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As told to Alex Westfall, 2877 words.

Tags: Art, Writing, Research, Collaboration, Inspiration, Beginnings.

# On understanding that nothing is done in isolation

**This Long Century founder and editor Jason Evans on the importance of decentering the self, slowing down, and renewing our sense of discovery. In your own words, what's the story behind [This Long Century](#)?**

The site was originally founded by myself, Stefan Pietsch, Georgina Lim, and Kate Sennert. Kate came up with the name. The idea was the same as it is now: to have a platform where people could contribute a reflection of personal meaning—how that is expressed is up to the contributor. With the site being ever-evolving, it made sense for it to take the form of a list.

At first we simply called the project a website or a blog. But the longer it goes on, and I see the different ways that people have used it, I see how it's grown into an archive or directory. Even more importantly than that, I think it's an unmediated space for personal reflection.

When we started in 2008, there were some forms of social media, but a lot of outlets for artists, writers, and creators were mediated, like interviews or press releases. I found amongst my friends that there was frustration about just not having something that was unmediated. This was before Instagram and just at the start of Twitter, so [This Long Century] was a place for people to put everyday thoughts down because there wasn't already a space for that.

**How do you find new artists to talk to? I wonder if working on this for 15 years has shaped your taste.**

When we started [This Long Century], it was often hard to get in contact with potential contributors. Again, this was before we were all on social media, so you had to dig around, because often there were folks guarding access to these people. At the time, it felt like having something that existed only online wasn't valuable. If I'm writing to a gallery, they're not thinking, "Oh, this would be a great place for this person to talk about whatever's on their mind."

By nature of those boundaries, we decided to update the site in groups of five. We always over-invite contributors and then figure it out. For example, we invite 10 people, and some say they can't do it right now, some say they're not interested, or can't commit to the deadline.

Within the commercial world, so many people have deadlines that exist that are inflexible. We never want to apply pressure to people. If you can't make the deadline, then we'll figure it out. What I'm getting at is that so much of the project—the archive—is out of my control.

You set out thinking these five contributors will work well together. And if one or two drop out, what you end up with in terms of an update is not what you started with. That's the beauty of it because it's not like our updates have been timed around certain launches or screenings-

**It's not tied to the urgency of a press cycle, yeah.**

By the nature of it, it's organic. It takes whatever form.

The other thing we did was look at people who contribute and ask, "Who have they worked with?" The site has this constellation built into it. I'm sure you could draw threads between people that have worked together, or who are friends. We were very fortunate early on to have the support of artists like [Collier Schorr](#), [Mary Ellen Mark](#), [Les Blank](#), which I think allowed us to open up the conversation with other people.

Something I have to say about everyone who has contributed to the site is that they are opening themselves up and allowing us to see things that we otherwise wouldn't be able to experience.

**Could you elaborate on what you mean by "unmediated"?**

I think about publications like Index Magazine, which was always great because a lot of the conversations would have the 'ums' and the 'ahs' and everything in there. I never thought of what we did with This Long Century as curation. That's not imposter syndrome, I just don't see it as that. I just see it as it's an archive that we're building.

I try not to center myself in the project. I rarely edit anything for the site. Unless someone says, "I want you to edit this," I don't touch it. Sure, maybe sometimes spelling mistakes, but I think there's something beautiful about contributions that have texture and cadence and that you can feel the person in that moment, in that piece. If someone's rushing and flustered or whatever, I like to lay it all out for people to see. It's this idea of the role of an editor as a 'beginner' or a 'non-expert,' and not an authority figure. I don't want to be the editor who comes in and says, "Okay, move this around, change this, do that." I don't want to dictate what people do. It should be open to contributors to give as little as much as they want to give. Sometimes, people contribute one photograph or one sentence, and that contribution can be as meaningful as one that's 500 words. This Long Century is a place for all of it.

We're also always finding ways to engage with past contributors. One thing we decided early on was that for every 100 posts, we would hand over the curatorial duties to past contributors and invite them to nominate people. Again, it's a way to almost randomize the list, to loosen any kind of control or hierarchy or sense of the hand of a single person. I never want it to feel like there's just one person making decisions over the contributions.

**You're creating a space for people to present something on their terms as opposed to being written about by someone in the third person. I'm saying this as someone who's writing a piece about your project!**

These days particularly, artists get asked to do so much by their galleries, among others. They're expected to have a presence online. Often, they're told to behave a certain way. Filmmakers put out films and studios tell them they have to repost and promote. I think it's terrible because one should be able to create a piece of artwork, put it out in the world, and not have to explain it.

How hard can you push something from being unmediated? I'd love to get to a point where I actually don't do anything for This Long Century. I'm not talking about AI, but maybe the next cycle is that I remove myself from the site, and finally just give myself over to serve the contributors and facilitate.

**Did you know when you started that the project would go on for this long?**

No! *[laughs]* When we started, the intention was kind of selfish. When I moved to New York, I was trying to find a way to engage with people beyond the surface level, like what usually happens at art openings. The site was a way for me to engage deeply and to learn a bit more about others, through personal experiences I hadn't seen presented elsewhere. We don't have a 5-year, 10-year, 15-year plan for This Long Century. In fact, that there's been so little written about the project tells you that we don't really know what we're doing.

**This Long Century speaks for itself.**

There's no PR machine; no interns or assistants. People will find it if they want to find it. I've always thought it's okay for the site to be a slow burn. It doesn't have to be 'of the moment' or up-to-date. I think it should just be online for people to dig into whenever they feel like they want to, whether it's once a month, once a year, or every couple of years.

The design and layout of the site have never changed either. People have suggested different things, like adding keyword searches. But I've always felt like that if you need to take the time to go through it, then that's probably a good thing. As our life online progresses, our sense of discovery has been taken away from us. Everything's simplified so we can move faster. And so if you log onto the site and your engagement first starts with, "Oh, I know this name," and you dig through those, you think "Oh, who's the person next to this person?" Then it leads you down one hole. That's probably a good thing.

**I return to the site whenever I feel lost, and my experience is unique to the place and time I come from. I'll revisit certain posts and new meanings will erupt, or I'll find a new artist to fall in love with. I'm curious if any contributions come to mind for you that epitomize This Long Century.**

Having never really changed what we're asking of people, I find it interesting that there are certain threads throughout. There are of course some surprises, but there are throughlines—odes to friends and family, or expressing grief. Another thread talks about the artistic process. I think this is a really special thing because I can't think of many other outlets in which people get to be transparent about not just the work process, but how their work is made in community.

**I'm now thinking of the contribution by Ayo Akingbade. That's one of my favorite ones, where she's making a portrait together with her friend.**

I really like that contribution too. Ayo had been collecting Nigerian records, and a lot of those that Ayo

mentions, I also have. So we got into this conversation, and over time we became friends. I was fortunate to play a small role with helping produce her latest film, KEEP LOOKING. Which is something we're doing more of. We've produced films for other past This Long Century contributors: Sara Cwynar, Sam Contis, and just recently, Mark McKnight, in partnership with producer Myriam Schroeter (who co-founded our sister project, Ecstatic Static). That's the other side of it—I've had a lot of friendships that have developed out of these exchanges because someone's sharing something so personal with you that often the only way to respond as an editor is to reciprocate with something personal. The site would not exist without the generosity of the contributors. So I'm very grateful for that. I know how fortunate we are.

**How would you describe the community that has formed around This Long Century?**

People gravitate towards it. I still think that's a pretty special thing. It is truly supposed to be for the artists, photographers, writers, poets, musicians, and filmmakers themselves.

At one point just before the pandemic, I wanted to create a reading room with my books, and also books by past contributors. A space where people can come and gather and read and exchange ideas. We didn't sign a lease on that space because three weeks later, everything shut down because of COVID-19. I think at one point in time, there could be a physical version of This Long Century place to gather, exchange ideas, and have a safe place to exist.

**But there are instances where The Long Century trickles into the real world.**

When I work on anything that we do that exists away from the online archive, I'm very weary of undermining the [initial manifestation of the] project. It has to be a different version. If we made a book, we couldn't just simply take [the site], put it into a book, and be done. That would be too definitive; not open-ended enough. The site has to, in all its forms, exist in an open-ended way. That's the only reason it's online. We could have started This Long Century as a journal or a book, but then we would risk creating a hierarchy. That's why the site takes the form of a list.

We're always finding ways to engage with people again since they can't make a second contribution to the site. In 2015, we did a month-long program at Spectacle Theater. We did the recent Criterion Channel program, which was centered around the idea of artists making other work in communication with other artists. We're starting a "This Long Century Presents..." screening series at Metrograph—each one will be centered on one contributor's work.

The next volume of Speciwoman will be a curation of This Long Century's archive, a box set made up from a selection of past contributions, this will be out first printed form of This Long Century. I'm not involved past helping connect Philo Cohen, the editor, with past contributors, I love that it's her curation of our archive.

We had the exhibition last year at Dunes Gallery in Maine. That was the first time we'd ever done anything resembling a physical manifestation of the site. This was around This Long Century's 15th anniversary. I'd been thinking a lot about our beginnings, where we started from. I've been taking a lot of time to go through past contributions. With that fresh in my mind, it made sense to go to artists and say, "How did you begin? What was your starting point?"

Our site has always been less of a definitive statement and more of a jumping-off point. So whatever we were going to do [to supplement the site] should also feel like that. To show something from the first couple years of an artist making work creates intrigue. You know, like, "Well, this is not what they're known for... how did they get from there to here?"

It was fun digging through people's old work. A lot of the time, artists would say, "I don't even know what that work is," or "That's in storage, come get it." Again, I think about the idea of time; how as a creator... your work, your process, your ideas, change constantly.

I love the idea of showing where people come from—beginnings—because it's before anything makes sense. You don't know what you're doing. We're all making mistakes—there's a lot of energy here, and we're just working with that. I think it's great to make mistakes. And I was fortunate that people were open to showing work that maybe doesn't represent where they're at now. There's a sense of vulnerability both to that exhibition and the archive as a whole.

**You have a background in filmmaking and creative direction. I'm curious about what the experience of running this site has taught you about your practice.**

The site is really about creating a space that is open-ended, non-hierarchical, and unmediated. If I think about what This Long Century stands for, and about my creative, personal, and political interests, they align in that both lead to this understanding that nothing is done in isolation. You have to work collaboratively with people—you need to decenter yourself; to be open to other ways of doing things... to other ideas, other people. These are things that I've always felt believed and understood in theory, but I think the site shows how to put that into practice.

**Jason Evans recommends:**

Pare de Sufrir by AG Rojas. We were fortunate for the chance to screen AG's latest film in March, as part of our ongoing series at Metrograph (NY) and Now Instant Image Hall (LA). In keeping with the artist's generous approach to his work, AG has now made the film available for people to watch worldwide for free.

It's a real gift, that prioritizes healing in this moment of unbearable grief.

The Great Book Return is an archive/reading room of books and shared resources related to Palestinian liberation, based in my hometown of Naarm/Melbourne. Established by local curators/writers Anna Emina and Celine Saoud, the archive was given its name in response to the 70,000 Palestinian books that were looted from public libraries and private collections during the 1948 Nakba.

People's Library for Liberated Learning, as part of the students 'Gaza Solidarity Encampments' across university campuses in the US (and now worldwide), many started their own free libraries, providing access to books, hosting poetry readings, small teach-ins, etc. Initiated by the Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine, this action feels especially significant in NYC where our corrupt mayor has cut city funding for libraries, forcing them to close on Sundays, while increasing NYPD spending by billions.

Close to the Knives by David Wojnarowicz. I have a t-shirt that reads 'Books are Weapons', which may be the best way to describe this collection of personal essays first published in 1991, by the great artist and activist David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS at age 37.

Gaza Mutual Aid Solidarity was started by a group of friends with loved ones in Gaza. Through micro-fundraisers this initiative has been raising money for the distribution of food and supplies on the ground in Gaza, including building solar panels to enable refrigeration and clay ovens for cooking. They continue to evolve as the genocide rages on, offering many ways to support their efforts... as we did with our own Gaza Kite Auction, together with artists Anna Sew Hoy, Ava Woo Kaufman, Narumi Nekpenekpen, Stanya Kahn, Wilder Alison, Willa Nasatir, and Yto Barrada.

Name

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Vocation

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Fact

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