



2009 Interview w/ Filmmaker Deborah Stratman

21 August 2009 by [Andrew Rosinski](#)



On the Various Nature of Things (1995)

Deborah Stratman is a Chicago-based artist and filmmaker whose work plies the territory between experimental and documentary genres. Her films and frequent work in other media, including photography, sound, drawing and sculpture often explore the history, uses, mythologies and control of highly varied landscapes: from Muslim Xinjiang China, to rural Iceland, to gated suburban California. She recently completed a series of works that collectively address concepts of the paranormal in the information age and is presently working on a new film about the milieu of elevated threat, patriotism, wilderness and the possibility of transcendence.



O'er the Land (2008)

1. You've been a successful filmmaker. *O'er the Land*, your most recent film, was one of the few experimental films to screen at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival — *O'er the Land* also won Best Experimental Film at the 2009 Ann Arbor Film Festival and had its European Premiere at the Rotterdam Film Festival — in the past, your film *In Order Not To Be Here* won awards at the Humboldt International Film Festival, the Chicago Underground Film Festival, and (again) at the Ann Arbor Film Festival.

Has success altered your outlook and optimism as a filmmaker? Creatively, does it affect your vision as filmmaker, knowing that your next film will be watched by the world? How does success help you as a filmmaker; and, is it ever a hindrance, such as making you more self-conscious about the next film you are going to make?

I don't think success is as much of a hindrance as the fact that when you gain knowledge and skill, you lose a certain naïve fearlessness. This can be crippling. so I try to keep taking conceptual/aesthetic risks, and to shake the self-consciousness that comes with experience. Public success might create obstacles in terms of the expectations you place on yourself to live up to some ephemeral bar set by whatever you last completed. Personally, that kind of public scrutiny barely registers compared to what I manage on my own. The 'we-are-our-own-worst-critics' syndrome.

Has 'success' altered my outlook/optimism...sure. Getting recognition for what you make is always encouraging. But I also love my films that never received a peep of praise, and will keep starting projects no matter how they eventually land in the world.



In Order Not to Be Here (2002)

2. Seemingly you prefer film. Examining your filmography (pythagorasfilm.com), I counted a 9-7 tally in favor of film. Some say HD video is becoming the new standard, and the cost of shooting a film on HD video is cheaper than shooting on 16mm film.

In the future, do you see yourself making more films with video vs. film? If so, will you opt for HD or SD video? What particular qualities, or pros/cons, do you associate with the two formats?

I prefer film, but not stridently. I shoot an almost equal amount of video and 16mm. The circumstances of each project prescribe its format. I'll adapt to mediums as they change, especially as it's becoming harder and harder to get a decent 16mm print. All of the great timers and printers and optical track technicians are retiring without being replaced. By the time they're all gone, I hope HD gear and post facilities will have plummeted in price and then I'll switch over in earnest. But if 16mm film remained accessible, or if I could afford to produce work in 35mm, I would stick with film. I prefer the material over the virtual, I prefer the speed of cutting on film which is closer to my native thinking speed (slow), and I'll always prefer rear-illuminated celluloid to projected electronic scanning.



On the Various Nature of Things (1995)

3. Technology, it's everywhere; humans are wired more than ever. Stan Brakhage, to a certain extent, denounced technology, stating it had many negative side effects.

To quote Alan Beck, "At what point did our computers go from being a tool to enhance our lives to a medium through which to live our lives?"

Let's say your strolling in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago — it's very possible you might see some serious technology multitasking — a dude, bluetooth headset in his right ear, in the midst of a phone call; left ear, earbuds, rocking out to the new Katy Perry album. In addition to that, in his right hand he holds his iPhone/Blackberry and he's looking up Katy Perry tickets with a 3G internet connection; left hand, he holds a idle netbook; under his arm he holds an idle Kindle.

Like it or not, the fact is us humans will share our future lives with technology. How should we use it, how often should we use it, and when should we eliminate it from our lives? And for artists and filmmakers, when does it hurt and help one's art, and how do you think technology will it affect the future of filmmaking + art?

If you are an artist, you more than likely employ some form of technological interface. Wood, paint, metal, fiber, glass, instruments... even words can be understood as tools. In this sense, technologies are bridges between minds (the artist's and the observer/listener). So to me, utilizing technology is nothing new, it's how art has always worked. But certainly, the site and frequency at which our lives can be interrupted has changed radically since cell phones, portable computers and the like arrived on the scene.

As I see it, there's been a major paradigm shift, on the same order as when radio and records first became available. It was a big deal when sound first became disassociated with place (radio), and

then later with place and time (records). Before that, sound had for millennia been associated with something live, and something close enough to hear. The sonic defined the 'here and now' in a concrete way. The rise of spiritualism concurrent with the advent of radio and telephony was no accident. Suddenly, the dead could return to life. Distances collapsed. Voices were being pulled from the ether.

The advent of the cell phone has meant not only that we can now walk freely in a HERE while talking into a THERE, but more radically, that our HERE can be interrupted at any time by a THERE. And there's always a strong desire to respond to that call, a sense that connecting to a THERE is more urgent, perhaps more LIVE than what surrounds one physically. It's a strange shift that I admit I've yet to acclimate to. I resist the way these new technologies make us always reachable. Personally, I enjoy being lost, or off the grid, or whatever you'd like to call it. And no, I don't have a cell phone. I know, it's archaic, and a bit stubborn. Maybe my genetic makeup is just better suited to a slower era. All of this is not to say that I don't absolutely enjoy the pleasure of working within a highly technological medium that allows me to manipulate time and space. There's no comparison. It's really a kind of magic.



The BLVD (2002)

4. What is your favorite beer and why?

I like a good pilsner, the czech Urquell is nice, or Becks. But I'm more of a whiskey/tequila supporter, Jameson/Cazadores, respectively. I was just in Scotland this summer and bought some righteous single malts.



O'er the Land (2008)

5. If you're comfortable with sharing, please tell us about your future projects, what to expect from them, and what inspired each.

I'm in sub-saharan Africa right now, shooting a short experimental documentary that was a mini-commission for the Rotterdam film festival. I'm focusing on Malawi, and how culture propagates here. I'm guessing it will be around 15 or 20 minutes, shot hand-held on miniDV. Apart from that, I'm mid-way through editing a short 16mm documentary portrait of a bird of prey facility in northern England that I shot this summer. That will be around 6 minutes. And I am supposed to be making a short video about comets for a DVD that Mike Plante (Cinevegas) and Mark Rosenberg (Rooftop Films) are putting together called ORBIT – basically a bunch of filmmakers making work about the planets using NASA footage. There's also a longer 16mm film about recondite Illinois history that I've been working on for a couple of years. It keeps getting pushed aside for various reasons, but in the next few months I'll try and get back to it, once all these little upstart films are out of the way...



O'er the Land (2008)

6. What is the key to an artist's success:

A) **Networking; who you know and who they know.**

B) **How much money you can acquire to fund a extravagant vision (e.g. Jeff Koons' upcoming \$25 million sculpture, where he'll suspend a working locomotive a hundred or so feet in the air, dangling from a construction crane).**

C) **Sticking with your individual vision.**

D) **Hard work.**

E) **For me, it comes down to RESILIENCE AND PASSION.**

(stubbornness, curiosity, self-confidence, grace and entrepreneurial spirit don't hurt either)



Energy Country (2003)

7. Let's say you've been stranded on a remote island for three years. A genie appears and tells you he will take return you home only if you list your top 5 films in order. How would you respond?

I'd say, "You've got to be kidding me. That's the worst question ever. This island is actually not so bad". Okay, then I might fumble around and try and come up with some films that maybe were at one time, under certain circumstances, my favorites, but will always fall short of representing a pantheon of 'the best'. And in no way can be listed in order. Since you ask, here are five. But if you ask me again tomorrow, I'd give you a different list: Agnes Varda's "Vagabond", Barbara Loden's "Wanda", Bruce Conner's "A Movie", Jean Rouch's "Jaguar", Georges Franju's "Judex".

8. What visuals and/or animals come to mind when you hear the word Dinca?

Small African rodent with big ears.

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Stratman teaches in the School of Art & Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Interviewed by Andrew Rosinski during the month of August, 2009.