Chris Moukarbel on making documentaries

What drew you to documentary filmmaking?

I went to school for art, and I had a short-lived art career after that. I was doing predominantly video art. I realized that I was more drawn to popular culture, and the art that I was making was always a critique of, or somehow involved with, popular culture. At some point I realized that was really the conversation I wanted to engage with, rather than critiquing it from this faraway place. What started out as a long-form video art piece about Chris Crocker and the birth of YouTube gradually became a somewhat traditional documentary. I say "traditional" in that it's an hour and a half long and it aired on HBO, but it was also made up primarily of YouTube videos. In that way, it was still kind of straddling the form of what I was doing before. That project opened up a world of filmmaking to me, which I realized was something that was more exciting than making art films. It was more suited to my interests.

When you go into a project like this are you operating on faith that your subject matter is interesting enough and that the "story" will reveal itself to you? At least with narrative filmmaking you have a blueprint to follow, with documentary filmmaking the big picture can be kind of elusive.

Narrative filmmaking and documentary filmmaking are both challenging in different ways. I still script in my mind, even though I'm making a documentary. I feel like I'm urging the universe in certain directions. So, on the one hand, it can be frustrating because I'm not always getting exactly what I want, but it's also liberating, because I'm going with wherever the story's taking me. I have these themes that guide me though, because you can really look at anybody's life—or any situation, really—and extract whatever narrative you want out of it. There's no objective truth in this. I feel like, especially with this recent film about Lady Gaga, I went into it knowing that there's no objective truth and that I was just making a portrait, an impressionistic portrait, of somebody that I thought was interesting. I knew that it would likely in no way resemble other people's vision of that person, because she's somebody that a lot of the public already feels like they have a relationship with. So, again, I'm kind of soft scripting, and I'm also just sort of going with where the story's taking me—but I definitely have an intention to some degree.

Were you able to spend a lot of time with Lady Gaga before you actually started filming?

No. [*laughs*] In fact, the first day that we officially met I was practically rolling cameras as I walked through the door. I just felt like it was the kind of situation that was either going to work, or not work, and she was either going to go for it, or not. In this case it worked, but we really didn't know what we were making, and she didn't have too many expectations. She was reluctantly entering into it, to be honest. She was kind of open to it, but was also so absorbed in her own life, and in her own music writing, that she intuitively felt it out and was like, "Okay, you can hang out and shoot me," but wasn't really committing to anything until much later, when it really turned into something more significant.

My process involves just going into a situation and watching. I think maybe it's an extension of how I am in the world anyway, I don't know. I try not to be in the forefront of people's minds when I'm shooting, but it's a funny thing because you're holding a camera, and it's the most conspicuous thing in the world, right? But it has been important for me in any of my projects to somehow dissolve into the background and just sort of be a ghost. I told Gaga that early on. One of our only real, formal conversations about the process was about that. I said, "I'm just going to shadow you, and I'm going to shoot everything that I see, because that's what I do." I told her if she asked me to turn the camera off, I would. She understood that she had agency.

Anytime I shoot anybody I want them to know they have agency. I like to shoot people where they know they have some kind of control and the ability to say no, because it's not fun for me if somebody is feeling insecure or somebody is afraid of being exploited. I'm not that type of filmmaker. I don't make reality TV. I'm not trying to embarrass people. I really want them to feel good about the work, even if it's challenging, and to look at it afterwards and hopefully see some aspect of themselves that they didn't even imagine, but maybe feel is true.

Ultimately it's all about trust and intuition. And shooting somebody is a relationship. It's like any kind of relationship, where either you feel comfortable—and you feel like you're willing to give power to someone else—or you don't feel comfortable and the dynamic is always off. If you never feel comfortable, then you're not emotionally, or creatively, invested in it… and it's not going to be worth anyone's time.

It is really interesting thinking about Lady Gaga in relation to somebody like Chris Crocker. They are clearly very different kinds of people, but they have the kind of outwardly facing public lives that lend themselves to being filmed. In both cases, did you have a clear sense of what kind of film you wanted to make before you started? What sort of portrait you wanted to create?

Both of those films feel similar to me, in a way, because both of them have enormous platforms and they are telling their own story every day. They're people in the public eye who are creating a living document of their lives. That presents a particular kind of challenge for a filmmaker, but it's also what I'm drawn to in making these films. What can you say about them that they haven't already said about themselves?

As we were wrapping up with the Gaga film, I wanted to make it clear to her that I didn't ever want her to feel like I was claiming that this was her story. Like, here I am, I'm telling *your* story. She's telling her own story and she knows that. She's very conscious of her platform. She's very conscious of her voice. So, I just wanted to make sure as the film was finished, and as we were talking about what this thing actually was, that she knew that I knew it was just my point of view, it was just a portrait, in the same way that I could have made a painting of her, and it would look completely different from someone else's painting of her.

The thing that irks me a lot of times with celebrity documentaries is that you never feel that they don't know they're being watched. There is always some element of artifice or playing for the camera. What I appreciated about the Gaga doc is that there are what appear to be several unguarded moments, particularly the moment where she plays "Joanne" for her grandmother for the first time.

Yeah, I think it was. It's funny, because it's all relative with her. She's so used to having cameras on her. So, on the one hand, people assume that she's always playing to the camera, and to a certain extent, yeah, of course she's always aware of the camera, she's Lady Gaga. On the other hand, because she's so accustomed to having cameras on her, she's probably more able to forget about them and be more likely to show some authentic version of herself with the camera around than most people would.

A lot of the conversation around the film has circled around the idea of whether or not she's real, or being real, which is not so much what I was trying to set out to do with the film. I wasn't ever claiming that this is the "real" Lady Gaga, or that you're finally going to see the real Lady Gaga. That's not really what I was interested in, because my feeling is that she's as real as anybody. The idea of having a camera in front of you doesn't necessarily mean you're performing your identity anymore than anyone else is performing their identity when only a person is in front of them or when no one is there. We are all performing our identity, all the time.

I'm not so hung up on whether or not she's being more or less real than someone else. I happen to think that because she plays with identity and authenticity and has always made that a part of her project in a pop space, that is more interesting and feels more enlightened to me than someone whose identity goes unchallenged. I love that we're always asking ourselves, "Is this real? Is she being real?" That being said, there's some pretty basic humanity in her that comes across both in the film, and when you're around her. I think it is because she's so accustomed to being filmed, and she's so accustomed to playing with the tropes of identity, that she's settled into a really comfortable place within it all.

I'd heard that Gaga didn't actually see any of the documentary until the actual premiere. How did that feel for you? That must have been nerve-wracking.

It was incredibly stressful. It was also playing out in a public space, so that was a whole other layer of stress and anxiety for me. She didn't want to watch it beforehand and it really freaked me out, because I kept sending her edits. According to her contract she was afforded the right to watch it, and to give me notes on it, which I welcomed, to be honest. That's not to say I would take all the notes, but it would have started a conversation, and a negotiation, about stuff creatively.

I expected that a back-and-forth process would happen, but it didn't. She just kept putting it off and putting it off, and finally said, "You know what? I actually can't watch this. I can't be objective about myself. I'll ruin it. I'll ask you to take some stuff out that will hurt the film, or I might kill the whole thing." So, she just basically trusted me and the project and she gave it space. She's kind of a purist in what she does, whether she's songwriting or acting or performing, and she understood that for a documentary about her to be good, she really couldn't be involved in it creatively. So she removed herself, which I was incredibly grateful for.

What was the editing process like for you? Did you have a pretty short turnaround between filming and when it needed to be done?

I actually edit as soon as I start shooting. That's part of my process. I have an editor that I work really closely with. We just start cutting things together right away. In fact, the first day of shooting with Gaga I cut something together by myself, just because I needed to get a handle on what it was and really look at it. I start editing right out of the gate. It informs my whole process, because when I go out and shoot, I'm already writing the story in real time. I'm looking for things that will support where the narrative is already headed. I don't know what I would do if I was just sitting back and looking at all the footage a month or two later and trying to figure it all out. That would be insane. I guess that is some peoples' process, but it has never been mine.

When you were younger you made your own short, art-school version of <u>World Trade Center</u>, the Oliver Stone film, and <u>got sued for it</u>. Did that experience temper your feelings about filmmaking or dealing with studios?

It's funny, because back then I was only making art, and I really thought of that as art. It was not even about the actual 12 minutes of film that I made, it was really about the context and the world that it was being launched into. So, when the lawsuit was settled and I couldn't show the film anymore, I was like, "No problem, it's already done."

Thinking back on that project, I was coming out of school and I was really feeling myself. I wanted to make a big, splashy statement about the power of representation, and the power that Hollywood claims to represent other peoples' stories, and the ways that those films affect policy. That was really where my head was at. In a way, that project set the tone for the rest of my work, because it was about that line between truth and fiction.

A lot of my other films deal with similar ideas, whether it's Chris Crocker—who is arguably the first "meme" celebrity—or someone like Gaga, who exists so heavily in the mediascape. I'm just really drawn to how we consume content and the feedback loop that we're now in, both with consuming and creating content in real time and also being a part of that content.

So much of the advice I see being lobbed at young creators is always something along the lines of, "Just do it! Just make something! Do it yourself!" What do you make of that? Is the best advice to gather your friends, make your own thing, and put it up somewhere—presumably the internet—where people will see it?

Yeah, that's essentially my advice, too. I started out being really intimidated about making films because I was thinking I needed to be much more precious about the whole thing. That's why I was making art instead. I had a lot of freedom, and I felt like, "Oh, fuck it, I can just take these YouTube videos and these home movies that I'm finding and I can cut them together to make something new!" There wasn't this expectation placed on what it was going to end up being, because it was just art, and I was just fucking around with ideas.

By the time I'd done that enough that it started to become something more serious, I had to trick myself into doing it. I was like, "Oh, I *am* doing this. I can do this." It's different for different people. I tell people to just make things and not to worry too much about if they are doing it the right way. There is no right way. Some people go to film school, or they work under really great filmmakers. That wasn't my experience. I just sort of taught myself how to make movies, and it's been about learning about how to tell stories. In order for me to make an hour and a half movie that can reach a lot of people, I had to unlearn a lot of my formal art education. Obviously I'm still applying a lot of that education to what I do now, but it's more about the spirit of experimentation and a general looseness. The most important thing to consider is the story you are trying to tell. You need a good story.

Chris Moukarbel Recommends:

<u>Cats</u>

<u>Mint Chip ice cream</u>

<u>Poppers</u>

<u>*Mulholland Drive*</u>

<u>Little Jimmy Scott</u>

<u>Name</u>
Chris Moukarbel

<u>Vocation</u>
filmmaker