité. The unexamined concept of truth or truth-telling is put into question by experimental documentary (as we tend to see it, anyway). Unfortunately, truth does not seem to be a stable attribute of the real that can in turn be directly and unproblematically captured by the camera. In this sense, conventional documentary practice provides the "raw" material by which the experimental doc undertakes its own dig, its own investigation. This investigation forgoes the noble aspiration to objectivity in order to explore the perceptual resources of the subjective, which can effectively demonstrate potential trajectories of agency, at a time when the public sphere has become all but identical with the media.

From early on (dial back to the '70s), we were pretty convinced that an oppositional culture would, out of both necessity and desire, be experimental or be DOA. So it seemed perfectly (or imperfectly) natural to be involved in radical political groups *and* to take part in the sometimes-pesky task of creating oppositional/critical discourse (for instance, by working on and/or writing for such oppositional journals as *Jump Cut*, *Toward Revolutionary Art*, and *Left Curve*) *while also* making films (and art and writing fiction, etc) that always deliberately mixed-up the factual, the fictional, and the experimental (in the model of anarchist/Situationist/Brechtian ideas). To get at all near this notion of resistance, contestation, and opposition, you would (we would) have to re-tell (a fictional impulse) histories (rooting around in the factual) in new or unexpected ways (the experimental). This could be excessive, but that's what we liked about such impure aesthetics—that they were suited to thrive at the edge of disorder, which was often enough the neighborhood we were living in. For example, one of our early films, *Shoplifting: It's a Crime?*(1979), starts as something like a documentary but, animated by a persistently Proudhonian premise that property is theft, shifts into a travesty of a training film and layers gender-switched narrration over appropriated footage from a "real" doc about shoplifting. Very impure.

Every so often, one has to restate what seems obvious, even to oneself (the old long-term memory problem). In an essay titled "For An Impure Cinevideo," we set out to "embrace the potential for an anti-spiritual search for impurity." But not because we were interested in mixed-form for its own sake. Calling on Julio Garcia Espinosa's celebrated argument for the revolutionary movement "toward an imperfect cinema," we developed a politicized version of the anthropologist Mary Douglas's crucial insight that dirt is "matter out of place." We said: "The point about dirt, as the momentary residue of a struggle or series of struggles, mixed together, perhaps inextricably, perhaps irretrievably, is that it has a history. Matter is to some degree changed by being out of place. The impure cinevideo takes the extraordinary complexity attaching itself to all matter matter of factly and assumes with pleasure that there is no unproblematic totalizing approach to it." If so, then what was purity? "The aesthetic alibi of authority." (Purity, Mary Douglas said, "is the enemy of change.") And, just for argument's sake, we could say (partly because we can't locate an appropriate Mary Douglas quote to cover the ground) that authority is little more than the publicly sanctioned legitimization of violence, whether implied, actual, or represented. This is more or less the territory of experimental documentary that's occupied us all along, as in *41 Shots* (2000), our conceptual video that displaces the horrific mess of the police murder of Amadou Diallo in the vestibule of the apartment house in which he lived in the Bronx to 41 other vestibules of well-appointed domiciles in Manhattan—the territory, that is, of the imagination of violence. In our video, the vestibule's transitional zone between inside and outside becomes an architectural metaphor for universal vulnerability to the sanctioned forces of order on the point of becoming "a great disorder." Similarly, we conceive a (perhaps subjective) link between the documentary and the experimental: a visual metaphor, which in handling a wrong connects people who are together to the extent that they are between. Or something like that, only dirtier.

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Jesse Lerner, *Magnavoz* (2006)
16MM, PRODUCTION STILL, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

JESSE LERNER

I think of "experimental documentary" less as an autonomous category or genre than as a borderland—the place where the avant-garde's interrogations of the real world meet the bravest and most inventive outposts of documentary. I see my works in film as precisely these sorts of border-dwellers, criss-crossing back and forth across the boundaries that separate documentary and art film, North and South, "high" culture and pop, political critique and formal experimentation.

I often choose to use a mixture of genres, cinematic styles and voices, and film and/or video formats and gauges to complement and embody the confusion of cultural hybridity. Most of my work in film deals with the U.S.-Mexico border, broadly defined—a space so highly charged that any artistic practice there inevitably confronts the complex politics of the place. Often my political critique enters through the examination of the anxieties, misunderstandings, and reciprocal influences between these two countries. In the places where the cultures of the U.S. and Mexico mix, we see that in spite of all the efforts of nationalists, nativist politicians, "Minutemen," and other xenophobic extremists, post-colonial hybrids proliferate. Orange County has its *Coyolxauhqui* (the *Mexica* moon deity), and *Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl* (on the proletarian outskirts of Mexico City) has its death metal bands. Both are distortions of the originals, imported models they emulate, but they achieve something new and stand as symbols of an emerging transnational *mestizaje*. The border is one of the places where the assumed isomorphism of cultures and nations is most apparent as a fictitious construct. For that reason, the anxieties of our transnational age are visible here in high relief, both in the pathologies of racism and xenophobia and in the contested expressions a mutant *mestizaje* for the new millennium. My films are less concerned with the economic or political nature of the relations between the two countries (the

stuff of public policy or trade analysis) than they are with the competing representations of those relations. The emphasis on representation carries over into the films' form and style, sampling a diverse range of styles to create provocative pastiches.

My feature-length essay-film *Ruins* (1999) examines the history of collections and exhibitions of pre-Columbian objects and traces the ways in which these Mesoamerican stones and ceramics have functioned within a contemporary political economy: as fountainheads of a modernist "primitivism," diplomatic bargaining chips, icons of a common past shared by the entire hemisphere, and in a myriad of other roles. *Ruins* takes Mexico's National Anthropology Museum as a blueprint for cinematic form. In the same way that the grand showplace for national archeology in Chapultepec displays decontextualized fragments of the Mesoamerican past, my film takes fragments representing the ruins from newsreels, classroom education films, travelogues, home movies, and other orphan genres and reassembles these to create other narratives. Unlike the Anthropology Museum, however, the film aims to critique nationalist appropriations of the past rather than simply embodying them.

Jesse Lerner and Rubén Ortiz Torres, *Frontierland/Frontierilandia* (1995)

Jesse Lerner, *Ruins/Ruinas* (1999)
16MM, PRODUCTION STILLS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

The American Egypt (2001) strives to make a film in the way that a historian conducts research in a series of related archives. Beginning with primary sources, both written and visual, the film pieces together a mosaic from these biased and often contradictory eyewitnesses, connecting forgotten moments in the histories of silent cinema, radical feminism, and social revolution to represent an emergent modernity on the periphery of the periphery, where the contradictions of a global economy take on extreme forms.

My newest film *Magnavoz* (2006) is perhaps the least documentary and the most experimental (at least, its refusal to sit within any genre parameters makes me suspect as much). There is documentary content in the historic text that serves as the film's script and in many of the original and archival images. The film takes this documentary material into a speculative science-fiction realm that simultaneously looks backwards at the Revolution's ideals and the neo-liberal betrayal of these aspirations and forward into the future, as imagined in the 1920s and again eighty years later.

The American Egypt and *Magnavoz* both investigate to radical social transformations and legacies of the Mexican Revolution: in the former, in the

exceptional context of Yucatan, where the Revolution took a more radical shape, and in the latter film through a series of allegorical figures and polemical radio transmissions broadcast from giant speakers placed atop different iconic volcanic peaks. In all cases, the political critique is multivalent and contradictory, opening up spaces for interpretation and debate.

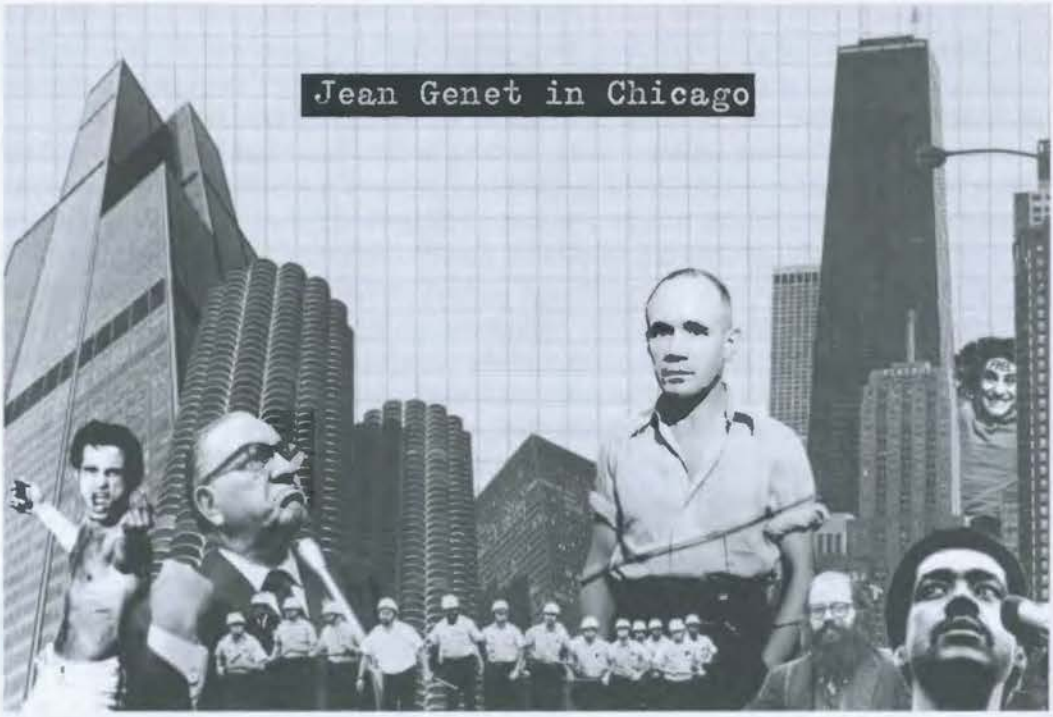
There are a host of contemporary artists, working in film, video, and photography that are creating inspiring and new work at the fringes of the documentary genre. The staged documentary photographs of Daniela Rossell provide a peek at the otherwise inaccessible world of Mexico's youthful super-rich elite, often the daughters of crooked PRI politicians who have enriched themselves extravagantly at the public trough. Though many of the young women denied it when these photos appeared in print, the images clearly document a collaborative theater of self-presentation, as well as being, of course, a striking visual record of exceptionally bad taste in interior decorating. Many of the photographs staged by Miguel Calderon also linger on the edge between theater and documentary, between social truth and flights of fantasy. His scenes of picnicking families massacred or of an art museum's cleaning staff staging scenes from their favorite colonial religious paintings in their uniforms, for example, reside on the outer boundaries of documentary.

* * *

FRÉDÉRIC MOFFET

I do not label myself a documentary maker. Never did. When pushed to label my work, I usually opt for "experimental documentary," since it is such an open-ended, contradictory category. This hybrid genre allows the filmmaker to create work that represents and questions reality as well as questions representations of reality. It allows artists who are dissatisfied with the grand narrative of modernity (the usual suspects: non-westerners, feminists, queers...) to re-write/challenge history and insert their distinct subjectivities into it. It allows one to lie in order to tell "a" truth.

My work *Jean Genet in Chicago* (2006) is a thief video; it consists of an intricate system of quotations appropriated from the literature and media coverage of the events surrounding the 1968 National Democratic Convention in Chicago. The piece makes manifest my desire to look critically at history and to highlight the subjective nature of documentary filmmaking—in this case by using a strategy of cross-fertilization between archival film footage and video reenactments of historical events with masked actors in contemporary settings. This technique is crucial to the project, as it destabilizes the line between past and present, fact and fiction. The "objective" commentary of the original documentary footage is removed and replaced by the highly subjective point of view of Genet, who was in Chicago to cover the convention for *Esquire* magazine. At first, Genet's queer rewriting seems contradictory and shocking; after praising and supporting the radical youth movement's rebelliousness, he moves on to swoon over the towering men in uniform, acknowledging his fascination with their brute force. The choice of this inappropriate object of desire certainly comments on the complexity of human emotions and the difficulty of aligning political and sexual desires. But something else is at work here as well; his erotic gaze upon the bodies of the cops alters their authority, transforming them from subjects to objects. This technique has been used countless times in ethnographic films, but here the power relationship is turned on its head, as the all-American authoritarian male becomes the object



Frédéric Moffet, *Jean Genet in Chicago* (2006)
COLLAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

of the queer vagabond writer. Genet's poetic revolution is ambiguous and remains so in the video, so that viewers are left to interpret it as either revolutionary or reactionary depending on their own criteria.

Like most of my previous work, *Jean Genet in Chicago* doesn't fit the usual filmic genres: it is a poetic documentary that utilizes a fictional approach. It is also a highly personal video disguised as a biopic—the story of an outsider lost amid a foreign land, attracted and repulsed by this new setting. Such fluid construction is central to my practice. It is essential for my work to be at once accessible and provocative in a way that allows the viewer to become an active participant in the act of making meaning. My work will never change the world (if I wanted to change the world, I wouldn't be making experimental documentaries), but hopefully it will engage the viewer, provoke a discussion or incite a different way of seeing, of thinking.

* * *

LYNNE SACHS

I Am Not A War Photographer

After breathlessly watching *War Photographer* (2001), Christian Freil's documentary on the life of print journalism's quintessential career war photographer, James Nachtway, I knew that Nachtway's remarkable credo:

> "Every minute I was there, I wanted to flee. I did not want to see this. Would I cut and run, or would I deal with the responsibility of being there with a camera?"

–was not my own. I AM NOT A WAR PHOTOGRAPHER is what I've decided to call a group of five films I've made over the last thirteen years. From Vietnam to Bosnia to the Middle East, the making of my experimental documentary films has taken me to parts of the world I had never expected to see in my life as an artist. Using abstract and reality-based imagery, each new film has forced me to search for precise visual strategies to work with these fraught and divisive locales and themes. Often opting for a painterly rather than a photographic articulation of conflict, I struggle with each project to find a new language of images and sounds I can use to look at these volatile moments in history. My films—and a recent web project—expose what I see as the limits of conventional documentary representations of both the past and the present. Infusions of colored "brush strokes" catapult a viewer into contemporary Vietnam. Floating drinking glasses moving across a Muslim cemetery in Sarajevo evoke wartime without water. Pulsing, geometric mattes suspended in cinematic space block news footage of a bombing in Tel Aviv. With each project, I have had to search for a visual approach to looking at trauma and conflict. In 1992, with my 16mm Bolex packed deep inside a backpack and no particular cinematic agenda, I got on a plane from San Francisco and flew west to see "the East" in the newly open Vietnam. In my film *Which Way Is East: Notebooks from Vietnam*, I make it clear right from the start that my childhood experience of listening to Walter Cronkite every evening had a strange, albeit well-informed, influence on my understanding of these volatile times.

> "When I was six years old, I would lie on the living room couch, hang my head over the edge, let my hair swing against the floor, and watch the evening news upside-down."

In my mind, there were two opposing views of the timeline of what we call the Vietnam War—and what the Vietnamese call the American War (1959 – 1975). The Pacific Ocean

Lynne Sachs, *States of UnBelonging* (2006)
PHOTO COLLAGE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

was a topographical manifestation of this temporal line of history's ebbs and flows, its moments of crisis, collapse and calm. I wanted to see it from the other side, to understand the most pivotal events from the Tet Offensive to the fall of Saigon, as well as small personal epiphanies from a Vietnamese perspective.

The early 1990s was a time when documentary makers were embracing video hook, line, and sinker. The ease with which you could shoot sound and picture simultaneously made it almost impossible to resist. And yet, I felt that I thought more clearly about the properties of images and sounds when I collected them separately. So I decided to carry my trusty 16mm Bolex with a 28-second shot limit and a small tape recorder. There would be no synchronous sound or on-camera interviews. In exchange for this inability to capture the gestalt of my touristic reality with the push of one button, I would have discrete sensory experiences of light and sound. Influenced by Trinh T. Minh-ha's disdain for zoom lenses as tools that enable us to shoot at a distance from our subject, I imposed a strict discipline on my own relationship to the camera. The sheer physicality of making an image became critical to my process. I had to move my body to find the frame I wanted.

I was living in Catonsville, Maryland in 1998 when I first came across the story of the Catonsville Nine, a radical band of Catholic anti-war activists who broke into a draft board office in 1968 and destroyed hundreds of files with homemade Napalm. I spent the next three years making *Investigation of a Flame*, a film on this extraordinary act of civil disobedience, a performance piece with political dimensions that resonated from coast to coast. I followed renowned priest Philip Berrigan in and out of federal prison, met Marjorie and Tom Melville on a sand dune near Tijuana, and interviewed Tom Lewis in the woods the day he was released from a recent stint in prison for knocking a fighter plane with a hammer. I became an obsessed detective in search of the proof of a noble crime; I desperately needed to find the lost roll of film that a local TV reporter had shot of the action. Once I found the reporter and convinced him to give me the material, I treated this sliver of historical detritus like a family heirloom.

I began *Flame* before September 11, when any fascination with the long-lost art of anti-war protests was considered purely nostalgic. When I showed my movie to a group of San Franciscans in October of 2001, many of the viewers in the theater expressed horror at the actions of the Catonsville Nine because the very act of breaking the law in the name of one's god was just a degree away from violence. When I showed the film a year after the US invasion of Iraq, people were giddy to remember that there was once a brave, vocal, engaged anti-war movement in this country.

That same year, I went to Sarajevo with videomaker Jeanne Finley to create a collaborative work with eight Bosnian artists. One year later, we completed the website, www.house-of-drafts.org, a virtual apartment building inhabited by nine imaginary characters living in Sarajevo after the war in the Balkans. From a performance artist who moonlights as a de-miner to a traveler caught by the inferno of a burning library, the website represents each of our ruminations on a city during and after a period of war. In the process of making this work, I discovered that giving people the license to explore their own histories through fiction was both liberating and regenerative. Rather than asking our collaborators to speak about their own harrowing experiences, we encouraged them to create funny, irreverent personas who could speak brazen "untruths," tell jokes, even lie in the most haunting and revealing ways.

On a November morning in 2002, I sat down to read the *New York Times*. To my shock, I came across the story of Revital Ohayon, an Israeli filmmaker and teacher who was killed

along with her two sons in a terrorist act on a kibbutz near the West Bank. I decided to make a film about Revital but was resistant to going to Israel. I was disturbed by Israeli political actions in the West Bank, and, having lived in New York City through September 11, I still felt too unsettled to travel where violence seemed to run so rampant. I convinced myself that I could understand this volatile place by reading novels and ancient texts and by looking at Revital's movies. *States of UnBelonging* was ultimately an effort at making an anti-documentary. I didn't want to see, hear, or smell for myself. I wanted to rely on my imagination. Ultimately, however, I capitulated to the sensory-deprived documentarian in me and flew to Tel Aviv with my camera in 2005.

In 2009, I will complete *The Last Happy Day*, the fifth I AM NOT A WAR PHOTOGRAPHER project. During WWII, the U.S. Army hired my Hungarian cousin, Dr. Sandor Lenard, to reconstruct the bones, small and large, of dead American soldiers. In this cine-portrait, I intertwine a children's theater piece, a documentary collage, interviews, and a silent-movie style narrative into an elliptical work that is, once again, an meditation on war's perverse and provocative stamp on the imagination.

* * *

M.M. SERRA

Art(core) is the explicit in the cinematic body and the name I give to my working process. I am M.M. for Mary Magdalene, and I make work that expands and explores the abject body in all its messy physical glory—in its pleasure and its pain. I am a sideshow fan, relishing Coney Island sword-swallower Insectavora or the burlesque strippers who survive on the fringe of our society. I remember with delight the fear I felt at the traveling circuses that my father took me to as a child in Pennsylvania; that world was filled with sensuous, dirty, spectacular men and women who were different in every way from the routine to which I was accustomed. My artistic obsession has grown and evolved since that time, sustaining my very artistic existence.

MM Serra, *Chop Off* (2009)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. *CHOP OFF* SCREENED AT THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL IN 2009.

In 1992, I made *L'Amour Fou*, a cine-meditation on the pleasures and terrors of sado-masochism in which my interviews with enthusiasts collide with porn clips, Fleischer cartoons, and Hans Bellmer poupees. Since then I have produced 17 short experimental films that focus on the body and its senses, each in its own way embracing an alternative perspective on gender and sexuality. In this spirit, I made *Chop Off*, my latest film, exposing the dark, fearful recesses of the human psyche by filming the body modification of performance artist R.K. Literally risking "life and limb," R.K.'s body is his medium and amputation is his art. The very act of filming him often stimulates a cascading range of emotions for me, from disgust to fear to dread.

I first met R.K. in the East Village at Clayton Patterson's gallery during a crowded opening night for Charles Gatewood's fabulous black and white circus photos. Surrounded by portraits of San Francisco vampires celebrating blood sport in all its sensuous gore, Clayton introduced me to R.K. I reacted with a shocked, light-headed dizziness after touching him and confronting the exquisite awareness of his missing fingers. R.K. had a huge, generous, full-faced smile, and my initial alarm quickly transformed into fascination. I immediately bombarded him with questions.

"Are you a psychoanalyst?" he responded.

"No, I am a filmmaker."

R.K. suggested that I interview him, and soon after I started work on my epic six-minute exploration of the abject body as ritualized, sculpted form and as a spectacle. *Chop Off* begins as a nightmare, in darkness. Grainy images move slowly, revealing the exotic circus performer Insectavora. The Latin mantra, "I am a human being, so nothing human is alien to me" appears superimposed over her ravishing tattooed and pierced face. Then a montage combines various images from the Coney Island Sideshow Circus and clips from Todd Brownings' two deliciously bizarre early films *The Unknown* and *Freaks*. Tightly woven into the tableau are downtown performance artist Kembra Pfahler, the parading Karen Black girls, and carnivalesque texts that question the power of bodily difference and its effect on the viewer. Haunting music, circus sounds, and street noises merge on the sound track, then evolve into R.K.'s voice. I ask him, "How do you feel when people stare? Is it empowering to hold others' gaze while feeling their fear— their pity or perhaps disgust? Do you have a ritualistic methodology? Are you sexually aroused after the amputation of your limbs?" He replies, "It's like a power I have over people when they stare." While his practice at times defies representation or verbal articulation, R.K. challenges an audience that would normally do everything possible to turn its head away to look and to see beauty differently. Viewers might be resistant to accepting this man's impulse to claim body modification as body beautification. Embodying both Michelangelo and his *David*, R.K. assiduously carves away at his own stone—his body—in search of a core that shakes me, as his pliant voyeur, to my very core. R.K. not only tests the boundaries of art and the body, but he also, in turn, inspires my practice and pushes limits of documentation.

* * *

DEBORAH STRATMAN

I Am Cheating.

1) Do you agree that "experimental documentary" is a valid category? How would you describe it? What are its aims and/or subjects?

> "Believability is always, to some degree, a function of what we are already familiar with. Something is believable if it is like what we expect form the world." - Elizabeth Cowie

I'M NOT SURE I BELIEVE IN OR COULD DEFINE DOCUMENTARY, LET ALONE EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTARY, IN A LUCID OR REVEALING WAY. I HOPE IT REMAINS UN-INDEXICAL. I HOPE IT STRIVES NOT TO DEFINE OR NAME BUT TO TRANSFORM AND EXPLODE.

Deborah Stratman, *Untitled (Valencia)* (2005)
C-PRINTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

***I Was Wrong* (2007)**

"The real purpose of surrealism was not to create a new literary, artistic, or even philosophical movement but to explode the social order, to transform life itself." - Luis Buñuel

2) How do artists who do the work of documentary—and yet are not primarily considered documentarians—challenge our conceptions of non-fiction cinema? What do you see as your relation to documentary?

"We erect barriers and call them disciplines or professions or ethics... they keep us on one side of the line and keep what we see and feel and sense and fear on the other side. They call it OBJECTIVITY ... and we are judged by how closely we cling to it." - Charles Bowden

WE CHALLENGE CONCEPTIONS BY NOT CLINGING. BY ERASING BARRIERS. BY ARRIVING AT TRUTHS UNMECHANICALLY OR, RATHER, BY NEVER ARRIVING.

"It's not because one accumulates facts that one mechanically arrives at some truth; I don't see truth as something defined by a sum of facts. When one realizes the aberrations carried out in the name of truth, one is compelled to question the objectivity of any notion—of truth as well as the search for truth itself and its absolutism." —Trinh Min-Ha

3) Where does documentary meet the avant-garde?

***Jersey Barricade* (2006)**

***September 12th* (2004)**

ON THE EDGES. AROUND THE NEXT CORNER. IN THE CENTRAL PIT OF BEING.

"There are two kinds of cinema. There is Flaherty, and there is Eisenstein. That is to say, there is documentary realism, and there is theatre, but ultimately, at the high-

est level, they are one and the same. What I mean is that through documentary one arrives at the structure of the theatre, and through theatrical imagination and fiction one arrives at the reality of life." - Jean Luc Godard

4) What role does political critique or activism play in your work? How are your politics communicated? How do politics and aesthetics inform each other?

"*We work with matter that resists us, and it is the struggle between the matter and the idea that gives birth to form.*" - Jean Marie Straub

FILMS ARE MONOLOGUES DELIVERED TO MUTE AUDIENCES. DIALOGUE IS NOT PART OF THE CINEMATIC CONTRACT. THEY ARE FUNDAMENTALLY TOTALITARIAN IN THIS REGARD. THE VIEWER, UPON ENTERING THE CINEMA, SIGNS ON TO HAVE HER OWN TEMPORALITY SUBSUMED BY THE FILM'S. UNDER THESE CONDITIONS, OUR BEST HOPE IS THAT THE FILM PROVIDES A LAWLESS PROPOSITION.

"*I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we are reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? ... We need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be an ice axe to break the frozen sea that fills us.*" - Franz Kafka

5) What recent works or artists have inspired new ways of seeing the world? Have inspired new ways of thinking? Have inspired change?

PLEASE MAIL YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO:
PYTHAGORAS FILM, 1958 W. WALNUT ST., CHICAGO, IL 60612

* * *

MARK STREET

Proust said that all art is translation, and it's true that being able to describe and elucidate one's work in a variety of contexts is important and necessary. I often find myself tongue-tied and ashamed when asked to give a pithy explanation of what I'm working on. I'm awkward with my film's relationship to other traditions (fine art? documentary? avant-garde film?) and find myself nervously talking about the process or pulling out some self-effacing anecdote that doesn't clarify what my film *is*. This may speak to my ham-handed communication skills, but I've come to believe that it also underlines a certain indeterminacy—a betwixt and between space the films occupy—and a refusal to join either accepted aesthetic traditions or traditional production models. I've decided that maybe this littoral state is a positive.

Just recently I finished *Hidden in Plain Sight*, a contemporary cinematic city symphony that I shot in four locations: Santiago, Chile; Hanoi, Vietnam; Dakar, Senegal; and Marseille, France. As usual, my attempts to talk about the film have brought up a host of questions about where the film sits in the world, as well as expectations people have for films in general. For *Hidden in Plain Sight,* I simply traveled to these far-flung locales and filmed whatever I wanted to, letting the moments unfold before me. Sometimes it felt unprepared and sketchy, but at other times the

Mark Street, *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2008)
MINI-DV FRAME GRAB, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

spontaneous mode of production seemed to trace an unrehearsed and immediate relationship to the urban milieu.

At a party for parents sponsored by my daughter's school, Emily, a pretty woman who'd seemed particularly intent on us knowing where she rented a country house turned to me. "You say you're a filmmaker, are you actually working on some sort of film?"

"I'm filming a series of portraits of cities around the world," I replied. "Urban sketches, really, just about observing street life in these locales."

Attention turned towards me in a way that it never had on the stockbroker-fathers.

"What cities?"

"How large of a crew do you use?"

"How long is the film?"

All fair and engaged questions from the group, I was happy to answer as best I could—though with a twinge of performance anxiety in the social spotlight.

As Emily let others ask their questions, I noticed her squirming in her chair, barely containing irritation bubbling to the surface. Finally she could hold back no longer. "I just don't get it, Mark. Who's asking you to make this film? Is anyone paying for it?"

I was momentarily stunned by the snarkiness of her question and just let the moment sink in. Emily's question points to a gulf in ideologies that I've been thinking about a lot lately. Do you need societal backing to do what you want to do, or can you shrink the scale and create on your own terms? Do you need a financial directive, or can you shoot something on a shoestring and find it pleasing and communicative? Do you jump in and create or wait for support and infrastructure? In a way, I think it's as much about how we see the world as it is about money. Are you answering a command with your artwork, or are you howling at the moon almost despite yourself? For better or worse, as unimpressive as it is at dinner parties, I'm firmly in the latter category.

Later I tried to engage an experimental musician to create music for the film. Again, I found myself at odds with prevailing assumptions. Despite the ostensible proximities of our disciplines, we were speaking different languages. We spoke about "process," "an experimental feel," being "bold with aesthetic choices." If I had been afraid of "low" production values, I explained to him, I never would have gotten on the plane to Dakar. But he wouldn't work on the project unless we followed a specific professionalized production model (scoring, rehearsal, professional studio recording) that I could ill afford because, you see, no one was paying for it.

At present, I'm sending around *Hidden in Plain Sight* to various festivals. As always, I'm irritated and deflated by film festival application questions that seem almost aggressive: world sales agent? publicist? In addition, I have to hem and haw over which box to check (experimental or documentary) to classify the film. These people are asking about a different kind of film, perhaps one Emily and the musician would like to see, with clear underwriters or a preordained place in the world.

With the kind of films I make, the idea of waiting for institutional support has always been anathema to me. I try to make films "out of necessity," as Stan Brakhage wrote. He also decried the goal of professionalism, noting that the word amateur connotes the *love* of something rather than a hope of financial rewards. I never expect to make money on my films and never wait to be asked to make them. You wouldn't ask a poet or painter about his financial backing, and probably not a novelist. It's hard to communicate this ethos of self-sufficiency, but I believe in it.

* * *

Tran T. Kim-trang, *Postcard*, 2008

TRAN T. KIM-TRANG

In this card, I wanted to explore the relationship between my family and my art. This is my baby picture; the boy a relative. I'll always wonder what's going through his head. As for the text, I was struck one day at how amazingly fresh my young son's eyes were on the world. Then I became envious of his imagination, wishing to discover for the first time anything and everything, when I realized, I could get a bit of that through artistic experimentation.

Jeanne Finley, John Muse and Tommy Becker

The Non-Fiction Imagination: A Dialogue between Two Installation Works about Youth

Clockwork: Birthday
Jeanne Finley + John Muse

We created *Clockwork* as a series of four short multi-channel video works, each shot in a location where physical touch between people is routine, yet highly charged: a dentist's office, a hair salon, a massage therapist's studio, and a teenage boys' slumber party. For each piece, we used multiple cameras to record a half-second of video every thirty seconds over a twenty-four hour period. The resulting works restructure the long arc of these intimate relations, revealing otherwise invisible habits of work and play.

Come Deer Children
Tommy Becker

Come Deer Children layers my daily experiences as a teacher in a public high school and as an artist in isolation in the studio. In the work, a slide show presents my students photographed in front of a decaying locker bay. Each student is photographed from behind while holding a pair of deer antlers to his or her head. The continual change of gender, race, height and hairstyles conveys the diversity and individuality of my students. The consistency and compartmental structure of the locker bay they face speaks to the uniformity of the institution that confines and often conceals their identity. Upon the release from their assigned seats, the deer roam freely through the hallways. The interaction in the herd reflects a growing self-awareness by the students, and their identity formation outside the classroom thrives.

Technology

Even if there is no image, there is the sound in the space. Then suddenly, a hand is documented removing the lens cap. For a brief moment, the camera alone wields the power of documentation, uncorrupted by the artist's imagination, the interviewee's alteration of self or the editing that will later dice the interview into palatable bits. We are confined to the abilities of our technologies in capturing, manipulating and displaying imagery, but the power of experience is what motivates us to turn the machinery on, and it's the power of the imagination that transforms and enlarges experience as it seeks connection.

We watch our children grow up and navigate the minefields of intimacy, tripping through and learning the dance of social conduct. The language that previously provided us with a view to their experiences becomes sparse. As adults we hope to be masters of vigilant observation, aware of the ease with which our eyes are diverted. What gestures or actions repeated throughout an evening define the social order and the relationships between comrades? How do these tender intimacies present themselves as both bravado and adoration?

During my first year of teaching high school visual arts, in the days before summer break, my classroom descended into chaos. Students sat on their desks, conversing freely at varying volumes; cell phone use was defiantly visible, food was passed about, and the idea of doing anything school related had gone out the window. As I sat looking in disbelief at the circus environment that evolved, Alice Cooper's song "School's Out" cycled through my brain. Overcome with empathy, I disconnected from the student-teacher relationship and for a moment became a teenager again.

Experience

The technology is a conduit that allows for a highly focused level of observation utterly different from merely looking, seeing, hearing, or feeling. As technologies change, the nature of the conduit between the documentarian, the subject and the audience changes, upsetting the balance of power and allowing all participants to find themselves on both sides of the power divide. As these technologies find their way into the culture, experimental documentary artists are drawn to new technologies because the balance of power has yet to be determined. We experience the world through the making of an image.

Jeanne Finley + John Muse "Birthday," part of the series Clockwork (2006)
4-CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION AT PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

In the video installation, *Clockwork: Birthday* we used six cameras to record fifteen frames of video every thirty seconds from noon to noon during a slumber birthday party for seven fifteen-year-old boys. Throughout the twenty-four hour period, the boys played ping-pong, break-danced, watched movies, used the computer, lit birthday candles and blew them out, ate, slept, wrestled and played with colorful balloons. The half second intervals of recorded video reduce language to sound and actions to gestures.

In the video installation *Come Deer Children*, three images are presented to the viewer simultaneously; recurring close up still images of my high school students photographed from behind holding deer antlers to their heads, found footage displaying varying views of a public urinal being cleaned, and a handmade animation of a bush of flowers struggling to bloom. Across this landscape of imagery, the text for the piece is displayed as visual instruction. "*Come. Come deer children. Come deer children and piss. Come deer children and piss on the flowers. Drench them. Drown them with your toxic fluid. Spoil them with your young, crisp, pollution, come. Come young ones, bathe mother with your processed glow. Release your soft nocturnal minds. Repeat dreams of tattoo placement, stolen cars and never getting caught for anything ever yes come*."

Image

We believe that the exercise of power in experimental documentary can also take place through structural innovation where our own work undermines generic expectations: the expectation of what a documentary or a story should look like, the expectation of who is in the position of power to tell the story, and the expectation that the truth is being told. Such formal dissonance is compelling only to the extent that it reveals the complex passions of individuals and communities, when it shows how stories too often settle these passions into coherent patterns of explanation. The non-fiction imagination articulates these "stories" – both subtly and overtly – revealing their nature as a series of patterns. We relish the discovery of these new, perhaps outrageous, patterns of daily life, always with a view to the strange and chaotic systems that seem to both struggle and thrive before our very eyes.

Our work embodies a shift in perspective. Six channels of video are edited to four channels. The recorded twenty-four hour cycle, presented in half-second intervals, is reduced to five minutes. The images are projected onto four large borderless plexiglass panels that can be viewed from either side. Half second clips of sound from voices, movies, music or a ping-pong ball mark a syncopated rhythm. The birthday candles, the centerpiece of the party, last a brief few frames. The lone break-dancer returns over and over again to his patch of floor to expel his limbs from the larger body of the party. Two boys share a chair and gaze cheek to cheek into a monitor. They sleep, each tangled within his own blankets, dreaming in fits and starts as the night finally passes over them.

My work embodies a shift in perspective. A release of control becomes an embrace of teenage disobedience. A moment of chaos recognized as a time of celebration in a nostalgic connection with my own teenage high school experience. With a play on a homophone, the teens transform from sentimental dears to hunted deer in their defiance of school and cultural codes of behavior. They are both the flowers struggling to bloom within cultural constructs and the ones being asked to urinate on the flower, a defined symbol of beauty. A voice calls out to them to embrace the moment and indulge in their feelings of rebellion, self-discovery, love, disregard, dream and contempt. The chance for reckless abandon may never present itself again. "*Come young ones, forget about the terrorists, play loud, hurt one another and curse freely. Consume fists of energy between fast food and sugar cereal. Find young lips to press against and worry to death about the consequences, come… Forget about all the world has to offer and come. Come deer children, take aim and piss.*"

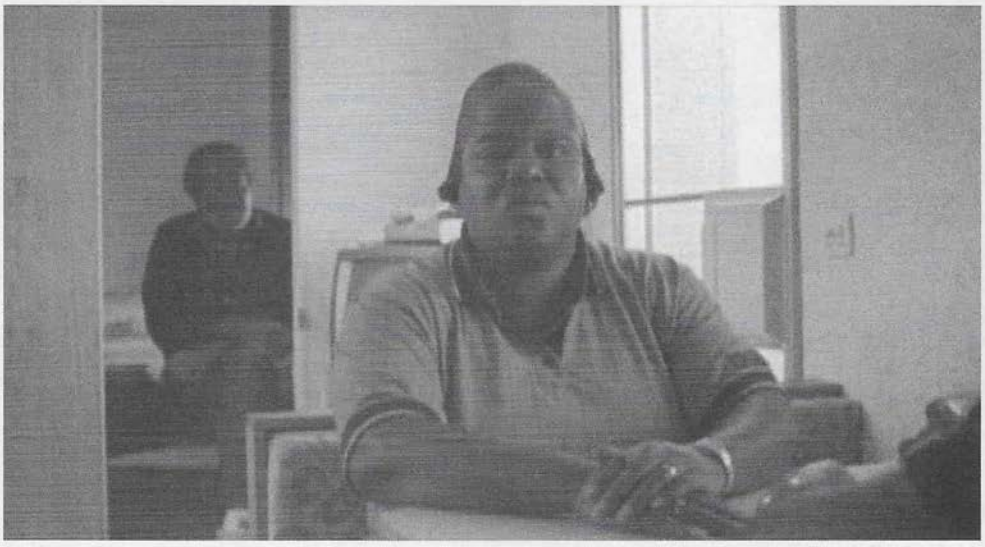
Imagination

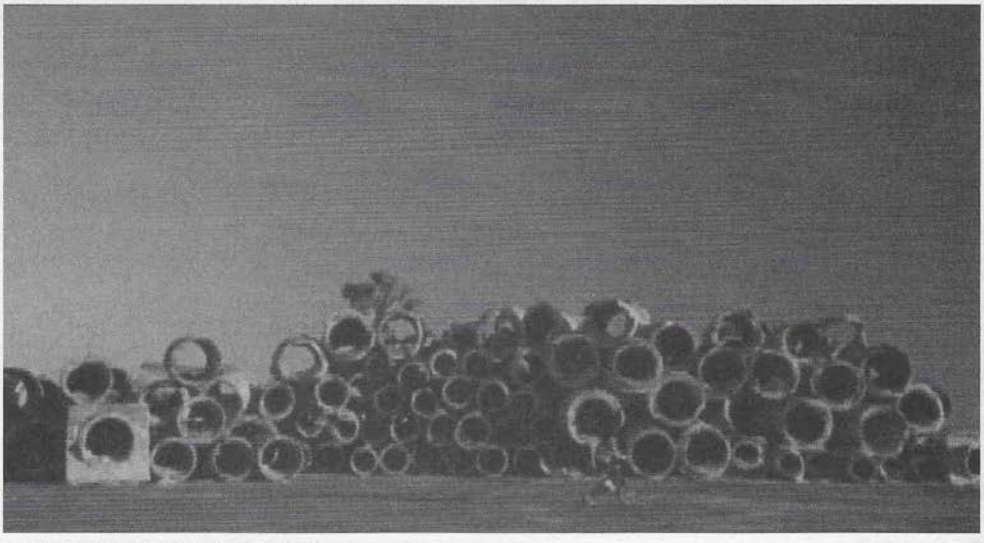
Placing non-fiction narratives within media installations opens up formal dissonance. To move the body into an arena where the scale of the image, dynamic of sound and sculptural elements all resonate with non-fiction materials can serve to explore the relationship between the document and the documented, fiction and fact, empathy and critical distance. This resonance is often more oblique than literal; thus the viewer too has some work to do, coherences to discover, and complications to untangle.

Clockwork was exhibited at Patricia Sweetow Gallery in San Francisco in 2006 and at the Headlands Center for the Arts in 2007. *Come, Deer Children* was exhibited at the Sweetow Gallery in 2006 and at Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York in 2008.

Tommy Becker, Come Deer Children (2006)
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

■ DIALOGUES





Liza Johnson, *South of Ten* (2006)
ALL IMAGES ARE VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURES BY JONATHAN KAHANA.

INTERSTATES: SOUTH OF TEN

South of Ten (USA, 2006, super 16mm film transferred to 35mm film, 10 min.) is the title of a film by Liza Johnson. The title also names a thin strip of Mississippi, bounded by Interstate highway 10 on the north and the Gulf of Mexico on the south that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in August and September of 2005. The film consists of a series of spare vignettes, in which survivors of the hurricane perform a set of documentary gestures in the ruins of their homes. In the following exchange, Johnson and Jonathan Kahana discuss the film and its relation to recent and traditional practices of documentary art and the cultural conditions of ruin and reconstruction that saturate the area in which the film was made.

Jonathan Kahana: The first time I saw *South of Ten*, my reaction was a mixture of delight and jealousy: I wished I had made it. Since I am not a filmmaker, I first understood this reaction as a kind of praise for the film: if I made films, rather than commenting on them, this is one I would like to have made.

Now I understand my initial reaction somewhat differently—that is, as a response to the film's style of documenting the lives of its subjects, a style I would call ethical. Since the film is only minimally narrative, the term "characters" is perhaps too strong for the figures we see, as they go through the motions of picking through the ruins and waiting out inexorable and sweeping changes to their physical, social, and political world. In a way that seems consistent with your earlier work, especially your recent video installation *If Then Maybe*, the bodies of these performers become the aesthetic and physical means to create certain striking gestures: boiling a trombone mouthpiece, throwing a pebble, detecting buried metal, sitting.

It is the indeterminate and collaborative nature of these gestures that makes me want to refer to an "ethical" appeal of the film. The viewer senses that they are shared gestures, enacted jointly by the film crew and its subjects and that they represent this process, even if it is not visible in the frame. For years, it has seemed natural to think about reconstruction or fabrication in documentary as a betrayal of the audience's trust in the form's commitment to truth. But the use you make of re-enactments in *South of Ten* seems instead to take quite seriously the injunction of ethics: to experience being "otherwise." And the film hands this responsibility to its viewer. Does this have something to do with the fact that it is not initially clear from any angle that these *are* non-actors, and that you do not include, as many filmmakers now do, the evidence of a process of reconstruction within the field of vision? The production values of the cinematography and the narrative continuity of the editing give the impression that each of those sequences was scripted and rehearsed, but I gather that this is not the case.

LIZA JOHNSON AND JONATHAN KAHANA

composed that you can more or less feel my subjective presence and that of the cinematographer, Anne Etheridge, staging every frame.

Jonathan Kahana: We would tend to think that the correct response to this situation, speaking politically and culturally, would be to strip away the fictions of the storm and the region. Since the people of this region had already been fodder for mythological and ideological production, a *vérité* process was called for, to let them speak plainly about their experience. But you are saying that in the process of making these scenes in and amongst the wreckage, certain conventional roles—for filmmaker and subject alike—could be displaced. So even though a natural disaster, when it can be described as a national crisis, is often the occasion for the grand agencies of representation (the state, the commercial media) to fall back on visual and narrative shorthands, in this place you found a loosening of these representational strictures.

Liza Johnson: It was a situation that allowed for older structures of representation to be re-used in an interesting way. It was a moment of cultural openness; in the destroyed context, the normal rules of culture were only partially in place and were partially suspended.

Jonathan Kahana: That description of the process makes me think of Raymond Williams's idea of the "structure of feeling."[1] Williams suggests that by the time a social identity or a social crisis can be narrated or analyzed, its disruptive force has already been subjected to a normalizing apparatus. But the "as-if" effect that you're talking about, and which seems to have occurred at different points in the film's production, would seem to maintain some of the openness to the future that Williams intends by his idea of *feeling*. And this "as-if," which is a tenet of realism, connects viewer to scene in a way that seems perhaps analogous to the constructive process by which you and your cinematographer worked out, with the film's subjects, what their actions in the film—what the film itself—would consist of. Can you point to places in the film where this tension or suspension enters the frame, so to speak?

1 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

Liza Johnson: Yes. Take, for instance, the camera movements that are motivated by the motions of the actors, where the camera tracks alongside the girl as she's riding her bike, or we're shooting out of the back of a truck, and she's riding towards us. These moments of motion

feel close to the character's perspective because they're motivated by the actor's motion. The people in my film don't especially have the things they need to make their situation workable, but they have a certain amount of presence and force on the world. They can lift a toilet or move a house back onto its foundation or, at the very least, propel themselves into the landscape.

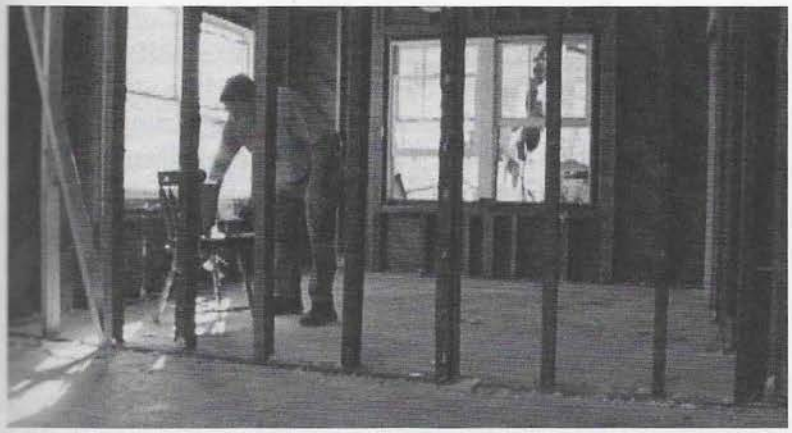
The conceit of the film depends on the reverse angle. Obviously in fiction this is nothing new, but it is not common as a documentary strategy. You can't really use the technique of the reverse shot unless everyone is cooperating, doing multiple takes, allowing the camera to move into their position to produce a series of mobile views that appear to correspond to a person's subjective place in the world, and the geometric placement of their body within that world. It's also the most important conceit of the project, because it takes for granted that the physical space and the gestures of the body have an impact on feeling, on meaning—that the physical stance from which you see the world matters. Stances, motions, gestures make something legible, and transmit feeling on their own, without the demands that the interview format places on a subject to perform and narrate his or her "true self."

Jonathan Kahana: So what you mean by "physical" clearly has something to do with the environment in which those gestures were filmed. The environment isn't simply the passive setting for those gestures; it seems to determine them in certain ways. So they make visible a connection between those people and the place in which they live, and since this place has itself undergone a profound transformation, it's a connection that is being invented or re-invented in the course of filming.

Walter Benjamin had a way of describing ruins that fits this situation quite nicely: he said that the ruin was a significant fragment of the past, but one that was significant for what it told us about the past's vision of the future.[2] The ruin is a constant reminder of aspirations that have gone unrealized. I can also see something of this ceaseless piling up of fragments in your work and in the work of many of your peers. Like a number of contemporary artists, you are working with reality and a method of assemblage that presents a collection of evidence but stops short of a closing argument. Is this a fair characterization of your recent work? And is it still correct to call this method, which doesn't aim directly at a goal, or a point, or a target, documentary work?

Liza Johnson: I'm definitely interested in a lot of the fragmentary work that you are, and absolutely as interested in registering an atmosphere that reflects reality as I am in making what we recognize as an argument. Or at least in what we have come to

2 In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (trans. John Osborne, New York: Verso, 1998), Benjamin writes, "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things," p. 178.



accept as an argument in documentary and news formats, generally devolving around simple pro-and-con formations.

Regarding this idea of ruins, once when I previewed the film for an audience, Walid Raad claimed that he could literally predict my shot breakdown and framing on the basis of Jalal Toufic's theory of ruins. Toufic says ruins are "places haunted by the living who inhabit them."[3] He describes a collapse of distinction between the outsides and insides of destroyed buildings, the outsides and insides of destroyed bodies. For him the visual logic of the ruin is the visual logic of the vampire—and he's not really being metaphorical when he claims that ruins produce a vampiric way of thinking about time and space. I have a lot of shots where the picture plane is blocked by something, a wall or an obstacle, as if I had expected it to be invisible, which Walid read as a symptom of the phenomenon Toufic describes. It's a mysticist theory of ruins, but so is Benjamin's, really.

3 Jalal Toufic, *Vampires* (New York: Station Hill, 1993), 34.

Jonathan Kahana: That sense of countermemory places *South of Ten* in a global tendency of resistance to state and official memory. The genealogy of *South of Ten* would include a kind of reflexive ethnography, which has had a major impact on the way that documentary filmmakers, even those working outside of traditionally anthropological areas, represent their subjects. But at the same time, your film seems to resist—perhaps not consciously or intentionally—the high degree of reflexivity we see in so-called experimental documentary of recent years. The reluctance of many artists and filmmakers to call their work "documentary" and the embrace of terms such as "anti-documentary" or "experimental documentary" is a symptom, I think, of a widespread suspicion about attempts to encounter reality, rather than resigning ourselves to sifting its representations.

Liza Johnson: Well, I definitely admire the work of the artists you mention and certainly would never resist being located nearby them in any way. For me what you're saying also needs to be understood within the legacy of modernism, and the kinds of selective formalism that have tended to exclude that which is seen as particular as opposed to universally true and beautiful, and by extension, have tended to degrade all kinds of minoritarian inquiry. So I would distinguish between the strategies of *those* artists and the broader reluctance of artists to call their work documentary for the reason that documentary *and* realism have tended to be degraded terms in art discourse in and even after modernism. I think *that* reluctance is a much broader art historical problem.

Jonathan Kahana: Could we call that problem "realism"? One of the things that makes *South of Ten* such an interesting work, one that has been compelling to many different kinds of audiences, is that while it has many features of a work of experimental film or video—its episodic character, its careful visual and auditory composition, the multiplicity of interpretations it invites—it also offers the pleasures of realism. From this perspective, it would appear that the film is not particularly invested in being identified as or with art. In fact, one could say that identity is not a value promoted by the film. I am thinking of the importance of the process of dramatization you described: the images that you and the cinematographer produced were the result of a negotiation between you, her, and your subjects.

In this respect, the film does not shy away from a contradiction between the collaborative, improvisational, and even therapeutic methods of its production and the film's carefully composed images: that is, a calculating or calculated—and perhaps even alienating—aesthetic construction that nonetheless uses the lives and experiences of real people. Many recent works of critical documentary are, of course, concerned with this very contradiction. In those that have adopted the method of re-enactment, many try to reflexively acknowledge that they—the films or their makers—are knowingly engaged in the reconstruction of experience as re-presentation, as narrative, or as image. But there is nothing in *South of Ten* to indicate that what the viewer is watching was never something other than a fiction, or that the film itself knows the difference between a process of fiction and a process of knowledge.

One could say that this places the film in the domain of realism. One could also say that this reluctance to engage in explicit gestures of reflexivity gives the film some affinity with a much earlier phase of documentary. I am thinking here of the kinds of work that filmmakers such as Humphrey Jennings and George Stoney were making on behalf of state and corporate entities on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1940s and 1950s, films in which

ordinary people were asked to play themselves in reconstructions of everyday life or the national crises that interrupted everyday life. What is traced on the surface of *South of Ten* is a social imaginary that is already at work before the image and sound recording devices are turned on and operated.[4]

Liza Johnson: I think the traditions you describe that tend to contrast art and realism are important traditions. But also I think there are important ways that what you describe as the pleasures of realism are also a form of affective engagement. And I think affective engagement can be a worthy place to begin a critical engagement with the viewer. I've been interested in critical work by Jill Bennet or Brian Massumi, who suggest that intense affective engagement can produce a "shock to thought," a starting point for critical thinking.[5] I'm interested in extending their work to think about the ways that realism can make an intense address to the sensorium. The bulk of realist storytelling probably isn't a starting point for critical thinking. But there is also a long tradition of critical realism that is always pushing a to move those "pleasures," those intense modes of sensation, to become a starting point. It is prescriptive and mistaken to presume that realism is the opposite of art or that its pleasures are the opposite of the critical projects that many artists aspire to.

Perhaps I am not using all the (ironically) familiar markers of self-conscious experimentation, but I am self-consciously calling out a pictorial history, a set of references. I'm trying to address some open secrets—the things Nina Simone says everyone knows about Mississippi (goddam!). To take a few examples, Wynton Marsalis said that "the black faces on CNN looking for lost mothers and fathers call up a historical memory of Southern slave families torn apart." Kara Walker produced an amazing show at the Met that was exactly about the circulation of this memory, called *After the Deluge*, where her juxtapositions forced realist and romantic painting to think critically. When we were shooting it was common that people would make analogies, especially to *Gone With the Wind*. My film particularly references sublime, Romantic landscape traditions, scenes of Gothic ruination, and the particularly Southern forms of the Gothic.

During the actual event of Hurricane Katrina, I thought that the ways that the hurricane dragged up these references would prove to be utterly not useful to the state, and in this way they felt special, set apart from almost all other emergency spectacles I can remember. These ones, it seemed, couldn't be recuperated. At the same time, the images of African-American people being treated like waste also served to re-inscribe damaging, racist ideas about black abjection, which in some ways *are* useful to the work it takes to maintain an unequal and racially malicious set of social

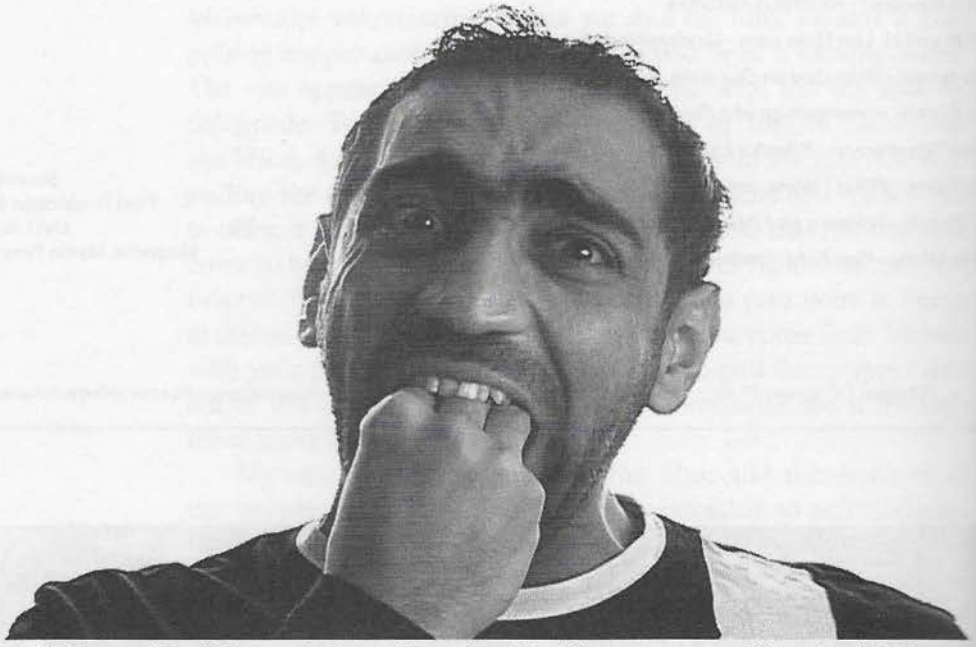
4 See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

5 See Brian Massumi, ed., *A Shock to Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) and Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

relations. I'm calling on what we already know about a tiny figure posed against the sublime ruination of nature, the wonder and terror of the human against the inevitable. Of course, here, what is natural and inevitable is not obvious, especially in New Orleans, where levees broke. I am concerned about the overlapping of what Katrina looked like with apocalyptic Christian theology, most frighteningly exemplified by the ways that our government has cynically used this belief system to naturalize the endgames of our economic system and empire and made them appear inevitable.

In my film, I'm doing everything I can to both reference and undermine these pictorial traditions. But these references were also at play without me. For example, when Anne and I were in Mississippi volunteering, before we shot the film, we saw a man pulling copper cable out of a site that had been a nursing home. The site appears in the film; it's the one with the big leaning colonnade. To us, it looked like the ruins of Tara in *Gone with the Wind*. And *that's also what it looked like to the guy who was pulling the cable*. In the most extreme conditions that reality had to offer, it was impossible for people not to note that life had also come to look like some of the iconic fictions of American national fantasy. What I mean to say is that even when your point in being at this site is very concrete—even when you've come from Mobile with your pickup truck because you want to pull the copper cable out of the site for recycling—you simultaneously see it through these historical frameworks as well.

My small gesture of making the film, and the gestures of the people who are acting in it, are intended to acknowledge that—even in the face of disaster and even despite pictorial and discursive traditions that make these events and social formations appear, wrongly, to be inevitable—all of us possess force, which means that actually nothing is inevitable. None of us are making gestures in conditions of our own choosing, but you never know which way things are going to move.



Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, Syrian performer Rami Farah in *not a matter of if but when* (2007)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

WHEN WE SPEAK OF THE FUTURE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA MELTZER AND DAVID THORNE

TESS TAKAHASHI

Beginning in early November 2007, I corresponded with collaborators Julia Meltzer and David Thorne for this special issue of *Millennium Film Journal*. This written exchange builds upon our prior conversations while engaging a number of issues: how their working processes have affected the development of individual pieces; problems that arise from the term "experimental documentary"; and the issues, feelings, and difficulties that have informed the work they produced during their residency in Syria. What also emerges from this conversation is a tension between my desire to produce overarching critical structures to explain and contextualize their work and the organic ways that David and Julia research issues, discover appropriate forms, and develop emotional registers in their works. They patiently critique my assumptions throughout. The (edited) conversation reflects upon the four major works they have produced so far, described below.

It's not my memory of it: three recollected documents (2003) is a documentary about secrecy, memory, and documents. Mobilizing specific historical records as memories that flash up in moments of danger, the tape addresses the logic of the bureaucracy of secrecy in the current climate of heightened security. Three events are analyzed: 1) a former CIA source recounts his disappearance through shredded classified documents that were painstakingly reassembled by radical Muslim students in Iran in 1979, 2) a CIA film documents the burial at sea of six Soviet sailors, and 3) digital images reference a publicly acknowledged, but top-secret, U.S. missile strike in Yemen in 2002. These records are punctuated by fragments of interviews with "information management" officials from various federal agencies.

We will live to see these things, or, five pictures of what may come to pass (2007) is a documentary video in five parts about competing visions of an uncertain future. Shot in 2005–06 in Damascus, Syria, each section of the piece—1) the chronicle of a building in downtown Damascus, 2) a recitation anticipating the arrival of a perfect leader, 3) an interview with a dissident intellectual, 4) a portrait of a Qur'an school for young girls, and 5) an imagining of the world made anew—offers a different perspective on what might come to pass in a place where people live between the competing forces of a repressive regime, a growing conservative Islamic movement, and intense pressure from the United States.

not a matter of if but when (2007) and *epic* (2008) were developed in 2005–06 in Damascus, Syria. This period of time was marked by momentous events: Rafiq Harriri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, was assassinated; the Syrians were pressured to withdraw from Lebanon after a 30-year occupation; the Cedar Revolution came and went; elections were held in Iraq and were followed by a descent into civil war; and Hezbollah strengthened its position in Southern Lebanon. These events produced widespread anxiety and anticipation

Los Angeles-based artists Julia Meltzer and David Thorne produce videos, photographs, and installations. Early projects centered on secrecy and the production of the past. Current works focus on visions of the future specifically in relation to faith and global politics.

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about the potential for imminent change in Syria: regime change, internal reform, internal collapse, civil war and the increased power of fundamentalist Islam. Over a period of several months, the artists worked with Syrian performer and filmmaker Rami Farah to record short sequences in which he responded to a prompt or a written text. Through a combination of direct address and fantastical narrative, Rami's improvisations speak to living in a condition of uncertainty, chaos and stasis.

12.1.07

Hi, David and Julia:

So, one question I have is about your decision to explore distinctly different forms in making what I'll call "experimental documentary," for lack of a better term right now. ...

Your first two pieces are multi-part videos that use different formal strategies within each part. *It's not my memory of it* has three distinct sections, four distinct strategies of telling stories, and it explicitly addresses how different kinds of documents (official and unofficial) and different forms of media (paper, 16mm, video, digital photographs, etc) come to produce different kinds of "truth." *We will live to see these things* uses five distinctly different strategies, which we once discussed as utilizing and interrogating a number of "traditional" documentary strategies (talking head interview, direct cinema, lyrical form, city film, etc).

One thread I see running through all four pieces is that they all seem to be dismantling traditional documentary forms by making those forms operate in conversation with one another. Of course, this "conversational" thread operates very differently in the new work *not a matter of if but when* and *epic*, the pieces that'll be in the Whitney Biennial this spring. I felt very personally and intimately addressed by Rami, the actor with whom you improvised the series of "monologues" (on the always indeterminate future of Syria) that comprise both these works. It's a very unusual address (and a very unusual form) for "documentary." Part of it is the way your actor addresses his viewer. He's very focused on the "you" of the audience, so much so that it was very difficult for me to remain distanced as a spectator. I felt pulled into a conversation about a place that I know little about—alternately accused, seduced, mocked, performed for—in a way that was both pleasurable and perplexing.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Tess

12.7.07
Hi Tess,

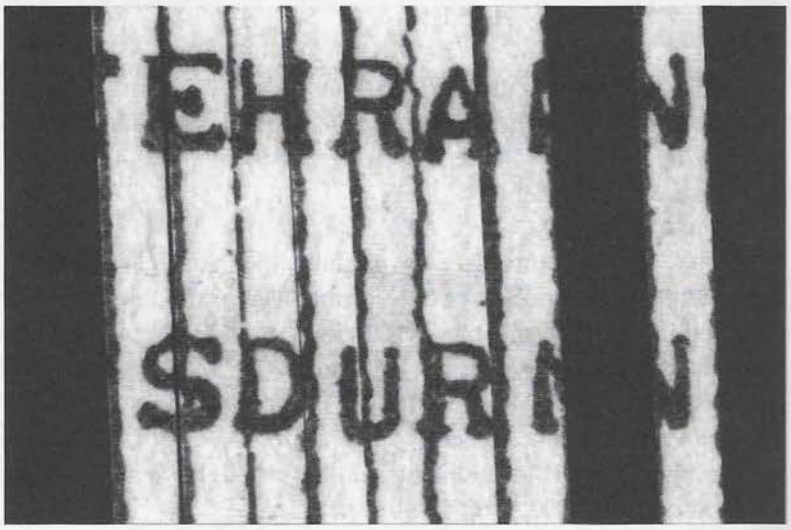
All of your thoughts and questions are about form: the forms we use, the overall "form" we are developing (across multiple and very different works), and, indirectly perhaps, about the form of "traditional" documentary. ...

While there is a bit of rhetorical flourish to the claim that our work is "documentary," we make the claim because the documentary tradition is a "tradition" we are interested and invested in, and documentary is the mode in which we work (from research to finished piece) even if we adopt the strategy, form, and language of fiction within the telling of a certain story. Tradition for me implies neither a set of rules nor progress nor a logically unfolding historical development, but rather suggests a field or, to lapse into militarism, a theater of operations.

Our recent works are "fact-based films that depict actual events and persons." Perhaps it is hard to read that sentence with a straight face, but the quoted fragment from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* definition of "documentary" already points to a falling apart of objectivity: fact-"based" means based on facts, it doesn't mean "facts"; "depicting" actual events and persons means to represent and thus alludes to interpretation and manipulation. ... My point is that there are facts, and there are fictions; they are a team, and they are pulling together. It seems silly to me to think or work them separately when they are as inextricably intertwined as they are in our psychic lives, which for each of us is a "real life." This is how we are approaching our recent projects, working these things together.

But it is not a blending, in my view, even though there are audiences that are perplexed. "I am not sure what is true and what isn't, what you've invented and what is real." (How, then, do we respond to this perplexity?) There are also, I would say, audiences that are now primed to *expect* fiction and invention to the strange degree that they mistake the "real thing" for a "fake." ...

We are interested in exploring different forms within specific works (in, as you mention, *It's not my memory* and *We will live*) and different forms more generally. What form or mode or address or presentation makes sense around this or that set of ideas, or for these questions, or with this or that body of images and texts? What does this research about X suggest in terms of form? What forms might effectively narrate these ideas? And what do we want to do and to learn about in this process through the taking up of certain forms? These are questions we might ask at the very beginning of a research process or a discussion around ideas and possibilities and that we continue to ask across the development of the work, when we are structuring material, editing, working with a composer, and so on. In a certain sense, there are very few "knowns."



Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, Reassembled shredded documents in *It's not my memory of it: three recollected documents* (2003) VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

In making *We will live*, for instance, we did not begin from a place of saying, "OK, this piece will have five parts, and each will take up a different form, visual approach, and mode of address." This only became important and interesting mid-way to late in the process, and then there was a constant revisiting of earlier decisions in light of more recent ones and working on an overall sequence, structure, and tone through which five different stories and forms would hold together. But the process I have just described is not particular to our work; I think it is a fairly commonplace methodology. Perhaps what is different in *It's not my memory* and *We will live* is that we did not settle on a singular form for the various stories. Each work became, as you suggest, a piece in which a number of forms (and ideas) are held in a kind of conversation or are structured together in relation to one another. For me, this process does not involve a negation of documentary conventions, or a "dismantling," as you put it, but rather a putting of things into relation in ways that open up possibilities of both form and content. (How would you describe the overarching "form" we seem to be developing? How would I describe it? Is there one?)

In *not a matter of*, though, we determined a singular form very early on in the process: an actor, a white background, a series of monologues, a strategy of direct address. But this approach developed out of the same field of research and questions that produced *We will live*. We call this piece a documentary as well, but perhaps here the term is more of a stretch or more of a suggestion about expanding the range of possibilities marked by that term. We wanted to make a record of a particular place at a particular time, through a particular form of speaking that bears direct relation to the ways one finds to speak in a situation where speech can not always be direct. It was around this kind of indirection—working in metaphor, allusion, and fantasy, and in a

Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, Downtown Damascus in *We will live to see these things, or, five pictures of what may come to pass* (2007)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

range of speech forms (curse, promise, threat, and so on)—that we structured both the texts and prompts provided to Rami and that we structured the edited piece. The result is, in some ways I hope, quite open in terms of the questions, "What is he talking about?" and "Who is he speaking to?"

All the best
David

12.11.07
Hi Tess,

... In each of the pieces that we have made over the last 4 years, our questions have begun with a journalistic impulse. In *It's not my memory,* we were curious about the methods, processes, and thinking behind declassifying historical documents. In the interviews we conducted, we sought answers to specific methodological questions. Similarly, with *We will live,* we were interested in what was happening in the present moment in Syria vis-à-vis the Bush doctrine. Our reading and focus on post-September 11th U.S. foreign policy brought us to Syria, and it was from this vantage point that we entered and began constructing a piece. With all of these works, we wanted to capture the emotional register of the events and circumstances of a bureaucracy, a place, or a way of thinking and speaking. Surely, this is what almost any film hopes to do at some point or another, so it is not so unique. We want to move people to feel something, and we also wanted our viewers to understand something about a complicated psychic state of affairs that was not clear or comprehensible. In terms of our thinking about how to create this feeling, our influences go to narrative fiction films and novels. ... Our way of having more control over our viewers' emotional response to a story leads us to write the stories that we have been researching.

I sometimes feel that we fall back on our segmented approach to a structure because we are unable to find or commit to a single story. I feel that we arrive at this structure partially out of our strange and sort of haphazard way of doing research. That being said, I do think that we have been able to make the pieces work in this section-based approach. In terms of "dismantling" a more traditional documentary form, I don't know. We do not set out with this as our mission.

It also might be worth mentioning here that we each bring different skills to the craft of filmmaking. As you know, I was never trained in any traditional/formal film school setting, and David never made a film or video or anything time-based before he met me. Thus, the projects really come out of a background and interest in writing, 2D image-making, book projects, and some strange theory-based hackneyed approach to filmmaking that I learned at Brown and then further developed at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Regarding *not a matter of*, we wanted to capture the way that people speak about politics and an uncertain political situation. I think we both knew that this way of speaking would not come across in an interview, and even if it did, it most likely wouldn't operate at the emotional level that we would be satisfied with. This is what led us to ask our friend Rami Farah to experiment with us. The project with him is, and continues to be, an experiment. We have an idea about situations, stories, events that we want to translate to the vernacular. We bring these ideas to Rami, sometimes in writing, sometimes not, and we talk. We spend quite a bit of time talking and working our way to a thread that allows him to spin something. He often doesn't know where he will end up, and we don't either. You, as a viewer, are supposed to feel accused, seduced, drawn in, violated, etc. The trick is that it works for many different situations and audiences. Who exactly Rami is speaking to is never clear: he might be addressing the regime, the Israelis, the Americans, his friend or his family.

Till soon!

Julia

12.18.07

Dear David and Julia:

In watching the pieces you've produced over the past four years, I've always had the impression that those representations come out of the material and your process of investigation. However, it's interesting to read about the way you work in more detail, and how the process of constant questioning and re-examination continues throughout the production process. The "sections" of each piece speak to one another, but they also intersect with the themes, forms, politics, emotions and material situations referenced in your other pieces.

When I used the term "conversation" to describe the way your work operates, I was thinking of it as the way in which a "number of

forms (and ideas) are held in a kind of conversation, or are structured together in relation to one another," as David writes. … I suppose the term "conversation" also applies to the on-going conversation between the two of you as you research, re-conceptualize, and rework your ideas in relation to a material political situation that is also in constant flux. I also was thinking about the ways in which your work talks to that of other artists—people who are invested in what it means to represent political and social situations where there is a lot at stake.

I'm also thinking about the way your work converses with Syria and Syrians, at least in terms of the community of artists and intellectuals with whom you intersected while there. (I think you said some of them found the work too "American" in its point of view?) You are people who came to Syria to teach and make work, and who, while there, entered into conversations with a group of people who have been engaged in an on-going process of speculation about the future in a situation where that kind of speech "can not always be direct": the speech of dissidents, architects, actors, teachers, moderates. Understanding the kinds of constraints under which speech operates in Syria right now makes me think about how you utilize "metaphor, allusion, and fantasy, and a range of speech forms," to capture the tone of a specific situation in which those aesthetic modes are already in play. Perhaps that can be a transition into talking more specifically about the ways in which the recent work engages with the political situation and the theme of "futures"? …

The way you engage with your subject matter and enter into this future-oriented political conversation situates your attempts to make a record of a specific place and time in a more intimate place. You engage with vernacular forms through your own conversation and collaboration with Rami in *not a matter of.* … The process does allow you (with and through Rami) to capture the bitter, playful, ridiculous tone of people talking about the future in private, intimate conversation—the mixture of hope, revenge, fantasy, and absurdism that evolves in the spinning out of worst-case scenarios and best-possible turns of events. For me, the Syrian work captures the way the two extremes of possibility—disaster and utopia—get mixed up, so that every seemingly concrete event becomes an evidentiary "sign" of one or the other.

I was thinking that it might be useful to have you guys talk about what's going on in Syria right now for readers (and people like me) who don't know very much.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Tess

1.7.08

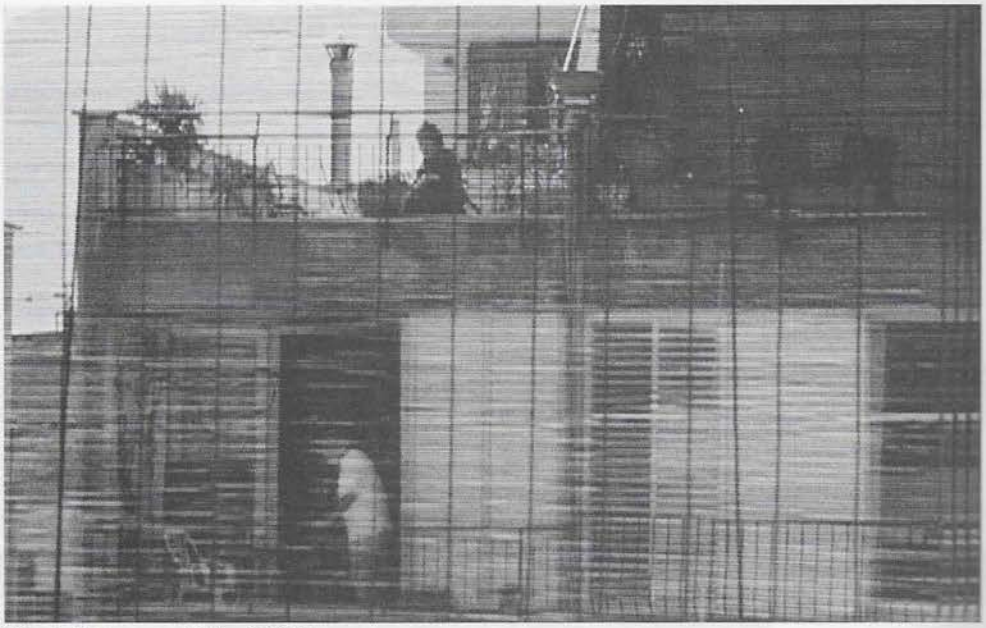
Dear Tess,

However ambitious it might have been, we wanted to make a piece that did not attempt to "explain" a situation for viewers, but

August 2007 to work with Rami again and to show the longer piece to a select group of people, we found the situation in Syria to be very much changed. There was no longer a sense of potential change or of uncertainty. Instead, there was a feeling of extreme oppression and depression in the air. There was no doubt as to who was in charge—portraits of Bashar Al-Assad were everywhere in Damascus, as he had just been "elected" in a referendum. The city was unbelievably crowded to the point of being stifling as there are 2 million Iraqi refugees there who have fled the violence in Iraq. It was very different, and the change was not positive. The people we spoke with did not have an ability to see beyond this situation. Everyone told us that they will wait until 2008—until the election here in the U.S.—for some change to occur.

Happy new year,
Julia

■ ARTICLES



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
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GHOSTED DOCUMENTARY

CHANTAL AKERMAN'S *LÀ-BAS*

"I don't feel like I belong, and that's without real pain, without pride. Pride happens. No, I'm just disconnected, from practically everything. I have a few anchors, and sometimes I let them go or they let me go, and I drift. That's most of the time. Sometimes I hang on for a few days, minutes, seconds, then I let go again. I can hardly look. I can hardly hear. Semi-blind, semi-deaf, I float. Sometimes I sink. But not quite. Something, sometimes a detail, brings me back to the surface, and I start floating again..."[1]

Chantal Akerman's digital video *Là-bas* (*Down There*, 2006) contemplates the legacy of the Holocaust on the daily lives of Jewish people, including Akerman, in and around a Tel Aviv apartment building. By focusing on the contemporary impact of historical trauma, *Là-bas* builds on the earlier films and videos of Akerman's documentary series.[2] In all of these works she eschews the standard cinematic techniques for historical reflection, notably the use of archival footage, in favor of a patient discovery of the signs of the past where they mark the present: the hundreds of anonymous portraits that become post-Soviet landscape in *D'Est* (*From the East*, 1993),[3] the final tracking shot of the East Texas road along which James Byrd Jr.'s body was dragged in *Sud* (*South*, 1999), and the slow meditation on the place where desert meets fence along the U.S.-Mexico border in *De l'autre côté* (*From the Other Side*, 2002). The camera of *Là-bas* is similarly trained on the here and now: for most of the video it gazes out the window of Akerman's apartment at the inhabitants of the building across the way. However, the content of *Là-bas* is more expressly personal than that of the preceding documentaries. In the voiceover, Akerman reflects on the significance for her family of both the Holocaust and Israel. Among Northern European Jews, Israel is often imagined as a paradise that awaits *là-bas*, and much of the video is about the inability of the country to provide the solace one hopes to find there. Heavy with subjectivity and memory, Akerman's words cannot be reconciled with the video's dispassionate and presentist visual track.

GREG YOUMANS

1 *Là-bas* exists in both French and English-language versions; Akerman speaks the voiceover of both. This epigraph is taken from the voiceover of the English-language version.

2 At the time of this writing, *Là-bas* is on view in the U.S. as an installation in *Chantal Akerman: Moving Through Time and Space*, a major touring exhibition (2008–2009) of her documentary series. I saw *Là-bas* in a different presentation format, theatrically screened three times in Paris between October 2006 and March 2007. The specificity of my viewing context—on a big screen, from start to finish, in a darkened theater, rather than on a monitor, looped, in a gallery setting—no doubt determines my analysis of the video.

3 For an eloquent discussion of the relationship between faces and landscape in *D'Est*, and of that film's insistence on the present, see Alisa Lebow, "Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman's *D'Est*." *Camera Obscura* 52 (2003): 34-83.

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As the epigraph to this essay suggests, Akerman is not simply *haunted* by the Holocaust, but *ghosted* by it. And one of the main feats of her video is to convey this particular affective state to the viewer. As we watch *Là-bas,* we do not experience an intense affective charge due to the eruption of past figures and impressions into our mundane present—the experience of haunting. Rather, we experience the opposite: the draining of affect and interpersonal connection from daily existence under the weight of unresolved and perhaps irresolvable historical and political events—the experience of ghosting.[4] In *Là-bas,* this emptying out of affect, occurring as it does within so politically charged a landscape as contemporary Israel, becomes, paradoxically, deeply poignant.

4 I will often deploy the presumptive "we" in my discussion of spectatorship in *Là-bas.* I prefer this to an abstract and impersonal construction, such as "the viewer," because I am convinced that the power of Akerman's video derives from its interpellation of the viewer (us) despite that viewer's (our) possible, in some instances even likely, resistance.

In an essay on the films *Yanzhi Kou* (*Rouge*, 1987) and *Haplos* (*Caress*, 1982), Bliss Lim presents the temporal dynamic of haunting as it is usually understood: "The ghost narratives in *Rouge* and *Haplos* function as an allegorical frame in which an almost-forgotten history becomes newly meaningful as a kind of haunting or ghostly return. These ghost films draw from their respective cultural discourses in order to vivify the *present's* accountability to the concerns of the *past*, and in so doing call into question the ways in which modern homogeneous time conceives of those very temporal categories."[5] But as I will show in this essay, *Là-bas* is a "ghost film" that works through a different principle than haunting as ghostly return. By insisting always on the present and by privileging spatial juxtapositions over temporal ones, the video rejects the liberal fantasy of haunting: any possibility of forgiveness, redemption, or healing through communion with the past is foreclosed.

5 Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film As Historical Allegory." *Positions* 9, no. 2 (2001): 289.

Scholarship on haunting has long insisted that the occasion of the ghost demands an intersectional analysis of ethics and affect, and *Là-bas* is no exception.[6] Here too we are confounded by a twin sense of ethical imperative and ethical impossibility. But in *Là-bas* this sensation derives not from communion with the dead, but rather from the uncanny feeling that, like the woman in the apartment, we might no longer be able to communicate with the living. Watching *Là-bas,* we become ghosts—ghosts who, most disturbingly, cannot materialize. In what follows I will try to account for the power of this unusual "ghost film" through a series of interconnected discussions of the video's *mise-en-scène*, its generic location, and its construction of spectatorship.

6 For paradigm-setting work on haunting, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* Trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

A Room With A View

One of the most unusual and oft-remarked aspects of *Là-bas* is that Akerman and her camera almost never venture outside. During most of the video, both are restricted to the interior of the apartment she rented during a brief stay in Tel Aviv. The only exceptions are two short sequences on a beach and a few shots from the apartment's roof-

Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
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top terrace, from which the sea is also visible. In this way, *Là-bas* evinces Akerman's return to the intensive apartment compositions of her early work; however, there is a difference. As Ivone Margulies has discussed, in Akerman's earliest films, such as *Saute Ma Ville* (*Blow Up My Town*, 1968) and *Je Tu Il Elle* (*I You He She*, 1973), rooms play a role akin to the stage in feminist body-art performances of the same era, demarcating an experimental frame in which the performer reiterates and disrupts the conventions and practices of everyday life. Margulies stresses the importance of the relationship between these "Akerman-chambers" and the outside world. "It is always the act of isolation *from another space* that brings into sharp focus Akerman's themes and aesthetics."[7] In Akerman's films and videos before *Là-bas*, the relationship between secluded, performative interior spaces on the one hand and more naturalistic, populated spaces on the other is almost always constructed temporally, through editing. That is, the protagonist, and the viewer along with her, spends time in the Akerman-chamber before or after time spent elsewhere. In *Là-bas*, by contrast, the relationship is constructed spatially: one is always *in* the room while simultaneously looking *out* the window. Both spaces are visible throughout most of the 78-minute video.

Là-bas occupies a hybrid generic space, caught between documentary and art cinema. In itself this does not distinguish the video within Akerman's oeuvre. What is novel about *Là-bas* is that it embeds this generic ambivalence within the *mise-en-scène* and then deploys it as a primary formal strategy. In *Là-bas,* the ethically charged outside world—the shared lifeworld of viewer, videomaker, and subject (the space of documentary)—is constantly juxtaposed but never integrated with the interior space of the apartment, an otherworldly space where things happen differently (the space of art

7 Ivone Margulies, "La Chambre Akerman: The Captive as Creator," *Rouge* <http://www.rouge.com.au/10/akerman.html> (Dec. 2006, accessed 11 Jan. 2008). See also Margulies' book-length study of Akerman, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
PUBLICITY STILL.

cinema). Caught in this divided and impossible-to-integrate *mise-en-scène*, the viewer must negotiate the experience of a video that is at once profoundly about Israel and inexcusably, unjustifiably, not. I will expand on this point in the next section, where I will consider at length questions of ethics and genre.

What most distinguishes the interior world from the exterior world of *Là-bas,* spatially *and* generically, are the human presences occupying each. In the experimental space of the apartment we find, or struggle to find, "Akerman." Sounds indicate a presence in the room—we hear footsteps and typing—and at moments we catch sight of a shadowy figure floating along the edge of the frame or reflected darkly in a mirror. It is soon established that this figure is the source of the off-screen voice, which we hear only briefly, during three phone conversations as she politely refuses invitations from friends to leave the apartment. The same voice provides the video's voiceover, which engages themes of suicide, confinement, and family through a sparse series of anecdotes and observations that drift back and forth between the general and the personal, the exceptional and the banal. To give one example, the seemingly idiosyncratic statement that simply leaving the house to buy bread and toilet paper is for her an act of heroism takes on added weight next to statements about her family history (an aunt in Brussels who became more and more reclusive before eventually committing suicide) and references to the dangers of life in Israel (a bombing that occurred not far from the apartment during her stay there).

Contrary to these primarily aural indications of the presence of "Akerman" within the apartment, the camera remains fixed on the windows, across which thin matchstick blinds have

been drawn. These blinds are thin enough to permit light to enter and the camera (and us) to see out, though they prevent people outside from seeing in. In his curatorial essay on *Là-bas*, Bill Arning speaks eloquently of the function and formal properties of these blinds. Observing that the interior of the apartment is underexposed and the exterior often somewhat overexposed (as evident in a few shots where we see naked white light spilling in through the open door leading onto the balcony), he notes that the blinds in fact enable us to see out the window more clearly. In this sense, "what blocks our view actually allows us to see better."[8] Moreover, the blinds constantly bring our attention back to the liminal status of the window, and by extension, the inside/outside dichotomy that structures the entire video.

8 Bill Arning, "*Down There (Là-bas)*," in *Chantal Akerman: Moving Through Time and Space*, ed. Terrie Sultan (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2008): 42.

Through these blinds, in shots lasting anywhere from thirty seconds to eight minutes, we observe people in the apartment building across the street. These neighbors do not evince the reclusiveness, pensivity, and trauma of the woman in the apartment. In contrast to the deep subjectivity saturating the room, the people outside are viewed with a distanced documentary objectivity. Akerman's signature static long takes represent them with what might be interpreted as direct-cinema non-interference and ethnographic rigor. Of course, any such interpretation must also account for the continued intervention of the blinds and for the denial of close framings to these people across the way, who always remain restricted to a small fraction of the screen. Through the layering of all of these aligned tensions—inside/outside, sound/vision, subjectivity/objectivity, self/world, art cinema/documentary—*Là-bas* draws us into a deeply conflicted spectatorial experience.

At the Threshold of Documentary

Since first viewing *Là-bas*, I have become convinced that my ethical response to the video has determined all other aspects of my relationship to it—critical, aesthetic, and affective. As such, I would like to attend carefully to the video's ethical dimensions here; however, I would like to do so without my analysis boiling down to an ideological critique of *Là-bas* or a simple condemnation or celebration of its maker. To avoid this, I must work against the usual ways ethics is discussed in relation to film and video: that is, as something that occurs at the stage of production, *before* viewing, and which a viewer or critic then evaluates and adjudicates *after* seeing the work. This model cannot account for the ways ethical tension is sown into the very fabric of *Là-bas,* nor for how this tension charges the air in the theater, alternately entreating, provoking, soothing, and disturbing the viewer. The video orchestrates a confrontation between the ethical demands of an exterior documentary space and the self-contained reflexivity of an inte-

rior art-cinematic space. As a consequence, the accomplishments of *Là-bas* derive as much from its ethical strategies as from its aesthetic ones, and the two can never be pulled apart. How, then, might we approach the ethics of a film or video in a way more akin to how we are used to approaching its form, which is to say as its very foundation and substance?

Documentary solicits a particularly *ethical* response from the viewer, more so than any other cinematic genre or practice. As Vivian Sobchack has argued, because documentary images are perceived to take place in the life-world that the viewer shares with both the documentary maker and the onscreen subjects, the behavior of that maker vis-à-vis that world and those subjects meets with intense ethical scrutiny and judgment on the part of the viewer, in a way that the director, diegetic world, and characters of a fiction film do not.[9] As a supplement to Sobchack's analysis, I insist that the expressly subjective, reflexive, and personal content of much non-fictional art cinema also largely escapes this ethical scrutiny, precisely because in these works attention is shifted from the fraught ethics of documentary encounter to the autonomous space of individual experience.

In my response to Akerman's video, I frequently deemed it ethically unjustifiable as a *documentary* about Israel. Put bluntly, I was disturbed that a documentary about contemporary Israel could have so little to say about Palestinians. Were *Là-bas* more declaredly a personal film, an essay film, an art film—all the terms that have been used to point to films and videos that, among other projects, work against documentary's traditional claims of truth, formal transparency, and regard toward the outside world—were it a video that put itself forward as being ostensibly and primarily about Akerman's subjectivity, family history, sense of exile, confinement, and alienation, my ethical response to it would be different. To the extent that *Là-bas* becomes that video, a profound meditation on what Israel represents and *feels like* for a Northern European Jew whose family history is indelibly marked by the trauma of the Holocaust, my ethical response to it already is different. No one film or video and no one film- or videomaker need or could take a definitive view on a subject as broad and complex as contemporary Israel. Because American audiences are most familiar with Akerman's experimental films of the 1970s, they are likely predisposed to receive *Là-bas* as art cinema and to approach the video in this way. Indeed, in the video's combination of personally-themed voiceover and oddly depersonalized, outwardly-directed camerawork, it has a strong resemblance to Akerman's 1977 film *News From Home*, a film that is seldom if ever labeled "documentary."

However, *Là-bas* bills itself as a documentary.[10] Despite its many refusals of the formal transparency often associated with

9 Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary" in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226–257.

10 For instance, the film won the Grand Prize at the International Competition at the 2006 International Festival of Documentary in Marseilles.

that practice, many of *Là-bas*'s elements—travel to an unfamiliar place, a stated desire to understand the culture and political situation there, a professed ethnographic interest in the people in front of the camera, the topicality of the work's subject matter—cast the video as documentary. Further encouraging an engagement with *Là-bas* at the threshold of documentary, Akerman's account of making the video suggests that it indeed has, or would like to have, something to say about the current situation in Israel:

When X.C. [producer Xavier Carniaux] proposed that I make a film on Israel, I immediately had the impression that it was a bad idea. An impossible idea even. Almost paralyzing. Almost nauseating.

He told me that one understands nothing there. It is from you that one waits for something. Me, no, I don't want to. There's nothing to wait for from me.

I spoke to Xavier of my resistance and only my resistance. My scruples. I was afraid that I would burn my fingers and my reason, afraid of the obstacles presented by my subjectivity, which on this particular subject seemed dangerous, confused. As for neutrality, it does not exist. It could only be false.

But the worm was in the fruit, and I set off down there [*là-bas*].[11]

In these few lines, the tension between documentary and art cinema is already at play, evident in the expressed conflict between the producer's and the videomaker's conceptions of the project and its significance. However much Akerman insists on her subjective relationship to Israel and the impossibility of political neutrality, the auteurist framing spins these qualities into the very stuff of definitiveness. *Là-bas* becomes her idiosyncratic and highly personal, and for that all the more profound and enlightening, "film on Israel."

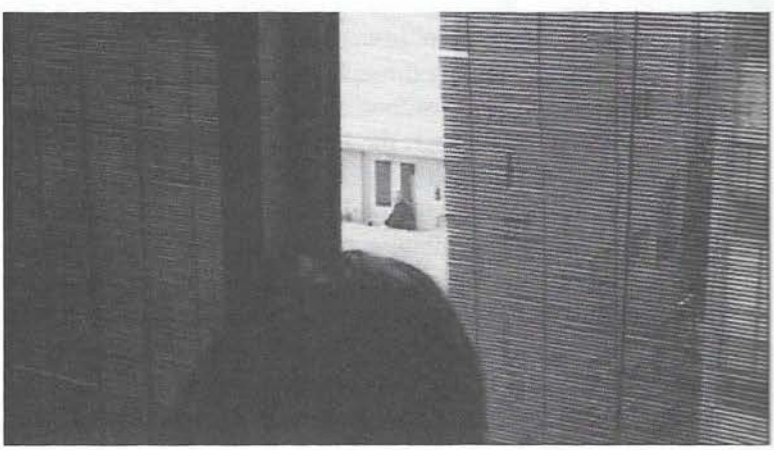
I am certainly not alone in expecting a "film on Israel" to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What has repeatedly provoked me in *Là-bas* is its politics of presence and absence around the key players in this conflict. The video never explicitly discusses or engages with Palestinians, with the arguable exception of the voiceover mention of the bombing down the street and subsequent statements concerning the protagonist's feelings of insecurity. One might insist that the sense of confinement running throughout the video thematizes the anxiety and danger of life in Tel Aviv during the Second Intifada, and therefore constantly foregrounds the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But this sense of confinement runs throughout Akerman's work; it is not isolated to this video. Moreover, in *Là-bas,* this confinement is made to point as much—more so, I think—to the reclusive aunt in Brussels as to the bombing down the street. It is the legacy of the Holocaust among European Jews, rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that lies at the video's heart. And *Là-bas* suggests that the conflict with the Palestinians is not the only, not even the primary, reason why Israel is not the paradise it is made out to be within the Jewish diaspora.

11 Quoted from the press booklet at http://www.shellac-altern.org/labas.html. English translation by the author.

What is equally troubling, and perhaps more surprising, about *Là-bas* is that the Israeli Jews who purportedly *are* its subject are caught on video but never really encountered. To borrow a term from Roland Barthes's meditation on still photography, these Israeli Jews are the video's *studium*, the site of professed meaning and cultural interest in and around the work.[12] In the press booklet interview, as well as during the Q&A after an October 2006 screening in Paris, Akerman repeatedly evoked her "fascination" with the people in the apartment across the way. The overwhelming amount of screen *time* devoted to these people certainly corroborates her paratextual insistence on their importance. But as already indicated, the politics of screen *space* around these figures seems to belie this interest: they are left small in the frame and constantly obscured by the blinds. In this way the *studium* of *Là-bas* is paradoxically *disregarded*. The video's gaze upon its professed subjects is neither voyeuristic nor engaged, but nor is it quite indifferent.

12 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981).

Caught between absent Palestinians and disregarded Israeli Jews, I found myself watching *Là-bas* with profound ambivalence. And yet something in the video moved me. Something that I have had no end of trouble identifying and isolating has managed to affect me deeply. Barthes's term for this "something" is the *punctum*, that which leaps out and wounds him in a particularly powerful photograph, that which is *poignant*. For Barthes, the *punctum* is always highly personal: it is his idiosyncratic connection to the photograph, neither generalizable to others nor intended by the artist. In most of his examples, Barthes locates the *punctum* flying under the radar of the photograph's *studium*, and he proceeds to commune with the former in spite of and even *out of spite for* the latter. It is always Barthes, the spectator, who disregards the *studium* in order to revel in the *punctum*. I am tempted to follow Barthes's lead, to turn my back on the "noise" in and around *Là-bas*—Akerman's professed intentions and the video's strange relationship to its "content"—and to accept that those moments in the video that have moved me must be mine alone.



Chantal Akerman, *Là-bas* (2006)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE BY AUTHOR; DVD COURTESY OF THE MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY.

But *Là-bas* does not allow for this kind of reading. I am not the one disregarding the video's *studium*, *she* is. The woman in the apartment orchestrates the video's structuring tension between proper meaning and improper action. She seems to know that *Là-bas* will take power in its unjustified disregard for its professed subjects, that it will gain in force by soliciting traditional documentary expectations of encounter and explanation and then failing to deliver on them. Every step I have made in my journey with *Là-bas* has found me struggling to turn my gaze upon the elusive woman in the apartment.

Ghosting the Spectator

When queried in the press-booklet interview about the video's bunker-like sense of confinement, Akerman replies, "I am a child of the second generation. This explains that."[13] But this statement can hardly account for the *feeling* of confinement in *Là-bas*. It is not through the clarity or succinctness of Akerman's explanations, provided either paratextually or in the video's voiceover, that *Là-bas* reaches the viewer. If in watching the video I have come to feel what Akerman seems to feel, what she seems to ask me to feel, this does not mean that I have *understood* her experience as a "child of the second generation"—I who am not a child of a survivor of the camps, I who do not comprehend why this sense of confinement should be that of the children rather than of the survivors themselves. *Là-bas* affects me, rather, because distance from the world, the fruitless desire to identify with others, the non-voyeuristic compulsion to look, and the impossibility of belonging become not merely themes of the video but structural to the very experience of watching it. As we watch we take on these conditions, whether or not we understand, whether or not we approve, whether or not we might wish to identify, or otherwise think we could identify, with this particular videomaker.

13 Original quotation in French. Translation by Youmans.

Watching *Là-bas,* we awaken in a strange room to an unfamiliarly disempowered way of seeing. We find ourselves caught between two sites of human presence, the videomaker behind us and the distant, semi-obscured people across the way, both of whom remain just out of full view. Akerman conveys her message to us, not through identification or the suturing of our gaze to her own but rather, through the perpetually restaged denial of any such identification or suture. Each shot in *Là-bas* is clearly marked, charged with the artist's vision, but across the duration of each take this sense of the artist's presence slowly fades away. We are granted her vision but not her gaze; it is as if the woman in the apartment is not saying, "Look at this with me," but rather "This is what I have to look at." As our eyes fix on and through the window, the video repeatedly indicates that behind us she is doing other things: pacing, typing, washing dishes, brushing her teeth, answering the phone. Paralleling the video's disregard for

its *studium*, those people in the apartment across the way, is the videomaker's disinvestment in the camera, and, by extension, in us. In these ways it is established early on that neither identification nor possession, neither empathy nor understanding, are possible here—however much they may be desired, solicited, even insisted upon throughout the video.

Since the mid-1990s scholars have explored the ethics and temporality of haunting: how to exist as a living, and thus privileged, human being among the dead of the past, the dying of the present, and the not-yet-born of the future, all of whom make demands on us. But Akerman's video presents less an ethics of being-with-ghosts than the ethical quandary of being a ghost. At first sight "Akerman" appears to haunt the room, but before long we find ourselves haunting it with her, only to discover by the end, most traumatically, that neither of us are in fact haunting that space at all. In order to haunt, one's presence must be felt by the worldly beings with whom one is trying to communicate. But as we look at the people in the apartment across the way, those documentary subjects who go about their days unaware that a videomaker and a spectator would like to encounter them, to understand them, and to care about them, we experience what it is to be a ghost who cannot haunt. If the scholarship on haunting insists that the traumas of the past continue to be felt through the agency of the dead, then *Là-bas* shows us that past trauma can also make ghosts of the living.

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SprocketKitLingoKit

Konrad Steiner

"I'm a maximalist"
—Craig Baldwin

P A R T 1 Intro and Synopsis

Craig Baldwin's *RocketKitKongoKit* (1986) is a documentary about how the Congo was released from colonial domination for a brief moment and then treacherously retaken by a puppet leader, funded through transnational corporations. It tells the story of the pillage of the land, the poverty of the people, the fomenting of factionalism and combat enhanced through First- and Second-World backing. It follows the trajectory of these events to a hypothetical Cold-War Armageddon reminiscent of the feared outcome of the Cuban missile crisis. The five-part assemblage consists of four parts history plus one part conjecture.

Not so fast. This is film of multiplicities. Hidden in each moment are instant relations to distant facts and interpretations. "RocketKit" itself mocks the Nazi engineers as Boy Scouts with their science projects. Its ironic twist is the "KongoKit" (German spelling), i.e. toying with a nation. KKK is barely hidden, drawing the equivalence between virulent racism and neocolonialism. The opening titles flickering out of the computer screen press the kit metaphor further. The film contains instructions and elements to piece together a history. That is what a documentary is, a kind of model kit, realistic detail to scale for the imagination at play. It uses received means to deliver its views. Baldwin effectively took pieces from many other (genre) kits in order to make this one. So the pieces fit together in this funny way. What details from the kit are missing? What is this a model of?

The voiceover scans history so quickly (Tyner: "..the film buckaroos over large chunks of history"[1]) that one struggles to track the story of subjugation and catastrophe. This did happen. But when "Part 5: Plan of Attack" begins, one is so out of mental breath from the urgency of the accelerated voice, whose pauses between words are edited out, even pauses for breath itself—that it takes a moment to realize that in fact the tale has veered off into conjecture. That moment is the full meaning of the film. When did history become tale-telling? Well, it never was anything else, but the form gives it authority wherein we accept its objectivity; with that move, film can now lie.

1 Kathleen Tyner, "Pushing the Envelope with RocketKitKongoKit," *Cinematograph* 4 (1991): 28.

PART II Situate

Man with a Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov, Soviet Union, 1929) takes cinema to the speed of sight, to make connections more quickly and with more scope, both at the cut and within the frame, the two boundaries of the silent shot. Vertov conceives of an international language of imagery alone, not based on theater or literature. He vows to show life as it is in a way that shows how life should become. The audience sees itself in dailiness, not dramatized, and the film refers to its own process, not hiding it.

Concurrently in the mid-1920s and 30s, Surrealist collage cinema of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, Man Ray, Germaine Dulac, and Jean Cocteau liberates the shot sequence from any rational discourse, however synthetic or revolutionary. This is a means to escape even the anti-theatric and anti-narrative reactions of Soviet Cinema. The cinema becomes a space for collective dream. Joseph Cornell, Hans Richter, Maya Deren, Sidney Peterson, et al., continue this exploration after the War.

Shot in San Francisco, Christopher Maclaine's *The End* (1953) is a nuclear apocalyptic, picaresque Beat film, full of longing and dread, addressed in voice directly to the audience. In the last tale Maclaine offers the audience a role or, rather, implicates the audience in the general malaise: "Here are some pictures. Here is the most beautiful music in the world. What is happening?"

In 1958, Stan Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* demonstrates how montage can serve an interior vision. Not only can cinema match the speed of physical activity, it becomes the mind's eye, unruled by the laws of physics, discovering the cinematic poesis.

Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958) and *Report* (1967) take the conventions of montage that create narrative forward flows and turn them into endless series of false moves and digressions, as though feints, trying to see past the surface created by seamless editing to unlock meanings hidden in the sea of images from which standard fare is assembled.

Guy Debord ups the ante of density in 1973 with *Society of the Spectacle*, poring over the surfaces of spectacular imagery with a totalizing voiceover critique and the Situationist technique of detournement, which "does not mean merely randomly juxtaposing incongruous elements, but (1) creating out of those elements a new coherent whole that (2) criticizes both the existing world and its own relation to that world."[2]

So Baldwin inherited these techniques of synthetic montage. Debord recharged montage with activism, but in a direct assault. RKKK's approach is viral. Messages are disguised as or delivered under an authority they seek to undermine. Abigail Child was also working on the same path in film, as a documentarist and poet with activist intentions. Both filmmakers resisted collusion with the authority of documentary conventions, although Child's critical approach adopted musical means, while Baldwin retained the narrative model.

2 Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, Trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), viii.

P A R T III "the subject is in flux"

In the 1970s and 80s in a certain branch of avant-garde writing (LANGUAGE) coming out of the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City questioned the construction of voice (and ego psychology) as a foundation of lyric. If you write of the experiences and facts of your life or the world using given models, genres, or concepts—the "kits" you're brought up on—you will be participating in thought and action that maintains convention: your experience will be subjugated to ideologies enforced by language itself. From that point of view, both lyric poetry and autobiography become problematic. These genres presuppose a prior self writing with the authority of experience. But the representation of experience is distorted by ideology. The ambition to escape a dialectic of representation between ideology and individual experience risks social unintelligibility or solipsistic isolation. The only facts left in such positivist purges are the ones of the moment of reading, which themselves are ephemeral, non-objective, and ahistorical. Writers' solutions to this dilemma presage the development of the "collage essay" as Baldwin practiced—practically invented—it as a solution to this problem of engaging history and facticity. Later, without renouncing convention, post-LANGUAGE poets and the so-called New Narrative writers in the Bay Area disavowed the priority of intrinsic self or social self, adopting plagiarist and pastiche modes that treat autobiography or lyric in a kind of double-cross against the inherited forms, even casting reportage or confession as a sort of self-plagiarism against the analytic approach of seeking facts beneath surfaces, rather seeking them through a play of surfaces, or better: facades.

RKKK is this hodge-podge of emulsions, styles, genre. Made of pieces of found footage, it is at once a pastiche of social documentary and a genre collage. It trades on the surface authority of commercial imagery. As the film opens, there is really no clue that you are not hearing a straightforward account of the moment of liberation of the Congo, while being given illustrative images of celebrants. As the film goes on, the objectivity of the picture is undermined by constantly shifting styles and the changing accents of the narrators. Similarly, these writers' use of convention against itself tries to create a parallax with convention to sound the distance to what is ineffable, i.e. not to image it, just measure its location and direction relative to one. And just as that text is *not* representing the self but rather an activity of negation of the distortion of habit, the film is doing something parallel with respect to history.

P A R T IV The Objective is ...

Sound film works with sync: sound and picture joined by occurring together, mimicking the integration of senses. Cinema transfers this "lip-sync" convention when voiceover talks about what it's showing. That is how illustration works, sound as caption refers to the image. The synchronous image confers authenticity by reference. The structure of cinematic representation is like the Saussurean sign, signifier/signified voice/picture joined together, but we know that binding (reference) is not fixed. The moment when the film begins to "slip" is toward the end of Part 2, the "fly gestation" sequence. Images of a fly's life cycle seem to depict the vector of disease spreading across the Congo, whose name itself had slipped by then to become "Zaire." But as the continuing monologue explains the reason for poverty and disease (historical cause and effect), these images transform into a metaphor for a parasite (the dictator), concluding the sequence with the shot of a petri dish with text "colony." Hand-tilting the infested dish to the camera now represents the foreign powers controlling the puppet oppressing the diseased population. Eventually there is so much play between the picture and voice that it becomes questionable how illustration can be trusted under these circumstances. Questions arise about the conventions of media, and through this fissure of reference *RKKK* creates a set of tactics, a new "kit" of techniques with which to interrogate history and historiography itself. The film is a jujitsu media machine, fighting convention by a controlled redirection of the force of received imagery, scrutinizing the represented objective. Objectivity is short for an ideal of factual knowledge that we publicly negotiate through alignments of non-coerced behavior. The document attests to history. The documentary is a genre that makes a claim on history. The fundamental gesture in a documentary is illustration. "The objective" is history. One objective of this film is to tell you something about conflicts in Africa that you might not know about.

P A R T V Model for the Present

From *Democracy Now*, May 22, 2003

The United Nations has asked France to lead a peacekeeping force in the mineral-rich Ituri region of Congo, amid reports of growing atrocities in fighting between rival factions there. The UN has also asked Britain to join the force.

A few days ago, aid workers reported finding the bodies of more than 200 people killed on the streets of the provincial capital Bunia, including women and children. Some of them were decapitated and the hearts, livers and lungs were missing in others. Two U.N. aid workers were also killed this week.

Rival factions are engaged in a bloody civil war, and they are backed by the neighboring states of Uganda and Rwanda. While much of the world's attention has been focused on [*sic*] elsewhere, millions of people have died in the war. Between 1998 and 2000, the International Rescue Committee estimates that close to 3 million people lost their lives to war, starvation and disease in the country.

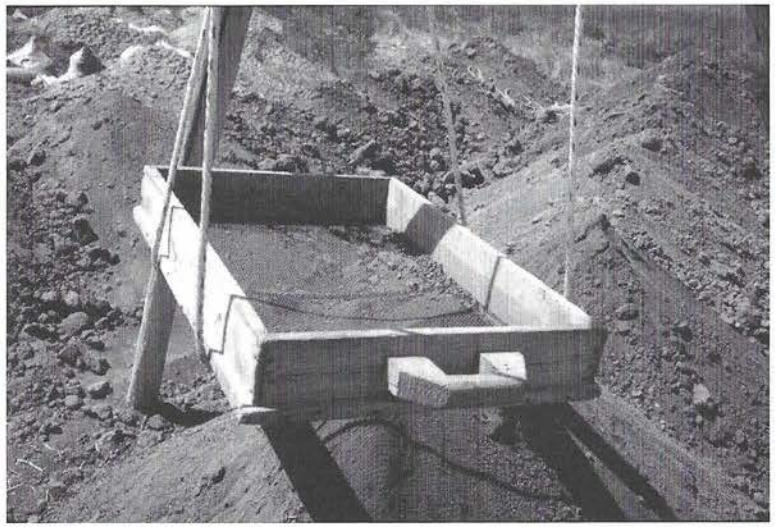
Numerous countries have been involved in the civil war, all of them vying for a piece of the nation's natural resources. At one stage six African nations had troops in the Congo, plundering the country's resources of diamonds, gold and oil and lending support to rival factions.

The Ituri region is also rich in resources. Apart from the region's farmland and valuable cross-border trade, Ituri is the gateway to the Kilo Moto gold field, the world's largest. A Canadian company, Barrick Gold, claims it owns the exploration rights to the gold mine. Former President George Bush Sr. serves as senior advisor to Barrick Gold's board of directors. Interest is also rising in Ituri's oil reserves in the Lake Albert basin. The company Heritage Oil signed a licensing deal last year. It is part-owned by British entrepreneur Tony Buckingham.

■ ARTIST PAGES

Peggy Ahwesh, Photograph from *the history of dirt* (2009)

the history of dirt



1

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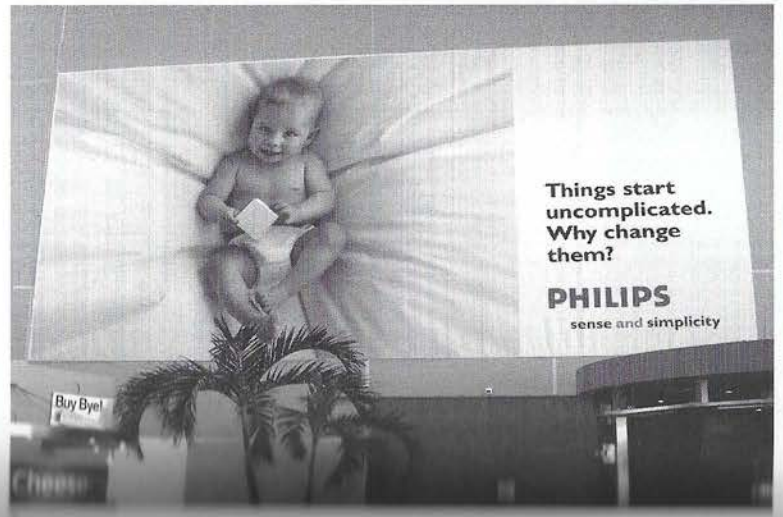


1, 2
Anatolia, Turkey. At the dig at Çatalhüyük, the remains of a 9,000 year old city, the oldest on record. Evidence of shrines, sculpted goddess figures, wall mount bull heads, suggest the development of a religious system renewing speculation of a Neolithic cult of female devotion.

3
Charles de Gaulle International Airport, France. Billboard.

4
Ek Balam, Mexico. Workmen rebuild a wall from rubble. Archaeologists say that a reconstructed site could be returned to the exact rubble it was found in, if procedures are followed carefully.

5

6

7

8

5, 7
Sabra & Shatila. Palestinian refugee camps, Beirut, Lebanon. My friend suggests I take pictures of the ground while on a visit to the neighborhood, explaining me that the history of the people is memorialized in the pavement.

6
Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. At the funeral home, I shoot video of my father's body much to my mother's dismay. Indeed, I have never looked at the footage since.

8
Istanbul, Turkey. A footprint of the Prophet Muhammed is on display in the Chamber of Sacred Relics at the Topkapi Palace, along with other fetish items such as his teeth and hair from his beard.

9

10

11

12

9
Beirut, Lebanon.
A painted drapery shields a construction site, projecting the future reality of downtown Beirut.

10
Jeannette, Pennsylvania.
Euwer's Truly Home Furnishers is a former client of my father's carpet business.

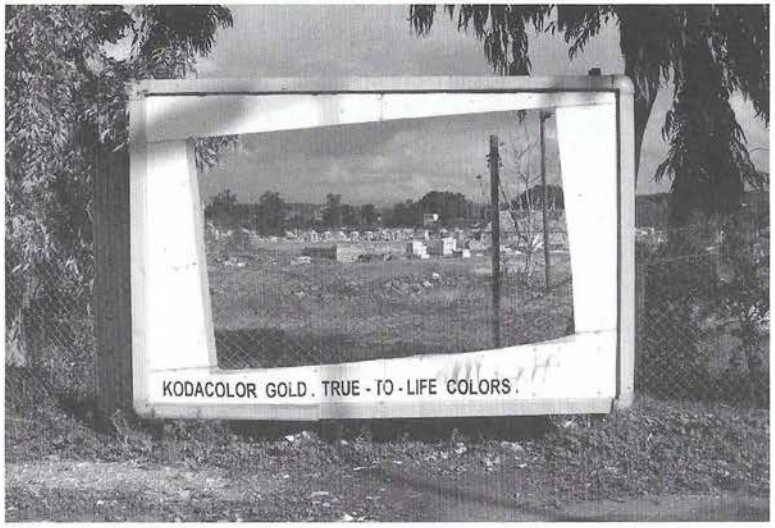
11
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.
Delays in the construction of the casino resort and entertainment complex built on the site of the defunct mill seem to be due to the builders' inability to secure structural steel.

12
Pamukkale, Turkey.
The spa at the Greek site of Hierapolis remains a popular tourist site today for swimming in the hot springs among the temple ruins.

13

14

15



16

13
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Viewing the remains of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building at a safe distance, a month following the truck bombing attack in 1995.

14
Istanbul, Turkey.
A tourist on the grounds of the Topkapi Palace shooting video.

15
Jacob K. Javits Federal Building, New York.
Notice at the entrance to the building in 2006.

16
Tyre, Lebanon.
A billboard with a hole cut out tha frames the Al Mina ruins in the background as a true-to-life Kodak memory.

Seònaid MacKay, "Fruit Bat, I Want To Have Your Baby" performance (2004, London)

Akil Kirlew, "Maya Deren, I Want To Have Your Baby" performance (2003, Buffalo, NY) part of *I Want to Have Your Baby*, Caroline Koebel (2003-05)
VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

I WANT TO HAVE YOUR BABY

Caroline Koebel, 2003-2005, collective performance action documented on miniDV, approx. 4 hours total, sound, color, multilingual with English subtitles, various presentation platforms: single-channel video, video installation, website, large-scale prints, artist's book.

CAROLINE KOEBEL

In the collective performance action *I Want to Have Your Baby* (2003-2005) more than 300 participants in sites including Los Angeles, Budapest, Havana, Berlin, Buffalo, and London conceived hypothetical offspring in a digital repopulating of the world with humane beings. *Baby* draws inspiration from the global protest movement against war and violence and seeks to give voice to the international peace-loving community. In serious play, it goes to the heart of things by focusing on "The Family" in order to subvert the American right-wing's appropriation of family in justifying its aggression machine. The project also seeks to broaden the meaning and representation of family. *Baby* combines political activism with conceptual art and feminist concerns. Not unlike the instruction pieces of Fluxus, *I Want to Have Your Baby* provides a framework within which others act—a catalyst of sorts. My role is at once to facilitate the individual participant's original steps through the project and to join these steps with the paths of former and future participants. The project promotes change through both adversarial and exemplary means: it provides an extensive and persuasive critique of authoritarian power structures while also harnessing the power of mindplay to posit alternate life-affirming potentialities. *I Want to Have Your Baby* disrespects limits and subverts forms in the way that it makes art out of politics without making "political art." Through this project that multiplies—that generates "life"—I hope to expand resistance of spirit, thought and action, while promulgating an aesthetic of choice.

Participants—regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, and biological reproductive capacity—give "mom" performances in which they conceive hypothetical babies that they believe would make the world a better place. Participants pretend to speak to their baby's other parent, saying why they want the baby and what they imagine the baby to be like. Co-parents range from best friends and favorite pet dogs to endangered species to specific places to famous people from history and to abstract concepts, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jimi Hendrix, Brazil, virtual reality, and the breeze. Anything is possible. *I Want to Have Your Baby* was inspired by my frustration—better put: my anger, my rage—not only with the Bush administration's policies, i.e., attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, but also with the sham election in which the ultrafundamentalists in the first place seized power of the so-called "world's greatest democracy." It was important for me at this time to follow a "no business as usual" stance, and

Caroline Koebel is a Brooklyn-based film and video artist whose work has recently screened at Anthology Film Archives, MadCat Women's International Film Fest, Ladyfest Toronto, Director's Lounge, Optica International Fest of Video Art, and Pantheon International Xperimental Film Fest. www.carolinekoebel.com

I felt a kinship with others who were also moved to take action in support of democracy and of the rights of all the world's peoples. I joined millions of others in online petitions and marches in D.C. to put brakes on the war machine. Hearing about simultaneous mass demonstrations in places like Rome and London from within the context of the U.S. movement was exhilarating. Soon I followed the growing desire to more consciously extend activism to my practice as a media artist, and I wanted to be tactical about this.

Although not initially intended to be anything resembling an ethnographic survey of cultural difference, *I Want to Have Your Baby* ended up drawing me into considerations of place, nation, individual rights, freedom of expression, sexual identities, and more. Because the project was trans- national and continental, I came into contact with numerous individuals who brought specific backgrounds and concerns to their participation (or lack thereof) in *Baby*. To share what I mean, I will describe some of the more memorable (mis)conceptions of *Baby*.

While some participants conceived fleshly babies, others leaned more towards the theoretical, seizing the ocassion of the video performance to comment upon the status of representation (by way of the moving image) itself. For example, a participant in Buffalo, NY, chose Maya Deren as a co-parent for how she has "provided a blueprint for film as a medium for observing the ephemeral" and for her desire "to articulate desire itself." The participant followed Deren to Haiti where she "produced a groundbreaking study of the occult and became a Vodoun priestess." He concluded his performance, "Through ritual you transformed both your mind and body into a silver screen onto which the living gods of Haiti were projected."

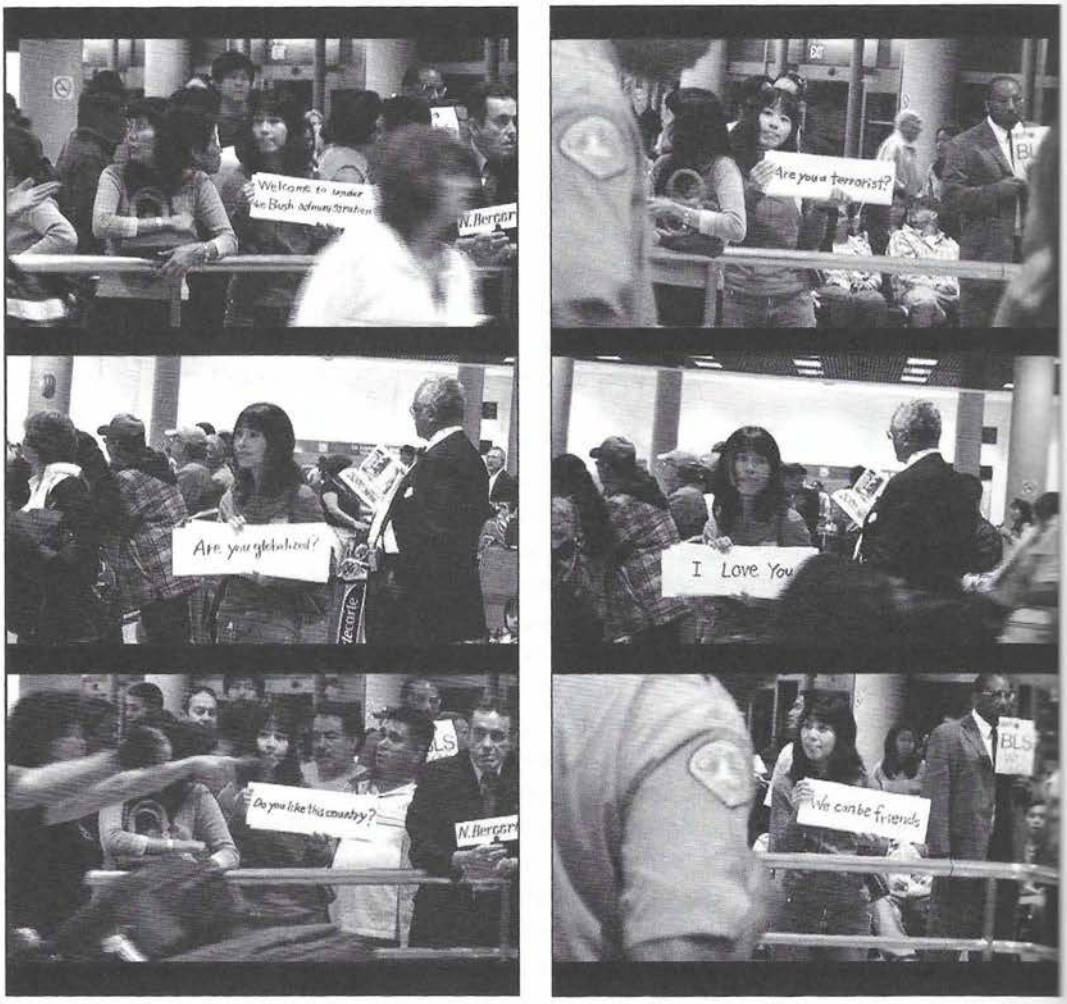
Having begun the project in Buffalo with participant contributions going more or less as imagined, I then found myself in a quandary when a member of an East London artist's collective chewed the spirit and terms of *Baby* and spewed them back at me. Behind the camera lens, I was in complete disbelief as I heard this participant articulate her desire for Osama Bin Laden's baby. This was not supposed to happen. Confused and bewildered by the imagination of the artist, I knew at the same time that it was not my intent to censor anyone's video performance (and interpretation of the project), so I kept steady for the interval of internal angst and attempted as best I could to give her free reign. In the end, the participant gave a stellar performance of the conception of her idea-baby, turning sex and reproduction with "the terrorist other" into radical peace negotiations. I also was appreciative of how her controversial response to my authorial ambitions caused me to dismantle any preconceptions of how the collective performance—and thus my project—would be realized. In crafting the framework of *Baby*, I sought to catalogue multiple and divergent responses, not to limit them. This participant helped me to accept the autonomy of the project's outcomes.

The breadth of knowledge brought by contributors to *Baby* inspires one to reflect anew on the bond between education and understanding and on the cultural politics (read the ecological necessity) of placing oneself as subject in relation to all other living things. Ignorance breeds fear. In an inter-species conception by another London participant, stereotypes about a distant Mammalian relative, the fruit bat, were dismantled. News to me was that after humans and dolphins, fruit bats "have the most complex language in the animal world." This performance further emphasized education: the half human, half-bat baby's genetic mapping contains the imperative to "go out into the world and teach others what amazing animals fruit bats really are."

At a gay and lesbian art and film festival in Budapest that hosted *Baby* as part of the Evolutionary Girls Club, I had a very hard time securing new participants. With Hungary's pride movement in relative infancy and memories of all too recent repression of alternate sexual identities, locals felt shy and intimidated and generally could not commit to being on camera. One young woman attending college in the US was the exception. Stressing the importance of "a room of one's own," she performed the conception of Virginia Woolf's baby. Ironically, her stake in self-expression was resistant in large part to self-censoring her identity in the U.S. At her small Midwestern Christian college, homosexuality was a taboo that (she feared) could be punished with the loss of her scholarship and expulsion. She explained the love relationship she had cultivated with another closeted young woman living under similarly homophobic conditions. Their relations took place mainly online through email with the focus on imagining how to be in actual physical proximity. (No wonder she was conceptually prepared to contribute to *Baby*).

In Cuba I walked the streets of Havana and visited the art school with a translator who'd identified me as "a progressive North American." Unlike the abundance of people at an art event in London choosing to decline, it was easy in Havana to pique strangers' curiosity. The Cubans' babies in particular bespoke free roaming imagination, and they conceived joy, the color spectrum, voice, song, nature, fantasy, and love (granted, they also chose Shakira, Jane Fonda, and Jennifer Lopez). Whereas in other cultural contexts I seemingly had to explain things ad nauseam to convince a minority to contribute, in Cuba the pleasure of my part in the process—and not the pain—was privileged (although I can't claim to grasp all the subtexts of this generosity of expression).

I Want to Have Your Baby is video activism, performance document, interventionist practice, and conceptual art coming together, laboratory-fashion. It is the opinion poll turned topsy-turvy. *Baby* remembers and resounds the primacy of the imagination in acts of resistance.



Chie Yamayoshi, *A Love Story* (2007), VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
PERFORMED AT THE INTERNATIONAL ARRIVAL GATE AT LOS ANGELES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

LOVE STORIES

To: anonymous_C@gmail.com
From: chieyamayoshi@yahoo.com
Subject: Becoming anonymous?

Dear Anonymous C,
I always wanted to be you, C. In showing my work in the U.S., I become uncomfortable when the audience tries to find Japanese femininity, even though I never address it in my work. If you are a female artist, you must inevitably take a position on how your gender and your feminist perspective inform the work. If you are from different culture, your work is expected to reference identity politics as a footnote to Western art history. Before acquiring the sole focus on the work itself, you must confront with the projection of stereotypes about the nationality and gender of the artist.

I became eager to be you, C. I became eager to make my work function as a humble revenge against such fantasies of the Eurocentric apparatus named art critique.
Truly yours,
Chie Yamayoshi

To: chieyamayoshi@yahoo.com
From: anonymous_C@gmail.com
Subject: Re: Becoming anonymous?

Dear Chie,
Thank you for sharing your struggle and thoughts. Since I became Anonymous C from "Chie Yamayoshi," my videos have dealt with strangers, staging fundamental questions about the very possibilities of a social bond. I ironically confront the impossibility of anonymity. As you know, video is a fascinating medium as well as a tool of desperation. When you hold a camera in search of so-called truth, what videotape captures is only a reflection of reality. Video is the apparatus of failure. However, within that reflection, strangers choose how to be represented. I tried to explore "fake intimacy" in my work, but now I call it "intimate fakery" because this latter phrase suggests the aggressiveness and contradictions in my solicitation of the anonymous encounter or the maintenance of anonymity within the encounter. This presents a double-bind for me, as a video artist. As soon as I speak as one stranger to another, the anonymity begins to slip away and the other begins to present themselves in their particularity, even when they are calling upon clichés and widely shared social conventions. Anonymity is both hard to maintain and hard to escape.

Best,
Anonymous C

This email exchange is ongoing …

REVIEW

The Cinema Of Pessimism: Eleven Films in the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival

GRAHAME WEINBREN

It wasn't an individual film.

I am quite accustomed to seeing a depressing (or depressive) movie, and whether it has an effect on my own mood or outlook is as much connected with my current state of mind as anything in the film. No, it was the depiction of intolerable situations in film after film, situations never caused or controlled by the characters, though they usually struggled valiantly to do their best against overwhelming odds, sometimes in vain, sometimes with limited success.

It was the accumulation.

Here are capsule descriptions of some of the films I saw in back-to-back press screenings of the Tribeca Film Festival 2008.

Seven Days Sunday (Germany 2008) written and directed by Niels Laupert
Feature length fiction film (based on a true story) about 16 year olds in former East Germany, so bored and disaffected that they go on a killing spree, targeting random older men. The boys seem nice enough, and neither they, nor we, ever get to know their victims.

War Child (USA 2008) by C. Karim Chrobog
Feature length documentary about Sudanese child soldier Emmanuel Jal, who became an international hip hop star. The film includes archival footage of him at age 9, as the interview subject of a UN film about child soldiers: he was a bright, endearing and innocent child, expertly handling his AK47.

Newcastle (Australia 2008) written and directed by Dan Castle
Australian feature-length surfing film about sinister family relationships that emerge after a surfer's accidental death.

New Boy (Ireland 2007) directed by Steph Green
Eleven-minute dramatic short about an African kid on his first day at his new elementary school in Ireland, haunted by the memory of his previous teacher getting dragged out of the classroom and shot to death. The assassination is convincingly depicted–and the child's graphic mental images put the typical problems of a quiet new boy into a different perspective.

Worlds Apart (Denmark 2008) directed by Niels Arden Oplev
Feature-length fiction film (based on a true story) of a girl and her brother banished from the tight-knit Jehovah's Witness community for fraternizing with outsiders. It is especially poignant when the girl's beloved younger sister looks at her like a stranger, refusing even to nod at her, when they happen to cross paths on the street.

Lioness (USA 2007) by Meg McLagan & Daria Sommers
Feature-length documentary about U.S. women soldiers in active combat in Iraq. They shoot and are shot at, they break down doors and intimidate the natives, while the White House, the Pentagon, and the rest of the U.S. military establishment repeatedly deny that women are ever on combat duty, insisting that they take only supporting roles in the horrible war.

Ana's Way (El Camino De Ana) (Spain 2007) directed by Richard Vazquez
Short film about a middle-aged woman who takes a long, hot, and difficult journey to visit her husband in prison only to find out that he's died. Little relief here.

Angels Die in the Soil (Iran 2007) directed by Babak Amini
Short film about a girl in Halabja, injured by gas attacks, who disinters human remains to sell to the families of the victims for more dignified funerals and memorials. Even less relief.

War God Love and Madness (Iraq 2008) directed by Mohamed Al-Daradji
Iraqi feature documentary about making a fiction film in Iraq: during the shooting, the production manager goes crazy, the director and DP are kidnapped and tortured first by "terrorists," then by Americans. The bright side is that the feature film gets made, though I suspect that this "making-of" may be a stronger piece that the movie itself.

Secrecy (USA 2007) by Robb Moss and Peter Galison
Feature-length documentary about the increase since 9/11 of unnecessary and dangerous secrecy by the White House, Homeland Security, and other government agencies. This film's elegant construction and beautiful, fresh imagery provide some pleasure, despite the fact that what it reveals is perhaps the most disturbing of all the films.

Baghdad High (UK 2007) by Ivan O'Mahoney and Laura Winter
Four boys are given video cameras by English documentary filmmakers to record their final year in high school in Baghdad. Not much happens – except local explosions, the deaths of a few friends, and one family's difficult migration to Kurdistan.

Is it that in the first decade of the 21st century the world was going through a bad period? Or that, in general, filmmakers look for (and find) dark subjects? Or is it a sign of hope that moving image artists point out terrible things, so that we can work to change them?