

**BOMB 140, Summer 2017**

**BOMB — Artists in Conversation**

Art : Interview

**Eric Baudelaire**

by Benoît Rossel

Eric Baudelaire started his career as a photographer. Today he makes films, writes essays and experimental texts, and produces maps, installations, and art across a range of media. I first met him after seeing his haunting photographic diptych *The Dreadful Details* in 2006. But it is by way of his films that I came to know the full scope of Eric's work. Pictures, notes, and ideas scribbled on paper hang on the walls of his studio, which is on the third floor of a former granary by the Canal Saint-Martin in Paris. There are a couple of laptops on a desk. But beyond that, there's nothing fancy. No mess. Everything seems efficient and useful. His video camera sits in a backpack ready to travel, along with a set of high-quality lenses he cherishes probably as much as his own eyes.

—Benoît Rossel

**Benoît Rossel** How did you go from making photographs such as *The Dreadful Details* to making films?

**Eric Baudelaire** *The Dreadful Details* is a very discursive photographic project. It tries to pack a lot of art-historical questions into an image that deals with war and its representation. Initially it was a commission from the French Ministry of Culture. I think they expected me to go to Iraq or another conflict zone to do landscapes with a large-format camera. Instead, I went to Los Angeles to a small ranch that had been converted into film sets. There was a „Mexican village“ that had been converted into an „Afghan village“ after 9/11. By 2006, when I started to work on *The Dreadful Details*, it was an „Iraqi village“ built entirely by a twenty-five-year-old carpenter who had never left the United States, and who had based his constructions on pictures from *Time* magazine. I used the money from the commission to hire people who worked on a Hollywood TV series set in Iraq, actors and extras who frequently played Arabs (although most of them weren't Arab), former Marines who worked as TV consultants, costume and makeup people, and so on. And I tried to compose a war image with them in the tradition of history paintings like the ones I grew up seeing in the Louvre by artists like Géricault, Delacroix, and Manet. The result was a picture, or rather two, because it's a diptych, but the process was very cinematic, and it made me want to make films.

**BR** In your first film, *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years without Images* (2011), we can hear two voices, one male, one female, telling us their versions of a story they share. The film is about the period in the '70s when Japanese terrorists known as the Japanese Red Army were hiding in Lebanon. We never see the two characters onscreen; instead, we see Super 8 images of Beirut and Tokyo. Early on, we hear the filmmaker Masao Adachi speaking about one of his own films, *A.K.A. Serial Killer* (1969). He says, „We started to film without knowing the story. We wanted to show that this image of power takes the form of the urban landscape.“ It seems to me like those sentences could also be applied to your work and the way you approach it. Would you agree?

**EB** There are quite a few aspects of Masao Adachi's thinking about cinema and life in general that are revolutionary, and that idea is one of them. It interested me in several ways when I first discovered him and his work. One was that it simply posed the question of how to think about the political dimensions of landscape. That's an interesting question in part because of the history of photography, and I came to filmmaking, as you just noted, as a photographer interested in landscape asking the same questions as Adachi: how do you photograph the landscape to reveal political structures? It spoke to me as a photographer, but also because I first trained as a social scientist, not as an artist.

But what spoke to me even more in Adachi's sentence was how it reverses the way traditional fiction and documentary films are made. Both generally point the camera toward the subject. But he proposes a very simple gesture: to turn the camera around 180 degrees. It suggests that our existence is shaped by the world we live in. And maybe we can learn something about the world we live in by filming it. Maybe we can reveal certain political structures or structures of power. That's a very Marxist approach to filmmaking: don't show the subject, show what the subject sees, the world that shapes his human condition. Adachi later called it the „landscape theory,“ and, I think it's very radical and interesting, yet very problematic.

**BR** Why is it problematic?

**EB** Because it implies a form of determinism that diminishes the notion of agency and free will, the belief that we can choose to become who we are, and not just what the world makes us into. That's one reason I don't take Adachi's landscape theory on faith. I've always tried to push back against and problematize that proposition, but also to play with it.

**BR** What I find very singular in *The Anabasis*—and there are many examples in your other films, too—is that we barely ever see the protagonists. Nor do we ever see you, the filmmaker. But you are all nonetheless very present. In that sense, this film is probably the opposite of propaganda. It never stops asking, „Where are we?“

**EB** Definitely. My art and filmmaking are clearly tied to that question. I think that's why I ended up making films. I couldn't find a satisfying way to address that question in my earlier studies and brief career as a political scientist.

**BR** How did you come to make *The Anabasis*?

**EB** I was interested in looking at the history of the Japanese Red Army for what it teaches us about today, for example, about the unresolved situation in Israel-Palestine, or about ideas of resistance, armed struggle, and a revolutionary ideology that is not trying to reform the system but rather to overturn it. I'm part of the post-'68 generation, still trying to figure out how to understand the world through the optics of these movements, which eventually failed. My generation inherited a world shaped politically and ideologically by our parents' revolutionary projects and failures. That's one reason I use the term *anabasis* so often in my practice. An *anabasis* is a journey that returns to its point of departure, but the people who partake in it are no longer the same, they have been changed by the experience. The etymology of the Greek word *anabasis* is both „to embark“ and „to return.“ It's a disjunctive synthesis between a quest for the „new“ and a return „home.“ The concept contains both ideas. My interest in the Japanese Red Army isn't romantic in nature: it is very much about the here and the now. The present understood from the perspective of the past.

**BR** Were you conscious of doing that from the very beginning?

**EB** Not at first. Most of my films are the way they are because I was teaching myself the process of making the film as I was making it. The form of *The Anabasis* is a result of two or three years of work. I started by sitting down and interviewing May Shigenobu with the idea that I would make a film about her mother, Fusako Shigenobu, who was the founder of the Japanese Red Army, exiled in Lebanon and now in prison in Japan. I filmed a number of interviews in Tokyo with May, and the stories were very compelling. But then I had a problem. I'm not very interested in being a journalist, a biographer, or even a straight-up documentarian. So what could I do with this fascinating interview of someone who has lived a remarkable life? When you record such a strong story, you need to find a form that can stand up to it. Otherwise, it's just oral history. If you want to call it a film, you need to integrate the story into an equally strong cinematic structure. So I sat on this interview for a few years.

**BR** What did you do?

**EB** I decided to impose a few rules onto the project. One was that I wasn't going to make a talking head film. I was just going to work with the voice. So I started cutting this interview and seeing what I could make of it. Then I realized that a film with a single character is problematic: to reveal the depth of the story you need to create contrasts, so you need other perspectives. May's version of the story is far from objective, so I needed to push back and raise questions about her narrative. The best way to do that was to find a second story to juxtapose with the first. I made another arbitrary rule for myself that I wasn't going to use archival material. I would parsimoniously choose excerpts of films, but I wasn't going to use traditional documentary forms and materials.

**BR** So you let your process dictate your film?

**EB** Yes. I needed a second perspective. That's how I had the idea of interviewing Masao Adachi—and, by the time I was doing the interview, I'd pretty much understood what kind of material I needed to build a film about the contrast of two oral histories, that of May Shigenobu and her secret underground life, and that of Masao Adachi and his transformation from avant-garde filmmaker to armed revolutionary. That's how I gradually built the structure of the film, but this didn't resolve the last problem, which was that I still needed to show something onscreen.

**BR** You decided to use neither talking heads nor archival material, so you created another form of image that would relate to these oral histories.

**EB** That's right. I began shooting landscapes that relate to the places and histories evoked in their stories, both in Japan and in Lebanon. But I think I started developing my own language as a filmmaker at the editing table. I began experimenting with what happens when you don't use the landscapes as an illustration of the narrative, but rather as an image that either moves against it or remains somewhat autonomous. I started exploring the possibility of sound and image working both with and against each other. My filmmaking is very much about exploring the proximity and distance between what is said and what is seen.

**BR** It feels like you try to take away everything that's not essential. There is no sound design, for example. Silence is an important part of this work. You play with its momentum and emptiness, but there are images all the time. How do you choose your images and relate them to what is being spoken without being illustrative?

**EB** I hate the term *sound design*—and the concept, too, in a way. When we talk about sound design, we tend to lose track of what's important in filmmaking, which is the simple relationship between sound and image. So-called sound design is often a process that obfuscates the essential, which is the juxtaposition and dialectical relationship between sound and image. I've always been interested in figuring out what kind of sensation and what kind of thought can be provoked by that juxtaposition. This is called editing, not sound design. In some of my films, the sound is simply voice. In *The Anabasis*, there was no need for direct diegetic sound. Other films, by contrast, are very much about sound recording. In the edit, you can strongly influence what an image conveys with the sounds you associate with it. Sometimes, that means creating a moment in which the sound and image work together to produce a more traditional feeling for the spectator. I also explore ruptures in this relationship in order to create meaning. What I'm most interested in is fabricating meaning and an emotional and intellectual journey by working back and forth between the traditional synchronicity of sound and image and its rupture.

**BR** *The Anabasis* was shot in Beirut and Tokyo, but it's never said where we are.

**EB** I blurred the lines between the two cities, but also between the „then“ and the „now.“ In other words, we're never told where we are, but the images function like memories. The temporality of the images is unclear, and the film is built on this indeterminacy. So it's unclear for viewers what they are seeing, but that obliges them to make up their own way to view and understand them.

**BR** What I find interesting is that you're not trying to fool viewers, you're just asking them to take responsi-

lity.

**EB** I like that idea. I don't think I've ever thought about it in those terms. It's interesting to me when the images are indeterminate because that's, I think, what makes a film cinema, rather than merely a document. I'm very much interested in the film being about a cinematic experience, and when the images are too determined, then we are in the realm of documents.

**BR** Is it also the case in the new film, *Also Known As Jihadi*, which appears in the Whitney Biennial this year?

**EB** The images are clearly from the present, but they're very open-ended in the way the camera moves and the shots are constructed. The film is shot in CinemaScope, so it's the wide panoramic format that you see in the old westerns. It's the same shape as a fisherman's net. I thought of the film as a kind of net designed to catch the projections of the spectator. And this open-endedness of interpretation is very important to me.

**BR** What is *Also Known As Jihadi* about?

**EB** It's a very loose remake of Masao Adachi's 1969 film *A.K.A. Serial Killer*, which is about a young Japanese man, Norio Nagayama, who killed four people with a gun stolen from a US Navy base. He never explained his actions. As Adachi was scouting locations for a film based on these events, he came up with a radical idea: the footage from the location scouting was enough, it was the film. *A.K.A. Serial Killer* consists of a series of landscapes from the places where Nagayama lived or traveled to during the nineteen years before the murders. *Also Known As Jihadi* follows the same proposition: turn the camera around to shoot not the subject of the film, but rather the landscapes that he has seen. Then film the clinic where the subject was born in the Parisian suburb of Vitry, the buildings he grew up in, his high school, and workplaces. Then film the landscapes of his departure to the Middle East: Egypt, Turkey, and the road to Aleppo where he joined the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front in 2012. And then, finally, film his journey home. Once again, it's a kind of anabasis, a series of landscapes contextualized by excerpts of official documents: police interrogations, wiretaps, and surveillance reports. Together, they form a kind of genre film, a slow legal thriller made up of landscapes.

**BR** How do you deal with or relate to a subject that's more directly political and controversial?

**EB** It's complicated to make a good film about a controversial subject because you have to transcend the controversy. But I think it's important to try because these are subjects that shouldn't be left strictly to journalists and political scientists. When you make a film about terrorism, secessionism, or about a jihadi, you are choosing a topic that doesn't generate unanimity. *The Anabasis* deals with the Palestinian-Israeli question; *Letters to Max* is a film about a secessionist territory that emerged from the civil war in Georgia; and *Also Known As Jihadi* is about a young Frenchman who goes to fight in Syria. In making films that delve into dangerous subjects, I've tried to explore what these stories or journeys are about. I tried to think about them without coming to any kind of legal or moral conclusion. It's very easy to fuck this up and make a heavy-handed film that answers questions instead of asking them. My perspective as a filmmaker usually begins with a sense of loss in the face of the incomprehensible, a feeling coupled with the intuition that the incomprehensible must have its reasons. And I've tried to find forms that reflect this position, accepting the feeling of loss rather than trying to resolve it.

**BR** I like that your films adopt a strategy of „less is more.“ Viewers may be a little despairing in the beginning because they are forced to wonder what's going to happen. But then they have to take sides—and either they're part of the film or they're not. If they are part of it, the film is very rewarding. How do you work? Do you work with a script? Do you allow accidental figures? How much do you do in the editing stage?

**EB** Well, one reason why my practice is eclectic is because I don't often work the same way twice. Thematically, my interests tend to remain constant. The works exist within a field of related ideas and concepts, but they take very different forms. In terms of methodology, I try to create the circumstances in which a film or a work can exist. I try to create parameters within which I establish control, but never fully. These rules create

constraint, but this constraint also creates a sense of freedom. In the case of *The Ugly One* (2013), the protocol was very simple and stupid: I commissioned a script from Masao Adachi. He had not written a screenplay for someone else for almost thirty years. He used to be a very well-known and respected screenwriter of the Japanese avant-garde. I asked him, „Can I hire you to write a script for me?“ He answered, „Yes, but on one condition: that I will write you a film that will be impossible to make.“ I responded, „That’s perfect. In that case, please send me a few pages of script every day in Beirut while I am shooting, and we will read them every morning and work in that manner.“ In Beirut, we had a crew, actors, and a very simple synopsis of what the story would be, which Masao had sent me at the onset. As we received the pages of the script, I realized that the script was, as promised, impossible to film.

**BR** How does one respond to an impossible script?

**EB** We created a meta-movie that didn’t simply translate the page onto the screen, it also resisted doing so. Truffaut famously said that you shoot against the script, and then you edit against the shoot. In this case, we had to do that in a very literal, nonmetaphorical way. The solution for me was to make the scriptwriter Adachi a voice in the film and catch actors in this very ambiguous space between the screenplay and the director’s vision.

**BR** Can you give an example? What did Masao Adachi write and, from your point of view, how was it impossible to make?

**EB** For example, he would send me a scene in which all the characters are dead, or a scene that requires the destruction of buildings, airplanes—a full battle scene and an explosion in which everyone dies. It was impossible to make from a very simple budgetary perspective. So Adachi was teasing me into finding solutions.

**BR** How did you react to these million-dollar scenes or dead characters?

**EB** I tried to solve both problems at the same time. The film progressively reveals that the characters are already dead. They are recounting their death around a dinner table, so I didn’t need to blow up buildings and have airplanes drop bombs on Beirut. Instead, I restaged Adachi’s scene in the form of a discussion around a dinner table among characters who realize that if the story is true, then they are necessarily dead. For me, it is also a political metaphor for the death of certain progressive ideologies during the civil war in Lebanon.

**BR** Watching this film, we’re not sure it actually takes place onscreen and we wonder if it’s taking place in the head of the characters or in our own heads. We are lost like the characters in the film.

**EB** For sure. The idea of being lost is associated with the stories that the films deal with: the journey of the revolutionary Left in Japan, their exile to Beirut, their involvement in the Palestinian struggle, in the Lebanese civil war, and their choice to remain in the Middle East after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had sustained their movement. In the end, they were lost, and left to figure out how to move forward. That sense of loss is related historically to the sense of loss experienced by some of my generation—a sense of loss about how to move forward in a world determined by structures we feel powerless to affect. I wanted to connect all these ways of being lost by plunging the spectator into a space in which the usual parameters that allow us to feel situated—time, the existence or nonexistence of the characters, and so forth—are not given.

**BR** I see it as a real blurring of the boundary between fiction and nonfiction film.

**EB** I don’t want to create hostile objects. I’m interested in telling a story, whether it’s at a dinner table with friends and a bottle of wine or when I’m making a film. I’m interested in captivating people through storytelling in the same way that I’m captivated by them and by films. There’s this passage by Wittgenstein: „A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.“ The ability of the image to captivate us is something that I find very important. Having said that, I’m not interested in simply making films that have a strong narrative and captivating images. I’m also

interested in films that challenge our understanding of the world and of cinema itself. And perhaps this is something that used to be, as you said, more common. Alain Resnais made *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), and also films like *Je T'aime, Je T'aime* (1968), and *Life Is a Bed of Roses (La vie est un roman)* (1983). These were almost mainstream films at the time, in the sense that they had serious budgets, large audiences, and standard theatrical distribution. And they absolutely turned our expectations upside down. Filmmakers who are continuing to challenge storytelling forms today are more of a minority, but there has always been this tradition. It has migrated from the cinemas to hybrid places halfway between the contemporary art world, the white cube of the gallery, and small film festivals. We have to navigate between these various worlds to be able to fund our films and get them in front of people, but it's still possible.

**BR** Your film *Letters to Max* (2014) features a former minister of foreign affairs in Abkhazia, Maxim Gvinjia, responding to questions you send him in the mail. There is one line in it that helped me think about what I was seeing: „Without past there is no present, and with no present there is no future.“

**EB** What I love about Max is his ability to alternate between very light-hearted observations about the world and big philosophical pronouncements. He's a very unusual politician in that sense. When he says that, he's talking about ruins and the fact that Abkhazia, the self-declared nation that he lives in, is still covered in the ruins of the 1992–93 Georgian civil war when it first sought to separate from Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union. I asked him, „What should I do about these ruins? Should I film them?“ Obviously, there's something very seductive about the ruin as a form in film, but it has to have meaning. One of the great privileges of working with Max is that when I have a question like that one, I can just ask him, and he verbalizes the problem posed by the question of what I was filming. So we hear his voice over the images of these ruins.

**BR** Did you know where it was leading you?

**EB** When I started making *Letters to Max*, I thought I was making a film about place, territory, and the status of this territory—about whether or not it existed as a function of its recognition as a political entity. What I realized—and what Max made me realize—is that it wasn't a film about place. It was a film about time. I sent Max letters, letters that should not have arrived, since France doesn't officially recognize Abkhazia. Max told me these letters were a kind of time machine. In the film, you hear Max answering my letters from the past, over images that I shot in Abkhazia later on. It opens the question of temporality: When is Max speaking? What timeframe is he speaking about? When am I filming? When am I editing the film? When is the viewer seeing these images? All of these questions imply a very complicated structure that has more to do with time than with place.

**BR** Somehow, that brings me back to the beginning of our conversation, when you talked about turning the film camera away from the subject. Without filming yourself at all *Letters to Max* reveals a lot about you.

**EB** Yes, in the sense that it poses the question of my place in the film. In *The Anabasis* and *Letters to Max*, we hear first-person narratives in the voices of the characters. But I'm the one who is juxtaposing these voices with images. I'm the one deciding the manner in which it all gets edited. So it's important for me to somehow situate myself in the film relative to the construction of the story and the characters. With Max, I chose to make an epistolary film based on a series of letters that I sent him because the content of these letters would situate us, and our relationship to one another. Max's position in the world is complicated. He was an official minister of a separatist nation not recognized by other nations, one that has a history of ethnic cleansing, to say it bluntly. Abkhazia is thus both a utopia and a dystopia, a place that represents independence and freedom for some, and exclusion and oppression for others, specifically, for the quarter million Georgian refugees who can no longer live there. This duality is embodied by Max because of his former position in the government, and yet he is a very pleasant, friendly, and sympathetic person who also happens to be my friend. But I still had to ask my friend tough questions about Abkhazia. The letters allowed me to show that the situation was two-sided in the same way Max is. My point here is simply that, for me, there is always a need to register the difficulty and complexity of my position in the film. That's why none of these are straight-up documentaries. I try to reflect the complexity of my position relative to my subject. And, sometimes, the situations

themselves impose this complexity upon the film.

**BR** That's what I find very interesting with your body of films. Each of them creates a new territory with its own frontier in the viewer's mind.

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Benoît Rossel's films include the documentaries *Le Théâtre des opérations* (2008) and *In Art We Trust* (2015), which has screened at the CPH:DOX film festival in Denmark and at festivals in Canada and Switzerland. He lives in Paris.