



COME PARTY WITH US

Stacy Kranitz has spent seven years documenting – and taking an active part in – life in Appalachia, a vast and often misunderstood region of the USA.
By Lucy Davies

Stacy Kranitz by
Marisha Camp

BELOW
Pine Mountain, Kentucky



Every summer, for months at a time, Stacy Kranitz lives out of her car. It's an SUV from which she's removed the back seats, built a bed and installed a fridge; a system perfected over seven years, since she began her enquiry into the people, history and landscape of Appalachia.

'It's easiest to be in constant motion' she says by phone from Ohio, which she flew into the day before, on her way to Kentucky, from where she will begin an eight-week journey around the region. 'It's the best way to work in Appalachia because it's very mountainous. Even if things seem close on a map the journey can take five or six hours.'

When she first began travelling for her work, some 15 years ago, Kranitz had apartments in either Los Angeles or New York. 'But I realised these were getting in the way of a deeper engagement, and I needed to create a life that revolved around making the work, so I got rid of the apartment. I sublet places when I need to, or do artist residencies.'

Time's Instagram Photographer of the Year 2015, Kranitz became interested in Appalachia while working on *From the study of Post-Pubescent Manhood*, a project documenting cathartic violence among male teens. 'I didn't know I was in Appalachia at first but, in talking to people, it became clear that I was somewhere with a unique history and a connection to an idea of rural white poverty. I began exploring, and reading.'

Appalachia stretches through 13 states but is famously indistinct, which encouraged Kranitz to 'create my own map; to feel out what was significant'. She quickly focused on the coal mining region, Appalachia's heartland.

Kranitz has grouped the series into four chapters – *Arrival*, *Exploration*, *Salvation* and *postscript*. They're loosely based on *the Bible*, but also myths concerning frontiersman Daniel Boone who, in 1775, cut a trail through the Appalachian Mountains; the 'Wilderness Road', the main route to the west.

'I wanted a narrative arc,' says Kranitz. 'I was thinking about colonialism; the idea of discovering a place. It seemed that the photojournalist in me is part of that colonial legacy, and there are a lot of problems with that gaze. I am constantly reconciling with that as I work.'

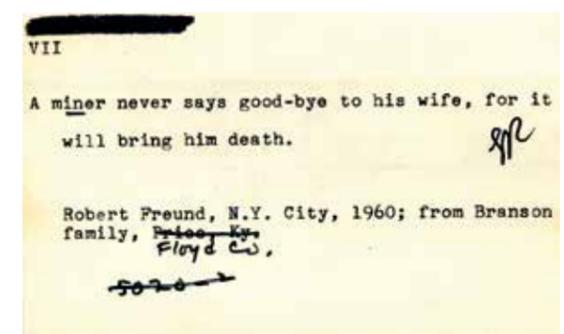
The work's title – *As it was Give(n) to me* – comes from a column in a rural Tennessee newspaper. "As it was give to me" is a local saying, but when I say it I have to say "As it was given", so it was this idea of us both saying the same thing but saying it differently. I'm very conscious with this project that I don't pretend to be Appalachian, so the phrase symbolised that inside/outside relationship that underlies my concern.'

Arrival opens with a typed index card on which an anonymous author works through potential titles for his or her book. 'Everyone finds titling hard, as you have to essentialise your work in some way, and that isn't always – and perhaps

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West Columbia, West Virginia, with Pat, an Appalachian Kranitz befriended during the project



'I WAS THINKING ABOUT COLONIALISM; THE IDEA OF DISCOVERING A PLACE'



FAR LEFT
Welch, West Virginia

NEAR LEFT
Index card from the DK Wilgus Folklore Collection at Berea College Southern Appalachian Archives

BELOW
Jolo, West Virginia



ON THE FRINGES

To see more of Kranitz's work, including her examination of masculinity, *From the Study on Post-Pubescent Manhood* (near right), and her look at World War II reenactors, *The Crevasse of the Reich* (right), go to stacykranitzprojects.com



'A GROUP OF PEOPLE SAW THEIR REPUTATION SPLASHED ALL OVER AS POOR AND BACKWARD'

BELOW
East Bernstadt, Kentucky



shouldn't be – possible. I wanted to open my project by saying “this isn't a solution, or an answer: this is a struggle to understand a way of life.”

These ephemera are central to her presentation. Throughout *Exploration* are cards from a local archive listing Appalachian superstitions about coal mining. She also photocopied historical illustrations: ‘I liked that they were rough copies – representations of a representation of a representation’ – and scanned messages from a column in a Kentucky newspaper where readers say what's on their mind, anonymously. It covers lost loves, grievances and politics, and is incredibly moving.

While at the University of California, Kranitz read fiction (*Christy*, by Catherine Marshall; *The Dollmaker* by Harriette Simpson Arnow, and a series of novels by Scott McClanahan), alongside critical thinking about photography and the representation of poverty.

Appalachia's reputation as a breeding ground for the rural white poor came in 1964 when President Lyndon B Johnson announced initiatives aimed at relieving, curing and preventing poverty.

‘He had to make America care about poverty in order to vote his legislation through,’ explains Kranitz. ‘It was the same time as civil rights, so they were wary of using inner-city poverty, because that was a poverty of colour, so he chose Appalachia, and he asked the media to come to the region and depict that poverty. Appalachia became the

poster child for poverty in America. The whole thing was totally constructed, and left a group of people who had seen their reputation splashed all over the world as poor and backward. They are still deeply affected by that.’

Kranitz knew from a very early age that she wanted to document things. ‘I started out wanting to be a filmmaker but I wasn't so great at directing other people to my ideas. Photography took that out of the equation: its solitariness is much more suited to my personality.’

As a teen, her idol was the German photographer, actress, dancer and film director Leni Riefenstahl, best known for her propaganda films in support of the Nazi party. ‘I was rebelling against my Jewish history,’ says Kranitz. ‘I read her biography, and I thought, “this woman is batshit!”, but she's also brilliant. Even though a lot of the things she was involved in were atrocious, that she couldn't be kept from making her work was fascinating to me. I like my heroes to be deeply flawed.’

In order to integrate herself into the Appalachian communities, Kranitz learned ‘to be myself, but that meant only certain types of people would respond. There's a connection there, something about their wanting to be around a person who's different, so they are interested in me as much as I am in them. Once they open the door, I walk into it and I make sure I keep it open.’

Inevitably she became closer to some than others. ‘There are certain places I

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Beckley, West Virginia



return to over and over. I've even had two local boyfriends over the seven years'. The boyfriends are included in the project, although anonymously. 'I've been talking about how my relationship to Appalachia can only be subjective, but I wanted to say that even as an outsider you can still develop meaningful relationships,' says Kranitz.

Another subject, Pat, has his own chapter – *postscript*. 'I met him through a kid in *Post-Pubescent Manhood*, who suggested I meet his "crazy" cousin. When we got there ... I shook hands and Pat said we were welcome to hang out. He was really drunk, and later he and his best friend Dozer got in a fight.

'It wasn't serious, but they were throwing things at each other and I got really excited by their comic hysteria, so started taking pictures. Pat got really angry, but later apologised. When I brought the pictures, he really liked them. I've often stayed in his spare room, or camped in his yard. He's a central figure, like a hub. People flock to him, he's always helping someone or other out. His trailer acts as a sort of community centre. He's a very special person.'

This summer has been less about photographing than concluding her project. Kranitz intends to spend her time 'pressing flowers, capturing spider webs, collecting dolls'. When she exhibits the work, these original materials are shown alongside.

'I started pressing flowers because there were days when I couldn't be

around people, I couldn't confront them, I couldn't be a photographer. The heat prevented me just sitting in the car, so I had to find something else I could do. I like it because it's very similar to the photographer's impulse to preserve. The dolls came from characters that exist in Appalachian folklore; wise women who sit on their porch and make quilts. These women are really fetishised – people make dolls, have dolls in their homes.'

She's already begun developing her next series too, a project in Louisiana addressing its legacy of plantations and slavery. And she's about to extend a series on Leni Riefenstahl she began with *The Crevasse of the Reich*, in which she impersonated Riefenstahl among set up shots with Nazi reenactors. Chapter two will pick up Riefenstahl's story in Sudan.

So what does she look for in a project? 'I'm interested in this reconciliation between fantasy and reality, how documentary photography fails. I'm also interested in long-form storytelling: what is deep engagement in a place?'

'A lot of documentary photography fails society; it attempts to create a right and a wrong, a black and a white, as in, "I am showing you this injustice we solve". We have to know by now that photography cannot do that. It doesn't mean photography's useless; it just means we have to acknowledge we're embracing that fantasy. I can go into anything with those ideas and there are so many directions in which to move, it's endless. I'm in a position to make a life of work.'

BELOW
Madison, West Virginia



'SOME DAYS I COULDN'T BE AROUND PEOPLE, CONFRONT THEM, BE A PHOTOGRAPHER'



FAR LEFT
Gatlinburg, Tennessee

NEAR LEFT
Beckley, West Virginia