

INTERVIEW

“Being Present Is Much More Important Than the Actual Film”: A Conversation with Eva Stefani

Ulrich Meurer

Central European University, Vienna

It would hardly be adequate to call Eva Stefani [<https://evastefani.gr>] a documentarist. Although trained in documentary and ethnographic filmmaking at various international schools, from the Ateliers Varan in Paris to NYU’s prestigious Tisch School of the Arts, she has long become an exceedingly versatile artist whose work ranges from 16 mm film to digital video, from visual art to written poetry, and from observational account to lyrical essay. It makes use of original material as well as found footage, and it is screened both at renowned film festivals and art exhibitions like the Venice Biennale and the documenta. But regardless of their great variety, the basic goal of all her projects – says Stefani in another of her numerous interviews – is to appreciate reality not as something exterior, situated outside herself, which can then be represented with the help of a camera. It is rather a site of self-examination, located inside her own personality and private biography, a complex so intimately intertwined with her that she could never be cut out from it. She always approaches this world from a close-up, low-angle point of view, encountering fellow humans with immediate trust and curiosity while also taking into account the deep historical past and wide national culture as constant influences on Greek public life and her very own work – the creation of equally personal and political images.

Ulrich Meurer: *As a warm-up and very general first approach to what you do, could you describe your interest in the documentary (or in documenting, if you prefer practice and process over a fixed genre concept)? What is the main focus of*

your image production; do you have specific concerns or ambitions, a style, a particular gaze?

Eva Stefani: Well, I don't want to answer by saying that I like the "observational style" or the "observational method" because this is not what you are asking me. Also, you are not asking what kind of subjects I like, but rather about my general approach. I would say that I am trying to explore things which are "unhidden", outside and inside of me: by examining things that I had thought of as given, but didn't know very well and then try to reveal them, I also find out things about myself that have always been right there. So, it is an approach that tries to do both: it is not just about finding an exotic tribe somewhere, but discovering something about yourself, something alien and, at the same time, very common, something which seems self-evident and very clear to you, but which is actually not that clear in a kind of an uncanny way.

I suppose, what I am interested in is more the "mystical" part of life and not a sociological approach in documentary. Of course, it always touches this field, but I would say it is more of an existential quest – like "Why are we here?", "What do we all do?" – rather than a statement about a specific group of people. Sometimes, this quest may start with something particular, but it always moves on to something broader and, I hope, deeper. The worst things I have done – although I hope that even these things are not so very bad, after all – are like illustrated lectures. Documentary, however, is not like that; it should always be an experiment, and what you see on the screen is the process of this experiment and not a fixed narrative. For me, this is the idea ...

U. M.: *Your mention of the "experimental" character of documentary leads right over to my next question. As you know, this issue of Filmicon – just like the conference on "Strategies of the Documentary" in Vienna that preceded and inspired many of its contributions – deals mostly with marginal, novel, or non-traditional trajectories of the documentary in film and adjacent audiovisual media. Against this background, to what extent do you see your work informed by classical documentary schools (like, for instance, direct cinema) and in what ways do you leave such beaten tracks to include innovative or even experimental perspectives? And is this a conscious process – do you think about your relation to documentary traditions at all?*

E. S.: I think, I am always situated between two classical documentary traditions and, actually, only these two attitudes exist for every documentary filmmaker. First, there is the "Flaherty-tradition" which tries to become one with the subject, merge with it and actually vanish in it – and indeed, you derive some pleasure from this process of vanishing into the other, of seeing with someone else's eyes and then trying to convey that. The second approach – but this is, of course, how I see it; I am talking about my own personal view – would be the "Vertov-

approach”, understanding life as clay which you can change and mold. Again, you merge with your subject to a certain degree, but you do not become one with it; you reconstruct it. So, my observational work is closer to the first tradition, and what I try to do in my so-called “experimental” films, or what you might call my more “radical” cinematography, is certainly closer to the second one: here, I collect items of reality and put them together in a different order – as if I was weaving or working with different pieces of cloth.

However, I think that both methods are experimental inasmuch as you never know the outcome in advance. On the other hand, I am not sure whether I like the term “experimental film” in general because making films should in all cases be an experiment; it cannot be anything *but* an experiment. Following a certain approach – let’s say, observational or direct cinema – does not ensure that the result will be a good film. For example, in *Acropolis* (2001/2004) I tried to do just that, and it was a disaster! From then on, I decided I had to find other methods to convey what I actually wanted to narrate about this whole issue of the Acropolis. I had to come up with something which I could not find outside in the real world, I had to improvise with different materials and abandon the observational approach. That’s why I use all these segments from various sources, Super 8 and Kodachrome, trash material, to do a reconstruction from real bits and pieces – well, perhaps not exactly “real”, but then again, in a way these image techniques are even more real than reality.

U. M.: *I am intrigued by your metaphor of weaving and treating images like pieces of cloth. It shows that the ‘new’ in documentary is also a question of the medium. One might say that your own use of media is rather diverse: it includes analogue material like 16 mm film, found footage, often in (Super) 8 mm, or photography, and more recently you also employ digital HD video, for instance in your essay film Manuscript (2017). Could you tell us about this shift to the digital image? What does it mean for the notion of “documentary”? Which aesthetic possibilities does it imply? Weaving, for instance? And in what ways does it affect the form of your work, for example with regard to the temporal sequence or spatial layering of images?*

E. S.: I don’t know exactly why, but I really feel that I have to alter the image whenever it looks too clean or too “digital”. Then I have to make it more “analogical” and, in my eyes, truer. This has to do with my past, with my wanting to mix things together, like, for example, when I paint. I am never happy with the first texture and always want to put something *on* it. I do not like things that have only one texture, and I also do not like this quality in the digital. That’s why I like painting on film where you can have several textures on top of each other and play with that. In some ways, it also seems more human – and more real.

U. M.: *But isn't there a contradiction in using the digital to make it look more analogue, or the smooth new medium to make it look more "human"? There are many instances in your work when the analogue is re-medialized or embedded in the digital. One of those instances would be found footage from flea markets or old home movies that you integrate and process in a digital framework. But what is the material or thematic surplus value of found footage; how would you describe its transformation into something new? Also – and perhaps a little provocative – when you use this material, isn't there a danger of giving your digital projects a certain warm and pre-industrial vintage quality?*

E. S.: Of becoming too nostalgic ... yes, there is. And I think I have fallen into this trap many times. It is something I do not like in other films I watch, and I do not like it in many of my own films either. It is very tricky – because, on the one hand, when you use this kind of archival material in a digital environment you cannot really be very rough on it. On the other hand, when you burn a piece of old film or paint on it, when you shape a film with your hands and put other textures on it, you can be much more violent – while, in this case, I haven't found a reliable way to avoid nostalgia and take out the "past".

I recently did a piece I wasn't very happy about with regard to this nostalgic feel. But I think it is helpful to find out that something you used to do and considered quite effective does not work any longer, and that you are stuck.

U. M.: *Yet, I suppose that a certain materiality gives you possibilities that you do not have in the digital. It is hard to intentionally program a glitch, for instance, or make the digital dirty.*

E. S. It is not so much about "dirt", though. First of all, I need to alter things – for example, I like drawing on paper that already has something on it, a note or a stamp; or it's yellow paper or red paper, it is not completely blank, or it has been in use before. This gives me the freedom to go somewhere else from there. So, it is not about making it "dirty" but rather about building on a fact that is already there. With the digital you cannot really change or work on such a material basis.

U. M.: *There is no underlying stratum, no palimpsest character, no history to it, nothing you can remodel ...*

E. S.: Yes, yes, there is no movement in time, not even an imagined one. When you shoot something on Super 8, it may well have this nostalgic quality, but it also gives you the illusion that you are playing with time. Moreover, there is something you can take in your hands and, as I said, actually burn, draw on, cut ... which you cannot do with the digital. You have a specific set of means and possibilities in every medium. And since I do not know how to put something *on* the digital image, I do it on the non-digital.

U. M.: *Turning from production towards reception, there are not only new audiovisual technologies but also new “post-cinematic” contexts or venues for the documentary and the moving image in general. Although classical film festivals still seem to be booming, “cinema”, both as an architectural space and a cultural sphere, is increasingly replaced or at least complemented by other projection sites – galleries, art centers, exhibition spaces – where the audience no longer sits motionless in the dark but is free to wander in a white cube with multiple screens. Your own work, for example, has been shown at the 58th Venice Biennale (Mouth, 2019; see the essay by Brenda Hollweg in this issue) or the documenta 14 in Athens (Manuscript) and Kassel (Acropolis, 2004 / Virgin’s Temple, 2017). Is this simply another kind of “cinema”? Or does this relocation have more significant consequences for your work – and your understanding of the documentary?*

E. S.: Well, I am not quite sure how to answer this. Even for the Biennale or documenta I only did two works that were completely new. For the most part, I showed older works that were not made for these occasions. So, I do not have that much experience, I do not really know how it is to actually create something knowing that you will exhibit it in this other context.

When I prepare something, I just try to find a way to make this puzzle work. I never think so much about how people will perceive it, particularly when it is a more experimental film and not about a person or specific people. I am not very concerned with the reception of a work and whether the audience will exactly understand. I rather ask myself, let’s say, how I could write a “poem”; I would see it much closer to poetry. Only if the film is about people, it is always very important for me that the portrayed persons would like themselves in the film. Or at least, I want to have the idea that they like themselves in that film and that – again, in my head – the people who come to watch this film would like the person on the screen, too. This is my first priority: I have never made a film about someone I did not like, or actually like very, very much ... or love.

U. M.: *Let us stick for a moment to that human element. You sometimes talk about discovering a new topic – when you roam the city streets and coffee houses until you have an encounter with a site or a person that appeals or “speaks” to you on a very direct human level (I hope, I am not over-romanticizing the whole affair). It seems inevitable that this practice places the human in the center of your images – it is an eminently “anthropocentric” method. With this in mind, what do you think about recent tendencies of the documentary to see the human as only one part of a world of multiple non-human agents, like in the films of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab or, in Greece, Proti yli/Raw Material (Christos Karakepelis, 2011)? To a certain degree, these films approach reality from a post-human or new-materialist perspective. Would this be meaningful for you as a filmmaker? And are there moments in your own work when you leave the human behind?*

E. S.: I think, even when my films are not about people, the human is always in the center of what I do. For example, I consider *Acropolis* a very anthropocentric film, although it is made entirely from old Super 8 footage and has no “real” people in it. And it is the same with *Manuscript*. I don’t know why, but I do not feel very close to the kind of films that you referred to. I feel alienated by them, actually, because they are often too sophisticated. Certainly not all of them, of course. They are interesting, but I do not smell the human element very much. Now, this may sound as if I was snobbish or arrogant; I am not saying that I make better films, but these films seem to me a bit narcissistic sometimes. They are supposed to deal with people, but then you cannot sense them.

U. M.: *Of course, Leviathan (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel, 2012) is probably more about humans and fishes and seagulls and night and water and plastic and diesel ...*

E. S.: *Leviathan* is wonderful, and also the first one they did, the one about the herders, *Sweetgrass*!

U. M.: *Let us turn to politics. Another possible deviation or expansion of the documentary tradition certainly relates to issues of gender. For one thing, many of your films refer to an (Anglo-Saxon) ancestral line of the documentary which presents itself as quite patriarchal – from Flaherty to Grierson, from Leacock to Wiseman, from Michael Moore to Castaing-Taylor. Considering this male gaze as well as our broader conditions of life, is there a decidedly “female” subject for you, a female gaze, a female sensibility, a female reality that should be documented? Or even a queer one – like, perhaps, in your current work in progress, *Nights and Days with Dimitra K.*, about a politically engaged sex worker in Athens?*

E. S.: A “female” documentary ... well, I would say that you cannot have documentary without empathy, even if a documentary film is about a brick wall. So, in that sense, this would indicate a female gaze rather than a male one. I mean, the issue of empathy is very important, even when you are dealing with inanimate objects or non-human beings, just like that urge to become one with your subject. I find this much more often in women artists, and I think, this could be called a female aspect – although many men clearly have it, too. Flaherty had it, for instance, this sense of becoming or wanting to become, this liquid state that might become or wants to become the other. This is what I would call a feminine gaze or feminine state of being as a documentary filmmaker.

Obviously, all this relates very much to being *close*. As I grow older, it becomes more and more difficult to carry a camera. And I start to think, why carry this big camera, why not take a smaller one? Or why even use a – how is it called, a very, very small camera – *GoPro*? I feel that I don’t even need this. I just

need my phone, or maybe not even my phone, just a notebook, and then reinvent the images. Or just take a picture of what I find interesting and then write something. So, I am becoming much more open and fluid about what a documentary and what reality is, or why something should be a film and not a book, or a comic book. It is crucial not to be too rigid about what something should actually become. I know that I always want to “take notes” about things – I take pleasure from this and from being in relation with people. But I suffocate from having to actually *do* something every time, create a closure from all those little stories that are happening in everyday-life, having to make a “film” with beginning, middle, and end – or in any other order.

I am moving away from your question, but what I am saying is that I see myself breaking free in the sense that I don't know all the time what I will do – just take notes and a picture, or just draw, while other things will lead to a film. I no longer want to start the way I started with *Dimitra* where I said, OK, I want to make a film about Dimitra who is a sex worker, and now we have to find money for *this*, or we have to deliver the film *then*, and so on and so forth. For me, this has become a very odd way to work. I suppose, it is how things function in filmmaking, but I keep coming back to the notion of weaving. You do things when the time is right, so in some cases a documentary may take ten years, and sometimes it can be completed in three weeks. It really depends on the kind of relation you have with your subject. Therefore, a “queer” documentary gaze or a “queer” perspective would perhaps be able to twist the rules and expectations all the time. It could be reality according to what you *think* – which means that you do not even have to make a film.

U. M.: *What you say reminds me very much of a novel by Tom McCarthy, Satin Island (2015). The protagonist is an anthropologist working for an international corporation, and his boss expects him to write the “big report” about contemporary society and the postindustrial world. Of course, it must also have a new form; he cannot write another book like Lévi-Strauss did more than half a century ago. At one point, he thinks that when doing fieldwork, he shouldn't even take notes, he should leave his tape recorder at home and perhaps just live in the situation – be present, be there with the people he is interacting with. And to create something like a “work”, there should be more like him, more anthropologists, a secret order of anthropologists, all doing the same and having clandestine meetings in the catacombs beneath the city of London. Basically, they would invent a new spirit of living in the moment: they abandon all media, no cameras, no tape-recording or note-taking, and do anthropology by being part of their time.*

E. S.: Yes! Or just being – not even being *there*! This is fantastic. But usually, when you see documentary as play, someone always tells you, the game will end at *that* date, and you will have to deliver *this* result. Then, it's no game anymore, it is no longer an exploration, and you are already restrained and fed up. So, perhaps I

am not all grown-up, but as I get older, I find it increasingly difficult to run the program and “deliver” – and not just *be*.

Also, I feel very critical about what is happening in the art world right now and how documentaries are exhibited in galleries. It seems quite spooky how “otherness” and the people who live at the fringes of society suddenly appear in all these areas and spaces of art and get scrutinized by critics and dealers and audiences. There is something weird about that: it takes us back to the museum and similar colonial institutions or discourses. Even though it starts out from the opposite, anti-colonial side, it ends up being quite problematic.

U. M.: *A kind of exoticism ...*

E. S.: Yes – although I have been part of it myself. I really wonder what is happening; it is very much like visiting a zoo.

U. M.: *On the other hand, your work is not only about otherness but mostly about your own sphere of life. It has an ethnographic focus on Greece, it deals with Greek history, mentality, sociality. It is closely entangled with Greek sensibilities, Greek politics and the Greek discursive landscape. Can you outline what is particularly “Greek” for you and therefore interesting to document? What bothers or angers you, and what do you experience as lovable or especially alluring about the Greek or Athenian reality?*

E. S.: You know, one and the same street can be very dirty or stink terribly, but this smell can also be very moving at another time of the day because it reminds you of a mid-afternoon when you were twelve years old. For me, the city is the story of my life so that in all things I turn away from or dislike I also find features that I love. It is like watching myself getting older and understanding what I have done wrong, my own contradictions and the fact that I cannot get over them. I am still in a kind of *kouvari* [tangle]. And Athens is very much a *kouvari*, too, so I feel very close to it. I like this big *kouvari*-situation.

U. M.: *However, I am also thinking of several of your essay films, for instance your deeply critical if not acidic Acropolis or Virgin’s Temple, that address topics like misogyny, the convolutions of sexuality and nationalism, religious orthodoxy and its right-wing instrumentalizations. So, your work is certainly not only about your personal memories and background: there is a lot of politics at the same time.*

E. S.: Of course – but again, this is connected to my own upbringing and contradictions. I mean the dictatorship of patriarchy that you experience everywhere in Greece, from schools to universities or grocery shops, and in very different forms. I do not think that this has changed very much over the years; I find it still very present, even though there may be more women in politics today.

But this social condition is not one of my concerns since I do not want to send any messages with my films. I suppose there are simply things that I myself have gone through or experienced and that, in a conscious-unconscious way, leave their mark on the film, even if they are not the main subject. It's the same with the gaze on the female body or issues of Christianity and femininity: in a sense, these topics are all related. But I do not try to make any general statements about them because I hope that my films are more complex than that.

U. M.: *Beyond such very concrete political issues – and with respect to Filmicon being a “Journal of Greek Film Studies” – do you think there is a distinct Greek notion of the documentary? Is there a specific understanding of “reality” and “representation” that would inform Greek documentary?*

E. S.: I don't think that there is something like Greek documentary. At least, there is nothing in documentary at this point like the Greek “weird cinema”. When documentary started to become a rather widespread practice in Greece at the end of the 1990s or early 2000s, the whole thing almost exploded and developed in many directions, because documentary had actually been very, very conventional before. What I want to say is, Greek documentary does not have an identity. There are creators or *auteurs*, but I wouldn't say that there is anything specifically Greek about them.

What I see as a possibility, though – we haven't done that, and I don't know why – might be to initiate something like an anti-documentary movement which would very much go with the idea of being present, like we said earlier, where being present is much more important than the actual film: the filming process rather than a film having been completed. This corresponds very much to the Greek philosophy and way of life: one of the good things we have is our sense for being really present. I think this could result in a true documentary of the *palami*, of the hand or palm, a documentary as intimate as a touch of the palm, where you get very close with your notebook, or your phone, or your face. I imagine a documentary of intimacy, but for no reason and of no reason. Perhaps, this would be a good way to describe Greek documentary as I like to think of it.

U. M.: *That sounds very tempting and quite erotic; it is a beautiful notion of documentary. Perhaps, you should teach this in your university courses: “filmmaking without camera”.*

E. S.: Actually, this is what I am doing at the graduate school, no-camera filmmaking. At the National Film School, we had a teacher who did a course on light which was called “No-lighting workshop”. He taught us to use natural light sources. Because most of the time, and also in theater, we act as if natural light did not exist. So, we have to actually invent light each time anew, even though light is always present. And the same often happens in documentary with respect

to reality: it is as if reality was not there, and you have to invent ways to present it.