

BY DAVID WALKER

PICTURE STORY

A FILM DOCUMENTING THE EMOTIONAL STRESS OF CHRONIC VIOLENCE



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Photographer Jon Lowenstein breaks the conventions of documentary narrative with his impressionistic video about how generations of Chicago's South Side residents experience the violence all around them. By David Walker

JON LOWENSTEIN'S SHORT FILM ABOUT THE IMPACT of violence on a cross section of residents on Chicago's South Side breaks documentary convention by combining audio and video that don't literally correspond. But the first-person stories and Lowenstein's impressionistic video clips correspond on an emotional and experiential level, resulting in a film that is more than the sum of its parts.

"I wanted to make a film that shows the story [as] a layered experience of memory, and time, and the impact of a certain moment" in each subject's life, explains Lowenstein, who made the film on commission from *The New Yorker*. "I wanted to give the feeling of what it was like to be in [each subject's] world. This was kind of like an experiment."

The film, called "A Violent Thread," appeared on

The New Yorker's Photo Booth blog on August 30. "It really is an art piece that touches on a big social issue," says *The New Yorker's* Elissa Curtis, who commissioned the project and was its supervising editor. "I wanted it to carry the lyricism and artfulness of [Lowenstein's] work."

Lowenstein pitched the project last February, not long after the murder of Hadiya Pendleton, a Chicago honor student shot to death just days after performing at President Barack Obama's second inauguration. "The idea was to make something topical and timely" for *The New Yorker*, Lowenstein says.

He has been documenting Chicago's South Side neighborhood for more than a decade, exploring the underlying causes of its poverty and violence. For the past several years, he has been experimenting



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A screen still from "A Violent Thread," Jon Lowenstein's short, experimental film about the impact of violence on Chicago's poorest communities. Lowenstein shoots video to capture the feeling of places and situations, rather than to explain them.

Online News Digest

The following are excerpted from breaking news stories recently posted on PDNOnline and PDNPulse. To read the complete stories and to find more news, check out www.pdnonline.com/pdn/News.shtml.



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"Family Reunion," from Carrie Mae Weems's series "Family Pictures and Stories, 1978-84."

Photographer Carrie Mae Weems Wins MacArthur Foundation 'Genius' Grant

Weems, a photographer and video maker who explores the roles of women and both historical and popular depictions of African-Americans, was one of 24 creative people named a 2013 MacArthur Fellow. The fellowship comes with a stipend of \$625,000, paid out in installments over five years. <http://bit.ly/15te4Th>

In TwitPic Copyright Claim, Daniel Morel Seeks \$13.2 Million from AFP, Getty

The photographer is seeking as much as \$13.2 million from Agence France-Presse and Getty Images at a trial to determine damages for copyright infringement of his exclusive images of the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Earlier this year, a court found AFP liable for the infringements. <http://bit.ly/16zJBCc>

Harper's Magazine Publisher Takes Stand for Paid Content

Publisher John R. MacArthur wrote a letter for the October issue explaining the magazine's policy not to publish journalism for free on the Web, and the decision not to post a photo essay for which a photographer risked life and limb, and the magazine paid \$25,000. <http://bit.ly/19ZxJeR>

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Lowenstein searched his video archive for clips that reinforced the themes and emotions of the first-person audio stories he recorded for “A Violent Thread.” Clockwise from top: A child drawn to a window by activity on the street; a nighttime vigil against violence; a fireman hoses blood from a sidewalk at a crime scene.

with audio and video as a means of finding new ways to tell the story, and reach new audiences. The work has been largely supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship that he won in 2011.

Lowenstein was shooting a lot of video footage with intent to make a feature-length film called *Ring of Hope*, about youth in the neighborhood, but he wasn’t shooting with a script in mind, the way most filmmakers do. “I just shoot,” he says, describing his style as “raw and rough.”

“The way I photograph, that’s the way I shoot video. I try to get the feeling of the place,” he says.

Meanwhile, he had begun recording people in his neighborhood telling stories about how they experienced violence. The impetus for that was an 87-year-old neighbor whose husband was killed in 1972. “Her kids were telling her she became more bigoted after the murder. It was changing who she was,” Lowenstein says. And yet the woman has stayed in the neighborhood because she loves it. “That made

an impression on me,” he adds.

Lowenstein approached *The New Yorker* about his idea to produce a feature film. Curtis says the magazine is venturing into video “slowly but surely,” starting with three- to five-minute pieces about big issues such as gun control and immigration. A story about the violence in Chicago fit the bill, and Lowenstein “has been living with [the story] for so long,” Curtis says.

The brief called for a five-minute stand-alone film that Lowenstein might also be able to use as a trailer for his planned feature-length film. But rather than focus specifically on youth, *The New Yorker* wanted the video to reflect diversity in age, gender and types of personal experience.



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Lowenstein ended up including six stories. “They weren’t gang bangers, they were just people,” he says. One was an elderly woman who refused to succumb to fear, and stands up to gang members who try to intimidate her and her neighbors; another was a young boy who witnessed a shooting; a third subject was a woman who feels imprisoned by her fear of walking the streets.

Lowenstein cut the audio first, with the help of his assistant and editor, Philipp Batta. Editors at *The New Yorker* re-arranged the order of the stories so the piece ended on a more uplifting note, but otherwise made little change to the audio, Curtis says.

Then Lowenstein started looking through his archive for video clips that flowed together with the audio in meaningful ways. “There’s a lot of pressure in photojournalism to tell the story in a narrative flow, and to have each picture explain something. I was trying to get away from the explanatory, and make it interpretive,” he says, adding, “I knew the visual style I wanted, I just didn’t know what the pieces would be.”

To find the clips, Lowenstein and Batta categorized his video archive by 20 or so different themes, such as landscapes, crime scenes, memorials and driving scenes. Then they began pairing selected clips with the audio. “The magic is in the editing,” Lowenstein says. “I

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spent a lot of time pointing to what I wanted to use.”

The first cut took about five days to complete. The final cut took several more months of back-and-forth. “It definitely went through quite a few versions,” says Curtis. “We worked on the pacing, the arc, the flow of the piece. We worked it into something that worked for our audience, and that worked for him.” (*The New Yorker* worked with its own video editors, Kristina Budelis and Sky Dylan-Robbins.) By the end, it was nearly eight minutes long, because a five-minute version felt too rushed. “We wanted it to breathe,” Curtis explains.

Lowenstein has now abandoned his ambitious plans to make a feature film—“I’m not ready to do a feature film like that,” he says—and instead plans to produce a series of five or six video vignettes similar to “A Violent Thread.” He recently won a grant from a Chicago foundation to produce the next video, about how youth on the South Side search for power and identity. Lowenstein says he’ll work with some of his former photography students from the neighborhood to shoot the video.

Meanwhile, he’s looking for funding for additional videos, and trying to find a publisher to make a book of his South Side project. “I made a ton of progress on the project” because of the support from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, he says. “I’d love to get a publisher so I can send [a book] to them.”