

EXPERIMENTS IN DOCUMENTARY

No. 51 \$8.00

# millennium

## FILM JOURNAL



# millennium

## FILM JOURNAL

No. 51  
Spring/Summer 2009

**EXPERIMENTS IN DOCUMENTARY**



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

# ■ 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 movie 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.

\* \* \*

### **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 constantly 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 presentations 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.

\* \* \*

#### 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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](http://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 filmmaker 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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 unpretentious 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.

\* \* \*

#### 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 relationship 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/



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

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.

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/revisions 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..

\* \* \*

#### **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 Jihad 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 Jihad 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 Jihad 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 Jihad 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.

\* \* \*



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

#### **BARBARA HAMMER**

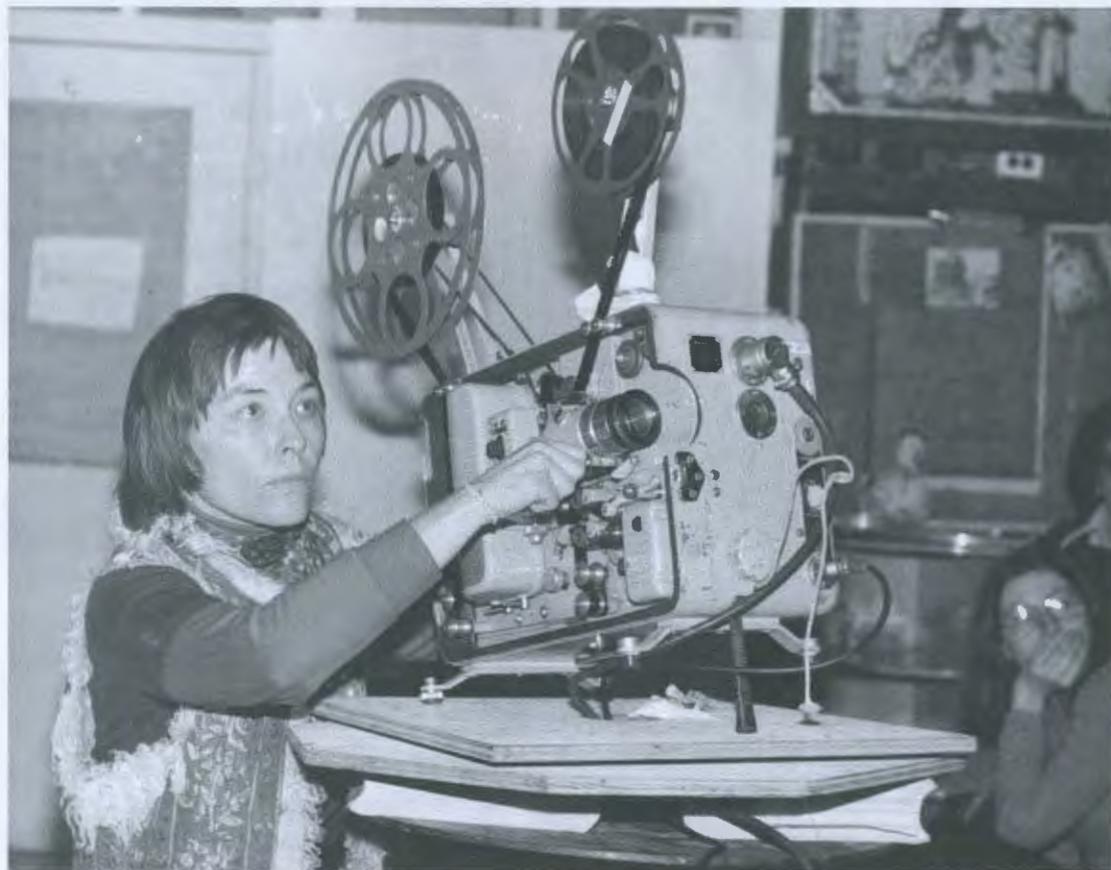
During the past year I have been organizing both my film and paper archives. In shaking the archive, what has broken free is an understanding of how experimental filmmaking has been both a way of working through my personal experiences and a way to challenge the conventions of film as a way of changing 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.’”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

### **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](http://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.<sup>7</sup>

### **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 cinefluorographic 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.

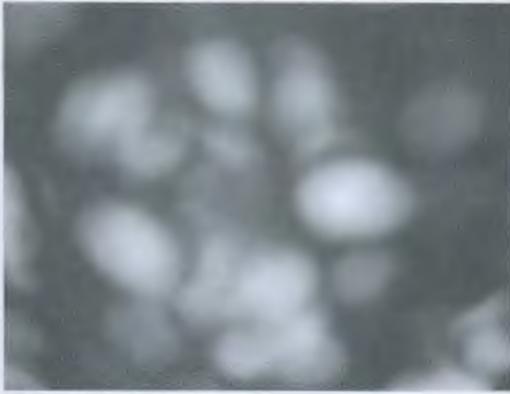
My goal with each of these films has been to activate the cinema audience through physical movement (*Available Space*), contrasts between artifice and material reality (*Bamboo Xerox* and the film strips), and multilayered images that question unitary and problematic origins (*Sanctus*). By creating 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.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>7</sup> 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

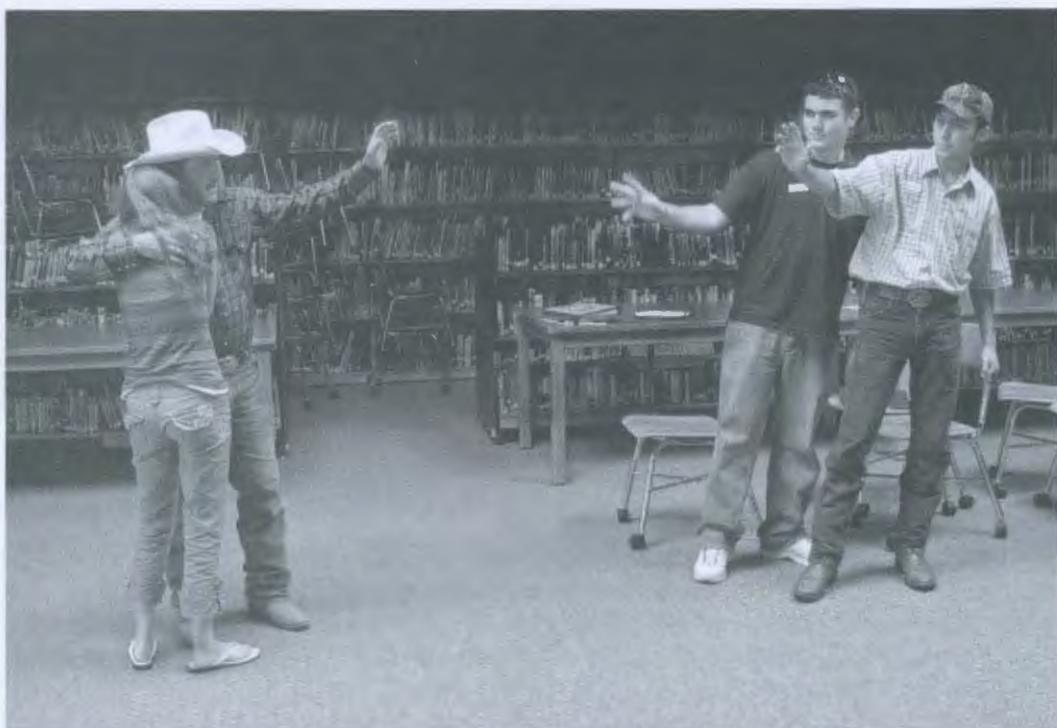
My film and video work consists of distinct but overlapping strands. Lately, I've worked on three projects in three different modes: observational, essayistic, and visual exploration around a concept. I consider all three projects to be documentary in nature because they are concerned with seeing the 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 Álvarez's *El Cielo Gira/The Sky Turns*, Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda's *Czech Dream*, Agnes Varda, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Rithy Panh, Jeanne Liotta

\* \* \*

#### **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)<sup>8</sup> to (post)-modernize and feminize his foundational praxis.

I call myself MP:me (MediaPraxis:AlexandraJuhasz<sup>9</sup>)—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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

"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.<sup>12</sup> I call for its death to be hastened.

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](http://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](http://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](http://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-imagining 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

<sup>13</sup> 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 ques-



Leandro Katz, *Paradox* (2001)

VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

tioned 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*.

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 Mátaco 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 *cinéma vérité*. 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 narration 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 García 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.

### Works cited

- Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 1966 and reprinted).  
Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," *Reviewing Histories: Selections from New Latin America Cinema*, ed. Coco Fusco (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1987 and reprinted elsewhere).  
Ernest Larsen and Sherry Millner, "For An Impure Cinevideo" (*The Independent: Film and Video Monthly*, May 13, 1990, pp. 24-27).

\* \* \*



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 Netzahualcōyotl* (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/Frontierlandia* (1995)



Jesse Lerner, *Ruins/Ruinias* (1999)  
16MM, PRODUCTION STILL, 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.

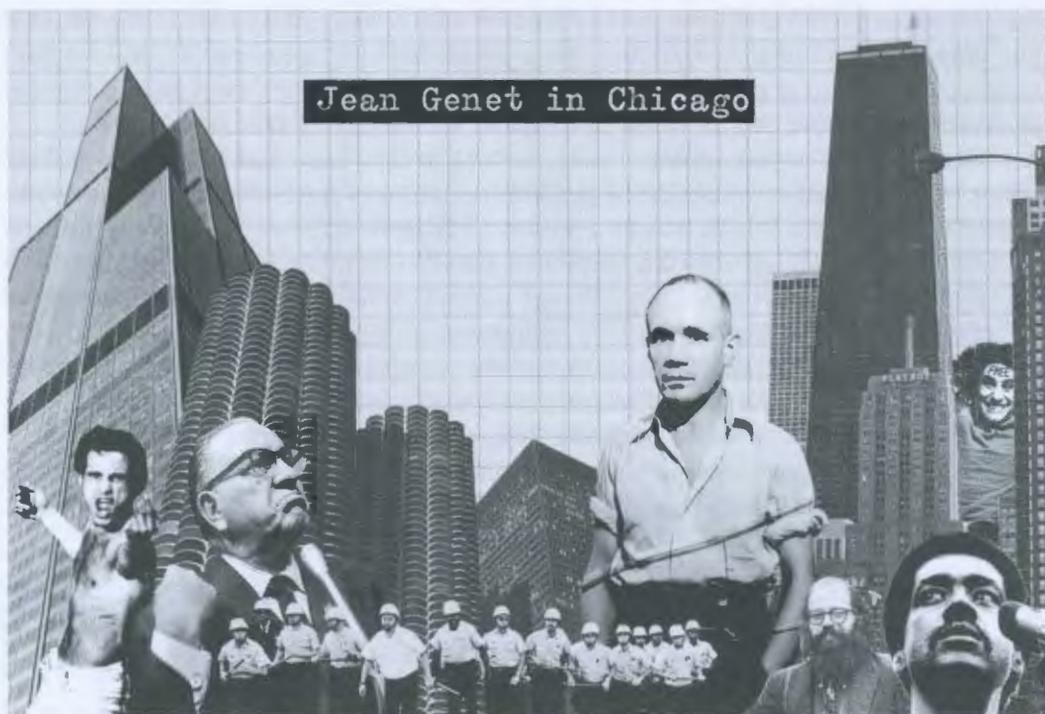
There are a host of contemporary artists, working in film, video, and photography that are creating inspiring and new work at the fringes of the documentary genre. The staged documentary photographs of Daniela Rossell provide a peek at the otherwise inaccessible world of Mexico's youthful super-rich 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](http://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



**MM Serra, *Chop Off* (2009)**

VIDEO IMAGE CAPTURE, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. *CHOP OFF* SCREENED AT THE SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL IN 2009.

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.

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 from 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 than 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.

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 open 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.