

SHELLY SILVER

COMING SOON
Shelly Silver's
installation
"Exceptional
Happenings," at
Argos Centre
for Arts and
Media, Brussels,
Apr. 26-June 28.

Interview by Steel Stillman
Portrait by Jonathan Dennis

STEEL
STILLMAN is an
artist and writer
based in New York.
See Contributors
page.

IN THE STUDIO



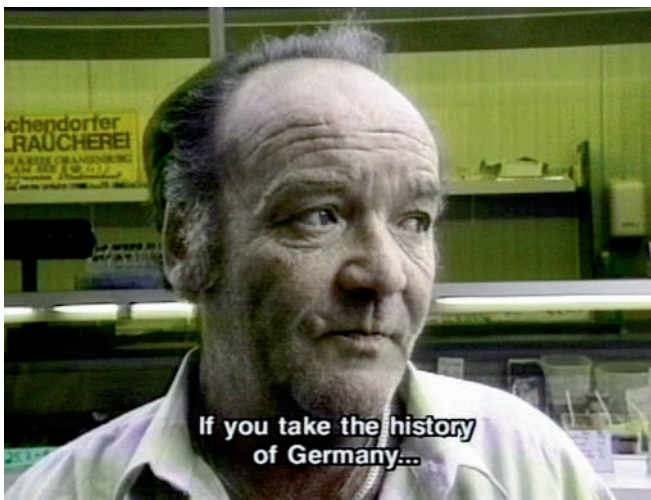
SHELLY SILVER'S FILMS are rooted in recurring questions: Who am I? Who are you? Who are we? What has been happening here? Where are we headed? Her response, in almost every case, is to take her camera out into the world and wait for answers. Since 1981, in eight feature-length films and 14 shorts, created in the U.S., Europe and Asia, Silver has explored existential questions at scales from the intimate to the global. Made mostly on video, her work defies easy categorization. It ranges from cinema-verité-style interview montages shot on the streets of Berlin and New York to scripted narrative films that blend documentary and fiction. In between are often witty meditations on desire and alienation. What unites these works is Silver's fascination with what connects or fails to connect one person to another. In a tradition generally attributed to the late Chris Marker, she makes essay films, whose object—even in those with fictional elements—is to make the world a more intelligible and communal place. Her far-flung subjects, it turns out, are all wrestling with the same questions that she asks herself. And the films' magic happens when her subjects' answers, however provisional, inspire our own.

Born in 1957 to scientist parents in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island, Silver experimented with photography in high

school before going to Cornell University, where she graduated in 1980 with two degrees—a BA in European history and a BFA in mixed media. She returned to New York later that year to attend the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program, and has been based there ever since. In the past 30 years, her films and occasional installations have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Yokohama Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and hundreds of other venues around the world, including most of the major international film festivals. In 2014, she had a retrospective of her films at DOK Leipzig and showed work in more than a dozen other places, from Athens, Ga., to Singapore. This year, she has already had an exhibition of selected films at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia as well as her most comprehensive retrospective yet, including a large video installation, at the Cinéma du Réel festival at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. On Apr. 26, her installation "Exceptional Happenings" opens at Argos Centre for Arts and Media in Brussels, where it will be on view until the end of June. Over the years she has received numerous grants—an Anonymous Was a Woman award (1998) and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2005) among them. Silver teaches at Columbia University and is currently chair of its Visual Arts MFA Program. Her studio is in Chinatown, in a 6th-floor live/work aerie whose views are recognizable from at least two of her films. We met there in January on a sunny afternoon.



Two stills from Shelly Silver's *Former East/Former West*, 1994, Hi8 video, 62 minutes.



STEEL STILLMAN When and how did you get involved with filmmaking?

SHELLY SILVER Filmmaking helped me resolve a huge conflict I was having at Cornell between my two majors. On the one hand, I was taking classes in sociology, psychoanalysis, the Frankfurt School, Deleuze and Derrida, with highly politicized professors. But on the other, I was studying art in a conservative, formalist art department. I didn't want to become an academic—I'd intuited that art offered more promiscuous forms of expression—but I just couldn't figure out how to make art do what I needed. So the summer following my junior year, after several semesters spent making aggressive conceptual pieces, I took a film class at the San Francisco Art Institute. I was hooked! Suddenly, I could work with time, movement, sound and especially words. Back at Cornell, no film or video courses were available. Instead I became involved with a local public-access TV station and made weird pseudo talk shows that aired live at 3:00 a.m. People would call in and, boy, did I get an earful. By then, Haim Steinbach had joined the art department faculty, and was bringing in visitors like Vito Acconci, Lynda Benglis and Joseph Kosuth. These experiences were the beginning of my life as an artist.

STILLMAN Were you already involved with video when you returned to New York for the Whitney Program?

SILVER Yes. Video in the '80s was still the low-rent cousin from the suburbs of film. It was cheap, and you could see what you were doing in real time. I liked its relationship



37 Stories About Leaving Home, 1996, Hi8 video, 52 minutes.

to television—this was the era of “Dallas,” “The Jeffersons,” “Three’s Company,” and Dara Birnbaum’s “Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry” [1979]. To access equipment I started working as a video editor, first at Rough Cut, an artist-run production and post-production house—Tony Oursler and Michael Smith also worked there—and then at Rebo Studios, where I edited everything: feature films, documentaries, music video, industrial shorts, stand-up comedy, advertising. The job at Rebo dovetailed with my obsessive questioning of storytelling, popular film language and genre. Why are things shot and structured the way they are? What expectations might the viewer have? How could I subvert those expectations? My earliest films were attempts to do just that.

STILLMAN In 1992, thanks to a German Academic Exchange Service [DAAD] grant, you gave up your editing job and moved to Berlin for a year and a half to make a documentary about the city’s reunification. *Former East/Former West* [1994, 62 minutes] is a collage of hundreds of on-the-street interviews. How did it come about?

SILVER I applied to the DAAD two years after the fall of the Wall, proposing to do a film about German national identity. I was accepted, but when I arrived some members of the committee said, “We love your work, but the Reunification is over. We hope you find another project.” After a month in Berlin, I realized it wasn’t over; the city was tense and changing daily. People in the West were making dismissive, even racist comments about people from the East, who, for their part, had never been asked about anything. *Former East/Former West* is not a traditional documentary, because there’s no narrator

guiding you. Instead it weaves together replies to 25 questions, each focused on a key word like *heimat*—an untranslatable term that means something like homeland—or “nationality” or “history,” as well as others like “capitalism” and “foreigner” that often came up during the Reunification. In Berlin, I learned the crucial importance of public space, of being face to face, talking intimately with strangers that I’d probably never see again. You establish an immediate, intense connection under those circumstances, due to their desire to explain and yours to listen. Making the film became a way of bringing their voices into an unruly, conditional whole.

STILLMAN What was the response to it in Berlin?

SILVER The first screening was difficult. People were living the change—they didn’t want to hear about it. Five years later, many said it was an interesting historical document but that the situation had changed. Then, on its 10th anniversary, I showed it there again, and the response was the opposite: people found it completely relevant. When an interviewer asks open questions, viewers tend to respond in relation to their own lives. When I screened *Former East/Former West* in Malaysia, viewers didn’t mention Germany at all. They wanted to talk only about relations between their own ethnic groups—Malays, Chinese and Indians.

STILLMAN From Berlin you went to Japan on a six-month fellowship, which led to *37 Stories About Leaving Home* [1996, 52 minutes], a project that grounds the experiences of three generations of contemporary women—daughters, mothers, grandmothers—in a traditional Japanese folktale.

SILVER There’s an element of self-portraiture in all my work. I’d been considering doing a film on mothers and

“Film, video—the magic of 24 or 30 frames per second—is a way of being present for each other. It can witness. It can mine the past for what is useful.”

Composite portrait of the Low family, base photo ca.1961, approx. 10 by 8 inches. Courtesy Museum of Chinese in America, New York.

daughters for some time, inspired not only by feminism but by the question of whether I'd ever become a mother myself. Japan seemed as good a place as any to investigate the topic; indeed, it offered the virtue of a certain distance from my own cultural assumptions. I knew very little about Japan and nothing about Japanese women—all I'd heard were clichéd stories about businessmen. Before leaving, I was told that no women would talk to me. Once again discouragement became an inducement. I spent the first couple of months filming Tokyo, mostly with a Super 8 camera. Gradually I met people, and of course everyone has a mother. Many women didn't want to be interviewed, but those who said yes really meant it. I drew up a series of questions and submitted them to my interviewees in advance. I asked about their early memories of their mothers; about when they first realized they were female; about love, disappointments, dreams and stories.

When I returned to New York, I had no idea how to edit the footage; all I knew was that I didn't want to impose a false arc on my subjects' lives. I had a sequence in which a woman recalls being sick as a child, lying in bed, staring at patterns on the ceiling, which, in her delirium, moved and reminded her of “The Juniper Tree,” the Grimm's fairy tale. That led me to research Japanese folk tales. Among these I found “The Oni's Laughter,” in which a mother, with the help of a priestess, rescues her kidnapped daughter from the castle of the monster Oni, by showing Oni “her most important place.” This tale, which is unusual in any culture—most fairy-tale mothers are evil stepmothers—gave *37 Stories* historical weight and a narrative armature, and I edited the interviews and the Super 8 footage around it. The interviews themselves were moving and intimate. It was remarkable, for example, to discover the strength of the grandmothers, many of whom had twice survived Tokyo's destruction, first by the 1923 earthquake and then by American bombs. Their bravery was undeniable.

STILLMAN In the lead-up to the 2008 presidential election, you brought the interview format you'd used in Berlin to the streets of New York. Did you have any idea that *in complete world* [2008, 53 minutes] would become a primer on American democracy?

SILVER Not at all. That spring I was seriously considering leaving the U.S. I was depressed about the war in Iraq, the increasing divide between rich and poor in New York, and the sorry state of the media's political discourse. I felt angry and helpless—and guilty about my helplessness. I decided, again, to take my camera into the streets. I asked people 20 or so questions that I would have difficulty answering myself—things like: Are you satisfied? Are we responsible for the



government we have? Do you feel personally responsible for the war in Iraq? What are you scared of?

In editing, my aim was to thread a rhetorical line that respected every voice. So *in complete world* oscillates between individual desires and the obligations of membership. It hinges on the word “responsibility”—whose root is “response.” There is no responsibility without dialogue, without asking things of one another. I fell in love with all the interviewees, whether I agreed with them or not. They are my people. I decided to stay.

STILLMAN A few years later you made *TOUCH* [2013, 68 minutes], an extraordinary fiction film about an unseen and unnamed gay man in his late 60s who returns to New York's Chinatown to care for his dying mother. Your character is an insider who's become an outsider, a librarian turned photographer. *TOUCH* is almost entirely observational—we watch what he watches, and we listen as he tells his story.

SILVER In 2009 the producer Karin Chien suggested I make a seven-minute film about Chinatown for the Museum of Chinese in America [MOCA]. The result, *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown* [2009, 10 minutes], presents a fragmented picture of the neighborhood from multiple viewpoints. After *5 lessons*, I wanted to go deeper and make a feature-length film that used long takes and was shot from one character's point of view. That character was built on the incredible voice of Lu Yu—the actor I'd used for voiceover on *5 lessons*—for whom I invented a fictional backstory, incorporating aspects of my own experiences as a photographer and filmmaker. This man uses a camera to reenter his old neighborhood, to piece together its history and his own, and to thereby construct an otherwise unimaginable future.

STILLMAN At one point, as the character attempts to describe his mother's life, he shows us a collaged family photograph that has been awkwardly assembled from many individual portraits. This composite image figures the necessary reconstruction of memory and serves as a metaphor for the film.

SILVER I like the way you put that. Filmmaking is never seamless. I found that photograph in MOCA's archive. It shows

Opposite, two stills from *TOUCH*, 2013, HD video, 68 minutes.



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Above, still from Silver and Nika Spalinger's multimedia installation *Hidden Among the Leaves*, 2000-15.

the longing to be together felt by so many families whose members are dispersed across the globe. Using this image, my character conjures a fantasy of his mother's past in a way that echoes his own invention by the film. When stories generate compelling characters, they live on in the minds of their audiences. The hero of *TOUCH* is fictional, and yet he *should* be here in Chinatown; maybe he is. *TOUCH* is a paean to photographing and filmmaking in public space—to the reciprocal significance of seeing and being seen. There's a sequence of photographs in the film from a 1918 edition of *Who's Who of the Chinese in New York*. Who, my character asks, do we see? And who were the people not photographed?

STILLMAN In an earlier fiction film, *suicide* [2003, 70 minutes], the lead character, a suicidal filmmaker who is played by you, compares filming to fishing and says: "The camera makes a line between my eye, the camera and you." Fishing is not unlike shooting. How do you, as a filmmaker, reconcile the predatory aspects of these metaphors?

SILVER I'm not sure I can. In the next line, the heroine of *suicide*—who is *not* me—whispers: "You. You exist, only because I'm looking at you." She is crazy, at the margins, but she's not making a metaphor. This line, between eye, camera and person, makes a true connection—her only connection, aggressive or otherwise, to life. Whereas, the character in *TOUCH* has a different relationship to image-making. For him it is about understanding and reentering a place, and he encourages the viewer to join him. Early in the film, he says: "I like that you're looking. . . . I want to keep you here, with me. My eye in your eye. My tongue in your mouth." He goes on: "To see is to take what's outside into our bodies." There is a vulnerability to looking. The eye is an orifice, and we are changed by what we see.

STILLMAN Over the years you've made half a dozen video installations. Possibly the most striking, *Hidden Among the Leaves*, originated in a 2000-15 collaboration with the Swiss artist Nika Spalinger. Please describe its first incarnation—and installation's appeal for you.

SILVER Nika specializes in sculptural interventions in public space. She and I decided to do something that would bring outdoor public spaces into the relative intimacy of a museum

gallery. Using two floors of the Museum for Art and History in Fribourg, Switzerland, we created a mazelike network of rooms and hallways, illuminated only by video monitors and projectors. I filmed the screened sequences at bus stops, swimming pools and downtown business areas in four Swiss cities. Most are short loops, lasting from a few seconds to a few minutes, which reveal surprisingly intimate and suggestive moments: close-ups of people's necks and ears; a telephoto shot of a mother picking up her daughter by her head; and another of a naked three-year-old girl pouring water from a watering can. A few monitors showed half-hour loops of people sitting on benches—life going on. Two things interrupted visitors' voyeuristic experiences. The first was that they'd unexpectedly bump into one another in the dark narrow hallways. And the second was a large, brightly lit room with a gravel floor and a single park bench at the center of the maze: there, viewers recognized that they, too, could be watched. Much as I love the communal space and controlled time of cinema—and worry for it—I'm also intrigued by the open-ended and unpredictable space of installation, where visitors can move around and more nearly approach filmed worlds.

STILLMAN You've recently finished *frog spider hand horse house* [2015, 54 minutes], a film that works equally well in either installation or cinema settings, perhaps because there is no explicit story. Instead *frog spider* respectfully challenges viewers to figure things out for themselves.

SILVER Having made so many films that are language-driven, I wanted to make one that wasn't—though ironically the inspiration was itself a story. I'd been reading A.S. Byatt's *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*, which juxtaposes her retelling of the Norse myth in which gods destroy the world and her memories of being evacuated from London to the countryside during the Blitz. My original plan had been to do something about children and fairy tales. In the end, I substituted wildlife for fairies but kept the binary structure: children and animals, two endangered species. *frog spider* is also a film about pedagogy. It was shot in suburban and semirural areas in the northeastern U.S. and Canada: in a daycare center, an elementary school, at riding and music camps, and on the street. You see and hear children learning to navigate the world, interspersed with shots of animals, living, dead and decaying—with very few adults. There's little separation between life and death in fairy tales. Animals struggle to survive, and children to learn and fit in. The camera in *frog spider* remains outside the action, able to capture and show but not to intervene.

STILLMAN Your early fiction film *The Houses That Are Left* [1991, 52 minutes] includes an intertitle: "Because the possible has become impossible, I allow myself to believe the impossible must become possible." That same conviction echoes again throughout the voiceover in *TOUCH*.

SILVER Film, video—the image magic of 24 or 30 frames per second, with black imperceptibly interspersed—is a way of being present for each other. It can witness. It can mine the past for what is useful. Its fictions make the impossible possible. Ever since I can remember, I've felt caught by the world. My way out is to look, to analyze, to ask, to go back and trawl for lost histories, and then to imagine something different. Film is good for that. ○

Opposite, two stills from *frog spider hand horse house*, 2015, HD video, 54 minutes.



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