CINEMAD

INDEPENDENT. AVANT-GARDE. CULT. UNDERGROUND. STICKS AND STONES.

DEBORAH STRATMAN

I thought I knew Deborah Stratman's work. Deep observations through beautiful images, especially long, controlled takes of landscapes and people in society. On her new DVD Something Like Flying (released by Peripheral Produce), she examines Iceland in FROM HETTY TO NANCY *(1997), suburbia through* IN ORDER NOT TO BE HERE *(2002), and a Chinese tightrope circus in* KINGS OF THE SKY *(2004), all with luscious camerawork and compelling themes. Her films have screened at many locations, from Anthology and Other Cinema to the Toronto and Sundance film festivals. But I learned through a cheerful phone call with Deborah that she puts a lot of herself into her films next to the observations of others, and uses a variety of styles and ideas.*

CINEMAD: Is teaching just the only job that experimental filmmakers are going to get?

DEBORAH STRATMAN: Yeah. They corral all the freaks.

Did you try do anything else?

I did freelance, although not very whole-heartedly. It was always very half-assedly on my part. For me personally, I don't know if this is the case for other filmmakers, but I just get too…if I'm working industrially, I get bitter and burned out about filmmaking. I mean, not that teaching doesn't have its moments where you feel burned out, but I never feel bitter about it. I always

feel like I get back as much as I put in. Whereas when I've done freelance work, I put in, but I don't feel like I get as much return. It's more psychically draining.

Totally.
I feel like I need to stay…

Stay the course?
I guess, yeah. I don't necessarily feel that teaching is the best solution for balancing working and producing, 'cause it's got its issues too. I definitely end up every couple of years absolutely needing to take at least a semester off because I have a hard time getting any art done while I'm teaching. But, you know, not everyone has that problem. A lot of people can be really productive right in the middle of teaching – which always amazes me.

Where did you go to school?
I started at University of Illinois in Champaign. I was in the sciences at that point, and then I dropped out of that. I think it was probably one too many calculus classes or too many engineers – hanging out with engineers – that end of science was really dragging me down. (laughs) I took a year off and finished my undergraduate degree at the Art Institute in Chicago.

Were you already in Illinois?
I was already in Illinois. Yeah, I grew up in Illinois. I've been here, more or less, for most of my life. I've lived other places for stints. I've probably spent maybe seven or eight years away from Illinois.

Were you dabbling in film, and science just seemed the safe way to go?
I didn't do film at all. In fact, I wasn't really making art at all. It was a hobby of sorts, but really I spent more time reading than I did making stuff. Though, come to think of it, there was a super-8 film class that I had in high school that I really loved that was an elective, but most of my electives were more dorky, like the Fermi Lab saturday morning science program. I was obsessed when I was in high school. I just pretty much stuck to the sciences and really thought that was the way that I was going to go. I was really interested in astrophysics and then…honestly, it was just the math that shot me down. The math and the engineers. They try to design those college lecture classes to weed out people who they feel don't have the mathematical acumen, and I was definitely one of them.

I also got a little freaked out at that point of my life about how all of my future work options seemed to be with military contractors. I just thought, "God, what are my options in this field?" I'm sure there are granted positions that you don't have to sell your soul to be a part of, but at the time, I was young and felt like, "Oh no, I'll compromise myself." So I did an about-turn, much to the surprise of my family, although they were very calm

about it in the end. They've always been very supportive. They've never been like, "If you do that, we won't support you any more." Or "We won't send you Christmas cards." I never got that vibe from them. They were always like, "Well, if you think that's the right thing to do, you should do it."

So, Art Institute was the next logical step?

That's where I ended up, yeah. I took a year off to travel and thought, "Well, I've always been interested in art..." It was a film class that I took which really clenched it for me. I think, in a way, filmmaking - the fact that I was dealing with optics, and mechanics, and time - really appealed to the physicist in me. And the way that the art form was mediated - the way that you're basically sculpting time. That's what got me going. I tried a whole smattering of classes, just like everybody does when they're still an undergrad and not really sure. And it's not that I didn't like anything else. But I enjoyed having to learn so many different things to make a film. I loved all the mechanical labor involved. And now I'm like, "God, what was I thinking?" (laughs) It took so damn long to get anything done that I don't know why I was so excited about all these steps.

Did you see a landscape or time-based film that sort of made sense because it was different?

That's a good question. I definitely remember really strongly when I was a younger kid coming back from watching, you know, whatever Hollywood movies I would watch with my brother and being completely amazed because he would come home and tell the story of the film to my mom because he loved to recount a film verbatim after he'd seen it. And I would be amazed how radically different of a film he had seen than what I had seen. He was always caught up with the narrative and the characters and the plot twists, and I was oblivious to that stuff.

I mean, I knew we had just watched the same film, but the things I would

notice would be like, “Well, what about that suspension bridge? You know, the one that was in the third scene?” And he’d be like, “What bridge?” I would always notice and get wrapped up in the places and the environments. Locations have always been what moved me, but I don’t have one charged moment that I remember watching a film and realizing, “This is what I want to do!”

There was definitely a lot small realizations… like seeing Peter Kubelka’s film UNSERE AFRIKAREISE (Our Trip to Africa) (1961-66). I remember that being sort of a little lightning bolt for me… finally seeing a film that was organized in a way that I felt like my brain was cut out for (laughs), like, “I can totally understand this!” Not that I didn’t admire films with stories, I love watching films with stories.

The myth about the experimental filmmaker is that they only like avant films.
Right, that we don’t like going to narrative films also.

And it’s like, “No, I just don’t wanna make them.”
I remember Antonioni was someone else who stood out…I guess because his films are so spatial…but I mean, when I first saw his films, and Jon Jost’s narratives and other people for whom the story’s really grounded in place, those films always clicked immediately. But I loved HERBIE THE LOVE BUG (1968) when it came out too, man.

The first, the original.
(laugh) Yeah, right. I can’t say I’ve seen the re-make.

I do want to see it, just to see such a train wreck.
Yeah, yeah. I’d definitely be curious…I mean, that’s one of the first films I remember walking to the cinema to see as a kid when the original came out. That and BUGSY MALONE (1976).

Oh, I just re-watched that!
You did?

It’s amazing. Netflix has a copy that’s got a Chinese menu. It’s fucking surreal.
It was surreal then. I remember it made a really huge impression on me. That’s awesome that you saw it. Oh my god.

It holds up so good. The songs are good and it’s so weirdly perverse. These kids get hit by pies and then they’re gone. So, they’re basically shot.
Right, right.

And all the cars are really bicycles. They peddle the cars.
Oh my god, I don't remember that at all. Really?

Yeah.
That's awesome. (singing) "My name is Ta-lu-lah."

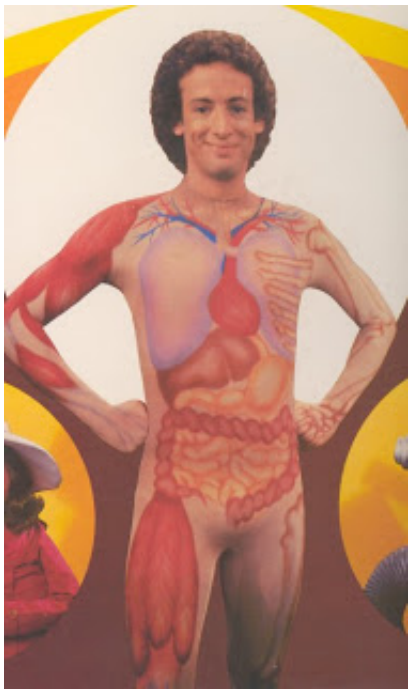
Someone said something to me, interestingly, the other day. They thought it was unusual that filmmakers' touchstones were less film than other forms of art. I don't know if that's true or not because I don't talk to that many filmmakers about what their touchstones were. But for me personally, narrative film was more inspirational than fine art.

Did you make a film at the Art Institute?
I did. I made a few films there. I made a film called MY ALCHEMY and I made a film called UPON A TIME. Which is...ehhh…it's okay. I would have the same reaction to MY ALCHEMY if it weren't for the fact that so many people have told me that it's their favorite film of mine. I'm always like, "What? Really?" So, I've come to trust that it has something in it that's good. Even though to me it seems like a super freshman effort. It must have something in it that moves people - that they connect with.

I made a few films at the Art Institute and then I took couple years off and just worked. I worked at Allied film lab which is closed down now. I was a printer of filmstrips. You know those old primary school filmstrips?

Oh yeah with the "boooop?"
Some of them were so good. I don't know what happened to them all. I made a point of collecting them at the time because I loved all the Mister Goodbody filmstrips. Outrageous. Do you remember that guy?

Yeah, he'd wear the skin suit.
Yeah. He's got a skin suit on with organs and whatever…muscles painted on it and he kind of looks like that exercise freak guy with the curly hair…



Richard Simmons.
Richard Simmons, yeah. He looks a lot like Richard Simmons. So, he's sort of a Richard Simmons head and body look-alike, but he's in these poses where he's like, "Mister Goodbody In The Wind." Or "Mister Goodbody Moving Uphill." They're really excellent, but I don't know where they are now.

I had a morning lab shift…it was really insane…from like four thirty in the morning to two in the afternoon or something. And then I projected at night. I was a projectionist for many years. And that was probably the best film education I'd had at the time. It was non-stop movie watching. You can't help but get excited. Then I started working as the co-op director at Chicago Filmmakers. And then, I realized that I had a backlog, so I went back to school because I felt like I needed some time off to make stuff. At that point also, I had started considering the teaching option. I'd done a little bit of freelancing at that point and knew that working in the industry or within that hierarchy probably wasn't the direction I wanted to go.

That's what motivated me to go to grad school really - just having a backlog of ideas and not having had the time to do it because I was working so hard. Cal Arts was good for that.

Was it most of the same teachers there now?
Yeah. Thom Anderson was a big influence for sure. His classes are a lot like his films. He will just show…he'll give this incredible lecture peppered throughout with myriad film clips…it's just encyclopedic, his brain - his knowledge of all these film clips. The way he teaches class is insanely

expansive. And James Benning was still there. He was obviously a big influence. And Betzy Bromberg, she was someone I worked with a lot.

Which films did you make there?
I made WAKING, which is a short. My thesis film was ON THE VARIOUS NATURE OF THINGS. I show that one pretty regularly. I also made a bunch of shorts: PALIMPSEST, POSSIBILITIES DILEMMAS, THE TRAIN FROM LA TO LA, A LETTER….

This DVD could've been way thicker.
I really wanted to make a double dvd. Because I get a lot of requests for THE BLVD and ON THE VARIOUS NATURE OF THINGS and UNTIED. I felt like it'd be really great to have a compilation with all that stuff, but I don't know…next time around maybe. There's too many.

Are the earlier films the same style? Or did you kind of work your way into the more controlled, longer take?
I worked my way into it, then out of it, and now I'm working back into it again. You know, it's interesting that FROM HETTY TO NANCY (1997) and IN ORDER NOT TO BE HERE (2002) are both on that DVD because those are the only two films I've made in that style.

Really?
Yeah. So, it paints a picture that's falsely emblematic…they're not unrepresentative of what my work is, but …

Those are the two extremes?
Those, in a way, are the two extremes. ON THE VARIOUS NATURE OF THINGS has much shorter shots, there's a good deal of found footage, it's all handheld, it's much more frenetic in its construction. I made FROM HETTY TO NANCY as almost a reactionary gesture against the stylistics of that previous film. In fact, I do that with every film. I think, "OK, now that I've finished with that tripod film, I'm going to make a handheld documentary about people instead of this distant, static, observational film about landscapes." I feel like they're reactionary in that way… developing out of frustrations with the previous film's limitations.

How did you decide to make a film about Iceland?
It was right after I had been living in L.A. for three years and knew I absolutely wanted to move somewhere that had a lot of snow and ice. I think a huge percentage of my films…not every single one, but in the last ten years, virtually every single one has been motivated by location first. Then I mine stories out from the location. I guess FROM HETTY TO NANCY was the first of those. The film right before that used Michael Faraday's 19th century physics lectures to the English public. It's basically an illuminated lecture, albeit very loosely illuminated. FROM HETTY TO

NANCY kicked off every film since then where I think, “Oh I’d really like to go to this place. I’m really interested in this neighborhood. How can I dig in more?”

That’s cool.
I wanted to go somewhere icy and dramatic, and I wanted to work near the sixty-fifth parallel where you’ve got the permanent day in summer and the permanent night in winter. Once I was obsessing about Iceland as a location, I started researching how I could get there. It ended up being via a Fulbright travel scholarship. Then I figured since Iceland was Danish for so many years, there would be some Danish cultural institutions to tap. I’m not sure if it’s out of colonial guilt or neighborliness, but the Danes are interested in funding Icelandic projects. I got some support from Det Danske Filmvaerksted which is a great facility in Copenhagen. They’ve got two really nice theaters and they’re always screening awesome films. They also have a post-production division with editing facilities. If they decide to support your film, they’ll provide you with the stock and a place to edit.

I originally wrote the Fulbright to research historic scientific and mythological texts in Iceland. I’m into that curious place where myth meets science, and how that used to be so much more common - there used to be more poetics to science. Right before I went, Thom [Andersen] suggested I read a book of collected letters by Louis McNiece and W. H. Auden. That’s where the letters in FROM HETTY TO NANCY came from. I had no idea at that point they would be in the film. But I liked that series of letters and how caustic they were. I just loved the tone of them.

What is that flag building you keep showing in the film?
Those are airstrip landing pyramids. Most of Iceland is pretty difficult to get around in the winter because there are so few roads. There is one road that circles the island called the Hring Braut, which means Ring Road. It basically follows the coast. The interior of Iceland is just a giant volcanic desert. Nobody lives there, except the occasional sheep rancher or meteorologist. A good half of the year you can’t drive there because the roads just become this thick gravel-encrusted ice. So people often use small airplanes to get around. Those small pyramids mark the airfields, and they’re the only architectural structures in the landscape, so I totally fell in love with them. I like the way that they become cairns that lead you through the landscape, and ultimately, the film. In Hetty’s letters, she mentions piled rock cairns they would find or build. You know, the schoolgirls get excited about building these cairns. Before I read those letters, I never even knew about the phenomena of cairns as path markers.

How are the people you encountered? Did they care about being filmed?
The people? (Laughs) Yeah, it was easy to find sheep, but it was hard to find the people. It really is an incredibly small population. When I was there, I

don't know if it's much bigger now, but the entire country was under three hundred thousand. I mean, tiny. The people there are fairly reserved, but once you get to know them, incredibly warm and trusting. There's very little crime in Iceland. The people are warmhearted, but they're slow to open. They've got that Scandinavian reserve to them. They're not quick to laugh or smile or to make jokes. Their personality surfaces a bit slower, but once it has, it's totally rock solid support, you know. They're would-never-leave-your-side kind of people.

Where were you living?
I was based in Reykjavík, the capital city, and was there for a good part of the year, but then would take little shooting trips out to the boonies. When I first got there, I hooked up with this group of geologists who were taking a big tour around the island to do rock sampling. And that was perfect because I got to see all of these remote places, and then knew where I wanted to go back and shoot. I did a little bit of filming with them, but for the most part, it was just a way to scout.

Most of the people I met were either sheep ranchers or fishermen. I met one eider duck down farm family that lived way up on an island in the northern fjords, and they had some milk cows too. Those are really the only industries there. Since I was in Reykjavík most of the time and had a lot of time on my hands – especially in winter when it's dark all the time – I took Icelandic classes, so I spoke a tiny bit. I think that alone…the rural folks would just melt. (gasping) "Oh you know Icelandic?!" "Well, barely." But that was enough of an effort to make people totally love you if you tried to speak a little bit.

It definitely came in handy to know a little bit. And since I drove three cars off the road from bad weather conditions, I'd always have to hike to farms and get their tractor to come get my car out of the shit.

And you were on your own the whole time?
No, there were a couple of time when friends came to help with sound recording. They each came for one month. But the rest of the time I was on my own. I tried to cram in as much shooting as I could while they were there to help. Otherwise, I just did everything myself.

That's an intense little jaunt.
Yeah, it was a real pleasure. Then I ended up moving to Latvia.

And then you came back to make a film about suburbia?
No, THE BLVD came after. FROM HETTY TO NANCY was so distant in a way. You never see people close-up.

Just the sheep people.
Yeah. The human population is only on the soundtrack. The film is mostly all distant, static observation. I'm very much not-of-the-community. So, THE BLVD was my reaction against that film. I wanted to make a film about my next-door neighbors in Chicago. Tim is my closest neighbor, or was. He's since moved. All of his stories about racing got me going. I figured, "I'll just make a film about all the street racers right here." I loved digging into the local streets. It ended up being a little more far-reaching than just my block, but it was definitely, for the most part, shot on the west side. And here was a whole other community, totally foreign, outside of my normal social circle. It was a little like being an anthropologist - getting totally involved in this unknown community right next door. It's a little schizophrenic actually. Sometimes I think filmmaking becomes schizophrenic because you get so wrapped up in these people's lives and they welcome you into their reality, but they never come over and spend time in yours. So you split your time, half in your own life, half in theirs.

How much do you get sucked in and how much do you keep a clear vision? With all these, do you pretty much end up getting footage and keeping the overall same idea in mind and then just dealing with it all in editing or are you doing some editing as it's going along?
It depends on the film. For THE BLVD and for KINGS OF THE SKY, I absolutely was not editing in my mind. I mean, not unequivocally. You make decisions every time that you frame something, but I didn't have an

overarching structure in mind whereas, in some of the other films, like IN ORDER NOT TO BE HERE, I definitely have a clear sense of scenes I absolutely need. I have pre-conceive more of the pieces, and it's more a question of going out to generate what I'm seeing in my head. Whereas with THE BLVD and KINGS, it's more of gleaning what's out there. "Gleaner" in the Agnes Varda sense - picking what's there and creating a shape with it once I sit down in the editing room. If I'm filming that way, I tend to edit in a frenzy – I'll give myself less than a month and just bang it out and it's done. These are films that happen more…

Natural?

No. The ones that are slower and more plotted – where I'm really consciously going to film certain things because I know that that's a puzzle piece I need – those take a lot longer to edit.

Did your short IN ORDER NOT TO BE HERE take a while?

It took a while because I would edit and realize, "Okay, I need to go shoot this now." So, the shooting and editing were happening more concurrently, whereas the more documentary kind of films are shot over a…either a three month period or, in the case of THE BLVD it was a year and a half period. Then I'm done, and then I go and do the editing. The shooting and the editing are completely separate and it just happens in this frenzy. The style of construction is pretty different for the different kinds of films.

IN ORDER NOT TO BE HERE seems scripted basically. Not that there's a 120-page script, but there's the obvious political overtones with suburbia and the way that we've made our own little prisons. But then at the same time, it's really beautiful shots and exposures. It's cool to look at the lines.

It's funny to try to make something about a place that ultimately you're horrified by or disgusted by or sort of frustrated by, but still want to make a

shot that's beautiful. It's a strange challenge. You know, "Well how do I show how horrifyingly vacant this is, and at the same time, make an image that people aren't going to have a meltdown if they have to look at for thirty seconds."

And that's the thing, I wonder at times, what kind of crowd is going to watch it.

That film completely surprised me because I thought it was one of those films that was going to be very private. I guess I didn't have much faith in what the audience was going to have patience for. So, I was really surprised when that film, of all my films, struck a chord. There was a lot of passion about it. They either passionately disliked it, or passionately liked it. It was really provocative in a way that the other films hadn't been.

It definitely gave me more faith in going whole hog - if I'm going to have a long shot, well, what the hell? I'm going to make it REALLY long, and not hold back from making the audience work, or making them sit through stuff. That film taught me that audiences want to work. There are a lot of people out there that appreciate not being pandered to and actually watching something difficult. But, when I first made it, I thought, "Oh man, no one's going to want to sit through this." I thought I was just making it for myself, and that it might show a few places, and that would be that… because folks want to watch the "people movies."

Just who wants to live in those cookie cutter homes?

That's what provoked me to make the film in the first place. How can someplace that's so hollow and gutted spiritually to me be so comforting and exactly what so many other people need and desire, and bust their asses working for…to achieve. I still don't understand it, but I made that film as an attempt to understand. After having grown up in the suburbs, it's this thing you ask yourself all the time. How are these people happy here? What are they getting out of it?

I don't want to live in an unsafe home, but these homes (and maybe the owners) are tasteless.

They don't have taste and they don't have…I don't think they sense how much they've been locked down. How much they're allowing themselves to be locked in or down. I don't know, maybe they're going to wake up at some point and say "Ahh! How did I end up here?" At the time I was first shooting, my parents were still living in one of the suburbs that I did a lot of filming in: Naperville, Illinois - which is very much like Valencia or Shaumburg. Upper-middle class, very clone-like, often gated, but not always…if they're not gated, they at least have those little gateways

announcing what the enclave is called. In effect, they're gated even if there isn't a guard there because everyone who lives there is so fricken suspicious if you're walking down their sidewalk and you're not from their community. They're self-gated.

My mom at the time…I would come out and sleep over at their place if I was filming during the week just because I was always shooting late at night. One night after dinner she was shaking her head and kind of crying and saying, "I just know that you're going to make something terrible about Naperville." Because she knew that I struggled with the place my whole life and was trying to come to terms with it. I was like, "Well, I don't think it's going to be terrible. It's just a process of trying to understand." My folks have seen it. And I'd say they appreciate it. They're parents, so they're proud. On occasion, they've actually forced their friends to watch some of my films, but, god, I can only imagine. I'm just glad that I've never had to be there.

At the Tupperware party?
Can you imagine? "Let's look at our daughter's experimental films!" And everybody there is just like, "Oh no!"

Did you encounter many people while you were shooting?
Very few.

Is that just 'cause you were shooting late at night?
Yeah, I think so. There were two or three times when security cars drove up and asked, "Umm what are you doing, ma'am? You can't be shooting here". And there were people working in the mini-mart or in the Dunkin' Donuts. When I was filming in those places, the people were kind of … they're just these service industry employees. They don't give a shit. There were no managerial-types there who cared. They were just like, "Yeah sure, film if you want."

"You can film my donuts."
"Go ahead, film my donuts" (laughs) I never saw anybody just walking on the street, or a neighbor who stopped and asked, "Can you tell me what you're doing here?" Nobody ever came out from any of the houses. The one interior, the little countertop and armchair, those are in a model home. I had talked to the real estate lady and gotten permission to film inside. It was just the security patrol guys, those were the only human interactions of the unstaged shots. The dog and the helicopter shots - I was working with people on those.

You worked with the dog.
Oh my god, that was a total fiasco. The first time I tried to shoot that, the dog we picked attacked the trainer. It was so horrible. Initially, I had

wanted…I was behind this fence. They were basically enraging the dog. We were enraging the dog because I wanted a shot of the dog running right at the camera, but we were behind the fence so it wouldn't attack us. So, they were riling this dog up. I had looked at a bunch of dogs because I wanted the one with the scariest, snarliest look. It was at this canine security company that leases their dogs out to security people who patrol lots at night, and to police who go on CTA trains with them sniffing out drugs. They have tons of dogs out there and they're all these scary, ex-fighting dogs. Anyway, the dog I picked went ballistic. I don't know if the trainer was new or something, but we were all on this one side of the fence and he was on the inside, and the dog just flipped. He started attacking the trainer. The guy picked up this bike frame that was in the yard and tried to hit the dog with the bike frame. It was a horrifying, bloody, freaking mess.

That's weird.

We couldn't even climb over the fence to help because it had hurricane fencing on top. It was so terrifying. One of the other trainers ran around to the front building because we were in the back of this locked industrial door. He ran all the way around, through the front door, through the building… I can't even remember how he got the dog off of the guy. The sound recordist I had with me that day refused to shoot with me again. He was so wigged out about it. I wasn't even filming. We were all trying to distract the dog. We were throwing stuff at the dog. The guy had his clothes almost totally ripped off and he was all cut up. It was so intense. What is that movie about the white dog?

WHITE DOG (1982).

I felt like I was in that film. I wasn't filming because it was too horrifying. We literally thought the guy was getting killed.

And this was the trainer of…
This was one of the trainers. What was incredible was he was okay. He went to the hospital - an ambulance came. The owner came running back out after the attack yelling, "Did you get that?" My jaw just dropped. I mean - I'm not a war journalist. I don't have the presence of mind to shoot when someone's actually being mauled right in front of me. For whatever reason, the owner was willing to have me come and shoot again. But, the second time we had to do it inside and we had to have the dog on the leash.

That's pretty appropriate for the film though.
I know! It's the security totally backfiring and biting you in the butt.

How did you decide to use the whole cops aesthetic?
The cop footage?

Which is fascinating while it's terrifying, too.
I had wanted helicopter images of people on foot being chased so that there was a mechanized pursuit…the police machine. An observational machine that was trapping people via the image making apparatus itself. Initially, I called around to sheriffs' departments to see if I could find the shot I had in mind. I just said I was a researcher teaching a class…I don't even remember what line I used... "We're examining various methods of observation…" I can't remember, but I got some departments to send me videotapes of footage they had of busts. I had the running shot in my mind and I thought I was just going to be able to find it, but I never could. The first image in the film is a found image, and that was really close to what I wanted, but I wanted one person running for a long time. So, I just decided I would stage it.

It ended up better as a staged scene because I got to let the guy escape, which was important to the movie at the end. I don't know what I would've done if I found the perfect shot, but then he got apprehended. I guess that wouldn't have worked, so I probably would've had to end up re-shooting it myself anyway.

Didn't you make your boyfriend do it?
No, no. It's this friend of mine, Joaquin De La Puente, that did it. Wow, yeah, I've never had a boyfriend who's that healthy, who could run that long (laughs) that would be good though. No, he's the one person that when I was wondering who the hell I could find who would be willing to run for so long, through traffic and then jump in a river… who came to mind. I thought, "Oh, Joaquin is insane; he'll do it." And he's very athletic. At the time, he was getting ready to move out of Chicago…that was another total fiasco. We ended up having to re-shoot that.

Really?

Yeah. It just took forever. It took me months to find someone who was willing to donate the helicopter time. It was a guy who contracts his 'copter to Fox News. He agreed to have me come up and basically do the filming on the way back from doing the morning traffic report.

I went out with Joaquin one day and we staked out the whole run – somewhere that would be kind of close to the heliport so that the pilot could do it easily on his way home. Initially, Joaquin started running from a school, but I cut that out because it became about a fourteen-minute shot, which was just too long. We plotted out the whole run, got ready to go up with the helicopter, and at the last minute, Fox News caught wind of the fact that there was going to be someone else up in the helicopter and they wouldn't allow the pilot to do it for liability reasons I guess.

But then, for whatever weird reason, the pilot… he's the one who owns the copter… decided he would take us up anyway, on his own time. There's also a guy who operates the gyroscopically-mounted camera. They both went up with me. Joaquin did the run, did the whole fricken thing, jumped in the river…actually in the first take, cop cars actually started following him and we had to radio down to the squads to let them know that it was just a film shoot. I thought, "This is prefect! It's amazing!" Poor Joaquin is probably flipping out, thinking, "Dude, they really think I've done something." We flew back to the heliport after the first run, and a friend went to pick up Joaquin in the river.

They met us back at the heliport and on the way back…we were shooting onto Beta… I said, "well, let's look at a little bit of the tape." The tape

operator guy rewound but he had FORGOTTEN to press record. Nothing was on the tape! At that point, I thought the film was over. I knew there couldn't be a film without that shot. I thought there's no way in hell this guy's gonna agree to take us up again. It's too expensive to fly the helicopter. Needless, to say it was really depressing. We landed… Joaquin and the driver had come up. They thought I was joking. I was like, "There's no shot." And they just started laughing. They're like, "Yeah right." I'm like, "No. No. There's really no shot." The pilot was so fucking pissed. He was military-esque guy with the tight assed walk and perfectly groomed mustache and very buff. He was containing his anger, but he was really pissed off. He stormed out from the helicopter to some trashcans and smashed them on the ground. It was incredibly tense. And then he just walked away. We didn't know where he went. We were all standing there like, "huh." And the poor tape operator, he was so…he felt horrible. He was so embarrassed. Something like this had never happened before and he'd been working with this pilot for years.

It's a different aesthetic.

Yeah, and just working with someone else in the helicopter and whatever… he just got flustered or who knows? To his credit, I don't know why, the pilot came back after about twenty minutes, and he was much more calm. Maybe he had a xanax or something, I don't know. And he just said, "It was our mistake. We'll do it again." I was almost in tears. I couldn't believe the guy was willing to do it again. Joaquin postponed moving to New York. And in the interim week before we shot again, I had gotten…I actually had a really bad accident. I got run over by a truck, so I was in a full leg cast the next time we flew…it was eventful. The filming of this project was eventful.

Damn.

Between the dog attack and the whole…jesus. For a film that's so hermetic, there was a lot of chaos in the filming.

How did you find out about the acrobats in KINGS OF THE SKY? Was this another location thing?
Yeah it totally was. I got interested in that area because it's the most inland place in the world. That was really interesting to me.

That's a crazy way to think about it. I'd never thought about that.
I'd been thinking about that in the context of the U.S.. I went to the center of the contiguous U.S. once. I really like the idea of the center of a land mass.

And it's Lebanon, Kansas, right?
It's right near there. There's a little bit of contention between two towns. They both say that they're the most central point. I think it depends on whether it's of the contiguous U.S. or what you're including in your U.S. when you say U.S.. There's another town that starts with an 'O', but now I'm not remembering the name of it. They're both really close together. So, thinking how enormous that continent is…the Eurasian continent… I got interested in that inmost region. Also, I've always been a fan of deserts, so I wanted to visit the Taklamakan because it's the second largest shifting sand desert in the world.

Through the course of reading, I found out about the Uyghurs, and found out about their political history. Then I read that tightrope walking was their national sport and I thought, "Oh, god. What a beautiful metaphor for where they're at." Politically and geographically: they're kind of sandwiched in between wanting technological advancement, wanting to have cell phones and economic growth. But at the same time, really struggling to hold onto their culture. It's such a catch-22 because if they allow technology and trade and the economic growth to come in, it also means an in-rush of the Han Chinese who are flooding, kind of drowning out, their own culture.

Plus, tightrope walking is just cool in general. Initially, I thought I would be making a film about a whole slew of different local sports, 'cause Uyghurs are known for their horsemanship…they have a history of this really weird horse games. There's this one sport, I forgot the name of it, that's kind of like polo, but you use a sheep. They actually toss a sheep between people on horseback.

Really? Using a sheep like a ball?
Almost like a ball. And some communities the whole sheep, a real sheep…

That's living and kicking.

That's living and kicking, yeah. And some use a dead sheep… they use just the head. And I thought, "jeez, I'll just make a film about the sports history of this area because it's so interesting." But in the end, it turned out better to focus on the tightrope folks. I raised grant money to go there not having any direct Dawaz [tightrope] contact, so I really thought, "Well, this could just be film about looking for tightrope walkers." I mean, maybe it's going to be an essay film about my failed attempt to find the tightrope walkers of East Turkistan.

It worked out real crazy. Within a week of arriving in Urumqi [capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region], I met the troupe, and not only met them, but was invited to go on tour with them because they just happened to be leaving in a few days. A month later, I finally spoke enough Uyghur to ask, "So… how long is this tour going to be anyway?" I had no idea it was going to be four months, but the timing was really serendipitous.

How did you fund it?

I had a grant. Once you're there, it's really cheap to live – the food and everything. Plus, I was sort of adopted by the performing family and so I stayed with them everywhere. If I had stayed in hotels or somewhere on my own, I would've definitely blown through a lot more cash. But even then, I would've had enough. I was supported by an agency that's not around anymore called the Chinese Adventure Capital Grant. It was a fund started by people who had gone to China during school, or right after school and ended up with money, so they set up this grant for other people to be able to do the same thing. I didn't have to work while I was there. I was just living with the acrobats and filming. Well, I was working in the sense that I would help them set up and breakdown – that was always a joint effort.

Was there an interpreter along the way?

No. When I first got to Urumqi, I had done a little bit of research so I knew there was a university in town. I figured there had to be English speakers at the school. I found some and they introduced me to a local journalist named Iliyar who spoke English. Iliyar was the one who introduced me to the troupe. He served as an interpreter before I left with them on tour. He helped with some of the first interviews I did with Adil where he's talking about his family history.

When we left, it was just me and the troupe. But I had my little notebook and just learned words as I went. By the time you've lived with a language for three months, you know enough to get by. You can't be witty, but you can express what you need and you can ask simple questions.

That keeps the filmmaking pretty pure too.
That's true for sure. People forget that you can communicate without words…that there are other forms of communication. I think it helped that I was traveling with artists – they're used to using their bodies to communicate so I think that it wasn't as strange to them to have somebody in their midst who they weren't going to be speaking with.

When the politics come into it – the crowd scene and the army comes in - I think it's a better audience experience when you're not prepared for that by narration or foreshadowing.
You know, that's a big point of contention, that scene. Almost inevitably the first question audiences ask is, "What was happening there with the police beating the people?" I did a lot of thinking about how I was going to contextualize this – whether I needed to. And I decided in the end to keep the scene as close to how I experienced it as I could. I was just as confused at the time. Initially, you know that there's something oppressive going on, but you don't necessarily understand the larger implications and the history behind the shot. And that seemed ok to me in the end. It expresses what I need it to: the confusion of that moment. Maybe audiences don't realize that the same scenario happened a lot. But it was really important for me to not have a voiceover explaining things throughout the film.

People are fanatic about Adil, so they show up in throngs, and then the Han police get completely freaked out because there's been a history of civil unrest there. That many Uyhgurs gathered together for any reason scares the authorities. So, a lot of times, the performances end up with over zealous police control.

How did you come to balance shooting the larger events with the quieter times?

I just shot what seemed compelling, basically. Which, to me, often are really quiet, kind of banal moments when there's not a lot happening. But it was a challenge. I was really intimidated by this film, more intimidated than any other film I've made because I've never felt so responsible for representing a culture that's not my own to the same degree. Ultimately, all I can do is represent my own experiences there and maybe, hopefully, give people some insight to who the Uyghurs are… because most people are like, "Wee-bol? What? We-wha..?"

If I can come away with people learning about a place in the world they hadn't really been aware of before, and the rhythms of life in that place, then maybe they'll be curious enough to look more into the political history of the area on their own…or maybe go there, who knows? I was freaked out when I was editing, for sure. In the beginning, I thought, "How am I ever going to do justice to this ancient civilization?" You can't make one film that tells that story. It became a lot easier when I decided, "All right, there's not going to be any voice-over. I'm not going to explain them. All I can do is explain my immediate experience."

How did you manage getting permission to film everywhere?

It was actually a big deal. I had a very peculiar carte blanche when I was there because I was traveling with Adil and he such a superstar. Most of the places I was filming in are closed to Westerners - closed to foreigners period. I was lucky. The cops were like "Oh, if (Adil) will sign this autograph for my daughter, no problem, we'll extend the American's visa." To the Uyghurs, Adil's not only an athletic superstar – a Michael

Jordanesque kind of character – but he's also like a Cesar Chavez. It's ironic that this guy who is the symbol of Uyghur nationhood and autonomy and independence, who's tied to the Dawaz origin myth of a tightrope walker vanquishing invading ghosts… which is just a thinly veiled metaphor for the Han cultural invasion… in actuality Adil is not that way at all. He's comfortable. He's the only Uyghur I met who has his own private car. It's mildly hypocritical in a way. He's a really sweet person and it's not that he doesn't believe in the Uyghur cause, but he's not an activist in any way.

Honestly, I never had any in-depth conversations with Adil, or any of the troupe members about their politics when I was there because they're all so paranoid about the implications or fallout of what they say. They don't want to be imprisoned, and they don't want their families to be hassled. The only people who were willing to speak openly on camera were after I left… Uyghurs who had already emigrated. That long monologue you hear at the end, that's a guy who lives in Toronto. He's an outspoken activist because all of his family is safely out of China and they're not going to have to deal with the repercussions of speaking openly. I didn't want to put anybody in that position where they would feel nervous about something they said on camera.

That makes sense. As important as political documentaries are, the subjects become a tool right away.
Exactly. That's a good way to put it. I didn't want them to be serving my agenda. I think the Uyghur political situation there is tied up with who they are, and I wanted to show that, but I didn't want to make a pedantic film. I wanted people to understand the circumstances, but then make their own political decision about what's going on in Xinjiang – about who's in the right, or who's being oppressed.

Has anyone in the film seen it?
The seven who defected, they've seen it. And two of them I knew very well from touring - Gulnar, the girl who tries to give me the cell phone at one point, and Dilxat – thr hat juggler. They operate as one large, rotating community of performers. They'll leave for two or three months, come back to their home base, cycle out some of the members, go on tour again, come back to home base, cycle out more members… on and on. The defectors saw the film when I screened it in Toronto. It was really sad. They were all crying.

I talked to Gulnar about two or three months ago when I was in California. She was the only one of the troupe who knew a little tiny bit of English. I was curious if they'd been granted political asylum, whether that had all gone through and what their residency status was. They went to some Canadian hearing their lawyer was going to start the proceedings by giving some background about what tightrope means to these people, like how

their art is integrated into the culture and what the culture even is, and the people on the jury had seen KINGS OF THE SKY and were like, "No, no, we know all about you guys. We know about your situation." How crazy that this experimental documentary was used literally as a tool to help these people gain political asylum. I thought that was incredible. I was totally psyched.

Has Adil seen it?
Adil has not seen it, at least to my knowledge.

I'm assuming he's still there performing.
He's still there. He went back. They're under an enormous amount of pressure right now because obviously after the defection, the government really clamped down on them. I've been afraid to send anything through the mail because I tried sending photographs after I first got back and by the time the performers got them they had been opened and photos had been taken out.

Adil was always unpretentious. I never got a sense that the other performers resented him. I think that he was completely personable with them and never had any attitude. When you're living in such close quarters with people for that long of a time, you have respect each other or else it's going to be a meltdown. I think they all had a real love for each other. That was my first experience ever being on tour. It's grueling.

What is the fear thing you're working on with the phone number that people can call?
I have a feeling that's going to be going on for a few years. It's just a survey. Lately I feel like fear has become such a motivational factor. It's been manipulated by media and by our current administration to corral people.

Keeping the fear level up.
As a method of control. That led me to think - to do a lot of self-questioning. What is it that I'm afraid of, and are my fears determining my…how do they factor into my decision-making? I started to ask myself that a lot, and then I just got curious about what other people are afraid of and whether this fear-mongering climate is actually effecting people. What are they actually afraid of? That's when I started printing up those cards because I thought it would be interesting to really hear directly from folks. Are they really afraid of terrorists? Are they afraid of being mugged?

The number one thing that people are afraid of….

What's that?
Lonliness.

Yup.
I was like, "Right on." That's my number one fear too. I can understand that. There have been so many answers that are not what the media portrays us as being afraid of. Is anyone really afraid of what the media is saying we're afraid of? Or is that just a lower grade fear, not the number one fear?

But what are people talking about in therapy?
Not being loved or not finding somebody to love, being lonely, someone you love dying…it's much more humane, I guess, and manageable. Not that loneliness is manageable.

Well, we kind of understand it.
We understand it…it's the fear of the other that the administration and the government is glomming onto as a form of control to make political decisions, but that fear is a false fear. I don't know what the project is, I'm still figuring it out. That's the whole point of the survey in a way. It's something that I'm still trying to figure out. Maybe this'll help me come to an understanding…at least it's nice to feel like I've got company.

There's a certain percentage of people whose number one fear is dogs or snakes. There's a lot of people who are deathly afraid of snakes. Or heights or more bodily things.

I would imagine a lot of people would say getting a job, supporting a family. No one ever says that?
You know that's interesting. There's been a lot of younger kids, people who sound like they're between twelve and seventeen or something who bring up AIDS and sexual diseases or getting pregnant, but I haven't really had people bring up class and economic stuff…actually I can't remember any answer that said that they're most afraid of losing a job. Maybe it's just a b-grade fear.

I've been recording all of them. Even the "Yeah. I'm wearing a black pair of pants and a gray shirt and I'm waiting for a cab and I called you ten minutes ago." It's so good. Why, with that answering message, would you think that

this was a cab company?

That's so great because it reminds me of HETTY - there's a beautiful shot and some guy walks by and looks, "Oh shit, I'm in…oh…I'm walking by. Sorry."
Yeah yeah yeah. It's like a waterfall.

They just keep walking. I think there's another shot like that.
Is it a scene with a dog…oh yeah there is a guy who kind of walks through, but he's not waving at the camera though.

You just don't expect it to happen.
He's just suddenly like do-do-do-do, walking through.

The dog, I was thinking about the dog, too. Dogs don't care about your art project.
"I just come here to see the landscape, man."

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