December 2015
How to work together Think Tank

Sharna Pax — part two: Prisoner of War

a conversation with Andrea Luka Zimmerman

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 presented a screening and discussion at Chisenhale Gallery on 1 December 2015, in response to their ongoing research. Material is documented in the Sharna Pax Library, an evolving digital archive containing interviews, commissioned essays and related content, as well as in a printed publication launched at the event.

The second in the series of interviews is published here with Andrea Luka Zimmerman.

Andrea Luka Zimmerman is a filmmaker, artist and cultural activist. She is co-founder of the artists collective Fugitive Images and a founding member of the Vision Machine Film Collective. In 2014, she won the Artangel Open Award for her collaborative project *Cycle* with Adrian Jackson (Cardboard Citizens). She is nominated for the 2015 Jarman Award. Her films include *Prisoner of War* (2016), *Estate, A Reverie* (2015), *Taskafa, Stories of the Street* (2014), *The Delmarva Chicken of Tomorrow* (2002). She lives and works in the UK.

A founding member of Vision Machine, Andrea worked in the USA and Indonesia, exploring the impact of globalisation, power, and denied histories. From this period developed her essay-film *Prisoner of War* (2016) exploring US militarism and foreign policy through a character study of one of its most enduring rogue agents. Bo Gritz was the most decorated Green Beret of the Vietnam War, with 62 decorations for valour. After Vietnam, he was Special Forces Commander Latin America and worked at the Pentagon under the Secretary of Defense. In the 1980s, Gritz went in search of US prisoners of war (POWs) in Southeast Asia, reportedly hoping to locate the POWs who, some believed, were still being held by Laos and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Prisoner of War

SP: How did you meet Bo?

ALZ: I met Bo when we [Vison Machine] were in America to research the project we did in Indonesia, which was around the 1965 genocide, and which led later to *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*. We were looking into US involvement with the genocide. We interviewed quite a few people who were working for the CIA and various other agencies, as well as looking through testimonies, interviews, books, etc. For example, William Colby, who later became director of the CIA (1973–76), would be compiling lists recording the Indonesian death toll. This also suggested how it was used in order to learn for the Vietnam war. We were interested in how violence is exported through certain strategies that are barely visible. That's how we met Bo.

SP: When and why did you decide to make a film about Bo?

ALZ: When I met him, I realized that he was more open about what he had been involved with than many other people we interviewed. He seemed to want to speak about the history he was part of. I realized that he was an amazing source to understand a certain historical period. For example, he filmed Afghan mujahedeen being trained on US soil, which has never been acknowledged until some years ago, on French television, in a passing comment. There was never an official acknowledgement, yet he did it and he filmed it. I could sense that I could explore the history of the Cold War through this one person.

SP: So it was more than being a film about him? It was about something else?

ALZ: *Prisoner of War* promises no immediate or direct access to historical truth, but to processes that articulate and perform the dramatic, narrative and generic conditions of the production of historical truth, and the production of historical actors. He is of course a historical actor in a very powerful constellation, and lived and worked through the whole period of the Cold War, both as an agent in the field in covert and secret warfare, as well as someone who would produce policy. He was a formidable executioner, but he also worked very high up in government. He was also part of a media distortion. It is rare that people operate in this way on both sides. Through this he had an insight that was unique, but he was also deeply damaged, because he had been absorbed into an ideology, a machine that spat him out the other end. He had been burnt by his own government, and had become a very outspoken opponent to some of their policies. He also realized that perhaps he killed for the wrong reason.

SP: How do your think of your relationship to Bo?

ALZ: It's an interesting question, because it's quite complicated. I've always been honest with him that my political beliefs are different from his, that I don't agree with what he has done, but that I want to understand what he's done and why he chose this path. I'm inviting a dialogue rather than making a judgement on someone who has made decisions that I can't understand. But over the years it has become something quite interesting, I feel like I almost have a quite deep understanding with him. And of course I question that. In order to be a good leader, he had to make people feel very close to him. He recruited assassins. How do you recruit someone who has never killed someone, how do you become their manager? They have very deep relationships. However, he is a highly intelligent man who was once very powerful, and I admire the fact that he is willing and courageous enough to really think through and explore the things that he was part of. I realize also that there are certain limitations. His PTSD means that there's a lot of sadness, confusion and protection. He made a suicide attempt; however, we need to open up this space to perhaps understand it more deeply, how young people believe this is the way to be, and the cycle of violence never seems to end.

SP: I know he also trained in hypnosis and that you tried it out together. Were there moments during filming, where you felt like you might be going too far, or where you felt like you might be afraid of the possible outcome?

ALZ: During that period we were very interested in what re-enactments could reveal that the spoken word couldn't. I felt at one point I did go too far. Early on in my filming with him, in 2008, I had asked him to do a re-enactment of a standard procedure of how he killed people. What was the fastest way? I asked him to do it, then I asked him to do it again and to do it again. By the end of it he was absolutely dishevelled. I realized that it wasn't fair to do, but that I wanted to release some of the rage I experienced at witnessing this scene unfold. They are questions you have to ask every time you do something. At one point we did self-hypnosis, where he went back to smell and feel everything around the killing fields. When I felt like he didn't answer what I wanted him to answer, I stopped him. It brought him out of it

and he said: 'You can't do that!'. It caught me out; I wanted something particular, instead of responding to what was coming. That was a very important lesson for me. It's very obvious, but instinctively one pushes and probes. I felt that I learnt much realizing that I went too far in my ambition to tell a certain story, rather than to allow a story to emerge, which is often more unexpected, and perhaps a little more uncomfortable also for me, as truth is.

SP: Do you see it as something you explore together? How do you see it in terms of collaboration?

ALZ: In some ways it is collaborative; in other ways it's not. Collaboration happens with the openness. I bring an inquiry. As the filmmaker, I say that I would like to make a film about these aspects of your life. In this way it is not something we do together. He said: 'I trust you,' and: 'I'll allow you to do that.' As a filmmaker, it is my responsibility to be able to demonstrate the complexity of this history and of this way of living. However, it is collaborative in the sense that we have developed trust between us. It is a constant negotiation. I'm not afraid to have a difficult film, which he will not agree with. I think that's understood between us. To try and open up and make visible a certain structural violence that exists within the US and, of course, elsewhere too. And what is expressed and how people are caught up within it, including myself, which is where my own vulnerability comes in. This is what many filmmakers hide, and I try to explore more deeply, this uncomfortable space.

SP: You start off, in this cut at least, by presenting Bo's many personas. In this way you perhaps immediately suggest the improbability of his narrative. To what extent does it have to do with the stories we tell ourselves in order to survive or live?

ALZ: I think it was a gift that he was also a person with all these different personas. So on the one hand, this kind of approach I take, and the relationship built over many years with Bo, trying to figure out a life, while simultaeously trying to figure out a history. I am very aware of the danger of slipping into a bio-pic, which would be a mistake here, as it would reduce the very history he helped shape and by which he was shaped to a personal set of choices, instead of looking at the bigger structures, what may be called 'structural violence', the intangible, the slippery, the way in which it affects, and is deadly. You usually don't find out about covert operations unless they go wrong or people speak out. Only these, then, are the ones we know, but the other ones we don't know about. The ones that history doesn't ever get to know about. Many of them are probably shredded before they ever enter into any kind of archive. So we only ever find out about the effect. There's an absence of a cause. So we can't pinpoint any cause and only study the effect – effects without a cause. He as a person was able to be all these different characters, and we will never get to know who he is. He himself probably doesn't even know who he is. But through that there may be a way in which I can show that juxtaposition and bricolage of attempts at disguising violence but also producing it.

SP: The way you approach your research and your filmmaking allows for a layered understanding of Bo, complicating binaries and assumed narratives. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that? Both in your research methods and in the filmmaking itself?

ALZ: We did a lot of research, before we even approached him. Then after I started working with him we did some shared explorations, for example re-enactments and role-plays. Through these, other kinds of knowledge follow. We did one where he played a kind of holy man. The research is both physical as well as looking at different possibilities of meaning-making**.** I interviewed many people who were very critical of him, people who wrote books about him, who didn't trust a single word he said. Academics who had written about myth-making. I became interested in unpacking these aspects. It is of course a film about Bo's life, but through him I'm looking at the relationship between official accounts of violence and more hidden memories and experiences. Through my approach, I aim also to explode the bio-pic genre, as it would never be truthful in this case. It would become a certain kind of narrative, with a conclusion and a transformation. We would have a new person and look

back and see where we came from. But that's just not true. There are these folds. I'm interested in the Bergsonian sheets of memory; you walk somewhere and suddenly you're back 20 years because of a smell. A bit like quantum physics, time is not linear, when you bend it, is it shorter? It could be really far apart. The time it takes you to you watch a film is linear and durational, you have to tear away at that form, it needs to have shape and a tension where everything combusts against each other.

SP: Perhaps with this mode of working, there are a lot of stories you don't forget. Does a particular story spring to mind, one which made you make a decision? Change your direction?

ALZ: I became increasingly less afraid to ask certain types of questions. Even though I always ask certain kinds of questions, I would initially ask them in a gentle way, but I became increasingly direct. I also realized that the bigger a crew I had with me the less successful my conversations were. He performed to the other people. Especially when there were men in the crew. I think it's about measuring against each other. I realized that the visits I did by myself were much more successful, because there was an intimacy that was lost when he was performing to others. I have experienced this in my other films as well now, perhaps it has something to do with how I am when a crew is with me, I am not sure. I know that I like to work alone or with at most one more person.

SP: This particular kind of relationship takes time to develop, which I know is important for you. Pedro Costa recently said 'To me it's just baffling that cinema managed to turn time into its enemy.' How do you think of this?

ALZ: It's a beautiful quote and it makes sense: how do we use time? This applies to different conceptions of time. How long do we hold a shot? When do we cut? There was a period which was difficult for me, because the production company wanted a much faster paced film than I did. It's not the slowest film in any case, because that's not the nature of this film, but there are certain things I would never cut up, for example, the re-enactment. And intercut it with other things. There's no reason. You have to develop such a strong sense of what time can do for your project. The times you put next to each other as well as the time of unfolding. How long you are looking at someone. Pedro Costa lights and stages things, and it takes a long time for each scene to unfold. His films can't even be called documentaries, they are not documentaries, but they are not fictions in a traditional sense either, they are much more interesting. *Prisoner of War* has a different approach and perhaps a different purpose. Bo was part of a broad period of historical time. He was directly involved with four decades of the Cold War. I'm trying to find this counterpoint formally. To explode this time.

SP: Do you want to talk about what happened in Idaho?

ALZ: He tried to commit suicide. He went to Idaho in order to set up this self-sufficient community, because the government had just come down crashing on him. Then he became narrated as this crazy guy, just another veteran who doesn't know what he's talking about, which is partially true. He's always been on the borderline, on the edge. He started training people in all these methods. How to make bombs, how to hypnotize, field medicine, counter-terror driving. He effectively created his own army. Some people thought that he kept a tap on the kind of ultra right-wing community that was against government and armed. But he's pro-government. He would never agree to anything which would be against the law. There's an interesting overlap. I guess you could see it as, that he was still working in a way for the government. Not officially, not directly but in order to keep peace. The government came down on him, and since he had become a whistleblower, he was no longer needed. And he needed to feel like he could still help and be part of something. I believe it has to do with PTSD, and only very recently are people, veterans, soldiers, able to speak more openly about this without being made to feel ashamed, and on my last visit Bo spoke about PTSD a lot, which is very important – to break the stigma.

SP: Could you tell us what and who are your inspirations in filmmaking and why?

ALZ: My biggest inspiration is probably Jean Rouch and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who has one of the most alive imaginations in cinematic strategies. From Rouch, I especially learnt a lot from *Petit à Petit*, and I think I used some of the strategies in *Prisoner of War*. The re-enactments, although they can better be described as enactments. In *Chronicle of a Summer*, Rouch hired a Brigitte Bardot lookalike and became more interested in the Brigitte Bardot lookalike and what she opened up. Or in *Petit à Petit*, when he estranges something, how it suddenly becomes absurd. Pedro Costa in relation to long-term engagement. But somehow that's parallel, because this desire came before I even knew about Pedro Costa. In *Horse Money* I saw a possibility opening up, where together one can actually produce something that is what film I think is made for in a way. I loved the film. Another inspiration is Bela Tarr's *The Turin Horse*. It's strange because my expression is so different, but I think this is one of the most beautiful films. I always loved Fred Kelemen's work as well, particularly in relation to camera and time, and he's the cinematographer in *The Turin Horse*. The way in which the camera moves, the time it takes to move, and the things which unfold in front of it. When it merges in that kind of way, that's for me incredible. Then of course I love Joshua Oppenheimer's work. Especially also all the collaboration we did together with Christine Cynn as well, camp and explosive ways of making films. I really like the fake myths of Sergei Parajanov. I like Agnes Varda, Chantal Akerman. I just discovered a filmmaker who I didn't know about, but really like. Esther May Campbell, do you know her? She did a film called *September*. Then I love Kelly Reichard's work, in particular *Wendy and Lucy*. Anny Sprinkle. When I was 16 she toured Germany and you could look into her vagina to see what it looked like. And all the boys were queuing up. I wasn't allowed yet, because I wasn't 18.

SP: A lot of forms of filmmaking depend on certain kinds of finance and money, how do you go about navigating that?

ALZ: Coming from a background where there's very little financing for my work to this day, you find pathways of collaboration. These kinds of limitations allow for finding other kinds of expression. I always come across people who say 'Oh, I can't do anything because I have no money.' But I feel that it's not about the camera you use, it's how you use something. Sometimes it's hard to finance things. *Estate* for example had very little money, and it was possible to make because everybody helped. So you have to perhaps work a bit harder to find collaborators. We're already so privileged here, that we can even make films, that we have time and safety to make them. I think we always need too much somehow. I mean I understand that some works need a lot of money, but do they really? Of course people need to be paid. In *Estate*, for example, nobody got paid, and that's a problem. I don't want to work in that way all the time, because I can't always ask people to work for free on my ideas. That's not going to be possible. We have to find a way to pay people. I think filmmakers have to ask these questions of the need for certain kinds of finance more often. Be ambitious, you don't have to compromise the ambition. If you find a way around it. And that's imagination, that's all we have.

SP: With Rambo*, the films, how did you have them in your process when thinking about the film?*

ALZ: I brought a Rambo lookalike to Sandy Valley. Sometimes a metaphor has to be literalized. If he is the real life Rambo, then why not play out a scene and see what it would be like? Because it's ridiculous, a person can't be this person. There are certain elements they may be. The whole month when I brought Gagik to Sandy Valley was structured around the narrative of *Rambo* films. Certain key moments that happened. Also we filmed Gagik re-enacting Bo's memory of how it really was, in relationship to the film. I love these as approaches, but sometimes they work in one's head better.

SP: I had a feeling that there are moments where his personal realization surprises you somehow. It feels like, oh wow, he really has thought about this, or he really has asked himself these questions. Was this your experience as well, and if so how?

ALZ: He was often so closed, like he would talk in such conventional terms about certain things, and then every now and then he would come out with such laser-sharp observations about his own life. The better my questions were, the better he could answer. For example, his understanding of what happened with the prisoners of war, when he said 'I was on the other side'. He became the enemy and it became all this ugliness. How he was spewed out by that which he believed in and still believes in. So he was on the other side of that which was actually his side. He still fights for his side, so there's this double meaning to it, which I thought was quite interesting.

SP: What impact do you think the film or the process of the filmmaking had on him, if any?

ALZ: I think while I was there, it gave him something to do, that's all. I have no other ambitions than that. The last time, it was interesting, because it felt like he was more willing to open up. He was very ill, and somehow therefore more relaxed. I've asked him these questions so many times, but I thought I might as well ask them again, because he hasn't answered them properly yet. And then he said a beautiful thing, I think. I asked him, 'If you were to confront all the people you have killed – you die, and you see all the people you have killed lined up – what would you say to them?' He said, 'I don't think about it because I'm not satisfied with the reply.' So he didn't have a reply to them yet. And then he goes on, so should I say this, or this? It was somehow very honest, just saying: 'I don't know.' Conventionally, narratively, we of course always are made to hope that there may be this resolution: 'I deeply regret it.' But of course there is not, because he did what he believed was the right thing to do at the time when he did it. Until he realized it was wrong. This is the catch, you fall for an ideology, and when that shifts, what is left other than irreparable carnage?

SP: Do you have something else to add?

ALZ: I hope you get to see the film, it will be finished some time in 2016.

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