



DANI LEVENTHAL MY ANIMAL LIFE





beaver

your bed holds Alexis and Ruth.

Mine holds

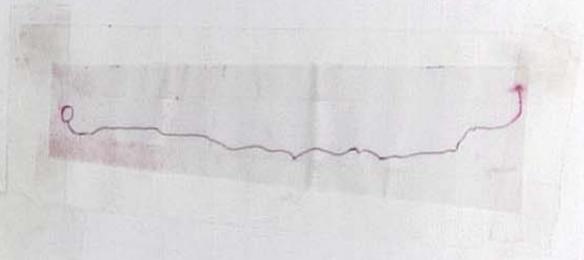
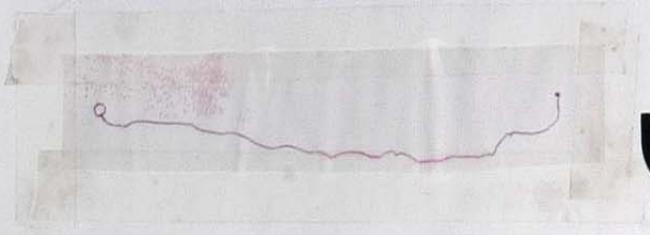
strangers



shall we make a judgement?







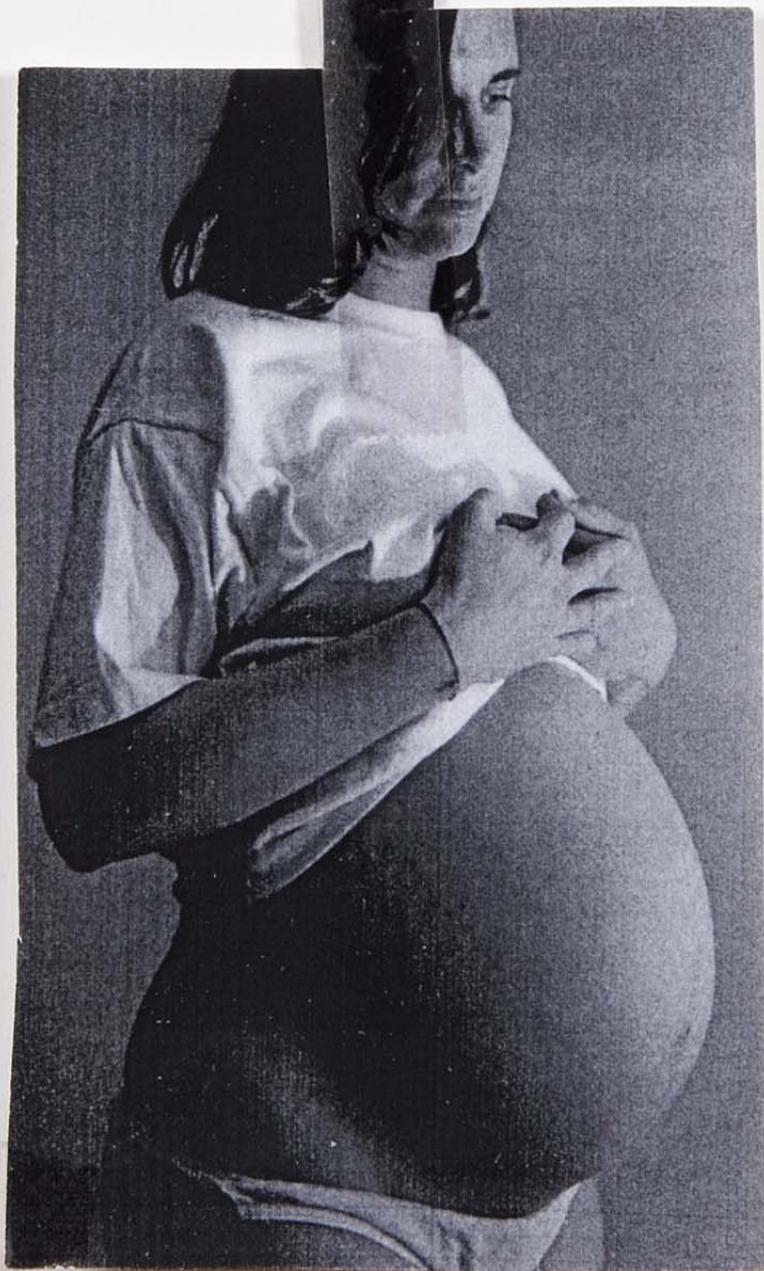




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**Rhyme
Time 2**
cutouts

boy

toy

rat

mat

rag

bag

dog

hog

frog

case

base

race

pin

bin

fin

wheel

meal

seal

hair

pair

fair

trip

lip

chip

plate

gate

mate

moon

spoon

tune

prune

flower

hour

power

tower

day

way

hay

tray

Introduction

What to say about this fearless artist, the one who carries her camera with her into the fray, the struggle, the embrace of each moment? She can find the light in it, that's for sure, the way filmers used to, the ones who once busied themselves lensing analogs for their own blood meridians and cellular expansions. But here the white male mantling has been passed on to a digital looker no less sensitive. How very rare, in this moment of instant, pervasive and throwaway pictures, when light is no longer needed for exposure, to find someone able to catch every last echo of a shadow almost cast. And how much more than this. Was it already three decades ago that talk ran down the avant walls about a woman's camera style? What would that look like was the question which haunted screenings as we pored over Sally Potter and Chantal Akerman and Trinh T. Minh-Ha. Sure, yes, exactly. But also Dani. The thing she never does, unlike so many of her male comrades, is to use her tools as a substitute for living. She doesn't want to sit and talk all day about how sweet the circuit boards are. She doesn't riff lyrical on the formats or the gear or the latest forget-me-not marvels. Instead she sticks her face into her life, into the heart of the problem, the question, the new lover, the old problem, again and again, and the miracle of it, is that she is able to bring her camera along. How does she manage to do it?

She put in some mentor face time with video avatar Steve Reinke, and rode his benign tutelage along the way to making her jagged half-hour epic *Draft 9*. Then she switched to still shorter forms while grappling with questions of her Jewish faith, the occupation of Palestine, the not quite land of milk and money in the kibbutzim. And of course love. Because the questions that fall into her camera are not landing on tangents, but on bodies that are staying up all night to speak to her on the bus, or sketching out her fortune on the front of a ruined car, or whispering to her like a child in the back of a synagogue dream. Her camera haunts and turns like an animal, she carries it with her everywhere, always ready to bring it forward, to push her own face forward, into whatever pressing question will hurt the most to ask. Forever she is opening to receive these wounded fragments from the front line of her own life, and offering a reflection on two kinds of memory: the souvenir and the *mémoire*.

The souvenir is the very near recollection of what you've lived, seen or experienced. The souvenir is already a story. Mémoires are unreconstructed elements made of rough cuts; a pre-story. If you undergo psychoanalysis you try to retrieve from your unconscious elements which arrive in very rough shapes. The mémoire is a pre-story, to speak of memory is to speak in fragments, and it's interesting for cinema to look for these rough elements of memory, more than for souvenirs, to gather rough scenes of what has been experienced, rather than pre-digested tales. That's the difference between television and cinema. Television is at the level of souvenirs while mémoires belong to the cinema. (Jean Perret)

If ever there was a cinema born and raised under the sign of Scorpio, it is Dani's. To tell the thing which cannot be told, to show what should not be shown, to uncover the last secret. She has come to bear witness, and to do it in a rare and perfect light. She can't help looking, and she can't help making these wounds beautiful. Here is a woman's camera wielded by a lover of women (what else?) and a first person account offered in fragments lifted from the shadows of the security barrier. At last.



Notes on Beginning by Dani Leventhal

For six years I have been studying the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Mindfulness in order to cultivate fearlessness. Too often I am driven by fear; and most of those fears are imaginary. But still, they can, and have been crippling. Mindfulness is a practice of being present which can override fear. Mindfulness requires meditation -- but I cannot sit still. The closest I get to that state is when I am making art.

Nine years ago my questions about human/animal relationships led me to the processes of skinning, cleaning and preserving animal hides. This work is especially conducive to a mindful state because it has an urgency and it engages both my brain and my body. Skinning a deer must be done quickly or decay sets in and insects swarm. The work demands my full attention or I will cut a hole in the hide or open the membrane that keeps the organs and blood contained. Another reason I stay committed to being present during this task is that I have developed the conviction that what I am doing is useful. I need to feel useful. I see the action as an interaction between myself and the animal. I am honoring the life of this animal that was killed due to human greed (we pave their territory) by transforming the fur into sculpture.

Shooting video is another tool for Mindfulness: a method for recording the moment. The idea of "capturing" on tape is important to my investigation of memorials, and what it means to create something that

honors the Everyday. At times, I perform for the camera to clarify my ideas, to imagine or recall. For instance: I made two copper rings that held frozen songbirds. In *Draft 9*, I wear the rings on both hands, then run and swoop the way a child animates a toy plane, showing a stubborn unwillingness to let them be dead. In *Porque Javier Chimbolema*, I climb onto the back of my girlfriend in an Indiana cornfield. She carries me. But, I am my burden; I am the white privileged artist who has the time to set up these shots.

Inevitably, I also use video to communicate my opinions. In two clips from *Draft 9*, I investigate perception and uselessness by looking at the relationship between pigeons and humans. For thousands of years humans have used pigeons as messengers in war, bred them to be eaten, and brought them to cities to beautify the environment. Now the pigeon is considered an urban pest, a rat with wings.

In *Draft 9*, I juxtapose a long clip of a pigeon against a blue background with images of my grandmother turning her head from side to side in a "birdlike" gesture. Old women are also considered a nuisance in Western society. I show the pigeon up close, revealing its iridescent feathers, and I show the fine details of my grandmother's gestures and skin, with the purpose of reclaiming the beauty and value of both beings.



Installations

Communion

Core Gallery, New Paltz, NY 2001

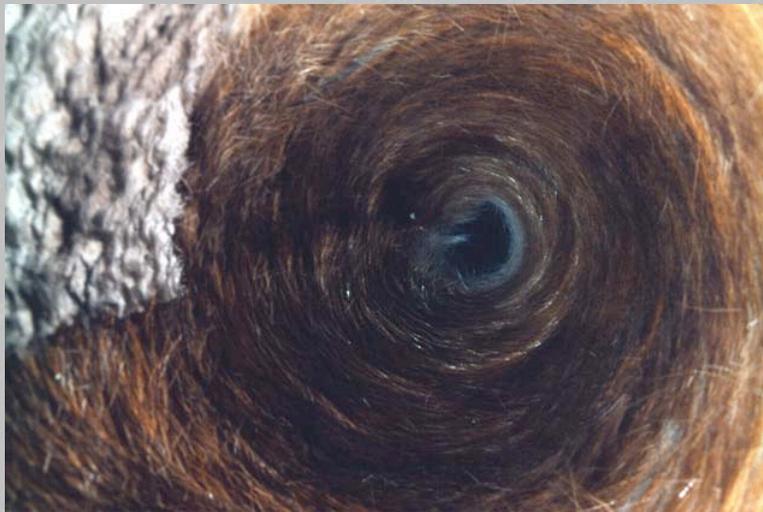
For Kneeling: Four cushions upholstered with fur: black bear, white tailed deer and Hereford cow. A shallow vat of powdered sugar. 80 images projected from above of women eating bananas. This was about praying for instant gratification, as if giving Jesus a blow job could deliver one from fear.

For Looking: Deer hide turned inside out, graphite and polyester resin.

For Rocking: 12 minute video of the artist wrapped up and rocking in cowhide.

All the hide and fur in this exhibit came from animals that were killed on the road or discarded by hunters, except for the Hereford cow which was a gift from a farmer.





Experiment : Intimacy

Core Gallery, New Paltz, NY, 2001
Collaboration with Carolyn Lambert

Steel container with dirt floor and plexiglass windows. Microphones and a live feed camera inside the container projected our voices and a close-up image of us on the opposite wall of the gallery.

Our objective was to endure prolonged physical closeness, confront the ramifications of confinement, and question boundaries in relationships as a public event. We built a freestanding bulkhead form of welded steel large enough to contain our bodies, but with little room for movement. The walls at the head and feet were made of plexiglass allowing for observation and making reference to a laboratory specimen case.

A microphone inside the box amplified our voices into the gallery and our moving image taken from a lipstick camera was projected on the wall. We performed verbal and physical intimacy within the cold steel vessel. The unscripted performance / experiment occurred for five hour periods once a day.

This was not play acting, we did not have a scripted conversation. We did not predict what ended up happening; The space became wet, the clean plexi got smeared with mud and hair. The air holes we drilled were not large enough. We both got severe headaches and Carolyn began to hyperventilate. Our conversation shifted from awkward self-conscious awareness of the audience to simply comforting each other.





Once Over Hung

Great Space, Chicago, IL 2002

A group of sculptures that are unified by the sound of the video and their shapes that defy heteronormality.

Once

I “fingered” a column of wet concrete then slathered the print of the hand shape with vaseline and filled it with water. Concrete is used for building foundations and I wanted to use it to represent the construction of sexuality which is a fluid concept. The phallic shape is problematized with the wet orifice. This piece was inspired by Judith Butler’s presentation of identity construction which opened up the possibility of gender in relation to an otherwise minimalist sculpture.

Over

The dark negative of the large polaroid shows an embrace of two women in the dark. The photo is professionally mounted on plexi but is leaning on a raw piece of sheetrock.

Hung

A frozen baby rabbit is hanging from the ceiling and dripping blood into a box of powdered sugar. Evidence of a hole and the powder on its face prove it was pressed into the sugar than hoisted up. This sweet violence is non-sense.





Relinquishing

Exhibition Space, Chicago, IL 2003

wood, steel, boat winch and concrete counter-weight for hoisting the artist off the ground.



A note on Feather-Stitch

by Lorelei Stewart

In *Feather-Stitch* Dani Leventhal brings together disparate elements that tether and tie some of the most basic and complex elements of life around us. Her interest in a garden can range from a wonder at growth as the simple consequence of light, water soil and care to a concern for sustenance, close observation and experiencing how we not only maintain our own lives but are connected to other life forms to a sly humor in the phallic forms of vegetables and how sexual uses could so easily coincide with dinner possibilities.

As some visitors know, Leventhal had planned to dissect song birds as part of her exhibition. Leventhal's dissections are careful explorations that in their movements and gestures evidence interest, care and reverence. In the same way that she sets up her surveillance camera to translate the multiplicity of vegetable growth into a representation, her dissections are intended to honor and understand the overlooked and marvelous in our midst.

In the course of planning this exhibition, Leventhal and Gallery 400 learned that most birds, even common ones that a cat might drag into a house or those that fly into glass buildings around the city, are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, a treaty and law that we have learned is little known by lay people but prohibits even the possession of protected birds. Though it is possible that Gallery 400 and Leventhal, if time had allowed, could have applied for permits to possess and dissect the protected birds, we halted the planned dissection. Leventhal is instead writing a list on the wall that names the birds covered by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Part of the processual nature of this exhibition is the ongoing writing of this list and Leventhal's continuing work on her series of drawings on paper. While you explore the exhibition you are invited to ask questions, step up onto and lay on the Rammed Earth Platform, and come back and join us for a cook out screening in the phallic shaped vegetable garden on Saturday September 6.

Feather-Stitch

Gallery 400, Chicago, IL, 2003

Phallic Shaped Vegetable Garden: Carrots, jalapenos, ochre, cucumbers, corn, zucchini. Planted in May for cookout harvest in September. Vegetables for an alternative to plastic toys.

Green on Green: Surveillance of an ochre plant transmitted into the gallery.

Current Drawings: Oil, graphite, photographs and glue on paper 52" x 42".

Dissection Table: Exato knife, magnifying glass, pins, hammer and container of salt.

1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act: List of over 1000 birds protected by the MBTA written with pencil on the wall.

Outdoor screening with blankets and popcorn
Can Can Can by KR Buxey 2.5 minutes, 2001

Fucked by KR Buxey, 2 minutes, 2000

Tassels by Carolyn Caizzi, 2 minutes, 2003

Picnic by Steve Reinke and Dani Leventhal, 3 minutes, 2003

History Lessons by Barbara Hammer, 70 minutes, 2000

Rammed Earth Platform: Eighteen tons of damp soil; 8' x 8' x 4'. Two vinyl pillows embroidered with feather stitches.

Rammed Earth Platform is completed when two people lay face down on it and hold hands underground. I made it in order to address my homophobia. The position of laying face down looking into a dark hole and breathing a musky scent suggests sexual activity, while the position of hiding one's face and holding hands "underground" suggests shame.

My intention was to make a genuine expression about the sexual body and to visually place same-sex sex in the spectrum of normal images – to show that it is as normal as dirt to love someone of the same sex.





Becoming-Just: Deterritorializing the White Space by Jonathan Rhodes and Shannon Stratton

Will the suffering of 100,000 African-Americans in New Orleans lead us to acknowledge this nation's deeply rooted racism? Will the inaction of a government, who had all but left these thousands to die, call us to arms? Will viewing repeated images of a desperate and impoverished community cause us to confront our own prejudice, privilege, and participation in white nationalism? As America moves into this new century, our discourse on racial justice and poverty has been relatively quiet and too easily quashed as soft-toned academia, if not silenced altogether by a fanatical federal administration. During her residency at ThreeWalls, Dani Leventhal embarked on a projected intended to reinvigorate the discussion about race. A storm in Louisiana might finally make it hears.

Justos Sobre la Tierra – Just Above Ground is a project built on failure. It began as an international collaboration with Ecuadorian artist Javier Chimbolema, with a plan that seemed straightforward enough. Javier would travel to the U.S. for the residency. Dani would meet Javier in New York City and drive them cross-country to Chicago, stopping for Javier to experience the great American landscape as they headed west through the rolling hills of Eastern Pennsylvania and the aging steel towns of Indiana, crawling over the Skyway and into the Windy City.

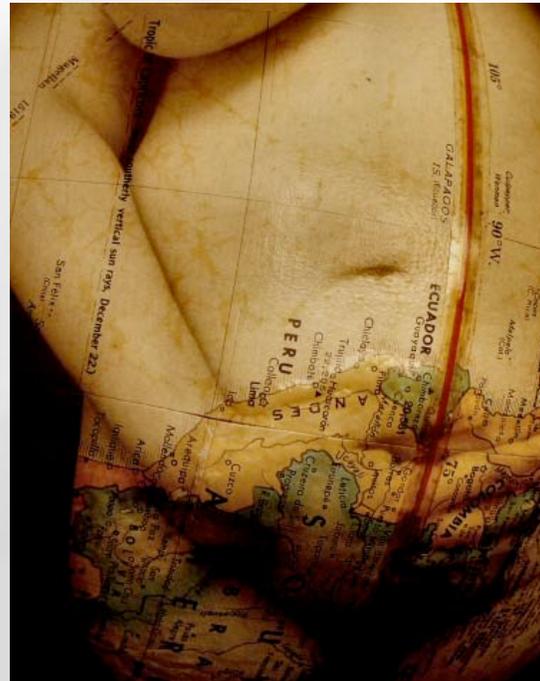
The pair met during the installation of Dani's show at El Container Gallery in Quito. Javier is a self-taught artist who finds occasional work as a gallery technician, though his livelihood comes from the family business: a butcher mart operated outside the small apartment where he lives with his wife, child and ten additional family members. Javier is Quichua Indian, part of the indigenous population and a member of Ecuador's large and impoverished peasant class. His place in the international art community is limited, to say the least.

Javier never made it to America and their project never got off the ground. ThreeWalls had taken the diplomatic route, working through the Ecuadorian Consulate in Chicago and the Embassy in Quito to secure his visa. But Javier has no passport, he has no papers whatsoever, the indigenous are destined to remain in Quito's poor southern district and do not need such things. To think that a dark-skinned, indigent foreigner could enter the U.S. to make art as easily as a white, educated American could enter Ecuador is to miss the racial prejudice that has controlled access to opportunity throughout world history. Admittedly, there was a certain naiveté to the original project, on the part of both Dani and ThreeWalls. Quite a bit may have been lost in translation, as it is asy from a position of privilege to assume Javier's priorities would be making "art" in America, rather than making money to send home.

Just Above Ground is the result of his original, aborted collaboration and a response to the forces Dani found were at work against Javier specifically, and against people of colour in general. Dani assumes the difficult task of creating work that would not only challenge its audience to engage in a discourse about race, but that would actually catalyze a metamorphosis in the viewer, changing their fundamental relationship to and participation in the latent racism that fosters so much social inequity.

As a social-political statement, Dani's project is ripe for a Deleuzian reading: her sculptural installation reterritorializes the gallery space, a wall mural maps the lines of flight of migratory birds, and single-channel videos document forms of capture as they play out in America and abroad. On the Deleuzian reading, change occurs when a minority influence reterritorializes the dominant social code, giving rise to new connections across a deterritorialized field. It is not a matter of incorporating minority demands into the establishment, but of inventing entirely new forms of social codes. When this metamorphosis occurs, an individual's life is changed; we celebrate these revolutions, however small, because with them the world changes.

Just Above Ground is designed to work as a machine of metamorphosis in which the participant traverses a recoded space, confronting their privileged position, to come out the other end transformed. The white cube becomes a laboratory, as Deleuze might explain, for Dani to promote change through active experimentation.



The image of a black woman's face confronts us as we enter the gallery. Projected on the wall outside the gallery door, this close-up film of Dani's friend Micah also awaits us as we exit. Inside, the installation includes a large, elliptical ramp rising from its base on the floor to a height of five feet at its peak. The surface is constructed primarily of wooden shipping pallets, which Dani had painstakingly collected, deconstructed, and reassembled as flooring for the walkway. One enters and exits the walkway from a wide pallet on the ground and as the walkway progresses upward, the ramp narrows, and the wooden flooring becomes more refined, from disjointed planks to a polished herring-bone pattern at the apex. Dani's construction of the ramp invites the audience to perform the sculpture, crating an environment where participation imitates the cycle of capture within hierarchical systems in which the top is a lonely and precarious position. Standing alone, the participant looks down at the base that supports the structure. Here the participant can also view the full wall mural which maps the flight patterns of migratory birds. By omitting artificial national boundaries and continental divisions from beneath these lines of flight, Dani offers viewers an illustration of absolute freedom from state forms of control, exactly the critical freedom that Javier lacked.

A failed project brought Dani back down to ground level where she would go out onto the street in search of materials, and into Chicago's own immigrant community for technical assistance. With *Just Above Ground*, Dani does more than explore exploitation and socio-economic disparities – the flood waters in the Gulf Coast have already washed away any façade of justice. Working to eradicate her own racism, she has designed a process for viewers to participate in their own transformation; a personal journey that is beautiful and poignant, as it is political.

Justos Sobre La Tierra - Just Above Ground by Elijah Burgher

Dani Leventhal's exhibition at the West Loop residency program and exhibition space ThreeWalls, *Justos Sobre La Tierra – Just Above Ground* (September 9 - October 1, 2005), tackles the subjects of inequality and mobility – the latter as it relates to national borders and migration as well as economic ranks – with an intellectual seriousness that is too frequently embarrassing to young artists. Viewers first encounter a video projected onto the hallway wall facing the gallery's entrance. A close-up of a young, black woman's face, presented at a larger-than-life scale, stares fixedly at the camera, and, by extension, at the viewer and into the gallery. A large circular ramp built primarily from wooden palettes found in the West Loop neighborhood, fills the main gallery space. Its lowermost point is nearest the viewer when s/he enters the space, thus beckoning to be climbed on, and is constructed in an intentionally and visibly slipshod manner. As the ramp rises in elevation, the construction grows gradually finer, so that its uppermost point, about five feet high, is delicately finished. Viewers are encouraged to walk the circular length of the ramp and kinesthetically experience the gradation of quality in manufacture. The fine finish at the top is contradicted by the fact that the surface is tilted and less wide than at the bottom, making one's foothold more precarious. By walking the ramp, one can obtain a bird's eye view of the ramp itself, the gallery, and other gallery-goers, as well as better survey the mural that unfolds across two adjacent gallery walls.

The mural, *Migration Map*, depicts the migration patterns of migratory birds: their tangled, color-coded trajectories together compose a rough image of the Americas, analogous to an image of the human circulatory system pictured without the body's contours. Two videos, one comprised of footage taken by the artist during a trip to Ecuador, play back to back in a screening room off the main gallery space.

Leventhal's original plan for her residency at ThreeWalls was to collaborate with self-taught Ecuadorian artist Javier Chimbolema, whom she'd met during a show in Quito. Chimbolema, a member of the Ecuadorian peasant class, was unable to obtain a visa, despite ThreeWalls and Leventhal's attempts on his behalf through the Ecuadorian Consulate in Chicago and the Embassy in Quito, and the original proposal was therefore aborted. Leventhal's exhibition became instead a meditation on the collaboration's failure, particularly how race and class conditioned that failure. This back-story clarifies the motif of movement in the exhibition, which is evident particularly in the ramp and the wall mural. The back-story also brings the political meanings with which Leventhal has invested her work into sharper focus, and provides the viewer with a frame that enables interpretation and ultimately judgment of the exhibition.

Interpreted in the light of North-South economic disparities, *Migration Map* defamiliarizes human movement across national boundaries by picturing the natural and free paths of migrant birds that freely trespass borders in their cyclical trajectories. The ramp likewise begins to signify rather transparently in terms of class: the higher one climbs, the better the manufacture of the ramp but also the more unstable one's footing. The liberty and alacrity with which the viewer may walk up and down the ramp also resonates cruelly and ironically with our knowledge of the many obstructions that stand in the way of both human movement across national boundaries as well as the American Dream of upward mobility. Neither possesses the naturalness or freedom of avian migration. One of the various obstacles, of course, is race.

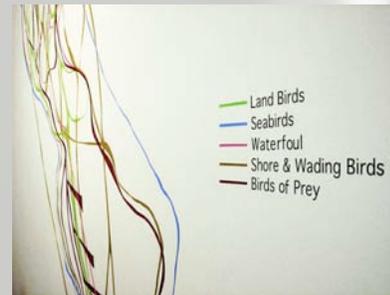
Leventhal seemingly collapses the plight of Chimbolema with people of color everywhere through *Micah's Pool*, which projects a black woman's face outside the gallery door, spatializing exclusion from the gallery as a metonym of a larger social, political and economic structure of racial exclusions. She peers into the gallery from outside, while we, presumably a white gallery-going audience, freely enter and exit. *Micah's Pool* and *Migration Map* are both illustrative of their subject matter to a fault. As such, neither captures one's imagination, ultimately failing to funnel one's energy into a thoughtful wrangle with the political situation the artist intends to explore. The manner in which *Micah's Pool* stages a standoff between the (white) viewer and his/her racial other leaves no room for

dialogue. The video allows too few ways in which the viewer might invest in the artwork, permitting only the two positions of assent and dissent. The ramp, as opposed to the video and mural, sets up quite a different relationship with the viewer. It, too, possesses a stubborn literal-mindedness, but engages the viewer in a more open-ended manner, playing on his/her bodily inquisitiveness as well as analytical skill. The straightforward but strained metaphor of the ramp spatializes economic inequality through height and quality of construction. The artist quixotically forces her metaphor onto the sculpture, insisting that this object signify in a blunt manner. There's a gap between the dumb matter of the ramp as an object and its intended allegorical meaning, providing the viewer with needed breathing room. This is the most salient feature of the artwork: the ramp's intended meaning, which is both obvious and heavy-handed, works precisely because the sculpture can't entirely bear its linguistic load, like a photograph with a caption that seems unrelated. It is true that Leventhal has taken pains to build her meaning into the very object-hood of the sculpture, but the intended allegory of economic inequality remains somewhat arbitrary.

Without Leventhal's expressed intentions, related in the exhibition by the essay written by ThreeWalls staff and the context provided by the other artworks in the show, the ramp could signify in a number of other ways – as an allegory of its own construction, for instance. This arbitrary quality becomes a strength insofar as it reinforces the wager that viewers will think through their factual,

sensory experience of the sculpture and its intended, politically fraught meaning, and effectively connect the dots between our material reality and the invisible vectors of power which violently structure that reality. The work of cognitive mapping that Leventhal expects of the viewer, or at least constructs a situation in order to facilitate, mirrors her own work as an artist; the gap she must cross lies between her political convictions and her material production of art.

Leventhal provides us with examples of the discourse that has influenced her practice and to which she presumably aims to contribute by laying out a selection of books on a table in the gallery. Amongst them, one finds such titles as *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* by bell hooks and *One Place After Another* by Miwon Kwon. Leventhal's exhibition is ambitious and interesting because the work being done in the exhibition is not only on the physical manufacture of art or the transmission of a political message, but also on developing a relationship between theory and practice. The uneasy forcing of object and meaning to coincide makes palpably obvious the risk and effort necessary for artists to refuse the role of fodder for commerce and gossip that is foisted upon their work by a market- and celebrity-driven artworld.





Slurry

nospace, Rosendale, NY 2007

Slurry is a drawing on wood and a hill through it in order to gain new perspectives. The sound of a child's voice loops from above while underneath the structure is a bag of slurry.

Cameos reoccur. They are ovals drawn round, protecting the beloved. A birth canal. A beached father without his head. An anonymous soldier. You can find legs bent in prayer and clouds for dreaming. Bombed-out yellows and greens. The 23rd psalm and placenta in a push cart. *Slurry* marks the territory. *Slurry* draws suggestions from animals because we might find in them, through them, a connection to ourselves in a larger sense of being.

Some people are born into positions of hate.

Translucent child skin, a child understands so much but how could he? Fears of mothering and the regrets of causing harm.

The desire to love and the desire to fuck and the willingness to be left alone. Searching.

A superstitious sister, a voluptuous camel, an exhausted German woman who needs to stay awake. We get dealt certain cards and that is the luck. One can choose to turn one's back and be riddled with fear. Eyes wide shut. But I don't want to. It is 2007 and we are at war.

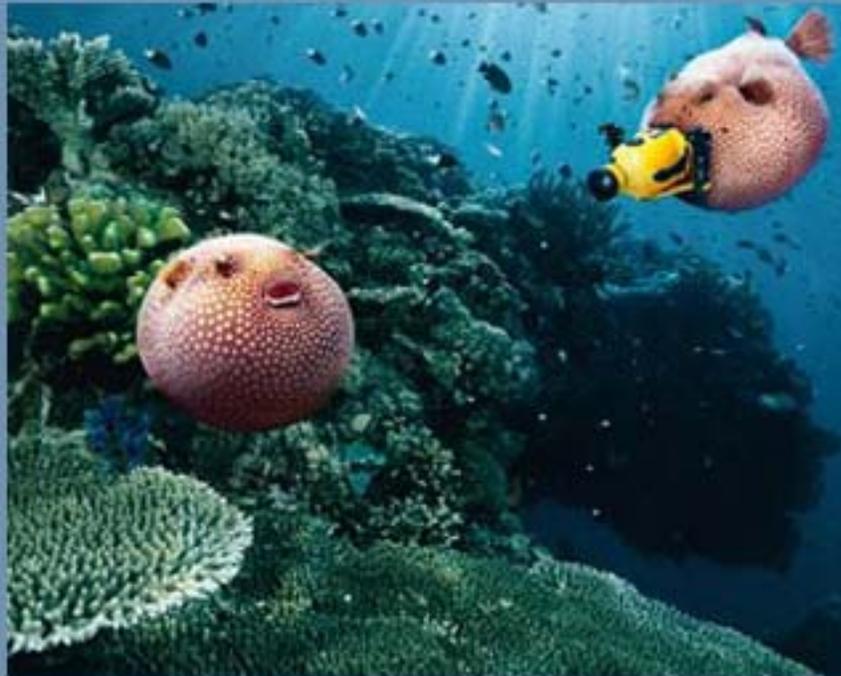












VIDEOS



In Rosendale by Judy Sigunick

I am thinking I should throw away the piles of photos, resumé, interview notes and reviews about Dani Leventhal. I don't mean throw away like its road kill, which is the fulcrum for some of her work, or the marginalized people in her film clips. What I mean is that I can only write about Dani as an artist, from the lens of her camera and my own, so I best be mindfully reactive.

So I grabbed my veggie chips and watched *Draft 9*, a 28 minute artist's video, full of cryptic messages inside a personalized narrative: traveling through cityscapes, down a river, cleaning up road kill, romps, laughter interspersed with a grandma-type person. The rhythmic pumping of Dani's legs, while riding through city streets, seems an outcry against humans hurting animals and humans hurting humans. It's a naïve sort of outrage, begging for reason. A larger-than-the-life-I-want-to-see ode to humanity, I am pleasantly relieved to see, in her film, fingers gently pulling dead fetuses from a mom deer and lovingly removing the fur from a still supple body on the roadside. It's a "love makes it okay" sort of thing that kept my hand off the eject key.

Dani's work is her journey. There are events and then there is her imagination of our world with a hefty dose of a personal struggle, for which she seems to beg forgiveness. But most of her work is set in motion, so she can't linger in self admonishment. She props her video camera from a specific vantage point so that we are the ones commuting to jobs, cycling through cities, rowing boats on the Hudson, riding the subways, talking to grandpa, a holocaust survivor who seems pretty ordinary, except for numbers stamped on his forearm (who else suffered in her/our family or perished in the Holocaust?) All with angst.

With her camera clamped onto the handle bars, I'm scared to take that ride. Oh, but never mind, I don't think I'm supposed to be the perpetrator or victim she would like to rescue. I guess I'm in cyber space, sitting in a rocking chair, visiting memories, proudly human, or maybe watching the troops in Iraq. Oh boy, I want to (gulp) Go Home. Anywhere but in the airport waiting to board a plane to Iraq, under someone's speeding tires on route 209 or seeking asylum in Newark, New Jersey.

But then, in her piece entitled "Relinquishing," a 60-foot plank mounted four feet out her studio window holding a winch and pulley system designed to lift her off the ground, Dani suspends herself for a six minute performance piece. The image of an artist, hanging Christ-like out her window is a complicated one, depending on who you are or what you think you need to "give up." Dani Leventhal swoops her audience through the quagmire of personal choices and disjunctive encounters, and the segments of her narratives barely hang together, like those five required courses in one semester. Was the young child in Dani's drawing being asked to draw (accurately) a bomb in sweet shades of red.? Dani's film clips tell one story. Her drawings, simple, direct, fussless, tell another - like a child's plea for justice, honor and harmlessness.

Suddenly, in *Draft 9*, Dani stares at me (and you) while pleading, "You're scaring me." Long pause. "Stop taking my purse". (Wait! Did I grow old and forget that I scared her? Did I mean to do it, anyway? What would I do with her purse?) Munch, munch.

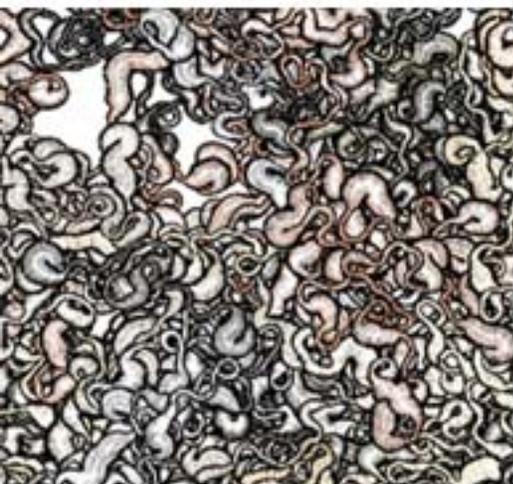
Guts by Steve Reinke

“Referentiality is traditionally assumed to be present in the act of writing. Similarly, the assumption that the consciousness of the filmmaker is somehow indexically represented within the selections made (such as the framing of the shot or its temporal length) while shooting footage is not uncommon within the scholarship on film autobiography. Jonas Mekas has claimed that an individual’s past makes itself felt within the selections that are made at any given moment of the present, when that same individual stands with a camera in hand. Mekas writes, “I began to understand that what was missing from my footage was myself: my attitude, my thoughts, my feelings, the moment I was looking at the reality I was filming. That reality, that specific detail, in the first place, attracted my attention because of my memories, my past. I singled out that specific detail with my total being, with my total past. [...] They all mean something to me, even if I don’t understand why.”

Robin Curtis, *Conscientious Viscerality: The Autobiographical Stance in German Film and Video*, p. 56, Edition ImMorde, 2006.

What does it mean to embody an image? I don’t know, but it seems to me Leventhal embodies her images in a very strange and specific way, that the images are not made of pixels but guts, and not just her guts, but guts in general, the great indistinguishable mound of coiling guts that constitutes this planet of busy animals. Not an eye moving through the world or a camera attached to a body moving in relation to some image or event, but guts, child-like guts curious about themselves and all the other guts in the world and what they have done and can do, and how they look and feel. (And these guts, being guts, have no interiority. You cut them open and just get more guts, if in smaller chunks with more complex, finer surfaces. But no unconscious. And no attitudes, no thoughts, no feelings. Guts that are noisy, but largely pre- — or perhaps post- — verbal.)





Only the Lonely by Danielle N. Kramer

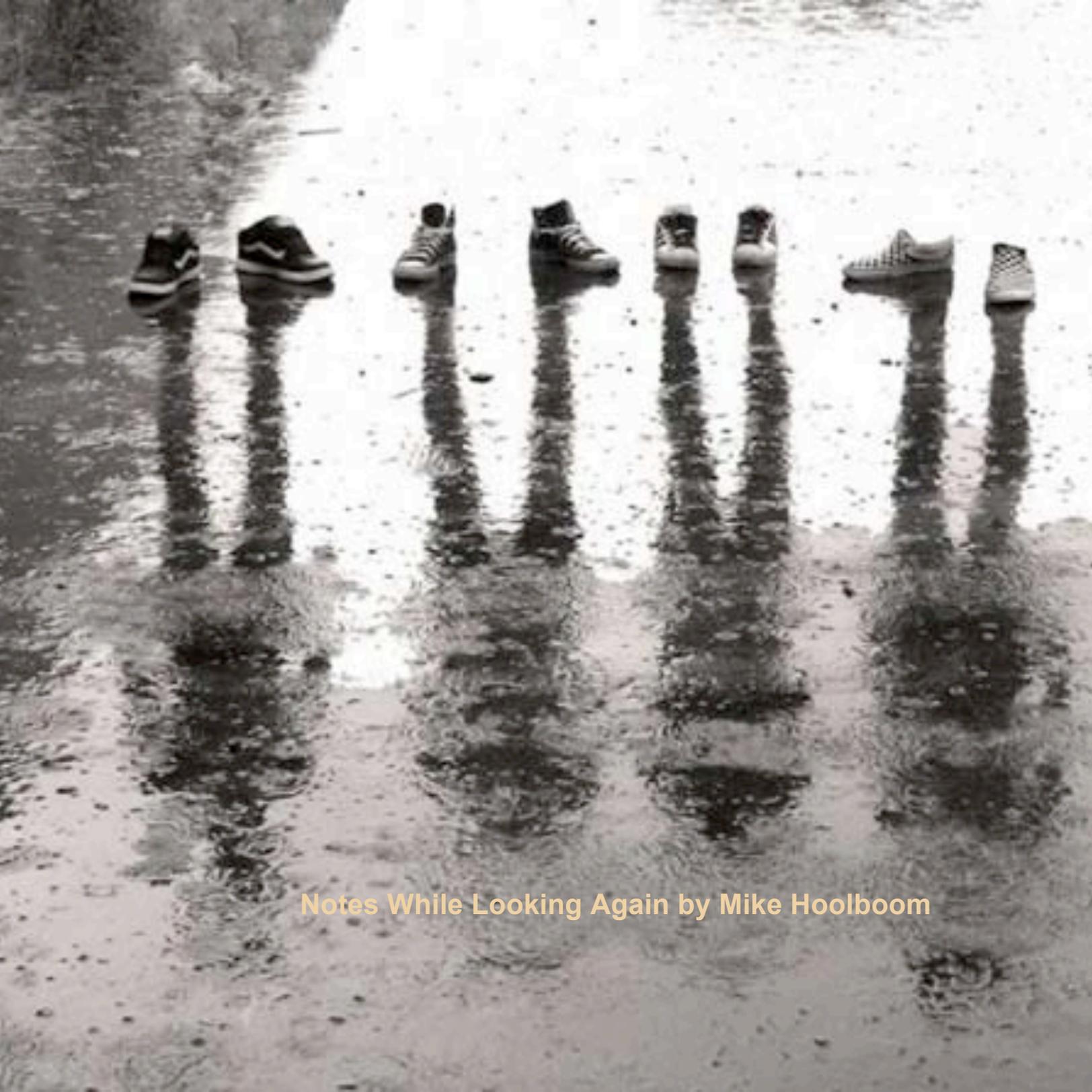
The program notes at the Gene Siskel Film Centre drew me in for Dani Leventhal's *Draft 9* (2003), *Show and Tell in the Land of Milk and Honey* (2007), *9 Minutes of Kaunus* (2007), *Picnic* (2006), and *3 Parts for Today* (2007), presented as part of the series *Conversations at the Edge* on Sunday, October 26, 2008. Reports of various random images under the description "astonishing video diaries" prepared me for the possibilities ahead. I took my seat, waiting to see how "skinned animals" and "romantic liaisons" would play out.

Camera shaking, sound cracking, Leventhal interacting from behind the camera, the video was eerily similar to old family home videos. The content quickly revealed itself to break well beyond traditionally comfortable family boundaries. There is an intimacy felt so deeply by the viewer as Leventhal captures the raw, human emotion gifted by her family and friends, all well aware of the camera, yet treating it as an extension of Dani, their daughter, their grandchild, their lover. Moments of awareness of being filmed drift in occasionally, but remain honest in their own right. Leventhal asks her grandfather for his picture. He senses her concentration through the viewfinder as she captures his tattoo that tells the tale of his

survival. We feel her shifting discomfort as he calls her out on her transparent cover of just wanting a picture.

Animals loving, breeding, injured and in death, spliced with intimate portraits of Leventhal's closest relationships, remind us of our own fragility in body and mind. Leventhal methodically skins the dead, ripping and pulling and tearing with dirty fingers. We sense the resistance of the thick coat of the heavy deer carcass, and know the amount of pressure it takes to pop out an eyeball from its socket. We think of our own. We watch as a broken bird gasps for breath, dying all alone, and we think of our own. We peer through the reeds as swans perform their sacred mating dance, copulate, then separate. We reflect upon these animals, this family, Dani, and ponder on what it is to be human, through happiness and suffering, in pain and in death.

Leventhal stated that in contrary to the description in the program notes, she does not consider her shorts to be video diaries. If they were diaries, they would be private, for her alone. I dare to ask, what more could be hidden when seemingly all had been revealed?



Notes While Looking Again by Mike Hoolboom

Dani and I had begun to write just a few words, the usual welcome mats of the English language, the learned hellos, and then I was granted the rare chance to show off her movie at the honcho festival in Rotterdam. Her half hour masterpiece *Draft 9* (28 minutes 2003) already contains a lifetime of looking. Perhaps several lifetimes. Is it because I am always so busy shirking the moment that I find a particular happiness in her movies, which are always bruised and dirty and up close to everything? Lacking any means at all, she finds the appropriate distance to her subject, and that distance turns out, in most cases, to be not much distance at all. And it's not just a matter of her camera, but her open face and hands and the heart following surely right along. Her heart is forever busy jumping up into the light.

There's too much in her first movie, that's for sure: too many looks and too many feelings. Can there be too much beauty in the world? Or only sadness, though that becomes beautiful too, once you turn it upside down. When vice is versa. Inside the bag there is a bird, and it's dead, isn't it? I can't tell. The line between living and dead is a frontier crossed and re-crossed here. Because the fish which I'm certain is dead turns out to be ready for feeding after all. Why don't I lie down with the black bear? The living are dead while the dead are animated, breathing, swimming, giving birth. In Leventhal's eyes (in her hands, beneath her camera) the dead are busy, restless, turning. And after lying down with the bear it's time to vacuum it. (Why? There is no time for why here, only time to pose

questions. The answers, the answering shots, come later, in the midst of further mysteries.) My death (in life) is a mystery to me: the fact that I'm dying all the time. And the largest mystery of them all is: how has this young woman, this Dani Leventhal, managed to get so much of it into her camera? There is so much living in her frames.

Draft 9 was collected for four years before being sprayed scattershot over 28 minutes of domestic mayhem. I could watch that (crow? hawk?) open its eyes forever but there is a blink and then another and then the face of Dani's mother looks out, silent, really looking, then, not occupied with a viral language but forced to meet the look across the cut of Dani's lover who is posed frozen while Dani falls at her feet, in an unfunny parody of love-me love. The Canadian geese (the ones who can live in the cold) are fleeing. A man eats a sandwich while a girl (his daughter? Why is she sitting so close?) laughs at his appetite, a dog is meal for flies, dead on the roadside, and then the artist appears again, supine in a doctor's office, waiting for the professionals to begin. Naturally they never appear, this work is much too important to be left for professionals.

This is a first person journey, a video zine, diary notes from one of the most skilled lens masters of the new generation. The camera is her company in this duet of death, the instrument that permits her to see the impossible, the unbearable, the invisible.

In her hands, seeing is also showing. This movie is difficult the way some people are difficult. They don't offer up on a soundbyte, they don't present like a TV news anchor. Is the dig worth it? No doubt. The babies are in the dead womb, the camera will bring them to life, and after the camera: you will. Won't you?

When Dani's movie hit the screen in Rotterdam I could feel the room change. It was a serious crowd, there were professionals there, the ones who had seen it all, the ones who'd written the books, climbed the mountain and brought back the tablets, those kind of folks, but when her movie started everything stopped but the pictures. They are difficult and bloodied, and proceed in a crashing collision of instants one after another, yes of course of course it's all too much, it's always been too much. But here at last was a room thinking as fast as she was cutting, jumping every jump, joining every disjoint, who could see as fast as she could live inside her camera.



It's just me I know, because I happened to be there, looking out from the small hole of my personality, but I felt that an artist was born that day, if being born meant recognition. The other cut of 'artist' happened a long time ago, when Dani got kicked by her first horse or stuck her face into a pig's face or who knows when. A long time before she ever picked up a camera that's for sure. She already had a body trained and opened up for looking, and when she got hold of a camera she just kept on looking, only this time there would be a record, a mark. She used her camera to go further, it was her mirror in the labyrinth, now there was nothing she couldn't face. Right?

Imagine my surprise a year after Rotterdam when a disc arrives in the mail from Dani with some hard scrawled charcoal drawings and on this disc four new movies made in 2007. Four! Of course the DVD is filled with sound that is distorted and too loud or way too quiet, and there are glitches and bits which won't play, but through the technical maladies it's all still there, the same heady jam that made *Draft 9* such a whirl.

Some thoughts.



Show & Tell





in the land of



Milk & Honey





“I was raised to believe that Israel is the land of milk and honey. So I, if I were to go there, that would just be, uh, a great thing. Doesn't matter what you're doing there, if you're in that location, it's good. So I went. And ended up at Kefar Menachem. I was put in the metal factory and painted plastic onto pieces of metal for light fixtures.

And then, I complained because my boss was sexually harassing me.

So I got moved into the chicken factory.

These hens had uh, barely any feathers left.

Their beaks had been clipped.

Their egg sacks were bright red and pink and it was way over crowded in this coop.

Each worker would collect 2000 eggs a day off the conveyer belt and then spray the eggs with bleach.

The Israelis had blonde hair in the front from spraying.

So every three hours we had to collect the dead hens.

It's so hot that they spray water from above.

They have fans on but they also spray water.

But this makes the floor of the factory like soupy mud.

And the roosters would chase after me with their prongs.

One day my boss told me to go get all the sick hens. Sometimes their legs would get caught in the wooden slats and so I had this tool, it was like a coat hanger that I would pull their legs out with. And um, so, I collected all the sick hens and I was thinking - great! They're going to get a vet! Bring a vet to the...(sound of crows cawing)

That was a naive thinking. There was no vet, and we put all the hens in a pen area. And later that afternoon, an Arab guy drove up in his jeep. To the fence. And we were handing him the sick hens over the fence.”



When *Show and Tell in the Land of Milk and Honey* (12.5 minutes 2007) opens I see a bee on a flower so close that I am also a bee, the camera hovering and swaying, blowing like the flowering stalks. Isn't she worried about being stung? Or perhaps these are the pictures which arrive after the bees have already landed and sunk their poisoned spears and flown off. But nothing deters her, she stays close, so very close. I am one of them now, because of her old magician's trick: she turns her camera, and then her audience, into bees.

Against a yellowed stain of a background a woman speaks about giving birth. She is double voiced, so it's hard to make out exactly, words and phrases emerge from the scrum. The way these words arrive, the issue of language, this is also labour. The site of production. Language doubles and redoubles, circles round itself. The opening scene is also the primal scene, the unbearable beginning: the bees transfer pollen grains to flowers so that more flowers can grow. Then a voice speaks of birth in a fall into language.

A woman busy licking between the thighs of another woman, the sounds of an animal, the huge hanging tits of a Scottish Highlander. It strolls right up to the camera and Dani says, "Hello," in a high voice and the horned beast gives her a head butt. The picture vanishes. Can video be as bruised and run over and beat up as a body? It can. It must be.

The subject looks back, the picture that touches, the cost of being so close, of intimacy which in Dani's world is also and always an animal gesture, an animal closeness. As close as an

animal, as close to our own meat and gristle as an animal.

A couple of kids play cards and the light glows around a shirtless body, he laughs and lays down another card as the camera stays down low. This is the rarest of all the abilities that Dani has—she is able to turn the camera on while life around her happens. Nothing stops or waits or freezes, everything is in motion and she is in the middle of this bruised, laughing fragment, looking up into the light. A German child draws a missile . And then Dani's large face looms into the lens. "I was raised to believe that Israel was the land of milk and honey." She winds up on a farm on a kibbutz where 2000 eggs a day roll off the conveyer belt and she is charged, along with some others, with spraying the eggs with bleach. (And collecting the sick hens to sell to the Arabs across the fence) After a stint at the metal factory where she was sexually harassed.

A night train pulls in, her grandmother offers her ice cream in a gallery filled with hanging screens and moving pictures. "There's a suicide bomber over there," Dani says and then takes a bite of ice cream. They are killing my neighbor's children and the ice cream still tastes good. They are destroying my corner store but when I buy my ice cream from the other corner store, the ice cream still tastes good. The Others, the Palestinians, the ones displaced and segregated, robbed of their own land and shunted into poverty and deprivation, all this suffering appears on screens, constantly playing, permanently on display and therefore invisible. "You get used to it." You eat ice cream and this turns the pictures off. It's a trick, an old magician's trick. All of my seeing is in my mouth. And my mouth tastes good.

A woman rescues a pumpkin from a swamp. Dani takes frozen dead birds out of a bag and fondles them. Their feathers blowing in the wind makes them seem alive. From a distance you can hardly tell, until you get up close. And she is always close. Her feet are dirty, her hands filled with bird death. The cat cries. Tarot cards are shuffled. The future, anyone?

A Puerto Rican man on a bus, the camera pushed right up into his face, talks about lizards biting his ears and hanging from his lobes all day when he used to go to school. He is also close with the animals. Why isn't she scared? Why is she so close, close enough to be hurt by his bad looking laughter which could turn into something else when the bottle runs out.

Finally we are in a bar looking oh so very clean and antiseptic. It changes colour like a mood ring, it is pink and blue and then pink again. Dani is the lonely occupant, waiting at her table. Back in the city, in a designed space, everything clean and orderly and perfect. In other words, no happiness. The camera is not close here, it looks at it all from a distance so that it can gauge the effect of this geometry on the 'subject,' the maker of course, it is always the maker who is at stake here. She is always dragging us along, pushing us into the face of strangers, party to another chance encounter.

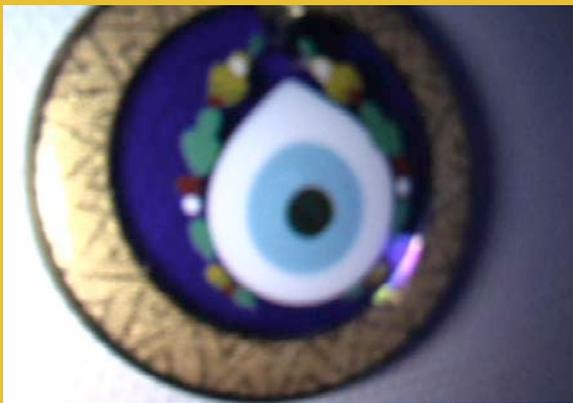
In the closing scene we see a woman on a tight rope, falling off. The bees make honey but cannot eat it. You want to see a nursing cow and it hits you in the head. And the woman between your legs? The child that comes from that place? The stranger on the bus? For a few moments there are gestures toward child's play, flights of reverie with the birds, only the birds are all dead

now. Now it is time to take up again with the monsters who are still alive, and I among them, dirtied and crushing you, and stepping on your hope without even noticing.



Litau, 7.5 minute video, 2007







Once upon a time there was an anti-Semite who, when parking her car, met a Jew. The Jew had a camcorder and a willingness to converse. But because of a language barrier, they resorted to drawing.

Once upon a time there was a group of feral boys who played cards, watched basketball on TV, and grunted like monkeys in trees. They were lost. They caused harm.

One day, the Jew left her apartment, walked through the woods, and ended up groping a woman under the gaze of a superstitious photograph. She didn't score, but she has the footage in safe keeping.



Litau (7.5 minutes 2007) opens with a dance number: is it a foxtrot or a samba, at any rate, it is one of those body shaking rhythm numbers that have left words behind. Three figures move together, lensed up close in swaths of brightly coloured fabric. It might be a her between two hims, there are no faces so it's hard to tell, might be she's wearing the pants today, might be he's got on his best hose and heels.

Meanwhile on the street, near the dirtiest and most beautiful windshield in all of Estonia, Dani listens to a woman talk and scribbles down words like *Puha Vaim* next to a child's face. "Or you go to hell, oh I understand. That's why you're willing to spend time with me right now," says Dani. One thing is for sure: this is not an interview like those which may be found in a score of other doc manoeuvres. For one thing, despite the woman's underlinings and rhetorical repeatings, it is clear that not so much is clear. Between them stretch a lifetime of mysterious experiences. After all that, how can I know you, how can I find you? Could it be here, on the rusted hood of this abandoned car, is this the place where we could make our stand together?

Dani's journal offers up another face, a star of David, a fire. They are the quickest of sketches, Dani is turning these unknown words (are they a prophecy, a warning?) into these small pictograms so they might be stored and saved and rescued from the present. They are both people of the book after all, it lives inside each of them as a text waiting to be recited. Signs are inscribed in her notebook so she can carry them away. And us alongside.

At this moment the camera tilts and a young girl in a polka dot dress spins round and comes to a stop, and then again and again in the other direction. Smiling. The woman keeps smiling, she is the one writing enigmas into Dani's notebooks, reciting foreign words. A minute into the scene the camera shifts again and the talker's face comes into view, it turns out she is a double-chinned, grey haired lady with a broad round face that narrows suddenly and precipitously into mouth and chin, as if their maker had run out of time or material.

A young girl colours a rocket yellow in silence. The mysterious words, pointed, emphatic, underlined, hang over this scene somehow, the way an impression of a room remains if you turn the lights on for a moment and then off. The phantom of a room remains for a moment. And then it too gives way.

A young boy in a bathing suit leans out on a rock, speaking to another boy crouching in the water below. Their mouths are turned away from us, turned towards each other. Unlike the usual cinema, whose inhabitants are always opened, on display, always 'turned out' to offer their audience the best view, the best seat in the house, here the views are partial, the codes only partially revealed, what is most often on view, again and again in this tape, is the way others remain a mystery.

Two young boys listen to a radio in a parking lot. "It's shit," says one. "I like it," Dani responds, which prompts the beautiful young one onscreen to curl his lips into an O and dance up and down. It takes about twenty seconds.

A young girl in a red dress climbs an apple tree. Three seconds. (Dani writes me about this scene: In this clip the boy who turned his lips into a vowel and hoots like an ape is the voice-over for the girl in the tree who is now an ape because of his voice-over.)

A Latvian soldier checks documents on a bus. The camera is low and unobtrusive, but right there in front of him. What if he notices? Will he look up and see her, and see us watching behind her? The threat of being seen, of being looked at in the wrong way by the wrong person. Ten seconds.

Two boys look into the guts of a car. One of them shirtless and lean, both of them blonde and too young to know any better. A girl smiles shyly behind them. She knows everything but lacks the agency to act, caught inside her gender trap. Action is left to the unselfconscious and unaware, the know-nothings. They gesture to something beyond the field of vision speaking in Lithuanian. Ten seconds.

Two children describe a soft shell crab encounter in German. "Was it alive before?" asks Dani. They never answer.

A woman lying by a river. Or dead. Or asleep. Pink top, brown pants, black rubber boots. Dead or alive, she is also part of the natural world.

A walk down a stairway with carefully close attention paid to the wooden banister, the camera follows its turning and twisting downwards. For some a road of yellow bricks, for others a wooden hand rail is enough.

Horses watery and close. Soft-eyed, they graze each other. Their soft touch is also a look.

A woman lies in bed, the camera pans over her in a post (pre?) coital haze. She is seen with the softest possible eyes. The eyes of a horse, for instance.

A football match on TV. (Could this also be love?)

Street musicians stroke their violins and cellos while Dani's camera returns to the car seen at the tape's beginning. The woman with two faces, large and small, has picked up her child, the one who turned and turned. They white out and the movie is over.

Litau is a prayer of moments, of tender strangers met in passing, but met full on. There is no holding back or opportunity for rest. She has made a composition using fragments of incomprehension. *Litau* refuses to wrap up all these encounters into a story, or pretend they are part of a single gesture. Instead we are offered the raw, unremembered stuff of living. Dani is always in the midst, pushing her face up close, trying to find a way to get through the scar of language which names and separates, which binds and heals, like the spine of a book opening and closing.

9 minutes of Kaunaus

6 minute video, Dani Leventhal, 2007

Domas Darguzs (7) Dani Leventhal (34) Kaunaus, Lithuania



Domas: "This place was built of ancient Egypt."

Dani: "Which place?"

Domas: "This place"

Dani: "This synagogue?"

Domas: "Yes, everything built."

Dani: "Wow."

Domas: "I think the mummy was sometimes dead and not dead. He was alive and bring here the peace. And now it's a little, not peace, but it's a little good, in here it's very quiet, it's all about peace."

Dani: "That's awesome. "

Domas: "Yes, it is."





Domas: "And there was five snakes, ancient Egypt snakes, but they looked a little interesting because they was green, of course. I was not scared because I found the gold, I found the gold and it was a victim. How you look with the sun and time. I was seeing the time..."



Domas: "If the man touch you here or here... you're dead. But I was too quiet, it was nothing, no snakes, no traps, no nothing. Just, it was a trap, I just don't know. It was, for people, you know, bone, people bone. Maybe something didn't dead. But those snakes..."

9 Minutes of Kaunaus (6 minutes 2007) the title says but the tape is only six minutes long. The other third has been shorn away, left to the imagination as a promissory note. In a Lithuanian synagogue young Domas Darguzs whispers his wide-eyed truths to Dani. His miraculous confession informs her that this place was made of materials belonging to ancient Egypt, and that world peace will arrive when we can look on with love at the art of living that stands before us as statues. "Awesome," Dani answers and he replies, "Yes it is." Wherever her subjects are, this is where Dani is. She meets them over and again, whether child or bird or insect or holocaust survivor.

In between his testimonials from the other side are moments from a goat farm. The goats suckle on artificial nipples protruding from a nipple tub, or in another protracted scene they are attached to milking machines. The udders well and secrete milk like an ejaculating penis, again and again, caught in the infernal cycle of production.

Fire snakes from Egypt, gold discoveries and the mystery of death all pour of Domas's mouth. One image gives way to the next in rapid succession like one of Dani's tapes. His pictures are made with words, issuing from the space between his first set of teeth, and the small shifts of focus which allows his face to enter the frame at a speed which permits us to receive him. Like oracles past his orations are casually transcendent, it is a sermon delivered not from the front but the very back row, where all the buried and forgotten truths may be met again by anyone young or innocent or animal enough to receive them.

3 Parts for Today

12 minute video



A nestling fell onto the pavement



An Israeli Defense Force pilot refuses to occupy



A woman talks to you in the grass



Location: Lithuania, last nuclear power plant



Location: Germany, wind farm



Location: USA, speedball race



The father prays



The grandma medicates



The Turkish friend violates the code



Canadian geese have remained North, and are mating to the familiar sound of Steve Reinke's voice.

3 Parts for Today (12.5 minutes 2007). There is something about a bird lying on the ground that doesn't look relaxed or at ease. It lies there in a cascade of grey and white feathers, heaving with breath, the yellow bill opening wide and all I can think is: how awful, how wounded. And how beautiful. It must have hit that harsh brick wall and fallen here, in the last beautiful light where Dani (does she ever sleep?) has found her.

Yonatan Shapira (named in the opening title as "The Refusenik") talks about joining the Israeli army after the first Gulf War and becoming a helicopter pilot.

Grandma Leventhal is lensed centimeters away from her left elbow, the camera pointed straight up into a wattle of neck and the sagging flesh of her arms. She takes a pill and then a cracker. "I just don't know why the pill doesn't go down without you tasting it?" Dani asks/says. How can experience be masked, buried, repressed? Are we in the land of metaphor here? The denial of even the most rudimentary rights for Palestinians is somehow equivalent to a pill swallowed by Dani's grandmother whose taste (or reality) is covered over by a cracker. Here is a politics searched for and unearthed and returned to again and again on home turf; in pictures of home, friends and familiars. The problem, the difficulties are never "out there," but also and most importantly "over here." How to find the necessary distance or closeness with the camera in order to be able to find them?

From a television screen a documentary fragment once again shows Yonatan Shapira speaking Hebrew, though the clip is silent (and shot home movie style, in what looks like someone's living room where he speaks in front of a small group of folks) yellow subtitles permit language to be applied. "And then a little seven year old girl

started running towards us. On one hand I saw this little scared girl... maybe she's going to explode... I shouted but she didn't stop..."

Incredibly at that moment a young girl gets up and walks by Yonatan. He can only smile and shake his head. "Yeah that girl was just about that high... but then I shot a warning shot in the air, the girl froze like this, for me it was like being hit by hammer on the head. For months afterwards I couldn't forget that moment, and then I told my commanders I'm not doing this anymore."

A blank post (or is it a chimney, a tower?) with a frayed red rope attached stands tall, the rope so hardly there by the time it reaches the far end of the frame that it seems to hover miraculously in the wind. The camera tilts to reveal it is the stem of a windmill.

Yonatan returns and contrasts the exhilarating lift off of his helicopter with the devastating effect these military machines bring to their target.

All at once we are offered experiences soft and hard. Raw and cooked. Dani feels along the seam of the real until these moments of contradiction erupt.

She films her father in temple singing with his eyes closed, softly chewing. The word "peace" passes through the air and some guitar and then there is some shuffling of hymnal pages. Isn't this word already a question? How can there be peace in the synagogue when this religion has been used to bludgeon and displace an entire Arab population?

Then Dani appears out of doors in jeans and a hoodie brandishing a bowl of muesli and fruit which settles into the middle of the frame. She talks but we don't see her face at first, her words and mouth are off screen. (Some illusory wholeness, some easy place of seeing and knowing is endlessly deferred or troubled.)

"There is a Jewish law that says that you shouldn't eat alone. I just had a meeting with Yonatan Shapira, and here is this activist, a Combatant For Peace, and it was so funny because I showed him this video that I made of him, of the lecture that he gave, and I have mixed the footage of him being a helicopter pilot with this bird. I have footage of this bird that had just fallen, a little fledgling, and he was like 'Did you give it some water? What did you do?' It didn't even occur to me to try to save that bird. It was just this beautiful footage."

A woman wrapped in a gold mylar sheet makes her way towards the Ignalina nuclear power plant in the distance. End of part one.

Part two opens with a set of titles.

Antje Miller's grandpa was a Nazi. One night last August we went out dancing. Antje Muller's grandpa was a Nazi. One night we went out dancing with my friend Unis, a Turk. He knew I wanted Antje and he hit on her right in front of me.

A woman in red calls out of a megaphone, bikes park near the windmill. A picnic of bread and strawberry jam ensues. At an amusement park mechanical camels race across their prescribed tracks, digitally slowed. A woman in a red dress walks gingerly along rocks in water. A pair of hands knit red yarn against a luminous red cloth background. Dani and a handsome man and a woman under a blanket on the beach. There is laughter and music, the

shutter speed is slowed, the pictures blurry and intense. He speaks German and Dani is so close, their feet are far away and a horizon of Black Sea just beyond them but the faces are close, the touch of the blanket fills the frame.

The woman lying there face down, never saying a word, somehow between 'them,' the man speaking German and Dani's playful accusations. Wait, wait. Is this woman the 'Antje' mentioned in the titles? Dani laughs to cover over her bad feelings (why do women do this so well, so often?) but it's clear she's hurt. Why is she hurt? I grope backwards across the line of pictures and find myself looking again at those intertitled words ("Antje's Muller's grandpa was a Nazi") and especially the words she uses for love. "Hit on her." To have the beloved taken away, seized, to have one's hope stepped on so that another's might hold sway, all this is "hit on her," taking a hit. Where to turn after this beach, why is there room under that blanket only for two? Dani records an enormous tree with a deep scar running along its length. I am this tree, this body of water, this unspeaking woman. Love is a hit.

Part 3

The voice of Steve Reinke erupts over pictures of a kosher Schawarma stall, and then two Canadian geese duck their heads into water in perfect time, turning around some unseen centre. Steve speaks a text of Dani's and it is delivered casually, or at least its laughing interruptions, its abrupt stop and starts, give it the impression of verité. He talks about meeting Shapira, the Refusenik, and then about prayer, the gods that live outside and in.

"The difference is that I'm no longer praying to an outside force, a force which reinforces my own insignificance. Instead I'm looking inside and the inside is always there. It's there 24/7. This other God outside sometimes doesn't seem to be there, sometimes seems to have receded into the distance or listening or not listening. But the one on the inside you can feel it and see it in other things it's just always there. So I can call on it, I can remember it. It gives no reason to escape into instant gratification of sex or booze and then the rebound from these things which is a kind of loneliness or emptiness."

The two birds fuck, that doesn't take long, both raising their necks alternately as if in triumph or release. And then they are back to ducking their heads under the water and using their bills to send water running down their backs. Like so many other pictures that Dani collects, they are so beautiful. They are also the end.

Yonatan Shapira's refusenik remonstrations are interwoven with moments of Dani's family (her grandmother and the pill, her father singing), her broken love in part two, and finally a sort of reconciliation (God is inside) while the geese fuck and bathe and swim right on.

So now of course I am waiting for more. It's enough for now, I've seen these movies and re-seen them. They are humming right along to the same tune that delivered *Draft 9*, so muscular and fearless and camera ready. Now I want more, at least enough to fill the granaries, the distribution houses, the screens of festivals in years to come. Let it rain. Let it all come down.



Pleasure Dome presents Internal Archivists

Aleesa Cohene & Dani Leventhal in discussion with Brenda Goldstein

Saturday, January 24, 2009 8pm
@ CineCycle, 129 Spadina Ave.

Internal Archivists brings together video artists Aleesa Cohene and Dani Leventhal for a screening of their works and a conversation about their individual practices with artist, writer and curator Brenda Goldstein. The program will feature excerpts from Cohene's new work, *Something Better*, along with her previous, widely acclaimed videos *Absolutely* (2001), *Ready to Cope* (2006) and *Supposed To* (2007), and Leventhal's new 90 in 90, as well as her compelling earlier works *Draft 9* (2003), *Litau* (2007) and *3 Parts for Today* (2007). The artists will also each screen works by other artists, including Young-Hae Chang's *Cunnilingus in North Korea* (2005) and *Alpsee* (1995) by Matthias Müller.

Aleesa Cohene has been making carefully crafted videos from found footage since 2001, displaying a deft ability to suture disparate samples of 70s and 80s cinematic ephemera into sharp, visually seamless narratives. Her works are audiovisual embroideries that reveal the political gradients and received knowledge accumulated in the collective unconsciousness.

Each of Dani Leventhal's carefully crafted images forms a page in her diary, at which her keen editing allows the audience only brief glances. Her video collages are part travelogue, part interview and part sketchbook of the artist's musings. The cast varies: repentant Israeli soldiers, dying birds, goats, cows, family members, windmills, lovers, strangers found in town squares and on commuter trains. Leventhal's cascading images accumulate like life's experiences and coalesce to form a personal grand narrative.

Cohene and Leventhal both assemble their work from vast archives of accumulated material. Cohene's archive is made of found footage, Leventhal's archive is made of material she has shot herself. Each artist struggles with belief and ideology - together their works map out an uneasy middle ground, illustrating how the personal becomes the political, and how distanced analysis becomes the personal.



Internal Archivists

Brenda: Good Evening, My name is Brenda Goldstein, I am a member of the Pleasure Dome programming collective and I am pleased to welcome you to our first screening of the winter 2009 season. This evening's screening is called Internal Archivists, and features the work of Aleesa Cohene and Dani Leventhal .

Dani Leventhal studied sculpture at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and is currently pursuing a MFA in Film/Video at Bard College. In 2004 I saw Dani's *Draft 9* here at a Pleasure Dome Screening curated by Steve Reinke called The New Everyday (The Day Before Tomorrow). I was moved by the power of the imagery, and the vast range of her skills which include performance and sculpture. And also her non-artistic practices: the raising, hunting and skinning — and most importantly, appreciation — of creatures great and small, an obsession with birds and an openness and curiosity that leads her to ask all kinds of questions of all kinds of people. Dani has an incredibly disciplined approach to having a video practice, which appears (and appearance is important to Dani) to involve poking a camera into every aspect of her life.

Aleesa Cohene, as many of you know, is a Toronto artist, whose work I have followed since I first saw *Absolutely* in 2001 and I've looked forward to each of her works since. I have also — like many Toronto-based artists — had the privilege of working with her. It is her razor sharp editing skills that brings

many of us back to her, and it is her sharp eye and vast technical knowledge that you can see in the making of her own work. This screening is a kind of send off before Aleesa goes to an artist residency in Copenhagen with the Danish Arts Council, which will be followed by a fellowship at the Kunsthochschule für Medien KHM where she will work in the same department with Matthias Mueller. We'll see his film *Alpsee* this evening.

I wanted to tell you a bit about the program this evening. Some time ago I approached Aleesa because I wanted to do a retrospective of her work. She was not entirely pleased at the prospect of an evening dedicated to her and suggested having a conversation with another artist. Dani Leventhal for instance, who was the one other video maker that I had wanted to show this season. That became the genesis of tonight's program. First we're going to see some of their early work, *Draft 9* by Dani, and *Absolutely* by Aleesa. Then we'll see a piece that Aleesa chose (*Alpsee* by Mathias Mueller) and a piece that Dani chose (Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industry's *Cunnilingus in North Korea*). And then we'll see some of their newer work. Then we'll have a discussion which I will moderate. Thank you for all coming, We'll see you after the show.

Work screens.

Absolutely by Aleesa Cohene (8:24 2001)

Draft 9 by Dani Leventhal (28 minutes 2003)

Alpsee by Matthias Mueller (15 minutes 1994)

Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries's
Cunnilingus in North Korea (9 minutes 2005)

Litau (7:30 minutes 2007)

3 Parts for Today (13 minutes 2007)

Ready to Cope by Aleesa Cohene (7
minutes 2006)

Something Better by Aleesa Cohene (8
minutes 2009)

Brenda: Yesterday, Aleesa and Dani met each other for the first time in my living room. We watched the entire program together and talked a lot about it and about our various works and where they come from.

Two interesting things came out of our discussions and email exchanges. A curator has recently commissioned Aleesa to make an explicitly queer film because she felt that Aleesa didn't put enough of her identity in her work. Dani responded to my early poster text which described her work as 'diaristic.' Dani suggested that her work is not a diary, because a diary is private, and she does not include moments she considers private on screen.

Could you each tell us a bit about what you choose to put up on screen and what you don't, and the process you use to get there? And how that has changed from your early video work to your present work?

Dani: How do I choose? Well, it depends which project I'm working on. In *Draft 9* I didn't have a plan or script or agenda. But in some of the subsequent work there's a viewpoint I'm trying to get across, so there's more thought out construction. Right now I'm working on a project called *90 in 90* and I don't know what the content of the footage is going to be, but I have a structure that I'm working within just to help me start and finish.

Brenda: How do you decide what's private? You include very personal scenes in your work that I would consider private.

Dani: I think it's private if I have any shame or hesitation around it. I wouldn't want to show you something that I don't feel... if I feel ashamed of it, I won't put it up there. But that might change over time. That's why a lot of the footage is old. I might not show it to you now, but I could show it to you three years from now when I won't feel the same way about it.

Aleesa: I generally try to go as deep into my shame as possible, and then write a story about that. I choose the footage quite linearly around that story. I look for dialogue first that I can piece together to tell that story, and once I find the dialogue... It's changed over time but this is where I've ended up. If someone is speaking and they say something I like and they're sitting and wearing a black suit and there's a window behind them, then I have to find someone with a similar suit who stands up next to a similar window, and it goes on and on and on. My decisions are really logical, I search



for things I can connect in that way. That being said, I have preferences. If I don't like the way something looks, I can't have it, I just won't build on it. If I don't like the way something moves, I won't build on it. I have no idea how to explain those choices. How do you explain what you like?

Brenda: You said about your most recent work *Something Better* that you followed a lot of rules.



Aleesa: I once attended a strictly religious high school where the rabbi announced that the most important commandments to follow were neither negative or positive, but the ones that were just *because*. There was no reason. I tried to think of my reasonless beliefs and tried to construct rules around those, but I don't know if that worked. Rules were designed which determined what had to happen or couldn't happen, and in the end, they became very concrete. For example, I don't want to use anyone else's edit. Everything has to be linear unless I'm really stuck and then I allow myself a cutaway; like a cat or a window or an exterior shot. But if an exterior shot is not needed then I have to keep going. Often I've thrown away long sequences. In *Something Better* I brought the entire family into the bathroom (all on separate screens, each one alone), and I was really excited. I remembered when I would brush my teeth with my dad. But then I couldn't get them out of the bathroom and I was really devastated. I can't show the front of the house five times.



Brenda: Why did you choose to show Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries's *Cunnilingus in North Korea*?

Dani: I don't write or use much language so I love how powerful and sexy that piece is using only words in black and white. It's political and powerful and I aspire to that – getting this really poignant message across about capitalism in a surprising way. To me it's as juicy and vivid as anything I might shoot, but it's done with language.

Brenda: Could you talk about why you chose to screen *Alpsee* by Matthias Mueller?

Aleesa: I love its everyday rawness, and how it smoothly it shifts into fantasy. It feels good and I love watching it. I love the blue dress, I would never wear a dress like that but I really like it.



Brenda: How did you discover Matthias's work?

Aleesa: Through Benny.

Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay: You hadn't seen it in Toronto?

Aleesa: No. Benny had a friendship with Matthias and I was hearing stories about him and then I saw his work for the first time in Oberhausen. It took me six days to work up the courage to talk to him and then he invited me for coffee with an older woman. I knew she was a lesbian and I felt he invited me because of that but I didn't know how to ask her. She curates a festival in Frankfurt about weather, and I thought these are the most amazing people on earth. It was all about weather. They were speaking English but I really didn't understand what they were saying. I found that exciting too, and we've been in touch since.

Brenda: Aleesa, you mentioned a rabbi, though we never see overtly Jewish moments in your work.

Aleesa: The project I'll be working on in Germany is going to be cut using only Jewish characters who will have a big fight about the meaning of life. I'm not uncomfortable with my Jewishness, but it hasn't found its place yet. When I address it, I need to saturate my entire vision, sprinkling a Jewish line in here and there doesn't work. I've tried that a few times but it never felt right.

Dani: How do I feel about it? It's part of where I come from and I've been focusing on it lately after an experience in Germany where I discovered a harboured resentment I didn't know I had. I wanted to look at where that comes from and see how it was learned so I could let go of it. When I started looking at it, of course, Israel came up, along with ideas of entitlement and land. I was on a kibbutz as a kid, and again in my 20s, but when I met a refusenik I began to look at the situation in a very different way. When you start to look at something it starts growing.

Brenda: Could you explain what a refusenik is and name some of the organizations you've been working with?

Dani: There's a group called Combatants for Peace made up of former Israeli Defense Force and Palestinian fighters. Not only are they refusing to continue their work, they're meeting and sharing their stories and trying to find new solutions. They're a minority but they're growing. Yonatan Shapira, who is in

3 Parts for Today, is touring the United States, and gives lectures in synagogues. There are a lot of groups involved in the peace movement. There's Rabbis for Human Rights, in Israel. There's Birthright Unplugged. People are going to pick olives with the Palestinian villagers so that the settlers don't steal them at harvest time. There's international people walking children to school who would otherwise be stoned by the settlers. There's a lot of good work going on out there.

I was in Israel with my father last January to make a video called *Skim Milk and Soft Wax* (44 minutes 2008). My father is an ardent Zionist, but he was willing to go with me into the West Bank because we went with the Rabbis for Human Rights. He felt comfortable being in a car with a rabbi going there, otherwise he would never go. I recorded our journey, and his coming around to listening. We had a meeting with Yonatan's brother, Itamar Shapira, and they argued. I can't argue with my father, but if I get him with a strong man it's great because he listens!

I would like to go to Jewish Youth Centres with the tape because we get washed in the story of the holocaust, and learn that we're victims who need to fight and defend ourselves. These stories maintain a vigilant violence. It's the same thing I felt in Germany. I'm looking at this woman, my collaborator, thinking, should I be friends with you? Your grandfather was a Nazi. It keeps happening to me, where I'm faced with my own racism, my own homophobia,

and that's what I put in my videos so I can grow out of this stuff.

Brenda: I'm wondering if you could draw a link between the man with the numbers on his arm in *Draft 9*, between Unis and Antje, and then Yonatan Shapira in *3 Parts for Today*. Do you think you can draw a link between each of these characters from your tapes?

Dani: The old guy in the bagel shop was a holocaust survivor who still had the numbers tattooed on his arm. A chance meeting. That was a bagel shop where my grandmother goes and I was with her. I've been told the story of the holocaust ever since I was born so I'm noticing him. Unis is a Turkish guy I met in Germany. I was there during the World Cup and I would go into his restaurant and watch the games, three times a day at the beginning of the tournament. I became friends with him, and learned about the German-Turkish mess. He was in love with Antje, I was in love with Antje, that was the drama. When I got back to the States I met Yonatan... I think it's all connected. Can you see how that is? (laughter)

Brenda: The connection I saw was the relation between the holocaust, and its echo two generations on in the same country, this time between Germans and Turks. For those of us who have been to Germany, the racism against Turkish people feels very familiar because of the stories our Jewish grandparents told. To hear Yonatan Shapira talk about the Israelis and Palestinians also feels familiar. The familiarity is in how dehumanization is justified. I am interested

in the blind spots in these ethnic-based conflicts — which are infinitely complex and, at the same time, incredibly simple. In each case there is a blindness to the repetitions of history, because more than half a century on, there is a new “other,” which makes it novel and somehow justifiable. The story of Jews in Europe is two thousand years old — the story of Zionism and the Palestinians already feels that old because the script has already been written.

Aleesa, I'm wondering how your overtly political work fits into your identity?

Aleesa: I've been involved with activist groups which have taken and involved me with different kinds of actions. But I always return to the question of what is motivating me. What's happening with me personally affects how I feel and react politically. I find that interesting, especially when I think of my own parents' Zionism. I never see my Dad more passionate about anything than his experiences in Israel. He fell in love with my mother in Israel. I'm like OK, whatever. So what? But there's an incredible passion around “the most beautiful place on earth” and his feeling is attractive. I'd much rather talk to him about his love for my mother than yelling and screaming about the DVD player that someone broke. Or whatever the problem is today. My interest is in the underlying emotional qualities of what we've come to call politics. The more I'm in tune with how I feel, the less I understand what's actually happening.

Gunilla Josephson: This tells me that you've understood politics, because politics is

everything that surrounds an individual. As soon as you have two people in a room it's political. In my mind you've moved from the work of politics into something which is more truly political, more Bergmanesque. I think you're much closer to that now.



Aleesa: I'd like to know a bit more, it's kind of embarrassing. I come back to Canada to find I've missed so many things which have happened. And listening to the CBC news six hours later is weird, it's the morning news but you're getting tired in the evening.

Brenda: Aleesa suggested that we play a word association game...

Aleesa: I thought it would be fun if we all played along. You begin by saying a word, and then the next person says whatever word comes to mind. Don't you think that would be fun? We could play too but that would be a bit of a spectacle. Mathew's leaving! (laughs) Like I say hot and you say cold and you say...

Dani: Green.

Audience Member: Blue.

Audience Member: Tired.

Audience Member: Awake.

Audience Member: Asleep.

Audience Member: Yellow.

Audience Member: Lana

Audience Member: Turner. (laughs)

Aleesa: You see it's fun.

Brenda: Yes.

Aleesa: Or we can do the clapping game.

Brenda: Or we could take questions from the audience.

Audience Member: I agree with Gunilla's comment about the progression of your work. I find the new work is still very political, breaking down archetypes of what it means to live in a nuclear family, shattering utopian ideas of suburbia and being middle class. Capitalism and the American dream are dissected through your found footage families, their relationships break down according to narrativized sequences which are very emotive. It is very personal work, even though you're using clips from sometimes well known movies.

Deirdre Logue: I'd like to ask Dani about the way you collect material.

Dani: Well this is my camera. (holds up her camera) It's small, so I can have it close and work discretely. I've been more careful recently because people sometimes say, "I never gave you permission to use that." So I'm asking permission now. But I just pointed out at you guys and didn't ask, because I thought I might shoot and then I didn't. I'm working on collecting nine minutes a day for the next 184 days and I'll extract three minutes per day to show. How do I choose? Things look so different through the camera. I'm looking here and this floor is sparkling a little bit. If I notice something I turn it on. Often it's late at night by the time I get around to my nine minutes so I look at what's right in front of me. Dizzy, my orange and white cat, had ruined my pretty red blanket with his shedding, but when I looked through the camera I experienced a shift. His white hairs accentuated the redness of the blanket, it had a new beauty which overcame and transformed my irritation. I like to find regular things.

I do want to create fiction, like the shot with Antje in the red hat and the red dress, but I'm not able to contrive connecting scenes. I don't write dialogue, for instance. But I do want to construct moments with people. I'm still connected to those boys in *Draft 9*, for instance, they're eighteen and sixteen now. I want to shoot Stephen who plays classical piano. I want to ask him to wear his baseball uniform, and I want his mother to be next to him putting on mascara. I have something in mind and I'm going to ask them to do it. But

mostly it's just going around and collecting whatever is sparkling at the moment.

Benny: Do you have a sense of where this footage belongs when you're shooting? Or is there lots of time spent viewing and reviewing images you've collected until connections or narratives emerge?

Dani: Part of the reason I'm making this very structured piece right now is because I'm overwhelmed by the amount of footage I have.

Gunilla: It seems to me then that your work is diary based. When you say that it takes you a few years to use material it underlines this fact, it informs me that your work is truly personal in a sense that what you're experiencing now is too painful. If you put it on a shelf perhaps you lose the sense of how personal it is, though we in the audience can still see it.

Dani: That's totally true. I don't like the word 'diary' because it's lower in the hierarchy than 'experimental film.'

Gunilla: You should not be ashamed of that.

Dani: Right, but I'm in these academic environments and we have these brilliant students...

Gunilla: Don't be afraid of them. You don't have to write dialogue.

Dani: That's the thing. I fall prey to feeling it's not good enough. All the feminists who say the personal is political... I agree when I

watch *their* work. Brenda brings me here so it seems worthwhile, I guess. You get affirmed and that's OK.

Brenda: Dani and Aleesa, I see a lot of similarities between your work and I'm wondering if you can see that in terms of structure or the way they're assembled?

Aleesa: We both like cats. That snapping sound when a duvet gets put onto a bed is awesome and I have that in one of my videos which didn't show tonight. Maybe that's really detailed. We have much in common personally so there must be lots in common in the work. We like to cut because we get quickly impatient.



Gunilla: So you've never heard of the old saying that women in the arts have to stay away from flowers and cats?

Aleesa: We're not really women.

Jennifer Norton: Brenda, how do you see the connections?

Brenda: Aleesa very carefully amasses an archive of found material. She collects and reviews and sorts and makes selections. Dani shoots and shoots until she also has a large archive to work with. Out of these repositories they both extract snippets to construct very personal narratives. Aleesa constructs the relationships between the characters in her work, this process reveals political gradients in their relationships, and in the coding of the material she works with. Dani allows similar political critiques to emerge by revealing specific moments and drawing relations between them.

Aleesa, why do you work with VHS tapes of movies made in the seventies and eighties?

Aleesa: I didn't know I was doing that at first. It's what was accessible to me. I love VHS, the feeling and the technical range of colour I can work with. I still hate DVDs and I won't talk about Blu-ray. Slowly things are getting switched to digital platforms. So I became interested in movies that weren't being transferred to DVD. When I was a kid I had a really hard time sleeping so I would go into the basement and turn on the TV. The movies I work with now are the ones I recognize from these late night showings.

I don't know any of the actors, that's part of the embarrassing area of my work. People approach me and announce, "That's Glenn Close," and I have to ask, "Which one?" I didn't know then and don't want to know now, because the more information I have about who these people are and how the film was made and who made the film, and even what the story was about, the less I

feel I can be subjective about it and really put myself inside it. Of course when you're young and tired and doing something wrong your mind is open. There's a certain style of filmmaking, especially around family drama, that is incredibly heartfelt and honest and free of sarcasm and irony.

I like to play these games with myself because I'll notice there's similar props from all these films made in the same time period. There's the duck light for instance. Duck light. Duck light. But finally I didn't like the way they were cutting together. Duck light in an ugly room, duck light in a garage, duck light in kid's bed, none of this goes together except for my obsession with the duck light. It's a night light which is in the shape of a plastic duck. There are the same curtains, sheets, fabrics and ubiquitous patterns I had on my bed. Lots of people talk to me about nostalgia and I don't know what they're talking about. It's not a question of nostalgia.

Audience member: Nostalgia reduces emotional impact and coats it over. I see nostalgia in your work, but it's a very special brand that hopefully reveals emotions even more fully. I feel you're reversing the nostalgic process because I can feel the hearts breaking of all these people you've created. I relate you to the children in the tapes, I perceive the child as the point of entry to the narrative. All the adults are seen through the child's eyes.

Benny: I thought that was one of the links between Dani and Aleesa's work. Dani, you are alternately behind or in front of the camera, so we get a very direct sense of

your body, voice and conversations. Whereas I feel that Aleesa searches out and finds herself in many different scenes. Sometimes the identification is with the child — particularly the young boys who kind of look like Aleesa — but she may take other forms like objects or relationships. I feel that Aleesa is also putting herself in front of the camera, though in less of an immediately recognizable way.

Aleesa: I have to make a new piece that is explicitly homosexual. It's going to be a fight between two women characters and I feel that they have to become girls but it can't be creepy. What I've collected is a range of ages and reactions and feelings. But I can't have one of them be very sexual with the other and then all of a sudden one becomes a child. The relationship between them is quite adult, and I don't know how it's going to work. I've been having a hard time because it's important that they change their age. That's my next challenge.

Benny: Are you saying the challenge is going to be to clarify the fact that there's one single relationship between the two of them, as opposed to mother/daughter, sisters, lovers...

Aleesa: It will be a single relationship, though each of them will take on aspects of other relations. It's just like when you ask your lover to stop trying to mother you. Or don't be a baby.

Benny: I think that if anyone is going to be able to create that balance it's you. I think that's one of your talents.

Aleesa: Thanks, that's sweet. I planted him.
(laughter)

Brenda: I'll take a final question if there is one.

Gunilla: Aleesa, are you going to deal with your polka dot dress questions?

Aleesa: I know my obsession with polka dots has not made a debut anywhere but Gunilla's house. I can't find any footage of people wearing polka dots, particularly white with red polka dots. I gave away a lot of my white polka dot stuff. My dear friend Lana feels that I have a suicidal wish. (laughs) Which is not too funny but I just had to give up some of it. Maybe Matthias will make me shoot polka dots.

Brenda: Thank you all for coming.



Dani Leventhal & the Question of Why One Should Care by Emily Vey Duke

Why should I care? This is perhaps the most pernicious of questions for artists. Why should I care when artists make ostensibly careless things? Things that sometimes even repel our caring about them - make us turn up our noses in boredom or disgust? Myriad forms of carelessness. Artists respond variously:

"I don't care if you care." "I can't allow myself to be concerned with the question of your caring. It interferes with my creative process." "If you don't care it's because I'm cleverer than you." Even, I have learned in my role as a teacher, "It would've been too much work to make you care."

Dani Leventhal is ready for this question. She can rebut. There is a short answer and a long one, and she is always happy to share both. Her long answers tend to the baroque, and often seem to be descriptive of a work totally different to the one you have asked about. Dani is a member of the family of artists who have astonishingly complex, imbricated rationales for their work that seem to bear little resemblance to the thing they've produced. There are symbolic systems and colour codes and plays on words and patterns of development that are nigh invisible to the untrained eye. It's fascinating to me that this happens - a work of art in itself, the rationale.

The short answer is that you probably aren't asking the question - rather, you're probably in so far that your eyeballs are bathed in the work because it's so fucking fascinating, and

beautiful, and frightening, and hideous. And perhaps even divine., or more properly, Holy.

And if you are still asking, then you are likely answering your own question even as you ask it. You (we) should care because caring is the subject of the work.

I speak here about caring both in the sense of curiosity (would you care to hear the latest news on C and R's messy separation?" - though Dani would never bite on that one - she'd care too much in the other way); and in the sense that denotes love, which preoccupies Leventhal fundamentally, both in her work and around it, in her life. Also, and fundamentally, it is about care in the sense of the word that denotes stewardship, as in "I will care for this set of acres until I'm no longer called to be its steward."

Leventhal, interestingly, manifests a world-view not dissimilar to that of the Fastwürms. The universe, in her tapes and drawings and sculptures, is one in which animism can live congenially alongside organised (or disorganised) religion. Animals and plants speak through her, as do ghosts and bugs and notions. Like the Fastwürms, Leventhal doesn't shy away from the profound or the mystical.

But unlike Kozzi and Skuze, Dani Leventhal never plays with kitsch. She seems to be an animal who lives her life without the intrusion of irony: she is neither its generator nor its

purveyor. I have never even heard her crack sarcastic, nor do I recall her appreciating any but the very broadest satire - *Hairspray*, maybe, but earlier John Waters I remember her declaiming as ugly and vaguely malevolent.

I wonder if this is the source of the overwhelming immediacy of her work. Irony requires a fantasized viewer who is outside the joke, a dupe, a straight-man. No such othered entity is imagined when watching Leventhal's work. But this lack of irony should not be interpreted to equal a lack of humour in the work. I've laughed (and cried, to use the old saw) hard watching Dani's tapes.

I laugh now, in fact, recalling certain moments: Dani, garbed in a bright yellow rain suit, descends into the shot from above. Over the rain suit she wears a harness. I know the back-story on this one because Leventhal and I were in graduate school in Chicago together at the time. She had petitioned the university to allow her to construct a winch out of I-beams and mount it outside her third-story studio, which would support her weight and allow her to lower herself to the ground. The school refused. It was patently unsafe, the school asserted. But Leventhal was undaunted. She had sketches. She had done some math. Nothing could go wrong! But the school held firm, so it was under the cover of night that Dani erected her winch. It's inauguration was set for dawn the following morning.

Leventhal always has a prodigiously dedicated motley crew of assistants, and I think there were three or four people helping her on the shoot that morning as she crept out onto the contraption and began her

descent to the earth. Two were waiting for her at the bottom: a tiny little girl of about 18 and Jon, the nerdy but sweet a-v cage worker who had the physique of a nerdy-but-sweet a-v cage worker. Dani probably outweighed him by about 30 pounds.

So Dani has taken her position and begins her descent into the shot. Before we see her, we hear a horrible, bleating retch. When we see her feet, nothing seems particularly amiss - her feet are pointing unnaturally down, we might later reflect, but no big deal. It's not until we hear the next almost animal cry, followed immediately by a white spray of vomit that we realise something has gone terribly wrong.

When her head enters the frame, bobbing unsettlingly, she looks utterly stricken - if still gorgeous and beatific. Her two miniature assistants race up to her and try with limited success to grapple her to the ground, unclipping the harness and letting her drop. She has lost consciousness, perhaps because her harness has cut off the circulation between her upper and lower body. Her helpers are hovering over her and making freaked-out sounds when we hear Dani tell them "I fell down!" Indeed.

It is in part this same ingenuousness that makes Leventhal's work so absorbing. She approaches everything in her world with this same sort of enthusiastic puzzlement. If it weren't for her deft handling of super-charged, complex subject matter (animal rights, gender politics and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance), we might think her naive. But she is not naive. She is simply and thoroughly curious about our world and all its vari-coloured citizens.

























