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As told to Lauren Spear, 2016 words.

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On learning by doing everything yourself

Filmmaker Ali Vanderkruyk discusses working alone, valuing accessibility, and embracing the resources available to you.

You began filmmaking by working as a technician at Niagara Custom Lab, a film processing lab, and there developed an intimate relationship with 16mm film. How do you feel like that job influenced your work?

Coming from a background in writing and stringing together odd jobs and kitchen work, it offered a tactility in a creative professional realm I thought I would never have. It afforded me patience, both with learning from mistakes and the tediousness that comes with that type of work, which led me to explore how to manipulate an image or animate on film. Now I have knowledge that led me to work as a film projectionist where I handle precious prints and could even lead me to restoration or archival work. The experience gave me an understanding of how to take care of film. I used to let projects get dusty (physically or figuratively), and now I'm much more meticulous and keep my film, cameras and files in an organized and controlled space, which I never would've done previously. It helped me grow up and take myself seriously.

When it comes to your filmmaking, you're extremely open to working within limitations and letting them influence the end project. Having worked with restricted and sometimes no budgets, you've always made something out of nothing. Can you explain?

I've always naturally leaned toward a sustainable, small-scale approach to filmmaking because if I was loftier in how I wanted to make films, I would talk myself out of it. By working with limitations, there's more structure and ironically more room for creativity. Working at the lab in Toronto offered me an opportunity to explore a medium that not many people have access to because of its prohibitive expense. When I was unable to purchase film, I often used leftover expired film and even made music videos under these circumstances. 16mm also has a limited capacity (you only get three minutes or 10 minutes for one roll) so this offered me this opportunity to think about time: "What is possible within that time? What can be felt in that time?" When I process the film myself, it is time-based as well. There's an anticipation where you're in the dark then the negative is revealed to you in the light. It's exciting but contained into one complicated medium which I find so enchanting.

When making a video for a musician, establishing the limitations with the person that I'm working with allows us to play and negotiate. I don't like to assert very much control over performances when I'm making music videos. Offering the same limitations that I have to the person that I'm working with, I think frees them a little bit as well to understand that there's only so much that you can do, but we do our best. On top of that, I feel like I've never really directed somebody. I've maybe directed where to stand or where to look or how to hold their body, but I've never tried to tell someone how to feel. I don't necessarily know how to craft a perfectly exposed image or a perfectly in-focus image, but I let my body do the work in the same way that I want whoever I'm filming to have their body work. You don't know exactly what the image will look like when you're shooting film, understanding the degrees of mistakes that can occur from start to finish. In knowing that, I allow myself this spontaneous production, where every step of the way is an unconstrained risk.

From my perspective, you are very spontaneous when you shoot and during the editing process, you become very meticulous.

That's true. Editing is my favorite part of the process because I black out and become scatterbrained when I'm shooting. I also work by myself which is, in many ways, a lot harder. If I had at least a couple of people on my team when I was shooting, I could direct or be on the technical side. But when I'm doing

both, I can't really be as present for a performance or as present technically and so there is a sacrifice on both accounts. I enjoy being meticulous when it comes to the edit because that's when I really am able to control the space more.

That's where I start getting influenced by the filmmakers I love, who like to expand the notion of space. I like to move a frame around or make an optical illusion or layer images on top of each other and surprise the audience. I feel like it's a cop-out to say that it's all intuitive, but I do kind of get into a meditation when I'm editing where I don't know where my mind is going. I was editing a video for my friend Olivia Kaplan recently and I felt stumped and didn't know what it would end up looking like. During the edit, I noticed an interesting pattern in the images I had gathered and let them dictate a "narrative." It might be the case where nobody sees the intention behind my editing, but it's so satisfying because I really like playing with illusion and creating continuity, but from more of an abstract place.

You touched on working alone, primarily. Why do you favor this way of working?

My pace is slow. I'm very much still learning, I like learning alone, and I unfortunately at this point don't trust anyone to manifest what I have in my head. Any vision I have is kept in a tight cage. But that's to my detriment, obviously. It makes me disorganized and I am in the process of letting that go and growing up and away from being so precious. I think I've just always been inherently uncomfortable with the designations in the film industry, of what different positions are and what they mean. Of course, there's power in having a role of expertise on set, but I think I've always been stubborn to commit to a single role.

I like the idea of being fluid and having both creative control and technical control. But more importantly, in my learning process, I want to know how to do everything. If I want to be an editor, I still want to know what lenses or lighting to use for a particular shoot or how to color grade. My aspiration, or guised ego, is to possess extensive knowledge even if I don't use it, so perhaps I can eventually be able to communicate that with a team.

So it's about having the language?

Yeah, it's about having the language, and I think it will make me a better collaborator in the long run. Me working alone is me learning, it's not me thinking that I can only do things by myself.

Do you feel like you're married to film as your primary medium or will you move away from it?

Definitely not married. With film, I'm mostly interested in innovating with as little money as possible and using the resources available to me. If the camera I have right now is my partner's Sony PD150 with a broken microphone or my Arri SRI that sometimes turns on and sometimes doesn't, I'll risk it. Luckily right now, I go to a school where I can rent beautiful cameras so I can explore what it feels like to shoot with advanced digital technology. I'm learning how to actually craft an image in my aesthetic, but I find I seek and go after the imperfect image.

I aim to create something that can be understood by an audience. If an image is pixelated in a way where I'm shooting a landscape that kind of looks like Google Street View, I am comfortable because it's digestible, the audience has a literacy in how to approach it. In addition, I like shaking the camera and making my presence known. I like the audience to feel that I'm leading them, otherwise, the experience is immersive in a manner I am not comfortable with. Some people can get away with it, but I don't think I can.

Do you like including yourself in your own work?

For me it's necessary. There are many discussions happening around documentary ethics and participatory documentary that are essential to any discussion around filmmaking. When you are relaying a story, whether it be yours or someone else's objectivity does not exist. Anytime a camera enters a space, there is a power dynamic and a subjective gaze. And so, to create an illusion that illustrates an idea where self-reflexivity is absent can be read as manipulation. I think what I enjoy is the idea of mediating that manipulation with the acknowledgement of the filmmaker. I want people to understand how I'm making it, which is why I often expose a camera being seen or a set, or how I've done something. I don't want there to be any sort of illusion that can't be penetrated.

You're currently working on a documentary. Would you talk a little bit about that?

I'm exploring the cryptic mortality of fish and ocean mammals as it relates to the maritime industry along the Canadian West Coast. For instance, I'm currently working with this one man who disentangles and performs autopsies on whales and teaches classes to civilians on how to save beached whales.

I was originally drawn to this topic because a couple of years ago, in the fall of 2020, there was an accident that occurred on the Capilano River next to where I grew up. A bunch of people, predominantly men, would recreationally fish for salmon just below a fish hatchery. One day the dam, which usually has an alarm when it opens, opened without warning, and the water came rushing down and killed two people. It was a tragic moment in the community and obviously was very affecting. I found myself thinking about how it could have been avoided, how the accident happened due to human interaction that was placed on the river in the first place due to the dam. I started contemplating infrastructure that interrupts nature, and how this fish hatchery on a river would ordinarily have had a natural reproductive salmon ecosystem.

Do you feel like as a filmmaker, having the position to share this story is a way that you can help repair as well?

I think it's not so much about the act of trying to repair, for me, as filmmaking is an act of reveling in or creating dialogue on a subject or simulating reality and not trying to pretend it's reparative. Even if I'm trying to tell the story, it doesn't mean I'm doing anything to change the narrative. Though that's bleak, I do feel like filmmaking itself is sort of a hopeless act. But that just could be my imposter complex and my preoccupation with failure and death right now.

Is there anything in your practice that makes you feel hopeful?

I guess when I'm talking about hopelessness I'm talking about trying to capture something that's uncapturable, trying to capture a moment that's already gone. But I think the chase is what's exciting, and that's what I'm interested in pursuing. Even though I know it's not possible to capture something like the ocean or the water if I could, what would it sound like? What would it look like? It's such a privileged space because it allows me to explore. It's hopeful because I get to do it.

Ali Vanderkruyk Recommends:

The Skin of Film by Laura U. Marks

Homemade bone broth

Watch Images of the World and The Inscription of War by Harun Farocki, get stoned then watch the "Frozen Worlds" episode of Our Planet

Hand mend those old jeans with the hole in the crotch

Make fake errands and run them all day while listening to KFM Country Radio

Name

Ali Vanderkruyk


Vocation


filmmaker

Fact

Tatum Howey

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