

On making yourself vulnerable your work



Experimental filmmaker Naomi Uman discusses the vulnerability required to make good work, operating with minimal resources, and how you can have a very solitary creative practice and still be a part of a community.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2389 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Focus](#).

You started your career as a personal chef for Calvin Klein, Malcolm Forbes, and Gloria Vanderbilt. When did you decided that you wanted to transition and become an artist and filmmaker?

I was always an artist, but I can't draw. I went into food preparation because I wanted to be making something. I guess I recognized that I was an artist when I made my first film, which was in my last semester of university.

You've lived in many countries such as the United States, Italy, Ukraine, and now it seems that you have settled in Mexico. What made you decide to stay in Mexico?

I lived in Mexico before I moved to Ukraine. I went to Ukraine for 10 years and I was really lonely there. My project of trying to form a creative community in the village really didn't take off, and I recognized that, a) the project wasn't functioning, b) that I was lonely, and c) I had an option for a better life, so I just came back to Mexico.

What made you realize that your project wasn't working?

Well, I went there to make a film, and then I stayed because I really loved village life and this idea of working the land and everything. I was hoping that other artists would come to the village as well and would also find that they could live basically without money, have a lot of free time to make their work, and produce their own food. But, people weren't coming. A few people came, but I would end up feeling incredibly lonely and isolated. And really, who wants to work the land and harvest if you don't have someone to share it with? Or a group of people to share it with? So I left.

You have a deep curiosity for things or subjects that are about to disappear. For example, traditions, infrastructures, ways of living—everything that's disappearing as the world becomes more complex and industrialized. Was there any particular situation that triggered this interest?

I was really interested in handicrafts as a kid. They were just part of my world. For example, my family would spend a vacation on a farm and I would always want to go visit the cows at a dairy near my house. My mom took me to weaving and dyeing lessons. It's something I've always been interested in.

Also with filmmaking, I started out before video was everywhere. It's like I'm a little bit of a dinosaur, but I

was born at the very end of the era of dinosaurs. These are things that I'm comfortable with, and that I feel attracted to because I see their beauty, and they become more beautiful because they're disappearing and becoming more rare.

Is there anything that you consider to be currently disappearing as people communicate differently, particularly in the ways artists are creating and promoting their art?

I would say analog film, doll hospitals, tailors, individually owned corner stores, and people making and repairing clothing and shoes.

What kind of beauty do you see in this vanishing environment?

The practical ability to fix things and prolong their usefulness is beautiful to me, and today we throw everything away, rather than repairing things.

What is getting lost by creating art with digital mediums?

Things are certainly being gained overall by the introduction of digital technology. More people are now able to make work, and it has widened the scope of moving image and sound work being made. But what is being lost is the ability to think in advance about what you are making to edit before shooting because your film material is so precious.

As an artist, do you think it's important to put yourself in situations or in a context where you don't feel comfortable or where you don't fit in?

That's my main practice—making myself very vulnerable. When you are pointing the camera at someone else, it is an aggressive act. It is even more aggressive when you do not know the people and they do not know you. I live among my subjects and learn as much as possible about their culture and language. I work alone, this is the main key. I must communicate with my subjects. I have no one to interrupt that direct (although at times unintelligible) contact. This makes me like a child, where my subject possesses all the knowledge and I am a vulnerable observer. It gives my subjects power.

You spent many years in Ukraine because you wanted to experience rural life and experience this vulnerability. I also read that you spent a long time with your subjects before you started filming them. What was the intention of this process?

Well, in the same way that all my films are bilingual with the language of the place where I made them plus English, I want the film to be for the subject as much as possible. I want it to be a cooperative experience in making the film, so I think it's a really aggressive act to come at someone with a camera until you know them and have their explicit permission and understand what it is that you're filming. So, I always wait until somebody's like, "Hey, let's film this." Or, I'll work a little bit with a very small video camera and let people use the camera themselves until I feel like it becomes a playful exchange between me and my subject.

Is it also about building trust with your subjects?

Exactly. They know who I am and what I want from them, and that I'm not going to just take something and go away.

I watched the video journal that you made while you lived in Ukraine. What was the purpose of this project? Did you start it with any particular expectations of what the project was going to be?

I decided that I wanted to make a critical portrait of myself. And, at the same time, I also wanted to make an idealized portrait of myself. So, I started the video diary project where every day I filmed one moment of my life, and I really tried to show the good and the bad through that process of filming every day.

But every once in a while when I felt really lonely, I would take out the camera again and talk to the camera. Those little pieces of video wound up being very useful in the video diary. But, I had sort of stopped the process. And then, the idealized portraits is a project called "Humor Rosa," which are airbrushed portraits of myself.

There is an episode called "A Short Story of Weird Girls" from the Amazon TV show I Love Dick that starts with a clip of your 1999 short film, Removed. When did you find out that you were referenced in this show? And, how do you feel about influencing other artists' work?

It was negotiated in advance. I love Jill Soloway, and I really respect Transparent. So, I was quite sure that I wanted to participate when they asked me. Plus, I feel like Removed is me riffing on someone else's artistic work, so I felt quite comfortable having someone else use it and incorporate it into their own work. I was very happy with the episode; I liked the way they also used the same technique with some of the video footage of the woman being erased. They also used a piece of Leche in the same episode.

You teach different kinds of classes and workshops, and you participate in mentorship programs. Do you see any patterns in your students about what they want to achieve in their careers, or about their definition of what failure and success is?

I'm part of a community of experimental filmmakers, and we all have really similar goals, which are basically just to have our work shown, and the gravy on top of that is to receive funding for our work. So, I think all of my students have similar professional goals. They're quite humble. They want to be able to survive as artists, make work, and share that work with others.

You mentioned that your students want to survive as artists. Do you think they come with this preconception that their work is only going to allow them to survive?

I think students want to make successful work. To have that, the first step is to have that work shown. To have a public for your work is the second step, and then, the third step is to be compensated. The fourth and main goal is to be able to have that work support you financially, which is out of reach for most of us.

Do you think your students have any common anxieties? What are they most worried about?

Well, when you're working with analog film, there's always the anxiety that you have a good image on the film. There's so many factors that could make that happen, so that's a real anxiety. And then, they're very anxious about the material itself because it's so expensive. There's a lot of built-in anxiety in using an expensive material. And then artistically, I don't think they have common anxiety. Each individual comes with their own set of issues and questions that they're working out.

Is there anything that you wish someone told you when you began to make art?

Well, somebody told me when I was younger that I didn't have talent, because I can't draw. I can't render things as they are with my hand. It really sent me on a detour. That's why I went into food making rather than art making, because I felt that I couldn't draw. I really wish that I hadn't received that message, because I think my life would have taken a different direction. I wish somebody had told me you don't need to draw to be an artist, or somebody had directed me to drawing classes to realize that I could develop that skill which I still, to this day, have not developed.

What is your next project about?

Right now I'm working on three films from Albania, they are a trilogy. They all work together. I've spent thousands of dollars and thousands of hours. I'm taking singing classes, because I want one of them to have my voice singing in it. I had Albanian instruments made, I paid musicians to record the song. Money that I would never spend on myself on a massage or on clothes, but without even thinking about it I spend it on the film

because it is who I am, and what I leave behind. So even though I don't have any funding whatsoever, I feel like I don't have any choice. I have to finish it. I have to make it, because it's who I am in the world. I don't feel like it's a masterpiece, but I do feel like it's an important project. I know it will have an audience, because I've had an audience in the past. It may be 200 people, but still, it's my public.

Who is your audience?

Film festival attendees, museum goers, students, cinephiles, and other filmmakers.

For the kind of work that you do, what are the most valuable resources?

Community, other filmmakers. In Mexico, it's other filmmakers, and there's a collective called LEC, which is a group of a many filmmakers. Then, there are these centers around the world, for example in Canada there's a program called LIFT; there's a collective Echo Park Film Center in LA where they have cameras, and they teach classes and have equipment.

Currently there is a really small and close community of experimental filmmakers.

Yeah. I think that there are probably 300 experimental filmmakers in the world who work on 16mm film, and we all know and help each other. We share information about film stocks and festivals. We need each other, because we're each other's public. We're each other's resource for information. For example, we keep the actual commercial labs running. We lend each other equipment. It's a very generous world because they don't manufacture the equipment any more, so we need one another to learn how to keep our projectors running, and processing film without chemicals, and things like that.

I didn't know that they don't manufacture the equipment anymore. So, how do you get access to the materials that you need?

Well, Kodak is still making film stock. It's much more limited in the variety, but they're still making it. The cameras are built like battle axes, so they last forever. People still repair cameras and lenses. There are also classes on things like repairing projectors, and we just pass information around.

It's good to know that there is a community that supports each other. Is it welcoming to new experimental filmmakers?

I think so, at least among the women filmmakers that I know. Additionally, there's really a sense of curators coming to town. There was a programmer here from the Rotterdam Film Festival and I arranged for him to look at other people's work. So, I really think there is a generosity. I'm sure there's a competitive edge that I don't feel at all, because I'm so isolated.

Did you ever feel that pressure to keep creating art?

I'm embarrassed about how long it's taken me to finish a film, because my paintings are sitting in a box and all the clothes I've made don't really count as art making. So, in the sense of my public face, I'm a little bit embarrassed about how long it's taken me, but at the same time, I've never stopped making things and creating. So, I don't feel stuck creatively.

Naomi Uman recommends:

some of my favorite things:

making things
steam baths with scrubby things
milking cows
playing with dogs

yoga
pineapple with chile

some beloved films:

Deborah Stratman's film [Untied](#) (:target="_blank")

George Franju's [Blood of the Beasts](#)

Mikhail Kalatozov's [Salt for Svanetia](#)

Name

Naomi Uman

Vocation

Video artist, Filmmaker, Editor, Director, Producer

