



AMERIKAN MOVIES

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Table of contents

The Parts that Make up the Whole, Some thoughts on the work of The Speculative Archive/Julia Meltzer and David Thorne by Pablo de Ocampo - 3

Frequencies: an interview with Jason Boughton - 6

Taking to the Periphery - 17
by Andrea Picard

Light Waves and their Uses - 21
by David Dinnell

David Gatten talk - 23

Hand Cranked: a Conversation with Filmmaker Lee Krist by Alex Mackenzie - 30

Milk and Juice: An unfinished text to the artist I wish I'd met before starting psychoanalysis by Deirdre Logue - 38

Experience Torn to Shreds/Experiments From the Granary, Vincent Grenier, A Retrospective by Mike Cartmell - 40

What is Felt Cannot be Forgotten: an interview with Deborah Stratman interview - 46

George Kuchar's Videos: Excrements of time by Steve Reinke- 58

Jennifer Reeves at Cinemateque Ontatio, fall 2006 – 64

An Interview with Robert Todd – 72

Long Live Experimental: and Interview with Julie Murray - 94

An Interview with Martha Colburn – 109

David Dinnell's Midden – 118

Dani Leventhal by Steve Reinke - 120

Notes on 4 Movies by Dani Leventhal - 121



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The parts that make up the whole

Some thoughts on the work of The Speculative Archive/Julia Meltzer and David Thorne

by Pablo de Ocampo

Since 1999 Julia Meltzer and David Thorne have been collaborating under the name The Speculative Archive. Though their output includes installations, texts, and photographs, the bulk of their work has been in the production of single channel video documentaries. The work they make is not, as they clarified in a recent interview, “experimental documentary, ‘not ‘mockumentary ‘not‘ quasi-fictional documentary, ‘ or any of the other new genres that point to some kind of crisis of the real.”¹ Despite this claim, it’s important to note that Meltzer and Thorne approach the construction of these documentaries with a willingness and readiness to blur the distinction or the separation of fact and fiction. This blurring of

“the truth” is a means by which to emphasize the often loose and uncertain nature of the facts they are working with. Meltzer and Thorne’s process is heavily rooted in an intensive investigation of documents—government texts, journalistic photographs, archival video footage—and how they are used in the construction of our understanding (or misunderstanding) of historical and contemporary political climates.

In 2003, they completed the video *It’s not my memory of it: three recollected documents*, which looked at the production and propagation of governmental secrets amidst the heightened security climate of the post-9/11 era.

¹“But will we live at all?” Interview with Naem Mohaiemen in Bindoun No.11 Summer 2007

The video takes the form of three chapters—the retelling of the disappearance of a CIA operative in Teheran, a film produced in 1974 (and only officially acknowledged in 1992) of the burial at sea of six Soviet sailors, and images of a predator drone missile strike against a convoy in Yemen in 2002. Interspersed amongst these *three recollected documents* are brief interviews with a number of government officials working in the intelligence field.

While these three documents serve as source and springboard for the video, they are not necessarily the sole focus of the work. That is to say, Meltzer and Thorne's process of working with documentary source material in these videos is often just as much about talking *around* the subject at hand as it is directly addressing it. In *It's not my memory of it*, each segment of the video conveys something of the story of a secret government action. But those secrets in and of themselves are not the core of this work; rather, it is by using these examples that Meltzer and Thorne talk about the culture and bureaucracy of the intelligence community in regards to classified records. A key point in the interviews is the explanation of a "glomar response,"¹ which is used by federal officials to "neither confirm, nor deny" information requested through the Freedom of Information Act. This notion serves as a lens through which we can view the elements of the video. Facts, evidence, and records can be uncovered—even published on the front page of *The New York Times*, but the official parties involved in these events can still claim to know nothing of their existence.

Their current body of work, drawn from their experience living in Damascus, Syria in 2005 and 2006, consists of two videos: *We will live to see these things, or, five pictures of what may come to pass* (the first chapter of which is also distributed as a stand-alone video entitled *Take into the air my quiet breath*) and *Not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time in which expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or was still to come*. Though these two videos stand apart from each other, they can certainly

be viewed as companion pieces: attempts to capture something of the confusion and chaos of the modern Syrian state; the effects of the regime's policies and actions, as well as those of outside forces; and the very uncertain future that the people living under that regime envision for their country. *We will live* utilizes a number of strategies—from straight interviews and observational documentary footage, to more composed and authored segments. The video consists of five chapters focusing on: the history of a government initiated building project on the site of a 14th century mosque in downtown Damascus, the pursuit of a perfect leader, an interview with Syrian dissident Yassin Haj Saleh, a *verité*-like segment shot at a Qur'an school for youth, and concluding with a "vision" of the future. *Not a matter of if but when* is composed entirely of performances that were created in collaboration with Syrian artist Rami Farah; working from written texts supplied by Meltzer and Thorne, Farah improvised a series of monologues that speak around these same ideas of uncertainty of the future under the al-Assad regime as well as the immense pressure and change from outside forces.

In its initial stages *We will live* was to look more directly at the effects of the Bush Doctrine (specifically the rhetoric around "preventive war," "preemption," and "imminent threat") on people in Syria. In the completed video Bush's national security policies are but one of the myriad influences, both internal and external, on the country. Nonetheless, these policies are still evident, especially in the final segment of the video, *a world purged by fire, or, mission accomplished*. This last chapter, perhaps the most authored of the work, begins with a narrator in Arabic, "We have been visited by a vision." This "vision" is then communicated through texts intercut with tableaux shot around Damascus. Written as a series of prophecies—"I see decisive victory unfolding," "I see that all who shall walk in my words shall live," "I see force and faith dissipating every imminent threat"—this chapter brings the narrative arc of the video to a close, or rather, it brings us more squarely into the future, a future that will undoubtedly be determined by external forces as much as those working from inside of the country.

²Named for the CIA salvage vessel *The Glomar Explorer*, which was dispatched to recover a sunken Soviet nuclear submarine. This salvage operation is what is seen in the second segment of the video.

In the course of their research and interviews around the building's history, Syrian architect Hekmat Chotta says "within this building you will find the story of the failed state of modern Syria." This statement is illustrative of how Meltzer and Thorne approach documentary. In their works, we are hearing not just the stories of the subjects we see on screen, we need to look beyond these stories and see how they fit together to tell the larger stories of the Syrian political climate, US foreign policy and terrorism, and the federal bureaucracy of secrecy. In the end, their work is not solely about the facts; the facts are just a part of what makes up the whole.

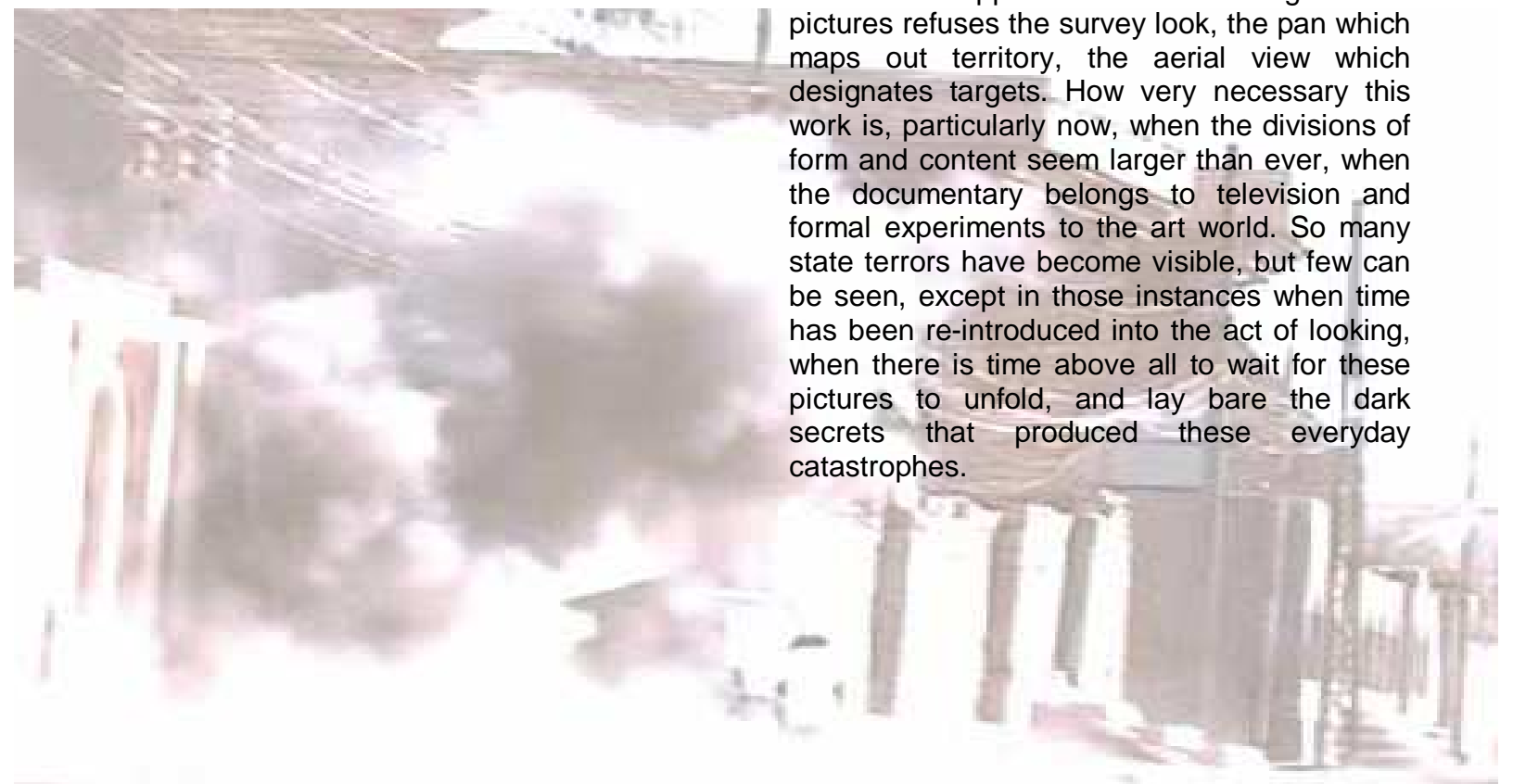




Frequencies

an interview with

Jason Boughton



Jason's practice begins with a long troll through the internet, he is a virtual pirate, a gluttonous fan (is there nothing he is not interested in?), searching for pictures the empire has left behind. In place of the camera, the internet, and once they have come home, regathered their digital parts into movies which he pulls apart and then together, he searches for a way to make them visible again. It isn't simply a question of re-presentation, of some clever reframing. Instead, he tries to close the door, he looks for a way for these pictures to refuse the viewer, to keep their mystery and demand our approach. Jason's battleground of pictures refuses the survey look, the pan which maps out territory, the aerial view which designates targets. How very necessary this work is, particularly now, when the divisions of form and content seem larger than ever, when the documentary belongs to television and formal experiments to the art world. So many state terrors have become visible, but few can be seen, except in those instances when time has been re-introduced into the act of looking, when there is time above all to wait for these pictures to unfold, and lay bare the dark secrets that produced these everyday catastrophes.

MH: How did you find the title for *The Frequency of the Sun* (10 minutes 2005)? Does naming come first, as something to gather thoughts around, or does it occur as an afterthought?

JB: Until recently, I worked by accumulation, images were added to or subtracted from other images until some sense emerged, or until they articulated an argument. *Frequency* started with a sequence of outtakes from *Why We Fight*, the American propaganda films made by Frank Capra. Some of those images are still there, but the first assemblies contained many more.

The name came along soon thereafter, when I found a source online for radiographic videos from NASA. There were audio clips as well, low-frequency solar radiation played through a radio receiver. That noise is under almost all of the tape, though it's mostly inaudible. After the name was fixed, it became a litmus for the other material: did it fit the name, which was also the name of all the parts as well as the whole...

This was during the American war in Afghanistan, and even then the Iraq war seemed a foregone conclusion. It was clear that all of this real and impending violence was totally impractical, that is, it would fail to address whatever the "problem" was, but still it played as a good thing: people seemed to want it to happen because it might be satisfying, not because it would be useful. This was the atmosphere while I was collecting material, and the goal of the video was always to make an argument about the American obsession with ritual violence, this enormous cliché, without actually engaging in the frustrating, spectacular, greatest-generation clichés.

MH: The opening shot is a bravura track through what appears to be a Midwest cornfield, though the preceding title has clearly identified this landscape as Iraq. It is a striking juxtaposition, and carries with it a sense that us and them are somehow the same. Where did you find this shot and why is it so long? Is duration an issue for you?

JB: The misidentification of the first shot is a trick I resort to fairly often, and is less a proposal of equivalence than an opportunity for confusion, like a small pin-prick opening made in the known, through which disorientation can spurt. A large part of my goal in any of these little videos is to sow confusion among the faithful, though I doubt the faithful are ever in a position to see my work.

That first shot is the opening of *Oklahoma!*, a cold-war era musical about the taming of the American mid-west. The final shot is its' evil twin, from Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*. I needed long shots, deep focus, broad horizons, limitless possibilities, and the fact that these two came from major motions pictures at opposite ends of the cold war was an added bonus.

I am often tempted by some fairly extreme durations because cinema comes with a slew of rules and behaviors by which it identifies itself, and exaggerated duration is one of my favorite ways to abuse an audience who thinks it may recognize some of those telltale cinema markings. Not that my own durations are truly abusive: I have only ever referred to strident materialist strategies; the boredom, discomfort, hypnosis. My own work has too many competing intentions to really commit to deadly duration, but someday, I promise, I'll make something really really long.

MH: How did you decide on the music?

JB: The music in *Frequency* is there mostly because it's awful and beautiful at the same time, but the selection was pretty narrow. I wanted all the music to match somehow, and also the structure of the video to be 'musical,' that is, taken from a musical form. I picked the Motet, early voice-and-small ensemble arrangements which usually had a sacred function. The lyrics were almost always bits of poetry rather than verses from the bible or sections of the mass, which made them more versatile as to when they could be performed. They have a very loose rhythm and an episodic

structure, with each vocal stanza given individual (if interrelated) melodic treatment. They (as well as lots of other things) are associated with early Polyphony, but these particular ones are not that old.

I think the key piece of music in *Frequency* is Vivaldi's setting of 'Piango, Gemo...' an anonymous poem which describes a heart so broken the only hope for rest is that another greater pain might come destroy the speaker completely. But all three are about powerlessness—the speaker describes their own total brokenness, they surrender to it with very little expectation of mercy.

*We came of course under the cover of darkness, the terrain was level and open, it kind of reminded you of a field in Kansas, a farmer's fields. It was wide open, gentlemen were out there herding cattle and sheep and women were gathering up wood and children were playing. Then we began to hear the voice of children carrying on and talking back and forth... and it was of some concern to me but I really didn't feel that we were in danger... forming up after the night... that changed suddenly. I got on the radio and called back and told them that we'd been seen. And as we're on the radio talking, I caught something out of the corner of my eye and there were some children moving along the canal, further back... I think I've been seen... These children to the east of us back away from the highway even further behind us, beginning to maneuver on us, and walking in the field around us... migod... There were two girls and a small boy with silenced weapons and the girl screamed. As they came in they would give out a yell, a battle cry like OOOOOO. And the girl screamed, it was terrifying but I can remember feeling inside myself my gosh we're all going to die here. (voice-over from *The Frequency of the Sun*)*



MH: Who is speaking and where did you find this testimony? What event is the soldier describing? What was it that drew you to this text in particular? It plays over a black and white image of a largely abstract cloud of smoke. Why this text with this image?

JB: The testimony is taken from a BBC radio documentary about the first Gulf War. The soldier is describing a reconnaissance team which was dropped at night in northwest Iraq just after the war began, quite a bit off target, so that when the sun came up they found themselves more or less surrounded by small farms. It is a fairly well known incident; they were pinned down by small arms fire for about twelve hours, until they were able to get air cover (the cluster bombs) and helicopters in to rescue them. The helicopter pilots described hundreds of bodies of Iraqi farmers and soldiers, burned out trucks and more. When I heard the story I had a kind of retching, 'gain the world, lose your soul' kind of response. Twelve marines, with only the weapons they could carry plus air strikes, spend half a day killing hundreds of Iraqis and then split without a scratch on them. Wow, this is amazing... but not the story you hear in *Frequency*. In that one, the Iraqis win, sort of. It is my revenge fantasy because I want my soul back.

MH: Why do we see pictures from the Battle of Britain where England/London was bombed by the Germans during World War Two? What is the relation between this imagery and the cluster bombs of the Iraq war which is described in the voice-over?

JB: The black and white material was taken *Why we Fight*. The shot in question is from a camera mounted in the nose of a dive bomber, run in reverse and slowed down quite a bit.

My step father was a child in the Battle of Britain. His hobby was airplane identification, he won some sort of trophy for correctly

identifying German planes by their undercarriages. He also spent some time in the tube, waiting for the impacts to stop, and came home one day and found a big hole where his house had been that morning. Later, after having been evacuated to the country, he watched a V2 vaporize the house behind his garden. So in my mind I'm not really comparing the American war machine to the Luftwaffe so much as I am comparing this old man to some Iraqi kid, watching the cluster bombs come down.

MH: America is presently at war (again), this time in Iraq (overtly), and busy organizing hostilities in many other countries. Your movie is, amongst other things, part of a motion picture protest, a venerable tradition in itself, though it is rare that works on the fringe take up overtly political themes. Why is this? And isn't the exhibition of this work reserved for avant safe houses where it can be sure to play to the converted?

JB: What are the pillars of this tradition? Groupe Medvedkin or Jack Smith? Maybe it is difficult to make political films because the first fight is always against the authority of film itself, the all-consuming eye, the vicious empty spectacle... Godard spent years undermining his own authorship, but he outlived even that.

Any discussion of 'center' and 'margin' is political; it's my guess that you coined the term 'fringe' by way of reintroducing a political logic into the kind of artistic production you like, as against the neutral and positivistic 'experimental.' This sort of thing was called 'avant-garde' not very long ago. I understand, though, that the limits of that protest tradition are contested; if Chris Marker's *SLON* is one of its pillars, does that mean Jack Smith isn't? Smith's work is simultaneously a shattering critique of capitalist desire-production and the production of a shattering desire all its own. I want to imagine a wild and valuable politics at

every stage of this kind of making; without help or money, showing it to people who may or may not pay, insisting on the value of something which is productive of nothing, which is without exchange value.

I'm just not sure about the safety of the avant house. Is everyone in there in love with the useless? Video at least has little credibility—no one even notices when it lies, or if they do they don't revere the lie as much. I'm bold enough to think that few audiences are already on my side, and once they've seen the videos, most wonder exactly which side is mine. That's the goal, anyway.

MH: *A halter of Strongly Twisted Rope*. (17 minutes 2005) is your first completed work in many years. It comes after leaving Seattle, settling into New York City, reinventing your professional life as a video editor, falling in and out of love. Why the long distance run between movies? What compelled you, after all this time, to pick up the torch (or do you hold, a la Godard, that seeing movies, writing about them and making them are the same occupation?)

JB: The last thing I did in Seattle was teach a workshop on 'non-fiction' filmmaking. I was steeped in a hyper-subjective, American avant tradition, and one day (on your suggestion) I decided that all non-fiction was equally perverse and corrupt, reliant on an over-determined technology of reproduction. This is where I invested whatever excess I had available. Between leaving Seattle and starting *Halter* I worked on plenty of moving image projects, I just failed to finish any of them. I made a living as an editor on the periphery of television, assisting on a few PBS documentaries and then editing for a corporate video production company. Training and industrial process videos, sales and recruiting tools, every low-rent sort of production short of weddings and bar mitzvahs. Somewhere in there was an attempt at a feature-length, verité

style doc about local New York politics, and plenty of abortive art projects. I would like to say that it was all leading up to something, but most of that was just punching the clock.

MH: *A Halter of Strongly Twisted Rope*. opens in the New York subway, a picture of "home," but seen through the wire scrims of an electrical conveyance, and the windows of an adjacent train that move past, offering isolating glimpses of a trapped and framed humanity, each of us locked into our own compartment, dreaming alone. Then a woman appears sleeping by the window. Oh, it was only a dream. If there is a central character to be found in this movie, here she is, though she never speaks, and appears in sidelong glances, or at an angle whose particular kind of awkwardness can come only out of intimacy.

JB: Most of the shots in *Halter* are from a vacation video I took in Egypt, including the train shot, the busted up cars, the hotel, the bedroom, the cemetery. The woman is my girlfriend Gretchen. It's a travel movie, and those are the things we saw, and those are the people who saw us when we went to Egypt: this tautology is more or less intentional. We learned nothing from the French architecture, we had no experiences in the Coptic cemetery or the Muslim necropolis, the Socialist-era transit system was invisible to us, the radical, post-colonial collapse of signifiers left no impression. It was pretty intense.

MH: The screen blacks out and George Bush Sr. says, "Stop everything." (and we do, the film stops, there is nothing to look at, only a voice in the darkness). "Say a prayer for our men in uniform who at this very moment are risking their lives for their country and for all of us." There is something chilling in this voice-over, because even though I've seen your movie many times, no matter when I play it the voice is always "correct," there are indeed men



(and women) in American uniforms fighting abroad.

When the image returns we are in a stairwell, a place of passage and vertigo. We hear the voice of Nu Nguyen (from the South Vietnamese militia) and as the camera pans up the stairwell we see that the two people walking (one ascends, the other descends) are moving backwards in slow motion. Why?

JB: At the time, the smallest dislocations seemed the most important. The shots are backwards because “time is going backwards,” from the fictional present of the first shots (Egypt) to the fictional past of the voice-over (Vietnam). It was really as on the face as that. It's a little hotel in Cairo called Pensione Roma—since that visit I have learned that this is where locals put their European and American friends, because it is cheap and charming in a beat-down sort of way. Like a lot of Cairo it has plenty of colonial era nostalgia going for it, the way I imagine Saigon was in the 1950s. At the time, a woman in a trench coat + Coptic cemetery + Indian funeral music + tales of Vietnamese covert operations, all these seemed to me to articulate something strange and awful and intensely particular. Sometimes, when I watch that video, they still do. On the other hand, the metaphysics got me out of coming face to face with any Egyptians, or the facts of Egypt, a material experience of Egypt (or American foreign policy), during my vacation, with my girlfriend, in Egypt.

MH: The second movement returns us to the cemetery. You walk through it with your camera, it is an American body moving once more through the spaces where foreign nationals are lying dead. Everything trembles as if in response, surfaces ripple, the usual physics no longer apply. Voices accompany this passage, hysterical screams, US soldiers talking about familiar spaces becoming instantly dangerous. Then you present a hazy scene of catastrophe, people are running but from what? In the background a large menacing cloud slowly fills the screen. Reporter Carl Phillips tries to describe the moment but his narration is similarly abstract and indistinct. This scene reminded me of Morley Safer's rap about embedded reporters and live coverage. He insists that live reportage is useless because reporters don't have any way of knowing instantly what is going on. “It adds heat but it does not add light,” Safer quipped. At the very end of this scene we see a New York police car, and realize that this catastrophe is not happening “over there,” in other countries, where American violence is a commonplace, but “over here.”

JB: That might be the least expensive link in the chain of association the video tries to build. Carl Phillips is the reporter from Orson Welles's original broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, and it is the only accurate voice-over attribution in the piece. Carl Phillips knew exactly what was going on, was attuned to that emptiness, to the uncanny (the shock of the

thing which is both familiar and terrifying). Is this moment in *Halter* making some sort of claim about how truth works, its strange structural relation to fiction? Or is it seeking an equivalence between the fear of the Other which Welles exploited and the one Mohamed Atta enacted? Is that moment a dramatic recreation of the terror of the Real, the unrepresentable, which can only be described through the fog of the Symbolic? This much is obvious: by the end of that sequence, nothing is clearer, no image more defined than when it started. And the thing Carl Phillips saw rising out of the pit went on to destroy everything in sight.

MH: The third movement finds us in New York: where are we and why is the image slowed down? Is it significant that your shooting describes a circle? Once again the audio is sourced separately from the picture, which is one of the ways in which "politics" is produced, the sound/image relation is reimagined "politically." Can you talk about the audio which accompanies this scene and why you used it?

JB: The voices over the Empire State shots are American pilots circa 1992, talking about the massacre of Iraqi troops between Basra and Baghdad, which is known as the Highway of Death. The shot itself was originally recorded in the summer of 2001, for use in a corporate recruiting film, some sort of impressionistic reveling in the glories of the big city. It was never used; post production was slated to start in late September, and by that time there were no longer any World Trade Center buildings in the distance, much less investment bank recruiting videos.

The voice at the beginning of section three is Robert McNamara in the mid-1970's, explaining that the bombing of North Vietnam was ethically acceptable because we could have nuked those little villages, and that would have been worse, right? Bin Laden clearly

made the same sort of calculations, about how much force would be enough force, when he was planning the Trade Center attacks, but I hope the video does something more than make this comparison.

MH: You deliver us to New York sidewalks teeming with people, and shift focus from the back end of the frame to those faces closest to the camera. You run this shot backwards and forwards, digitally adding layers of soft focus to ease the transitions. What are we seeing here and why?

The final shot is an airplane flying backwards, as if you want to "take it all back," retract the endless American sorties flown over other countries in order to bomb them.

JB: I don't know who's voice that is giving the patriotic harangue over the street shot. I do know it is a radio recording just post WWI. The shot is more re-purposed corporate-video footage, and the effect was produced in-camera.

Recently I looked at *Halter* again, after quite a long time and quite a few stabs at new work. For the life of me I can't figure out why so many of those shots are in slow motion. It all seems like so much unproductive pointing at something outside the frame and away from the things that are in the frame. There it all is, the ugly meat of any elegy; vision-crazed tourists sweating out the observation deck, the Trade Center towers, the handy-cam's auto-focus going nuts back down on the street.

I think there is something basic wrong with *Halter*, a sort of misunderstanding between me and the material, between how I wanted to experience the present and what was, or is, representable. What I mean is, the dislocation produced by the motion effect is too small, too familiar, fails to ask a question. I no longer wonder if something in particular is revealed in

those attenuated intervals, rather, I wonder if there is anything to reveal at all. Aren't the motion effects a mystification of that emptiness? Wouldn't it be better to see the tourists looking, and then see the camera looking? There is no image I could record that would ever be an image of a thing, more than a thing itself, so all that manipulation seems to obscure what was actually there—a building before the building was gone, a mass of anonymous desires, the slow grinding of the auto-zoom, all looking. I've started hunting around for the source material—maybe it will be revised entirely, same shots in the same order, in real time, the voice-over and music trailing out over black.

We had a phone conversation a few weeks ago—it was late and raining, and I had just finished fucking up yet another freelance editing job. We talked about Ken Jacobs' epic length *Tom Tom, the Piper's Son*. You seemed to suggest that the point of all that temporal atomization hung on some mystery revealed. Did I understand that correctly? Is there more than just the physical affect—wouldn't just staring at landscape passing from a train window produce the same value? And is that enough? My point is: I no longer wish to transport any viewer to a place of contemplation.

I guess you need to see my flicker movies. They are fucking punk rock, the farthest from formal things, flailing acts of psychic violence, horrible frontal-lobe-burning, cock-thrusting death fantasies, more along those lines. This is my way of approaching the Godard/Farocki demand: to enact metaphysics rather than just speak them, and then speak under meaning instead of at it, without presumptions of authority, in weakness. It is the Lacanian Real, the Gap, the Shift, not the Thing but the space between us and the Thing. Fuck yeah.

How was Christmas with the family? Or did you stay in the arms? Was Christ born again? Was he huge and shining, brilliant and horrible, did the wet little babe force his love on you, empty you of questions? I know you are not as enamored of all that shit as I am, the horrid little tyrant Jesus, but we did have a bit of fun at the homily this year. The super-gay priest read a bit of poetry by Kenneth Rexroth which compared the gifts of the Three Kings to the act of carnal love—"Frankincense like tangled hair, Myrrh like entwined limbs"—sort of thing. I think he was trying to illustrate the complicated tools which God uses to do his work, even the mighty need to shit and fuck but the meek have all the cards anyway. Rexroth was an anarchist womanizer but the folks in the pew were too sleepy to notice.

Just back last night from the long holiday adventure back in the north west. My giant family is wonderful, really, a mess of labour and difficulty and sincere trying to be together. The cost of this is enormous to them, free flowing bitterness and resentment, but the results are good, they are like a tribe of savages adhering to ancient rules even as the forest is burned down to make way for condos and strip malls. Being with them, every time, is so intense, their presence and love and interest is so aggressive. I don't know for sure that I could live among them, but the older I get the greater the feeling of loss every time I leave, the more certain I am that my exile is self-imposed.

MH: Do write and tell me what's been happening now that you've entered the liberating confines of Columbia University. I remember when you got the news, we were in that honcho clothing shop when your small phone rang, and something like your future raced into your ears. You had been carrying a tattoo design in your wallet for how many years now, and were going to get that done pronto in

celebration. What's it been like over there, what have you been doing?

JB: That clothing store was Century 21, right across the street from the World Trade Center site. I remember you bought a hot little black shirt, some nipple-piercing show-off number. I love that shirt. And I was looking for Tony Soprano-style golf shirts, my new look, which has only gotten more exaggerated in the past year.

Since then I have been making things pretty quickly, short segments of limited ambition, exercises. Almost all are made with footage of various conflicts in the Middle East, all found on the internet. I have spent hours dredging the web, on bit torrent sites, streaming news pages, bulletin boards, YouTube, etc. There are a few sites dedicated to tracking and collecting war footage of all types, especially the soldier-produced camera/phone footage and the trophy shots of roadside bombs exploding, shot by the paramilitary fighters who plant them.

During all this searching I found eight days worth of selects from a single source, a cameraman embedded with a marine unit during the first siege of Fallujah in 2004. For various hard to explain reasons, most of the location audio is unusable, and like most web video the picture is extremely compressed, but the footage is pretty amazing. It is at once tense and dull, violent and abstract because the enemy has been removed. During six hours of footage only six living Iraqis appear: two women in a basement apartment who are frightened but unharmed, and four men of various ages who cross a street on the fifth day, waving a white flag. None of the soldiers get injured, but every day the city is more fucked up. Debris piles up on the roads, more doors are smashed in, more smoke in the distance. I had the material for upwards of two years before I could think of what to do with it.



So far the soldier footage has turned into three short videos. *Empty* (6 minutes 2007) is a montage of long, static landscape shots, the sort of thing that might be used as establishing shots, moving closer into more defined spaces and then back out. Most of the audio is room tone from an effects library, and for the most part it doesn't match the shot in any way. The action in the shots is more a lack of action—sometimes there is smoke in the distance, or trees moving in the wind, or darkness increasing between one shot and the next. Sometimes the surface of the shot seems to be moving, but this is a mirage, it's just the compressed pixels rearranging themselves from one frame to the next. Otherwise the action is in the visible results of something which has already happened. The city is ruined, walls have fallen, something has burned or is burning but the fire itself is invisible.

The second piece is called *Home* (:20 seconds, 2007). This is a silent, twenty-second sequence of action shots showing soldiers kicking in, shooting out or blowing up the doors of various buildings. The shots are extremely short, featuring only the moment of impact or explosion.

The longest soldier footage thing is called *Movement* (16 minutes 2007). Unlike the other two pieces it loops and has no title card. I began work on *Movement* by stringing out all six hours of footage, and then I deleted all the material without soldiers, or whenever the camera was static or moving sideways or backwards or panning or zooming. That left the camera moving forward—even the slightest pause was cut. Through ruined streets, into broken gates and doors, up stairs, through homes, down stairs, back out into streets, running or walking, always in a long line of soldiers moving forward. The original audio is replaced with slick production sound effects of

anything that might make a noise on-screen, mostly footsteps on sand, gravel, tile floors or concrete streets, but also doors opening and closing, metal scraping on metal, and occasionally the sounds of hands adjusting automatic rifles. Once you see a truck drive by and once a tank, so you hear those as well. There is no speaking, no ambient tone, room tone or wind.

MH: The missing enemy, the ruined city, the perpetual war machine marching forwards. How many times have pictures from this war lit up broadcast screens around the world, and how seldom does any sense attach itself to these public communions? Your movies feel like they have been set inside the mirage of “coverage,” but why the abstract sound treatment, allowing us to hear the foley artist at work, generating appropriate (if incomplete) aural accompaniments to these bloody imperial designs?

JB: The embedded shooter made many precise decisions, with results that are experienced as much as known. The static wide shots look just like landscape painting, the set-up shots of forced entry, the endless POV traveling shots are all created for serial digestion. The shots are so well built, there seemed nothing more fact-like than the decisions on the surface; here was a useful, awful contradiction. The added audio work was driven by a similar need for awful contradiction. The surface texture is extremely degraded (because of compression), so it needed a noise that would fight with it in the most subtle way possible. I collected as many footsteps sound effects as I could find, recorded some of my own, spent days and nights placing them and still it isn't perfect. I'll make one more session before I send it anywhere. For the first minutes it is hard to tell the sound is fake. Then you think you know, and then you're not sure. It's unsettling, maybe just a little horrifying, a little!

Got a new tattoo, A huge north western native sea monster on my right shoulder reaching round to my back. A wild angry monster, an agent of chaos, the blessing of unpredictability. It still hurts.





Taking to the Periphery

by Andréa Picard

"What changes our way of seeing the streets is more important than what changes our way of seeing painting." Guy Debord

In 2005, Lonnie van Brummelen was awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome in her native Netherlands for *Lefkosia*, the third installment completing her 35mm "triptych," *Grossraum*. The international jury comprised of artists and art world professionals dutifully commended van Brummelen for her treatment of the divided Cyprus capital, while reserving their fanfare for the work's breathtaking images. They exclaimed in their jury statement that, "One is simply engulfed in its beauty," and their enthusiasm nearly leapt from the page. There's no question that van Brummelen's recent filmic work is seeped in a formalist, almost classical beauty. "Painterly," "photographic," and "visually arresting" are adjectives that are naturally applied to *Grossraum*. In it, the documented images reveal a world of luscious flora and fascinating patterns of texture and colour, and internal rhythms created by the movement of those being observed, as well as

by the meticulous and aesthetisizing ways in which the artist observes them and the attending geography. The more one learns about van Brummelen, however, the more one cannot deny the steadfast left-leaning critical engagement which underlines her current practice—one which questions the institutionalization (and militarization) of everyday life, as well as that of art itself. From this installation alone, it is clear that van Brummelen is mindful of a vital terrain that bridges the too often contradictory consideration of aesthetics and issues. The two have regrettably veered away from one another, both in the field of cinema, where the dominant documentary mode is increasingly one of low budget video images made for broadcast and not for projection (gone are the days of the gorgeous Johan van der Keuken longform travelogues), and in the visual arts, where the commodified art object is inherently 17

at odds with political engagement. But when aesthetics, issues and political art-making are weighted equally, the results engender tremendous import, riddled as they are with paradoxical tensions suggesting a transformative experience beyond the normative boundaries of reception. In that, van Brummelen's art-making recalls that of another Dutch artist, documentary master Joris Ivens, whose revolutionary formalism was matched by his edict to represent the invisible and the physical risk involved in that very task.

Grossraum is a sequential, single-channel, 35mm film installation in three parts examining three sensitive border points along the ever-expanding Europe, which is paradoxically growing its territory while tightening its frontiers. Documented, in ravishing and precise compositions, are checkpoints at Hrebenne, nestled between Poland and Ukraine; Ceuta, a small Spanish enclave in mainland Morocco; and the capital city Lefkosia (a.k.a. Nicosia), divided between Greek South Cyprus and Turkish-occupied North Cyprus. Van Brummelen made the pilgrimage to these remote sites with lumbering camera equipment in tow to witness and capture daily life on film, as well as to visually record the landscapes along these heavily patrolled margins. Accompanying the floor-to-ceiling projection is *The Formal Trajectory*, a publication written and produced by the artist and her collaborator Siebren de Haan, which chronicles the real-life narrative behind the making of *Grossraum*. That account, or trajectory, is one of official letter-writing and clever permission-seeking, interspersed with diaristic accounts of their travels and in-depth researched histories for the three locations portrayed in the installation. In the opening letter, van Brummelen states her case plainly: "The European territory is expanding: internal borders are taken down, external borders are reinforced. For many Europeans, 'Europe' nevertheless remains an abstract entity. The impact of the recent developments of the EU seems difficult to grasp. With a 35mm landscape film of three crossings in the European outline, I would like

to give an impression of the wide range of landscape and inhabitants Europe contains."

Then she stresses, as she must, that the footage taken will be used strictly for artistic purposes. A goodwill promise of disarmament for art in the eye of the establishment is rather benign and lacking in might. Thus the question must be asked: Can a poetic evocation of Europe's problematic borders effect positive change and bring about awareness of injustices to those who suffer within a system that benefits others? On their own, the three film fragments seem to wield little persuasive power as their quiet lyricism presides majestically over the work, no explicit discourse in sight. And yet a dialectical tension results from van Brummelen's treatment of this unique landscape film, effectively drawing the viewer into a heightened realm of examination/contemplation.

In "Hrebenne," for example, which became her subject in May of 2004 just as Poland was accessioned into the European Union, we see large trucks line the streets as their drivers await the necessary visas to cross the border, with wait times of up to three days. This newly-created European gateway, lacking in proper infrastructure, has caused a blockade where basic necessities like food and shelter are not readily available to those stuck in a *Weekend* quagmire. This scene of stasis is juxtaposed with a masterful long take revealing the sublime beauty in the immediate landscape: a white cotton-ball sky, a sfumato painted forest plucked from a Gerhard Richter canvas, a pristine and shimmering lake, molten earth, tall grasses sprinkled with wild flowers. From the artist's bird's eye view, the contradictions of what lay before her can be captured with her controlled ambulatory camera which yields monumental compositions in which the expressive force of disorder creates its own rapt rhythms. Despite the non-descript, modest and ramshackle buildings, beauty is everywhere to be noticed, and not just in nature. The matching patterns and colours dotting the roadways are rendered photogenic

through the camera's eye, informed by a set of artistic choices including focus play and associative editing. The viewer is seduced by beauty, then compelled to look much closer as our gaze is redirected toward these small-scale maneuvers.

At Ceuta, van Brummelen's camera describes the surrounding area of this Spanish-Moroccan city and its Mediterranean seawall, with a slow, steady pan along the 8.5 kilometre border, displaying an incredible Abbas Kiarostami-like landscape through which people climb toward the border peddling contrabando. The image is fraught with discordance; it is at once remarkably beautiful and alarming in its implication. *Grossraum* is comprised of such images, which seize both with their splendour as with their disquieting realities. The liminal space produced by this tension might not rally for resistance but for those of us who believe in the transformative power of art, its strength runs deeper. Van Brummelen with her poeticizing eye and sagacious mind sets out to undertake what Guy Debord, the controversial leader of the Situationists, called for in the quote above. But does a danger lie in aesthetisizing areas of conflict? The sword being double-edged, the artist takes a cue (consciously or not) from Godard who put forth

that the meaning of an image comes from its caption. The caption in this case is provided by *The Formal Trajectory*, the companion piece which imparts the context and wrests some of the film's destabilizing abstraction. In Lefkosia, the flag of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus appears ubiquitously like an emboldened brand name, on signage and physically embedded in the landscape with a mosaic of pebbles fashioned in the inverse colours of the Turkish flag. This blanketed TRNC flag is shot from different points-of-view, displaying its dominance over the land as a potent nationalist symbol, a striking decorative relief, and assuredly a provocation for the Greeks. Rendered in crisp 35mm, the image is arguably more visually captivating than it is dialogical. Without the accompanying text, that is.

The title *Grossraum*, which is used in German to denote a greater area's relation to the center (as in "the Grossraum of Munich," for instance, similar to "Greater Toronto"), is also an obvious allusion to German political thinker Carl Schmitt's theory of European integration that emerged out of fascist Germany in the late '30s and was further developed in reaction to a growing American hegemony in post-WWI Europe. The cycle of history is not lost in these



images. Used here by van Brummelen, the term "Grossraum" is subverted; direction is focused onto the peripheral cities of Hrebennie, Ceuta and Lefkosia, not to the almighty center. This antinomy of center and margin, of inside and out, of autonomy and entrapment, and of form and content largely informs the artist's practice as she visually and intellectually explores the boundaries of public space and the implications engendered by obstructed movement from physical barriers or reconstructions. An earlier work from 2003 titled *Obstructions* documents in 16mm black and white the chaotic inner-city peregrinations of people going about their daily lives amid construction zones and renovated squares in Amsterdam and The Hague. Adopting a high-angle point-of-view, van Brummelen provides a panoramic vista of the obfuscating maze-like scenes with alternating close-ups that create a sort of entropic claustrophobia despite their nostalgic formalism. From Ivens to Rodchenko, *Obstructions* suggests its lineage—but the concerns are manifestly those of the artist, who takes it further by turning to the gallery space in order to sculpt an experiential contradiction between the silence of her images and the mechanized clamour of the projector—itsself a symbol of artistic resistance amid an increasingly digital age.

Van Brummelen is a modern-day descendant of the Situationists, whose Dadaist ethos mobilized against a dangerous, intellectually stagnant and sterile milieu and sought to fuse art with everyday life in order to transform society. Her work, which includes interventions and performances, films and installations, photographs and artist publications, is surging with like-minded urgency; it's conceptually rigorous, analytically rich and voluble and fervently engaged in a culture of resistance. The literal *détournements* of those she films echo those she must make as an artist whose work inevitably rests within an institution of production, consumption and reception. By challenging this doctrine through contradiction and knowledge, van Brummelen continues to ask: Can art survive in a capitalist world? The tensions awakened in her work reveal some of the struggle to make socially engaged works of art which retain their formal autonomy. Such is

the case in *Grossraum* with its painterly compositions and clarion call captions.

This text was originally commissioned by Gallery TPW (Toronto Photographer's Workshop) for the exhibition *Grossraum*, April 5 - May 7, 2007.

About the Artist

Based in Amsterdam, van Brummelen was the recipient of the Prix de Rome in 2005. She has exhibited extensively in museums and film festivals throughout Europe, and was recently featured in the Gwangju Biennale in Korea.

About the Writer

Andréa Picard is a film programmer at Cinematheque Ontario and The Toronto International Film Festival. She contributes a regular Film/Art column to Cinema Scope magazine and has published for numerous other publications including Prefix Photo, Canadian Architect, Border Crossings and Flash Arts International.





Light Waves and Their Uses

by David Dinnell

Long filmstrips of ink-speckled acetate hang from racks in a corner of artist Bruce McClure's Brooklyn loft. Shelves are packed with film reels and cans. McClure, sitting behind a table in the back of the room, prepares to fire up one of four film projectors for a piece entitled *Christmas Tree Stand (parts 1-3)*. It's one of several dozen multiple projector performance pieces he has created in the last decade.

A practicing architect, McClure has been based in New York since 1985. Long preoccupied with visual perception and the illusion of motion intrinsic to cinema, in 1994 he began constructing phenakistiscopes—pre-cinematic devices that create the illusion of animated motion. These experiments led him to the work of stroboscopic flash photographer Harold

Edgerton, who had created nearly identical devices in the 1930s. Continuing his investigation of the moving image, McClure soon started working with film loops and their simultaneous projection.

McClure plays his projectors as if they're instruments of light and sound. Working from a "score" of alternating flicker films or, according to him, "ink sneezes," he projects his filmstrips simultaneously to create an illusory sense of movement and a density of abstract textures. Each performance is unique, neither improvised nor fixed. He works intuitively within certain parameters determined by each piece's structure.

For *Christmas Tree Stand*, McClure begins with a stark white circle that flickers and pulsates on a handmade flat-black screen. A second projection, more diffuse, soon joins in and provides a kind of halo that transforms the circle into a sphere. These unified images simultaneously expand and contract as McClure adjusts the brightness of each projection through a rheostat. The black-and-white flicker produces a perceptual phenomenon of riotous chromatic color.

As the mind flails to make concrete sense of the image, dread gives way to the joy of engaging with pure form. The insistent metronomic rhythm of the syncopated projectors becomes metallic and stretched; menacing harmonic overtones peal like the bells of a mechanized carillon. The piece continues with the addition of two more projectors with modified gates, producing a grid pattern that seems to rotate as McClure adjusts each projector's light. The introduction of color through gels placed in front of the lens brings forth rich, shifting color fields.

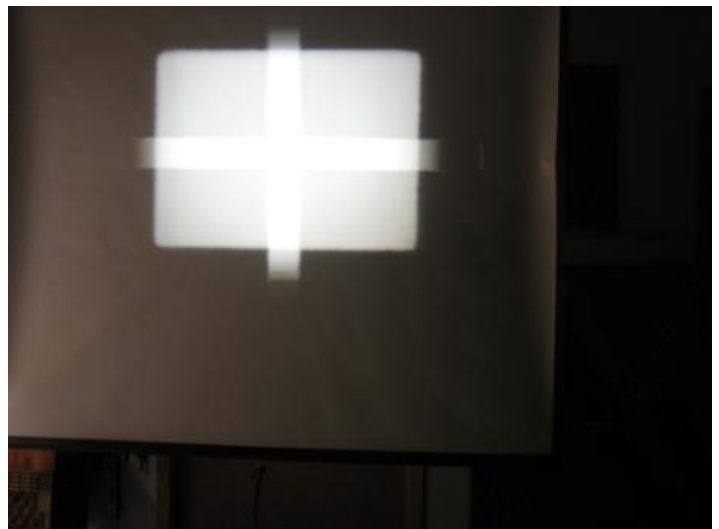
Forty minutes into *Christmas Tree Stand*, after the last projector dims and the room goes black, bizarre bluish-purple tendrils can be seen for several minutes. These after-images left on the retina are like the final movement of McClure's performance.

Inspired by the paintings of Robert Moskowitz, which are at once abstract and representational, McClure says “there’s always a narrative content to my works, but I find myself thinking: If they are narrative, then what do they represent?” McClure describes what he means by explaining the four looping projections in *Quarterdraw*, a work exhibited at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. “They created a wave form, like the sound of waves crashing on the beach. Combine the four of them and you have little waves, big waves. While I was projecting that, you could almost feel the breeze coming out of the screen. There was a sense of re-creating some kind of environment. Maybe it’s natural, maybe it’s not.”

In his 1903 book *Light Waves and Their Uses*, Albert Michelson expresses a desire for the near future to bring “a color art analogous to the art of sound—‘a color music’—in which the performer seated before a literally chromatic scale, can play the colors of the spectrum in any succession or combination, flashing on a screen all possible gradations of color, simultaneously or in any desired succession, producing at will the most delicate and subtle modulations of light and color, or the most gorgeous and startling contrast and color chords!”

This uncannily accurate description of some of McClure’s pieces predates it by more than a century, and it attests to the ongoing desire in our culture for a direct art affecting our sense and experiences. As McClure disassembles the mechanical apparatus of cinema to its most elemental forms and then reconstructs them in unexpected ways, viewers of his work are left with an increased awareness of their own existence as sensate beings. The best of his performances cleave any larger societal or cultural concerns and get at the heart of creating a truly visceral experience.

Originally published in the Metro Times prior to Bruce McClure's performance at the Detroit Film Center, September 2005

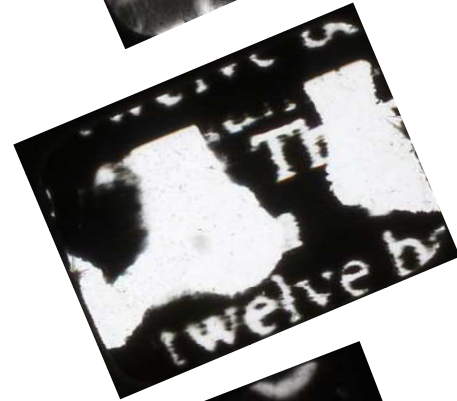


DAVID GATTEN TALK

May 7, 2005

presented by Hallwalls at the Market Arcade
Films & Arts Center in conjunction with
Beyond/In Western NY 2005

I'd like to say thank you to Joanna and to the curators from the Beyond/In WNY biennial. It's exciting to be able to bring this work to Buffalo and so this feels like a special occasion for a couple of reasons. This is a cycle of nine films that I've been working on since 1996 and now the first four of those nine are done and tonight is the first time that they'll all be shown together. I think there's about nine more years of work and five more films. It's significant for that reason. I know that many people here tonight have seen some of those films over the years, but for people that don't know what all this is about: these are nine films all of which take as a point of departure a volume from the library of William Byrd of Westover who was living in Virginia during the early part of the 18th century and among other things that he is noted for, he collected the largest personal library of anyone in the colonies. He had about 4000 books. And he organized them according to his own scheme; he made sense of them in a very particular way. He died in 1744. After his son's death in 1777 the library was auctioned off and a number of the books were bought by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's books later went to the government to form the basis for what is now the Library of Congress collection. I'm interested in the Byrd collection as a site for the transfer of European intellectual, religious, scientific, philosophical thought to North America



All of the films take a book as a point of departure. I'm interested in those books and in William Byrd, his daughter Evelyn Byrd and certain events in the life of that family. The films are also explorations in a biographical sense, in a historical sense of that time and that family. They are also all films about different manifestations of division. Division of landscape; division of objects; division of people across time and space; the categorization of knowledge; the division of labor that existed in Virginia and most of the colonies in the early 18th century and the way that can be envisioned in plantation architecture; the line between life and death, between knowing and not knowing.

The second reason I feel this is a significant place to bring this work is because I always associated Hollis Frampton with Buffalo. Frampton's work has been deeply important to my own thinking, his films certainly but perhaps more than that, his writing. It makes me very happy to bring this work to a place where Frampton spent so much time.

Thirdly, I'm a little overwhelmed with the people who are here right now and the distances people have traveled from Boston, and New York, and Toronto, and Detroit, and Ithaca, Syracuse... all sorts of places. Some of you know I'm a little bit under the weather right now and had a turning point in Toronto a few weeks ago at the Images Festival, and it's great to see so many people from Toronto again in such short order. I feel really blessed I have such a good community of people in Ithaca where I live, and such strong support. I have fantastic students there and that is one of the things that keeps me going as a filmmaker, that keeps me thinking, active, enthusiastic and inspired about cinema.

One of the other things that keeps me going these days is knowing that this work has, and I hope can continue to participate in, a conversation. I feel lucky to have been able to show it as often and to as many people as I have.

There are a lot of people who have made this possible. There is one person in particular who has been consistently interested in, advocated for and supported this work and has shown all over the world and so for that reason would like to dedicate tonight's screening to Mark McElhatten. I'm very happy that he can be here tonight.

There will be slight pauses between the films; we don't want them to run together too much. We're going to look at the films in a different order than how I made them; this is a series of films made out of order. The first is *Secret History of the Dividing Line* that's about 30 minutes and it was made in 2002 and then we'll go to the *Great Art of Knowing* and that's a 2004 film and it's 37 minutes long; the third one is *Moxon's Mechanical Exercises*, that's 30 minutes from 1999 and then we'll end with a film from 2001 called the *Enjoyment of Reading*, and that's about 18 minutes.

(screening)

Q: Can you describe to us what films five through nine are going to be?

DG: The fifth film is based on a book by Robert Boyle called *Occasional Reflections on Certain Subjects*, and that is very much Evelyn's film. I think there's a trajectory in these first four pieces, from the expedition led by William Byrd to the introduction of Evelyn in the second film (*Moxon's Mechanical Exercises*). Although she's never addressed, it's Byrd's way of thinking about her. She gets it all in number five because that's the centre of the nine and she's where I identify. I'm interested in William Byrd, in his library, the things he wrote, the things he did, but the emotional center belongs to Evelyn and I. Then moving back out, *Plume Volant, or The Flying Pen* is the basis for number six. That book is a manual of shorthand that William Byrd used to devise his own short hand code which he used to write his secret diary which was not actually deciphered and translated until 1929. That film will be



about surreptitious communication, about secret languages, Evelyn and Charles' love letters, and William Byrd's secret diary. Then we go back to the expedition. I spent a month one summer actually trying to find the old dividing line, using secret texts, old maps and contemporary ones, trying to find the 57 locations listed in the appendix of the secret history of the dividing line and then film at each one, and that process is still incomplete. I filmed at 42 of those 57 locations. The dividing line, the border, has actually moved about 30 miles to the north since 1728. Virginia keeps getting smaller throughout history, all of the East coast used to be Virginia and it has slowly been whittled down. There will be people in that film, and sound. Color is introduced in this last one, the next film is predominantly in color, then sound gets introduced in six, people come in, in seven with sound in a big way. Eight is *Half Penny's Principles of Architecture*, that was a book about how to design your plantation so that's the image that I'm using to talk about slavery. I'm particularly interested in those spaces that were the liminal spaces: the

kitchen, the stables that were used by both whites and blacks—and where those boundaries existed and where they did not, and how the actual architecture played into that. The last one is the ghost story film: *The Ecstatic Heavenly Journey* which is about Charles and Evelyn and their affair and its outcome.

Q: It's such an amazing project and so well researched. But how you see it as cinematic?

DG: Right, why is this not a book? I'm certainly interested in the graphic nature of the printed word but I'm also interested in the rhythms of speech and music. In cinema I am dealing with graphic elements which exist in time. The fact that you're reading at a pace I determine means that you can read more or less at any given moment. I want to give and take in this process of presenting material. I'm hoping that keeps the suspense up; that you don't always get it all and that things will accumulate. In the broadest sense, that's why.

When I started this process I didn't know what I was doing. I had been making what I think of as landscapes that are actually greatly magnified cement splices made with a misaligned splicer. I had been thinking a lot about Agnes Martin's work, and I was just tearing pieces of leader and splicing them back together. Then I saw a footnote referencing the dividing line and the secret history of the dividing line and thought ahh! I'm going to steal that title. Splices are important divisions for cinema, I was thinking completely formally about defined durations. But I thought if I'm going to steal this for my title, I should at least go and look it up and see what it means. This was the summer of 1996. I went to the library thinking I was going to be there for an hour and it's been nine years.

I first encountered texts about the expedition which mapped out the dividing line between Virginia and its neighboring states. I was in graduate school and knew that I was supposed to be making films but I was putting that off and going to the library. For two years I did this,

without making anything really. I got interested in Byrd's library then became really interested in Evelyn, and her story. She was his oldest daughter, and in 1723 she was taken to England to receive her formal education. There she met and fell in love with Charles Mordant, who was the grandson of the 3rd Earl of Peterborough. William Byrd eventually found out about this and it was a disaster because Lord Peterborough was his main political rival in England at the time, and the Peterboroughs were Catholic and the Byrds were a good New World Protestant family. So, when he found out about this he shipped her back to Virginia. And there she refused all suitors, it turns out that between 1726 when she came back and 1735 she carried on a secret transatlantic correspondence with Charles Mordant, with letters carried back and forth by people on ships, sometimes only a letter a year. I was very interested in their relationship that existed only through text and took place over time.



In 1735 Mordant traveled to the colonies under a false name, infiltrated Virginia society, contacted Evelyn and made plans to elope. They booked passage on a ship with the help of William Byrd's secretary who it turns out was also in love with Evelyn, and ended up betraying them. Charles was tied up on the ship, while Evelyn was prevented from getting to it. The ship was lost at sea and everyone died.

Her best friend was Ann Harrison, the very young wife of the owner of a neighboring plantation, and they used to walk—there's this wonderful description of their walk along the borders of their two plantation in this grove of trees, and the story goes that they had made a promise: that whoever died first would attempt to come back and contact the other person and try to let them know what it was like on the other side. In the spring of 1737, following Charles' death, Evelyn wrote to Ann Harrison that she was too heart broken to go on, that she was sure that she would die but that she would keep her promise and try to come back to her friend. Two weeks later she died, though the records show no illness. The cause of death was heart failure. She was twenty nine. The following spring in 1738 marked the first of seventeen recorded sightings of the ghost of Evelyn Byrd, on or around the estate of Westover. She appeared first to her friend Ann Harrison. She's now a fairly well known Virginia ghost, you can read about her in various books. It took me two years to piece all of this together. I didn't know what I was doing, I didn't know it was a film at first.

I was moving and taking things down off the wall in a small apartment in Chicago. There was lots and lots of stuff on the wall, including a photocopy of a lithograph that had been given to me by a teacher showing a woman turning away and her hands sort of dissolving. My undergrad instructor had shown this one day in class while discussing the myth of the handless maiden, and I had really loved the image and I think Joanna knew that and ended up giving me this photocopy. I put it up on the wall and said, oh, that's Joanna's handless maiden. But taking it down from the wall and

packing it up I found written on the back the title of the piece that had been on my wall for these seven years. "Evelyn Byrd, the Ghost of Westover." I'd been researching her for the last two years and at that point I felt that I'm a filmmaker so this would become a movie. Then I found the things I was interested in, in terms of cinema and language and reading and graphics and music. All of that followed from this contact.

Q: Susan Howe is very present in your work. Maybe you could talk a little about that.

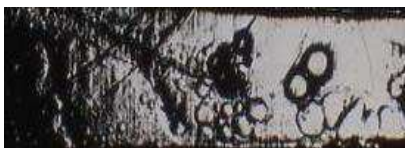
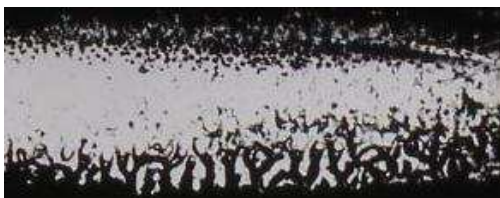
DG: Absolutely. Like Frampton's writing I've found her writing to be not only inspirational but instructive. She is someone who works with text as image and is deeply engaged in American history. She even has a book that's called *Secret History of the Diving Line*, which is mostly about her father and the book he wrote about Oliver Wendell Homes, but there are seven or eight lines of Byrd in there. I was certainly thinking and reading from her about translation when I was making *Moxon's Mechanical Exercises*.

Mike Zyrd: Seeing these four films together, I think that three contained references to Robinson Crusoe.

DG: Good, excellent! Yes, that's correct, and there will be more. God, how did you see all three, that's fantastic, it's so quick in one of them. I will reveal no more. That's one of the things I've been dropping in and you're the first person to pick up on them. Not much is known about the ship wreck obviously except that no one came back. But I have some ideas about that, so Crusoe is going to play a part.

Q: Could you say a little about gaining access to Byrd's collection and how that happened?

DG: It's been surprisingly easy. The collection as such doesn't exist anymore. The objects are dispersed but records remain which preserve the collection as an idea. In 1958 there was an article published in *The Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* by a man who spent ten years of his life trying to find Byrd's



books and this article details his search. He started with the auction of 1781 that you see the announcement for in the second film, and followed the paper trails as far as he could get. Out of the 4000 volumes he had actually located, by 1958, 400 of them. And in subsequent years, before his death, he found 200 more and ascertained that at least 1200 more were destroyed in fires. A couple of years ago a book came out that reprinted the entire Stretch catalogue with all 4000 volumes in it—it's an incredible work of scholarship, a bibliography of sorts that lists all of the known information on each of these 4000 volumes using the 1958 article as a basis. So I had a place to start, I knew where the 600 extant books were located and many of them are in Virginia at the Virginia Historical Society, many of them are in Philadelphia in various locations, particularly at the Antiquarian Society, at the Philosophical Society, surprisingly at the Pennsylvania Hospital Library in Philadelphia. At some point, 75 of the books went right there. So I just contacted these institutions and asked if I could come and film. I explained what the project was and everyone has been incredibly nice. There have been various levels of concern over the material. In some places you have to wear white gloves, and require supports and only the curators touch them and they stand right there while I set up the camera. In other places they just bring them right out; actually at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia where I was working with the oldest and most fragile stuff, they set them right on the table, I could take them anywhere in the building. A conservator came around occasionally to see what was I doing but they let me set it up. I sat and waited for six hours for the light to be right. People have been great. I think that people in libraries who are working with these old books are so excited and bewildered that someone is making a movie about them, that they become very enthusiastic and take some ownership in the project also. So much of my work is studio bound and it's by myself and I really like people, I'm not trying to get away from people in my studio—so I love the chance to go out and actually have these interactions.

In Virginia there was one particularly fragile book that they bring out only once every five years because they don't want it exposed to light. I did the shot and gave them the book back, then realized I was shooting Tri-X but I had left the 85B filter in, so it was the wrong exposure. It was critical to *The Enjoyment of Reading* so I actually went back to the counter and asked, "Can I have that back one more time?" They checked it out to me again so now that book can't be checked out for ten years.

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about why you chose to show them in the order you chose to tonight?

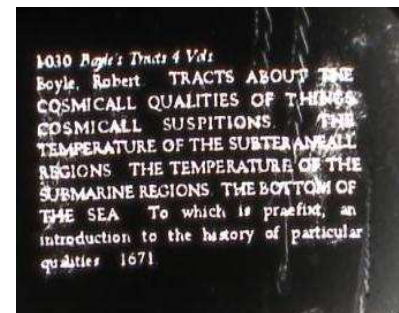
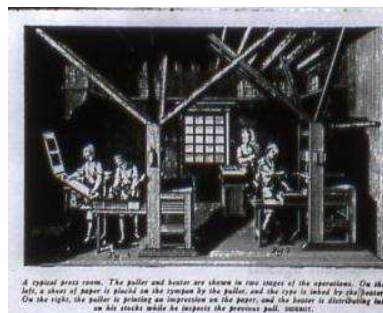
DG: I hope that the information unfolds and accumulates in a certain way. I'm interested in moving back and forth between the films which convey very specific information and the films which are dealing with more formal and conceptual things about reading and not being able to read. I'm hoping that you continue moving to different places even as things reoccur. I do think that this a narrative project. I would say that it is largely a non-fiction project but I believe there is a story, I'm trying to tell a story. And so I do have an idea about what order I want the story to be told in.

Reanimation is significant in these films. Taking things that are still and making them move again is important and I think that's an idea about history in general. How do you deal with history, how do you make it present? *The Great Art of Knowing* is a film about trying to reach back and contact something that is dead and make it alive again. Finding that bird on the lawn was really important. I had already started working on the Leonardo Codex of birds, and was interested in birds and the Byrd family, bringing the Byrds back to life. Using the image of the bird and trying to reanimate it on film so that it's flying again was really important. The idea of the after life; that's why I feel the order has to be *The Great Art of Knowing* followed by *Moxon's Mechanical Exercises*, a film that's looking at the Bible but it's also the Gospels. Again trying to pull something back up. And then by the time we get to *Enjoyment of Reading* Charles and Evelyn are alive again and we're going to get their story.

I think that's a highly dispersed answer to your question—there's logic for me and I'm curious to know the many logics that could be derived from the sequence of these films.

Q: As you make each film, do you find the others are giving you more ideas and making it easier to continue to make these films?

DG: I have tried not to think too far ahead, and not to map this out too specifically because I don't want to end up executing a plan. And so far, I've been able to make the films in a way in which I'm able to respond to things that are in my life. I consider them, even though highly veiled, highly autobiographical films. I didn't know why I was making *Great Art of Knowing*, a film about separation from someone you love, and death, because I was very happy. I have a better understanding of that film now than when I made it. While I know what the five films are that are coming next, I think that there is enough room for me to respond to whatever is going on here (points to himself) and find that in the film. That's part of the reason the films have been made out of order: I'm not positive which I will finish next. I'm well into three of them, but we'll see which one of them catches hold this summer. I'm trying to preserve the ability to respond; I also have made other films that are not Byrd related, and I'm into three other things now that are not Byrd related, so that allows me to not feel constrained by the overall project. I've also given myself a lot of time. I have until 2028 to finish the series because that will be the 300th anniversary of the dividing line expedition, so there's time in there. I hope to be done in ten years, but there's time.



Hand Cranked:

A Conversation with filmmaker Lee Krist

by Alex Mackenzie

Alex MacKenzie: Maybe we can start off by discussing your body of work and how hand cranked material fits into it. Is this a natural progression from other pursuits?

Lee Krist: My use of a hand cranked camera originated in my current experimentations with making photographic emulsions. I hand process all of my films so I gradually got more and more interested in photochemistry. Having a chemistry lab at my disposal was also a big asset. But the 35mm hand crank route was a result of needing to work with a durable, large format film camera that could basically pass anything and everything through its gate. In addition to the long exposure, my hand cranked camera allowed me the technical capabilities to pursue making my own film stock.

AM: You have been making films since you were sixteen. What initially turned you on to this medium? Is your family background an artistic one?

LK: I always wanted to be a painter. I have very poor hand-eye coordination, so the fine



arts were tough for me. I think what really turned me onto film as opposed to video was the fact that you could shake the camera, do stop motion and it wouldn't look as nauseating as it would on video. My family isn't artistic—good food, but no art.

AM: Are you in communication with anyone else creating their own emulsions, or is this entirely your domain?

LK: I hear bits and pieces about people doing similar things. But it's mostly second hand news. I know many people have tried it, but I am quite unaware of the extent of their photochemical achievements.

AM: Could you speak a bit more about the actual creation of film emulsion? How does that work exactly (okay, not exactly, but generally...)?

LK: Well, to simplify it, all you have to do is sensitize silver and have it properly suspended on a surface. Something that I have yet to successfully achieve. If I were a photographer, my life would be so easy.

AM: I understand that you work at a film lab and that it was a dream of yours to pursue this. Does the content of lab contracts (commercial work) matter to you, or is it the process itself that takes precedent? How much are you keeping this job to have access to lab chemicals and how much do you really love it?

LK: I like working with film; touching it, handling it in a very inhuman way. I'm not into it for the chemical perks, it holds a special craft appeal, like I'm preparing for the future. I don't really have to deal with people or if I do they are just students. The only troublesome things about the job are the environmental and carcinogenic elements.

AM: Your films seem very personal, intimate and fascinated by a closed system of elements. How do the subject of your films and the

LK: Wow! I really like the closed system of elements metaphor. It's a good euphemism for what I do. For the portrait series, the subject matter was very grounded in the technical situation that I was in. My work was previously comprised of landscape and abstract imagery. I was paralyzed by the idea of shooting on precious and time consumptive stock. So the most logical approach was to film things that were personally.

AM: I like that both the film stock and the film subject become sacred. It seems that both the technical and the conceptual spring from limitations inherent in the medium: economics, durability, etc. Do you find the limitations inspiring, even necessary?

LK: For me it's not the limitations themselves that are inspiring but my personal response to them: the attempt to work and struggle within the confines of a specific situation and achieve personal satisfaction with the results, as if it was my original intention.

AM: How important is the necessary "in-person" element to your presentations? Is it exciting, disconcerting, primary? Is this as much a part of the "piece" as the making of it?

LK: It is one of those unexpected surprises that you don't think you would like until you experience it. It has enriched my life tenfold. It drew me out of the hermetic filmmaking mode that is quite rampant in experimental work. It's nice to bring things to basics and be able to show people your films as an extension of yourself and the life that surrounds you. It makes the experience of being an artist more tangible.

AM: How specifically performative is your work? Do you integrate the projector set-up in the audience somehow? How much do you think the audience is watching you instead of your work and is that okay with you?

LK: I feel my work could be more performative. Right now, it's at the simple "show people your films" stage. I try and set myself up in the middle of an audience. That way it doesn't feel like everyone is watching me and it makes me less nervous. I'm okay with people watching me crank instead of paying strict attention to my films because when you think about it, how many times do people get to watch someone hand crank a projector? It's reassuring to see the combination of the two.

AM: You choose to work with these limited tools and so are inspired by your responses to them, but you actually set up these limitations in the first place. If you had, for example, chosen the video medium, this wouldn't come up. Nor would you be pursuing anything resembling what you are doing with your work now. It seems you are making a very conscious decision to limit yourself in a very specific way. I guess it leads back to that question of responsibility and the role of serendipity or chance-results when you create work. Could you speak about that?

LK: I don't see responsibility and serendipity as being necessarily bi-polar.

AM: I agree, they are not opposite ends of the spectrum. I'm still curious about the drive you feel when creating work. Do you experiment with a "who knows what will happen next" attitude, achieve certain results and then refine? Or do you seek out something very specific, get results and refine? Or keep trying until you get what you want? How much is chance and how much planning?

LK: I have very specific visual intentions for my films, I aim at perfection but what happens is another story. If I ever got what I want I'm not so sure I would be pleased with it. In terms of my work structure, I tend to have a more pseudo-scientific process. I don't get specific with certain projects but I do have a general intent that provides me with various results that I couldn't repeat if I wanted to.

AM: Could you explain The Big Film Cycle? Are there more than one?

LK: The Big Film Cycle is just a name for the series of 35mm films that I present. At present it encompasses five films and will include more films upon their completion. I prefer to think of it as a series. I'm not quite sure how the cycle came to be. I think Stephen [Stephen Kent Jusick, New York based curator] wrote it up that way for the Daily News. I prefer it were called Big Film.

AM: Given the form and technique involved, how concerned are you about the preservation of the films you make? Do you see them as having a limited life cycle and ephemeral in nature or do you see preservation as important/necessary? Are the films you present reversal or do you make prints?

LK: I'm concerned enough to panic about only having and showing originals but not enough to do anything about it. Everything I present is camera originals. And the first few scratches hurt but after a while it just becomes a choice you have to make: show films or save them. I should make prints, but if being a printer at a lab has taught me anything, it's that when it comes to making prints there is no such thing as exact mechanical reproduction. It would be so hard just to get the various exposures right, let alone the hand processed colors. That leaves me with the film originals. I guess it gives the films an ephemeral quality that is not usually present in most work. They aren't going to last, but they might as well go out with a bang then as vinaigrette. I can imagine a time for restoration later, though the purpose wouldn't necessarily be to reproduce the work per se, but to partially capture some form of it for later recollection.

AM: I'm interested in the "dead media" qualities of your work. Do you feel that label references your work? And to what extent are the technical apparatus that we use changing? Or is it just the way we receive and process information that is changing?

LK: I feel that my work is very much located in the present and is involved in a discourse that questions how we use certain technologies and our relationship to them. And I feel this relates to questions concerning my transgender identity.

AM: I agree with you that the use of so-called outmoded technologies is not a harkening back to the past, but rather a way of examining the present, a reaction to the modes of information processing available to us today. I've worked with super-8 cartridge projectors not because they are hip retro items, but because they do what I need them to do, which is to create filmic images that I can quickly switch between without having to reload projectors. While this is now possible with videodisc technology, it is not possible economically. And so in a way both you and I are reacting to economics at a certain level too, obviously in combination with aesthetic interests.

As with much of the successful experimental work out there, I believe your work challenges the viewer/audience to reconsider what is a "good" image and how "standards" are in fact an economic ploy and cop out. But I particularly like that your work exists outside of this realm and, far from being a reaction, actually exists on its own terms (which is far more interesting) while creating discourse. I am curious to know how much gender issues play into your work and how you feel about the pigeonholing of work that is "gay", "queer" or "transgendered" in festivals which base content on sexual orientation. How does your trans identity affect or inform your work?

LK: In terms of the pigeonholing of certain work, this just creates a queer ghetto that no one wants you to get out of. While those structures of queer film festivals are vital in challenging the dominance of heteronormative experience in film, it is vital that we go further: in addition to questioning the messages in media's representation of society, also question the medium itself and how we use it. I find it interesting to explore ideas of how my trans identity and experience informs the way in which I process information and how it

affects my aesthetic sensibility and the overall imagery of my work. For me it feels that "normal" ie mainstream filmic or even narrative forms of film just don't do it for me in terms of capturing the whole "what it's like to be alive" thing. Many attempts at presenting life experiences on film are just too stifling. I find the majority of experimental films stifling in their specificity when they address issues of gender and sexuality. It puzzles me the extent to which people feel that these issues can be easily translated into information that can be processed. In my work I try and let things speak for themselves. And while I find it hard to articulate the queer elements of my work, they are there.

AM: With regards to your transgender identity, do you see the struggle you have with identifying the queer elements of your work as part of a greater problem, that there is no recognized language to put these questions into?

LK: Films that deal with queer matters in implicit, subtle ways are still hard to cope with. Queer subject matter is readily identifiable, but in terms of aesthetic sensibility, or autobiography, audiences are reluctant to locate it. Usually people take the easy way out and try to ignore it and place the work in a very heteronormative context. This has certainly brought to light the way in which people approach my films.

AM: Could this tension be the driving force behind your work? Is your work an attempt to invent this language?

LK: Yes, my work is part of a drive to invent an appropriate filmic language. One that correlates with my experience of the world. Right now I feel rather comfortable in my current style. My previous work was much more abstract. Now I feel that I have achieved a pretty good balance between abstract and documentary imagery.

AM: Can you tell me about some work out there—queer or otherwise—that speaks to you?

LK: In terms of queer work I have recently begun looking into the work of Roger Jacoby. He made a lot of hand-processed film in the seventies. Unfortunately he died very early in the AIDS epidemic. Outside of his contemporaries, Jacoby's work is not that widely known. I personally have seen only bits and pieces, but I can personally relate to his approach to hand processing. I look forward to studying his work....

(4 years pass)

AM: It has been a while Lee, what have you been up to lately?

LK: The film I am currently working on is called *Tableaux Vivant*, which is French for group tableau. I don't know French, it was a random dictionary fortune that I received on my birthday quite some time ago. I've exhibited filmstrips from this body of work in an installation of the same name. It's still in the shooting phase. The film is a return to the landscape imagery of my previous work, but also expanding the notion of portraiture. I am interested in working with imagery that explores the relationship between self and place. My work is getting more and more autobiographical.

AM: In your earlier portrait works, this self/place idea is also very present. Could you talk about your autobiographical approach?

LK: I view all art as autobiographical regardless of its subject matter, so for me the question is how best to achieve the level of autobiography I want the piece to have. It's something that continually shifts in my work. In the case of landscapes, my primary focus is to meditatively engage with spaces of great beauty. This provides me with endless fuel to go through the parts of life that aren't as sweet. When I work in portraiture it's more of an exercise in self-

forgetting, stumbling attempts to relate to people through my work. AM: Why your recent gallery installation approach to exhibition?

LK: *Tableaux Vivant* as a film installation arose out of wanting to show my friends in Portland, Oregon what I was working on but not being able to project the work for them. I was offered the space and opportunity to do a film installation in town. I wanted to show people how I work with film mainly as a transparency. I rarely project my work while creating it. I mainly view it by hanging it in front of my windows. So the installation is a recreation of my experience with the film. It is very basic: just filmstrips hanging from a pole illuminated by a film projector playing a loop of black flicker. So when you view the filmstrips there is this black flicker in the background, replicating the moment of blackness that occurs in film projection, but also referencing memory and the idea that these images come out of the blackness of memory.

AM: I know you are planning on step printing some of your past works so that they can be presented on conventional 35mm projection equipment (ie not hand cranked). Has the in-person presentation of your work become less of a priority?

LK: As an artist I'm trying to do new things with my work, and to be honest, I'm tired of hand cranking my films, lugging myself around the country, the technical hassles of working with a non-standard projector... I'm tired of the obscurity my work has because I can't engage in the same channels of exhibition as other experimental filmmakers. I want to do new things and I don't feel that desire conflicts with



the aesthetics of my past work. The Big Film Cycle is arriving at a slow but steady conclusion. While I am still exhibiting the work, in terms of production I still have to finish up one or two portraits that have been left undone. The performative aspect of the screenings are part blessing and part hardship as with most things in life.

AM: Does this flexibility speak to a desire for a many-versioned body of work?

LK: Yes, I would love to have that option, to have my work available to screen without my presence in the same manner as Jack Smith's work or Peggy Ahwesh's Pittsburgh Trilogies.

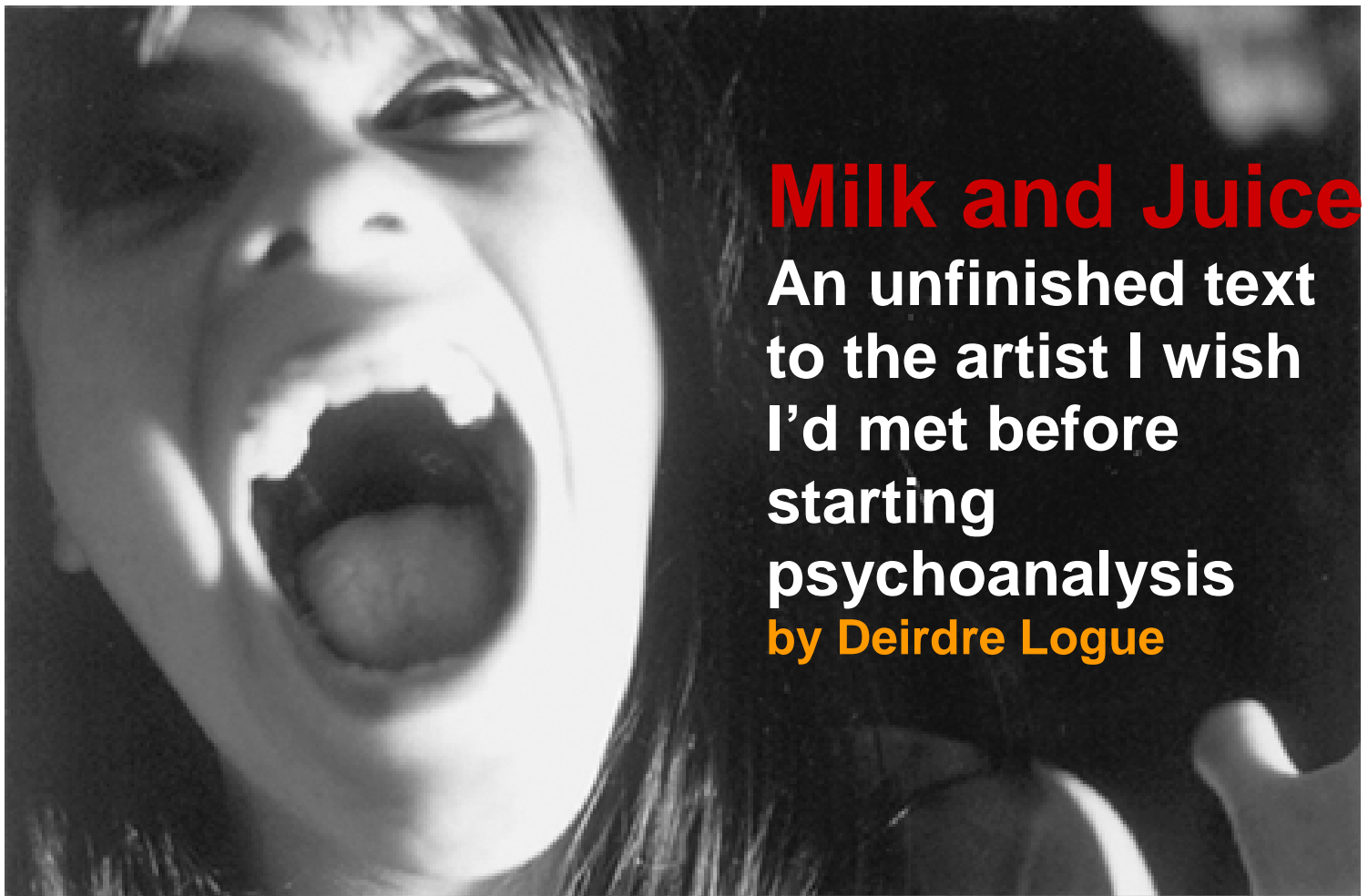
AM: As serendipity and chance inevitably play into the presentation of "live" work, what determines your choices in the step-printing process?

LK: My main challenge will be the replication of motion and how to accurately reproduce the color and texture of the hand processing. I don't feel it's a compromise because I think of these prints as documenting my work. While they will have a life of their own, they will not be exact replicas, I look forward to the opportunity to creatively fashion the material in a new form. My ideas on how this will be achieved will become more apparent once I start the process and explore the tools. That said, I don't think anything could be as sacred as the originals. At this preliminary stage, the aspect that I find the most exciting is finally being able to watch my work projected on a big screen.

AM: We spoke in the past about the ephemeral nature of this work, the fact that originals are being projected and decomposed while they're being shown. With this move to duplicate prints, has your interest in legacy and/or preservation shifted?

LK: The idea to duplicate my work came about through an offer from the LIFT (Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto) film co-operative to use their newly acquired Oxberry camera. Up until that point the execution of such a project was not on my horizon because I did not have or fathom access to equipment that would allow me to preserve my work. I don't feel that it is a shift since I still work on and project reversal films. Ever since I began making films my primary focus was to create a working method that would allow me to make films without any financial restrictions. As an artist, when I confront the choice of what film stock and processing method to use, I am continually drawn to the reversal process. I feel that the quality of reversal stock is unparalleled and—compared to negative—I just enjoy processing reversal more.





Milk and Juice

An unfinished text
to the artist I wish
I'd met before
starting
psychoanalysis
by Deirdre Logue

Just One Look:

After my first viewing of the three-disc Video Data Bank compilation *Pistolary: Films and Videos* by Peggy Ahwesh, I felt something unexpected: urgency. I start looking for her in her movies. I want to see what she looks like. I start stopping the DVDs here and there to examine the faces of her performers. Maybe I will catch her reflection in the eyes of that one woman with the microphone, the microphone she threatens to shove up her ass. I start to speculate. Is she the crying baby mommy, feeding from the wild, articulate Martina? Is she the one who hears the police that never come, the warrior that doesn't stand a chance in the cardboard forest, or the quiet one, the one who cuts her lover's throat.?

I know she is there, in every shot, on every dirty plate, in the bathroom grout, spiraling under fingernails.

I feel jealous. Jealous of the severed hand that gets to touch and all the gambling and booze, I want to be the one who can fight off vultures and bad dogs with a simple foil knife. I want to be loved by the misbehaved and to fuck on the floor with my socks, shoes and glasses on. I want to be the hotel rooms that get loved by the lost, all the dead that get buried and Peggy Ahwesh's glass eye—the one without a lid.

Cat's Ass:

Much has been eloquently and articulately said about the naughty richness of Peggy Ahwesh's movies. I had seen and read a little so when watching some of her most celebrated works, I knew this politically charged and often controversial artist was responsible for delivering something new. She is after all Pittsburgh's most rambunctious, sexy punk rock tomb raider. So I expected to see things I hadn't seen before, and I did. I expected there

might be times when I felt uncomfortable, unsettled, and I was. I expected the dark, the smoke, the white-hot. I was seduced. It was hypnotic, all consuming, addictive. And she pushed me right up close up to the image, even when things were painful. She gets me so close, closer than I can stand, and she never cuts too tight or rushes me through the room. No shot ever seems unfinished.

She gives me colour, composition, abstraction, glitter and T-Rex. She gives me time to swallow. Ahwesh gives me permissions, allows for my seepage and slippage. She gives us all enough space so that everybody that wants to be a baby for the movie gets to be a baby for the movie. She gives us milk and juice. And it's more than I can take at first; she makes you feel like it's a gift, she pushes you up against the wall and then it's where you feel you should be. It's scary but it's only a puppet, a performance, the real and the fantastic co-exist. Once the performance is recognized you get to cross the line with her.

Whose house is this, whose party is this?

With her special Pixelvision, Ahwesh is experimenting with us. Wind blows backwards across the toy camera's ears, oranges are grey, apples white. There are dangerous gifts. Someone haunts this corpse's night. In strange weather, sadness comes ashore and so the paranoid take to higher ground, making a run for Heaven's Gate. They are tougher than I am, with their popsicles and pistols. They smoke crack while they wait. Maybe I should have waited too. It's what brings us to the couch, it's what makes our shoulders hurt, the lack of this event, the hurricane that never comes. It gives me time to construct a face like Peggy Ahwesh, the artist I wish I'd met before starting psychoanalysis.





Experience Torn to Shreds/Experiments From the Granary, Vincent Grenier, A Retrospective

by Mike Cartmell

...two world wars, totalitarianisms of the right and left, massacres, genocides, and the Holocaust—have already signified (if one can still speak meaningfully) an experience torn to shreds, one impossible to put back together. It also points out the failure of the “I think”... doing its utmost, to reassemble the fantastic images of the real into a world. A defeat experienced not so much as a contradiction or failure of philosophical audacity, but already, as a cosmic catastrophe, like that mentioned in Psalm 82.5: “All foundations of the earth are shaken.” Emmanuel Levinas

dream delivers us to dream

As in a dream, I remember one warm summer night in Chicago, a few years ago. It was near dusk, Vincent Grenier and I sat on his porch

drinking a beer and chatting. And through the gaps between the buildings in front of us could be seen heard felt a large urban intersection, the confluence of several busy streets, the frequent blare of car horns and vocal chords, the palpable swelter of city heat. (I give these details in hopes of delivering to the reader an oneiric picture.) Slung crazily on the façade of a bank, an electronic sign blipped its version of time and temperature, each serenely inaccurate. The sign then, and its memory now, put me in mid of Lacan's account of a similar scene in 1966, his description of Baltimore in the early morning as “the best image to sum up the unconscious.” During our conversation, Vincent told me of his admiration for Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, and the importance it holds for his own work.

that cryptic might

Testament of fracture, fractured testimony; fragments of witnessing and the bearing of witness. I invoke this picture that it might lie, encrypted, in the back of the reading I take here, and that it might come to animate (privately, secretly) that difficult circulation between viewers and films that we can call a cinematic reading (vision, but also scrutiny; hearing, but also listening: to witness.) A reading which, in Blanchot's words, "is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty—at bottom it doesn't exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend." And with anguish, a certain grief.

I grieve that grief can teach me nothing

But it is the process that is crucial. Precisely the experience, it we understand this word etymologically as trial or test, a perilous crossing. Grenier's films experiment with the experience of others, their difficult acts of memory or let us say, remembering; gathering together the errant fragments of something that was, that will not be again, and rearticulating them (that is, in speech) as members of something else, something that is. Or better, that will be.

the capital exception

I will say that the singularity of Grenier's approach lies first in its refusal to accord any transparency to the presentations of the speakers, or to the cinematic (re)presentations of their speech. For the making of these films is also a rearticulation, a speaking of experience; and the same sorts of obscurely potent and embedded particularities that make, for each one of us, the peculiar drift of our speaking peculiarity our own, constrain the maker too, and so the work. The second mark of exception would be that these complications pertain to the experience of the viewer as well.

I do not make it; I arrive there

So that the notion of the maker as intentional, deliberate, mastering comes to be tempered (at the very least) by the perils (accidental, spontaneous, unmasterable) of his own experience. (I think of Lacan's account of his theoretical procedure in Seminar XI: "I do not seek, I find.") What's available is gathered up, put to the test, subjected to experiment by one who is himself in process, on trial. (Perhaps he could say, with Melville's Ishmael: "I am the architect, not the builder.") And the work takes shape, and shape again in the shaping of each viewer who risks a leap.

In this our talking America

They are talking, everywhere and always, about loss. In *I.D.* Joanne has lost her job (perhaps her dignity); Milton's parents have lost their home and possessions, and he his breath; Steve recounts Harpo's death (and where is his brother Sean?); Gayle talks about the Prisoner who has lost his name. Lisa's story in *You* is of a failed love affair, and Dan in *Out in the Garden* has lost his future. What is remarkable is the powerful passivity with which they speak in the face of loss, the passion not only of what they say, but of how they say it, how they behave as they speak. They all perform a labor, let's say a work of mourning. The losses of which they speak amount finally to loss of self, and this labor of speaking, this coming to terms with loss becomes an effort to find oneself again, to remember oneself.

where do we find ourselves?

Precisely at a loss, and everywhere and always. Every recovery from loss is a gathering, through speech, of those scattered remnants which happen to hand, and which we sort through (as if to separate kernel from husk) and piece together as experience in which we find ourselves again, and anew. But every new experience of self risks new perils, and the price of recovery of self is the to

recover it again. The question “who am I?” can (must) only be answered again and again, and only partially, in fragments. Every finding of an answer entails its failure, and the question must be broached anew in a speaking (we could say, dialectic) that is not terminable.

All our blows glance, all our hits are accidents

I come back to Grenier’s approach. Blows (I mean the way the maker approaches) glance because they are observations, they bear witness. Hits (I mean the character of the observations, the cinematic articulation) are accidents because they are not essences. He finds what comes to hand, picks it up, uses it in his own (peculiar, particular) way. Take the amazing segment from *Out in the Garden* in which Dan’s face as he talks is reflected in (in a way, superimposed upon) a framed photograph that seems to be several decades old. The man depicted could be Dan’s father or grandfather, but he’s young in the photograph, younger than Dan, wears a collar and tie and a confident, maybe even smug, expression. Dan is speaking about being HIV positive, about how concerned people are, about the pity he reads in straight people’s faces, how they seem to confer a death warrant upon him, how he wishes they weren’t so concerned. His face (its reflection) is distorted by the imperfections of the glass in the photo frame. Sometimes the two faces seem to merge into a composite, sometimes one or the other grasps our attention. A stunning range of oppositions is set up: youth/middle-age; confidence as to the future/hopelessness in the lack of a future; a movement, in the past, toward the future (to be experienced)/a movement, in the present (now past) toward the past in search of experience (to be remembered, to be missed): paternity, engenderment, generation/filiation, non-engenderment, end of generation; straight/gay; clarity/distortion. (I am not being exhaustive.) All of this can be found in the found image/segment, but it finds no essential or

immanent meaning. It can be given (it gives itself) only and precisely to be read, and meaning can be conferred upon it only retroactively (and only inconclusively).

everything looks real and angular

This process (trial, test, experiment) of approach by indirection, as if taking an (accidental, not deliberate) angle on things, is relentless in these films. Dan almost never speaks on camera directly; Instead we see him hear him through a window which reflects the bare branches of a tree, as a shadow on a patio, in a mirror, and so on. In *I.D.*, Gayle speaks off-camera in the Prologue, Nadra is caught in extreme close-up (her hands, the back of her head), Steve is reflected in a mirror (or his reflection is blacked by his interlocutor). Milton talking about his parents is superimposed on Milton talking about his asthma attack, the two soundtracks competing for dominance. All of this angularity, this indirection requires that some direction through (let’s say, across) the film has to be found by the viewer in his or her own way, should that way be risked.

Like a bird which alights from nowhere

So many oddities of Grenier’s mode of cinematic articulation (call it a language, a way of speaking: I continue to insist) simply invite us to be struck (not a glancing blow, a hit!); I mean impressed, moved. In *You*, what seems to be a double image of Lisa swims and glitters on the surface of some ocean, as she tells the story of the Porsche driver with the baseball bat. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a stick emerges from the bottom of the image, and then two feet. The stick stirs the water and we have to rethink (re-experience?) what we’ve just seen (and what we’ve just heard?), and work out (is it possible?) what we’ve witnessed. Find something, lose it, refind (passively, passionately) something new again.

we thrive by casualties

Pushing this a bit further, this stunning double reflection of Lisa I mean, we can see (from this distance, retroactively, that is) how casually apt it is. There are two reflections, and there are two Lisas: she speaks (she remembers) and she writes (we know not what): there is Lisa now (she is speaking) and Lisa then (she is spoken). The displacement at work here is extensive: Lisa now (speaking) is Lisa then (being filmed) but also Lisa as she will always be (on film); but Lisa on film will never be apprehended fully the same way twice by any viewer. (The potential for vertigo is immense in trying to think this through.) Also doubled is the “you” to whom Lisa speaks, who is presumably her real ex-lover, but whose position, because of the pronoun, the viewer can’t avoid taking up to some extent. And with that identification comes the threatening aggressivity in Lisa’s address.

these beautiful limits

At the beginning of *You*, Lisa talks about her fear of going to the movies with “you” because of the danger of one of “your” excessive responses to people talking during the film. We see her partially hidden behind a large shaft that’s part of some sort of machinery, the cogs and wheels of which, and the flickering light in which it’s bathed, are suggestive of a movie projector. You (I mean you the viewer) are in fact at the movies, watching this film. Maybe somebody’s talking rudely nearby. Maybe you’d like to take a swipe at him. There are plenty of invitations in the film (and in the others) for identification, but also plenty of operations (non-synchronous sound, rapid cutting, bizarre images, aggressivity) which undermine it. What is crucial in these films that stress the absolute particularity (I’d even say the potential unintelligibility) of a person’s experience (and his or her means of speaking it) is their



as frequently blocked; the viewer can suffer (as a passion, I'll say) this blockage, will experience it as a loss, and can be changed by it; and the viewer can then return to the film to find a different articulation of the blockage or passage of identification in a process (trial, experiment, experience) potentially interminable. A dialectic, that is, which, in its itinerant circulation around the question of identity, exerts upon it (for viewer and maker both, I'd say) a destabilizing force.

we have not arrived at a wall, but an interminable oceans

Or, we must say with Blanchot, at "that marine infinitude which both buoys and engulfs." We are lost, we capsize, we meet the limit which would sublimely overwhelm us, but find ourselves anew again, recovered on board the devious-cruising bark of experience newly remembered: passage for another risky crossing.

I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture

In these remarks I've privileged Grenier's most recent films, his "talking pictures." While I'd be unwilling to propose any developmental saga, I can (sketchily) suggest some features of the early work that are pertinent to the late. The delicate luminous illusions tested in *While Revolved* and *Closer Outside* resurface in *I.D.* and *You*, reflecting the illusory identities at stake there. *Interieur Interiours* sets up a kind of feminine topology (of the fold, say: a kind of chiasmic crossover of inside with outside), a spatial erotics resonant with Lisa's doubled (maybe inverted) image in *You*, and with the use of superimposition in *I.D. World in Focus* opposes mapping, the finding of direction, to indirection (focal articulation), and suggests, through its investigation of the book, that finding oneself, one's place, has something to do with reading. More generally, the early films exhibit (uncannily) the uncanny domesticity so crucial to the later work.

ghostlike we glide

D'Après Meg foregrounds the uniqueness of human gestures as a pre-verbal mode of expression (call it a speaking). And I will say that *Time's Wake (Once Removed)* marks the transition to the "talkies" in its shifting from the domestic to the familiar (the family, but also the sense of ghostly companion: it is that sort of wake too). Composed of fragments of what seem to be "home movies", and using many of the formal elements of the work that succeeds it, *Time's Wake*, despite its silence, establishes a (ghostly) discourse inexorable and mournful in its drift as the icepack in the St. Laurence.

I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me

I cannot apologize for the personal, peculiar (not to say perverse) character of my remarks. My account has been of the work of my friend, my Vincent Grenier, as I experience, as I think and speak it and him. If has no authority but my meager own. If I have (perhaps unfashionably nowadays) made him Emersonian, it is because I read him as sharing the complex and ethical approach of Emerson's "Experience" to "this new yet unapproachable America." This approach, this experience (experiment), is mournful and recuperative and renewing; it is torn, in fragments; it shakes the foundations of the earth. (I could have spoken of its mystical character, risking everything.) It is nothing without its peril. Somebody's always liable to come after you with a baseball bat. We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them! If Vincent has a Hitchcockian cameo in his films, it can only be the masked and crazylimbed skater in *D'Après Meg*.

we dress our garden

So many gardeners in these films: Meg, Milton, Dan; even Lisa tends a watery garden. A

familiar (uncanny?) metaphor: Eden, America. A garden could also be a cemetery, or that wild growth that overruns the site where a concentration camp used to stand. We dig and dress, we prune and tend and cultivate; or we simply stand and mark the place, observing the grasses and wildflowers and the few remaining broken scorched bricks. Tending, attendance; a labor, a duty. And sometimes we can, as Vincent Grenier can, stoop down and separate the corn from the dross, gather it up and store it in the granary. Our sustenance over a hard winter. Our seed for spring.



(Mike Cartmell is a Canadian experimental filmmaker and writer, currently living in Ithaca)

“Simulacra: The End of the World” (tr. David Allison) in David Wood (ed.) *Writing the Future* London: Routledge, 1990 p. 12.

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The boldface headings of each of these paragraphs are extracted from Emerson's essay.



What Is Felt Cannot Be Forgotten

an interview with
Deborah Stratman

When she raises her camera, seeing is already thinking. Yes sure there is the raw delight in watching the light well up inside the body of the visible, but always these views are pointed (in the Roland Barthes sense of the punctum, they are sharp, they poke, they wound their viewer, which is her first of all, and then us.)

She has tried different kinds of making, there are documentaries about street racing in Chicago, a circus troupe in China, and found footage missives which take aim at a gendered divide, and more besides. She is not like a boy who casts the same variations of fingerprint again and again, and yet, at the same time, in all her work there is a quality of watchful attention, an outraged politic, an experience

lived through the body and searched out again through her camera double. It is only space constraints that keep us from presenting Deborah's loquacious, witty insights into each and every one of her movies, the real estate of the page permits discussion of only three. So I invite you to imagine the before and after tellings, as if arriving at the scene of an event which is already underway. We enter mid-stride, in the midst. A restless searching, an appetite for pictures without end.

MH: *On the Various Nature of Things* (25 minutes 1995) appears as a series of science riddles. Set in six parts (gravitation, magnetism, heat, cohesion, erosion and illumination) and narrated via the journals of Michael Faraday (1791-1867) (though self taught he was responsible for the magnetic field, the use of electricity and much more), your fragmented presentations present a series of audio visual puzzles, one quickly giving way to another. In "Gravitation" a fish is chopped while Faraday riffs about "power." Can you explain the upside down/motion picture dinosaur which follows this? And draw a connection between the underwater life, the unmade bed, and a cup thrown against an outdoor fire place (?) which is met by the sound of a canon going off, as if a whole pantry had been tossed. Are these all opposing instances of gravitation?

In "Heat" bees pollinate flowers while Faraday describes a melting block of ice. Why? There is a keen attention to light here, a jittery nervous camera plunges past a vast forest fire and city lights, what are these night fires, and why the hyperbolic camera stylings? In "Cohesion" you produce a flickering pan between a man holding a spinning globe and sheets of paper pinned to the ground. Are these the names attached to nature (which 'cover it up' so that it can't be seen?) In the closing chapter, Illumination, Faraday's stand-in remarks, "You see the screen remains dark," while you show us a white screen. Is this because overexposure is also a method of concealing, that light can be used to illuminate situations but also to mask and disguise?

DB: Faraday is one of my heroes. Along with his advances in the field of electromagnetism, he also developed the phenakistoscope, that cinematic forebear. It's one of those rotating cylinders with slots cut into it to which you peep through to see incremental images on the inside wall appear to move. He was interested in persistence of vision. If you've never had the occasion to read Faraday's populist lectures, I'd highly recommend them. They're funny, adroit and illuminating. I found a book transcribing his Christmas lectures at the library and was struck by the way he (or Science in general) sought to apply taxonomies to the chaotic conditions of everyday life in order to grasp them or make connections between phenomena. I thought, well here is a system I can appropriate for my film, because I was struggling at the time to reign in what was becoming a very unwieldy aggregation of footage.

I think the system I choose is equally matter of fact and totally absurd. There are many instances, some of which you point out, when the category of "Force" and concurrent footage are plainly at odds. And other times where a connection can be made, but only in an emotional or metaphorical sense. "Erosion" can allude to geography which succumbs to the elements, or a failing relationship. "Gravity" can speak to the attraction of objects to one another, or gravitas. All of the forces, in fact, are as poetic as they are scientifically specific. We are interned by these laws, they govern us, as Faraday says, and yet lyricism provides us a means of escape. I suppose that is the main theme of the film.

The film is filled with riddles, so it feels a bit like cheating to solve those that seem opaque. Like Raoul Ruiz, what interests me are the possibilities of misunderstandings between what is seen and what is said. But I'll have a go at a few... Holding a lens up to the image of the heavy dinosaur beast is a way to let him defy

gravity. The sequence in "Cohesion" with the globe-holder and paper-pinner is about the futility of giving names to things. Mapping and naming are not necessarily knowing, but there is a beauty in the way they work. When Faraday states that the screen remains dark, though we see a screen that is white, it points to the way overexposure can conceal, and prods us to question where truth lies. If we see one thing while being told another, what do we do? Why should we trust the voice of reason?

As for the hyperbolic camera work I was going through a phase where the camera accompanied me everywhere I went. Camera movements were Vertovian extensions of my body, or of my emotional state. I was cine-writing, enamored with the streaks and strobes and flares I was getting. When I think back about holding the camera then, it almost seems like I was divining. It makes me think of those Asian mediums who intuit messages by grasping small chairs that flail violently about as they cipher virtual characters on a surface. Like an overly aggressive ouija technique. I miss the naive trust I had in light and movement and intimacy then. It's something I'd like to try and get back to.

I think the film is both dark and joyful. It's a kitchen sink film, an encyclopedia of sorts, searching for a way to catalogue what I was seeing and hearing and wondering at. I was trying to be equally true to my intuitive grasp of the world, and that of Western science, and the cinematic apparatus itself. There are twenty four chapters as a nod to the constraints that film applies to time.

MH: *Untied* (3 minutes 2000) shows a tight rope walker (a theme you would take up four years later in *Kings of the Sky*) and then a man and a woman fighting, over and over. The found footage collage continues with a child lying (dead?), a man kissing a woman's hand, another couple fighting, seen through a door's

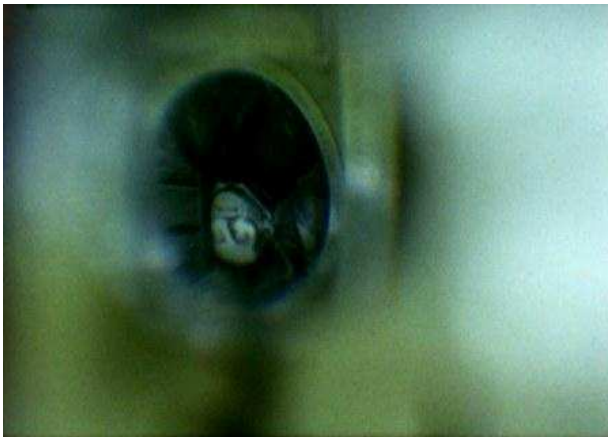


peephole. And then a flickering lampshade. The home is a war zone, the gender divide irreconcilable. The final enigmatic shot offers a sled skimming across the ice. Is there no hope?

DS: Hope. Lately it seems so last century. Gone the way of walking, like those Romantic poets who composed best at three miles per hour. Gone the way of politicians and newsmen who were ugly and could write their own speeches. Gone the way of real sugar and butter. Or of film celluloid.



But yes, definitely, there's hope. Though in the case of this film, it's much closer to 60 mph than three. That's what the final shot is all about for me. Being released. Shot out into the unknown. Set free from the debilitating rigor of unhealthy relationship patterns to an unwritten place where self-definition can start afresh.



When I shot that particular footage which you surprisingly and delightfully describe as a sled skimming across the ice, I think it may have been the first time I had ever visited the Great Salt Desert in Utah. I'd had that particular image for years before I made this film, never knowing quite what to do with it. I have visited the salt tundra many times since, but that first visit was unforgettable. The white flat expanse tabled before you in all directions. The loss of familiar context and scale is glorious. I suppose being way out at sea must be similar. There's such a rush from being able to drive without adhering to a road. It made me think about how radically altered our surroundings and our thinking have become over the past couple centuries since the land became inexorably scarred



with the linear geometries of motorized travel.

Untied is about the sensation of being untied. It's about the record needle that finally gets lift out of its stuck groove. It was made partly in response to a series of violent accidents that had left me immobile and house bound. It was also a kind of farewell to a failed relationship that had taken too long to let go of. Like so many things.

MH: *The Blvd* (63 minutes 1999) is a slice of impressionistic urban ethnography looking at street racing in Chicago. Over and over you are the only woman in the scene (though you are behind the camera, not in front of it, occasionally heard replying). Can you talk about how being a woman helped or hurt you in gaining access, or what it meant being a white woman in a mostly black world? The traditional doc approach is to establish "characters" whose "story" we can follow. Instead you offer us a collection of fragments: a mechanic and his garage, visits to a late night diner, gambling moments, curbside views of the races, spectators. What does your approach gain that the other leaves behind? Could you talk about the phenomena itself? There are so many gathered to watch, streets are blocked off, how is all this organized and does it persist?

DB: The phenomena of street drag racing is totally riveting, and yes, it persists! I was fascinated by the ritualized spectacle of the race, and by the devotional attention put into the cars. It seemed incredible to me that so much time and energy and passion are spent on something so immaterial and transient. I think speed might be a bit like faith, a new kind of belief.

Logistically, the guys have a number of spots where they might stage. They basically wait around until someone sets up a race. Then everyone places bets and drives en masse to some pre-determined location where the race happens. The racing tends to be very in-and-out because nobody wants to get caught. Their cars could get impounded and it's a very steep fine. So the area where people stage or hang out is generally not the same place where the highest stake street races happen. They try to find well-paved quarter-mile spots without intersections. If there are cross-streets, bystanders will block them off with their cars so nobody will drive through unknowingly. There are other, more casual races that will go off one after another at popular, crowded spots where onlookers come every weekend. These are the spots where the cops open all the water hydrants—you can't race on a wet street. If you got to a street where all the hydrants were on, you knew you'd missed the race.

I do think I establish two characters, though we don't follow their stories in a linear sense. One is Tim Mullins, my mechanic/neighbor who is a master storyteller. I could listen to him for hours. The other character is Chicago's west side, at night. Tim's garage is closed now, but when I moved into the neighborhood ten years ago, it was still open. His garage was an amazing node where people were constantly stopping by to check in and catch up with local news and gossip. Of course, the place was always busy with ailing cars, but plenty of people stopped in just to visit. Tim is a very perceptive, generous person. He was always finding work in the shop for people who were broke or adrift. As a result, the place had a baffling and constantly rotating ensemble of employees.

In the video, I return to my "characters" in the same way that visitors stop in at Tim's garage: sporadically, maybe a little impulsively, not following any narrative arc, looking for



someone to share news with. I thought of the garage and the emptied city scenes as moorings to loop periodically back to. Tim's garage grounded the neighborhood, and was especially salient to me since he had been a big racer himself.

Most of the neighbors have left since I made the film. The Henry Horner homes which were a big public housing tract one block south of me have all been torn down. And when Tim closed up the garage, it felt like the pumping heart of the neighborhood packed up and split. The empty building is still there. It's kind of sad.

As for being the only woman, there were always a few others, so I never felt particularly

isolated or vulnerable. Also, it's important to note that on most of the shoots I had collaborators with me. Jay Cookson shot a good deal of the footage as a second camera person. And Melinda Fries and Wheat Buckley often came along as sound recordists or assistants. Some of the most interesting footage I got was when I was working with Melinda. I think this was because the presence of two women with a camera seems an innocuous, curious anomaly. When Jay was shooting, the men were pretty guarded and cagey. People would ask him what TV station he worked for. I was never asked. I didn't come off as professional. But that led to more comfortable interactions with the people I was filming. Sometimes pervasive stereotypes can really work in your advantage.

I was keenly aware of my whiteness. I was (and still am) self-conscious about the hazards of my white self representing black others. But I wanted to make this piece despite my apprehension. Mostly because when I first moved back to the States after five years living in Iceland, Latvia, Russia and Denmark (cultures decidedly remote from my own), I needed to make a piece about my local Chicago neighborhood. I tried to be honest about including myself and my aesthetic, so that I'm a known quantity to the audience; so that the gulf between filmmaker and subject can be approached from a place of some knowledge instead of pure speculation. Still, scenes harbor different things for different people. For instance, I have always loved the introduction to Tim at the beginning of the film—where he walks towards the camera and asks what kind it is and then takes the camera and shoots his friend dancing and goofing off, and then films me, and then hands me back the camera, which we see via the shadow. But I recently watched that same scene with three of my black students and they were totally offended by it. In their opinion, I was perpetuating the stereotype of the technologically-stymied and jig-dancing black man. And in a sense, they're right. I had never considered that sequence before in that way. I think the scene speaks perfectly to my relationship with Tim, and to his relationship with the employees, and to his sense of humor, so I don't regret including it. But I felt guilty (and complicit) about not seeing the potential implications of that particular series of images in terms of the larger history of representing blackness.

Some really incredible things happened during the making of that film. The most exciting to me was that five or six of the guys who were part of the crowd I was following got their own cameras to document the races. I can't think of any better outcome of a documentary gesture towards a community, than people from that

community taking representation into their own hands.

MH: *In Order Not To Be Here* (33 minutes 2002) begins with a terrifying surveillance video offering an aerial view of police (or border patrol? Soldiers?) gathering up folks in the dark. The camera has a voice (the sound of the eye) which is used to locate the people targets, and guide cops on the ground. And of course, for those trying to cross the border, it similarly sees what they can't see, that their moments of escape are rapidly dwindling. Where did you find this footage?

DS: The footage you see at the beginning of the film came from the Collier County Sheriff's Department in Florida. To get it, I placed a lot of cold phone calls to a lot of sheriff's departments. It's a bit hazy in my memory now what made me decide upon any given department. I vaguely recall researching and compiling a list of police departments who employed helicopters. I told them I was an instructor (true) teaching a class (true) about new ways that technology, and specifically photography and video, are employed by law enforcement to aid with forensics or in pursuit of their 'targets' (not exactly true – though a few years later I did teach a photo class about the history of the image as evidence called "Collecting Visible Evidence").

I was very specific with the officers about the footage I was looking for. It needed to be an assailant on foot. The discrepancies in scale and power between the robotic police machine eye and the vulnerable metabolic body had to be explicit. It needed to be at night, employing infrared so the figures became spectres. The pursuit needed to be as long as possible. My line was that I was giving a lecture where I wanted to have some visual examples of just what FLIR* technology was capable of. (*A FLIR unit is a gyroscopically mounted camera on the undercarriage of the helicopter. It's

controlled by a tape operator on the inside with a kind of joystick. It's basically an airborne steadicam.) What I was in essence trolling these law agencies for was the image I ended up staging at the end of the film. I kept asking them for pursuit footage that followed a runner who jumps in the water. Unsurprisingly, nobody had this. When I realized I couldn't find what I wanted I decided to shoot it myself. Also, and this is critical, none of the departments had footage, at least that they were willing to admit they had, of the pursuant escaping. The film wouldn't work if the fleeing runner didn't ultimately shake his pursuers.

Anyway, at some point, a Florida agent told me he had exactly what I was looking for, and sent me a VHS compilation tape which including the scene I used in the film. The dogs were a revelation for me. They brought up such tactile mental imagery, escapees running through swamps, heaving breath, acrid smells, the terror of knowing the pack had your scent. And they were a nice portent of the menacing dog footage that occurs later in the film. I was also taken by the fumbling blindness of the K-9 officers trying to heed the directives of their airborne colleagues, whose frustration is hilariously evident.

When I was first collecting this footage, border crossing had not entered my mind at all. But it suggested itself anew with each viewing. I'm pleased that it slips towards that interpretation.

MH: You follow up with a night time vigil showing emptied streets, walls, police wagons passing at night, a searchlight illuminating moments of a middle class home front, and then moments of the perfect life inside, the overstuffed chair, the recipe book held open by a machine. The fragile compact of home, walled up, fortified, dogs baying at night. We don't know who you are but stay away from our overstocked kitchens, our garages bursting with cars, the booty lining our closets. Where

are we and why did you shoot only at night? What led you to render this exposition of every day fears, recasting the bright facades of American commerce as menace and threat?

DS: Yes, these images are a 'vigil' in their mute, unyielding gaze, holding out for some unstated spiritual shift, as if I were filming from a hunting blind. It's the emptiness of the locations which goads the camera to continue the vigil. I chose to shoot at night because I needed the locations empty to suggest the metaphysical hollowness I experienced in the design of these communities. As a kid who grew up in the suburbs it was a feeling I struggled with for years. These are not spaces designed for interaction or bodies. They are not walking communities. In fact, they're not communal in any way. People move from their houses to their garages to their cars and leave for work inside their steel and glass bubble. The absence of a public commons removes the soul from these places. They have as much heart as a parking lot.

This need to portray emptiness was very much a reflection upon my own psyche, the lack of conviction I had been feeling, the loneliness of being human. For a long time the film wasn't going to be about the suburbs at all. It was the hollowness I was after. Corporate and suburban planning eventually became the vehicle through which I felt I could get at this void. It's a problem, no? How to convey spiritual bankruptcy or moral hollowness via material things? How to film numbingly bland places without boring the audience to death?

There's a secondary reason for filming at night. The sites take on renewed depth with all those different color temperature light sources, and facades falling off into darkness. Plus, I'm extremely partial to the eerie buzz of fluorescents. I tried shooting during the day and it was terrible, sickeningly flat and quotidian.

MH: The film ends with a seven minute sequence showing a man running at night, seen in negative, while newscasters describe a house fire and cop shooting in Los Angeles County. I'm guessing you staged this to rhyme the opening, then laid the radio audio underneath. Can you talk about these decisions and how you approached the shoot?

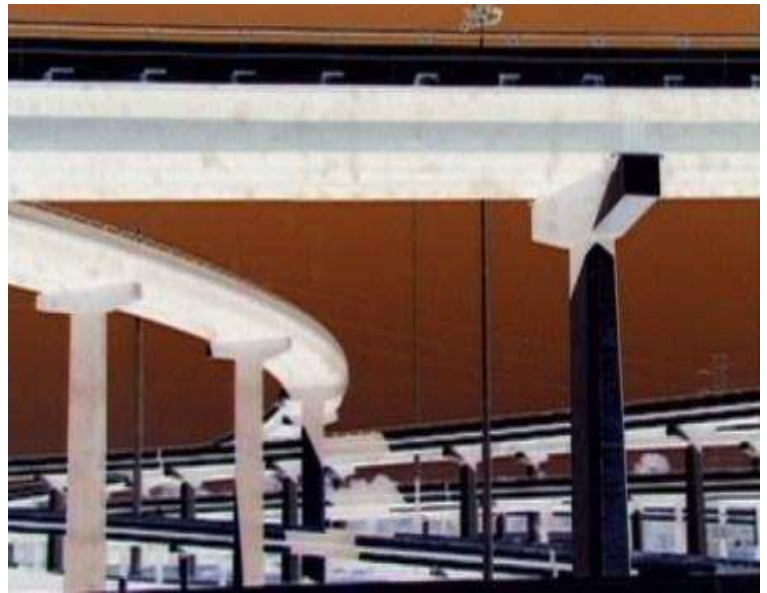
DS: The audio is actually a combination of three sources. One layer is the live audio recorded during the shoot through the helicopter's two-way system. If you listen closely, you can hear me giving directives to the camera operator. I was sitting next to him in the helicopter. You can also hear static and snippets of air traffic communication. The second layer is electronic music composed by Kevin Drumm which riffs off the sound of the helicopter. The emphatic pulsing literally raises your heartbeat which is why that final sequence is so gripping. It's totally physiological. Kevin is an incredible composer, I discovered his work by accident in a record store in New York, and it turned out that he was virtually my neighbor in Chicago. I contacted him out of the blue to see if he would be game to collaborate on a film project, and to my (and the film's) good fortune he agreed. The third layer is sound taken from a CNN news report about an event that occurred in Valencia, California where I happened to be teaching just prior. Valencia is an upper middle class, extraordinarily 'master

planned' community about forty minutes north of Los Angeles. Just after I left a local, who had been passing himself off as law enforcement, and who had amassed a huge arsenal of weapons, had been found out. Officers and then eventually SWAT teams were sent in to try and extract him from the house. He died inside rather than surrender his fortress and identity.

I included this story because I wanted the running figure to potentially be this Valencia man. At one point one of the agents interviewed states, "Maybe he did escape, maybe he did survive the fire. We want to make sure it's safe..." I wanted the running man to be many things. I wanted him to be us. I wanted him to be an illegal immigrant. I wanted him to be an escaped slave. I wanted him to be a Columbine killer (the full fourteen minute-shot actually opens with the runner bursting out of a school). I wanted him to be the guy we're rooting for to shake the overbearing panoptica of contemporary society. I wanted him to be the human who is missing from the rest of the film. The one we're placing all our bets on to make it out of our hyper-controlled environments. The scene was also an oblique way of paying homage to JG Ballard and his novella *The Running Man*. The book, especially its location descriptions, provided me with some much needed threads early on in the conceptualizing of the film.



The running man is the core of the film. He was played by my friend Joaquin de la Puente, who was the only person I knew at the time in good enough physical shape, and crazy enough, to run so far without keeling over. I didn't have enough money to rent a helicopter, so I trolled around for months until I found a local guy who contracted his helicopter to Fox news for their daily traffic reports. He offered a free ride if I could map out the shoot to happen on the way back from the morning news. Joaquin and I scouted around near the heliport and mapped out a run that would include a school, suburban lawns, parking lots, a high voltage power corridor, traffic crossings and ultimately a river. The pilot called a few days before we were supposed to go up and said he can't do it... Fox doesn't want the liability. Then he called me back a day later and said, what the hell, he'd take me up on his own time. This still seems incredible to me. We did the whole shoot, river and all, and on the flight home I asked the tape operator to rewind the tape so we could check it. He did, but there was nothing there! He had forgotten to press record!! The pilot was so pissed he had veins popping out of his neck. The camera operator had never screwed up a shot in thirteen years of working with this pilot. It was just one of those bizarre flukes. So we get back to the airport, and the van drives up with Joaquin all wet and the other crew and I have to tell them that we didn't get the shot. Joaquin started laughing because he thought I was joking. None of us could process it actually. The pilot had gone storming off and was throwing trashcans in the hanger. We were all very dejected, especially me because, as I said, without this shot I knew I didn't have a film. After about ten minutes the pilot came out and very calmly and professionally states it was their mistake, and we would reshoot. I almost started crying I was so relieved. Joaquin couldn't shoot again just then because he was too exhausted, though in hindsight, a more beleaguered runner might have looked better.



We returned a week later for the take you now see. This time, they had to remove a seat in the helicopter so I could fit because in the interim I had been run over by a truck and was in a full plaster leg cast. But that's a whole other story...

MH: *Energy County* (14:30 minutes 2003) is a polemic shot in Texas that decries America's reliance on oil. Highways connect experience, traders bid prices higher, and telephone wires carry ghost voices yodeling for times which never happened. Brown water bays, oil rigs from past and present and a restless consuming fire are collaged with America's first invasion of Iraq. The biblical undertones of "security" and "defence" (newspeak for invasion, government overthrow and systemic torture) is laid over multiply exposed refineries at night. Christian radio takes aim at an endless enemy, yes, it's well observed, but aren't you preaching to the choir here? Don't the rhetorics of this work ensure that it will find a home on the avant safe circuit, far from the religious right and so help preserve another comforting split between "us" (the good people, who require energy to deliver our good messages), and "them," the ones busy waging war and pumping oil?

DS: This is a hard video for me to write about because I've always felt a little embarrassed by its didacticism and its easy targets. "Preaching," be it to the choir or otherwise, is something I generally recoil from. I guess the simplest way to qualify its existence is that it served as a release valve for the exasperation I was feeling at our state of national affairs. I made it extremely quickly, a reactionary response to a reactionary situation. My lurching for tractable targets is exactly what the men are doing at the end of the film, burning the flag. Or what the cop (you only hear his voice) is doing when he stops me because I have a camera on a bridge, profiling me as a terrorist. I think the video fails in that this is not evident, but I did

want to include and implicate myself in this tendency towards angry dumbness. It's my car after all that's being pumped with gas. And the buzz of those electric trees sounds an awful lot like the buzz of my editing drive.

I think the best thing that came out of this piece was the work I've been currently up to. It's hard to qualify yet, but in general, it's about the culture of elevated threat. And just what exactly it is that this word Freedom represents to people. I've broadened my field of Americans I'm speaking and listening to. Whether this will ultimately free the film from being stuck in the "avant safe" circuit seems doubtful.



Because I have no interest in making a conventional documentary, and my aesthetic bag of tricks remains more or less the same as it's been for the last twenty years. Which means that the venues available to me will inevitably be art houses and festivals and alternative euro channels and experimental film classrooms. BUT, and this is very important, I think when I show the film to the people actually IN it: machine gun owners, Federal Border agents, retirees in their fully loaded RVs, high school football fans... these people will all say, "Yeah, that's what freedom means to me." So while I personally might be suspect of how much we have lost or surrendered in the name of "freedom," I hope that opinion will lurk more patiently in the background.

In terms of what experimental film can achieve in a political world, there's a passage I really love from Alain Badiou's essay *What is a Poem?* "Dianoia* (*discursive thought, or argument and reason as opposed to intuition) is the thought that traverses, the thought that links and deduces. The poem itself is affirmation and delectation—it does not traverse, it dwells on the threshold. The poem is not a rule-bound crossing, but rather an offering, a lawless proposition. [...] Philosophy cannot begin, and cannot seize the Real of politics, unless it substitutes the authority of the matheme for that of the poem." Or as Charles Bowden puts it, "What is explained can be denied, but what is felt cannot be forgotten."

Ultimately, my frustration with the monologue inherent to the cinematic contract resulted in pursuing other kinds of artmaking alongside my filmmaking. Film demands a mute viewer; someone signing on to leave her own temporal space in order to enter mine. I both love and struggle with the totalitarianism behind this fact. So my non-film work tends to be encountered by accident, requiring participation or

collaboration to be activated, approaching something closer to a dialogue. It is publicly situated work that doesn't rely on the expectation of the sublime, as one would have upon entering a museum, or a movie theater. The nature of the encounter is more democratic. I'm not sure that film viewing can ever be political in the same way.

MH: *Kings of the Sky* (68 minutes 2004) is an ethnographic document where you find faraway moments with your small digital camera and bring them home. You are in Chinese Turkestan, watching a circus troupe prep and put on a show. Nearly wordless, the camera draws up a series of painterly compositions (shadows on a wall, luxuriant fabrics, candle light) but doesn't the absence of a speaking subject render these performers as figments of a mute spectacle? Except for Adil Hoxur of course, the tight rope walker, "king of the sky," whose repeated presentation ensures that the perilous journey of identification is underway. He is the only one whose talk merits titles. Horribly, one of the high wire girls falls off the rope and the crowd is sent home early. The girl (how could she be so young?) survives and a chicken is slaughtered to make amends.

There are travels to two further cities, and two further performances, which lend structure to this "three act" movie. In a lonely night trek, when the movie is nearly done, a lengthy speech details the troupe's Turkic Muslim background, and its repression (and in turn the repression of all Turkic values throughout China). Thousands of books have been banned, its religions outlawed. First we watch, and then we listen. This is an unusual structure for a documentary, can you talk about your decision to include this information so late in the time line? How did you connect with these folks and what was it like spending four months on tour? How did they view your project, and was it difficult to obtain permission to shoot?

DB: If we gain nothing from experimental film, I hope at the very least it convinces us that there are more ways to 'speak' than with words. In my films, I've tried again and again to attempt a cinema where strongly held beliefs, political sentiment, existential longing, even historical reverie might be presented and argued non-linguistically. We communicate in so many ways. Why always this deference to spoken language as the more true, or expedient?

You propose that the absence of a speaking subject renders the film's protagonists members of a mute spectacle. To me they are no more mute than any of us are when we visit a culture whose language we don't share. Communication still happens. Humor still happens. Concern and gossip and judgment still happen. The First Watch Then Listen format you rightly bring up is something I came to very deliberately after agonizing over structure for a long time. I arrived there for a few reasons.

First, it was important that the film reflect the linguistic muteness of my experience with the troupe. I had no translator, and was just barely able to speak in a rudimentary mix of Chinese and Uyghur. And yet I had little trouble understanding most things. My experience was made easier of course in that I was traveling with a group of artist-performers who are very comfortable using their bodies to 'speak' with. They make their living this way! To me, it seemed absolutely in line with our mutual identity as artists to allow embodied, visual communication to prevail.

Second, language is incredibly politically charged in this region. How you identify yourself (Uyghur or Chinese), what you call where you live (East Turkestan or Xinjiang), what language you choose to speak, and in whose company you speak—all of these decisions are dangerously loaded and potentially criminalized. The atmosphere of cultural repression is extraordinarily sharp and ubiquitous. No one, ever, speaks their mind directly. Everything is couched in double meanings. Setting your clock to local time as opposed to official Beijing time (which is five time zones away) is an act of cultural defiance. Fables are analogues for current socio-political strife. All this is to say that neither I, nor the troupe, was comfortable addressing political concerns directly on camera. Even off camera, they were extremely cautious. Because I did not want to endanger any of the troupe members, and because I was never able to get a Uyghur to actually speak his political mind on camera until I was safely out of the country, I felt that the language of protest needed to come at the end of the film.

Lastly, and maybe this is the deepest held reason for watching first, then listening, I did not want this film to start off dogmatically stating its position. Most viewers have no idea who or what Uyghurs are. I felt that by first revealing their environment, the cadence of their home life, their markets, their off-hours, their music, their architecture, their national sport (tightrope walking) a viewer might begin to have a sense of who these people ARE, before attempting to understand their political situation. We are much more than just our politics. If I started the film from a position of critique, I thought it would shut down the viewer's experience of Uyghurs

as a people with an extraordinarily rich culture and history, not reducible to an 'oppressed minority.'

I'm glad the film registered for you as two or three performances, as that's what I was going for with the edit. But those performances are actually cobbled together from over fifty shows, in as many cities, over a period of three and a half months.

I left for Xinjiang with no contacts beyond an English professor at the University in Urumqi. I knew I wanted to make a film about tightrope walkers because the sport seemed to be such a perfect metaphor for the balancing act that is the Uyghur political/economic situation. I was also interested in the region because it's the most inland place in the world and yet has such a dense history of traversal, being situated along the silk road, and at the monstrous continental joint of the Middle East, Europe and Asia.

I figured if nothing else I would make a film about looking for tightrope walkers. Unbelievably, within two weeks of arriving, I followed a circuitous route via a professor, and then a very enthusiastic and well connected newspaper reporter, the troupe's manager, a Uyghur psychic spoon-bending Mafioso figure named Kurbanjan and ultimately, Adil Hoxur, the tightrope superstar. I found myself accompanying his troupe on a tour that circumnavigated the Taklamakan desert over a period of nearly four months. It was, in short, a crazy coincidence of generosity and luck.

There's so much more to say about this film, but I'm going to leave it there. It's better to watch than read about anyway.

MH: *It Will Die Out In The Mind* (4 minutes 2006) opens with a rocket flare and then a series of shimmering titles appear as movie talk transcription and interrogation, and an unlikely nostalgia for the Middle Ages. "There's no Bermuda Triangle. We have triangle A B C which is equal to triangle A1 B1 C1. Do you sense the terrible boredom of this? It was interesting to live in the Middle Ages. Every house had a goblin, each church had a God. People were young. Now every 4th person's elderly. It's boring, my dear." Then a white suited man with a propulsion pack lifts off in the desert (in super-8, slowed down), sending him beyond the crowd, and then back to earth. Yes, I remember when the future was going to look like this, with those strong jawed men leading the way. Where did you find this footage and why use it here, as the closing refrain of an argument? You are making an argument, aren't you? Where do the titles come from, and why the five hundred year itch for goblins, churches, Gods and triangles with more than three sides?

DS: I like the notion of transcription as interrogation. That the simple act of inscription implies judgment. I guess that's what happens when histories get written down, epochs get named and ordered, moralized and quantified. I'm absolutely interested in the power of the word, though I don't trust it.

For me, the film is an inquisition of science by the paranormal. It wonders whether the semantic, while it tramples everything in its wake these days, might not be missing a lot of the picture. The nostalgia is perhaps more for phantasmas than the Middle Ages per se. But yes, I am making an argument: For the possibility of spiritual existence in our information age. For something more expansive and less explicable than logic or technology as the conceptual pillar of the human spirit. For never getting to the bottom of things. The video is actually one

third of what I've begun to think of as "The Paranormal Trilogy" (*How Among the Frozen Words, It Will Die Out in the Mind* and *The Magician's House*).

Everything in this video is borrowed. There is no original footage or words. All the on-screen texts are lifted directly from subtitles in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*. The high contrast imagery is residual surrounding information from whatever was behind the subtitles. There is one other high contrast image of a miniature model city being hit by a meteor. You see a quick flash of buildings followed by the bloom of an explosion. This shot and the rocket flare at the beginning of the video came from a documentary about meteors that I checked out from the library. I'm embarrassed to say that I can't remember where I got the jet pack footage. But to me, those scenes with the levitating man and their nostalgia for the future are important because they leaven the nostalgia for the past of Tarkovsky's text.

The title of the film comes from a passage in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*:

Stavrogin: ...in the Apocalypse the angel swears that there'll be no more time.

Kirillov: I know. It's quite true, it's said very clearly and exactly. When the whole of man has achieved happiness, there won't be any time, because it won't be needed. It's perfectly true.

Stavrogin: Where will they put it then?

Kirillov: They won't put it anywhere. Time isn't a thing, it's an idea. It'll die out in the mind.

As for the five-hundred year itch, I guess it's because Western Capital hasn't allowed much room for autonomous goblins. The mega-church gods serve commerce, and

all the triangles with more than three sides are stuck serving the military industrial complex. Maybe they always did. I just like proposing, or no, hoping, that something powerful or romantic or sublime still lurks beneath it all. Not necessarily as a thing, but as an idea, as fugitive as our minds.

MH: Exterior views of a country house with barely heard child whispers and a lonely piano opens *The Magician's House* (6 minutes 2007). We see a mailbox announcing that we are in Ithaca, a view looking out from the house, as if the house could look, a shed siding a forest of a backyard. It takes time to make an approach, to enter, and you allow us this time. An emptied chair rocks as an airplane goes by (on the soundtrack) and an organ tries a few notes. The chair grows more animated as the shot goes on (are you playing this in reverse?) A sunset photograph by a window (as if to remind the window of the view) brings us to the mysterious closing shot: a spot of trampled grass, a mark, a sign left behind. You never show us a person (oh wait, there was a photographic portrait in a book, glimpsed upside down), but no one alive and moving, though everything here feels animated. Can you talk about the impetus for this visitation, the very carefully structured soundtrack, the emptied portrait vessel of the house? (by the way I love this movie, it is really fantastic)

DB: Last night I was watching a print of Agnes Varda's film *Cleo From 5 to 7*. In it, there's a scene where Cleo sings about being lonely and feeling like a house full of empty rooms. It happens at her moment of transition from being a fetishized feminine spectacle to more of a participant-observer. I found myself moved by the song, and that line in particular. I've always been sweet on filmmakers who let physical spaces be avatars for psychic spaces. Tsai Ming Liang is a genius in this regard and Tarkovskii of course. Too many filmmakers to start listing really. *The Magician's House* is my

little homage to those films. It lets the house, both its interior and exterior, be a topographic map of a mood. And in this case, my mood was sad, a bit spooked, reverent, adrift.

Why this particular house is a bit more complicated. A filmmaker friend of mine used to live there. He is someone who always struck me as alchemical in his practice. In fact, he's never seemed quite of our century. I was invited there as part of a small film tour I was on, but by the time I arrived, there had been a stunning series of emotional, physical and professional cataclysms in his life. And so he was no longer in the house. He had quite literally fled.

So there I was, feeling a bit forlorn anyway thanks to my own (unrelated) relationship woes, walking around this evacuated farmhouse, acutely aware of the tangible presence it seemed to harbor. Not necessarily of this missing friend per se, but rather a more ambiguous energy—something that had been until moments before furiously, absolutely filling the place. It was a strange experience. I decided that next morning to shoot two rolls of film, limiting myself to the house and its yard, and I used virtually every image I shot. By far the best shooting ratio I've ever managed. It wasn't until months later that I recorded another friend walking through an entirely different house at night. His are the footsteps you hear in the film. In terms of sound design, in never takes much to suggest a universe. Like Bresson says, the whistle of a train imprints upon us the whole station.

The piano music was an odd coincidence. I fell in love with Georges Gurdjieff and Thomas de Hartman's deceptively simple piano pieces a few months ago. Gurdjieff himself was a mystic who thought that people wandered around like sleepwalkers, never seeing reality. He composed music to be used as a kind of

backdrop for a series of dances he devised to help people be alert to the present moment. I generally hate using entire pieces of music, but decided to use this particular song because I felt the mood suited the house and the film. I only later learned that the title of the song translated as *The Struggle of the Magicians*. This blew my mind, as I'd already arrived at the film's title.

The upside-down portrait is actually the face of Athanasius Kircher, an amazing 17th century figure who is credited, among myriad other things, with inventing the Sorcerer's Lamp, or Magic Lantern—one of the very first cinematic devices. His portrait was printed onto a sheet of plastic taped to the window. There was a little magnifying glass in the room through which I shot the image. For me, Kircher and the fleeting image you see of a projector's illuminated sprocket wheel become quiet sentinels to the passing epoch of plastic film.

Oh, and yes, I optically printed the rocking chair in reverse.
A la Cocteau.





George Kuchar's Videos

Excrements of Time

by Steve Reinke

George Kuchar and his twin brother Mike began making small gauge films as teenagers in the Bronx. These films clumsily reconstruct and restage the tawdry melodrama and cheesy horror of Hollywood B film. I can't resist listing some titles: *The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire* (1954), *The Thief and the Stripper* (1959), *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* (1960), *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof* (1961), *Lust for Ecstasy* (1963) and *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966).

Nine of these films have recently been recipients of National Film Preservation

Foundation monies—along with Kenneth Anger's *Rabbit Moon*, they are the first experimental works to be honored.

These early works have earned their place in film history on a number of fronts. They offered a way through the impasse of the psychodrama (which was the then-dominant mode of first-person artists' film) by stressing the performative over more essentialist notions of subjectivity. In this, they also became the prototype for certain strains of queer cinema. Against prevailing notions of high art, they maintained a relationship to popular culture (particularly the most debased genres) that was parallel rather than antagonistic, demotic rather than elitist (to say the least). Whole strains of underground/experimental cinema were spawned by the Kuchar brothers' early work. Two names in particular are frequently cited: Andy Warhol and John Waters.

David James, in his indispensable *Allegories of Cinema: American Cinema in the Sixties*, writes about this early Kuchar work in relation to pop art (which it anticipated and influenced) as a critique of authenticity:

... first, authorship is inscribed not in the narrative or the imagery so much as in the self-consciously domestic manufacture; second, in the quotation of industrial motifs, affection is indistinguishable from a self-conscious distancing that suggests but always short-circuits explicit criticism; and third, signification hovers between the generic stock and the hypothetical real life outside the film that the diegesis invokes but never asserts. . . . The films always reserve their own seriousness at some level, and so always preserve some degree of thematic urgency. The oscillation between lampoon and emulation strategically preempts the unequivocal affirmation of either; the authentic can be present in neither art nor nature, film nor life, but only glimpsed, fragmentarily, in the practice that slips desperately between them. What is this practice, this apparatus, that has the amoeba-like ability to slip desperately between film and life, which allows one to be on all sides of the camera simultaneously? Not film, and not merely camp, or some kind of queer performativity, but specifically: Video.

As camcorders became available in the mid 1980s, George began making videos: an outpouring of work that thankfully continues unstaunched. A few hundred titles, often more than a dozen a year, ranging from pop song to epic feature film length. They arrive by the U.S. Mail, often in groups of two or three, at the Video Data Bank in Chicago. In the envelope is usually a hand-written note containing tape descriptions. This is his description for *The Cellar Sinema* (1994), selected partly for its brevity: "A descent into the blackness of the projected image and the curators who flick the switches and grease up all moveable parts for hot action when the lights go out." The condensed (one could say hard-boiled) hyperbolic language, the humor, which is coarse and clever in equal parts, and the sexualizing of the cinematic apparatus are all typical.

Although his work has been widely screened and celebrated, (Kuchar is famous and beloved in the independent media world) it has been slow to get the critical attention it merits. Gene Youngblood's re-assessment of Kuchar's work is typical. Youngblood was an appreciate fan from the beginning. Writing about the films in 1968, he detected something serious in the apparently light-hearted work, and compared Kuchar to Bunuel, though finding it necessary to note that Kuchar was, of course, inferior. Today he unequivocally states, "George Kuchar is one of the great artists in the history of the moving image." I agree.

Some impediments to it being taken "seriously":

1. The body of work is so large, critics can't easily digest (let alone watch) all of it.
2. Individual titles often rely on their relationship to his body of work for their complexity to be appreciated and their impact to be felt. They are not autonomous, but part of a larger—epic and ongoing—project.
3. As George is the fundamental presence in almost every title, (simultaneously author, narrator and subject), the work can seem all the same, just George being George. The restlessly protean nature of the work—it adopts and abandons strategies with nonchalance—often goes unrecognized.
4. George's persona is essentially comic; he's a clown, melancholy but affable. And clowns are always slow to get respect.
5. The work is unabashedly homemade, celebrating the technological possibilities (and reveling in the limitations) of consumer equipment. Despite the consummate skill Kuchar employs in all aspects of production, by industrial standards it is amateur rather than professional.
6. Rather than sticking to camp strategies that are safely ironic or satiric, Kuchar frequently deploys a scatological kitsch viewers may find indefensibly puerile. (For a brilliant defense of this aspect of the work, see Gene Youngblood's writing on Kuchar, at this time only available with the VDB box set.)

Kuchar's video work can be grouped into two categories: student collaborations and solely-authored works. Kuchar has taught production for many years at the San Francisco Art Institute, as well as frequent visiting artist gigs at other American institutions. Steve Seid describes the student collaborations as "wildly ambitious, jerry-rigged epics that slash and burn their way through the Hollywood lexicon." Kuchar himself describes the process in 1989's *500 Millibars to Ecstasy*, which documents a visit to University of Wisconsin, Madison: "...

like sleep-away camp with a lust-crazed zombie seeking unholy couplings with the gas- and bug-free residents of College Town, U.S.A." (Kuchar's comic persona allows for unrequited yearning, but not unrestrained coupling: the wished-for or attempted seductions of our horny pedagogue always go awry.) These works desperately attempt to maintain their narrative drive against out-of-control libidinal drives. But flaming creatures must flame (or pretend to flame, however ineptly), so coherent story-telling becomes secondary. (The meticulous lighting and framing, the rag and bone shop props and costumes are, of course, never secondary.)

George's solely-authored works constitute the bulk of his production. As soon as he picked up a video camera in 1985, it seems as though Kuchar had decided to de-emphasize the autonomy of individual titles in favor of an expansive, continuing corpus of work that does not have fixed boundaries. I think of these works as components of one large project—not an autobiography, but a journal studded with self-portraits and portraits of others (often with little distinction between the two).

The camcorder allowed Kuchar to exceed the limits of filmic autobiography and documentary. Steve Seid observes:

...the camcorder allowed Kuchar to be everywhere at once. He was behind the camera cajoling innocent bystanders, before the camera pouring out heart-rending confessions about spent youth and intestinal juices, and somewhere in-between adding campy layers of in-camera observation.

It isn't that Kuchar is physically everywhere at once (as important as his presence is) but that he simultaneously occupies three usually separable positions: author, narrator and subject. This is particularly apparent in his groundbreaking works of the mid to late 80s, which are constructed through in-camera editing. "In-camera editing" is really a term from film. It refers to works that are shot sequentially

and not subsequently edited. In films that employ in-camera editing, we are assured that each shot is profilmically consecutive, that the events of the second shot occurred prior to the events of the third shot. Video, with its instant playback and erasability, can inscribe time with a greater degree of flexibility and ambiguity. George's use of in-camera editing (we really should have a different term for it as it so fundamentally differs from in-camera editing in film) involves taping long shots, rewinding the tape, and inserting new material. In this manner George creates a kind of eternal present: events and his commentary on these events are seamlessly woven together in a way that makes George always present in the text (as subject and narrator) and separate from it, as an authorial presence providing commentary (author and narrator). If autobiography is necessarily retrospective, Kuchar developed techniques that make it simultaneously immediate and retrospective.

Video Album 5: The Thursday People (1987) was the first of Kuchar's videos to come to prominence, and justifiably so. I have never seen a better—or more moving—depiction of mourning as a social process. It documents, without sentimentality, the final days of underground filmmaker, and ex-Kuchar

student, Curt McDowell, as well as the days following his death. It is more straightforward in its approach than many other titles: Kuchar announces scene changes, and we can easily follow the chronology of events (which include screenings, a Sunday outing with his friend Panos to a Greek festival, etc.). But, as always with Kuchar, it would be a mistake to think the work is not meticulously constructed, or merely left to the contingencies of everyday occurrences. Throughout the video, a brittle cheerfulness is maintained through the suppression of other emotion. Relentlessly optimistic in social situations throughout the video, Kuchar in the final scenes uses his mother as a foil. George retrieves pictures of McDowell's funeral (which is not otherwise depicted in the video) from his (McDowell's) underwear drawer to show her. His mother, seeing them, weeps restrainedly. When George says he looked good, she replies, "He didn't look too good to me." The price of this transgression of (necessarily hypocritical) social niceties: an outpouring of emotion. In his final comments, Kuchar alternates between maintenance of an optimistic social order ("He looked kind of good in the coffin, sort of like an old Scottish gentleman.") and pessimistically humorous comments aimed generally at humanity ("The ravenous, the ravishing, and the ravaged."). This split occurs throughout Kuchar's work. It would be simplistic to suggest that the truth lies in his a- (or possibly anti-) social pessimism rather than his social optimism. Though Kuchar's work relentlessly interrogates the price of socialization/civilization, he is not a romantic searching to free himself.

In *Cult of the Cubicles* (1987), one of Kuchar's New York videos, George celebrates his 45th birthday ("Thanks for bringing us on the Hell planet, Mom.") and argues with his mother about his dirty underwear, which he holds up to the camera saying: "Dear Lord, I'm sorry I fight with my mother, but my underwear is my business, and the business of my audience. It ain't that yellow." Why is it our business and not Mom's? This is not confession, but mock confession, sleazy entertainment

masquerading as confession. The mock confession can never be submitted to the institutions of power, or it will become an actual confession and the carnivalesque joy will be drained out of it. The physical and moral abjection would then be subject to various regimes of control and correction. Mom must never know. This is the nature of disgust, of the scatological, in Kuchar's work: it side-steps confession and avoids control. The clown may take responsibility for his own melancholy, but for nothing more.

Also in 1987—*annus mirabilis*—the incredibly sad *Rainy Season*. Here, Kuchar uncharacteristically drops his affable comic persona. It is one of the few tapes in which he has sex; alas, his lover falls into a deep post-coital depression and George is powerless to help him. In *Rainy Season*, Kuchar's mastery

of in-camera editing reaches a new level of precision. The climax of the tape is a conversation that is constructed by dropping in new sections, often in mid-sentence. George responds to finding a pony-tail elastic band his sad lover left behind. The slashes represent edit points:

Lynn: No one would dance with me so I had to dance with the furniture.

George: That's very interesting, because many times I have sex with the furniture. It's safe.

Lynn: All you have to do is be yourself.

George: But I am myself and that's the problem. It's safe sex, but it's sick. / Oh Lynn, what has become of us. Look here. This held / the hair of someone who shared in my darkness, but in a way the furniture's so much more / stable and well-constructed. We biological specimens do / damage to our brain cells and then I'm hated by everyone / from dope addicts to students.

For his weather diary series, Kuchar annually visits Reno, Oklahoma in tornado season and "storm squats" in a motel. *Weather Diary 3* (1988) is all about anticipation: waiting for the fulfillment of desires that will never be fulfilled. Our protagonist, George, both wants and



doesn't want. He wants to experience extreme weather, but only at a safe distance, and mediated by television. Likewise, his sweetly unrequited desires for the boy next door are as touching as the boy is unwitting. Any desires that can be easily realized are consigned to the realm of disgust: hot dogs, pizza, and the resulting feces. The nature of desire—to be present as long as its object remains unattainable—finds a profound correlative in Kuchar's use of video. He is in the moment, documenting and enacting desire and also outside of the moment, posterior to it, able to provide commentary. But he is also able to be anterior to the moment. In one scene he masturbates in the shower. This long shot is identified as the present. The cut-aways (a guy mowing the lawn, etc.) are added later in the process to humorously suggest what Kuchar might have been thinking as he jerked off. But as he shakes the semen from his hand, he hums the music that moments later occurs extra-diegetically. If the cut-aways are posterior, the humming is anterior, anticipatory.

Kuchar pops in and out of time, the profilmic time of the documentary event. At the moments when this time-popping happens, humor is often produced. After the shock of laughter comes a certain deep and ordinary sadness.

Both *Point 'n' Shoot* (1989) and *A Rocky Interlude* (1990) feature George's beefcake friend John. In *Point 'n' Shoot*, named after the cheap Vivitar camera, John is the happy object of George's (as well as the video camera's and the Vivitar's) gaze as he lounges in the Jacuzzi. This relationship, of model to artist, seems simple and ideal, as far as the cameras are concerned. Things get rockier in *A Rocky Interlude*. George's crotch grab is intercepted, and they squabble when hiking. But slow motion shots of a shirtless John reveal that as long as everyone stays on the appropriate side of the camera, everything's fine.

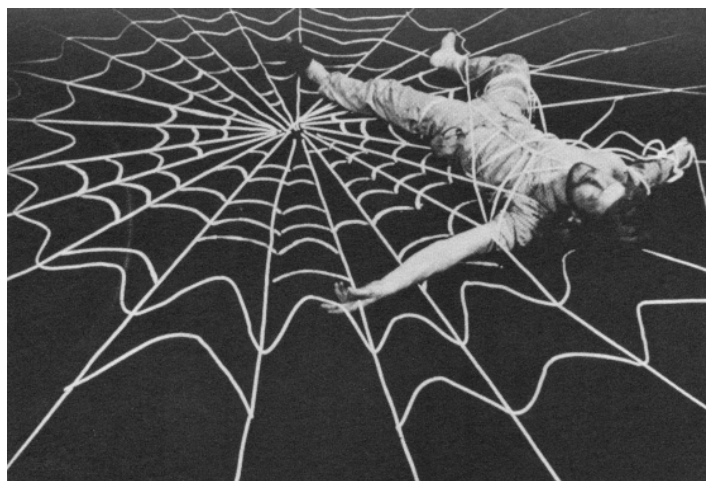
A solution to this model/photographer problem is reached in *Snap 'n' Snatch* (1990): everyone is simultaneously photographed and photographing. Briskly edited to a cheesy,

though compelling, pop song (that plays twice) the video is an innocent pansexual orgy in which everyone gets to be on both sides of the camera.

Scarlet Droppings (1990) riffs on a letter to a boy written on the back of a girl's class photo George finds among the autumn leaves in Normal, Illinois. A masterful use of repetition—both visually and in the spoken letter—builds a nostalgic melancholy that George undercuts in his final Schopenhauerian monologue:

Just take it for what it is. You know it's not like a person. Maybe you're better off with a person, maybe not. They both bite your head off. You know the way animals are. You just have to accept them. You can't make any kind of judgments. They're run by instincts. You can't expect them to behave morally. It likes to eat, it likes to have sex and it likes food. Don't expect too much from a thing like that. Just take it for what it is.

This article was commissioned for Video Data Bank's 5 DVD box set entitled "The World of George Kuchar."





Fall 2004

Susan Oxtoby: *The Time We Killed* premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival where it received the FIPRESCI award for best feature, and then picked up an award at the Tribeca Festival in May of this year for best New York narrative film. I want to welcome Jennifer to introduce the film and then of course she's here with us to take questions afterwards. Please give a warm welcome to Jennifer Reeves.

Jennifer Reeves:

Thanks for coming, I'm so glad to be here. I was struggling a little about how to introduce the film today because it evokes certain feelings that I had last Wednesday when Bush won another term as president. I still feel rather raw and depressed. So I prefer not to say a lot up front. I'll just say this is quite a different feature film than you're used to. We spend a lot of time in the head of a character that is somewhat of a split for me; it's shot like a diary in my own apartment, but is presented as a narrative. I'll be happy to answer any questions you might have about it.

Film screens.

Susan Oxtoby: Jennifer thank you so much for a very beautiful and interesting work. It's hard

to come up with questions after such an emotional experience as this, but I was struck by a sense of freefall, structurally, and then obviously it's a project that has its own timeframe after 9/11 and delves into home movies. Could you talk to us a bit about how you broached this project: did it begin as a small project which grew? How did you arrive at the structure?

Jennifer Reeves: When I started shooting, without a script, I thought the film would evolve into a longish short film based on montage. I was inspired by Warren Sonbert's work, and Jack Chambers' *Hart of London*. I think the film grew into a longer narrative with montage elements, because I was going through about as many personal changes as the world was undergoing at that time. I worked on it between 1998-2003. There was a murder suicide next door, I moved, my father died, 9/11 happened, I ended a relationship and was alone, the invasion of Iraq happened. Original intentions or inclinations were not enough, almost irrelevant to me. As my perspective changed in response to changes in my life and in the national or global situation, I updated, added, subtracted material and it turned into a feature. Not once but as an ongoing process.

It's been almost a year since I finished the edit and I already see it differently. I was trying to weave a lot of different concerns that I'd had, including the idea of feeling paralyzed, not being able to have real power in your environment. I also wanted to evoke nostalgia via home movies. Eighty percent of the footage in the montage sequences are home movies or you could call it diary footage, and twenty percent of the montage sequences are things I shot later to support certain ideas. The present day narrative scenes of the main character shot in the apartment all came later in the process, after a few years of shooting the home movies. I like the home movie parts best, because they're about flying away.

My process was about wanting to weave together these different personal and universal

themes which I felt were related, the idea of wanting to escape your reality, whether it is the reality of your own psychological boundaries, or what's going on outside of you. When dealing with these depressing realities you're using imagination in a positive way, but also as a means of escape from pain and responsibility. I was trying to weave these many conflicting strands to show connections and make sense of them. At present I'm also seeing the film as a product of fragmentation, in the flight from reality one mode of escape can fail, so then you're looking for another kind of escape. Robyn's job writing romance novels is one way of producing a fantasy life, of trying to have intimacy and sexuality. Remembering the past with great nostalgia is another escape from what's going on right now: being an isolated shut in, violence nearby and militarism. I was trying to bring out the tension between wanting to be in the present and continually struggling to get out of it, out of the room.

The filmmaking process was incredibly convoluted and inefficient I have to admit. I've made so many shorts by creating images which responded to a moment, and then forming the films on the editing table. But doing a feature length film that way posed some challenges. I was basically making it like a short, which is what I knew how to do.

Audience: Could you talk about the woman in your film?

JR: Lisa is a really good friend of mine and I've always worked with friends in my films. After three years of working on this as a montage film, when I thought of making it into a narrative feature, I put out a public casting call and received hundreds of headshots. It seemed incredibly absurd to me as I leafed through them! I realized I didn't want an actor; I wanted one of my friends that I could connect with. This is a personal and intimate film. There's no crew, just me and Lisa during the scenes

where she's present. Another reason why I chose Lisa is that we have this connection artistically and through psychoanalysis and free association which figures into the film's montage and voice-over. I love her voice and poetry. I heard about her from Robert Kelly the poet and Stan Brakhage who said, "You have to meet Lisa Jarnot." She had been working and teaching in Colorado with Stan and moved to New York. So we basically had this blind friendship date. We became close friends very quickly. Working together felt collaborative, and as far as the poetry she wrote for the film, I didn't ask her to write it, it happened very naturally on set. She was bored with the process of me moving the lights and tripod around and started writing poetry, which responded to the moment, the scene we were working on, the conversations we were having about political happenings and personal experiences.

Audience: The scene with the neighbor coming over to complain about the leaky radiator finally makes Robyn deal with it, after having avoided it, having fixated on this other kind of intrusion into her apartment. She has this weird smile after the woman leaves, Robyn seems almost happy for no apparent reason. Can you clarify what that's all about?

JR: She's obviously afraid of people, but at that moment she's happy to see Lucy again because she hasn't seen anyone for a while. And she still hopes Lucy could be a friend, after her maybe messing up her previous chance: that awkward time Lucy came over for a visit and Robyn went on and on. Lucy's also a contact with reality. So Robyn was going to try to make it her reality and deals with the leak. She finally calls the landlord. She hadn't been thinking about how she's affecting other people, because she's been so caught up in her sense of victimization.

Robyn does want to reach out and get better on some level. But when Lucy came over and hung out earlier on, Robyn was so used to the monologues in her head, her desire to be understood, that she spoke inappropriately too much. She drinks to relax. She doesn't know how to ask questions. It's funny to viewers because it's painful and ridiculous how much she reveals. I see Robyn as more social phobic than agoraphobic. A lot of people see her as an agoraphobic. The labels aren't necessarily important to understand though, the actions and impact on her life is more important—and how she symbolizes all of in one way or another.

Audience: I think I recognized something from your film *Chronic*, is that right? They both deal with women afflicted by some sort of mental illness. How did you research and create these characters—do you have personal experience?

JR: I used footage from *Chronic* (1996) for some of the flashbacks, which deal with psychiatric hospitalization, self-destructive behavior and attempted suicide. As a film *The Time We Killed* deals with some unfinished business I had from *Chronic*. I played the main character in *Chronic* who dies in the end, but now we can pretend this didn't happen, and I can reappear as June (my small role in *The Time We Killed*), the mental patient who conformed to society and is able to function better.

Robyn is another possible outcome for the main character of *Chronic*. Her previous suicidal behavior has been replaced by new neuroses. For me the idea of never leaving the house and the stream of consciousness voice-over reflects back to her time in the hospital. She is now hospitalizing herself: I'm not going to leave the apartment until I've figured out what's wrong with me. It's a self-imposed hospitalization. What happens years later to people who have spent time in mental

institutions? You go away somewhere to solve your problems, you talk about your problems and focus on yourself and then you go back into society when you're well again. It's not just literally about the hospital but our culture.

I joke I used "method-filmmaking" for this. In a sense I became the character as I was editing, because my editing system is on the computer where Robyn's writing her novel. I'm living and editing in the apartment where I shot the film. And I spent so much time editing, I didn't get out much!

A lot of the shots of Robyn are actually me, it's a third reason I asked Lisa to play the main part. We have the same height, and we both have bony wrists and hands. A lot of close-up shots that don't have a head in the frame are me (I shot them myself with a tripod). In general, a lot of what's in the film was shot in the apartment while I was editing, when I needed something else like a cutaway or transition scene, or just when I just wanted to get away from the computer. Birds would often come and tap on my window, I don't know if it has to do with the previous tenant feeding them, but they come fairly often and I go to the window and shoot them. There are different kinds of birds at different times. Maybe there's a rumor out there that there are good snacks on my fire escape. They've actually pecked away some of the wood around the window frame. I shot some of that too but I thought there were enough birds already in the film.

Audience: You spent a long time making it. How did you know when it was finished?

JR: I shot a lot of footage I didn't use, I kept going out and shooting more. I tend to do that when I'm editing. As far as the voice-over goes, the script was continually re-written and re-edited. Even during the last week of editing I re-wrote entire parts and shot new footage. It took five or six years but could have gone on

forever. I had told myself I would finish it in 2002, but it took more than another whole year.

In October 2003 I sent out a tape of the work-in-progress to the Berlin Film Festival because they'd seen an earlier rough cut and were interested. They invited the film based on that so I decided to finish it then and there. If Berlin wanted to show it, it must be almost done. I was afraid and relieved. I don't think I would have ever been totally happy with it, so I had to finish it for another reason.

Audience: How have people reacted to the film?

JR: Responses have been varied. It's hard to answer because there aren't very many experimental features, and festivals don't have sections for experimental features. I get the impression some people are perplexed, not expecting or having any reference point for it. I was surprised by the person who saw it in Las Vegas who said it was the best movie there. And that was where I got my worst newspaper review. Some people get mad that it's not more political. But I'm glad I didn't put more of that guy's face in the film, I'm going to have to keep seeing G.W. over the years and that will be painful.

Some people say: I've never seen anything like this, and it will never leave me. They relate to its form and content and that's good to hear. There's been a huge range. By trying to weave together all these different concerns I did something, which is a no-no in film, I made it a lot more complicated than a feature film is supposed to be, there's a lot of mental leaps you have to take, and it's based on free association. How do you get an audience to free associate with you, so you're guiding them yet giving them the chance to have their own associations? I think audiences feel OK when they realize they don't have to go with it every second, which is how experimental film

can engage people to think. It's OK for you to go off into your own thoughts for a while and then come back; it doesn't have to be like a Hollywood narrative where every single moment you're inside a directed story. I also feel like it depends on your mood. It was painful to watch today, a week after Bush was elected for the first time (in his first term, you know, he wasn't technically elected). There used to be more laughter in reaction to this film, I put some wry humor in to give a relief factor. But now we're bracing ourselves with how much more badly things can go. It will be easier to watch in ten years when things are getting patched up... I hope.

Audience: The neighbors are in a constant state of turmoil, arguing, accusing, crying. They are rubbing together their wounded loneliness and producing the din of "society." Could you talk about their noisy intrusions, which ensure that no matter how deeply Robyn withdraws, she can never be alone?

JR: There's a loneliness and isolation we all feel in living our lives. Well, this is something I believe about "the human condition" and that it has to be this way. It's different for different individuals and cultures, and the intensity fluctuates. Most people try to avoid this painful solitude... maybe more in cultures like America that promise you can purchase or entertain yourself out of unhappiness. So Robyn is not unique in her solitude, but her extreme situation highlights her struggle with it. She has chosen an isolation of sorts, to face her self or demons, but she also can't tolerate it and needs diversion.

So to get back to her neighbors' intrusions: their suffering comes through her walls and she identifies with them and is disturbed. She cares to know about them, so can't block them out. She can forget herself for a while or at least feel her current life isn't so bad as the abuse or violence going on the other side of walls. But

we know there was violence in her past, and so she also wants to block them out. Often when there's a scene in the film where she's heard something violent through the walls, she goes off into reveries of better times. People or places she once loved and lost. Usually there is a real freedom and openness to these montage reveries. Nothing happens inside walls, but in open air, often in nature.

The way Robyn identifies with her neighbors, through the sound they project through her walls, is like the way people identify with TV characters. You watch them over a period of time, see their dramas unfold, and your imagination fills in the blanks so that you can feel you've gotten to know these people. They keep you company. But the neighbors are too real, in danger, she doesn't have an on/off button to exercise any control. Her imagination is the off button at least sometimes.

On Robyn's television, Iraqi civilians are told to stay in their homes for safety; you hear Rumsfeld's voice say this on the soundtrack. These civilians seem like neighbors to Robyn, even though they are more endangered than her Brooklyn neighbors. Robyn stays in her home for another kind of safety. I wanted an awareness of her privilege and America's privilege to be highlighted here.

I've always been aware of the full power of sound in film... it's an independent force with characteristics that can't be accomplished visually. Sound is more intimate and subtle; it comes to you, enters your ears. It is less solid and specific, demanding you to exercise more imagination than an image does. Images or representations on a screen become objects. The images in your mind, that you conjure up to accompany the sound you hear, are more powerful, personal and complex. This is ultimately why I utilize sound more than sight for Robyn to experience the present outside world, to activate her imagination, her fears.

Even when she watches TV, the sound of the bombs in Baghdad is more present than the fuzzy images. The sound of moaning in the porn she watches is more present than the scrambled image from the station. Making the film with this emphasis on the soundtrack places the viewer in the same position as Robyn, making it a more subjective experience. The viewer is made to imagine, as Robyn does, stirring up their own questions and fears of what the screaming might be about, whether someone is getting hurt or what is the fuller story of the murder suicide across the air shaft.

Audience: Is it true that people who have been molested in their youth will always draw trees with holes in the middle? Why does Robyn burn holes in her writing while sitting in the bath?

JR: Well it is true that when I was a teenager a psychiatrist handed me some paper, asked me to draw a tree, and when I didn't put a hole in the tree he was certain I'd never been molested. But since I'd thought of drawing a hole, and that I usually drew holes in trees, but didn't do it that time... I never forgot what he said. I kept wondering if he was right, and that maybe then I had been molested! But the whole thing was rather absurd in my adult opinion now, and I was trying to bring out the absurdity of it in the film. This dry humour is meant to leave some of the ambiguity intact.

With the burning of the writing... It certainly is more cinematic than using a paper-shredding machine and it's a more historical method to protect secrets; it fits her tendency for nostalgia. I think it also shows she's a little bit paranoid or off. And there's a pleasure in fire, because of the heat, light and danger. Starting a fire in your apartment is risky, but the bathtub is about as safe as a fireplace, when a window's open.

Audience: Your film is filled with the ravishing black and white beauty of Manhattan buildings, are these high contrast beauties the consolation for a life lived alone, or is Robyn able to achieve this state of delirious watching because of her isolation?

JR: All the montages of city or country are meant to be taking place in her head. Conventional films show memory as realistic flashbacks or re-enactments. But memory is not so solid; it is fragmented and abstracted. The high contrast film, which loses gradations of shadow, abstracts and reduces the images to form with missing "information." This seemed an appropriate aesthetic for what I was trying to convey, what I think is a truer expression of memory. And that's why I use montage rather than constructed narrative for these sequences, so all the pieces aren't there. Just fragments of the original events.

Audience: What does this line mean: "Terrorists brought me out of the house, but the war on terror drove me back in?"

JR: She was already isolating herself regularly when 9/11 happened. But the danger and fear and shock of that event, so close to her, gave her courage to go out. I think she says, "People felt as afraid as I normally do." So she had more in common with strangers in New York, a nice change from her isolation. But it was short lived.

This corresponds to my own emotional reaction when 9/11 happened. I try not to forget American history like politicians and television announcers seem to forget (except when it's convenient for them to justify something). After my initial hope of coming together with the people of my city, I was suddenly terrified knowing without a doubt the US military response would be huge and lead to more innocent deaths than 9/11 and it would be not just futile but would make all matters worse. It

wasn't just Bush and the government. The war on terror and vengefulness was adopted by most Americans in and out of New York. I saw how bloodthirsty people were. Even all the American flags flying everywhere freaked me out. So any delusions of a positive unity fell away. Not many of my friends were like that, but you know, the protests against the bombing campaign in Afghanistan were pretty minimal here (and those protestors got so many insults and rage from people)! I was relatively happy with the level of protest against the Iraq invasion before it happened, but well, it didn't work.

Audience: Alongside the beautifully composed and controlled images of Robyn in her (your) apartment universe there are lyrical flights into forests and waterfalls and Berlin which seem like diary moments, fleeting handheld memories, with the camera hand brushing over a rock or a face, touching and then moving on. Did you collect material always with this movie in mind, or is the camera also an accompaniment to living? I'm wondering in these moments about the difference between this movie and your life, and if there are lines which threatened to collapse (no, no, I can't show this, or else: I hope she does something interesting, so I can film it, or: I know we're having a great old time together, but would you mind if I stage manage this moment so I can put you in the beautiful light?)

JR: I wish I could have my 16mm camera with me at all times in the way Warren Sonbert, Nathaniel Dorsky and others have made films. I can't afford or physically handle it, but when I do take my camera out it is because I will be with a friend I want to film, or in a place I want to explore. My approach is to be natural, trying not to force any situation. I want to respond to the moment, capture something I like about someone's personality or energy in a subtle way. I don't bring lights or a tripod. But all the while, I have faith that this footage will become

an integral aspect of a film that I will make for public viewing, and that is what distinguishes this footage from being a home-movie. I shoot my home movies in Super 8, and my "public" movies on 16mm.

The montage sequences in *The Time* are primarily made up of footage like this from my life, my personal world. I think about the sequence of Valeska Peschke with her strange head-covering on the streets of Berlin, and in the big blow-up house in her loft. Both objects were creations of hers; she's a great artist. It was 2000 when I shot that, and at that point I did not have a narrative film in mind; *The Time We Killed* wasn't born yet. I only knew then that I was making a film that would include direct-address portraits of people. And so I shot this film portrait of my friend Valeska with her artwork, all very spontaneously. The footage captured our joy of the moment, becoming close friends—an unlikely scenario for people living in San Diego and Berlin. When *The Time We Killed* began to take shape as a story film, I asked Valeska if it was ok with her if I used these images of her and her work out of context, as footage for a fictional character in my movie. She wasn't a lover of mine, but the image of her and the way I framed her showed the love I wanted to portray in the story between Robyn and a woman from her past. The element of her character dying of cancer worried me: would Valeska think it was too spooky? But she was fine with my using "her likeness" in this totally fictional way. After that was settled, we shot two more scenes of her in New York to fill out her as a character.

The same applies to footage of the little girl Dragon, who is not my niece (as she is Robyn's niece in the story). Dragon is actually my god-child, which is why I had filmed her several times from infancy to being a toddler, before I even knew what the images would be used for. I asked her parents if I could use the images and sounds of Dragon as fictional material within my narrative, and they were fine with it. They also appear in the film.

Actually, *The Time We Killed* started with this kind of footage. In 1998 I traveled to New

Zealand to be with friends and a love interest. We traveled around the country and I decided to bring high contrast black and white film to shoot, so I wouldn't end up with a travelogue about beautiful colorful New Zealand! I knew I wanted to shoot portraits of friends and lovers and animals and landscapes, and have them be something mournful and dark. Something out of reach. This is where *The Time We Killed* started. These people and places form Robyn's internal narrative, her fantasy and memory space.

Audience: The movie ends with Robyn taking her dog out for a walk, free but not free, out on the street but still on a leash. "At least animals are not animals," she says earlier. Instead of her apartment there is a waterside idyll, on the pier. Why this gesture of ending?

I really didn't want to give an answer at the end to Robyn's "end state." Uncovering a past trauma doesn't cure anybody... at most it helps you want to move forward with your life, it is an incentive to take emotional risks again. Recovery from mental illness or trauma is very slow. To have Robyn suddenly free from this compulsion to stay indoors would be false. But in this little leap forward (getting out of her building via fire escape) she had to stay in her safe fantasy realm. So I shot this scene with hi-con 16mm film, hand-held, which is how I shot all the memory/fantasy montages. (I used a video camera on a tripod for the present-tense scenes of life in her apartment.) In this final "narrative scene" showing her taking care of the dog, she's also slipping into fantasy, a montage of thoughts and images. She speaks a strange associative poem of another time and place. She sees images in the water of her past and lost loves. At the water, she perhaps contemplates her former suicide attempt of jumping off a bridge. We know her desire to die has been with her a long time. But while she walks the streets and returns home she's deciding to live.

Thanks to Andrea Picard at Cinematheque Ontario for making the transcript available.



An interview with Robert Todd

I met him when he was still in black and white, in a diner at the Ann Arbor Festival. There was something about his face that seemed charmingly unfinished, chiseled out of some particularly American brick which was soft in all the places a face should be hard. It was a face that said yes, even to strangers. Especially to strangers.

And he was quick to dismiss whatever new movie he was trotting out on the circuit. He would wave it away and speak only about the new fine hope he was working on, or the dream that was about to begin. Haunted by death, leaving the past behind, driven.

It wasn't unusual then to be a committed avant maker plying your trade in 16mm, though as each year passed, the numbers dwindled. But not on Robert's end. As if to make up for the rapidly approaching vanishing point for the analog world, he is busier than ever committing his seeing to a hand wound Bolex, following the light and becoming it. His tools are increasingly extensions of himself, his camera eye looks and receives, he is able to film in the deepest shadows knowing that some final shimmer will find its way onto emulsion. Teaching pays the bills, and so he is by necessity an urban dweller, but he has a particular feeling for the natural world, and lenses it with a sublime precision which draws the viewer through his camera and out the other side. With Robert's work we are always at an intimate distance, a touching distance. He needs to bear witness, to take the risk of seeing from both sides of the lens. He was there while the men in maximum security counted the days, when his father died.

He has a certainty which refuses mastery. The following interview occurred via email and has been considerably edited down from Robert's voluminous and eloquent responses. As if at last he had been summoned to confession.

MH: Do you feel, as an American avant movie maker, that you have arrived "too late"? That there exists a "heroic" period of creation, marked by the 1960s, canonized in books and universities and the formation of seminal institutions, which have rendered the efforts of all those who have come after, like yourself, relatively invisible?

RT: On my own, I rarely think of this. My primary focus is on something that I've become excited about in the last rolls I've shot. My primary concern is with film's interaction with light sources and how we come to position ourselves as either emitting, ignoring, baking in or hiding from light or dark (clarity has some place in this interest, too). Because my background is in drawing and painting, my major influences have not been filmmakers, though I have had strong responses to films that I've seen.

I feel that I "arrived" as a filmmaker at a perfect time. I was ready to make films when it was cheap and challenging and offered me things I could not find in drawing and painting but didn't eclipse them. "Visibility" (recognition by others?) is far less important than my ability to experience the living and making of art. I feel fortunate to be involved in a dialogue with my own work and that of others whom I respect, but I feel more fortunate to have the time and means to make work, and believe that I am a worthwhile part of a conversation for people who share my concerns. That may be small-minded (or small-visioned?), but I have no grand aspirations around being canonized or broadly distributed.

MH: How do you mark your work in relation to this tradition of the untraditional? Are you walking in the footsteps, stepping in the shadows, or do you feel absolutely free of those constraints, the call of what's been done before, the stoop of precedent?

RT: These questions are fun to consider, and not just because I'm a teacher. I don't feel absolutely free of the constraints of this tradition—some of this has to do with how programmers and others see what I do, but much has to do with how I respond to things, as suggested above. I don't see myself as expanding upon processes established by others, but I do see cinema as sharing a vast vocabulary of process, form and subject matter that I feel echoes of when I'm in the edit room. I'm not particularly well-versed in either cinema studies or the history of avant-garde/experimental filmmaking, but I've learned much from others as I've discussed their processes or seen their works. Most of these people have not been canonized, but I recognize that they've been influenced by myriad sources which necessarily includes films from the canon. Some of my strongest responses have been to films that have never been finished or have been to moments within super-8 films that have never been shown to an audience of more than two.

That said, there's also something about short-format filmmaking that both allows for free artistic production and a quoting of/from the untraditional tradition. When I'm shooting, producing or editing, I remain flexible, but I form an idea as I go that becomes an organizing principle that gradually rules out notions of freedom within the overall experience (both of making and viewing). I'd like to be able to say that the precedents I follow are my own, but that'd be about as delusional a statement as I could ever make about my work. In the end, I'm looking at an outward reflection of my internal self,

sometimes through multiple mirrors. Am I hedging here? It all seems slippery to me, like asking if I behave this way because my father did so, once, long ago...

MH: We run into each other whenever you have another film (or two or three) finished, and are back on the circuit getting it lit up. But you rarely want to speak about whatever brings you into town, instead, you are filled with enthusiasms about yet another new flash, another set of seeings which you are aching to realize. Your relentless work habits lead me to believe that you are trying to cheat death or something (why so many movies? why push so hard?), but also that you want to resist becoming "defined" by what you've just produced. On the one hand I feel you are absolutely committed to the shaping of seeing which each of your movie requires. But on the other hand, as soon as the finish line approaches I can feel you slipping away, leaving it behind, there will be no resting on laurels, no waiting to see what recent activities has brought to bear, instead you are already off in search of the next one.

RT: Cheat death? Hmm... I was speaking with a painter friend about what the process is like. She was talking about a series she's making (49 paintings) that are phases within a transitional state. I said that this reminds me of what it's like to be in the mode of making films—they are transitory and transitional: there doesn't seem to be a state of completion. While making *Qualities of Stone* in May 2006 I became interested in some things which were shot through the summer and fall for *There*, which in turn led me to shoot in the winter. In each instance, I felt that there was more to say because when I watched the footage cut together, it was nagging at me, not like a problem, but like a solution that I was having trouble seeing. Shooting was a way of seeing more. I suppose this is akin to a scientist who's noticed something, comes up with a

hypothesis, gets slightly different results than expected and learns that there's more to this discovery that need puzzling and exploring.

But this only captures some of the picture, I do have little fires that crop up, and I obsess about pursuing them. The film that I have already made is the record of a process of discovery which I'm only casually interested in revisiting. But the great thing about having my own program at Ann Arbor (2007) is to see several movies flow as a set, as if it was one movie made in parts. This larger view is exciting because it blends various mysteries together that make more sense than I could ever glean from a single film. Making is ongoing but has moments where a greater digestion and stock-taking is necessary. Few have been with me when I'm at that point, and it's usually something that happens privately, when I screen a bunch for a few friends or myself. So I don't resist being defined by my work, rather I am curious as to the nature of this rather fluid event and its revelations...

MH: *Speak* (7:30 minutes 1997) opens up from an identification with a newborn, offering grainy, negative solarized home movies and teeming waves as the poles of past and present. You rhyme slowed reflections in a bowl with clouds passing across a blue moon, mouthfuls of milk, blurred shapes which pass too quickly to be identified. Throughout the tape there are invocations of a speechless speech, a mouth before language (a woman is filmed so that the sun appears to blossom out of her lips, obliterating them in light, or lighting them up). A face (is it yours?) appears half submerged, speaking underwater, but there are no words. Who once wrote that no one really remembers childhood, what we have instead are memories of memories. Is this what your lyric impressions are delivering to us?

RT: *Speak* was constructed of texture and time ruptures so that all points of visual reference

slip through and around each other, to be taken in as a gestalt. Memory is what we use to fill the space between the beginning and now. The body of the film (the space between these waves) is a collage of impressions that articulate the relations between the self and the sea it swims in. For me, the most self-conscious moments produce the greatest swells, and in these states, it's hard to steer in a steady, singular direction, but in those moments I often "see" the most. "Seeing" in the sense of admitting a maelstrom that draws in all currents to shine its phosphorescent mix of memory, design, dream, emotion, revelation, insight. Not all of what we "see" we will to "see," and not all such storms navigate to a safe port. This film, quite optimistically, doesn't concern itself with destinations, only the journey (darkness and light).

MH: About your movie *Clip* you write: "For over a year I've been working on the subject of the Death Penalty and its significance to our culture. This piece has grown out of the footage that I've shot for that film, and some of the concepts I've been juggling. I had an idea that the imposition of a strict formulaic process to living imagery would drastically alter its appearance, much as the strict adherence to dogma can disfigure or even destroy a life. On my way to the beach to film waterfowl, I had the misfortune to witness a truck smack into a bird in flight and drive unflinchingly on. As I waited with the bird for help, I brought my camera to bear on it. It felt awful, as if I were revisiting the violence done by the trucker. It made little difference that my machinery was held at a distance, I was aware of myself imposing a violation on this hapless creature. When I saw this footage projected I was deeply disturbed, and felt much gut-wrenching empathy with this bird, and horror at the recognition of the camera callously whirring on in its fearful face."

Clip shows a bird subjected to a maniacal optical reworking, layers collide and blend and melt away. As a viewer I wonder: why all this work on such ordinary pictures? I have seen it a few times now, but never knew "the story behind the picture." And now that I read the story, the experience feels deeper, the pictures clearer. You are doing something akin to Brakhage's *Sirius Remembered*, an ode to his dead dog. I think it began with a walk he took behind his house with a friend who doesn't notice the dog lying dead at all, so Stan sets to work recapturing his dog's lying, rotting last sights and post-death visions via a hyperbolic cutting strategy. You also bring a great load of re-looking to bear, is it so that you can control death, slow it down and start it up again? Or more simply to show how this ordinary moment is also (like every ordinary moment) extraordinary? Perhaps you could also talk about the ordering itself, you worked with a kind of "script," didn't you?

RT: The death you spoke of before (my "cheating death" through the bounty of making art) and the one that is mentioned here come not from places I see but only imagine. Where I've been touched by death (my uncle, my father, my grandmother: all of these were deeply affecting in ways that permeate much of my work, including *Lost Satellite*, *family history*, *Fable*, *fisherman*, *Our Former Glory* and *In Loving Memory*) is different from where I've seen the potential for death, and the re-working of that potential. The film also suggests the cruelty of non-participatory observation that is a sort of "death"—the death that comes from distancing. I feel that others have discussed this more eloquently than I could, but to put it in my simpleton terms: the camera can work as a story works—pantomiming an ideal state of being, rendering events in a way that suggests that immortality is possible. It reduces life to something wonderful, and places it within language. In the moment of observation, we are There, yet Not There because we allow the

camera to weave a "story" around the event. In this sense portraiture becomes still life: the capture shows the relationship between myself, the medium, and the subject—a dance that removes my full attention and risk of everyday interaction and replaces it with a secondary series of interactions. A different type of life is lived, and the other potential life has been suspended or replaced.

When I would paint a portrait with the person in the room with me, the paper or canvas and all of the machinery surrounding the making can hardly be invisible to the subject, nor can the actions I undertake as I dance reactively to the material emerging in front of me. I change, and yet I wonder how the subject and the environment change? How do they react to what I am doing? Active portraiture, in which the subject moves, can allow for more incident, and a sort of shared authorship can take place, but, as with "directing," the arbiter of the recording device is the one who holds the keys to the door to the world, which is the surviving evidence of the event. We agree to this relationship when we agree to "sit" for a portraitist, or to accept the camera into our lives. And in so doing, we close certain doors—whether or not we choose to acknowledge this is another matter, but it is the matter (the subject matter, in a way) of the film *Clip*.

The first "script" for the film was influenced by what was at that time an organizing principle for my life: my preoccupation with the distancing mechanisms that allow for the execution of our fellow human beings by our "society" in the loose political sense of that word. My gathering at that point was directed toward certain images that could hold potential for the larger film about prisons: beauty in decay or decaying beauty, the disfiguring of ideal or iconic spaces, the sense of an idyll within the commonplace. These were rather simplistic notions, but I was at the beginning of a journey and took the most obvious steps. I

say this to emphasize that at this point I had a "story" to tell without the specifics—I had an organizing principle, and the world could expect little mercy from me.

I had shot the birch trees and one of the jails (among other things not used in *Clip*), and was on my way to the beach to shoot the water and birdlife there (one large piece of my life puzzle is that I have a familiar identification with birds, so an impulse toward shooting or drawing birds is also an impulse toward self-representation) when the accident described in my write-up occurred. I was bird-sensitive and already had an organizing principle, so the event was both shocking and fitting. The camera came out, and a kind of death occurred to the life I would lead (we would have led?) were it not so. As I shot, I further developed my "script" by choosing positions which gave the camera a character that became increasingly aggressive and agitated.

After shooting through the bird's recovery (and having no help arrive from the Rescue League), I shot the birds on the beach. I thought some of this would make its way into the death penalty film, but I didn't have a clue as to how that might happen. I was further shaken and embarrassed when I saw the footage projected. This was the beginning of the contouring of the "script." I thought about my anger at the callousness of the truck driver, furthered by the callousness of myself as camera operator, happily distancing myself from distress. I felt compelled to voice this through an editorial act that would create the kind of harsh environment that my spirit found itself trapped within. I wanted to underline the cruelty of these organizing principles through hyper-stylization, creating a structure that would give life over to the machine. Mathematical formulas seemed a good choice because they were the linguistic basis of a machine unconcerned with content, so I created a form that I could fight against through

my more romantic (content) choices as a filmmaker.

The formula: The imagery is spread across 100 feet of film, which is 4000 frames. These 4000 are broken into 10 sections of 400 frames each. The first section shows a single image from a sequence of images (shot A) held for 400 frames. The second section's first frame is the second frame of (shot A) and its second frame is the first frame of another sequence of images (shot B), and these two images alternate for 200 frames, at which point (shot A) moves to the 3rd shot in its sequence and shot B moves to its 2nd frame in its sequence. Each section introduces a new image sequence (shot C - J), and divides accordingly (section 3 has 4 divisions of 100 frames, section 4 has 8 divisions of 50, etc.).

If one could say that a singular image suggests a disembodied sort of spiritualism (death), then unhinging oneself from the singular icon on the screen suggests a further denial of the original form from which the image was culled. The rephotography (through optical printing) was a recreation of the distancing effect of the shooting of the material in the first place, I could only concentrate on the counting down of the printer as I blocked and unblocked light from film frames to allow the formula to have its way with the film and my psyche. In the end I let the formula break down, and this seemed to satisfy the romantic in me.

In a way, the film reflects a kind of anxious epiphany—a hyper emotional state of affairs belied by the banality of the context found in the environments that surrounded the events that I'd shot. I found the banality as distressing as my own actions. I suppose I wanted to bring the epiphany (of life overtaking death) to the place that I felt it—didn't my conscience come to the fore in the end? For me it did, and in reliving or reviving it I seem to have reaffirmed it, at least for myself. I haven't made another

film using that process, but the insights I gained have determined courses in other films made since.

MH: *Our Former Glory* (9 minutes 2002) opens with a suite of negatives, beautifully rephotographed by you, looking closely at these faraway figures from another time. Why these pictures, and why do you keep them at a distance, refusing a particular moment, allowing the past to keep its secrets? Then you create a duet of faces shown in extreme close-up, intimate and melancholy, and a stubborn architecture which is aggressively reworked through rephotography, as if you are trying to crack these rigid geometries. Television appears as well, not as clip collage, but as abstract lines and white noise, the outside world appears as abstractions, there is little social space here, only the murmur of a lost interiority and the left behind, hand-made offerings to those “missing” in New York after the trade towers went down. Do you feel that your abstractions (which are derived from the world after all, they are photographed) are abstract? Or are they documents? Can you talk about how you structured this movie? Why the title? And what set you on the path to this making?

RT: When the first Trade Center bombing took place, the idea of the building as a symbol of commerce was emphasized by the media, but for me these buildings didn't appear real—a unisex pair of unpeopled blocks. They distilled our notion of Empire into something gothic, the ultra-container advertising the generic value of the systems of capital and exchange that we've bought into.

A few months prior to their collapse, a news piece brought to my attention the fact that artists had studios in these buildings (maybe only one of them). A softening of the line? For me this was the first humanizing aspect of these structures that I'd encountered in my life

(as a child I watched them grow...). The weekend following the collapse, I was due to attend a wedding of an old friend, and I went to NYC to meet up with another friend so we could travel to that event.

What was this collapse?

Americans once believed that liberty and commerce were tied together—the Trade Center facing the Statue of Liberty—but ironically, no sooner was the symbol for Commerce lost than the primacy of the commercial was underlined (Bush's speech telling us all to continue travel and shopping as an act of strength and belief in the American way is still played at airports across the US), and the government quickly began curtailing Liberty as if it were an embarrassment. Within a few weeks, the American flag would mean something that few could agree on. We had become an empire long ago, and now the foundations of that empire was called into question around the world. *Our Former Glory* refers to this.

When I went to NYC, I took a walk along the Brooklyn promenade, and I brought my super-8 camera. I shot the memorials that were quickly becoming trash (the working title for the film was "trash"), and some other shots of the site of the former Trade Center buildings (along with a few other shots from my friend's apartment). The memorials were largely cheap, gift-shop items bought from vendor carts, there was plenty of mass produced, impersonal plastic to go around. The starting point for the making of this piece was my reaction to those memorial items, what these cookie-cutter icons hoped to represent versus what they were quickly becoming, and the pathos found in the simplest of transient forms. This reaction was weakly conveyed in the footage. When I saw it projected, I didn't have an idea of how it might change into something else.

I went to Ann Arbor that year and shot some super-8 in Detroit. I rode the monorail and concentrated on the motor of the camera, shooting single frame and 18fps. I shot the buildings that were swirling around me, and they seemed hollow and sad, maybe even a bit sickly.

I reviewed the "trash" footage, and was struck by the chaos, something I'd found a bit of in the Detroit footage as well, and then I noticed another similarity which was in the bar-coded materials that were in the memorials, the patterns of the flag and the buildings, and it hit me that this is what I would be working with: the visible language of commerce, juxtaposed with chaos, humanity, and an older iconic form, the circle (though that didn't occur to me until much later).

The Bar Code (as a language) became the central character in the film, and the structure reflects my own feelings about this "abstract" presence in our lives. It is a language that we cannot read, but is translatable by machines. It is a mirror of binary computer code which defines the global social sphere's functional communication and the means of its practical application. As a labeling device it has been tied to commerce, but its uses extend to the non-commercial as well. As I wish to suggest, the boundaries between the commercial and non-commercial have long ago eroded, and this film provides a portrait of that.

The structure is narrative and follows the transformation by cracking through rigid geometries in a visual battlefield that employs references to television, advertising and consumption and the concomitant obliteration of subjecthood. The film ends, oddly, on a hopeful note, where the "chaos" of human warmth is foregrounded through the hand-made pleas for info on lost loved ones, and the veil riding over the image of the lost towers.

The film begins in a mood which contrasts with the towers, leading from the telescoping shots of the past in negative and positive space, to the "intimate" somber shots of the faces which are disfigured in battle with the bar-code later in the film. The beginning plates slide through focus, they are meant to be intangible, suggestive and beautiful, recalling in a somewhat nostalgic manner, a time that we can glorify pictorially but not hang on to. Shooting those images involved careful selection (they were pulled from my wife's grandfather's collection, and I mixed family with travel, negative with positive) and construction (to bring us into the home, toward intimacy, but not in a direct or specific way). That care decays as the film progresses, so as the bar codes dominate, I was looking through the lens less often, shoving things in front of the optical printer randomly.

One interesting feature of this film is the soundtrack. Keeping to the language of the barcode, I translated the "Barney" (purple dinosaur) theme song into barcode, and then printed this onto transparent film using varying "font" sizes of bar code (this also produced the traveling mattes seen midway through the movie). I then ran this film through a 16mm projector and recorded the sound from the optical reader into Protools, and used this not only as part of the soundtrack, but also as a "gate" pattern for another major component of the soundtrack which was ten minutes of daytime television. The pure barcode sound is particularly grating, and meaningless to our ears, much as the noise of a fax machine might be.

MH: *Thunder* (11 minutes 2004) is a nature movie which shows the bulldozing of trees in your neighborhood. The rough, handheld super-8 footage of the fallen trees is framed with long, graceful passes of 16mm footage which, as usual in your work, is very beautiful. You show the remaining trees after rainfall and

in the early morning light, in colour and in black and white high contrast. Your camera drifts up these old trunks, sensitive to the movement of stripped branches in the wind. It closes with a winter storm seen in dying light. The tendency you have to make everything beautiful creates an effective elegy for these fragile ecosystems trying to co-exist alongside houses and humans (though people are never seen here). But doesn't the aestheticization provide a mask which hides the destruction that "nature" is forever carrying out? Isn't the act of creating pictures a way of distancing you/us from "the natural world" (or is the movie theatre also part of nature)?

RT: In bourgeois society, landscape painting is the defining tradition for discussing nature visually. There's the God version of nature (wrathful, hungry, expansive, outside human control), the Romantic version sees it as the setting for human experience, anthropomorphized versions use nature as substitutes for human characters or emotional states, and then of course there's Impressionism that tunes nature to the key of whatever optics the paint favors. In photography this might be named pictorially reductive naturalism. Why this list? Because within these categories, flora serve as either window dressing, some portion of the Ground, or as a supporting prop within the works, not as the main Figure.

Scientific endeavors in the 18th-19th century were more interested in the character of floral nature, and through their inquisitive (empirical, positivist) taxonomic pursuits, a cold identification with the particular needs of plant life began to develop. Through these efforts, exquisite works on paper and in glass were produced which elevate plant life's spiritual representation in a way that the American Luminists would never approach. Still, the project of "Nature" was known in either a more general Darwinian way, or, as the

transcendentalists would have it, God's business on earth (and if it's his business, shouldn't we be closer to it?). This had a hand in spawning, among other things, the bucolic cemetery movement, which in turn was followed by the hubristic call to "naturalize" portions of the new industrial cities. This legacy survives in our ideas of nature as both aesthetically satisfying and recreationally engaging. But in the end, it's all still seen as a ground, while we are the figures, the ones who act. Hence they are subject to urban planning and human maintenance. As unfit subjects, they are disposable, replaceable, consumable. I mean to reassert the Subject of the plant as Figure in a portraitist's sense. I see the tree in the center of town as a living being. Shackled, yes, but alive and with us. Through this identification, one can begin to posit portraiture. To make it happen in a meaningful way, as I suggest earlier, a kind of love must be kindled.

In *Thunder*, I wished to treat these Trees as individual beings, caught within the ambivalent forces of human desire. I wanted to encourage an engagement with these beings that might lead to beauty and narrative. So I let the color be the Ground—the space of beauty that you describe is an evolving sense of the artist's discovery of some of the changes of the trees' lives. There is a haunting beauty at the beginning of the film which is pushed into another realm through the destructive force of the crane. The death of those trees is the beginning of what I see as meeting, or facing up to, the attitude of disposability as a demon in the Western psyche. Winter is the acknowledgment of the destructive power of nature—the whitening of the world, purity interrupting life. It is the end of a long strand of color. The crows feed on its remains.

The hopeful note (I'm such a romantic, no?) is found within the stillness of the machine as the snow overcomes it. A special kind of Life can

take place within the short space of a truce, even if it exists only in a spiritual or transient sense. All of that said, there is a struggle within my films concerning Beauty. In art making it appears as a kind of love, and yet I see that its conflation with idealized forms can lead to a split between life and the place we imagine it being (the transcendence of the ideal, something that art can facilitate). *Thunder* offers contrasting forms to break the sheen of the film skin. The shift in colors within the super-8 section, the green veil of the fence, the move from super-8 to 16 then back again as the storm approaches, the dim flat color and space of the tree at rest in the middle of the film with the machinery around it, and of course the shift from the glorious brown-and-white to the dull throb of winter.

I was also interested in breaking the film's spatial sense in order to destroy any iconographic celebratory references, moving it away from the Olympia diving sequence and closer to Kubelka's African experience. Perhaps I fail to make these differences meaningful for others, or register with their physical experience of the piece, but they remain for me. It's interesting how we can wade through much that is non-beautiful to find small rewards, and how this process is akin to a relationship, and can also be beautiful.

Is the movie theater part of nature? If theater is part of human nature, yes. If the action of light on our perceptive minds can let emotions run like wind across the grass, yes. If we hold each other's hands and stroke each other's backs in the cinema like baboons on the plains, yes. If we can plant something there that takes hold, grows, and reproduces, yes. If love is possible there (as I suggest in the creative act of representation), yes.

MH: In *Stable* (7 minutes 2003) you visit a farm with a keen attention to detail, the drippings of a pipe, the way light falls onto grass, or a

horse's snout, or the side of a building, one spectacular view follows another, but they're not held so long. Don't worry, your editing seems to suggest, beauty is everywhere and in abundance. You use a variety of film stocks, each with its own look, though the "subject" remains the same-or does it? Why foreground these formal transformations, and how has this rural visitation rendered the life "behind" these striking moments more vivid? Or is that beside the point? Farms (or so I imagined) are work sites first of all, but the only one working here is you, the animals are grazing or looking slowly into the lens, nature is growing "all by itself," the farm (a container for the natural world, re-purposed as food) is presented as an unpeopled idyll. Isn't this a way not of looking (which the film is very concerned with) but of looking away? How to begin to address the small farm at this precipitous moment, when farm suicides in India, Pakistan, and Argentina (to name only three countries) are occurring in staggering numbers, as small farms (like the one you depict in your movie) are driven into bankruptcy by "free trade" agreements (which keep food tariffs high, and farmer subsidies in first world nations intact), government coercion, and multinational monoliths like the genetically modified seed producer Monsanto?

RT: When my sister started reading books to her son, she was struck by how many stories used the farm or farm animals as characters; also notable were ABC charts and other language-building aids that referred to beasts and provided further fascination for children (and their parents) who are, for the most part, living far from working farms (they are much more likely to encounter these creatures at zoos, historical reenactments, or petting parks). Her response was to build her character lexicon from the creatures surrounding her suburban home—characters which the children would more likely encounter (outside of domestic pets this meant mosquitoes, wasps, small rodents, etc.).

But the animal is only one small part of what's held at a distance—the farm itself will continue to remain exotic for the suburb/city dweller. I just saw a short called *Fail Better Farm* (a student thesis project) that profiled a couple who had quit their jobs in the computer fields in order to rent a farm in Maine. Their pursuit was inspired by a movement to buy organic and local produce, and to distance themselves from commercial culture. But in the end, the mindset seemed wholly romantic, bringing to the fore a nostalgic stance that rings true for many bourgeois who feel that old “get back to nature” dream of Rousseau’s, as if some core set of values could be regained when one’s “living” is made through husbandry.

I had been shooting film on this farm for several years. There were things that caught my attention that I wondered about but had no answers to—the stamping of hooves, spots on a horse’s back, the color red. There was also the psychic attraction to animals, the life of a domestic, the weird romance of moving dirt. I filmed with an eye on most of these things (a few shots in *Trauma Victim* come from this shooting), but never with a serious thought of putting a movie together. The confused alienation alluded to in *Trauma Victim* increasingly took over, as did my churned up feelings about life in the face of death. I was deep into the death penalty project at this point, and Dad was up and down in health when I visited the farm one day and casually started shooting close-ups. My first focus was on the mutilated and decaying baby bird, and I recalled *Clip* and found myself looking on in horror, so further shooting was led by thoughts of reverence and sympathy. This turned out to be the overarching emotional lens that I brought to bear on the place.

I wanted to bring the farm alive in terms that replaced the pictorially grand or quaint with something that might move vision into mystery

and wonder. I needed to feel the bird in this place, a site with a life cycle that would normally seem separate or beyond me, but here seemed to pass through me, bringing a history to the fore that I hadn’t felt before. My connection to Animal was hinted at through seeing the water ripple in a way that I found myself thirsty for. I found myself looking at things like animal time and animal focus. The sense of the animals having only this world to live in was something I brought inward. In this way, the film prepared me for seeing death as real (a place of resting and also profound ignorance), and seeing life as preciously beautiful—a play of moving colors of emotion, awareness and form that could find meaning in fragmented vectors.

With *In Loving Memory* I shot the exteriors of all of the prisons in a way that was intended to keep the viewer on the outside of the fence, to make no pretense of a possible understanding of a “true” aesthetic of the space within, the space that feature dramas and certain documentaries seek to unearth or exploit. My approach to the farm was a reaction to that idea, sympathetically showing what an interior understanding felt like.

Shifting textures paralleled shifting states of being. Using multiple exposures meant wrestling with ideas concerning control and direction—all of these multiple exposures were done in-camera, and my ability to impose a directed vision onto these events was challenged in interesting ways that wound up defining the editorial structure of the film. Stability became a principle feature of the piece. These images were at their most muddled (to the point of being unwatchable) when there was no organizing principle, but seemed trite when strategies were strictly adhered to. And this, I felt, was a pretty good metaphor for both vision and being, and one that allowed the images to win out over me and bring the subject (the life-place) into that



reverential space that made it (for me) a successful portrait.

MH: *Trauma Victim* (17:30 minutes 2002) opens with fragments of seeing on the edge of the visual world, framed by tentative looks out a draped window. The world appears “too dark,” or “too light,” rendered in a spectacular montage of strobing green flashes and overexposed bathtubs. This opening movement gives way to a five and a half minute meditation on Niagara Falls, rendered in your customary lyric style, before we enter a blue, high contrast forest for a couple of minutes. The final ‘scene’ aggressively alternates a fence and a flapping sheet in the breeze (one takes shape in the wind, the other rigidly reshapes), before a final, enigmatic shot shows us a soft focused balloon floating in air. The voice of Robert Bauer floats under these pictures in a quietly questioning manner. “Carrying your own weight, it’s an uphill battle.” Who is he?

RT: Robert Bauer is a painter of portraits and landscapes who has a studio across the hall. He asked if I would sit for him, and insisted that I have a far away look, and then spent much time waiting for me to enter the appropriate



zone before attempting capture of this mental positioning (posturing?). The end result reminded me of a mix of Lucien Freud and Albrecht Dürer, and I recognized a darkness that brought forth something hidden. So I asked that he return the favor and make an audio recording that followed the same process of waiting for him to enter a zone I guessed we might have in common (seeing that he could evoke this special place in me through a surface rendering meant to me that he had the capacity to arrive at that place himself). There is something about his voice-music that suggests to me a quiet strength, and a weatherworn life. I also see this in myself. I sensed in him the capacity for an advanced self-other portrait, where my sense of self was superficially aged, and I mean that texturally and reflexively.

The movie starts with an obscured image which feels more like distressed leader than anything else—it’s the balloon reprinted on black and white film. Following that is the light bulb suspended in mid-air. The bulb makes focus happen, and at the film’s end, this bulb winks out to white, followed by this distressed image followed by its parent color image of the fuzzy balloon. This image, like some of the

Niagara Falls images, leaves the viewer in a suspended state, floating above the ground and not moving—a key metaphor in the film.

The distressed (or "barely there") image is something to be pushed against or away in the beginning (the bulb is the arrival point), and as the film runs its course and we arrive in the field of bulbs, Robert's speech about the "uphill battle" only leads to further questions which remain unclarified. When the bulb winks out and we are once again looking at the distressed image, the "answer" is one which leads us into the impossibility of the dream place—the world of the child, or even the pre-child. I see the end as regressive in that sense.

MH: How does his speech relate to the natural world viewings which occupy the visual field?

RT: Robert's speech (my orchestration of his speech) is a plea for repression, and as it moves forward, it pretends to reveal an inner life. But the words do not "add up," looking back conjures pain which he would rather avoid, or at least he would prefer not to name the source of pain directly. This is akin to not allowing language the keys to the heart. The images that I spin out suggest a movement away from pain—the dream within this Dream are the movements that take us away from the tub (the centerpiece of the film, the place where we relax, space out, imagine ourselves healing). The sequences of "Natural World" evolutions are conjured dream images that suit his will to escape but as they develop, they come to reflect the pain he seeks to avoid.

MH: Why the extended visit to the Falls?

RT: The waterfalls are extended until they become unbearable. They begin in beauty, deep within a water-spa, then decay into a thin and fairly aggressive environment that can no longer soothe (neither as water, nor as tourism). This is a reference to the pretense of

the healing power of the Bath. The gluttony that accompanies our obsessions and fantasies of comfort are less important to me than the sense that the fantasy has run away from itself and crossed into another realm into which we'd (I'd) rather not have arrived. There is a fairly clear sense of spatial displacement in this section when one considers the position of the camera/viewer. Other pieces of the film move us "away" from plausible real space (via abstraction, or the use of different film stocks) each time they move us toward the pain.

MH: What does the title mean?

RT: There was a complicated series of thoughts that led me to the film, and they buzz around this title. I had ideas about our country, how we allow and even encourage each other to function in a state of permanent adolescence. I'm not talking about the drive to appear youthful, but the will to achieve an identity based on adolescent comfort, certainty and reduction. The icon for this state is the car. Our neighborhoods are prisons locking out non-domesticity, and the car is an extension of that lock-out. They are based on fraudulent notions of our ability to name ourselves, because we cannot see through to the essential event—the social being that lives within a world of difficult creatures who do not speak our language, of places that, on the surface, cry "inhospitable!" The inability to look inward or open outward, to rely instead on comforts that, if examined deeply, may lead to death. We look away from our own pain and the pain we cause by being this way. These features call to mind a state of trauma. I place myself within the ranks of the traumatized, because I, too, have my own inaccessible fountain of pain that comes from not having my feet on the ground, but floating in the air high above the reality that this civilization denies. We are locked into a Sky Castle that relies on ignorance, distancing and self-deception to keep its momentum.

MH: Your cross-country epic “documentary” *In Loving Memory* (47 minutes 2005) takes aim at maximum security prisons across America. It opens with a collage of voice-overs, unusual in your work which is very circumspect in its use of language. This chorus of voices answer a series of (unheard) questions: what is your happiest memory? What was the nicest thing you ever did for someone else? Thirteen minutes into the movie a phone caller mentions his incarceration, this is the first hint that this beautifully lyric movie might have a darker side.

While the first “movement” is filled with a blend of natural imagery (trees, flowers, water) and apartment interiors (magnificently lensed, of course), the second movement brings us to the prison(s), and a series of calls from death row inmates follow. As the movie progresses you seem increasingly constrained by your subject. Your lyric, intuitive style is battened down by the numbing repetition of punishment, and the vast store of information which arrives in a very long series of intertitles. I can imagine you came across a whole lot of relevant, vital info on your travels and researches. Can you talk about the use of titles to dish this material?

You leave the greatest shock until the closing credit: the speaker’s we’ve seen in the film’s moving opening passages are identified as actors. Why actors? Why not name them as actors right away?

RT: The obvious subject of *In Loving Memory* is the memory of life in the face of imminent death. In addition to the movement of landscapes from lush fertility to arid desert, there are characters who tell stories and we see them in their homes. My hope was that because of the tone struck in the first series of images—the wide open landscape, the beautiful but somber close-ups, the oxygen tube and pills, the mixture of faces, ALONG

WITH the title’s reference to the epitaph—the viewer would be oriented towards the character’s relationship to death, and so direct sympathies towards the identification that fiction and poetry allow for. Still leaving open the question of who these people might be. By having the first voice arrive from an answering machine (it’s my sister, and I think it’s apparent that this is from a relative, an intimate), the question of why some of voices are from phone recordings is suspended. This withholding brings a confusion that we can be comfortable with, it allows us to invent a community of storytellers, and invent our own feelings about their situations. But it is a sort of imprisonment that I offer. It is revealed that at least some of the people are (or have been) incarcerated at a point that is deep within the interviews, at a time when the landscape and other imagery has revealed its problematized development. The film continues to withhold, but now in a less kind way. There is a larger reference to our political situation here, in terms of the pretense we have that we “know” the scope of our own agency, our ability to affect the political landscape, but also that we “know” our neighbors in a larger national sense. As more is revealed about these things through sustained attention and/or contact, the more our previous restrictions are unveiled, and the more complex these situations are revealed to be. Naming the actors earlier would defeat the illusion of openness that allows identity speculation.

I was aware of the restrictive nature of prisons for those incarcerated and for the public at large. For some this is the *raison d’être* for prisons—to keep this distinction sanctioned (sacred?) in every possible way. Originally I thought of setting up interview-like conditions at the prisons, but I didn’t like this thought for a number of reasons.

First of all, from a practical standpoint, I couldn’t imagine actually being admitted by the

prison authorities. I knew that journalists were allowed in, but that otherwise only family members had easy access. There were some who had been able to gain entry, but when I recalled the results they seemed unsatisfactory. Secondly, by using actors I might gain a sense of shared humanity that placing them inside the prison would obliterate. I thought of filming them in some special way—faces only, shallow depth of field—but I still wasn't happy with the flat nature of the representation.

The third reason was that the interview situation could color their responses based on how they were reacting to me. I wanted a situation that would allow them to speak to the world at large (a naive conceit, I admit), so I realized at that point that their words mattered much more than the encounter or the visual representation. I decided to call them. The only way to do this, as it turned out, was to write them and have them call me. I wrote to prisoners across the country, some on recommendations from people like Kazi Toure (American Friends) and others because I was interested in a particular State as a representation of one that had a lot of people, a few people or somewhere-in-between number of people on death row. It was a lot of letters. Some states sent my letters back before they reached the prison, but most seemed to get through. The letters asked that the receiver either write and mail their responses back to me, or that they call an 800 number that I'd set up so I could record the responses. I had a fairly low level of positive response, and because I couldn't count on a specific time for anyone to call, my producer and I had to monitor our phone-with-tape-machine from 7am to 7pm from June to October. But it was worth the wait.

One thing I liked about this set-up was that the inmates were not asked questions cold, without a chance to consider their response. I was

happy with the written responses—some were brief, and others extremely long, but all were a mix of public and intimate that made them interesting.

Outside of showing the written text, there was only one way of having them available in the film, and that was having someone else reading them. I had initially thought those readers would be people from my neighborhood, but instead I turned to people who could commit to a sustained work schedule throughout the fall of 2004, and this meant actors. We worked for two months on the audio performances, and went through various interpretations of what an "effective" performance might mean, and I recorded all of these sessions. This allowed for a variety of textures, something I could work with in structuring the movie as a reveal of "information" over time. Sometimes the same voice seemed to be representing very different characters or narratives (in the film sequence, immediately prior to the "incarceration" line, the performances become a bit stiff, and there is subsequently an alternation between flat and nuanced performance levels until the voices of the actors are heard no more).

As far as the shooting went: I sought out all of the state prisons in the US that housed death row inmates. I picked up non-death-row-housing prisons as a result of (apart from a bit of bureaucratic slight-of-hand) not only an interest in some of these, but also because early on I had experimented with interior prison shooting in the abandoned jail at the center of Boston and this served as an aesthetic touchstone for me in the film. It was yellowed and dirty, decaying back into a state of nature through neglect, and I found this helpful in considering what else I might shoot in the US landscape when approaching other prisons from the outside.

I gained access through the public information office in each state's Department of Corrections. Once permission was granted, I had to contact the warden at each prison. In some cases guards would accompany me on my rounds, in other cases I could proceed unsupervised. In some States I was allowed access to the inside of the prisons, something I had not planned on, but these visits did provide me with useful shots.

"Useful?" Yes, the cinder-block-only death row cell interior contrasted beautifully with the rich apartments seen at the beginning of the film. AND I thought that the viewer's titillation at being led inside death row should be particularly unrewarding and unromantic: broad empty spaces with big fat bars and surly men and too much fluorescent light. When I began shooting the non-death-row prisons, I settled on the idea you mention: that the richness of my "intuitive style (is) battoned down by the numbing repetition of..." the environment of incarceration leading to death. So I let Restriction rule, leaving the prisons to stand taxonomically embalmed within titles that reflect nothing but distressingly cold facts: listing the number of inmates awaiting death in each place. This succession would lead, I hope, to questions about why these numbers, and when will I escape the relentless march of these images? I mean for the audience to seek escape from the weight of these facts over time, like a prisoner forced to pace (physically, mentally) in his or her cell over the vast tracts of state-regulated time that we seem to be stuck supporting. Is this asking for hope to spring within a structure that offers no hope?

While I was making this film, my father was dying. At first this was not apparent, but in the Spring of 2002 (a year after I began making contact with the prisons) my parents were notified that he had kidney cancer, the disease that would eventually claim his life. At first I wasn't aware that there might be a connection

between my choice to make this film about life in the face of death, but over the course of that summer, I served as caretaker to my parents' house while he was either undergoing treatment or in recovery at the hospital, and at that time of intensive reflection on the film and the struggle that was happening close to me I began work on what would become *Trauma Victim*. This film strengthened the connections between my filmmaking and my particular state of mind/being. The definitive connection came when visiting my parents at a motel. During that visit my father was recovering from surgery, enduring increasing pain, and his recovery (his life) was in jeopardy. They sent me to the pharmacy which was a drive away—too far it seemed for me to make it back with the medication in enough time to be of any use, and I sped shaking like a reckless crazy person down the road. My fear was palpable, and I was on auto-pilot, I had been reduced to an animal state, reacting with all due impulse and emotion to this situation. A life was at stake.

As my father went through recovery, it seemed that he'd been granted a reprieve—an old story, no? The months that followed seemed to be good ones for him, but the sense of fear and urgency remained for me. So from that point of view, this personal crisis did not leave me through the further stages of making *In Loving Memory*. However I did not imagine that images of my father or any direct references to our family's story would enter into the movie. Apart from that, in spite of their conservative view of things, my parents seemed to be taking an interest in the film because they could see that it was a major priority for me. My father in particular was undergoing a spiritual change that made him much more engaged in the lives and projects of those close to him. It was becoming increasingly easy to fold my work into my life, as far as these connections with my family went.

In November of 2004 I found myself in Arizona, visiting the last of the prisons in a vast dustbowl as the sun was setting. I had just left the guard station and was losing my light while setting up the tripod for the first shot when my cell phone rang and my father asked how I was doing. I couldn't talk, and he was in physical distress (the cancer had migrated to his lungs). It was a very sad moment for me. I was paralyzed, and saw the bind I was in as an emotional one, a staging ground for my own inability to easily share my feelings and thoughts with him, directly outside the only maximum security prison I'd encountered that had no windows to the outside world. It was then that I realized that our "story" was folded into the imagery I'd been shooting since 2000. When I got home, there was a message on the answering machine, the message from my sister that is the first main piece of vocal material in the film. A week later I made my way down to my parents' house with two short-ends to shoot some of his medication bottles and oxygen machine, as supporting material for some of the shots of one of my actors which included the oxygen tubing (also at the beginning of the film). I still had no thoughts of shooting my father. Before I shot, I helped my father up to the sink, and I could feel a rising terror within me, and I didn't know where it was coming from. He lay back down and seemed glassy-eyed to me, but it was hard to distinguish this as something different from what had come to be his "natural" distressed state. I began shooting, but I hadn't gotten far into it when I realized that I had not taken any footage of Dad for a while and I would just take one unobtrusive shot from the other room. Very soon after that, it was apparent that he was in an accelerated decline, and a nurse was called. Soon after that the ambulance was on its way. The last shot of the roll I'd been shooting was the EMTs lifting him up on the stretcher. I felt this situation was happening out of my control, I was in the car again, speeding to the pharmacy, trembling. I ran into a closet to reload, and that

two minute roll should have been light struck because I was in such a state in the closet (another metaphor for my withheld communication/emotions?) and I ran out to film as they led him out of the house and into the ambulance and away, away, away. Can you cry from behind the lens? I could. I went back into the house, both parents gone, and shot the empty bed, and realized that this was the last material I would shoot for this film, and would become the centerpiece. I recalled the voices of the men from Missouri describing their work in the hospice programs at their prisons, and the insights that they'd earned from those experiences, and they came to stand with me there, as I shot the empty bed and the bottles of pills with the name "Todd" on them. I didn't consciously realize that my father would not be returning to this house, but I think I knew that he was nearing his death. I could not really face this. The "facing" of it would come a short time afterward, immediately prior to my sister's wedding when he was there but not there, and I could see in his face all of the connections we shared, communicated or not. I understood that his passing was my passing, and that he would live in this way in this film, the most sacred project in my life. His "role" is spread throughout the film. Through the distress in his life he became (or joined) the Human Face in the film (you never hear his voice...), and it is his world as much as the other participants' that is decaying around him, allowing a kind of clarity of thought and feeling that is sometimes obscured within the riches of our everyday taken-for-granted opulence. I am here expressing the personal side of this film, which is only one side of it for me, yet it is a side which I feel now contributes to its political potency by further wedding my presence to the material, showing the author as more than a casual observer or clever constructor. Since then I have been more actively incorporating the life around me into my films. *Evergreen* was a more pointed elegy to my father and the feelings he left behind for me and the other

films have offered transformative views onto my family and the local environments I inhabit.

MH: *Evergreen* (16 minutes 2005) begins with precisely framed forest moments, the camera tilting into the light, the first roll in black and white, the second in colour. There is a luxuriant radiance that pours out of each frame, as if light were not falling onto plants, but coming up out of them. After a brief glimpse of a Sunday painter, flies settle on a paint palette, the natural sound give way to machine drones, oceans beckon liners, and the first of many shipping containers marked Evergreen appear. A tree watches a plane fly past. The port appears as mouth and anus, ingesting and repelling. New houses are being built, the land fenced off and titled and sold. Is it strange to extoll the virtues of nature in an ecologically toxic, machine driven art like cinema?

RT: I made the film as an allegory paralleling my own reconciliation with the loss of my father. There is a life we observe, a life we idealize, a life we are repulsed by, and a life we live. *Evergreen* is about these states of living. How's that for a generalization?

There is a wonderful complexity in the natural world that defies simplicity, I find this textural chaos visually enchanting. The act of landscape painting or photography can celebrate that diversity, turning away from human controlled designs, whether physical or temporal. The painter is as integrated within the film frame as the plant life. Her "brushes" are flower petals. Through the act of painting, she inadvertently feeds the flies. For the first moment in the film, a commerce is established—the flies feed on the art itself, leaving their tiny fly droppings on the swimming page. Concurrently the image becomes less controlled. Flower petals are caught and held in spider webs. It is at this point that the container ships enter because shipping is the lifeline of human commerce. The containers were mainly shot during the making of *In Loving Memory*, but they couldn't find a home since they held too much weight as a symbol of commerce and of adult child-play. I was attracted to both their formal simplicity and their ubiquity, but also to their functional value as shells. I was further struck by their "deaths"—rusting in makeshift cemeteries in ports across the planet. What does this mean?



Moving from the fantastic world of incident that so enchants me into the world of commerce acknowledges the forces at work necessary to create the space of art in the material world. The aesthetics of commerce is facilitated by simplicity (of colour, shape, scale) and interchangeability. There are too many of us to live in the “natural” world, instead we live in a world we have chosen to make, which might be named Evergreen (as the containers are named). This modern-day fairytale imagines us everlastingly beautiful, efficient, harmonious... What is being described is the nature of artifice.

What about the death of my father? In order to come back to life, I must find a way past consolation. To do this, I assert that I am no more than a vessel containing and dispersing light and shadow.

MH: In the opening of *Bliss* (4:40 minutes 2006) you follow a dark grey couple with flash bulbs trailing them, then cut into quick glimpses of stained glass church windows (is God also a celebrity?). There are crazy beautiful shots of... help me, are they leaves or fire flies, turning in the wind? A bouquet of focal shifts brings us to a beach where lightning plays and people speed past. Who has time to look? This is the longest shot of the film, by far. Did you worry it would upset the temporal balance-like using too much garlic? Why the shots of the American flag, the children gathered in the park, the sudden ending?

RT: The church's sanctuary is shown as something elaborate, beautiful, fragmented, transitory... barely real. The spinning light is caused by large flies, mayflies perhaps, circling around each other in the afternoon sun. They are nature's parallel to that “sanctuary,” shot in super-8. Then there is a move to video: inside all is quiet, outside all is color, light, and the clamor of work and play (the children in colorful clothes) as the clouds begin to gather. The

long shots on the beach let us see the approaching storm, and in the longest shot, the waterspout builds threateningly and gorgeously while passersby continue their leisured lives, unimpressed at this pending disaster. This is where politics enter, the final shot brings the funnel cloud over the darkening city, an event we are powerless to address except by watching. It is as if watching could offer a blissful refuge from the storms of the world. So I don't worry about the length of the last beach moments, nor of the suddenness of the end—the BOMB of silence that is suggested through the cut-off.

Why the flag? It might be seen in two directions, either as a symbol of hope and unity that will endure in the face of the storm, or a pugnacious symbol of American bravado. I framed it at the bottom left of the screen to show how pathetic our (American) hubris is in denying the realities of global troubles whether they be of our making or not, a reference to a national identity that sees itself as immune to both the consequences of its own actions and the changing face of the world it has helped to create and destroy.

MH: *Qualities of Stone* (11 minutes 2006) is a graveyard visitation, though headstones make only a brief appearance, instead you draw attention to the natural world that surrounds them, often dripping wet in the rain. Flowers swoon into focus, macroscopic tissues of stems and branches come into view. This gives way to a series of upside down trees glimpsed as the framing adjusts. Are you filming the viewfinder of a camera? Are you looking at a look? Oh yes, there it is. A series of frames impose their view on the natural world, and then we are looking through a circular matte, as if through the scope of a gun. Shooting. Then you deliver us into a black and white world of a dream—where are we? Wind breathes life into the trees, they gesture

towards us and each other before bursting into flower. Some trip.

RT: This is the third in a series on urban naturalism (following *Thunder* and *Evergreen*). I was shooting through lenses and viewfinders, interested in the effects of mediation, both on how I was acting and how I was perceiving my actions. With the super-8 camera's diffusions in the graveyard I was hiding a bit, moving increasingly toward a crouching position as I danced among these stones feeling out my relationship to them. My "escape" from this movement (and "speech" with the graves) is found in the white-budded branches which blossom in the end, a revisitation following my discoveries.

The cut to green signals a new beginning, at once luxurious and melancholy. It is a more sharply defined sense of space, in which I start from a hiding position and move out into the light. It led to an entangling (wedding?) of plants and fence, held together in the rain. The idea of these forms sharing something was interesting to me, but so was the feel of the rain, the beautiful pearls it left on the tips of these things, catching the light just so... Moving into the dim was another retreat of a sort, feeling the love of the plants through a new kind of light and lens that finds its way into a field of other lenses-within-lenses: layers of mediation bringing their own transformations into play as I move increasingly towards interior explorations that brought the life of the glass to the fore. It was like working with living eye extensions that allowed me to release myself into a pool of vision. I thought of the lens as a seed, the viewfinder as a sister to that seed, my eye as a two-way mirror, and my hand as a kind of cultivator-of-dialogue, with both my mind and the subject-space as destinations for all of their activities. The life residing in the lens might be an extension of the self, even as we are mesmerized by its confabulations. I found these new playmates in

the darkness, and through them a new perspective on the relationship between the organic and inorganic, finding myself, in the end, OUT in the full light of day.

MH: I think *There* (9:35 minutes 2006) is your most perfect film though I can hardly raise up a word (like a shield) towards a question. What to say about its dreamy darkness, the attention to natural shapes, the camera opening and closing its light aperture to let this abstract world breathe? Why all this edgeless beauty, the searching intervals, the seething microverse of small events?

RT: My sustained appreciation for the richness of *Light* developed initially in drawing media has gradually met up with my development in filmmaking. Following *Qualities of Stone* (which brings the process of making into the picture's subject space) and *Interplay* (which is more of a dance piece humming along with the various places I inhabit), I felt a need to turn further inward and undertake a kind of *Fantastic Voyage* into my own lightstream-as-bloodstream. The vehicle for this was a single plant that I'd been given in gratitude. Initially I had wanted to reflect that feeling (now become my gratitude for such a marvelous gift into my dead-world office), but I quickly became lost in this light journey that the plant form was offering to me, obviated through microphotography. By looking closely, I seemed to be looking within... something. Inside the lens, the world of the plant triggered a kind of mutual dream relationship, a reflection of shapes in the mind. Was it *Our* mind? The mind of the plant shown through its "body language," and my recognition of it?

As each film roll came back and was projected, I seemed to find greater connections between my emotional state and the world that was being created and recreated, as both light and darkness grew to speak with equally intriguing and, in a way, disturbing voices which both

thrilled and challenged me to answer back—to further facilitate the weaving of the "tale," a creation of this scape that seemed to mirror my own internal beanstalk worming and webbing its tangled way indeterminately through and around itself to the imagined world of giants at the top of the clouds. This is the sense with which this was edited—finding voices within the light of a newly-rediscovered world (through the camera) that gives life (the light stream reflecting the blood-or-spirit stream) a chance to breathe/flow in many directions. Of course those voices might seem my own, but I feel they are brought into being by, through, and for "others." This is the fun I have watching this film develop its music; "listening" to these voices is a way of hearing my heartbeat, and knowing that its sound offers a way for others to beat with it, celebrating a kind of mutual spiritual mortality. This is why I (in my description of this film) call the light "seeds," the darkness, "soil," the movement along the path of time (both in the making and the viewing/hearing) paralleling a life's growth, the fruits of which are these unusual discoveries of spirit. My latest excursions continue this shared path of directed discoveries.

MH: You've been putting off sending me a disc of new things because each day promises something even more up to the minute, hot off the computer, straight from the lab. But at last, here it is: *Office Suite* (14 minutes 2007), one of a trio of movies made this year, and it's only July. What a monster you've become. Would you mind coming up here and photographing my life and make it look like this? All shimmering and mysterious and dark and beautiful. What have you become: the beauty machine? Your camera trails along the edge of windows, or electrical cords or the edges of paper and cardboard and everything sings, it's all so lovely. I remember (or do I?) Hollis Frampton exclaiming over Brakhage's "frightening" tendency to aestheticize all of his experience. It's certainly strange to see the

same rhythms of seeing, the same floating tilts and rack focusing, once applied to forests and gardens, now at play in an office world. Don't get me wrong, it's perfect, I look at it and think: yes, I DO want to marry him. My camera, my way of seeing: until death do us part. So tell me, what are these shapes, this brooding luminosity, telling us, or has this show world left telling behind?

RT: It seems so difficult to talk about the present, and especially this version of it: a film that's still at the negative cutter as I write. This film was self-consciously oriented to do exactly what Frampton's afraid of: aestheticizing experience, in this case steeped in an environment that is typically reviled. This "office" is also a home to me. I wanted to build a filmic space that reflected my daily cycles of focus, frustration, relaxation, and madness—made within the confines of the actual material culture in which I am brewing/stewing. From the start I felt that I was doing something that was kind of cute, as suggested by the punnish title—taking the banal and transforming it into the Real (the Real that I mention in other responses to you). It also follows from the development of the films made in 2006: *Qualities Of Stone's* "movements" that tie organic life with inanimate or inorganic material, the dance features of *Interplay*, the evolving microverse in *There*, and the celebration of the everyday space of my life as inclusive of others found both in *Interplay* and *Bliss*.

I wanted to enter something familiar with an eye toward elevating it. I loved the imaginative space that opened up in *There* through the use of black and white film, so I stuck with that when shooting the interior spaces. I find that I see with a color eye, so I'm always surprised at what becomes filmically visible in black and white, and somehow that seemed appropriate to me when dealing with an office as subject—a restrictive place that's full of surprises (mine's

quite a "mess", really), and one that strives for (and often fails to find) simplicity and clarity. I looked upon this space lovingly, seeking out the luscious texture of its various skins, teasing out its forms through an obsessive caressing of its edges, breathing lightly down the necks of the unique players emerging from the shadows or basking in the shifting light.

After a few months of these discoveries I felt I would bring more of these reflections-of-self to light if I had a sparer palette. Like Ernie Gehr in *Serene Velocity*, I found myself in a hundred yard long corridor. Like the horizon, it spoke to me of certain yearnings (the invention of a space beyond or behind it), and both insisted on its solidity while defying me to decode its impenetrable silence. *Serene Velocity's* rigorous response to this space seemed to recreate it as an office sprite might: staying stoically connected to the spirit of the place by keeping a "lock" on the camera, expanding and exploding the shape through mathematical lens changes, underlining the tension between picture plane flatness and the deep perspectival lines of the hallway. My way of dealing with this silence was to move both with and against the lines of the space, dancing with this rather unimaginative partner in the four hundred-foot rolls that I shot there. When that wasn't quite enough to push the image space into sympathetic vibration with my inner space, I resorted to single frame work and, finally, severe camera manipulation. As I reapproached this place with the camera, my actions became louder and more frenetic tracing the development of the film (particularly in this section) and a typical day for me, so I was rather pleased with this double entendre. I CAN be rather brash and impatient, as this section suggests, especially when something or someone won't talk back to me, but I'm also dreamy and detached at some points in my day, and of course intimately, determinately and often passionately involved with those small, rather important things that

some call details and which I think of as familiars, whether they be ideas, creations, or people.

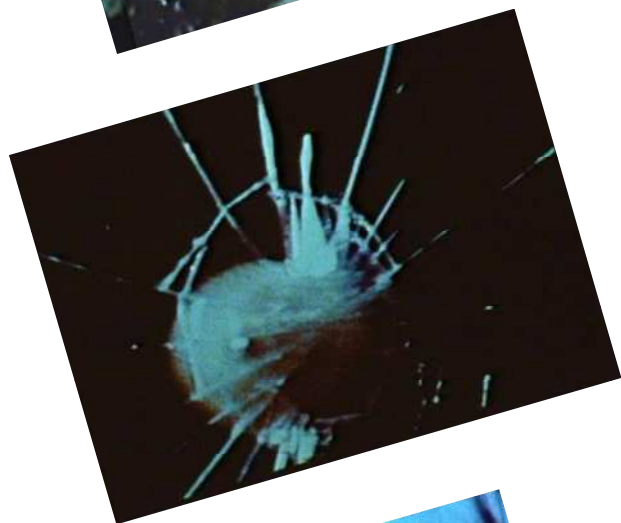
MH: Again, this is a fine response, a way of living with the camera as accompaniment to one's life, and working out problems or teasing out new dimensions (adding depth) to what is already "known" (a process which seems never ending). What you didn't address so much is the rapturous beautifying momentum of it all. Not that you haven't said enough about what you've done and why, but is this the same as looking at moments of one's life with "rose coloured glasses?"

RT: If the lens of the camera is roseating, then I will take that as adding the red rub of a blush to things, that is to say, bringing a certain passion of vision to these states/environments. So yes, my vision is certainly selective, the process of single-channel shooting sees to that nicely). I think this is how I'm wired—I seek out elemental buds in the viewfinder and blow lightly on them in the hopes of fanning their nascent warmth into mesmerizing flames/frames as a way of creating dialogue in a rapturous state, as if meaning can be more apparent (or underscored more emphatically) in this place of heightened awareness and attention. It insists that the ecstatic state is always here, within the minute folds of the everyday, I just need to adjust my vision to let the contours of that arena become apparent.

I'm not making the office glorious for the sake of reclaiming workplace aesthetics but bringing the world in front of me into sublime focus for the sake of continuing dialogues about states of being which I believe are the most interesting spiritual conversations. We can find rapture or elevation with strangers (seeking out the exotic), but how much more challenging and rewarding to find this within the familiar.

Long live experimental everything

an interview with Julie
Murray



She should be a writer, or at least: and a writer. She lenses it all up with precision, and makes of her meager picture harvests a maximum yield. But the way she writes about these interior musings are bedtime stories for the avant garde. Her work is not literary of course, though the word is never far from her frames, whether via the long shadow of literary inspirations or in conversations with friends. What a pleasure it has been to receive her idiosyncratic para-science ruminations, these inquiries into knowing and seeing, often culled from found footage which has been run so often through her fingers that she might as well have made them herself. The author, the authority. In this world of small marvels, where so much has been put into doubt (into play), this much is sure: it is difficult work. The viewer is active or not at all (what was that?), the collisions of picture moments might appear accidental to the casual onlooker, and how to bring a sustained and nuanced understanding to these shorts when they are most usually displayed with seven or eight others, each bearing sight's understanding in different directions. This resistance to an easy read, the rewards of sustained and repeated viewings (nearly impossible for material reasons), the compacted impressionism of her work, all these are traditional, or at least, not unexpected. She is part of the traditions of the untraditional. But these avant gestures are more usual at twenty, and Julie has entered the second and third decades of her making with no signs of slowing. Not that she's in a hurry, the point of these small fabulations is at least to be able to stop and stare and wonder and digress and imagine some new pleasure born. She bigs up insect life in her camera microscope, she looks at the golden Manhattan light, a movie theatre turned into a parking lot, she runs a boy and his grandfather backwards in the hot house until they make far too much sense. The punctum, the point, the sharp edge of the picture. Yes, these pictures hurt to watch. Read them if you dare.

MH: When asked why she wrote, Marguerite Duras famously replied that she lacked the strength to do nothing. I'm wondering if you can spill about how you became a filmmaker, and why you've persisted while so many have stopped?

JM: I have been thinking more deeply recently about this art of doing nothing after I heard an interview with a man who has just completed a book in defense of sloth. As well as causing me to wonder how he reconciled the issue of having to actually hunt and peck his way through the task, which many might be inclined to call "work," or "busy" at the very least, it also stirred in me a new resolve to find a nice mossy oak under which I will sit for hours, gazing, first with one eye, then the other, reading—or not—as the mood might strike. And even more so since with every passing year this particular marble's inhabitants seems increasingly committed to deeper and more riven torrents of bureaucratic flotsam than ever before, reducing time, that element so malleable to the art of filmmaking—to a grubby currency, concerned only with loss, expenditure, management and waste.

I hereby rebel.

In answer to the first part of your question, which, I have a feeling, will do more to preserve my dignity than the second half, I studied painting and mixed media in Ireland in the early 1980's and, gravitating more to the mixed media part of the resulting degree, was naturally open to the idea of film but at the time of graduating college, knew very little about it. This had not stopped me from making a super-8 montage film in my last year there, however. This film incorporated both found and camera original footage (appropriation was art issue de jour at that time) and did not survive graduation, if I remember correctly, as the response to it was so tepid I judged I was not much good at it and, besides, did not know how to proceed with the medium, anyhow.

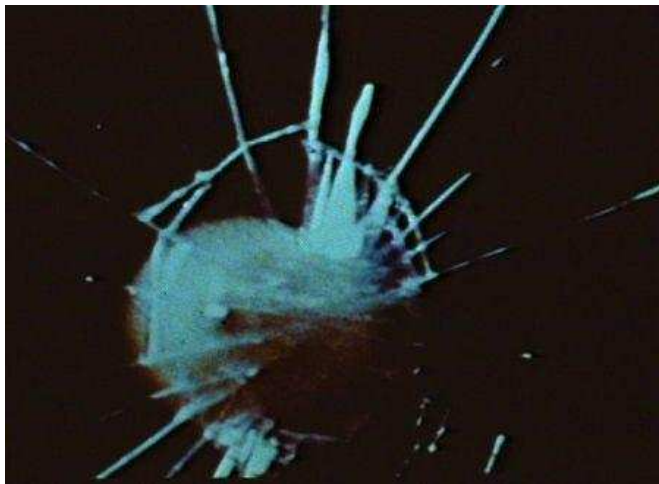
Arriving in the US as a student I signed up for a class that promised to lay bare the mysterious and mercurial history of recent American avant-garde film and happened also to provide access to a very good Super-8 camera for those who wished to try their hand at it, of which I was a most enthusiastic one. In that time I made a ten-minute accelerated montage piece which showed around a bit; bars, impromptu theaters and such. Through these screenings I met many of the San Francisco avant-garde film-making community—so many souls of such prodigious talents from almost everywhere but San Francisco. Encouraged by the lack of art snobbery and the generally positive responses to my efforts, I made another one. This one a montage on Ireland, sex, and Irishness. More positive responses. So I made a third, fourth and fifth, all Super-8, before changing to 16mm format.

I found I didn't get bored spending hours and hours poring over images and sequences of images, constructing and deconstructing fleeting narratives—some taking place between a couple of frames at times—gazing at rows of images—one hardly different from the next in a sequence—and meditating on such metaphysical questions (as only the under-employed can usefully indulge in) as to just how much time one could say, while holding the strip of film between their fingers, had passed between them right there in their plastic present tense. I imagine knitters, weavers and other practitioners of the tactile arts think these things too.

In short, filmmaking stimulated many of the same kind of thoughts I dwelled on in my activity as a painter, but with the added dimension of time, as well as a connection to a social group that were open, culturally unprejudiced and an awful lot of fun. Filmmaking of this kind was also so wide open in terms of form and possibilities and screenings were always very busy and socially spontaneous, unlike gallery shows. Everything was inventive and, it seemed, experimental all the time. Who wouldn't get along with that?

Which leads me to the second part of your question, about which I have not yet decided as to whether it is one of a truly useless variety—why does anyone do anything, anyway—or whether I simply do not wish to examine too closely this long path of economic hardship, if not outright fiscal disaster, that I have taken. So, can we just say—because it seemed like a good idea at the time?

MH: You are living in a country which is presently at war in Iraq, many would insist that the US is in a state of perpetual war (it has bombed more than 25 countries since ww2, assassinated more than 30 leaders, intervened in more than 40 foreign elections, military oriented products accounts for about a quarter of the total gross domestic product). This has been made possible, in part, by an acquiescent press, eager to spread the lies of the ruling class. How does fringe media figure into these mass hallucinations, or does it?



JM: I have a lot of opinions about the world, inner and outer, that I live in, some good, some bad, but if they get "written" into my work as any kind of political statements it is by the most oblique means. I feel way too clumsy in the way I work with hard facts for the results to be of any use to me or anyone else. My films are not political and are, expositively speaking, leaky vessels, Irish owned, registered as transnational and flying a US flag of convenience. The only noble thing that can be said of the enterprise is that they are not in pursuit of the endangered pink dolphin or Patagonian tooth fish.

***Conscious* (10 minutes 1993)**

MH: *Conscious* (10 minutes 1993) combines science, nature and industrial film snippets from the 50s and 60s to produce a rapid fire collage of haptic cinema. It opens with a sequence which shows a child being touched, a newborn so sensitive that each gesture suggests violence and violation, and then this child is thrown out into a bewildering world of montage collisions. A camera tilt becomes a cherry dropping onto an ice cream sundae becomes a churning sludge of concrete becomes a practice skeleton massaged with a red heart squeezed, rhyming the cherry. Hot dogs and overhead trains make vertical rhymes while parachutes, kitchen sinks and oil wells share circular motifs. The world appears as pattern and geometry. These dis-arranged received pictures stages a world "already there," waiting for the newborn to enter. Is your cutting a mime of coming-to-consciousness, or images of pre-memory or? Curiously, while I'd never seen this movie before it was so very familiar. There is a genre of movies (via Ortiz and Connors and) mined from the same inexhaustible well of industrial pictures (haven't I seen that operation before?). Am I feeling the conventions of the unconventional? Or is this like listening to a blues lick, it's all in the intonation, the way a note bends, the grain of the voice?

JM: I couldn't know whether you had seen that operation before. Are you asking me to inform you whether or not you are jaded by this genre of filmmaking? Many years have passed. Quite understandable. The reality for me of working with fragments of pre-existing films is one of a kind of semi-consciousness in a sandbox. Handled this way and that, moved here and there, at some point they begin to bind, to coagulate, becoming sensible to an unconscious 'illogy' and to form a tale of some kind.

I only discovered how closely this form of filmmaking was to writing a real diary when, after nearly a decade of absence from them, I re-looked at some of my early super-8 films and saw the "pages" of the times in which they were made quite clearly, though they were utterly invisible at the time.

Even though there are always a few known autobiographically associative images that I end up including consciously, generally speaking the thrust of any film begun is to wander around in murky uncharted metaphors without life belt or preemptive strategy. Attempts to pin this approach down as a template or schematic for future use instantly imposes such deprivations as to kill the thing stone dead. Bleached like oxygen-starved coral, all the right shapes are still there but skeletal hardness replacing the river of its living bloom. Film being of fixed photographs sits on this cusp always, compelling and ghostly, both dead and alive, seemingly about memory yet inadequate to the task.

Going back and forth over moving images I quickly found the process of editing had the effect of dissolving any illusion of spontaneity I might have initially ascribed to the liveliness of content. This mechanized rhythm revealed became as deeply a part of the whole as the content, so human behaviour thus roboticized

became a matter of geometric rather than psychological arrangement, these mannerisms unquestionably doubtful as a representation of reality. The illusion ruined but the attraction still intact. I still try. I notice others do, too.

Anathema (7 minutes 1995)

MH: In *Anathema* (7 minutes 1995) a suite of circling industrial pictures gathers round the figure of a surgeon (pre and post-op) who notices, by the film's end, that a spot has appeared on his own hand. He is not immune, impartial and removed, after all. The repeating figure of a man "shot" in some kind of science experiment (though reviewed in slow motion he appears to be falling "the wrong way," as if his fall is play acting), a frog eating, a man who looks like a camp victim (could he still be alive?). I feel these pictures are telling a precise and exact story, only I don't know what the story is. There is a grammar, underscored by your material assertions (showers of red dots and film flares) and deliberate repetitions which draw the disparate materials into a private alphabet. Pedro Costa said that seeing in cinema occurs only when the door is closed, when the viewer is refused. But here I am left wondering: what is happening?

JM: I think the doctor is a priest and is, with proprietary interest, searching through the carnal mess of tissue to discover for himself the essence of life. Probing, however, violates the sacrosanct darkness of the body, staining it with light and the body dies. Life flees and the soul goes on the lam. The idea for the film came when I found two old reels, one an instructional film intended to show medical staff the proper way to scrub up for the operating room while avoiding getting any germs on their hands or clothing and the other fragments of what looks to be a clinical trial of an early version of a taser gun.

In the first, figures fitting themselves, or variously being fitted, into these vestments with

such measured deliberation and uninflected perfunctoriness readily reminded me of the duties of priests and altar boys normally undertaken in preparation for a mass. This idea is clinched in the shot of the male doctor patiently holding aloft his arms in a pose of "Let us pray the Lord have mercy on our souls" while the nurse ties the robe at his back. He ceremoniously washes his hands and I thought of that anguished nightmare Macbeth lives where he cannot rid himself of the imaginary blood from his hands following his murdering of the King of Scotland. A toning powder that I had applied to the film to reduce its pink hue failed to dissolve and left spots all over the surface, like a cartoon skin rash. I thought it funny that the film material itself might get in on the action in this way. Had I planned it I think I would have found it unacceptably hokey.

There are so many variations on the dressing for the operating room sequences that the litany of moves and combinations, once disarranged, are emptied of original meaning and became a compact catalog of gestural phrases available to pluck at random and associate freely with all the other bits and pieces I had collected.

The footage of the tattooed character who is shot with a taser gun had a curious aspect to it which you have spotted correctly. There is something fake about his reactions. His long hair, tattoo, glasses. Was he a 'walk-in', a fake 'walk-in'? A just-released casualty from rehab? A struggling joe making money in some trial experiment? Something about the predicament he is photographed in sets these questions in motion. The nurse is also a curiosity. She presses the button but seems wholly unprepared for what follows. Our friend grimaces wildly and contracts in pain, but, in doing so, catches a foot on the flimsy mat he is standing on and, in that split second, refocuses all his attention (more than should properly be available to him, if we are to believe the

grimace) to recover from the trip-up. A little doubt sets in. And what is more native to the business of faith, belief and the comprehension of God than doubt? Think of Carravaggio's *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, his finger is sunk in the wound. He is not even looking at the event but is focused elsewhere, as though reading the contents and information through the tip of his finger darkly buried in the flesh.



With these things in mind I chose music for a mass composed by Olivier Messiaen with an insert of a phrase sung by John Taverner. The slow and incredibly beautiful way this very formally structured hymn is sung, each note measured as is each phrase so that the whole piece holds the listener aloft on the intricately distributed rhythm of sound and not sound, the body borne entirely on this magic wind of measured breathing, held and then so carefully released. In contrast to *Conscious*, I cut the shots longer (where possible) to match these measures.

The very thin man revealed near the end is dead.

The spot the doctor discovers on his hand is a hole in his glove.

Enter germs.

Enter the world.

If You Stand With Your Back To the Slowing of the Speed of Light in Water (17 minutes 1997)

MH: *If You Stand With Your Back To the Slowing of the Speed of Light in Water* (18 minutes 1997) is filled with "your" pictures: there are city lights in puddles, the geometry of a bridge, telephone wires, passing trees, hand

processed emulsion scrapes: what does it mean to convert the world into these abstract patterns?

JM: These are insignificant 'image' patterns in a gelatin bind glued to a ribbon of polyester. The world and its conversion is a different matter altogether. Right now it looks like a toss-up between a baptism by fire and one by water, as lately its lovely body seems to be either in flames or drowning. It is very, very serious.

MH: The movie is framed by images of a train trip, and so appears as a ride through a city of picture events which collage insect worlds (glimpsed via found footage) and human constructions. Can you talk about the ordering of the movie, and its long title (which implies looking away, and a dangerous light)?

JM: The footage that became *If You Stand...* was amassed over time and in fragmentary form was the working material for a series of film loops generated for performances I carried out with filmmaker Caspar Stracke in the mid 1990s in New York City. These performances were a lot of fun. They involved six to eight projectors in and out of which we threaded our film loops as quickly as our sweaty hands could manage. The resulting mayhem generated novel results and occasionally reached moments of hypnotic rhythmic harmony between image and sound which made it all seem worth it.

The sound in of one of the performances we did at a big loft gallery in Soho, NYC, was made by DJ Olive and in another by Ikue More, both great sound artists. We were lucky. After we had finished these performances I found myself with quite a number of film loops composed of fragments of shots that rhymed in a certain tight way and were closed unto themselves needing no justifications of before's-and-after's. I had other longer clusters

half formed on the bench with developing ideas as to how I might use them and eventually began to assemble all these elements into a single strand. It was going to be one long poem in the form of a single run-on sentence with no breaks, with one image or idea leading into another by rhythm and rhyming metaphor.

The footage of the trellis work of the Queensboro bridge was hand processed and put to the sound of radio static, as if things were coming in and out of sonic focus. It seemed well suited to accompany the picture's occasional intermittency due to the hand processing. It provided a good "bracket" if you will, for the whole film, setting the viewer up for journey and uncertainty and making a doorway into the run-on montage to follow.

On a personal level the film was a document of the city lived. Much later I turned my attention to T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* after my curiosity was aroused by an ex-communist party lesbian acquaintance who I heard one day extolling the virtues of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by the same author. I re-read *The Love Song...*, determined she was right, and then read *The Wasteland*, which impressed me deeply. It had both the depth of the truth of things as well as being utterly liberated in terms of the how these were put together. I liked feeling the "hinges" in all this, how elegant and gross and risky the articulations. Dream, document, narrative and images torn from the day's fragments all making these enormous, unburdened leaps between each other. (I used a small part of Eliot's reading of *The Waste Land* in my later film, *Orchard* because of his antique way of reading).

MH: The industrial strength soundtrack is particularly evocative, it is often as fragmented as the picture but provides an unsettling counterpoint, over and over you choose sounds which don't quite fit, they are close to

what is being pictured, but never exact. Why this unsettling disjunction?

JM: Generally, I wanted the soundtrack to be a composition of low, tentative noises (it is much more riotous than I had in mind at the start) and to apply unexpected sounds, a snake laughing like a baby for instance, or the sounds of dripping water while the cheekbone of a wooden head carving is chiseled. Preceded by a close-up of a rheumy beaver's eye blinking once in time to the first of the water drops, it sets up an idea in the mind that is not in the picture beheld. I suppose "disembodied" is the appropriate term. It is very like the exploration one engages in when one is editing images together. The two constituent parts joined together invoke a third which lives like a ghost in the mind. Having multiples of this kind of editing then, fills the mind with ghosts and that is the work, really, or a good portion of it, at the very least. Without this component, there is not much life to the film for me.

The title "If You Stand With Your Back to the Slowing of the Speed of Light in Water," is a composite of two sentences from a young person's science book explaining what happens with light, and reflects this fundamental process outlined above. The very simplest instance of collage; that of associating two disparate elements and as a result evoking a third. I carried out this exercise a while ago by conjoining the Pare Lorenz film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, with a largely unedited list of motor sounds from a BBC sound effects CD. These were two big 'found' entities glommed together and the result was surprisingly complex. Rhythm, structure, timing and critical import were all substantially affected in a very engaging way.

With *If You Stand...*'s title, I liked the magical divination evoked in the idea of deliberately turning of one's back on the properties of light, how, in this unreasonable and unscientific way,

one could still know everything that was important to know about this thing.

***Otherrehto* (3minutes 2000)**

MH: *Otherrehto* (3minutes 2000) announces its palindromic status via the title, which can be read backwards and forwards. The first image appears like a parenthesis or frame, or calipers. The image is mirror printed, what appears on the left hand side of the film's centre or fold is mirrored on the right. What are we looking at here? A text by Coleridge runs between the frames, followed by superimpositions of a figure skater turning, a sea animal, and after your name, a moment of sea tide. The Coleridge text suggests that a woman's "physical deliquium" (pleasure?) will invariably be understood as "a momentary union with God." I am reminded of Owen Land's frequent use of palindromes as an impetus to the Christian conversion experience. What is the relation between pleasure, palindromes and God?

JM: I don't know the specific historical source of symmetry's association with Christian conversion but it comes up a lot, it seems. I have read G M Hopkin's essay, set in the form of a Platonic dialogue, on the symmetry of a leaf as to the question of beauty and what that might be. My use of the mirrored smoke tendrils had that in mind but at the same time was intentionally profane. The effect looked like something interchangeably vaginal and phallic and ultimately, to my mind at least, something so fundamentally attractive a shape as to be almost "cuddly" or "cute." Normally in the starched corridors of the culturati academy, visitors as well as the committed are quietly discouraged from wandering too close to the subject of pure sentimentality, usually by unspecified signs of paternal disapproval such as wall-eyed expressions or the patronizing nods of feigned interest, a necessary defense, perhaps, lest the dentata of the whole business

succumb to premature gum disease. How then to keep the art beast alive?

In an off-hand way the image here is my wondering about this question of beauty/attraction and ideas of perfection inherent in the consideration of symmetry. The smoke makes the shapes seem ghostly as well as made of silk.

I was reading a biography of Coleridge around the same time and came across the text of his speculations on the “bodily deliquiums” of Teresa of Avila, Spain. He had read an account of her young life and penchant for psychic transports and visions. The account placed them firmly in the Catholic tradition of visitations from God, and in his extravagant yet succinct way with the language, he expressed his skepticism about the claims. (Two hundred years later an article in the New York Times magazine wondered the same thing, though not with the same wit.). I kept the grammar quirks and errancies of the text as they were so much a part of the way Coleridge played with the shape of language in his poetry. He made up the word “deliquium,” it seems, Latin-izing the word “deliquesce.” With his legendary appetite for laudanum (opium preserved in brandy), he knew a thing or two about “imperfect fainting fits” and “momentary union(s) with god,” but for all his (also legendary) hubris, didn't sink to the pretentious claim that it was a visitation with god.

I liked that there was politic, a legible subtext, to everything about the short note, and that it was more than the sum of its parts. The ice skater stands for a whirling dervish, a Sufi-originating dance where a deliberately repetitive physical action over time allows the body to become spirit. The fish is, well, a fish. This fish issues one single very physical thrust, an act of pure will against its circumstances, the elements, so is a good balance or

counterpoint to the skater. A harmonious unsymmetry, maybe.

On top of that this piece was made in conversant reply to Keith Sanborn's *Mirror*, also a digital video piece which takes as its subject the elusive image of Dreyer's Joan of Arc on a smoking pyre and dissolves it with the ripple portrait of Dorothy, from *The Wizard of Oz* mouthing, "There's no place like home..." while singers intone words authored by the 11th century Abbess Hildegard von Bingen which appear in text form at the close of this six minute piece informing an unspecified "you" as to some of the particulars of bestowed Divine Intelligence. I'm more on the Coleridge side of things, I think. Following a screening in NYC of short films in which *Otherehto* showed, Ken Jacobs, shaking his head and looking perplexed said to me, "Jesus is not my thing". I was baffled. Jesus? Who said anything about Jesus? Coleridge's 'god' (in lower-case) was as close as it got.

***Micromoth* (6 minutes 2000)**

MH: In *Micromoth* (6 minutes 2000) a winding sound accompanies the rolling of an insect body across the field of vision. Moments of a close-up world come into view through an ever-changing field of focus. Yellow fields and blue. A blue ringed circle admits some further molecular insights, strands of insect leg and plant life appear and disappear. How did you make these pictures and how are they structured?

JM: I purchased an old Bausch & Lomb microscope from a tipsy palm reader on Clinton Street late one night on my way home from a stultifying event purporting to be art. Setting it up on the kitchen table and inserting all the usual things into the view path—sugar granules, rice, salt, a dead fly—I felt inspired all over again and the desultory waste of time that I had just come from evaporated on the spot. For the next few days I attended to the

business of peering through the eyepiece at whatever had died on the windowsill the night before. Everything was beautiful. These sessions, probably lasting no longer than twenty minutes at a time, were more akin to the secret door in *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* than anything definitive or scientific. It seemed obvious to commit these explorations to film in this unadulterated form—spontaneously, according to chance—each time I looked through the lens and began wandering about the visual plane it was utterly new, even if the unfortunate corpse under scrutiny was the same one from days previous.

It took a bit of time to figure out how to arrange the camera over the microscope to secure a picture and when I was finally ready to shoot a toe operated the cable release, one hand operated the X-Y—axis panning knobs while the other took care of the focus knob. Most of the interest for me was the way these objects, so enlarged, undeniable and firmly ascertained in such a close-up detail, fell so easily apart at the slightest movement of the focus knob. How light bends. This, along with the generally dizzying effects of staring through the eyepiece for long periods of time, caused some new and deep fundamental doubts about the simple proof of things. All is not as it seems.

When it came time to commit these findings to film, the approach was pretty straight-forward; wind the camera, all limbs to their stations, baste breath and release the shutter. All new discoveries and exploratory views unfolded which were as new to my eyes as they were to the film frame in those instants. I used the rolls largely as they were, not making so many cuts as I normally would. What I like the most is how the eye is taken on unexpected journeys around the image plane in such a fluid way. What might read as a legible picture of an insect is transformed into abstract motion by the slightest change of focus

When it came to putting sound to the images I indulged in imagining what microscopic spaces would sound like. I put together a collage of different atmospheric “compressions,” (much of the sense of “compression” being in the cuts from one atmosphere to another—that feeling you get sometimes when you walk from one room to another and the door closes behind you—how that changes the sound reverberation.)

I had a paying job around that time which took me out to Long Island and I recorded some cicadas there. I commuted from the densely populated Lower East Side, where young trees planted by the Parks Department often lasted only a week or two before some loud-mouthed, carbon-belching SUV backed into them in a pathetic attempt to park, knocking things flat.

There was no quiet.

Ever.

It was a constant cacophony of boom cars, garbage trucks, people yelling, squabbling ladies-night at the local smelly nightclub, helicopters buzzing the neighborhood and car alarms being set off, garbage trucks, and police yelling, “Put the weapon down” on TV through a hundred open windows.

To be eating lunch while sitting on a lime green lawn thickened with fertilizers and sprinkled with genetically purified flowers while listening to a sonic wall of cicada sound felt like something truly novel. Not nature, exactly, but appreciably different from what I’d come from.

Thinking about atmosphere and room tones I set up the big four-track reel to reel recorder in the kitchen and plugged in a tiny lavalier microphone which I then attached to a long chop stick. Employing all the concave-shaped things I could find in the kitchen, I set about dipping the microphone into each one to see

how the sound changed. A coffee cup, a vase, a bowl. You could still hear the surrounding environment, like pigeons cooing outside the window, or the fridge, but changes in tone were dramatic, as if they were the result of the changing shape of an ear.

This went well with the images since it set up the same frame of uncertainty as to the definitive representation of a thing. One of the sounds, played back on a good system, (which can be heard even though the sound on the film is an optical track and therefore not very hi fi), came from a spherical chemistry flask. All the sound reverberated equally back to the mic and somehow this made an extraordinarily deep throbbing tone that vibrates a speaker in a most physical way. I learned later that the composer Alvin Lucier made a music piece using this method, too.

I have this attraction to the sound of passing planes; the slow glissando of the drone from one note to the next lower down, and have used it a few times in soundtracks, (in *Detroit River* and *Detroit Block*, two of a trilogy of video portraits I made of that city). Often this sound turns up in field recordings since nowadays there is so much air traffic it is hard to avoid it. I use it in *Micromoth*, attached to the footage that appears in a small circle and rack focuses in such a way that the sound might be that of traveling down this imaginary tube, like the eye's gaze down the barrel of the microscope.

***Untitled (Blood)* (8 minutes 2002)**

MH: In *Untitled (Blood)* (8 minutes 2002) a Manhattan building lights up with a golden time lapse glow, window shadows dissolve in and out of darkness, golden light moves uneasily over surfaces, an electrical storm courses through the city skyline, closing the first "movement." Do you think of movements or scenes when structuring your work? When the image returns it is splintered and abstract,

silhouettes turn on a window shade, and light follows light. Shifting focal planes lend an eye to icy, crystalline structures, seahorses turn in water, shapes dissolve in water, your (?) shadow on the snow, blood is poured into water. The containers shape whatever is put into it (the flow of experience, of seeing and feeling). Could I venture a hypothesis? Light is the fool's gold of a filmmaker's quest, these glorious abstractions remove the cinema from the bloodied visceral world. Perhaps this is too reductive a reading.

JM: It's an interesting question: "where is the question here?" Although I am not aware of setting up a film as a question and then using its duration, content and form to answer it, I nevertheless feel that this interpretation as a metaphor could be applied, after all, no matter how abstract or dissolute the form of a piece of work, I do search about for an "ending;" some suitable way to close the event. In this case I hold for a long time onto the shot of blood in water. After the initial spill into the porcelain sink it stops moving and for blood, as you know, this is coagulation—stasis, a form of death. If that happens in the body it is a very serious thing indeed. The film, in all its attention to movement and flow and change is like a dialysis machine (to extend the metaphor of the machine of cinema).

I had, as usual, amassed some camera footage that leaned toward the abstract and I wanted to string it together into one coherent montage, the way one might gather one's thoughts before making a statement out loud. In the end, the out-loud statement said something like: light matters. Light gives substance to plasma, after that anything can branch from it, so it grows (the montage) like a tree, or let's say, with the same logic as a tree.

It was made at the same time as *Untitled (light)* as it happened, though that is the only fact that binds these two films together. Also it was

made without sound. When I had a transfer to video made I took the opportunity to make a soundtrack. Since I had other plans for whatever funds were available then, I chose not to make a composite print so the sound version exists only on video.

I Began To Wish (5 minutes 2003)

MH: *I Began To Wish* (5 minutes 2003) is a mysterious reworking of a grandfather-grandson relation. What movie have they been orphaned from, why is everything run backwards, and why is there no sound? They appear in a greenhouse where the natural world can be potted and controlled, too late as it turns out, there is an implication that the boy's parents have already died, and he has been left in the care of his grandfather. Three sets of titles appear before flowers begin to close, blooming in reverse. "Soon I wished that my dad had killed me. He said nobody knew why flowers were so beautiful. It seemed like the flower was talking to me." A strawberry unripens, pollens blow, plants sink back into the ground, winter arrives. But deep in the ground a white tendril grows, even in the midst of this darkness and withholding, new feelings, new life, is busy being born.

JM: The title of the film is a variation on a subtitle that appears within the film, which reads: "Soon I wished my Dad had killed me" The film is composed of two sources; the first is a moral lesson on the business of being a good boy which plays up sympathy for the apparent misery of an elderly man in an effort to promote virtue. In order to be available as an educational tool to the deaf community, the audible content of the film was synopsisized into statements that appear as subtitles at the bottom of the frame. That these juxtapositions of text and image were expeditious in nature only lends greater richness to their value as an auto-poetic form.

The man in the original is not the father. He is the next door neighbor whom the boy has harassed in the past, mainly by tossing rocks through the greenhouse glass. The man is a lonely orchid grower. The boy's punishment, administered by a father we never meet, is to help the orchid grower in his potting duties. The boy is resentful. An unseen gang of assailants come by one night and break all the glass in the greenhouse and it is only then that the boy sees the routine difficulties the man faces in trying to nurture these flowers. They come to an understanding.

The second source is a short encyclopedic account of flowers blooming. The sequence of flowers ungrowing is deliberately left as a list, one following the next, with only small intrusions of other shots. I excised much of the material from the first source, keeping only the shots that could be strung together in a way that detoured the narrative document into something darkly anxious and a little ambiguous at the same time.

Editing the two sources together on the flatbed I noticed the portend of the gestures as they ran backwards seemed much more intriguing and strange than when it all ran correctly. So with the exception of the shots where the subtitles occur and one or two others, all the footage is optically printed backwards. Attempting to sort out the world, so angled, becomes a mystery. The manner, for instance, in which the man withdraws the proffered rose while his face falls out of an expression of something resembling joy or happiness, is a puzzle, and the strawberry growing backwards, red and so strongly evocative of its ripe taste at the start, draws the taste buds archly backwards on a journey from sweet to tart to increasing bitterness and hardness. You have to have tried to eat an unripe strawberry to know this. The hands, originally picking up the broken shards of glass, piece by piece, now appear to be carefully laying them out, one by

one, as if parts of a jigsaw-puzzle and the potted plants are just as carefully laid down on their sides in what looks like a ritualized repose. I cut in the subtitled shots to suggest the man and boy were related and to juxtapose this anxious relationship with the boy's new awareness of his own sentence.

MH: How strange. I read your answer and think yes, of course, that's exactly what you did. But part of me doesn't believe you. Part of me wants to accuse you of hijacking the Julie Murray that made this movie, and that in her place you are mouthing words you learned by careful observation, watching her through a thick glass. I say this in part because this work stung me to watch it, it is filled with a fathomless mystery, as if you had trained a special camera on the inner life and somehow wrung a documentary record of some sharp fragment, which could be presented only as a riddle, as this backwards moving story semblance. If your explanations are impostered it's only because they refuse any real explication of its affect, which you are doubtless wise to do, why expect authors to plunge into the morass of reception theory? Call it predilection or habit, but I read this movie as personal documentary, unthinkable to arrive at this backwards lean without enduring first some personal catastrophe (or lesson?) which makes it inevitable, or at least necessary.

JM: I think you get to the mystery of it, which really did appear all by itself when the two sources began to weave themselves together. There is indeed a strategy maintained in simply describing the parts as usable discoveries. It helps fill the silence. There is a passage Jack Palance reads to Joan Crawford in *Sudden Fear* that this reminds me of. I saw it a few years after making *I Began to Wish...* Crawford knows Palance is going to kill her and she is scared shitless. He is playing the good husband and asks her would she like him

to read to her. She nods with giant fearful saucer eyes. He reads her the following:

"Let mystery have its place in you; do not be always turning up your whole soil with the plowshare of self-examination, but leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring, and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for the unknown God. Then if a bird sings among your branches, do not be too eager to tame it. If you are conscious of something new—thought or feeling, wakening in the depths of your being—do not be in a hurry to let light upon it, to look at it. Let the springing germ have the protection of being forgotten, hedge it round with quiet, and do not break in upon its darkness; let it take shape and grow, and not a word of your happiness to anyone! Sacred work of nature as it is, all conception should be enwrapped by the triple veil of modesty, silence and night."

It is from Chapter XII The Journal Intimne of Henri Frederic Amiel Translated, by Mrs. Humphrey Ward December 2, 1851.

Imagine this read by a man with cold blooded murder in his heart, and so chiseled of feature, so hot of eye. No wonder she trembled. What is 'reception theory'? Is it a real... thing?

***Deliquium* (15 minutes 2003)**

MH: *Deliquium* (15 minutes 2003) feels like a very personal work, though it deploys not untypical collage collisions, marrying moments of the natural world (speared fish, floating seahorses, fallen trees and blue butterflies) with human designs (artificial snow, divers, boats, but most often: men at work in factories). How did you arrive at the title and how did you begin collecting pictures?

JM: I liked the way the word, "deliquium," sounded and thought that an interpretation of

the way in which images associated with one another in a montage could set up a sense of divine chaos and suggest a similar condition to the one Coleridge was referring to when he coined the word (see above). The trick, or ruse, if there ever was one, is more easily detected in the mechanics of filmmaking; that the “divinity” in this case is evidently a construct. Nevertheless, there persists a sense that by combining images, a third article is conjured.

With this film, as with, *If You Stand With Your Back to the Slowing of the Speed of Light in Water* (1997), I aimed to achieve a kind of delirious yet coherent single run-on sentence, using moving images instead of words. The images are from old films I have collected, some scraps I have found and material I shot myself. The footage of the man rubbing the wallpaper was something I recreated from a 1930’s wallpaper advertisement picture I had been given by a friend. It showed a man in a suit standing in a breakfast room facing the wall, his back to the “viewer,” his hand touching the wall’s surface, while a woman in the foreground prepared a table with food. He held a newspaper in one hand and seemed to be in a fugue state, ignoring the woman, the time of day (there’s a clock on the wall and he wears a wristwatch) and the outside world (newspaper). The idea that this man was “divining” everything he needed to know in life through merely touching the patterned wallpaper appealed to me.

I engaged the generous help of a friend who kindly rubbed the wallpaper to distraction until I had collected all the shots I needed. It wasn’t until I was assembling the found footage parts of the film two years later that I thought of including this wallpaper rubbing footage. It placed a person/character amongst the dream-like montage in a very plausible way. I also filmed the faces of these weird twins from a picture-painting I found in a flea market one day. They provide suitable antagonists to the

wallpaper man, I thought, their gargoyle fingers entangled together with barbed rose stems. In a reflective echo of this, a cowboy shows up among the found footage divining for water with a bent piece of wire. Apparently this is quite a common way to find underwater springs when driving cattle over long distances, so the image has a kind of incongruous ordinariness to it.

It is not simply that a piece of found film might depict something useful to my plan, though that is often the criteria with which I begin. It is also its material aspect, the degree of decay or evidence of aging adds layers to the reading of the film as a whole. Along with the impulse to narrative the mind engages in upon seeing two pictures placed next to one another, it is also processing the material evidence of the image. It is easy to tell which shots are from films made in the 1980s and which are from the 1960s by their style of production and clothing and mannerisms of people shown. The found footage—ranging from scraps of industrial films, educational films, and bits of negative from someone’s feature outtakes—tells its own material history.

I enjoyed finding new use for the scraps of negative that had clearly been part of some involved formal low budget production. Out of 4000 feet of discarded takes from this inscrutable narrative, I found ten feet that I could use. This I optically printed, keeping it as a negative image, since the shots were infinitely more interesting as negative than positive images—something to do with how the end-of-roll camera flare makes the figures seem to move in and out of disappearance.

The final image in *Deliquium* is a still picture which is out of focus completely at the start and slowly becomes sharp to reveal a hand clutching the back of a bird. This is the proper way to handle a bird, I am told by people who know. It prevents injury to both bird and hand.

So this most humane of instructional images, instead of being one of awful captivity, as first surmised, turns out to be one of bearable captivity instead.

MH: The natural world is fallen and speared and fragile, while manufactured landscapes turn humans into factory products. Into this mix there are photographs which struggle to be seen, negatives and home movies which blink in and out of darkness, delivering a sense that you are recalling a family here, that the factory workers have familiar names, that you are describing a generational struggle. Are you telling your story by showing us the work of others?

JM: I think *Deliquium* deserves the term “sprawling” a little more than the other collage films. The hinges from one image idea to the next are often based on a quick succession of matches (poetical or metaphorical connections), but the whole movie strings out like one of those glued Chinese paper decorations. It is unlike *If You Stand...* in that it did not begin as clusters of images in loops. So there is more tension in *Deliquium* as a result, since the eye and brain are tugged along rapidly through continuously alien territory with not much relief and only a few returns, such as the man rubbing wallpaper or the picture painting of the strange large-headed twins and the seahorses, but even these do not “clarify” or cement a logic or story trajectory particularly.

There is a sense of always having to do catch-up with the possible meanings of the pictures or their associations but this is barely, if at all, achieved before the next set are laying themselves out along the ribbon of disclosure. This goes all the way to the end. Like most of the collage films, it works better if one lets it sink in, rather than actively trying to comprehend it in a conventional sense. On one or two occasions someone has had the guts to

confess they nodded off for a part of it. I tell them they may have had an improved viewing as a result.

This is a poem I wrote that I submit to catalogs whenever I get a request for a description of the film:

DELIQUIUM

16mm
color
sound
15 minutes (but represents 800 years)
2003

Hidden among the pounding of animal hides,
All tamped into maps, their shapes
Explicit replicate butterfly wings, lie the motives
of Lír.
The king who paid improper attention to his
children.

From that first fascination
And its lascivious gaze,
Came the gorged desire for substance,
Among the skins,
Nets, shadows and milk bottles
Pried from the stomachs of metal fish,
Steam, smoke and things that won't stay,
Speared, dangled, measured, divined.
All dreamed through wallpaper,
Or dowsed from something they drowned in
long ago.

Snowed in on either side,
The swans,
Lír's beloved children,
Begin their 800 year journey.
From lake and to the sea
A thousand more.

Orchard (9 minutes 2005)

MH: *Orchard* (9 minutes 2005) begins with a rainy drive, seen through the windshield. Where are we? You arrive at a forest which

appears in a blend of colour and black and white, the camera is always moving, following tree roots like the lines of a map. There is a glimpse of winter, the watery reflection of a building, the sounds of the ocean and then spring arrives, and with it a bevy of butterflies, rainwater on a leaf. Then you bring us inside a church, gazing at the ceiling, before looking out from a country bridge in winter. The only voice in the film says through radio static: "That corpse you planted last year in your garden, has it begun to sprout?" A suite of forest fire moments ensue. Is this orchard dying or is old growth being burned away to make room for new roots? How long did you shoot for, and where are we?

JM: I like your reading of *Orchard*. I get more from that than from inventing or re-drawing trajectories I have now or had in mind when putting the thing together. I shot some of the rainy drive footage (opening shots) and the tree footage while on one of my many sojourns to Ireland to visit kith and kin. My brother, Peter, knows of this area of woods not too many miles from where he lives and suggested we go there one day. I was amazed by this place. It was land that had once belonged to a poet who was wealthy. Name escapes me right now. He was landed gentry and when he died the ownership of the land reverted to the Irish government who entrusts the local council to maintain its upkeep, for which it has no money to do so it grew wild. It had been an apple orchard and, when we trudged through twenty years hence, it had become inundated with bramble and gangly, untamed trees that found the most absurd meandering paths toward the light. What used to be buildings and cider mills had long since crumbled away. Saplings took root on the tops of what remained and in time grew thick and tall, their roots wending down around the bricks and piercing the mortar. It was such a graphic example of mutual dependency, for at this stage, had the roots been pulled out the wall would have fallen

down and vice versa. A powerful natural order of inscrutable design had superceded the geometric one (the surrounding trees had been planted in neat rows, originally). It was a couple of years before I got to go back again and actually shoot some footage there and it grew even more brambly in my mind in the interim.

Strictly speaking, I should not give in to the temptation to tell more about the footage than is already obvious, like where and when it was shot, since that is not what the film is about at all. In my heart I believe persons are no less or more than trees in the cycle of things and will one day get around to doing their bit by providing excellent mulch for an as yet unnamed plant. Rhododendrons, maybe, or perhaps a fungus. A sea of mushrooms. This, and some ideas about transubstantiation are at the middle of *Orchard*.

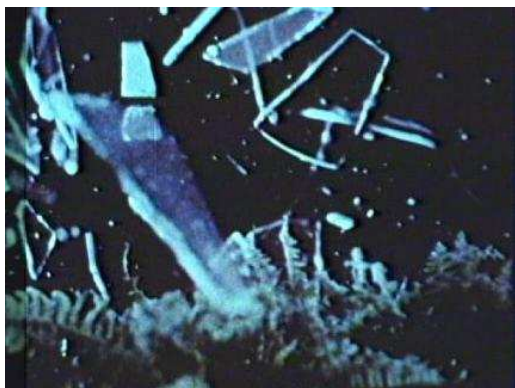
I arranged the sound so that it starts out with a low throbbing rhythm that is reminiscent of movement. It syncs up a bit with the windshield wipers and then when we reach the woods the sound changes to the quick ringing of a melodious bell, a sound that suggests held breath or suspended time. This business of time is explicitly referred to again—moments versus ages—at the end when we hear the old recording of T.S. Eliot reading a small part of *The Waste Land*. He refers to Myle: "...you who were with me on the ships at Mylae..." which, when I looked it up, turns out to be an important strategic battle that took place off the coast of Sicily in something like 246 BC.

In the poem this is an apocalyptic kind of dream, where hordes are streaming across London bridge and the voice calls out, asking after a corpse planted in a garden: "...did it sprout? Will it bloom this year?" The moment becomes impossibly elastic, taut between the familiar image of a British landscape and an

ancient and remote place among the chaos of the sea.

History and its lacing of all the threads of action and outcome, of course, can quickly establish the rational links that would tie these two images together; war ships bobbing on the bosphorus and all the people and events that eventually connect them to pale tea roses nodding in an English garden at vespers, but the vertiginousness of the dream form is more immediate and in being so is very much more powerful. This idea, of linearity being so pretzelled in the stringing together of images, is emulated in the film's form.

The ceiling is in what was formerly the chapel of a military hospital at Kilmainham, Dublin, dating from the late 1700, which now houses the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The ceiling is made out of papier maché which allows the forms to be considerably more dimensional than if they were plaster, since the paper weighs hardly anything. I was drawn to the way in which over-ripe fruits, vines and leaves were arranged according to another order which concerned itself wholly with an applied aesthetic and composition within the ceiling's rectangle, yet always negotiating between the two states, neither man-made order at the expense of nature's order (assuming of course there is a difference!), nor chaos in abandonment of order. There is a fat cherub's face anchored between two wings in the design and this links to the butterflies that follow.



During those ceiling shots there can be heard a whispering sound. This is conceptually specific but obscure, so it bears up only as an anecdote and does not I think change the reading of the film. In the film the sound becomes associated with the stutterings of the butterfly movements. The sound came about this way: All the architectural companies who bid on the contract to design new buildings at the Twin Tower site in lower Manhattan were required to give demonstrations of their ideas in a public forum which was broadcast over the radio. They presented at the Winter Garden, a cavernous glass building in Battery Park City and their voices echoed off the walls. Since it was radio this was all, informationally speaking, one had to go on. I thought it was highly ironic that these men (no women) booming grandiose statements about their building designs were doing so within a building that was by its own grandiose shape creating an echo that almost neutralized their speech. The more emphatic they became the more muddy it sounded. Their talk about buildings was being structurally altered by a building that was designed right along the lines of the ones they were proposing! Like an image consuming an image. Their words, as hard-edged as blocks, having struck the walls, floor and ceiling of the Winter Garden, wobbled back to them in a daze. I decided to record what I could from the radio of these speeches and then, as an expression of this concept, edited out the words leaving only the resonances of them, the shadows. What remained was the fragmentary sibilance of consonants along with a continuous, formless, wavering tone that immediately reminded me of church. As a child growing up and dragged along to services I would be in a half-dream state simultaneously aware of the floating, echoed drone of the priest and the more urgent nearby whisperings of my mother and various aunts. That the film closes with images of burning that are uncertain as a sign is fitting, I think, don't you?

Exile: an interview with Martha Colburn

I look at her work and think: oh, that looks like fun. Even if the bile is running hot and yellow and streaming from the guts of some model-turned-skeleton, there is something about the post-punk soundtracks, the hand-made, Disney-in-a-kitchen-sink approach that draws me right in. Yes, the people have turned into monsters, the skyline is ablaze but my foot just can't stop tapping to the a-go-go beat.

One thing is for sure: she is hard at work, all those excitable action figures twitching and breathing their next to last, and vomiting flames and torn apart and put together again, it's all happening one solitary frame at a time under the hot lights, with the wind-up camera turning twenty four times per second into how many eternities. It is a cinema, a life, of restless transformation, of permutations and variations, made in a small arena, the camera pushed up close to the action, and inside that small arena she rolls all of her profuse energies and lets them run back into the lens. The skeletons are shaking with the beat, and from this prodigious outpouring she has turned from Americana erotics to Dutch dreams and lately to more p is for political matters, rubbing her hands into the dirtied spawn of empire.

MH: I'm wondering if you could talk about how you got it all rolling. Could you set the scene? Weren't you living in Baltimore, a city not known exactly for its fringe movie scene (or is it below the underground)?



MC: I actually got 'rolling' in the local south mountain fairs where I grew up in PA. From there, to Baltimore. I had a band (duo group The Dramatics) and did other musical projects on the side with groups like "The Pleasant Livers." Through living with musicians and co-operating a record label we released six Dramatics records and went on tour in Europe. I was surrounded by musicians I liked and made films to their music and my music. Musicians from all over the world would come to our warehouse and get shut up in there with us. It was an inspiring place (with no heat). I basically froze for ten winters. I made about thirty films and 5000 hand collaged record covers, so I felt the groove there, but it was a scary place. It wasn't so much "below underground," as it was Hell on Earth. Movie scenes there was not. I was hanging with musicians from other parts and worked at a funky cabaret featuring the local talents of assorted characters who were all great.

I made my work on the floor. I set up my dad's old tripod, taped the corners (one duct taped with a brick to hold it down, and animated on the floor this way with a super 8mm camera). That's the set-up. I did the painting and collaged materials, then filmed it. I made like thirty some films like that. To mix it up sometimes I made fake commercials starring my friends, or a drag-striptease, or the pet ducks (that lived in our sink) would make a music video that was supposed to be taking place in the Knitting Factory. We just had fun. New York freaked me out, even though I had hardly ever been there because I thought it could threaten one's creativity with its consumer culture and high rents. That kind of bull-headed, close-minded, anti-social attitude can have positive results. Go with it if that's what you're feeling. I created a self-styled kind of creative temporary utopia with all my musician friends and then boyfriend Jason Willett and roommate Jad Fair (when he wasn't on tour). I then moved to Europe and could not find that "place" again. Now back in

America I have managed to find it again, in this old speakeasy bar that was in the 80's for a moment called EXILE, and Klaus Nomi and Blondie played here. So yeah, I live and work out of a place with a huge sign that says EXILE on the outside of it. Need you say more, right?

MH: The pictures you use are often written or painted over, like graffiti. The figures (most of your steals are figures, faces, bodies) are tagged and Colburned, brought into your world. I'm thinking of the cat heads on pin-ups of *Cats Amore* (2:30 minutes 2001) or the fangs you've given cheery advert pitch girls in *Evil of Dracula* (2 minutes 1997). Like taggers, 'the original' is still there, the same way a spray bomber would leave a train or building behind, only marked now by your visit. Do you see a relation?

MC: I never directly thought about graffiti. Currently I am thinking about the physicality of what I am filming, the broken piece of glass I once used to do paint-on-glass animation is used, a piece of random paper from the street, the physical texture of the world around me enters into the picture.

MH: In *Skelehellavision* (7:40 minutes 2002) porn images are painted over (often with skeletons and flames), a skull faced cop degenerates into blurred colour smears, snakes churn out of navels and into crotches, and images repeat and re-circulate in this frenzied mash up. What does it mean to paint skeletons onto a series of pin-ups? (Is it a reminder that these people are older now, perhaps dead?) Sometimes it looks like you've scratched all the emulsion away from a face flung back in pleasure—how did you make this movie, where did these pictures come from?

MC: I found these pieces of film which I manipulated in a thrift store, next to the last erotic theater in San Francisco to show film.



They closed and I found some of the discarded footage. The rest is animated, flat puppets floating on glass over black and then superimposed with footage of a volcanic flow at night. I did those scratched pieces in projection booths and trains at night, on a film tour in Europe on a mini light box I carried. There are hand scratched skeletons on each frame and flames and dots and lines.

MH: What does it mean to paint skeletons onto a series of pin-ups? (Is it a reminder that these people are older now, perhaps dead?)

MC: There's a lot of Bosch-like demonic scenes combined with these pin-up. It marks a transition where I started doing research on particular subjects and working it into more thematically related films. I researched the idea of the afterlife for this film. I combined these historical notions of the "fantasy/Hell/afterlife and combined them with the idea or rather fact that sex can literally result in death.

MH: In *XXXAmsterdam* (3 minutes 2004) you re-animate painted figures from centuries past and let them walk the streets again, adding to the fevered cultural jam of torn up streets and pin-ups, police women, clipper ships and drugs. But don't these fleeting impressions run only surface deep, like the restless changes on television, giving us no time to look at anything?

MC: Yeah they do. they are surface deep! It wasn't made as some masterpiece. It's like a public neighborhood film for this place called the Baarsjes where I lived for a time, and I had to get a 'neighborhood grant' from The Stadsdeel de Baarsjes to get out of some slippery back-rent problem I had incurred at this ex-dental office I was living and working in. It's made as some kind absurd portrait of this area. There's absolutely no defense for it. At the time it was essential that I make it, to make it to live, to make a better film, etc... It actually

shows quite often in Holland and the Dutch Filmbank, which is so awesome, distributes it.

MH: How does this film and *A Little Dutch Thrill* (2 minutes 2003) (where a series of pin-ups are painted over) convey your sense of Holland?

MC: I was friends with the drummer Wilf Plum, in a band, he used to be in the Dog Faced Hermans and played with the Ex occasionally. Well he had a band (Luana Flu Winks) and they or I got a grant to make a film, and that's what I made and turns out it won first place at this Dutch short film series, I forget the name of it. It was just for fun and to survive at the moment. I based it on a Belgian magazine called Gandalf, which was known for its satirical take on culture/sex/politics.

MH: How was your move to Holland? What was it like to be the reason artist?

MC: I moved there on a two year art residency at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten. I moved to Amsterdam in 2000 and traveled a lot to do shows and escape the weather and the terribleness I felt living there. I got a lot of work done and really have to laugh at the absurdity of the very particular forms of misery I experienced there, specially watching these Bruegel and Bosch documentaries lately while I work on my new film. At one time I lived with a junk dealing philosopher wanderer that was straight out of a Bruegel painting. New input you know, after ten years in the Baltimore ghetto....

MH: In *Destiny Manifesto* (8 minutes 2006) early North American settlers dig into the soil of the "new world" and find modern war planes flying from the earth. Cowboys appear in deserts littered with blood and Native corpses. A Native brave is superimposed over the prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the infamous prison in Cuba where detainees were routinely

subjected to torture ordered by the white house. You rewrite the Western as an imperial line that runs from Native genocide to Iraqi invasion. Can you elaborate on this relationship?

MC: Visually, yes. Well it's like fighting our own past. Images take over images, things dissolve into each other, like these staged fictions found in art depicting the wild west covering up the hardship and suffering and conflict of nation building. The chaos and wildness of Iraq has been compared to 'the wild west.' I wanted the film to be a manifesto, about this idea of destiny in American culture, but now the destiny is taking us East, as opposed to West.

MH: Do you feel that because of the length and style of your movie making, it will inevitably play to audiences already hip to the message (do you worry that you are 'preaching to the converted')?

MC: Well, I'm not preaching. So, I see it as, well, at least people outside of America see a work from America that is, not specifically anti-Bush, it is however looking at something in America's motives which, in certain instances, are very destructive. There's a lot of Anti-Americanism, even among what you might think of as well informed people. Expressing your ideas, especially politically, should be done without reservation. My work is not seen in the seclusion of the film circuit of animation, or the art world, or the underground cinema scene. I go to extra lengths to send my work for screening specifically in places which are 'out of reach,' like Spokane or Korea or little towns in Europe.

MH: *Meet Me in Wichita* (8 minutes 2007) is an upended version of The Wizard of Oz, with O__ B__ L____ recast in most of the major parts. After a hurricane sends Dorothy into the nether world, Iraq is bombed and D walks horrified through its ruins. O____ appears as the tin man spouting oil, the wicked witch



whose cat attacks D's Toto dog, a hunter who shoot D. At last O_____ is killed by falling bombs but his ghost causes a black rain to fall. Oil uber alles. Why this fairy tale of American foreign policy, and the B_____ L_____ riffs?

(THE O-B-L IS NOT WRITTEN OUT BECAUSE,,,,,MY WEBSITE WAS INVADED ONCE BY AN (I assume) EASTERN GROUP or person THAT TOOK AWAY all MY FILM clips AND PUT UP A PAGE OF SKULLS SAYING, DOWN WITH EASTERN SITES! DOWN WITH THE USA! DOWN WITH DENMARK! THE NETHERLANDS ETC...SO I THINK IT'S BEST TO LAY LOWER ON THE RADAR? SOUND CRAZY? Well, the world is crazy now, and this was around the time of those scandalous cartoons coming out of Northern Europe.



MC: Firstly it's interesting to note that *The Wizard of Oz* was written as a political fairy tale. I thought to look at school play production pictures. then realized how much America uses this tale to escape into. How they are recreated with a sense of urgency and thrifty crudeness over and over. The Oz that takes place in American living rooms and schools is created by regular people. How different these play productions are from the media machine which creates the other fairytale of politics. It's all an escape and it's all real and imaginary at the same moment. Hollywood and your living room and the school cafeteria dissolve into one another.



You can see how everything is made and done in the film. For the filming of this film it was in the 100's degrees in New York City. I have no air conditioning and have to cover my windows from the light outside to film. I had, for the first time, assistance filming because of the heat and the 'animation stand' (resembling more a hunter's bird stand) which required me to climb onto an old safe to look through the camera

and press the button very, very carefully as the camera is basically suspended on the end of a horizontal two by four jutting from the wall and shakes if the button is not pushed in a particular way. So I had interns help me, that somehow came from other States, like remote parts of Virginia and Massachusetts. Had these once-strangers sleeping on my couch not been prodding me to teach them to animate in the sweltering heat while they're on anti-A.D.D. meds and there's no stopping their focus, and they're bossing me what to do next with the damn puppets and paint, I don't know how I would have made it. There's backgrounds that are three by six feet and hundreds of little pieces. Fun nightmare.

I was listening to Glenn Gould a lot while making it and thought to have piano on the film. By calling a few friends in California to see if he knew a pianist, I found V. Vale, who is also the editor and founder of Research (books) in San Francisco. I mixed his piano improvising with sound effects made by Jad Fair, who has been a long-time collaborator.

Meet Me In Wichita is an indictment of America's dangerous foreign-policy naivety. The film is a play between fact, fiction, politics, fantasy, terror and morality. The film features O____ B__ L____ (as several characters from the Wizard of Oz) and Dorothy in a battle of dark forces and faces of Evil. It's a dark film, not unlike my earlier work, but it is painted in pastel and cheery almost fluorescent watercolor colors. I'm making something dangerous; sweet, something dark; light, something violent; friendly.

Why make this film? It was my expression of frustration with the fairy tale politics times we live in, with 'smoke and mirrors' leaders, faces of good and evil, and so on. It is made with pastels and cheery fluorescent watercolor colors. I took these 'dark forces' rendered for us in the news everyday and placed them in a

candy-colored land. The narrative approach is not something I do often, but in this case it's a narrative that is sometimes nonsensical and in a way childish. Dorothy, for me, is America. Bin Laden is our current 'face of evil,' and he fills all the roles like a chameleon. It's a film that plays with guilt and innocence and icons and how we put a face to the idea of 'Evil,' be it Indians or women or Bin Laden etc... what's the next new 'face' of the enemy?

Meet Me In Wichita is like a note in code. an answer to the question "Where is O____ B__ L____?" He's in our imaginations. The power he has in people's minds is far greater than anything the man is capable of. So there is no answer, but everyone would like to think there is. That's why I made this film as a loop. There is no end, the wizard is not revealed for what he is, Good does not win over Evil, Dorothy does not find her way home.

MH: In *Don't Kill the Weatherman* (2007) a pair of medieval figures cut down trees with chainsaws while owls look on. A naked man emerges only to be sliced to bits. A lightning bolt upsets the scene and Christ on the cross replaces the tree. Winged trumpets greet him and are zapped by bolts. A monk driving a car runs him down and then some deer fall under the wheels. Two devils gas him up, then he is taken to heaven while his vehicle goes down in flames. There is much more in this biblical retake, including melting glaciers and the Ark and industrial pollution. This biblical drama of ecology recasts global warming as biblical legacy, what led you to these themes, why the chainsaw nuns and why the title?

MC: This film was made in collaboration with the Rosenbach Museum and I based it on an apocalyptic 15th-century French Illuminated manuscript Christian tale. If you look closer the naked man is chained by his ankles to the tree and represents a 'tree-hugger,' you know... like the environmental activists who chain

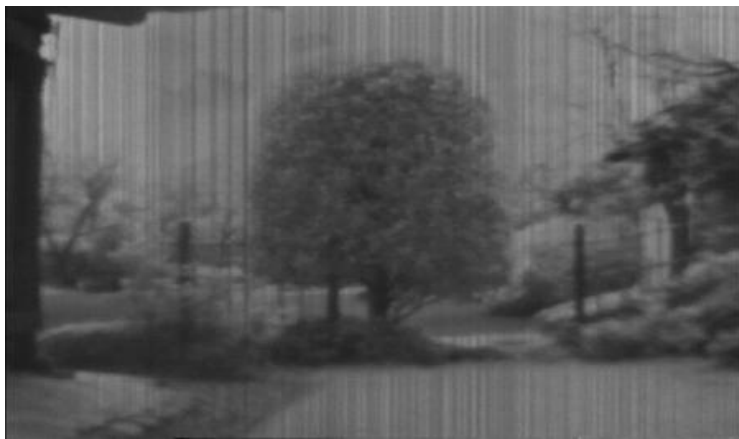
themselves to trees? There's a debate amongst Christians now about the immorality of energy use, specifically in affluent nations. Richer nations produce far more carbon dioxide than insect-vectored diseases, increased floods, droughts, and hurricanes. I called it Don't Kill the Weather Man! As if it is a statement that your average American may say to another (if they were eco-conscious) but also a variation on the Greek saying 'Don't Kill the Messenger!', he messenger in this case, being he who tries to bring the bad news of things to come, environmentally.

Nothing can be done unless it is through the mediation of the computer... I say to that: I will not be brainwashed. I'm a big supporter of the real world, yes, and it's funny that that could be political in any way, but it is. The idea of 'digital versus analog' is for me not one of finance or image quality, but of something more to do with the soul of the work. I'm working now on a film dealing with drug addicts and Puritans. These groups both 'tweak' in the spiritual and physical world PLENTY without ever using computers. As I work on the puppets for it, making some 600 hand-made hinges for preachers and pimps to be assembled, and fifty foot long painted backgrounds, some with five moving layers, and moveable fingers to grab at their Bibles and Meth pipes, I am in a way having to do work in the same way my subjects might obsessively take apart a stereo over and over or read the Psalms obsessively. The physically obsessive nature of its creation is in tune with the subject.

The techniques I am interested in exploring, for instance the multi-plane-glass-with-three-dimensional-panning-backgroundanimation technique, was never really developed much after its invention at Fleisher Studios in the 30's. Watch the old Popeye's. I'm not interested for some quirky retro reason, and certainly not for 'hipster' points. It's just that for my work to technically grow (since I work

completely manually/physically) I have no choice but to look back in time for information. With the introduction of computers and video, innovations in the way I work came to a halt, so it's kind of this endless field for me to invent in technically and discover new things. Without ten guys in lab coats, and Disney's money, I am coming up with these ghetto fabulous-more and more complicated animation stand-rigs, made out of hack-sawed shelving metal-bolted together. I'm with Bruce Bickford when he said in an interview that the world should just make movies and then there wouldn't be wars or waste or all this mess.





David Dinnell's Midden

by Mike Hoolboom

I have to look up the title in the dictionary which tells me Midden is a refuse heap, a garbage dump, but also: a mound that indicates the site of human settlement. How curious. I watched this movie first of all in a glorious three screen incarnation (before its current one screen distillation), with all three projectors perched on top of book piles and chairs and cast against my living room wall. It was the large and small all at once, fitting enough for what still feels like a home movie shot far from home. Driving north on a punishing highway with a trunkful of gear was the only way David figured he might share what he had been working on for so long already, and I couldn't help note the disparity between the tangled hairnest of wires and machines and the distinctly lo-fi touch of the pictures, captured with some sub-optimal security camera, long out of date and distinctly malfunctioning. He found it, he told me later, in a story which might be apocryphal, in a junk store for a few dollars. The camera and all its touches belongs to the midden, the forgotten and thrown away. The invisible world.

We had already found our common ground in a particular brand of minimal laptop electronics, personified by dronesters like Phil Niblock and Jonathan Coleclough, or looping deliriums like William Basinski, or the dry electronic epics of Eliane Radique. David had a near encyclopedic command of this microverse, and had the uncanny ability to name a cd just by flipping it over and eyeing the track lengths. He was happiest listening to what might sound, to someone just dropping by, to the very same note, for a very very long time, and catch all the ways that note was gathering colour. Those fine ears, sensitive to every whisper. He was honing his attention one drone at a time, but somehow the cinema, his first and greatest hope, could come alive only when he was far from Detroit, which is where he was laying his pillow down in those days. So it was off to Japan for a trek of three months and at last he found himself, blown across the country by chance and the Bullet Train, in rural Ibaraki prefecture, where he took up residence with his thrift store camera and began to record

pictures. It is not something he does lightly, the way others knock out a sketch, or raise a camera to fix their child's attempt to walk upright. It is a look that is a long time coming, that comes from far away, and when it arrives it is attuned, like the minimal music he so adores, to every twitch and change in the picture plane. The way a pixel grazes from light to dark, the fall of a leaf, all this feels momentous, dramatic, superlative.

What did he commit to tape there?

Mostly it is the forest we are privy to. There are long shots of trees, all shimmering in a digital grain and black and white. I used to watch a lot of these kind of movies. Slow things filled with leaves and rocks and water, quietly making its way, but it rarely raised my pulse rate, even then it looked a whole lot more fun to make than it was to watch. But somehow David's pictures are different. (Or are they different? Or am I seeing them only through the scrim of friendship, the hustle of wires and elaborate set-ups he entertains just so these pictures might hit the screen, the living room wall, so that we can both see it at the same time. Am I looking at pictures of a forest, or pictures of my friend?)

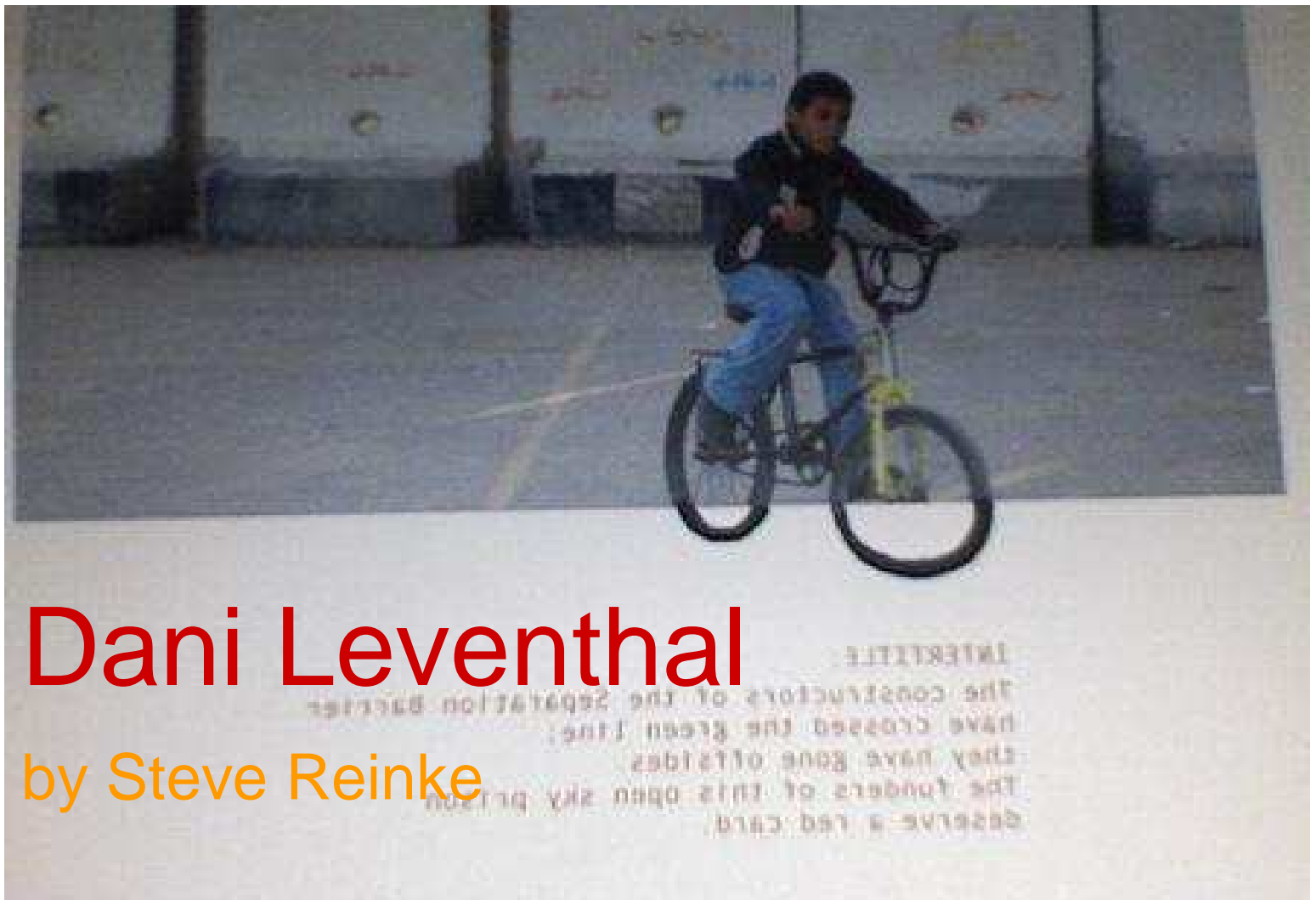
The first picture arrives. Is it a tree or only a shadow of a tree? And the light in the sky, is that lightning, or just some video glitch, the system showing itself at work? These pale, hardly there remnants of forest are the opening salvo. What is being recorded here is less a statement of presence than an assertion of their disappearance.

And then in the hazy light of day a city is glimpsed from far away, as if we were the scape looking out, a thousand lines re-marking the dull sky. Pictures of a home far away from these other homes arrive, it is not one of the encroaching presences, the concrete dwellers, massed and bullying their way forward without being able to see the natural world which contains and surrounds them. For how much longer?

From a respectful distance we see a woman (is it?) , her head wrapped in a kerchief, carrying a stick as she enters her house. It is the only shot of a person in the entire video. A person! Yes, this is a great event, four maybe five minutes into the video, the equivalent of a bomb going off in an action movie, she walks into her house. A suite of home interiors follow, the drapes lilting in the breeze, the white grey light causing some kind of vertical line video marking because of the camera's inability to negotiate the light. It forms a curtain of looking, of waiting and arousal. My deformity, my inability, is my beauty. Through my flaws I make myself visible. I watch for the flaws in others, and learn to read them too. Low fidelity, long looks. An aesthetics of midden. Don't throw me away yet, not yet.

And then we are off into the forest, at first on foot, and then with a secure three legged solidity. In the movie's longest shot (3:22), watching over a cluster of trees (what else?) the picture tears and a black wound slowly asserts itself, a void that lies beneath definition, which the picture plane is busy staving off. Not that, please no. While everything else in the movie is grey-light or dark but relentlessly grey-the wound is jet black. Close-ups of the bamboo forest are waiting in their light and shadow, these delicate almost white trunks as if about to speak.

Then the screen darkens and we hear a man sing a mournful song. Sound but no picture. We have been watching a lost place, a site which can no longer be seen because the sensibility that created it is no longer around. The old man sings and we can hear the traffic occasionally zipping past. The city is coming and when it swallows this place there will be no one around to remember the midden, the refused, the already disappeared.



Dani Leventhal

by Steve Reinke

"Referentiality is traditionally assumed to be present in the act of writing. Similarly, the assumption that the consciousness of the filmmaker is somehow indexically represented within the selections made (such as the framing of the shot or its temporal length) while shooting footage is not uncommon within the scholarship on film autobiography. Jonas Mekas has claimed that an individual's past makes itself felt within the selections that are made at any given moment of the present, when that same individual stands with a camera in hand. Mekas writes, "I began to understand that what was missing from my footage was myself: my attitude, my thoughts, my feelings, the moment I was looking at the reality I was filming. That reality, that specific detail, in the first place, attracted my attention because of my memories, my past. I singled out that specific detail with my total being, with my total past. [...] They all mean something to me, even if I don't understand why." Robin Curtis, *Conscientious Viscerality: The*

Autobiographical Stance in German Film and Video, p. 56, Edition Immorede, 2006.

What does it mean to embody an image? I don't know, but it seems to me Leventhal embodies her images in a very strange and specific way, that the images are not made of pixels but guts, and not just her guts, but guts in general, the great indistinguishable mound of coiling guts that constitutes this planet of busy animals. Not an eye moving through the world or a camera attached to a body moving in relation to some image or event, but guts, child-like guts curious about themselves and all the other guts in the world and what they have done and can do, and how they look and feel. (And these guts, being guts, have no interiority. You cut them open and just get more guts, if in smaller chunks with more complex, finer surfaces. But no unconscious. And no attitudes, no thoughts, no feelings. Guts that are noisy, but largely pre- — or perhaps post- — verbal.)

Notes on 4 Movies by Dani Leventhal

by Mike Hoolboom

Dani and I had begun to write just a few words, the usual welcome mats of the English language, the learned hellos, and then I was granted the rare chance to show off her movie at the honcho festival in Rotterdam. It's a masterpiece I won't write about here, her half hour *Draft 9* (28 minutes 2003) which already contains a lifetime of looking. Perhaps several lifetimes. Is it because I am always so busy shirking the moment that I find a particular happiness in her movies, which are always bruised and dirty and up close to everything? Lacking any means at all, she finds the appropriate distance to her subject, and that distance turns out, in most cases, to be not much distance at all. And it's not just a matter of her camera, but her open face and hands and the heart following surely right along. Her heart is forever busy jumping up into the light.

When Dani's movie hit the screen in Rotterdam I could feel the room change. It was a serious crowd, there were professionals there, the ones who had seen it all, the ones who'd written the books, climbed the mountain and brought back the tablets, those kind of folks, but when her movie started everything stopped but the pictures. They are difficult and bloodied, and proceed in a crashing collision of instants one after another, yes of course of course it's all too much, it's always been too much. But here at last was a room thinking as fast as she was cutting, jumping every jump, joining every disjoint, who could see as fast as she could live inside her camera.

It's just me I know, because I happened to be there, looking out from the small hole of my personality, but I felt that an artist was born that day, if being born meant recognition. The other cut of 'artist' happened a long time ago, when Dani got kicked by her first horse or stuck her face into a pig's face or who knows when. A long time before she ever picked up a camera that's for sure. She already had a body trained and opened up for looking, and when she got hold of a camera she just kept on looking, only this time there would be a record, a mark. She used her camera to go further, it was her mirror in the labyrinth, now there was nothing she couldn't face. Right?

Imagine my surprise a year after Rotterdam when a disc arrives in the mail from Dani with some hard scrawled charcoal drawings and on this disc four new movies made in 2007. Four! Of course the DVD is filled with sound that is distorted and too loud or way too quiet, and there are glitches and bits which won't play, but through the technical maladies it's all still there, the same heady jam that made *Draft 9* such a whirl.

Some thoughts.

When *Show and Tell in the Land of Milk and Honey* (12.5 minutes 2007) opens I see a bee on a flower so close that I am also a bee, the camera hovering and swaying, blowing like the flowering stalks. Isn't she worried about being stung? Or perhaps these are the pictures which arrive after the bees have already landed and sunk their poisoned spears and flown off. But nothing deters her, she stays close, so very close. I am one of them now, because of her old magician's trick, she turns her camera and then her audience into bees.

Against a yellowed stain of a background a woman speaks about giving birth. She is double voiced, so it's hard to make out exactly, words and phrases emerge from the scrum.

The way these words arrive, the issue of language, this is also labour. The site of production. Language doubles and redoubles, circles round itself. The opening scene is also the primal scene, the unbearable beginning: the bees transfer pollen grains to flowers so that more flowers can grow. Then a voice speaks of birth in a fall into language.

A woman busy licking between the thighs of another woman, the sounds of an animal, the huge hanging tits of a Scottish Highlander. It strolls right up to the camera and Dani says, "Hello," in a high voice and the horned beast gives her a head butt. The picture vanishes. Can video be as bruised and run over and beat up as a body? It can. It must be.

The subject looks back, the picture that touches, the cost of being so close, of intimacy which in Dani's world is also and always an animal gesture, an animal closeness. As close as an animal, as close to our own meat and gristle as an animal.

A couple of kids play cards and the light glows around a shirtless body, he laughs and lays down another card as the camera stays down low. This is the rarest of all the abilities that Dani has—she is able to turn the camera on while life around her happens. Nothing stops or waits or freezes, everything is in motion and she is in the middle of this bruised, laughing fragment, looking up into the light. A German child draws a missile. And then Dani's large face looms into the lens. "I was raised to believe that Israel was the land of milk and honey." She winds up on a farm on a kibbutz where 2000 eggs a day roll off the conveyor belt and she is charged, along with some others, with spraying the eggs with bleach. (And collecting the sick hens to sell to the Arabs across the fence) After a stint at the metal factory where she was sexually harassed.

A night train pulls in, her grandmother offers her ice cream in a gallery filled with hanging screens and moving pictures. "There's a suicide bomber over there," Dani says and then takes a bite of ice cream. They are killing my neighbor's children and the ice cream still tastes good. They are destroying my corner store but when I buy my ice cream from the other corner store, the ice cream still tastes good. The Others, the Palestinians, the ones displaced and segregated, robbed of their own land and shunted into poverty and deprivation, all this suffering appears on screens, constantly playing, permanently on display and therefore invisible. "You get used to it." You eat ice cream and this turns the pictures off. It's a trick, an old magician's trick. All of my seeing is in my mouth. And my mouth tastes good.

A woman rescues a pumpkin from a swamp. Dani takes frozen dead birds out of a bag and fondles them. Their feathers blowing in the wind makes them seem alive. From a distance you can hardly tell, until you get up close. And she is always close. Her feet are dirty, her hands filled with bird death. The cat cries. Tarot cards are shuffled. The future, anyone?

A Puerto Rican man on a bus, the camera pushed right up into his face, talks about lizards biting his ears and hanging from his lobes all day when he used to go to school. He is also close with the animals. Why isn't she scared? Why is she so close, close enough to be hurt by his bad looking laughter which could turn into something else when the bottle runs out.

Finally we are in a bar looking oh so very clean and antiseptic. It changes colour like a mood ring, it is pink and blue and then pink again. Dani is the lonely occupant, waiting at her table. Back in the city, in a designed space, everything clean and orderly and perfect. In other words, no happiness. The camera is not close here, it looks at it all from a distance so

that it can gauge the effect of this geometry on the 'subject,' the maker of course, it is always the maker who is at stake here. She is always dragging us along, pushing us into the face of strangers, party to another chance encounter.

In the closing scene we see a woman on a tight rope, falling off. The bees make honey but cannot eat it. You want to see a nursing cow and it hits you in the head. And the woman between your legs? The child that comes from that place? The stranger on the bus? For a few moments there are gestures toward child's play, flights of reverie with the birds, only the birds are all dead now. Now it is time to take up again with the monsters who are still alive, and I among them, dirtied and crushing you, and stepping on your hope without even noticing.

Litau (7.5 minutes 2007) opens with a dance number: is it a foxtrot or a samba, at any rate, it is one of those body shaking rhythm numbers that have left words behind. Three figures move together, lensed up close in swaths of brightly coloured fabric. It might be a her between two hims, there are no faces so it's hard to tell, might be she's wearing the pants today, might be he's got on his best hose and heels.

Meanwhile on the street, near the dirtiest and most beautiful windshield in all of Estonia, Dani listens to a woman talk and scribbles down words like *Puha Vaim* next to a child's face. "Or you go to hell, oh I understand. That's why you're willing to spend time with me right now," says Dani. One thing is for sure: this is not an interview like those which may be found in a score of other doc manoeuvres. For one thing, despite the woman's underlinings and rhetorical repeatings, it is clear that not so much is clear. Between them stretch a lifetime of mysterious experiences. After all that, how can I know you, how can I find you? Could it be here, on the rusted hood of this abandoned

car, is this the place where we could make our stand together?

Dani's journal offers up another face, a star of David, a fire. They are the quickest of sketches, Dani is turning these unknown words (are they a prophecy, a warning?) into these small pictograms so they might be stored and saved and rescued from the present. They are both people of the book after all, it lives inside each of them as a text waiting to be recited. Signs are inscribed in her notebook so she can carry them away. And us alongside.

At this moment the camera tilts and a young girl in a polka dot dress spins round and comes to a stop, and then again and again in the other direction. Smiling. The woman keeps smiling, she is the one writing enigmas into Dani's notebooks, reciting foreign words. A minute into the scene the camera shifts again and the talker's face comes into view, it turns out she is a double-chinned, grey haired lady with a broad round face that narrows suddenly and precipitously into mouth and chin, as if their maker had run out of time or material.

A young girl colours a rocket yellow in silence. The mysterious words, pointed, emphatic, underlined, hang over this scene somehow, the way an impression of a room remains if you turn the lights on for a moment and then off. The phantom of a room remains for a moment. And then it too gives way.

A young boy in a bathing suit leans out on a rock, speaking to another boy crouching in the water below. Their mouths are turned away from us, turned towards each other. Unlike the usual cinema, whose inhabitants are always opened, on display, always 'turned out' to offer their audience the best view, the best seat in the house, here the views are partial, the codes only partially revealed, what is most often on view, again and again in this tape, is the way others remain a mystery.

Two young boys listen to a radio in a parking lot. "It's shit," says one. "I like it," Dani responds, which prompts the beautiful young one onscreen to curl his lips into an O and dance up and down. It takes about twenty seconds.

A young girl in a red dress climbs an apple tree. Three seconds. (Dani writes me about this scene: In this clip the boy who turned his lips into a vowel and hoots like an ape is the voice-over for the girl in the tree who is now an ape because of his voice-over.)

A Latvian soldier checks documents on a bus. The camera is low and unobtrusive, but right there in front of him. What if he notices? Will he look up and see her, and see us watching behind her? The threat of being seen, of being looked at in the wrong way by the wrong person. Ten seconds.

Two boys look into the guts of a car. One of them shirtless and lean, both of them blonde and too young to know any better. A girl smiles shyly behind them. She knows everything but lacks the agency to act, caught inside her gender trap. Action is left to the unselfconscious and unaware, the know-nothings. They gesture to something beyond the field of vision speaking in Lithuanian. Ten seconds.

Two children describe a soft shell crab encounter in German. "Was it alive before?" asks Dani. They never answer.

A woman lying by a river. Or dead. Or asleep. Pink top, brown pants, black rubber boots. Dead or alive, she is also part of the natural world.

A walk down a stairway with carefully close attention paid to the wooden banister, the camera follows its turning and twisting

downwards. For some a road of yellow bricks, for others a wooden hand rail is enough.

Horses watery and close. Soft-eyed, they graze each other. Their soft touch is also a look.

A woman lies in bed, the camera pans over her in a post (pre?) coital haze. She is seen with the softest possible eyes. The eyes of a horse, for instance.

A football match on TV. (Could this also be love?)

Street musicians stroke their violins and cellos while Dani's camera returns to the car seen at the tape's beginning. The woman with two faces, large and small, has picked up her child, the one who turned and turned. They white out and the movie is over.

Litau is a prayer of moments, of tender strangers met in passing, but met full on. There is no holding back or opportunity for rest. She has made a composition using fragments of incomprehension. *Litau* refuses to wrap up all these encounters into a story, or pretend they are part of a single gesture. Instead we are offered the raw, unremembered stuff of living. Dani is always in the midst, pushing her face up close, trying to find a way to get through the scar of language which names and separates, which binds and heals, like the spine of a book opening and closing.

9 Minutes of Kaunaus (6 minutes 2007) the title says but the tape is only six minutes long. The other third has been shorn away, left to the imagination as a promissory note. In a Lithuanian synagogue young Domas Darguzs whispers his wide-eyed truths to Dani. His miraculous confession informs her that this place was made of materials belonging to ancient Egypt, and that world peace will arrive when we can look on with love at the art of

living that stands before us as statues. "Awesome," Dani answers and he replies, "Yes it is." Wherever her subjects are, this is where Dani is. She meets them over and again, whether child or bird or insect or holocaust survivor.

In between his testimonials from the other side are moments from a goat farm. The goats suckle on artificial nipples protruding from a nipple tub, or in another protracted scene they are attached to milking machines. The udders well and secrete milk like an ejaculating penis, again and again, caught in the infernal cycle of production.

Fire snakes from Egypt, gold discoveries and the mystery of death all pour of Domas's mouth. One image gives way to the next in rapid succession like one of Dani's tapes. His pictures are made with words, issuing from the space between his first set of teeth, and the small shifts of focus which allows his face to enter the frame at a speed which permits us to receive him. Like oracles past his orations are casually transcendent, it is a sermon delivered not from the front but the very back row, where all the buried and forgotten truths may be met again by anyone young or innocent or animal enough to receive them.

3 Parts for Today (12.5 minutes 2007). There is something about a bird lying on the ground that doesn't look relaxed or at ease. It lies there in a cascade of grey and white feathers, heaving with breath, the yellow bill opening wide and all I can think is: how awful, how wounded. And how beautiful. It must have hit that harsh brick wall and fallen here, in the last beautiful light where Dani (does she ever sleep?) has found her.

Yonatan Shapira (named in the opening title as "The Refusenik") talks about joining the Israeli army after the first Gulf War and becoming a helicopter pilot.

Grandma Leventhal is lensed centimeters away from her left elbow, the camera pointed straight up into a wattle of neck and the sagging flesh of her arms. She takes a pill and then a cracker. "I just don't know why the pill doesn't go down without you tasting it?" Dani asks/says. How can experience be masked, buried, repressed? Are we in the land of metaphor here? The denial of even the most rudimentary rights for Palestinians is somehow equivalent to a pill swallowed by Dani's grandmother whose taste (or reality) is covered over by a cracker. Here is a politics searched for and unearthed and returned to again and again on home turf; in pictures of home, friends and familiars. The problem, the difficulties are never "out there," but also and most importantly "over here." How to find the necessary distance or closeness with the camera in order to be able to find them?

From a television screen a documentary fragment once again shows Yonatan Shapira speaking Hebrew, though the clip is silent (and shot home movie style, in what looks like someone's living room where he speaks in front of a small group of folks) yellow subtitles permit language to be applied. "And then a little seven year old girl started running towards us. On one hand I saw this little scared girl... maybe she's going to explode... I shouted but she didn't stop..."

Incredibly at that moment a young girl gets up and walks by Yonatan. He can only smile and shake his head. "Yeah that girl was just about that high... but then I shot a warning shot in the air, the girl froze like this, for me it was like being hit by hammer on the head. For months afterwards I couldn't forget that moment, and then I told my commanders I'm not doing this anymore."

A blank post (or is it a chimney, a tower?) with a frayed red rope attached stands tall, the rope

so hardly there by the time it reaches the far end of the frame that it seems to hover miraculously in the wind. The camera tilts to reveal it is the stem of a windmill.

Yonatan returns and contrasts the exhilarating lift off of his helicopter with the devastating effect these military machines bring to their target.

All at once we are offered experiences soft and hard. Raw and cooked. Dani feels along the seam of the real until these moments of contradiction erupt.

She films her father in temple singing with his eyes closed, softly chewing. The word “peace” passes through the air and some guitar and then there is some shuffling of hymnal pages. Isn’t this word already a question? How can there be peace in the synagogue when this religion has been used to bludgeon and displace an entire Arab population?

Then Dani appears out of doors in jeans and a hoodie brandishing a bowl of muesli and fruit which settles into the middle of the frame. She talks but we don’t see her face at first, her words and mouth are off screen. (Some illusory wholeness, some easy place of seeing and knowing is endlessly deferred or troubled.)

“There is a Jewish law that says that you shouldn’t eat alone. I just had a meeting with Yonatan Shapira, and here is this activist, a Combatant For Peace, and it was so funny because I showed him this video that I made of him, of the lecture that he gave, and I have mixed the footage of him being a helicopter pilot with this bird. I have footage of this bird that had just fallen, a little fledgling, and he was like ‘Did you give it some water? What did you do?’ It didn’t even occur to me to try to save that bird. It was just this beautiful footage.”

A woman wrapped in a gold mylar sheet makes her way towards the Ignalina nuclear power plant in the distance. End of part one.

Part two opens with a set of titles.

Antje Miller’s grandpa was a Nazi. One night last August we went out dancing. Antje Muller’s grandpa was a Nazi. One night we went out dancing with my friend Unis, a Turk. He knew I wanted Antje and he hit on her right in front of me.

A woman in red calls out of a megaphone, bikes park near the windmill. A picnic of bread and strawberry jam ensues. At an amusement park mechanical camels race across their prescribed tracks, digitally slowed. A woman in a red dress walks gingerly along rocks in water. A pair of hands knit red yarn against a luminous red cloth background. Dani and a handsome man and a woman under a blanket on the beach. There is laughter and music, the shutter speed is slowed, the pictures blurry and intense. He speaks German and Dani is so close, their feet are far away and a horizon of Black Sea just beyond them but the faces are close, the touch of the blanket fills the frame.

The woman lying there face down, never saying a word, somehow between ‘them,’ the man speaking German and Dani’s playful accusations. Wait, wait. Is this woman the ‘Antje’ mentioned in the titles? Dani laughs to cover over her bad feelings (why do women do this so well, so often?) but it’s clear she’s hurt. Why is she hurt? I grope backwards across the line of pictures and find myself looking again at those intertitled words (“Antje’s Muller’s grandpa was a Nazi”) and especially the words she uses for love. “Hit on her.” To have the beloved taken away, seized, to have one’s hope stepped on so that another’s might hold sway, all this is “hit on her,” taking a hit. Where to turn after this beach, why is there room under that blanket only for two? Dani records an enormous tree with a deep scar running

along its length. I am this tree, this body of water, this unspeaking woman. Love is a hit.

Part 3

The voice of Steve Reinke erupts over pictures of a kosher Schawarma stall, and then two Canadian geese duck their heads into water in perfect time, turning around some unseen centre. Steve speaks a text of Dani's and it is delivered casually, or at least its laughing interruptions, its abrupt stop and starts, give it the impression of verité. He talks about meeting Shapira, the Refusenik, and then about prayer, the gods that live outside and in.

"The difference is that I'm no longer praying to an outside force, a force which reinforces my own insignificance. Instead I'm looking inside and the inside is always there. It's there 24/7. This other God outside sometimes doesn't seem to be there, sometimes seems to have receded into the distance or listening or not listening. But the one on the inside you can feel it and see it in other things it's just always there. So I can call on it, I can remember it. It gives no reason to escape into instant gratification of sex or booze and then the rebound from these things which is a kind of loneliness or emptiness."

The two birds fuck, that doesn't take long, both raising their necks alternately as if in triumph or release. And then they are back to ducking their heads under the water and using their bills to send water running down their backs. Like so many other pictures that Dani collects, they are so beautiful. They are also the end.

Yonatan Shapira's refusenik remonstrations are interwoven with moments of Dani's family (her grandmother and the pill, her father singing), her broken love in part two, and finally a sort of reconciliation (God is inside) while the geese fuck and bathe and swim right on.

So now of course I am waiting for more. It's enough for now, I've seen these movies and re-seen them. They are humming right along to the same tune that delivered *Draft 9*, so muscular and fearless and camera ready. Now I want more, at least enough to fill the granaries, the distribution houses, the screens of festivals in years to come. Let it rain. Let it all come down.



Show
&
Tell



in the land of





Milk
&
Honey



"I was raised to believe that Israel is the land of milk and honey. So I, if I were to go there, that would just be, uh, a great thing. Doesn't matter what you're doing there, if you're in that location, it's good. So I went. And ended up at Kefar Menachem. I was put in the metal factory and painted plastic onto pieces of metal for light fixtures.

And then, I complained because my boss was sexually harassing me. So I got moved into the chicken factory. These hens had uh, barely any feathers left. Their beaks had been clipped. Their egg sacks were bright red and pink and it was way over crowded in this coop.

Each worker would collect 2000 eggs a day off the conveyer belt and then spray the eggs with bleach. The Israelis had blonde hair in the front from spraying. So every three hours we had to collect the dead hens. It's so hot that they spray water from above. They have fans on but they also spray water. But this makes the floor of the factory like soupy mud. And the roosters would chase after me with their prongs. One day my boss told me to go get all the sick hens. Sometimes their legs would get caught in the wooden slats and so I had this tool, it was like a coat hanger, that I would pull their legs out with. And um, so, I collected all the sick hens and I was thinking - great! They're going to get a vet! Bring a vet to the...(sound of crows cawing) That was a naive thinking. There was no vet, we put all the hens in a pen area. And later that afternoon, an Arab guy drove up in his jeep. To the fence. And we were handing him the sick hens over the fence."



Litau, 7.5 minute video, 2007, Dani Leventhal





Once upon a time there was an anti-Semite who, when parking her car, met a Jew. The Jew had a camcorder and a willingness to converse. But because of a language barrier, they resorted to drawing.

Once upon a time there was a group of feral boys who played cards, watched basketball on TV, and grunted like monkeys in trees. They were lost. They caused harm.

One day, the Jew left her apartment, walked through the woods, and ended up groping a woman under the gaze of a superstitious photograph.

She didn't score, but she has the footage in safe keeping.

9 minutes of Kaunaus

6 minute video, Dani Leventhal, 2007



Domas Darguzs (7) Dani Leventhal (34) Kaunus, Lithuania

Domas: "This place was built of ancient Egypt."

Dani: "Which place?"

Domas: "This place"

Dani: "This synagogue?"

Domas: "Yes, everything built."

Dani: "Wow."

Domas: "I think the mummy was sometimes dead and not dead. He was alive and bring here the peace. And now it's a little, not peace, but it's a little good, in here it's very quiet, it's all about peace."

Dani: "That's awesome. "

Domas: "Yes, it is."

-- Cut to Star of David on the ceiling--

Domas: "And there was five snakes, ancient Egypt snakes, but they looked a little interesting because they was green, of course. I was not scared because I found the gold, I found the gold and it was a victim. How you look with the sun and time. I was seeing the time..."

--Cut to scapegoats milking and nursing--

Domas: "If the man touch you here or here... you're dead. But I was too quiet, it was nothing, no snakes, no traps, no nothing. Just, it was a trap, I just don't know. It was, for people, you know, bone, people bone. Maybe something didn't dead. But those snakes..."

3 Parts for Today

12 minute video

by Dani Leventhal



A nestling fell onto the pavement



An Israeli Defense Force pilot refuses to occupy



A woman talks to you in the grass



Location: Lithuania, last nuclear power plant



Location: Germany, wind farm



Location: USA, speedball race



The father prays



The grandma medicates



The Turkish friend violates the code



Canadian geese have remained North, and are mating to the familiar sound of Reinke's voice.

יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא בעלמא די-ברא
 כרעותה, וימליך מלכותה בחייכון וביומיכון ובחיי
 דכל-בית ישראל, בעגלא ובזמן קריב, ואמרו: אמן.

יהא שמה רבא מברך לעלם ולעלמי עלמא.

יתברך וישתבח, ויתפאר ויתרומם ויתנשא,
 ויתהדר ויתעלה ויתהלל שמה דקודשא, בריך
 הוא, לעלא מן-כל-ברכתא ושירתא, תשבחתא
 ונחמתא דאמירן בעלמא, ואמרו: אמן.

יהא שלמא רבא מן-שמא וחיים עלינו ועל-כל-
 ישראל, ואמרו: אמן.

עשה שלום במרומיו, הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל
 כל-ישראל, ואמרו: אמן.





What



Are



You



Doing?

