詞 BROOKLYN RAIL

SKY HOPINKA and belit sağ with Almudena Escobar López



Dislocation Blues

Belit sağ is a videomaker based in Amsterdam, with a background in videoactivism. Her work unfolds the internal stratification of information investigating affective and critical engagement with images in the context of the everyday. Sky Hopinka's videos explore the subject's affective relationship with its environment through history and language. Both Hopinka and sağ question hierarchical processes of thinking that persist through time and space, strategically unveiling the contingency of power relations. *Dislocation Blues* by Sky Hopinka and *disruption* by belit sağ were recently programmed together at the Projections sidebar of the New York Film Festival; they had never seen each other's work until a few days before this interview.

The Brooklyn Rail, November 2017

Almudena Escobar López (Rail): Now that you both have seen each other's work, let's start from that initial connection. Sky, you are using the word "dislocated" and, belit, you are using the word "disruption." These two words speak of disconnection and confusion. And I wonder: belit, what are you disrupting? And Sky, where are you dislocated?

Hopinka: It is difficult to locate oneself. The title of *Dislocation Blues* came about because whenever I went to the camp in Standing Rock and came back to Milwaukee, on the road from one place to the other, or within the camp itself, I felt dislocated. It was fascinating because there were so many different groups of people, so many different ideas, so many different versions of success and of failure. And I know that I am part of that that because I was there and I identify with these people. But at the same time, within that larger whole I still don't know where to locate myself and I don't know where I fit in or what my ideas are. It is like being a bubble within a bubble or floating around with other bubbles that are bouncing into each other. There were many personal and beautiful moments but at the same time it was hard to know what was going on, what was true, what was false, what was neither true nor false and how I was complicit in representing those things with my camera.

sağ: I could have called my piece "dislocation" instead of "disruption." I think "disruption" is more sexy at the moment of making the video. I was watching news from Turkey and I was going crazy in front of my computer watching the coup attempt and what followed it, and I wasn't able to get those images out of my head, nor could I leave the computer screen. I made the film to communicate this feeling of being completely overwhelmed. The journey of me walking in the video is a loop. There is no start nor an end. Where I depart and where I arrive are a bit lost in my head. One starts existing in different realities.

Rail: Both of you approach knowledge as a journey. For belit, this is the process of feeling overwhelmed by the mainstream media. And for Sky there is this idea of meandering, which is associated with walking and driving.

sağ: Yeah, Sky, you have a lot of footage from cars, a lot of journey, and also on all sides, sometimes you're in the back of the car, sometimes you're in the front, sometimes you're on the sides.

Hopinka: There's always some sort of movement in a car or me walking around somewhere. It is such a big part of how I grew up, traveling around, powwow to powwow with my family, road trips with friends or me wandering around. It's just such an important way for me to experience the world through a car window, contemplating the terrain. There's so much history that can be seen through a window.

When I encountered the text of Kengo Kuma that I used in *Anti-Objects, or Space without Path or Boundary* (2017), I just found it really gratifying. Thinking of how places are meant to be meandered through, because when you walk through a space you get to know it. You get to know that one route that you just did, maybe you'll never know it again, but you knew it then. I'm a big fan of distance between me and subjects or me and landscapes or me and objects. I think there's a lot from my own culture grounded in a quiet approach to strangeness. The approach is, "here you are, here I am, let's get to know each other." I feel you're getting to know me while I'm getting to know my subjects, no matter how familiar I am with them. Again, it's just another element of this meandering through relationships, through landscapes, and through all of this. Which is to say, it's a lot about searching.

sağ: All the landscapes are not backgrounds—nothing is a background, everything is part of the story, and you can totally feel it. I was very touched, especially in *Jáaji Approx* (2015), by your use of superimposed landscapes. When I was watching your films I was thinking that they are about your experience of your surroundings, but also the experience of language, the experience of the camera, the camera being with you in a very casual way, like a companion, and not going after a certain aesthetic—the aesthetic comes with the experience. And then there is a meditativeness in your works. They take their time to search because it is ultimately about your experience... and

then things come out of this experience. It feels very natural.

Rail: This is also related to the experience of language, which is so important in your films, Sky. We need to learn grammar because that's the code we all share, but it is more important to learn the essence of language, the interpersonal relationships—which you learn by meandering with language, by talking with the other.

Hopinka: I started making videos the exact same time as I started learning chinuk wawa. My teacher has a methodology called, "Where are your keys?", where he tries to dismantle the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student so that there is a sort of push-pull relationship between languagelearning and language-teaching. That really influenced the way I approach video, because on one hand it's solitary—me holding the camera, doing the editing and the sound, etc.—but at the same time, too, my collaboration with people is a big part of it. I am trying to respect their agency within it and not feel that I have control over their images.

Rail: belit, how do you navigate collaborations in your work?

sağ: I was part of video activist groups, and a lot of the work that we make is anonymous, nobody owns the work, the work is shared. At a certain point, in some groups, we started writing down our names in order to take responsibility for the work. When I collaborate with artists, everyone signs their name, this time mostly for very different reasons. In the case of working with communities, a lot of questions come up, especially if I am not from those communities. I realized that the only possible way to work in those situations is by revealing the working processes as much as possible.

I reflect on my relationship to people by revealing what the camera does, who takes the camera, how the camera changes what it is filming. And also my proximity and distance, i.e. the relationship to the subjects is very important. On the other hand, the other difficulty is when people give you permission to

use the footage. They might be very generous and polite, but that doesn't mean that they understand what happens to that footage, so the responsibility is still with me to decide and to think about it, even if I have their permission. Even if I explain where the footage goes, that doesn't mean this, i.e. what happens to it in the art world or in the film world, translates perfectly to their world—it does not. They mostly do not have any connections to these worlds. The relationship will never be equal, and you cannot undo that imbalance. It becomes a huge ethical question. I don't have one answer to this question, but I think not doing the work is not an answer either. My work is about figuring out how to do this work especially in the communities that I don't come from.

Rail: Sky, when you went to St. Paul to make *Visions of an Island* (2016), how did you negotiate the situation? You've done a lot of work about the Hoocąąk people, but this is different—how did you approach it?

Hopinka: By not trying to be a teacher of this culture. I want to be careful of what I'm pointing my camera at, I don't want to be an authority on this culture, because I'm a visitor, I'm an outsider. I'm an indigenous person, but I'm also not from this tribe or this community or from this region. Having these different tribal boundaries can be a problem, but also can be empowering to respect the sovereignty of certain tribes and certain people and certain cultures.

I've grown up with that my entire life because I grew up in the Northwest and my tribe is from Wisconsin. I was always aware that I'm Native—but I'm not from there. And being in California or Oregon—I'm Native, but I'm not from there. I'm not saying that I was a total outsider and outcast from these different Native communities—they're very welcoming and very generous but I want to make sure I'm not exploiting that generosity—that I'm respecting it and treating it as precious in some way. Some things deserve to be precious and some things don't. I think relationships with people and their kindness are things that should be. So going back to distance, traveling,

landscapes and all that—again, it's searching for my place within these different landscapes or relationships with people in a specific place.

Rail: This a very interesting approach to identity, especially living in the United States where there is this obsession with subjectivity and selfdefinition. Take for example the racial forms that require you to self-identify. It forces you to define yourself because, if you don't, you only have the "other" option left. So, you must "other" yourself.

sağ: I was born and raised in west Turkey, which is known as the "white" part of Turkey. My family is not white, but they pass as white—although parts of my family are from religious and ethnic minorities. I pass as white because of my education and my social position, and how I perform in the society in Turkey. I was raised white. I was not educated in the minority language nor in the minority religious values; this was the way my family protected me from being "otherized." When I came to Amsterdam I thought I was white because that was how I was in Turkey. A little later I started realizing, "I don't pass as white here," and everyone knows that, just not me [laughs]. I think this is also when I realized that I passed as white in Turkey. It was so bizarre to realize this and then I started understanding certain dynamics, especially how tokenism works, and I realized how people look at me, how people perceive me, treat me. It is extremely important to understand this in order to position yourself and your work, especially if you are making work that deals with politics of where you come from. So my whole understanding and making sense of my life in relation to others changed. That was pretty big, and it is still going on, it is an everyday process

Hopinka: In indigenous introductions it's part of the formality to say who you are, who your parents are, who their parents are, what clan you're from, and where they lived. It's interesting how this parallels in American culture in some ways because it always ends up with "either you're an American, or you're not." It's the easiest thing to say, "I'm an American," and that means that your family is Irish, French, German or whatever, and it displays as

white. But then, if you're not white, then you have to go into this heritage that Americans for the most part have abandoned. The onus is always on me to define who I am by what I'm not. It's always definition by attrition or definition by negation that shapes who you are in the eyes of the majority.

Rail: I think this is an important question when thinking about what you are doing with your work and how it is received.

Hopinka: If you come from an Otherness, then by default you are the informant for the greater culture, and you're responsible for teaching or explaining. I'm a member of this tribe but I'm not its spokesperson. I want to be taken seriously as an artist—not as, an "Indian Artist," as a "Native Artist," a "Black Artist," always that prefix that defines who you are, or how you talk about your work. But at the same time, too, I identify as a Hoocąąk artist, and I don't want to erase that or diminish that in any way.

Rail: Sky, I read an interview that you did for the *Third Rail*, where you talk about your very first video in 2010 in which you and your friends built a fishing scaffold on the Columbia River. And that was it, you only wanted to capture the experience of it without teaching anything to anyone.

Hopinka: I like thinking about my work's accessibility or lack of accessibility, which is also closely tied to visibility and legibility. There are native people all over the place here but they are often unseen. Once you start to present yourself and allow yourself to be seen, you get things like cultural appropriation or just these other terrible representations of native people in the media. They want to see westerns, they want to see headdresses, they want to see mascots, but they don't want to see the violence done against the people. This is the broader context of what American audience wants to look at. I want to show what I want to see. With every culture and every language there are codes that we are conscious and unconscious of. It's fascinating and generative to think about these ingrained codes, play with them and see how that leads to a deeper understanding of how I exist as a Ho-Chunk person who

is of Pechanga descent, who lives in Wisconsin in the United States under Trump, and what within myself do I want to be seen and what do I want to look at.

Belit, how about you? When I was watching your work, I was thinking a lot about the audience for this, in terms of the language and legibility of the texts. Is it for an English-speaking audience, is it for an audience where you're from? Because there are so many things I'm getting from these images, and I am not sure of where to place myself.

sağ: They all are made for and in different contexts, I guess. *(Against) Randomness* (2017) was made for a People's Tribunal about the attacks of the National Socialist Underground—a neo-nazi group. So, it was made for an audience that is mainly the victims and their families, to create solidarity. It's also for grassroots groups around the tribunal. The video talks about the people who have been victimized and attacked, about that experience. Every work is different. It's not that they are made for one audience and they should stay for one audience, but they have to function in different contexts. And, for example, *Ayhan and me* (2016) is almost like a site-specific work. It was made specifically for that specific institution that censored my earlier work, and later censored *Ayhan and me*.

Hopinka: Yeah, I think that's really interesting. It's like a site-specific work for a site that's not allowed to exist.

sağ: Well, for a site that doesn't allow the work to exist. *disruption* and *if you say it forty times* (2017) are closer to each other because of their content. People from Turkey would probably recognize entirely, every detail, every little character that shows up there. But I also think that it translates into different contexts even if people don't recognize or know every character. They're made for certain audiences but they're not meant only for



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those audiences. I want to see my work in art contexts, activist context, in communities. I want my work to communicate to different groups.

Rail: Both of you use found materials in different ways. Belit, you use material from the media, and you do not define yourself as a journalist, and Sky, you use text and oral narration from other people. I would like you both to talk about your relationship with archives, and the tension between personal and collective memory.

sağ: I use a lot of quotes but those quotes are never really quoted. You know that they are quotes but you don't know where they are from. I am trying to get rid of hierarchies like "this is a reference from an amazing philosopher,", "this is an amazing film," "this is an amazing writer," etc.—situations where that reference gives me credit. I want to get out of that self-flattering way of using references—it really annoys me. I'm trying to put the references on the table at the same level with each other, in order to see how they relate to each other, without the hierarchy of knowledge, without the hierarchy of images. How do they communicate with each other? And how do they speak to us without these references? How do they communicate with each other?

Hopinka: When I was going through the recordings for Anti-Objects and the text, I chose the parts that I just felt a really strong emotional attachment to -they may not have been the most academically rigorous or the most historically important. I just respond to things that mean something to me immediately and that stick with me. I am interested in things that are overlooked because they don't seem important but are important in different ways or have the potential to be important. This is a really exciting part of looking through archival materials, especially when so much of the culture of others has been documented. The sort of things that linguists or anthropologists have overlooked. It helps complete a puzzle for me, asking, "what did my culture look like a hundred years ago, fifty years ago? forty years ago? ten years ago?" A really important part of Wawa (2014) for me was accessing the recordings of Henry Zenk and Wilson Bobb. The thing that I was interested in was their side conversations. I love the moment where Wilson is cooking breakfast and asks Henry if he wants some eggs and bacon and this leads into this little, sweet exchange of trying to figure out how to say

bacon in this language. When I showed that to Henry he said that I captured how their relationship was, just hanging out and talking. That felt humbling and encouraging to keep on looking at the errata, the margins, looking at the footnotes.

sağ: But you give a different type of information in your work, the information that is left out in the hierarchy of information; it is not credited information. Going back to the journalism question: I'm not a journalist, but I find that what goes wrong is not when a journalist films or tells a story but rather what happens to that story. I think that journalists, like video activists, have a role that is very valuable. To me it is about contextualizing and telling your story over and over and over again. And asking, when someone says "violence," what kind of violence are we talking about? It is about going deeper and saying that we need to pause, talk and reflect on these terms. As for my practice, I want to see my work as part of a larger movement. I find it really difficult to call it activism, but it is definitely connected. My work is not based on the types of information that we talk about, but the types of information that are not talked about, that are not recognized, or verbalized.