





The view from here:  
a young Marina Lutz, in one  
of countless photographs  
taken by her father

When Marina Lutz, then aged 37, lost her mother to dementia 10 years after losing her father, she began the slow process of going through their storage. There she found box after box of reel-to-reel audio tape, Super-8 films and more than 10,000 photographs. They were all of her, each one taken or shot by her father, Abbot Lutz, microscopically documenting the first 16 years of her life through the prism of his lens. There were pictures of her on the lavatory, pictures of her naked as a pre-verbal child, some in which her hand was innocently holding her genitals; pictures of her in her underwear as a pubescent girl and footage of her asleep with her teddies, tossing and turning while having a dream.

There was audio tape of her father coaxing her to sing, reprimanding her for her childish tears at not being able to live up to the moment; audio of when she was told why Father Christmas had decided she was a bad girl undeserving of a doll; and footage of his interrogation of her first dance. There were shots of her backside bending over loo seats, pants round her ankles, and shots of her, years later, bending over in cotton underwear, looking cross at once again being pursued by the camera. For Lutz, the archive – “just a bunch of boxes full of crap until I turned it into a historical document” – provided a window on the past. She came to regard the material as “evidence” – evidence of her father’s voyeurism, of his latent paedophilia, of his bullying, coercive nature, of his pathological narcissism; of her objectification; emotional abuse and stolen childhood. “In not one of those 10,000 photographs am I smiling and the only time my parents touch me is to hold my hand in a restraining way, as if to stop me running away.”

Over 10 years, Lutz watched every movie, listened to every tape, looked at every photograph. She numbered each film and logged every scene. She listened to every audio tape and typed out every word as a script. It became her own obsession.

In an attempt to deal with the material, she went into therapy and in 2005, three years after being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, Lutz cut together some of the film to show her therapist as a way of expressing her feelings of violation. Three years later, she worked on the material again, editing it down to an 18-minute film that she called *The Marina Experiment*, in which she exclusively uses her father’s footage and audio to create “art” of her own.

It is both an exercise in reclaiming the material and exposing herself as the recipient – she hates the word “victim” – of her father’s predatory desires: “Now I am chronicling his view of me through my own digital video microscope and you can watch me watch my father watch me,” she explains.

Abbot Lutz, a Russian Jewish emigré who grew up in the Bronx, had at various stages of his life been a professional photographer and collector. His images are proficient. *The Marina Experiment* uses the most dubious footage and pictures together with his voiceover in a way that presents the case against him. It is a brilliant piece of film-making from somebody who had absolutely no knowledge of how to do it: “I did it instinctively,” Lutz says.



“”

**In not one of those  
10,000 photographs  
am I smiling. And  
when he touches me  
it is to restrain**

Prompted by friends, in 2009 she sent it to Super Shorts, a small film festival in London, where it picked up Best Documentary. It has since won nine awards at film festivals around the world and been licensed by the Documentary Channel in the US, playing twice a month. Lutz is a regular speaker at festivals and uni-

versities and is currently attempting to raise money for *The Marina Experiment Part II* – which she loosely thinks of as “The Trial” – eventually to be followed by *Part III* – “The Verdict”. In the short trailer she has made to raise funds for *Part II*, the narrative restraint of *Part I* is replaced by retribution. “You liked watching me and it made me uncomfortable,” she says, addressing the dead Lutz: “Now I’m turning the tables; I am going to upstage you, give you the cold shoulder, the thumbs-down. I wanted to find a reason to like you, but in every box there was another clincher.”

*The Marina Experiment* has, since its release, gathered a word-of-mouth cult following. The critic Thierry Méranger, writing in the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, was struck by the similarities to Yoko Ono’s famous documentary, *Rape*. “Eighteen extraordinary and exciting



**Striking a post: Abbot Lutz photographing a model. He had at one time worked as a professional photographer**

minutes,” he wrote of *The Experiment*, calling it, “the most beautiful discovery... If no individual document is in itself proof of guilt, the accumulation and layering of images and sounds leave no doubts... Rarely has found footage revealed so many intimate issues.” Carol A Mandel, dean of the division of libraries at New York University, delivered an unequivocal verdict: “Brilliantly intense and the message is penetrating.” The film has been projected on to the side of a building in Paris and used as an installation in the window of a New York gallery.

**IN THE FLESH**, Lutz looks younger than her years, with glossy hair and expensive clothes. She is an assistant to a New York casting agent – to which she brings the same talent for organisation that proved vital for structuring the archive. She says that for the first time in her life she is finding artistic expression – in fact, any expression at all.

She was an only child and there had been no siblings to verify her unhappiness at home. Lutz had grown up damaged, with feelings of suffocation and of being unloved. She fled the family apartment on the Upper East Side in 1977, aged

## “ How guilty was Abbot Lutz? Or are his images simply his own 16-year artistic project?”

16, and never looked back. While she maintained a fractured relationship with her Italian mother, a disciple of Mussolini, she never spoke to her father again. Ironically, for all his videoing and photographing – an aspect of her childhood that, bizarrely, she cannot remember – she says that her father, a photographer during the war, “didn’t see me”.

As an adult, she hated sex, although she had copious amounts as a “groupie”, numbed with drink and drugs; took heroin for 10 years; became a pot dealer; briefly worked in a strip bar; and was unable to sustain even one healthy relationship with a man. Now she knows why: “What he did was obliterate my personality,” she says today, aged 52: “I grew up and for the longest time I had no idea who I was. I wasn’t present in my own life. I really struggled with that for many years.” Her mother, she thinks, “was suffering from a very dark depression. I don’t honestly know if my mother was aware or paying attention. It has been pointed out to me that surely it is a mother’s job to protect the child from the father in that situation.”

The damage, not just of the past, but of so many years spent living with the “evidence” – runs deep. There is one box she still can’t bring herself to go through and the rest of it has to be hidden by a curtain in her apartment as she can’t bear seeing it every day: “At one point I thought my relationship to my archive is very similar to the relationship with my father – I am continuing to go after something that makes me feel terrible.”

By way of an example, she talks through various crushing episodes from her childhood (recalled from viewing the archive, not from memory) such as when her mother scrawled “No Good!” over a letter in which she is identified as being gifted at school. “Why? Why did she write that?” On another occasion, she says: “I was punished a lot for not singing when he wanted me to sing – you see it on the tapes. But how bad could I have been?”

**SUFFERING, FAMOUSLY**, has long produced good art. In 2007, for example, the French artist Sophie Calle’s critically acclaimed *Take Care of Yourself* was made after she was dumped by a boyfriend electronically, ending with the words “Take care of yourself.” Calle – whom Lutz greatly admires – showed the email to 107 female professionals, photographed them reading it and then asked them to analyse it. First it was therapy, she admitted, then art took over: “After one month, I felt better. There was no suffering. It worked. The project had replaced the man.”

“I think [a result of] my continued pursuit of this project is that I have found my voice,” explains Lutz. “I have found a way to express myself that is effective and I gain great satisfaction from, although it is very painful. I think, too, that’s also part of the story that people like – because it is like making lemonade out of lemons. It’s the damage that enables the creativity – I think that it’s because there is so much power in the pain that it translates.”

In the trailer for *Part II*, very much a work in progress, Lutz goes on to say to her father: “You made a mistake when it came to leaving behind 16 years of evidence. You picked the wrong girl.”



**Larry Rivers in his New York studio in 1958. For four years he filmed his daughters naked, while asking them about their sexuality**

*The Marina Experiment* raises many complex issues, not least the sensitivity and controversy of using children in art. In 1990 the FBI raided Jock Sturges's San Francisco studio as part of an investigation into child pornography: his work featured adolescent and pre-adolescent girls in naturist communities (all photographed with their parents' consent) as well as a famous long-term collaboration with Misty Dawn, whom he photographed from a young child until her 20s. A grand jury did not indict him. Sally Mann's 1992 work *Immediate Family* featured 65 black-and-white photographs of her three children, all under the age of 10, dressed and undressed. Opinion was largely with her because her children participated happily in her work and she ceased to photograph them once they reached puberty. In 2001, police twice raided the Saatchi Gallery after the *News of The World* called a photograph taken by the British artist Tierney Gearon of her two naked children at the beach, wearing identical masks, "a revolting exhibition of perversion under the guise of art". The photograph was not seized, and Saatchi did not remove the image. As Laura Cumming, art critic of this newspaper, explains: "The scene was comical – one cartoon face shared between two, and a light skit on Botticelli's *Venus*, too." The same year, *Time* named Sally Mann America's best photographer.

The idea of complicity is a vexed one when you consider that in the eyes of the law, minors cannot express consent. As it stands, there is no legal definition of what image is or isn't innocent. A jury must decide, based on "current recognised standards of propriety". As Cumming says: "Who can define 'current recognised standards of propriety'?" The Crown Prosecution Service can only guess what a jury might think."

Lutz's work resonates in other areas, too. The retrospective interpretation of images has never been more pertinent than in the current climate of social networking, which requires and invites an almost compulsive photographic capturing of the self. There is a disconnection caused by viewing your own life through the lens of a camera phone, outsourcing memories to technology such as webcams and Twitter, logging experiences in ways that have no lasting power beyond the immediate.

For Lutz, this disconnection is greater because the images of her are not her own. Memories of her childhood have become entirely shaped by what her father saw and recorded: "My memories are with the archive," she says, "because I have been living with it for so long and going through it for so long. I don't really have those other memories."

The fundamental question remains: how guilty was Abbot Lutz? Was he a latent paedophile, now exposed by his own Facebook-style documentation? Or are his images simply a 16-year-long artistic project – rather like Sturges's project with his "muse" Misty Dawn – now posthumously distorted, through clever editing, by a daughter looking to find answers and place blame?

Marina Lutz acknowledges that she has no memory of sexual abuse, although states that he spanked her bare bottom "what felt like almost every day" and would massage



“”

**Men seem to see the film as an affront. It makes them feel they have done something they're ashamed of**

her back at night, hands straying uncomfortably down her back. In one of the audio clips Marina Lutz uses to her own end, Abbot Lutz, a collector of books, antiques, postal cancellations and vintage pornography, is addressing a symposium sponsored by the *New Yorker* and we hear the words: "The idea of

this tape is to tell us from beginning to end everything that happened, not for us to know, but for you to know 10 or 20 years from now."

**LAST YEAR, AS** *The Marina Experiment* gathered momentum at film festivals around the world, another story broke in New York which raised the identical question of whether a male artist, in recording his daughter's developing sexuality, was shattering taboos or destroying innocence. Eight years after the death of pioneering proto-pop artist Larry Rivers, his archives were sold by the Larry Rivers Foundation for an undisclosed sum to New York University. The archives contain correspondence and other documents that shed light on his relationships with artists such as Willem de Kooning and Warhol, and poets such as John

**Family snaps:** (top) Tierney Gearon at the Saatchi Gallery with the controversial photograph of her children. Below: Marina out for dinner with her father

Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, with whom he had an affair.

Among the material was a film, *Growing*, in which Rivers filmed both his adolescent daughters, Gwynne and Emma, naked or topless, and interviewed them about their developing breasts. The filming began in 1976 when Gwynne was 11 (exactly the time when Abbot Lutz was conducting his filming). Gwynne Rivers is captured nude in her father's shower and topless between his black satin sheets.

A year later, Emma was involved, too, and twice a year for more than four years the daughters were filmed, naked or partly naked, while Rivers asked questions about their bodies and sexuality. Emma Tamburlini, now 43, has since said the filming contributed to the anorexia she began suffering at 16: "It wrecked a lot of my life," she told the *New York Times*.

She began a fierce campaign to reclaim *Growing* and have it destroyed. Gwynne, initially silent, later admitted she drank to excess in her early 20s, and had difficulty connecting emotionally with men. She has also sought help from a women's therapy group dealing with sexual-abuse issues: "I'm not saying it was all the film of *Growing* but... that careless attitude on my father's part," she has since said.

In a voiceover to *Growing*, Rivers admits that he made it in spite of "the raised eyebrows of society in general... and even my daughters – they kept sort of complaining." Gwynne has since recalled how, like Lutz, she would often be asked to sing a song: "To go from singing a song for your father and then to suddenly be told to take off your shirt... the dread in my stomach when I heard those words drowned out the lovely feelings of performing for my dad."

Horried, Carol A Mandel, NYU's dean of libraries – herself a vocal supporter of Marina Lutz's work – has declared NYU wants no part in *Growing* and has handed the video back to the foundation, where it resides with David Joel, the director. Backed by fellow board members, including the girls' aunt and one of his three sons, Joel refuses to hand the film over to Emma, citing it as important source material for a large Rivers painting made in 1981, and also as art in its own right. Three more sons agree the film should be preserved. Emma Tamburlini has said she has spent years in therapy trying to deal with Rivers's behaviour and, like Lutz, at one point created a work of art of her own to try to cope with the emotional damage.

Lutz was struck by two things about the case. The first: "It made me think if my father was doing it and this famous artist was doing it, I bet you lots of other men were doing it, because the Super-8 camera was developing around this time." This has been confirmed by the talks and lectures she gives: "Female members of the audience come up and literally pin me to a wall," she says. "They ask me, 'How can I help myself?' You are so brave, they say, they tell me they had similar experiences as a child, they tell me their stories, they ask me questions... and it is always women." This was the second element of the Rivers story that struck Lutz.

Rivers's sons, who had been painted naked by him at formative ages, were emotionally unaffected, vouching that there was no sexual overtone or latent pornography in their father's work. Objectors to Lutz's film are, she says,



“**I have found a way to express myself, but it is painful. It's like making lemonade out of lemons**

always men: "I got one email titled 'Jail Time'. 'Shame on you!' it said. 'How could you take these loving photographs that your father took of you and put them together to make him look so terrible?' Men see it as an affront to their manhood or to the male race or something. The only thing I can think is that it makes them

feel they have done something they are ashamed of."

Such criticism of *The Marina Experiment* makes her unsure and uncertain of her feelings. One French filmmaker, who has since become her friend, pointed out that from a technical point of view she was an editor, and that she had, by repeating certain images and sounds, manipulated the footage to present Abbot Lutz in the way she wanted.

"I told him that I can't make up audio tapes," she remembers, "and that I used the repetition because that is how I felt going through the archive. I kept finding the same thing and it kept hurting me and hurting me. It felt right."

"All I can say is that I wasn't present in my own life. I know what I'm doing now and I'm really happy about it – not all the time – but I am making conscious choices now based on who I am today and how I feel at this time and it feels great." ■