Doc Fortnight: The Filmmakers Speak

BY AARON CUTLER

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The Event, courtesy of Atoms & Void.

Doc Fortnight 2016

February 19-29 at MoMA

The fifteenth edition of Doc Fortnight comes to the Museum of Modern Art this year with an array of twenty programs representing twenty-nine films. The series (previously known as “Documentary Fortnight”) offers a remarkable array of nonfiction filmmaking whose diverse best works are each marked by a perceptive and curious gaze.

Roughly half of the filmmakers represented in the series (several of whom will be on hand for screenings) speak below about their Doc Fortnight works. These monologues were created during e-mail exchanges with the filmmakers and are published here in the order in which the films will screen. Correlations between the artists’ words and works are best left to be discovered by the reader.

Courtesy of Rosa Filmes.

Billy Woodberry's opening night film And When I Die, I Won't Stay Dead (screening February 19th) offers a biographical portrait of African-American poet Bob Kaufman, a historically undervalued Beat Generation artist whose work reacted to American society between the 1950s and 1980s. Woodberry says, "I first learned about Kaufman and his poetry many years ago, and afterwards carried within myself the secret desire to make a film about him. The tragic dimensions of his story initially seemed too daunting and I set the idea aside; eventually, though, his life provided me with a means not only to discuss his work, but also to reflect on the culture, history, and politics of the USA as it has developed from the mid-twentieth century up till now. Kaufman lived through a tumultuous era, throughout which he stayed committed to radical ideals. A central feature of And When I Die, I Won't Stay Dead is the presence in both written and spoken form of Kaufman's poetry, which was finally his way of being in the world. His poems use humor, satire, surreal imagery, and a sensibility akin to improvisational jazz in order to offer an ongoing critique of his society. Poetry and the struggle to be a poet are what principally make up his legacy."

Courtesy of NGF Nikolaus Geyrhalter Filmproduktion GmbH.

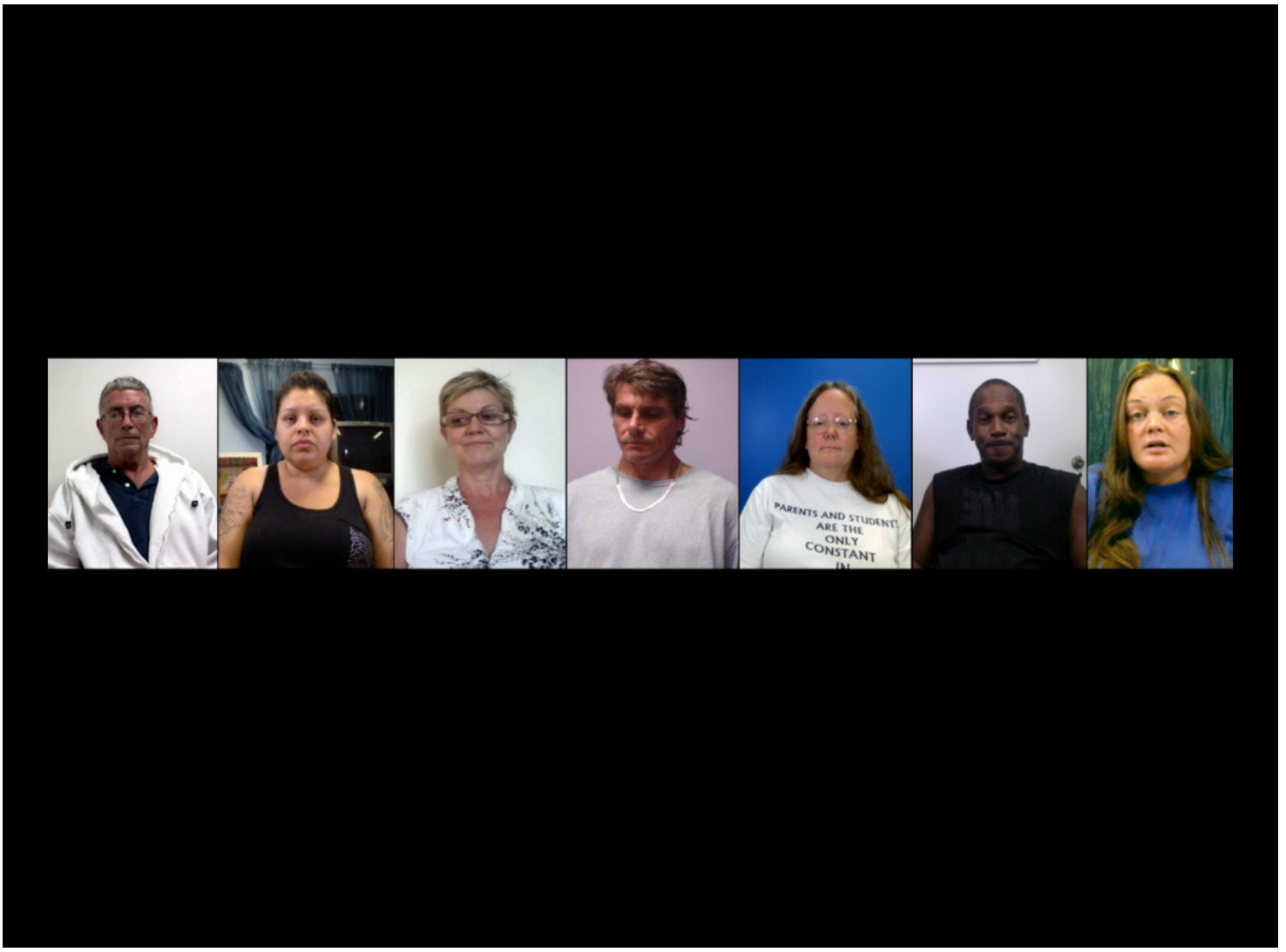
Nikolaus Geyrhalter's gentle observational film Over the Years (screening February 20th and 23rd) presents a decade in the lives of seven people and their family members following the shuttering of the textile factory where they work in Lower Austria's rural Waldviertel region. Geyrhalter says, "My plan was to make a film about people losing their jobs and follow them for three to four years to see how their lives were affected. The people upon whom I focused were essentially the last employees of the factory at the time we started shooting—the ones who were there when the company had to close down. The recording period became much longer and my relationships with these protagonists became much closer, though, than I had anticipated. We could have stopped filming at some point and the story of becoming unemployed would have been told well enough, but it felt like a shame not to continue. From that time on and throughout the rest of a decade, we simply followed whatever happened in these peoples' lives, without any further guiding script or concept. I was surprised to see that, for our characters, losing a job was not only not a negative experience, but sometimes even a positive one. Some lives turned better and more colorful after a release from years of work."

Courtesy All Ways Pictures.

Qiu Jiongjiong's moving Mr. Zhang Believes (screening February 20th and 21st) places theatrically stylized set pieces alongside scenes of firsthand storytelling by the elderly Chinese man Zhang Xianchi, a one-time Communist Party supporter who was nonetheless jailed as a rightist during Mao's rule due to his father's Nationalist sympathies. Qiu says (through translation by Cecília Mello), "History always repeats itself, from the Great Famine through the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution. These major events have been absent from the official narrative of the new China, which avoids them, especially as their witnesses gradually die out. My interest has lain in the past that cannot be forgotten, of which the self-analytical Zhang Xianchi—who dared to look back at it—is a part. He was a common man, a victim of ignorance swept up by currents, and his life story moved me and made me wonder what I would have done in his place. I digested the material that he gave me and that I collected through a polymorphic narrative that reconstructs his story with a blend of fact and of imagined scenes. This film exists for people who do not know part of our history so that they can see a truth uncovered; it is also for people who experienced that history directly, and I hope that it can help ease their suffering."

Herd, courtesy of Carnivalesque Films.

Two short films co-directed by Ashley Sabin and David Redmon, Neige and Herd (screening February 20th and 21st), offer playful studies of Montreal snowfalls and of barn-bound animal interactions, respectively. Neige will have its world premiere. Sabin and Redmon say, “Neige was our way of embracing the winter season in Montreal, where we lived for two years, and a small part of a longer film about Montreal alleyways. Herd is part of a longer-form project about donkeys, which intrigued us with their brays. Both films place viewers in tactile worlds. We emphasize the physicality of ephemeral places through sounds and textures. Humans are not our focus; instead, we’re interested in the ontology of non-human objects and animals, and in how they choreograph and enact dynamic atmospheres of taken-for-granted experiential immediacy. Both Neige and Herd form part of a larger ecosystem depicted through a combination of classic structural shots and ethnographically inclined durational approaches attuned to the material and invisible fabric of fleeting dwellings. The films attempt to evoke encounters with evanescent objects and to locate the sentience of animals in their expressive and varied gestures. Our cameras do not capture moments—they transfigure and add to them sonically, materially, and bestially.”



Courtesy of the filmmaker.

Natalie Bookchin's Long Story Short (making its world premiere on February 22nd) shows myriad Americans fading in and out and in again as they speak about their experiences of living beneath the poverty line, with the videos containing their individual monologues presented onscreen alongside each other. Bookchin says, "I wanted to make a film where Americans facing poverty did the explaining, rather than have their circumstances explained to them. I also sought to link contemporary network culture and the U.S.'s drastic recent increase in poverty and income inequality by using digital tools of the new economy to highlight people displaced and dispossessed by it. The 'social' in 'social media' was taken at face value: I spent a year visiting homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programs, and job training centers in Los Angeles and in the Bay Area, where I invited anyone interested to make a video about their experiences of poverty—how it feels, how they cope, and what should be done. Long Story Short includes nearly everyone that participated.

My goal was not to present one hero, but instead to create a cinematic space where even a quiet voice could be heard amidst others. I also wanted to reveal commonalities among the many different experiences. I hope that the film's form—with its rows of human speakers and black placeholders—suggests that for every story viewers hear about poverty in America, there are many more still unheard."

Courtesy of Atoms & Void.

Sergei Loznitsa's found footage film The Event (screening February 22nd and 24th) renders an August 1991 public revolt against Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet government (one that helped lead to the fall of the USSR four months afterwards) through black-and-white footage recorded by multiple cinematographers on Moscow streets. Loznitsa says, "I first saw the archival footage shot by cameramen from the Leningrad Documentary Film Studio a few years ago. After I made Maidan (2014), a film about the recent Ukrainian revolution, I realized that this footage could be used in a prequel. Maidan and The Event complement one another. A viewer can compare

the faces and reactions of the people in the two films and see how they deal with situations of the utmost importance. In contrast to the Maidan uprising—which was an extraordinary and genuine outburst of popular protest that proved that civil society truly exists in Ukraine—August 1991's protests were managed and controlled by authorities, who I believe provoked and manipulated the public without ever losing control of the situation. A creative rebranding of power (not a desperately needed reform) was carried out in Moscow during subsequent years. It strikes me how, though The Event's footage was shot just a quarter-century ago, the people in its crowds seem to have vanished forever, and their descendants to have lost the plot once again."

Thomas Østbye's Out of Norway (screening February 23rd and 24th) complements the filmmaker's earlier Imagining Emanuel (2011) with a second portrait of Emanuel Agara, a dreamy and imaginative Liberian man frustrated by his inability to emigrate from Norway back home due to lack of documentation. Østbye says, "I thought it important to continue recording what happened after Imagining Emanuel's conclusion, and for the second film took a different approach. While Imagining

Emanuel showed its protagonist from the outside, I decided that this new film would do the opposite. I chose not to shoot a single image myself, and instead gave Emanuel a camera for him to use new means with which to express himself. He changed from being an object of study, both before the camera and in a foreign society, to being a storyteller and a man of action who could present his own gaze. During the shooting, he also broke out of a seemingly impossible years-long limbo—allowed neither to stay in Norway nor to leave it—thanks in part to recognition from the first film. He received a cache from Imagining Emanuel's 'Human Rights Award' given by the Norwegian government to short films, and eventually used that award money to buy illegal ID papers that enabled him to finally get out of Europe."

Courtesy of the filmmaker.

Naeem Mohaiemen's Last Man in Dhaka Central (screening February 23rd and 28th), the third film in his The Young Man Was series, continues his studies of 1970s revolutionary Leftist political movements and challenges facing them; this third part interweaves firsthand and archival interviews with recently deceased Dutch thinker

and activist Peter Custers. Mohaiemen says, “Peter, like many European leftists of his generation (especially post-Herbert Marcuse), believed that even if the alienated masses trapped inside modernity were numbed into obedience, the revolutionary spirit might still be found ‘outside’ modernity–in the prisons and ghettos of the First World, or in the cities and villages of the Third. It was a search for the latter that led him to drop out of a Ph.D. program at Johns Hopkins and move to Bangladesh in 1973. As he found out, though, there was never a complete outside; a numbed proletariat could also doom leftist uprisings in the vaunted Third World (as Godard hinted in La Chinoise [67]). In spite of a horrific prison experience (the Dhaka Central of the title), Peter retained, to the end of his days, a yearning for socialist revolution. The film, as a story told in reverse, is invested in the hope that can remain even when you are within the chronicle of a death (of a movement) foretold.”

Courtesy of Venado Films.

Betzabé García’s pleasurable and vivid Kings of Nowhere (screening February 24th and 25th) absorbs viewers in the daily rhythms of San Marcos, a near-abandoned Mexican village where some people still live despite regular flooding. García says, “I

began making the film with a persistent question in mind: Who could live in this place? For six months San Marcos is flooded, and for six months it is completely dry. Much to my surprise, I discovered that there was still a shop producing tortillas on a daily basis, and that three families still inhabited the town. They seemed to be doing quite well, and some of the people—who had moved themselves into San Marcos's most beautiful home—even comported themselves as though they were kings. I came to have so many questions about what I saw that I was driven to spend five years in San Marcos. The film transmits the sensation of being in a place repopulated by animals, belonging almost to magical realism. Within this place, each family faces the flooding in a different way. Spectators viewing their situation can see the idyllic and the surreal, a paradise or a hellhole. I hope that they, in turn, are left with a question: How will I face life?"

Courtesy of Too Many Cowboys.

Jacques Perconte's sensorially immersive experimental work Ettrick (screening February 26th and 29th) takes a colorful, highly pixilated journey through a famed Scottish forest. Perconte says, "What first attracted me to this area was its

astonishing light. During the month of October, the tall grasses in the valleys are colored with wonderful shades of yellow and green. I started filming without knowing what I wanted and gradually discovered the depth of an environment shaped by human activity. The Ettrick Forest, which I had been told was larger than London, was being torn down and replanted plot by plot. The path through the forest is at times filled with massive trees pressed together such that the sun's rays can hardly filter through them, and at other times bare save for a few trunks amidst uprooted stumps. I eventually came to understand as well that I had to include the textile industry connected to the nearby River Tweed (one of the purest rivers on Earth) by showing textiles being produced. Images and sounds of landscapes, textiles, and machines are interwoven throughout Ettrick, which continues my artistic interest in building combinations of forms that represent humanity's relationship with Nature."

Beth B.’s self-reflexive Call Her Applebroog (whose world premiere will come on February 26th) visits the studio and the mind of Bronx-born visual artist Ida Applebroog, whose complex identities include that of the filmmaker’s mother. Beth B. says, “I have watched my mother for my entire life, so who could tell her story better than me? Call Her Applebroog grew out of fifteen years of filming and observing Ida and her work. I wanted to show the complexities that surround her in an honest and respectful way, while also delving deeply into some of the dramatic private parts of her life that I believe motivate her ceaseless efforts to create art in fearless and provocative ways. She is a private person who didn’t want to be filmed and repeatedly told me to turn off the camera. The boundaries between us were

often blurred, and navigating our relationship became part of the film's story. The film itself continues a career characterized by work that challenges social conventions, embraces underdogs, and focuses on social issues and human rights. It looks to give voice to the unheard and to liberate the mind and body."

Courtesy of the filmmaker.

John Gianvito's Wake (Subic) (screening February 27th) takes a long, sober look at the American occupation of the Philippines through conversations with people around the area of Subic Bay contaminated by environmental waste for which the U.S. military is responsible, along with historical context for American military presence on the islands and its impact on Filipino civilians. Gianvito says, "For three summers between 2006 and 2008, I traveled to the Philippines to document the human and environmental impact of toxic contamination around the site of the country's former U.S. naval and airbases—the largest such facilities found anywhere overseas until the Iraq War. I had first read about that site's tragedies (which still persist, largely unabated) in a 1999 Boston Globe exposé. As no story unfolds in a vacuum, the film additionally recounts the frequently forgotten—more often, willfully suppressed—details of the Philippine-American War, which in my view are intrinsic to understanding not only the contemporary state of the Philippines, but the broader consequences of erasure and contaminations of history. Wake (Subic)

completes a nine-hour diptych that I call For Example, the Philippines, which began with my similarly themed film Vapor Trail (Clark) (2010); 'for example,' because it documents a pattern of behavior and fallout that has been replicated in many parts of the world at many times."

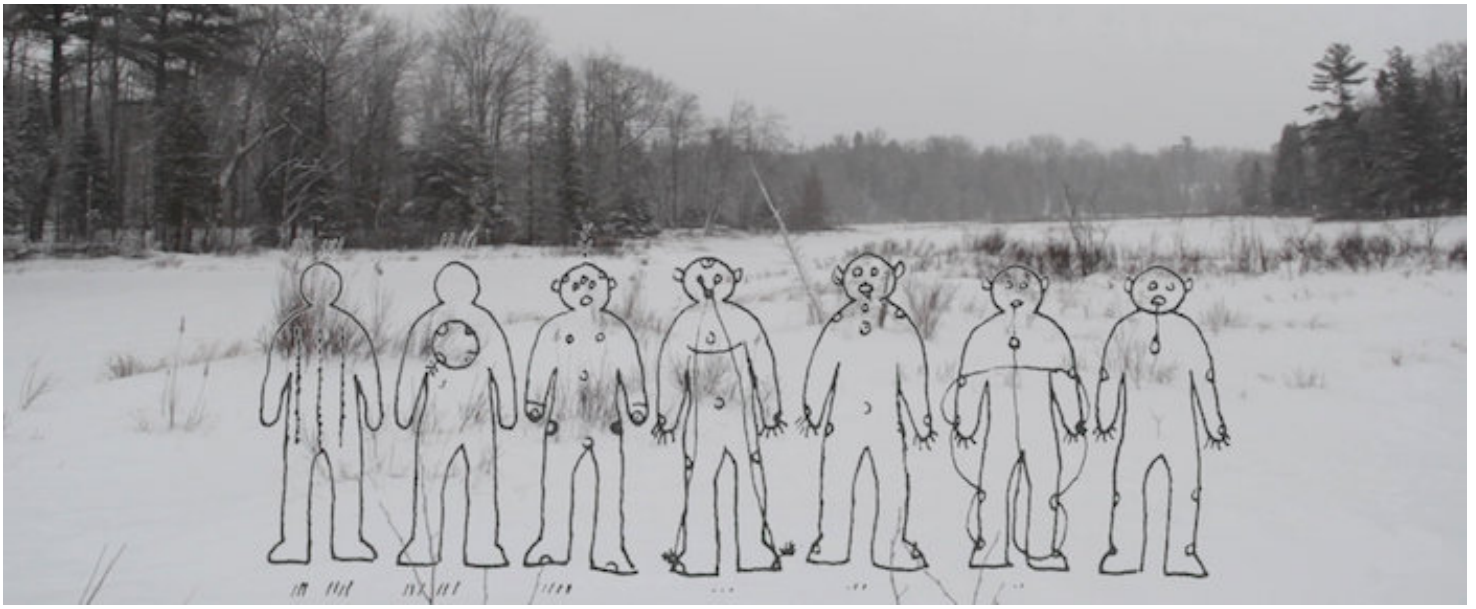
Othmane Balafrej's wrenching black-and-white Sbitar (receiving its world premiere screenings on February 27th and 28th) brings a vérité approach to scenes set in Ibn Sina Hospital, the largest and oldest public health center in the Moroccan capital of Rabat. Balafrej says, "Sbitar lacks a linear narrative and contains only three sets of characters: The hospital's patients and family members, its staff, and the institution itself. The viewer is immersed within a microcosm of society through short observational moments that indicate how logistical and bureaucratic problems are taking the ER to the verge of breakdown. Morocco's wealth continues to expand for its wealthy classes while its impoverished citizens grow in numbers, a disparity whose resulting social rifts are reflected in the country's medical system. The government has never considered health care to be a major priority, and while private clinics continue to be modernized constantly, nothing has changed in the

public sphere for decades. In my opinion, public institutions reflect their surroundings. Through explorations of relationships between staff members, doctors, patients, and family members, I tried to show a largely impoverished society where religion is omnipresent; a society whose doctors study and speak in French to patients who understand only Arabic; a society tragic and comic at once; a schizophrenic society."

Courtesy of the filmmaker. Photo: Santi Palaciois.

Tadhg O'Sullivan's The Great Wall (screening February 27th and 28th) traverses border sites throughout the European Union while a narrator recites the text of Franz Kafka's 1917 story "The Great Wall of China," which here becomes a commentary on the Union's tenuous current state. O'Sullivan says, "I was interested in seeing how power is expressed through architecture, and in showing how cities are built to create and reflect divisions, with extreme systems of control creeping subtly into our everyday lives. I also loved the timelessness of the story by Kafka, whose central concern with how power is derived from peoples' willingness to submit to it helps

make him the most relevant writer for today. I chose to use his story, in the manner of a timeless fable, as a looking glass through which to see contemporary Europe from afar: A powerful empire, full of towering glass fortresses, whose core teems with financial mandarins; miles upon miles of walls protecting its borders from invading swarms; a populace that has accepted its surroundings, whether actively or passively. I believe that we have begun to see recently in many countries, though, how power can be withdrawn as well as given. Kafka tells us that the builders of walls are none other than ourselves. To me, his message is hopeful."



Courtesy of the filmmakers.

Adam Khalil and Zack Khalil's closing night film INAATE/SE/ [it shines a certain way. to a certain place./it flies. falls./] (screening February 29th) retells the Seven Fires Prophecy story belonging to the Native American Ojibway People through a mixture of interviews, animation, staged scenes, and other elements that collectively show the powers of the Ojibway inhabiting Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The Khalil brothers say, "We tried to tell the story of the future of the Ojibway by looking to the past. This story, which has been passed down through the generations, gives a narrative of their colonization. It functions simultaneously as myth, historical record, and prophecy, and because of its oral nature, its details have shifted over time. We wanted our filmic retelling to be true to our community and to us as individuals, which required radical new forms that could push back against traditional representations

of Native Americans onscreen. For us, the story of the Ojibway is relevant today—it is important for citizens of the United States and of Canada to acknowledge their government's policies in relation to the history of the colonized in this continent, and to know that they are actively complicit in North America's ongoing suppression of the sovereignty of over five hundred nations."

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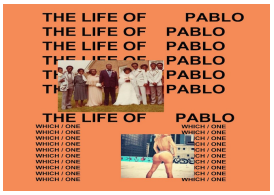

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