

Otherwise: Notes on being perennially in-between



**Therese Henningsen &
Andrea Luka Zimmerman**

As artists and friends we have worked together for many years, blurring the boundaries between filmmaking and shared experiences of life. Our dialogue seeks to describe a way of working distinctively respondent to situations, people and places: one that discovers its own process in the making.

Therese Henningsen is an artist, filmmaker and programmer. She has worked closely with Andrea Luka Zimmerman on the films *Here for Life* (2019), *Erase and Forget* (2017) and *Estate, a Reverie* (2015). She has screened her films *Slow Delay* (2018) and *Maintenancer* (2018) with Sidsel Meineche Hansen at Chisenhale Gallery (2019), Whitstable Biennale (2018), Whitechapel Gallery (2018), Close-Up Cinema (2018), SMK Statens Museum for Kunst (2018), Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art (2018) and KW Institute for Contemporary Art (2018), among others. She is a member of the film collectives Sharna Pax and Terrassen. She holds an MA in Visual Anthropology from Goldsmiths College and is currently working on a practice-led PhD in Media Arts at Royal Holloway University.

Andrea Luka Zimmerman grew up on a large council estate. She is an artist and filmmaker. Her work is concerned with marginalisation, co-existence, waywardness, social justice and a search for radicalised re-relations between people, places, and ecologies. Films include the Artangel produced *Here for Life* (2019, Locarno Film Festival, Special Mention), *Erase and Forget* (2017, Berlin Film Festival, Competition), *Estate, a Reverie* (2015) and *Taskafa, Stories of the Street* (2013). Selected exhibitions include 'Civil Rites' (2017, The London Open, Whitechapel Gallery), 'Common Ground' (2017, Spike Island, Bristol) and 'Real Estates' (2015, Peer Gallery, London). She co-founded the cultural collectives Fugitive Images and Vision Machine and has co-edited the books *Estate: Art, Politics and Social Housing in Britain* and *Doorways: Women, Homelessness, Trauma and Resistance* and published extensive articles in *Open Democracy*, *La Furia Umana* and *Homecultures*, among others.

Estate, a Reverie (2015): filmed over seven years,

it reveals and celebrates the resilience of people profoundly overlooked both by the media and the wider social world, asking how we might resist being framed exclusively through class, gender, ability or disability, and even through geography. *Erase and Forget* (2017): explores personal and collective identities founded on profound, even endemic, violence. It examines the propagation of that violence through Hollywood and the mass media, the arms trade and wider societal structures.

Slow Delay (2018): "You've got something I want, and I've got something you want," he said. Twins Trevor and Raymond have lived together in New Cross for fifty years. They opened up their home to me after I approached them on a bus asking to film them.

Here for Life (2019): A collaboration produced by Artangel, with theatre maker Adrian Jackson. An uncommon story told on common ground by ten Londoners. What does it cost to exist? We are all *Here for Life*, here for now.

- Have you never wanted to share your life with someone since?
- No, never since...
- Why is that?
- Because I only loved one woman once, I never ever loved anybody else. All I wanted to do was to go and visit them and they'd come and visit me, that's the only thing... [Pause] What about you? Now it's your turn to tell me your story, I want to hear from you now
- About love?
- Yes, have you had it yet?
- Love?
- Have you had it?
- Had what?
- Have you been fucked yet?

Andrea Luka Zimmerman: In *Slow Delay* you show what cannot be expressed at all easily, and rarely directly. The twins seem at first to be shy, attentive, awkward. After an exchange of formalities, you ask, "Why did you let me in?" "Because of something you have," one of them replies. "What's that?" A pause. "Down below".



Your camera keeps rolling and as you don't respond the moment expands into what feels like several minutes of silence. Their body language is innocent and irreconcilable with what one of them has just said. I think this moment expresses the most deeply held heteronormative attitudes. Here, for a brief moment, we see undeniably 'how it is' – how a man makes a woman (an) object. You transmit this rupture. It's made even more uncomfortable because you leave this scene uninterrupted. And we sense that what he said was unexpected, even for you. It's unsettling.

Therese Henningsen: For me, it relates to an uneasy experience of being in the world. I get drawn to situations where I experience disjunction. When someone acts in a way that I don't expect, or that I can't readily or easily make sense of, there is a charge and tension which for me requires a suspension of judgment. The situation you mention exemplifies this, because Raymond says something that would usually remain unspoken or that would often be perceived as socially unacceptable. Rather than jumping on such a statement, resisting it, or arguing against it, I felt the need to pause. I am intrigued by what happens when you decide to stay within an ambiguous and contradictory experience. We have previously talked about the final scene in Viktor Kossakovsky's *Belovy* (1992), where Anna sits at the end of the table and listens to recordings of arguments with her siblings that we've overheard earlier in the film. She laughs, and then cries, then laughs, then cries again. It's at once confusing and very moving. I mention this because that moment with the twins left me similarly perplexed:

"What just happened?" I don't want to be scared of engaging with whatever it is that makes me feel uncomfortable and unsettled. I feel like I see this too in your relationship with Bo in *Erase and Forget*. He's someone that many people refuse to relate to, but instead of shying away from that you engage with him and give him your full attention. This allows a more complex understanding of him to emerge. You acknowledge that Bo came from an underprivileged background and that after joining the army he started to act out a very deadly kind of hypermasculinity, and that's uncomfortable, but he's still not reducible to a cliché or a single reading.

AZ: Questioning one's self-censorship of fear, or of being unsettled, is part of an ongoing process for me too. As filmmakers we need to remain open to being challenged by the people we work with; otherwise, like you say, we are only ever working to confirm our own expectations. When I asked Bo to tell me what it was like to kill someone, he asked me why I wanted to know the details, what the purpose was. This made me pause and wonder if my intentions were sensationalist, although the film was of course my 'reason'. I believe that we have an obligation to talk about the cost of state sanctioned killing, human bodies that *are* no longer because of this act. Bo 'excelled' at what he did: he is memorialised in General Westmoreland's memoir as 'The American Soldier', and it was only when he turned against his government that he fell from grace, which is when he became a different kind of extremist. He grapples with the fact that he is the one with the dead on his conscience, now that the political landscape has changed. What I mean to say is that we *all* need to think about the line in the sand that we may or may not choose to cross. The belief that taking a life can be heroic, patriotic, necessary, for democracy and freedom, must be challenged. A few days later, he told me how he started to enjoy taking life, which is when he realised he was losing his mind, and afterwards he no longer killed. I left his direct address; where he mentions my name and says to the audience that he is only telling us this because I asked him to. Novelist and poet Anne Michaels talks about the

different urges that lie behind our desire to make work: some emerge from silence, while others emerge from speechlessness. My work emerges from the latter.

– **Do you need any help from social services?**
 – **Yes.**
 – **What do you need help with, can you tell me?**
 – **Not really, no.**
 – **You don't need any help?**
 – **Well, it's not so much that I don't need any help, I do, probably.**
 – **What's your postcode?**
 – **4 8 H N.**
 – **What's that, sorry?**
 – **4 8 H N E8.**
 – **What is it, E8?**
 – **E8.**
 – **E8, yes? (long pause)**
 – **What's your full postcode, please?**
 – **E8!**
 – **No, I need your full postcode.**
 – **4HN, 4HN E8.**
 – **4HN, yes (pause).**
 – **Have you got a landline?**
 – **I've got a parrot!**

TH: There is this scene in *Estate*, where we see that you've given John B a mobile phone to call social services. We see his cramped flat with things everywhere from floor to ceiling, and his partner Danny sits next to him on the couch. It seems obvious to us that he needs support, however it is hard to understand exactly what his condition is. He struggles to respond to the memorised and formulaic questions with anything other than a defeated sigh. This scene shows the inhospitality of a system in which only those who are able to speak up and explain themselves within a strict set of parameters can get help. As it unfolds, his despair is almost unbearable to watch and our discomfort grows. We feel we are looking at something we shouldn't be looking at. Then something jarring happens, like a break in the formula, as the woman at the other end asks if John has a landline and he responds, "I've got a parrot!" All of a sudden an impulse to laugh replaces the former feeling of disquiet: it's a challenge to feel such contradicting emotions at

once. The moment is tragicomic, moving, and stays with us for a long time after. Why do these kinds of contradictions cut so deep?

AZ: I think they do so because they come from how life is: it is not just tragic, not just happy. It is a complex web of refusal, despair, joy, and obstinacy, and all of these things can exist within the same moment. Complex articulations are therefore neither this nor that but this *and* that, and so if you work on accessing this space, you can reach a truth (one that holds contradictions) that is felt deeply. This becomes political when seen in relation to conditioned public narratives. My work is underpinned by a longstanding ethics, and so there are of course safeguards in place for the people I work with (for example, in both *Estate* and *Here for Life* participants could veto footage: anything they were uncomfortable with I would take it out). Remember John H from *Estate*, who developed Parkinson's? He welcomed me to film him in the most difficult of circumstances. We wanted to show the real cost of what he went through: his courage and refusal to be forgotten by a system, regardless of the reality, in which he was *literally* forgotten – they forgot to bring food, forgot to help, forgot to do anything at all. He wanted to use the film as a way of being remembered, as a way of being present for all those who are like him: single working class people with no family, left alone with nobody officially checking in, although the 'system' knows about their conditions. He lived without a lift on the fourth floor of a council estate and so he had no way of getting downstairs safely, as he could not walk due to the severity of his disease. Had he not had the neighbours he did, he would not have survived for as long as he did.





TH: It's true; we acknowledge that life comes first, that the work emerges from *within* and *across* ongoing situations. Jean-Pierre Gorin suggested in an interview that, "there is some merit to the position of the perennial in-between". This is a space that we both want to inhabit, acknowledging how our backgrounds and experiences shape our perceptions, actions and behaviours, while also insisting on an approach that is open-ended and intuitive, with encounters on the borders between selves. This means opening oneself emotionally and psychically in ways that might be 'risky', taking ourselves to the edges of what we think we know.

AZ: I work with the people who are around me: it's a way of making a momentary community, and it often takes place with people on the margins, because this is where I feel most at home. Inside me there is a constant tension between being part and apart, feeling awkward most of the time, unsettled, and with a sense of not belonging that comes from a violent and loveless childhood. When I was growing up I felt drawn to my grandfather, who had survived five years in a gulag, tortured and broken, who had done time in prison and hung out with circus people. He would win money by entering Rottweiler cages. I am drawn towards mavericks like him who, like some of the people you see in *Estate* and *Here for Life*, do not trust the system and make their own way and rules. Somehow both they and the places they made and occupied survived, often for much longer than expected – and that's where I draw my strength from.

TH: When I first met you on Haggerston Estate for one of the collective bonfire social events and

started to work with you on *Estate*, I was drawn to this temporary space which seemed generous and regulated by a different set of rules. The estate had been marked for demolition and, in this period of transition, where the rules of the previous structure had broken down and a new structure was yet to form, residents were able to inhabit a shared space differently. There was a sense of possibility and freedom. Because you were living there – and I would soon live there also – the filming merged life and work. You once called it an anti-community, because communities are always exclusive whereas an anti-community allows anyone to partake who wants to, however different they may be. It is a shared and non-shared space always in the making. Through spending time together, and taking care of things which have nothing to do with film, situations develop and spaces are opened up, both physically and mentally, for thinking and imagining otherwise. Both of us are often drawn to working with people whose lives sit uncomfortably with societal expectations, whose lives are wayward. What do you think of this waywardness?

AZ: For me, what is most valuable is that sense of a creative and collaborative unpredictability. It's also important to me that the formal aspects of the film emerge from the subject matter. I refine that relationship until it can evoke, suggest, and gesture outwards. What I wish to create is an unruly poetics of the everyday, exactly that kind of the wayward working-through you describe. And within that refusing to be seen through the gaze of dominant narratives and, instead, imagining *on one's own terms* is crucial. *Taskafa*, *Estate* and *Here for Life* refuse to accept the world as it *is* and instead propose the world as it *might* be. In so many arenas of life we are told that 'this is how it should be' and 'there is no alternative'. This is as much socially as culturally, politically as personally: we rarely have the chance or 'permission' to occupy multiple, sometimes contradictory perspectives. Such fixity suggests that decisions – confident, unyielding – have already been made regarding an attitude, opinion or a 'truth'. For both of us this is anathema to the process of making and living. We feel that there

is a mutual vulnerability at stake in the opening up of a space that does not contain any prior assumptions; a space that refuses preconceived ideas and seeks instead to understand how life could and might be through the relationships that emerge; the act of inhabiting it together.

TH: Exactly. And this shared presence in space and time also contains absences – in the other's larger, longer 'story', but also in one's own story (the inevitable solitude of existence; the fact of an ultimate unknowability, even to oneself). Selves are landscapes without fixed landmarks. As a result, both individually and together there is a need and an opportunity to configure this enquiry *otherwise*. This is not to suggest, of course, that an ethical or moral commitment is never made. Claiming *not to decide* is just to choose by another name. Rather, it allows for the fact that the knowable or legible shift, dependent on the angle from which they are viewed. Openness is not to be confused with 'neutrality'.

AZ: We are situated against industrial making; against a broader surveillant bureaucracy of being. Rather, I feel that we are proposing intuition, a sense that recognises but that does not yet know; wayward, wandering, patient, alert, attentive. We wish to explore the ambiguous zones, where that which is not, and might never be known is allowed – encouraged – to dwell: a site where encounters across difference can coexist.

TH: It is an attitude to making that allows for people to take space and doesn't prescribe how they should be. It has always been difficult



to articulate what attention means in relation to working in forms and production structures where there is often a demand for explanation and causality. But people's actions and expressions can rarely be reduced to being 'about' or 'meaning' something, especially when the interpretation is carried out by people with vastly different life experiences. It has been interesting to think about how to navigate between observing and giving space for a situation to unfold, and an active probing and instigating. In *Here for Life*, when we were location scouting for a horse riding scene in Brixton and there had been discussions about obtaining permissions, Errol said, "Me personally, I would just take the horse and walk it down here anyway, and just say to people, watch out!" He then added, "It's much better to ask for forgiveness than permission."

AZ: The scenes in *Here For Life* feel to me as though they are true to a shared experience. Not only did the Brixton horse scene emerge like this but many others also, such as the stealing of the salmon in Billingsgate. Collaboration is about creating environments that allow all those involved to generate ideas together. It is an attitude to making, being open. By acknowledging power relations you create the possibility of altering them. But it's the process that's collaborative, not the intention of the authored project as such. The people who participate in my work challenge me to go further than I would have imagined possible on my own. Such an approach feels so rich to me, and the work becomes more wilful as a result. When one does it well, people feel they have full and conscious agency. And this, I believe, is the foundation of the utopian impulse we've hinted at but not directly named. Our work – together and discretely – suggests that another world is possible. But we hope never to forget that such utopias are proposals, and ultimately processes, whose strength lies in their openness. They are not solutions. The answers they give us lie in their questioning.