

UNIONDOCS ANNOUNCES THE RECIPIENTS OF THE UNDO FELLOWSHIP
Supporting collaborative research for radical practices of documentary filmmaking.

(Brooklyn, New York. September 26, 2019) UnionDocs Center for Documentary Art is honored to announce the selection of four pairs of artists and writers for the UNDO FELLOWSHIP, an initiative to expand radical filmmaking practices and research new languages of documentary cinema. The fellowship recipients include scholar Erika Balsom with filmmaker Eric Baudelaire, essayist and artist Steve Reinke with collaborative artists Dani and Sheilah ReStack, film scholar and programmer Nzingha Kendall with filmmaker Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, and writer and editor Matthew Shen Goodman with filmmaker James N. Kienitz Wilkins. Each of the fellows will receive \$20,000 for their participation in the yearlong program, which includes a seminar at Doclisboa in Portugal, a retreat at EMPAC at Rensselaer in Troy, New York, and a public symposium in the Fall of 2020. UnionDocs Executive Artistic Director, Christopher Allen remarked, “This is an extremely talented group of filmmakers creating provocative, risk-taking work. The partnerships they formed with brilliant critics, scholars and writers have enormous potential. We are thrilled by the opportunity for this experiment in grant-making, finding ways to foreground collaboration and place the critic in closer proximity to the artist’s process. Our goal is to push the artist’s projects forward and activate a vibrant dialogue on how their work operates in the world and how it advances social change — really digging into what drives the creation of this aesthetic invention in the first place.”

For the inaugural year of the UNDO FELLOWSHIP, UnionDocs asked nominated writers and documentary artists to apply together, proposing a shared question to motivate their regular intellectual and creative exchange over the fellowship year. This inquiry was intended to root in the artist’s practice and yield resources for the development of their projects, aesthetics, and methodologies. “We started with the romantic notion of a writer and a filmmaker sending letters to each other, sharing insight and observation, finding useful references, and hashing out philosophical arguments,” said Allen. While communication in the fellowship won’t be limited to just letters, UnionDocs is cultivating a similar spirit of formality to these sustained explorations that will allow for the whole cohort to engage and contribute in their strength and diversity. Each pair’s proposed focus of research will be workshopped through a series of in-person gatherings and remote discussions and ultimately be addressed in a final publication to be conceived and authored by the writer. Fellows were selected with equal consideration given to the excellence of their previous work and to what the pair’s proposed research focus can offer to progressive social movements. They have posed ambitious questions concerning documentary representation (see the list below), and the final collection of writing hopes to make a significant contribution to documentary discourse.

The avenues of support for formally adventurous, artful documentary are few, yet the appetite and necessity for new cinematic languages is growing. While its impact is difficult to quantify, this work has the power to ask important social questions, to push audiences beyond comfortable worldviews, to offer alternate angles on the persistent causes and manifold effects of inequality, and to create shared experiences and emotional references that can strengthen communities of activism. Funding for this program has been provided by the Ford Foundation’s JustFilms. Chi-hui Yang, Program Officer for JustFilms, noted that, “Documentary filmmaking and its discourse are central to addressing questions of social justice, for how they make visible ideas and structure how we think. The challenges facing society today need new languages to engage the

public with and the Ford Foundation is thrilled to be supporting UnionDocs and these remarkable artists and writers in this effort.”

A seminar running October 22nd through 25th as part of the 2019 DocLisboa festival will bring this cohort together for the first time to launch their research. Each pair of fellows will lead a two hour session engaging with a small group of seminar participants to introduce and explore their shared inquiry. They will also invite guest filmmakers from the festival selection who share similar concerns into the conversation. UnionDocs plans to continue this model of opening up the fellowship exchange to a wider public through a kind of online seminar to be opened in January. Audio recordings from the convenings of the fellows will be edited and narrated to create short thematic episodes, and a limited number of remote seminar participants will be given access to online streams of the fellow’s films along with supplemental materials and readings.

The fellowship will culminate in a two-day symposium in Fall 2020 (location TBA) that will host an audience of artists, scholars and students. The near-complete texts of each writer will be presented and discussed; additional films, experiments and works-in-process by each artist will be screened; and invited guest panels, artists presentations, break out sessions and other activities will be organized to expand on the four motivating questions at the center of the fellowship. Writers will then have until the end of each year to incorporate feedback received at the symposium into their final works of authorship. UnionDocs will support the writers independently in seeking prominent avenues for publication, but will also publish a special volume including the four final texts along with images, ephemera and process notes from the fellowship year.

MOTIVATING QUESTIONS

LANGUAGES OF LIBERATION

Scholar Erika Balsom and filmmaker Eric Baudelaire propose to explore how the revolutionary languages of the 1960s and 1970s – languages of documentary filmmaking, artistic expression and political action alike – resonate today. How have the energies of this moment persisted and mutated? How can they provide a resource for thinking through the urgencies of the present, for the future? In a moment when hope for political transformation feels increasingly necessary, what forms and acts can best respond to the need to re-imagine reality?

ARCHIVE REPAIR

Film scholar and programmer Nzingha Kendall and filmmaker Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich propose to explore alternative narrative-making grounded in radical black intellectual production, responding to what Saidiya Hartman refers to as “silence in the archive.” They ask how can black storytellers work in the realm of reality when traditional records of reality historically rendered black subjecthood invisible? How might the transparency imposed on minoritized subjects be resisted by employing gaps and fragments to achieve strategic opacity? By interrogating film form and genre, they seek to extend possibilities for moving images to resuscitate embodied, spiritual, and coded understandings of black experiences.

SHAPE SHIFTS

Writer and editor Matthew Shen Goodman and filmmaker James N. Kienitz Wilkins ask what is the value of appropriation today? While the term has become shorthand for a singular kind of cultural misappropriation, creative adoption in film, art and writing has also been a radical gesture of critique and a means of drawing attention to conditions of production. By tracing a genealogy inside and outside of film and rethinking the potential of such acts, they hope to develop a discourse around appropriation that would enliven it as a tool for artists, activists, and anyone else considering the politics of claiming something as one's own.

EMBEDDED EXISTENCE

Essayist and artist Steve Reinke will join collaborative artists Dani and Sheilah ReStack to think through a queered phenomenological discourse of documentary practice that asks what an artist does with the world? Building from Restack's "feral domesticity," Reinke expands into an exploration of how "feral subjectivity" — a hybridized approach to filmmaking, one that mode-shifts between approaches — opens up a new set of possibilities for representing the endlessly complex plenitude of being in the world, and reinscribes that representation with the physical, sensual processes of an embedded existence.

MEET THE FELLOWS

Erika Balsom is senior lecturer in Film Studies at King's College London. She is the author of 'After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation' and 'Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art', as well as the co-editor of 'Documentary Across Disciplines'. She contributes to magazines such as Artforum and Frieze, and has published in scholarly journals including Cinema Journal and Grey Room. In 2018, she was awarded a Leverhulme Prize and the Kovacs essay award from SCMS.

Eric Baudelaire (1973, Salt Lake City) lives and works in Paris, France. After training as a social scientist, Baudelaire established himself as a visual artist often focused on social and historical research. Since 2010, he has devoted himself more seriously to filmmaking. His feature films include Also Known As Jihadi (2017), Letters to Max (2014), The Ugly One (2013) and The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years Without Images (2011).

Matthew Shen Goodman is a writer and a senior editor at Triple Canopy.

Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich makes work about the private lives and worlds of black women. Her practice is rooted in archival research and field research, which then gets translated through a writing process, and then finally a filmmaking process that includes narrative, documentary and experimental film techniques. This means working closely with archives that until recently did not preserve or respect black voices and thinking about how to represent histories that have been neglected.

Nzingha Kendall is a film scholar and programmer. Her work focuses on moving images by black women from across the diaspora. She has a PhD in American Studies and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African American and African Studies at the University of Virginia.

Steve Reinke is an artist and writer best known for his monologue-based video essays. He is the author of two books, co-edited four anthologies, and written dozens of essays, mostly on artists' film. He is a professor of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern. His work is represented by Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.

Dani and Sheilah ReStack have embarked on an artistic relationship that is formally and emotionally adjacent to their domestic lives, a quotidian zone they share with their young daughter Rose. Both artists have established careers on their own. Neither Dani' video work or Sheilah's multimedia performance and installation work could exactly prepare us for the force of the women's collaborative efforts. – Michael Sicinski, Cinema Scope, 2017. ReStack collaborations have shown at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, Iceberg Projects Chicago, Toronto International Film Festival, Images Film Festival, Toronto, Lyric Theater, Carrizozo, NM, Leslie Lohman Project Space, Gaa Wellfleet, New York Film Festival and The Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio. They have received grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, Ohio Arts Council and Visual Studies Workshop, NY. They have been residents at The Headlands in Marin County and their newest video Go Ask Joan was made at the MacDowell Colony this summer.

James N. Kienitz Wilkins is a filmmaker and artist based in Brooklyn. His work has premiered at international film festivals including Berlin, TIFF, Locarno, Rotterdam, NYFF, CPH:DOX, BAMcinemaFest, New Directors/New Films, and beyond. In 2017, he was included in the Whitney Biennial and a retrospective of his work was showcased at RIDM (Montréal). He has had solo exhibitions at Gasworks (London), Spike Island (Bristol, UK) and currently, Kunsthalle Winterthur (Switzerland).

ABOUT UNIONDOCS

UnionDocs is a Center for Documentary Art that presents, produces, publishes, and educates. Since 2005, we've brought together a diverse community on a search for urgent expressions of the human experience, practical perspectives on the world today, and compelling visions for the future. Our programs are run with the belief that documentary art, when paired with thoughtful context and open debate, is an invaluable tool for understanding the complexities of contemporary life and creating a more compassionate, engaged, and integrated society.

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