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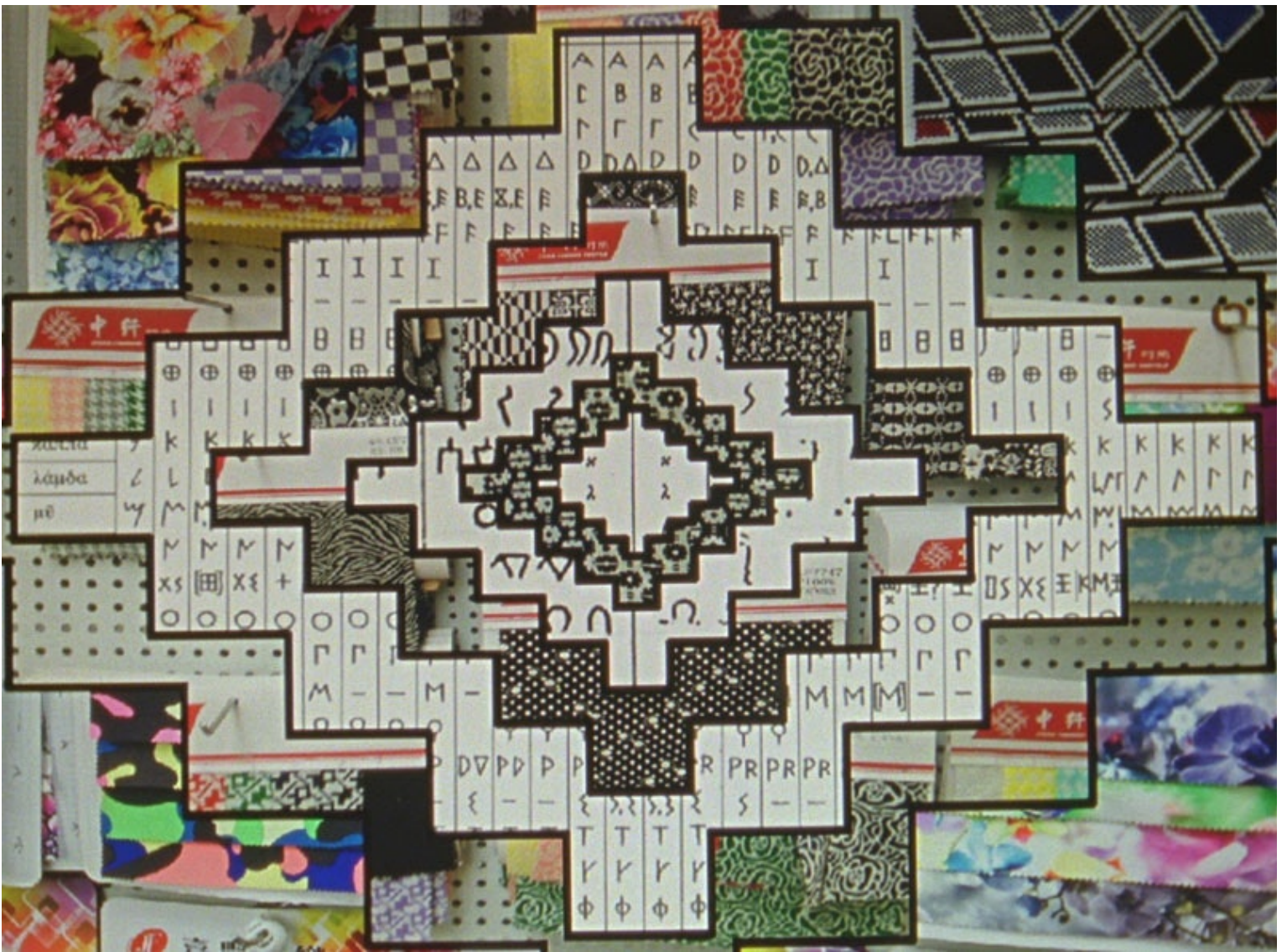


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Film INCONVERSATION

JODIE MACK with Leo Goldsmith

OCT 2018



A still from *The Grand Bizarre*. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

Filmed in more than a dozen countries, Jodie Mack's maximalist sixty-minute opus *The Grand Bizarre (The Pleasure of the Textile)* comprises tens of thousands of individually shot frames of psychedelic textiles, maps, alphabets, shipping containers, and electronics. As in her meticulously hand-animated short films, each frame becomes part of a vast and wildly frenetic whole, which, in this film, forms a global symphony of strange codes and hidden patterns. Set to a similarly manic ersatz global pop bricolage on the soundtrack, Mack's film is both hyper-specific and breathlessly sweeping in scope. We video-conferenced after the film's world premiere at the 2018 Locarno Film Festival to talk about weaving, kimchi tacos, "tramp stamps," and alternate knowledge systems.

Leo Goldsmith (Rail): Your film is remarkably rich with ideas, but you completely eschew text. Although, I think you mentioned to me that at one point you did consider having voiceover or maybe song-lyrics at one point?

Jodie Mack: That's true—some of the songs did used to have lyrics. I was trying to appropriate various vocal tropes in pop music, so there was some auto-tune and things like that. But the problem became that my lyrics were essayistic—I just wanted to talk and talk and talk. When you listen to pop music, it actually doesn't have many words. So, it felt like a challenge to not use language, because if you have lyrics or words, with everything moving by at such a fast pace, you can't rely on the viewer hearing and understanding everything. Even thinking about the way we know pop lyrics, how many times do we get those wrong? A lot. So, throw 'em out.

Rail: [*Laughs*] But obviously there are lots of themes and ideas that you want to convey through the film. Was that part of the process, to find a way to convey ideas through imagery and pattern and montage?

Mack: Ultimately I needed to let go of a lot of my expectations for comprehension on the audience's part. It's like, "Hey! Here's my movie! It's about everything, everything, everything!" The idea to remove the lyrics was freeing because it allowed the viewer to make their own assumptions. Making these decisions based off montage and connections based off image and sound—I felt like that was the more sophisticated route to try; to try and imply all of this, but not to look down on anyone not getting it. Some of the power of experimental film is giving the viewer the autonomy to make decisions about what they perceive. So I thought, just give it to the viewer. They could perceive it on one level; they could understand it on another level. This is a film that definitely benefits from a re-watch. I was really interested in this idea of a speed-read through history or a data regurgitation or a cinematic CliffsNotes told through motifs, as opposed to through words.

Rail: Animators have a very specific way of working that's different from that of, say, an observational cinematographer. They spend a lot of time in a closed studio focusing on minute details and small movements—something you capture in the film's coda. But here you're often working outside, perched on a cliff, or in very public situations, in the middle of a market with people coming up to you all the time asking you, "What the hell are you doing?"

Mack: In a lot of the films that I've made—or the parts of this film that are shot at home on the animation stand—you get focused, sit there for hours, shut the door, do the thing. With this film, I was constantly talking to people, giving animation lessons, having philosophical conversations about mainstream media, meeting strangers, talking to kids skipping school, all that sort of stuff. Everyone comes up like, "What's the camera? What are you doing?" So I was constantly armed with supplies. I had filmstrips; I had clips of the animation so I could show it to them. Normally when I'm at home I count a lot. I have a little ticket-taker that I count with when I'm shooting. With this film, I just had to pay a little bit less attention. Sometimes I had a buddy with me that would click the camera while I ran back and forth. Sometimes the buddy became the people fielder. But it was a great way to meet people. I definitely took down tons of email addresses and WhatsApp numbers and still communicate with a number of these previous strangers that I met on the road shooting. What was interesting to me is that you think of animation as something that demands a lot of control, but going out into these type of circumstances you're basically forfeiting that type of control and embracing the lack of it in some ways. You can't control the clouds and you can't control the people in the park and you can't control the wind—that was another huge element—or the sun changing; things like that.

Rail: This process, of course, makes the film a quasi-ethnographic project. This must have been on your mind while making the film, especially because of the ongoing conversations about cultural appropriation these days.

Mack: Yeah, that was a huge concern. The film was basically finished while hanging out with Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard. It was funny because I didn't feel like I was able to get an ethnographer to acknowledge my project as something that was in conversation with what they were doing. The difference here is that the active camera is a passive camera. This is an active camera that's bringing life to the scenario and there's a very different sense of labor for the maker. I shared the labor with the subjects in the way that a lot of ethnographic films do not. At Harvard I would get into a lot of conversations with people about anthropology—this whole idea of cinema as research and this whole idea of power dynamics between makers and subjects. But I felt like I was working in an obtuse form where I didn't have many examples and I didn't have many mentors to talk to about how to approach this type of work.

I thought a lot about the exploitation of people, and I wondered: can you exploit objects? Maybe

you can emancipate objects and give them new spirits by turning them into animated dance members or something like that. I wondered if maybe I could sidestep a big problem of ethnography by working with objects. I wondered about the possibilities of learning a place through objects versus learning it through people or testimonials.

Rail: Working with objects becomes a different way of knowing things—to have an object in your hand and to touch it, the idea of a tactile sense of something. Were you thinking of your animation of the objects, of touching and working with these objects, as a kind of research?

Mack: That was another reason that I chucked the language out of the story. When you go into the idea of ethnographic filmmaking—anthropology, Peace Corps, white privilege, white savior, guilt, add in the next complex-yet-memefied problem here—when you get into these notions it became apparent that I would take interest in a textile, then I would go and read about it and I would sit in a library, look around, and wonder if I could trust anything that was in any of the books. How have things been lost in translation? And how has it been portrayed based on the position as an “other?” As a college professor, I really wanted to grapple with this notion of “knowledge,” especially now that information is so malleable on the Internet, it really proves the problems of the book.

I’m really interested in this idea of different types of knowledge: Things you learn or read, which can be right or wrong. Learning Spanish in school, and then arriving in Mexico and realizing how much slang there is and how you don’t actually know the language. Again, that was another reason why I took the language out. I had no clear position, I didn’t think I had any authority, and anything I could possibly say could be totally wrong. Information became suspect and that was another reason to allow the film to be an experience. A lot of people ask, “Why aren’t you telling us the names of the patterns? Why aren’t you telling us what they mean?” And I say, “Well, it’s very slippery and the information that’s recorded about it, I don’t know if I believe.”

Rail: My favorite part of the film, which is the sequence with the images of—it’s probably not cool to call them “tramp stamps,” but let’s say “lower back tattoos”? I’m assuming they’re images you found online, that you didn’t get 400 people with back tattoos into the studio.

Mack: Well it’s so funny, I’ve actually had this idea to make this movie called *Tramp Stamp*. I used to live in Chicago, and I got this idea during Lollapalooza that I could post up on a corner and just start getting everybody’s tattoos because I knew everybody was going to have one. Maybe not now because it was kind of a 90s thing, an early Aughts thing. Somebody did say, “I really don’t see how that part fits into this film.” But I totally see it! There’s appropriating these images that have meaning as symbols and language, but they make it decorative and they don’t actually know. The whole idea of tattooing never being a part of “white culture” at all, becoming more a decorative embellishment of the body. So that was actually going to be a short, like ten years ago, then thinking about how to put that into this movie was really important to me. All the stills for that were sourced from the Internet. Something I thought, about half way through making this film, “This film would be maybe more interesting if I just made it *all* from the internet,” and thought about the idea of travel through the internet. This virtual stereotyping of place that comes through by travel advertisement or tourism or touristic diary.

Rail: It sets up an interesting conversation between what you are doing and the idea of the Google Image Search, of finding likenesses between certain things. I think this is true of a lot of your films: they are very analog responses to a very digital media landscape.

Mack: That’s how I saw it. I felt halfway through making it that this movie could have been about *anything*. It could have been about making shoes or plates. It could have been about food. A big thing that I wanted to include, but just didn’t, was this whole kimchi taco, “Currito,” Pastafari world that we’re living in, where we hybridize all these foods together. It’s a Frankenstein pattern, and all these things can be related to an original artisanal practice, the

industrialization of that practice, the re-artisanalization of the practice now for the rich. When we grew food it was for everyone. Then we industrialized and made it cheap. But, it made us all sick. And now to get the good food again, it's now become a thing for a different class. But who has access to this type of food?

Rail: This relates to the relationship between artist and artisan, or art and craft. This work seems so much about the invisibility of the labor behind these beautiful textiles. How do you see your relationship as a filmmaker and animator to that work? I think this is especially important in thinking about the history of labor in animation and the difference between the individual animator and the post-Fordist industrial model.

Mack: Exactly! Animation is one of the first industrialized art forms in many ways—it takes a very large team of people to crank out these projects. The idea of independent animation is actually very silly in some ways, because it's like asking an individual human to become a team of people, which speaks to this whole idea of construction of identity in a labor force: how an individual sees themselves as a worker, how they wrap their identities around labor, and how they are constantly interfacing between many objects for which they do not know the origin. Experimental filmmakers like to consider themselves underdogs or punks or away from some sort of institution. But working with the textiles and specifically the textile patterns completely unraveled all of that history for me. I could no longer take minimalism seriously. This was not a development in art. This was a rip-off of textile designs. Albers, Stella, any of these people—they're using textile designs really. It's not a huge conceptual step to say, "I'm not going to do landscapes and portraits anymore." It's always been happening and maybe had been the actual first way we made art. Because when we first made art, we didn't have this spatial reasoning system of perspective; we weren't on the grid yet.

That was maybe one of the reasons I couldn't interface with people that consider themselves ethnographers. That's a very serious, austere discipline. Perhaps you can't take on this subject with these colorful little threads, because there is all these Etsy-vibe problems that come into it. I feel that textiles *are* these underdogs that reveal a lot but don't necessarily get the attention that they need.

Rail: Do you see relationships between cinema and textile fabrication? Watching the film, I was thinking about Beryl Korot's installation *Text and Commentary* (1976 - 77), which brings together video and musical composition and weaving. And there's a connection beneath all of this between the work of animators, especially early animators, and early computer programmers, who were mostly women, so that programming, animating, and weaving are all types of "women's work."

Mack: There is of course a close relationship between the sewing machine and the film projector—I.M. Singer & Company made both. There are many filmmakers and artists that make work about this. And then there's the development of the Jacquard loom, which, as I understand, was the first instance of binary code. Which I think is where Beryl comes into play: this idea that binary code allows numbers to function as commands as opposed to words. There is a huge relationship there, and I think it gets more and more muddy as we move on technologically. I would argue that textiles are some of the first ways of mapping space in some way. They are the original grid. You need this grid to make sense of it and you need the grid to make the designs and to make the pattern. Therefore everything is on a grid, therefore we should learn to draw by thinking of things on a grid, etc., etc. Animation of course is the art of time, and as I mentioned before, the development of computer animation was in parallel with the development of computer sound possibilities, which then standardized time. In some ways, textiles standardized space, which gave a lot to the development of computer technology as a way to think about standardizing time.

Rail: You've mentioned your work as an educator: Can you talk a little bit about this? I always think it's interesting when artists are also teachers. And for some people that can be a fraught

relationship—often because of the time teaching takes away from art-making—but it sounds like you really enjoy it.

Mack: I love school. When I was a student of Roger Beebe’s—in the middle of Florida at a public school—I found an immediate goal for myself in the model of his life, where he was making films and teaching. I was very lucky to get a teaching job quite young.

The time thing isn’t an issue for me—I can find the balance. But I question the model we have for education. There is a lot of class distinction that goes into the idea of mastering something: you have to have the means to learn a language; you have to have a certain amount of resources to learn music, or to be able to read music, or have the time to be able to practice your instrument. Same with painting or drawing. I find the impossibility of education for all extremely problematic. And I find it problematic that experimental film is, for the majority, taught within very expensive private schools. I wonder, as contemporary academic institutions become more vocational, what is going to happen? The discipline of Film Studies was born because they didn’t want to teach filmmaking in universities, because it was vocational. They wanted to keep this idea of Big Knowledge, talking about cinema and writing and inventing nomenclature and adding -isms and -ologies to things. But now universities are going, “Please! Please go work for Pixar! We really want to bring in this corporate element, and we have to give our students jobs.” In America at least, it seems almost obligatory for people to need undergraduate degrees if not *graduate* degrees, and to have those not be free from the get-go is a huge problem.

At the same time, there’s so much potential there to move forward. I feel the real impasse in art *and* in education is “it would be nice if things were funded by the government.” But essentially, corporations fund our government: all roads lead to blood money. Our whole generation is asking how we move forward. How do we make bends in the grid? And is the grid made of string or metal?

Contributor

Leo Goldsmith

LEO GOLDSMITH is a writer, curator, and teacher based between Brooklyn and Amsterdam. He is the former film editor of the *Brooklyn Rail*.