

Natural Life



Natural Life, still, 77 min, HD, Color, Stereo, 2014, English & English Subtitles [French Subtitles Available]

I. PROJECT SHORT DESCRIPTION

Natural Life is a feature length experimental documentary challenging inequities in the U.S. juvenile justice system by depicting, through documentation and reenactment, the stories of five individuals who were sentenced to Life Without Parole (Natural Life) for crimes they committed as youth.

The youthful status and/or lesser culpability of these youths, their background and their potential for rehabilitation, were not taken into account at any point in the charging and sentencing process. The five will never be evaluated for change, difference or growth. They will remain in prison till they die.

The project portrays the ripple effect that the sentence has had not only on the incarcerated youth and their victims, but also on the community at large.

II. PROJECT SYNOPSIS

Natural Life, an experimental documentary installation produced in conjunction with the legal efforts of The Law Offices of Deborah LaBelle (LODL), challenges inequities in the juvenile justice system by depicting, through documentation and reenactment, the stories of five youths who received the most severe sentence available for convicted adults--a sentence of "natural life" or "life without parole".

Fear of juvenile crime has in recent years violated the fundamental ideas upon which juvenile court rests, and specifically, the belief in children's unique capacity for rehabilitation and change. State law makers and the federal government have more and more frequently opted to resort to harsher punitive adult models, demanding that children be put on trial as if they were as culpable, liable and informed as adults who commit similar crimes.

Forty-one states in the U.S. elect to enforce a sentence of life without parole (natural life) on youth under the age of eighteen. The sentencing system for youth is especially vulnerable to a challenge where over half of the youth did not, themselves, commit a homicide, and at no point in the process was their youthful status and lesser culpability taken into account.

Natural Life aims to portray the ripple effect that the juvenile justice system's imbalance has had on the lives not only of the incarcerated youth and the victims of their crime, but on their family members, on law enforcement and legal officials and on the community at large.

To that end I have videotaped close to fifty interviews with individuals who were involved with the crime, the arrest and the sentencing of the five featured inmates. Among them are judges, lawyers, police officers, reporters, wardens, teachers, child psychiatrists, legal experts, members of families of the incarcerated as well as of the victims' families; all this alongside extensive recorded phone conversations with the inmates themselves.

These interviews were coupled with staged and documented scenes from court and from the main characters' childhood and crime setting. That is, critical past moments from the stories were reenacted by the now older parent or brother at the original site of the event.

Lastly, to compensate for the legal restriction on videotaping the incarcerated juveniles in prison, I located an abandoned prison in Michigan, and with a group of youth actors and an ex-prisoner who assisted in directing them, shot dozens of hours of detailed images depicting the day-to-day experience of life in prison as told by the interviewees. Thus an additional layer--images depicting a prison inhabited by kids only--is woven into the array of recorded stories.

By injecting fiction (hypothesis) into the documentary format, I want to propose alternative interpretations of the documented facts, and to destabilize and question the public version of the crime and the sentence, as well as their inevitability.

The project thus attempts to transgress and complicate the tension between fabrication and record, guilt and innocence, accident and intent, as well as the gap between acting and manifesting, projected and recalled worlds. My hope is that the formal crossing over between staged scenes and documentary film will make tangible and felt the actual lives, stories, legal structures and statistics that underlie the current state of youth serving life without parole in the U.S. I am pursuing through it a desire to engage in a public conversation that makes tangible claims and has immediate bearing, as action, on personal and political realities.

III. DIRECTOR STATEMENT

Over the last fifteen years I have been developing a language for communicating human social and political realities in visual media, through almost imperceptible digital manipulation and careful sequencing of (or navigation through) the recorded moments.

Both my linear and my interactive video work have consistently been engaged with representing the encounter -- or conversation -- with a variety of groups and individuals, typically ones whose lives embody complex or decentralized social/political settings (in Palestine, Turkey, the U.S. and Germany, among other locations). At the same time (and perhaps especially) the work could also be described as an exploration of the inevitable, yet nuanced, failure of this very act of representation.

When recording the encounters with freshly nuanced and never fully known concrete lives and moments, I look for ways to destabilize and undermine any projected unities -- of character, of story -- with which I (or the viewer) could assume control over difference. My goal is to somehow express the freedom from narrative or ideological framework that the details I find embody.

Failure to contain, to tell a coherent story, is an aesthetic driven by a political and an ethical goal. I want to have the work suggest the very same resistance to analysis that draws me to the documented scene in the first place. I use ellipsis and contradiction to frustrate my effort to hold on to what I am at the same time grasping to know and tell.

The visual language I developed aims to question and expose the ideological bias underlying any single view; to fracture and destabilize the various frameworks which safeguard the stability of narrative structures and hierarchies (the in/out of a story, the uniformity of character, genre divisions etc.); and finally, to complicate the separation between documentary and fiction.

I tell the stories of the five individuals featured in Natural Life from multiple angles, ranging from that of the legal experts and law enforcement officials, through family members of the inmates and relatives of victims of similar crimes. My goal is to examine context as activating and revealing change and difference – synchronically, through simultaneous yet incongruent views on similar acts or events, and diachronically, by allowing positions and phrases to mutate and flip meaning, as in a pun, when transitioning between stories.

This is done first and foremost through the literal device of a split screen. The voices, thus, are always interpreted through more than one view: older and younger, black and white, victim and perpetrator, police and convict, inside prison and outside it. The meaning of each of the two sides of the screen, however, mutates and alters. Difference is the only constant.

My hope is to depict change as inevitable, and difference as structural. And in that way, challenge the underlying presumption of permanence and sameness that the sentence of life-without-parole for juveniles claims and imposes.

IV. PRODUCER/DIRECTOR BIO

TIRTZA EVEN

A practicing video artist and documentary maker for the past fifteen years, Even has produced both linear and interactive video work representing the less overt manifestations of complex and sometimes extreme social/political dynamics in specific locations (e.g. Palestine, Turkey, Spain, the U.S. and Germany, among others). Her work has appeared at the Museum of Modern Art, NY, at the Whitney Biennial, the Johannesburg Biennial, as well as in many other festivals, galleries and museums in the United States, Israel and Europe, and has been purchased for the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art (NY), the Jewish Museum (NY), the Israel Museum (Jerusalem), among others. She has been an invited guest and featured speaker at numerous conferences and university programs, including the Whitney Museum Seminar series, the Digital Flaherty Seminar, Art Pace annual panel, ACM Multimedia, The Performance Studies International conference (PSI), The Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts conference (SLSA) and others.

V. CREDITS

Producer / Director: Tirtza Even

Featured Inmates: Matthew Bentley, Kevin Boyd, Barbara Hernandez, Efren Paredes, Jennifer Pruitt

Music: Oded Zehavi

Editing: Tirtza Even and Meredith Zielke

Camera: Emilie Crewe, Gonzalo Escobar, Tirtza Even, Yoni Goldstein, Raphael Rodolfi

Installation space designer: Ivan Martinez

Assistant Director for Prison Reenactments: Phillip Sample

In-Studio Camera and Lighting: Joey Carr

Sound Design: Jacob Ross

Color correction: Tom Rovak

Camera Assistants: Ronen Goldstein and Scott Slade

Editing consultant: Susanne Suffredin

Reenactment Actors: Lakim Carney, Chrissy Garcia, Faizan Hasnain, Kati Holland, Crystal Marquez, Madison McLean, Kaicey Pare, Scott Slade, Michael Szala, Cora Swise, Carlos Wagener-Sobrero, Pierre Walker

Interviewees: Mark Bilkovic, Lynn Boyd, Lessie Brown, Andrew Burch, Paul J. Ciolino, Bernardine Dohm,

Robyn Frankel, Nolan Gottschall, Elizabeth Hernandez, Hon. David B. Herrington, Hans R. Koppenhoefer,

Hans R. Koppenhoefer Jr., Velia Koppenhoefer, William Kucyk, Deborah LaBelle, Donald Logan, Inge L.

Longpre, Thomas L. Morneau, John C. Polasky, Denny W. Pruitt, Jason Pruitt, Mitchell Ribitwer, Ron Roberts,

Tammi Smith, Edith Marie Stone, Andrea Waple, Pamela K. Withrow

Logging: Gonzalo Ubillus and Courtney Clay, the Law Offices of Deborah LaBelle

Produced alongside and with the extensive support of the Law Offices of Deborah LaBelle (LODL)

VI. SELECTED CREW BIOS

DEBORAH LABELLE, Consultant and Resource Provider

Deborah LaBelle is an attorney, professor, writer and advocate who focuses on the application of human rights for marginalized communities. She has been lead counsel in over a dozen class actions that have successfully challenged policies affecting the treatment of incarcerated men, women and juveniles and their families.

Ms. LaBelle is a Senior Soros Justice Fellow and, the first American recognized by Human Rights Watch as a Human Rights Monitor. In addition to her private practice, she is director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Juvenile Life Without Parole Initiative. Her publications include *Women at the Margins, Neglect, Punishment and Resistance* (Haworth, 2002). *Ensuring Rights for All: Realizing Human Rights for Prisoners in Bringing Human Rights Home* (Praeger Press, 2008); and *Bringing Human Rights Home to the World of Detention* (Columbia Human Rights Law Review Article, Vol. 40.1, Fall 2008).

Ms. LaBelle is a recipient of Michigan's State Bar Champion of Justice Award, recognized as one of Michigan's top lawyers and received the National Trial Lawyer of the Year Award from the Public Interest Foundation (2008) and National Lawyer Guild's Law for the People Award (2008). She received the Wade Hampton McCree Jr. Award for the advancement of social justice presented by the Federal Bar (2009) and the Susan B. Anthony Award from the University of Michigan (2010).

ODED ZEHAVI, Music Composer

Oded Zehavi's music runs the gamut from atonality to neo-romanticism and has won international accolades from both audiences and critics for its appealing and emotional content. His tonal language draws from music traditions of the Middle East (Jewish and Arabic), European art song and contemporary techniques, exploring the fusion of western and ethnic musical heritages.

Scholarly pursuits include a recent sabbatical as a research fellow at the University of Michigan's Frankel Institute, investigating ancient and contemporary applications of the shofar as a Jewish ritual object. He is frequently invited to lecture on Israeli and Jewish music at conferences in Israel, Europe and America.

He has received numerous prizes and commissions for his works and has been performed by renowned conductors and ensembles such as Zubin Mehta, Valery Gergiev, David Robertson, Israel Philharmonic, London Philharmonic and Kirov Opera Orchestra in some of the world's great concert halls, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Festspielhaus and Musikverein. Zehavi is a professor of Music at the University of Haifa, Israel.

YONI GOLDSTEIN, Camera Person

Yoni Goldstein is an Israeli born, Chicago based filmmaker, cinematographer, and editor whose work puts forward multi-sited transects of body, conflict, and diaspora. Goldstein has gone on to work on a number of socially critical media projects: from examining hybridized healing practices in the Northern Andes ("La Curación"), to life sentences for children in US prisons ("Natural Life"), to large scale tableaux of historical and somatic memory ("The Jettisoned"). His works have exhibited in numerous international festivals and galleries, including Hot Springs Documentary Festival, Sydney Latino Film Festival, The Ann Arbor Film Festival, Festival International du Film Ethnographique du Québec, Hot Docs Digital Doc Shop, Globians Doc Fest Berlin, Aspekty Film Festival in Poland, and is collected in the US National Library of Science. His cinematographic works have been selected for The Cannes Film Festival, The Whitney Biennial, and The New Media Festival in Korea.

Yoni Goldstein is an alum of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (BA 2004) and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA 2009). Yoni Goldstein has also resided at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague and at the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Daisy Soros Prize for Fine Arts, Paul Robeson Grant, and the Lawther / Gradd No Violence Award.

IVAN MARTINEZ, Installation Space Designer

Ivan Martinez is an artist and designer from Miami, Florida, now residing in Brooklyn, NY. His work examines the commonly recognizable typologies found within our built environment in order to reassess those objects as a framework for storytelling, observation, and gathering. The resulting work has the ability to be altered and repositioned which consequently embeds, at times literally, artifacts of the transformative and functional history of the object.

Ivan's main interest is in the implicit social and political language embodied within these objects. When utilized, his work adapts, disappears, or continues to be built as an effect of the user's/ viewers' engagement with them. Personal memory, the public domain, and communal archive are explored in an effort to recognize the ethos of specific locale.

After receiving a BFA at Florida State University in printmaking and photography he became a designer and art director for various communication and media agencies in Miami and New York. In 2012 Ivan graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an MFA in Design for Emerging Technologies. As an artist he has shown internationally, investigating the relationship between objects, narrative, and technology.

MEREDITH ZIELKE, Co-Editor

Meredith Zielke is an award-winning filmmaker, educator, audio producer and the co-director of [Standing Point Films](#), an independent media house for critical documentary and film-video art production. She is also the executive editor for [SocialScope Productions](#), which produces the [50Faggots](#) docu-Web series. She holds degrees from the University of Michigan (BA in biology, film production and Spanish) and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA in film/video and new media).

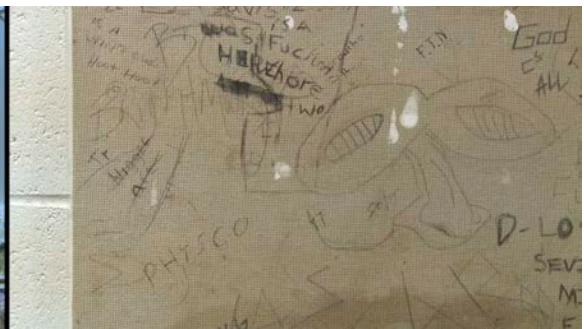
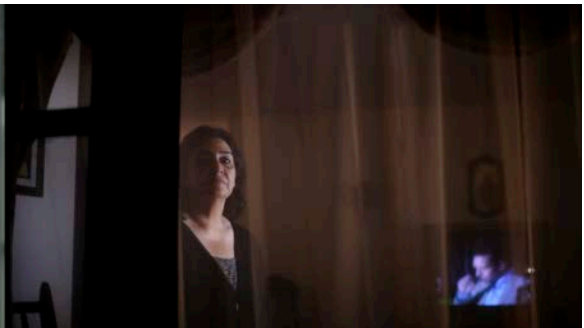
PHILLIP SAMPLE, Assistant Director for Prison Reenactments

Phillip "UcciKhan" Sample was born to a single young mother December 10, 1975 in impoverished Detroit Michigan. He was raised between the slums of Detroit, Michigan and the gang ridden Southside of Chicago, Illinois. As a result of dysfunctional and unstable housing, ill-education and violence, Phillip became his environment. He joined a gang at 11 years of age and became the leader of his own gang by the time he was 14. Phillip caught his first felony as a juvenile and continued to expand his criminal record until he was convicted of 3 counts of assault with intent to commit murder at 18 years of age and sentenced to 12-20 years in the MDOC. While in prison he began to undergo self-evaluation and inevitably would began the process of self-transformation. He became heavily involved with prison politics and experienced the horrors of incarceration to the fullest extent. Released after serving 15 years, Phillip has returned to society with intent to amend past actions and contribute to the re-building of the community that he helped to destroy. He is currently the owner of The Passion of The Life LLC. (<http://www.thepassionofthelife.com/>); and has made its presence felt artistically, vocally and actively. He is currently working on his autobiography The Passion of Life which will be accompanied by a documentary and soundtrack.

VII. SELECTED PRESS

- * ["Working Documentary "Natural Life" Brings Experience of Young 'Lifers' to Screen"](#), The Chicago Bureau, Nov 20, 2013
- * ["Documentary Filmmaker Tirtza Even Speaks on Her New Film About Juvenile Incarceration"](#), Vocalo.org, Nov 14, 2013
- * Review and featuring of Natural Life during "The Stream", produced by Omar Baddar, Al Jazeera America, October 28, 2013
- * "Art festival had something for everyone", Kristin Rose, Hamtramck Review, Volume 5 No. 41, October 11, 2013
- * [Preview of Natural Life at Edwin gallery](#), Knight Arts, Oct 4, 2013
- * ["Tamms to Tokyo"](#), Bad At Sports, Feb 12, 2013
- * ["Peering Inside"](#), Fnews Magazine, Nov 20, 2012
- * ["An Exploration in Three Parts: Prison Past and Present at The Sullivan Galleries"](#), Bad At Sports, Nov 13, 2012

VIII. STILLS



IX. DISTRIBUTION

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X. CONTACT

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Image from a panel discussion hosted by Edwin gallery, Detroit, during a preview exhibition of Natural Life, Fall 2013.