

The Dialectics of Making Movies

Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen interviewed by Lia Yoka
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Sill from *41 Shots*, 2000, 14 min, digital video

personal / political

Lia Yoka: Your *Out of the Mouth of Babes* (1987) is a documentary criticizing the militarized nuclear family, with your own family as protagonists. *Shoplifting: It's A Crime?* (1979) is a cross between a humorous instruction manual and a dramatized essay about stealing from supermarkets being a cheerful moment in the social injustice of poverty. *41 Shots* (2000) is an experimental video about the assassination of Amadou Diallo by the police, which his family used in the trial... In all these works, there is a tension between the subjective gaze of the camera on the one hand, and on the other, the political relevance and purpose of the film. Is *Rock The Cradle* (2012) a personal approach to abstract, impersonal politics, or an inherently political work about your personal experiences on the road? Are you conscious of a distinction (or conflict) between the personal and the political in constructing your films?

Sherry Millner & Ernest Larsen: Let's say we look at this question from the political point of view first. Anarchist, situationist, and feminist praxis, as distinct as they are, certainly meet and overlap on the ground of everyday life, which is also, of course, the primary ground of subjectivity and its potential transformation. So from that point of view, as political film/videomakers, it makes total sense for us to construct works that follow through on the principle, on the assumption, really, that the personal is political, that every aspect of what we call the personal, even the

most intimate, is thoroughly marked or inflected by the dominance of political structures and affects. We learned that early on, in making *Womb With A View* (1983), which is about Sherry's pregnancy—in which we managed somewhat mischievously, but with some success, even to politicize the moment of conception. And then, on the other hand, to turn that around, to look through the lens of the individual, there is, for us, anyway, an irreducible, maybe even inexhaustible, potential to show at that basic level of the everyday (or the autobiographical) the cracks, the contradictions, the surprises or shocks, which authoritarian structures produce and maintain on a minute-by-minute basis. For us, as image-makers, that also bespeaks the most compelling aspects of what film and video are capable of or what you try to get to, anyway: those moments when you can make the moving image crack open in viewer's minds, to show not just the critique of the way things are but the points of resistance, which happen in the moment, when the camera is rolling. A third, perhaps simpler, way to look at this question is to insist on the primacy of the intersubjective, as a theory of perception.

Rock The Cradle, then, turned out to be another attempted variation on that approach. Its production was not planned in advance and was more or less open-ended to begin with. We had already shot some material before arriving in Thessaloniki in September of 2009—but being in Thessaloniki during those days and participating in a demonstration and in our consideration of how the aftermath of the December '08 uprising still affected everyone we met -all of that- focused for us what had been the broad subject matter of the video. We came to Europe to do some screenings and so on, but also to take the opportunity to assess in and with video the past and the present of radical antiauthoritarian practice as we traveled. We have a broad knowledge of anarchist history, of course—and perhaps we thought this video would take on as it progressed a more documentary-like form. But in fact, what seems to make it work is that tension of two American anarchists finding themselves in a challenging and inspiring situation and trying to understand— to translate, in a sense—its very rooted and deep structures here in Greece. Nevertheless we continued to frame this approach within allusions to anarchist history, particularly in Paris and Barcelona, on the one hand, and then on the other hand, within an antonymic comparison of the social center and the foreigners detention center, both of which have proliferated in Europe.



Still from video, *Prototype: God Bless America*, 2006, Martha Rosler in [State of Emergency](#) projection.

film / video

LY: In the 1970s you were experimenting with the documentary video techniques when everyone was doing avant-garde films. When video art shows and experimental film festivals both developed, separately and even parallel to each other, your work never quite fit in either genre. Does this distinction between film and video mean anything to you? Did it ever?

SM & EL: Nearly all of our video projects use some film footage—often, but not always, appropriated. In *Rock The Cradle*, for instance, we use a bit of a scene from the Marx Brothers Depression-era film *The Cocoanuts*, in which Groucho inimitably discusses wage slavery. Sherry's film *Disaster* (1976) was double-screen Super-8; it was followed by a number of 16mm films and then we moved into 3/4" video, then camcorder, now HD. For us, the great advantage of video is that it's cheap. We have little talent and no patience for fund-raising—and besides few serious political filmmakers get funded in the US. Also, moving-image format no longer matters as such in prospective venues and film festivals. What gave us problems at times in screening our works is, we feel, another, more interesting, issue. There is a canonical tradition of documentary film; there is an equally honorable tradition of art film; and there is a third tradition, equally venerable, of experimental film. Our work appropriates elements, figures, styles, whatever, from all three, as we see fit. Such an assertion of the validity of mixed form becomes all the more problematic—not from our point of view, of course, but too commonly from the point of view of gatekeepers whose digestive systems are often, and not unexpectedly, delicate—when one adds to this brew the all too prominent ingredient of radical politics. To be fair, there is periodically in the US and to some degree internationally, a welcome opening for political media. In the art world, this reception tends to be filtered through the

established formalist demands, which, in their smooth abstraction, unfortunately blunt –if they do not erase altogether– the specificity of the political.



Still of Madonna & Child statue from video *Sight Gag #7*, 2007, Sherry Millner/Ernie Larsen in State of Emergency projection.

form / content

LY: *Rock The Cradle* is included in Oliver Ressler's and Gregory Sholette's (traveling) exhibition *It's the Political Economy, Stupid!* which recently opened in Thessaloniki. Most works in the exhibition are political theses about the crisis, often with clear argumentation and rhetoric, fixed viewpoints, coherent style and narrative. Your script contains from word puns over found images, to romantic shots of demonstrations shouting slogans, to personal travelogue, to historical documentary, to poetic landscape to sarcastic social commentary... Why this particular approach to the dialectics of form and content in a work about today's crisis and social resistance?

SM & EL: We admire works like many in *It's the Political Economy, Stupid!* that attain such conceptual rigor: among their other virtues, the clarity of their terms of representation enable viewers' relatively direct ease of access. *Rock The Cradle*, however, is a video essay, formally speaking a development from Bunuel's geographical inquiry, *La s Hurdes*, through Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, Harun Farocki, and Rene Vautier, among others, works in which structure is not a given, established in advance, but discovered as an essential part of the process of production. We aim for a somewhat more flexible or at least more openly personal filmic language, to locate ourselves rather than assuming a voice more authoritative because subsumed within the strictures of documentary form. In that sense, *Rock The Cradle* aims at translation, in the consciousness that form is also content — for audiences to begin to understand, for themselves, step by step, metaphorical translation by translation, what was at stake in the revolt of December '08. An essay, need it be said, is a personal form of communication which explores and tests a number of related ideas and situations—since it is not a thesis to be rigorously or

logically proven, it takes on the potential to be more convincing. We wanted to suggest (especially for the politically under-educated audiences in the U.S.) a range of contexts in which to grasp what has been happening in Greece, which, as we see it, amounts to a kind of laboratory or test-case for what global capital is attempting to force upon the world. Such contexts and tropes include: certain moments of anarchist history in Europe, the lived continuity of such moments in the present, organized folk rituals of revolt, the world-wide consciousness of Greece as the cradle of democracy and a satiric critique of that largely incorrect impression, the explosion of political graphics, posters, and graffiti in the Exarchia section of Athens, the constitution of anarchist and left politics in Greece, how distinct forces came together in the streets of the cities of Greece during the rebellion and whether those forces—youth, immigrants, students, the alienated, the autonomous unions—were united in some way around a politics of the excluded, etc, etc., etc. In other words,

we needed a compendious and expressive form if we were to be able to translate much or all of this into video, a form that pretty much attempted to mimic on both affective and intellectual levels the many-sided potential of an anarchic revolt.



Still, Border Guard from video *Feral*, Louis Hock, 2004 in State of Emergency projection

collective / individual filmmaking

LY: Film is supposed to be a “collective endeavor”. In your case, this doesn’t mean what is usually meant by the phrase, i.e. a director, a producer, technical staff, a crew etc... You do your films on your own – no studios, hardly any actors... Yet you are by no means “private” artists. You are always organizing festivals and screenings of other peoples’ work, in small galleries, universities, on buildings, in open squares, in self-organized spaces. You curate shows and film festivals, and your self-standing *State Of Emergency* (2010) was actually an anthology of other artists’ videos. So it seems you define the balance between the “collective” and “individual” aspects of filmmaking differently than both the film industry and the video-art world.

SM & EL: We have at times worked with a small crew, when budget and planning

allowed. And it's not at all uncommon for videomakers to work alone; over the years collaborative work involving two people has become more common in the video-art world. The terms of our collaboration together change depending on the project, though most of our videos are co-authored. Our process in writing and editing involves an almost excruciating but all-in-all extraordinarily complex (and rewarding) amount of give-and-take—it's less true that we write or edit a project than we re-write and re-edit it—all very time-consuming but quite the opposite of the conventional mode of production's customary division of labor, in expanding an original idea and abandoning ego-driven ideas of authorship, arriving in the best instance at an enriched mutuality which would be lost or impossible in the absence of such a process. In addition, we often use appropriated imagery, quotes, borrowed ideas—thus expanding in deliberately problematic ways on the notion of a mixed if not collective definition of authorship. Given this and our activities as curators, it's fair to say that we are interested in advancing a notion of the productive instability of authorship rather than adhering to the binary of collective vs. individual.

Of course, we have regularly participated in many collective endeavors, political and/or cultural. Our early involvement, for example, in the Marxist media journal *Jump Cut*, often meant a considerable amount of struggle with people who often didn't have the same political or aesthetic convictions, while caught up in the act of producing a magazine. The act of working together on *Jump Cut* effectively created a solidarity that a mere discussion or reading group would never be able to achieve.

Another example: A 1992 video project which correlated the history of military camouflage to the history of modern art led to our co-curating a group of installations at a working-class mall in western Massachusetts, involving four other artists. The installation we put together was an elaborate living room scene, with four mannequins, Mom, Dad and the kids, in camouflage, all fully-furnished in various styles of camouflage, with our video *The Art Of Protective Coloration* playing on the camouflaged TV. Downstairs from this installation was a U.S. Army recruiting station. The correspondence between the camouflage art and the camouflage reality (the recruiters downstairs all wore full camouflage uniforms) became especially startling when the young recruiters came upstairs to watch the video. The local press played the installations as: "Marxism comes to the mall." We worried that the still young mall managers would be freaked out by this reception but the opposite occurred: they supported us and began taking visitors through the installations, conducting docent tours and explaining what the installations were about. The other workers at the mall, bored silly, began taking their breaks in the installation. We quickly learned, once again as we have in other such situations, that so-called ordinary people have little if any problem in 'understanding' unconventional forms like installation art. They embraced the work in fact and were very sophisticated about its intentions—which we also 'advertised' with graphics placed around the mall.

With *State Of Emergency* we were interested in reviving, in the post-9/11 era, the tradition of the collectively made political protest film in digital video—but more importantly in shifting from conventional enclosed venues to the streets, restaurants, social centers—and in that sense shifting or momentarily destabilizing

the conventional (and passive) definition of the audience. With this aim we sometimes succeeded—a new sort-of-collective addressing a happenstance-grouping of people—who were by no means a collective but were no longer merely a (pre-selected) audience, becoming at times an activated group. We wanted also to address a range of people who did not and would not ordinarily attend art spaces. Overall we needed further research and a few more resources to fully, let's say, learn how to de-commodify the set of relations that structure the encounters between artists and audiences. To flip this problematic for a moment, our more recent efforts at collaboration and at curating also aim to create new collective contexts for artists (in *State Of Emergency* particularly) and for the history of oppositional cinema/video with the programs we put together for Oberhausen 2008 (“Border-Crossers and Trouble-Makers”) and the Subversive Film Festival (2009) in Zagreb. These programs in putting together new and ‘old’ work (that even in its own time was under-screened) often suggested otherwise dormant possibilities. To quote then 80 year-old René Vautier, whom we invited to the Oberhausen screenings, as he stood on a stage with four very young filmmakers, “I am not 80, I am four times 20.”



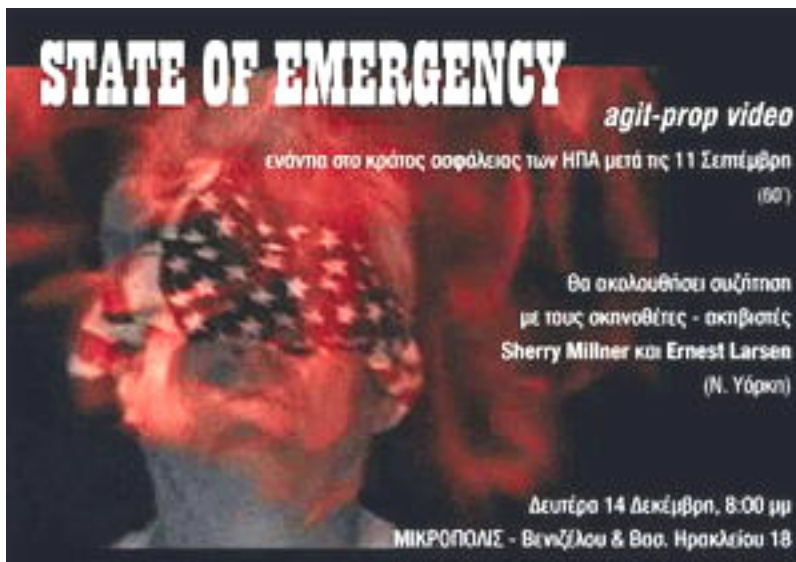
Still, 'sharpbeaked hoodwinker' from *Predators in the Aviary*, 2009, by Sherry Millner/Ernie Larsen.

occupy New York / “occupy cinema”

LY: Any hopeful signs, any lessons from the Occupy New York movement? Do the contradictions in the “Occupy Cinema” group point in any way to broader issues within the Occupy Movement in NY?

SM & EL: The mostly but not entirely young(er) people of Occupy in New York were genuinely amazing in their passion and commitment. While we cannot and should not speak from our own limited and brief contacts with Occupy Cinema it was also active and inventive in the events we participated in. Let us take a step back and say one or two things not directly about Occupy Cinema but about some of the effects on such a movement in the strange hothouse known as New York City... There is

probably always a split in such rapidly emerging movements between the politically experienced anti-capitalist radical (to use a minimal description) and the sudden enthusiast with little direct previous experience or political education. Some of the latter whom we observed were young dissatisfied professionals eager to make their skills immediately useful on the spot—which was as it should be, but which also involved a *naïveté* that could be breathtaking at times. Some few others appeared to be involved to some degree because the situation provided a venue and/or a network for their own art or media products. The sociology of this segment is interesting but not inspiring—it smacks of the competitiveness of New York professionalism gone very wrong. Was it significant that the makers of the early videos about Occupy referred to them not as ‘activist’ but as ‘promotional’ videos? Perhaps we are overly sensitive to the resonance of vocabulary. Nevertheless this was, we think, a minor note. Occupy was the first struggle for a very long time in the U.S. to involve a genuine rejection of hierarchical structures, replaced with assemblies, with consensus and working groups, that consistently came up with unexpectedly creative forms of protest. In Zuccotti Park the long-term commitment to egalitarian practice (in all the many aspects of everyday life including cooking, cleaning, access to resources, the library) was a transformative experience which will not fade away. Occupy will come back in some unpredictable form as the objective situation in the U.S. plays out.



Poster for State of Emergency outdoor screening at Anarchist Bookfair, Thessaloniki Greece, 2010.