from an interrogation of the artists' own investment in them and in the underlying ideologies they manifest.

—Christine

tion, of history, of fiction and truths. I mean it to be a zone of images and sounds that nobody will want to fast forward.

—Helen

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Camcorder Politics

by Alexandra Juhasz

"Tell me about your mother/sister/daughter," her voice queries. Images of her daughters, sisters, mother answer back, their black faces etched with similar family features: "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 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 mike mixed her words harmoniously with the ocean's 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.

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Sharon and I were members of a unique "video-support" group called The Women's AIDS Video Enterprise (WAVE). We met every Saturday for six months, along with five other participants, with the ultimate goal of producing an educational videotape for the communities from which we come. In the meantime, we got to know each other, to learn about AIDS, to discuss AIDS' impact on our lives and our communities, and to learn how to think critically about media. This process was rewarding, if not easy, for our backgrounds are both challengingly dissimilar and surprisingly the same. We are black, Latino and white. We are without a high school degree, with a college education, working towards a PhD. We have husbands, siblings, nieces, aunts, friends who are HIV positive or who have AIDS; some of us may be HIV positive ourselves. We are all women. We were all concerned enough about the toll of AIDS upon our lives that we were motivated to do something, and that something was to make a culturally sensitive video about the things we know about AIDS: **We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS.**

WAVE took several years to fund into action. It fell through the cracks of funding compartmentalization: neither strictly art nor therapy, activism nor education.* Yet, as a videomaker and graduate student who had made several tapes about women's issues and AIDS, the project made a great deal of sense to me. I needed to move beyond telling women's stories "for them."

I understand the kinds of risks women take when they speak about their HIV status publicly. The media has never been kind or sensitive to low-income women of color (whatever their health), and alternative media practitioners come to such communities with this legacy before them. Furthermore, beyond the discrimination that anyone is likely to face after disclosing sero-positivity, women are quite likely to have children for whom their fear of discrimination is paramount. Secondly, as a white, highly educated videomaker, I was, in my earlier projects, even with my own relationship to the AIDS crisis, still an outsider, asking women different from myself to illuminate devastating and personal experiences for my camera. In this project, as member of a long-term support group, I became a member of this small community. Finally, I know that the most effective AIDS education comes from the specific communities to which it is targeted. Renee Sabatier explains:

> 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. [1]

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Glenda has piles of snapshots of herself and her loved ones which she shuffled and organized endlessly, preparing to shoot: five fluffy, 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, filled the frame with her chosen images.

She then interviewed her co-workers at The Brooklyn AIDS Task Force (Glenda works for them as an AIDS educator). "How do you see me?" she asks. In her self-portrait Glenda edits their comments about her in succession. The portrait begins with the song "Lean on Me" illustrated by her image in a photograph. It ends with the blurred and lilting images her mother took of her after getting a brief lesson in camcorder operations from Glenda.

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The first hour of our weekly meeting was usually devoted to "the support group." Marcia, a social worker and group member, led this part of the meeting. One week we discussed sexism in the work place for the full three hours of our meeting. Another session was devoted to a discussion of racism — four of the women in the group are black, two are Latina, and I am white. 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 the private and difficult issues which are raised for us as people confronting 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 becoming very comfortable having the camera around, and talking about these things out loud to equip us for the very intimate interviews we gave.

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For her self-portrait, I shot Aida lounging on a white sofa in her two bedroom apartment in Bensonhurst. She wore no make-up, hadn't done her hair, and chose to be taped in a hot July evening's loose tee-shirt. For a good forty-five minutes — interrupted only by a quick check at 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 young, single mother who left home at sixteen, Aida has gone through a lot. It's only recently, she informs me, that she 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."

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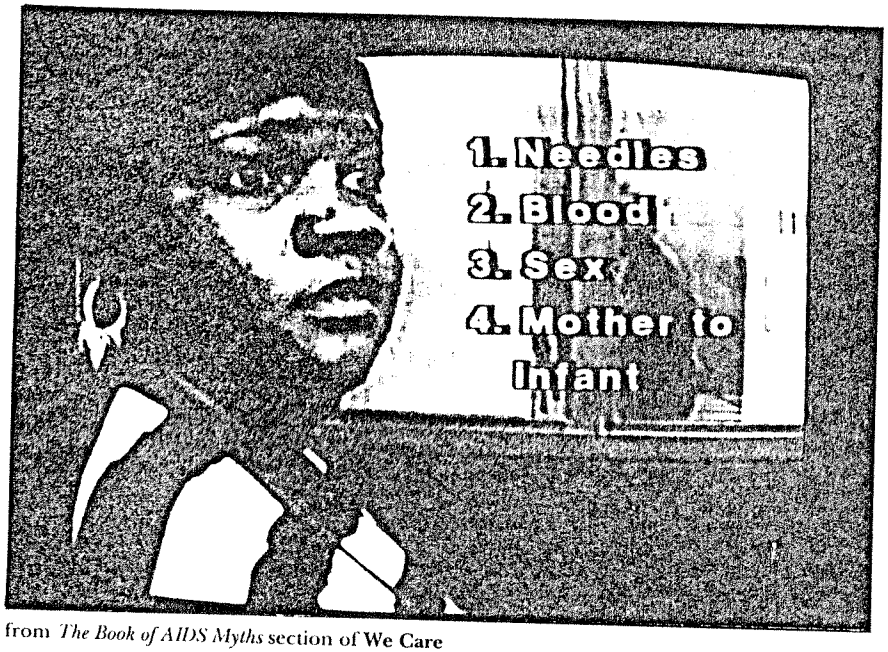
The last two hours of our weekly meetings, under my supervision, were dedicated to video education: both how to use our camera, microphone and lights, and how to think about AIDS media critically. We watched many tapes about AIDS and videotaped ourselves discussing these tapes' value, shortcomings, assumptions, targeted audiences, stereotypes, formal strategies. We had varied visitors to the group who discussed theories of representation, their own alternative AIDS media, or the factual information we needed to know about AIDS. We taped these presentations, continually 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 and 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

*WAVE is funded by grants from The New York Council for the Humanities, The Astraea Fund for Women, ArtMatters, Women Make Movies, and is sponsored by The Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, Media Network and Downtown Community Television.



from *The Book of AIDS Myths* section of **We Care**

mother corrects them; our own conversations; our building and its surroundings; interviews on the street; public presentations our members made; and the Gay Men's Health Crisis' AIDS Walk.

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Juanita went to the School of Visual Art in New York City for a year, many years ago. Her self-portrait documents many aspects of herself, including her long love of film, literature and poetry. As her voice reads one of her poems ("Misery Dane," the poem's title is also her pseudonym), images of herself, her home, family, political concerns and literary devotions pop in and out with stop-action technology. Husband, daughter and son, posed on a couch, shift position, form new couplings at her whim. "Things appear, things disappear," she says. But mostly her self-portrait concentrates on her own image as she changes, quickly and repeatedly, using costumes, glasses, wigs and 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."

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Marcia's self-portrait similarly raises questions of aesthetics and politics. Days before we shot, she made a collage of magazine images, hand-printed words, a pair of earrings, the cut-out names of black women authors, the initials of her loved ones. These items she glued or printed upon a rectangle of white tag-board. Glenda panned the camera closely 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.

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The documentation of the life of one black woman — "MSW" tells her degree, "JR" identifies her boyfriend, her name in big, black letters holds the center of the white field, "MARCIA" — is both beautifully personal and desperately political. In a culture where the privilege of self-expression and its public articulation is equally dependent upon financial and social privilege, the voice of each black woman describing herself, her life, her work, her needs, especially in media, is political. Alile Sharon Larkin in her article about black women filmmakers concludes:

> As independent Black women film-makers, we actively create new definitions of ourselves within every genre, redefining damaging stereotypes. As we examine the films of Black women we find rooted and aware characters who live in the real world. We create with the understanding that our humanity is not a given in this society. A primary struggle in our work is to recapture our humanity. And so it is a vicious cycle. We hope that with our films we can help create a new world, by speaking in our voice and defining ourselves. We hope to do this, one film at a time, one screening at a time, to change minds, widen perspectives and destroy the fear of difference.[2]

This is not to say that all 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 apolitical, uninterested in politics' disruption and anger, seeking instead a stable comfort and local improvement. If anything, the political dis-ease of the postmodern condition hits hardest the already culturally disenfranchised, for they do understand the inaccessibility and inapplicability of mega-politics and multi-national corporations. But, although few us wish to carry signs or picket, we do want to speak and we have much to say. We watch T.V. and we read the papers and we know that our stories are not being told. We note bias and distortion, prejudice and stereotyping. We know that a black woman is 13 times more likely to have AIDS than her white counterpart, and that a Latina is nine times more likely.[3] We know that AIDS is political. Give us a camcorder, and this is what we say.

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Carmen didn't have the chance to produce her self-portrait. Her husband

hadn't been feeling well, and she decided her Saturdays were better spent with him and her daughters. We told her to come back when things became easier at home.

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And for me? In my self-portrait the camera allowed me to obsess over my body. Ironically enough, most of my fellow self-portraitists cast themselves out of the picture: as voice-over, photograph, other's description. But, if this would have suited me in earlier times, today I cannot help but be obsessed with images of my own body, what with this virus ever on the periphery 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.

This return to — and at the same time renunciation of my body — recalls for me the long work of feminism. I am forced to remember that as a woman I am ever bound to battle along the front of my body: whether it is because of HIV or unwanted pregnancy. But even as I was uncertain about the reaction to my words, my AIDS, as I recorded my poem and my skin, I wondered if my feminism is just as tenable for the other participants in the group. As group leader there were some things I wanted to "teach," and others I thought appropriate only to say.

The power relations of this project were complicated — who tells for whom? But the response to this is most definitely not paralysis but discussion. For when we talked we learned things about our similarities and differences and about the numerous deployments of "power" throughout the group. Some of the members of the group have more money than I do, and some less; many of the group have suffered the losses of AIDS more than I have, while others have lost less. And if I have more words to contribute about critical theory and media production, the others quickly respond: "yes, but..." or "no, instead..." Certainly, the final video has moments of my "taste," my preoccupations. But it looks little like anything else I've produced because other's tastes and preoccupations have melded with my own.

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We Care begins with a poem by the same name by our in-house poet, Misery. She wrote it for an AIDS awareness day sponsored by the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force which our group documented for the agency. When we were all sitting in the editing room deciding if we wanted music in our tape, and what kind, someone remembered the poem. We re-recorded 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 body: We care for people, people with AIDS. Why do we care you might ask. 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.

We decided to make a tape for care providers for two reasons. First, we knew from experience that there were very few resources for this ever-expanding population of AIDS sufferers. Second, this was the one relationship to AIDS we all shared and something about which we all had experience, insight, advice. We sat down one afternoon and wrote down all the things we thought a person would need to know if that person had just found out that someone he or she knew was HIV positive or had AIDS, and was not yet connected to the "AIDS community." Those suggestions organized the tape, which strings together six lengthy interviews. Juanita gives advise to volunteers; Glenda and Sharon explain available services; Marcia discusses issues around death and dying; a doctor is interviewed to give her opinions; a friend of Sharon's, Marie, who is a fifty year old HIV positive black woman, gives a guided tour of her apartment. The speaker often introduces herself to the camera and the audience, explaining what she will say, and then says it.

To counter the rhythm and seriousness of these segments we constructed six "Myth" breaks, which work to dispel dangerous myths about AIDS while adding a lighter, faster, and more "polished" look to the tape. These sequences begin with a hand opening a book entitled *The Book of AIDS Myths.* The misinformed words of on-the-street interviewees (or us, pretending to speak these words) are what you see and hear on the book's "first page." The footage is continuously identified as myth by a big red "X" or a flashing "myth" sign. Then the incorrect statement is wiped off the screen: "You can get AIDS by drinking out of the same glass as them..." Another response wipes on, spoken by other on-the-street interviewees, or members of our group. An interview with Carmen and her husband Willy is often highlighted in these sections: "You get it from the blood, or sex," says Carmen. Then the book slams shut, but now reading *The Book of AIDS Facts.*

Mostly the tape speaks the voices of people who are living with this crisis: calm if sad, but also strong, loving and unafraid. For people who are not yet living with this disease, this is strong testimony to both AIDS' centrality in the lives of many communities and sadly but importantly, its normalcy. For people who are living with the epidemic the voices are reassuring and stable; they identify a community.

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When I watch the tape I know to whom it will speak, and wonder to whom it won't. On its own terms WAVE succeeded: **We Care** is a community-produced, community-specific video that speaks, loudly and lovingly, to people who are similar to those who made it. Will people outside this community (low and middle-income urban communities of color) be equally moved, educated, entertained by **We Care**? Will artists and media makers be as interested in the process as I am? Will cultural outsiders be intrigued by this access to a community other than their own? These kinds of questions that

audiences will answer bring me to the final aspect of the project.

One third of the total budget of this project is devoted to its distribution and exhibition. Besides twenty screenings we will make for our neighbors, co-workers, churches and agencies which serve the population we are targeting, we will make one hundred dubs of the tape to distribute free of charge.* Work like ours is as much about its being seen as it is about its making. Our work is first and foremost about communication: first among ourselves, then to our local community, and finally to anyone else who will listen.

**for more information, contact Alexandra Juhasz at (212)477-4768, or Glenda Smith at (718)596-4781*

Footnotes

[1]Renee Sabatier, *Blaming Others: Prejudice, Race and Worldwide AIDS* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988), p. 123.
[2]Alile Sharon Larkin "Black Women Filmmakers Defining Ourselves: Feminism in Our Own Voice," *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribaum (London: Verso, 1988), p. 172.
[3]Panos Dossier, *AIDS and the Third World* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989), p. 41.

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Cecelia Dougherty/**Grapefruit**

by Valerie Soe

The Beatles exist in late-twentieth-century culture as emblems, familiar and significant to a broad spectrum of devotees. They originally captivated their audience with a combination of canny marketing, timing, talent and good looks, but were eventually elevated to the status of pop icons, as recognizable and as pervasive as Mao. The four individual human beings who comprised the musical group gradually mattered less and less in the mythic whirlygig that The Beatles became, effortlessly transformed into symbols through which passed late 1960s pop culture mythology. Consequently, fictionalized accounts of The Beatles' story have always been especially limp, trying to realistically recapture what had already been perfectly forged in the eye of their beholders. Only the various screen biographies of Marilyn Monroe and Jesus Christ are comparably ineffectual in attempting to depict the elusive appeal of their respective subjects.

Latter-day renderings of The Beatles' tale ignore a basic element in the widespread appeal of legend and myth. Although based in factual events, the most enduring legends have a flexibility and ambiguity about them which the reader/viewer interprets to his or her liking. Most attempts to recreate The Beatles' day-to-day existence mistakenly assume that facts and events are the key to the appeal of any mythic figures. This misconception manifests itself most notably in the inordinate amount of significance placed on casting actors who physically resemble the original Fab Four, and on duplicating most faithfully the details and chronology of events in their ascent to godhead status.

Because it discounts the importance of reproducing facts and mimicking physical attributes when recounting myths, Cecilia Dougherty's **Grapefruit** (1989) has the ring of truth to its interpretation of The Beatles' saga. This is so despite the fact that not only Yoko Ono but all four Beatles are portrayed by female performers. This throws the entire resemblance issue out the window, a tactic which allows the piece to work on a more interpretive level. Dougherty uses The Beatles to examine the manipulation of these elusive qualities, and the significance of myth and relative reality to various observers.

Dougherty recognizes that approximating reality is inconsequential in depicting a mythos so ingrained in the collective unconsciousness. The characters' anachronistic costumes, such as Yoko's black plastic digital watch

Cinematograph

volume 4