



An Interview with Canadian Frame(lines)

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On January 1st, 2013, Alexandra Caulfield and Ryder Thomas White will spend a full year travelling across Canada, living and working in a school bus that they have customized to facilitate Super 8mm film workshops, all with the aim of exploring an allusive subject: Canadian identity. Their project, Canadian Frame(lines), is a fusion of filmmaking, DIY craft and sociological research principles that will lead workshop participants to film three minute cartridges of what they believe illustrates Canadian identity, and consider how this resounds within their community. The project will conclude with a gallery installation that stages the films to create a walking tour of Canada, and embody the experience for viewers. If Donald Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) and the NFB's *Challenge for Change* program (1967-80) conceived a love child for our generation, it might resemble Canadian Frame(lines). Their innovative approach to identity renews a Canadian preoccupation with participatory projects

and realist aesthetics, while going beyond both of these histories as an independently funded project.

What initially inspired this project?

Alex - This project has had a long, slow path into being. It all started about two years ago. Ryder and I were sitting on a park bench in North Burnaby, looking out over the inlet and the oil refinery... we were entering into our last years of university and trying to figure out what was going to be next for us. I was itching to travel and Ryder was contemplating becoming a Canadian citizen once he was eligible. As we talked about our dreams and aspirations for the next few years, and what we wanted to do with our films, the type of impact we wanted to have... the core ideas behind and goals of Canadian Frame(lines) became clear to us.

Ryder- Frame(lines) grew out of a passion for telling stories, for traditions and for the value of local

knowledge.

Alex - We wanted to avoid only giving our take on Canadian identity, and allow the country to speak for itself through the works of its many inhabitants. **Ryder**- I also want to know Canada on a personal level so that I can be a responsible and valuable citizen of Canada.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey, once wrote over twenty-five years ago: “the question of Canadian identity is political in the most direct sense of the word, and it brings the political together with the cultural and ideological immediately and inevitably.” Does her writing resonate with you all these years later? Does this reflect in your ‘interactive approach` approach to documentary?

Ryder-I’d say that the word “political” has taken on a different connotation than the one in which Mulvey meant it. We eschew the political, as it is currently known. Politics are polarizing, and Frame(lines) aims to circumvent arguments that relate to governance or reproducible qualities of our social systems. We’re looking for politics as Mulvey [I think] meant it: where the interests of the many meet the interests of the few. True art is great for this because it makes the most of each individual component while allowing it to remain a member of the whole. We want to create a database of Canadian images that does not reduce or consolidate their individual qualities—rather, by compiling them, we may greater appreciate the ways in which they are alike and in which they are different.

Alex- As for the interactive component, we wanted to ensure that we work with people without marginalizing them. We are very aware of the exploitative potential in documentary, and it can be a dangerous thing to not recognise your natural biases when sharing the stories of others with the world. It would be very easy for us to bring our urban viewpoint. One that has been heavily influenced by exposure to many forms of media, and a university education in film, arts and cultural, and completely re-write other Canadian’s stories, so that they fit neatly in our own narrative. It is very important to us to avoid the patronizing attitude that can be seen in many, particularly older, documentaries. As a result, we were both really drawn to the use of

Super-8, and DIY practices.

Dealing with Super-8 film today requires a lot of finesse, while it once had a history of being widely processed and being easy to handle. How has this change influenced your program?

Alex- Using Super-8 and DIY processes, including the hand-developing of film, is, for me, about giving and facilitating others to tell their own stories... We hope it will be an exchange between the people we meet over our interpretation of them. One thing I’ve noticed when talking to people about Canadian Frame(lines) and asking for their thoughts on Canada’s cultural identity is that a lot of people feel uncomfortable discussing their personal views and experiences with Canadian identity.

I think that, because as a nation we haven’t had this discussion openly in many decades, the question can feel overwhelming. It [the question of Canadian identity] can be quite intimidating... people don’t want to get it wrong. I believe that using Super-8, and encouraging people to use it in a non-narrative, non-linear fashion, allows people the freedom to express themselves without being too self-conscious.

Seems like a personal understanding of identity would be recorded outside verbal limits... it isn’t restricted to a verbal discourse about Canada.

Ryder- That’s hitting the nail right on the head, pretty much. I think you can write and write and write and a lot of good things have been written about Canadian identity, but they don’t tackle, for instance, visual anecdotes that don’t live up to the standards prescribed by academia. Maybe we encounter a woman whose husband hangs his jacket up in the hall closet “just so” in the light of the evening before he closes the front door. Getting that last blast of the elements before you take shelter is very Canadian to her. So if we can give her a camera, have her film it, then the immediacy is really striking. It’s an actual point of view, not something we’re told about. I think we should point out that the same is true anywhere: the written word can never present an issue in full detail.

Iris Marion Young, in re-shaping our concep-



tion of the political representation of difference, has turned to the Derridian concept, *différance*. Addressing identities in this way leaves them “in their plurality without requiring their collection” and this avoids making a reduction of “the many into one” It is interesting to consider how your interactive approach navigates this concern.

Ryder- We want to understand identity by seeing if a common iteration emerges between the films produced... learning from others, not just being the filmmakers interpreting.

I think I made some points that are pertinent here when we were talking about Mulvey. I mean, the Canadian ideal is the “mosaic”, right? That’s what we’re taught: the U.S. is a melting pot, Canada is a mosaic. It’s bordering on corny but it’s still a worthwhile idea. Anyway, I think what is of great importance is that our process leaves the end wide open. We would love for contrasting ideas to emerge. We would not be upset in the least if the image of Canadian identity became more cloudy as a result of further discussion and an increase in number of viewpoints. We wanted to ask people what they thought of Canada because we hoped they would talk not only to us but amongst themselves and then continue on in their communities.

Alex- Also, the participants are involved in a tactile, physical process... and this extends their representations with a sense of physicality. To me, this process seems to represent yet another Derridian concept trace...which according to Young, is the “movement of temporalization” where a moment can “carry traces of the history of relationships that produced it.”

Ryder- Well, I was always big into the idea of “indexicality” as it is outlined by Charles Saunders Peirce. It’s more or less the same as Young’s take on “trace”—the index is the mark left by an action. For instance, a footprint is the index of a step, right? So film has this inherent indexicality to it, it’s always the index of the light that has struck it, which is to say it is an index of the profilmic event. We can take this one step further and say that visible remnants of processing are the indices of the processor. Through this kind of analysis, the filmmaker becomes intertwined with the physical presence of the film—from shooting it and experiencing the same light that exposed the film to mashing it through buckets of chemical, spooling, unspooling, and untangling it. The filmmaker is the film. That’s not that common these days.

How has it been planning your route across Canada?

Ryder - Well, it hasn’t been easy! We’ve been working at this project for over two years now, and in that time both of us finished our degrees (BFA Film) and were involved in countless other projects. I personally had a string of new media works and an installation that just went up this summer. And I am finding for myself that this kind of long-term planning is tricky (we’re not very accustomed to it in the present day). That said, everyone is very receptive to what we are doing and a lot of people want to help. But we do find sometimes that the whole “Canadian Identity” thing isn’t urgent for a lot of the people we talk to...sometimes people don’t feel like it is worth spending time on. That said, such a response just spurs us on even more! Besides that, though, it’s been great. We get to read

lots of stuff, learn about all kinds of different places...it's definitely one of the best things we could be doing straight out of school, I think.

What have been some recent challenges in preparing for this experience?

Ryder-I think I touched on this a little bit in the last question, but one of the biggest issues is keeping track of everything. There are a lot of components to this project, and they range from the very specific, literal, logistic qualities (where do we go/how much food are we going to eat/what will happen to film developer in newfoundland in February) to the esoteric, subjective aspects (why do we care about Canadian identity/how do we market this project so its legacy is enduring). You just have to keep your mind really open.

Another challenge too is that this is a brand-new style of film project. It's not a documentary, with a specific set of goals where we are shooting and editing the final product. It's not a community art project, where we establish ourselves and have people come to us. It's not a research investigation, where we have control variables and can follow set protocols. It's all of those things, and sometimes parts of them overlap and clash! So we're just trying to pioneer this new method as best we can, with the hopes that it is as good as it can be this time and that we can build upon it in the future. (You can even see traces of this problem in all our writing about Canadian Frame(lines): "It's a travelling, interactive documentary/community engagement project." Seriously, WTF is that?)

We've really just tried to think outside the box as much as possible. We didn't really want to be beholden to anyone else's pocketbook in terms of the content we ultimately will produce, so we elected to fund as much of the project as possible ourselves via a crowdsourcing campaign that took place this summer. Also, when we found we were losing steam PR-wise, we thought "What can we do to get attention that we won't have to spend money on? Let's go read about Canada at the Art Gallery!" And it was fantastic—we must have talked to over a thousand people and made a couple hundred dollars in cash donations over a couple days. We love to get out and talk to people one on one, because that's where we can really convey not only the fun aspects but also the gravity and necessity of the project.

MORE INFO at

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BIOS:

Alexandra Caulfield attended the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at Simon Fraser University and has a major in film. Her short film *A Paperback Life* screened at the Montreal World Film Festival and at the Anthology Film Archives in New York City as part of their New Filmmaker's Series, both in 2010. *A Paperback Life* also won the Royal Reel Award at the Canada International Film Festival in Vancouver in 2011. Alexandra has two films currently on the festival circuit; the comedic short that she wrote and directed called *Free Section*, as well as a short narrative film entitled *MESS* that she co-produced with Caulfield White Productions co-founder, Ryder White.

Ryder Thomas White also attended Simon Fraser University's film program. Ryder's expertise lies in cinematography and alternative processing. His short film *Gutter Standard*, co-produced with Chris Lennox-Aasen, has screened at the Local Sightings Film Festival in Seattle, and his latest short *MESS* is currently on the festival circuit. Ryder's filmic event/installation *The Chase!* premiered at Trench Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver on June 21st, 2012.