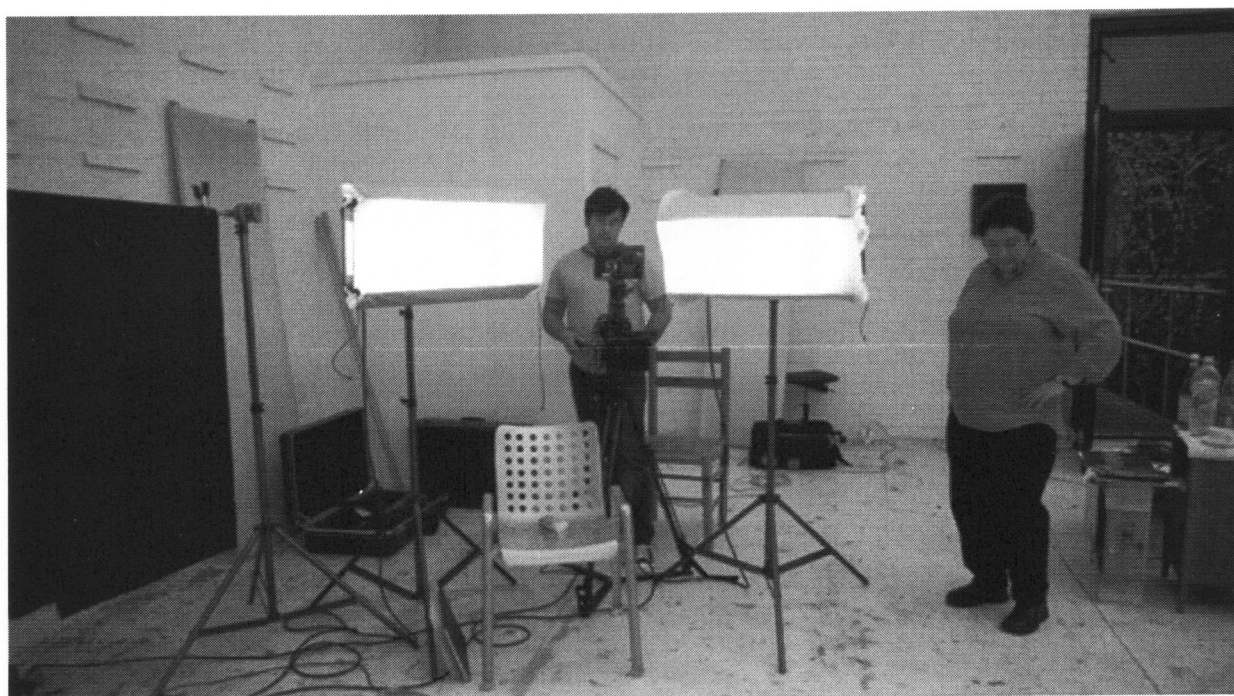


## CALENDAR



Thought process: Nancy Kates (right), with John Romeo, considers how to transfer the life of the mind to film in her Susan Sontag project. (Photo by Sandi Sissel, courtesy filmmaker)

### In Production

## Kates is in a Sontag state of mind

By Michael Fox

Here's a game you can play next time you have a bunch of documentary filmmakers in your parlor. Ask which is the bigger challenge, making a film about a dead subject who's not around to resolve discrepancies or fill in gaps, or a living person who retains certain rights and prerogatives and can turn the project into a living nightmare.

Nancy Kates admits to a small sense of relief that the subject of her work in progress, **Regarding Susan Sontag**, isn't here to obstruct her efforts. Although the renowned author, essayist and critic was one of the leading public intellectuals in America for decades until her death in 2004, and avoided neither the limelight nor controversy, she was also extremely protective of her private life.

"I don't think she would have allowed someone to make the kind of film we're making while she was alive," Kates says. "There was an unauthorized book, **Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon** [by Carl Pollyson and Lisa Paddock], that came out in 2000 and she tried to keep friends from cooperating with the authors." But Sontag also sold her diaries to UCLA (with the first volume, edited by her son, published in December). "I think she had a complicated relationship with privacy," Kates

notes.

The bigger question the East Bay filmmaker faces, both practically and aesthetically, is how to transpose the life of a writer—the life of the mind—to film. "It's probably the central challenge of the project," she concedes. It would be easier, an interviewer suggests puckishly, if Sontag had engaged in the same brawling and headline grabbing as her contemporary and occasional adversary, fellow New Yorker Norman Mailer. "There's a plethora of fascinating archival footage of her. None of it involves fistfights," Kates replies, laughing.

That footage includes no less than seven screen tests Warhol made of the young Sontag (often armed with shades and a cigarette), her cameo in Woody Allen's **Zelig** (essentially playing herself) and her TV appearances with hosts Bill Moyers, Ted Koppel and Tom Brokaw, among others. There's also an abundance of interviews where Sontag discusses her ideas, "which makes the film heady," Kates allows, "but better for her to explain them than someone else."

In addition to all that, Kates has asked L.A. experimental filmmaker Lewis Klahr to collaborate. A master of montage, Klahr will recreate **Her Fragrant Emulsion**, his obsessive 1987 homage to '60s B-movie actress Mimsy Farmer, with Sontag in mind. Klahr's contribution can be expected to infuse Kates' film with a dash of playfulness.

Kates' last film, the riveting 2003 documentary **Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin** (directed with Bennett Singer), profiled a lifelong civil rights activist and mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who never got his due—in part because of his homosexuality. Given that Sontag didn't come out as a lesbian, although she and photographer Annie Leibovitz were longtime partners, is one of Kates' goals to reclaim Sontag as a queer icon?

"I would say it's not one of my goals," Kates declares. "There've been a lot of revelations about Sontag since she passed away, and even before then. The goal of the project is to illuminate her life and work. Obviously, the fact that she had numerous same-sex relationships is part of the story of her life. There are people who make what I would call pro-gay propaganda films and I think that's important, but I don't do that myself."

Kates has shot several interviews, but needs to raise a substantial amount of money to finish production. (She has cut a captivating trailer for fundraising purposes.) If one considers that Sontag was almost 72 when she died four years ago, it's pretty clear that filming other members of her circle can't be delayed forever.

Another open question is how, with the Internet transforming city life, bookstores closing and newspapers shrinking, Regarding Susan Sontag will play to educated young urbanites when it debuts in 2010. "The [intellectual] world where books were paramount is all going away," Kates says. "The culture is really different than it was 40 years ago." That may explain the lack of competing Sontag projects. "If there are any, they are not at the stage we're at," Kates says. "Shortly after she passed away, I thought, 'It's a good idea to be first.'" She laughs again. "Maybe fools rush in." Then she adds, growing serious, "I don't think there are that many people who are willing to take on this kind of challenge." For updates on Regarding Susan Sontag, visit [www.sontagfilm.org](http://www.sontagfilm.org).

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