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LISA TRUTTMANN: "IN THE ESSAY FILM, NOT EVERYTHING CAN BE VERIFIED"



Photo: Elsa Okazaki

By Vladimir Seput

Lisa Truttmann (1983, St. Pölten) is an Austrian artist and filmmaker based in Vienna. "In her work she weaves documentary elements into staged settings and essayistic montages, tracing the structures of social, urban and natural landscapes" (www.lisatruttmann.at) (<http://www.lisatruttmann.at>). She studied Transmedia Arts at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and received a Fulbright scholarship for her graduate studies in Film/Video at California Institute of the Arts. Her latest film *Tarpaulins* is a beautiful essay film screened at the festival of Austrian film *Diagonale* in Graz this March. In that compelling new work she dedicated two years to follow sculpture-like tents for termite fumigation in Los Angeles and used that phenomena to reflect upon concepts of home, uncanny, destruction and creation. We talked to Lisa about *Tarpaulins*, her inspiration behind it and her work as a moving image artist.

Desistfilm: In your new film *Tarpaulins* screened at this year's *Diagonale*, you follow the story of termite fumigation tents throughout Los Angeles. How did you find yourself in LA in the first place?

Lisa Truttmann: It started with a Fulbright scholarship for my graduate studies at CalArts, and **Tarpaulins** ended up being my final film there. So I lived in the Los Angeles area for more than three years on and off, and my film was mainly developed there. Soon after I arrived I noticed the first house covered with tarps and I was struck by its appearance. As I kept seeing these tents again and again I knew that I wanted to make a film about them.

Desistfilm: That's when the idea for the project emerged?

Lisa Truttmann: Yes, mainly while driving and walking around the city. When I first saw workers on the roof setting up a tent I just thought of some kind of art happening. It looked totally strange to me and only after talking to people I realized that it's a common thing in the city. Termites eat away the wooden structures of the buildings and that's treated with a toxic gas. The tarps make sure to keep it inside for a few days until it disperses in the atmosphere. Of course, it's not good for the environment, but I've been told that there's no other effective treatment. It's a complex issue. Naturally, everybody wants to save their houses, defend their homes, their property. And therefore we accept the drawbacks. As one of my interviewees puts it: "It's just an ongoing maintenance (...). Live back East you have tornados and you have earthquakes and termites in California".

Desistfilm: What I liked in the film is that the idea of termites' presence changes, from being strictly negative in the eyes of the home owners you develop that concept into something that tells us about the notions of labor and immigration...

Lisa Truttmann: I actually started by looking at these tents as sculptures around the city, I had no idea that it's a matter of termites. Later, after I figured out what's actually happening, I started to observe them and their behavior, their place in the ecosystem, we even talked to an entomologist to get more details. So the project started with sculptural objects and then spread out on a lot of different paths.

Desistfilm: It seemed to me that there was a political aspect at least in one of those paths. Would you agree with that?

Lisa Truttmann: Of course, it's about the concept of work and the many different aspects of it. It's about my work, the termites' work, my colleagues work, and ultimately about the workers who do the jobs for other people's houses. It's mostly immigrants.

Desistfilm: Did you also try to use the termites as a metaphor, to criticize the politics of those who see a threat in other people staying in their homes uninvitingly?

Lisa Truttmann: Not really. That aspect of the home and somebody or something invading it is definitely present, but in a slightly different sense. I tried to reflect upon that in the scenes in which the voice over spoken by my Austrian friend refers to the concept of the uncanny. The politics you mentioned are there, but not necessarily with such an explicit message.

Desistfilm: Could you tell us more about how you went about developing that concept of the uncanny in relation to termites' invasion?

Lisa Truttmann: When you imagine that there's thousands of little animals living with you and eating your home away, that's already kind of creepy. But then your home is covered up and gassed entirely. All those termites die and their bodies remain in the structure. During this process owners have to move out temporarily and a lot of people are afraid of coming back. They don't know if the house would stay toxic afterwards. There's a lot of fear involved. After all, it is a very poisonous and lethal gas for living beings, including humans. That in itself is a very uncanny thing – your home first invaded by animals, and then by something toxic. I think the idea of *home* is especially significant in the US. To have your own home, to be the owner seems to be very important. And suddenly everything you own, all you have inside of this house is being threatened.

Desistfilm: We talked a little about the concept of work. I saw that you collaborated with a lot of people on this project and you called them companions. It's such a pleasant though slightly unusual expression, it reminds me of a journey that you are taking with someone. How did you come up with it?

Lisa Truttmann: The name actually came from one of the companions who proposed it. I had difficulties with the credits, because those people contributed in so many different ways. They're all close friends whom I've met at CalArts and we would always work on, and discuss our projects. They helped me from the beginning to the end of the making of the film. Sometimes they would drive around with me and record sound, or lend their hands, help with lighting, with text and language, and most importantly, support me conceptually with their comments, thoughts and ideas. And then there was also another,

much bigger group of people which I call 'tent hunters'. That's everyone who sent me messages when and where they saw a tent I could film. All of them were very important and I couldn't have done this film without them.

Desistfilm: What about the concept, how did you go about it? Did you work on the visual part before the audio commentary?

Lisa Truttmann: I'm glad I got my first film funding from Austria, but I applied for a short film which later became a bigger film. That made every step in the process more complex and take a lot longer than expected. In the end, it was all possible because of the opportunities I had at CalArts. Once I had my main material shot I started thinking about the structure of the film. I spent the summer in Vienna, and decided that after three months I have to come back to Los Angeles with a rough cut. My whole wall was filled with notes and it was really overwhelming at times. I started doing assemblies and somehow managed to separate things in different scenes and topics. I edited bits and pieces of the fragmentary script I had, and then recorded my voice just to get an idea of rhythm and timing. So in the montage I constantly went back and forth between image, text and sound, it was a parallel and playful process in a way.

Desistfilm: That also relates to the concept of an essay film that you embraced and it seems to me that such a concept is becoming more popular among filmmakers. How do you see essay film different from the documentary?

Lisa Truttmann: Sometimes my film is labeled as a documentary because that makes it easier to show it at film festivals. Essay film is often still looked at as a documentary that is more free, poetic, made from a subjective point of view. For me, however, essay film is a very important genre. It was essential as a form for the whole concept of the film, that literally reflects back upon its content. It all started to make a lot of sense when I discovered the essay **White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art** by Manny Farber and the work of Jean-Pierre Gorin who in his piece **Proposal for a Tussle** refers to Farber's idea about termite art in order to describe the essay film. Gorin also curated a programme for the Viennale and the Austrian Filmmuseum in 2007 called *The Way of the Termite (Der Weg der Termiten)* which was a retrospective of essay films from 1909 to 2004. I had the catalogue in which his writing was published, and all these things added up nicely.

Desistfilm: Is the reason why you work with the essay film because of its subjectivity and reflexivity?

Lisa Truttmann: Yes, definitely. Not everything can be verified, not everything has to be about facts. It's more about the ideas they trigger, and the process of thinking, how to reflect upon things, how to experience them, as well as places and people. There's a lot of freedom in it. I come from an art background and it seems to me that a lot of artists who work with film choose essayistic forms. It feels like a certain bridge because it's on one hand open but at the same time there are documentary elements in it, many interests overlap and I like that.

Desistfilm: Do you work with the moving image in the art context as well?

Lisa Truttmann: **Tarpaulins** is a film that's made for the cinema even though it's also going to be shown at an art festival in Vienna. I like to make work that functions in both contexts, gallery and cinema.

Desistfilm: In that case, do you re-appropriate it for a gallery space?

Lisa Truttmann: Yes, if it makes sense. I take that freedom because it's my work and I'm interested to see what happens if I adapt it for a different context. Recently I was part of an exhibition at Memphis, in Linz, where I showed an installation piece that included a video on a monitor, a big framed photograph and a few smaller ones. The 4 sound channels connected those individual parts across the exhibition space. Now I'm planning to make a single channel film version of it because I'm curious to see how it will work in the cinema, where there is a completely different spatial experience. Things have to be re-thought and reconsidered.

Desistfilm: Were there some direct influences on your film, I am particularly thinking on Agnès Varda's film *Mur Murs* from 1981...

Lisa Truttmann: I saw a lot of her films at CalArts and they have been great inspirations for my work, but this one I rediscovered a little later in my process. It actually became my favourite one and I really loved how my film relates to hers in a sense that she's also a foreigner discovering Los Angeles through a certain perspective. Other important influences were filmmakers and mentors from CalArts,

such as Rebecca Baron, Thom Andersen, James Benning, Bérénice Reynaud, Chris Hill and many others. They introduced me to a lot of films and thoughts that later became essential references for me.

Desistfilm: Do you have any new projects in mind?

Lisa Truttmann: Definitely. Right now I'm finishing three short film versions of works that already exist in different forms and contexts, one of them I just mentioned. I recorded the material during a residency I did in Shanghai. And I have another project in mind for the US – but I didn't even write a concept yet. I'm really excited about all new things coming up.

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