



Gabi Schaffner

**THE MADNESS OF THE DOCUMENTARIST**

*Translation by Gabi Schaffner & Tobias Fischer*



Photo: Peter Bretz

**Gabi Schaffner**, born 1965 in Offenbach on the Main; works as a traveling artist, writer, photographer and publisher within the field of “autopeotic systems”; first audio works were done in 2002. Since 2006/07 she has also produced radio shows for *Deutschlandradio Kultur* and *Hessischer Rundfunk*.

Any documentarist must either be mad or go mad while persuing her work. It might be all very well to embark on a journey, but carrying along technical devices for the purpose of documentation is sometimes presumptuous and can lead one into the quagmire of self-humiliation, too. Not that it would be a question of falsehood, which is inevitably attached to any object of objectivity. But isn't documentation, generally speaking, a kind of theft? Isn't it like stealing from time? And, what's more, isn't it done in a more than awkward fashion considering the value of that which is documented?

With regards to the total inadequacy of human perception, the question arises as to whether or not the obsessive pursuit of a particular goal must automatically lead to insanity. But a documentarist must turn mad just at the moment he or she realizes that something wonderful is happening... but the videotape is at its end, the pencil broken, the aperture wrongly adjusted or simply the battery is dead. It has happened to many, but few have put it in writing: the failure of the ethnographer right in the middle of things. Compared to the total triumph that results from having captured

something absolutely unique; something precious; the authentic copy of a stretch of time. The DNA of reality, a sequence of real-time. Holy real-time, mantra of the field recordists. Lost! Lost!

### **Technical Failure #1: The Handsome Young Man**

The minidisk recorder failed for the first time on a Sunday morning, 7th of July, on the occasion of a bus trip into a neighbouring village (which had been organized for journalists and interested individuals by the festival board). The bus stopped in front of a vestry equipped with a wooden stage and rows of chairs. The backdrop of the stage was adorned with a Finnish landscape painting in sparkling green and blue; cloudlets in the sky and a little brook. We were introduced to: the village choir, the music teacher (being prominently seated next to the piano), some little nippers with violin and accordion at a tender age ranging from five to seven years, and a handful of young talents from the vicinity. Now there was an exception, a boy of maybe 16 years who, when you just looked at him, caused something in your heart to tremble. This, as far as I could see, was due to the delicate features and lines around his mouth which was straight but still the most mobile part of

his face. His accordion-playing was without question first class, and consisted of only two short pieces. Each single tone, each note appeared as an innermost expression in his face and only after that were they emitted as sound from the instrument. Naturally, such an instance happens much too fast to perceive and name it consciously – only by memory can one slow it down and retrieve it in fragments. I had put the broken machine aside and was totally absorbed in this much too short contemplation. His face remained, while he played, perfectly naked and sensitive, but so deeply immersed as to be unreachable.

### **Technical Failure #2: Smokesauna, 9th July 2006**

The gloomiest moment of my Finnish documentary mission came shortly after I'd acquired a treasure in the form of a gleaming new Sony minidisk recorder from the *Kansanmusikki-instituti* in Kaustinen. I was unable to activate the reload-function of the battery. No electricity supply whatsoever was to be found, neither at the sauna nor in its immediate surroundings. I shared this pitchdark room with some girls and two men. One has to know that the acoustics of the sauna in Pauanne is very special. The building is made from wood and stone,

the damp air and especially the directly adjoining architecture of the pool hall next to us – they all combine and melt into a unified entity that allows the faintest tones to retain echo and sound, warmth, colour, resonance and depth. You are listening to: the rubbing of skin onto wood, the crunching of pebbles, the crackling and moaning of the wooden beams. Its acoustic twin track: the creaking, opening and closing of the massive door, the loud hiss of the *löyly* followed by languorous moans and sighs, the soft murmur and occasional laughter, the swoosh of water-buckets being refilled, the sound of water on skin and, nearly inaudibly, on hair, the slippery sound of soap, the splashing of water on pebbles, and in between: the rhythmic, twittering, rustling noise of the *vihtas* (birch twigs) on wet bodies. Now a soft hum rises like a breeze that seems to move around the room, a humming that gets louder and divides itself into two or three girl's voices. You can hear their voices, but the girls themselves are invisible, their knees, calves and ankles being vaguely perceptible.

The melody is a simple improvisation being doubled and added to, with strands that intertwine like long tendrils and which – still in all their simplicity – develop more and more bewildering patterns. Again the voices

rise and fall back into silence. Then there is a moment of laughter and silence, and another woman starts to hum a new melody. Now it is four girls singing and I am nearly crying. The two men join in a no less artful manner and I sit there, painfully tortured by all this beauty entering my mind and ears. A beauty that is fatally and forever beyond retrieval and documentation and lost for the world. I was not happy when the singing ended. I was shattered by the awareness of my technical dependency. For days, I grumbled and my brain whispered sardonic insults even in my dreams. If I had known what follies I would further commit with this machine in the course of my journey, I would have thrown it into the pool.

#### Deleted #2

Every day around noon, a dance orchestra rehearsed on its small wooden platform in front of the main stage of the Kaustinen festival. The weather was somewhat rainy and there was less hustle and bustle than usual. Later in the afternoon, Finnish men and women would be circling around in step with the tunes of tango, waltz and polka. The wooden planks under their feet would silently creak and one would just barely be able

to hear the shuffling sound of their soles in direct proximity of the floor.

But now, at a distance of approximately 10 meters, a hardly 18-year old punk, head bent down, had seated himself with his guitar on a little stonewall. In front of him was the empty case, next to him his girlfriend picking at her nails. I placed myself a meter away and switched on the recorder. A twofold, stylistically ambivalent track unfolded of which one part belonged to the rehearsing orchestra. On the other side, there was the punk with his guitar, not bad at all... he was squeaking Finnish lyrics in a bolshy way and taking the guitar to its and his limits. It would have been better though, if he had managed to get more than just one and a half verses together... perhaps not right away stunning but probably better for his career anyway. Even so, I cherished the fact that he had dared to enter into a fiddler and accordion atmosphere, with or without hope of earning himself a beer. The girlfriend tapped her booted foot, but after 10 minutes the boy had played all pieces that he knew until the second and half refrain and put the guitar aside. I tossed him a coin into the case and went away. I was very happy with this recording but only until the moment when I accidentally deleted it.

### **Deleted #1: Eero Peltonen Sings the *Song of the Happy Squirrel***

Did I talk about the aura of technical disaster in the beginning? Well, now my head is again veiled by a dark cloud, quite similar to a mosquito-swarm-cloud and I am being heavily pestered by the vile, derisive hum of failure in my ears. Before my inner eye: visualizations of finger tips on wrong buttons, the downfall of technical devices from tables and rocks, malfunctions of in- and outputs, and in between, the gaping black gorge of forgetfulness.

Therefore, it is now time for *Laulu oravasta* – the “Song of the Happy Squirrel.” Eero has translated the words for me, therefore I know what it is about: A squirrel sits in its cove high up in a tree and it looks down onto the world. But all it sees is death and murder and other evil things happening on earth. The squirrel is very frightened, but then it looks another way. Right before its nose, the tree stretches a big branch out into the open air, green and green with rustling leaves. Just like a beautiful big flag, thinks the squirrel and continues watching the swaying branch. By now, the whole tree has started to sway, and the squirrel feels warm and comfy. The trees rocks the squirrel in its cove like a mother rocks

her baby to sleep. All the trees of the forest move with the wind and the whispering of the leaves makes the forest sound like a kantele: *Metsän kantele* – the kantele of the forest. At the end, it looks up through all the leaves and branches into the sky. There, birds are floating in a huge flock through the blue, singing. And the squirrel feels very happy.

The song is a famous poem by Aleksis Kivi, the first Finnish writer who dared in 1870 to publish a novel in his mother tongue (and not in the formerly prescribed official language that was Swedish). Eero says, of course everybody would talk about Kivi's novel „The Seven Brothers,“ but his songs would also be very beautiful. The squirrel song has a rather simple melody; at the end of each verse, Eero's voice comes down to a deep bariton, vibrating on a single tone and then starting anew. The squirrel song ends very low somewhere in the bass notes – and that was the moment I started to cry. Heart of wax, perhaps, who could tell.

#### Deleted #4

» *Hey, do you speak English?*  
No.

» *Hm, I guess you do though.*  
Only a bit.

» *I have a question about this tractor race here.*  
I don't know.

» *Well, where do all these drivers come from?*  
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» *From Finland?*  
Yes, Finland.

» *And who invented these competitions anyway? Are they a finnish thing?*  
I don't know.

» *Well, did the Finns invent the tractor races?*  
No. I guess the Americans.

» *Aha. Is there a prize to be won?*  
Oh yes! Lots of money.

» *And the drivers, are they famous somehow... I mean do the people know them from TV or so?*  
Could be, yes. I think some of them are famous.

» *Well, thank you.*

(Subsequent notes of a failed interview with a teenager during the „Full Pull“ tractor championship at Kalajoki, 15th July 2006.)

**Deleted #5: A Yoik. Inari, 20th July 2006**

» *Would you sing a yoik for me?*

Don't know. What will you do with the recording?

» *It's a private recording. It help me remembering things more accurately, after the journey.*

Ok. But I am not such a good singer of yoiks. My voice is nothing special. There are others, more professional yoik singers.

» *That's ok.*

This is my own yoik, and it's not very long. And I don't want to have it used in public.

» *Ok. I won't do that. At which occasions do you sing it?*

I sing when I am travelling alone. Mostly in wintertime, riding the sleigh together with my son.

» *Do you sing other songs too on these occasions?*

Yes. Often. But this yoik is my personal yoik.

» *Did you learn it somehow?*

No... When I was a child, I listened to my mother yoiking, but this one is different. It just came to my mind and since then it is mine.

Marja-Leena sings. She sits with a straightened back, hand folded in her lap. Her yoik is indeed not very long, a sequence of modulated notes, rising and falling with a little swerve in its melodic pattern. It is like a scent in the air, which one will follow for a couple of breaths only to find out that one has lost it already. Marja-Leena looks at me.

» *Thank you. This was beautiful.*

You're welcome. But there other artists, really.

» *I know. But I rather enjoy collecting from... normal persons.*

I don't recall how it happened that I deleted Marja-Leena's yoik from the MD. I had listened to it again the

same evening via headphones. A yoik seems to be made only for one's own voice and for no one else's. That's why Marja-Leena's firm and somewhat deep timbre permeates every single note. Yoiking often reminds one of yodelling, but it is different, because not only the high notes are used and neither exclusively the head voice. By listening to a person yoiking one can tell from which region and even which family she or he comes from. And there are infinitely subtle twists of mood. A yoik can be the yoik of one person and can be sung altogether differently. It may express joy or love or sorrow. The pattern can be varied but it still belongs to an individual. A yoik resembles a name. No wonder that they are only reluctantly revealed to strangers.

GS