

# FELIX

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## PREVIEW

### 4 Editors' Introduction

BY SHU LEA CHEANG AND  
KATHY HIGH

## VIDEOLOGUE

### 9 VIDEOLOGUE NUMBER 1

#### Color - Develop Normal or Multicultural Politics Dis-Sected

ANNIE GOLDSOHN 10  
ADA GRIFFIN 14

### 23 VIDEOLOGUE NUMBER 2

#### (Re)position or Permission for My Motives

CHERYL DUNYE 24  
YVONNE RAINER 27

### 37 VIDEOLOGUE NUMBER 3

#### Guarding Our Own Best Interests or Parallel Lines/ Connecting Tongues

PHILIP MALLORY JONES 38  
MICHELLE VALLADARES 42

### 59 VIDEO

#### Shift Form

KELLY  
ALEX  
INDU  
FRANC

69

### 81 VIDEO

#### How Can Publi Critic

TONY  
ART JO  
VALER  
REA TA

### 97 VIDEO

#### Medi Stag

CHRIS  
BARBA

## A

### 48 Troul

KEN FE  
AND S

### 53 NCZ

NOT C  
revolut

# A CROSS-CIRCUIT VIDEOLOGUE

## 59 VIDEOLOGUE NUMBER 4

### **Shifting Communities/ Forming Alliances**

KELLY ANDERSON 66  
ALEX JUHASZ 60  
INDU KRISHNAN 63  
FRANCES NEGRON-MUNTANER  
69

## 81 VIDEOLOGUE NUMBER 5

### **How Many of "Us" Can Slip Through? OF Public/Private Critiques**

TONY COKES 84  
ART JONES 82/89  
VALERIE SOE 87  
REA TAJIRI 85

## 97 VIDEOLOGUE NUMBER 6

### **Media Dialects and Stages of Access**

CHRIS HILL AND  
BARBARA LATTANZI 98

## AND MORE

### **48 Trouble in Truthsville**

KEN FEINGOLD, COCO FUSCO  
AND STEVE GALLAGHER

### **53 NCZ Untaped**

NOT CHANNEL ZERO — the  
revolution, televised

## ARTIST

## CONTRIBUTIONS

- 18 REGGIE WOOLERY  
20 O.FUNMILAYO MAKARAH  
30 JEAN CARLOMUSTO  
34 JUAN DOWNEY  
45 AYOKA CHENZIRA  
46 CARA MERTES  
73 GEORGE KUCHAR  
76 THOMAS HARRIS  
78 TESTING THE LIMITS  
90 CAROL LEIGH A.K.A.  
SCARLOT HARLOT  
94 NORMAN COWIE  
95 8MM NEWS  
106 ROB DANIELSON  
110 MARTHA ROSLER  
113 RENEW

## FINALLY

- 132 Contributors  
136 Subscribe!

**4** **SHIFTING COMMUNITIES/FORMING ALLIANCES • Which community can we claim to be our own? As we would not want to be confined within a given community, we set out to relocate ourselves in a broader sense of communities. To situate oneself within a collective memory, to seek out modes of collaboration, the community-based media-makers are “experimenting” with channels of Inter-Action. Watching carefully how we “frame” one another, we want to try to work through these processes of imaging, presenting people’s words, careful not to “steal their soul.” Mediating the power structure that is inherited from the apparatus of medium/media practice, Anderson/Juhasz/Krishnan/Negrón-Muntaner strive to “empower” as they construct crossover communities. As Anderson comments, these are some “notes on the possibility of exchange.” — Eds.**

## ALEX JUHASZ

**I** am an advocate, practitioner, and theorist of a form of media practice — camcorder activism — that is exploding around us, even as prohibitions upon our speech and expression escalate. Camcorder activism is the low-end, low-budget, community-produced video that has been enabled through recent technological developments like camcorders, VCRs, and cable. It is a media practice that challenges the more normative uses of the medium in its remove from capital (it’s

cheap and it isn’t made to sell commercials), in its highly personal and political nature (it is most typically made by individuals and communities who have come to video because they have something urgent to say, usually about themselves), and in its form (which often quotes, but equally often disrupts televisual conventions). I recently concluded a project, The Women’s AIDS Video Enterprise (WAVE), which typifies many of the goals and processes of this new mode of video production. In

this article I want to explore the positive and negative aspects of this practice — particularly its relation to the broader context of similar and different practices that have occurred during the past decade of activist camcorder activism.

We have learned that the most effective way to address the needs of the community is through the production of local, low-budget, low-cost video. Low-budget video of color are distributed by AIDS, yet traditional materials are produced from these communities, and we have attempted to address the lack of cultural modeling a more effective production of video for the disenfranchised and the hardest hit by AIDS.

The WAVE project, which I have worked on myself, a white woman from Manhattan — met the needs of the structure of an organization that was discussed with a member of the organization who was taking on the project. The project also included a video about the way that the project was resented and the way that the project was covered in the media. In response to the coverage of the project, the project produced a video, *Video for Communities Affected by AIDS*, which was distributed to the community as well as having

The articles are organized in order of their response. Each article, as it was produced, was sent onto the next writer, etc.— Eds.

this article I would like to share some of the positive and negative experiences — particularly those involving interaction within a community that is both similar and different to my own — that occurred during the process of this activist camcorder project.

We have learned that AIDS education is most effective when it comes from the communities to whom it is addressed. Low-income, urban women of color are disproportionately affected by AIDS, yet there are very few educational materials available for these communities, and almost nothing produced from *within* them. WAVE attempted to remedy this dangerous lack of culturally-specific resources by modeling a method for organizing the production of AIDS education by and for the disenfranchised communities hardest hit by the epidemic.

The WAVE group — six black and hispanic women from Brooklyn, and myself, a white woman from Manhattan — met for six months using the structure of an AIDS support group. We discussed with a social worker (also a member of the group) the toll that AIDS was taking on our lives. But our sessions also included basic video production education, as well as discussion about the way that AIDS has been represented and misrepresented in the media. In response to the inadequate coverage of the issues most important to us, the group produced *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, a tape that has been distributed to nearly one thousand community service organizations, as well as having been exhibited in muse-

ums, on college campuses, and on cable television.

Before WAVE, I had made a number of more conventional (if still "alternative" and politically progressive) educational documentaries about AIDS and sexuality, which had put me into an uncomfortable (if standard) position. For one, I found myself mostly documenting the lives, concerns, and political needs of others, specifically the low-income women of color who are disproportionately affected by AIDS. I worried that, good intentions be damned, I was still enacting some version of the typical power dynamic of the documentary interaction: "me" taping/"them" speaking, me white/they black, me rich/they poor, me outside the crisis/ they inside.

For reasons theoretical and personal, this made me uncomfortable. The ethics of the documentary interview and documentary "consent" are always a matter of concern. The legacy and inherent contradictions of anthropology and ethnographic film made me wary of my position as a white outsider asking women different from myself to illuminate devastating and personal experiences for my camera. And, regardless of the good intentions or positive interactions of any particular interview, I was inevitably taking and having others' images to use again and again, to edit to my liking, to make my videos, to further my career (even if unintentionally).

I responded to these many concerns by organizing WAVE: a video project where I would cast myself as one member of a self-constituted and small community. As much as I wanted to participate in a kind of media production that



**Top and above:**  
***We Care: A***  
***Video for Care***  
***Providers of***  
***People Affected***  
***by AIDS (1990)***  
**by WAVE**

challenged the seemingly inherent power structures of the documentary interaction, and that empowered the people most profoundly affected by this crisis to articulate their needs and concerns for themselves, I realized it was foolish to erase myself entirely from the production process. I had skills that I could share with others (most importantly, my ability to raise funds and my technical knowledge about the production process).

Therefore, I attempted to organize a mode of production that took responsibility for producing within a community outside my own. Producing communally was one tactic towards dispersing power within the production process.

After learning and practicing video skills, everyone in the group was as much a potential camerawoman as a potential interviewee. Similarly, utilizing the form of a support group insured that all participants were equally vulnerable (we all expressed our problems and needs to each other), while at the same time allowing a supportive environment to respond to the issues and emotions that were raised. The long-term nature of the project was also an important facet, since people were expressing complex and private things that take time, and trust, to make public. Furthermore, I found it critically important that people were paid during all aspects of production — for their time, as well as for all the other expenses of the project (child care, cab fare). Finally, discussion about the function of media was a necessary feature of the project. This prepared us to make a work that was conscious about its power, its potential effects, its critical edge. We believed that *how* we presented information was as important as what information we included.

Although I raise ways that I attempted to take responsibility for my position as an outsider in a community other than my own, one of the most enduring effects of participating in this project has been that my very understanding of what a "community" is has changed drastically. I found that the process of video production was itself an act of community construction. The formation of the WAVE group as a particular and temporary "community" from which we produced an alternative AIDS video, demonstrated the ways

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What the audience addressed? individuals issues of rac nity, famil

that individuals cross lines of ethnic, class, gender and other differences, to form useful, if temporary allegiances. Although it was true that I was "different" from the women in the group, and that they are different from each other, it was equally true that we produced from the places that are similar. For instance, it was interesting and important to learn which of the experiences of AIDS' impact on our lives were shared by all (even though we are "different"), while also considering our different experience of the epidemic. We made a tape about and for care-providers because we recognized that these concerns unified us, even as other aspects of our personalities and lives were not the same.

Although this sounds somewhat utopian, I also learned that there are structures of power and privilege which are more difficult to overturn than those of the documentary interaction or the nature of a small community. For instance, one of the participants in our

video, a black, middle-aged woman who is HIV positive, gave an interview because she shared our belief that if people see and hear the unspoken voices of AIDS, this may alter assumptions about who is HIV positive and why. Yet the subject of her interview, an explanation of the conditions which make her feel vulnerable as a person who is HIV positive, has not changed even though our video is a step towards this direction. Now she has decided that she does not want her image aired on television. I do not blame her, but I worry that this is the most debilitating kind of "catch-22." The very reason why the disempowered members of our society must speak, or make video, are the reasons that they cannot. The camcorder is allowing communities which have rarely had access to public discourse the opportunity to speak out — it is an empowering tool of expression and dissent. However, people continue to speak in a world that has not changed as quickly as has media access. ●

## INDU KRISHNAN

I use video differently from Alex, Frances and Kelly. My work isn't overtly politicized, nor is it designed as an organizing tool. It isn't made from "within" my community, nor is it solely intended for it.

What then is this "community" or audience to which my work is addressed? I would describe it as those individuals bound together by the issues of racism, politics, cultural continuity, familial ties, gender roles, and

the concept of self. It is a community of spirit. A community not limited to Asian Indians alone.

Commenting on my recent tape, *Knowing Her Place*, a white woman from the midwest wrote to me saying that she "came expecting to see the differences in East Indian culture and instead saw the similarities, and the struggle for identity we all experience."

However, my focus was narrow in making *Knowing Her Place*. It is about