

DEvised FILMMAKING PRACTICES

Finding a Person and Losing a Person: On *Cameraperson*

Kirsten Johnson in Interview with Alex Lichtenfels

A. L. The project for the journal *Performance Matters* is about looking at process, and how people work, and how people have developed their processes that they use in their career, or their craft, or their art. That's the focus.

K. J. Just process around camera work.

A. L. I was hoping also to ask you a little bit about the films that you've directed. To start off with, how did you get started? What's the history, and what was your route into becoming a cameraperson?

K. J. There's always the short story and the long story, but as an American, I was incredibly confused and interested in race relations from the time of my early childhood, because I grew up in the '70s, and didn't understand what was going on, on a social level, but I could feel the racism in the worlds that surrounded me, and it didn't make sense to me. So I was always trying to figure that out.

I was raised as a Seventh Day Adventist, and it is a pretty particular religion that has certain constraints. No dancing, drinking, smoking, but also no movies. As a child, I saw missionary slides. I would see these slides of the world, and see someone wearing this fabulous outfit in Papua New Guinea, and then it would be like, "Look. We converted them, and now they're wearing khakis and a light blue shirt." And I would just be confused as a child, because I was like, "They looked really good before. What did we do?" I watched some movies and there were some people in our church who were a little subversive, and so I remember sneakily seeing *Harold and Maude* at someone's

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Alex Lichtenfels is a filmmaker and theorist who is a senior lecturer in film production at the University of Salford. He has several years' experience in the film and television industries, working primarily as a freelance producer and director in corporate and advertising venues. He is also an independent filmmaker with the Primary Films collaborative, producing or directing numerous short films as well as several longer projects. Through his work, he investigates emerging filmmaking practices, driven by research into technological changes and how methods used in other artforms might be applied to filmmaking. He is concerned with how these practices might allow for new types of films that engage audiences in nonstandard ways. He is currently pursuing research projects on remodelling the organization of film production based on anarchist political principles, and the links between film and antihumanist ethics.

house when I was a kid. But I really didn't go to the movie theatre, and movies were off limits in a certain way. I watched some television. But I think from a very early age, I was quite visually preoccupied.

As I aged, I grew, I started to question the religion and grow away from it in some ways, but I ended up going to a secular university, which blew my mind. When I was there, I became really involved in South African anti-apartheid activism. I was very curious about African colonial history, and I happened to see a couple films by Ousmane Sembène, and then a film by Djibril Diop Mambèty. I saw *Touki Bouki*. And it was so different from what I understood about blackness in the United States, and the history of African American history and racism. There was just such a self-confidence and an un-self-consciousness, and a freedom, and a different energy, that I was just like, "Whoa, what's going on here?"

My senior year of college, I thought I would be interested in writing about how different directors of colour dealt with racism and blackness all over the world. I wanted to go to Brazil. I wanted to go to London. I wanted to go to Paris. I wanted to go to West Africa. I made the finals of the competition, and then I didn't get it. I was so embarrassed and disappointed, so I just decided to buy a one-way ticket to Dakar. I didn't speak French. I didn't know people spoke Wolof. I didn't know it was an expensive city. I didn't know the country was Muslim. I was incredibly naïve, and very young. I literally got on a plane and went, and knocked on Ousmane Sembène's door. He was like, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" And he said, "Well, we're making a movie in a year and a half. If you're still here then, you can be an intern."

I stayed in Senegal for two years. In the course of that, I met all of the Senegalese filmmakers, went to FESPACO, realized there was this really odd and, once again, racist world of European funding for African films, and there were all these older European women having affairs with African directors. I could see my future, and I was like, "I don't want to be writing books about African cinema when I'm fifty."

Suddenly, one of my friends said, "You know, in France, there's a film school, and it's free." I went to France, and spoke to them about whether I could apply for this school, and they're like, "No, you're an American. We're giving money to countries where people need support." And I said, "Could I apply as a French student?" And they were like, "I don't think you understand. We have the crème de la crème of France here. This is an haute école." I talked to someone else, and they're like, "They'll never let you in. There's no way in the world they'll let you in, especially if you apply as a director, but maybe you can sneak in through one of the technical departments." That is how I chose cinematography, not because I had a particular proclivity for it, but it seemed like the most likely thing—not choosing sound editing and production. I like images. Just by the sheer absurdity of who I was—I spoke French with this strong Senegalese accent—I got into the cinematography department.

There, I totally fell in love with the camera. I was sort of shocked, because . . . this is the centre of filmmaking. Why wouldn't you want to be in this position? You're the one who gets to hold the camera and move the camera. I think from my complete lack of exposure and my naïveté, when I encountered the power of the camera, I was completely incredulous that I was allowed to be the one at the centre of things, to be at the heart of things. It feels like a secret, in a way, how much the camera is the centre of cinema. I always have this feeling that I get to be here. It's like a free gift of pleasure, that I'm the one that gets to touch the camera.

A. L. You talk about that being a revelation. Was there something that happened, or a particular sort of project that you worked on in which that realization took hold?

K. J. At the time, we were working with big 35-millimetre film cameras and 16-millimetre film cameras, and I was intimidated by loading the film, and the lenses, but I also was very struck by the preciousness of things, the way cameras were treated so reverentially, and that there was so much protocol around it and the delicate handling of it. I loved that, even though it's not really how I am at all. At the time, video was just beginning, and we were using these huge SVHS cameras or Betacams.

And while I was in film school, like any film school student, I was learning rudimentary ideas about cinema language, but because it was the school that it was and the time in history that it was, we got to meet some remarkable people. I had lunch with Godard at the cafeteria. I talked with Raoul Coutard. And Agnès Godard. I talked to Agnès Godard. . . . Not knowing anything about anything, barely knowing anything about cinema, I was meeting these remarkable people and having conversations about what it is to make films. There was also an incredibly sophisticated sound department there, and a really wonderful man named Michel Fano, who talked a lot about how natural sound recording conveyed emotion. I think almost more than anyone at the school, it provoked me around what might be possible when I filmed.

My first opportunity came from Amy Ziering, who came to France with a deal with the French government if she employed a French film student working on her film about Jacques Derrida. I, as a student, got to film with Derrida, and that was a realization that the camera could give you access to a person of his calibre. I knew that I knew nothing, but I get to go into Derrida's house because I'm the one who knows how to work the camera. He had a lot of skepticism about being filmed and pushed back a lot about it, and really felt like no image of him and no scene of him would ever accurately represent his complexity and his dimensions, and so there was often tension around whether we could film or not film. At one moment, he said, "You're out. Everyone leave. I can't deal with this. I'm too distracted. I need to think. I'm preparing things." And Amy was quite desperate because she'd flown over, and really needed to shoot, and didn't have any money, and all these kind of things. So she really begged him, and he said, "Well, if only Kirsten stays here with the camera, and she does not say a word, that would be okay."

I literally stayed in his house, wordless, for eight hours while he worked and prepared a trip. I think that day, in combination with observing him as an extraordinary person, it just changed everything for me. I realized that I could show what I was thinking in the way that I filmed. That had never occurred to me. I thought I had to explain everything. As a human, that's what I have to do—tell you what I'm doing, tell you what I'm thinking. [Not explaining] became increasingly pleasurable as the day went on. I would have an idea and then search for the way to embody it in response to who he was and what he was doing. That's a key moment for me.

A. L. Is there an example of that, of a shot that you took or something where it was in response to, or something you did?

K. J. We'd had these ideas about the fact that he didn't believe that being filmed could accurately represent him, so I was trying to film him in reflection, or through windows, or in distortion. But then there's just a moment where he's clicking the pen tops back onto the pens, and it's this very small gesture, but it feels like you see how his mind is working. It occurred to me that it is absolutely

the case that filming is fragmentary, inadequate, and incomplete, but there is evidence that you can gather that relates to people's inner states. You can't know anything. I don't know what it meant for him to very carefully put those pen tops on. But there was a way that he did it that was so deliberate and clearly such a habit, and so unusual, that it's as meaningful as evidence about him as a thinking. To capture a shot like that, and do it in—not in opposition to him, but him saying, “You will never learn anything about the interior of me by filming,” and then I was like, “Ooh. I don't know what I learned, but I know something more than I knew before.”

A. L. Watching a film like *Cameraperson*, for me—and maybe it's because of the clips you select, but I guess you select them for a reason—there's definitely a very developed style that is going on there. Is that something that you're conscious of developing, and how has that developed since the Derrida film?

K. J. It was a revelation for me upon making *Cameraperson* that I did have a consistent style or approach that's pretty ineffable. *Cameraperson* is made of footage that exists over the course of twenty-five years, so of course, technology is changing. The cameras I was using: the lenses are changing. My capacity to see what I'm actually shooting was changing, going from I'm looking through a tiny eyepiece, to I'm looking at a teeny-tiny screen, to I'm looking at a giant high definition screen. All of those things are changed throughout my career.

Yet what I had to admit in a certain way when I saw the footage was that, one, I was present—there's evidence of me in the footage, and there's evidence of the way I behave and the way I think and how I feel in the footage. That may be, at times, extremely abstract, but I did not understand how present I was. I believed, in some ways, that I was skilled at filming in different ways for different directors, and then, in fact, when I looked at the footage, I was like, “Oh, I'm a one-trick pony.” There's a way in which there's a sameness to it, which I could devalue or accept or value, depending on how I feel. But it was a revelation to me, and it was not something I was ever purposefully trying to do, to develop a style. I was much more interested in searching with directors for “How do we create the cinematic language that's necessary for this particular film?” The revelation of how coherent *Cameraperson* is was a total surprise to me.

A. L. One of the things that I saw in it, and I don't know if you were doing intentionally, is a real attention to duration in shots, letting shots go on and on, even when something has happened in the shot—which is usually when we expect the cut—so that you keep encouraging or making the viewer look at what happens next, and what goes forward in a shot. Have you had any thoughts on that, or have you noticed that, or whether that's just me putting interpretation to your work, or . . .

K. J. Well, I think it's a very beautiful observation. The motivation for me in the choices we made about how we sequenced things or which shots we chose was very connected to, “How do we allow the viewer of the film to share my experience?” Part of my experience as a cameraperson is this pleasure and curiosity of searching for shots, and then the necessary patience of waiting for things to happen. But over time, I've developed the understanding that you don't just stop when you've found one thing. In fact, there may be more things coming. And that there's increased pleasure if you have waited almost to the point of despondency, so that there's nothing more, and then suddenly, boom, there is something more. So, for example, the shot with the boxer. Never in a million years would I imagine we were going to find his mother. But the payoff of that, for me as a cameraperson, and for the spectator, is huge, right? I didn't stop at that moment. I continued to film him for probably half an hour after that. I kept following him.

One of the things that was a conundrum for us when we were making the film was “How do we translate extremely long duration into short periods of time?” I filmed the baby who was struggling for life in Nigeria for dozens of hours. I can’t remember right now the exact number of hours, but it’s something insane. There’s like thirty-four hours’ worth of footage. That was part of what had been disturbing and haunting for me, to watch that family go through that, to watch the hospital staff attempt to save him when they did not have the capacity to save him, when they were pulling medical teams away from other patients because I was filming, which we learned later. All of those things are in the pain and conflict and ethical dilemma that I carry about that footage. And it lasted a really long time in a situation where people are screaming, it’s loud, there’s HIV positive blood on the floor. The physical experience of being there is incredibly intense. So then how do I . . . What’s the duration of a shot I include in an hour and a half long film? Interestingly, part of how we upped the intensity of that particular scene was that we took the sound out the moment the baby is born, so that literally from the first moment that he’s born, you as an audience are holding your breath, thinking, “Is he breathing?”

I was looking for the many different ways the tools of cinema are able to give us the possibility of having emotional experience that is not real life, right? It’s not me filming a baby who’s deprived of oxygen for thirty hours, right, but it is fragments of that, and then how do we allow that to connect to the intensity of what it really was, without being manipulative or deceitful? That was part of what we tried to do with the film, was use the footage in as many different ways as possible, so some shots are their entire duration, there are montages, there are shots that . . . The woman who has the abortion, in the original film, she was a cutaway, so just adding her voice was what changed it. That was very deliberate, trying to use all of the many different tools of cinema to express the experience of being the cameraperson.

A. L. That really comes across especially for me, that sense of self-presence and your presence in the film is definitely there. One thing that you mentioned that I’d like to pick up on is the idea of searching when you’re using a camera. That’s so present in that final shot, where you’re panning left and right, and you’re picking one person up and then all of a sudden—and as I watch, what my experience of you is, that you pick it up before I notice it, and that puts you in such a present tense moment. I just wonder how on earth do you do that? Do you notice it, and then stop the camera? Is your body is very intuitive? How does getting a shot like that work for you?

K. J. Thank you. I’m so glad that that shot was meaningful to you, because for me there’s so much of cinematography in that shot.

A. L. The focus, as well, was impressive.

K. J. It is the finding a person and losing a person. For me, I feel like there’s an enormous amount of loss in the act of filming people, as much as there is this incredible experience of discovery and passion and pleasure, because you can’t stay. You can’t go as deep with the person as you want to. You can’t “do” for them. These kinds of things go through one’s head. I feel like I’ve learned about searching from the example of other camerapeople, particularly Jorge Müller Silva, one of the camerapeople on *The Battle of Chile*. In the opening scenes of the film, we see the footage of Leonardo Henrichsen, who filmed as a soldier in a tank turns and points a gun at him. Then we see the image tumble when Henrichsen is hit by the bullet and loses control of his camera. He died shortly thereafter. Silva is the cinematographer who continued on the film after this death—this is a cinematographer filming knowing that he could be shot and killed for working on this project—he

goes to this military funeral when things are on the verge of violent change. Basically, someone has assassinated the naval admiral who is loyal to President Allende, and all of the different heads of the different military branches are there at the funeral pretending that everything is normal, but in fact, half of them are about to support Pinochet taking power by a military coup and half of them know they're probably going to be killed.

Silva just does this extraordinary work. It's a super tense situation. It's formal. He's not really supposed to be there. And he's shooting on 16 millimetre, and he—search is the word. He just slowly moves up people's bodies until he finds a detail that betrays something, not even necessarily knowing what it betrays. Someone's doing his tie and being cocky, someone's got a drop of sweat dripping down his neck, someone's scratching, but as soon as he registers that detail, then he just pans away and finds someone else. And he lands where he lands. So he might land just on a nondescript part of their jacket, and then he very calmly just starts searching for the evidence of what that person is feeling internally. That shot, it's just a sequence. The way he pans out with full trust he will find something has been a great inspiration to me throughout my career. And he was killed after the coup happened. He was one of the people taken to the stadium and killed. He really was operating under fear for his life, and yet he had this incredible calm confidence in the profundity of human existence, and the fact that psychological things show in people's body language, and that the camera can see them.

For me, that's what I try to do, trust that there is visual complexity in the world that will share something with me. I just pan—I just followed. In that shot, I would just follow a person until they were replaced by another person. In a certain way, for me, it's saying every human individual is worthy of being filmed and being seen, and basically all you have to do is look with patience and curiosity and love.

A. L. It's a word you've mentioned several times, "evidence," that the camera looks for evidence, but it's not an evidence that produces knowledge, necessarily, or produces knowledge in the way that we think about it, but produces complexity, human complexity.

K. J. That's right. And it can't be verified, necessarily. The other thing that I think is so fantastic about it is that it's generative, so that once you have seen a shot that has given you some evidence, then you realize that you can triangulate that shot with another moment. For example, I'm making a film with my father right now, and we were filming auditions of the stuntpeople who are going to play him, who are going to enact his death. So we're looking for his doppelganger. It's a comedy. It's going to be funny.

So in doing the audition, we were having him stand next to the stuntpeople who are supposed to play the role of him. Suddenly you realize, in a wide shot, because they're the same size as him, even though it's perfectly absurd—he's an eighty-five-year-old man, and this is a thirty-four-year-old with big muscles, but who's trying to look like him, so they slump their shoulders—you have this effect of the idea of a doppelganger. To place that in a symmetrical way, suddenly you're seeing Tweedledee and Tweedledum. There's a twinning of the image that then becomes a way that I shoot my father with other people. And then it is coming up under this idea of, when my father dies, he cannot be replaced. He is irreplaceable. And yet he is just a man. Many men look like him. Someone will . . .

Those themes that are a part of my thinking and feeling about what the movie will be, I have found visual code to express. Then I look for that shot. It's not that I set that shot up, but when I see him standing next to another man, I think of the idea of doppelganger. I think of the idea of irreplaceability. I think of doubling. And it informs a language that I am creating in the service of making the film. This generative aspect, where you get ideas from filming, because you see and recognize something in what you have filmed.

A. L. That's really interesting, because earlier the way that I understood what you were saying was that the progress that you made in your development of style as a cameraperson was not based in self-reflection, or you weren't aware of it. But there is some connection there between the work you do and the way you think, and then the way that feeds back into your work when you gather images is . . .

K. J. Absolutely. Yes. And no question, for example, that I learned early on how differently expressive hands are from faces. That's a stock thing that you learn as a cameraperson. Shoot a cutaway of the hands. But there's a language around a lot of cinematography that I feel is misleading. Words like "B roll" or "cutaway" basically give you the understanding that the action is something like "let me just get this thing that's meaningless, because we'll need it to cheat." I have found the actual word "cutaway" misled me for many years in filming until I discovered, it's not a cutaway of the hands, it's: look at someone's hands in a meaningful moment, and you will discover a world about the person that you will never see in their face, particularly if they're trying to contain their emotion or hide their emotion, or they don't even understand themselves.

I have this moment with a mother whose son had been shot in cold blood, and we filmed her probably only three months after he'd been killed. We were filming a meeting with her and the son's father and the lawyer. She started smoothing a napkin in such a way that I knew she was about to completely collapse. I was the only one who saw it, and without asking the director, I stopped filming, and I said, "Do you need to take a break?" She left and disappeared into the bathroom, and was completely collapsed. The director was quite confused and angry with me, and, "Why did you do that? We would have filmed her crying." And I was like, "This is a relationship. This person has agreed to be in a film about her son's death. She will obviously cry in this film. But if we, in this first half an hour of filming her, expose her in this way, trap her into this situation of being filmed, she will not trust us."

When you're becoming a cinematographer, you have so many words—shoot, and take, and stealing images—I think there's a whole vocabulary of cinematography that emerged from parasitical processes that were a part of colonial military history, that had to do with misrepresenting people, taking things from people, being acquisitive, and I'm searching to express new vocabulary.

Creating the word "cameraperson"—it certainly existed before, but was not really used. I'm not saying I invented the word, but to affirm the word in a deliberate way was a deliberate act and a response to. . . . You know, every day someone calls me a cameraman, but there's a way in which what that says is: some people are allowed to do this, some people are not allowed to do this. You embed this cyborg idea into the very word. I am not just a person when I film. I am not just a camera. I am a cameraperson. And I see and experience and have power in ways that I don't when I am just a person, and that a camera doesn't without a person. I think that's increasingly relevant as we move into a world of more machine filming cameras, as we go into more surveillance camera, more world in which the simple technology of the camera is making choices that people aren't, and

AI. I think the particular subjectivity of the person who [is] seeing is ridiculously meaningful, and we're not acknowledging that. I think we have great potential to lose that in our images of the future. I'm a real advocate of trying to find and advocate for words that express the complexity of what's happening.

A. L. Well, it's a question. Would it be fair to say that those words and that terminology also extend into the processes, into the way that camera operators are trained to capture certain images, for example?

K. J. Absolutely. I feel like there's so many things I had to unlearn, and that I was striving to do for years until I realized, I don't want to do that or be that. It's also in the behaviour, so that you learn, "I need to be a fly on the wall and not be present, and be invisible." And then people do things like walk into people's worlds and just start filming them without asking if they have permission to do so, without introducing themselves, without recognizing that other people have agency. I've certainly been guilty of this many times, and often it's a question of, you know, it's sunset, the light's dropping, you've just got to get the shot because the shot's there and it's so beautiful. So you do these shots, and then after the fact, you realize with horror what you've done.

An example of that would be in Nigeria, the grandmother of that baby. I had been filming with her for hours. I knew her name. She had given us permission to film. But they didn't expect that the mother would almost bleed to death. They didn't expect that the baby would be in crisis. They'd given their permission when the woman was pregnant with two healthy twins. But I kept filming, and there's a moment when, in their protocol in this particular hospital, a family member has to carry the baby from one clinic area to another. And it was an emergency situation, and the grandmother was carrying the baby, and I ran around in front of her and was walking backwards. She stopped and posed. I realized, here's this woman whose grandchild is dying, but because of the hierarchy in her mind being a seventy-year-old Nigerian woman, if a white American woman with a big expensive camera is standing in front of her, she believes she has to stop, even at the expense of her own grandchild's health.

I have learned many times that even when you think that people have agency, that they are actually embedded in a structural social political system that has so conditioned them to be powerless that, even though they may be full of contempt for you or just horrified that you are filming in such a moment, they will accept. That is where I realized that part of the history of camerawork is this abusive. . . . It's an abuse of power that has not been acknowledged. I think that's in the imagery, and it's in the ways in which we realize there's been such misrepresentation in imagery of all kinds.

A. L. That goes right back to your opening about being a child seeing those images from the colonial era.

K. J. And just a child picking up on the signals of the world. Like, hmm, something's off here, right?

A. L. That brings up the whole question of ethics, and how you then go. You find yourself in that situation, and of course however much you might want to rid yourself of the associations that a camera might have, or the things that a camera is doing in terms of power structures, it's not possible, I guess, to do that completely. How do you then approach those situations in such a way that you think that what you're doing is ethical, but you're still getting what you want and are making a film that you want to make?

K. J. I think that that tension is almost always present. Early in my career, I sort of imagined, oh, I can be decent, and I can be ethical, and that's what I want to be. Over the course of my career, I've realized it is a much more complex matrix than that. I am in the matrix with. . . . The reason I am there is because either I am making a film or I have been hired to film on behalf of another director. There is no other reason for me to be there than my contribution to making a film. But I've also learned that it is not necessarily always shooting in that moment, actually filming, that is the choice to make. Sometimes making the choice not to film, like in the example I gave with the mother of the shot son, the choice to stop filming is the thing that enables the future film.

One of the things I would say, very simply, I have learned to be kinder to myself, and to accept that making mistakes about what is ethical or what is decent, being naïve, is acceptable to a point, but if you have been given the information or the knowledge and you ignore it, then I think you are accountable for your lack of ethics. You are responsible for the way in which you may be causing hurt or harm or pain, or into perpetuity, damage to another human. I accept that I often do not yet know things, but as soon as I learn things, then I am accountable to what I have learned. I need to be thinking in as active a way as possible, so to know that every situation is freighted with power dynamics, and relationships that exist that precede our presence as a camera team will go on after we leave, and that the film has the potential to change those dynamics, perhaps on behalf of one person we've filmed and not on behalf of another person.

One of the things that really matters to me when I think about filming is the notions of past, present, and future. I think of cinema as time travel, and I think of myself as having the capacity to—the camera allows me to be physically present in situations that I would never be in. But by being extremely present in that place, I must learn as much as I can about the past of that place, and I must imagine the possible futures, because I, by being there with the camera, am changing that matrix. That's one of the things I love thinking about, is: What do I not understand about what's going on here? What do I not understand about why someone is letting me film? That's another thing that I think about constantly. Why are they letting us film? What is the motivation there? What is the need? What is the wish? I often say, when you come with a camera, you come with a promise. You just don't know what it is that you're promising and to who.

This idea that I'm actively thinking about all these dynamics all of the time is so busy in my head that I sometimes forget that I'm a part of that puzzle, because I'm trying to figure out things that are unfamiliar to me, I forget what is familiar, what is me. Then there are moments like the Nigerian grandmother who remind me, oh, that's what I look like. That's who I am to her.

I constantly battle against the ways in which we are all seen too simply. Like looking at anyone, there's a series of labels that people see from the outside. But I'm trying to continue to give clues. What I'm doing when I'm filming is trying to give people many more ways into knowing who I am, so that they don't stay on the surface of who they believe me to be. That allows them to perhaps wish to share more of who they actually are. Because I believe that all of these identifying identities, they impact, profoundly, who we are, and they really matter, especially if you're living in a racist world or a misogynistic world, or a world where poverty is disrespected. . . . All those things matter, and yet there is also still a very particular person there who has a complicated relationship to their racial identity, and has a complicated relationship to being a woman, and has a complicated relationship to aging—and is hilarious, and is mean-spirited, and can be both. I'm trying, when I film, to give people clues about disrupting what they think they're seeing so that they can disrupt what I think I'm seeing.

A. L. And that's so clear in the way it comes across in *Cameraperson*. I actually wrote it down in my notes. There's a dedication to complexity, to complexity of people.

K. J. I like that. I am absolutely dedicated to complexity [*laughs*].

A. L. I think it goes back to the things we were talking about earlier, like duration or looking for evidence. To me, those were ways that some of those things, some of the complexity of people started to come across. To me, it's very anti that idea of making a film where you set it all up to conform with a particular vision of the world. You're looking for what you don't know, or something like that?

K. J. Yes. And then in the moment with Kathy Leichter where the snow falls from the roof. Then the world gives you something even more mysterious than you could imagine. And then the level of pleasure of having a moment like that is so intense, because it's just like, "Ahh! There's more going on than even I imagined." I love having that happen. The extreme surrealistic serendipity of the world is really thrilling to me.

A. L. In almost all of the films that you include in *Cameraperson*, there's a real dedication to politics as well. That must be something you're conscious of. How does that come about? How do you go about choosing projects, to the extent that you can choose projects, of course?

K. J. One of the dualities of me, perhaps, is that I very much believe in the specificity of the individual, but I also understand that people exist within systems. I think that comes from my upbringing, in that I felt very particular. I wouldn't say I felt alienated. I actually believed in the religion I was raised in when I was a child, so I felt very much a part of things, but I also felt deeply in confusion in relation to some of the things that were given to me as absolutes. But even though when Waco happened in Texas and went up in flames, I was within a system. Despite the fact that I was this sweet, thinking, caring child, I would have been on that team and thought that the apocalypse was coming, and gone down in flames happy, because I existed within a particular system.

I think I translated, at a certain point in life, my understanding of the religious system in which I existed into looking at political systems. For a while, I would say my understanding of that was quite simplistic, also. There was a missionary zeal I was raised with, and I translated [it] into politics with an activist's sensibility. It happened to align with a moment in documentary history that was convinced of its own capacity to make positive change. I was absolutely a part of a wave of impact films, and I was also a part of a wave of personal films. In both cases, I felt like I started to understand the limitations of both of those genres.

But for quite many years, I felt that I had the capacity to do something. I needed to do something. There's a genocide happening in Darfur. I need to go to Darfur, because maybe this is a way to contribute. I can't change things in any other way. And then, through the experience, I realized change is not a one-to-one thing like that. In similar ways, I was seeing the evidence of what NGOs were doing all over the world, seeing the way governments were failing all over the world, seeing the way individuals were failing all over the world, and just how hard it is to be a decent anything in the world, or create a system that functions.

The moment I started working with Laura Poitras, I finally found a match of a person who had an aesthetic vision that connected to a sophisticated, complicated political vision, that connected to a real interest in “What is happening to this particular human in this really remarkable position they are in that is at the centre of a system?” She found a way to bring complex psychological portraiture and systemic understanding together that, for me, was a revelation. Anything short of that became less interesting to me. Once I realized that that kind of combination was possible, I didn’t want to work on other projects that were [not doing this].

A. L. A question related to that is, how does that relationship work? I assume that when you’re going around filming, you must be in quite small teams, probably. Only you and a director, or maybe a soundperson, or . . .

K. J. Yeah. In that case, we were often just the two of us, but sometimes with a soundperson. I will give you an example. When we were working on a film, we didn’t know what it would become, and then it became *Citizenfour*, and it became *Risk*. Because Laura is who she is, she’s thinking about the complexity of cinema language at the same time she’s thinking about the complexity of the individual we’re filming and the scene. With the project we were working on, the general set of themes about the project was surveillance, and what do we not know about how governments are surveilling us, and who are the people who understand more about that than us? And how do we get to them? How do we film them? In the course of doing that, we watched *The Conversation*, which is this incredible film about paranoia, about surveillance. We talked a lot about the opening shot of the movie, which is this slow zoom into the park, where the sound is distorted, and marvelled at how much that shot did to communicate about the themes of the film.

So when we were following Julian Assange into London for him to go to this court appearance, we decided this is the perfect opportunity to attempt to quote that shot. We planned to follow him into the courtroom in a handheld shot walking behind him and then to film his exit from the courthouse from a location across the street up in a building, which would allow us to quote the shot from *The Conversation*. I rode with him in a taxi into the city, followed him up from behind as he got out of the car and walked to the courthouse as planned. What happened though was that it was so intense when we got out of the car—there were so many other cameras, and I was so amped up, that I put the camera above my head, and I was following right behind him with this great tight shot of his head. But [in] moving the camera up high like that was when I pushed the wrong button. I turned the camera off when I thought I was recording! I did not record it. And I was, like, going to die.

And Laura is so remarkable that—because anybody else would have been angry at me and so disappointed, and, “Well, we’re not going to take that risk on another shot. You have to try to get close to him when he comes out of the courtroom, and that’s what matters.” She was like, “Ah, that wasn’t that interesting a shot. What we’re trying to do with this other shot’s going to be much more interesting.” Which is incredibly generous of her, for one thing, but it’s also . . . She understands, when the stakes are really high is when you make terrible mistakes. It’s so intense.

So we went across the street and went up I don’t know how many storeys, and had this window. When Julian emerged out of the court, his little head of white hair, and I started slowly zooming out. We had a soundperson down on the ground. Wellington Bowler was there. You were getting these close voices and far voices, and people responding to him. You had the intimacy, more intimacy than I ever could have gotten in the crush of people, and we had this shot that was full of ideas. That’s the kind of leadership she has as a director, where you’ll think about ideas together, you’ll try

things, things will fail, she will not punish you, but she'll see it as an opportunity, and she'll double down. Like, okay, we're going to risk this. She understands how to take risks in ways that are very meaningful.

A. L. Just to go back to *Cameraperson*, I wanted to talk about the editing in it, as well as the camera work. One thing that happens is that you're contrasting shots of these far-flung places, often with people in quite traumatic situations, with shots of your family, and there's also these quite big tonal changes that go on from very traumatic scenes to very playful, more comedic scenes. I just wondered what were some of the thoughts or some of the ways that you came to those decisions to make those kinds of cuts.

K. J. When you are a cameraperson, your life can go in the course of a day from being with the most powerful people in a city to the most destitute people in a city to an incredibly joyful situation to a traumatic situation, in a moment. You travel that as a cameraperson. One of the things I was experiencing, because I had filmed so much and had been so many places—I've been to, I think, eighty-six countries in the world—is that you start to not be able to remember anything, because it's just too much. Your system can't hold all of the images, all of the people you've been staring intently at. That loss of memory was happening to me at the same time that I was experiencing my mother's Alzheimer's, and I was completely fascinated by how memory works and troubled by the fact that I was having all these incredibly intense experiences, yet I honestly could not tell you where I was the day before. I was trying to remain a coherent person.

And so I wanted that in the movie. I wanted the level of contrast of, we're in Yemen, about to be arrested and thrown into jail, and I have two twins, and I'm a mother, and I'm home playing, to just smack those up against each other as hard as I experienced them. I was pregnant when I filmed the shot that I just told you about Julian Assange—I got a sonogram in Egypt when we were filming the hackers who were doing the revolution. You're in these situations, and you're like, I can't believe this is happening. And you're managing all of that. I wanted the viewer to experience this accumulation. Things take on more meaning if you have been in six post-genocide situations than they do if you've only been in one. It turns out, that's me. I have been to all of those locations. That takes on a different meaning. So I was trying to include the fact that all of this experience that the camera has allowed me has changed me and allows me to see the world in a different way. That was part of what we wanted the editing to do.

I had two remarkable collaborations in the editing process. The first was with a woman named Amanda who helped me break through a lot of my inhibition about me being in the film. I did not want to be in the film at all. We went through a process that was so emotionally draining for us that she needed to stop. She couldn't go any further, and then I took a real break, because what we had made revealed to me that I was traumatized in ways I didn't understand. Together, we had made this really raw, unwatchable, almost message to ourselves that things were not okay. I don't know if that makes sense.

I once filmed in Haiti, and we were going to meet a journalist at the airport. And instead of saying hello to me when she met me at the airport, she put a photo of two kids who had been burned—they had been set afire with rubber tires as members of the opposition. She put this photo of their charred bodies in my face, and said, "We need to go get photocopies of this right now." I was like, "Whoa." She's in the middle of things. She's so deeply in what she's in, she does not even know

she's not saying hello to me as a human being, and she's putting this image of great trauma in my face.

That's what I felt about the cut that Amanda [Laws] and I made, when she had allowed and encouraged me to go as deeply as I could into this traumatic material. Then it was almost like a message to ourselves of, "Oh, this is not okay, and we can't do this to other people." This isn't what you do to someone when they come to a movie theatre. You don't stick this photo in their face, and say, "Look!"

That cut had lots of voiceover. I talked over everything and explained everything, and that was just oppressive in every level. So we had this notion of, maybe it would be possible to do the film just with the footage. I started floating that with different editors who were available, and when I met Nels [Bangerter] and started talking to him about it, that's when I realized we had something on our hands. Then we basically went with that idea. I told him everything that I could think of that I wanted in the movie, and then I said, "Let's try to do it with no voiceover." He took a test run at that all by himself. I stayed out of the edit room for weeks and weeks, and then we had a proof of concept of, "Oh, yeah, this will be possible."

A. L. Moving forward, are you planning to do more films where you direct or you're not only being a cameraperson?

K. J. Post-*Cameraperson* I made a promise to myself I would not work on anything that doesn't attempt to push the form, and is not profoundly risk-taking. So there's a way in which, if Laura were to come to me and say, "I have this project . . ." I agreed recently to work with Sam Green on his Kronos Quartet project, which is entitled *Joy*. But basically, I'm working on this project about my father that I told you a little bit about.

And then the other project I want to talk to you about, because what I'm interested in is exploding this notion of subjectivity behind the camera. It's a longer-term project about the idea of camerapeople in the twenty-first century. It's talking about this pressure I see coming from the future that exists in many countries already, China, Egypt, where documentary camerapeople make films about nature or sports, where people . . . it is now clear repressive governments understand that you can't have a brilliant subjective person operating the camera, because it's too dangerous to them. So I'm working on a long-term project that I hope will include an exhibit and the work of many different camerapeople, going back into all of our different archives to explore these different themes. That's what I'm working on, and would love to continue to be in conversation with you about it.

A. L. Doing this project, I think that there's a consistency with a lot of the people about this idea of the camera being connected to the person's subjectivity, and certainly camerawork takes place within that context of either these very oppressive governments, where you can't film something unless you're filming something that they don't mind, or the opposite of that. I find it in the UK: anyone can pick up a camera and use it, but while you're not prohibited from filming, you're encouraged to use your phone, or your camera in particular ways, and to make adverts, or to make yourself look beautiful, or whatever it is. To me, that's a context which is also denying subjectivity in some way.

K. J. Absolutely. I so appreciate the way that you're putting these ideas together and are interested in what the camera does. And I do think the context now is really different, and I don't think we have

analyzed it enough yet. I don't think we know what it's going to be yet. All of this is up for grabs in ways we never imagined.

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Kirsten Johnson has had final editorial control of the script of this interview.