AIDS TV

Identity, Community, and Alternative Video

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Introduction: The Words, Art, and Theory of WAVE

In this chapter the Women's AIDS Video Enterprise (WAVE) takes the form of words. Here, I will focus upon my own video project—from preproduction through distribution of the videotape, *We Care*—to describe making activist video—at least for me. I will use words to explain our video exercises and late-night phone calls, the quirky and diverse women who were the project's participants, and my large doubts and small triumphs. I will call this process of writing letters, asking for funds, eating dinner at group members' homes, choosing to include a particular image in our tape *We Care*, and taking the completed video to a homeless shelter in the Bronx, "art." I will call my subjective descriptions of these many activities "theory." I may sound defensive. I guess I am worried. These are important words to be used for things as seemingly inconsequential as the particular, personal, everyday feelings of an individual engaged in activist video production.

But I hope that the idea of the alternative AIDS media which has accumulated incrementally to this point in the book leads us inevitably to the conclusion that to best understand what the alternative media is and what it does—to best understand the tapes we make, our art—personal knowledge about the processes of funding, distribution, production, and viewing is essential. My words detailing a project I know from the inside out are the best example of a theory of this kind of art—not because they are the most true, or accurate, thorough, or systematic, but because they attempt to enact as closely as possible, without being there yourself, what making this work feels like to an individual who undertakes it. If the most precise definition of alternative media depends upon its unique capacity to allow individual makers and viewers to construct themselves as marginal subjects through a dominant form, then the closest thing I can imagine to a theory of alternative AIDS media is to scrutinize and even reenact this function with words.

The following words about WAVE are best understood by mobi-

lizing three varied but often intersecting theoretical traditions about art, writing, and the relationship between theory and practice. The first could be called a Marxist sociological study of art or, as Terry Eagleton explains, theory that assumes that "art is first of all a social practice rather than an object to be academically dissected. . . ."[1] My "academic dissection" of the videotape *We Care* will be framed with a discussion of the social practice of the group of women who produced it, the "pressures, hierarchies and power relations"[2] that structured the project and the lives of the individual women involved. To understand our video, our lives, needs, problems, and relationships need to be understood too. Janet Woolf maintains that "in the production of art, social institutions affect, amongst other things, *who* becomes an artist, *how* they become an artist, how they are then able to *practice* their art, and how they can ensure that their work is produced, performed, and *made available* to a public."[3]

Whereas a certain kind of art production—that by professional "artists"—may rely upon a somewhat standardized account of who an artist is, how she is able to produce, and how her work is made available to consumers, for activist art production by nonprofessionals this is never the case. The kind of "artist" who might not call herself an artist, who makes her work when she is not really at work, the kind of artist who has neither a degree nor training nor the personal and institutional support and validation these things allow, this kind of "artist" may understand art production as a kind of unaccustomed and rare privilege. This kind of artist might lack the confidence, or time, or money to produce, yet she produces nevertheless. Therefore, to think about alternative media production by this kind of artist, I must also talk about the real difficulties of real people's lives. That is, why it is harder to work on and complete an art project when one is poor because so many other responsibilities interfere (taking the baby to the hospital, cleaning the house, going to work, taking care of husbands and parents and nieces). And why it is harder to work on and complete an art project when you are a Latina who has been taught that your words are not important, when you are a lesbian who has been taught that you are not creative or smart, or when, as a woman, you are instructed that this is not your realm. The underlying motivation for WAVE's organization as a support group is this understanding of art. The production of art cannot be separated from the other tensions, anxieties, and problems that women encounter during their daily lives and in their sense of themselves.

Here, the second theoretical tradition—that of feminist theory—comes into my analysis. I will be describing the personal interaction and growth of the female participants in WAVE, including myself, and to do so my tone will be necessarily descriptive and anecdotal. To understand what alternative media is, we must first understand the local effects of media production and spectatorship on real people. How little is a tape like *We Care* understood if it is not known how Aida took the tape to a community college and led a class there, thus becoming a college teacher for an afternoon? Or how Carmen showed it to her mother and finally began talking about her husband Willy's HIV infection? Or about how my relationships with these women profoundly affected the way I know AIDS and myself? None of that is made visible in our tape. It can only be written about here, because I know, because I was there. Needless to say, this extratextual information is central to a full understanding of our work of art.

Which brings me to the third theoretical tradition which shapes this chapter—the Birmingham Centre's "ethnographic approach" toward media studies, founded upon the belief that talking to real people about their relationship to the media will alter what theory says about the ideological functions of this institution.[4] So I am going to talk with myself—write—what my relationship was to the media, and to the other women in WAVE, as we made and showed *We Care*. My understanding of "theory" recognizes that chicken and rice at Carmen's house is not simply a part of putting theory into practice but is part of theory itself. Knowing about the details and difficulties of her life alters my *ideas* about her, and my *ideas* about her relationship to the WAVE project and video production. Cross-cultural, cross-class, cross-town friendship—the sharing of a meal, the enjoying of wedding photos, the pleasures of hospitality—organizes our abilities to produce video together, organizes the videotape we produce, explains its content and form as much as any abstract idea about education, representation, or AIDS. Aida's self-empowerment—that she was afforded the opportunity to be an expert, a teacher, an artist—*is* academic. My expanded knowledge of AIDS, through the experience of people who live with AIDS in households other than my own, facing different obstacles, *is* theoretical. The day when nobody came to our weekly meeting because babies were sick, friends had died, people could not deal with the long subway ride on a snowy day *is* deeply about how lived experience affects production and, therefore, production's theory. Although academic theory structured this project (detailed below), the making into practice of that theory altered, contradicted, and transformed it into something else. What came out on the other end were not generalized statements

about the meanings of media, but specific and sometimes uncertain words about the everyday processes of video production with and for real and diverse people.

The WAVE project was a group of seven women who met and discussed AIDS' impact upon our lives, while learning how to make video, munching on doughnuts, and drinking coffee. Aida, Carmen, Glenda, Juanita, Marcia, Sharon, and I met weekly for six months. Words can only mimic, shadow, stencil the twenty-two long and hard Saturday meetings we shared.

> For six months, a video-support group for women will meet weekly with a social worker and videomaker at the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force (BATF) to participate in an innovative education. The members of the group will discuss the impact and toll of AIDS on their lives, while at the same time analyzing how the media has covered (or ignored) the crisis, particularly as it impacts their community. Basic education in video production and media criticism will coincide with the group's progress. As they decide what is most lacking in the AIDS education offered to their community, they will respond by producing their own video, to be actively distributed. (Excerpt from funding letter)

The videotape we shot shows what we looked like and the words we said during those twenty-two weeks. But even with these reminders, it is hard to recall how it felt each week: the fear, the humor, the sadness, the challenges. Funny, how even the most self-consciously recorded, documented, preserved activities like this project nevertheless come back to words. How else to describe the cold Sunday wait for Juanita at the AIDS Walk, or the hot summer subway ride to Sharon's at the Far Rockaways? The video documents of these days are more selective than my memories—incomplete, fragile, dated; they tip off my recollections. On videotape are recorded the people we were in 1990. Today some of those people have died; we are thankful but wary of their video images, records of a time when we still hoped for their long life, their healing, the happy days we would share. And today the women of WAVE are changed. When we see our video images from 1990 we notice that we have put on and lost weight, we have grown out our hair, we have married, changed jobs, moved; our ideas and hopes have changed. When we watch who we were in 1990, we feel nostalgic and we also feel connected to the past, our work, and to each other. Video initiated this connection; it still feeds it, but now we are also friends outside video. *We Care*

is effective AIDS education, and WAVE was a successful video project, because each took into account the specific needs and lives of individuals. I hope to capture and convey that concern in the words that follow.

Preproduction: January 1988–February 1990

The WAVE project started as words in my head, words discussed with my friends and professors, words which eventually were typed into my computer, printed out, and sent to seemingly countless offices of nonprofit organizations as funding requests.

> WAVE intends to produce AIDS prevention education that is hitherto lacking and greatly needed: community-specific information made by and for the low-income, minority women who are at great risk for this disease. WAVE proposes to shift the hand on the video camera from the distanced and punitive control of the mainstream media to the women who come from the communities most affected by this crisis. The women participants in WAVE will be enabled to articulate and then respond to their concerns about the present state of HIV education and treatment by producing their own educational videotape for their community. (Opening paragraph from a funding request letter)

After almost two years those words became money, $20,500, minus 5 percent to my nonprofit funding sponsor, plus in-kind donations of editing time, and later a $5,000 distribution grant. After that, the money became "art": the three videos produced by the WAVE project, *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS, A WAVE Taster,* and *WAVE: Self-Portraits.* So said, it sounds easy. Immediate. But a great deal of word processing, mailing, and rejection letters occurred between my requests and the cold, hard cash. My words now will never evoke the disappointment, the uncertainty, the massive expense of energy, time, and passion which was the funding process of one political art project during the Reagan eighties. It has been difficult to remuster that level of dedication, commitment, and faith in my project which was the minimal requirement for getting WAVE funded. So, as with many other experienced, enthusiastic, and capable artists, the daunting prospect of facing the humiliating and draining work of fund-raising keeps me from making tapes like *We Care* more frequently.

I am not the only WAVE producer so blocked. Several women involved in WAVE who hoped to continue to produce on their own have been

unable to break through the highly professionalized requirements of arts funding. Juanita has been hoping to make a tape about lesbians of color and AIDS. Sharon speaks of a video project about anger. But without a professional fund-raiser's command of written English and film jargon, knowledge of receptive organizations and the ability to network, or even the ownership of useful computer programs and laser printers, the women who come to art production with a great deal of passion but without the privilege of an art school degree, a B.A., or a summer internship with the right gallery are virtually excluded before they begin.

It is not simply my determination, but my education, my contacts, my knowledge of what was "in" conceptually, theoretically, and politically, and my access to and power over words, that eventually allowed WAVE to be funded so that our video could be produced. Art funding is hard to explain or predict—a complex system of favor-trading, of people you know, of where you have shown, where you went to school, what is "in," who is "in." A key to the funding of WAVE was that during my two years of fund-raising I was an active participant in the New York City art scene through my involvement in the Whitney Independent Studio Program and NYU's Department of Cinema Studies. The gulf between the motivation to produce, an excellent concept of what will be produced, and the acquisition of even minimal funding needed to do camcorder production is not typically bridged by talent and enthusiasm alone.

Thus, a complete reading of any work of video needs to be aware of how and why it was funded and all that *was not* funded as that particular work received backing. During the grant cycle in which the WAVE project got significant funds from our primary funder, the New York Council on the Humanities, Amber Hollibaugh and Gini Retticker were also attempting to get funds for *The Heart of the Matter* (1993). My request marked the second time I had applied there. After my first unsuccessful attempt I was invited to apply for a "minigrant" from the agency for what was admittedly unnecessary "research"; this process actually represented the hoop I had to jump through to make my application properly fit the category of "humanities." On this second time around, Amber and I knew that the agency would not grant two projects on women and AIDS in one cycle. What were we to do? Stagger our funding requests to this agency, meanwhile upsetting one project's funding rhythm? Compete against each other when we were friends and colleagues who entirely supported each other's extremely different projects? We decided to each include a letter in our applications supporting the other project. Yet this did not safeguard us from what we already

knew would occur. I received funding that year, while *The Heart of the Matter* had to go through more rounds before being granted NYCH money.

For two years I attempted to raise funds for a project that empowered people to educate themselves and, in the process, made them stronger, more articulate participants in their own lives and communities. For practical as well as theoretical reasons I chose media production for this project. A tremendous amount of AIDS education has been produced in video. Such videos are easily integrated into the kinds of educational outreach being deployed against the crisis. AIDS tapes easily play in the places where PWAs meet and are treated. Although pamphlets have been produced in great number, printed literature in English is not effective in educating people who are either illiterate or non-English speakers. Furthermore, as is often argued by proponents of media literacy, people are already highly educated consumers of television.

But even though those involved in AIDS education have known about the importance and feasibility of localized education for a long time, it took several years to fund WAVE into action. The project fell through the cracks of funding compartmentalization; it was neither strictly art nor strictly therapy, neither entirely activism nor entirely education. Ultimately, WAVE was funded by arts and humanities (not health or social service) organizations because arts support sources were the ones that I knew to turn to, and my skills, connections, and resources could most effectively be used among them. Admittedly, too, AIDS was a trendy funding issue during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even as arts support became defunded, timid, and censored, some of the most effective and powerful responses to the AIDS crisis came from "cultural" producers.

Yet Douglas Crimp emphasizes that an "idealist conception of art" is often what is behind a celebration (and funding and showing) of AIDS work as either commodity or act of redemption.[5] He argues that although many of the producers of AIDS activist art receive funding and art world acceptance for their AIDS art, they remain "wary of their own success. Such success can ensure visibility, but visibility to *whom?*"[6] I remain wary of our art world funding and our art world successes, even as I also understand how vital they were and are to the production and dissemination of this video project. Certainly, in the case of WAVE and *We Care*, the success and visibility of our work as "AIDS art," rather than AIDS education, served to further the progress of our AIDS education. Art world screenings mean money and dominant cultural affirmation in a way that homeless shelter screenings never can, even as homeless shelter screenings are the primary intended use

of the tapes. An art world screening gets a review in a magazine, which then gets clipped and included in a grant request for distribution. You get the grant because you have received validation where it counts. This kind of dominant cultural affirmation leads directly to the "real" or desired affirmations of educational and political art. In the case of WAVE, the "success" of the project in the dominant art scene allowed for the raising of funds which let us distribute the tape for free.

It is a testament to the courage and experimentation of small or adventurous funding agencies (NYCH pushed all of its boundaries about "humanities documentaries" to fund this never-for-PBS project) that projects like WAVE get money. But it is equally a testament to the way in which most highly endowed agencies *cannot* fund such projects that projects like WAVE must operate on minuscule budgets in relation to less political, less experimental, and more expensive work. For example, the reasons that WAVE was *not* funded by the NEH are very revealing. After sending off a boxload of application materials to the NEH (the massive application requirements of such agencies, which cost a great deal in copying and mailing alone, keep many poorly funded agencies from applying in the first place), I received a terse and immediate response. My project could not even reach the stage of project evaluation, because it did not qualify for an NEH grant on several counts. One, NEH-sponsored media must be in a "professional format" (¾" or 1" videotape) because all NEH-sponsored projects must be eligible to be considered for PBS airing. This was a highly suspect position on their part, for media technology now allows any format to become "broadcast quality," for example, the playing of home video footage on the nightly news. Interestingly enough, after *We Care* was selected to be screened on New York City's WNET's "Independent Focus," it was later determined by the technicians there that the tape was not "broadcast quality," and they did not air it. This occurred even after I had returned to my editors who carefully remonitored what the editors insisted was a perfectly broadcastable signal. Broadcast, then, is no technical standard but an ideological one, which means politics, not professionalism. The policy that material produced on ½" video cannot be funded for or aired on PBS is political, because it keeps low-budget, community-specific work from arenas of mass distribution. Secondly, WAVE did not qualify for NEH funding because such grants were designed specifically to join "media professionals" with humanities scholars. I was hiring no media professionals; therefore, I did not qualify for an NEH grant. The very point of my project—to challenge the notion of who a professional could be—did not, in the eyes of NEH administrators warrant breaking their needlessly prohibitive, exclusionary protocol.

Another telling example of missed funding involves a New York City Department of Health grant, which would have been perfect for this project, but for which I did not apply, again for illuminating reasons. The grant, which involved considerable funds for community-based AIDS service organizations doing risk-reduction education, required an application form that was quite literally a book. The process of getting DOH money, appropriate for hospitals and other large health organizations with fund-raising staffs and the necessary equipment, machinery, resources, and time to fill out a book, makes no sense for the very cash-hungry, resourceless organizations that DOH was trying to target.

Yet an industry defined by such funding hypocrisies has not kept alternative AIDS media from being produced. In fact, great quantities of work get funded despite such hurdles, for many of the same reasons that WAVE eventually got funded: alternative producers participate in labor-intensive, dedicated funding drives, or they work with shockingly small budgets. For the most part, I received small grants from small, politically identified funders: ArtMatters, Women Make Movies, the Astraea Fund. My two "large" grants ($19,500 and $5,000, respectively) from New York State's Humanities and Arts Councils allowed for the tape's production and distribution.[7]

Because of the money I finally did raise, BATF took me seriously enough to consider sponsoring my labor-intensive project. It was my money, more than my ideas, that convinced this beleaguered and often broke community service agency to take on yet another project. I had decided to approach them to sponsor WAVE because of their close connection to the communities they serve. While, again, I cannot devote words here to the years of BATF's social service work that built the level of trust necessary to encourage community participation in a project of this sort, this is another vitally important extratextual condition which allowed for the project's successful outcome. With my grant money and this AIDS service agency's backing, resources, staff, and, most significantly, its connection to Brooklyn communities of color, WAVE at last began its life beyond words on paper. Needless to say, a great deal of thinking, soul-searching, planning, and theorizing had been expended before I finally wrote a successful grant application and raised the money which allowed us to begin work one cold Saturday in January 1990.

Three years earlier, during the summer of 1987, after having lived in New York City for a little less than a year, I decided to volunteer for the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC). At that time, like most of my fresh-from-college friends, I knew no one personally who was HIV-infected. Yet, like any politically aware person, I *knew* one thing, and *assumed* another. I *knew*

that AIDS was becoming a hot spot in our society, where the political concerns which were most important to me churned, collapsed, and reverberated—politics of sexuality, health care, poverty, race, and gender. I *assumed* that soon I would know someone—many—who would be infected. I look back and see that my initial knowledge and assumptions, both political and personal, have with time been proven only too true.

I was assigned to GMHC's media department, which consisted at that time of one woman, Jean Carlomusto, who was single-handedly funding and producing a weekly cable television show, "Living With AIDS." After completing a few menial assignments for her, I asked if I could produce a half-hour show on women's issues and AIDS. As hard to believe as it may seem now, at that time there was very little being written or produced in video about women's relationship to the crisis. *Women and AIDS* (Carlomusto and Juhasz, 1987), the first tape I produced for GMHC in response to this lack of attention, broadly sketched the social and political context of women's relationship to the epidemic and thus helped to fill the enormous gap in available resources for and about women. Because of this lack of needed materials, the tape virtually distributed itself, being shown nationally and internationally at museums, at AIDS conferences, before AIDS support groups, and at colleges and universities, among other arts and service venues. After this tape, I produced two more shows for the "Living With AIDS" series. Each of them—*Prostitutes, Risk and AIDS: It's Not What You Do, But How You Do What You Do* (1988, with Carlomusto), and *Test for the Nation: Women, Children, Families, AIDS* (1988)—approached with more detail some of the issues raised in *Women and AIDS.*

My work on these video projects, in conjunction with my experience as an AIDS activist and my graduate education in cinema studies and ethnographic film, forced me to rethink my production strategies and intentions. For reasons academic, lived, and artistic, I needed to move beyond telling women's stories "for them." First, although by this time my relationship to AIDS had become personal as well as political, I found myself in my video work mostly documenting the lives, concerns, and political needs of *others*, specifically, low-income women of color, the female population earliest and hardest hit by the crisis. The media has never been kind or sensitive to such women, whatever their health, and alternative media practitioners like myself come to such communities with this legacy before us: abusive interviews, promises of anonymity unkept, words used out of context.

Even though my interviews for GMHC were different from the classic mainstream interaction, and even though I tried to include my own re-

lationship to the crisis in the productions I made, I found it increasingly difficult to continue to produce this kind of work. I felt that—good intentions be damned—I was still enacting some version of the typical and highly suspect power dynamic of the filmic exchange: me taping/"them" speaking. Me white/they black. Me rich/they poor. Me outside the crisis/they inside.

For reasons theoretical and personal, these dichotomies made me uncomfortable. Feminist film theory speaks of an innately aggressive apparatus, a system of looks which are inscribed by patriarchal power relations. (I wondered if this remained true even when a woman, myself, held the camera.) The ethics of the documentary interview have long been a necessary area for academic and practical concern. (I wondered if even a consensual interview was not necessarily manipulative.) Even though I would meet with my "subjects" several times (unlike the more usual one-shot affairs of TV journalism), and even though I shared a personal and political agenda with them, and even though I did not *want* to abuse the power granted me by the video camera, I found that the structure of making media left me in an uncomfortable position. I was *taking* and *having* others' images to use again and again, to edit to my liking, to use in making my videos, which, in turn, would further my career, even if this was all primarily in the service of getting the word out about AIDS.

Finally, the legacy and inherent contradictions of anthropology and ethnographic film made me wary of my position as cultural, white outsider (with my own, personal relationship to the AIDS crisis nevertheless), asking women different from myself to illuminate devastating and personal experiences for my camera. Similarly, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, the producer of *AIDS in the Barrio* (1989), writes:

> When media professionals ask, "How can *we* awaken *them* (communities with little or no political power) to the potential of media?" we assume a patronizing position. As a Puerto Rican and lesbian film/videomaker, I am aware of the double bind of being both part of the power (as a professional) and marginalized by it (as a cultural and sexual Other), and the effects of these contradictions in the power relations one establishes with communities that we claim as our own. . . . It is important to ask these questions if mediamakers are to avoid reproducing the power structures we amply criticize in our work and our discourse as independents.[8]

I attempted to ask these questions and to respond to this double bind by organizing WAVE, a video project where I would cast myself as a

teacher and a member of one small community, a long-term video AIDS support group. There, I would be revealing as much or as little as would my once subjects, now my fellow group members. There, I would be taking as much responsibility for speaking, holding the camera, deciding the questions, as would my peers. Of course, I was still the motivating force behind this "need to awaken them," but the participants in the group would actively choose to participate in this awakening; they would be told up front what they would get from (and give to) taking some control of the media.

I am certainly not suggesting that this project was a "solution" to the structural problems and contradictions in the power relations of filmic interaction. But I am suggesting that paralysis in the face of these difficulties is an even less effective approach. Independent videomaker Annie Goldson explains how working on the series of tapes she coproduced with international movements labeled "terrorist," *Counterterror* (1987–92), contributed to analysis, rather than concealment, of the structures of domination and oppression. "For whites not to address racism is to deny we are already implicated in its processes and institutions. To remain silent is to carry out the self-fulfilling prophecy that we will return to a position of liberal guilt, inactivity, and perhaps—depending on one's class—privilege. . . . The mute guilt "expressed" by many producers of European descent (although I reject the term "Eurocentric"—again it is universalizing, eliminating differences among whites) positions whiteness as superior."[9]

The point is not that as white, or middle-class, or college-educated, or HIV-negative producers we should not involve our work with issues of race, class, or sero-status, but that we *should*, responsibly. Videomaker Michelle Valladares writes that "white artists carry the burden of an historical legacy as 'observer.' No matter how well-intentioned their observations, they must be held responsible to this history."[10] Thus, I organized WAVE in an attempt to take responsibility for the legacy of white involvement with otherness and observation while also acknowleding my implication in the history of the AIDS crisis. I first acknowledged that altering my position as observer was not as simple as giving a camcorder to people who never had the opportunity to use one. Taking responsibility for these histories inspired my attempt to address power imbalances on all levels of the production process. In preproduction this meant a dialogue about our backgrounds, current life conditions, and our relations to each other—our similarities and differences. I wanted to think through with more fluidity the essentialist notions of identity which would keep me from working with this community (and them from working with me) because I am white and the other group mem-

bers are black and Latina. Negrón-Muntaner discusses how her AIDS work led her to understand how the word *community* "falls short of describing the multiplicity of experience within these groups."[11] I believed that I could be part of a community with women of different class, ethnicity, sexual preference, and HIV status from myself. Part of the group's work would have to be defining what our particular "community" was. Making a video would help us (force us?) to raise these difficult questions.

Furthermore, WAVE seemed an appropriate response to some of the difficulties I was confronting in my video work because I was learning about the kinds of risks that women take when they speak about their HIV status publicly. Beyond the discrimination that anyone is likely to face after disclosing sero-positivity, women are highly likely to have children for whom their fear of discrimination is paramount. In addition, the ways in which many women who are infected lead their lives are illegal (because of their own drug use or that of their lovers, or because of the link between prostitution and drug use). Thus, to ask a woman to speak about AIDS before a camera is often a setup for discrimination or even prosecution. The process of making tapes for GMHC about prostitutes' or maternity issues was frustrating but illuminating about this aspect of AIDS educational video production. Even the designs and desires of an alternative media approach to these sensitive issues were not enough to empower women with personal experience to talk in front of a video camera and microphone, let alone to make their own videos about such issues. I knew only one prostitute—Carol Leigh, the AIDS, prostitute rights, and video activist—who was comfortable speaking on camera. For the tape on maternity, only one white female PWA would speak on camera with her image recorded.

This is another reason the project was organized around a "support group" model. Dr. Dooley Worth, who served as a project consultant, established the first peer group for high-risk women. She found that women, especially women of color, needed time and space to begin to trust AIDS education as well as to feel comfortable admitting and discussing their own relationships to the crisis. "The response of black women to personal risk for AIDS must be considered in the context of the risks associated with living with sexism, racism and socio-economic oppression on a daily basis, of constantly being reminded that one is distinct from and "inferior" to the majority, that one has limited access to addressing one's needs. Black women's wariness of self-disclosure is part of their larger survival strategy."[12]

Inefficient filmically (a video "about" these women could have been produced in two to three weeks), but efficient in more important ways, par-

ticularly in terms of the kinds of responsibility I needed to take as a producer/outsider, the joining of video production with the usual work of a support group expanded both of these activities. As our personal troubles and concerns regarding the impact of AIDS upon our lives were revealed to the group, we would think about how such issues could be expressed in the even more public forum of video. In fact, the structure of a video, with its necessary relationship to narrative, gave us a ready-made form which channeled our own narratives. Because a video was to be made, we needed to speak. Because a video needs to be coherent and organized, linear and structured, our words sought similar patterns.

Finally, WAVE was the outgrowth of one further difficulty I had found with my previous video projects: my knowledge that the most effective AIDS education comes from the specific communities to which it is targeted. Renee Sabatier explains that "AIDS prevention can only be effective if it changes people's sexual behavior. In the Third World, and among ethnic minorities in the North, this is unlikely to happen if AIDS education is perceived to emanate from a predominantly white, relatively privileged, outside establishment. Instead it must be made compatible with the aspirations and plans which those communities are drawing up for their own development."[13]

At present, the only precaution against AIDS is risk-reduction education, and one of the best responses to infection is sensitive, knowledgeable, culturally specific information. As the numbers of infected rise steadily, especially among poor urban women of color, it is clear that a crisis exists in such education. New educational tactics, which take into account the particular needs and values of the distinct communities suffering most from this epidemic, are sorely needed.

Yet knowing about the power of community-specific education and seeing it happen are not necessarily the same. For the very structures of oppression which made low-income women of color more susceptible to this disease (and others) denies them attention from the powerful institutions which make and fund media, and more significantly, these oppressive structures rid their communities of the resources necessary to make their own media. Catherine Saalfield and Ray Navarro in their article about activist AIDS media by and for people of color explain that "to issue demands for culturally sensitive materials without taking into account the economic, cultural, and racial obstacles that exist in the independent sector of film and video assumes that people of color will be able to easily overcome such well-entrenched barriers. . . . When asking, 'Where are the videotapes from

minority communities?' one may as well be asking, 'Where are the Black physicians, the Latino dentists?'"[14] The programs that have successfully brought media production to disenfranchised communities (i.e., Challenge for Change, Worth and Adair's Navajo Film Themselves Project, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, the Walpiri Media Association) depended heavily upon outside funding, which was never stable or fixed and came and went with the political tides.

Even when the political or cultural tide is in one's favor, the differing effects of dominant cultural affirmation upon various members of our group provides a telling reminder of the discrepancies in power and privilege that divided and divide us. Surely, when *We Care* does "well" in dominant cultural settings it affects all of us in positive ways, yet only some members of the group have résumés upon which the information that the tape played at the Whitney Museum matter, and even fewer of us have résumés upon which such information is relevant. When a reporter from the *Village Voice* attended one of our meetings and interviewed everyone afterward for a story on the WAVE project, we were all excited, proud, nervous—even those of us who did not read or care about the *Voice*. Great, we thought, this is just what we need—public attention, affirmation in a dominant form; we can show the article to our friends; we can show it to potential funders. When the story took weeks and then months to be written and rewritten, and then never ran because of conflict between the writer and her editor, we were reminded of the underside of "real-world" attention: you don't control it. But more so, it became clear to me that the *Voice* was indifferent to the specific functions of this manner of art production. The *Voice* did not recognize or respect the tenuous relationship to authority, vulnerability, and expertise felt by these artists. To run the piece would build up authority, to pull the piece was to confirm vulnerability. For the women in WAVE—unlike other "artists" who may have experience with attention, reviews, coverage by the mass media—it was a painful, and distrustful experience to open up to someone from the mass media. When the article did not run, everything that we suspected about the dominant culture being uninterested in our story, being manipulative, tricking us, was proven true. The women of WAVE were both hurt and scornful. We gained nothing but pain from this attention which came from outside where we worked, who we were, what we made. Nevertheless, the experience did not keep us from producing; it simply further entrenched our sense of why our project was unique and deeply important.

Production: February 1990–August 1990

"Tell me about your mother/sister/daughter," Sharon's voice queries.

Images of her daughters, sisters, mother answer back, their black faces etched with familial similarities: "If you want my opinion, I'm very proud of her," says her daughter.

"But what about AIDS?" Sharon wants to know. "Does she devote too much of herself to AIDS, and doesn't this make you angry at her?"

"Sure it makes me mad when she's gone so much. But maybe she doesn't know that, even so, I understand. . . ."

In her self-portrait, these interviews with her family are intercut with Sharon speaking on the beach. I videotaped her one afternoon as she stood on the rocks looking at the ocean. The crashing waves forced me to stand directly in front of her with the Camcorder. In tight close-up the microphone mixed her words harmoniously with the ocean's steady beat.

She speaks of the way the ocean purifies her, washes her clean. AIDS' toll has been enormous on her, bringing the death of countless friends, and the illness and death of more family members than I often have the will to contemplate. She goes to the beach at the Far Rockaways "to get lost:" to lose herself in the breeze, waves, and the roar of airplanes taking off; to momentarily lose her memories, her duties; to get the strength to pick up and do it again (figure 16).

The first meeting of the Women's AIDS Video Enterprise was a nervous encounter. Suddenly, all of these real women were sitting around the table with me. I had to make them like me. I had to make them want to come back next week. I didn't know how carefully I needed to trod the AIDS territory. Could I say the word?

The participants had been recruited by BATF, specifically by Glenda (their employee who was to be an administrative liaison between the group and the agency, while also participating as a group member). All I knew about the women sitting expectantly (reservedly?) around the table was that they were concerned enough about AIDS to have both tapped into BATF and to have found the idea of a group like this one appealing. They each had signed a contract accepting the terms of the project: a $15 weekly payment, carfare, child care, and a six-month commitment. "Things were better than I could've imagined—because they were real, real women—with their uniqueness, their own intelligence, their own stories, their own limitations.

Figure 16   Sharon Penceal, *Self-Portraits* (WAVE, 1990).

They *all* were dynamic, committed, for real and personal reasons. Proud. So different from my usual crowd—some parts so similar to me" (excerpt from my journal, March 24, 1990).

We went around the table and explained why we were there. This process was rewarding, but not easy, for our backgrounds were both challengingly dissimilar and surprisingly the same. I said I was hoping to make a new, useful, effective AIDS video. I hoped we would get to know each other, learn about AIDS, discuss AIDS' impact on our lives and our communities, learn how to think critically about media, and learn how to use the camera, microphones, and lights so that we could make an important contribution to the limited body of AIDS media. Aida spoke of family members she had lost as well as of discrimination and fear in her neighborhood. Glenda wanted to learn how to make tapes. Sharon's brother had died the week before, and she was both angry and depressed. Carmen started to cry when she explained that her husband was HIV-infected. Juanita, a volunteer for BATF, once had aspirations to be a filmmaker. She said this project joined two of her greatest interests. People were tense, wary, not sure if they should give. The room felt cold. Everyone was jittery. Yet only with hindsight do I know how truly distrustful the participants were—of each other, but mostly of white, professional, nervous me.

After a bagel and coffee break we watched two videos, BATF's *Mildred Pearson* (1988) and AIDSFilm's *Are You With Me?* (1989). "Had to make people see and talk about media other than as content or as jumping off point for personal history. Should one want to? Is this enough?" I wrote in my journal that day. As the weeks went by, people got better at looking "my way"—beyond content, at why something was made the way it was, not just at what it said. Basically, though, we were always drawn to tapes that created or recorded the power of a personal connection to AIDS, the

power of real passion, commitment or grief, regardless of the form. Thus, we talked a lot about the different effectivities of documentary or scripted work. Which form best allowed for this power? Which would we choose? We discussed what it meant to make something "community-specific." Did videos made for specific communities actually encourage and exaggerate cultural stereotypes? Juanita commented that in *Vida* by AIDSFilms, all the Latino characters wear crosses around their necks, the man is macho and irresponsible, the woman is a single mother and lives with her single mother. She said this confirmed racist assumptions about families of people of color. Aida said it looked like her house. I said, it looked nothing like where I grew up, but that issues which the characters were confronting made sense to me—how to negotiate using a condom with a resistant lover, for instance.

After the first week I returned home (as I found I would do for the following twenty-one weeks) extraordinarily spent. So much responsibility, too much coffee. I was responsible for everything going well, but I was also responsible for not using too controlling a hand. I was responsible for this thing to work—for a video, a good video, to come out of this hodgepodge of faces, this jumble of stories. I was responsible for the grant money, and for buying breakfast. After our second meeting I wrote, "And I feel my own prejudices fall into place as I doubt my desire to be *friends* with these women outside the project. Is this okay? I wonder about my own lack of sensitivity when I thought I could enter this world, ask to know their problems, and then not give on a larger level than my weekly meetings. *Is* this my responsibility as filmmaker, human, friend?" But after even that first meeting, I realized one other thing: they were responsible, too. Responsible enough to have devoted most of a Saturday to AIDS education, personal empowerment, and contributing to altering the course of the epidemic by leaving kids and lovers, warm beds, and late breakfasts. *They* would take up some of the responsibilities for the project's success because it was their project, too.

Glenda has piles of snapshots of herself and her loved ones which she shuffled and organized endlessly, preparing to shoot: five pastel baby faces smiling, she and a friend posing at the beach, her mother dressed to party. She put the camera right up to those photographs, and, after finally making sense of the macro-lens, her chosen images filled the frame.

Then, she interviewed her coworkers at the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force. "How do you see me?" she asks. "Skinny. Funny. Smart. Moody. Into music. Into your church," they say.

Glenda and I met one afternoon and edited together her self-portrait.

Figure 17   Glenda Smith-Hasty and family, *Self-Portraits* (WAVE, 1990).

We edited their comments about her in succession. But she frames these interviews with a musical and pictorial montage.

Her portrait begins with the song "Lean on Me," illustrated by her many images in photographs. At its end, quite artistically I assure her, the self-portrait closes with the end of the song, accompanied by the blurred and lilting images taken of her by her mother, after she received a brief lesson in Camcorder operations from Glenda. Glenda mugs to the camera, smiles at her mother, and is lost from view as the camera wiggles, swings down, and finally pans the room to find Glenda again as she sticks out her tongue (figure 17).

The first hour of our weekly session was usually devoted to the support group. Marcia, a social worker, led this part of the meeting, although she was a member of the group as well. However, on some weeks (our second meeting, for example), conversation filled the full three hours. "We talked and talked—a lot—too much," I said in my journal entry of that week. "Filled the time allotment. But I figured, especially early on, getting to know each other, to loosen up, is more important than the 'real work.'"

The function and importance of the support group facet of the project cannot be stressed enough. Here, we found a comfortable and comforting place from which to speak about and face the private and difficult issues which are raised for us as women, people of color, people affected by AIDS. The kinds of issues we articulated in our final videotape are not easy to speak about in public; they are private and painful. It took comfort with the camera and talking aloud about these things to equip us for the deeply intimate interviews we gave. Furthermore, it was here, in our long and dangerous meetings, that we began to understand something much more than our individual problems. We also started to discern who we were as a group,

in relation to each other. We talked about what our "community" could be—the WAVE community, the seven women we were. The power relations of this project were complicated—who speaks for whom? But the response to this realization, if at first fear, subsequently led to discussion. For when we talked, we learned things about our similarities and differences and about the numerous deployments of "power" throughout the group. For some of the members of the group had (and still have) more money than I did, and some less; many of the group had suffered the losses of AIDS more than I had, while others had lost less. And if I had more words to contribute about critical theory or media production, the others as quickly responded with ideas and expertise of their own. Only by talking could we begin to explore our similarities. Only by talking could we get to the more complicated place of comprehending the differences *within* our similarities.

For example, we spent one session discussing sexism in the workplace for the full three hours. After we had shared experiences ranging from practical jokes (a bucket of water poured from a doortop onto a shirt, making it see-through), to more angry symbols of distrust (a tampon on a desk: you must be on the rag), we agreed that as much as feminism had allowed us these possibilities for work, it had not altered many of the conditions which define interactions between men and women. We also began to understand that some working environments are more sexist than others. Another session was devoted to a discussion of racism. We moved again during the course of this discussion from the experiential details which mar all of our daily lives to larger conclusions about the society we live in. We discussed how few opportunities we have had to spend time with women who are of different ethnicities from ours, let alone to become friends, to become intimate. And a great deal of pleasure was taken in talking about stereotypes about whiteness—how I proved them untrue, and often, just to tease or "read" me, how I confirmed them. Few opportunities in my life have offered me the opportunity to reflect upon the impact of racism within a space that was both interracial and safe, where there was room to tease, to push, to question, to hear. At our reunions, the girls continue to poke at me lovingly about my white, skinny body wearing outrageous clothes and standing out in group photographs. So much is worked out in these remarks; I remain an outsider as I am drawn right in.

In the WAVE group we were all vulnerable, we were all safe. What endangered us, what we were scared of, what hurt, what we could make fun of, was different for each one of us. During our second meeting we spoke

about disease, illness, death, how to go on. Sharon, after talking about her brother, her many other infected family members, and the thirty or so friends she had lost, asked, "What's it all for?" This was simply my first taste of the high pitch of catastrophe and crisis from which my own class privilege had sheltered me. Sabatier comments on class issues and crisis in her book on worldwide AIDS. "AIDS is in reality the latest crisis to emerge besides all these other epidemics—of infant mortality and malnutrition, of stds and other infectious diseases, of heart disease, stroke and diabetes, of alcohol and drug misuse or psychological distress and social disruption—which disproportionately affect the globally disadvantaged."[13] Over the course of six months together, the seven of us faced more personal tragedies than my family and friends will confront in twenty years. Babies falling out of highrises and dying. Child and wife battering. Teenagers hit by cars, AIDS deaths, unwanted miscarriages, fathers with heart ailments, brain tumors. What I also saw, however, was, if not an ease, then an acceptance of crisis and death as a part of life also unmatched in "my community." If class privilege allows most of my family and friends to lead long, relatively healthy lives, it also allows us to avoid mortality and the incorporation of disease and death into the normal cycles of life. First for middle-class gay white men, and then for others of privilege, AIDS has thrown a wrench into our tidy expectations about life. However, for society's less privileged, AIDS is just one more insult, just one more catastrophe, illness, upset among a life already full of them. "How to answer the question of Sharon: what's it all for? She didn't have an answer—and mine, to get out your heart, soul, knowledge, love into the world, was superficial and bourgeois in her world of death and disease. Who am I, with my privileged relationship to life, to communicate my world vision to her? I have no answers, and can frankly not even hear what she says about her own pain—I've had so little of it" (March 31, 1990). Of course, AIDS brings crisis into my life. I used the group to learn to gear up for my own AIDS pain. I taught the women how to use the camera; they taught me how to confront the disease and possible death of loved ones.

At the end of the second session I asked everyone to take a turn recording someone else's brief "hello." It was unclear what was scarier—to say something, unrehearsed, before the others and the camera or to pick up the camera and make it work right. Humor, silliness, and uproarious laughter were the responses. Juanita pretended to do a commercial, Glenda spoke "street," I jumped onto a table and begged permission to come down, Sharon admitted that "she loved the camera, the camera was hers." However, after

our six months of taping, people relaxed on both sides of the camera. Practice, familiarity, and noticeable improvement grant technical confidence to those who initially resist.

For her self-portrait, I shot Aida lounging on a white sofa in her two-bedroom apartment in Bensonhurst. She wore no makeup, had not done her hair, and chose on a hot July evening to be taped in a loose T-shirt. Although she called attention to this several times before shooting, and then again when we were editing, she felt no urge to formalize our interaction.

For a good forty-five minutes—interrupted only by a quick check of her dinner simmering on the stove—Aida spoke candidly and articulately about her past, her goals, the changes she's gone through, her beliefs. She credits her seven-year-old son, Miguel, with giving her purpose and strength, even when things were at their worst. A single and young mother who left home at sixteen, Aida has gone through a lot. And it's only recently, she informs me, that she's turned into the responsible, giving person I now know. "I give a lot of love," she explains. "Even if I don't get any back."

In her edited self-portrait, after she refers to Miguel, Aida cuts to footage she shot of him sitting on the stoop.

"What does your Mommy like to do?" she asks him.

"Well, she likes to listen to music. Spanish music sometimes. And she likes to sit outside. . . . And drink."

"Mikey!" She stops the camera. "Answer again. You can't say that."

But later, when we are all watching the footage, helping each other edit our self-portraits, everyone agrees that that interaction must be left in its entirety (figure 18).

The last two hours of our meetings, under my supervision, were dedicated to video education, both how to use our camera, microphone, and lights, and how to think about AIDS media critically. We watched many tapes about AIDS and videotaped ourselves discussing these tapes' values, shortcomings, assumptions, targeted audiences, stereotypes, formal strategies. One week we compared my *Women and AIDS* (1988) to an NBC News Special *Life, Death and AIDS* (1986). As usual, the group criticized the broadcast media. Although they were quick to condemn the News Special ("Tom Brokaw's not talking from knowledge, just off a piece of paper," said Sharon), I also encouraged people to critique my work. Too many issues covered, too many concerns, it left you confused, a little daunted, they said. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why our tape, *We Care*, is so clearly focused, so specific

Figure 18   Aida Matta and Miguel, *Self-Portraits* (WAVE, 1990).

in its intended use and purpose. As we watched AIDS tapes, preparing to make our own, I was always pounding two questions into everyone's head. Who's it for? What's it for?

We also had visitors who discussed theories of representation, their own alternative AIDS media, or the factual information we needed to know about AIDS. We taped these presentations, constantly increasing the pool of images available for our final videotape. Also, in preparation for our final project we did a series of short exercises to familiarize ourselves with the equipment as well as with a range of possible formal strategies. Our self-portraits were the last of these exercises. We also taped role-plays (a lesbian couple learns that one partner is HIV-positive), scripted scenarios (two children argue about how HIV is transmitted, and their mother corrects them), our own conversations, the building where we were meeting and its surroundings, interviews on the street, public presentations by our members, the Gay Men's Health Crisis' AIDS Walk. These weekly exercises were extremely important, making us delve deeply into a small project, enjoying the pride of completion, learning from self-critique.[16]

However, on the third week nothing like these things occurred, because nobody came. It was snowing. It was gray and cold. I knew I had blown it. Scared them off. Bored them. Things were too heavy too fast.

The problem. Oh the problem. No one came. No one. Aida and Carmen called, and finally we called Sharon and Juanita. People are sick, babies are sick. Sharon seems to be depressed. I'm not sure if I should take it personally (I failed/the project failed) or work this all into the reality of this project which involves women who have *a lot* of other worries and responsibilities—and to also remember

that this feeling unsure about the group is a natural (not necessarily bad) part of the whole deal. I'll call everyone this week. As long as they come back, this may be good for us. A break. (April 7, 1990)

After this week, I broke down a lot of my resistance and ambivalence about communicating with the members of the group outside our Saturday meetings. They needed to know I was their friend. I needed to know the same. On April 14 I wrote, "I called people over the week, and that seemed to make a big difference. *My* initiative to break down that line. There is an answer to that responsibility question: I do have a responsibility to follow through." These calls began a still continuing relay of phone conversations that goes on between all of us to this day. For a lot of fear was raised by the project. Fear that during the "support" part of the group we were exposing too much. Fear about our abilities to succeed in this important undertaking. Fear about making the tape, and ending the group. The calls were to confirm our abilities, to remind us about the others' friendship, to buoy worried spirits, to support in times of duress.

Finally, the calls brought about the event which settled my qualms about the group's viability more or less for good. During Week Thirteen a small coup occurred on the phone in regard to the proper role of Marcia, the social worker. "There's a little discontent brewing (and articulated) among the masses (Juanita, Aida, Carmen). No more psychoanalyzing they say! We came to learn about AIDS. After more talk, it seems that several have been hurt by Marcia's straight (personal, opinionated) advice/analysis" (June 16, 1990). This was all expressed to Marcia, and she pulled back. Things had gotten too heavy, which was not what people wanted. If it was upsetting that people were bothered by aspects of the group, I also saw this interaction as a claim on group ownership. My leadership, Marcia's leadership, had been challenged and overturned. This was *our* group. Its shape and definition were the concerns of every one of us.

Juanita went to SVA (School of Visual Arts) in New York City for a year, many years ago. That touch of filmmaking has never left her, and it is one motivation behind her participation in our group. Her self-portrait documents many aspects of herself, including her long love of film, poetry, and other literature. As her voice reads one of her poems ("Misery Dane," the poem's title, is also her pen name), images of herself, her home, family, political concerns, and favorite books pop in and out with her use of stop-action technology. Piles of books grow and shrink on her bureau.
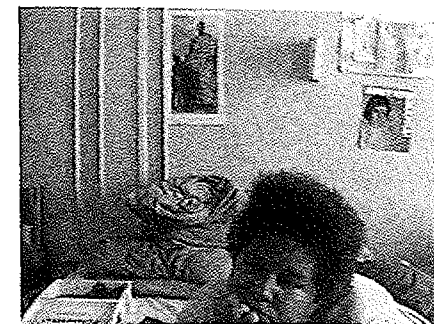
Figure 19   Juanita Mohammed, *Self-Portraits* (WAVE, 1990).

"Books are the things I crave. Books give me lives, new and old."

Then, it's her family we see, jumping rhythmically to her stop-action recording. Husband, daughter, and son, posed on a colorful couch, shift position, form new pairs at her whim. "Things appear, things disappear," she says.

At one point her two-year old son, Shah, appears, hugging a book entitled AIDS in the Mind of America. *Juanita's voice-over says, "My life's ambition, to help people understand AIDS."*

But mostly her self-portrait concentrates on her image as she changes, quickly and repeatedly, using costumes, glasses, wigs, and other props. Momentary glimpses of her lying on her bed, eating a sandwich, reading a book, wrapped in a sari, are replaced with a mocking pose as she reclines on a couch. "I'm weird. I guess you're not," says her voice, which concludes, "Misery Dane, that's my name" (figure 19).

The camera gave all of us, if Juanita especially, the power to organize and control the small details of the bedroom, bookshelf, and family—something that is often difficult for women in "real life." Books and self-image rearranged, children on the fly, the camcorder gave Juanita an opportunity to express herself as a strong black woman, activist and worker, mother and wife, reader and writer. And this capability of expressing herself has continued beyond the time span of the project for everyone, if for Juanita most of all—she bought her own camcorder, then volunteered at AIDSFilms, and is now producing segments for GMHC's "Living With AIDS Show." She and her daughter, Jahanara, have formed the production company Mother/Daughter Productions and have completed several tapes together.

A camcorder is not difficult to operate. With practice, the images be-

come stable, the framing centered. Carmen uses her father's camera to record family gatherings, her daughter's kindergarten graduation. Willy, her husband, told me she had learned a lot. She knows words and does things with the camera he had never heard or thought of. "You know, she could take a media arts course," he said in the interview I shot of the two of them for our final tape. "She has ideas." Carmen blushed, but looked pleased. After Juanita acquired her camera, she began scheduling and shooting countless interviews. Her city councilman, her neighbors, her colleagues. She has tape after tape of interviews, and she ended up supplying nearly half the final footage for *We Care.*

WAVE was about a series of empowerments. Feeling better about oneself as an individual among a community of women with similar concerns. Feeling good about oneself for making an important, valuable, and professional videotape, which others use and like. Feeling good about oneself for having a skill that can be applied as often as one wishes outside the organized group, even after the project is completed. Walk down any street, go to any event, even turn on the TV, and see "real" people shooting small, lightweight consumer cameras. And, after watching *Our Favorite Home Videos* (showing viewers yet another tripping mailman or baby tipping over), remember that all "the people" need is a real project to work on, a real purpose for their work, to make something like *We Care,* as well as their goofy home videos.

Marcia's self-portrait raises questions of aesthetics and politics. Days before we shot, she made a collage of magazine images, handprinted words, a pair of earrings, the cutout names of black female authors, the initials of her loved ones. These items are glued or printed upon a rectangle of white tagboard. Glenda panned the camera over the particulars of Marcia's life made small and neat on one sheet of paper. Later, we taped, then edited in, Marcia's voice as she explained how she composed her self-portrait.

She says how hard it was for her to think about her own life in this objective way. Ultimately, she decided to split her life into three significant pieces: her friends and family, her work, her interests outside work. For all of her initial trepidation, she comes off as the incredibly motivated, together, and independent woman she is, dictating with confidence her ambitions, her qualifications, her desires (figure 20).

The documentation of the life of one black woman—"MSW" tells her degree, "JR" identifies her boyfriend, her name in big, black letters "MARCIA," holds the center of the white field—is both beautifully personal

Figure 20 Marcia Edwards, *Self-Portraits* (WAVE, 1990).

and desperately political. In a culture where the privilege of self-expression and its public articulation depends upon financial and social privilege, the voice of each black woman describing herself, her life, her work, her needs, especially in media, is political.

This is not to say that all of the women in the group define what we are doing as "political." In many ways, at least on initial discussion, these women would define themselves as defiantly apolitical, uninterested in the disruption and anger of politics, seeking instead a stable comfort and local improvement. If anything, the political dis-ease of the postmodern condition hits the already culturally disenfranchised hardest. For they best understand the overwhelming distance that separates individuals from political and economic power. The women in WAVE may not want to picket or march about an issue, but we still have much to say. We watch TV, and we read newspapers and magazines, and we know that our stories are not being told. We note bias and distortion, prejudice and stereotyping, even as we take note of the news that is being reported or the TV soap opera that endlessly plays on. We know that a black woman is thirteen times more likely to have AIDS than her white counterpart, and that a Latina is nine times more likely.[17] We know that AIDS is political. Give us a camcorder, and this is what we say, call it what you will.

Carmen did not have the chance to produce her self-portrait. Her husband had not been feeling well, and she decided that her Saturdays were better spent with him and her daughters.

We told her to come back when things became easier at home.

Neither was Carmen with us for our editing sessions, but everyone else made it. Until this point (Weeks 14–15), we had shot everything in long

take or edited within the camera. But, the self-portraits were different. We were to conceive of these projects on our own, with the promise of editing defining their conception. Some people shot their tapes during the Saturday meetings, others took the camera home. I shot Aida at her apartment, Juanita shot me at BATF. Then I bullied over and over, "Log your tapes, it'll make editing so much easier."

If there is any part of video production which I obsess over, it is editing. I love to edit. Sitting in that artificially lit room for unclockable hours, scrutinizing and moving with the most minute technical precision little moments of once real time. I am precise in my imprecision in the editing room, and I usually cannot deal with intrusions from realtime, be they in the form of people, phone calls, or breaks. And yet, there I was, with six women crammed into a room, all of us editing our self-portraits, often with no real plan about what shot would follow another. I worked the machines, but the ideas came from the group. Theirs was a highly literate grasp of the power of editing; people used the cut not simply as a mark of progression, but of opposition, expansion, comparison. The self-portrait maker would turn to the others and ask their opinion. Should I make this cut here, or should the take run longer?

During the editing of *We Care* my blind dedication to editing as a private affair was shattered for good. Although, in this case, I arrived in the editing room with typed lists, game plans for organization, ideas about the shape of the final tape, I learned the most simple lesson about other strategies of editing. For, obviously enough, the ideas and brainstorms of a group of people are ever more expansive than the plans of one individual. We made up things as a group in the editing room that I could not have thought up on my own. Of course, this slowed the process (again, the reason why this kind of work is inconceivable with mainstream media deadlines), but it expanded the process at the same time. The idea for using the poem "We Care" was that of our intern, Kimberly Everett, who came to the project from Women Make Movies. We needed something to pull our diverse ideas together. We needed a different kind of footage from the talking heads which made up the bulk of the tape. The definitive mark of our tape—its title, and the reading of the poem which inspires it—was conceived after the fact of production, during editing.

And for me? In my self-portrait, the camera allowed me to obsess over my body. Funnily enough, most of my fellow self-portraitists cast themselves out of the picture—as voice-over, photograph, other's description. But
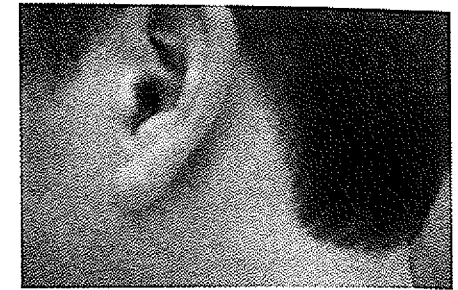

Figure 21   Alex Juhasz, *Self-Portraits* (WAVE, 1990).

if this would have suited me in earlier times, during the WAVE project I could not help but be obsessed with images of my own body, what with this virus ever on the peripheries of my vision—in my work, in my friends, potentially in me. In my self-portrait, images of my old body, from photographs, are juxtaposed against too-close and very ugly images of my skin, my knee, my hand. I used to want this body to hold the shape of me, but now I'm not quite so sure. If that body holds antibodies that are not me, then I scream to denounce its form. This is what I say in the poem I read over my images (figure 21).

I was uncertain about the reaction to my words, my AIDS, as I recorded my poem and my skin on a Saturday, I wondered if my ideas, my feminism, were useful for the other participants in the group. As much as I say in these pages that we were honest and open with each other, that WAVE was safe, I also need to emphasize how closed and calculated this honesty could be. There were many things about myself which I tried to keep hidden—aspects of my life-style, aspects of my politics. Perhaps they seeped through. Who knows? My hesitancy to expose myself came as much from my understandings of who the other women in WAVE were (rightly or wrongly) as they did from my understanding of myself (rightly or wrongly). I crafted the personality which was Alex-at-WAVE in response to the personalities who were Juanita-at-WAVE and Glenda-at-WAVE. My self-portrait made me feel vulnerable because I spoke in a different voice when I made it: Alex-at-home, Alex-afraid, Alex-the-academic, Alex-the-AIDS-activist.

The complex power relations which occur when the filmmaker, the teacher, that person who is typically *outside* the group, is also an *insider*, even as she retains her status as outsider, is the focus of much experimental ethnographic film, embodied especially in the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, who has stated, "Undercutting the insider/outsider opposition, her interven-

tion is necessarily that of both deceptive insider and deceptive outsider. She is the inappropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least 2/4 questions: that of affirming 'I am like you,' while protecting her difference, and that of remaining herself: 'I am different,' while unsettling every difference of otherness."[18] I would never want to deny that I was the teacher, the director; I had certain knowledge that I wanted to share. I had real skills that I contributed (my ability to raise funds, my knowledge about equipment and the media). But in so many ways I was the learner, and in so many ways I was willing and hoping to disperse the power typically offered to me in the position of director. My hope was not to get outside the dynamics of power created by ethnicity or race, access to knowledge or equipment, but to multiply and feed the complex weavings of power that define any interaction. I wanted to begin to take account of a videomaking process where *all* of the participants, not only the white director, are deceptive insiders and outsiders. I know that it is too easy for the onus of responsibility for this project to be placed on my shoulders or to be taken up by me (because I am white, because I initially raised the funds, because I directed the project), even as it would be too easy to say that I was "an equal" participant in the making of this project (because I am white, because I initially raised the funds, because I directed the project). The making of identity and community, across difference, through video production, acknowledges the impact of binaries of power, even as it collapses them. How else to work together?

Because I make WAVE into words here, because I have that privilege, or desire, or skill, we invariably hear my concerns, my viewpoint, my issues. I am well aware of this control, how this control mirrors other controls I had during the production process. Yet in the video production process, control was much more dispersed than it could ever be in writing. This, obviously, is another reason why committed artists choose to make their work in video.

We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS

We Care begins with a poem of the same name by our in-house poet, Misery Dane. She wrote it for an AIDS awareness day sponsored by BATF, which the group documented. When we were all sitting in the editing room deciding if we wanted music in our tape, and what kind, Kimberly (our intern from Women Make Movies) remembered the poem. We rerecorded it, and it is now the central, organizing force of the tape. All of our voices say the refrain, "We Care." Sharon's deep, resonant voice reads the poem's stanzas, "We care for people, people with AIDS. Why do we care you might ask? We care because people with AIDS are people like us. . . ." This poem is repeated twice more in the tape, playing under titles like a song with a familiar refrain.

The reading and meaning of the poem also make up the most literal site within the text that embodies and formalizes the collective production of the project. The tape has no narrator, no narrative voice, but the power that organizes it is the poem, and the poem brings the sounds of the many voices of the group into unison. Viewers have said that this harmonious voice then affects the way they see the tape's images, because these images are also then understood as a collective vision; no one hand selects what and how we see. This is a fair interpretation of a tape that was shot over six months by seven sets of hands. Its collective nature is a definitive feature in both the content and form of our video.

We decided to make a tape for care providers for two reasons which illuminate how the production of community media makes good education while also serving as a vehicle for the reproduction of community and personal identity. Having seen many alternative AIDS videos, we knew that virtually nothing had been produced for the ever-expanding population of people who are care providers. And we knew that the most effective media we had seen had a very specific and explicit agenda as media that announced its use value, that made explicit its address and intended audience. Secondly, as a group of seven diverse women, each profoundly affected by AIDS, the one thing that we held in common, which made us a community from which to shoot video, was that we were all care providers ourselves. This common place from, and to, which we spoke cut across the class, ethnic, and educational backgrounds that "split" us, and instead it bound us together in what we knew and in the concerns and experiences we had in common.

We sat down one afternoon and wrote down all the things we thought a person would need to know when just finding out that someone was HIV-positive or had AIDS. Those suggestions organized the tape. We distributed these sequences to teams of two to tape. Juanita giving advice to volunteers. Glenda and Sharon explaining available services. Marcia discussing issues around death and dying. A doctor giving her opinions. Sharon's lover, Marie, a fifty-year-old, HIV-positive black woman, giving a guided tour of her apartment. On-the-street interviews. A group discussion. The tape is organized into informative sections that focus on the advice of care providers themselves. Typically, a section's speaker will introduce herself to the camera and to the anticipated audience of AIDS care providers

before speaking. The group used video as a method to record dialogue for an anticipated and acknowledged audience. The form of the tape reflects the concept of explicit, local address. "Hi, I'm Glenda, and this is Sharon. We're going to tell you about some of the services available to you if someone you know is newly diagnosed with AIDS." In the outtakes of this sequence, which are included in *A WAVE Taster*, we see Glenda and Sharon debating this atypical sort of media presence. "Am I supposed to know her?" "Who are we supposed to be?" asks Sharon. "Yeah, you know me," answers Glenda. "We are ourselves." This is our highly recognizable style: speaking to the audience members as if they are part of our group, speaking ourselves as if we are a member of this group, as if we are ourselves.

A most powerful example of this "as-if-ourselves" direct address is the sequence called "Being at Home with HIV." A direct cut from this title opens to an image of a beautiful and strong middle-aged black woman who looks into the camera and says, "Hi. I'm Marie, and I'm HIV-positive. I'd like to take you on a tour of my apartment and show you what has and has not changed, now that I'm positive." In a society where, because of discrimination and misinformation, it is almost impossible to be "out" with HIV as a middle-aged woman, Marie's comfort with the project is evident in her willing address and tour of her home. The camera is intimate, the eight-minute tour virtually uncut as she takes us through her living room, bathroom, and bedroom. The long take validates her knowledge and her emotions. We respect her work, we respect her words, we leave them unedited. In fact, all of the major sections of the tape are left almost entirely uncut. A person has something to say, and the camera records her saying it. "This is my living room. It's the same as it's always been. I need a new carpet, but that's another story."

The intimacy of the encounter makes evident a relationship between camera person and interviewee rarely seen in mainstream media. In fact, mainstream interviews typically take only one of two tactics. The interviewee speaks directly into the camera as if there is no camera, or the interviewee speaks to an interviewer, also included in the image. *We Care* uses neither of these conventions in its many talking-head interviews. Spectators of the tape have commented on the unusual "looks" in this section and others. Often the speaker does not look into the camera but at another person in the room. This constructs a pro-filmic reality that includes both the presence of the camera (and the audience-to-be it stands in for) and the other people participating in the taping event. In the case of Marie's interview, Sharon and I stood in the room and behind the camera. Marie spoke to her

lover, as much as to the camera. Again, the group dynamic which organized the making of the tape organizes its form as well. We construct a shot which records a group, which *is* a group that itself brings the spectator into this collective, safe space.

To counter the rhythm and seriousness of the informative segments, we constructed six "Myth" breaks, which work to dispel dangerous myths about AIDS while adding a lighter, faster, and more "high-tech" look to the tape. These segments are highly edited with fancy effects (wipes, dissolves, freezes, an image that "blows up"). They begin with an image of my hand opening a book entitled *The Book of AIDS Myths*. The misinformed words of on-the-street interviews (or us, speaking the words we heard during interviews) are what you see and hear on the book's "first page." The footage which records people imparting incorrect information is continuously identified as *myth* by graphic effects like a big red "X" or a flashing "myth" sign. Then the incorrect statement—"You can get AIDS by drinking out of the same glass as them . . ."—is wiped off the screen. The page is turned. Another response wipes on, spoken by other on-the-street interviewees or by members of the group. An interview with Carmen and her husband, Willy, is often highlighted in these sections. "Sure, everyone's afraid of AIDS. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. But I know how you get it, see?" Then the book slams shut, but it is now called *The Book of AIDS Facts*.

Criticism from some spectators of the tape about our presentation of "AIDS facts" reveals both the nature of the AIDS "industry" and the difficulties of cross-community education.[19] There is understandable contention in the AIDS community about what AIDS "facts" are (i.e., many believe that AIDS is not caused by HIV; some say that Saran wrap is not safe for oral sex). But, beyond these disagreements, the different politics of AIDS education, as people try to reach different communities, has created many different "languages" with which to talk to people. For instance, when Carmen says that she knows how people are infected, she explains that this is through "sex" or "using drugs." Many AIDS educators would insist upon using the terms "*unprotected* sex" or "*shared* needles" to make sure not to feed hysteria. But Carmen knows that people can have sex and can use drugs safely (she has lived with someone who is HIV-positive and is not HIV-infected herself), and this is what she says when she calmly articulates *her* education with *her* words. To challenge the way that Carmen offers the knowledge she has about HIV and AIDS would be to challenge the very expertise that is established by allowing her to speak on-camera. It is clear from community screenings of the tape that one of the reasons spectators hear these facts and

insights in a new and powerful way is precisely because the speakers in the tape are *not* speaking like AIDS educators.

Another example occurs when Marie says that she does not let her three-year-old granddaughter use her towels. Many AIDS educators would insist that this statement perpetuates the incorrect information that HIV could be spread in this way. However, I believe (as did the several AIDS educators in the group) that her larger message (that you do not need to uproot your life to account for living with a person who is HIV-positive) overrides the "incorrect" information she provides about how she chooses to live—quite comfortably—with HIV-negative relatives as someone who is HIV-positive. To cut out this statement or other statements she made would be to radically question the very "expertise" that is constructed by allowing her to explain what she knows as she says it and knows it.

When watching other AIDS tapes (particularly those of the mainstream media), the women in the group were constantly explaining that the people in them were not "real." "Real" means many things, and one of them has to do with proximity to information. "Experts" are not real because they know about things from a distance—from reading or studying, but not from living or experiencing. Marie is real because she knows about "Being at Home with HIV" from doing it herself. A white male doctor reading all of the precautions one needs or does not need to know would provide an entirely different manner of education from Marie's tour. It might be "true," but it would not be real. The power of Carmen as educator is her real relationship to the virus. This realness is made evident in her uncorrected speech, her evident nervousness and her clear commitment to the ideas she espouses, all marked by the courage it took for her and her husband to talk about HIV on-camera. This is particularly important in light of this book's earlier discussion of distance, realism, and reality. In *We Care*, knowledge is closeness; reality is the *lack* of authority.

The tape speaks the voices of people who are living with this crisis: calm if sad, but also strong, loving, unafraid. For people who are not yet living with this disease, these voices testify to both AIDS' centrality in the lives of many communities and, sadly but importantly, to its normalcy. For people who are living with the epidemic, the voices are reassuring and stable; they identify a community. Thus, a binding together took place across boundaries of difference in our construction of the tape as well as in our conception of our audience. We made a tape assuming that the majority of our spectators, like the producers of the tape, would be urban women of color affected by AIDS. We assumed that they would be people wanting to know

more, and people who would also benefit (as we had done) from a sense of community. We assumed our audience would share experiences with us, share our concerns. That is why the audience would choose to watch a tape with this title.

When I watch the tape, I know to whom it *will* speak, and I wonder for whom it will not speak. On its own terms, WAVE succeeded. *We Care* is community-produced, community-specific video that speaks loudly and lovingly to people who are similar to those who made it—a tape *I* could *never* have made on my own. All of the participants in the tape are people of color, except for me and the counselor who models deep breathing to relieve stress. Are people outside this community equally moved, educated, entertained by *We Care?* Are artists and mediamakers as interested in the process as I am? Are cultural outsiders intrigued by this access to a community other than their own? These are the kinds of questions that audiences answer. Addressing and learning from the actual needs of real viewers is what alternative distribution and exhibition is all about.

Distribution and Exhibition: September 1990–Present

But if we think about art in relation to the AIDS epidemic—in relation, that is, to the communities most drastically affected by AIDS, especially the poor and minority communities where AIDS is spreading much faster than elsewhere—we will realize that no work made within the confines of the art world as it is currently constituted will reach the people. Activist art therefore involves questions not only of the nature of cultural production, but also of the location, or the means of distribution, of that production.— Douglas Crimp[20]

WAVE, as an example of "AIDS activist art," challenges conventional notions about the nature, function, and production of ART, because it displaces—or traces—the meaning of art from production to exhibition. *We Care* was made to be needed by its makers *and* its spectators. And *We Care* most wants to be seen by the very people who are left unaddressed by the art market, the art world, the art museum. Thus, in its self-selection of audience—care providers of people affected by AIDS—our project must challenge the traditional mechanisms and economics of distribution. Our tape, *We Care,* not only wants to be seen, it intends to contribute to change. WAVE's videotape is one in a history of what Thomas Waugh calls "the committed documentary," because a self-aware focus on the possible political

effects of distribution plays a major role in the nature of the project: "They are all works of art, but they are not merely works of art (although some have been reduced to this role); they must be seen also as films made by activists speaking to specific publics to bring about specific political goals."[21]

The history of film includes many such projects that emphasize distribution and exhibition because of a commitment to the process of change. Dziga Vertov writes of "film-cars" on trains and "film-wagons" to get films to the isolated peoples of the Soviet Union in the 1920s.[22] Producers of the Third Cinema like Octavio Solanas and Fernando Getino emphasize the revolutionary potential of the screening itself which "provokes with each showing, as in a revolutionary military incursion, a liberated space, a *decolonized territory*. The showing can be turned into a kind of political event."[23] And John Downing argues that Newsreel became increasingly attentive to screenings: "The basic concept, however, was a vital one and clearly defined Newsreel's commitment to the political *use* of film. . . . Newsreel began to argue that the film should never stand alone and the structure of the screening has as much priority as the structure of the film . . . the viewing event itself (became) a vital part of the politics of filmmaking."[24]

To understand art as a means toward social change is to understand "art as a verb":[25] to plan for art's *use,* not only its funding and production. Understanding art as a process and not an object profoundly affects the nature of artistic production and theory. For example, the making of *We Care,* its look and structure, was organized by our intention to speak certain things to a certain kind of person—to communicate to "specific publics" about "specific political goals." "Progressive art, more than any other, has got to communicate," says Lucy Lippard.[26] Thus, to make or make sense of progressive art—art of communication—is to take seriously the work that occurs *after* the object is made. We would ask: "Will a person who just learned a friend is HIV-positive want to know this?" "Will people in our neighborhoods be comfortable with this?" Items were cut and added during editing because of what we assumed the impact of a sentence or a scene would be on our conjectured audience. Many clips were included in the final video which came from a particularly beat-up tape of interviews that Juanita had shot. The impact of the words transcended the technical imperfections of the footage. Meanwhile, the imperfections of the tape quality formally signified our commitment to saying this particular thing to our intended audience.

Projects like WAVE challenge traditional understandings of art not so much because of an oppositional formal composition or aesthetics, but more because they foster a link between the work of making and the work of viewing. I am not implying that WAVE does not have an aesthetic—our tapes look and are constructed differently from mainstream media—but this aesthetic is one of purpose, of expressiveness. Writing about the Third Cinema, Teshome Gabriel explains that "we are talking here of 'activist aesthetics' and 'critical spectatorship.' The relationship between the two has a distinctive form which accounts for the character of the aesthetics of third cinema. These aesthetics are, therefore, as much in the after-effect of the film as in the creative process itself. This is what makes the work memorable, by virtue of its everyday relevance."[27] The scratched-up look of some of the interviews we included in the tape *signifies* to an audience that the content of these interviews mattered most, that its "everyday relevance" was its art. We included them *even though* they were not perfectly clean, perfectly recorded, perfectly framed. These "unaesthetic" interviews said things that we thought people needed to hear. Their aesthetic was their relevance, as much as it was the realness signified by their lack of "professionalism" or "broadcast standards." For, when you think about it, what exactly is "wrong" with a video image with a little dropout, those lines which lack resolution and look like scratches in the image?

Furthermore, if art is a verb, this explains how, for WAVE, our art did not conclude with the final edit session, but only began anew. The process of artistic production was clearly rewarding to the participants in the group. However, the process of artistic distribution is proving to be so as well. We have proudly taken the tape around to agencies and organizations in our neighborhoods. We have shown it to our families, coworkers, and AIDS professionals. Artistic *expression* here means the tracing from production through distribution: How has the tape been watched? By whom? In what contexts? How does it feel to show it?

Not surprisingly then, nearly one half of WAVE's total budget was devoted to distribution and exhibition. Besides the twenty-plus screenings for our neighbors, coworkers, churches, and agencies which serve the populations we are trying to reach, we have made more than seven hundred dubs of the tape which we have distributed free or at low cost ($30). We have sent out flyers, put ads in AIDS service publications, and entered contests. The tape has played in film festivals, on cable and on broadcast television, in church basements and hospital waiting rooms.[28] Our project is first and foremost about communication: first among ourselves, then to our local community, and, finally, to anyone else who will listen. "Where the dominant cinema prioritized exchange value, oppositional filmmakers have emphasized use value," writes Julianna Burton.[29]

One of the reasons so few producers take up this relationship to their production is that it is no easy task, especially with video. A sort of schizophrenic impasse seems to exist in the educational video industry. Low-budget technology means that more and more tapes are being produced by more and more people; it also means that more and more organizations and individuals are using video in educational efforts. Staff meetings and in-services inevitably use video at some point in the program. But, not surprisingly, since the costs of video production (and purchase) are much lower than that of film, the distribution of video is much less lucrative than film distribution, and so much less developed as an industry. The tapes are there, but it is not so easy to find or sell them.

When factoring an AIDS video into the already small network of alternative distribution companies willing to distribute low-budget, progressive, educational video, things become even more difficult. Nonprofit or progressive distribution companies streamline their work by distributing tapes about, and to, particular communities: women, health care professionals, African Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, unions, museums, and galleries. An AIDS tape can be useful to all of these communities. Most alternative AIDS tapes require some complex interweaving of these particularized distribution networks—and this mechanism for distribution is not already in place.

Furthermore, the people who most need to see AIDS tapes like *We Care* are the disenfranchised members of our society who are not going to be reached by even the methods of progressive distribution which still channel the work they handle through institutions and organizations. Effective distribution of educational materials to the people most affected by AIDS means nothing less than grassroots distribution, which means nothing more than labor-intensive, pro-active strategies that take the tape to the people who need it. Which means, in reality, that most of the work must be done outside the well-worked grooves of professional distribution: the maker becomes distributor (but rarely gets paid for the job). The "Seeing Through AIDS" program is a novel response to these dilemmas. Created through the unheard-of union of a media organization, Media Network, and a city health agency, the New York City Department of Health, the program sponsors AIDS video workshops for the people who most need to get their hands on alternative AIDS video. Facilitators bring to their audiences of AIDS educators, health care workers, or PWAs a range of hard-to-find tapes that will prove useful for the audience and their clientele.

"Seeing Through AIDS" notwithstanding, almost every really suc-

cessful (useful and used, not merely screened at preeminent cultural institutions) alternative AIDS tape I know is distributed primarily by the people who made it. This means phone calls, follow-up, letter campaigns, follow-up, then long train rides to hard-to-find agencies, a small audience, and then, finally, few of the institutionally accepted markers of success. ("Send us reviews, PR, brochures," say curators, funders. Would a Xeroxed flyer from a church bulletin board count?) There is a flip side. A video in a well-known gallery that gets a *Voice* review will, almost guaranteed, play in a backroom where people waft in and out, catching the middle five minutes of a tape without any context. A *successful* screening finds a tape playing to fifteen members of an HIV support group or women's club, the tape introduced by the makers and then discussed afterward.

Therefore, for all these reasons (to get the tape where it needs to go, to feed the makers with active, responsive audiences, to allow the tape to have its utmost educational effect) WAVE's participants were paid $50 to screen the tape wherever they chose: homeless shelters, museums, drug rehabilitation centers, graduate school classrooms, the Queen's Department of Health. The economic incentive was important: allowing the WAVE project to continue to give. But, the self-empowerment found in media production is matched by the tremendous power and pride felt by the members of the group as we take our work to our churches, schools, jobs, and families. The viewing sites are endless, and reflect our different communities. I had enough funding for twenty-five such screenings, although we could easily have done fifty, and people have continued to organize and run screenings without pay.

There is a lot to be gained by running a screening: affirmation, critique, varied responses, which feed back into the meaning of the tape since it means different things to different people. The object changes in relation to the contexts of exhibition. Furthermore, these self-selected "community screenings" are precisely the sort most fruitful for alternative media, because the audience already shares some claim to an identity which joins them together and the presenter already has some relationship to this already-constituted group. Thus, Juanita showed the tape at her union clubhouse; Aida showed it at a community college where her sister is a teacher; I showed it to graduate school classes at NYU. "This means that the result of each projection act will depend on those who organize it, on those who participate in it, and on the time and place," write Solanas and Getino.[30]

"Where's the chicken?" Glenda asked, joking but serious, at the large screening we did at the Downtown Community Television Center.

Among the hundred or so viewers there, only a small number were people of color. It was my screening, on my turf, with my "community" out in force. The bagels, cream cheese, olives, and dried fruit I had picked up at the deli near my house was not what would be served at other WAVE screenings, would not be served at Glenda's screening. At the screening Juanita and I led at a homeless women's shelter in her neighborhood, grape soda and cookies were the appropriate fare. And, instead of big-screen projection, the tape played on the recreation room's TV screen, halting for thirty-two minutes the flow of soap operas that women were sitting in front of—and tuning out.

The audience at DCTV was attentive, communicative, supportive. The viewers at the shelter were less trusting, more divided in attention; some sat glued to the screen, nodding, responding, while others either watched with removed curiosity, slept, came in and out, or loudly opened bags of potato chips. But in all cases questions were asked after the screening, praise given, highlights and concerns discussed. The makers who attended these screenings led the conversations, answered questions, posed questions of our own.

At the DCTV screening a tremendous amount of interest was shown in the process: who did what, how did we edit, how did we come up with the structure. In fact, in this arena, another one of our tapes, A WAVE Taster, was the more popular. "The first tape isn't really for me," said one friend, an AIDS activist, who was implying that she did not need to hear AIDS 101 information, but was also referring, I think, to the fact that the players in We Care are not people like her. More to her liking, A WAVE Taster shows the process of the group, our interaction, the discussions, my role as educator, my relationship to the participants, their relationship to the issues and the camera. My friends with a less immediate relationship to AIDS than myself were more interested in the working of the group, its success (and difficulties) as theory made into practice. A WAVE Taster most typically shows at screenings where education about AIDS is supplanted by education about media production. At the shelter, the questions and responses were about AIDS transmission, AIDS facts, AIDS experiences. The video served as starting point for conversation about safer sex practice: what condoms to use, how to use a dental dam. Women wanted to talk about their friends and family who had died, about discrimination and the toll this had taken on them. After we talked, Juanita handed out free condoms. Was this why they had stayed to talk? And does this make the interaction any less valid?

If one thing seems to hold true across the varied communities which view our tape, We Care establishes a sense of ease and a lack of embarrass-

ment about discussing HIV in public. Perhaps this is because the "experts" are real people who have really experienced what they talk about, or because the experts look and act like the real people who live and work with many of the spectators of our tape. I have developed many of my ideas about the reception of community-specific media by watching varied audiences watch We Care: women in the homeless shelter in Brooklyn, AIDS educators at GMHC, white, highly privileged prep school students in Southern California, academics at documentary conferences. The kinds of identification allowed by alternative media that I raised earlier—both within a self-defined community, and between communities—are evidenced in the many receptions of We Care. In some places, people watch the tape for the vital information it provides about services. For people less directly affected by AIDS, they speak of identifying as women who know the weight of many kinds of care provision, or as individuals who have experienced the totalizing effect of other illnesses or personal crises. Some audiences focus on their shared concern about strategies of video production.

Yet, all audiences speak of the sense of comfort, ease, and community, which is produced by the tape, and which invites them in, regardless of their class, ethnicity, gender, or HIV-status. This is hard for me to describe, but I know it is there too. I recognize this sensation to be an integral facet of successful alternative media, just as it marked successful "feminist documentaries" of the seventies, according to Barbara Halpern Martineau, "the relationship of commitment between filmmaker and subject, and between these two and the audience, provides a little-discussed dimension to the issues of how women are 'represented' in (feminist) documentaries."[31] This chapter has been an attempt to address this dearth of discussion. I have tried to show that the relationships among myself, the participants in WAVE, and our audience are definitive of our alternative video practice.

WAVE: A Coda for the First Group

The first WAVE group has been disbanded since 1990. Juanita told me not long ago how far apart we have all grown. Whereas we used to talk at least weekly on the phone, the calls are now much fewer and farther between. Much has changed in people's lives since we met: Willy died of AIDS in 1992, and Carmen is beginning to date again; Aida has moved to Chicago and is thinking of having another child with her new boyfriend; Juanita lost her job and landed another as a videomaker; Glenda got a raise, got married, and is getting her master's degree; Marcia also changed jobs and is thinking

of working on her Ph.D.; Sharon's daughter had a baby, and Marie, her lover, has also died of AIDS; my friend Jim died, and I got and lost my first academic job and then found another. Such things now happen to individuals in the group, and others find out later. Our direct influence on each other's lives has ended. The group concluded, but people's lives go on.

Nevertheless, a scandal which occurred in the summer of 1991 got us all yacking on the phone again. We had been awaiting an article written about the group in *New York Woman*. A journalist from the magazine, having heard me give a presentation about the project, decided to write an article about us. She interviewed all of the women in the group and followed Juanita to some community presentations of the tape. Later, we received calls from a "fact-checker." My impression of the article was that it was responsible and interesting. The fact-checker assured me (as had the journalist previously) that no one's name would be included who felt uncomfortable about it, and every quote would be checked for its accuracy. I knew, for instance, that Carmen did not want her name published in this context. She and Willy were "out" about his infection only among a limited number of people.

Before I received my copy of the magazine in the mail, I got a call from Juanita. "Have you seen the article? Marie is really mad! She's trying to sue everyone in sight. Her family doesn't know she's HIV-positive." It turned out that the magazine had illustrated the article with stills taken from the video: one of these of Marie was accompanied, erroneously, with the words "Woman with AIDS."

Many problems stemming from this mistake demonstrate the innate sensitivity and difficulties of alternative media production. The most obvious lesson is known by anyone involved with journalists: although it is nice to get press, no one can handle your story with the sensitivity that you can. Although the magazine had carefully checked the facts printed in the article, this same care had not been exacted regarding the photographs. Marie would not have wanted her picture in the magazine in the first place, and she was particularly angered by the misinformation printed beside it. She believed that the picture could have very real consequences if someone who knew her, but did not know she was HIV-positive, learned about her infection in this way.

But further, Marie was upset with the WAVE project. She had agreed to participate in an AIDS educational video that would be seen by people involved in the "AIDS community." But she had not agreed to be in a video that would receive attention from the "general population." Yet the project had grown bigger than the group's good intentions. People see it and use it

in places where we no longer have the same kind of direct control that we have when we are the ones who screen it. After all, there are nearly a thousand copies of the tape in circulation, many of them probably dubbed copies themselves. Marie's image is locked on to those thousand tapes. Although I felt assured that for the most part her image would be seen and used in ways that she had initially agreed upon, I could not have guaranteed her that her image would not show up again in a place or situation in which she was uncomfortable.

The lesson seems clear. The very reasons that Marie's testimony was so valuable are the reasons that she remained vulnerable. She agreed to the courageous act of being imaged in this public format. She understood how much good her interview does. She was proud of the tape and used it herself when she took part in AIDS education at conferences and groups. Yet her life had to go on in a world where she had real things to fear for being identified as an HIV-positive woman by the wrong people or in the wrong contexts. Although her interview does contribute to the lessening of discrimination against PWAs, she went on to live for several years in a world where discrimination also continued.

The Second Video-Support Group

In November and December 1990 I ran a second video support group for HIV-positive men and women at Woodhull Hospital in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. After the success of the WAVE group, I hoped that similar projects could be organized to be produced by and narrowcast to other underrepresented communities confronting HIV. AIDS educators at BATF who had helped conceive of the first project and had followed WAVE's progress were eager to try it again. A short while earlier, the agency had received a grant from the New York City Department of Health to run small support groups in underserved neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Nancy Warren, who administered this grant, thought it would be interesting to make one of these groups into another video support group.

A number of circumstances coincided to help us decide where, and for whom, we were to run the group. Sharon (from the first WAVE project) was facilitating a highly successful support group for HIV-positive men and women at Woodhull Hospital. Sharon's group had already gone through two eleven-week DOH contracts, and she was starting on a third because the group's participants refused to let it conclude. The group members were devoted to Sharon and highly committed to each other. For many of them, it

not only was the first place where they had an opportunity to learn about HIV and discuss their feelings concerning it, but it was the only place where they felt a sense of community, where they could acknowledge their infection publicly without stigma. This seemed a good place from which to draw the new video support group—HIV-positive people already motivated and empowered about AIDS, people already involved with each other. Sharon chose four group members capable of taking on the extra commitment to join the second group. We would meet at Woodhull, and Sharon would lead the group.

For five weeks Sharon and I met two times a week for an hour and a half with Junior, Alvin, José, and Kathy. These meetings differed almost entirely from those with the first group, even though I attempted to follow the same model. Perhaps the reason was these participants were very different people from the women who made up WAVE. The four participants in the second group—three New Yorican men and an African American woman—were more economically disenfranchised than the women in the first group, and all of them were HIV-positive. Only one of them worked regularly, and this job was sponsored by a government program for PWAs that provided job training and employment in television repair. One group member was supported by family and was in the process of applying for public assistance (encouraged by Sharon's support group). Another, also living at home, was about to start a job as a home attendant (inspired by the HIV-support group). The fourth group member lived at Woodhull Hospital, a situation preferable to homelessness, but little more. All of the group participants had been or still were intravenous drug users; several of them had prostituted for drugs or money, and one had spent time in jail.

Another reason why the second video group differed from WAVE, however, was that we decided to conduct the group with little money. For the first project I had come to BATF with New York Council on the Humanities funds in hand, while in this case I was using only the funds available to BATF. To have stopped the ball rolling to raise funds would have diminished our energy and enthusiasm. But BATF's grant from the DOH covered only Sharon's salary. I already had video equipment, bought with WAVE's budget. All the other necessary expenses of the WAVE project (food, transportation, video stock, editing, payment for the participants) would have to be dropped, or covered by juggling the small reserves of BATF's budget. We figured out that VHS videotape could be donated by BATF's education department. My cab fare to and from the hospital—necessary because I was bringing video equipment—would be covered by BATF. I would try to find

an organization that would donate editing time. All other perks (except for participants' subway fare to the meetings) would have to go. We decided that the positive effects of running such a group (the personal empowerment of the participants, the acquisition of a skill, the making of a video project) were more important than doing so in the relatively luxurious and ideal fashion of the first group. It did not make sense to wait the two years it would take to possibly get a grant to run another group. People were ready and waiting to make a video about AIDS; an agency and staff were ready to support the project. Had I been working with an organization that was not desperately staying afloat with a limited budget, the small amount of money needed to run this second project more effectively would have been easily available. Yet if I had been working with a wealthy and stable corporation, we would not have reached the very people and communities that the project aspired to involve. This is, of course, only one of the numerous catch-22s of low-budget community video work.

Choosing to run the group with almost no money was, then, my first mistake. For even though we advocates of camcorder activism delight in its relatively low cost, money is still the bottom line for media production. The WAVE project with its measly $30,000 budget ran upon a fraction of the usual cost of video production; but $30,000 is still $30,000. Low-end video is more expensive than other forms of artistic production (even if it is less expensive than film and professional format video), and it takes longer to produce and longer to learn. Yes, owning a camcorder allows individuals and groups the possibility of making a video for almost nothing, but other expenses that give integrity to a project and its participants must also be taken into account. People who are denied power and attention in most aspects of their lives need particular attention and care if they are to accomplish the difficult work of self-expression. This is a hard pill to swallow because the people who most need to produce media at minimal cost are those most in need of funding for "the extras."

Time was the second element in short supply. The DOH grants funded groups that met eleven times (WAVE had met twenty-two times). In halving the number of meetings, we needed to reduce the project's scope. Instead of viewing and discussing ten television shows and videos about AIDS, this group would see only two or three. Instead of participating in many preparatory projects before producing a final tape, this group would do only a few. And while the first group understood that it would be producing an important tape in response to the present body of AIDS media, the second group's aspirations were not as high. The members never believed

they would produce a tape which would be watched by people they did not know. Instead, the participants would have a compilation of the work we produced to take home and show to their friends and family; the time commitment would be short, the editing costs minimal.

These decisions were important. We never could have asked for a six-month commitment from this group, as I had received from the first. These were people who had no idea where they would be in six months, if they would be healthy, let alone if they would be making the biweekly meetings of their video group. The short-term nature of the project fit the realities of their lives. Still, it was the long-term nature of the first project that allowed us to define our needs and concerns—and our voice—as a group. It was incredibly taxing to maintain six months of energy and commitment for the first project, but it allowed us to take ourselves seriously and to make a tape that would be taken seriously by others.

The second project raises the seemingly contradictory issue of how to produce artwork that is taken seriously by its makers and spectators when the conditions of people's lives make it difficult for them to do so. The space, time, and energy necessary to concentrate on something as consuming as a video project are precisely the luxuries that many of the underrepresented communities in our society do not have. Does this mean, again, that only the privileged can produce in the form of video? Or does it imply that our standards of what is "effective" and "serious" must alter as the range of media production expands?

The atmosphere at Woodhull was certainly not conducive to making people feel empowered or committed. Often our meeting room was locked because someone had forgotten to open it (everything at the hospital—toilets, elevators—was locked or guarded). Each time this happened, we had to ask busy, distracted security guards to let us in, and they would then need to call some other bureaucrat to get permission to do so. Our meetings were often interrupted by unapologetic doctors wanting to use a Xerox machine stored in our meeting room. If we wanted to watch footage, we had to sit in a locked section of the hospital where an outside agency was running a separate study. A woman who worked in these offices was so hostile toward the group that we often chose not to screen material at all. On the other hand, some members were extremely aggressive toward all of these figures of authority, which was an understandable but often undermining attitude. The contradictions here are similar to those I have already discussed. It was generous of the hospital to let us use its space, but with generosity like that, who needs opposition?

The positive effects that the project did have on its participants should not be undervalued. The members of the second group were extremely excited about the project and committed to it. They attended meetings religiously. Yet their understanding of the project, and my presentation of it, were very different from the way things had been for the WAVE project. For reasons both personal and organizational, video production for the second group was more a vehicle for personal introspection than community education. Lack of time and institutional support led me to present the project in more traditional terms than I had done before. The boundaries between me and the other group members stayed fixed. I was an outsider with money, skills, equipment, and a plan who came into their lives for a brief period (five weeks) and then took a cab back to Manhattan, which was exactly the kind of hierarchy I had attempted to challenge in the WAVE project. How could I transfer control of the project to the group when the group did not have the time, or the environment, within which to learn to express itself effectively through video production?

In this group it was, unfortunately, the most comfortable arrangement for me to be only the teacher, the giver, and for the participants to be the students, the takers. Members of this group were accustomed to people like me (social workers, clergy, medical professionals) coming into their lives, ostensibly to give them something for free. They are grateful but wary, all too aware of their loss of control and autonomy in this power dynamic. I also maintained a sense of wariness. I felt that the group members were extremely needy, that they would take as much from me as they could without giving much back. Since we had no time to get to know each other well, systems of social positioning already in operation were not challenged. I realize now that assuming the position of authority as I did was, in fact, a tacit form of taking. But the process of reevaluating and repositioning power relations among a group of people occurs over time and in relation to shared experiences that prove earlier assumptions to be invalid or incomplete. The lack of money and time reinforced more traditional power relations. I see this most clearly in my own writing about the two projects. When I discuss WAVE, it is always as "we," but when I discuss the second group, it most usually is "they" and "I."

Because of the largely unchallenged power relations structuring our interactions and because of the personal needs of the group members, the camera was used and understood in relatively straightforward terms as a vehicle for their self-articulation. For the WAVE group, on the other hand, concerns about the *process* of production were equally as important as its

possibility. The second group recorded interviews, role-plays, poems, and scripted scenarios with a much less critical relationship to modes of representation. They had much to say, but they would say it in whatever form I suggested. Neither the time in group meetings nor the commitment outside them could be found to plan things in advance. The footage we shot was more loose, more raw, and often more powerful than that made by WAVE. The meetings had a similar feel. I learned early that this group did not respond well to preplanning. Sessions ran better when things felt slightly haphazard. I would come in, we would schmooze, I would suggest an exercise, we might get to it, we might do something else. I would ask people if they had worked on things since we last met. Sometimes they had, sometimes not.

These characteristics explain, in part, how we determined our final videotape. When we brainstormed, my ideas were given the greatest weight. I suggested that we pull together the footage already shot, using the concept of one evening of programming on a TV channel. This suggestion was unanimously accepted. Even though I said that the project was ours, it somehow remained either theirs or mine. Yes, they shot it and presented themselves, but since I remained the media professional in their eyes, as well as in my own self-presentation, my ideas came first. Then, although everyone was invited to come edit on a Saturday, I was the only one who made it. The editing facilities generously offered to me to use were in Manhattan, but the group participants were from Brooklyn. Thus, I edited our footage together in the loose pattern we had determined at the previous meeting. The role-plays became a "soap opera," scripted discussions about using condoms and dental dams became "commercials," the talk-show-style interviews we had shot became a program called "The Positive Hour."

The group's final tape, *HIV TV,* is somewhat difficult for me to watch. The interviews and role-plays reveal the pain and difficulty of the speakers' lives. At some moments their lack of command over English makes their attempts to communicate difficult, as, for example, when Kathy discusses the use of a dental dam with insight and honesty, but she trips over the words for dental dam and clitoris and must be prompted by those of us off-camera. At other moments, however, the speakers' ability to say something about AIDS or their own experiences is profound, exact, and powerful. For instance, Alvin talks about his experience of being HIV-positive while in jail. Kathy talks about her recovery from drug addiction. And the role-play that became the soap opera, "Living . . . ," chronicles two gay Latino men who meet in a hospital waiting room while both are waiting to hear the results of their HIV antibody tests. After each of them consults with a doctor,

both of them learning they are HIV-positive, the two meet again in the waiting room and decide to go on a date. The usually censored messages that positive HIV status can be empowering and that HIV-positive people can be sexual are powerfully articulated through these scenarios.

HIV TV does not have the cohesive flow or tightness of *We Care,* in part because the group never really decided who or what the tape was for. While I strongly believe that a self-conscious and explicit understanding of audience and purpose is the key to building the foundation for alternative media production, in this case production served primarily as a first step toward a conscious and articulated political discourse. Clearly, if this group could have continued to meet and produce (if adequate funding were available, if their lives were easier), they would have "progressed" toward the manner of practice that I value. Is this what I should hope for? Are my ideals about self-consciously political and educational work fair expectations for all activist production? And what if this ideal cannot be reached by compromised, but critically important, production projects? *HIV TV* is a direct recording of the feelings, knowledge, and concerns of a significant community of people affected by AIDS. Clearly, making the video, and then owning it, was vitally empowering for the participants. It allowed them a forum to articulate for themselves, and to a larger audience, their ideas and knowledge about the AIDS crisis. And clearly, if that is all the tape can do, that is enough. *HIV TV* is useful to many people just as it is: people working with HIV-positive urban people, poor people, people of color.

The production of *HIV TV* demonstrates the complex play of elements that are required to do community-based media well. The initial WAVE project was successful because of a fortuitous and planned conjoining of talented, committed, intelligent producers, who had sufficient funds, time, and attention for them to feel empowered and educated enough to produce. These circumstances allowed both the goals and the process of video production to be clear to everyone. And WAVE's private funding allowed it autonomy from the chaos, poverty, and bureaucracy that exists even in many of the most well-intentioned community organizations.

It becomes clear why projects like WAVE are so rare and so difficult to repeat. It took years to get the money to do it properly. It took incredible amounts of energy and commitment to see it through. Although I have emphasized the seemingly utopian power of camcorder technology, the second project demonstrates the existence of blocks more significant to media production than limited access to equipment. Even if the positive effects of media empowerment through self- and community identification are real,

the disempowering conditions under which individuals live their lives continue to be real as well. Furthermore, in a political climate of downsizing funding for social welfare, art, and education, it becomes even more difficult to raise adequate funding for this kind of political and educational community work.

I remain optimistic about the ways that video is being used by various communities in response to AIDS and other social crises, while I learn again and again to be cautious about the underlying conditions of oppression that do not change, even as media use expands. While I hope that I have shown just how important media empowerment can be in altering the understanding of AIDS for its producers and viewers, I believe I have also confirmed how vulnerable such already compromised individuals are. Yes, representations matter, but so do a multitude of other conditions. The politics of community-produced video extend beyond video's positive effects on individuals and communities. If we are to fully gain from the promise of the camcorder and other new video technologies, we must use a more conventional understanding of politics, one that moves beyond critiques of representation, to do the work needed to end the conditions that keep people down.

Conclusions

The many strengths and liabilities of the alternative media which have been discussed in this chapter point to what finally distinguishes this work from broadcast or mainstream media. The making and viewing of alternative media come from an urge to construct identity and community from the position of an endangered outsider. Working from the society's margins, the signifiers of "broadcast" video production are necessarily lacking—and good riddance. For alternative producers may lack professional training, massive funds, full-time attention to their artwork, or often even an adequate sense of self-worth. Yet these very weaknesses are the alternative media's strength. Speaking to specific publics about specific goals, the alternative media bridges the gaps between producer and spectator, viewer and viewed, addressing them not as a purchasing public but as an engaged and articulate community.