South of Ten (USA, 2006, super 16mm film transferred to 35mm film, 10 min.) is the title of a film by Liza Johnson. The title also names a thin strip of Mississippi, bounded by Interstate highway 10 on the north and the Gulf of Mexico on the south that was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in August and September of 2005. The film consists of a series of sparse vignettes, in which survivors of the hurricane perform a set of documentary gestures in the ruins of their homes. In the following exchange, Johnson and Jonathan Kahana discuss the film and its relation to recent and traditional practices of documentary art and the cultural conditions of ruin and reconstruction that saturate the area in which the film was made.

Jonathan Kahana: The first time I saw South of Ten, my reaction was a mixture of delight and jealousy: I wished I had made it. Since I am not a filmmaker, I first understood this reaction as a kind of praise for the film: if I made films, rather than commenting on them, this is one I would like to have made.

Now I understand my initial reaction somewhat differently—that is, as a response to the film's style of documenting the lives of its subjects, a style I would call ethical. Since the film is only minimally narrative, the term “characters” is perhaps too strong for the figures we see, as they go through the motions of picking through the ruins and waiting out inexorable and sweeping changes to their physical, sexual, and political world. In a way that seems consistent with your earlier work, especially your recent video installation If Then Maybe, the bodies of these performers become the aesthetic and physical means to create certain striking gestures: boiling a trombone mouthpiece, throwing a pebble, detecting buried metal, sitting.

It is the indeterminate and collaborative nature of these gestures that makes me want to refer to an “ethical” appeal of the film. The viewer senses that they are shared gestures, enacted jointly by the film crew and its subjects and that they represent this process, even if it is not visible in the frame. For years, it has seemed natural to think about reconstruction or fabrication in documentary as a betrayal of the audience's trust in the form's commitment to truth. But the use you make of re-enactments in South of Ten seems instead to take quite seriously the injunction of ethics: experience being “otherwise.” And the film hands this responsibility to its viewer. Does this have something to do with the fact that it is not initially clear from any angle that these are non-actors, and that you do not include, as many filmmakers now do, the evidence of a process of reconstruction within the field of vision? The production values of the cinematography and the narrative continuity of the editing give the impression that each of those sequences was scripted and rehearsed, but I gather that this is not the case.
Jonathan Kahana: We would tend to think that the correct response to this situation, speaking politically and culturally, would be to strip away the fictions of the storm and the region. Since the people of this region had already been fodder for mythological and ideological production, a whitewash process was called for, to let them speak plainly about their experience. But you are saying that in the process of making these scenes in and amongst the wreckage, certain conventional roles—for filmmaker and subject alike—could be displaced. So even though a natural disaster, when it can be described as a national crisis, is often the occasion for the grand agencies of representation (the state, the commercial media) to fall back on visual and narrative shorthand, in this place you found a loosening of these representational strictures.

Liza Johnson: It was a situation that allowed for older structures of representation to be used in an interesting way. It was a moment of cultural openness; in the destroyed context, the normal rules of culture were only partially in place and were partially suspended.

Jonathan Kahana: That description of the process makes me think of Raymond Williams's idea of the "structure of feeling." Williams suggests that by the time a social identity or a social crisis can be narrated or analyzed, its disruptive force has already been subjected to a normalizing apparatus. But the "as-if" effect that you're talking about, and which seems to have occurred at different points in the film's production, would seem to maintain some of the openness to the future that Williams intends by his idea of feeling. And this "as-if," which is a tenet of realism, connects viewer to scene in a way that seems perhaps analogous to the constructive process by which you and your cinematographer worked out, with the film's subjects, what their actions in the film—what the film itself—would consist of. Can you point to places in the film where this tension or suspension enters the frame, so to speak?

Liza Johnson: Yes. Take, for instance, the camera movements that are motivated by the motions of the actors, where the camera tracks alongside the girl as she's riding her bike, or we're shooting out of the back of a truck, and she's riding towards us. These moments of motion
feel close to the character's perspective because they're motivated by the actor's motion. The people in my film don't especially have the things they need to make their situation workable, but they have a certain amount of presence and force on the world. They can lift a table or move a house back onto its foundation or, at the very least, propel themselves into the landscape.

The concept of the film depends on the reverse angle. Obviously in fiction this is nothing new, but it is not common as a documentary strategy. You can't really use the technique of the reverse shot unless everyone is cooperating, doing multiple takes, allowing the camera to move into their position to produce a series of mobile views that appear to correspond to a person's subjective place in the world, and the geographic placement of their body within that world. It's also the most important conceit of the project, because it takes for granted that the physical space and the gestures of the body have an impact on feeling, on meaning—that the physical stance from which you see the world matters. Stances, motions, gestures make something legible, and transmit feeling on their own, without the demands that the interview format places on a subject to perform and narrate his or her "true self."

Jonathan Kahana: So what you mean by "physical" clearly has something to do with the environment in which those gestures were filmed. The environment isn't simply the passive setting for those gestures; it seems to determine them in certain ways. So they make visible a connection between those people and the place in which they live, and since this place has itself undergone a profound transformation, it's a connection that is being invented or re-invented in the course of filming.

Walter Benjamin had a way of describing ruins that fits this situation quite nicely: he said that the ruin was a significant fragment of the past, but one that was significant for what it told us about the past's vision of the future. The ruin is a constant reminder of aspirations that have gone unrealized. I can also see something of this ceaseless piling up of fragments in your work and in the work of many of your peers. Like a number of contemporary artists, you are working with reality and a method of assemblage that presents a collection of evidence but stops short of a closing argument. Is this a fair characterization of your recent work? And is it still correct to call this method, which doesn't aim directly at a goal, or a point, or a target, documentary work?

Liza Johnson: I'm definitely interested in a lot of the fragmentary work that you are, and absolutely as interested in registering an atmosphere that reflects reality as I am in making what we recognize as an argument. Or at least in what we have come to accept as an argument in documentary and news formats, generally devolving around simple pro-and-con formulations.

Regarding this idea of ruins, once when I previewed the film for an audience, Walid Raad claimed that he could literally predict my shot breakdown and framing on the basis of Jalal Toufic's theory of ruins. Toufic says ruins are "places haunted by the living who inhabit them." He describes a collapse of distinction between the outsides and insides of destroyed buildings, the outsides and insides of destroyed bodies. For him the visual logic of the ruin is the visual logic of the vampire—and he's not really being metaphorical when he claims that ruins produce a vampiric way of thinking about time and space. I have a lot of shots where the picture plane is blocked by something, a wall or an obstacle, as if I had expected it to be invisible, which Walid read as a symptom of the phenomenon Toufic describes. It's a mystical theory of ruins, but so is Benjamin's, really.

Jonathan Kahana: That sense of countermemory places South of Ten in a global tendency of resistance to state and official memory. The genealogy of South of Ten would include a kind of reflexive ethnography, which has had a major impact on the way that documentary filmmakers, even those working outside of traditionally anthropological areas, represent their subjects. But at the same time, your film seems to resist—perhaps not consciously or intentionally—the high degree of reflexivity we see in so-called experimental documentary of recent years. The reluctance of many artists and filmmakers to call their work "documentary" and the embrace of terms such as "anti-documentary" or "experimental documentary" is a symptom, I think, of a widespread suspicion about attempts to encounter reality, rather than resigning ourselves to sifting its representations.
Liza Johnson: Well, I definitely admire the work of the artists you mention and certainly would never resist being located nearby them in any way. For me what you're saying also needs to be understood within the legacy of modernism, and the kinds of selective formalism that have tended to exclude that which is seen as particular as opposed to universally true and beautiful, and by extension, have tended to degrade all kinds of minority inquiry. So I would distinguish between the strategies of those artists and the broader reluctance of artists to call their work documentary for the reason that documentary and realism have tended to be degraded terms in art discourse in and even after modernism. I think that reluctance is a much broader art historical problem.

Jonathan Kahana: Could we call that problem "realism"? One of the things that makes South of Ten such an interesting work, one that has been compelling to many different kinds of audiences, is that while it has many features of a work of experimental film or video—its episodic character, its careful visual and auditory composition, the multiplicity of interpretations it invites—it also offers the pleasures of realism. From this perspective, it would appear that the film is not particularly invested in being identified as or with art. In fact, one could say that identity is not a value promoted by the film. I am thinking of the importance of the process of dramatization you described: the images that you and the cinematographer produced were the result of a negotiation between you, her, and your subjects.

In this respect, the film does not shy away from a contradiction between the collaborative, improvisational, and even therapeutic methods of its production and the film's carefully composed images: that is, a calculating or calculated—and perhaps even alternating—esthetic construction that nonetheless uses the lives and experiences of real people. Many recent works of critical documentary are, of course, concerned with this very contradiction. In those that have adopted the method of re-enactment, many try to reflexively acknowledge that they—the film's or their makers—are knowingly engaged in the reconstruction of experience as re-presentation, as narrative, or as image. But there is nothing in South of Ten to indicate that what the viewer is watching was never something other than a fiction, or that the film itself knows the difference between a process of fiction and a process of knowledge.

One could say that this places the film in the domain of realism. One could also say that this reluctance to engage in explicit gestures of reflectivity gives the film some affinity with a much earlier phase of documentary. I am thinking here of the kinds of work that filmmakers such as Humphrey Jennings and George Stoney were making on behalf of state and corporate entities on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1940s and 1950s, films in which ordinary people were asked to play themselves in reconstructions of everyday life or the national crises that interrupted everyday life. What is traced on the surface of South of Ten is a social imaginary that is already at work before the image and sound recording devices are turned on and operated.

Liza Johnson: I think the traditions you describe that tend to contrast art and realism are important traditions. But also I think there are important ways that what you describe as the pleasures of realism are also a form of affective engagement. And I think affective engagement can be a worthy place to begin a critical engagement with the viewer. I've been interested in critical work by Jill Bennett or Brian Massumi, who suggest that intense affective engagement can produce a "shock to thought," a starting point for critical thinking. I'm interested in extending their work to think about the ways that realism can make an intense address to the sensorium. The bulk of realist storytelling probably isn't a starting point for critical thinking. But there is also a long tradition of critical realism that is always pushing a move to those "pleasures," those intense modes of sensation, to become a starting point. It is prescriptive and mistaken to presume that realism is the opposite of art or that its pleasures are the opposite of the critical projects that many artists aspire to.

Perhaps I am not using all the (ironically) familiar markers of self-conscious experimentation, but I am self-consciously calling out a pictorial history, a set of references. I'm trying to address some open secrets—the things Nina Simone says everyone knows about Mississippi (goddamn!). To take a few examples, Wynston Marsalis said that "the black faces on CNN looking for lost mothers and fathers call up a historical memory of Southern slave families torn apart." Kara Walker produced an amazing show at the Met that was exactly about the circulation of this memory, called After the Deluge, where her juxtapositions forced realist and romantic painting to think critically. When we were shooting it was common that people would make analogies, especially to Gone With the Wind. My film particularly references sublime, Romanic landscape traditions, scenes of Gothic ruination, and the particularly Southern forms of the Gothic.

During the actual event of Hurricane Katrina, I thought that the ways that the hurricane dragged up these references would prove to be utterly not useful to the state, and in this way they felt special, set apart from almost all other emergency spectacles I can remember. These ones, it seemed, couldn't be recuperated. At the same time, the images of African American people being treated like waste also served to re-inscribe damaging, racist ideas about black abjection, which in some ways are useful to the work it takes to maintain an unequal and racially malicious set of social
relations. I'm calling on what we already know about a tiny figure posed against the sublime rapture of nature, the wonder and terror of the human against the inevitable. Of course, here, what is natural and inevitable is not obvious, especially in New Orleans, where levee breaks. I am concerned about the overlapping of what Katrina looked like with apocalyptic Christian theology, most frighteningly exemplified by the ways that our government has cynically used this belief system to rationalize the endgames of our economic system and empire and made them appear inevitable.

In my film, I'm doing everything I can to both reference and undermine these pictorial traditions. But these references were also at play without me. For example, when Anne and I were in Mississippi volunteering, before we shot the film, we saw a man pulling copper cable out of a site that had been a nursing home. The site appears in the film; it's the one with the big leaning colonnade. To us, it looked like the ruins of Tara in Gone with the Wind. And that's also what it looked like to the guy who was pulling the cable. In the most extreme conditions that reality had to offer, it was impossible for people not to note that life had also come to look like some of the iconic fictions of American national fantasy. What I mean to say is that even when your point in being at this site is very concrete—even when you've come from Mobile with your pickup truck because you want to pull the copper cable out of the site for recycling—you simultaneously see it through these historical frameworks as well.

My small gesture of making the film, and the gestures of the people who are acting in it, are intended to acknowledge that—even in the face of disaster and even despite pictorial and discursive traditions that make these events and social formations appear, wrongly, to be inevitable—all of us possess force, which means that actually nothing is inevitable. None of us are making gestures in conditions of our own choosing, but you never know which way things are going to move.