



Erie (stills), 2010



SCHOOL IS NOT IN SESSION

KEVIN JEROME EVERSON AND
JARRETT GREGORY IN CONVERSATION

Kevin Jerome Everson's film practice brings together archival, documentary, scripted footage and "choreographed" depictions of reality—often focusing on labor-work or the ordinary activities of everyday life—and in the process challenges geographic, class, and racial stereotypes.

JARRETT GREGORY

You work in many different mediums. How did you start working with film in particular?

KEVIN JEROME EVERSON

I've always done it. As an undergrad I made some crazy films, and in grad school I was mostly documenting performances. Then when I was four or five years out of school I was part of the 1994 *Black Male* show at the Whitney. At the time, I was making work about art objects that are presented in African American homes, and the objects that in turn present them. So for example end tables—you put framed photographs on end tables. But when I described that work, I kept talking about how people would work five days a week, get paid on Friday, go to Bing's furniture, pick out an end table, bring it home. I was always describing time-based stuff instead of the objects themselves, so I started making films around that.

JG

So there's a ritual you were expressing through an object, and then you moved to expressing it with film; is that accurate?

KJE

The ritual was part of the backstory, and the ritual also had to do with economy; someone had to pay for the object, it was worth something, and how did the people who own it pay for it. I was always thinking about that kind of working-class backstory.

JG

Economy runs through a lot of your work as a theme, as does labor. When asked about documentary, you've been quoted as saying that "everything in your films is fake."

KJE

Well, *choreographed*, yes. That's a better word.

JG

How do you start a film? What's your process after you identify something you want to treat as a subject?

KJE

It depends on the piece. I'm making a film now about a boxer from my hometown who had this famous—well, infamous and famous—fight with Sugar Ray Leonard. A guy named Art McKnight from Mansfield, Ohio. Sports are like dance or art: you need to show up. You have to practice and keep making things. So I'm making a film about the boxer Art McKnight. This whole body of work I'm making now is about people, objects, or elements

from my hometown that have been represented either on TV or in the movies. This fight was on ABC's *Wild World of Sports* but you can't find it anymore, so I started to reenact it. It's not a document.

JG And you prefer that distance from the initial event?

KJE I like the idea of choreographing things. When I was making figurative sculpture, you have a model posing and then you make the thing out of wax, and that becomes the art-thing. I rarely like the found object. I like to represent a thing, and so for me the choreographing is the representation of it. I was looking for that fight, the Art McKnight fight, only to represent it. But we couldn't find it, so we had to use Art's play-by-play of what happened during the fight.

JG And you use choreography in most of your film works?

KJE The real world is stupid and boring anyway, so I would rather choreograph it. I've only made maybe three films that even if I hadn't shown up, everything would have been going on without me. That's *Quality Control* (2011), most of *Park Lanes* (2015), and the new one, *Tonsler Park* (2017)—although I did tell them to bring in African American workers. If I do use real people in a situation, I usually like to manipulate it, so I can get a better frame on it and find things in it that I think are interesting, or find the art gesture in it, so to speak. The repetition that I like.

JG I'm thinking in particular of *Erie* (2010) and the very striking image of your daughter staring at the candle. How did you settle on that image? That's obviously something that you staged.

KJE Sure, I mean, nobody is going to sit there and do that. The only thing that's not staged in that film is the guy breaking into his own car. I just happened to drive up on him.

That summer before I made *Erie*, I did this film called *Old Cat* (2009), and that was the first time I had done a long magazine take, the full frame, ten minutes. I thought, I could make eight of these and have something of a narrative film. I was thinking about it; I think I was in Paris at the time. My daughter is into martial arts, so I asked her mom, "Do you think she could stare at a candle for ten minutes?" And she said yes. So in that film, since the viewer has to concentrate for ten minutes on something, in all of the scenes, each character has to concentrate on something for ten minutes as well.

JG Your newer body of work is a departure in some ways, in that you don't have people in those works.

KJE It's the same formally. I didn't have to cast people but I was looking for General Motors cars, since the General Motors factory in my hometown closed. It was a stamping plant, which is where the whole idea of re-stamping those cars came from. That's a form of casting. I was working with films where I had huge casts and I was kind of tired of it. I wanted to have no people, but it was just as hard as having people, since I still needed people to get shit going, to move the cars around.

JG Can we talk about *Sound That* (2014), with the men working on the manhole? When I was watching it, it struck me that you're able to take something that is typically in the periphery, that is never the arc of a story, and by filming this you bring the sidelines into the center. It's a simple gesture in a way, but the outcome is powerful. Their challenges become ours, as viewers. By giving these workers your attention, they have an entirely different presence than they normally have when, for example, one sees people working by the side of the road.

KJE I like to make the invisible visible. People take it for granted that things get done. But there's always somebody's hand on it. In Washington, DC, at four o'clock in the morning, there's a lot of people buzzing around because they turn the city on, and that's something people don't notice or that they take for granted. Before you get up, somebody has to push the button, so to speak. These guys work in the water department; everybody needs these people.

JG In one of your interviews, you talk about "the diversity of black folk"—that's the quote I wrote down. Which related to the piece you shot in the Congo. I also get the sense in looking at your work that it's intentional that your subjects are black but it's also circumstantial in the sense that that's an aspect of the world that you're interested in representing, and it's not a political gesture.

KJE No, it's not a political gesture at all. That's somebody else's move, not mine.

JG So then will you tell me a bit about how race factors into your work, from your point of view?

KJE For me, when I look through the viewfinder, I know that these people have a different set of histories than people of European descent. And for me, that's part of the backstory. It's the history of "how did I get here?," the black migration, and that's important for me.

JG Was your trip to the Congo the first time you were in Africa?

KJE Yes, the Rotterdam Film Festival commissioned twelve filmmakers who had never been to the continent of Africa, and we each had to pick a country.

JG Why did you pick Congo?

KJE Well, I couldn't get into Angola because I couldn't get a visa. It's hard to get into Angola. My grad school had an international program, a lot of people there were straight out of the Peace Corps. With these Angolans every time I opened my mouth and didn't speak Portuguese it freaked them out because I looked like some Angolan. So I thought, hell, I'm going to go to Angola and find some cousins. But I couldn't get in there, so I picked Brazzaville because Kinshasa is just across the river. And I wanted someone to waterski in between the two. And that was the film *BZV* (2010). It was fantastic there.

JG Has the experience informed your work since?

KJE No. But I wanted to film it as if I was in St. Louis. It literally did not make a difference that I was in Africa. I didn't want to fall into those tropes. In fact, at the screening at Rotterdam, some guy pushed me—they were so hostile to my film there.

JG Why?

KJE Because there were a lot of NGOs, and in the film, the country is never mentioned. I filmed a couple there who were buying a bed. Casual scenes. People waterskiing.

JG And people expected that if it's Africa, it should be represented in a certain, very serious way?

KJE Yes, in America we have this perception of how black people should be represented. If you're European or American, you have to bring back these images. People want to be told what they want to know. In fact, that year I made a film called *Company Line* about snowplow drivers in Mansfield, Ohio, and that film felt more foreign to Americans than *BZV* did. Americans in the art world aren't used to seeing labor or people working, or black people just telling stories. They're used to seeing black people in relation to a body politic, and so they get freaked out when the work doesn't inform their politics. The liberal folks want to be told that they're white and liberal. Because they want to do good, and just by viewing a documentary it seems like they're contributing, so to speak. And when I don't give them that, I meet with hostility. That liberal audience is used to comfortability, of seeing certain people a certain way.

JG And there's something opaque about your films; there's no moral, or takeaway.

KJE School is not in session. I'm not teaching people anything.



Top, left and right - *Company Line* (stills), 2009

Above - *BZV* (still), 2010



Above - *Sound That* (stills), 2014



The Island of St. Matthews (stills), 2013



Tonsler Park (stills), 2017





Park Lanes (stills), 2015



Quality Control (stills), 2011



People think they're going to participate; they think we need them. Once that servitude is not met, they don't know how to react.

JG And this is why you experienced resistance to *BZV*.

KJE I didn't want to give them Africans working, and sweating in the heat, and making things, and showing their hands, and their feet. Shit like that. You have to actually make more of an effort to find that than you do the people getting off the bus, going home, meeting their families, watching TV. I wanted to tell this backstory of looking for a bed, shopping for furniture—it stemmed from that furniture piece I was making. In Brazzaville I wanted to make three scenes. I also filmed a guy on the river fishing. The people learning how to waterski.

JG Was the waterskiing challenging to set up?

KJE Ha, yes, because it was the first time in the history of Congo that an African has ever waterskied.

JG I was going to say, I don't imagine it's that common there.

KJE I don't know why I like waterskiing, because I can barely fucking swim, myself. I think it's a way to mark the landscape, to be in a boat and film. Another film, *The Island of St. Matthews* (2013), has waterskiing in it. In Brazzaville I needed to figure out a way to film the river, so I used an old drawing technique—figure-ground relationship. I put the figure there, but that's not the subject matter; the landscape is the subject matter. The figure just gives us an excuse to film it; then everything feels necessary. I thought, that's a way to film the landscape, to have a figure in it instead of just the machine and the boat. It's like painting, the same kind of composition. I have a lot of visual-art references when I'm making films, because I'm dealing with the pictorial. I'm trying to move toward pure abstraction. I think the new boxing film will be along the lines of what I'm getting at. It's shot; I just need to cut it.

JG Why abstraction?

KJE When I was young I was always attracted to minimalist art. So I always thought that was a goal. I can't just show up with a cube. I think about Ellsworth Kelly or Sam Gilliam and how I get to that, so I keep just pushing the materials around so it becomes less pictorial. It depends on the film. In *Tonsler Park* I wanted people to be in the way. Everything is about the election, but it's really about these people in front of them moving back and forth. I was trying to make a flicker film. The formal quality is what gets me out of bed.

JG And within the medium of film, you switch seamlessly between 16mm and digital video.

KJE Coming from a sculpture mentality, it's about the materiality, and the materiality is the object of film. When I'm thinking more about audio, then it's about HD because that has the ability to record audio. But when I'm not thinking about audio, I'm thinking about 16mm. It's all about the material. The process has to be part of the content.

Kevin Jerome Everson (1965) was born in Mansfield, Ohio. He is currently an Associate Professor of Art at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Everson has received fellowships from the Guggenheim, NEA, NEH, Ohio Arts Council and the Virginia Museum, an American Academy Rome Prize, grants from Creative Capital and the Mid-Atlantic, residencies at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Yaddo and MacDowell Colony, and numerous university fellowships. His artwork—paintings, sculpture, site-specific installations and photographs—and films, including five features (*Spicebush*, 2005; *Cinnamon*, 2006; *The Golden Age of Fish*, 2008; *Erie*, 2010; *Quality Control*, 2011) and over seventy short form works, have been exhibited internationally at museums and art institutions including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; REDCAT, Los Angeles; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Whitechapel Gallery, London; American Academy of Rome, Rome.

Jarrett Gregory is a Curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. She has previously held curatorial positions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Among her recent projects, she curated the Focus section of the 2017 Armory Show, and the LACMA iteration of Pierre Huyghe's retrospective, which was awarded Best Monographic Exhibition Nationally by the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). Gregory sits on the advisory board for the Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI) in Lusanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as on the advisory council for The Gogova Foundation and Artist Residency in Baku, Azerbaijan. Gregory has written for *Castello di Rivoli*; the List Visual Arts Center at MIT, Cambridge; the New Museum, New York; the Whitney Museum, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the *Exhibitionist* journal; *The Believer*; *Flash Art International*; *frieze*; and *Even* magazine.