

About the Project

The Beginning: Pre-Production

The story of how we ended up at Olala Farms in North San Juan, California, in the summer of 2015, begins just about four months earlier, on a cold winter day in February of the same year, in Zurich, Switzerland. At that time, we (Selina and Christian) had been students at the University of Zurich for a couple of semesters: Selina majoring in Anthropology with a minor in Popular Culture, and Christian majoring in Popular Culture with a minor in Film Studies. Since an early age, Christian has been interested in anything film related, including film history, film theory, and the principles of filmmaking. Selina on the other hand was a movie junkie, mostly for the sake of entertainment. However, during her anthropology studies she developed an interest for ethnographic film and other visual research methods. Soon these methods, mostly ethnographic film, became a mutual interest of both of us, and began to be an often discussed subject.

Thus, on that particular cold winter night in 2015, the two of us met with an old friend of Selina's family, retired archeologist Lawrence G. Desmond from Palo Alto, California. Due to his Swiss heritage, Larry spent a couple of months in Switzerland every year, and has been a family friend since the 1980s, when Selina's parents spent a year in Boulder, Colorado. Larry has always been of interest to Selina, mostly for practicing her English, but also because of his archeological knowledge, which became more interesting, since she started her studies. As the three of us went to get a cup of coffee in Zurich's Niederdorf before having dinner, we ended up having some very interesting discussions about our studies and about Larry's work as an archeologist. Larry was especially interested in the subject of 'Popular Culture', of which he hadn't heard of before. The three of us continued talking about popular and visual culture, film studies, fieldwork, and about the 1960s in San Francisco, and somehow Larry started telling us about some friends of his, that were living on an organic farm in Northern California. He started telling us about how he met Robyn Martin and Arlo C. Acton many years ago, and that they are both artists who were living in the bay area during the 1960s before moving back-to-the-land to become organic farmers. As a result of our conversation he showed us a video he took of Arlo, working in his yurt studio in 2012. Larry, who has been a passionate photographer for many years, had always thought that it would be a great idea to document Robyn and Arlo's stories and their life on their farm, preferably by film. Half-jokingly we started asking questions

of who they were, where they lived, about their art, and about their life as organic farmers, becoming more and more fascinated and intrigued by the idea of actually going there and documenting their life. There was a lot of excitement in the air on our memorable train ride home, with many questions unanswered, and still being puzzled about the possible seriousness of the situation. Especially the thought of using a film camera was very compelling to us.

Over the next couple of days our discussions gradually became more serious, and we started considering that this might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of doing our first real fieldwork abroad, and going on such an adventure. We started to do research on Arlo and Robyn and their home, Olala Farms, in North San Juan, California. Subsequently we started exchanging emails with Larry about the possibility of actually going to the farm that same year during our summer break from university, mainly because Larry had told us that Arlo's memory was not what it used to be, and that the stories he had to tell were starting to fade away. This left us with about four month of preparation time, not having any experience in how to use and work with a video camera. Also, both of us didn't have any hands-on experiences in doing fieldwork abroad. However, all of these obstacles did not hinder our intentions of producing an ethnographic film. The four months before our big trip were very eventful and busy, full of preparation and planning: including calculating the budget, planning our trip and the duration of our stay etc. It also included learning how to use a video camera, which we didn't really manage to completely accomplish beforehand.

At the university we came in contact with Brigitte Frizzoni, head of the popular culture department, who was incredibly helpful during our preparation, and after the fieldwork was completed. We also met with Michèle Dick of the anthropology department, who specializes in visual methods. She was the first one to give us some helpful advice on how to conduct fieldwork with a camera. Michèle and Brigitte are now our bachelor supervisors, which again has been a great help, since they both were involved, in some way or another, since the beginning of the project.

As we prepared for our trip and began discussing different methods used in visual anthropology, we soon noticed that we stumbled into an area of different approaches, definitions and understandings of what an ethnographic film encompasses, and that there are no clear do's and don'ts that we could simply follow. Before the fieldwork, we only touched the surface of the different approaches of visual anthropology, and only later (after conducting our fieldwork), started reading texts by Sarah Pink, Jay Ruby, Karl

Heider, David MacDougall, Paul Henley, and others. Before the trip we also had to think about the technical prerequisites, e.g. what recording devices are necessary to capture sight and sound, how to store and backup our footage etc. With help from the university and from our families, the trip to Olala Farms quickly came closer. We wrote a letter to Robyn and Arlo in order to explain our intentions of making a documentary about their life on the farm. We also contacted their children by email. Apart from that, there was no direct contact before we actually left, but we knew from Larry that it was okay to spend some weeks at the farm, and that we were welcome there.

In July of 2015 we finally left Switzerland and our long journey to San Francisco began. After a very long trip from Zurich to Berlin, from Berlin to New York, and finally from New York to San Francisco, we safely arrived at 11pm. After staying in Oakland for a week to visit San Francisco and get used to the new time zone we drove up north in the direction of Sacramento, Grass Valley, Nevada City, and finally to the San Juan Ridge – still not knowing what exactly to expect. After a long drive from the Bay Area up north, we reached Tyler Foote Crossing Road: a narrow winding road through the vast forest with only a few mailboxes visible, that kept going up and down to finally reach a low point where we crossed the Yuba River. Soon after we drove past the famous Mother Truckers, an organic grocery store that Larry had told us about, where Robyn and Arlo sold some of their produce. Nowadays their daughter Ana and her partner Jeremy are still selling to Mother Truckers. From there we kept on driving on Oak Tree Road and almost missed our turn to Robinson Road. On Robinson Road the path got smaller and bumpier, but we kept on driving until we reached the point where the concrete ends. From there the only way we could go was to drive up a steep, gravel road leading straight to the gate of Olala Farms. At the gate, which we had to open by hand, we were greeted by the barking of two rather big dogs (Ana and Jeremy's Moon and Tucker, who later turned out to be very kind, loving and protective). Entering the gate we kept on driving, first past the Grannyhouse where Ana and Jeremy live, then past the broken school bus and past the old yurt. We also passed the fields and Arlo's art studio before finally reaching our destination in the late afternoon. We were once again greeted by loud barking of two even bigger dogs (Sterling and Ridgely, Robyn and Arlo's guarding dogs) who at first seemed a little scary. We took one last breath and exited the car, not really able to realize that we finally arrived at our rather 'unknown' destination. As we slowly walked towards the house, Arlo was sitting in the driveway listening to the wind and the birds. He welcomed us with a smile as we introduced ourselves. A little later Deborah emerged from the main house offering us a

delicious chicken sandwich to regain our strength after the long journey. Everything was new and unknown, the quiet aura of the place, the forest surrounding us, far away from busy city life. Robyn was not home yet, she was out picking wildflowers and herbs for her homeopathic remedies, so we spent the rest of the afternoon talking to Arlo and sharing our plans with Deborah. When Robyn arrived later that day, we were impressed by her fierce and very friendly appearance as she, once again, welcomed us to their home. This marked the beginning of our four weeks of filming, interviewing, listening, observing, and documenting our experiences and life on the farm, processing an almost infinite number of impressions and stories.

Problems and solutions in the field: Production

At first the idea was to produce an ethnographic documentary film about Arlo and Robyn's life as artists and activists in San Francisco during the 1960s, and about their decision of going back-to-the-land in the 1970s. We went into the field with an idea of a very specific film and storyline, naively hoping that with the method of observational cinema, on-site interviews and archive footage, we would be able to bring our intended storyline to the silver screen. The first half of that film was supposed to show what happened in Haight-Ashbury, Berkeley and the rest of the United States in the years prior to 1970, using only footage of San Francisco, while the second half was supposed to show Robyn and Arlo's life, beginning at the time they moved back-to-the-land. Everyone who ever worked with film or video probably knows that things can turn out quite differently from the way they were intended. Even before arriving on the farm, we realized that the first half of this film would be very hard to produce for a number of reasons. First off, we were not able to produce our own footage of past events, which meant we would have to rely on either the archives of Robyn and Arlo, hoping they had recorded some audio-visual material themselves (they hadn't), or on expensive stock shots that we couldn't afford. Secondly, a number of films or programs had already been produced about the subject, which meant that there was no new information we could have conveyed with the first half of our film. Just like that, half of our film vanished into thin air before the actual production even started.

This was a minor setback, and we swiftly decided not to focus on the past too much and to turn our attention to the present instead – meaning that there would be stories about the past, but always from the perspective of the present and told by people we met on the farm. However, problems and difficulties we had to deal with in the field did not stop there, as we realized on our first day on the farm. The first thing we encountered was the language barrier. Even though we both spent some time in the States learning English – Selina for one year and Christian for half a year – we still had problems with understanding everything, especially if somebody spoke in an accent unfamiliar to us. We also needed to get used to the amount of 'talking' that was going on and that surrounded us every day. In other words, there were always a vast number of people around, talking about various things, sometimes changing topics by the minute. An answer to a particular question that we asked, could go on for half an hour or longer, often wandering from one topic to another, describing in great detail many trivial specifics, that were not essential to actually answering the question at hand. We uploaded the unedited video of Robyn

answering our question of how they met filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni, as an example of such a lengthy answer. Even though it was very interesting to listen to these detailed stories, we only realized later – while viewing the footage – that these types of answers made editing very difficult, and that our interview approach was more suited for an oral history project, than for an ethnographic film. The longer we sat in the driveway listening to stories, trivia, and discussions, the less we were able to keep up with the things being said, which sometimes lead to us losing the thread of the conversation. At times we were unable to pick it up again, because the subject had already changed and our concentration had faded. Unfortunately, this often resulted in an inability to ask follow-up questions and to go into further inquiry, because the speaker had already moved on to another subject before we were able to pose a clarifying question. This was very tiring at times, and most evenings we just dropped into bed exhausted, still processing everything we had seen and heard during the day. Luckily, after a couple of days on the farm, we got used to the language and their way of speaking, and listening and understanding became easier.

Another difficulty we experienced was due to the fact that we both did not have any previous experiences with doing ‘real’ fieldwork. Even though we learned about the theoretical aspects of ‘doing fieldwork’ at university and even carried out a couple of small projects, these exercises didn’t really prepare us for the situation on-site because they never involved being in the field for an extended period of time or in a different country, and did mostly not even require us to spend a night away from home. Going to a place such as Olala Farms, even for four weeks, can be quite challenging. Many questions arose in advance, for example: Will there be a toilet and a shower? How hot is it going to be? Will there be any wildfires? Where are we going to sleep? Are there wild animals around, such as bears or mountain lions? Are we really expected, or do they still not know that we are coming? Are they going to be ok with us filming there?

When we arrived, the farm was a pleasant surprise: most of the time, there was running water - even though it had to be filtered before becoming drinking water - and there was a proper toilet and a shower inside the house – a nice change to the ‘outhouse’, which is an outside toilet that we used many times. We ended up sleeping in a tent, but finding a spot to pitch our tent was a bit of a challenge, because the whole property was much bigger than we expected and the hilly terrain didn’t make it easy to find a plain spot. Plus we were looking for a place that shielded us from the sun, and we wanted to stay close to the farmhouse, because we relied on it for water and other necessities. We soon found an

excellent spot next to the pond and close to the farmhouse. Even though both of us had at least some brief camping experiences, based mostly on going to festivals for a couple of days, we never spend a longer period of time camping. Although we split our four weeks at Olala Farms into two equal parts of two weeks each, exploring the southwest of the United States in the meantime, the four weeks in total still required a bit of getting used to. The first night in a tent we realized that camping in the forest of the Sierra Nevada foothills does not compare to what we previously experienced. Despite the fact that we camped on the property of Olala Farms, the unfamiliar sounds of the nightly forest can be quite scary at first, especially after learning that the wildlife surrounding the farm included bears and mountain lions – something we were told on our first day by a number of people. We got scared by an unfamiliar noise, originating somewhere close by, during our first night in the tent and decided to spend the remainder of the first night in the house. It's a bit embarrassing to admit that the noise we heard turned out to be the sound of the bullfrogs living in the pond next to our tent. Needless to say we ended up having a good laugh after finding out about the origin of the sounds we heard. However, we also have to admit that we were very glad to have both of the dogs - Sterling and Ridgely – escorting us to our tent every night from then on. Both dogs usually spent some time in front of our tent to make sure everything was okay, which made us feel very safe and less scared. After we settled and got more and more used to the place – this actually happened more quickly than we had anticipated at first - we felt at home and began to enjoy the beautiful nature that was surrounding us.

Now it was time to start our research. All we knew about the place and the people living there beforehand, we knew from Larry: stories about how Arlo and Robyn met and how they got married sometime in the 1990s; that they left San Francisco to go back-to-the-land to become organic farmers; that both of them were doing art, and that they had raised 4 children on the farm. In many informal conversations with Robyn and Arlo, we learned, piece by piece, more about their lives, including where they grew up, how they met and where they were living in San Francisco during the 1960s, why they moved to Hopland and how they eventually ended up buying the property on the San Juan Ridge. We learned a lot about their life on the farm, about the fire they experienced in 1976 that destroyed much of the property and most of their belongings shortly after they moved there, we learned about how Robyn got into homeopathy and herbalism, and about the animals they used to have and the plants and vegetables they used to grow. We also learned more about the diverse community of North San Juan and about some of the social events, like the

'May Day' celebration and the 'Cherry Festival', that take place in the area. We learned about their sweat lodge and 'the sweats' they used to have, connected to spiritual events and gatherings. And of course, we heard about the numerous people who stayed on the farm over the years, be it for only a short period of time or for more than a year. Of course we did not only hear stories from Robyn and Arlo themselves, but from two of their children, Ana and Aero, and from Deborah and Arthur – a couple who stayed with Robyn and Arlo during the summer of 2015 - as well, and whenever someone was over for dinner or lunch, we learned even more about the place and even more stories were told. We only started using our camera around day four or five after our arrival at Olala Farms, because we wanted to get to know the people and the rhythm of their daily routines beforehand. By the time we started using the camera, we had already heard countless stories that we didn't manage to record, and were not sure what we should focus on, or how our finished film was supposed to look like. Should we focus on organic farming, or would it be more interesting to show Arlo's artwork? Who should we talk to and what topics should we cover by conducting interviews? Because our intention of making an ethnographic documentary about the life and times of Robyn and Arlo hadn't changed, everything we learned, observed and talked about, seemed to be important, thus we could not find a specific storyline that we could focus on and use as a basis for our film. We decided to ask Robyn and Arlo and two of their children, Ana and Aero, as well as the people visiting the farm, what they thought was important and what topics we should cover in our ethnographic documentary. Even though we did not receive a definitive answer, a common denominator was that the film should focus on the 'here and now' and therefore show how the daily life of the retired artists at Olala Farms looks like in 2015. We were told that we should try to capture the 'spirit' of Olala Farms of which so many people grew fond of over the years. In a way this was good news for us, since we already decided not to focus on the past as much as we planned originally. Then again, this 'new focus' did not really solve our problem of narrowing down the topics and themes surrounding Olala Farms. Therefore we made the decision to try to film as much of the everyday life as possible, capturing mundane activities such as cooking, farming or having guests over. We also tried not to interfere too much in these daily activities, and shifted the focus away from only interviewing Robyn and Arlo, to also include their friends and family. The interviews we did turned out to be very helpful in providing context in the sequences that you can find on this website. But the task of filming as much as possible during our four weeks on the farm, with the aim to capture everything of the everyday life, proved to be

quite difficult: First, there was just not as much happening as we expected before arriving. Many days consisted of people coming over for either lunch or dinner, and even though we witnessed many interesting conversations, there was no real 'action' - meaning activities with a clear starting and ending point - that we could have used as a continuous sequence or story line. Therefore, most of our days consisted of us not knowing what the day will bring after getting up in the morning, which turned out to be very tiring at times. But this 'way of life' also had somewhat of a calming effect, because we were not able to plan ahead and somehow got immersed into the 'mood' and the 'atmosphere' that surrounded Olala Farms. We adjusted our methods to the slower pace of living on the farm, and on some days we were pleasantly surprised by an interesting new visitor, or got to know two of Robyn and Arlo's children, Aero and Ana, who were so kind as to not only invite us to their homes, but to also share some of their stories about growing up on the farm. But the slow pace made us more observing of not only the things going on on the farm and the stories told, but rather of the 'feeling' of the place, including the smell and the sounds. Due to these circumstances, there were days, of course, when basically nothing happened. Sometimes it was due to the heat outside which made everyone tired, or somebody had a cold and didn't feel too good, and very rarely, there were days when nobody came to visit. On these days, we didn't do much filming and were maybe a little disappointed or concerned about not being able to gather enough footage. But of course we always kept in mind that both Arlo and Robyn already had a very eventful and exciting life behind them, and started slowing down. Nevertheless, we got to experience enough days when the farmhouse was packed with visitors, with groups of people sitting in the driveway, in the living room, or around the dining room table, with more people arriving by the minute. This, on the other hand, was sometimes a bit overwhelming, because there was almost too much was going on at once, which meant that we had to decide what to focus on and what to record.

This brings us to the subject of filmmaking: As mentioned before, none of us had any previous experience in using a movie camera and we naively believed that it would be enough to just record whatever happens, and to eventually be able to make a movie out of the recorded material. Consequently, we soon realized that there is more to filmmaking than just recording what happens in front of the camera. Not having a lot of preparation time before going to Olala Farms meant that we only read some basic texts about filmmaking beforehand, and thus, resulted in us having to deal with different problems and issues on-site. Without going into too much detail, here is a list of some of the

difficulties we came across while making our first steps as filmmakers (most of the problems listed below could have easily be avoided through a lengthier preparation time and an introduction to the essentials of filmmaking):

- Know your camera: even though there is an autofocus, which makes filming much easier, especially when you don't know how to use a camera, one should not forget to turn it on. Due to our lack of knowledge of how our camera works, we ended up with some out-of-focus-shots that were difficult to use in the editing process. Examples can be found in the radio sequence with Robyn and in some of the interview shots of Aero.
- Framing is not as easy as you might think: even with a wide angle lens, we experienced many situations where it turned out to be quite difficult to fit everything and everyone we wanted into the frame without moving the camera too far away from the action.
- Audio needs to be considered and constantly checked: Neglect will result in too much background noise, or voices that are too low, or even entire shots that cannot be used, because of the rushing of the wind.
- Bring the right equipment: Even though we were working with compact flash cards, we didn't bring a card reader, which could have been purchased for little money. Therefore we had to connect our camera to the computer to copy the footage, which meant that filming was not possible during this time.
- Shoot to edit: Filming without some sort of a plan or idea of how the finished product/film should look like, will make editing very hard. Even though we did have a clear vision before going to the field, we had to completely change our entire concept on-site, and again after viewing most of the footage. Lucky for us, we shot enough material (~50h) to adjust and change our plans and visions for our project after the fact – resulting in the creation of this website. But an ideal situation would be to visit the field twice: first, to do extensive research and get to know the field and the protagonists; and secondly, to do all the filming.
- Know your film format and your editing software: This is easy to forget, but very important. In our case, some of the index files that the camera generated could not be transferred to the computer. Therefore some video files needed to be converted into another file format before we could actually work with them in editing. Fortunately it worked out in the end, but we wasted a considerable amount of time, which could have been easily avoided with the proper preparation.

- Video does not replace field notes: The initial plan was to log all the footage in a spreadsheet every night, to effectively minimize the need for written field notes. Because we did not have access to power in our tent and sometimes produced numerous hours of footage in a single day, we only managed to label the folders of the daily footage and only wrote down a couple of remarks, allowing us to keep at least a basic overview of what we filmed that day. This resulted in countless hours of viewing our footage at home, taking detailed notes and transcribing the conducted interviews. This way of note taking turned out to be very helpful in the editing process, making it easier for us to find the footage we needed. But again, we would have had much less work in the post-production phase, had we taken more field notes and kept a detailed production diary directly on-site.

Even though some of the problems we encountered in the field could have been avoided in advance – which would have made the post-production process less difficult and less tiresome – we learned many new things. Through this approach of ‘learning-by-doing’ we acquired new skills in using a camera, how it feels to actually conduct fieldwork abroad, and what problems might occur in the field. Therefore we think that it is inevitable and important to make some mistakes in the process, because it helps you being better prepared for future projects and different situations. The experiences we made in North San Juan turned out to be very helpful and we could even use our newly acquired knowledge for another project, an ethnographic film about a Swiss Viking association called *Blackmoore – Between Fantasy and Reality*.

Despite the difficulties we came across, we really enjoyed our four weeks on the farm. It was not only a very interesting and instructional time, but also a great adventure and an amazing experience. We became very attached to the people we met, enjoyed our quiet time away from vivid city life, and came home much more centered and content. Looking back we are incredibly happy about the fact that we took a leap in the dark and that we were courageous enough to enter this field without knowing what to expect.

How to make sense of all of this: Post-production

As briefly mentioned above, we recorded about 50 hours of footage during the four weeks we spent at Olala Farms. The fact that we continued our studies at university right after coming back to Switzerland by the end of August 2015, and that we were working along the way as well, prevented us from viewing and working on the recorded footage straightaway. Therefore the viewing of the footage and the direct work on the proposed film about Robyn and Arlo was neglected and delayed. Directly after returning from our fieldwork, we didn't know that we will be able to work on this project as bachelor thesis, therefore prioritizing other things over working on the project.

We did however continue working on the spreadsheet we had started during our fieldwork, which meant that we sometimes watched hours of footage in one sitting. In the spreadsheet, we wrote down what date the shot was taken, who was in it, what the shot was about or what was said, how far the camera was from the subjects (long shot, close-up or other), and if the shot was good enough to be used. We adjusted our way of working in the process and started writing down only the most relevant information, such as the content or a transcribed interview. The list itself turned out to be extremely helpful during the editing process, because we could easily find everything we recorded, which made working with fifty hours of material much easier. We highly recommend such a detailed documentation of all the recorded material. We continued working in the same way on all subsequent audiovisual projects, regardless of the amount of footage.

Only while watching the footage, we realized all the things we had done wrong in the production phase, including the things discussed above. Apart from the technical difficulties and the resulting shots that we didn't like, a major issue emerged in terms of structure of the film. Since we had to adjust our methods on-site and discard our initial film concept, we had no obvious structure of this yet to be made film in mind. We realized that our way of working was basically doing fieldwork using the camera as a tool for note taking, and not the way we should have worked for an ethnographic film. This problem kept us busy for a number of months, maybe almost a year. During this time we started reading up on theory regarding ethnographic film, we took seminars, attended the small ethnographic film festival *Regard Bleu* twice, and even produced a short film, applying the things we have learned. We realized that we naively recorded as much as possible without interfering or interacting, constantly hoping that this would yield fairly objective shots – at the time of our fieldwork, we thought this was the right way to go. Also, using a tripod without any camera movement made editing very difficult. Through the reading more and

more texts and the new experiences we made with filmmaking, we concluded that true objectivity can never be realized through any medium, because the subjectivity of not only the filmmaker but also the protagonists is inherent in the footage produced. These discussions and conclusions, along with the first experiences we made with editing, made us reconsider the idea of making an ethnographic film and eventually lead to the decision of producing an 'ethnographic multimedia project' instead. This decision gave us the possibility to contextualize certain videos, give additional information and work with a less linear approach. This was liberating in many ways and simplified working on the project, because we now were able to structure the information into coherent sequences, which we then arranged according to the places the videos were taken. This new, non-linear approach made it possible to let each viewer explore the farm individually. The point of letting people explore and experience the farm on their own terms was very important to us because we found it very exciting to explore this place ourselves and find new things in every place we looked. Therefore we wanted to pass this experience on to the viewer. Even though we know that exploring the farm in reality does not compare to doing it on a computer screen, we hope to have found a way to get the viewers as close to the real experience as possible.