

# STRANGERS WITHIN DOCUMENTARY AS ENCOUNTER

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*The foreigner is within me, hence we're all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners. – Julia Kristeva*

**with Khalik Allah, Ruth Beckermann, Jon Bang Carlsen, Adam Christensen, Annie Ernaux, Gareth Evans, Jane Fawcett, Xialou Guo, Umama Hamido, Therese Henningsen, Marc Isaacs, Mary Jimenez, Juliette Joffé, Andrew & Eden Kotting, David MacDougall, Toni Morrison, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Bruno de Wachter, Andrea Luka Zimmerman**

*Strangers Within* is an anthology exploring the idea of documentary as encounter through essays, stories, interviews and other creative responses by filmmakers, artists and writers. The texts engage with the risks of encounter, unsettling assumptions about the distinctions between host and guest; stranger and friend; self and other; documentarian and protagonist. Opening up a series of questions about the mystery of another person, whose difference and unknowability is already a part of one's self, the anthology offers a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the convergences between encounter, hospitality and autobiography.

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## **Praise for *Strangers Within***

'*Strangers Within* is a wonderful gathering, a beautifully cadenced set of essays in which a stellar cast of free-spirited independent filmmakers discuss the art, philosophy and politics of representing other people in documentary practice. Happily they show how the very idea of 'other people' is absurd: the subjects of documentaries, like their makers, are elusive, mysterious, changing, full of contradictions. What emerges is a vision of non-fiction cinema as a contact zone, a travelling space of fertile estrangement and entanglement, a commitment to deep and experimental listening.'

**– Sukhdev Sandhu**

**Director of the Colloquium for Unpopular Culture, New York University**

'Sifting through the pages of this precious book is like walking on the beaches of Agnès Varda: we gather a myriad of lustrous images, of encounters, memories,

films. We stumble upon correspondences, connect the dots of the unvoiced dialogue among its authors – touching on identity and strangeness, method and poetics, documentary and auto/biography. What *Strangers Within* so admirably advocates is the absolute necessity of a cinema of the first-person. Its greatest achievement is

to redefine this as a cinema of risk-taking, open to the stranger, a generator of the encounter: as a truly hospitable cinema.'

**– Professor Laura Rascaroli University College Cork**

## **About Prototype**

Prototype, established in 2019, is committed to creating new possibilities in the publishing of fiction and poetry through a flexible, interdisciplinary approach. Through the discovery of high-quality work across genres, Prototype strives to increase audiences for free-form

contemporary literature. House Sparrow Press and Test Centre (2011-2018) are imprints of Prototype.

Recent titles include Yuri Felsen's lost modernist novel *Deceit*, in its first English translation by Bryan Karetnyk, Lucie Elven's acclaimed debut novel *The Weak Spot*, and *The Boiled in Between*, the debut novel by Turner Prize-winning artist Helen Marten. Lucy Mercer's debut collection *Emblem* is The Poetry Book Society's Summer Choice for 2022, and Lila Matsumoto's *Two Twin Pipes Sprout Water* was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for Winter 2021. Prototype was awarded a PEN Translates award by English PEN for *Island mountain glacier* by Anne Vegter (translated by Astrid Alben), published in March 2022.

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## Don't Play with That Girl

Andrea Luka Zimmerman

Sometimes I like to say that I am a filmmaker, because people think it's glamorous, but to explain what kind of film it is that I am making, or what I am seeking, gets complicated, and so occasionally I just sit with the glamorous part and enjoy what it conjures.

'Don't play with that girl,' said his mother, who was completely sure anyone living on that council estate they never entered and wanted to be as far away from as possible - even though they were only down the road, in a house - was a corrupting, or contaminating, influence. True, there exists a newspaper article showing my old housing block with an arrow pointing at it in a large font: 'Working Class Reality', and the newer houses down the road, also with an arrow: 'Middle Class Fantasy'.

I never considered *myself* as 'working class'. We don't until we are forced to, by imposed structural comparison.

I feel a kinship with those who had to hustle to survive; those who learned to hide what happened behind closed doors; those whose bodies were not welcomed by disabling structures, and those who, as kids, received no touch other than violence. I lean towards those who feel shame even after many years of trying to overcome it; those who feel sorrow and confusion as the foundation of their being; who, though they might not always be able to - but always try - want to make a world that is liveable for all, including the non-human; towards those who did not make it.

I used to be a hairdresser. Someone at a bus stop told me about a filmmaking course, and I went there the next day. I didn't have a portfolio; I borrowed one ... To the surprise of my grandmother, who commented, 'You did so well, I was sure you'd become a drug addict.'

However, to make films with the people I do, and when it comes to explaining the process or result to those that ask, and because of the way that culture works and how people are included or excluded from it, it is mostly to people outside that way of living, and although it has now become easier as I can show previous works, I need to do a lot of undoing in response to them telling me, probably with admiration or in

support or with some sense of uneasiness, I never can tell, as it appears to them, that I, or rather my work, 'gives voice to the voiceless'. Sometimes, but it happens often enough for me to mention it, I am told that they think that the people in my films 'are so lucky to have met you', that they had 'something creative to do', not thinking that it implies that they assume the people in my work, which is my community, and also me, would otherwise perhaps simply

have suffered in misery, as if they had no internal lives of their own. It's peculiar, this, and usually, probably mostly always, entangled with the belief that it is everyone's inevitable desire to move in a certain direction socially, culturally, materially, and so they are part of producing this gaze, not always hostile, of course, but objectifying, nonetheless.

So you are out, then you are in, and then, in their way of thinking, you are fine, you are no longer that, move on, get over it. In East Berlin, after Germany's reunification, landlords who filled in and painted over their buildings' bullet-marked facades would receive more funding than those who decided to keep the marks visible. Because there was so little money, the consensus became that pastel was nice.

To maintain a courage for living feels like the hardest, and perhaps *the* lesson of life. For me, this has been helped by living alongside, and occasionally within, the holding structures of a *chosen* belonging.

My grandfather drank so much that he was never sober but also never appeared drunk anymore. He had been in a Gulag labour camp and then sailed the world; he had butterfly, heart, ship and mermaid tattoos all over his arms and legs, as well as a prison teardrop. Children could still buy alcoholic drinks in shops then, and so he got me to buy the beers as he was banned from most places. When he needed money, he took bets, entering cages where Rottweiler guard dogs were kept. He was never bitten, and I am sure I learned my comfort around dogs from him. His stories always returned to the Gulag. Then I found out he wasn't my mother's real father; I understood the possibilities of what this meant.

We grew up in a relief settlement at the edge of Munich. We were among the first to move in; sheep still ran through the estate. My mother used to cook Spam with tinned mushrooms and rice. Let's just say I retain an ambiguous relationship with the smell of dog food.

I always wore the same clothes and my hair was greasy. 'Don't play with that girl,' I heard them say about me, and add, 'she smells.' I was accustomed to sourcing nourishment in unexpected places. I knew where to look for it, and I was not alone. I still hug trees. I learned to drive a car at thirteen. My friends spoke more languages than I.

'Don't pick on that girl,' Sandra would tell him after he continued to bully me, even though it took her, much smaller than me, to show me how to fight back and not simply curl up and cry.

'Don't play with *that* girl,' I was told, but I did, and, when she ran away, I hid her in my wardrobe for nearly a week, until the police came.

'Don't *play* with that girl,' said my mother before her fists rained down on Ramona and me.

My mother had me when she was a child herself. She had been 'given away', as the child of a child refugee with a significant and lasting undiagnosed mental illness.

I used to carry pepper spray then. I remember noticing that the caretaker, whose name I have tried to remember for many years, didn't have that slight bend in the neck that often shows in people who have been in institutions for a long time or who feel beaten down, or who simply rebelled against the order to 'stand up straight'. One evening, when another new boyfriend didn't want me around, I refused to go home, and the caretaker took me to a drag bar - their girlfriend was performing that evening.

The German language is gendered, and they taught me to speak in a way that would not replicate male dominance. They said it starts with language; that access depends on who is asking; that marginalised spaces are racialised, gendered, disabling; to believe in an otherwise, trusting that dissonance frequently reaches moments of harmony, and to be alert to processes of radical hope. I learned to dream, then; a process of social dreaming.

'Don't play with that *girl*,' said the bouncer about my friend Raoul because he could be a girl less easily than me a boy. Being flat, I had no problem binding and passing, and we went to men-only bars. When Raoul died of AIDS I was not allowed at his funeral because his parents said he wasn't gay, and something broke open in me again.

My first conscious memory is a dream, of being strapped to the back of a lorry, facing the way we'd come, with my parents waving goodbye. I didn't feel sad at all. Then the lorry and I joined a circus, and it became wild.

Even before primary school, I started hearing people say I seemed different. Later I heard that I seemed weird. I felt uneasy about it. Especially since, even now, I sometimes stare at people, looking for something, forgetting they can see me, too.

For a long time, I feared that I was what others perceived me to be. And as, often, that perception was that I was peculiar, this became a self-fulfilling dilemma. Over time I learned not to worry about it, to understand that I am drawn to those who move their mouths, hands, limbs in ways un/familiar to me. It stirs something, a sense of possibility, almost like when someone whom one has barely noticed suddenly says something completely unexpected, which then changes how you see that person, probably forever, and suddenly you have all the time in the world for them. Or they for you.

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Exclusion is the rule in binary practice (either/or), whereas poetics aims for the space of difference - not exclusion but, rather, where difference is realized in going beyond.

– Édouard Glissant

The way I make films is by wanting to see something that *is* there but which is often *unseen* owing to persistent cultural tropes, such as the ways in which my and others' pasts are so often represented as only realist, abject, in need of charitable support - that perpetuates a way of being visible based on erasure, a kind of plastering over, like the pastel colours of the 'new' Berlin. The critical thinker, writer and artist Morgan Quaintance calls this experience a 'marginal melancholy', where structures demand an ongoing performance of lack.

Shame. Structures and practices based on extraction and domination, that marginalise because they simply do, because they can and, mainly, because to own the imagination is power. Power is slippery; we often only notice it when it is enacted on (our) bodies.

In *Unexamined Life* (dir. Astra Taylor, 2008), philosopher Judith Butler and artist and disability activist Sunaura Taylor talk about how bodies are not just agents of resistance but also fundamentally in need of support. Official narratives delegate pity towards vulnerability, in turn contributing to the disabling. Because film is foremost a visual art, you must ask, what do you see? How do you see?

Poet and essayist Eileen Myles speaks about this in another way, one I feel close to in my own way of working, a 'seeing *with*' those that will be there once the work is finished, and this knowing becoming part of the making. The invitation into it.

And my whole way of doing this therefore is laden with the ambition for the product to have a lot of world in it, be a little humble, messy and dirty, so that people can enter like they walk into a building, a public building that is there since once I am done it's theirs. I vanish into it first but then you do too. I guess it's 'my writing' but really it's a common practice. That's my dream.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, for the critical geographer Doreen Massey this seeing takes place in *space*, which is a social dimension. When we are able to look at what is present in a place all at once, we quite literally see different time zones at work: generations, values, experiences and communities all brushing, blurring, merging and shifting with and against each other, to produce a feeling, a history of space that is multifarious. And importantly, for Massey, space initially offers a moment of respect. Time, then, in space, allows for the emergence of relations, a process of relations.

There's a looking at each other, a possibility of seeing, which is something that we can feel when it happens. In this way of thinking, space is the dimension of radical simultaneity: a convivium of stories, the possibility of coexistence. Time is the dimension of sequence, of what is before, now and to come. Historians of 'progress' turn space into a sequence. They claim as an unequivocal positive all that is brand new, vibrant, so-called lively and diverse, convenient, better, modern and safe. What this implies is that all that is not new, is old. That what is not now vibrant, lively and diverse is inconvenient, outdated, impoverished, unsafe or risky. In this vision the future's history is already fixed, it is laid out towards what is deemed inevitable, without deviation towards 'modernisation', such as the need to raise rents or the need to demolish.

This narrative of inevitability masks the conditions by which we end up in this dilemma in the first place, be it through laws, policy, the perverse power of corporations or the machinery of marginalisation, derogating everything that does not fit this narrative of progress. Those who do not fit into these new worlds - those who are less wealthy, socially disadvantaged people, disabled people, drifters, animals, anyone who lives a life that is not part of these ideas - are the ones to be narrativised as marginal. For Massey, difference is reduced to a place in the historical queue, whether that means

the working class, the global majority or all those who have not yet arrived in the promised land where, according to the law of capital, we should all be actively headed.

This is what interests me: this movement, which is very subtle, of perception, is a shift *in* perception.

For instance, the privatised city, or one that proposes a privatised space - which includes militarised private cars, private healthcare, private everything - has its mirror image in the Other, producing clichés and stereotypes that reinforce the abject and public fear, and which then marginalise even further by making people feel unwelcome, and in fact, in time, they're not welcome to participate at all, becoming undesired strangers in their own time and place.

Many more of us are not from an inheritance class than are. Many more of us are not the ones who've never had to work, or who've never had to walk because they could afford a bus ticket, or who've never had to take a bus because they have other means of transport, are proliferators of corporate greed and ecologically disastrous pension schemes, property developers, buy-to-let landlords, private school proponents, insurance schemers ...

For most of my life I lived on different versions of so-called 'sink' estates. I lived on the last one for eighteen years, and because of the stability it offered I was able to start a journey of healing.

'Don't play with that girl,' he would say, and mean Sammy, who reminded me of when I was her age, where everything was for the taking, including my bike, which I eventually got back. Later, before he became housebound, Jeff burned down the sorry remnants of a playground, and this became our bonfire pit. He turned one of the frequently burned and long-abandoned cars on the estate into a cat car, and another into a fox car, where we put scraps of food. Another neighbour, John, cut off the tips of his shoes

to make sandals, not because he couldn't afford new shoes, he said, but because he didn't need two pairs, so why not be creative?

I started the *Estate* project because of all of this. Jeff refused to leave his flat and his two little dogs because the public retirement homes won't allow pets. I've never understood why this is so, and why meals on wheels are being distributed by delivery robots instead of people, or why the post office had to be privatised because it made 'only' £50 million profit. Jeff was sure they wanted him to die to avoid the need to rehouse him. He was always in pain. He said: 'I've got a little dog here, and my little dog has got more sense than all the governments have ever had. They're nothing but a load of thieves. Oh, they are! They're thieves. They're the ones that get away with those big crimes, and the money. They're the ones. And if we do a small offence - like we diddle a bit of money out of social security - they come down on us like a tonne of bricks, and yet they can take millions. They can take millions ... and they do. And they do.'

I felt at home there, whatever I looked like, often not wanting to speak then, wanting to speak, having to listen. I learned to listen. I knew a door would always be open, and mine was too. I learned how to look out for others as part of a community, in and of difference. The place simply didn't conform to the processes of gentrification. And my films draw on this idea of obstinacy and creative waywardness, instead of simply resilience, towards lives more fluid than finance and power and property want to allow.

The film's frame cannot contain everything that it tries to hold, so there is a necessary messiness to that holding, a layering. I seek a cinematic vernacular, one of fragments, of imperfect memory, glimpses, unpredictable encounters; to start way down the road of a 'story', not to plod through the tired cause-and-effect or beginning, transformation and end. Who gets to tell what story, and how to tell it ...

The film 'industry' demands assimilation towards an expression that is deemed 'cinematic' by the gatekeepers of funding bodies. There is seldom any genuine desire for expression in ways that may yet not be quite understood; for those who think through and with, not about. Our lives are not reducible to just one way of feeling, saying, seeing, telling.

In making *Estate, a Reverie* (2015), we initiated a housing campaign that became visible because we installed a large-scale public artwork called *i am here* (2009-14) on the facade of our building. The work was featured on the BBC, in magazines and newspapers; it received a lot of attention. I tried so hard to find a producer who wanted to help this film, and when I did, the famous producer said, 'You have to use a three-act structure: this is our struggle, this is how we struggled, and this is what happened.' Our film needed reducing, in his mind, to a schema of the same kind that produces the very conditions of our undoing, socially and economically. We know that there is no one story, so why insist on one form to tell them all?

In *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (1984), writer and storyteller John Berger wrote: 'There is no word in any traditional European language which does not either denigrate or patronise the urban poor in its naming. That is power.' I met Berger in 2012, and he read passages from his novel *King* (1999) for my film *Taskafa, Stories of the Street* (2013): 'A mistake, King, is hated more than an enemy. Mistakes don't surrender as enemies do. There is no such thing as a defeated mistake. Mistakes either exist or they don't. And if they do, they have to be covered over. And we are their mistake, King. Never forget that.'

The book ends with a dream of survival, with King the dog feverish, running for sheer life towards refuge, for collective survival, reaching the wide opening of a beach, the sea ahead, the sounds of the bulldozers and police cars drowned out by the waves, and yet, upon turning around, King sees that there is no one else left. It was a fever dream. It is a daring dream to think otherwise.

My work features animals, often dogs, as they occupy a peculiar and particular place in our human history. They see us for who we are, rather than as a number or as 'other'. They will recognise us. To me, urban animals are witnesses in the face of power: the power we grant them, and how we

appropriate them. Hope, here, is always the process of finding beauty, especially in those places deemed ugly, pathetic, insignificant. The pathetic as a refusal of the gaze of power is an idea I heard Eileen Myles speak about. This is a beautiful idea.

I will likely always feel drawn to, or most at ease, in less regulated places. I am drawn in my making to lives lived at the edges, even if - and perhaps especially when - those lives are first glimpsed, often in the public eye, visible but not seen. I don't believe the idea of 'overcoming' one's situation is helpful, as it implies there is an end to something. If this were true (that we can arrive, instead of seeing life as a daily practice of doing and undoing), we would not continue to have the kind of fatal injustices we do.

Filmmaking to me is not confessional but shared and contested, troubled and alive. Sometimes stories, even poetic or lyrical ones, need context and sometimes they don't. I am drawn to bodies that can show us what they carry; words are often not enough. And sometimes images too are not enough to reveal a feeling: some things cannot be shown.

We can lean on others but not so much as to make them tumble over. Similarly, when someone leans on us, we need to take care not to let them tumble when we step aside. Of course, at times in intimate relations and friendships this kind of over-leaning may be necessary, and possible. I believe, too, that sometimes we need to hear our stories told by someone else, as this might allow us to take the space, too. This is how I learned to speak, and this is a process I learned from Forum Theatre, and especially from the rehearsals during the making of *Here for Life* (2019).

In 1985, in an interview for the BBC's *Arena*, writer Jean Genet said, 'I enjoyed making a clumsy kind of theatre. And by being clumsy, perhaps there was something new about it.' How does one find this clumsy stranger within oneself, the creative person who isn't constantly self-censoring? We know that we see what we know. With each new film there is a need to see in a way that we don't yet know. To see *together*, because of the entanglement of all our lives (in the fullest meaning, beyond the human-centric, the thin spaces), and so to encounter both the other in front of us and the stranger within.

There are many contradictions; the world I am drawn to is incomplete. I watch a lot of films that are technically accomplished but which are unfinished, because they never went on the journey that mattered with the people they filmed. Properly thinking through our lives is precious and fragile.

So that's how I think of my approach, which I hope is far from the extractive, industrial and normalising.

Before I made my first long film, in order to make the work on a certain scale I learned that we needed deeply to collaborate; in that way, we can enable each other to act tenfold instead of just doubling. At the turn of the century, I co-founded Vision Machine Film Project with Christine Cynn, Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo. We explored how to make films with people as a practice of self-(re)imagining. In the early 2000s we offered a free film school for local people in the East End of London and worked in the United States and Indonesia to track the aftermath of state-sanctioned violence and the production of ideology and myth through mainstream cinema as a way to deny the foregrounding of secreted<sup>2</sup> historical and contemporaneous, murderous forms of injustice.

To be creative in the face of power; to know that suffering manifests differently, and often circumstantially, and never to forget to strive to make a space for those less able to participate (and to know how fragile that space is); to make space inside oneself for what one does not know and may never know, but still to know it is real and not to paint that space over.

As where I live (Hackney, London, in social housing) has changed, so also has my need to hide my postcode to get a job. I live on the 'poor door' staircase of my block, something I campaigned against for so long. And yet now, being here, I am grateful for it - that my neighbours are not the millionaires living next door, that they do not engage lawyers to force you to take your chattering parrot indoors so they can 'work' (as happened to a friend nearby); to live in a way where we have to negotiate our communal space,

even when there are problems, as a coming together, attempting to figure out some of the various, often gloriously incompatible ways of expressing what it is to be alive. Where you find the courage aged 85 or 92 to squat outside the housing office in a caravan because they say you have a minimum five-year wait until you qualify for housing. And where this doesn't go unnoticed.

ENDS / June 2022

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen Myles, *For Now* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> I developed this idea of secreting history in 'Secreting History: Spectral and Spectacular Representations of Political Violence' (PhD thesis, 2006), an extract of which appeared in Andrea Luka Zimmerman, 'Secreting History - Screening "History": 21 Takes', *La Furia Umana*, 36, 2019, [www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/69-archive/lfu-36/888-andrea-luka-zimmerman-secreting-history-screening-history-21-takes](http://www.lafuriaumana.it/index.php/69-archive/lfu-36/888-andrea-luka-zimmerman-secreting-history-screening-history-21-takes), and culminated in the feature documentary *Erase and Forget* (2017).