



**YOUR DAY IS MY NIGHT**  
你的白天是我的黑夜

A FILM BY LYNNE SACHS

# YOUR DAY IS MY NIGHT

A film by LYNNE SACHS

Featuring YI CHUN CAO, LINDA Y.H. CHAN,  
CHUNG QING CHE, ELLEN HO, YUN XIU HUANG,  
SHEUT HING LEE, KAM YIN TSUI  
and VERAALBA SANTA

Co-producer and Editor SEAN HANLEY

Music STEPHEN VITIELLO

Co-writer ROJO ROBLES

Cinematography SEAN HANLEY and ETHAN MASS

Translators JENIFER LEE and CATHERINE NG

Additional Editing BRYAN CHANG

Production Assistance MADELINE YOUNGBERG

Sound Recording AMANDA KATZ and JEFF SISSON

Sound Mix DAMIAN VOLPE

Booklet and cover design ADRIAN CURRY

65 minutes – color – stereo sound – 2013

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# ON THE MAKING OF YOUR DAY IS MY NIGHT

I've spent most of my life as an artist thinking about how to convey my observations of the world around me in the visual and aural language of film. I experiment with my perception of reality by embracing an associative, non-literal approach to images, and it is through this artistic exploration that I grapple with the natural, social, cultural and political phenomena that I witness through the lens of my camera.

I think of the bed as an extension of the earth and I've been keen on using a bed as a starting point for a film project for a long time. For most of us, we sleep on the same mattress every night; our beds take on the shape of our bodies, like a fossil where we leave our mark for posterity. An animal that borrows its home from another species is called an *inquiline*, and in Spanish *inquilina* is the word for a renter. During the Revolutionary War, George Washington slept in many borrowed beds and now, hundreds of years later, his brief presence is celebrated from one New England town to the next: 'George Washington Slept Here' has a kind of strange signification and prestige. But for transients, people who use hotels, and the homeless a



Lynne Sachs and Kam Yin Tsui on location in Chinatown

bed is no more than a temporary place to sleep. Nineteenth Century photographer Jacob Riis documented numerous examples of tenement life, and it is through his lens that I was able to begin understanding what it means to live in an urban shift bed house. In Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, he exposed to the rest of America the poor, immigrant experience he witnessed in downtown New York City. Decades later, conceptual artist and sculptor Félix González-Torres photographed a series of empty, unmade beds to commemorate the life and death of his partner, as if the very sheets that remained could remind him and us of the body and the man he had loved.

Recently, after 25 years of making experimental documentaries, I learned something that turned all my ideas about filmmaking upside down. While working on *Your Day is My Night*, I came to see that every time I asked a person to talk in front of my camera, they were performing for me rather than revealing something completely honest about their lives. The very process of recording guaranteed that some aspect of the project would be artificial. I had to think of a way to change that, so I decided to invite them to work with me to make the film, to become my collaborators. This process began in 2011 and it's changed the way I make movies. This change in my process of filmmaking has taken me even deeper into a new type of collaborative filmmaking, one that not

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only explores the experiences of my subjects, but also invites them to participate in the construction of a film about their lives.

We presented *Your Day is My Night* as a live film performance at five different arts venues in New York City and the completed film premiered at the Documentary Fortnight at the Museum of Modern Art in 2013.

—Lynne Sachs



Yun Xiu Huang, Sean Hanley and Lynne

## REVIEWS



## SIGHT & SOUND

Best Films of 2013 List

by Sukhdev Sandhu

New York's Chinatown, a place as much spectral as real, flickers and flares into life in this singular hybrid of documentary, performance piece and cine-monologue. Seven working-class, immigrant residents of a shift-bed apartment play versions of themselves, recalling violent upheavals, long journeys and endless yearnings. Beautifully scored by Stephen Vitiello, marrying subtle comedy to its dominant mood of dreamy disorientation, and achieving a rare intimacy, it's one of the most mysterious and magical evocations of the migrant city in many a year.

# SAN DIEGO ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL

Winner, Best Documentary Feature 2013

by Christina Ree

"Moon... working / sun... sleep." Shift beds, which exist in China and below-the-radar in the U.S., provide a place to sleep by the hour, largely for the working poor far from home. In the aptly titled *Your Day Is My Night*, experimental filmmaker Lynne Sachs probes the informal family formed within the tight quarters of one such shift bed apartment in the heart of New York Chinatown.

Beautifully blending anecdotes, evocative audio textures, and an ensemble of elderly immigrant performers/participants, *Your Day Is My Night* is sumptuous and exploratory, bringing us a Chinatown we have never seen before in film. Working with interviews and non-actors, some of whom are shift bed residents themselves, Sachs uses a dedicated mix of storytelling modes, including stage performances and poetry, blended in with Chinese wedding singing and line dances. Where the film truly flowers is in its many moments of casual intimacy – chopping a watermelon, combing hair, massaging a friend's shoulders – and the luxury of hearing remarkable stories that emerge from old folks: snakeheads, family violence under Chairman Mao, a nightclub named after Chinese wage pay, mattresses for the poor, a mother's imprint in a bed.

Sachs' camera roams through a Chinatown that goes above and below ground level; vivid scenes in weddings, mahjong parlors, choked bedrooms, and cramped kitchens trace an urban network that feels as palpable, dense, and human as the Internet can often feel, with feared borders and struggle deep in the pores.



## THE NATION

by Stuart Klawans

February in New York City brings the Documentary Fortnight program at the Museum of Modern Art, which this year included the world premiere of a remarkable project titled *Your Day Is My Night* by Lynne Sachs. In January 2011, Sachs began working with middle-aged and elderly residents of shift-bed apartments in New York's Chinatown; immigrants are jammed into closet-like shared rooms, and the beds are in use around the clock. Sachs gained the confidence of these people, heard their stories, assisted as they worked up monologues about their pasts and helped shape the results into a film, which features performances by several of the subjects themselves. Made with collaborators including cinematographer Sean Hanley and composer Stephen Vitiello, it's a strikingly handsome, meditative work: a mixture of reportage, dreams, memories and playacting, which immerses you in an entire world that you might unknowingly pass on the corner of Hester Street.



## FILM THREAT

by David Finkelstein

*Your Day is My Night* is a fascinating and innovative portrait of Chinese immigrant life in New York by Lynne Sachs. Sachs made the film through a lengthy series of workshops with Chinatown residents who became the film's authors and performers. Most of the actors are retired people who have had some experience performing in amateur dance and theater productions, so they are comfortable as performers, without being overly polished. Only one makes his living as a performer: the wedding and nightclub singer Yun Xiu Huang, whose charismatic screen presence is an engaging part of the film. The film is framed around the common immigrant experience of living in "shift bed houses," crowded apartments where the beds are shared in shifts between those with daytime and nighttime jobs.

The film employs a variety of story-telling modes to convey the immigrant experience: scripted monologues, improvised scenes, and verité footage. The actors have all either lived in shift bed houses, or

are familiar with them, so the monologues combine autobiography with biography. There is also one completely fictional element in the film: the character of a Puerto Rican girl who comes to stay in the house, which is used to dramatize the characters' relationship with non-Chinese. This untraditional approach to documentary filmmaking, freely mixing the spontaneous and the staged, proves to be an innovative way to use multiple strategies for telling a story about the subjective experiences of immigrants, which would be hard to convey through conventional documentary techniques. In a similarly hybrid way, Sachs deftly blends digital footage with sequences shot on film. The staged scenes have lush lighting and lovely cinematography by Sean Hanley and Ethan Mass, making *Your*

*Day is My Night* a more visually sumptuous experience than most documentaries.

THIS UNTRADITIONAL APPROACH TO DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING FREELY MIXES THE SPONTANEOUS AND THE STAGED.

We see some of the pleasant parts of communal living, such as sharing cake on a holiday in the kitchen. The scenes of food preparation show that one of the great aspects of New York Chinese culture is that every meal is carefully prepared from fresh ingredients, as opposed to the fast food options eaten by many other immigrants as well as middle class New Yorkers. Some scenes depict

frankly the friction that can develop when roommates not only share a tiny room, but a bed as well. One of the film's most visually lavish and fun sequences is the elaborate Chinese wedding where Mr. Huang is singing, with its gaudy ballroom decorations, perfect groom and bride, and dancing girls who look like they popped out of a Chinese music video. But the film also depicts less glamorous occupations, such as working as a dishwasher in the crowded kitchen of a restaurant.

All of the monologues reference beds or sleeping in some way, and this theme organizes the material around the search for refuge from the hardships of life, whether it is grinding poverty in the US, or atrocities which the characters endured as young people during the Cultural Revolution in China, or the wrenching separations caused by war and by immigration itself. It is striking how beds become poetic metaphors with so much resonance, as in the anecdote a woman tells about sharing her bed with her grandmother until her grandmother dies when the girl is 14. Afterwards, she has the whole mattress to herself, but she still only sleeps on "her side," as if to honor the importance that her grandmother still holds in her heart.

Between the monologues, a good part of the film is given over to montage sequences depicting the texture of Chinatown life. These beautifully shot and edited sequences combine exteriors which focus on arresting details of the street such as elevated subway tracks in the rain or old pamphlets affixed to lampposts, with interior shots of the characters in their restless attempts to sleep in crowded conditions, or their morning routines of Tai Chi. The soundtrack, too, is a carefully composed collage of ambient sounds. Stephen Vitiello's haunting score of piano, guitar and electronica creates an atmosphere of suspended contemplation which greatly adds to the film's power. These sequences are highly effective at conveying the flavor of everyday life for the characters.

The characters in this film are poor and endure multiple hardships, but their culture and their lives also provide them with many pleasures and a supportive community. The language barrier keeps many of them locked inside Chinatown, but they still interact with non Chinese New Yorkers at key points. The obvious difficulties of managing a crowded, small apartment where people sleep in shifts only highlight the social resourcefulness and sophistication of the Chinese culture which makes it a workable, if not ideal situation. *Your Day is My Night* invents a style of filmmaking in which the storytelling skills of the subjects are tapped to make them into effective collaborators in a sophisticated film which creates a vivid sense of the inner lives of immigrants.

# INTERVIEW



Catherine Ng and Lynne

## THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Lynne Sachs in conversation with Karen Rester

When the experimental filmmaker Lynne Sachs taught avant-garde filmmaking at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1992, few if any in our class had ever heard of the essayist Chris Marker, with whom she later collaborated on *Three Cheers for the Whale*, or Trinh T. Minh-ha, whose approach to filmmaking strongly influenced her own. In an interview we did back then, Sachs talked about Trinh's ability to maintain a certain distance in her work in order to create a non-hierarchical space in which events unfold. At the same time Sachs was adamant about being "participatory" and, for her first long format film *Sermons and Sacred Pictures: The Life and Work of Reverend L.O. Taylor* (1989), "interacting with the people that I was talking to in a very physical way."

Sachs, who is also known for incorporating poetry, collage, and painting as well as dramatic performance in her films, continued to explore and develop this approach over the course of 25 works, including her latest, *Your Day is My Night* (2013), a hybrid documentary about residents in shift-bed apartments, a virtually unknown phenomenon of New York's Chinatown. Like her previous films *The Last Happy Day*, a portrait of her distant cousin who survived the Holocaust, and *Wind in Our Hair*, a loose adaptation of a Julio Cortázar story, the film weaves in fiction elements—some are jarring, others are so seamless they're hard to pinpoint.

The film is especially notable for the unexpectedly personal monologues the residents of this insular community deliver, which are based upon her interviews with them. How an outsider got a group used to staying out of the public eye to open up is largely the subject of our conversation.

**Karen Rester (Rail): Let's start off with the Uncle Bob story that launched you on this project.**

**Sachs:** So I have a 93-year old distant relative named Uncle Bob. He told me that in 1960 two planes crashed over New York. One went down over Staten Island and the other one crashed onto Flatbush Avenue. I said, "That's horrible! I'm sure all the people on the plane died, but what about the people on the ground?" He said, "Well, Lynne, there were so many hotbed houses in that area, who knows?" So, of course you hear the expression "hotbed house" and you think, "Hmm, that seems pretty racy!"

Turns out a hotbed house is where workers, and, in this case, people who worked on the docks in Brooklyn, shared beds. One person was on the night shift, one person was on the day shift, and that really sparked my imagination as a platform or a location. Then I discovered that these shift-bed houses—which is another name for them—still exist in Chinatown today.

That's what led me to the Lin Sing Association, where I met the

group of older Chinese immigrants who would collaborate with me on the film.

**Rail: And, as you told me, you asked some of the performers in the film this one great question while auditioning, about beds, that led to some of the most intimate stories in your film.**

**Sachs:** It wasn't a clever question at all. It was just what I needed to ask: Can you tell me anything interesting that ever happened to you in a bed? I thought they would tell me something like, "When I first came to the United States I lived in a room with eight people. Let me tell you, it was hard." Instead, they were the ones who opened it up to stories that were very personal, very revealing of the larger story of Chinese history and Chinese immigration. It went from one Chinese man telling me about living on a mattress in a closet in Chinatown for three months to another woman talking about lying in bed and dreaming about the father she never really knew. That question sparked their imagination.

That's a key to documentary for me. When you can work with the people in your film and get them to harness their own imagination.

**Rail: I think I mentioned I've been recording interviews with some Chinese relatives in the Mississippi Delta, and even being a member of the community it's not easy getting them to open up. So when I saw your film the first thing that came to mind was, how in the world did a non-Mandarin speaking white woman get them to reveal some of their most intimate details on camera?**

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**Sachs:** [Laughs.] I think one of the keys to working in reality and working with people is allowing the extraordinary to appear familiar rather than exotic. If you immediately respond, "Oh that is so heavy!" then you've introduced a level of intimidation. So if someone was telling me how during the Cultural Revolution his father was beaten to death by a group of farmers, I'd say, how did you feel about that as a child? If you didn't have any food what did you eat? I tried not to make these issues, which have this mythic horror, seem that big, because then it becomes scary to talk about them. So I'd guide them to revisit these moments in the most vivid way possible, not as a symbolic event in the history of China.

**Rail:** **This isn't your first film about beds. You made *Transient Box* in the early '90s. I understand you, camera in hand, asked your now-husband, Mark, whom you'd only known for a few weeks, to accompany you to a motel room and remove his clothes?**

**Sachs:** [Laughs.] I wanted to film the marks a man leaves on the bed and in the room, but I wanted him to remain invisible. All the detritus that people want to erase, the pieces of yourself that you leave behind, are interesting to me.

Of course in your own bed you can leave as much as you want and people aren't going to sweep it away. That's what intrigued me about these shift-beds. People aren't able to leave an imprint of themselves and that became very unsettling to me.

**Rail:** **The British artist Tracey Emin once did a controversial installation called *My Bed*. She took her bed, which she'd been sleeping in when she was depressed, and put it in the Tate. It was blood-stained and there were condoms around it.**

**Sachs:** That's exactly what would never happen in a shift-bed apartment. You wouldn't leave that detritus because that's saying, "This is mine." By erasing your presence you're inviting another person to establish theirs.

**Rail:** **How did you see Chinatown before and after the making of this film?**

**Sachs:** Before I made the film, Chinatown was a place to feel out of place. A place in New York where you had the sense you were in another country. I'm really interested in this French word *dépaysé*, to be out of your country. It also means to be disoriented. I like the idea that when you go into another community you have this sensation of being an outsider. And for most people so much of it is about gratification. You feed your eyes. You feed your mouth.

Then I started making the film and Chinatown became a neighborhood.

It's not just a destination for outsiders to go and experience the pleasure of another culture. It's a place where people have very intricate relationships, and they work, and they sleep. They don't want to leave it because it's so supportive. I didn't know any of that, for sure, and I didn't know what happened above the ground level. For me, Chinatown was all on the first floor—

**Rail:** **Shops.**

**Sachs:** Exactly. It's almost as if I never looked up. Now I look up and I can imagine looking in. And I have friends to visit.

**Rail:** **I'm half-Chinese and Chinatown is a foreign place to me, though seeing your film helped change that. I think movies have**



On set with Yun Xiu Huang and Veraalba Santa

**trained me to think of Chinatown as background or an exotic setting where the protagonist chases the bad guy through a maze of crowded streets.**

**Sachs:** You never know how a film will draw open curtains on various worlds for audiences. There's the New York City audience that sometimes responds, "Oh, you've forever changed the way I walk into Chinatown." And maybe not just Chinatown, but any place where you feel you are benefitting from its differentness. Then there's the audience made up of young Chinese immigrants who say the film harkens back to a time in Chinese life that was closer to their grandparents.

**Rail: At least two of your performers have lived in New York since the, 60s. They'd never been to the Metropolitan Museum of Art until you took them there. What inspired you to do that?**

**Sachs:** One of the things I tried to do was take them out of their comfort zone. I think this is what creates unpredictable, almost theatrical situations. We went to the Met to see two things. The first was an exhibit called *The Emperor's Private Paradise: Treasures from the Forbidden City*. It was a simulation of a grand palace in China in which the emperor created different seasons in different rooms. So if it was winter outside and he wanted to be in spring time, he would go to the Spring Room. I just love that idea because it's the antithesis of living in a shift-bed house, where you have such little control over your environment. Then I took them to the 20th century wing to see Andy Warhol's floor-to-ceiling portrait of Mao Tse Tung. I actually wanted to trigger something, I wanted to rock everyone's world. I thought, big things are going to happen! We get there and they really couldn't have cared less.

**Rail: [Laughs.] Let's talk about the wall you hit during the editing process. The film suffered from a dramatic storyline you couldn't make work. People didn't like it, you were devastated, and you didn't know what to do.**

**Sachs:** My husband Mark actually said to me, "Stop sitting in front of your computer editing, editing, editing, and not going anywhere—it's getting worse!" [Laughs.] Then, out of the blue, someone sent me an email about an abandoned hospital in Greenpoint looking for artists to put on performances. So I called everybody up and said, "Let's do our show live, I'll bring two beds." We did it again in the Chinatown public library. Then at University Settlement, a community center in the Lower East Side. I grew to love the performance more and more, and saw it as a way to lay bare the structure of the film.

**Rail: Did that help you finish it?**

**Sachs:** Enormously. Especially with the transitions. Once you listen to these really intense monologues you can't just move onto something else that quickly. Where do I take the viewer afterwards? I realized I could integrate scenes we recorded from the performances as transitional places where people could meditate on what they heard.

**Rail: By the way, I misinterpreted your title. I realize now it's dialogue between two people sharing a shift-bed. One has the day shift, the other has the night shift. How did you come up with it?**

**Sachs:** I knew the film was called *Your Day is My Night* before I even started shooting. It's a little bit of a tribute to Truffaut's *Day for Night* and also, the history of narrative filmmaking where if you needed day but were shooting at night you just created it. It's sort of like the Forbidden City where the emperor had so much power that he could create seasons. The hegemony of everything. I've always resisted that in my filmmaking. I didn't want to be a director per se; I wanted to be a filmmaker who didn't work in such hierarchical situations.



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