DOCUMENTARY AS CO-CREATIVE PRACTICE
FROM CHALLENGE FOR CHANGE TO HIGHRISE:
KAT CIZEK IN CONVERSATION WITH MANDY ROSE

Edited by Anna Wiehl

Kat Cizek was recruited by the National Film Board of Canada in 2004 as Filmmaker-in-Residence, with a brief to reinvent the influential NFB project Challenge for Change which, from 1967 to 1980, sought to put media to work for social change by turning documentary subjects into collaborators.¹

Since then Cizek has been experimenting with forms of interactive media practice that are grounded in co-creation, collaborating with partners including media-makers, academics, city planners, architects and — most importantly for her — 'the people formerly known as the subjects'.

From her first experiments at the NFB as Filmmaker-in-Residence to her multi-year, multi-faceted Interactive Emmy award-winning documentary project, High-rise (Cizek et al 2009–15), forms of collaboration have been at the heart of her practice.

In a conversation with Mandy Rose, Kat Cizek explains the ethos which underpins her work, and explores the potential and challenges of a co-creative approach.

Mandy Rose: One of the key concepts of your creative work is co-creation. What does this idea mean to you?
Kat Cizek: Co-creation for me is a method or an intention to make media with people that aren’t media-makers. As I go into different disciplines and worlds I see that there are very specific definitions of co-creation as being a type of, for example, social entrepreneurial approach. So the term is causing as many problems as it’s solving. But for me co-creation is a very broad term that implies a thoughtful process, which involves a collaboration with the intent to make quality media with partners instead of just about them, to make media as a media-maker together with people that aren’t media-makers: citizens, academics, professionals, technologists, organisations.

MR: You’re talking about making media together, but in your projects your collaborators don’t necessarily record media themselves?
KC: I would make a distinction between participatory and co-creative media-making. Many times I work with people who are highly specialised in their fields, and want to be involved in the creation of media, but have absolutely no interest in picking up a camera, recording or editing — medical doctors and architects, for example. Co-creation is about having a broader sense of the co-design and the spirit behind making something. Participation is only one specific methodology that is appropriate for certain contexts and not others.

MR: Do you think of co-creation as an approach specific to digital and to interactive media?
KC: I think it’s a social and political response to the new capacity that technology affords us. Technology allows us to be collaborative in new ways. However, for me it’s important not just to fall back on technological collaboration; but to think very specifically, politically and socially about how and why we are doing things. So co-creation comes about in dialogue with the technology as the tools for collaboration change and evolve.

Approaches to collaboration have really evolved in the last ten years. When I was in the middle of Filmmaker-in-Residence ten years ago, I wasn’t seeing much of this kind of collaborative practice. It existed and it has existed for decades; but in the last five years I’ve seen much more collaborative media happen-
ing, and the breakdown of silos and disciplines in journalism, in the academy, in media-making, going along with the idea of coalitions and partnership building.

MR: Let's take that apart in terms of how that has played out in Highrise. Who would you say were your co-creators in this project?

KC: There are many individuals and organisations. My closest collaborator throughout the process was veteran NFB producer Gerry Flahive. The first inspirations for even creating Highrise were some of the world-class urban thinkers and practitioners here in Toronto; Graeme Stewart, architect, the thinker behind the Tower Renewal project; Deborah Cowen, a critical geographer at the University of Toronto who has spent a lot of time talking and thinking about urban issues, about how Toronto has become extremely segregated and how that maps out into the city socially and geographically; Emily Paradis, a collaborator on this recent project, 'The Universe Within' (Cizek et al 2015), and was there already in the early days of Filmmaker-in-Residence when she was doing her PhD with homeless women; she was an early advisor. Another urban thinker at York University who has been key is Roger Keil, who was just beginning a large research project into global suburbanisms, with the hypothesis that suburban cultures and infrastructures often have more to do with each other globally than they do with the centres of the cities that they are attached to. The starting thesis for Highrise was that something was happening at the edges of our cities that wasn't related to our conventional notions of urbanism, and that we needed to approach it in new ways.

MR: How do you initiate these co-creative processes? What kind of conversations do you have?

KC: When I'm beginning a collaboration with a potential co-creator, I try to move the conversation away from 'I'm making a film about you and your ideas' to 'We are making something together and we don't know yet what it's going to be. It involves your expertise, it involves my expertise, but I'm not pointing the camera at you.' This is certainly a shift of focus away from a conventional documentary approach.

MR: So how did you get started with Highrise, and how did it evolve?

KC: One of the first and really important partners was the City of Toronto who had just opened a Tower Renewal office and were looking for pilot sites in the city. I started exploring those sites which brought me to the west side of the city - to Kipling Avenue.

It was one of the pilot sites for the Tower Renewal project, but I was also closely connected to MicroSkills, a community organisation that had been working in Etobicoke for 25 years. It was a wonderful example of suburban community organising. The organisation had taken over a strip mall by the airport. It was run by a Jamaican-Canadian community organiser who had some support from Microsoft. She had hundreds of computers and was running large-scale professional training for people in the neighbourhood.

Everything about that community organisation was nothing like what we think of when we imagine organising in the city centre. It was responding to the needs and the demands of the local community. It really was humbling for me to see what organising might look like in the suburbs. There is so little of it, so it was impressive what they had achieved, and they were slowly taking over the strip mall with these courses and classes in professional development. They had just gotten a grant to bring a civic engagement office in the pilot site of the highrise that the City of Toronto had chosen.

The day I walked into one of the offices, they had just hired a community organiser who had worked in eastern London - Russ Mitchell. He was very experienced, and I loved his modest, practical, from-the-ground-up approach. We really hit it off.

Out of eleven new neighbourhood offices around town, he was the only one in Toronto who actually put one of these offices inside a highrise. A lot of them ended up in shopping malls or other community organisations. He said: 'I've got to be where the people live. That's where I've got to be.' He had no media experience, but he got the principle of what we were doing right away, as a frontline worker he really understood it.

So with him we started doing participatory media projects at Kipling, very early in the process of Highrise. The six residents who joined our group were further key co-creators, giving us insight into what it's like living in a highrise in contemporary Toronto.

So - residents, architects, community organisers, community organisations, the City of Toronto and academics - those were the early players. Then later we were approached by the New York Times.

MR: Would you describe your relationship with the New York Times as a co-creative one?

KC: Sure, and it was unprecedented and unusual for both the New York Times and the NFB at that time. Here were two institutions trying to figure out how to work with one another across multiple departments in order to create something that neither of them would have considered even five years earlier.

It was, for example, unusual for the New York Times to be in video let alone interactive audio-visual media. They'd done a lot of interactive data journalism, but creating an interactive documentary was new for them.

MR: Was 'A Short History of the Highrise' (Cizek et al 2013) one of their first short-form documentaries?
Video-based, absolutely. They had a burgeoning video department at that point, really cutting edge, and they also had amazing multimedia. We ended up working with the designer/developer from Snow Fall (Branch 2012), which had been their biggest multimedia project, but that was text-based. It was essentially a very well done piece of conventional journalism that had these multimedia design applications on top of it. Whereas our project was video-based, with interactive elements that the New York Times had never done, and it was built as a multimedia piece.

MR: So this called for some deep collaboration.

KC: It was a really deep collaboration, and we worked mainly with the interactive team. We collaborated also very closely with the archives and the photography department, with the rights department as well as with the social media desk, because Part IV of 'A Short History of the Highrise' was user-generated. We put a call out to New York Times readers to submit photographs. So I consider that a really interesting example of co-creation.

'Universe Within' (Gizew et al. 2015), the most recent project, was also a really unique form of collaboration. The work was built on this fantastic grant that Deborah Cowen and Emily Paradis were able to get from the SSHRC. They received a substantial partnership development grant, and with that they were able to fund the research and the development of what became 'Universe Within', and they'll also be publishing a book based on that research.

MR: So that was a separate research collaboration to the global suburbanisms work.

KC: Yes, first Deb and Emily were advisors on Highrise as a whole, and then we collaborated on a specific project. I'd been talking about digital citizenship with both Deb and Emily and they didn't know each other though they are both at the University of Toronto. At the time neither saw digital as their area of expertise (Emily's expertise is participatory methodology). So we had long conversations and then finally they said, 'Okay, maybe digital citizenship is something we should be concerned with'.

MR: What was your initial research question for the project?

KC: While Heather Frise, my colleague at Highrise, and I were working at the Kipling site, we kept wondering, what are the digital lives of the people in this building? This was tricky, as we only knew six people well, we knew about twenty fairly well, and as to the rest in these two highrises, two thousand people, we had no idea who they were, where they came from, what kind of digital connections they had. We assumed that if people have recently arrived in Canada, digital media must be an important part of their lives. So we decided to put together a survey of the buildings. With Deb and Emily we co-designed a research survey and we hired fourteen people from the buildings to interview their neighbours door-to-door. We did this in fourteen languages, as the idea was to represent as many languages in the building as possible.

Over the course of six weeks, we interviewed over a hundred households. We had this amazing team, with the academic researchers and peer researchers in the buildings, who brought so many ideas to the project too.

One aspect that sets our process apart from other research is that often surveys are done and the people involved have no idea what the results are, so the research is useless for the people who actually live there. Our goal was to analyse the data and put it into a newsletter as quickly as possible. Within two weeks of having finished, we came back with a thousand copies and put them under the door of every household. Thanks in part to that research, they were able to get a grant to build a playground, because the data showed how many people under twenty were in the building - 50 per cent of the population, which is incredibly high and an unusual statistic for a Canadian neighbourhood. That's more like a figure you'd see in a First Nations community here in Canada, or in the Global South.

MR: It sounds like the collaborative relationships and research enabled you to surface information that wasn't otherwise accessible.

KC: That's right, and that information then helped define what the media project would be. That's the difference: it is not going in and saying, 'I'm going to make a film about your ideas.' It's more like, 'We're interested in seeing how media might work to advance some of the ideas and knowledge that exist in this community.' It's a completely different starting point in terms of the relationship. We are really rolling up our sleeves and trying to figure out what is going on here and what we can learn from each other.

So even just the act of doing a neighbour-led survey, where it was neighbours interviewing each other as opposed to some researchers coming down and knocking on the doors; that had an impact. Once the tenant/researcher had gone into those apartments, the next day they would see those people and talk again. Then it's, 'There's a tenant's association meeting next week, why don't you come?' So the product of the work wasn't just the data that we collected. The process itself helped develop community spirit and provided networking opportunities for people. Beyond that, some of the work got a lot of media attention, and that brought some funding, and interest in the community, or helped develop that interest.

MR: To what extent have you delved into histories of community media in this Process of thinking about your own co-creative practice? Have you looked back at Challenge for Change?
I've definitely come out of a tradition of alternative media, and when I started Filmmaker-in-Residence in 2004, the direct mandate for me was to reinvent Challenge for Change in the digital age.

So I wouldn't say that I went back and watched every Challenge for Change project, but I certainly did some reading about it, watched some stuff, and talked to people within the NFB about what Challenge for Change was. In particular, The Fogo Island Process (Low 1967) was something I was really interested in, and one of the projects of Filmmaker-in-Residence out of the seven that I did at the hospital was specifically an adaptation. The question was, 'Can I take The Fogo Island Process and adapt it to the contemporary academic hospital? How would that look?'

What happened in Fogo was a process in which Colin Low, the filmmaker, worked with Memorial University to use film as a way to document the lives of members of a community who were destined to be relocated.

The provincial government had decided that they would remove them from the island. The people on the island didn't want to go. Colin Low went in and documented their lives, in what were really film fragments. He brought that material to the provincial politicians and civil servants and had them watch it and respond to it on camera, and then he brought that back to the community, and then through that process, the community began to organise and articulate their goals and hopes and dreams for how they could stay. Through that process, they came up with the idea of a community co-op cannery that is still in existence today. It's a pretty amazing example of how the process of filming can make a difference. So, yes, I was absolutely inspired by that example.

Then, beyond community media, we are just standing on the shoulders of giants of critical community organising, strong traditions in many places around the world. I was inspired by that as well as; for example, in Filmmaker-in-Residence, I was really inspired by interventionist research—doctor and nurses who weren't satisfied with the conventional model—that you do research and then you publish it and then somehow expect that miraculously your work becomes of service to the community ten years after the fact. There is a sense of urgency and responsibility, and I really felt that that was the tradition of Challenge for Change.

MR: What other experiences have informed your co-creative approach?
KC: The most formative experience I had was collaborating with homeless young parents with no fixed address in the context of a hospital. We were asking: How can we make these parents get into contact with the service providers of the hospital that provides them with services? How can they be invited to speak more honestly? What might really make a difference in the way the hospital and healthcare providers work with young parents?

Healthcare, as troubled as some of it can be, has some really interesting innovations happening within it. For example, technology is being applied, which is helping to break down silos and create a more collaborative, patient-centred approach. This affects both the delivery of healthcare, and even co-creation itself, when appropriate. So there is innovative thinking, institutional change and social innovation that we have a lot to learn from as media-makers.

MR: Did you know that when you chose St Michael's hospital as the location for Filmmaker-in-Residency?
KC: Well I didn't choose St Michael's, that's what was so humbling about the experience. I left the academy, I'd gotten a degree in anthropology and I was so sick of postmodernism [laughter]. I really felt disgruntled and disenchanted by it. So it was a hugely humbling experience to be given this assignment to go into this hospital and I learned so much at every level.

For very practical reasons, we decided to align ourselves with the frontline workers at the hospital, and we were in principle being accepted by the hospital, but the corporate arm and particularly the public relations arm of the hospital was very, suspicious of us. They'd had a previously bad experience with a reality TV show in there. So they were like, 'What, Filmmaker-in-Residence, you're just going to wander around with a camera?'

So, the frontline workers that we immediately hit it off with and had this co-creative relationship with, they said: 'Well why don't we frame this as academic research. We'll go through the research and ethics board of the hospital and in that way it protects what we do as knowledge gathering and academic research. It's not for PR, and they have to respect the academic freedom in the project.'

So we were asking all these questions; what is informed consent? What is ethical practice? How do you really work in a research context with people in a way that provides them with rights and responsibilities?

We often just pay lip service to these issues in documentary and don't think through them carefully enough. This project, in contrast, was an opportunity to gather benefits and learning from a co-creative process in terms of understanding risk, mitigating and figuring out ethical ways to have people be able to make their own choices when possible, but also protect them when they can't.

MR: How did these experiences inspire your concepts of co-creation and collaboration in Highrise? What were the terms of the relationships with people you worked with? And how do you conceive of authorship or your own role in the co-creative process?
KC: I don't see authorship and co-creation as a dualism, but I do see shifts with...
regard to new evolving and transitioning forms of relationship. Mostly I think it's about finding a pragmatic moment - the moment in which you think 'Yes, we can collaborate on this specific thing at this moment.' Then, however, there is also the point where you realize that it's your turn, and you want to continue making a documentary where you have people participating but not having them in your editing room eight hours a day.

So, I consider myself definitely a director, but the relationship that I have with the people that I work with is quite different, I hope, than a conventional documentary project and it's a scale, it's a spectrum.

MR: What do you think are the biggest challenges of working in this way?

KC: The messiness [laughter]. There is no obvious way to do it, no formula. No co-creation process is like the one you have done before, and just managing expectations or even figuring out what those expectations might be is starting anew.

MR: So how do you steer a path in terms of your co-creative practice to make sure that you are on firm ethical ground?

KC: Part of it is respecting people's investment and skills and energy. So paying the people when they do work is just one key ethical principle of ours. We've negotiated that differently with participants. So for example, in the end parts of No Fixed Address (Cizek et al 2009) we provided food, public transportation tokens as well as honoraria in the work.

When we started doing the Street Health Stories (Cizek et al 2007), which involved young parents being trained on photography and interview skills so they could create a portrait of the health and wellbeing of the homeless through their own voices, we actually hired the young women and paid them per hour. In Highrise, one of the community organisers was very adamant about not offering honoraria upfront because he felt that this could compromise some of the other work that they were trying to do that could not offer honoraria. So ethics of co-creation here included respecting that partner's limited resources as well, and above all, respecting the principle of civic engagement. The whole idea was that they weren't just hiring people to do work for them, but they were trying to develop a responsibility and a commitment on a part of those citizens without being paid for it.

So again, it was about how to create projects and space for these bigger dialogues across sectors, across disciplines, across ways of life that have a larger frame than the frames we have in the way that we create media. That is certainly a big goal, a kind of a metagold of co-creation.

MR: Are you referring to political critique and systemic change?

KC: Yes, systems change, and larger. I am thinking about how we address things that are much bigger than we are, and what we normally do in our disciplines? How do we pull together coalitions? How can we work together and look at the bigger picture? I think that is the broader political goal.

MR: So it is a question of how you take things from the individual to the societal level.

KC: And it is also about how you keep it in an artful place where the readers or the audience or the users or whatever you want to call the people that you are pulling in are also allowed to co-create some of the answers. This differs from the preachy, didactic perspective of putting it like: 'Here are our solutions.'

MR: So it's about maintaining your critical relationship to what you're observing? Do you ever find that tension between a critical and a co-creative model?

KC: Having a background in journalism, I really like to defend editorial control, even if this model is changing. In all our projects we maintain editorial control: ultimately the decisions are ours to make - not just me as a director, but NFB as an institution and certainly the producers play an important role.

The same goes for other co-creators: the doctors in the Change for Change project at St. Michael's Hospital remained doctors in our process, I did not tell them how to administer medication. Still, that doesn't mean that we weren't learning and informing each other about our practices - respecting each other's expertise was part of the co-creation model. So the fact that I brought in my expertise in journalism and documentary and understanding in which ways a critical position can enhance a conversation - that became part of the game, too, though that was not something that I thought of when we entered the co-creative relationship, if that makes sense for you.

MR: It more than makes sense, and though it is certainly not the end point of the discussion on documentary co-creation, it's a brilliant point to end on.

NOTES

1 MicroSkills is a non-profit, charitable organization in the Greater Toronto Area supporting youth, women, unemployed, racial minorities, immigrants and newcomers to Toronto, as well as other community members of Toronto who address them. MicroSkills aims to develop programmes and workshops that allow their clients to participate in Canadian society most fully, to achieve self-determination and to attain economic, social and political equality. For more information see http://www.microskills.ca/. Accessed 31 October 2016.

2 The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council is the national granting agency for social sciences and humanities.

3 Kat Ozek here refers to Young Parents No Fixed Address where she was working together with young women who were pregnant or parenting and had experience with homelessness.