

# CONTENTS

<b>Therese Henningsen &amp; Juliette Joffé</b> Preface: Documentary as Encounter	<b>7</b>	<b>Therese Henningsen</b> All These Summers	<b>161</b>
<b>Toni Morrison</b> Strangers	<b>17</b>	<b>Marc Isaacs</b> The Lens as Shelter	<b>177</b>
<b>Jon Bang Carlsen</b> The Image of the Village <i>trans. Denise Rose Hansen</i>	<b>23</b>	<b>Gareth Evans</b> Strangerhood: On the Art of Oliver Bancroft	<b>193</b>
<b>Ruth Beckermann</b> In Praise of Detours <i>trans. David Perrin</i>	<b>37</b>	<b>Mary Jiménez Freeman-Morris</b> Gordon's Face Deal	<b>209</b>
<b>Khalik Allah</b> There's a Strength in Defencelessness	<b>43</b>	<b>Andrew &amp; Eden Kötting</b> Prick Me with Your Calamity, Wind Me with Your Familiarity	<b>215</b>
<b>Annie Ernaux</b> Towards a Transpersonal 'I' <i>trans. Dawn M. Cornelio</i>	<b>55</b>	<b>Bruno De Wachter</b> Single Ticket <i>trans. Patrick Lennon</i>	<b>241</b>
<b>Jane Fawcett</b> Freightened Curriculum, and My Family and Landscape: An Inheritance in the Flesh	<b>61</b>	<b>Adam Christensen</b> The Red Dream	<b>257</b>
<b>Andrea Luka Zimmerman</b> Don't Play with That Girl	<b>65</b>	<b>Xiaolu Guo</b> The Mystery of Language	<b>265</b>
<b>Umama Hamido</b> Pepe Pepe Pepe	<b>79</b>	<b>Contributor Biographies</b>	<b>268</b>
<b>Trinh T. Minh-ha</b> Other Than Myself / My Other Self	<b>95</b>	<b>Filmography</b>	<b>275</b>
<b>Xiaolu Guo</b> Woman with a Movie Camera	<b>123</b>	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>Juliette Joffé</b> A Long-Forgotten Image	<b>133</b>		
<b>David MacDougall</b> The Strangers within Us	<b>141</b>		

**PREFACE:  
DOCUMENTARY  
AS ENCOUNTER**

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**THERESE HENNINGSEN  
& JULIETTE JOFFÉ**

I try to understand the intensity of my chagrin, and why I am missing a woman I spoke to for fifteen minutes ... Now she is gone, taking away with her my good opinion of myself, which, of course, is unforgivable. Isn't that the kind of thing that we fear strangers will do? Disturb. Betray. Prove they are not like us. That is why it is so hard to know what to do with them.

— Toni Morrison

In her text 'Strangers', written in 1988 and reproduced here, Toni Morrison is both enlivened and disturbed by an encounter with a fisherwoman – a stranger – whom she names Mother Something. The temporary presence of Mother Something, and their conversation – lasting merely fifteen minutes – leaves an indelible impression. The fisherwoman announces that she will return but does not, and is nowhere to be found. Her disappearance provokes conflicting responses: betrayal, fascination, obsession. She becomes an object of Morrison's projections, a cause for either false alarm or reverence. On reflection, Morrison realises that these emotions are provoked by a fear of the stranger within herself. This echoes with the title of this anthology, borrowed from Julia Kristeva. Kristeva proposes that we discover our own disturbing otherness by our projective apparition of the other at the heart of our attempts to maintain a 'solid' us. Accepting the difference within ourselves, she says, is the ultimate condition of our being *with* others.<sup>1</sup>

Kristeva's definition of the stranger within felt resonant when, two years ago, we first talked about putting together a screening programme focusing on the relational possibilities of the documentary encounter. The idea grew from a conversation we had about two of our own films: *Slow Delay* (2018), based on Therese's chance encounter with the elderly twins Trevor and Raymond, and *Next Year We Will Leave* (2021), a reconciliation with Juliette's hometown, Paris, through a dialogue with strangers. We talked about

how they, although differently, shared a sense that the encounter with the person(s) – strangers – filmed spilled beyond the screen, directly affecting our own lives in the making. We wondered whether this is always the case in any type of filmmaking process.

This question led us to further reflect on the interrelations between encounters, hospitality and autobiography. Encounters, particularly with an emphasis on the unexpected and non-predetermined encounter and its relationship to filmmaking processes. Hospitality, inspired by Jacques Derrida's two lectures on hospitality, held at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris in 1996. In 'Foreigner Question' and 'Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality', Derrida considers hospitality as a question of what arrives at the borders in the initial surprise of contact with an other, a stranger, a foreigner.<sup>2</sup> Autobiography, with an emphasis on exploring a personal cinema where the first-person narrative echoes the stories of those filmed.

The screening programme kept being delayed, and instead what was initially conceived as an associated pamphlet gradually grew into a work of its own – this anthology. We researched the works of filmmakers, writers and artists that resonated with the idea of 'the stranger within'. While our initial impulse concentrated on an exploration of filmmaking processes, we felt compelled to include writers and artists whose work – albeit in discrete ways – spoke to our concerns: Annie Ernaux, Toni Morrison, Adam Christensen, Jane Fawcett, Bruno De Wachter, Gareth Evans.

While encountering others in documentary processes is almost always (by its very nature) unpredictable, predeterminations of a question, an idea, a concept are often palpably felt. Projections onto those filmed are common (if not unavoidable), whether through logically arriving at certain narratives or through interpretations of people's life experiences. If a person does or thinks 'this', it must mean 'that'.

In both the physical and social sciences, suggests anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall, intentions are generally favoured. You need to have an idea of the direction of your research and of your main question, otherwise you merely have a muddle of undirected interests. The outcome can often be predicted from the questions asked, and the work serves to test conclusions already guessed at. Occasionally this opens up a completely new line of inquiry, but this is seen as exceptional rather than part of the original intention. MacDougall instead proposes 'dislocation as method'. In this approach, expectations may be upset, revised or superseded, and objectives recast by particular experiences:

Here the outcome is unpredictable and open to sudden shifts of direction. To work in this way often means entrusting yourself to strangers and there is always the risk of becoming a stranger yourself ... For the filmmaker it is more than a calculated risk: it is a voluntary act of dislocation.<sup>3</sup>

MacDougall reminds us how letting go of our preconceptions involves an element of risk. When filmmakers are not sure what to think and not sure of the direction an encounter may take, the process becomes guided by uncertainty and doubt. Not trying to dominate or shy away from the unknown requires trust in the discovery process.

Addressing the making of her films *Estate, a Reverie* (2015) and *Here for Life* (2019), Andrea Luka Zimmerman describes the value of an approach that embraces the unfinished and the clumsy; of going on a yet-to-be-defined journey with the people filmed. With each new film, she suggests, there is a need to see in a way that is as yet unknown. Wandering and drifting is also welcomed in Ruth Beckermann's *Those Who Go Those Who Stay* (2013), in which she sets out to make a film with an intentionally unintentional gaze. This takes her on an unexpected journey across Europe and the

Mediterranean; an embodiment of her suggestion that every detour changes the destination.

Caught between two worlds (or more), filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Minh-ha's approach to autobiography values movement and journey and accommodates the exploration of our multiple selves. As a stranger to a new environment, everything safe and sound is destabilised. Trinh speaks of a voyage out of a known self back into the unknown self. The self loses its fixed boundaries – a disturbing yet potentially empowering practice of difference. There's a strength in defencelessness, advises photographer and filmmaker Khalik Allah, and in laying down your armour. In *IWOW: I Walk on Water* (2020), filmed mainly on the corner of 125th Street and Lexington Avenue in Harlem, New York City, he engages in a filmmaking process guided by chance encounters and by his ongoing friendship with the homeless Haitian man Frenchie. He explains how whenever he meets another person he is also meeting a part of himself. Here, the autobiographical meets the to-be-shared biography of the subject.

Seen this way, the filmic encounter could be interpreted as a hospitable act on both sides of the camera, allowing for a shared experience: the filmed welcomes the maker into their life, and, in turn, the lens becomes a temporary shelter for the filmed. In his interview about *The Filmmaker's House* (2020), filmmaker Marc Isaacs points out that 'camera' means 'room' in Latin. To film someone is also to welcome them into a tangible or intangible space: one's gaze, one's house or life. The porosity between 'life space' and 'filmic space' opens to a wider question: can or should the encounter with the other through film change the maker's life? Like any encounter, it has the power to do so. In *Far and Near* (2003), writer and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo meets people in rural Wales whose differences from and similarities to herself allow her to reflect on her own life and journey.

Yet strict boundaries are often palpable when filming another and tend to separate the spaces behind and in front of the camera.

**STRANGERS**  
—  
**TONI MORRISON**

I am in this river place – newly mine – walking in the yard when I see a woman sitting on the seawall at the edge of a neighbor’s garden. A homemade fishing pole arcs into the water some twenty feet from her hand. A feeling of welcome washes over me. I walk toward her, right up to the fence that separates my place from the neighbor’s, and notice with pleasure the clothes she wears: men’s shoes, a man’s hat, a well-worn colorless sweater over a long black dress. The woman turns her head and greets me with an easy smile and a ‘How you doing?’ She tells me her name (Mother Something) and we talk for some time – fifteen minutes or so – about fish recipes and weather and children. When I ask her if she lives there, she answers no. She lives in a nearby village, but the owner of the house lets her come to this spot any time she wants to fish, and she comes every week, sometimes several days in a row when the perch or catfish are running and even if they aren’t because she likes eel, too, and they are always there. She is witty and full of the wisdom that older women always seem to have a lock on. When we part, it is with an understanding that she will be there the next day or very soon after and we will visit again. I imagine more conversations with her. I will invite her into my house for coffee, for tales, for laughter. She reminds me of someone, something. I imagine a friendship, casual, effortless, delightful.

She is not there the next day. She is not there the following days, either. And I look for her every morning. The summer passes, and I have not seen her at all. Finally, I approach the neighbor to ask about her and am bewildered to learn that the neighbor does not know who or what I am talking about. No old woman fished from her wall – ever – and none had permission to do so. I decide that the fisherwoman fibbed about the permission and took advantage of the neighbor’s frequent absences to poach. The fact of the neighbor’s presence is proof that the fisherwoman would not be there. During the months following, I ask lots of people if they know Mother Something.

No one, not even people who have lived in nearby villages for seventy years, has ever heard of her.

I feel cheated, puzzled, but also amused, and wonder off and on if I have dreamed her. In any case, I tell myself, it was an encounter of no value other than anecdotal. Still. Little by little, annoyance then bitterness takes the place of my original bewilderment. A certain view from my windows is now devoid of her, reminding me every morning of her deceit and my disappointment. What was she doing in that neighborhood, anyway? She didn’t drive, had to walk four miles if indeed she lived where she said she did. How could she be missed on the road in that hat, those awful shoes? I try to understand the intensity of my chagrin, and why I am missing a woman I spoke to for fifteen minutes. I get nowhere except for the stingy explanation that she had come into my space (next to it, anyway – at the property line, at the edge, just at the fence, where the most interesting things always happen), and had implied promises of female camaraderie, of opportunities for me to be generous, of protection and protecting. Now she is gone, taking with her my good opinion of myself, which, of course, is unforgivable.

Isn’t that the kind of thing that we fear strangers will do? Disturb. Betray. Prove they are not like us. That is why it is so hard to know what to do with them. The love that prophets have urged us to offer the stranger is the same love that Jean-Paul Sartre could reveal as the very mendacity of Hell. The signal line of ‘No Exit’, ‘*L’enfer, c’est les autres*’,<sup>1</sup> raises the possibility that ‘other people’ are responsible for turning a personal world into a public hell. In the admonition of a prophet and the sly warning of an artist, strangers as well as the beloved are understood to tempt our gaze, to slide away or to stake claims. Religious prophets caution against the slide, the looking away; Sartre warns against love as possession.

The resources available to us for benign access to each other, for vaulting the mere blue air that separates us, are few but powerful: language, image, and experience, which may involve both, one, or

**THERE'S A  
STRENGTH IN  
DEFENCELESSNESS**

—

**KHALIK ALLAH**

IN CONVERSATION WITH  
THERESE HENNINGSEN

**THERESE HENNINGSEN:** I'm interested in talking about filmmaking as a form of encounter. I think your filmmaking is very much a process that is led by the encounters you have with the people you film. And so, to start with that question, I'd like to know if you see your filmmaking as a form of encounter and, if so, how?

**KHALIK ALLAH:** Sure. I would say that I do documentary work and it's unpredictable. There are many people that I stop in the street and it's just that: it's an encounter, there's a level of communication that is unpredictable. I think that's also what makes it interesting. I'm not even sure what I'm going to say in that encounter, and I'm not sure what the reaction is going to be – to me filming, or to the questions I may pose. So the work is definitely a form of encounter, but my personal attitude is that whenever I meet a person, I'm meeting a part of myself. I don't see the encounter as encountering somebody that's separate from me. My work is very much about identifying myself in the other, in the other person. My work is about empathy and showing that there is a relationship between artist and subject.

So it definitely is an encounter; I would say it's a loving encounter. It's a respectful encounter. Sometimes I want to film somebody, and I ask them for permission, or I'll tell them what I'm doing, and they say, 'No, I don't want to be a part of that', so I just move on. I have to respect when the person doesn't want to be filmed. A lot of my work is predicated on trust, and again, the trust of my subjects, so it's very important that I have that in place before moving forward. It's very rare that I'll film something without the permission of a person.

**TH:** You said, at some point, that when we look outward we see a reflection of what we first witness inside ourselves – which I guess relates to what you said just now. Could you talk a bit more about that?

**KA:** Much of my work has to do with showing the audience that there is nothing to fear, showing people that there is nothing to fear. Because a lot of my subjects are on the fringes of society. They're almost what some people would consider 'untouchables', or at the bottom of the societal totem pole, in a sense. And shooting at night-time in their neighbourhood ... there's not many people that are comfortable even walking through there, even if they live in the local area. My work is really about choosing to see the light in a person instead of the darkness in a person – in the sense of choosing to identify with the love the person has, rather than be afraid of the person.

Perception is a choice; we choose what we see. We look inward first and decide what we want to see and then project it outward onto the world. Focusing on the light in another reinforces it in yourself. And that's why this work, in a sense, is also therapeutic for me. Because it helps to strengthen my attitude about people and life in general, and about the world. I feel like all of us need to change our perception of the world, to some extent. To see it as a safe place, as a loving place, and as a harmless place, but oftentimes we have a past in the world which hasn't been all of those things, and we expect the past to repeat itself. When I'm working, my work is really about healing and letting go of the past and freeing up the future: opening the future up to be free and different from the past.

**TH:** I think there's something really interesting in what you're saying in relation to affirming or saying, 'I film those people who touch me or who I am drawn to, or who I love and feel connected to and see myself in.' In relation to that, do you see your filming as a form of autobiography?

**KA:** It was about me to some extent, especially the later half of *IWOW: I Walk on Water* (2020). That dealt more with me, but not



**PRICK ME WITH YOUR  
CALAMITY, WIND ME  
WITH YOUR FAMILIARITY**

—

**ANDREW &  
EDEN KÖTTING**



OFF WE GO AGAIN THEN – Cabin Doors to Manual  
Diary entry 7 April 1988: Leila induced last night @ 54 cm  
11.45pm – A baby girl was born – emergency caesarean section –  
delivered by Doctor Fish – 8 lb 10 oz – food pumped directly into her  
stomach – doctors concerned that baby is not behaving normally.  
A year later.  
A church step somewhere in the French Pyrenees.  
Medieval.  
Archival.  
On a day so hot I was worried that the top of her head might burn off.  
Eden, a daughter.  
Eden, a catalyst for my new beginning.  
Life before Eden and life after Eden.  
What was to become of me? Us?  
Her Joubert syndrome meant that she was missing a bit of her  
cerebellum.  
Her vermis. Some brains.  
I'd finished at the university and the thing that is the whole of life was  
in front of me. Us.  
And this remembering like the urge to tongue a wobbly milk tooth.  
Consuming. It takes me right back to when things are never that clear.  
Not then.  
Not now. They never were.  
But  
There it is. There you have it. In the picture. In the frame. Fairly full  
to overflowing with the pain, of then, not knowing.  
The philosophical, physiological, biological and historical pain  
of not knowing.  
Those elements, those autobiographical components that inform  
the whole.  
The corpus.