

Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies

## **Dossier on Women and Video: Histories and Practices**

Editor's Note · 1

Melinda Barlow

Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival,  
1972–1980 · 3

Melinda Barlow

What Is That *and* between Arab Women and Video?

The Case of Beirut · 41

Laura U. Marks

No Woman Is an Object: Realizing the Feminist

Collaborative Video · 71

Alexandra Juhasz

Marina Abramović's Performance:

Stresses on the Body and Psyche in Installation Art · 99

Maureen Turim

Interview with Patty Chang · 119

Eve Oishi

The Politics of Disappointment:

Todd Haynes Rewrites Douglas Sirk · 131

Sharon Willis

Twin Pleasures of Feminism:

*Orlando Meets My Twentieth Century* · 177

Anikó Imre

Books Received · 212

Volume Index · 215

*Editors:* Amelie Hastie, Lynne Joyrich, Constance Penley, Sasha Torres, Patricia White, and Sharon Willis

*Advisory Editors:* Elizabeth Alexander, Rey Chow, Danae Clark, Julie D'Acci, Mary Ann Doane, Alexander Doty, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Ana Lopez, Wahneema Lubiano, Anna McCarthy, Meaghan Morris, Linda Orr, and David Rodowick

*Managing Editor:* Emily Davis

*Interns:* Andrea Fontenot, Nina Seja, and Junko Yamazaki.

*Camera Obscura* is published three times a year by Duke University Press, 905 W. Main St., Suite 18B, Durham, NC 27701.

Thanks to the University of California, Santa Barbara, for its support of the editorial office in the Department of Film Studies. *Camera Obscura* also benefits from the generous support of the following institutions: Johns Hopkins University, Swarthmore College, University of Rochester, and Division of the Arts, University of California, Santa Cruz.

Thanks to the Department of Film Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, to Kathryn Carnahan, film studies business officer at UCSB, and to Alexander McKee for editorial assistance.

Send correspondence to *Camera Obscura*, Department of Film Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-4010.

Visit Duke University Press Journals at [www.dukeupress.edu/journals](http://www.dukeupress.edu/journals).

Direct all orders for *Camera Obscura* to Duke University Press, Journals Fulfillment, 905 W. Main St., Suite 18B, Durham, NC 27701. Volume 19 of *Camera Obscura* corresponds to issues 55–57. Annual subscription rates: institutions, \$94; e-only institutions, \$85; individuals, \$30; students, \$20. Add 7% GST and \$9 postage for Canada. Add \$12 postage outside the US and Canada. Back volumes (institutions): \$94. Single issues: institutions, \$31; individuals, \$12. For more information, contact Duke University Press Journals at 888-651-0122 (toll-free in the US and Canada) or at 919-687-3602; [subscriptions@dukeupress.edu](mailto:subscriptions@dukeupress.edu).

Photocopies for course or research use that are supplied to the end user at no cost may be made without explicit permission or fee. Photocopies that are provided to the end user for a fee may not be made without payment of permission fees to Duke University Press.

Address requests for permission to republish copyrighted material from the journal to Permissions Coordinator, Duke University Press, 905 W. Main St., Suite 18B, Durham, NC 27701; [permissions@dukeupress.edu](mailto:permissions@dukeupress.edu).

Copyright © 2003 by Camera Obscura  
ISSN 0270-5346

*Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* seeks to provide a forum for dialogue and debate on media, culture, and politics. Specifically, the journal encourages contributions in the following areas: analyses of the conjunctions among gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation, as these are articulated in film, television, popular culture, and media criticism and theory; new histories of film, television, popular culture, and media criticism and theory, as well as contemporary interventions in these fields; politically engaged approaches to visual culture, media production, and contemporary constructions of feminism—inside the academy and in popular culture.

#### Contributor Information

*Camera Obscura* seeks substantial review essays that engage with current “academic” and “popular” debates in feminism, culture, and media studies. The editors are particularly interested in essays that identify and intervene in trends or tendencies across books, genres, media, or disciplines.

*Camera Obscura* is also interested in publishing interviews with feminist practitioners in the mass- or alternative-culture industries.

For more information, please contact one of the editors or the *Camera Obscura* editorial office ([cameraobscura@filmstudies.ucsb.edu](mailto:cameraobscura@filmstudies.ucsb.edu); 805-893-7069). *Camera Obscura* uses *The Chicago Manual of Style's* endnote citation format. Submit three copies of manuscripts to *Camera Obscura*, Department of Film Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-4010.

#### Indexing and Abstract Listings

*Alternative Press Index, Art Index, Arts and Humanities Citation Index, Film Literature Index, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, International Index to Film Periodicals, International Index to Television Periodicals, Studies on Women Abstracts, and Women's Studies Index.*



Video animation still by Joe Saito from *RELEASED: Five Short Videos about Women and Prison* (2000)

## No Woman Is an Object: Realizing the Feminist Collaborative Video

---

Alexandra Juhasz

No woman is filmed as an object; everyone is a subject who combines and presents physical, emotional, intellectual, and political selves.

—Julia Lesage, “The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film”

### **Feminist Collaborative Video**

Feminist video does collectivity exceedingly well.<sup>1</sup> Certainly other politicized cultural movements and individuals work through this method, and, of course, feminists also produce work in collaboration in film and other media (as Julia Lesage testifies above). However, I assert that there is a profound natural mechanics to women’s work in video that makes the medium’s method, theory, and theme the interactive and politicized subjectification of the female sex. Film and patriarchy share the project of women’s objectification—they make victims. Video and feminism see women as complex, worthy selves—they produce subjects. In

Copyright © 2003 by *Camera Obscura*  
*Camera Obscura* 54, Volume 18, Number 3  
Published by Duke University Press

feminist collaborative video, the medium (inexpensive, debased, nonprofessional), the message (woman, as subject, needs to be constructed), and the ideology (the personal is the political; process over product) align into a near-perfect praxis. I should know: as producer and advocate of a great many such projects, I have found a beauty, synchronicity, and power in the process of making and screening feminist collaborative video that is, in these moments at least, almost emancipatory. And thus, this warning: though it is always postulated as an ideal, there is little writing about the *realized* feminist collaborative video. Here I will look at *RELEASED: Five Short Videos about Women and Prison* (a project I produced in 2000) to trouble, and sometimes celebrate, the neat alignment between video, subjectivity, collectivity, and feminism.

### Setting the Scene(s)

The scene of class domination is the same as the scene of voyeurism, both depending on an unspoken desire of the object of the bourgeois subject's knowledge repossessing her power in difference.

—Lauren Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*

The art of punishing then must rest on a whole technology of representation. The undertaking can succeed only if it forms part of a natural mechanics.

—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*

The classic victim documentary scene, like that of voyeurism or class domination, demands (at least) two players, separated by power but drawn by desire, who agree to engage together in an art of punishing that reenacts the object's previous victimization through a procedure of representation. Produced with the intention to reveal and heal injustice and pain, such performances serve primarily to cement the systems of domination, suffering, and pleasure that form the natural mechanics of both the original punishment and its depiction. In this way, the documentary

exchange is also like the prison. Both systems weaken some and strengthen others, using technologies of vision and distance, all the while buttressing hegemonic power. In both the prison and the documentary, the one charged with vision wields power. Distance and difference, in both scenes, force or coerce silence and testimony in turn. Class, race, and gender relations structure these interactions and are thereby solidified. And, by maintaining the classic position of subject/object, the victim documentary also necessarily reestablishes the inside/outside binarism that is not merely metaphoric but definitive of imprisonment.

Are there alternatives to restaging victimhood in prison, documentary, and similar theaters of punishment? As a feminist documentary scholar and video maker, I felt this as an overriding concern in producing the activist art video *RELEASED*. Given that female inmates of American prisons are victims of state, social, and ideological systems (not only incarceration but also welfare, racism, sexism, and physical, emotional, or drug abuse) that punish them for their usually victimless crimes; given that a special condition of their punishment is a near blackout of portrayals of their pain and suffering in and out of prison; given that the most common response to such a predicament is the unleashing of that tired tradition, the victim documentary; and given that the victim documentary performs the work of revictimizing, I struggled to represent women's victimization in prison in ways that challenged these harms without perpetuating them. While there is one strain of feminism, victims' rights, that has reconceived and valorized the victim position to some real political success, as a feminist video maker keen on re-visioning punishment, I had different priorities.

So I looked to another tradition—the victim critique—extolled by a variety of linked artistic/political/theoretical traditions, but manifested most holistically in feminist methodology and the (at least) thirty-year documentary tradition it has inspired. In *Feminism and Documentary*, editors Diane Waldman and Janet Walker insist that “feminist filmmakers have thought long and hard about the politics of people filming people.”<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in a counterdocumentary practice that they call

“shared-goal filmmaking” (18). Similar linkages built across the documentary scene have been named “continuity of purpose” and “third voice” in feminist anthropology, “collective ethical accountability” in queer film scholarship, and “radical reportage” and “committed documentary” in film studies.<sup>3</sup> But what makes feminist collaborative documentary unique is that the linking of politics, method, and theory defines and indeed created the field: it is foundational, not ancillary. “Feminist documentary filmmaking is a cinematic genre congruent with a political movement, the contemporary women’s movement. One of that movement’s key forms of organization is the affinity group,”<sup>4</sup> writes Lesage.

Collaboration is the obvious and ubiquitous alternative to victimhood. Since the late 1960s, an affinity with collectivity has been shared by the interconnected women’s, countercultural, and other liberation movements, and it has been manifested in the organizing, political art, and research they produce. “THE FEMINISTS is an organization without officers which divides work according to the principle of participation by lot,” the group of women with this name proclaim in their early-1970s manifesto. “Our goal is a just society all of whose members are equal.”<sup>5</sup> As in politics, so in political art: “If we propose freedom, we need to create our works in a libertarian manner. If we speak of non-hierarchical solutions and inventive leaps, we must make them in the process as well as the resultant art work,” expounds Judith Malina on her anarchist group Living Theatre.<sup>6</sup> Film and video, too, were produced collectively during this period—from Newsreel to TVTV—and this work and its radical process were linked to the ideas and practices of the counterculture, the New Left, or the women’s movement. Similarly, feminist art, video or otherwise, was often produced through a collective process. In her essay “Collaboration,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, Judith Stein explains that “it was not until the seventies, with the renewal of feminism in America, that artistic collaboration became for many women a political act and a creative first choice.”<sup>7</sup> Antihierarchical, process-oriented, less costly, populist, and user-friendly collective political production has worthy goals wherever it is practiced. “Our intention is to minimize the tendency in all research

to transform those researched into objects of scrutiny and manipulation. In the ideal case, we want to create conditions in which the object of research enters into the process as an active subject,” write sociologists Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Johanna Esseveld about their feminist research methodology.<sup>8</sup>

The countertradition of victim critique forefronts the contradictions that are always set in play, yet typically remain repressed when affinity, pleasure, and danger are mobilized by an art of punishing that objectifies one and subjectifies the other in the name of knowledge and control. The collaborative documentary is more nuanced or self-aware about the relations of mutuality existing between even those who are separated by technologies of vision and pain. The feminist documentary video that emerges is as varied as the methods with which practitioners experiment and the causes with which they engage: women describing orgasm, in a circle, in a consciousness-raising group (*The Politics of Intimacy*, 1972); female and male AIDS activists recording the faces, demonstrations, and analyses of their movement (in New York, the female-driven AIDS activist video collectives included Testing the Limits, DIVA TV, and my own WAVE project); and lesbian Latina high-school students creating poetic and angry images of their daily lives (through the youth video empowerment project, REACH LA).

Several documentary theorists propose that such changes in process also create new documentary aesthetics. According to Lesage, the prototypical feminist documentary *Self Health* “is characterized by its presentation of women in a collective situation sharing new knowledge about their physical sexuality. . . . Even more important to the mise-en-scène is the women’s collectivity.”<sup>9</sup> She continues: “Women’s very physical presence is defined here in women’s terms, collectively” (229). Thomas Waugh argues that gay and lesbian documentaries—also, for him, defined primarily by their collaborative methodology—are organized through “three fundamental ethical principles of the gay movement [that may be] summarized as a basic truthfulness engendered by respect for self, the freedom of the individual (sexual) choice, and—believe it or not—love.”<sup>10</sup> He believes that this

ethic is translated into a unique documentary form through accountability “to subject, audience, constituency and self” (253).

Since the mid-1980s, I too—enabled by these multiple and linked traditions—have been engaged in making and writing about committed documentary video (about AIDS, feminism, queerness) that attempts to realign political women through collaboration, accountability, and a queer ethics. In 2000, I produced *RELEASED*, the activist art video on women and prison, in this tradition. Nearly fifteen people collaborated on our documentary—male and female, straight and gay, people of color and white people, ex-prisoners and nonprisoners. We wanted the images we created to be one step toward revealing the psychic and social consequences produced by a nation increasingly bent upon incarceration as a solution to social problems inspired by vast inequities of wealth and privilege. Certainly working with women who have been imprisoned and using production strategies that acknowledge them as artists, activists, friends, and comrades—as well as victims—seems a more ethical and empowering way to represent the experiences of female incarceration. However, even a fully realized and successful collaboration cannot fully undo the divides of difference, position, and victimization that define documentary. It is my contention that any collaboration that takes place through acts of representation will also remain painful for all participants: makers, subjects, and viewers. For every documentary—like every prison—is an arrangement founded on violence and disequilibrium.

How to reduce the pain associated to the documentary of the prison? I will discuss how a feminist reevaluation of the victim documentary led to collaborative theories and practices, including those in *RELEASED*. I will then consider if our representations of prison produced radical meanings alongside documentary’s inevitable violence. At collaboration’s limits—representing the prison, the locale in our contemporary society where class, race, and educational privileges are most bifurcated—can makers and viewers achieve its promises of alternative arrangements and visions of power and suffering?

### The Victim Documentary

The classic victim documentary has a long history. Documentary scholars often trace its origins to the British “school” headed by John Grierson in the 1930s. In 1935, Grierson and his colleagues took newly mobile sound recording equipment to working-class slum dwellers to make *Housing Problems*. As Brian Winston notes, “Given that the victim was to become a staple of the realist documentary, especially on television, the significance of *Housing Problems* can not be overstated.”<sup>11</sup> The filmmakers let these “poor suffering characters” describe their bleak and deplorable living conditions in their own words, and with their telling class accents: “Nobody had thought of the idea which we had of letting slum dwellers simply talk for themselves.”<sup>12</sup> For Grierson, and all who follow, the socially conscious artist (funded by the state or private industry—in this case, the Gas Council, the publicity arm of the British Commercial Gas Association) could contribute to change by presenting, without interpretation, the words of society’s victims to the ears of society’s captains. Other historians of the tradition challenge not so much this description as they do its birthplace, moving it from metropole to colony, from class to race.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*—shot in the Northwest Territories of the Dominion of Canada in the 1920s—can also be understood as the initiation of the victim-documentary tradition, along with the origins of documentary itself. Winston calls this an “imperial film-making,” one bent upon exposing the depravity of a colored and colonial other for the curious gaze of the white documentarian and his audience.<sup>14</sup>

Victim documentaries in their classic and common mode—they still dominate the documentary landscape—focus their attention on the talking-head testimony of one who has experienced victimization. In the process, her weakness is confirmed: it must be grounded in a prior pain or punishment meted out because of her pitiful difference. It is the victim’s very fragility (attributed to race, class, gender, sexuality, health, nationality, and the like) that makes her the documentary’s subject; it is the documentarian’s very potency (economic, technological, social,

national) that allows him to record her pain; it is the viewers' curiosity, founded in their distance from the scene/seen, which elevates them from the victim. While deviations from these norms are likely, and even expected, we can always return to the familiar, dominant position for comfort, power, and reestablished equilibrium. Thus the ultimate position of authority for documentarian and viewer is the one of judge who determines if the other's suffering is deserved. During this trial, her torment (deserved or not) is reenacted through the form's reliance upon testimony—which requires that she relive her suffering—and, arguably, through the victim documentary's very structure. "The very act of representing others not only bears with it moral responsibility, but, more sinisterly, is a form of domination," according to visual anthropologists Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool.<sup>15</sup> They write that the acknowledgement of such structural violence brought about an associated "crisis in representation" in ethnography, documentary, and related fields.

This sinister art of punishing, this mechanics of domination, like that of any debasement that leads to claims of victimization, is structured on an irrefutable power imbalance, an unequal exchange between a subject and his object. The documentarian's subjectivity is confirmed as he is cast in the role of considering and considerate intellect, the agent of artistic change for an incapable other. Meanwhile, the victim's objectivity (or objecthood) is a necessary precondition for this action. Of course, the documentarian is neither victim nor body—otherwise he would be making a documentary in the autobiographical or reflexive mode. He controls this scene via technologies that enable him to see, listen to, and then judge another's pain through his controlling vision and voice-over. If he is doing this the right way, he maintains distance to assure objectivity (in both senses of the word) and then leaves the scene with a quality documentary, allowing him to do it again. Meanwhile, the victim is for this moment alone granted authority (by the grace of the generous documentarian), only to be quickly cast back into obscurity, probably not paid for her effort, and certainly edited so that what she says is placed into a

context that is not of her choosing. Finally, every time the documentary is screened, she is as likely as not to be judged (lacking) again for revealing herself as a pitiful victim. Pat Loud, one of the "subjects" of *An American Family*—the documentary series that broadcast a year of her family's life (including her husband's frequent infidelities that led to their televised divorce) to a hungry American audience—complains succinctly about her documentary experience, one defined by "the treatment of us as objects and things instead of people."<sup>16</sup>

Loud describes an unpleasant feeling with which we are all familiar, especially we women. Being treated as an object or thing occurs in social interactions in which an individual believes she is denied respect, dignity, or her distinct personhood; her words are treated as if irrelevant or interchangeable (even as she has been invited to speak); or she feels controlled by and not an equal agent with another with whom she voluntarily engages. In the victim documentary relation, the subject is invited to present testimony that circles a previous physical (and perhaps emotional) pain, but the pain created in the new scene—the object/thing feeling—is psychic and never physical. To distinguish here between bodily and mental suffering is neither to value one over the other nor to suggest that they are completely distinct. However, it does demand registering the specificity of victimization in documentary and its relation to the other arts of punishing. The victim of the documentary—rather than, say, that of the prison-industrial complex—could be said to willingly engage with a precarious system that sets into play feelings of power and vulnerability, subjectivity and objectification, that are primarily controlled by another who is sanctioned to act by dominant systems of difference in the name of some perceived offense to that very ideological system.

To distinguish between psychic and physical pain demands different questions. "What is the boundary between society's right to know and the individual's right to be free of humiliation, shame, and indignity?" asks Calvin Pryluck, one of the small handful of documentary scholars who challenge the victim tradition.<sup>17</sup> By

engaging a discussion of ethics, such scholarship invokes terms that reveal the specificity of documentary victimhood. Here we meet a subject who is taken advantage of, deceived, manipulated, given false impressions, stereotyped, intruded upon, made the object of voyeurism and its related sadism, stolen from, exploited, profited by, controlled, silenced, and dominated. “A serious ethical question is hereby raised,” writes Winston, “since the tradition of the victim inevitably requires that some measure or other of personal misery and distress be if not exploited, then at least exposed.”<sup>18</sup> Yet in *Feminism and Documentary*, while Walker and Waldman are quick to acknowledge the contributions of this “image-ethics discourse,” they argue that it remains within “parameters we think too narrow because 1) it originates from the perspective of the empowered self, and 2) it ignores a whole group of documentaries that are made and function in a very different way.”<sup>19</sup>

Feminist documentary’s subjects and theorists begin with a self who is herself, in many ways, like an object, a thing that is not already necessarily empowered. They ask us to consider what feminists have more vehemently flagged about narrative traditions: how bad it feels to be made via representation into the object of another’s psychosexual impulses. And then there is another concern, again one that is almost never raised about documentary: “If no, or little, social effect can be demonstrated, how can justification stand?”<sup>20</sup> As a feminist documentarian who has taken others’ images to be used in the service of political projects in which we all share, I make it my central concern to consider what social effects come from our work, and at what cost. I do know that from collaborative documentary work we often forge activist communities and identities and shape new meanings of the issues we care about, as well as of the media and our own agency in relation to it. But I must admit that even with all this on our side, I am also aware that my documentary comrades who are racially, economically, or otherwise distinct from me do become something akin to my victims when I take, edit, show, own, and leave them as images, even when this is done through collaboration.

“Our vision is our complicity,” writes Rabinowitz.<sup>21</sup> The “us” here is feminist intellectuals and cultural workers like Rabinowitz and me. For nearly all social documentaries—even collaborative ones—are set in a scene similar to the one painted by Rabinowitz in her book on activist documentaries of the 1930s. At that time—and in our own—most social documentaries were initiated by concerned, educated, and often progressive cultural workers participating in the lives, experiences, and issues of those less advantaged. From the WPA photography of Berenice Abbott or Margaret Bourke-White, to my collaborative AIDS videos or the prison project under consideration here, it is clear that whenever difference mobilizes the scene, complicity, pain, and power follow for all participants. Rabinowitz highlights this central contradiction written into the engagement: each party needs and uses its other. On the one hand, “without middle class women representing them they would not be represented at all” (66). But on the other, “the voyeur, like the radical intellectual, needs its object and their resistance, and it is in the double knowledge, as Lukács noted, that the other holds the potential to revise the terms of power” (41). Collaborative feminist documentaries seek both to represent and to revise terms of power while taking responsibility for the consequences.

### Undoing Victimhood in Theory

No matter how hard a victim system may try to maintain its boundaries, there is permeability between guard and inmate, documentarian and subject, inside and outside; there is reciprocity, friendship, deceit, and collusion. Even in prison, the institution cannot absolutely silence its inmates or fully control what and how they see. Prisoners communicate amongst themselves, with guards, and with the outside world. They make prison art, file legal briefs against prison conditions and employees, and plan insurrections large and small. So attests prisoner, political activist, and artist Elizam Escobar: “Even under extreme repression, individual freedom is unavoidable as we must keep on exer-



cising our decisions and responsibilities. Here again art comes to the rescue, because it has the inventive power and wit to deride, deceive, and betray censorship as well as self-censorship.”<sup>22</sup> No victimhood is total just as none is merely pathetic. For the victim, there is always the possibility of power in difference, ennobling through testifying, authorization via representation. Legal scholar Martha Minnow reminds us of still more rewards associated with victimhood: “Obtaining sympathy, relieving responsibility, finding solidarity, cultivating emotions of compassion and securing attention.”<sup>23</sup> On the other side of the divide, there is the possibility of empathy, recognition, and political affinity. Sometimes the guards collude. Thus collaboration also defines the scene. Then greater abuses are enacted to maintain control over representation and limit collaboration; abuse keeps both sides in check. Of course, the more abusive the system, the more certain its instability.

When discussing the production of culture in something like a documentary (rather than, say, that of a culture’s material institutions like its prisons), deconstruction—the unleashing of certain instability against itself—has become a kind of formal and political given. In his discussion of ethnographic filmmaker and anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff, ethnographic filmmaker and anthropologist Jay Ruby explains that “the researcher-filmmaker seeks to locate a third voice—an amalgam of the maker’s voice and the subject’s voice, blended in such a manner as to make it impossible to discern which voice dominates in the work—in other words, films in which outsider and insider visions coalesce into a new perspective.”<sup>24</sup> Like the views of many theorists of collaborative research, Meyerhoff’s and Ruby’s ideas about feminist anthropology support an undoing of the binarisms that have served to control, separate, and discipline—on both sides of the wall. Instead, Meyerhoff and Ruby envision the creation of hybrid positions from which to see the world anew. George Marcus also charts a movement in theories of the anthropological exchange—from rapport, to collaboration, to complicity. He credits Clifford Geertz for his foresight about “an awareness of existential doubleness on the part of both anthropologist and

subject.”<sup>25</sup> In 1968, Geertz wrote of the anthropologist’s responsibility to see the “inherent moral asymmetry of the fieldwork situation. . . . [T]o recognize the moral tension, the ethical ambiguity, implicit in the encounter of anthropologist and informant . . . is to discover also something very complicated about the nature of sincerity and insincerity, genuineness and hypocrisy, honesty and self-deception” (90).

Geertz warns that even a radical ethnographic practice will evoke misrecognition, coercion, and irony alongside its much-anticipated friendship, collectivity, and common predicament. Mary Fonow and Judith Cook discuss similar experiments in—and self-criticality about—feminist research methodology in “Back to the Future: A Look at the Second Wave of Feminist Epistemology and Methodology.” As Fonow and Cook suggest in their introduction to *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship As Lived Research*, “Reflexivity is also evident in feminist methodology through its emphasis on collaboration between women researchers. This encouragement of collaboration is a reaction to the impetus for action. . . . there is also the expectation among some scholars that feminist collaboration will bring about a deeper intellectual analysis, an original approach to framing the question.”<sup>26</sup> But they caution, “The emphasis on collaboration between researcher and researched masks the real power of the researcher, who has greater control over the research process and product. Moreover, the researcher is free to leave the field at any time” (9). While breaking down arrangements that separate is the first step toward more complex and just systems of knowledge and power, as for all upheavals, such ruptures are anything but benign. “Most lesbian documentaries represent such risk-taking on the part of filmmakers and subjects,” suggests Barbara Halpern Martineau in her early attempt to theorize the emotional, political, and aesthetic ramifications of a (lesbian) feminist documentary process. “The relationship of commitment between filmmaker and film subject, and between these two and the audience, provides a little-discussed dimension to the issue of how women are ‘represented’ in documentaries.”<sup>27</sup>

As is always the case, new (film/video) subjects demand new (film/video) forms and new (film/video) ethics. In his discussion of the ethics and aesthetics of gay and lesbian documentary cited earlier, Waugh lists several more integral production strategies for collective filmmaking: a reliance upon the interview, less editing, spontaneous collective reflection, community dialogue during and after the shoot, and a commitment to radical exhibition.<sup>28</sup> I would simply add this claim to Waugh's compendium: collaborative documentary—necessarily self-reflexive because both the process and the producer must be engaged—seeks methods that grant subjectivity to the subject. "This is a question of direct import to feminists, since women are so often objectified by film," concludes Martineau. "If the protagonists are treated as subjects, i.e., as centers of consciousness with accessible points of view, how is this rendered by film? If they are treated as objects, i.e., their images manipulated to illustrate certain ideas or attitudes alienated from their own consciousnesses, in whose interest is this manipulation carried out?"<sup>29</sup>

### **Undoing Victimhood in Practice: *RELEASED***

I devised a unique documentary format to address questions like Martineau's while trying to represent the complex social crisis of women and prison in a new way: commissioning short pieces from five political artists who I knew would approach this topic with diverse styles while covering varied content. This project (like all my other collaborations) could have been realized only with video. In my feminist video collaboration, the vast majority of my almost-nonexistent funding goes for the costs of the "process" rather than "production" (meetings, transportation, food, paying all participants). Adding on top of this the high cost of film production would make the work impossible to achieve. When this project was conceived in 2000, digital video had become so affordable that I could rely upon a pool of artists who already had access to their own (cheap but also high-end) production and postproduction equipment. Digital video allowed me to pursue a

feminist linking that hitherto had been cost-prohibitive: art-video and documentary. In my earlier collaborative video projects, the low-tech visuals of the VHS camcorder allowed for a look and feel of authenticity and community. In *RELEASED*, the quality and beauty of our images (and sounds and edits) created a different kind of authority.

On a less organizational and more formal level, I thought that five discrete videos would point toward both the immensity and the intricacy of this issue while undoing singular documentary authority. At the same time, formal ruptures would reinforce our intended disavowal of ownership. And I am certain that it was because we were representing incarceration in *RELEASED* that this collaboration I initiated came to multiply itself. Very quickly, all but one of the participants independently chose to combine forces with an ex-prisoner. In two pieces, the artist I had selected went on to invite a close friend to work with her and be her subject. Carol Leigh invited Duran Ruiz, a fellow prison-rights and AIDS activist, to work jointly (except when Ruiz was incarcerated) on their contribution, "A Gram o'Pussy." Enid Baxter Blader chose to make "Sheltered" about and with her childhood companion, Christine Ennis. For "Unyielding Conditioning," Sylvain White decided to work with a female producer and friend, Tamika Miller, and then the two interviewed three activist ex-prisoners, one of whom, photographer Tracy Mostovoy, went on to become a project participant who contributed her art and experience to the larger video. Irwin Swirnoff, in "Making the Invisible Invincible: Cheryl Dunye and the Making of *Stranger Inside*," chose to document a female artist who was in the process of shooting a feature narrative film about women in prison for which she had collaborated with prisoners.

Our collaboration enlarged and complicated the position of the victim. In *RELEASED*, the "victim" of documentary often makes victimization the subject of her testimony. She analyzes prison or documentary as pain-systems (rather than or alongside with her own personal suffering). Furthermore, she is often linked (visually, structurally, or through shared authorship) with

another, the “documentarian,” so that she is not left isolated and vulnerable. Sometimes, the documentarian is also seen (or heard) as she or he reveals feelings of discomfort, responsibility, distance, and friendship. A personal and political allegiance to another, and others like her, serves as a shield built upon conviction. This movement between stability and instability of position becomes both protective tactic and cautionary tale. For instance, “A Gram o’Pussy” is an account of Duran Ruiz’s experience of being the subject (classic victim) of a mainstream documentary, a *20/20* exposé on drugs and prostitution that went on to win an Emmy. “Pussy” is initiated by Carol Leigh’s voice-over as she explains that she had suggested to the *20/20* staff that her friend Duran might be a good subject for their documentary as she, too, “likes to be represented.” While Duran’s testimony about her victimhood in the initial representational experience is a significant part of their piece, as are selections from the *20/20* documentary recontextualized and now under their scrutiny, the video also highlights Carol’s quest to understand her culpability for Duran’s first (negative) documentary odyssey as well as Duran’s articulate critique of the punitive representational and prison systems. Duran and Carol explore Myerhoff’s “third voice,” as it is their (threatened) friendship—and the possibility of together crafting a better representation of Duran as artist and activist—that is their video’s “subject.” Fellow performers Duran and Carol realize an anti-victim video that focuses less on the victim than the victimization: observation’s role in the related arts of punishing and pleasure.

“Gram o’Pussy” is clearly about the perils and easy abuses of representation: the necessary consequences of the victim documentary and always possible end-results of collaboration as well. But so, for that matter, is “Making the Invisible Invincible.” Irwin Swirnoff begins his piece by asking, “How do you tell a story that is not completely yours?” He asks this in a double sense: How can he make art about another artist’s process? And how can she make art about an experience she has never had? “This is their story, not mine,” echoes Dunye, speaking about the fiction film she is

making. Dunye, like Swirnoff, is represented solely in voice-over in his women’s prison video that illustrates her ruminations about representing women and prison with his gritty super-8 black and white film footage of her feature film shoot of a women’s prison. The divide of authorship/subjecthood becomes as unclear as that of responsibility/blame: everyone is accountable. “Invincible” is multiply voiced, experimental in visual style, and reflexive in content so that it can make clear the unclear: the impossibility of knowing or showing another’s experience. Instead, Swirnoff displays the austere and repetitive architecture of the prison (set) while exposing the apparatus of the film machine that tries to capture it. We see massive lights, expensive cameras, and Dunye, as she molds and manipulates her actors’ bodies into the shapes she needs. The “subject” of this short is the complexity of representing prison, and while Dunye admits that what she knows about this experience comes primarily from “workshopping her script with women inmates,” she also suggests that as a black lesbian in American society, she shares something of the prison experience in its invisibility and politicized unrepresentability and in its status as a raced, classed, sexed, and gendered site. “Who’s going to give ourselves a voice but us?” she wonders at the end of the short, linking herself and her representational plight to that of all others—women inmates, too—held outside the parameters of what the mainstream deems acceptably visible. Dunye, like Swirnoff, uses her representational authority to stem the abuse of mis- and underrepresentation for “all stranger babies: those the society deems unacceptable, those the society disregards.” They seem to suggest that self-identified victims of social violence can join together—at times, through this affinity in representation—as long as we keep relative the cause and conditions of our personal suffering.

“Sheltered” and “Unyielding Conditioning” are also about violence—specifically the sanctioned offenses of sexism and the sexualized injustice it demands; poverty and the boredom, drug and alcohol addiction, and other forms of self-abuse it requires; and racism and its emotional and economic injury. More tradi-

tionally organized around talking-head testimonials of four ex-prisoners—Angela Davis, Claudia Timmin, Tracy Mostovoy, and Christine Ennis—these videos present the subject of their joint testimony as the identification and analysis of the larger social problems that lead to and explain women’s incarceration, occasionally amplified by their private experiences. “Unyielding Conditioning” is comprised of two visual elements: talking head interviews in color, and Mostovoy’s photographs of women prisoners in black and white. Women prisoners’ faces and words are its sole material. However, White and Miller shoot and edit the interviews with the visual style and rhythmic pacing of a music video. They cut abruptly and quickly from eye to hand to mouth; they blur in and out of focus. The effect undoes stability, access, and immediacy on the visual register. Meanwhile, the women’s words testify to the inseparable links between drugs, prison, and violence. The instability of this “unyielding condition,” and the viewer’s inability to access it through representation, are formally reaffirmed. Their testimony leads to only partial knowledge. These subjects are protected because we can never assume to know (and own) them, to transform them into objects or things.

“Sheltered” sanctions Ennis’s testimony about the links between (her) drug abuse and incarceration. Structured in part like a confession, the video presents Ennis explaining that not talking about this, and more specifically about her repeated rapes by a halfway house employee with HIV, “is keeping me sick.” Sexism—in its invisibility and inevitability—repeatedly determines her course, and the depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and incarceration that inevitably follow: from her first arrest for a crime that her boyfriend commits but for which she is jailed, to her first experience in prison, where leering male prisoners become punishers in the criminal justice system. Unlike more traditional talking-head testimonials, Blader inserts two highly personal registers of her own into Ennis’s private tale. Blader’s “art-video” visuals—haunting drive-bys of deserted, desolate rural and urban streets, train tracks leading to nowhere, boarded-up tenements with the doors kicked in—illustrate Ennis’s words as

Blader’s poetic voice-over returns as a refrain, making this their shared-and-private story of rural white middle-class boredom. Writes Lesage: “The narrative deep structure sets the filmmaker in a mutual, nonhierarchical relation with her subject (such filming is not seen as the male artist’s act of ‘seizing’ the subject and then presenting one’s ‘creation’) and indicates what she hopes her relation to her audience will be.”<sup>30</sup> Documentarians, friends, and artists, Blader and Ennis tell of a shared history that leads one girl directly to art, the other to drugs, prison, and then, this art. Again we are reminded to keep relative their distinct experiences of power and suffering while understanding how these images and world can be related.

*RELEASED* is certainly about women and prison: female ex-prisoners’ testimony, faces, and analysis are always its subject. But there are no images of prison. That is to say there are no documentary images of prison. We do see Dunye shooting a movie on a prison set. And images of prison are visible through the illustrations of the artist, Joe Saito, in “Breathe.” We go “inside” through his imagination alone. We watch his dialogue-free vision of a place of slightly, subtly permeable boundaries. An inmate’s dream of release opens his story and becomes literalized when a leaf—soft and tilting—enters into her cold, hard cell accompanied by a gentle laugh at video’s end. Breaking out of the cycle of objectification set in place when any victim testifies to her caged state, Saito undoes this restraint by relying on the face and words of no person—and no prison—in his contribution to *RELEASED*.

As we see, prison is not really visible in *RELEASED*, nor is its day-to-day life or totalizing structures. These images are too easily sensationalized and consumed; they are what we usually see, what we, nonprisoners, long for, when prison is represented. The violence of these images feeds on and creates victims. In *RELEASED*, we instead make apparent, through women’s voices speaking about prison, a formidable strain, a more general fatigue, and a wariness. Our video’s voices testify to drugs, sexism, racism, and alienation—all facilitate big business. But as they do so, they resist being reduced to prison, even as they describe what

happened to their bodies and minds in this place that (some) others can never know. They expose their once-imprisoned bodies through images and words to which they agree. Even so, the voices of *RELEASED*'s subjects are not fearful, are notably non-didactic, and are rarely pathetic. Instead these women present themselves as well-qualified judges of a systematic condition that they have experienced personally. So, in our video, the viewer or documentary is not set up to judge the victim. Rather, the victims judge the system(s). And they do so in collaboration with others who wish to know and seek to understand. Prison is the strain, fatigue, wariness, drugs, sexism, racism, alienation, and big business exposed in our subjects' words and faces.

"What is important is not the didactic pretensions that we possess the solutions, but the idiosyncratic ways in which works of art can bring out the real aspects of the human condition in particular and specific contexts or experiences," proposes Puerto Rican artist and political prisoner Escobar. "Art is, from this perspective, an encounter where we have the possibility for a symbolic, political, and real exchange."<sup>31</sup> *RELEASED* is most effective as a collaborative feminist documentary if it allows for a "real exchange" for its makers in the production process and its viewers during reception. The viewers and makers of *RELEASED* who have been or who are imprisoned share the need of release, of freedom—a decidedly human goal. They also need to dialogue with the never incarcerated about this. But *RELEASED*'s ultimate goal, as feminist video, is subjectivity: something no woman can take for granted, something that the imprisoned are denied with even greater violence than those on the outside.

If one is an object or its master, one escapes accountability; with collaborative subjecthood comes responsibility. With responsibility, there is both pleasure and pain. Our project does not suggest that the pain of prison is healed in its representation, or owned and controlled as it is viewed. It stays what and where it was—painful and violent, in and of the prison.

### The (Feminist, Video) Collaborative Circuit

A repressive, moralistic assertion that women's cinema is collective film-making is misleading and unnecessary. . . .

A collective film of itself cannot reflect the conditions of its production. What collective methods do provide is the real possibility of examining how cinema works and how we can best interrogate and demystify the workings of ideology: it will be from these insights that a genuinely revolutionary conception of counter-cinema for the women's struggle will come.

—Claire Johnson, "Women's Cinema As Counter Cinema"

What are the possibilities of response open to viewers? Is the audience expected to consume objectified images, or is there a possibility of dialogue and subjective response?

—Barbara Halpern Martineau, "Talking about Our Lives and Experiences"

How shall we decide whether what we have done—the knowledge we develop—is worthwhile? How shall we decide if what we say is true? . . . In terms of an emancipatory goal [we] might ask whether our findings contribute to the women's movement in some way.

—Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Johanna Esseveld, "Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research"

The authors cited here draw a feminist video circuit: from self-aware text to subject-audience to women's movement. My contribution speaks to the earliest phase in an exchange that might conclude with social change for women. I have discussed the way in which collaboration alters the process, and thus the content and form, of *RELEASED*. I conclude by considering how we might mark a relay that continues after a collaborative production process ceases with a completed video. To put this another way: feminist collaboration can be fully realized only when it creates feminist reception. For certainly collaboration, for any feminist documentary, multiplies when the video is used, in an effective way (with "intentionality"),<sup>32</sup> by the political movement with

which it links. As for *RELEASED*, it might relate to Ann Cvetkovich's observation that AIDS activist video "gathers and disseminates new information" as it also provides "analysis and critique of how representation and information are produced and attention to the form in which information is presented, not just its content."<sup>33</sup> But, as she and the authors above attest, for an activist video to really *work* it must say something new while also being heard, seen, and used newly by the movements and individuals to whom it speaks. "All good art offers lessons in how to see," suggests Lucy Lippard.<sup>34</sup> Grant Kester echoes this argument: "Within this outlook, the work of art is less a discrete object than it is a process of dialogue, exchange, and even collaboration that responds to the changing conditions and needs of both viewer and maker."<sup>35</sup>

The video camera, when used collectively, is a machine that can potentially contribute to the production of what Lesage hailed at this article's beginning as "physical, emotional, intellectual, and political selves," and to what I have called subjecthood and its associated responsibility. Can the monitor, the flip side of the video apparatus, facilitate a collective, subjectifying reception for viewers? Is there the possibility for collaboration to occur across this divide? Patty Zimmerman has written that this is the definitive feature of feminist collaborative video about abortion rights: whatever their form, "their relationship to spectators remains identical. They pose as redemptive. They rescue the spectator from ignorance or passivity."<sup>36</sup> For members of any movement, simply being addressed as a political person in a media landscape that constructs viewers as conservative, passive, and bored is an act toward subjectification. But for women, there must be something more: not simply what the piece says, or how it says it, but how it *feels*, how it *structures* its viewer and her reception as experiences of a subject. If it feels nonhierarchical, multicultural, feminist, or collective, could this create some of that feeling (not the object-feeling of victim documentary, but the subject feeling of collaboration) in the viewer? If a woman is hailed, and then views, as a subject, can she know (herself and the world) differently?

I have attempted here a description of (my) feminist, collective video production and product. Feminist media scholarship has also looked long and close at mainstream and avant-garde texts, and at the reception of dominant media as well. But thinking through the entire feminist circuit leads me to note that there is little writing about feminist reception (of feminist collective video). I am calling for nothing less than a phenomenology of feminist reception. I am well aware of a certain energy in the room after most screenings of *RELEASED* or of other collective videos; I am aware of engaged dialogue that follows. But I can only hope and not know how *RELEASED* might make you feel and know. So, instead, I shall end (and begin) with this: Adrian Piper writes that she makes art first to free herself, as a Third World woman, "in order not to feel trapped and powerless."<sup>37</sup> But her work is equally inspired by her viewer. Could we give words to a viewer's transformation that might occur between subjects, through art, across technology, but not through a natural mechanics of victimization or objectification? Piper tries:

My purpose is to transform the viewer psychologically, by presenting him or her with an unavoidable concrete reality that cuts through the defensive rationalizations by which we insulate ourselves against the facts of our political responsibility. I want viewers of my work to come away from it with the understanding that racism is not an abstract, distinct problem that affects all those poor, unfortunate other people out there. It begins between you and me, right here and now, in the indexical present. (290)

## Notes

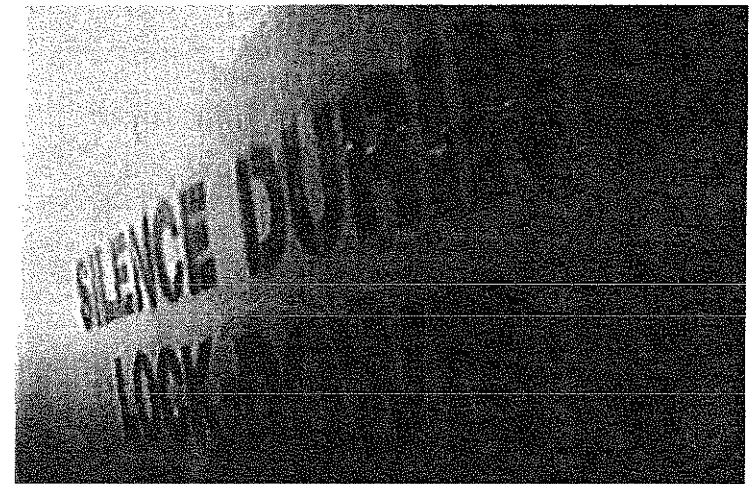
My thanks to Kathleen McHugh and Melinda Barlow for their close and thoughtful editing, comments, and support of this essay.

1. Feminist video also does autobiography very well. For writing on feminist autobiographical video, see my "Our Auto-Bodies, Ourselves: Representing Real Women in Feminist Video," *Afterimage* (February 1994): 10–14, and essays by Julia Lesage,

- Michelle Citron, and Michael Renov in *Feminism and Documentary*, ed. Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Feminist film has done theory very well, as enacted and historicized in this publication since its inception.
2. Waldman and Walker, introduction, *Feminism and Documentary*, 13.
  3. See, respectively, Frances Mascia-Lee, Patricia Sharpe, and Coleen Ballerino Cohen, "The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology," *Signs* 15.1 (1989): 22; Thomas Waugh, "Lesbian and Gay Documentary: Minority Self-Imaging, Oppositional Film Practice, and the Question of Image Ethics," in *Image Ethics*, ed. Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 253; Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994), 112; and Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), and *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
  4. Julia Lesage, "Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics," in *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1984), 222.
  5. The Feminists, "The Feminists: A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (NY: Quadrangle, 1973), 371. Capitalization in the original.
  6. Judith Malina, "The Work of Anarchist Theatre," in *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990), 44.
  7. Judith Stein, "Collaboration," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1994), 226.
  8. Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Johanna Esseveld, "Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research," in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship As Lived Research*, ed. Mary Fonow and Judith Cook (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 136.
  9. Lesage, "Feminist Documentary," 226.
  10. Waugh, "Lesbian and Gay Documentary," 250.
  11. Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: BFI, 1995), 45.
  12. Griersonian filmmaker Edgar Anstey, quoted in Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 44.
  13. See Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
  14. Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 20.
  15. Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool, "Paradigms Lost and Found: The 'Crisis of Representation' and Visual Anthropology," *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 116.
  16. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 112.
  17. Calvin Pryluck, "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 260.
  18. Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 46.
  19. Walker and Waldman, *Feminism and Documentary*, 15.
  20. Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 46.
  21. Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 112.
  22. Elizam Escobar, "Art of Liberation: A Vision of Freedom," in *Reimagining America*, 91.
  23. Martha Minnow, "Surviving Victim Talk," *UCLA Law Review* 40 (1993): 1415.
  24. Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 199.
  25. George Marcus, "The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scène of Anthropological Fieldwork," *Representations* 59 (summer 1997): 96.
  26. Mary Fonow and Judith Cook, "Back to the Future: A Look at the Second Wave of Feminist Epistemology and Methodology," in *Beyond Methodology*, 4.

27. Barbara Halpern Martineau, "Talking about our Lives and Experiences: Some Thoughts about Feminism, Documentary, and 'Talking Heads,'" in *Show Us Life*, 254.
28. Waugh, "Lesbian and Gay Documentary," 259.
29. Martineau, "Talking about our Lives and Experiences," 255.
30. Lesage, "Feminist Documentary," 280.
31. Escobar, "Art of Liberation," 89.
32. John Greyson, "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices," in *Reimagining America*, 63 and 72.
33. Ann Cvetkovich, "Video, AIDS, and Activism," in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant Kester (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 182–83.
34. Lucy Lippard, "Hanging Onto Baby, Heating Up the Bathwater," in *Reimagining America*, 234.
35. Grant Kester, "Ongoing Negotiations: *Afterimage* and the Analysis of Activist Art," in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality*, 15.
36. Patty Zimmerman, "Fetal Tissue: Reproductive Rights and Activist Video," in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality*, 250.
37. Adrian Piper, "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present," in *Reimagining America*, 290.

**Alexandra Juhasz** is professor of media studies at Pitzer College. She makes and writes about committed media. She is the author/editor of *AIDS TV* (1995), *Women of Vision* (2000), and with Jesse Lerner, *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary Theory and Practice* (forthcoming). She has produced over fifteen activist videos, including the feature documentaries *Dear Gabe* and *Women of Vision* and the feature film *The Watermelon Woman*.



Still from *RELEASED*