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WAVE in the Media Environment: Camcorder Activism and the Making of *HIV TV* Alexandra Juhasz

Camcorders have brought television production
to the neighborhoods: the playgrounds and gar-
ages, the town councils and the local dumps.

Dee Dee Halleck¹

The camcorder offers a practical response to the theoretical dead ends of ethnography and multiculturalism. Ethnography is most typically an unreciprocated will to know some disempowered "other," while multiculturalism, according to independent media producer Ada Gay Griffin, often belies "the diversity of the self-determined points of view of the disempowered."² With a camcorder marginal communities are able to represent themselves cheaply and easily. People can take this camera to where they live, where they protest, where they get HIV counseling: playgrounds, local dumps, Woodhull Hospital in Brooklyn. Then they show their images right back to the people they recorded and to their friends. In contrast to the typical uses of broadcast technology, such images are made by and for local, opinionated, individuals and communities. As Jean Carlomusto, the producer of The Gay Men's Health Crisis' weekly cable show, *Living With AIDS*, explains, "activist television such as *Living With AIDS* doesn't speak to a 'general public' that is presumed to be white, heterosexual, middle-class male. Activist television doesn't homogenize material; it speaks to specifically affected populations."³ The most pressing issues of our era—including AIDS, war, police brutality, reproductive rights, homelessness, the environment, the identity politics of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and class—are being documented by people from within affected communities, for spectators who share all kinds of self-identified difference with the makers. Such projects emphasize the "self-determination of the disempowered," documenting the experiences and needs of the disenfranchised because *they* want them to be imaged.

The camcorder is not a new imaging technology that differs remarkably from the other forms of video that preceded it, but it produces images for little money, and with little technical know-how. Camcorders

are lightweight and relatively inexpensive, they have controls no more complex than a VCR, and shoot on 1/2" tapes that can be screened immediately in people's homes. The most profound impact of this new technology lies in its social and political potential: people can make media who never could before. In his address at a conference on independent media, Marlon Riggs confirms the mainstream media's power to silence:

the media systematically balanced and checked, all right—or more accurately, squelched and negated—voices and visions like mine which threatened society's established Voices of Authority—those smooth, polished "broadcast quality" voices (in media, law, government, science, business, advertising) which privileged, without the slightest twinge of self-consciousness, or self-interrogation a construct of America—of American Power and Authority—that was rigidly, monolithically, white, male, and unquestionably heterosexual.⁴

By taping and then playing back their own images and events on camcorders and VCRs, individuals and organizations that are rarely pictured by the video cameras of the mainstream media can see themselves in what appears to be a dominant form.⁵ It turns people on to see images of themselves where they usually see Tom Brokaw, Murphy Brown or Bart Simpson. Furthermore, imaging issues for yourself addresses profound educational and political needs. As DiAna DiAna, a beautician and AIDS activist writes, "people must understand that when you can't talk about sex and you can't use the 'condom word' on TV, it is really difficult to educate people."⁶ Thus, DiAna, founder of the South Carolina AIDS Education Network and the star of the camcorder production *DiAna's Hair Ego*, engages in camcorder television production to educate others. Under-imaged and marginal communities, like AIDS activists in South Carolina, can now contradict, expand upon, and analyze their ongoing engagement with mainstream media by using the same technology in a new way: to report for and to themselves about their issues, needs, and concerns. Ellen Spiro, producer of *DiAna's Hair Ego*, proclaims in her *CAMCORDIST'S MANIFESTO*:

camcorder footage contributes to a broader analysis of an event by offering an alternative to broadcast media's centrist view. It has the power to add a dimension to the chorus of voices heard, providing a platform for seasoned activists and concerned community members, rather than the same old authoritative experts giving their same old scripted rags.⁷

This new political practice of camcorder activism encompasses a

range of effective educational, organizing, and artistic work. Much of the discourse about this new visualization technology by producers like Spiro, DiAna, and myself, shows the zeal that often accompanies the introduction of a new tool for artistic production. In this essay, however, I would like to use my experiences with camcorder activism as a cautionary reminder about the many conditions that enforce and maintain oppression, even in the face of the seeming utopianism of media production. 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. Camcorder access means little if a person is too over-worked, sick, or self-doubting to pick the camera up and shoot. Disempowered people in our society are silenced as much through complex systems of oppression, including poverty, racism, homophobia, sexism, and poor education, as through lack of access to tools of cultural production. For me—a white, upper middle-class, educated woman—the camcorder is liberating because it means that I can produce political and educational video, which is becoming increasingly more difficult to fund, for a fraction of the cost of a 3/4" project. The camcorder makes it easier for me to continue teaching other women to become mediamakers, but I must be especially conscious that other women (and sometimes men) who share my excitement about the power of video come to media production with different needs and constraints. My work with an HIV video support group illuminates the complex and sensitive conditions surrounding camcorder education and production.

The decision to take action through video production and analysis is not uncommon to the AIDS crisis. The advent and distribution of the camcorder coincided with the inception of AIDS activism. The ability to represent marginal or oppositional positions inexpensively with media technology worked in tandem with a movement rooted in a politics of representation. Like the women's movement before it, AIDS activism often organizes around the critical relationship between lived experience and signification: whether this is in ACT UP's "postmodern" attention to discourse (their "Silence = Death" slogan, the focus on terminology, or their success at organizing demonstrations for cameras), or in the production of language or culturally specific AIDS educational materials, for instance in Spanish, Haitian-Creole, or comic book form. In her article "Video, AIDS, and Activism," Ann Cvetcovich underscores the significance of what Douglas Crimp has called the "cultural activism" within the AIDS movement. She writes: "In its simplest sense 'cultural activism' refers to the work of gathering and disseminating information—in this case to draw attention to the inadequacies of government and medical policies and to educate people

about the prevention and treatment of AIDS.”⁸ There have been hundreds of alternative videotapes produced for these purposes in the past ten years in a variety of forms that include cable access talk shows, documents of performances addressing AIDS, documentary portraits of PWAs, experimental works deconstructing mass media representation of AIDS, educational tapes, and activist tapes.⁹ Such tapes have active and ongoing distribution, showing to the many and diverse people who are affected by AIDS.

In November and December of 1990 I ran a video support group for HIV-positive men and women at Woodhull Hospital in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. The group produced the videotape *HIV TV*, a compilation of footage that expressed their experiences with, and opinions about, HIV infection. This video support group was modeled on a project I had organized and completed during the previous year: the Women’s AIDS Video Enterprise. WAVE was an attempt to facilitate AIDS educational media production by and for people from communities that are disproportionately affected by the epidemic. In the first WAVE project, a group of six black and Latina women from Brooklyn (and myself, a white woman from Manhattan) were recruited by the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force (BATF), a community AIDS service provider, to participate in a six-month project in which video production education would be combined with an AIDS support group. Over the course of our twenty-two three-hour meetings we discussed how AIDS affected our lives, we learned how to use video production equipment, and we analyzed the (mis)representation of the issues most important to us in the mainstream and alternative media. The project took account of the economic difficulties of the women’s lives by paying them for their time, as well as providing funds for child care, car fare, and other expenses. We produced three videotapes—*WAVE: Self Portraits*; *We Care: A Video For Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*; and *A WAVE Taster*. *We Care* was then distributed to nearly one thousand community service organizations and other cultural institutions interested in AIDS, and it was exhibited by members of the group at nearly one hundred community organization meetings. The results of this project seemed to confirm the power of camcorder activism: we had produced a much-needed and much-used tape, we all learned and grew from the experience, and people left the group with skills and ideas that have continued beyond the project.

After the success of the WAVE group, I was hopeful that similar projects could be organized to narrowcast to other under-represented communities confronting HIV.¹⁰ AIDS educators at BATF who had helped conceive of the project, and had followed WAVE’s progress, were excited to try it again. The agency recently had received a grant

from the Department of Health (DOH) to run small support groups in underserved neighborhoods in Brooklyn. The woman who was administering this grant thought that 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 (a member of the first WAVE project) was facilitating a very 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 was starting on a third because the participants in the group refused to let it conclude. The group members were devoted to Sharon and very committed to each other. For many of them, it was not only the first place where they had an opportunity to learn about and discuss their feelings about HIV, 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 be the group leader.

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 were almost entirely different from those with the first group even though I attempted to follow the same model. Perhaps this was because the participants were very different people from the women who made up WAVE. The four participants in the second group—three New-Yorican men (New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent) and an African-American woman—were more socially and economically disenfranchised than the women in the first group, and all were HIV-positive. Only one worked, and this through a special government program for PWAs that provided job training and employment in television repair. One of the group members 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 (also inspired by the HIV support group). The fourth member of the group lived at Woodhull Hospital; this was preferable to homelessness, but little else. All of the participants in the group had been or still were intravenous drug users, several had prostituted for drugs or money, and one had spent time in jail.

My two video projects were based on the assumption that the best AIDS education comes from the communities to which it will be addressed: urban women of color; and poor, HIV-positive, urban, men

and women of color. Because these communities are economically and/or culturally disenfranchised, many of my organizational strategies were indebted to the questions raised originally by the theories and practices of ethnographic film. What are the implications of taking a camera into a community or culture that is different from one's own? Are there ways to produce videos cross-culturally that responsibly take account of power imbalances? How can I be self-conscious about my privilege in the face of Alvin's or Kathy's life experience, and still produce a work collectively?

The colonial origins of anthropology¹¹ have fueled a great deal of critical thinking and production that attempts to reconceptualize and redefine the power relations of ethnographic representation. For example, in his 1975 article "Beyond Observational Cinema," David MacDougall calls for an ethnographic film practice that is "a process of collaboration—the filmmaker combining the skills and sensibilities of the subjects with his [sic] own. This requires that they and he, whatever their differences, be moved by at least some common sense of urgency."¹² In the early eighties, MacDougall and his wife, Judith MacDougall, produced a number of films in Australia for Aboriginal communities who requested that their rituals or political activism be documented. But it was the coming of the camcorder that actually brought MacDougall's theories to their most complete fruition. In fourth world communities as diverse as the Aborigines in Australia and the Kayapo in Brazil, anthropologists and other cultural workers have been teaching indigenous people how to make their own media. My project, teaching video production skills within an HIV video support group, was indebted to this vision of ethnographic representation.

Although teaching the "objects" of ethnographic film to become its collaborating "subjects" is an important step towards altering the power relations inherent in cross-cultural representation, it raises another set of concerns. What are the dynamics of power between teacher and student, between the provider of equipment and training and the recipient, especially when this is coupled with race and/or class difference? One of the aims of the WAVE project was to alter the power relations of the typical ethnographic media interaction, to break away from the model in which the (usually white) outsider/filmmaker enters a community, shoots, and then leaves with images in hand. The support group allowed a place where a new, temporary community could be formed from which to produce. Our gender and mutual participation in an AIDS support group gave us a sense of community. Because everyone in the group was both potential interviewer and interviewee, people did not necessarily take up their conventional roles in relation

to the camera. We all taped and were taped. The choice about who was seen, and who saw, was not determined primarily by race or class difference but by our particular areas of interest and expertise. Juanita shot interviews of her friends and coworkers, Sharon and I shot on-the-street interviews at her boyfriend's apartment complex in the Rockaways, and Marcia spoke about death and dying. In this project, where I worked collaboratively to produce video with people who are of different race, class, educational background, or HIV status from myself (and each other), I relied upon two conceptual frameworks to attempt to think and work this through responsibly.

First, I acknowledged the value of many of the skills and powers that I have (technical production skills, owning my own basic camcorder rig, and most importantly, my ability to raise funds), and decided that I would rather use them toward creating media that I believe is vitally important (and lacking). Quite often, the response to taking account of privilege in the face of others' disadvantage has been a liberal paralysis. Sadly, this means that work does not get done for want of funding or lack of skills, but it also has a more dangerous ramification. Independent videomaker Annie Goldson explains how working on the series of tapes she co-produced, *Counterterror*, 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.¹³

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: "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."¹⁴ Thus, I organized WAVE in an attempt to take responsibility for the legacy of white involvement with otherness. 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 this history 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 rela-

142 tions to each other, our similarities and differences. We discussed how the mainstream media typically (mis)represents the lives and concerns of poor people, women, people of color, and PWAs, and then we devised strategies to do this differently in our own production process. Allowing ourselves, and people like ourselves, to be the "experts" of the tape was one such strategy. Life experience, rather than academic degrees, qualified people to speak out in our tape. We chose to produce our tape for urban people of color; all the interviews, locations, and issues came from these communities. In distribution, this focus on community specificity continued. The members of the group were paid to organize their own screenings. While I took the tape to New York University and the Donnell Library Media Center, Aida took it to Manhattan Community College, and Juanita showed it at her Union Meeting Hall.

I also structured the project with some of the failures of earlier, similar projects in mind. MacDougall explains: "Involvement with one's subject can become a kind of pose—the fleeting recognition of the film crew which gives a sense of candor but really reveals nothing. For a film to gain meaning from the breakdown of old narrative conventions, that recognition must develop into a genuine conversation."¹⁵ Placing media production into a support group setting was an attempt to address the complexity for people (especially women) of putting into language, and then into the public forum of media, the private and difficult issues involved with AIDS. Unlike when I was teaching the video production component of the project, the support group facet of our weekly meetings provided a space during production where I was vulnerable and an equal in conversation. The long-term nature of the project responded to people's distrust of both the institution of the media, and the white-outsider-with-a-project. It takes time to develop trust and productive working relations; it takes time to learn how to think about and make media with confidence.

Another conceptual framework that helped to make sense of my role as an outsider initiating a project was an understanding of the complexity of community. While the initial WAVE project was composed of a diverse group of women, we did share (at least) three things in common: our dedication to AIDS crisis intervention, our commitment to intervention through video production, and our gender. We were a self-selected community, united by a valid, if temporary, allegiance. Making a video is a form of community-building: the crossing of conventional boundaries like those of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual preference so as to locate and identify the *similarities* from which to produce as a collective. Indu Krishnan, videomaker, writes: "What is this 'community' or audience to which my work is addressed?

I would describe it as those individuals bound together by the issues of racism, politics, cultural continuity, familial ties, gender roles, and the concept of self. It is a community of spirit. A community not limited to Asian Indians alone."¹⁶ In the same vein, I believe that communities of producers can be formed through similarities of beliefs and politics, through shared "spirit." The WAVE project, and the later HIV video support group, were two communities formed around video and AIDS. Of course, real differences remained. In the case of the WAVE project, we learned and fed from these differences, compared notes, understood our individual experiences with AIDS in light of those of the others. For the second project however, these differences interfered with production in significant ways. This occurred because many of the organizational structures and conceptual frameworks that I have just discussed broke down. In the second project, for a variety of reasons that I will explain, I did not provide adequate money, time, space, or skills so that this group could form a new community from which to produce.

Perhaps most significantly, we decided to do this video support group with little money. Whereas for the first project I had come to BATF with New York State Council for the Humanities funds in hand, in this case, I was using only the funds available to BATF. The ball was rolling; to have had to stop and raise funds would have slowed our energy and enthusiasm. But BATF's grant from the DOH covered only the group leader'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, pay for the participants) would have to be dropped, or covered by juggling the small reserves of BATF's budget. We figured out that 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' subwayfare to the meetings) would have to go. We decided that the positive effects of running such a group at all (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 luxurious and ideal fashion of the first group. It did not make sense to wait the two years it would take to get a grant to run another group. There were people ready and waiting to make a video about AIDS, there was an agency and staff 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 this does not take into account the other expenses that give integrity to a project and its participants. 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 lesson to swallow because those people who most need to produce media at minimal cost are those most in need of funding for "the extras": these are people who cannot afford to volunteer, to become one of Bush's "thousand points of light."

Time was the second element in short supply for the second group. 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 scope of our project. Instead of viewing and discussing ten television shows and videos about AIDS, this group would see only two or three. Instead of doing many preparatory projects before producing a final tape, this group would do only a few. And while the first group understood that they would be producing an important tape in response to the present body of AIDS media, the aspirations of the second group were not as high. They never believed that they would produce a tape that people they did not know might care to watch. Instead, the participants would have a compilation of the work we produced to take home and show their friends and family; the time commitment would be small, the editing costs minimal.

These decisions were important. There was no way we could have asked for a six-month commitment from this group, as I had done from the first. These were people who had no idea where they would be in six months, if they would be alive, 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 these participants' 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 this 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 work 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 under-represented 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). We would have to ask busy, distracted security guards to let us in, who would then need to call some other bureaucrat to get permission. Our meetings were often interrupted by unapologetic doctors wanting to use a Xerox machine stored in the room in which we met. 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 in the group 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 their space, but with generosity like this, who needs enemies?

It is important not to undervalue the positive effects that the project did have on its participants. The members of the second group were extremely excited about and committed to the project. They attended meetings religiously. Yet their understanding of the project, and my presentation of it, were very different from that of 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 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 very brief period of time (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 themselves effectively through video production? In this group it only made sense then (and was, unfortunately, the most comfortable arrangement) for me to be the teacher, the giver, and for the participants to be the learners, the takers. These people are quite used to outsiders like me (social workers, clergy, the medical profession) coming into their lives ostensibly to give them something for free. They are grateful but wary. They are all too aware of their loss of control and autonomy in this power relation. I also maintained a sense of wariness. I felt that the members of this group were very needy, that they would take as much from me as they could, without giving much back. Since we did not have the time to get to know each other well, already operating systems of social positioning were not challenged. I realize now that taking on a 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 prior assumptions to be invalid or incomplete. The lack of money and time worked to reinforce 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 discussing the second group, it is most usually "they" and "I."

Because of this, 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 important to its *possibility*. The second group recorded interviews, roleplays, 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 that I suggested. There was neither the time in the group meetings, nor the commitment outside them, to plan things in advance. The footage was more loose, more raw, and often more powerful than that shot by WAVE. The meetings had a similar feel. I learned early that this was not a group that responded well to preplanning. Sessions ran better when things felt slightly haphazard. I would come in, we would shmooze, 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 met last. Sometimes they had, sometimes they had not.

This explains, in part, how we finally determined our last project. When we brainstormed, my ideas were given more weight. I suggested

that we pull together the footage that we had already shot using the concept of one evening of programming on a TV channel. This was unanimously accepted. Even though I said that this was our project, 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 cheap and generous editing facilities with which I have working relations are in Manhattan, but the participants were from Brooklyn. Thus, I edited our footage together in the loose pattern we had determined in the meeting on the Thursday before: the roleplays became a "soap opera," scripted discussions about using condoms and dental dams became "commercials," the talk show-like 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 roleplays reveal the pain and difficulty of the speakers' lives. There are moments when 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 trips over both the words for dental dam and clitoris, and must be prompted by those of us off camera. But there are other moments when the speakers' ability to say something about AIDS or their own experiences is profound, exact, and powerful. For example, Alvin talks about his experience of being HIV-positive while in jail. Kathy talks about her recovery from drug addiction. And, the roleplay that becomes the soap opera, "Living . . ." chronicles two gay, Hispanic men who meet in a hospital waiting room while both are waiting to hear the results of their HIV tests. After each consults with a doctor, both 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 primary foundation for 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

148 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 very significant community of people affected by AIDS. Clearly, making it, and now owning it, is 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 this is all the tape can do, this is enough. *HIV TV* is useful to many people just as it is: people working with HIV-positive urban, poor, people of color, people from those communities themselves.

The production of *HIV TV* demonstrates the unique and complex play of elements that are required to do community-based media well. The WAVE project was successful because of a fortuitous and planned conjoining of talented, committed, intelligent producers, with sufficient funds, time, and attention for them to feel empowered and educated enough to produce. This allowed both goals and process 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 that there are other blocks to media production than 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 also continue to be real as well. Furthermore, in the present climate, it only becomes more difficult to raise adequate funding for 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 and careful 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 many other conditions. The politics of community-produced video extend beyond its positive effects on individuals and communities. If we are to fully gain from the promise of this new imaging technology, we must acquire a more conventional understand-

ing of politics that moves beyond critiques of representation to the work needed to end the conditions that keep people down in the first place.

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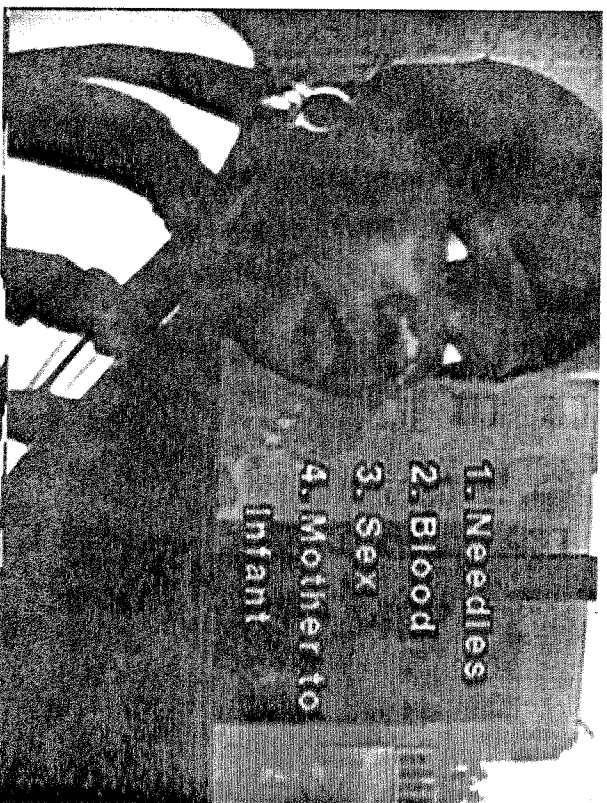
NOTES

1. Dee Dee Halleck, "Plunk Your Magic Twanger Yourself," *FELIX* 1:1 (Spring 1991): 26.
2. Ada Gay Griffin, "What's Mine is Not Mine/What's Mine is Ours/What's Mine is Yours/What's Yours is Yours (Power Sharing in America)," *FELIX* 1:2 (Spring 1992): 15.
3. Jean Carlomusto, "Making It: AIDS Activist Television," *Video Guide: World AIDS Day*, 10:3-4 (November 1989): 18.
4. Marlon Riggs, "A Snap! Queen Deliberates: 'Reading' the Media," *Immediate Impact* 1:1 (Fall 1991): 7.
5. Halleck writes about the "narrowing of the gap between 'amateur' images and 'professional' ones" because of technological innovation on the low-end front, and because of the "non-professional" style taken up by the likes of MTV and television advertising. See Dee Dee Halleck, "Watch Out Dick Tracy! Popular Video in the Wake of the Exxon Valdez," in *Technoculture*, ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 219.
6. DiAna DiAna, "Talking That Talk," in *Women, AIDS and Activism*, ed., The ACT UP/NY Women and AIDS Book Group (Boston: South End Press, 1990) 222.
7. Ellen Spiro, "What to Wear On Your Video Activist Outing (Because the Whole World is Watching): A CAMCORDIST'S MANIFESTO," *The Independent* (May 1991): 22.
8. Ann Cvetcovich, "Video, AIDS, and Activism," *Afterimage* 19:2 (September 1991): 8.
9. John Greyson, "Strategic Compromises: AIDS and Alternative Video Practices," in *Reimaging America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed., Mark O'Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990) 61.
10. Halleck, "Watch Out!" 222. Halleck describes narrowcasting as a process that provides "programming for communities of interest, answering specific educational needs."
11. David MacDougall, "Beyond Observational Cinema," in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings (New York: Aldine, 1975) 118.
12. MacDougall 120.

13. Annie Goldson, "Color-Develop Normal or Multicultural Politics Dissected," *FELIX* 1:2 (Spring 1992): 120-121.
14. Michelle Valladares, "Guarding Our Own Best Interests or Parallel Lines/Connecting Tongues," *FELIX* 1:2 (Spring 1992): 44.
15. MacDougall 121.
16. Indu Krishnan, "Shifting Communities/Forming Alliance," *FELIX* 1:2 (Spring 1992): 63.



HIV TV (VIP Video Support Group, 1990)



Ways women can contract HIV, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS* (WAVE—Women's Aids Video Enterprise, 1990).