



# “VIVA LA GAP”

## A CONVERSATION WITH DEBORAH STRATMAN

In a freewheeling email exchange on the eve of her Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago exhibition *Chicago Works: Deborah Stratman* (March 17 - December 6, 2020), filmmaker and interdisciplinary artist **Deborah Stratman** converses with *Expressionless*' D. Taylor on her cinematic and non-cinematic work, radical listening, relationships between sounds and spaces, forming time, the documentary form, technique, *feeling-tone*, hole-ontology, Studs Terkel, the supernatural, among other things.

## I

E: The sonic dimension of your work suggests a rigorous modeling of the relationships between recording-event and the representation of place, experience, concept. Examples range from the matter-of-fact, 'indexical' presentation of the sounds of the shooting location in *The Illinois Parables* (2016), to the use of something like continuity sound in the barroom scene in *Optimism* (2018), to sounds that are almost in direct confrontation with the content of the images, as in *On the Various Nature of Things* (1995). Some of your films, like *Hacked Circuit* (2014), even directly comment on the construction and manipulation of "real" sound through highly manipulated sound. In *Order to Not Be Here* (2002) integrates Kevin Drumm's electronic pulsations into the sound mix, to harrowing and immersive effect. How would you describe your approach to recording and representing place and experience through sound? Is it specific to each film, or are you doing something more programmatic? Does this approach have political, ethical or personal implications (insofar as these can be considered separate)?

**DS: Sound makes space. Is space. Is nothing without space. Sound is expressed through and changed by space. I love making space with sound which is just making forms with time. It's the ultimate temporal sculpture medium. When you ask about approach, that's how I'd describe my primary relationship.**

**But there's lots of other relationships that define the ways I like to work with sound that have to do with, say, memory - the way rhythm makes things indelible - tone, humor, augury/foreboding, transposition, rupture, setting background or defining a protagonist - to me melody can be a formidable protagonist. Though in terms of inclination, I'm more a ground than a figure person.**

**Political-ethical-personal, absolutely the aural has repercussions here. But so does the image. So does everything really. I don't**

**think I approach ethics more pointedly or successfully in one or the other.**

E: Loving this equation of *making sound-space* (sound=space) and *making time-form* as a way to think cinema-making. It feels axiomatic. The relationship of memory to this is interesting as well - thinking cinematic devices as translating *feeling-tone* and rhythmic nuances of memory (maybe we could provisionally define memory as *the palpable absence of a particular listening?*) into time-forms.

Of course, some have made analogies between elements of your work and that of Straub and Huillet, but the incongruities are maybe more interesting here than the comradeship. In any given film of theirs, it seems that sound-space is always doing a kind of double duty: acting as index of the immediate conditions of its recording in a given place at a given time (no dubbing or continuity) and as index of some essentially inaccessible social-historical past (which is always a function of the former duty: locations chosen, conflicts between images, sounds, etc.). Of course they pushed this very far: you can find Straub moralizing against the use of cinematic imagination and "formless form," shots essentially become blocks of documentary-time, absolute fidelity is emphasized.

Your work also seems to be mobilized against historical amnesia, and totally conscious of place and time of recording, but far more willing to play with interpretation, manipulation, recreation, *feeling* of memory. Are your time-forms built in fidelity to some primary act of listening (or remembering), or are they building something else entirely?

**DS: That parenthetical definition of memory makes me think of Merleau-Ponty's description of a ghost as a perception made by only one sense. Apropos when we're talking alongside the great phantom, cinema.**

**I'm on board to think about memory as the absence of a particular listening. Or maybe**

**any listening....? The radical thing about listening, like Salomé Voegelin says, is that it *must* share time and space with the object or event under consideration. It's a philosophical project that demands involved participation. There's no detachment. It's not the 'over there' that vision gives us, but an in-the-midst. Which is what makes listening such a good locus for the socio-political. On the other hand, sound is an intriguingly obstinate and malleable arena through which to take on history, because if we're listening to something, it's unfurling. It's never a static artefact.**

**Straub-Huillet are very important for me, but I'm happy you mention the incongruities. What idiom and dialect convey is immeasurable; a sub-surface mix of cadence, inheritance, geography, epoch... I think there's a connection here to what I aim towards in constructing time-forms. An idiomatic erratic product of the dance I perform with my material. Most of the time, the only things my time-forms are built in fidelity to is themselves. Sometimes not even that. Though if they're well-made, there's an allegiance to the unfurling present *and* to the remembered/recorded past. Or to forecast. History and augury are equally productive companions to the moment.**

**Often my work grows out of a primary act of noticing. Might be a passage of music, an illustration, a story told... But I'm not interested in fidelity to the thing as I came across it, or as I thought it. Like our buddy Walt Benjamin says, nothing's poorer than a truth expressed as it was thought. It's best if my ideas get snagged or interrupted by the world. I'm happy when subjects get in my way and become interlocutors. That's why I'm drawn to modes like documentary, where chance has a seat at the table.**

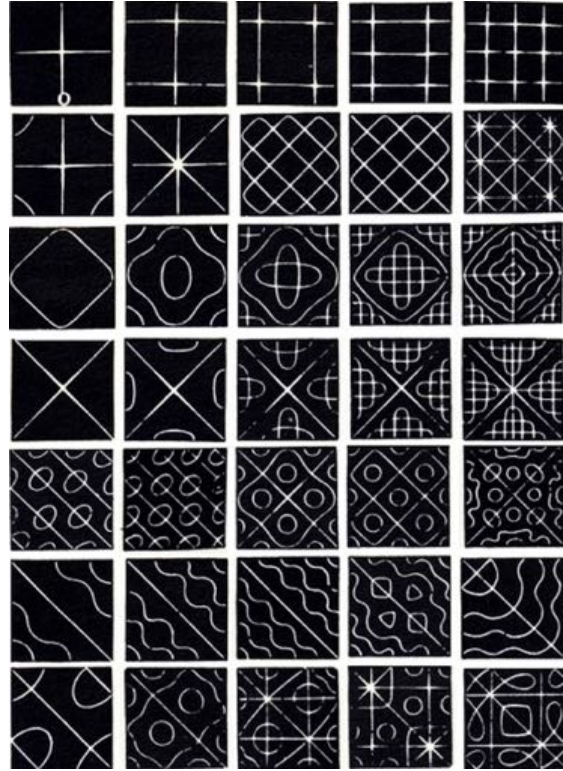
**E: I'd like to zoom in for a moment on the triple relationship of what you call augury/forecast, history/past and the moment/present in your time-forms, and specifically this figure of**

**augury as opposed to history. History - and correct me if I am misinterpreting! - seems to be analogized with past time, which may or may not be "remembered" via the perpetual "moment" of the screen, the recording, etc. There also seems to be a necessary relationship here between contingency and the representation of history, or even a parallel between chance and the realm of history generally. But what exactly is this third element, *forecast* or *augury*, in your time-forms? What are its implications? By augury, do you mean eschatology, soothsaying, editorializing, utopian projection, a gesture 'off-screen'? To bring this closer to Voeglin's discourse as you mention it, is augury a kind of *listening for*?**

**DS: It's all those things and more. Forecasting is sort of like remembering, except you're walking backwards into it, and there aren't any leavings available to sift through. When I use the word augury, I'm talking about projecting. It's anticipatory and conjectural. It could be tied to signs of narrative or melodic convention. It could be speculation based on cadence, or a product of pressures built through editing, setting, gesture, framing, what's beyond the frame, etc. Without augury there's no suspense, or surprise, or rhythm. There's a channelizing of attention, or yes - a listening for. I believe in listening. Radical listening. Attentiveness is powerful. Observation, in its potential to cede space and agency, is powerful. We should question the habitual. Question bricks. Question the height of the curb. Which station our radio gets left tuned to. The route we favor. Notice who speaks. Who gets the last word. Be curious why certain renditions of events are given more credence than others. Be answerable for what we learn how to see.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> These last few sentences are adapted from *Yes, Virginia, reality is worth caring about*, my contribution to "Qu'est-ce que le réel? Des cinéastes prennent position" (ed. by Andréa Picard, 2018), which is, in turn, deeply indebted to the thoughts of Georges Perec and Donna Haraway - DS



TOP LEFT: from *Kings of the Sky*  
MIDDLE LEFT: from *THE BLVD*  
BOTTOM LEFT: from *Ray's Birds*  
TOP RIGHT: array of Chladni forms

E: I would also like to explore your interest in what you're calling the documentary mode a bit further. One is tempted to suggest that a time-form of yours like *The BLVD* (1999) was produced in something like a documentary mode, or maybe *with* a documentary mode, as it documents a very particular social configuration in a particular place, is beholden to the contingencies of subjects' actions, enunciations, etc. Or, with completely different subject matter (and subject species!), a time-form like *Ray's Birds* (2010). But to avoid being too hasty, how do you conceptualize this notion of *documentary*? Are some of your films more documentary than others?

**DS: *Kings of the Sky* (2004) lands here as well. With each of those films, it so happens I'm focusing on a person or group that performs. The racers perform drag races, the kept birds perform their raptor-ness, the Uighur troupe perform acrobatics. Seems I favor an observational mode with theater at its jelly center. *Hacked Circuit* is considerably more staged, but there's a similar nesting at work.**

**Documentary sits at the edges of where reality is collectively decided upon. As an operating mode, I think of shooting conversationally, improvisationally, in-response-to vs. hewing to a script or choreography. As a mode it looks more to the indexical (say, a Chladni form) than the conventional (e.g. an alphabet), and towards recording something found rather than something invented. Some of my films stage and invent more than others. But does that make them less documentary? Vertov leans yes. Flaherty no. Kluge says reality is a paper tiger and should be possible to represent as the historical fiction it is. In any case, I'm happy when my designed forms are open to accident, and my observational forms acknowledge their artifice.**

E: Maybe this could bring us to the ways you work through questions of framing and of visual space. Your work is heterogeneous, but much of it seems to carry something of a 'look,' certain aesthetic consistencies (even in your non-cinematic work). Much of this surely has to do with your approach to editing and juxtaposition, and in this *feeling-tone* tying everything together. But whether in video or 16mm, there seems to be a tendency toward decisions like static shots, unconventional partial framings of bodies, painterly compositions, long Straubian pans. There seem to be spatial and aesthetic analogies even among the most seemingly distant pieces (in terms of subject matter), like between the way you shoot a bird's legs in *Ray's Birds* and the way you shoot a vacuum cleaner in a music video for James McMurtry (1995), or between the way you shoot a living room in *The Illinois Parables* and the way you shoot the empty *Magician's House* (2007). How do you work through questions of framing and composition in your time-forms? Your notions of "designed forms open to accident" and "observational forms acknowledging their artifice" seem highly relevant here, but specifically, do you feel like you tend toward a certain way of thinking about framing and visual aesthetic that is perhaps in excess of the contingencies of a given encounter with a shooting subject?

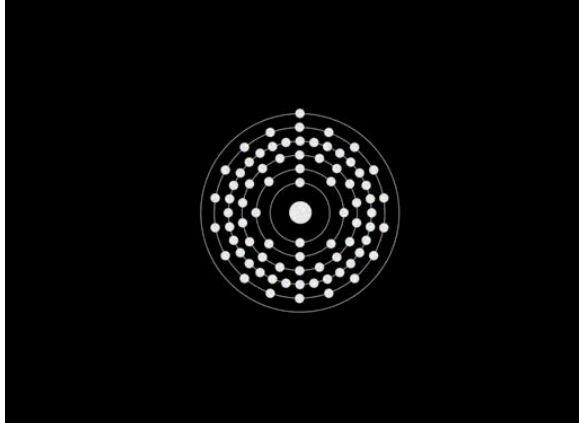
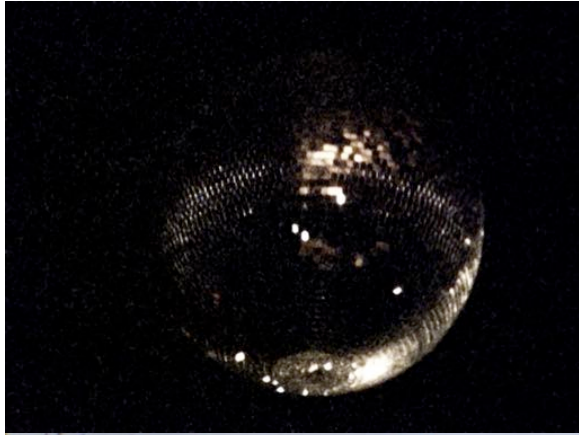
DS: Framing typically isn't something I think through. It's intuitive—a combination of balancing forms and pressures. Mostly, I just know the frame when I see it. You know how resonant frequencies ring in a form? A place might sound dead, but when you tap the right frequency, everything starts to vibrate. With framing, you might say I scan for a container with visual resonance.

E: Are there also instances in which you plan, diagram or otherwise anticipate shots in advance?

DS: Yes, as opposed to those resonant sorts of framings just described, I absolutely diagram out or plan for some shots. Sometimes quite methodically, as with the single tracking shots of *Hacked Circuit*, or *Immortal Suspended* (2013). On occasion, I've drawn out framing ideas (e.g. Wanet McNeill in *The Illinois Parables*). I often do mental run-throughs for sequences (e.g. aerially tracking the running man of *In Order Not To Be Here*, paddling into the drainage tunnel in *The Name is not the Thing named* (2012), shooting from the hot air balloon at the end of the *Parables*). And I often pilgrimage to places I want to capture. Take *O'er the Land* (2009)—nearly every sequence in that film involved a sortie: Niagara Falls, the US/Mexican border, the high school football game, RV sales lots, Morton Thiokol plant, the French/Indian war re-enactors, the bird research center, the machine gun festival. I'm often very clear on what setting I want, if not the framing per se.



from *O'er the Land*



LEFT: from *Optimism*

## II

**DS:** When you say ‘barroom’ scene in *Optimism*, are you talking about the casino with the cancan dancers? Because that ping pong shark-porpoise-nerpa audio is also from a bar. A different bar.

E: Ah, a casino! *Optimism* is a good case to focus on for a moment. Not only is there a lot of sonic play, bits of music, etc., but there are these gloriously unsettling CGI and VFX sections with expanding gold atoms, digital noise disco balls, etc. alongside these almost pastoral documents of people and landscape. All of these interactions seem to reflect social dissonances surrounding the town's gold mining history (especially given the First Nations man's meditation on land use at the end), and certainly plenty of other mysterious things as well. Can you discuss some of the thinking and listening that went into this film?

**DS:** *Optimism* was shot while my partner Steve Badgett and I were working on a public sculpture commission in Dawson City, YT called *Augural Pair* (2011-2016). I had no project in mind while I was shooting. It was just free form note-taking and filming for pleasure. I thought I might use it in a film someday, but I wasn't aiming for anything. Steve and I had many conversations around the history of that place - what value is, how value gets tied to desire, to extractive industries, to land, to ownership, to myth. All of those conversations came to bear on our process and the sculptures we eventually made. They seeped into the film too, but more indirectly. The film might actually have digested the ideas better because I sat on the footage five years before I edited.

I might never have made the film if I hadn't come back across the conversation with ex-Mayor John Steins that you hear at the beginning. I love that blender sound revving up as John's buddy Eldo mixes his drink. The fact that they're talking about this dream of installing a heliostat up on the hill to shine

down a puddle of sun mid-winter when it's always dark in the valley is a perfect accidental rhyme with the mirrored disc that you see later in the film. That disc had nothing to do with the heliostat. It's just serendipity that the sculptural object Steve and I made so fluently stands in for John & Eldo's dream. Same goes for the sound of the ping pong game which can't help but invoke *white ball*. Again, a coincidental tie-in with the hillside disc / punch hole / fallen sun.

Once the circular refrain emerged, I leaned in, ergo the disco ball and the electron shell (or occult mandala, depending on viewer predisposition). The structure of the film is a kind of loping, forward-moving circle – like a stretched slinky. I use a lot of transplanted sync, where we hear something well before or after we see it.

E: All fascinating. In terms of method, do you often shoot and then edit footage years later?

DS: Sometimes I work very quick. Like sketching. But at least half of the time I shoot and either don't return to material until years later, or am working on it sort of continuously, but over a very long time.

E: What's the utility of this?

DS: Alienation. The footage feels less mine if it ages. The shots get detached from the experience that generated the desire to shoot them in the first place. Some things sit because I never had plans for them. I just shoot what moves me then add it to the shelf - something I can tap later when the right idea comes along. Other times I'm clear on what I should do, but the thing I'm trying to make is obstinate. And then other times, I aim for as little thinking as possible—hold the camera like the net.

E: I'd also love to hear more about *Augural Pair*, which also seems a good segue into thinking about the relationship (in this case direct relationship) between your filmic work and your

work in other media, which is just as fascinating.

DS: *Augural Pair* were two sculptural interventions that considered how value and desire are connected to landscape and acts of removal. A giant mirrored disc attended by carved wooden ravens was installed on a cliff across the river from town, while in the town bank window, electronic signage displayed the live price of gold per ounce. Both of these interventions had an associated viewing scope to bring them closer. Mineral extraction has been the key arbiter of population in Dawson since the Klondike Gold Rush. And while we were there, a mini gold rush just happened to be in effect. The price had sky-rocketed and the landscape was busy with surveyors and speculators.

The mirrored disc could be a hole through the cliff, a fallen star, a giant satellite dish, a gleaming eye or the shit of the sun, depending on the disposition of who was looking and when. You couldn't see the ravens unless you looked at it with the scope. We carved the birds after looking into Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in origin stories and thinking about the ways that flights of ravens have served augural purposes. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in ancestral home is around the confluence of the Klondike & Yukon rivers, where Dawson City later got built.

As for making non-films, some ideas just need alternate delivery modes. And it's nice to work publicly, where an encounter with art is less likely to be planned. Radical listening has been central to a lot of these projects.



This fight will not end in terrorism and violence, it will not end in a nuclear holocaust, it begins as a celebration in the rights of Alchemy, the transformation of shit into gold, the illumination of dark chaos into light... This is Isabel from Phoenix Regatta Radio, signing off until tomorrow. (Born in Flames, 1983)

- Au** – the chemical element gold
- Augere** – to increase
- Auger** – helical screw blade: a tool with a helical bit for boring holes
- Augur** – to divine; portend a good or bad outcome; foresee or predict
- Augury** – a sign of what will happen in the future; an omen; observation of the sky and birds; divining from the flight of crows; sorcery
- Aus** – to shine
- Auspex** – one who observes the flights of birds for the purpose of reading omens.
- Auspice** – a divine or prophetic token
- Ausus** – dawn
- Aurora** – a natural electrical phenomenon characterized by the appearance of streamers of colored in the sky, usually near the northern or southern magnetic pole; Roman goddess of dawn
- Aura** – the distinctive atmosphere or quality that seems to surround and be generated by a person, or place
- Aural** – relating to the ear or the sense of hearing
- Aureole** – a circle of light or brightness surrounding something, especially as depicted in art around head or body of a person represented as holy
- Auric** – relating to the aura supposedly surrounding a living creature; of gold with a valence of three
- Aureate** – denoting, made of, or having the color of gold.
- Auriferous** – containing gold
- Aurum** – gold

In Aztec and Mayan tradition, gold was known as the excrement of the sun.

**Crow Steals the Sun.**

The world was all dark, all the time.  
 A chief kept the moon, the stars and the sun all to himself. The chief's daughter went to the river to So Crow turned himself into a pine needle, which she accidentally swallowed down. Nine months later she bore a child. The chief doted on his grandchild, who cried and begged to play with the sun. The father relented and gave his grandchild sun to play with. He rolls it around. He plays with it, laughs, had a lot of fun. Then he rolls it to the door and out it goes.  
 "Oh!" he cries. He just pretends. He pretend cries because that sun is lost.  
 ...  
 Then Crow disappears. Has the sun with him in a box. He walks around. Comes to river. Lots of animals are there - fox, wolf, wolverine, mink, rabbit. Everybody's fishing. That time animals all talk like people now. The world is dark.  
 "Give me fish", Crow says. No one pay any attention.  
 "Give me fish or I bring daylight." They laugh at him.  
 He's holding the box - starts to open it and lets one ray out. Then they pay attention. He opens box more. They're scared. Finally he broke that daylight box and throws it out. Those animals scatter, hush and turn into animals like now, and the sun come out.  
 "Go to the skies," Crow says. "Now no one man owns the light. It will be for everyone."  
 (transcribed Northwest Indigenous American myth)

LEFT: *Augural Pair in the wild*  
 ABOVE: *conceptual notes for Augural Pair*

III

E: Comment on this notion of *feeling tone*. Is this a kind of philosophical method of listening, or to understanding and representing worlds, that you identify with or draw from?

DS: The feeling tone is an intelligence beyond words. I'm not sure this is what it was for Studs exactly. But I know the concept meant a lot to him. I think he first came across the phrase in an interview he gave.

In his book *Division Street: America*, one of his interviewees, Nancy Dickerson, says, "Let's face it. What counts is knowledge. And feeling. You see, there is such a thing as

**feeling tone. One is friendly and one is hostile. And if you don't have this, baby, you've had it. You're dead." So I guess it's also about the meaning of gesture, of our actions. It's philosophical, but it's also base.**

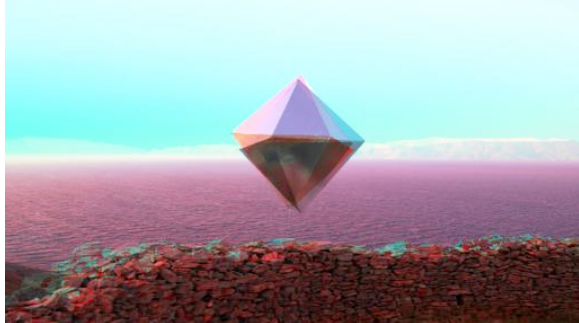
E: Definitely pragmatic, but also a pretty profound way of looking at and listening to things. And communicating things--it seems cinema is the obvious medium for this, as word and language isn't even half of the matter. A more enigmatic film like *Xenoi* (2016) - *strangers* - where you get something like a sense of the contemporary haunting Western history without a word spoken--totally feeling-tone. Is



feeling-tone a factor in the editing room as much as while you're shooting, or while you're thinking about your projects?

**DS: Yes - definitely a factor in the editing room. The editing room is the heart of my cinema so I couldn't survive in there without feeling-tone.**

***Xenoi's* locations are like a deck of cards, each with a particular historical or economic anchor. So in this case, editing was a bit more like stacking. The film was a collaboration with composer Michael Pisaro. We'd been invited as mentors to the Syros Sound Meetings and the theme that year was "khôra". Michael introduced me to the spiral of fifths (Pythagorean Comma) which influenced both of our recordings. To me, *Xenoi* is math meets sociology. I wish I'd been able to film a heap of discarded life vests. But Syros is generally bypassed as migrant landing site. Still, the thin financial climate permeated the country. Seems to be a hallmark of our times.**



from *Xenoi*

#### IV

**DS: Are you guys really into deadpan? Or what do you mean by expressionless objects?**

E: We're into deadpan too, but we pulled the word expressionless from Walter Benjamin. He initially used it to describe a favorite artwork--Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece--but it comes up in other early essays, like the one on *Elective Affinities*, to describe a moment in the aesthetic/critical experience of a work that cannot be systematized, and shatters any possibility of totality in the work. Benjamin suggests that the expressionless moment is what makes an artwork an artwork, and not just continuous with nature.

**DS: So feeling-tone is actually an expressionless object, in that it can't be systematized? And if I have it straight, the expressionless moment is a fault in perception around something that's felt to be art. For the art to be art, it needs the gap. This is a lead. It makes me think about the ontology of holes and the usefulness of absence. Michel de Certeau says the gap might be a failure of reason, a blind spot that makes reason accede to another dimension - the dimension of thinking. And to think, the indeterminate is necessary.**

**At any rate, we filmmakers think a lot about gaps. Cinema's riddled with them and is aerated by them. Viva la gap.**

E: In light of all this, it is interesting that *Xenoi* followed from the theme of *khôra*, this sort of interval between forms or places... As you say, art needs the gap to be art, and film needs to be aerated with gaps, and thinking begins, as it were, at the gap; but your art specifically and directly seems fixated on the gap as subject matter as well. Whether the gap between locations, between waking life and sleep in *Waking* (1994), or even between people, lovers, relationships in *Untied* (2001)--these are just a few examples. At the same time, your work so often seems to be about connections:

collectivity, culture, community, worlds. Even *Xenoi*, the film about *khôra*, there are intimations of a community of the displaced. Moving from the register of form to that of subject matter (insofar as they can be separated), can you comment on what has drawn you to gaps, thresholds so consistently throughout your work? Is there a relationship between *gap* and *connection*, or *community*, in your work?

**DS: I'm not sure it's possible to have connection without a gap. Between me and someone else, there's always the thing we have to traverse that makes it a relationship in the first place.**

**Absence is the marrow of seduction. It's what I'm missing that seduces me. Plus, it seems good to take advantage of what is not: doors in a house, memorial silences, general strikes, the space between our eyes, between hearing and seeing, between things and their names. Gaps are what produce dimension. And here's an even deeper void that motivates me - the one at our core that we sense but can't say. If I knew it, if the lights got turned on in there, or in any other murk for that matter, then I wouldn't need to make work anymore.**

## V

### [DS sends an image of Pythagoras]

E: Very happy about the Pythagoras connection here. For one, there is always this dancing between a kind of *mathema* and (especially in this connection) *akousmata*. Your work seems to do this very explicitly. In a kind of Pythagorean vein, your time-forms often seem to twist together the magical, supernatural, even the occult with something like rationality, science, mathematics. There are Aleister Crowley references, a through-going fascination with alchemy, a palpable interest in ghosts and hauntings and the paranormal, alongside, say, space travel, surveillance tech and homages to Michael Faraday. Can you expand on this?

**DS: I'm starting to suspect I've got overly binary tendencies, but for me magic and logic are sides of a coin. They're both messengers of sorts. Ways to reach towards what we don't understand, poke at it a bit. Where does faith reside in the information age? What's the conceptual pillar of the human spirit? For a film to succeed, it needs a somatic something that transcends intellect. This supernatural / rational configuration comes up in *The Illinois Parables* too. I'm thinking of three characters: the preteen telekinetic firestarter Wanet McNeill, critical mass equation formulator Enrico Fermi, and Fred Hampton, the "black messiah" Cointelpro sought to prevent the rise of. I think it's the first time these tendencies have been personified in my work.**

E: Let's talk about *The Illinois Parables*. It feels like a culmination. For one, it plays with just about every documentary cinema-adjacent strategy one could imagine. It also seems you're presenting something like a theory of history, ideology, contingency. We could spend an eternity working through philosophical resonances--obviously Hampton, Tocqueville, Emerson, Fermi, but maybe even Althusser, Dilthey, Ricœur, Brecht, Anaxagoras and so on. You get political struggle, magic, chance, erasure, time, reenactment, a thousand years of nonlinear history, all in Illinois. It's relentlessly empirical and feels like an occult ritual. Can you discuss the process - some of the listenings, conversations and aerations that informed and shaped this piece and the "thin places" explored in it?

**DS: The process was slow. Ten years. I didn't know where I was going for the first seven. An initial spark came from *O'er the Land* which at one point was going to include religious freedom as one of the freedoms it considered. That got too unwieldy (I mean, 'freedom' is already heroically unwieldy), so I put it aside and eventually those musings mutated into the *Parables*.**

**I think the first sequence I staged for the film was the preteen firestarter. I knew early**

on that I wanted a rejoinder to the critical mass equation and that paradigm shift that came with the nuclear advent. I had the Nauvoo and the Cahokia mound material very early too. But those shots weren't staged. At least not by me. I was just out on sorties. The story that Elder Everest tells about the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith was something he likely recited a lot as part of his role-playing in the Browning home at the restored Mormon settlement. And Ravenwolf just happened to walk into the frame. It was only years later when the fact that a black shaman had walked off the mound and into my shot cracked the film open for me. I was always amazed that it happened. But when I was filming, I didn't know I'd be making what I ended up making. I just knew the project needed to start way before white colonists showed up. He astonished me again by showing up at one of the very first screenings I had in Columbia, MO at True/False festival. As best I knew, he lived in East St. Louis. But turns out he used to busk in Columbia and someone who saw the film recognized him and knew how to get in touch.

The last thing I shot was the hot air balloon footage which starts and ends the film. I knew I wanted footage of Michael Heizer's *Effigy Tumuli*. And I knew that the lifting off, that wobbling floating moment where your body's weight is left behind was going to be psychically necessary. The heaviness of the histories becomes too much otherwise. But I didn't know that aerial material would also *begin* the film. It ended up working really well because it allows you to drop to the earth and cycle through the three sorts of mounds that appear in the film - those of indigenous mound builders, military arsenal storage mounds, and Heizer's mound (itself a reenactment of native mounds), before we commence with Ravenwolf.

A thin place as I first encountered it is a Jesuit idea. A place where the boundary



ABOVE: from *The Illinois Parables*

between this world and some other is very thin. A place of energy. A place we don't perceive with all five senses, where experience goes beyond those limits. That concept, perhaps in a more secular or political sense than intended by the Jesuits, was a guiding principle for me throughout for deciding on what locations and stories to use.

At any rate, many folks have had more interesting things to say about the film than me. I speak best with the film. It says things I could never articulate, and don't want to articulate.

E: Your MCA exhibition *Chicago Works* is also based on this film, with an additional exploration into the world of Studs Terkel. Can you talk about this exhibit, and how the content and concerns premised in the time-forms of the film have been translated to installation and gallery space?

DS: The *Chicago Works* show is two parts. *The Illinois Parables* plays in one gallery, and directly adjacent is *Feeling Tone*—a set depicting one of the WFMT radio studios Studs operated out of. It could be considered a missing parable, but it doesn't require the film. At one point I'd considered including an episode on Studs in the *Parables*, but for various reasons left it out. Mostly because his tapes were still at the National Archives being digitized, so inaccessible while I was editing. Also, I didn't want the film to get too Chicago-heavy. And I didn't want twelve parables. Too clock-y and Catholic. I wanted something less stable, and I like eleven as a prime number. Indivisible imbalance implies a politic.

I'd thought about reenacting the studio for a few years but didn't have a context. When curator Jack Schneider and I started talking, we realized the MCA would be a good fit. And while *Feeling Tone* doesn't need the film, I think it might need Chicago.

In any case, Studs' legacy seemed better to take on through something more tactile than cinema. He wrote extensively, so of course we have his books to hold. But if we're talking about his sonic life's work, those five decades of voices beg a physical anchor. A film seems insufficient to relay the massive arc of 5000+ taped conversations. Maybe any form is insufficient. The installation at least nods to it.

The radio booth functions as a kind of spaceship. Dorothy's transplanted house. But the sound it plays is always now. History is what's *happening*.<sup>2</sup> Mounted on the exterior of the structure are four institutional speakers, one per side. The whole thing might just be an elaborate speaker cabinet. The idea was to have one new conversation looping per day throughout the run of the show, which was originally to be 120 days. The conversations range from 1953 to 1996. If the show gets to exist as intended, the guards are the only ones who'll hear the whole piece, and Studs as he ages.<sup>3</sup>

E: Do you have any closing thoughts?

DS: I've been thinking a lot about rocks. Send recommendations

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<sup>2</sup> Nod to Pablo de Ocampo for this great phrase – the title of his 2013 Flaherty Film Seminar. - DS

<sup>3</sup> The COVID-delayed exhibition is now open until December 6, 2020. As the days the museum can be physically open to visitors will be limited and subject to change, we've decided to play one interview per day until the show closes via the MCA website. There will be 143 conversations in all, rolled out in chronological order. Now anyone can have the guard experience! Tune in for five rousing Studly decades. - DS

TOP & MIDDLE: plans for *Feeling Tone*  
BOTTOM: booth from *Feeling Tone*

