

Interlude: Life as Raw Material

Eva Stotz

Abstract *Eva Stotz describes in her text her own practice as filmmaker and how she deals with her own position and biography. She draws on her own works and the approach she took towards her creative practice. Examining the challenges of selecting and curating images in her documentaries, she considers the dilemma of the real and problematic claims to accurate representations of people and places. Thereby, she highlights the situatedness of documentary works that are born out of specific historical contexts and moments.*

Keywords *Filmmaking; Eva Stotz; Directing; Tempelhof/They Are Flying Planes; Sollbruchstelle/Devil; Hides in Doubt; Global Home; One Million Steps*

My Background

“Practices of Imagination – Placings of Imaginaries,” the theme of the conference at the University of Eichstätt in February 2024, touched upon an essential issue for me as a filmmaker: How does the world show itself to me? What shapes my imagination? After all, it is a cocktail of factors that makes each person interpret the world differently. In my case, this cocktail is white, Central European, cis woman, mother, middle-class parents, general university entrance qualification, atheist, grew up in the analogue age with books and cinema, and traveled a lot. How do I make a documentary film when this cocktail gives me so many perspectives? With what justification can I represent mine?

I found great justification in my female perspective. Even as a child, I realized that most of the films I saw were narrated by men. Women must tell stories about the world and convey their wisdom and approach to life. The female voice is still too often missing. But wouldn't it be more important to explore perspectives that do not originate in the white mainstream society? Unfortu-

nately, the film industry still makes too little effort to ensure that non-white filmmakers have the opportunity to tell their stories. Yet we need these different perspectives to face the complexity of our times. At times, feelings of privilege and “white guilt” almost made me give up the profession, but I continued making films because of a sincere interest in understanding people and our human condition. With a great desire to raise awareness within myself and my community. To build bridges with stories. With an access and privilege that I should use to support marginalized voices. But the most important fuel was my love for stories, and the exhilarating feeling when life co-writes the script.

About the Dilemma of the “Real”

In documentary film, the distinction between documentary and interpretation/fiction is not clear-cut. It is a question of degree. In the filmmaking process, countless decisions are made that are not immediately noticeable to the audience; on visual language, music, and editing, and others for purely technical, aesthetic, or political reasons. My mere presence with the film equipment and team affects the reality in front of the camera. So, it is impossible to make a documentary film without manipulating the pure information. I see life as raw material, carrying hundreds of different narratives in every moment. From this, I mold what comes close to my idea of the world and, by making a film, I put it up for discussion. If I misrepresent a topic or people, there is no authority to consult. I alone am responsible for my decisions.

Stop, Immerse, Let Go

As a documentary filmmaker, I see my task as stopping the information acceleration of our time and working my way into the subject. Talking, asking, listening, reading, getting lost for a moment in the jungle of possibilities. With camera and sound devices, marveling at the indescribability of how and what people say. And realizing again and again that life itself is the most exciting film set and the most creative screenwriter. When deciding on the focus of a film, I follow my “emotional motor,” a driving force that comes from within. It helps to ask honest questions to gain clarity. It is the nucleus where it hurts, and from where the search for images, voices, and places in the outside world begins. And it gives me the perseverance necessary for creating a film. This work

teaches you to change your mind about so many topics. It teaches you how to embrace the process, even when nothing goes according to plan. Eventually, you find a way to retell this expedition as a story and emerge on the other side of the metaphorical jungle canyon.

In my essay, I will use four of my films to illustrate the lessons I have learned from this work.¹ All are independent productions, which means I was able to work freely as a filmmaker without any specifications regarding the format or target group. In these projects, I could (and had to) negotiate everything in terms of content with myself whilst considering the protagonists. But a film is also about teamwork, and, on this journey, I was accompanied by creative masterminds. When I use “we” in this article, I am thinking of, and thanking, my companions who helped me give birth to these film babies—editors, camerapeople, producers, sound-, light-, music experts, and many other creative souls.

Tempelhof/They Are Flying Planes, 2005, 16 min.

For a seminar at film school, we had to shoot a film on a “wasteland.” There were still a lot of them in Berlin at the turn of the millennium; places in the city characterized by a certain wildness. I was drawn to the area located on the flight path to Tempelhof Airport. Here the airplanes landed right in the middle of the residential area over the St. Thomas cemetery—a special kind of “God’s acre.” Most of the graves on this side were to be cleared; only a few were still intact. The juxtaposition of dog owners, mourners, and residents provided some interesting moments.

However, something completely different was captured in the film. Further ahead, by the taxiway fence, people, mostly strangers, came every day to watch airplanes take off and land. What went through their minds as they watched these airplanes between long periods of standing around in silence? I often wished myself far away from the city limits of Berlin, and there was a natural interest in finding out what it was like for others. I also saw fences as an interesting psychological and narrative element, as applied urban territoriality. A fence divides people into different groups; here, a thin wire mesh fence separates people into travelers and non-travelers. I decided to shift my focus to the surreal wasteland, to this blank space by the fence. The fence, as a kind

1 All films can be viewed on my website, <http://www.evastotz.com>.

of antagonist, could help me learn something about people's dreams, a fence that guards the desires and keeps the dreams safe.

Telling Authentic Stories

And yet, how do I get the people who stand there to give me their trust and show me what goes on within their minds? A simple way to slowly put yourself into another person's shoes is to literally take the same point of view. Doing what the person does, which in this case meant a lot of silence, waiting, and watching. At some point, I stopped being an observer of others: My sound engineer and I became a part of the place. The rhythm of the time there, the regularities, influenced us, and in this synchronization, I was able to empathize with the people. Time spent together builds trust, which is the key factor in documentary films. Trust allows me to show myself vulnerable and share personal things, which in turn makes it easier for the other person to open up. At Tempelhof, I realized that most people are happy to talk when they get honest attention. And suddenly there seems to be an unwritten agreement that I can ask about anything.

Search or Find

We all have helpful concepts according to which we read the world. Understandably, the “searching gaze” does not find as much because it constantly compares itself with the inner image, categorizing everything as “useful” and “not useful.” I often receive the greatest gifts in the moments when I relinquish control over what I am about to encounter. At Tempelhof, a man in an old pink anorak speaks in a strong Berlin dialect:

It's all so uncertain. You don't dare go in. I'm not going in there. Nope. I'll go on the train. But not on a plane. I'm just scared. Because I've never flown on an airplane before. That's the thing. Like other people, they go in there, just like that. And some, they're scared. A lot of people are scared. Believe me. Many.

And indeed, I found out that many of the people on the fence were afraid of flying. They readily told me that they would never board a plane, never be part

of the world of travelers on the other side of the fence. A discovery that I hadn't even anticipated, something I found without looking for it. I made relinquishing control a personal mission in the next film that I use to illustrate my lessons learnt. Here, the subject spread out far in front of me, too difficult to grasp; I invited "Chance" to help write the script.

Sollbruchstelle/Devil Hides in Doubt, 2008, 63 min.

The idea for the film *Sollbruchstelle / Devil Hides in Doubt* (2008) emerged when I returned to Germany following three months in East Africa. It is easier to question your class and culture after having travelled long enough for "normal" to become something else. I came back and realized how present and pervasive and present the topics of "work" and "jobs" had become in Germany, along with associated fears; of losing a job, of not finding the right job, of un-supportive colleagues and superiors, or negative developments in the job market. During this time, I kept seeing the same mental image: A man goes to work at his company every day, but all he does is sit in his office. He has nothing to do and is not allowed to talk to anyone, just as no one is allowed to talk to him. His only task is to endure the loneliness and degradation. Order is imposed from above, and he complies. I realized I knew this man—it was my father, Franz.

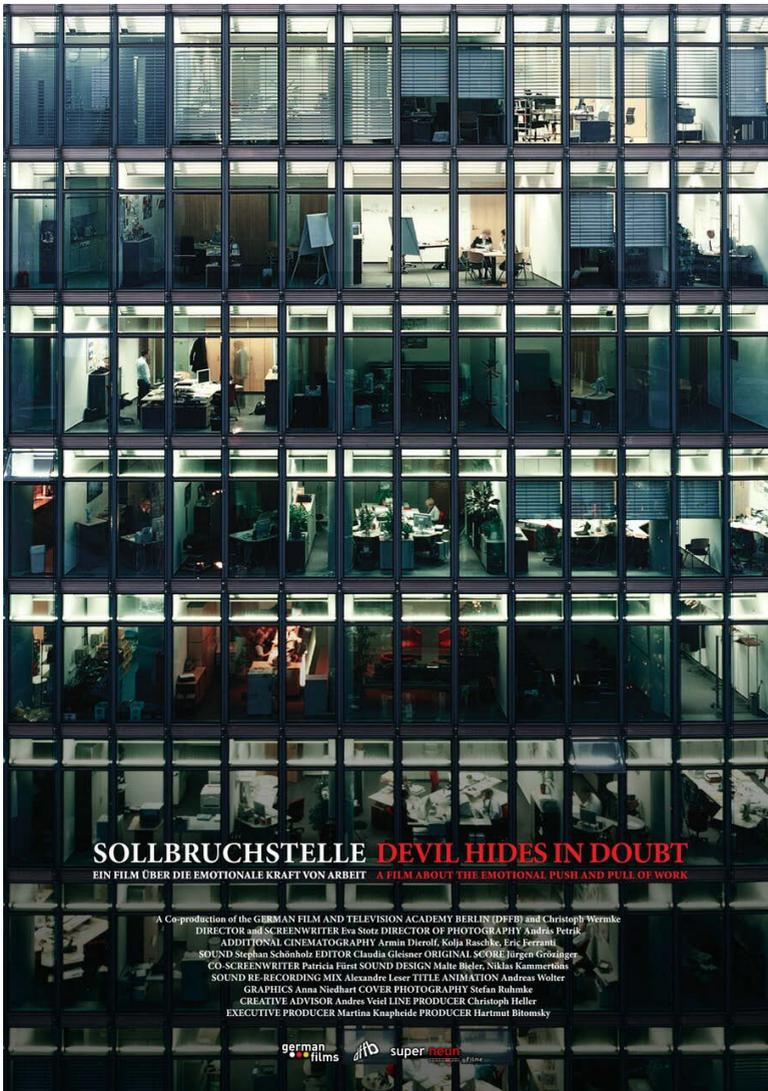
The process of creating this film travelled from the inside out. It started with my father's personal and traumatic experience that, because of family closeness, became mine to some extent. To summarize the story, Franz had worked for thirty years for the same automotive company and was on the verge of retirement and a non-terminable pension. One day, without explanation, he was made redundant for "operational reasons." The real reason was that his boss had left the company, and the new boss had gradually replaced the entire team. However, the company continued to expand and hire staff. My father took this global company to court, sure he would win, and he did win. But the company simply did not implement the points he had fought for; it was a Pyrrhic victory. Represented by the HR manager, the company shifted the attack to a psychological level, trying to break Franz with bullying methods. They finally imposed a contact ban to "maintain peace in the company," something known internally as the "Fiat Method." All to ensure that he finally resigned of his own accord to spare the company the expensive severance payment. Ironically, the HR manager's story also ended badly. When he did not manage to get my father to resign after a year, he was dismissed himself. He was given

two hours to clear his desk. The new HR manager ended this “solitary confinement,” but Franz was too mentally broken to reintegrate into the company. At some point, he accepted a severance offer from the company and left in defeat.

Conversation with Franz: Exploring the Primal Conflict

When I started working on the film, ten years after this episode, I still had many unanswered questions. Above all: what made Franz put up with this degrading treatment for so long? And why did he even want to sue his way back into his old position? For me, time spent in a lonely office symbolized a waste of a lifetime. I knew for sure that I did not want to make a personal film, but the journey had to start at the place closest to me, my family. I made an appointment with Franz for a two-day interview. My idea was to tell my father’s Kafkaesque, brutal work story, thereby making the guilt and the chain of effects of social bullying visible. And share my father’s story to give his struggle the attention it never got. The film was supposed to bring some justice, albeit late.

The reality, I discovered, was more like this: My father wasn’t just a victim of the system. He was also terribly inflexible and could not see his way out of the situation. Through the interview, it became clear how much my father was a product of a time when lifelong employment was still the norm. And how much the world of work had changed. Apart from traditional wage labor, he had no vision of how he could continue to participate in social life. This realization provoked a change of perspective. I saw my father and the HR manager, at war with each other because the system dictated it. They lacked a vision of how things could be different. Wanting to understand the dependencies of the HR manager tasked with getting rid of Franz at the time, I phoned him. Terminally ill with cancer, he told me that he had not spoken about this time to anyone, not even his partner, so there was no way of getting him to speak in front of a camera. My father saw my contacting him as a betrayal and avoided contact with me for a few months. At that point, I understood that finding my attitude towards my father’s story was much more than just working on a coherent film. It was also about finding my place in the complex world of work. I decided to adapt the filmic form to the gradual removal of layers.



Movie Poster Sollbruchstelle/Devil Hides in Doubt, © Stefan Ruhmke

Essayistic and Associative

I divided the shooting time into five phases and went for an essayistic structure of the film. The essayistic form does not strive for a stringent narrative but is rather about the development of thoughts before the eyes of the viewer. A search that may move associatively. The multiple shooting phases allowed me to concretize the new questions which arose after each phase. In my experience, most importantly, I needed clear questions to get clear answers. After being unable to obtain the HR manager's interview, I focused on Franz's colleagues in the company. Why had his work buddies of so many years respected the contact ban?

Walking the Labor Chain: Employees, Students, and Children

Shortly afterwards, I read an article about acting classes for managers. Participants learn how to use acting methods to make a targeted impact on their colleagues. I found a class that agreed to let me film them. When I presented my film and its structure to the group, one of them gave me clear feedback: "If you are open to all sides, you can't be quite right in the head." The essayistic approach is unusual in a goal-orientated environment such as work and management, where predominantly linear thoughts, goals, and narratives are produced.

After shooting with the managers, I examined students at a career center, a generation before the molding of the world of work began. Recalling my own visit to the career center's informational training 15 years ago, I was horrified to find that this preparation for the world of work was still standard. With both the acting managers and the discouraged students, only one person at a time agreed to an interview. But exactly the right ones. Their statements were a gift to my film and provided important answers in my exploration of the topic.

Saskia, a participant in the career center's informational training, said:

I recently asked my career counselor what I am in this society after leaving school. To get the status "unemployed" I will need to work for at least a year. That is if I don't get the university place that I want or a place for a voluntary social year. What am I if I don't have all that? And then he said to me: Nothing. And I find that so blatant. That you're nothing.

Gunnar, a participant in the managerial training, said:

A working relationship is like a love relationship. Often, the love is already over, but you still stay. My mate always calls it “the warmth of familiar shit.” Actually, it sucks, you’re up to your neck in shit. But at least it’s warm here, because it could get cold when you go out there. That’s why a lot of people become very immobile and stay crouched.

I wanted to take another step away from the streamlined world of work and talk to children. I happened to hear a radio report about a primary school that hosted philosophical discussion rounds with children. My scriptwriter friend and I decided to turn a story that my father had often told into a children’s story. Fittingly, he had observed this incident from his office window. Outside, there stood a bridge, and one day, a shepherd was leading a flock of sheep across it. The young and agile sheep came first, followed by older ones, and bringing up the rear were the limping, injured animals. One sheep collapsed in the middle of the bridge and was left lying there. Much later, a car pulled up and, in my father’s words, a “torn, dirty shepherd”, got out and lifted the sheep into the boot. The way my father told the story made it clear that he identified with the broken-down sheep, which, like him, was too old and had been carelessly disposed of by society. The perception of this scene through his eyes in a moment of “solitary confinement” was naturally extremely charged. I wanted to see what thoughts this story would inspire in children who have no connection with the world of work. We told the slightly reworked story to a class of eight-year-olds and then filmed the dialogue:

Boy 1: Well, I can imagine that the sheep ran out of the flock and then the dog came after it and bit it on the leg.

Boy 2: If it hadn’t run out of the flock, it wouldn’t have hurt itself and the shepherd wouldn’t have to do anything. So, the shepherd is not to blame.

Girl: I think the shepherd is to blame because he should have seen that the sheep was running away and should have looked out for it.

Boy 2: But it’s not the shepherd’s fault. If the sheep had walked along well, the shepherd wouldn’t have to do anything.

Girl: No. He should have taken care of it or even carried it. That’s what you can expect from a shepherd.

Boy 3: And what’s it like in nature? Where there is no shepherd?

Boy 3's clever question alludes to another: If we do not meet within a system that dictates how we live together, how caring are we for each other?

Stefan on the Billboard

I had been wondering for some time how I could translate Franz's oppressive period of isolation in his office into a picture to make it tangible. One day I drove past a huge billboard attached to a tower block above a wide street; it was an advert for a flat screen. There was an actual seat in the center and an actual person sitting on it! A large arrow pointed at this person with the words "He waves back too!" And indeed, if you waved at the man sitting 20 meters above the street, you could see the little figure waving back. I immediately felt a connection to my father's story; two men at work in an exposed situation who are treated in a derogatory manner. It seemed to me like the translation of my father's inner space into another reality. This one was completely different but full of subtle points of contact. I got in touch with the man on the billboard, Stefan, and was soon able to interview him. Both shared dreams about flying and thoughts of suicide. My father talked about it at the end of the film, and for the first time his controlled attitude broke, and he burst into tears. Stefan became severely depressed two years after the billboard job and ended his life by jumping from a tower block.

It took many months of editing to arrange these and other elements into meaningful cinematic form. It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces had to fit together in an associative way. The trick in this form was not to let the gap between scene A and scene B become too big, or the viewer cannot make a connection and gets lost, and not too small either because the clumsy visualization becomes tiring. Large enough so that a resonance chamber is created in which what is said continues to influence the next scene. With a gap that the audience can fill with their own experiences. My film came at the right time; *Sollbruchstelle* was published in 2008 when the economic crisis hit. Many companies were forced to downsize, and people everywhere were made redundant in shocking ways. The systemic predetermined breaking points of our working world became visible everywhere.

The film won awards. The German Television Award came as a particular surprise. The awards recognized the uncomfortable essayistic narrative style, which is rare in today's TV productions where the audience is mainly considered "overworked and tired people who just want to relax." Many screenings at

film festivals around the world have shown that the result of this fragmented storytelling is more than the sum of the individual parts. It became clear how much this topic and its open form invited people to recognize themselves in it and to examine their own thoughts and actions. Several times, people in the audience reported experiences very similar to one of the protagonists or to those of Franz. This brought about a change in my father. Hearing the words of gratitude from other people, that he was not alone in such humiliation, helped him to find some closure. When the film was shown at a festival in Turin, at the company's European headquarters, I informed the press that it was about Fiat. When two newspapers reported on it, this film ultimately became a small vendetta. With far fewer heroic gestures than I had originally imagined, but with the sustainability of a contemporary documentary, and with great personal growth. And above all, with the satisfaction of giving space to a suppressed voice. An employee fighting for his dignity, one of many. Because it is my father's story, and my relationship is a personal one, showing him as vulnerable was not an easy choice. But the deeper I delved into the pain of this story, the more it detached itself from the person. As if in the unconditional analysis of an individual pain, one discovers the universal one.

Global Home, 2012, 90 min.

For my next project, I wanted to focus on an alternative to this growth-oriented economic world. I came across the age-old concept of the Gift Economy, where the economy is not based on commercial exchange. Rather, it is a form of cooperation that relies on people initially making a voluntary advance contribution without being directly remunerated for it. Gift Economy ascribes to humans an intuitive accounting system and a need for balance. I discovered the online network of Couchsurfing.com. On this website, people from around the world offer a place to sleep to travelers for free. It was already apparent that the Internet, as a technology of globalization, was increasingly encroaching upon our private lives. For me, the attitude of literally opening the door to strangers was the right way to deal with it. I visited five people I had found on Couchsurfing. Casey, the website's first programmer and founder of Couchsurfing in San Francisco; Mamatal, a Tuareg music manager in Bamako, Mali; Clara, a Brazilian dancer in Göreme, in Eastern Turkey; and Alice, a British permaculture activist in Beit Sahour, in Westbank, Palestine.

There would of course be a lot to write about, but I decided for this essay not to go into details. Unfortunately, I don't think it's a good film. To be fair, it became a 90-minute documentary with profound, great protagonists, beautiful locations in enchanting images, special sounds, and music. And yet, the film doesn't take off and become an experience of its own in the mind of the viewer. This production was the first one where I worked with stronger guidelines as it was a collaboration with an established production house. The funds came faster, but to apply for such funding one needed detailed scripts, research footage, scene descriptions, and photos in advance. From the beginning, the magic of the surprise was not really allowed to unfold. During the shooting, my gaze was searching. I felt that I had to deliver and wasn't available to follow the crazy script of life. During the editing, there was pressure to serve certain 'viewer groups'; people who has hardly traveled in their life was also supposed to understand my film.

I had not conceived of the film in this form. I wanted to let my associative free spirit play out and not kill the vibe with an explanatory personal voiceover. We entered the editing phase with these controversies, and the result was a compromise—an average documentary film. Even back in 2012, when not every released film competed with such a huge amount of newly released media, an average documentary film had a short lifespan. A great premiere at SXSW in Austin Texas, a few festivals, a few courtesy awards, late TV airing—and that was it. Investing three years of my life, albeit not exclusively, no longer felt balanced. I strongly reconsidered whether I should continue in this profession. Or make a big change to stay true to making authentic films. I decided on the latter and founded my own production company, ronjafilm; inspired by Ronja, the robber's daughter, one of the few female and wild role models of my childhood.

One Million Steps, 2015, 20 min.

With ronjafilm, I produced the next project, *One Million Steps – A Short Documentary in Istanbul*. I was very stirred and felt connected to the series of revolutions in the Arab world from December 2010 onwards. Then there were the Occupy protests around the world beginning in September 2011. I felt part of the general expressions of mistrust towards existing systems. What was my narrative within it? After my research in Tunisia and Egypt, the complexity of this topic was overwhelming. I could not find an authentic approach to a story, there was

no clear “yes” that I should make a film here, and in the end, even my camera was stolen. I was looking for a different, non-verbal approach. *One Million Steps* was born out of a spontaneous fusion with the Dutch-Indonesian tap dancer Marije Nie. We both had an interest in communicating socially relevant issues without words. Marije’s tap dance was to me a thrilling approach to people, bold, humorous, and direct. We came up with the idea of using her as a semi-fictional character, as a “dancer of steps,” to tell the story of the metropolis and the pressure it exerts on its inhabitants through movement, rhythm, noise, and music. We chose Istanbul rather by chance.

The experiment of merging fiction and documentary fascinated me. I wanted to challenge reality with an imaginary character and was also hoping to speed things up. I could not take the time that a purely observational or essayistic exploratory documentary film requires. This dancer character with a polka dot skirt and red lipstick interacted with the flows and movements of people. In addition, there were certain staged scenes with non-actors who embodied a conflict of daily life in Istanbul. These fictionalized scenes were intended to get closer to depicting life in a metropolis under economic, political, and social pressure. The reality that emerged showed the limits in the mixture of documentary film and fiction. It was amazing to see how the documentary images simply had a much greater impact. The viewer immediately senses the power of the real.

Back in Berlin editing, I struggled with the gaps in the material. Something fundamental was missing in this story. Then Ufuk, a friend and co-producer in Istanbul, called: “*Come back, Istanbul is full of what you were looking for; rhythm, noise and movement. Every evening, pots and pans are banged on all the windows. Everyone is fighting to not lose the last park in the city center!*” Two days later, Marije and I were back and continued filming. It meant adapting everything to the unexpected and opening doors for other narrative styles, but staying calm as my original intention came back in an unusual form. We had been looking for signs of pressure, now we got to see the release of pressure up close.

The Gezi Park was one of the last green and non-commercial places in the city center. Suddenly there were plans to build a shopping mall on it. One morning, men came with bulldozers to uproot the trees. A small group of the “usual” eco-activists were present and chained themselves to the trees. Through social media networks (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube), the call to “Occupy Gezi” spread like wildfire and just three days later, more than 10,000 supporters flooded the park. Representatives of an otherwise divided society entered into dialogue, generating an infectious hope. With witty and creative

actions, the protests spread all over the internet and sparked solidarity actions in Germany, the USA, Greece, France, and many parts of Turkey. It felt like this solidarity, the sheer number of people, and the international attention could not be ignored. Our call for fair living conditions and peace must be heard.

Being “in the right place at the right time” amid historic change gave me the feeling of fulfilling a greater task with a film. My protagonist’s tap dance, her iron-shod shoes, suddenly became an instrument of protest. At one point, a drummer friend of ours climbed onto a barricade made of iron bars, beds, and shields, and turned it into a drum kit. The two of them improvised and, with incredible speed, a rhythmically-clapping, cheering crowd emerged. Every gathering of people at this time ended with the slogan shouted at the top of their lungs: “*Her yer Taksim her yer direniş! Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance!*”² This was followed by a brutal tear gas attack by the police. We ran in the gas, panting, and I thought for a moment that I was going to lose consciousness. My friend Marije, in her costume dress and tap-dancing shoes, skittered across the streets. My camera kept rolling. We found an open stairwell and fled inside. In the edited film, I left our panting audible as well as the sounds that are usually cut out, such as the change of the camera aperture and focus pulling. I wanted the reality to brutally break the film frame. The reality here went beyond. In this moment the film was about two women struggling with the shock of excessive police violence.

In post-production, it was challenging to give the somewhat naive character of the tap dancer a credible basis. “Where does she come from and what is she looking for?” were the questions viewers asked after screenings. In the end, the only approach that worked was the most honest one and closest to our perspective. We started the film in an animated world. The playful character follows a musical curiosity and then falls from the sky into the center of an Istanbul on the brink of revolution. This worked fine as a beginning but in *One Million Steps*, my exploration of the “dilemma of the real” showed that one’s own reality determines the direction. You cannot hide yourself even behind fictional characters.

The eponymous million steps taken in this film come to a standstill at the end. We end with the standing protest of Duran Adam. Many people in Istanbul and various places around the world stopped and stood still to express their solidarity and protest. The years 2010 and 2011 were characterized by a particular

2 Taksim is a square next to Gezi Park where a lot of the demonstrators gathered and camped.

hope for profound social and political change. However, the downward trend after the Occupy protests as well as after the Arabellion was noticeable soon afterwards. Too many people lost their lives in these protests, and thousands suffered from the return to authoritarian practices and increased repression. Many civil society actors had to leave the country and have been living in exile ever since. The hoped-for reforms remained unfinished. The film traveled around the world and remains a memory of a time full of hope and global solidarity between citizens. Anyone who witnessed it will carry a spark in their heart that will remain indelible.

This film marked a turning point for me. People fought for their vision of the world in a concrete and human way. The film's height was created by the comprehensibility of their desires. And yet they seemed absurd in the context of a world that is geared towards increasing turnover. This brought me to my next project in Berlin, *Field Trip*.

***Field Trip*, 2018, 100 min. in 14 episodes**

Back in Berlin, something surreal happened. A referendum was held in May 2014, and in all Berlin districts, an overwhelming majority voted in favor of the “Law for the Preservation of Tempelhofer Feld (ThF Law).” This concerned the future of the former airfield at airport Tempelhof—the place where I shot my first doc film at the fence. After air traffic ceased in 2008, the gates were opened to the public two years later. For the first time in eighty years, everyone was allowed to enter the 386 hectares of emptiness! The draft law, published by the sponsor of the petition for a referendum “Initiative 100% Tempelhofer Feld,” contains the following provisions:

1. The State of Berlin will refrain from selling, developing, and partially privatizing Tempelhofer Feld;
2. The Tempelhofer Feld will continue to be available to the public in its entirety and without permanent restrictions;
3. Tempelhofer Feld will be preserved in its significance as a historical site and as a place of remembrance.

Coming from the fight for Gezi Park in Istanbul, the field meant an even more utopian force for me. Can this be true? Tempelhofer Feld is already being tugged at from all sides. Urban planners, architects, and investors are greedily

eyeing at the enormous, lucrative area. Where is the freedom in this open space real, where is it fake? But as long as the earth remains intact: What stories are stored in this soil? How can we encounter the past on this empty strip of land, and use it to develop visions for the global city of tomorrow?

Now that the decades of longing behind the closed fence are over and it has been opened, I felt it was almost a duty to explore this place in depth. This vast, rugged piece of land in the center of Berlin, which strangely defies the laws of capitalist society, deserves a long-term documentary. Yet, what is the right form to tell the story of this place? The history of the place is so old, crazily eventful, and will continue to be written in so many ways, both now and in the future; It seemed almost presumptuous to me to create a hierarchy as to which story should be told.

Finding the Form

The idea of a long, linear documentary film was unsatisfactory from the start. The debates surrounding the field were so fast-moving that a document carved in stone would be outdated in five years. When I met Frédéric Dubois, an expert in interactive storytelling, with journalistic practice on internet- and data-related topics, the idea to approach the place through an interactive narrative was born. We also connected on the interest in using storytelling for active community building. With two more strong team members on board, Joscha, the creative technologist and Svenja, the creative producer, we freed ourselves from many conventions.

We brought the first interactive open-source documentary film into the world, made the timelines round and no longer linear, had “clickable cross-roads” between the film and gave away our material and the software for free. We even invented a new genre, calling Field Trip ‘a hyperdoc.’

My Principles Applied

This form does not give the impression of being something complete. Ergo the “dilemma of the real” was a much smaller one in this project. The many short films are small excerpts of a large reality that can be expanded infinitely. Also, the connection of the film to the real world gave this work a different, tangible quality. The great documentary film lesson of “stop, immerse, let go” was very

much challenged in this project. It is difficult to tell touching stories and create surprising images in a huge open space where there is nothing but grass, a handful of trees, and the sky. New qualities of immersion were needed. Stopping time was above all in the sensitive conducting of interviews and searching for archive images. I lived out my love of associative storytelling with archive material.

For example, the story of a woman who fled the GDR with her mother as a child. They flew from Tempelhof Airport and the field became a portal to a great new chapter in their lives. But how to make this tangible? In a long interview, I came across the part of the escape story where the family was separated from their brother and one day it looked like they would have to flee without him. I made this painful story an essential pillar of the film and connected archive material associatively to the story in the voice-over. As is so often the case, it is the pain that breaks us open as viewers and connects us to the shared human experience.

In other episodes, I concentrated more on the moment of the first encounter with the colorful life of Tempelhofer Feld. For example, with the former forced laborer from Poland whom we found through a contemporary witness organization. At our invitation, the now 90-year-old woman came back to Tempelhof Field for the first time since she was 16 years old. She quotes the commands of the camp leaders and recalls how she used to fill in bomb craters on the field in winter wearing only wooden shoes. Next to her, children roller-skate and fly kites. This project made it clearer than ever before that one of the most important principles in my documentary film practice, “telling authentic stories,” is directly linked to the form. And because we remained an independent ronjafilm production, funded by several smaller grants and a successful crowdfunding campaign, we were free to explore such new territory. For me, this interactive form with short films was the most honest for how encounters with people in the field are possible.

Co-operation, Not Competition

Behind the scenes, there were other moments of liberation for me as a filmmaker. The fact that the material we shot did not, as is usually the case, disappear in archives after being selected once for a film was an enormous liberation. Competition and exclusivity play a significant role in documentary film-making. As I producer I was also able to develop our fair payment models.

All employees at *Field Trip* were paid equally and based on “lifetime spent”—the strongest currency. In mediation, we worked worst- and best-case scenarios out beforehand, and therefore grew through the project close together. We worked for three years on this project. Even though everyone had to secure their livelihood with jobs on the side, it was a beautiful closing of a circle for me.

Trust as a Cornerstone

My twenty years of practice in documentary film have taught me one thing above all: trust. Trust in myself—the more honest I am with my perspective on the world and my specific narrative style, the more powerfully I can tell and touch people. Trust in other people, who show themselves in their essence, and devote themselves to a film narrative without a hidden agenda. Trust in the carthasian impact of documentary film, both for the filmmaker and the audience. And trust in life itself, as a surprising and never boring author. With each film, I grew as a documentary filmmaker into an increasingly open and accessible world. Nevertheless, after coming full circle, I was no longer prepared to be on this ‘busy motorway.’ Fighting for attention in the flood of new daily audiovisual media seemed a strange use of my energy. I am currently working mainly as a lecturer and film craftswoman where I create for people and projects with the videos needed by artists, projects, and institutions. However, my journey as a filmmaker continues and I feel blessed performing in this profession. Since a documentary film is never just a simple report of reality, it is always a comparison between my imagination of the world and the way I experience it. The camera shows me what I often overlook, but it is also a tool to make visible my own fantasies and projections as a filmmaker. I know that I will always seek the magic of the real and strive for collective transformation through this art of imagination.

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