

Beyond Personal Documentary

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Abstract

"I make home movie therefor I live

I live therefor I make home movies"

Jonas Mekas, *Lost Lost Lost*

The personal documentary and the biographical film, at their very best, reflect both a desire to discover and need to reveal, discover that which is already forgotten and reveal how the personal story is implicated in social realities and historic processes. When a documentary does not embody a passion to discover a forgotten truth it simply become a chronology and cannot be referred to as personal, and when it fails to suggest how the personal is emblematic of some larger social or political phenomenon it becomes a form of pornography of the self. The successful personal documentary is thus inherently a form of investigation, an inquiry into the self or the nearby, and frequently into the past, tackling directly the problem of memory and time, and so the films often take on the structure of the fragmented nature of the broken down recollections that are its materials. In my research for the past three years, I've been working towards finding a new form for my work, one that would enable me to keep creating film-based art which in its essence can still be referred to as both personal and documentary, but would step beyond linear storytelling, beyond non-linear storytelling to a place where moving images and sounds create an actual new space in the gallery, a space with no beginning or end, a magical space that feels familiar and strange at the same time.

My films will often tackle themes of exile, immigration and otherness, and use an idiosyncratic approach to history, by telling my own subjective unofficial history of a particular time. In her book, *Experimental Ethnography*, Katherine Russell identifies four distinct, subjective voices of the filmmaker: as the speaker (narrator), as the seer (the person holding the camera), as the seen (the person on camera), and as the editor (277). It is this last editorial voice of the writer of temporal structures, the collagist, that is most central to my films and is one of the primary concerns of this dissertation.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Background	7
Investigations and narrative and non-narrative	10
Investigation 1: The joy of subletting	11
Investigation 2: Lietuva	15
Investigation 3: Robson corner of Shenkin	17
Methodology	21
Origin	21
Decision	22
Concept and approach	22
Production	24
Editing	26
Presentation/Installation	28
Distribution	28
Critical Reflection	30
New Horizon	32
Bibliography	34
Films and art work mentioned	34

Introduction

A week before immigrating to Canada I went to visit my aunt Noemi, whom I always liked. Her only son Eli, who was forty-five at the time, has a rare disease called Generalized Dystonia with symptoms similar to cerebral palsy, and their family seemed to live a very isolated life, mostly dealing with Eli's difficult condition. But in spite of Noemi's limited exposure to people she was a very keen observer of behaviour and often asked the right questions. When I told her that I was going to Vancouver to follow my filmmaking dreams she asked "what kind of films do you want to make?" It may seem like a trivial question but it never occurred to me that I should question my basic interest in cinema, I just knew that I always wanted to make movies and I was finally going to give it a go in Canada. But what kind of films *did* I want to make? After thinking about it for a moment I answered "I want to make films about what makes people the way they are, what makes me the way I am".

This, in nutshell, reflects my cinematic sensibility - I have an inherent interest in people and their behaviour because through them I can understand myself. This reflects a great desire to decipher my own behaviour but also reflects the basic function of cinema - it's a medium that works on identification. This perspective prioritizes the everyday and a focus on the lives of ordinary people. It echoes Baudelaire's idea of the artist as a flaneur, an observer, "the painter of the passing moment", his job is to "distil the eternal form the transitory" (12). But it is not only a search for the beauty of everyday circumstances or an attempt to capture the details of people's manners but an attempt to grab on to something of myself.

My films approach life from a psychological perspective, and are concerned with identity. They operate within the context of interactions between people in the spaces of community, urbanity and family. I look at immigration and early childhood trauma as the formative events of my own psyche and break down my experience as a twice-immigrant (Lithuania to Israel at age 6, and Israel to Canada at age 30) into its experiential building blocks. The theme of memory also plays a big part in much of my work, as do intergenerational relations.

In Walter Benjamin's childhood memoir, *A Berlin Chronicle*, he describes memory as a fan, writing that "he who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside" (296). Memory for Benjamin is an endless sequence of folds, unfolding further and further into infinitesimally small details, or fragments. There isn't a necessary order to these fragments and no chronology to the unfurling. This fragmentation (thematic and temporal) is central to my works, it mimics not only our memory but our very thinking and our dreams. The past, in my work, doesn't unfold on a straight line of causality but rather as isolated events and recollections, and the viewer is tasked with the job of putting them together. In many ways, the path towards further and further fragmentation was the one I traveled on the furthest in my research for the past three years, and that one which had opened the most formal possibilities for the creation of new work.

Gill Deleuze (along with Félix Guattari) develop the concept of multiplicity which is an entity that's achieved through the twisting or folding of simple elements. A multiplicity has porous boundaries and is defined provisionally by its variations and dimensions. It's a complicated structure that rejects the division between the one and the multiple, and looks at differences of multiplicities. For Deleuze multiplicity isn't an adjective - a multiplicity of meanings, but a substantive - the meaning is a multiplicity. I like the idea of multiplicity in the context of my film work. Rather than creating the film with the idea of discrete elements that come together to tell a story, I'm looking at meaning as a multiplicities right away, and looking at differences between these multiplicities, trying to take in everything that they are. For me multiplicity is a move away from straightforward storytelling and dramatic structure. In my film *Lietuva* (2015) I look at a particular family photograph, and the stories that various people tell about the moment when this photograph was taken act as kinetic fuel to the eventuality of me realizing why I don't have any childhood memories, but the act of looking at this photograph is charged with many other thematic possibilities: the possibility of deciphering identity through iconic relics, subjectivity in the photographic image and it's interpretation, the tendency to add narrative and timeliness to static images. The scene is in fact a multiplicity, already a complex structure of relations and meanings, rather

than a building block towards a dramatic resolution of a story. In some ways my practice based research for the past three years can be viewed as a path towards thinking in multiplicities.

Background

Historically, my films, and in particular *Lietuva* (2015) belong in the rich tradition of autobiographical documentary, which takes its cues from literary autobiography and from documentary film. The tendency to turn the camera onto one's self can be identified as a proper movement in the late 60's in the USA. Jim Lane, in his book *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*, identifies the fiction film David Holzman's Diary by Jim McBride and L.M Kit (1969) as a film that anticipates this movement (33), but it's origins can also be tracked down to American experimental filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and his film *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) where Brakhage documents his son's birth, and the films of Jonas Mekas, who started documenting his everyday a week after he came to New York as a refugee from Lithuania in the early 1950s. These were later released as the film *Lost Lost Lost*, 1976. Both of these filmmakers use everyday moments almost like found objects in a collage to create a work of visual art, creating what Katherine Russell calls "experimental ethnography". This approach had much influence of my work *Robson corner of Shenkin* (2016). The diary-entry is a popular form of autobiographical documentary, and notable works that had a great effect on my work include David Perlov's monumental project *Yoman* (1983), and Ross McElwee's films like *Sherman March* (1985). The intimate and telling interactions with family members and friends in these works fortified for me the validity of the "unofficial History" approach. Another major influence on my works are the films of Alan Berliner who uses particular story entry points to conduct investigations into his own life and family history, asking questions like, "is anyone's life inherently interesting if you look close enough?" in *Nobody's Business* (1996). The idea of trying to decipher one photograph and contextualize it in my film *Lietuva* (2015) is a direct reference to the opening of Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1996).

Then there is the more essayistic approach of filmmakers like Agnes Varda in *The Gleaners and I* (2000), and Wim Wenders in *Notebooks of Cities and Clothes* (1991), who investigate their own lives (aging, in the case of Varda, and artistic process for Wenders) by looking outward and making comparisons. Though my works don't necessarily operate on the same literary level as the above mentioned works, there are

narrative moments in them that I feel a connection to. In one scene in *Gleaners and I* (2000), Varda photographs her own skin in extreme close up, trying to come to terms with its wrinkles and spots, in a similar moment in *Lietuva* (2015), my mother my sister and I discuss what is the appropriate distance to photograph older people.

Formally, typical elements of the genres are the use of a subjective voice over narration, digging up archival footage and still photographs, or playing with that notion by presenting newly shot footage as archival, as in Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2011) or Tracy Emin's *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995), and a staging of a family encounter where the filmmaker tries to recover lost memories as in Anri Sala's *Intervista* (1998). All of these themes and elements can be found in the works that I produced in the past three, in one way or another.

Typical themes include immigration and displacement and the films often include a journey, both geographical and temporal, and use a variety of other techniques and strategies that according to Katherine Russell "merge self representation with cultural critique" (279). I have immigrated twice so far, at age six from Lithuania to Israel, and at age 30 from Israel to Canada. These events have made their mark on my personality, my perspective, and, to a great extent, on my work. The way immigration complicates identity and the self identification as 'the other' that comes with it, provide a unique vantage point on society and a strong documentary impulse. My father also had a great influence on me as a story teller. On one hand, his strong performative side modelled ways to hold an audience captive and on the other hand his limited attention span taught me how to tighten my storytelling and 'cut to the chase'.

The dynamic space between the objective and subjective offers a furtive ground for theoretical discourse about personal cinema. Jim Lane describes it as "the tension between the documentary impulse to objectively record a historical world "out there" and on the autobiographical impulse to subjectively record a personal world "in here"." (4). In fact, the very question of documentary film objectivity is a point of reference in this discussion as noted by Brian McIlroy in his essay *Observing and Walking the Thinnest of Lines: Phenomenology, Documentary Film and Errol Morris*, "it is now common to read that, theoretically speaking, documentary and narrative fiction film 'proper' are indistinguishable as constructed realities." (1-2). Jim Lane brings forth

three reasons why the autobiographical documentary is one of the most important sub-genres in current documentary. First, it brings in subjectivity to a field that traditionally strives for objectivity, second, placing the filmmaker in the work as both the subject and the maker creates complex references to the actual world, and third, personal documentary has formally enhanced the way documentary films look and sound (4). Personal , and autobiographical documentaries are open forms. They can include literary elements of poetry and prose, sections of visual art, as well as fictional or fantastic parts.

The focus of the autobiographical documentary are people who aren't well known to the general public (the film's aren't made by big name filmmakers), and focus on private events and histories of private citizens. But the films often contain significant connections to broader social events and make links between the everyday and wider historical realities. In my film *Lietuva*, for example, I attempt to link my parents' attitudes to child raising to the social realities of the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and connect the idea of government-promoted paranoia to my own childhood trauma. By doing that I produce what Jim Lane calls an "unofficial history" of that time (5). Rather than try and write an "official" history, by analyzing the effects of KGB tactics on the collective psyche of the people, I tell my own intimate story, and though it's an anecdotal approach to history and psychology, it contains much truth.

Much of my work has strong ties to another film movement that can be generally referred to as Direct Cinema with origins in the early 60s in the USA. These films minimize the usage of contrived elements like voiceover narration and formal interviews, and instead bring in subjectivity through editing and context. I shoot my films thinking about them in scenes, capturing the moments that would enable the work to communicate something real about what happened. I choose moments and characters that are inherently interesting to me, and therefor I try not to add artificial elements. My films *The Joy of Subletting* (2015) and *Lietuva* (2015) are both works of Direct Cinema. The filmmaker of that mode that most influenced my work is Frederick Wiseman and his seminal work *High school* (1968). Though he is far more concerned with the social than the personal, I am greatly influenced by his editing style of putting together complete continuous scenes that aren't necessarily connected to each other narratively,

presenting a puzzle for the audience to put together, driven by the perceived potential for truth in the individual scenes.

Investigations, narrative and non-narrative

I started this dissertation by talking about discovery a revelation because the idea of an investigation is central to my work. First, from a straight forward narrative perspective - in my works there is some objective truth that a character in the film is trying to uncover. This search, out in the world, is reflective of an internal search and realization, and the connection between the two is a key to reading the work. But there is also a formal investigation taking place. I'm looking for ways to radicalize the idea of montage in my work, introducing chaos and randomness into the work to gradually replace structure and narrative. After spending a decade and a half perfecting strategies of narrative structure, in my work as a film editor, I find myself yearning for non-structure and non-narrative, a perceived freedom, a shift from the head to the eye, or perhaps to a different part of the head. I'm tired of manipulating, I'm fatigued with the burden of responsibility the comes with structure and narrative, but can I do without its rewards?

Another form of formal investigation comes out of being confronted with the challenge of exhibiting film work in a gallery space. This challenge made me think about how film work can be presented and wonder about the possibilities that open up with presenting work outside the film theatre, in a non-scheduled screening. Yes, people are much less attentive in the gallery, and it's more difficult to achieve total domination of their perception, but perhaps that domination isn't necessary, or interesting? Perhaps the idea that the audience will have various physical and perceptual positions in relation to the work can add another plane of expression? I can play with the physical connection between the viewer and images on screen, since they now have an actual relation to the viewer's body. The temporal experience of film work in the gallery is also entirely open, the show doesn't even need to have a beginning or ending. Ultimately the Gallery environment seems to follow few conventions, it doesn't create concrete expectations and doesn't demand a story in the same way that the theatre screening does.

Writing this I realize that my formal investigation seems to exclude the process of filming. I considered forms of montage, I experimented with forms of presentation, but

my materials and the way I acquire them remain mostly unchanged. And yet, my final work *Robson Corner of Shenkin* looks radically different compared to my first work in this program, *The Joy of Subletting*.

In the following section I will break down my research based on the specific investigations conducted for the particular works.

Investigation 1: The Joy Of Subletting

<https://vimeo.com/113692501> password: joy

The notion of an investigation is particularly central to my film *The Joy of Subletting*, which follows my friend Itai Erdal and I, as we try to find out what happened to his sub-letter. The man mysteriously died in Itai's apartment, leaving all of his belongings strewn all over the place, almost as clues waiting to be interpreted and understood. In the film's opening Itai shows us the numerous empty journals he finds in the apartment, the man's last wish perhaps, for someone to fill out the diaries and tell his story. Once again, the expressed narrative quest to find out how the man died isn't necessarily the film's ultimate interest. Though we fully answer that question, the real theme of the film is the level of connection we share in this urban environment. Itai didn't care to know his sub-letter until after he died, and though we spend a night investigating the man's life, and, in many ways, fill out his journals for him, we are quick to start forgetting about him and erasing these diaries as soon as we've written them. Itai had a night to think about this, and comes to the conclusion that "this is not my life, he just happened to die here". He then mentions that I too had an opportunity to get to know the man, since he often sat and waited for his girlfriend on the swing I hung on the cherry tree outside my yard. "We're all neighbours here", says Itai, in the film's final statement. But I never did approach the man on my swing, who, as the film reveals, was having some tumultuous times, perhaps contemplating his last chapter right there outside my house. Moreover, I never even considered the fullness of his existence, in the same way that I don't consider the existence of most of the people who live around me, and briefly pass through my field of vision. These observations are made without judgment, neither Itai nor I seem to feel any guilt. I end the film on a long shot of my

swing, with some houses in the background. Maybe this is where the man's girlfriend lives, maybe it's my house, or maybe it's Itai's house. This is a picture of life in this quaint and pleasant city. This is the point when the personal becomes implicit in the social.

The film presents an actual investigation that happened in the real world - two guys snooping through a dead man's stuff. But for me, the real investigation continues long after the physical investigation ends. The editing stage, where I put my film together, is a place of research and experimentation. How can I order the series of events in a way that would reflect my perspective on the subject matter? What order will promote a sense of authenticity and truth? What sequence will achieve the opposite, and make it feel constructed and contrived? I created three, very different, cuts for this film through the process of editing. The first was a chronological cut, which was done in continuity-editing style, where I attempt to preserve the illusion of continuous time and space, neatly cutting between matching shots, carefully creating a logical progression in the dialogue, methodically constructing a sense of completeness. Here I put my skills as an accomplished editor to work, capitalizing on the drama, using reaction shots, music and everything else at my disposal to make people want to watch this thing. Once this cut was complete I discovered that it privileged the narrative at the expense of theme and meaning, and surprisingly, was perceived by many as fictional (potentially because the events are so unlikely). Most people thought that Itai was an actor and that this is a film in the found-footage genres.

I decided to embrace the fictional potential of the story and wrote an alternative fictional dialogue based on the events I documented. I got two actors to perform my script and cut them along-side the documentary footage as two versions of the same event. The result wasn't very interesting. It seemed that the two styles undermine each other, and especially the fictional narrative seemed unbearably contrived. This reminded me that in a resolved work the formal investigations should probably be kept in the background.

I decided to lose the scripted version, and recut the film for the third time, this time prioritizing theme and meaning, ignoring chronology and the notion of continuous space. I followed an intuitive decision making process, simply cutting to what I wanted

to see next. Some of these decisions followed the story, others seemed like associative connections, and others were hard to explain. The resulting cut was fragmented and called upon the viewer to piece the story together.

The film finally seemed to include the social commentary I was looking for, and was perceived as a documentary that contained some truth. Randolph Jordan, in his essay *The Gap: Documentary Truth between Reality and Perception*, notes that truth in imagery isn't necessarily "a function of the image's indexical relationship with its subject" (1), but rather that "truth might be understood as that which lies in the gaps between the perceivables that we fill in with the stuff of thought" (1). There is an interesting parallel here between film and perception, editing and thinking. The more ordered and comfortable the film is, and the smaller the gaps between ideas are, the less truthful our perception of it is, because it doesn't resemble the way we think. Dai Vaughn, an editor of thirty years, in his collected essays about documentary film *For Documentary*, comments on the connection between order and the perception of truth, saying that "the mere act of cutting a sequence into coherent shape, the craftsman's compulsion to resolve the irresolution and tidy up mess, contributes to a tradition whereby the viewer sails under sealed orders: and the very structure of the film conspires with the well-turned commentary to rob it of that penumbra of incomprehensibility which would preserve its link with reality and encourage the viewer to grant it further thought." (33).

But the fragmentation of a chronology achieves more than a sense of realism (or truth). The fragments in the film can not be successfully re-assembled back into some order, moreover, they don't even feel like fragments of anything. The complex structure of the film stands on its own, without any relation to some original order of events. This is also true thematically, the film engages us through an overt investigation thus raising basic questions about knowing. Can we know someone based on a poem they wrote? A selfie they took? A diary they never wrote in? A prescription drug they took? The empty vodka bottles they drank? The bible they stole from a hotel room? These fragments of a person cannot be successfully arranged into an identity. But the film raises other questions, and allows for other readings, moral questions around suicide, religion, the ability to overcome childhood trauma. The unique and complex structure that holds all these broken narratives and themes can be referred to as a multiplicity. It's a complex

structure that does not refer to a prior unity, there are no units of meaning that can be easily identified and experiences, the film doesn't have a satisfying relation between the one and the multiple, there is just multiplicity.

The final version of the film runs 20 minutes, and though it violates most notions of film continuity, feels like it tells a coherent story that happened in the world, and can be read in a psychological and social context. Fragmenting and folding a simple chronology - the events of one evening, into many disjointed moments that seem to take place out of time, was the first step on the path of radicalizing narrative structure for myself. I had to sacrifice my dramatic instincts for the opportunity to actually say something, not an easy thing for a professional editor to do.

Investigation 2: Lietuva

<https://vimeo.com/134073771> password : lietuva

Lieutva (2015) has a clear and open question that is setup in the beginning of the film, namely “why don’t I remember anything from Lithuania?” I revisit my birth place (Vilnius) after 35 years trying to remember something by encountering the physical landmarks of my childhood - the building I grew up in, the playground, my daycare. And so, at least on the surface, the film seems to address questions about the nature of memory, why do we remember certain things and forget others? What are actual memories, and how do they differ from second-hand memories, family stories and photographed moments? We get to observe two modes of investigation, one where I actually travel to Lithuania and physically place myself in my childhood arena, and the other in Israel, where I investigate my past by looking at photographs and talking to my family members in an informal setting. This raises questions about these two distinct modes of investigation and how they bring to light different types of information.

Formally, the tension between these two storylines is the major narrative force in the film, and though they are practically unrelated and shot four years apart they illuminate each other and provide many opportunity for a synthesis of ideas and juxtaposition. The conversation in my parents’ apartment focuses on the moment of immigration as the cut off point to our ‘Lithuanian life’, and it’s revealed that this was a traumatic moment for every member of my family. The political reality of the time (Soviet occupied Lithuania, interrogation by the KGB, wire tapping), and my parents’ status as dissidents and its uncertainty, are two social realities that are brought to light. This is also my way of introducing the idea of trauma into the film.

As my physical quest in Lithuania continues, it becomes clear that it’s unlikely to produce any tangible results in the form of actual memories, I will not gain access into these blocked moments. But the other quest, talking to my family in Israel, is more fruitful. It turns out that I was not informed of our impending plans to leave Lithuania and so the whole thing came as quite a shock, and this may be the reason why I blocked out my entire life in Lithuania from memory.

The quest is over, but the film isn't. Back in Lithuania my sister tells me of another buried moment from my childhood, my first day at daycare. This too came suddenly, without any preparation or a 'gradual entry' plan, and, according to my sister, it too had visible and long lasting effects on my psyche. At this point the story broadens, and it is no longer about my particular quest, nor is it about the nature of memory, but rather about how early childhood trauma shapes who we are. It's a tragic realization - we are made up of these traumatic moments to which we no longer have any real access. As my sister finishes her story hard rain starts to fall (always a convenient metaphoric moment) and I escape into the decrepit staircase of my childhood building, where I watch the rain through a dirty window. This is a long passage with no action and no dialogue, just a space for contemplation and mourning.

Lietuva mixes fragments from two separate chronologies, creating a sense of disorder. There aren't clear relations between the fragments, if they can even be identified as such. Once again the work functions as a multiplicity, a unique and complex structure of ideas and moments that lead to an experience, and creates a space for thematic contemplation.

Investigation 3: Robson corner of Shenkin

Excerpt - <https://vimeo.com/173935037>

Installation documentation - <https://vimeo.com/170099895>

And still it felt like I've only started walking on the path towards fragmentation, disorder and multiplicity. During my first two years in the program I started experimenting with the possibilities of showing film and video work in the gallery as a response to the challenge of the MAA program to considering film as visual art.

At the same time I began exploring film and video works by artists who successfully operate in this world, and I began to collect elements that seemed interesting. I looked at the films of Rodney Graham, such as *Vexation Island* (1997) or *CitySelf/Country Self* (2001), and though I wasn't interested in the conceptual reduction and intellectual humour that is in the core of much of his video work, I was curious about his use of the loop structure and the performative aspect of his films. This influence is apparent in my video work *Smash The Fountain, 2014*, a short loop where I smash a video monitor displaying Duchamp's *Fountain*. This was my naive response to the challenges I was facing as an 'immigrant' film person in the fine arts world. The work is quite minor, but while making it I discovered that much of my film and documentary methodology applies to this kind of work, and that the process of making and showing it was very satisfying. I discovered that it allowed me to create video works by myself, in my studio, having all the tools that I need at the tips of my fingers.

During my search for relevant contemporary video artists I came across the works of Omer Fast and was immediately struck by the clever connection between presentation and content in a work like *The Casting* (2007). In the installation room we hear two stories told by one American soldier (actually an actor acting as an American soldier) intercut together. One story is about a bad experience with a woman in Germany, and another about a shooting incident somewhere in the middle east. On one side of the screen we see stylized dramatic recreations of these stories and on the other side we see the actor telling the stories and Omer Fast listening. We can see that the stories the actor is telling are made up of many little pieces cut together from several shooting days. By using several channels of projection with one sound track he created

multiple possible experiences of the work that enhance each other. I also enjoyed the fact that his work brought to the foreground media practices and in particular editing. In *CNN Concatenated* (2002), Fast created a collaged, video monologue made up of many CNN anchors delivering one word at a time, forming a disturbing voice directly addressing the audience, telling us why we may be unhappy in our lives. For my interim exhibition in 2015 I created a collaged religious sermon, made up of many evangelists saying only the word “God”. The rhythm and the delivery makes it sound like an actual sermon, with changing intensity and audience reactions, but all you hear is “God” repeated. Once again I found the process of making this work and exhibiting it satisfying. Working with found footage was liberating, there is so much film and video that’s already out there!

But these early conceptual works were on a different path, a path of formal inquiry, they weren't where I was really going. They lacked the documentary element that's in the core of my sensibility as a maker, they didn't address the challenge of showing video in the gallery in an interesting way and they weren't multiplicity. They were video puns, perhaps even successful ones, but they didn't represent my strength of creating unique and complex structures that exist on their own, and they lacked the intimacy and personality I love.

Robson Corner of Shenkin, 2016, seems to address many of these concerns. The work is a four channel video installation, covering most of each of the four walls in a square room. Each video channel has its own audio track, which syncs up with the imagery on that video channel. The channels loop independently, and because they each have a different running time (20 minutes on average) the specific combination of images and sounds at a particular moment is never repeated, and the experience can never be exhausted. The video consists of extreme slow motion images (96 fps) of random people crossing the street, walking towards the camera, slowly coming into focus for a brief moment. The videos are shot in Tel Aviv and in Vancouver and are presented as a fantastical intersection between these two worlds. This is an opportunity for people to stand at the intersection of the two identities inside of me, and experience their similarities and differences. The audio tracks contain a spoken narrative taken from two interviews I conducted with my wife Noa Spivak in 2001 and 2016. In the interviews

she comments on her experience as an immigrant, on her changing identity and on feelings of solitude. These audio 'thought-bubbles' are embedded in the sound tracks of each of the channels and so their order in relation to one another is always changing, sometimes two interview pieces will complement each other, sometime they will contradict each other because of my wife's changing perspective, and sometimes they will overlap and making comprehension difficult.

The work defies structural characterization. There are no discernible units in this structure, it isn't easy to breakdown the experience of being in that room. The space it physically occupies is a room in a gallery but the space it creates is somewhere else or perhaps nowhere else. The room has a kinetic quality, it moves and twirled the viewer, generating a strong body experience. The room seems to edit itself and so the work can be viewed as a generator of connections and associations. And at the same time the work is still personal and intimate and the materials are very much documentary materials - footage taken from the world, audio interviews with a common person, dealing with someone's identity.

In this work I feel like I've resolved many of the questions I was dealing with for the past three years. I wanted to keep making video work that maintained its strong connection to personal documentary, I wished to develop a unique visual style that would distance me from the home video aesthetic I was getting tired of (or more simply stated, I was looking for something beautiful), I wanted the work to utilize the opportunities that arise from the presentation environment - the fact that people are able to move in the space and the many projection areas available, and perhaps most important, I wanted to achieve multiplicity, the sense that the work operates on many planes, raises different questions and invites varied readings, but it doesn't achieve that through a particular order of elements, I wanted it to feel like there are no elements, no structure, just an independent endless space, different every time you enter.

Methodology

In a particularly memorable scene in Alan Berliner's documentary film *Wide Awake* (2006) he drinks a cup of coffee for the first time in his life and decides to use the caffeine rush he's feeling to explain to the audience the strange, colour-coded, massive wall of drawers behind him. He pulls out drawer after drawer containing film reels and sound reels, and explains "the red boxes are black and white film, old news reels, educational film, things I got from the national archives, the orange boxes are sound effects...", he continues this explanation at break-neck speed for over 5 minutes, while opening dozens of drawers. This is a self portrait of the documentarist as a collector. Though I am not that obsessive of a collector, and definitely not that organized, I live life looking around me for opportunities to collect filmic moments to be used in some project down the road.

Origin

When thinking about the ways in which I make films I must first ask myself where do the ideas come from? What is the origin of the desire to convey something to an audience (or perhaps to myself)? I realize that the origin of my personal films is quite ancient, in relative personal terms of course. By the time I actually engage in making the films, I've already been carrying them with me for a long time. The void surrounding my birthplace of Lithuania, my formative years of which I have no recollections, the black and white photographs of a strange boy standing in an unfamiliar place, have all been on my mind as far as I can remember. The question of memory and its relation to identity, the formation of second hand memories out of family narratives and the difficulty of holding on to the passing moments of our life are themes that have been occupying my inner dialogue for as long as I can remember. All these themes have been waiting for an event or a story to hold them together. So, my preoccupation with identity, some sentimental notions regarding the past and my constant search of good narratives are perhaps the pillars of my practice. In the end I feel that the good stories I have to offer are about myself, and not because I'm a very important person or because my life is particularly interesting, but because I know it best. I've been thinking about these stories my whole life and put them through the great editing machine of time and

can now tell them eloquently, in a way that would make them relevant to others and would tie them to social or psychological understandings.

Decision

The second question I ask myself, reviewing my methodology, is how do I decide which of these preoccupations and internal conversations has ripened, and is ready for a work to be created? A definitive answer is hard to come by.

Sometimes it's some previously shot footage that calls out for completion, as is the case with Robson Corner of Shenkin. A few months ago, a friend of mine, who was working on an autobiographic play, reminded me of an interview I shot with his wife 15 years ago. It was my first year in Vancouver and the pains of immigration were very much alive for me, so I had the idea to follow the immigration process of three Israeli women (my wife included) and started by shooting several interviews. The immigration project never went anywhere but my friend wanted to review his wife's interview for the purpose of writing a play. As I was capturing the footage from tape I had the opportunity to look at my wife's interview as well, and was struck by how much had changed. In the Interview my wife is unquestionably an Israeli. I see it in the way she expresses herself, and I hear it in the content as well. As I was watching the interview I was trying to imagine how she would answer my questions now. What would her perspective on immigration be? How would she describe Israel? How would she describe Canada? Instead of just wondering I decided to reshoot the interview, and in order to prevent any tainting of the results I didn't allow Noa to see the old Interview (even though she repeatedly asked to see it). The new Interview revealed an extremely altered identity in almost every way possible. I now felt like I may have some materials to begin thinking about an actual work, the decision to pursue (or perhaps engage) was made.

Concept and approach

Once I have decided to make something I take a step back and start thinking about how to make it, or more accurately what exactly it should be. I try to harness my excitement about the subject matter, the story or the materials and imagine myself at some point in the future experiencing the completed work. I don't try to see it all finished

in my mind, because if I could do that what would be the fun in actually making it, what would I be investigating? But I try to imagine it's basic form and it's effect.

When I was thinking about Robson Corner of Shenkin I was aware that the idea of juxtaposing two interviews is a didactic one, but I'm not interested in a simple statement about how time changes us, I'm interested in finding a form that would allow several identities to exist simultaneously and bring forth a subject matter visually. One of the things that seemed to have changed the most for my wife in the fifteen years that passed between the two interviews was the direction of her gaze. Fifteen years ago she looked outside for answers, she considered herself as a constant and the environment as something that could (or should) change, whereas now the opposite was true, she looked inside herself for answers. This idea of how people look, or where they look, and how this may be a difference between Israel and Canada connected me back to a visual or formal idea I was thinking about. For some time now I've been experimenting with shooting people on the street from close range with very long lenses and a very shallow depth of field in slow motion. I'm trying to create high drama from everyday life by allowing the viewer to look closely at a strangers face for a very short period of time. There's something special about slow motion. It's as if through it, time emerges as a malleable material and announces itself, "I was always here, you just weren't paying attention". It has the capacity to monumentalize the mundane, often in disturbing ways, it sharpens our gaze and gives priority to movement, to expression, to humanity. Immigration does many of the same things. The act of displacement gives urgency to the examination of the very basic relations between an individual and society. It destabilizes the internal notions of self-worth, it puts into question many of our well-ingrained behavioural norms. I was mostly impartial to slow motion in scripted work I saw through the years - in an already-contrived context, the technique seemed like a lazy way to achieve drama. But when I looked at the work of Bill Viola, and in particular the *Quintet of the Astonished* (2000), I realized that in a different context slow-motion monumentalizes video and has the capacity to give it painterly and sculptural qualities I was interested in. In the *Quintet of the Astonished* 5 actors are shown silently having a deep response to something. We can intimately look at their slowly changing expression and gain access to their emotional world. I was struck by how slow-motion, which a kind

of artifact, actually cancels out the artificial nature of the work, and the emotions expressed are perceived as strangely truthful. I enjoyed this realization, particularly since the home-video style of my earlier documentaries started to feel limiting in the sense that it was very difficult to capture some transcendence and introduce something sublime into the work. I desired to break the representational nature of this style and introduce some painterly qualities into my work. I wanted some of the stillness of the way we look at paintings to be possible for my work, I wanted to introduce some artifact into the work but I wasn't interested in staging. Interestingly, Bill Viola motivation for using slow motion was quite similar, in an interview from 2013 for the website Art in America, he describes how his first use of slow motion in 1995 came out of looking at paintings "I became fascinated by Pontormo's altarpiece Visitation (1528) and wanted to make a work dealing with the essence of a social situation with interrupting and shifting relations. I envisioned it in extreme slow motion, resembling a painting with three women clothed in the beautiful colors of Pontormo."

I was also thinking about the various possibilities of showing film work in the gallery space and in particular Omer Fast's *The Casting*, with its multiple channels and perspectives. I decided to try and put all these thoughts and influences into *Robson Corner of Shenkin*.

Production

When I move to production I usually strive for a healthy mixture of planning and chaos. I think about the interviews I'm going to conduct, I may even prepare for them by reviewing some notes, or referring back to relevant existing footage, but I never write down a list of questions. I usually keep topics of interest in my head instead. I like to just put myself in a situation and react. Frederick Wiseman, one of the world's most accomplished documentarists, describes his production stage as a process of collection and thinks about his reactive mode of shooting as a "shifting combination of judgment, instinct, and luck" (3). I like being prepared but I don't like it to be planned. I like an interviewee's answer to invite the next question.

Though not primarily a cinematographer or a sound recordist, I usually shoot my projects myself and record the sound. I've been more engaged in both elements in the last two years, and have been getting more proficient at both. This production model allows for great freedom and mobility, and the tools I'm using are relatively easy to operate on my own.

For the purpose of shooting my street footage I needed a special lens that would allow me to achieve the shallow, painterly look I wanted. I found a long, fast zoom lens that allowed me to shoot extreme close ups from about 15 foot away and at the same time work with an open aperture that delivered a very shallow depth of field in a high-light situation. Coupled with my DSLR's 96 frames per second capability, a small zoom recorder and a light-weight tripod, my whole production package fit into a backpack.

The idea was to put myself in the street, setup the camera at eye level where many people pass by, and hide in plain sight. I was like a trapper setting up a trap in the form of a 2*3 foot frame, 15 feet from where I was hiding, and anyone who passed through the frame was captured. To camouflage myself I used my cell phone, pretending to read or send emails, not looking at the lens much, just putting one hand on the tripod. There was a clear sense of danger and vulnerability shooting this way. There was some price to pay for looking people straight in the eyes, which is why we usually avoid doing that. I registered this sensation and made sure it was present in the final work. On several occasions I was confronted by people on the street inquiring about my intentions there, but for the most part my camouflage worked and people didn't notice me much, or if they did, they didn't make much of it.

I quickly realized that another way to hide myself was to record sound as I shoot. The small zoom recorder was another thing I could just hold and look at, drawing less attention to the camera. Doing this, I became increasingly aware of the richness of the sound scape around me. I started picking up fragments of conversation, becoming aware of how aggressive the traffic sounded, and was struck by how much music is on the street. In Tel Aviv a busker dominated the sound space with an intense display of drumming on pots and pans and in Vancouver the nearby food cart produced a distorted version of hip hop and pop songs. All these observations that were made on the day of shooting contributed to my approach to the sound mix of the piece months later.

Editing

Based on my indecisive production model, where materials are often collected without a concrete plan, it naturally follows that much of the creative work is done in editing.

There are two general methods that I apply to editing my films - reductive and constructive. These aren't mutually exclusive and I alternate between the two quite freely. In the reductive method I simply select materials to be used, in no particular order, with no great refinement, and keep narrowing my selections until I arrive at a desirable assembly of footage, which can now be ordered and shaped into a film. In the constructive method I select a starting point, which isn't necessarily the beginning of the film, but often is, and start making a refined film right away, adding more pieces into an evolving structure which looks like a film from the very beginning. There are advantages to both methods. In the reductive paradigm I take fewer risks, carefully considering my footage, over and over again. It's also an easy way to start a task that may often be incredibly daunting. But I much prefer the constructive method because I can begin making the film right away. Every piece that I complete looks like a film and the process is much more enjoyable. I refine my cut as I go and can always review what I've done, enjoy it, and become motivated by the emerging work. This process relies heavily on a constant flow of ideas and continued inspiration, and has the potential to frustrate or even self destruct when the flow of ideas dries up.

Alternating between these two methods eventually gets me to a point when I feel that the film has reached some completeness, that the story is told, or the effect is achieved. This can be called a rough cut. I typically seek someone else's input at that point. I will screen the work for three or four people and take careful notes. I selectively address the notes that resonate with me and recut the film. This process may continue for a few more iterations. Sometimes a complete rethinking, or re-imagining is called for. Once I feel that the major problems are addressed and the current cut wasn't an improvement on the cut before it, I conclude that the film has reached the necessary

maturity and move to the fine cut stage. I review every cut and every moment and make sure that it's as perfect as it needs to be. I make a series of small changes that improve the overall experience significantly. Once this process is complete I lock the cut. The last two stages of completing the film are sound and colour (which also refers to some other aspects of picture adjustment like reframing or titling). I may use professionals to help me with these elements or do them myself.

How much of this process was still relevant to a work like Robson Corner of Shenkin? There isn't a beginning or an ending, there is no narrative, I wanted to release much of my responsibility to the connections in the work, so it self-edits in a way. And yet, the process was very much the same. I selected materials, I made transitions to hold them together, I matched dialogue and sound to picture and created 4 distinct movies from each street corner, two from Vancouver and two from Tel Aviv. But my criteria for many of those decisions was very much different than it usually is. I made decisions freely, based on momentary desires, I avoided any didactic or narrative thinking. I was cutting for myself, staying close to my intuitive reactions to the footage, never overthinking anything. There were no setups and payoffs, no overt manipulations, just an impression, a feeling. This non-cerebral approach to editing was exciting. The work wasn't any less detailed or precise but it wasn't didactic, there were no parts in a greater structure, there was just some complexity that was being created and seemed to dictate itself.

But even with all 4 channels of video and audio complete, the work wasn't finished, moreover, it wasn't even made yet, I haven't seen it yet. Throughout my work as a filmmaker and editor, the presentation of a work was merely an after thought. Yes, it mattered some if the film was made for the theatres or for television, yes, there sometimes was a particular target audience in mind, but the presentation was always a two dimensional medium, the audience was watching while sitting, and the experience was always scheduled. How does all this change with people standing as close to the screen as they want, coming and going, perhaps even talking to each other.

Presentation/Installation

Installing *Robson corner of Shenkin* was an entirely new experience for me. Working with the limitation of a particular space, I had to figure out how to project a large image from a short distance without creating shadows on the walls, I had to experiment with projection surfaces and I had to deal with a very challenging environment sound-wise. But beyond all the technical challenges I was facing, I had to deal with the anxiety of not knowing yet if the work is any good. The four channel projection that coved most of an entire room and created a certain effect, only played in my head to that point. Just two days before the opening, and I have not seen the work at all. The night before the opening, around 7pm, I connected all four projectors and speakers in the room, and started cleaning the floor of my exhibit. As I was cleaning I gradually adjusted the audio levels and the projection settings, still very much in install-mode, in some way afraid to look at the work. But there was no avoiding it any longer, the work was installed, the floor was clean the audio and video properly set, and I had to look at the work for the first time. I found myself standing in the centre of the room being spun and thrown by the images and sounds, attracted to the directionality of the sounds, drawn to the emerging people in the shots, being jarred by the clashes and contradictions in the narrative. I realized that it was working. It was an amazing sensation, a familiar sensation, not unlike the moment when I look at a good scene I just finished cutting and appreciate it as a viewer for the first time. I realized that this new process of a gallery installation is well within the scope of my methodology. I actually enjoy it. I had ideas and strategies in putting this work together. I wanted to create a new space which wasn't experienced as a room in the gallery, I wanted the work to be read as infinite, I wanted poignant juxtapositions to be created in the narrative, I was hoping for illusions of continuity in the space, with vehicles and people crossing from Robson to Shenkin, surprisingly, it was all there.

Distribution

My films and installations are made for general audiences but not for everybody. There is a certain expectation that comes with the commitment of time. Audiences often expect a high degree of entertainment at the movies, some expect an escape from everyday life, neither group will enjoy my films. I am looking for sensitive audiences, introspective people who seek an active experience, which allows them to interpret the films and project themselves unto them. The works are not specifically meant for an art-audience and have the potential to effect various types of people, but I am primarily aiming at the film festival goers, the experimental film lovers and the documentary film aficionados. I have yet to decipher the visual arts crowd. The reactions in the gallery are reticent, people aren't eager to start conversations or express opinions and the whole experience is subdued. No one claps, no one laughs and no one cries. But perhaps it's the same destabilizing effect of immigration? I have immigrated to this art space from the comfort of my well established career in film, and people are just a little different here. In *Robson corner of Shenkin* I ultimately accept my shifting identity as a result of my immigration to Canada, but I'm also learning to accept my immigration to the visual art world, now as a three-time immigrant.

Critical reflection

Coming into the MAA at Emily Carr I was hoping to spark something new in my practice. I spent 15 years perfecting my story telling skills, working as an editor and director, to the point that these skills became somewhat of a burden. I wished to work in a more free paradigm, where story and entertainment were not the only measuring sticks. Working in a commercial environment, a film wasn't permitted to be puzzling, or not deliver the answers to the questions it asks, a film couldn't be confusing structurally or temporally. A formally challenging film is considered broken and needs to be fixed, and you are explicitly asked to do so by your collaborators, the producers or the network, whoever put up the money. I wanted to replace the collaborative nature of much of the film work I did with a studio practice that would enable me to create work independently, by myself.

I also wanted to retain much of my basic engagement with the world as an artist. The idea that the materials I need are happening in the world was one I wasn't willing to lose. At the same time I felt that I wanted to introduce some artifact into the form, and distance myself from the completeness of the filmic experience, with its overpowering capacity to represent the world, which often leaves little room for metaphor.

The path that eventually lead me to the creation of *Robson corner of Shenkin* could be viewed as two separate investigations that lead to the same point. On the one hand my grappling with the documentary structure trying to achieve a non-structure, and on the other hand a formal journey towards a gallery based practice, working with narrative loops, abstractions and found footage. I am quite happy with the point at which these two investigation converged. I feel that I am ready to create new work in what I consider a new style, a mixture of documentary materials with a visual approach that enlarges small human gestures and moments. This form is both unity and difference, the material and form can live together and fight each other at the same time.

In *Robson corner of Shenkin* I tried put together many of these ideas into one work. Though the work surprised and delighted me, once it was installed, I realized that there was some imbalance between the kinetic nature of the experience and the spoken

narrative. The spoken narrative couldn't carve the space it required to be fully integrated into the work. What other strategies can I discover to put these elements together? Which elements in the work are concepts that I can come back to and which elements are incidental beings, only relevant to this one work?

There is also a more straight forward line of reflection I'd like to offer, mainly around the installation itself. Since this part of the process is a new addition to my methodology there is much about it that I'm just now discovering. The detail oriented nature of picture editing and sound editing in film is something I'm deeply familiar with, now I'm realizing that the installation itself is even more particular, and that small mistakes at that stage have a great effect on how the work functions. I chose to project my video on a grey painted wall which made the video blend into the wall and allow for the eye to wonder to other parts of the room, working against the fantastical illusion of a new space. A projection on a slightly raised surface like a grey painted MDF board would have made the video come into the room, helping everything else on the walls (speakers, sound baffles, electrical elements and the projectors themselves) disappear. The same can be said for the sound. I underestimated the need for sound baffling in a small room with 4 sound sources, and had to install whatever sound baffles I could find a day before the opening. I used 4 near range studio speakers that were installed underneath each screen, and though they produced the sound quality I needed, they were more noticeable in the space than I wanted. The same can be said for the wiring. Some of these imperfect decisions were a result of the short installation time we had (2 days), but more importantly it taught me that installation is no time for compromise.

New Horizon

One morning this past July I came out to my back yard and saw my 8 year old son, Lior, and 5 of his friends digging out the ground in my unpaved parking spot. Apparently he convinced his friends that they can pour concrete there and turn it into a small basketball court. Instead of explaining how ridiculously large the project was and that there was no way they can pull it off, I decided to help them out and dig with them. They soon got tired and I now had two large holes in my parking spot. There was no way out of this but to finish it somehow. Since I was engaged in my last summer intensive at Emily Carr, working on my final exhibition, I decided to put out an ad for diggers on craigslist. Though I received 70 replies in just 20 minutes, getting someone to actually come out and do the work wasn't that easy, people kept saying they will come out but never showed up. After a few days with no progress two guys finally showed up. They were both in their fifties, not properly dressed for a hard days work digging, and it was immediately clear that they were alcoholics. They started digging out the soil in the back, passionately conversing in what I believed to be Chech. I asked them about the language and they were surprised that I recognized it correctly. Johnsy, who was taller, and slower with the shovel, soon left, but Dalibor who was small and seemed like an experienced digger stayed on. We started talking over a beer at the end of the day, and he shared many details of his biography. He talked about his substance abuse, about his traumatic childhood in the Chech republic, about his strange relationship with Johnsy, but mostly he liked to talk about microbiology. He told me about how termites fight bacteria and about a research in Tbilisi on viruses that kill bacteria and other selected topics of microbiology. Since there was much more digging to do I decided to try and create a portrait of Dalibor using some of the approaches and style I developed in *Robson corner of Shenkin*. I photographed Dalibor working in my yard for several hours using my 'slow and shallow' style of shooting, and whenever Dalibor took a break I shot him talking about microbiology in a more conventional documentary style. The footage of Dalibor working captured beautifully the monumental nature of his struggle to survive, and at the same time his small lectures on

microbiology captured some desire for the transcendent, some amazing passion and love for the natural world, for life. My research in the MAA program seemed to have produced a new framework to work in. I no longer think about the interesting and engaging encounters of my life in the context of a documentary film. I don't think about it in terms of narrative, character development or emotional impact, I don't collect interviews and visuals to be put together in a linear way. Instead I see multiplicity right away, some inexplicable structure begins to emerge and I follow it intuitively, making one decision at a time. The work, in the end, will be a curious, paradoxical object, made up of invisible parts, functioning in mysterious ways.

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