

# Weinberg/ Newton Gallery

## A Conversation with Deborah Stratman

Today, we're sharing a conversation with [Deborah Stratman](#). Her experimental documentary film, [The Illinois Parables](#), links the stories of diverse subjects, from indigenous peoples to natural disaster survivors. The common landscape connects these seemingly disparate stories of upheaval, violence, and struggle in order to illuminate the common threads of human endurance in the face of unimaginable difficulties.

Deborah Stratman is a Chicago-based artist and filmmaker interested in landscapes and systems. Much of her work points to the relationships between physical environments and human struggles for power and control that play out on the land. Recent projects have addressed freedom, expansionism, surveillance, sonic warfare, public speech, ghosts, sinkholes, levitation, propagation, raptors, comets, and faith. She has exhibited internationally at venues including Centre Pompidou, Hammer Museum, Mercer Union, MoMA, Witte de With, Whitney Biennial and festivals including Ann Arbor, Berlinale, CPH/DOX, Full Frame, Oberhausen, Rotterdam, Sundance, and Viennale. Stratman is the recipient of Fulbright, Guggenheim and USA Collins fellowships, a Creative Capital grant, and an Alpert Award. She lives in Chicago where she teaches at the University of Illinois.

Conceived of as a tool, [Weight of a World](#) presents artworks that elicit lessons to be learned – and to be taught – from global conflict, local lore, and cultural identity. Presented in partnership with [Facing History and Ourselves](#), [Weight of a World](#) comprises sculptures, paintings, film, and supplementary programming that pivot upon two vast, inextricable categories: history and identity. The works on view recognize the roles of individuals within the long arc of history: how we are formed by our contexts, and how we may impact what comes next.

[Weight of a World](#) is on view at Weinberg/Newton Gallery from July 13 - September 15, 2018.



Still from "The Illinois Parables", 2016. Runtime 60 Min, 16mm or DCP

**Weinberg/Newton Gallery:** This work, *The Illinois Parables* - draws on events that are driven by faith, technology, and exodus. These events are particularly emblematic of the complex history of Illinois.. How did you narrow down to the 11 events featured in this film? What was the selection process like?

**Deborah Stratman:** I was trying to speak about as much as possible with the fewest possible moves. Working towards a maximalist minimalism. I didn't know at the outset that I wanted 11 parables, but I knew 12 was wrong – too many Christian and calendrical

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associations. I settled on 11 because it's a prime number, so irreducible, but also a little unsettled or imbalanced. That destabilization is a central theme in the film – it affords a kind of uncertainty that allows room for thinking. I tried to focus on historical events that were both extremely local, and political in their specificity, but also general or allegorical, able to rhyme with similar events across time. I wanted to avoid the most commonly re-told stories, like the great Chicago fire or ole' Abe, and to avoid too many Chicago-based stories. Otherwise I would have tried to cram Studs Terkel and Harold Washington into the mix. A guiding principle was the idea of "thin places," but rather than exclusively in the Jesuit sense of a place where the border between our world and the spirit world is thin, I was thinking about thin boundaries between sites with a heavy past but seemingly benign present.

**WNG:** Our partner organization, Facing History and Ourselves encourages people to examine history with the context of their identity. Are the events that you selected common regional knowledge? Were the local residents that you were engaging with generally aware/knowledgeable of the events?

**DS:** I think some of the histories might be common knowledge, but many are not. Most everybody knows Enrico Fermi had something to do with the critical mass equation that led to the first nuclear bomb, but maybe not that he was doing his experiments in Hyde Park. Many people will have heard of Fred Hampton and the Black Panthers, but maybe they won't have known how Ed Hanrahan and the States Attorney's office created their own false version of events for the nightly news by building sets in their offices and re-enacting the raid. Probably quite a few people have heard of Nauvoo, but maybe not that Joseph Smith who is a prophet to the Mormons was martyred there. And I think far fewer would know how less than a year after the Mormons had been run out across the Mississippi, which was then the edge of our country, Etienne Cabet and his Icarian followers moved into the freshly vacated village to start their own socialist utopian community. There was one person I met in Macomb who knew the story of the alleged pre-teen 'firestarter' Wanet McNeill. And around Murphysboro, quite a few people knew of the Tri-State Tornado (to this day, the deadliest in US history). There seems to be general familiarity with the Trail of Tears, though I think most people might not have known where specifically the purged Cherokees and other first nations peoples passed through Illinois. Or that more died in our state than in any other during those years of forced exodus. Folks around Alton know about the Piasa Bird legend because they've been repainting that mural for a century or more. But I'm not sure how many know that it's in reference to a mural that Fr. Jacques Marquette and Joliet saw and recorded on their river journeying. And I'd guess most people don't know Michael Heizer produced a land art work in Illinois, or even who he is for that matter.



*Still from "The Illinois Parables", 2016. Runtime 60 Min, 16mm or DCP*

**WNG:** Parables is an interesting term to use- implying that there are lessons to be learned from the past events, and it gives the film theological overtones. The pacing of the film encourages the viewer to have a meditative experience with the depicted scene. How did the

idea of “parables” influence the pacing of the film and the cinematic style?

**DS:** Yes, I used the term ‘parable’ for its embrace of the allegorical, or the archetypal. I’d say my parables are more secular ones, but definitely invested in ethics. I want them to resonate with other histories and places. The pacing and style aren’t directly connected to the concept of parables. This has more to do with making a film that is extremely dense, and needing to provide space for people to ruminate and drift.



*Still from "The Illinois Parables", 2016. Runtime 60 Min, 16mm or DCP*

**WNG:** Can you speak a bit about the use archival footage in the film? How did you decide to use the original footage or to re-enact certain scenes? Was it based on the availability of existing footage?

**DS:** I’ll answer this more broadly by saying that I was interested in what version of events, or modes of presentation, we tend to trust more than others. That’s why the film is so packed with different types of material, archival and otherwise. There are newspaper headlines, paintings, enactments and re-enactments, voiceovers, interviews and archival films. My choice and alternation of these have more to do with a desire to keep shifting the register of evidence, than about access or availability.



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