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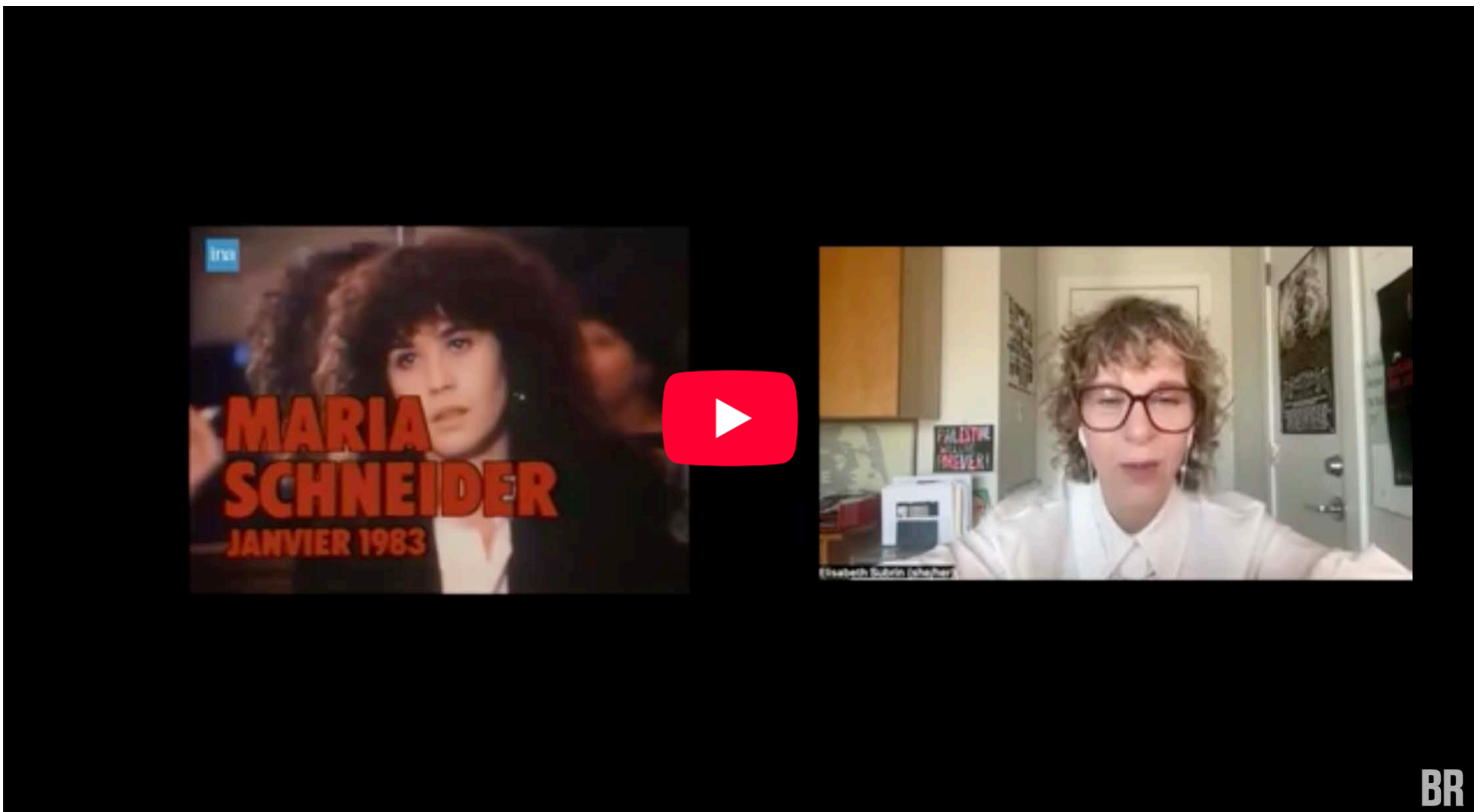
THE NEW SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

#1142

# Elisabeth Subrin: The Listening Takes / Manal Issa, 2024

Featuring Subrin and Jill H. Casid

**Tuesday, January 14, 2025** 12 p.m. Eastern / 9 a.m. Pacific



NSE #1142 | Elisabeth Subrin and Jill H. Casid

These free events are produced by The Brooklyn Rail.

Artist Elisabeth Subrin joins Rail contributor Jill H. Casid for a conversation.

## IN THIS TALK

[Visit \*The Listening Takes / Manal Issa, 2024\* at PARTICIPANT INC, New York on view through January 26, 2025 →](#)

## Elisabeth Subrin

Since 1995, **Elisabeth Subrin**'s critically acclaimed films and video installations have sought to excavate the fissures and erasures in dominant histories through an intersectional feminist lens. Known for her use of reenactment, beginning with her widely recognized 1997 film *Shulie*, solo presentations of her work include MoMA, The Vienna Biennale, ICA Philadelphia, ICA London, among many others. Group exhibitions include The Whitney Biennial, Cannes, The Walker Art Center, Greater New York, The Hessel Museum, The Mattress Factory, New York Film Festival, Rotterdam, and the Viennale. Her film *Maria Schneider, 1983* premiered at Cannes, receiving a 2023 César. A Fulbright, Guggenheim and Sundance Fellow, she is a professor of film and media art at Temple University and lives in Brooklyn.



[https://elisabethsubrin.com/  
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## Jill H. Casid

An artist-theorist and historian, **Jill H. Casid** holds the appointment of Professor of Visual Studies in the Departments of Art History and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Casid is bringing to completion *Doing Things with Being Undone in the Necrocene*, the first part of a two-book project on *Form at the Edges of Life*. Casid is the author of *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minnesota, 2005), *Scenes of Projection: Recasting the Enlightenment Subject* (Minnesota, 2015) which is in Spanish translation (Metales Pesados, 2022), and the co-edited collection *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn* (Yale, 2014). Casid's artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently at the steirischerherbst '23 in Graz.



[http://jillhcasid.net/  
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# To be a Woman is to be an Actress: Elisabeth Subrin at Participant Inc

[Christen Clifford \(Https://Cultbytes.Com/Author/Christenclifford/\)](https://Cultbytes.Com/Author/Christenclifford/)

January 31, 2025



Manal Issa (center), and director Elisabeth Subrin (back to camera) on location at "The Listening Takes" (2024) by Elisabeth Subrin at Participant Inc. Courtesy of Participant Inc.

**T**HE LAST TANGO IN PARIS was released in the US in 1973. A film by Bernardo Bertolucci starring Marlon Brando said to be the greatest actor of his time. The director and actor conspired against the 19-year-old lead actress, Maria Schneider, and manipulated her into a nonconsensual sex scene<sup>[1]</sup> that was not in the script. Schneider was asked about it in an interview in 1983. The artist Elisabeth Subrin remade this interview into two separate and distinct works: one a short film *Maria Schneider, 1983* which premiered at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival and won a 2023 France's César for Best Documentary Short, and the other an art installation which was commissioned by The Bell Gallery at Brown University and shown there in 2023, and shown again at Participant, Inc. in 2025.

Both projects start with restaging the 1983 interview with 3 different actresses, Manal Issa, Aïssa Maïga, and Isabel Sandoval. The identities of the actresses—Lebanese French, Senegalese French, and Trans Filipina, respectively—become important as the stories diverge and come together.

In the interview, Schneider was asked "Can't you separate your experience from the force of the film?" My fellow art viewers in the gallery scoffed when I was there. Let's just say I never need to see another Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, or Roman Polanski film ever again.

The film is a story, a neat short narrative in three acts, in which the interview gets more complicated as the film progresses. The installation, however, is more complex and involved.

We are witnessing a woman (Subrin) witnessing women (Issa, Maïga, Sandoval) witnessing a woman (Schneider) witnessing herself—her actual self, as opposed to her victimhood or her characters in films.

In an interview in *Filmmaker* magazine, Subrin spoke about her single-channel short film and the three-screen nine-speaker installations and noted: "how a singular biographical representation of a subject is impossible."<sup>[2]</sup> Similarly to Gary Husvit's film *ENO*, here the artist gives us multiple versions to reflect and refract multiple truths. The effect is eerie and beautiful. As one wanders through the installation, we see the Marias listening to each other, and since the backs of the screens are covered in resin, a ghostlike image is doubled, so at any moment, there may be five Marias, not just three. Not only listening but glistening. One can sit on a bench and see all three screens at once, or drift in the blackness, surrounded by women and their words.

There is a sense of time travel, of going back and forth through space, one woman's experience ricocheting through the hearts and experiences of anyone who has been sexually assaulted. It's a subtle yet blistering take on rape culture, in which the ghost of Maria Schneider seems to be shimmering between the screens, her refusal to be seen as an object is instead an inspiration, especially to younger viewers.

The additional short film, *Manal Issa*, 2024, further complicates the idea of reperforming and the ideas of representation, the gaze, and the actress as an object.

In the gallery at Participant Inc., opposite her take in *The Listening Takes*, Issa—a Lebanese French actress known to me from her work in *The Swimmers*—is seemingly absent in the film that bears her name. All we see is her empty seat, her coffee, her cigarette, an iPhone. But she's there, in voice, answering the same questions that Schneider did. The Issa film is a mirror, a reflection, a refraction, another type of reperformance, not only can she not separate art from her personal life, but from her public and political life.

I've long been a fan of Subrin's, from her early film *Shulie* to the 2010 show *Her Compulsion to Repeat* at the Sue Scott Gallery, to her 2016 drama *A Woman, A Part*, about a burned-out actress to her 2018 blog, *Who Cares About Actresses*.

Subrin wrote in 2006 (<https://elisabethsubrin.com/Trashing-Shulie>), about her film *Shulie*:

“My compulsion to repeat is certainly not groundbreaking. Yet I relate this impulse to an increased, perhaps even perverse, need within my generation to recreate struggles we did not physically experience. Or did we? Why would one repeat, fetishize, or desire a historical moment if there was not an intimate connection if one was not somehow a product of (or participant in) that period? ....Questioning who and what merits historical preservation, and why we crave this history, is what provoked the particular repetitive strategies of this project.



Elisabeth Subrin (left) and Ariana Rienes (right). Courtesy of the writer.

I went to a conversation between Subrin and poet Arianna Rienes at the gallery on January 26th, 2025 where both got deep about being Jewish women artists. Rienes spoke of Subrin's work as “looking at women who are looked at....pointing to the mechanisms of misrepresentation and exploitation.”

They spoke of the spiritual, how the piece feels like a seance, and Subrin talked about the decision for Issa to not be on screen in the new work.

The story was that after Issa came to Subrin and said no, she changed her mind, “the camera was capital”, that she didn't want to be used by the camera, and Subrin came back with the idea of her absence. Reportedly, Issa replied that Subrin was “the only person I've said 'no' to who didn't walk away.”

This dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration between director and actor is somehow evident in the piece, the recognition of understanding and holding one another through the lens, the multiple lenses, of the camera, of the zoom screen Subrin directed through, through the screen we see now. Here is the consent that Schneider wasn't offered.

As an artist and as a woman who has been sexually assaulted, this hit me hard. How many times had this abandonment after a refusal happened to me? To all the women I know? Most people are so used to women saying yes, to being the agreeable good girls we are taught to be since birth, that when we DO say no, that's it. It's one reason why saying "No" is so hard for so many people socialized as women, knowing the abandonment that happens afterward. I teach at The New School, and in my class "What is Rape Culture?" We practice saying "No" in a variety of ways: everything from screaming "Get the fuck away from me!", to how to tell a friend you aren't available, to delineating sexual boundaries.

On Sunday night, Subrin reminded us that Susan Sontag wrote in her 1972 essay, *The Double Standards of Aging*, "To be a woman is to be an actress."<sup>[3]</sup>

I'm especially interested in acting and reperformance as I started my performance career as an actor, working mostly in experimental works written and directed by women and later in regional and Off-Broadway plays.<sup>[4]</sup> My first professional acting job was in high school, and I still perform in the works of other artists like Alix Pearlstein and Laura Parnes. The first reperformance I wanted to stage was Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*. I wrote to her asking to restage it as exactly as I could, gesture for gesture- much like Manal Issa does with Schneider's interview here. (Aissa Maïga and Isabel Sandoval take their liberties.) Schneemann wrote to me refusing my request for permission and noted that she was a painter, not a performance artist. Later, I thought fuck permission, and did my version of *Interior Scroll*, with the text about maternal sexuality and patriarchy and childrearing rather than sexism in the art world. I paired it with an endurance piece in which I attempted to destroy childproof furniture. It lasted only about 10 minutes. (*Childproof/Cunt*, at Grace Exhibition Space, SITEFEST, curated by Chloë Bass, 2011<sup>[5]</sup>) Later, I reimagined Annie Sprinkle's *Public Cervix Announcement* as a performance called *Feminist Peep Show* (2011-2015, various venues, including Glasshouse and The New Museum<sup>[6]</sup>) showing not only my cervix but also my rectocele<sup>[7]</sup> and scars from tearing during childbirth while telling the audience of Sprinkle's genius and educating them on the aftermath of squeezing a baby out of your vagina. I've also remade works by Joseph Beuys, Ana Mendieta, and William Pope L. for Clifford Owens. To me, reperformance is a way of getting inside a performance, feeling the core, experiencing the interior, putting myself in that artist's physicality. The repetition allows me to re-perceive, I am changed, and my understanding of the work is changed by my somatic sensations. I recreate in order to create.

At one point during the conversation, Reines exclaimed, "It's so weird, what actresses do. They get possessed!" Yes, we do. Sometimes it's a connection, sometimes a taking over, an outside-in or an inside-out, a shifting of spirit. I used to make altars to my characters: writing their histories, cutting out photos from vintage magazines, imagining what lipstick they wore, love notes they'd saved from their high school first loves—if they'd had one, I'd scour thrift shops and streets for things the role required of my soul.

Subrin revealed that the day after *Manal Issa, 2024* was filmed, 500 people were killed in an Israeli bombing of Beirut. She also confided that one CAN see Issa in the background through the window, in Beirut, walking outside the cafe with her daughter.

In the gallery, we have this unexpected chorus of voices, where the actors all sync up. The experience of being supported by other women, especially in terms of who is allowed to speak and who is listened to, as actresses, creates an atmosphere of magic and possibility. When Sandoval speaks of rape, we are all listening to trans women. These women listen to each other, offering witness to each other and then we, too, are the witnesses and participants in a transformation. And then, when we know that we see Issa going about her life, we see her freedom in that moment. Freedom to not be seen, to not be gazed upon. An autonomous woman.

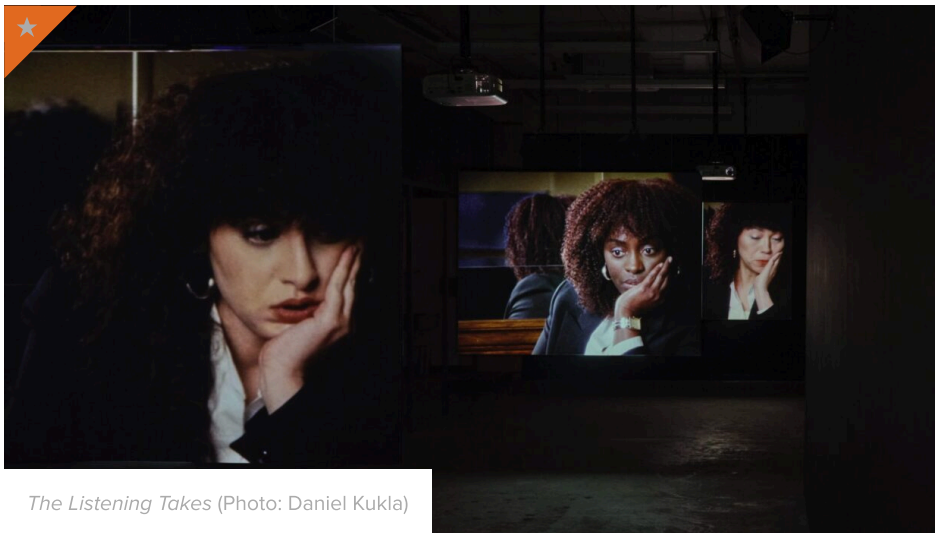
*Elisabeth Subrin, The Listening Takes / Manal Issa, 2024, is on view at Participant Inc. through February 2, 2025.*

1. <https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/films/news/bertolucci-interview-last-tango-in-paris-maria-schneider-marlon-brando-a7453836.html> (<https://www.the-independent.com/arts-entertainment/films/news/bertolucci-interview-last-tango-in-paris-maria-schneider-marlon-brando-a7453836.html>) †.
2. <https://filmmakermagazine.com/128765-elisabeth-subrin-the-listening-takes/> (<https://filmmakermagazine.com/128765-elisabeth-subrin-the-listening-takes/>) †.
3. <https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2020/08/beauty-lies-sontag.html> (<https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2020/08/beauty-lies-sontag.html>) †.
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/30/theater/theater-review-once-again-that-hulking-creature-remains-nameless.html> (<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/30/theater/theater-review-once-again-that-hulking-creature-remains-nameless.html>) †.
5. <https://bushwickdaily.com/news/178-chloe-bass-so-much-amazing-stuff/> (<https://bushwickdaily.com/news/178-chloe-bass-so-much-amazing-stuff/>) †.
6. <https://archive.newmuseum.org/public-programs/2234> (<https://archive.newmuseum.org/public-programs/2234>) †.
7. A type of pelvic floor injury, I wrote about it for The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2017/dec/28/vaginal-health-post-partum-maternity-rectocele> (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2017/dec/28/vaginal-health-post-partum-maternity-rectocele>) †.



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# “... A Singular Biographical Representation of a Subject is Impossible”: Elisabeth Subrin on Maria Schneider, Manal Issa and *The Listening Takes*



*The Listening Takes* (Photo: Daniel Kukla)

**D**rawing upon a 1983 interview the actress Maria Schneider gave to the French TV show *Cinéma Cinéma*, Elisabeth Subrin’s short film *Maria Schneider, 1983* premiered at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival and went on to win in 2023 France’s César award for Best Documentary Short. In Subrin’s film, three actresses — Manal Issa, Aïssa Maïga and Isabel Sandoval — progressively interpret the text of Schneider’s interview throughout the 25-minute piece, with Issa strictly recreating Schneider’s original answers while Maïga and Sandoval adapt the text to reflect their own experiences in the film business, turning the work into, as I wrote in the intro to [a previous article](#) on Subrin, “a dialogue that

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by [Michelle Handelman](#) in [Directors, Interviews](#) on Jan 21, 2025

[Aïssa Maïga](#), [Elisabeth Subrin](#), [Isabel Sandoval](#), [Manal Issa](#), [Manal Issa 2024](#), [Maria Schneider 1983](#), [michelle handelman](#), [The Listening Takes](#)

**February 2** at New York’s PARTICIPANT INC gallery, the three actresses are each given their own hanging video screen, and viewers cross in front, walk behind and amble between them, shifting attention to view the actresses singly or all together. The effect is entirely different as the viewer experiences the actresses all at once, receiving not just their words but the force of their attention as they “listen” to each other’s testimonies before their voices all converge to reach a final choral conclusion. (For the viewer, it’s a journey aided by the masterful sound design, in which the voices naturally fade in and out, repositioning themselves as the viewer moves within the work’s soundscape.)

Accompanying *The Listening Takes* is a new work by Subrin, *Manal Issa, 2024*, in which the Lebanese French actress is not a presence but an absence. Like *Maria Schneider, 1983*, the interview takes place in a cafe — there’s a coffee cup, an iPhone, a cigarette left burning in an ashtray — but Issa’s voice as she answers the same questions asked to Schneider in 1983 comes from somewhere off-camera.

From the [press release](#):

Similar to the sound design of the three-channel installation, which underscores the listener’s attention, with *Manal Issa, 2024*, Subrin directs us toward deeper listening by referencing the hypothetical interviewer’s questions through pauses in the voiceover, presenting only Manal’s answers. We don’t know who she’s speaking to; she is there, but not there. While Issa (b. 1992) and Schneider have markedly different life experiences, they share an unwavering commitment to their principles, despite consequential sacrifices and public criticism. Displaced from Lebanon multiple times due to war, Issa’s life has been shaped by politics. The reaction to her protests about Palestine on social media and on the red carpet (including at Cannes in 2018) led to her quit acting until there is a ceasefire. If *The Listening Takes* implicitly refuses to separate art from life, *Manal Issa, 2024*, pushes this further by refusing to separate life from politics.

To interview Subrin, we asked artist and filmmaker [Michelle Handelman](#), who also makes work for both single-channel and [installation](#) viewing. Below, they discuss the origins of the project, the math required to synchronize the three interviews, shooting *Manal Issa, 2024* in Beirut just before the bombings there, and how the meanings of *Maria Schneider, 1983* expand by virtue of the installation form. (Disclosure: I produced Subrin’s 2017 feature, *A Woman, A Part.*) — [Scott Macaulay](#)

**Handelman:** Elisabeth, how did you start your research, and how has your relationship to Maria Schneider and her cultural significance changed since you first began this project?

**Subrin:** My interest in biographical subjects usually just starts as fascination and a kind of frustration with how the subject has

**“Meredith Understood That I Needed the Freedom to Create My Own Interpretation of Her Work and Life”:** [Billy Shebar on his Berlinale-Premiering Meredith Monk Doc, \*Monk in Pieces\*](#) by [Lauren Wissot](#) in [Directors, Interviews](#) Feb 18, 2025



I researched Maria [Schneider] for many years for what I planned to be an experimental biopic, but then the pandemic hit, and I couldn't do more research in France. But earlier I had seen a short French TV interview with her where she critiqued the patriarchal, capitalist nature of the film industry. And she's coerced into talking about the 1972 film *Last Tango in Paris*, a film in which she was manipulated into a nonconsensual sex scene. Her comments in 1983 had so much prescience and subtext, pre #metoo, that I couldn't stop thinking about how this is a story that just keeps going. And, how the manipulative nature of the interview mirrors the sexual violence she experienced on set.

**Handelman:** Because I really wanted to watch your process chronologically, I watched the original interview with Maria Schneider first. Then I watched your single-channel piece, *Maria Schneider, 1983*. And then I watched the installation, *The Listening Takes*. In the single channel work, you see one person perform the original interview, followed by another, and then followed by yet another. And while the three actors say slightly different words specific to their own personal experiences and histories, the viewer still has the experience of focusing on one “Maria” at a time. This linear progression makes each “Maria” occupy a position in the past in relation to others, and lends itself to understanding each performer as first and foremost as an actor because they're repeating the same lines. But in the installation, with all three performers present and listening to one another while the other one speaks, you feel the personal identities of each performer, as well as the holistic relationship between all of the performers, and how this one story of patriarchal oppression speaks to and for all of us in the audience. We become listeners sharing the burdens that these Marias are revealing to us, and it's very powerful. Why did you decide to create both a short film and a multi-screen installation for this work, and what was the production process like in shooting both simultaneously?

**Subrin:** It was instinctual that there should be an installation and a single channel. I had a feeling that there would be things that would resonate in different ways between the two. The single channel essentially has a three-act structure, the journey through these three Maria's. It moves linearly, and the end is a third act reveal and a reckoning, finally, with the trauma that couldn't be spoken in the first two cycles. The installation has nine speakers and a complex immersive sound design. When you wander through these three screens, listening to one [Maria] speak while two other actresses silently receive what she's saying, you start feeling like other Marias are inhabiting the Maria that you're looking at.

I'm obsessed with the idea that history moves forwards and backwards, folding on top of itself, and the three channels articulate my ideas about how a singular biographical representation of a subject is impossible — that Maria is a multiplicity. There's a feeling of healing through speaking and



**Handelman:** I'm also a moving image artist, and I do a lot of work with multi-screen installations. I know that a multi-screen installation often has the effect of dividing a viewer's attention because so much is going on in the room and the viewer has to constantly shift their focus around. But instead of dividing the viewer's attention, I found that *The Listening Takes* actually sharpens the viewer's attention, which I found fascinating. Could you talk about how you directed your performers during the moments when they are not speaking and are just listening? Or, just more about the production process in terms of how you shot each one individually. To sync the three of them as you have, there must have been a lot of math involved.

**Subrin:** Exactly. I had never shot on a soundstage before, and it really helped. It was just extraordinary to be all quietly clustered around this intimate set in Paris. The whole crew said they felt like they were holding space for the performers. And there was indeed a lot of math involved. I wanted the three-channel work to feel like chamber music when the three Marias are speaking at the same time, or when they come together and then go off. When they are each doing the script, they go at their own speed and have their own emotions. But I wanted them to be connected at times too, so I chose an important beat — an “anchor beat” — in each of the five shots in the film, and I wanted them all to be on that same beat on the same moment. So we had stopwatches, and we cued from behind the camera.

**Handelman:** Did you do a lot of rehearsals?

**Subrin:** A lot of rehearsals for their spoken performances, but not for their seven-minute long takes, that we called “listening takes.” With the long takes of Aïssa Maïga and Manal Issa, what they're actually doing on set is listening to the real Maria [Schneider] do the real [French television] interview. And in the case of Isabel Sandoval, because she doesn't speak French, we recorded Manal performing Maria's interview in English for Isabel to listen to. Their performances — the ways they receive Maria, listen to Maria — are just so different. In the film and installation, I'm working with them on three registers: them as actresses playing Maria Schneider, a character who's also an actress; their feelings about Maria's experiences in this original interview; and then their own feelings about the subject matter. So, in rehearsals, I wanted to learn as much as I could about them so that I had that toolkit. For example, Aïssa had a very intense level of empathy for what Maria went through, and there were certain moments where I wanted to pull her, Aïssa, closer to the lens. In a way, I was giving them a complicated direction: “I want you to perform Maria but infuse it with yourself.” That's very nuanced and slightly abstract, but they all did it beautifully.

**Handelman:** In the single channel version, we have three cycles. Now in *The Listening Takes* we have four cycles, and the fourth cycle is what you were describing as being like chamber music,



**Subrin:** I guess the operative words are “insist” and “experience attunement.” I was insisting that we really be with each performer through their own interviewing, inhabiting what they were going through. To have to live with that interview three times. The particular shifts of each of their reactions, their tone, their attitudes and their responses to each of the interviewer’s questions are subtle. They change in affect, language, performance style, even translation (as well as color, sound design, subtitles, etc.). If we just [initially] saw all three of them [at the same time], we’d be excited by the phenomenon: “Look at how these are synced together!” It would be decorative, in a way. If you’ve had to saturate yourself in these three distinct performances, when they come back together, I think it just becomes a much more powerful experience.

When you hear them all together, even though there are only three speaking, it feels like a chorus, like many women speaking. It feels so forceful to see these three different actresses having this experience at the same time. My hope was that you would feel even more powerfully a kind of collectivity and a resistance, almost a pushback that an individual person [can give to the system]. Like, I’m thinking about Gisèle Pelicot and her trial in France right now. One of the things she noted was how alone she was at first, and then these crowds of women were circling the courthouse every day in support of her and saying, “You’re not alone.” You could see how her affect and strength was supported by having the power of all these voices together. One of the struggles women have talking about sexual violence is that it’s usually them alone having to “prove” their experience in front of other people. And this time they were doing it all together. So it feels like a very different register. And to me, both were important.

**Handelman:** The other piece that you have at Participant, Inc right now is *Manal Issa, 2024*, which the press release describes as a fourth reenactment. Could you talk a little bit about what this piece is, how you see it as a reenactment and how you worked with Manal scripting it?

**Subrin:** The piece began as I was planning for this show at [Participant Inc](#) over a year ago. Manal and I stayed in touch after *Maria Schneider, 1983*, and after the horror began in Gaza and Israel, we started talking a lot. It was a way to kind of metabolize, to quote Arianna Reines, what was going on. Manal’s family has historically been displaced multiple times from Lebanon, and she has been politically invested in Palestine for a long time. I kept wanting to send her Instagram posts and articles to show her that there was political resistance in the United States. Processing together felt meaningful, in this tiny little way— bridging this devastation as a Shia Muslim Lebanese French person and as a Jewish American 5,200 miles apart. I was having questions about showing *Maria* during those first months given the film is partially dependent on Manal’s extraordinary performance, and the real



I read at the beginning of screenings. And that process initiated a really meaningful way of collaborating long distance.

I was trying to find a way to bridge the Maria Schneider project and the devastating crisis in the Middle East, which seemed virtually impossible. And then I just had this idea. Manal was the only one of the three actors who didn't get to adjust her reenactment according to her own perspective. The other two got to go in and think about what they would change if they as themselves had been interviewed. So, I proposed to Manal that she reenact the same interview, responding to the same questions but from her own perspective in 2024. Manal is brilliant, so we had epic Zooms, text threads, voice messages, breaking down the film's questions, and this turned into hours of essentially documentary interviews that expanded to her whole life. And then over months, we just kept distilling it into a script.

I was going to go to shoot it with her in Beirut but the timing was obviously complicated. And then late last spring, Manal said, “I don't want to do this because I don't want to be on camera right now.” So, I proposed [the concept of *Manal Issa 2024*] to her, and that's how we wound up with a missing Manal. It's such a miracle we did that that because her choice not to be on camera is haunting and holds the whole space. We're so aware of her absence and presence.

**Handelman:** Manal's words as well as her delivery are incredibly powerful. It's quite moving and, actually, incredibly visceral even though there's no camera movement, until the very end. It's a testament to the power of words and cadence.

**Subrin:** I think it's also a testament to rigorous looking. Like I told the cinematographer, Bassem Fayad, when we first met, “You're going to feel crazy because we are just [shooting] objects moving around a table.” But there was an incredible amount of study and preparation. References like *Stalker*, *Jeanne Dielman*, and still lifes where the level of rendering and light makes it something you want to look at forever. For the color grading I did not want to go down the road of Westernized Middle Eastern film cliches, like the desert golden wash, or the blue/gray war palette. I wanted something that was beautiful and rich but also not like product placement, not like a Super Bowl ad.

**Handelman:** That's something that Manal talks about in the film, her desire not to be on screen and to figure out what is true in this moment in time — breaking down the artifice of acting and filmmaking when you're faced with murder, carnage and war all around you. I have to bring up that chilling moment in the film, when we see the water glass shake on the table and we hear the sonic boom, while Manal speaks about how there's always a boom before the bombing starts. The day after you shot this the actual bombing of Lebanon by Israel began. Can you talk about that moment on set? Were you directing it remotely? How big was your crew then? What happened when that sonic boom went off

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boom is scripted. We were essentially reenacting it, meaning that the sound is inserted, and the shake of water is fake. But daily there are sonic booms, so we were staging a sonic boom that could have happened during the shoot, and that was harrowing. I'd been on lots of Zoom meetings with Manal, the producer Lara Abou-Saifan, the cinematographer Bassem Fayad, and the sound recordist Victor Besse, who were all in Beirut, where they'd be like, “Did you hear that? Hold on, we just need to go to the window and check that.”

I was directing remotely from Brooklyn with a live feed from the camera, my editor Jenn Ruff was also on the Zoom, and the crew was on location in a cafe on Hamra Street in Beirut. But even directing from afar, the sonic boom reenactment was so disturbing – asking a Lebanese crew to recreate an experience they were living in the moment. I mean, even putting a cell phone on the table a few days after the pager explosions and bombing in Dahiyeh was intense. Nobody knew what was going to happen. Everybody was holding in a lot of emotion.

All the light patterns on the table are completely constructed and controlled by a remote so that when the sunlight in the window got brighter, the shadows were adjusted. And Manal sat there between takes, rearranging the objects with us, taking a sip of coffee, smoking the cigarette, etc. I thought that *Maria Schneider, 1983* was the simplest film I ever made, which was wrong. *Manal Issa, 2024* was even simpler, like we're doing a shoot that's a reenactment of a table. But the smaller you make something, the more focused, the more meaningful and precise everything has to become. Which ashtrays? What are the reflections in the glass? How [burned] is the cigarette? Where is the smoke going? How are the shadows changing? Where should the phone be? Suddenly there's a lot of meaning on that table. It was very intimate and intense and humbling to be recreating something that all of them there were viscerally experiencing every day. And anytime we said cut, of course everybody would be checking their phones to see what was actually happening [outside].

*Michelle Handelman is a New York-based award-winning filmmaker, visual artist, and writer. She is a Guggenheim Fellow, along with awards from Creative Capital, NYSCA, NYFA and Art Matters. Her 1995 feature film BloodSisters: Leather, Dykes and Sodomasochism is part of the New Queer Cinema movement.*

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# FILM COMMENT

## Secondhand Time

By [Ayanna Dozier](#) on November 12, 2024

*This article appeared in the November 8, 2024 edition of The Film Comment Letter, our free weekly newsletter featuring original film criticism and writing. Sign up for the Letter [here](#).*



*A Picture for Parco (Ayanna Dozier, 2022)*

I had the last of my six colposcopy surgeries—a procedure that cuts out cancerous cells from a cervix—in December 2020. To commemorate the one-year anniversary in 2021, I did my makeup, put on a fascinator, and filmed myself eating half a dozen boiled eggs while simultaneously crying and gagging beneath the blinding heat of stage lights. The short film that captured this, *A Picture for Parco* (2022), was a recreation of a 1980s Kazumi Kurigami ad for the Japanese department store-chain Parco, in which Faye Dunaway slowly eats a hard-boiled egg on camera. In re-creating the piece, I wanted to memorialize my terrifying experience and elevate it into something concrete and beautiful—something less pathetic than the reality of the repeated, invasive procedures I had endured for the prior three years.

*A Picture for Parco* is perhaps a ridiculous film, but it was born out of a lineage of other women's films that find ways to return to—and even reframe—painful events through filmic dramatization rather than through the performance of testimony usually expected of women and marginalized subjects. Memoir construction is a field that women filmmakers have often elasticized to envision themselves, experimental artist and autobiographer Kym Ragusa writes, “as more than their bodies or emotions . . . as actors in and witnesses to their place and time.” In retelling my gruesome experience on my own terms, I could acknowledge that it had happened, even though I had been so quiet about the ordeal in my personal life.

I viscerally recalled this sense of a secondhand time—felt in my body as abdominal pains—while watching *Maria Schneider, 1983* (2022) by Elisabeth Subrin. It is a 24-minute short that reenacts a seven-minute interview with the titular actress, which aired on French television in 1983. In that conversation, Schneider addresses how the film industry presents a limited vision of women, and makes a point of demarcating her “self” from her persona as an actress, gesturing to a capacious life of desire beyond the enclosure of her work. Just as the interview seems to head toward a rich exploration of Schneider's artistic fantasies beyond acting, the interviewer brings up her experience on the set of Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), in an obvious reach for salaciousness. During production of that film, Schneider, then 19, was infamously coerced into performing an unscripted rape scene by Bertolucci and her co-star Marlon Brando—a violation that would shape her approach to filmmaking for the rest of her career. Faced with this abrupt change of tack, Schneider refuses to engage and chides the interviewer for trying to make the conversation about the role of men in her life rather than about her.

In *Maria Schneider, 1983*, Schneider's refusal is performed three times by three actresses—Manal Issa, Aïssa Maïga, and Isabel Sandoval—who each play with different elements of her speech, mannerisms, and identity. Subrin first cast Maïga, who is of Senegalese descent, taken by the actress's bold public rebukes of racism and sexism in France's film industry. Schneider's commentary, reworked through the voice of Maïga, becomes a critique of the absence of Black women's subjectivities in film beyond the industry's own limiting frameworks. Issa and Sandoval deliver more "faithful" reproductions of Schneider's interview, though Sandoval's rendition draws out the queerness of Schneider's life, which was often overlooked by the media, seeking to present her as a vehicle for male desire. The film becomes something of a palimpsest, dramatizing the constant processes by which women artists use cinema to erase the imprints of men on their experiences, and add new information to restore or reclaim their agency.

Schneider's refusal to recount what she had already discussed in other public forums is not a denial of her experience, but rather an assertion of a public identity beyond one film, beyond the presence of two men in her life. This is a type of *no* that is not a withdrawal but a swerve, intended to affirm one's existence outside the narratives of others. Zia Anger's *My First Film* (2024) takes a similarly meta approach to dramatizing the director's public and private, professional and personal refusals. The film chronicles the making of Anger's first feature, *Gray* (aka *Always All Ways, Anne Marie*), which was produced on a shoestring budget and then rejected by every festival it was submitted to. For many years, *Gray* was listed as "abandoned" on IMDB, and Anger failed to secure funding opportunities for other projects because she languished in the limbo of being perceived as a first-time filmmaker. In 2019, Anger took charge of this experience via a hybrid performance piece titled *My First Film*, in which she provided live commentary while screening clips and outtakes from *Gray*. During the course of this performance, Anger tells us that she has had two abortions, and draws parallels between her thwarted launch as a filmmaker and the termination of her pregnancies. Neither experience is meant to be viewed as a "failure," but rather, as open-ended possibilities that were left behind in order to pursue something else... that also did not work out.

I attended a live performance of *My First Film* at New York City's Metrograph theater in 2019 while hemorrhaging blood. The day before, I'd had a colposcopy—neither my first nor my last. I had been "gifted" a cancerous strain of HPV from a failed relationship that I was forced to recall corporeally each time I went under. Though the surgeries were terribly violent, involving a speculum, scissors, a knife, and stirrups, the healing was worse. The first weeks following these operations often left me bleeding profusely and feeling like my insides were going to drop. But it was all an *internal* terror. I had no visible scars or bruising. The hardest part was feeling like life was outpacing me: I could not do the things one does to get over a failed relationship—like date, dance, and go out—and my burgeoning film practice also halted. I had to suspend my ambitions and desires until my body could catch up with me. This is all to say that *My First Film* hit a little too close to home.

I was moved by Anger's desire and commitment to speak about something that had no real evidence of existing—to speak to the pregnant ambitions of many women that are derailed due to health issues or sexual injustice. How many of our creative passions are considered "abandoned" because we took time off to deal with trauma, afterbirth, reproductive failure(s), terminated birth(s), or assault? This year, Anger premiered a feature-length, narrative adaptation of the live performance, also titled *My First Film*, with actress Odessa Young playing her on-screen surrogate, Vita. The movie takes a surprisingly traditional approach to narrating the turmoil of Anger's experience making *Gray*. This includes a clingy boyfriend who admits to impregnating her without her consent due to her supposed neglect of him; the abortion that allows Anger to return to production; her father's illness; an addiction to Adderall; and the enduring pains of trying to be a filmmaker in an industry that refuses to trust, let alone accept, the terms by which women choose to imagine their lives.

Having experienced the live version, as well as the virtual editions Anger performed during the pandemic lockdowns in 2020, I felt nostalgic for the other lives and selves of *My First Film* while watching the feature adaptation. I longed for Anger to allow time to leak out of her story rather than containing it in a narrative form. Or maybe I am simply too attached to the blood bond I had forged with the film in that theater in 2019. It doesn't matter, though, because Anger has birthed the film she wanted.

In conventional accounts of history, women's "lost time" simply does not count. But through these cinematic returns, Anger and Subrin invite us to witness failures and refusal, imbuing them with significance through re-performance. French writer Annie Ernaux puts it perfectly in her 2000 memoir, *L'Événement*, as she returns to the memory of terminating her pregnancy almost 40 years before: "Among all the social and psychological reasons that may account for my past, of one I am certain: these things happened to me so that I might recount them. Maybe the true purpose of my life is for my body, my sensations and my thoughts to become writing, in other words, something intelligible and universal, causing my existence to merge into the lives and heads of other people."

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