

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Aislinn Thomas and Ruth Skinner in conversation

Aislinn Thomas: I was thinking about your description of the editing as tender (was that the word?). I take an intuitive approach to editing, often not really knowing what I'll do until I start doing it. But I think I'm pretty sensitive to the ethics of representing others. For instance, at one point I came across a wedding party on the overlook above the falls and they were not keen on engaging, except for the climber in formal dress who spoke with me away from his friends. Someone later suggested that I should have kept the camera rolling and recorded everyone. It would have made for good tape, but for better or worse I couldn't bring myself to do it. I appreciate it when people are willing to be vulnerable in front of the camera and I want to be respectful and trustworthy.

Ruth Skinner: Yes, "tender" was the exact word I jotted down while watching. And next to that I wrote "Editing as respectful gesture // editing, collaboration, respect." It's a very engaging work, made in a very economical way. You keep the frame on individuals long enough so that we have time to take in their responses, but also their mannerisms, their clothing, and little interpersonal foibles. We start to interpret glimpses into their relationships with each other as

friends, family, partners—nodding along, echoing and praising each others answers, elaborating, cutting each other off, cracking jokes. This “streeter”-style, spontaneous interview format has the potential to go in a lot of different ways, often at the expense of the person in front of the camera. Cameras show a great deal of a person simply by being trained on them for too long. So I see care in how you edit these interviews together, and genuine interest as well as a wonderful attention to awkwardness. But within the pleasure of watching people be interviewed, your shots never linger to the point of feeling mean or malicious. The frame doesn't stay on one individual, couple or group for so long that it starts to feel exploitative.

You also keep yourself at bay as an element. I think we hear you begin to ask a question from behind the camera just once, under the sound of a man laughing as his own joke. And you keep a similar proximity to many of your subjects. They are within a mountainscape, and within arm's reach of you and the camera. Those decisions keep us engaged on the people who are speaking as visitors within the landscape. And you are implicated as one of those visitors as well. As the folks in your film say, we walk mountain trails for a lot of reasons: to escape the city, to exercise, to commune with nature and/or a higher

power, for a romantic moment, for a good view (or a photograph of ourselves in a good view), and often for some sensation that we've conquered a challenge. I love the simplicity of coming to the mountains to film people talking about the mountains.

AT: I know the part you're talking about! I edited myself out because I was so repetitive and it seemed like a good choice to have the questions be implied rather than stated.

It's interesting that you notice that the shots didn't linger. The first edit I did was really straight-up: the first section was everyone's response to "what do you think about the mountains, how do they make you feel?" prefaced by black video with that text. The second section was of everyone's response to "did you know that the mountains used to be ugly?" (again, with the text). A friend kindly reminded me of the "less is more" and "complicated is better" principles. So I jumbled it all up, took away the questions and was pretty happy with the result. I wonder if breaking up the tape like this, so that there are probably at least 3 segments of each person or group of people throughout the video, created the effect you describe.

There were so many awkward moments! Most

people were really generous and earnest, it seemed —not qualities that are in contradiction with awkwardness (quite the opposite, maybe?), but qualities that make the awkwardness feel productive...to me, at least. I have quite a bit of social anxiety, so having a project that puts me behind a camera (even if it's just a phone rigged up in a way that involves masking tape and a giant wind sock) provides a premise and container for speaking with strangers for long periods of time. It also (DIY rig aside) legitimizes doing this thing that isn't typically part of what we do in public space. At least here...my partner is from the US and often remarks how unfriendly people are in Canada. It's more common where he's from to strike up conversations with folks you don't know.

RS: Right! It feels like all these aspects combine to entail a kind of emissary subjectivity, and that becomes a tricky position to navigate. And as mentioned, we inevitably come across other people on the same mountain paths. I once hiked a mountain with a friend, the both of us decked out with layers of gear, water, snacks, sunscreen. We were huffing and puffing upward and a couple passed us on their way down dressed in their Sunday best: dress and heels, suit and brogues. My friend and I suddenly felt quite silly. We were ejected out of our

fantasy of the (en)noble mountain journey. We were experiencing the landscape like a movie or theatre set, a backdrop for whatever pleasant stroll or intense physical ordeal needed to happen on it. I think of all those early Notman studio photographs of men dressed as grizzled mountaineers—journeying to the photo studio in the centre of town, getting dressed up, getting dusted with fake snow, posing among trees and taxidermy. Those photographs shaped a national image of the Canadian wilderness, and the Canadian adventurer within that wilderness. And that visual relied on imagination, special effects, and stage magic.

So if I can stick with this, the emissary quality that weaves throughout the film also speaks to an anthropocentric perspective that is quickly crumbling apart around us. Again, it was a deft editing decision to include a few instances of people discussing climate change and the smoke that was overtaking Banff on that particular day. One couple complained about the smoky weather keeping them from the summit, and another couple claimed that it kept them from enjoying “a true mountain experience.” I think a third person kind of shrugged about it with a, “Oh well, that’s not something you can control.” Contemporary environmental consequences are very present in this film. They linger over everything and everyone like a

fog. And in spite of numerous insinuations on the benefits of enjoying beautiful mountain views and taking in fresh mountain air.

AT: It's kind of you to assume that the inclusion of conversations about smoke to be a deft decision on my part! The smoke moved in part way through my stay in Banff, and part way through the shooting of this project. It was so inescapably present for so long and there was no getting away from it. People kept remarking how apocalyptic (always this word) it felt—the light was incredibly eerie, especially in the evenings, as I recall. Rita McKeough, who was on residency at the same time, had such a heart for the non-human life impacted by the fire that she created this intense and moving sound piece in response. It was odd and disorienting not to be able to see the mountains that surrounded us, and we could feel the toxic effects of the smoke on our bodies. There was that one couple that was so disappointed about not having a “real” mountain experience because they couldn't see the vistas they'd travelled for.

So many of the people in Banff in the summer months seem to be visitors (from so many places!), and I was one of them. You can drive right up to 2 of the 3 spots I filmed in, so they are relatively physically accessible. The third, Sacred Buffalo Guardian Mountain (aka

Sleeping Buffalo or Tunnel Mountain), is a tiny mountain, and it can be a manageable hike for infrequent hikers. Shooting in these places was pragmatic, and also facilitated interactions with people who weren't necessarily athletes or mountaineers.

It was interesting how emphatic most people were in their opinions of whether or not it was believable that the mountains used to be ugly. I wanted to do the project because I found it to be such a stunning fact, but it was one that I accepted. I was surprised that it was a stretch for some to see our relationship to the mountains as contingent. But I had longer to think about this than the people who agreed to go on camera to speak to their "experience of the mountains," which I think is how I pitched it.

RS: I really loved that real-time portrayal of interviewees hearing that information, and the accompanying sheer refusal to agree: "No, that's impossible." "Crazy." "I can't comprehend that," or "I can't relate to that." I think the individual who kind of chuffed, "What do they know?", hits it square on the head: what people "knew" just a few generations ago was so different from what we understand now—culturally, environmentally, physically, aesthetically. And within that we have such diverse and contradictory beliefs about what mountains do and

represent that all relay with or against more “quantitative” forms of knowledge about what mountains are. Mountains are a thing to be conquered. They make me feel small. They help me to find myself. They are really beautiful expressions of nature. They are really beautiful expressions of the divine force that guides nature. They are a novelty from my city life. They are an entertaining expectation. They are therapeutic. They are terrifying. They are calm. They are breathtaking. They are challenging. They are relaxing.

A couple of individuals in your film very astutely trace a changing relationship in relation to pre- and post-Industrial culture, evolutionary theory, class systems, nature tourism, folklore, and Romantic and psychological formations of the uncanny. As you have mentioned, and as some of your interviewees mention, mountains are much more accessible now thanks to cars. Some have stairs and gondolas built into them so an individual can prioritize what they get out of their individual “mountain experience,” whether it’s a challenging workout or a good view. The man who cites the writers Nan Shepherd and Robert Macfarlane mentions that a certain approach to mountains entails “not just seeing them as an image.” And you resist giving us that perfect mountain image in this film. Instead, you allow these speakers to

gradually and subtly direct understanding of how mountains are imaged. Never too explicitly, and always leaving space for whatever personal perspectives we viewers might have. But given that your film is appearing in a program co-hosted with A Museum of Future Fossils, I'm curious about where your thoughts currently are in relation to *our* relation with mountains, and nature as a whole, after the process of making this film.

AT: I think it was Diane Borsato who said, "mountains are different things at different times," which is so true of just about anything. It seemed that most people I spoke with were genuinely moved by being in the presence of the mountains. There was an overall enthusiasm for the landscape, and often a sense of awe. A brief tangent: a friend told me about doing studio visits with Banff Centre artists-in-residence recently, and how some of them were able to get lots of work done, and others were completely unable to do so. She was trying to figure out what each group had in common, and apparently it was the people whose studios had mountain views who could not create work. Everything seems so inadequate in comparison to the mountains! Fortunately for me, my studio had an unremarkable view that was usually blocked by curtains. But my bedroom did not, and it was very difficult to sleep.

In geological terms the lithosphere (of which the mountains are a part) is considered elastic. I think a lot about this: the mountains were created hundreds of millions of years ago by processes that continue to work on them today. The mountains are in progress and they are ever-changing. We see the mountains as so solid and reliable, but they are like the rest of us. My dad, who is a geologist, describes the Rockies as “young mountains.” By extension, they will one day be old and weathered, and will eventually experience transformation that obliterates them entirely. To try to contain this and the timescale it entails within a human perspective is so difficult, and something that many artists and scientists do in brilliant ways.

RS: Maybe we can use that very lovely description of “in progress” to dovetail into another topic that you write about, which is access. It’s been quite wonderful to get to know your work and your writing, which in turn introduced me to a number of conversations that seek to shift how we think about access within gallery and exhibition spaces. It made me realize that conversations around access, for all their well-meaning intentions, are already at risk of becoming stymied. And this current dialogue between us arose out of an opportunity/challenge due to the

fact that you aren't able to easily attend this LOMAA/ Future Fossils screening here in London to give an artist's talk. Would you speak to that?

AT: For me, most decisions are necessarily filtered through pragmatic considerations of what I physically can and can't do, and what the ramifications of a choice will be given all the other choices in its vicinity. I thrive in low-stimulation spaces, which is a fancy way of saying I'm very sensitive to light and sound. I have a different sensory processing and different thresholds than most, and many public spaces are not only disorienting but can trigger terrible pain. Chemical sensitivity is another one of the things that I have in the mix. So I encounter a lot of barriers, and often rely on others to help me travel. I'm not super well-connected where I live, so it's almost always my partner who supports me in this way. It takes a lot of strategizing.

I was supposed to be out of town during the screening, so Christine had asked me to create a recorded artist talk. I asked if there might be an alternative, something that would be more of a life-giving process given my other commitments right now. Having a conversation was appealing and doable. I ended up having to cancel my travel plans, but this format is still a good fit in this case.

At some times and in some ways a talk is an okay option because the format allows me to be present in a potentially large group, facilitating a kind of social access. Yet it is depleting, given that the convention of an artist talk involves a projection (though I once gave one in the dark! I should really do that again). A recorded talk wouldn't afford me the ability to be present, and would require my figuring out the technology. But through this conversation I get to be in dialogue with you. It creates a different kind of social access, and social access is a big deal—being disabled is often isolating.

RS: I think it is really important to spend time on this: on acknowledging ways of facilitating access directly in the outputs of a practice, and also ways of facilitating access through all the orbital actions that accompany a practice, like artists' statements, talks and interviews, or publications. You passed along the piece you wrote for Akimbo, "Why Access is Love and There is No Such Thing as 'Barrier-Free,'" and I'd like to cite your writing here, as well as the work of Sandy Ho, Mia Mingus, and Alice Wong which you reference in that text:

"Given the broad range of human experience, perhaps the most kind and ethical stance is to realize

that we can never anticipate every need, let alone develop adequate boxes to check in response. Not that this should keep us from trying to anticipate and meet the needs of our community, but that it should keep us humble. I am especially frustrated when spaces describe themselves as ‘barrier-free.’ Usually this is a shorthand for barrier-free physical access (i.e., accessible for those using wheelchairs and other mobility aids), but the claim to universal accessibility is suspect. After all, not only are needs diverse, but they are frequently in conflict. It is not uncommon for one person’s point of access to be another person’s barrier. And so I ask instead, who is not present? Who is beyond our welcome, consideration, and care for the simple reason that meeting their needs is not straightforward? Or for the more complicated reasons that lead us to not even notice they’re missing?

“...When I think of access as love, I’m reminded that access can be connected to joy and pleasure, also. It needn’t come from a place of duty, it needn’t be a chore when shared and held with care. Access that seeks to merely check the boxes or do the right thing is not true access. It is not loving and it does not address the injustices that create and support ableism in the first place.”

Having worked with a few gallery spaces (artist-run,

commercial, ad-hoc), I recognize those instances of not being as attentive to access as this essay (gently, intently) challenges us to be. The idea of fulfilling certain checkboxes of access, but neglecting to continue the conversation in a mutual way, resonated. So did the notion of attentiveness to individual access needs as a necessary expression of affection and love in those spaces. This embrace of love feels like activism, especially as we see exhibition spaces becoming commercialized and commodified, and—to varying degrees—run on language and frameworks borrowed from capitalism and the market economy.

I read this as severe patience and intimacy, and I use “severe” with great admiration. The proposition flies in the face of the compulsion/demand to continually get exhibitions, events, and publications out into the world. It implies a slowing down in order to have those exchanges, and an approach to exhibitions and accompanying outputs that remains reflexive and open-ended for as long as necessary.

AT: It is radical (and yet simple! In the way that the simplest can also be the most complex) to centre conversation and relationship when it comes to access. And when I say access, I mean it in the broadest sense—as in not necessarily tied to disability. I referred to this text as a rant initially

because it was very much informed by a deep and abiding rage that comes from so many frustrated attempts at (and the sheer labour of) negotiating access...a process that is often demoralizing. I don't know if it has patience at its core so much as necessity. Or maybe patience is a necessity given that that dignified access is aspirational for so many of us. I don't know if approaching access in a relational way takes that much more time for an individual or an institution, but it's definitely a meaningful quality of time—connective, collaborative—and comes from a generosity of spirit rather than fear or duty.

To circle back to thinking through our relationship to the natural world, the thread that I see through our parallel discussion of access and mountains is care. Care and uncertainty. So many visitors to the mountains deeply care about the landscape, whether that connection is spiritual, nostalgic, ineffable, embodied, curious or fill-in-the-blank. I think that the most hopeful, meaningful, and productive ways forward when it comes to our relation with the world *and* with each other, are motivated by care and grounded in a relationship to uncertainty—a willingness to be with the truth of things and stand on shaky ground.

It takes courage to be in a space of not knowing (how to interact with, welcome, or support someone; how to avoid catastrophic climate change). It can be uncomfortable, and so often it triggers fear. But when met with awareness it becomes so generative. Not knowing becomes a space of trying and failing and trying; an elastic space that holds all the imperfections, incompleteness, and in-progress-ness that we bring to it. It's real. It's humble. And it's a foundation for meaningful (inter)action, which we so urgently need on all fronts.

It's shaky ground. And it's grounds for hope.

BIOS:

Aislinn Thomas is an interdisciplinary artist whose practice includes video, performance, installation and text-based work. She culls material from everyday experiences and relationships, exploring themes of vulnerability, possibility and failure. Recent and upcoming exhibitions include the WRO Media Art Biennale in Wroclaw, Poland; Holding Patterns with

Art Spin & Tangled Art + Disability in Toronto, Ontario; and a project for the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre, Alberta. Aislinn currently lives and works in the Grand River watershed in Ontario, Canada.

Ruth Skinner works as an arts organizer, academic, publisher and curator, and is often in collaboration with other artists and researchers. She is pursuing a doctoral degree in Art and Visual Culture at Western University, and her research encompasses photography, esotericism, experimental publishing practices, and artists' books. Based in London, she was a cofounder of Good Sport project space and was previously manager of DNA Gallery's bookshop. Currently she serves on the board of Forest City Gallery, is a co-programmer of Support project space, and operates as the independent publisher Edna Press.