

November 2015

How to work together Think Tank

**Sharna Pax — part one: I miss you. I love you. I hope I see you before I die.
a conversation with Eva Marie Rødbro**

For How To Work Together's Think Tank, Sharna Pax are researching film practices that work with collaboration and particular anthropological sensibilities, involving conversations with artists and filmmakers including Eva Marie Rødbro, Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Joshua Oppenheimer, Seamus Harahan and Chan Hau Chun. Sharna Pax presents a screening and discussion at Chisenhale Gallery on 1 December 2015, in response to their ongoing research. Material will be documented in the Sharna Pax Library, an evolving digital archive containing interviews, commissioned essays and related content, as well as in a printed publication to be launched at the event.

The first of a series of interviews is published here with Eva Marie Rødbro.

Eva Marie Rødbro (b.1980, Denmark) is a film director with a background in visual arts and photography. She graduated from the National Film School of Denmark in 2015. Films include *We Choose The Milky Way* (2015), *Dan Mark* (2014), *Monkey Donkey* (2014), *Kruger* (2013), *I Touched Her Legs* (2010) and *Fuck You Kiss Me* (2008).

I miss you. I love you. I hope I see you before I die.

SP: We are going to take your film I Touched Her Legs as the starting point for our conversation, but please feel free to talk about other projects, and we will also talk more generally about your way of working. But if we start with that film – how did that project come about? How did you end up there?

Eva: I decided to go to Brownwood after doing some research. I knew I wanted to go to Texas, because I wanted to go the biggest state. It was the state I had the most visual and cinematic ideas about before I even went there. I knew I wanted to go to a place that was far away from the ocean and far away from any big cities. I imagined somewhere in the middle of a big flat landscape. I had just finished a project in Greenland (*Fuck You Kiss Me*), so I thought it was going to be the same sort of endless vast landscape, a different kind of desert. I was looking at the map a lot, at cities and towns. Reading about how many high schools there were. I found a place that was exactly the right size. It was not big enough to be the centre of anything, but still big enough for everybody to live a full circle of life and maybe to continue to the next circle of life. But nobody would ever come there to look for anything because it is just like any other place. I wanted to find young people who knew that they were living in a place like this.

SP: How did you go about meeting people when you were there?

Eva: When I arrived it was really, really hot. It was the summer holiday and there were no people in the streets. I was scared of driving, so the first week I was just walking around. But then I had to get a car, so that people would start talking to me, because they thought I was really scary and weird just walking around in the sun. I started finding small places, where

kids would hang out in the afternoon and in the evenings. I saw some and spoke to them, and then I found this one white house with a porch. I found that porch and these people, and that became the main place with the two sisters, Betty and Emily. There was a guy skate boarding outside.

SP: Did you start to film immediately, or how did you build up a relationship?

Eva: With all of them, I started filming pretty much straight away. So I would just say: “Hey, what are you guys doing? Can I film you skate?” It is such a big help, when people are doing something concrete, an action, because it’s creepy when strangers walk up to you and say: “I’ve been looking for you all my life, you are amazing, I just want to look at you and film you.” It’s very strange also, when you’re an adult and they are actually children, so it’s good to have an action that can connect us in a more innocent way, so they understand that we have a common interest. So I would film these kids skating, but I knew that I wasn’t really interested in that. Then when they went into the house, they said: “You can come along.” That was the first day, and they wanted to smoke some weed, so they said: “Eva, if you get us some, if you give us 20 bucks, you can just stay here as much as you want and film whatever.” I said: “Okay”.

SP: How do you think about the relationship with the people you work with?

Eva: I have had very different relationships, but somehow all of them are very alike. There’s a lot of love in there. I find some people that I get really interested in, but then they also get interested in me, because I see them, and I want to hang out with them in a way that they don’t get all the time. If somebody would come to me like this, I would also want to hang out. I’m still in contact with most of these kids. I have been speaking a lot with Betty recently, the older sister. We spoke a lot last week. It’s like: “I miss you. I love you. I hope I see you before I die.” But when we hang out in the beginning of course, it’s like: “Yeah, you can be here, you’re cool,” and then: “Okay, let me help you with your homework.” Just trying to be there and give something back into their lives. Most of the time I was not filming while hanging out with them.

SP: So it’s more than making a film?

Eva: Yeah, it’s getting to know... It feels like building a bridge from one planet to another, and then just seeing what happens. In the end you have to leave, even though you feel like you want to stay, but you have to leave at least for a while because it gets so intense for all parts. It goes really fast.

SP: Perhaps when entering these new spaces there is an uncertainty about where to position yourself which opens up ways of seeing. Like when you first meet someone, it’s a constant negotiation where you’re learning a lot very quickly.

Eva: When I made this film, I was really aware that it was very much about that. That’s also why I called it *I Touched Her Legs*, something that is said in the film. It’s this short, tiny gesture, which can feel so big. Because when you really feel like touching the person next to you, you know how it feels? It’s like the rest of the world is not there any more.

SP: Do you navigate the relationship constantly? Is it something you do together?

Eva: It’s always in relation to the kind of person I am following or looking at. Sometimes it becomes more of a game. “Hey, stand over there,” or: “Let’s do this,” and sometimes it’s just me following. People having the whole motor, you know. That’s also why each thing becomes pretty different. When there’s a different language, there’s a different chemistry of meeting. So with *Dan Mark*, the other film I made with this kid, it’s half him, half me

basically. It's just me running.

SP: In this mode of working you accumulate a lot of stories or moments that you never forget because it's something that happened between you and another person. Does a story like this spring to mind? Perhaps something that changed your direction or that made you make a decision.

Eva: I think with Betty, I knew the first time I saw her on that porch. The day before I had met another girl there, who was sitting with her baby. She was just 16, sitting with this child. I was hanging out with her in the afternoon and everything somehow felt very dark. Her grandmother was inside the house. There were some dogs as well; they were half dead. I didn't know what I could give there. The mental state of this young girl, on the porch with her baby. I felt so ruined after. There was no connection, it seemed like she had gone; gone to another place already. And then I think it was the next day, I was in my car going around really close to the place where I was staying. Basically just around the corner from my house and the two sisters were sitting there and these guys skate boarding. I just knew. I could see the whole film. I could also see ten more films than the one I made, right there. I knew that these girls existed; they already looked like girls from a film. I could feel an equality immediately in our relationship, because they were smart, and they were checking me out like: "Who the fuck are you?" They had a lot of attitude, but they were ready. They were ready to do anything, because they had nothing to do. They could also take advantage of me. So the first meeting was like, I've got to stay put right now, because these girls, they've got it.

SP: You've said before: "I want to take people to places they otherwise wouldn't have gone." If we're talking about the people you work with, could you give us an example of this?

Eva: It was a unique meeting for all of these kids somehow. You make a different setting to what these kids have experienced before. To have conversations which have a different structure. They were really thinking about a lot of things. I like to plan some things. Maybe they're thinking at first that I'm crazy if I start saying that there are not many plants here in this landscape, there's not much life going on and it makes it feel like you get more in contact with what's out there. Like when you're in the jungle it feels like the rest of the universe is so far away because it's so enclosed, but when you're in the desert, it feels like the stars are closer. I speak to them about these things, and some of them start listening and new things start happening and it's beautiful to be with people who are growing and understanding and wondering about things and having fun. Playing with ideas together for the first time.

SP: You focus mainly on young people and that space before things have really set, where people are figuring things out. Maybe that affects the way you can enter their spaces as well, because they might have a certain kind of openness to you coming in. What's the idea of spending time with different groups of young people?

Eva: I think it's probably many things. I grew up in a boarding school for young people because my dad was the headmaster there, so I have always been surrounded by hundreds of teenagers. So somehow this was my world. They always had the same age, all throughout the 80s and 90s. I was scared of them, but they were also my heroes. They were not really grown-ups, but they had love bites, cigarettes and mohawks. It is also the time you have for yourself, being young. I know from my own life, I have almost the same time for myself now as a teenager has, but very few grown-ups do or choose to have that. It's the time you spend with your friends or with yourself without really being busy with anything, especially if you don't have all the means in the world to entertain yourself. The stuff that happens when you hang out. There's an openness in that and you're not protecting yourself so much at this stage.

SP: When you say you are constantly navigating the relationship and following your intuition, have you ever felt that you don't know? That you can't decide in a moment, whether you are

right or wrong when making a decision?

Eva: That is really when it is not the right person somehow. With the newest film (*We Choose The Milky Way*), the girl that became the main character, we had so much we could do. We met a couple of years earlier and it was just crazy. But when I met her recently, there was a shift. I felt I could never be alone with her, even if I was alone with her. There would always be some disturbance and I would often be in doubt about what was actually going on and what I could ask from her. Also because she was so damaged. I wanted to protect her, but I knew that I would have to push her to get anything from her because she was so smart. I was in doubt the whole time about what was right. I was pretty sure most of the time that we didn't feel the same. It was just really difficult to work on this. Because it's not the same, the magic is not there. It's better when I don't doubt the trust, otherwise it makes me stop and think too much. If we can just hold hands and we know where each other are, then there can be a lot of small doubts. I'm very good at making the decisions if the main agreement is there.

SP: Is it important for you to make yourself vulnerable? Is it important that people feel that they can somehow step into your personal space?

Eva: I think it varies how I can give people something. For example with *Dan Mark*, it's not important to let him step into my personal space so much, because I also don't know what he would be looking for there, but definitely, he's crashed in my house and I've made him a lot of meals and you know, washed his hands. So it depends. With these girls, it was really important to be someone very available who could help them. I was giving rides everywhere, I was basically just a taxi driving around and made myself really accessible. Also, to talk and give and listen, ask questions. To give them something, because I think that is a really big part. I'm also a very polite person and very shy, so of course I always have to know that it's okay. I have to give myself a lot of reasons that it's okay to come and mix myself up into somebody else's life.

SP: During shooting, do you enter a stage where you know that you're doing this project right now? Do you enter another mode?

Eva: I can recognise this, especially if it's for a long time and I'm alone in it. For example after four weeks, I've tried that several times, then I start really doubting again. At that point I don't have an overview of what has happened and I try to write down what I've been doing. Then when I go back I get really confused and scared. I remember when I was leaving Brownwood, I had the worst case of insomnia in my whole life. I couldn't sleep at all. I was terrified that I had been there for so long without getting anything done. In the end, I had to go to a friend, who lived out on a ranch to get sleeping pills and get tucked in because I was losing my mind. So I can get very doubtful at the end of shooting, because I'm so obsessed. In Brownwood I had three groups of friends. I would spend my time equally between these three, so that none of them became tired of me. I would always be able to come with something fresh, but also, because I was too shy to stay in any of the places the whole time, I would say: "Okay, I've got to go ... Now I'm back!" I bring a lot of awkwardness with me as well, you know. In many ways that's also good, because that's disarming for both parts. It's a bit clumsy, but it's very well intended.

SP: Something I've felt when watching the film is a sense of uselessness of gestures or perhaps gestures which don't serve an immediate function and cannot be easily explained. Could you talk a bit about that?

Eva: Yes, that whole film is sort of just gestures. It's still really important to me, because it reminds me that this is important, all the in-between, all these gaps, I'm still looking for it but it has become less specific for me. All the awkwardness, the small gestures that you do. It's all about trying to be in the world, being in your body, in a group, or just in a room. It's never

easy especially when you're being looked at, when you are in a situation where you film. The film is always happening and someone is looking at you and I think that's important also. People talk about 'fly on the wall', that I use this technique, but I don't really think that exists. There's always a conversation going on, looking and allowing to be looked at.

SP: We're quite interested in some of the more formal gestures. Repetition and performative gestures, and how you've been working with film formally.

Eva: I've always been looking at people and what they do. Since I was very young, I've had a slightly crazy relationship to the mirror, having long conversations with myself. Sometimes I'd turn around and be like "Hi ... oh hi!" I just started reading a book called *The First Bad Man* by Miranda July and the whole first page is describing this. This was of course something I was ashamed of admitting when I was younger, but now I think it's very normal to try to step outside of yourself, that distance, that movement. Everybody has that, everybody can recognise that. We need this little short distance in order to know that we are ourselves somehow. It's touching, when you see people being self-aware for just a second.

SP: Sometimes you can look at people's gestures, something that should be a simple thing, like eating, and suddenly you can't stop looking at it and it strikes you as odd somehow. I suppose it relates to this sense of looking – what you perceive and what you register.

Eva: I think that also relates to what you said before. But then it's about isolating it and taking it out of context, that's what I think is interesting, so it doesn't become part of a meal situation or a getting ready situation, but isolated so it becomes these gestures – iconic, universal images of just being human. Which can be out of time and out of place. As long as there are arms and legs and hands and bodies, there are movements that will be repeated. They will always be very unique because they will belong to the person, but they will be the same, a choreography of people.

SP: You use a form of editing that doesn't attempt to construct a smooth, linear narrative. A kind of dissonance and compilation, but at the same time a connectedness; that these things can sit next to each other. Maybe it's a question about the way you edit and what you're trying to produce through that kind of editing. Your technique, I guess.

Eva: It's been a little while since I've been editing myself. If I'm trying to make something longer that has more of a story, it's difficult, it becomes impossible. When I did *I Touched Her Legs*, it took me forever, but I also feel like I learned a language while doing it. It sounds so clichéd, but it really felt like I taught myself a language that came from me. It was reassuring that the logic of my brain could be expressed somehow and actually communicate. It was a pretty religious experience for me. I didn't feel like I was inventing something that didn't exist, I just did what I felt was right. So there's a red light and then I'll go to a big, red room and then I'll have black and then I'll have a movement that goes into another room. This makes sense. This is how the world is. But I don't think this is something I can do all the time. It was a technique that brought me from one place to another and it's always going to be there in all my work.

SP: To perhaps continue with another thing you've said before: "I want people to recognise themselves in people they didn't think they understood." Could you try to talk a little bit about that?

Eva: To boil it down, my main mission is to build small bridges to everywhere. Between people and groups and different cultures. Sometimes when you talk about people and you try to explain that, "This is how this person feels," it can be very hard to identify with. It's more about finding that distance or closeness and that's what I'm trying to do, because then you can recognise yourself in everybody. Like in fiction or novels, if the character has a good,

fully shaped presence somehow, you'll be able to recognise yourself, even if it's an old man or a rich psycho-killer. To a great extent I can do that with real people. I'm also always most interested in kids who don't have the most easy life. Who are pushed out in a difficult spot in society. So if I can make other people understand them as what they may be instead of a troubled poor southern kid, an abortion rate or statistic – if you can experience this encounter, you'll find some love for this person. I remember, when I saw *Streetwise* by Martin Bell for the first time, and it was so beautiful the way you meet these kids. I knew I would remember these people forever.

SP: How do you think of success and failure? What does it mean to lead a successful life or a life of failure?

Eva: There's always a story where there's some disorder. There has to be some cracks. In general the world is just extremely fucked up. That's my basic belief. It's completely out of balance. The idea of success and failure is completely pornographised. My mission is to find places and groups of people, where there are a lot of components of chaos but somehow this creates a synergy of a wholesome universe. There are always mini-colonies of life everywhere and to look at them and appreciate them is important to me.

SP: When you say that your basic belief is that the world is pretty fucked up, perhaps this also suggests that there is no resolution?

Eva: I don't think I will ever come with any suggestions of any systems, but I can probably imagine myself making some more angry stuff, not politically angry but more violent. I can feel that I own my anger more as I'm a bit older. I feel more decisive.

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