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Jennifer Fox's Reincarnation as an Artist Entrepreneur

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I recently had the pleasure to speak with documentary filmmaker Jennifer Fox regarding her latest film [My Reincarnation](#), which opens in New York and Los Angeles on October 28th before screening in theaters worldwide. A comprehensive screenings calendar is available [here](#).

Filmed over 20 years, *My Reincarnation* is a wonderful film that chronicles the epic story of the high Tibetan Buddhist Master, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, and his western-born son, Yeshe. The film follows Namkhai Norbu's rise to greatness as a Buddhist teacher in the West, while his son, Yeshe, recognized at birth as the reincarnation of a famous spiritual master, breaks away from his father's tradition to embrace the modern world. Never before has a high Tibetan Master allowed such complete access to his private life. With her signature intimate entry to both families, Fox expertly distills a decades-long drama into a universal story about love, transformation, and destiny.

According to Fox, *My Reincarnation* was the most terrifying film to make since her first documentary *Beirut: The Last Home Movie*. As an avid Buddhist and follower of Chögyal, Jennifer assumed a deep sense of personal responsibility for the project. Although Chögyal never specifically asked Fox to make a film about him, Jennifer felt pressure to deliver something as unique and meaningful as the Buddhist Master's teachings, philosophy and life. She was terrified by the tremendous responsibility involved in such a film.

Jennifer also found it difficult to raise funds for the film, furthering complicating matters. Apart from contributions from the Hartley Film Foundation and The Buddhist Channel, Fox almost entirely self-funded the 20-year odyssey. When she lost an Italian television deal she had to raise \$100,000 to provide *My Reincarnation* to finish the film -- and hope for some money left over to release the movie. She quickly realized that this would have to be a team effort.

Jennifer's experience self-distributing the documentary *Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman* was helpful in formulating and executing her crowd funding campaign for *My Reincarnation*. Not only did Fox use the email lists that her team generated from her theatrical tour of *Flying* for her *My Reincarnation* campaign, she also decided to use much of the same distribution team. She has written on Hope for Film about her record breaking experiences using Kickstarter -- but I wanted to distill down her experience to the essentials. The main fundamental for her -- which drives all of her films is passion. (How else can you finish a film that has taken 20 years to complete).

The fundamental principle behind her successful Kickstarter strategy is simple: A campaign should be a creative act. It is not about getting money from people. It is about involvement. It is about communicating and engaging with fans and taking them with you. Above all, it is about learning to be a more open artist.

5 Lessons Jennifer Learned from the *My Reincarnation* Campaign:

1. Losing the fear of opening up a project to the public can change the tide of the film. However, Kickstarter is not right for every project or for every phase of a project. You have to determine whether an audience will support your film, and whether you have the ability to do what it takes to complete the campaign.

2. Survival as a filmmaker depends on the acceptance of change. You can't rest on your laurels but must continue opening up to what's new. There is a new world of engaging with audiences to fund and release films. The old system of distribution and marketing is largely gone for most filmmakers, and Kickstarter and Indiegogo have revolutionized film finance. Change or die.

3. It is important to partner across generations. You have to balance wisdom with younger energy and knowledge. Kickstarter solidified the idea that to keep working one must collaborate with younger people. It is interesting how *My Reincarnation* is

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jon-reiss/my-reincarnation-movie_b_1062656.html

4. Build a team. You can't do it alone. Having a second or third set of eyes is vital. In fact, you need a team more for distribution and marketing than for the production itself. Jennifer largely shot and edited the film by herself. But she needed a team to help her bring that film out into the public eye -- both for fundraising and distribution and marketing. Employing a "Producer of Marketing and Distribution" or PMD" is almost a necessity in today's filmmaking climate. (A PMD is a new crew position created to help artists connect with audiences and manage the distribution and marketing process.)

5. Campaigns should not be one-dimensional. They should be multi-platform strategies wherein new ideas, incentives and videos are constantly added and expanded. If you are embarking on this process, ask yourself, 'What are you giving them? Most campaigns all have the same message: "Give me money." What motivates your audience to come back to the site and reengage?' Make sure your pitch stands out from the pack.

In a sense all artists must look at their lives and examine if what they have been doing is working, or perhaps realize as Yeshe did that another path beckons to us -- ready to embrace us. As Jennifer points out, making films, and all art for that matter is an act of faith -- faith in the process, faith in the potential connection your work will have with other people.

Jon Reiss is filmmaker (Bomb It, Better Living Through Circuitry), author (Think Outside the Box Office) and consultant whose most recent book is Selling Your Film Without Selling Your Soul which he co-wrote with The Film Collaborative and Sheri Candler. He works with numerous film organizations, film schools and festivals to bring a variety of distribution labs and workshops around the world. His upcoming books concern new models of artistic entrepreneurship and the concept Producer of Marketing and Distribution.