

# Career

BY ELIZABETH ANGELL

In a spacious, light-filled, duplex loft near New York's Chinatown, Catherine Gund lives with her family and runs her nine-year-old documentary production company, Aubin Pictures. The apartment has few walls and almost no doors, and the space swirls with the detritus of its daily occupants: Gund; her partner, Bruce; a long-time Aubin Pictures employee, Angelina Sapienza; four children; a cat; and a lazy, sweet-faced dog. Children's coats and shoes, colorful rain boots and diminutive bicycles are lined up in the entryway. A small riot of toys dominates the living room. Family snapshots are everywhere, tacked to the refrigerator in the open-plan kitchen, to the walls of Gund's office, and to the mirror in the bathroom. Gund is a self-described "neat person," but it is clear that no amount of effort could contain all that goes on in this apartment. So she offers up her home as an apt metaphor for Aubin and her myriad other projects: everything is connected, and no activity or role can be isolated from another. "[My work] is like this house, this workspace," she says. "It's all interrelated."

Gund's resumé includes a dizzying array of pursuits. She is a director, a producer, a sometime camerawoman and editor, a feminist, a philanthropist, an AIDS activist, and an advisor to countless people interested in any of these topics. Her description of any single project close to her heart inevitably leads into another. Aubin's next release, a film about a teacher called *Touch of Greatness*, reminds Gund of her children's progressive public school down the street, which reminds her of her early work producing public-access television shows that deconstructed the media, which reminds her of something her

daughter once said about a Cheerios commercial. And so on.

When pushed to list her professional titles in their preferred order, Gund chooses filmmaker, then media activist, then donor organizer. "And always and forever a mom," she says.

This list is deceptively straightforward. For Gund, each title represents an umbrella of activities. Filmmaking is collaborative and allows her to work with different people on every aspect of making a film. Media activism "covers so many bases," she says, "watching media critically and teaching critical thinking, making media and supporting media projects which challenge the mainstream." She chooses "donor organizer" because it encompasses not only her own philanthropy but her work as a mentor to young people who wish to have an impact, either financially or through volunteer work.

Several colleagues noted Gund's ability to move easily in and out of different roles. "Catherine is extremely articulate and very knowledgeable," says Scot Nakagawa, an old friend who worked with Gund on *When Democracy Works* (1996), an educational video about several radical, right-wing initiatives that affected elections in the mid 1990s. "She is a good listener, and she has this ability to quickly assimilate new information. She has a sort of chameleon-like quality to her."

Gund began her film career in the late 1980s as an AIDS activist, making documentaries for ACT UP and using her videos for outreach and awareness in hospitals and with community groups. She spent the 1990s making a series of short films that explored gender and sexuality, and she wrote extensively about feminism, class, and lesbian issues. She was deeply concerned with the growing influence of the conservative movement, and she remains committed to progressive causes and to discussing difficult topics like money and sex.

"The dominant society paints such a prosperous picture of people living in this country," she wrote in one essay, "[and] it can perpetuate the wholly inaccurate image of this as a classless society. We have bought in, so to speak: most everyone, it seems, will define herself as middle class. That is, until she starts talking specifically about the parameters and experiences of her life. Then everyone has a story. These are the voices, the stories, the dialogues that could create change."



# Collision

Catherine Gund's dizzying array of pursuits include filmmaker, activist, and donor—in that order



Filmmaker Catherine Gund (Judith Haleck)

Her interest in “stories” eventually lead Gund to full-length documentaries. In 1996 and 1997, she directed and produced *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance*, a film about a controversial performance artist. Athey’s work explored religion, sexuality, and violence, and the HIV-positive artist gained notoriety for the sometimes extreme self-mutilation he practiced during his performances. Athey garnered nationwide attention when right-wing activists and politicians launched an attack on the National Endowment for the Arts, which had funded the Walker Arts Center, where he performed in 1994. Gund set about making Athey’s work accessible to a far wider range of people than the few who had been in his audience. The film, which won a Silver Jury Prize for documentaries at the Chicago Underground Film Festival and was included in one critic’s contribution to *The Village Voice’s* Top Ten Films of 1998, allowed Gund to transition from activist to full-blown documentary filmmaker.

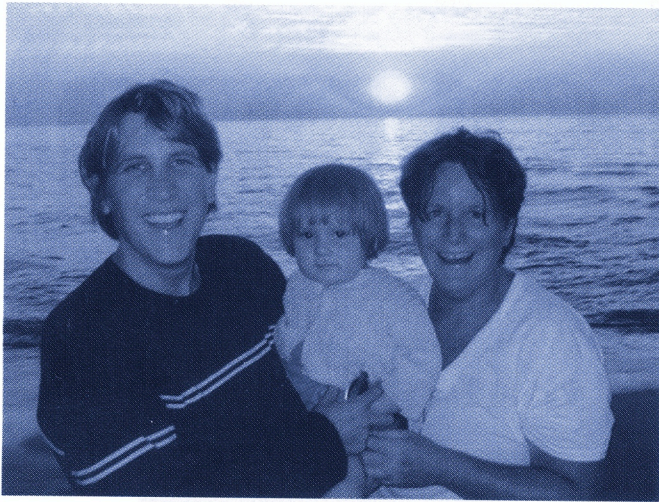
Gund formed Aubin Pictures in 1996 to produce and distribute documentaries that would “promote cultural and social awareness and change.” Despite her interest in reaching a wider audience, she remains attracted to projects that reflect

her political convictions. In 2000, Aubin released *On Hostile Ground*, a film that Gund produced about three embattled abortion providers and the ongoing assault on *Roe v. Wade*. And this year, the company will release two films, *A Touch of Greatness* and *Making Grace*, which was directed by Gund.

“At Aubin, we focus on whatever’s timely, whatever is going on in the world,” says Sapienza, who has worked with Gund at Aubin since 2000. “We try to stay in the world, and we try to be involved in every part of the process, from distribution to doing outreach and making the film an activist tool.”

*A Touch of Greatness*, a film by Leslie Sullivan, profiles Albert Cullum, an elementary school teacher who used poetry and drama to work with students in unconventional ways. The film includes lovely footage of Cullum and his students in the early 1960s, recorded by Robert Downey, Sr. On its surface, the film is an uplifting portrait of a dedicated teacher. But





**Ann Krsul (left), Leslie Sullivan (right) and their daughter Grace Ann Emerson Krsul-Sullivan (John Krsul)**

Gund points out that she saw something more in Cullum's dedication to inspiring students: a commitment to each child's individuality. Cullum adamantly rejects the lowered expectations that characterized so much of public education, and Gund hopes the film will illuminate the debate over the best way to educate children today. (The film won Best Documentary at the Hamptons International Film Festival and the People's Choice Award at the Starz Denver International Film Festival, and it premiered on PBS in January.)

Gund's own film, *Making Grace*, is a portrait of a lesbian couple and the first child they have together. She followed Ann Krsul and Sullivan (director of *A Touch of Greatness*) as they chose an anonymous sperm donor, went through the grueling process of insemination and the hormonal joys of pregnancy, and faced the occasional difficulties of being a lesbian couple in straight society.

Gund had strong political and personal feelings on the subject—she came out in college (eventually returning to a heterosexual relationship) and shares custody of her first three children with a woman who was her long-time partner—but she wanted to make a verité film that would reveal a story, not a polemic. "I really like documentary because it takes a story and tells it in a language that people can understand," Gund says. "It's recognizable, it touches on our basic humanity. I know [nonfiction films are] subjective—I believe we tell the story that we want to tell. But that story takes place in a recognizable space." (*Making Grace*, distributed by First Run

Features, will be released theatrically in June, and will be available on DVD on their website: [www.firstrunfeatures.com](http://www.firstrunfeatures.com).)

Gund's populist leanings may come as a surprise to anyone who recognizes her family name. She is a member of a clan famous for its wealth and philanthropic generosity—not a background in which one would expect to find someone who advocates so openly for social change and even, in her own words, "revolution." But Gund credits her mother, Agnes Gund, for talking about lefty issues and for supporting her unconditionally as a child.

Aggie, as Catherine calls her, is a legendary art collector and sponsor of the arts who served as president of the board of the Museum of Modern Art for many years. Her mother also gave to many progressive causes, and in the 1970s, when public school budgets were being gutted and art programs eliminated, she created Studio in a School. The pioneering nonprofit helped to place artists in hundreds of public schools, after-school programs, and homeless shelters across New York City. She also supported ACT UP before Catherine had even heard of the group. Many of Agnes Gund's friends in the art world died of AIDS, and Catherine remembers her mother mourning them all.

"My mother is a wonderful example of someone who prioritizes people over anything else," Gund says.

Catherine was raised in Cleveland, Ohio, and Greenwich, Connecticut, and though these were conservative communities, she says that she and her siblings were encouraged to be creative and outspoken. "[My siblings and I] inherited security and safety from our skin, and our class," she wrote in a 1996 essay called "Lucky." "Being a political activist, an artist, and an out lesbian were all things that wouldn't, (and didn't), topple my world or my parents' world, wouldn't compromise my safety or my ability to succeed. That's how it was in my rich family."

Gund's mother may have nurtured her daughter's artistic instincts, but it was at Brown University that Catherine embraced the politics that still inform her work. Gund entered Brown in 1983, at a time when the school was at its activist





**Catherine Gund and her children (L-R) Sadie, Kofi, Tenzin, and Rio (Bruce Morrow)**

heyday. She was involved in myriad social causes: South African divestment, nuclear proliferation issues, the school's "third world" center, and protesting the American involvement in El Salvador. She eventually spent a semester at UC Santa Cruz, and graduated in 1988 after five years. "Nobody went in less than five years," she says with a laugh. "It just took you so long because you were so busy protesting everything."

Gund had learned early that her family had money and that it came with unique responsibilities and obligations. She is the first member of her generation to serve on the board of the George Gund Foundation. That foundation, which gave away almost \$28 million in 2004, was established by her grandfather in Cleveland, where the Gunds made their money in banking.

Gund says that she decided early that she never wanted to make a contribution to something out of guilt, only out of conviction. She married these instincts with the activism she had embraced at Brown. In 1993, she co-founded the Third Wave Foundation, a group which funded feminist issues and works with women between the ages of 15 and 35. She has also been part of several organizations that promote giving within groups not usually associated with philanthropy, from women and people of color to young adults and gay and lesbian men and women.

"I want my money to effect a more just society," Gund wrote in "Lucky." It is a sentiment that has surely guided Aubin Pictures as well. ★