Doc Talk Podcast Makes Contact With ‘Every Contact Leaves A Trace’ Director Lynne Sachs And ‘Trillion’s Victor Kossakovsky
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Matthew Carey
We are here at IDFA with the filmmaker Lynne Sachs. Your film, brand new film, Every contact leaves a trace. You had your world premiere last night. How was that?

Lynne Sachs
Yes, indeed. Actually, you're sitting in a theater and you see a few people come in, and then it fills up and there's kind of a joy and a little bit of a fear, because how many people will stay, you know, like, can I sustain their interest? You know, if you calculated there's about 200 people here times the minutes, I think, why would they want to spend that time in my cosmos? And they stayed so sigh of relief there. And that they laughed at moments that I, I knew were like kind of aha moments or awkward moments. They're like laughing maybe with me. Then there's quite a few really serious sections and the room seemed really quiet. I feel such a sense of excitement and relief and also, oh, okay, now I can go on to the next chapter of my life.

MC
It's, well, it's a magic chapter when you spend so much time on its own, you begin it with, is a quote from Edouard Locard. I'm going to bring up–

LS
Beautiful pronunciation.

MC
Who, really someone who made the observation that every contact leaves a trace and sort of pertaining to the area of forensic science. But before we get into really the direction you take the film, explain that a little bit more. It's such a fascinating and rather fundamental observation.

LS
Well, he made a fundamental observation, in regard to crime. So he was the kind of person who was interested in solving a case. And he recognized that even when a diamond ring or a collection of gold cufflinks is stolen, by a thief. There's something else that is seemingly ephemeral that is left. Now, he was talking about this before we understood DNA, but he also recognized the implications of a fingerprint, the oil on your hand, all these kind of bodily residues that could linger. And that was as a result of something else being taken. But I read that and I transposed it to the interaction between two people. I came up with the title before the pandemic, but it became even more resonant, let's say, during the pandemic, when we were having interactions with people that were not quote in real life end quote. But, we still nevertheless had a level of intensity, even with people that we might have met on zoom or or in some other context that we call virtual. There's still this, this, ability for people to leave a piece of

themselves with someone else and, and be transformed in both directions, perhaps. So that got me thinking about the dynamic between two human beings.

MC
You know, when you're speaking about the pandemic, I was thinking of contact tracing as well. Yes.

LS
And we didn't even have that term before.

MC
No, I think, though I think that was pretty novel. And yeah. And just to state that, you know, we're not talking about a two crime documentary at all, you're taking this in a very profound and fascinating direction. Again, looking at the traces that are left when, when people interact. In the case of your film, part of how you approach that is going through a very large collection of business cards, I guess around 600 of them that you would get and in some cases trying to recollect, wow, who is that person and how did I meet them? In some cases you do remember them, and many understandably like I have no recollection of meeting that person. Why did you keep the business cards? And then in going back and reaching out to some of these people, I, I love it if you'd speak about some of the people that you did reconnect with.

LS
Well, I guess I initially just kept the cards as one would. It's sort of a part of maturing, you know, you're accumulating objects and they don't take up much space. But as I've been making this film, I've talked to many people who shed those cards. They decided at a certain point they were nothing more than clutter. And I never saw them as clutter. I mean, I saw each card as a distillation of a human being. The human being had chosen to embody or identify themselves in a certain way. It was a chosen way. For some people. They were business cards. For some people they were calling cards, but they were manifestations of how they wanted to introduce themselves to the world. Maybe they were authentic to really who they were being.
They had become. Or maybe they were who they wanted to be. And that was just as important to me. Like, I'm very interested in that notion of lies and white lies as a kind of fluid way of announcing yourself and, and choosing who you want to be to the world. So that was fascinating to me. And it wasn't just people in the film world, you know, I have cards for someone who is a, you know, works on your feet or I have cards for people who sell paint, and I have cards for people who do renovations and, you know, but so it's it's both lofty and and kind of prosaic, but isn't life that way, you know, I didn't, you know, some people told me, well, I just saved cards that for people who might be of assistance or people who were significant to my work or career, but I was interested in also all the others, because you do make have exchanges or conversations with people in all walks of life that make you look at the at the world around you and in different ways. So then I was going through the cards and I had to decide, you know, who was going to make the cut. They didn't even realize that they were auditioning for my movie.

MC
Little did they know…

LS
Yeah. At first it was a matter of of sort of being intrigued by trying to find someone again. Would it be possible were the numbers still accurate? And at first I thought, okay, I'll be kind of practical in that way. And then I did a flip flop, and I, I thought about the people who whose cards left a haunting sensation for me, or there was a certain kind of ambivalence, and I would I couldn't resolve it because the fact that it seemed unresolved seemed to me to indicate that that their presence within me was still active, even if I didn't know it. By pulling the card out, I, I got, a sensation of that was, let's say, was more psychological that made the meeting seem very intimidating, but also a little risky. I think that there's an aspect of documentary making that is not necessarily, oh, I need to go to an exotic place, but I need to go to a place that will shake up my thinking. And so I kind of picked people like that, that I wasn't sure about those were some of the possibilities. And, and, so do you want me, would you like me to mention a few of the people?

MC
Yeah, I think it would be great if you don't mind talking about some of the people that you have to interact with. Obviously you had seen them in some cases, maybe like a decade before where the exchange of the card happened.

LS
Yeah. But in some cases it's 30 years!

MC
Oh my goodness.

LS
Yeah. I'm just going to pick a person here, a person with whom I couldn't reconnect for the film. And there was a woman who was a very, very good chef, not a professional chef, but she did catering. But she was in the United States as a Syrian refugee. And, I had shot some film with her as a kind of public service, a family, an Arab American family center was doing a fundraiser to help her and her family pay for their travels here, here, meaning the United States. And so she and I really connected, kind of like, I'm not a good cook, but I loved her food. And, we were both moms. And so we really got along. And I was also interested in the fact that she was the only Syrian woman I knew. So as I was reading about the horrors of what happened during the Assad regime, what it would mean to try to escape that country before he was taken down. This was, she'd been in the U.S. about eight years or so. And, so I thought, I have her card. And she presented herself as a cook. But I know there's a whole story behind this piece of paper, but she didn't quite understand or let's say, except, the paradigm of, oh, you're a filmmaker. And you were asking me to do something for you, which is to have an interview or to be to interact with me or you and be filmed. That didn't make sense to her. For someone who had escaped a country where, you know, even her identity was complex

MC
and perhaps she would think of it as an interrogation.

LS
Yeah. Interrogation. And, I've made other films where that model of, I ask you to give and you give and I take, has been challenged. So I accepted that challenge. But I didn't accept within me that she wouldn't be in the film. So instead, I actually decided to book one of the most complicated Syrian recipes for Mock Luba at home, and to have her enter my consciousness instead of my film through an image. So I think about her while I'm cooking, and so she's invisible to the film. In the film, I talk about the fact that we send each other flowers for Mother's Day, which is emoji flowers. And so we have

MC
Virtual flowers

LS
Virtual flowers, but it doesn't matter because I know around Mother's Day I think about her and she thinks about me. And so we have– that's kind of intimate. There's a kind of like a kind of recognition of our relationship to our children and to the passage of time. And it's just saying, I'm thinking of you, but there's a closeness and also a distance. So she is, let's say, embedded in my consciousness. And she is not in the film visibly. We have seen each other, but she drew the line that way. And then also, well, that's one person. There's another person who was a therapist of mine. There's another man whose life unfolded in front of my eyes in a very public way, through his arrest and, through–

MC
The artist.

LS
Yeah, through Homeland Security. There's a woman who grew up during World War, was a child during World War two in Germany. We met through the film world at the period in which Germany was changing and the wall came down. But we talk about the Holocaust period and what she understood and didn't understand. And it was my first opportunity to really go deeply with a German person about that period. So each one had a had potential for a kind of revealing experience. And that's tempting to me.

MC
And there's something quite fascinating that there's a literal aspect with the business cards of interest being left behind, because in some regards to be fingerprint on there and we see you listing or working with someone and sort of, I guess, showing you how to remove a fingerprint.

LS

Thank you for asking about that. I did spend a lot of time reading about forensics and thinking about the fact that even if I never touch a person's hand or give them a hug or even feel the their breath against my cheek and let's say, or in the same room there, there is the possibility that the card contains, some of their essence, some of their DNA, as we call it now. And I wanted to know, really, if they had held it, if their fingerprint had touched it, maybe you would get some, some residue of that, or maybe you would actually get some biological matter. So I went to a forensics lab at John Jay, which is a college in New York City. And they were so open to talking to me because they said, everyone else comes here from the, you know, the television stations and the newspapers, and they only want to talk about crime and, and they, they and in their words. To me, this is more about the kind of philosophical dimensions of excavating material that a human being leaves. It became resonant to me also because I was reading about what they call affect theory, the notion that we have an exchange and you, literally change my being so I read like some, some discourses on that, which is part of like kind of contemporary culture. So it became really a reason for doing research, which I love that side of my practice.

MC
And one of the things that I found myself thinking about, and I don't know how much this relates in the where doesn't, but that were we as human beings were all kind of debris, you and were shed at all times, and ultimately we were kind of disintegrating eventually.

LS
I love the word shedding. And I have to tell you, I just wrote a book that was published by punctum, books, and it's all about laundry and the whole book, it's called Hand Book in Manual on Performance process and Labor of Laundry. So over a period of ten years, I did a lot of performances in Laundromats, a play I was interested in, and, laundry workers. I was interested in the complexity and danger of working in a laundry mat because laundry mats, people, people associate with really with cleanliness and good smells. But those smells can be very noxious. Also, the weight of lifting every single day you know, enormous bags of laundry and the folding, the, the sort of. Anyway, there's a lot around laundry and I'm super interested. But! I've done a whole performances around lint, so lint, it's very and I've written a poem about lint.

MC
That’s wonderful.

LS
And when you said shedding, it made me think about lint. And I actually thank you, thank you. Because you saw my film and you thought of something that's been, very, very much at the center of my thinking for a decade. And that is the notion of, like, somatic connections. The ways that we leave pieces of ourselves like animals do. They shed once a year and we are like, oh, that lizard shed. And I think it's kind of beautiful and sometimes I have done live performances. They're always with film. So they're sort of multi-dimensional in that way. And I have someone, like an usher at the front of the theater giving away pieces of lint. And some people think it's kind of intriguing, and I want them to be able to fiddle with it while they're in the

show. But other people think it's disgusting. Because it’s got sweat, it's got hair. It's got pieces of clothing. Yes. And it's got skin. Just what you said. So yes, the cards are a form of shedding and and leaving a bit of yourself. And so as lint.

MC
and I also was thinking about the fact that this the skirts are kind of disappearing.I mean, now it's so common for people. I mean, we see it at festivals. I mean, somebody, you know, you sort of bump your phones or okay, scan this QR code and then their contact comes up. And I think people I find are almost a little bit embarrassed now about having a business card like this. It's kind of old fashioned, but there's still a utility to it, and it leaves a trace more than the digital trace.

LS
It's funny that you mentioned about bumping up with the two cell phones last night. There was a party for the filmmakers here at Idfa and so I started talking to a man and I think we around the same age, actually, and we were saying we both lived in New York. And I said, here's a card. He said, oh, no, no, no, I don't carry a card. And so he put his he immediately put the phone up to mine. And in a way I felt it–

MC
Without permission!

LS
Yeah, exactly. I felt like he was giving me a kiss on the cheek. And there was a je-ne-sais-quoi kind of like connection. And then when I left, I thought, whoa, that was so intense. His phone touched mine.But, you know, it's just a machine. But it had that sense of tactility to it, even though I didn't touch his hand. And with the card, in a sense you might not touch the other person's body, but for me, the card maybe now, like the phone, really is an extension of our body. I mean, the phone in a way, is more of an extension of our body because it contains the way we think. It contains our friendship, it contains our photographs. There's so much inside that we feel it is sort of almost within us, not without us. You know, like we feel naked without our telephones. But the card was another. Another offered other possibilities of future. That's the thing. Both of them are who you are. But how we might exist simultaneously.

MC
Again, one of them and these truly remarkable things I think about your film is how you approach the visuals to it. And I love the fact that you begin with a kind of a pulpy milk bath. And you as a filmmaker have the confidence, I think. And you tell me what you think of my conception of this, that the audience will not necessarily and probably will not know what this visual is. And that's I think that's wonderful. I think so many documentary filmmakers are too literal, and the image must exactly match what the narration or the interviewer is saying. And you're expanding our mind in a way, in a, in a really interesting way where we have to think about the visual, what we're hearing. You. And so anyway, I guess that's a long way of complimenting you on the visual.

LS
I have to tell you that that's why I make films, and I feel uncomfortable with the literal, I have another film. Your day is My Night. A friend of mine who makes more traditional documentaries said I needed an establishing shot in Chinatown in New York City, and I thought I'd never include establishing shots, but something about that, about what she said convinced me. And so I put it in. And now whenever I watch the film, I feel it's so unnecessary because I feel like in that film we see various apartments in Chinatown. But you didn't need to say no. It was at the corner of Henry and Allen Street, and it reminds me of Seinfeld. When you see that shot, I feel humiliated because all of Seinfeld was shot on a set. My film was not shot on set, but it didn't need that. But anyway, I'm glad you brought up a shot where you felt a certain kind of, the wilderness. And then it became clear people who know about papermaking would understand that that's paper. The pulp of paper making. My brother, who's a filmmaker, watched the film and he said, Lynne, you know, I didn't understand that it was paper till much later. And I said, okay, because that's actually a thread. And he and I added a whole scene because he was watching it as we, as I was making it. And I added a scene at the end where, you see, and I'm glad I did. I appreciated, where you see, the woman who made the paper handing off a blank card to me. And then we put the name. Every contact leaves a trace on a little business card. And so it was for me, the resolution of another stream of time.

MC
You have another screening today. And in fact, I better not get to that. I don't want you to be delayed for that screening. But after IDFA For what? What are your plans for the film?

LS
Oh, thank you for asking. Well, it's interesting because the film had a couple of other invitations in Europe, and we knew we. I'm working with Kino Rebelde as my distributor internationally. Maria Vera, who's the rep, who runs that small distribution company and specializes in experimental documentary, said. This one I think you should try to premiere in Europe. So I did, and so I'm, I'm waiting to figure out where the premiere will be in the US. That'll be exciting. And I'm just going to say I'm happy to be here and I'll see what's next.

MC
Well, the film is Every Contact Leaves a Trace. We've been speaking with Lynne Sachs, the director and producer writer of the film. It's been such a pleasure. And it's a really marvelous, totally distinctive film, and just purely fascinating. So I hope many people will get to see it and see what's here in Amsterdam. Thank you so much for your time.

LS
Oh, thank you for allowing me to understand my film better. And that's why I traveled across the Atlantic. Why I'm staying here for every Q&A. It's that exchange is really important. You know more about yourself.

MC
Well, again, Lynne, it's been a pleasure.

LS
Thank you, Matt.