

*Your Face Arrived*  
*Mike Hoolboom*



*Fri. 2 April – Sat. 7 June, 2014*  
*Niagara Artists Centre / St. Catharines, ON*



























## *Your Face Arrived*

*Editor + Mike Hoolboom*

*Designer + Kilby Smith-McGregor*

*Thanks to Pela del Álamo, Jorge Livero, Marta Diaz Rodríguez  
and all the fine folks at the Curtocircuito International Short Film Festival.  
Special thanks to guiding light Stephen Lemus.*

A publication of the Niagara Artists Centre



Supported by the Canada Council



Canada Council  
for the Arts

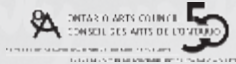
Conseil des arts  
du Canada



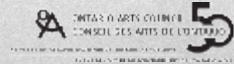
# YOUR FACE ARRIVED MIKE HOOLBOOM

FRI 2 APRIL - SAT 7 JUNE 2014

NIAGARA ARTISTS CENTRE  
ST. CATHARINES ON, [WWW.NAC.ORG](http://WWW.NAC.ORG)



Canada Council  
Conseil des arts  
du Canada



Canada Council  
Conseil des arts  
du Canada

*on your newly useless legs*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## *Introduction*

- 11 **introduction**  
by Stephen Remus

## *Essays*

- 15 **The Fringe Membrane**  
by Adrian Martin
- 17 **To the Wonder:  
the Films of Mike Hoolboom**  
by Michael Pattinson
- 20 **A Truthful Cocktail**  
by Aleksander Huser
- 22 **Looking Back, Looking Beyond:  
Two Films by Mike Hoolboom**  
by Genevieve Yue
- 26 **In the Hold of Life**  
by Jim Supanick

## *Interviews*

- 31 **Candid Camera**  
by Jennifer McPhee
- 37 **Three Letters on Failure,  
Tears and Forgetting**  
by Alexandra Rockingham  
+ Mike Hoolboom
- 41 **Being Loved Again  
a Chitchat with Stephen Andrews**

## *Notes*

- 53 **Notes on Buffalo Death Mask**  
by Mike Hoolboom

## *Scripts*

- 69 **Positiv**
- 73 **Dear Madonna**
- 74 **Still Here**

## *Bio*

- 76 Artist Bio
- 77 Film + Video
- 78 Writer Bios



## INTRODUCTION

*The world never ends in my dreams.  
Only I do.*

### **The Steve Machine**

by Mike Hoolboom

Mike arrived at the Niagara Artists Centre with friend and NAC member Lauren Corman. They spent a long time with Jarod Charzewski's installation in the Show Room Gallery, a built landscape of old clothes that took weeks to construct and had pretty much taken the place over. It was a massive thing with an actual cave and I think Mike and Lauren spent most of their time in there. I was fond of that space too. It was weirdly quiet, the clothes had this effect of both insulating you from outside noise while deadening whatever sound you made when you were in there. It was a serene place, a sanctuary really.

I can't recall if it was that day or on a separate trip that Mike gave us a package. Or maybe he mailed it. At any rate, a package showed up that included the AGYU catalogue. It was my first opportunity to get a grasp of his work. It was a kind of awakening: Right . . . this guy! I was immediately keen to work with him on making an exhibit happen.

There was then, and there still is, a lot of excitement about NAC's involvement with an art house cinema that's opening a block away from our digs on St. Paul Street. The cinema's to be part of a big new performing arts complex and NAC is angling for a stake in programming films. I'd already jawed with Deirdre Logue at V-Tape about the prospects of embedding experimental films into the screenings—and here was Mike, on the doorstep.



In putting the show together, we talked about how what became *Your Face Arrived* should be on a film and not a video installation tip. So we built a little movie theatre with seats salvaged out of the old Seneca movie palace in Niagara Falls to make sure gallery-goers recognized they were having an experience with film. It seemed necessary; Mike's films are imbued with the poetry of cinema, the ethereal evocation of dreams and memories, and then there's something else too.

In trying to put my finger on what that something else is, I recalled a metaphor to help understand consciousness using the film projector and the screen. The beam of flickering light from the projector is our consciousness, light as the power of our minds to create inner experience. The images and sounds the filmmaker arranges are the forms of our consciousness, the things that trigger our senses and forge our perceptions. We're obsessed with what's happening on the screen. We're concerned foremost with what we perceive. But it's that beam of light—it's consciousness itself—where the most mysterious meanings of existence reside. I think the something else in Mike's films is his directing of our attention to the light.

Since the show, Mike came down to our STRUTT Wearable Art Fiasco—nearly two thousand demented partiers in an old factory—and made a short film. We watched *Where the Night is Going* at our first NAC board meeting this year. Fourteen people around a table on a Tuesday night with the formality of French intellectual aristocrats, drinking red wine and thinking on the ideas of Guy Debord; every time NAC's like a sanctuary we know we've got it right

### **Stephen Remus**

Niagara Artists Centre

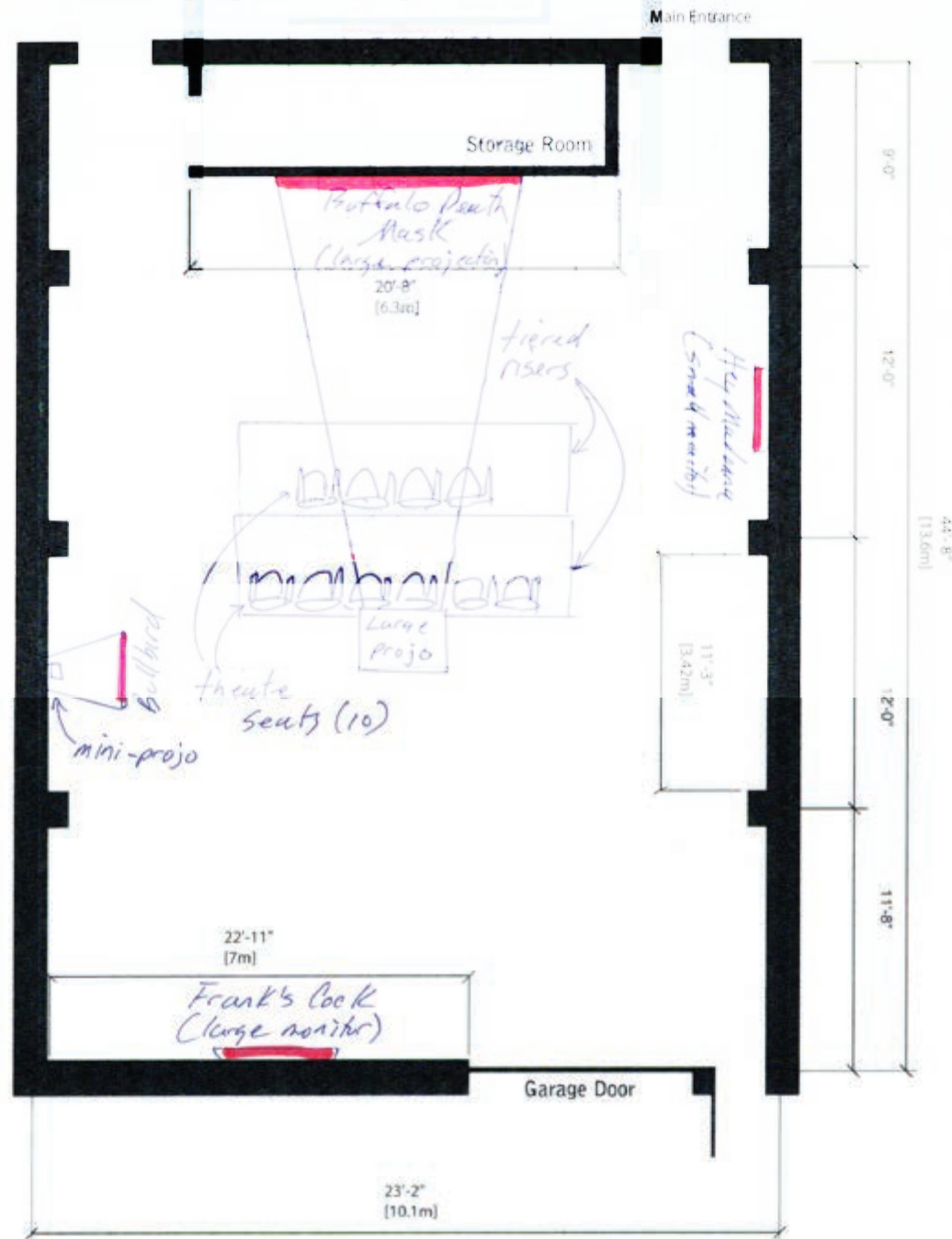
+ + +



# Niagara Artists Centre Show Room Gallery

354 St. Paul Street St. Catharines ON L2R 3N2  
905 641 0331 [nac.org](http://nac.org) [artists@nac.org](mailto:artists@nac.org)

*Mike Hoolbourn*







*Essays*



# THE FRINGE MEMBRANE

BY ADRIAN MARTIN

Originally published in de Filmkrant, November 2014

At the Curtocircuíto festival in Santiago de Compostela in October, a small but intense retrospective was devoted to the Canadian filmmaker Mike Hoolboom. Mike is not the kind of director who hordes and archives every last trace of his creative process undertaken over the past three decades—quite the contrary, he regularly withdraws some pieces from circulation, even to the point of junking them altogether. Some films only really work in a specific time, place and occasion, he explains; and besides, we already have too many films and videos in the world, too many images and sounds to deal with.

In a splendid Masterclass offered at the festival, Hoolboom offered his thoughts on the creative process, as influenced by Zen Buddhism. Something we need in modern life, he suggests, is *attention*—the ability to pay attention, to be attentive to people, things, faces, feelings that flow back and forth in any encounter. And immediately, I began musing on the tensions at the heart of the work of this prodigious artist—someone who is too little-known and celebrated on the international stage of experimental, avant-garde or (as he prefers to call it, more democratically *fringe* film.)

Many of Hoolboom's works, such as *Frank's Cock* (1993) and *Tom* (2002), are strikingly intimate portraits of close friendships in the era of AIDS. Like in the late films of Stephen Dwoskin, the shadow of looming mortality is offset by rapturously lyrical celebrations of momentary epiphany: dazzling light from bodies, interpersonal happiness, everyday grace. But, on the other hand, these films are



also a spectacle, projected onto a screen for an audience with prying eyes. This doesn't bother Mike: every good film, he says, starts as a 'threesome'—with the third party being at, the start, a piece of technology like a camera, and then, eventually, the spectator.

But where, exactly, is the 'attention' factor in the blistering montages (mostly appropriated images) that make up most of the running-time of Hoolboom's films? His films are not minimalistic, patient or contemplative—which is our modern cliché of cinematic attentiveness. All his films arise from what he calls a *detour*, a type of running free-association through a vast field of images and sounds—in order, usually, to finally return to something simple, such as the face of a friend.

For Hoolboom, these images and sounds are what lies 'between' us—not in the sense of a barrier or disguise, but rather a living membrane that connects us. Many of his films, including *Public Lighting* (2004, newly re-edited) and the in-progress *Scrapbook*, address how our identities—for good and for ill—are constituted through imaginative projections and identifications. In *Damaged* (2002), he chose a set of random postcard images just as he found them in a box in a shop, and asked himself the question: *what life could correspond to these pictures?*

It is rare to find a Hoolboom film without narration, without a story of some kind—without an 'address' to the spectator, whether printed on screen, or delivered in voice-over. It's what he does to keep his work intelligible and accessible—even to his mother, whom he imagines as his 'typical' viewer. But Hoolboom's narrated stories work like the prose of Roland Barthes or the films of Terrence Malick: anybody, anywhere, of any age and in any kind of body, can inhabit these richly emotional 'I' and 'you' and 'he or she' propositions, these shifting signifiers that are not empty, but full of yet-unmade possibilities.

Similarly, we are never sure, while watching his work, how these stories started, or where exactly they come from: a real life (Mike's, or somebody else's)? Were they filched from a novel, a movie, a joke, a quotation? Are they pure fiction, reverie? And was the story written to fit the associative-flow of the image-sound membrane, or vice versa? The concrete answers do not matter: what matters is the flow, the wave that he offers, which we can catch and ride—if we dare.

+ + +





# TO THE WONDER: THE FILMS OF MIKE HOOLBOOM

BY MICHAEL PATTINSON

Originally published in Curtocircuito Festival Catalogue, October 2014

Positive is a double-edged sword in the cinema of Mike Hoolboom. On the one hand, when the Toronto-born filmmaker was diagnosed with HIV amidst the confusion, ignorance and prejudice that pervaded the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s, to be labelled 'positive' was to be living under something resembling a death sentence. On the other hand—as is so amply demonstrated in Hoolboom's own 1996 short *Letters From Home*—in the decade following the AIDS crisis, positivity in the emotional sense was less an individual attitude than a survival mechanism for an entire community struggling against social misconceptions and institutional failures.

Filmmaking has been a thing of affirmative action for Hoolboom. In the decades since his diagnosis, he's amassed a body of work comprising more than fifty films of varying lengths. In addition the Canadian has been known to revisit and revise such works—trimming, lengthening and merging them as well as withdrawing them completely from circulation. Hoolboom's cinema is one of ongoing re-evaluation and self-definition—an observation perhaps applicable to any prolifically self-observing artist, though in this instance things appear to be especially sharpened. Indeed, Hoolboom's tireless, creative energy pervades each individual work—his films are aesthetically maximalist, tonally composite, emotionally complex and thematically dense.

Hoolboom's oeuvre is both historically and culturally specific. His award-winning 1993 short *Frank's Cock* is as good an example as any of how inescapably of their time his films are. References to MTV and to iconic, era-defining sports stars ("the Michael Jordan of sex, "the Wayne Gretzky of hard-ons") place this eight-minute short thoroughly and aggressively in relation to a contemporary pop scene—a zeitgeist from which it is also at an appreciable remove. Hoolboom heightens this disconnect through avant-garde techniques: multiple frames compete for our attention within his overall composition, while actor Callum Rennie addresses viewers directly in a single-take monologue to camera. If stylistically it's plausible to imagine this as part of early-90s cable television, in terms of content it's decidedly less so.

The films respond to their maker's bodily afflictions in other ways. Hoolboom's hand-processed works are the product of a physical process involving an intimate care and attention far removed from a depersonalized industrial practice, whereas the ways in which he alters found footage and melds it with his and others' home movies speak of permanent distortion, a transmutation whereby the new offspring is at once recognisable and eerily displaced—changed forever, and yet the same. Meanwhile, hand-written intertitles and voice-overs—such as those in *Buffalo Death Mask* (2013) bring a verbal urgency to proceedings. As part of a community much maligned and repeatedly silenced, it is not enough to merely exist—not enough to think, therefore be—the old adage demands a reformulation: I speak, therefore I am.

When such a community's daily experience is one of fear, misunderstanding and contempt, speaking out and the optimism that entails are themselves sources of vulnerability. Such themes come to the fore in Hoolboom's remarkably beautiful feature-length

essay film *Tom* (2002) about New York cineaste and filmmaker Tom Chomont. Himself diagnosed with HIV, Chomont recounts his own life with empowering frankness, while Hoolboom situates his story within a wider, cinematic history. The film is an impressive amalgamation of movies from the previous century which it juxtaposes against the unthinkable personal heartache and ongoing preoccupations of its subject as the latter heads towards an uncertain future.

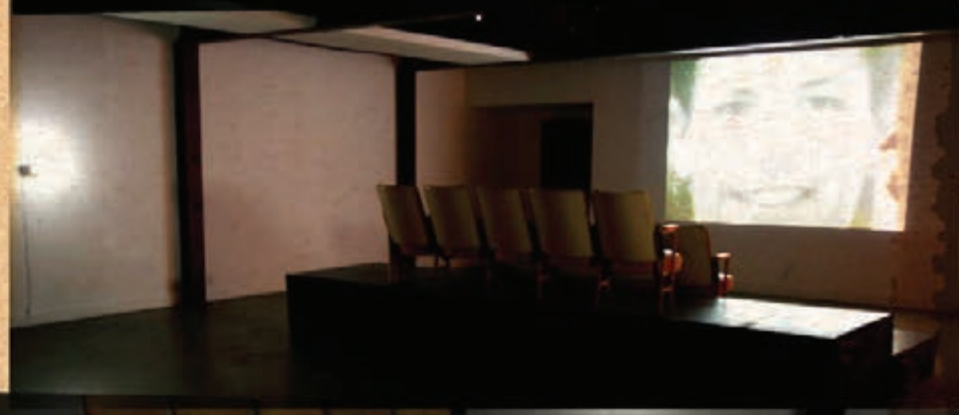
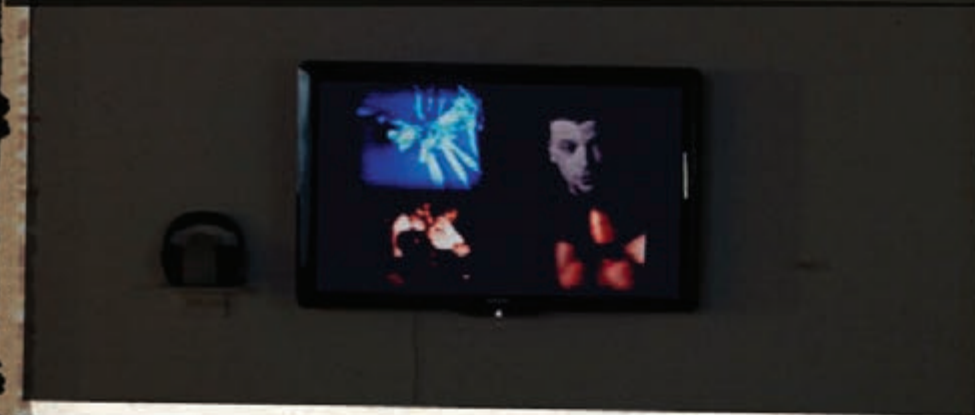
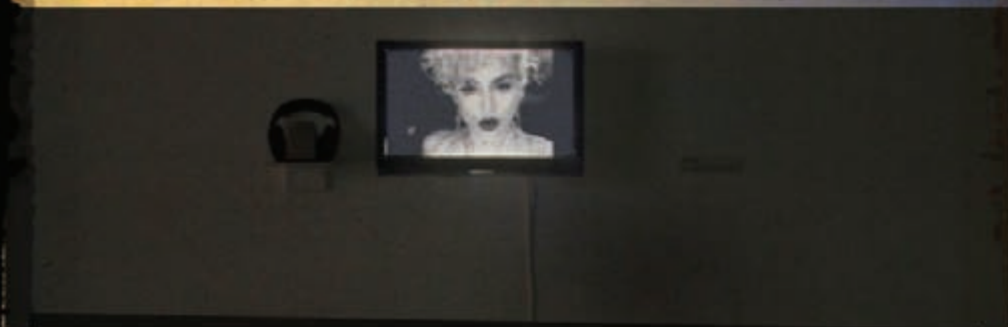
Indeed, in looking both forward and back within the eternal present tense of the moving image, Hoolboom has in recent years touched upon another tension—that between analog and digital forms. Though it's celluloid whose death agony cinephiles have begun to decry, Hoolboom can't afford nostalgia: in *Tom* the piling on of images both digital and analog suggests at the very least a curiosity for change—and all the uncertainty, vulnerability, fear, discovery and wonderment that come with it.



+++



YOUR FACE ARRIVED  
MIKE HOOLBOOM



## A TRUTHFUL COCKTAIL

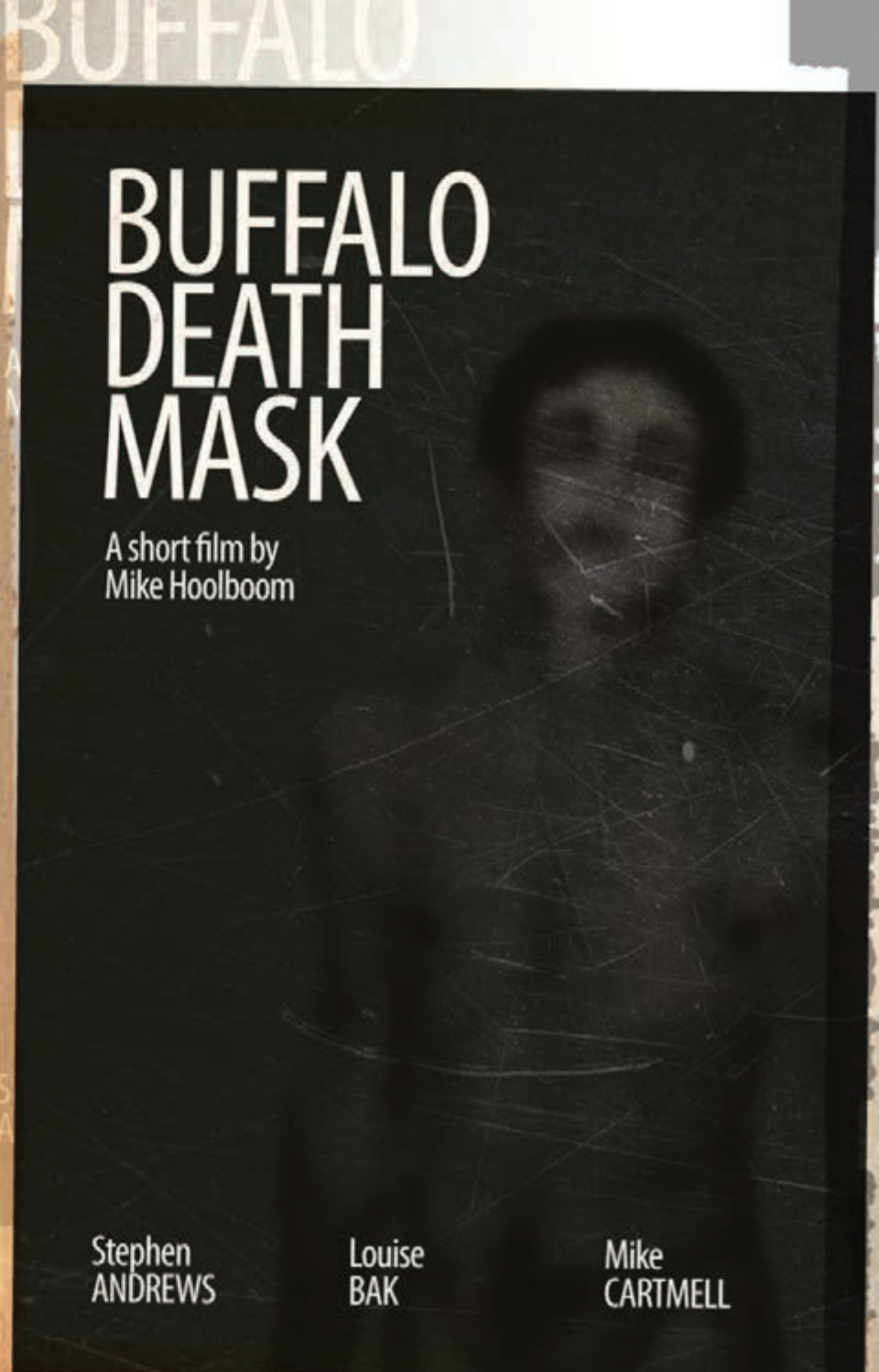
BY ALEKSANDER HUSER

Originally published on: FIPRESCI Website, May 2013

In the late eighties, Canadian experimental filmmaker Mike Hoolboom was diagnosed with HIV, resulting in him increasing his rate of production rapidly. So far, Hoolboom has made more than fifty films and videos, which have appeared in more than four hundred festivals, receiving around thirty awards—including twice the Best Short Film award at the Toronto International Film Festival, as well as two life time achievement awards for the filmmaker and several retrospectives of his works. Quite a few of Hoolboom's films have been selected for the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, an old and prestigious festival that pays special attention to the experimental and avant-garde cinema.

Through more than two decades, Hoolboom has been a long time chronicler of the HIV virus and its effects. This is also the theme of his 2013 film *Buffalo Death Mask*, which was awarded this year's FIPRECI Prize in Oberhausen. Addressing the disease with both an earnest and poetic approach, *Buffalo Death Mask* has a universal appeal, discussing life and love as well as sickness and death. Indeed, these are large and weighty issues which the film nevertheless treats with a surprising amount of humor and manages to give some original and interesting perspectives.

As *Buffalo Death Mask* begins, a face with vague features emerges, almost looking more like a mask than a human face, a bit later replaced by a somewhat clearer one. The slowly rotating images are accompanied by atmospheric music, and by texts at the bottom of





the screen which at first appear to be more or less esoteric poetry, but are then revealed to be someone's—most likely the filmmaker's—deeply personal memories of a lost loved one.

After this establishing part of the film, other powerful, dreamlike images unfold, as the sound shifts to a recording of a conversation between Canadian painter Stephen Andrews and Hoolboom himself. Both having survived the HIV virus long enough to receive the new life saving cocktail of medicines, they are the fortunate ones, but have both lost people they loved to this plague of the twentieth century.

In their strikingly sincere conversation, they lament both the disease in general and these deaths in particular. Nevertheless, warmth and humor are just as striking features of the talk, making its content almost as soothing as the sound of the men's voices.

While they recollect the deceased, the two men reflect as well on how losing those who love you also means losing parts of yourself—in terms of losing their recollections of you, as well as their feelings for you. As Andrews puts it in the film: If you don't have these people who know you, then where are you?

Thus, the film acknowledges how we are dependent on others to define ourselves, no less in love than in life in general, yet refuses to let anyone be defined by a disease, however fatal.

Furthermore, these openhearted and quite gripping discussions are illustrated with equally strong visual footage of several individuals and their signs of the disease, as well as images of more general crowds and communities. This imagery serves to illustrate the film's many poetic juxtapositions, combining the specific with the universal, memories with the present, lightheartedness with melancholy, and, ultimately, addressing both survival and defeat. Certainly celebrating life, while also addressing the unfairness and even ambivalence of still being around, when so many others are gone.

Mike Hoolboom's *Buffalo Death Mask* is rich, complex, and somewhat enigmatic, yet has an appealing simplicity to it. The winner of the International Critics Prize at the 59th Oberhausen International Short Film Festival can be described as both a personal documentary and a visual poem, and is a striking, warm and beautiful film. A true cocktail, indeed.

+ + +

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING BEYOND: TWO FILMS BY MIKE HOOLBOOM

BY GENEVIEVE YUE

Mike Hoolboom's *Frank's Cock* (1993) and *Buffalo Death Mask* (2013) are both structured as reminiscences, dialogue-driven accounts of a time in the mid-nineties when the AIDS epidemic was at its deadliest. In the former, Callum Rennie delivers a monologue about Frank, a gay man dying from AIDS. Rennie speaks from the perspective of Frank's partner of nine years, marveling at Frank's vivacious and sexually voracious nature as he mourns the imminent passing of his lover and friend. With *Buffalo Death Mask*, the voiceover conversation between Hoolboom and artist Stephen Andrews is similarly retrospective. It takes place in 2013, ten years after the time of *Frank's Cock*, and from the other side of the release of the "AIDS Cocktail" in 1995, a drug therapy that transformed what had been a death sentence to a manageable, though still fraught, affliction. The two friends, survivors of a disease that claimed so many lives, share memories of lost loved ones and the era that is vanishing along with them.

Both films' accounts of the AIDS crisis are permeated by loss. This is felt in an acutely personal way, through intimate details about those who suffer from and eventually succumb to the disease. Frank, in Rennie's telling, is larger than life. We learn that he cracks bottles open with his teeth, has "a thing for omelettes," and makes ample use of his titular endowment (he has a penchant for fucking to the sound of the CBC). Such stories, however, can only approximate the presence of a man who we never, and will never, see. Rennie's own face, addressing the camera in a stark black and white composition, only occupies one corner of the screen, initially surrounded by darkness. As he speaks





the other three quadrants gradually fill with footage of microscopic organisms, fragments of Madonna videos, and scenes of sex between men. The images, and the music that accompanies them, amount to a lively din, like multiple televisions playing different channels turned at once. With the description of Frank's illness that ends the monologue, however, the other images return to the darkness, a reminder that even this healthy, robust man, stricken with Kaposi's Sarcoma like so many others, will eventually fade.

The loss that pervades these films is compounded by the fact that, when loved ones die, so too do we lose the parts of ourselves that they carry with them. In *Buffalo Death Mask*, Andrews describes this as being "doubly bereft": "Not only do you lose them, you lose what they remembered about you." In this way, loss is not singular, but extends to friends, lovers, and, beyond that, entire communities and even a generation. This broadened scope, which stretches far beyond the individual accounts of the films' narrators, is suggested in their richly layered imagery, particularly with *Buffalo Death Mask*'s 8mm footage of artists in their studios, people gathered in crowds, and time-lapsed images of the Toronto cityscape.

*Frank's Cock* and *Buffalo Death Mask* do not only revisit the past through dialogue, but also stage scenes of retrospective viewing. Both are themselves ways of looking back. *Frank's Cock* was made by compiling four channels of video footage and rephotographing it with a Bolex. Film, the elder sibling medium to video, is used to gather and add dimension—chiefly grain and a sense of depth—to Rennie's first-person narrative. The look back in *Buffalo Death Mask*, meanwhile, involves a longer delay between the shooting of the source material and the compilation of footage. Hoolboom retrieves footage shot from a decade prior, around the time of the making of *Frank's Cock*, and reworks it digitally, slowing down the image of his friend, Mike Cartmell, who had since passed away. At the beginning of the film, we see Cartmell's face in extreme close-up, his eyes closed and covered with coins like one of the shades ferried by Charon to the underworld. Cartmell was already dying at the time the footage was shot, but it is the dusty, grainy footage, the slow dissolves from one frame to another, his squinting and deeply shadowed eyes, that suggest the completion of his passage to the other side. Somehow, in that earlier moment, something of the future was glimpsed.



The footage is like a time capsule, not a frozen moment of the past, but a message to be delivered to the future, to our own time. And rather than letting him fall into the Lethe, a river that causes forgetfulness, *Buffalo Death Mask* retrieves Cartmell, and lingers over his image.

The moment both films return to is the early nineties, when the AIDS crisis was full-blown. As a disease that has disproportionately affected the gay community, it threatened both from within, claiming tens of thousands of lives annually in North America, and from homophobic forces without, including the public stigmatization of a “gay disease” that, among other things, delayed crucial medical research into treatment. The arrival of the AIDS Cocktail antiretroviral therapy, mentioned in *Buffalo Death Mask*, dramatically affected mortality rates for HIV/AIDS, and it marked a juncture between those who died and those who were lucky enough to receive the new treatment in time. Both groups, however, were indelibly shaped by the disease, and seropositive individuals like Hoolboom and Andrews have since carried the guilt of survival and the burden of memory. In handwritten text that appears across the bottom of Cartmell’s slowly turning image, Hoolboom asks, “why are we still here when so many are gone?”

Memories of us are carried with the dead, and we in turn hold on to traces, however insufficient and partial, of their lost lives. The time before 1995 is, in many respects, irretrievable, largely because the culture around HIV/AIDS has profoundly changed. Though there is plenty of media documentation of the time “before,” and in this way many of Hoolboom’s films join the important artist and activist work of organizations like ACT UP and Visual AIDS, the current moment is threatened by a different, less visible, and less urgent conception of the disease, truncated from its deadly past.





*Frank's Cock* and *Buffalo Death Mask* restore this sense of the disease's past, and the lives it claimed, through an attention to the materiality, and attendant fragility, of bodies and film. At times, film is treated like skin, speckled and wounded, as when we see the spray of shingles across Hoolboom's torso in *Buffalo Death Mask*. "The body remembers," he says in voiceover, and so too are his films charged with remembering. They not only record the stories of Frank and other lost loved ones, but bear the marks, the hazy texture, of memory itself, like photographs worn from repeated handling. We see, in *Buffalo Death Mask*, grainy Super 8 footage of a man walking down a city street, engulfed in passing headlights, and, toward the

end of the film, a group of people gathered in a fog, their figures barely discernable. As they dissipate, first into the orange cloud, then into darkness, we see their faces turned upward. What are they looking at? An airplane, a star, some other kind of light? Though the film does not reveal the object of their attention, the scene recalls the earlier image of Cartmell's eyes covered with coins. These tokens that secure passage to the other side are also a way of seeing, a look to some point beyond, and a viewpoint that Hoolboom's films ardently strive to share.

+ + +



## IN THE HOLD OF LIFE

BY JIM SUPANICK

*There is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.*

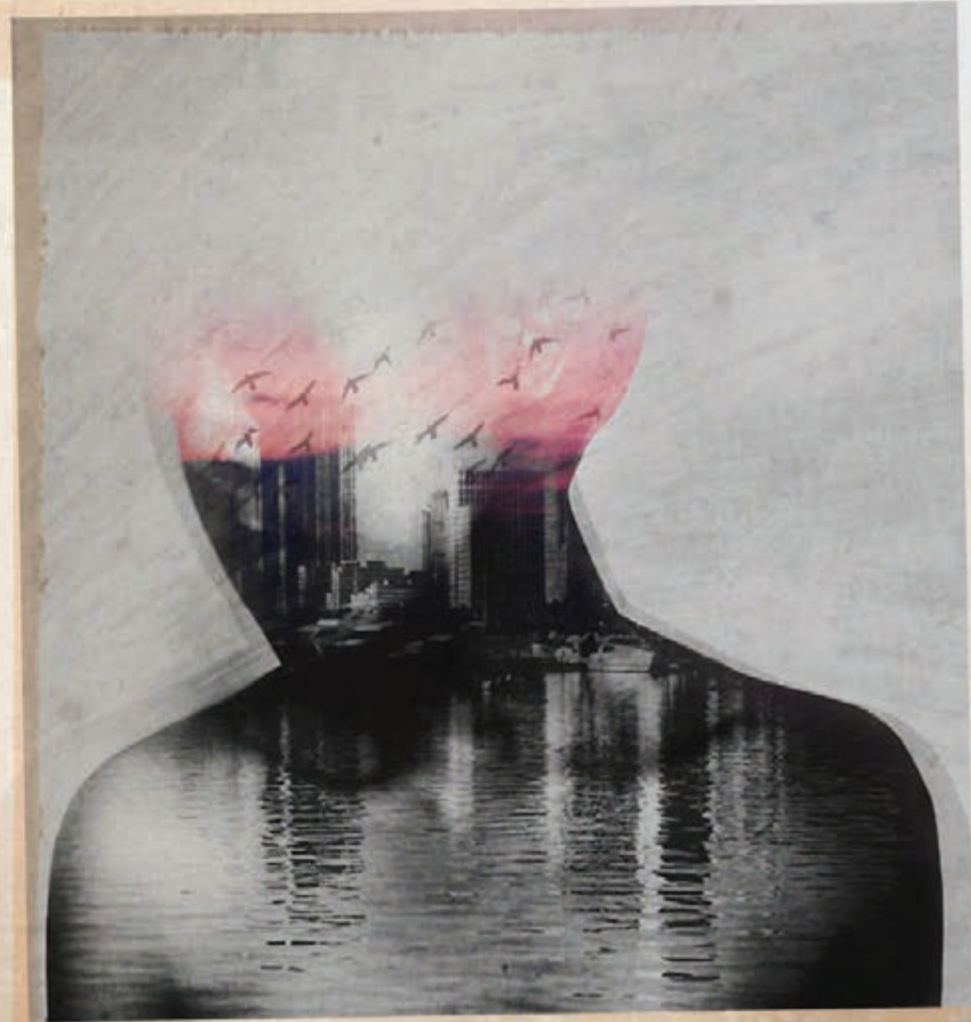
*To determine this degree, and therewith the boundary at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present, one would have to know exactly how great the plastic power of a man, a people, or a culture is: I mean by plastic power the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way; to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds.*

**Untimely Meditations**

Friedrich Nietzsche

*I stayed up one night playing poker with Tarot cards.  
I got a full house and four people died.*

Steven Wright



Andre Bazin sadly never lived to see disc rot, Face Juggler, VHS clearance sales, the Cher Effect, video enhanced gravemarkers, or Mike Hoolboom's films. What if a media technology merger with the life sciences were to imbue the latter with truly galvanic, life-restoring powers? I like to imagine Bazin returning to us as a talking head on some 42" plasma screen, taking stock of the contemporary situation, offering a reassessment of his well-known views on the photographic image in light of such recent artifacts.



I mention Mike Hoolboom as the odd man out amidst this list of things because his autoethnographic project in one sense offers an extended caveat to Bazin's formulation ("to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life"), that self-described *mummy complex* which motivated artistic creation at its earliest origins.

Two Hoolboom films—*Frank's Cock* (1993) and *Buffalo Death Mask* (2013)—effectively screw with Bazin's notions without invalidating them altogether. And for the history they document, this pair of films—thematically coupled, and revealing in their contrasts—deploy wildly inspired formal gambits and laughs where you'd never expect. They reorient us too, amidst the radical shifts to how AIDS once was and is now looked upon throughout much of the Western world.

When I first saw *Frank's Cock* I mistook it as documentary testimonial—not only that, but I viewed the narrator's face as a spectral presence within the frame—badass, but about to vanish—counting down to his lover's demise while unaware of his own soon to come. (How relieved I was to learn that the young narrator—played by Callum Keith Rennie—has lived a far happier future that includes a starring role on *Battlestar Galactica*!) It premiered at a

moment that, as Hoolboom recently described, "Being infected meant that you were carrying not only the certainty of your own death, but the possibility of death for everyone that touched you."

From the very start, Rennie's face takes on an uncertain presence in the upper right of the frame; as the film proceeds other images appear one by one, spilling into the soft remaining quadrants as if to allow a glimpse of the irreducible fullness of his life with Frank and which his words alone can't possibly contain.

As the film won awards at major festivals, the first drug cocktails were beginning to show promise in successfully treating those infected. But that move from guaranteed fatality to a new glimmer of hope (courtesy of Big Pharma) brought with it a false sense of resolution: was the crisis *within* really over?

*Buffalo Death Mask*, made twenty years later, offers a provisional answer. Built upon the mutual reminiscences of Hoolboom and painter Stephen Andrews (a long-time friend who shares HIV-positive status), their exchange is buoyed by a humor familiar to those who've come to know death up close. They talk of promiscuity, the improvements in drugs, the guilt of survivors; most striking of all are Andrews's insights regarding his partner's demise: "Not only do



you lose them—you lose what they remembered about you. And if you don't fully understand yourself, you're kind of doubly bereft... suddenly you start to feel a hollowness in yourself, because you had it backed up with these people... it's about being knowable too... suddenly you don't have these people who know you... then where are you?"

Sharp shocks are there too, like the moment we see Hoolboom raise his shirt to reveal the painful flaming lesions from a nasty case of the shingles; I'm reminded here of a passage from *The Steve Machine*, Hoolboom's one and so-far-only novel: "But the only way to survive this plague was to become someone else. I would let the illness ravage the body of the person I used to be, destroy it layer by layer until there was nothing left. I was determined to escape to give myself over to someone who could never be positive."

Its erotically-charged montage reveries and slow-melting superimpositions of faces, friends, and fire have a liquid, floating quality—effects surely heightened by Machinefabriek's music; such densely layered complexity would be inconceivable had film not shed its own skin to reveal digital video's new plastic powers. The slow extended sequence just after the opening title shot is a case in

point: originating from a 16mm in-camera superimposition shot years before, the footage sat unused until Hoolboom began its temporal sculpting—a process partly possible though wholly impractical in its native format. What might Bazin say about its glacial suspension, its tangle of temporal conundrums—Charon's obol on a still-moving body, as if to mock mortality, time, the medium itself?

The philosopher Catherine Malabou describes the brain itself as the very source of plastic power, endlessly reconfiguring new synaptic routes of possibility—and we as individuals, in turn, teeming with new potential as part of the social body: "...to talk about the plasticity of the brain means to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form but also the agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model."

Malabou traces the notion of plasticity as a philosophical concept back beyond Nietzsche to Hegel; she writes that, "Hegel tears it away from its native domain, art, and assigns to it its true domain of validity, the development of subjectivity. Then the essential task of translating the subject is incumbent on plasticity." Does this suggest that the plasticity of an artistic form might offer a similar tack towards life itself?





## Postscript

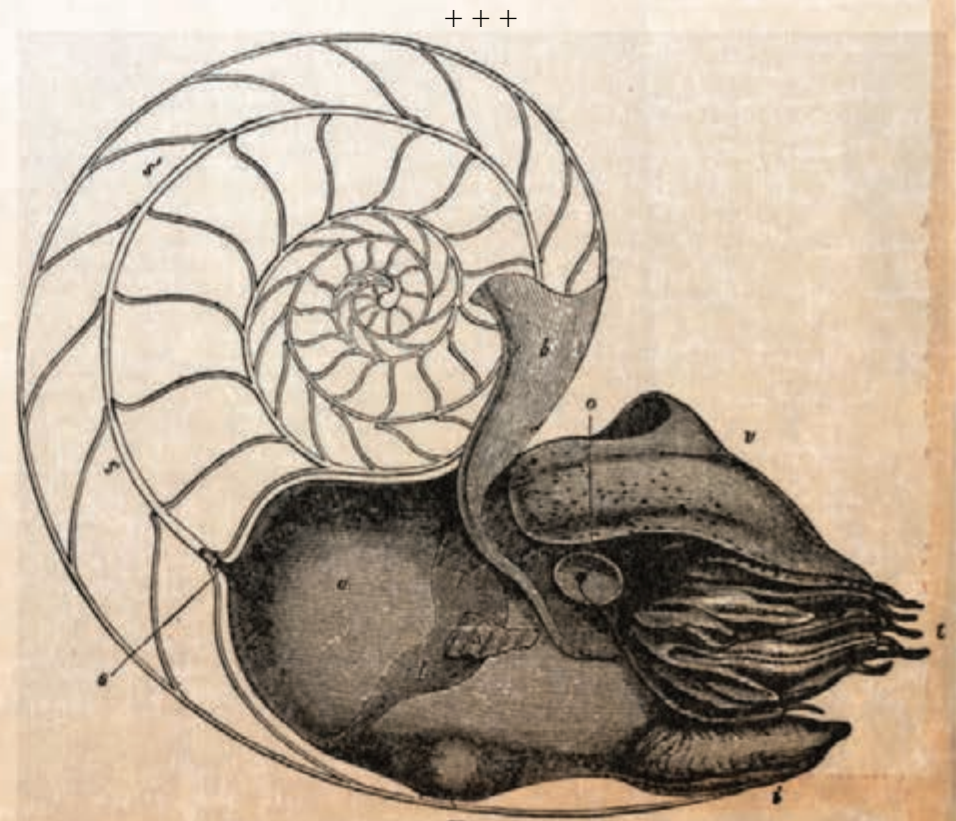
*This is where I had to stop, because if I'd ignored the already-past deadline, I would've just kept writing, maybe something twice or three times as long, elaborating on the autoethnography idea and how your films extend that practice beyond the self and into community and active collaboration in various forms... I also wanted to talk about your habit of reworking films, contrasting it with the "fixed and finished" paradigm of Bazin (the beginning section grew out of that, so I hope that idea is at least implied by it); and I also had a compare-and-contrast passage on "Krapp's Last Tape" and your autoethno (you sitting, listening with the Nagra—was that deliberate reference or just occupational commonplace?), emotionally crippled Krapp next to make-a-film-and-make-a-life Mike.*

*The ending IS abrupt—partly my fighting the impulse to impose some sort of forced writerly resolution that I've so often done before. Your take on the Malabou part is just as I intended—and I hewed to the more suggestive/less overtly explicit end of things—even if I had the time, the vision, the expertise, I felt it'd be horribly presumptuous to make something prescriptive. One thing I've gotten from the reading of this past year was some renewed sense of hope—Malabou, Hardt and Negri, even to some extent Badiou... I guess I learned from them that you can be clear-eyed and critical and still feel things can change.*

*So I think I was just trying to describe what I was seeing in what I'd awkwardly call your art/life continuum, which carries a different degree of intensity than most any artist I know... and honestly, I haven't thought about AIDS so deeply since I did a seminar with Douglas Crimp way*

*back in grad school—aside from that it dwarfs my ability to really say something useful about it. It raised a lot of stuff regarding my limits—for compassion, emotion, and thought. (I hope this doesn't sound self-flagellating.)*

*Next time I write you I'll tell you all about siphonopods, my big discovery from hearing the curator of fishes at the AMNH give a lecture last night.*



A dramatic, low-key photograph of a man lying down, possibly on a wooden surface. He is wearing a white t-shirt. A hand is resting on his right shoulder. The lighting is warm and directional, creating strong highlights and deep shadows. The man's face is partially visible, looking upwards. The overall mood is intimate and contemplative.

*Interviews*



## CANDID CAMERA

BY JENNIFER MCPHEE

Originally published in *The Positive Side*, Summer 2013

*Over the past three decades, Toronto's Mike Hoolboom has quietly become one of the most unique and respected fringe filmmakers in Canada, creating more than fifty films and videos garnering thirty awards at festivals around the world. A true artist, Hoolboom pushes creative boundaries by refusing to create films that tell us what to think and feel—instead, he wants viewers to have their own unique experiences.*

*Hoolboom's film **Positiv** (1998), the first of his six-part **Panic Bodies**, explores the dramatic and unsettling impact of HIV on his identity, his body and his relationships with friends and family. In the top quarter of a four-way split screen, Hoolboom's handsome face delivers a personal, unsentimental and often witty monologue about HIV, while a montage of intriguing and disorienting images in the remaining three screens symbolically and seamlessly reinforce his perspective. He begins by explaining how he no longer feels at home in his own body. "The yeast in my mouth is so bad it turns all my favourite foods, even chocolate-chocolate chip ice cream, into a dull metallic taste, like licking a crowbar," he says, staring directly at the camera. "I know then that my body—my real body—is somewhere else, bungee jumping into mine shafts stuffed with chocolate wafers and whipped cream and blueberry pie and just having a good time, you know?" I had the opportunity to talk to Mike about the making of this short film.*

JENNIFER: You have described the type of movies you make (experimental or fringe films) as difficult movies. Who are they difficult for and why?

MIKE: What if I want to share with someone the beauty and terror of a face? And perhaps the stories this face has to tell can wait until after the sheer contact encounter, the way the two sides of this face speak such different truths, as if they were a pair of tectonic plates torn from different continents. Could I make an hour-long movie (would that be long enough?) that would allow people to absorb this face? These kinds of movies, which might resemble friendship, can feel unfriendly. Why is that face still on the screen and why is it looking at me like that? After the viewer has received all of "the information" the picture

has to offer, what else becomes possible? There are subgenres of movies dedicated to these questions. Not to mention the lives these movies make possible (if we can imagine that satisfaction happens twice, the first time as picture/wish/fantasy, and the second in its realization).

Mostly people watch movies where the position of the viewer is clear. There is an exacting balance of knowing and not knowing. Where I am, what I know, and where I am going lies in grooves sometimes called genres or motion picture habits that provide comfortable viewing portals. Experimentalist movies, on the other hand, sometimes provide a haven for not knowing. How long does it take to see the crowd of faces you are hosting in your face? And what does it mean to be left on my own to see them, instead of being pushed around and directed? Instead of unifying its audiences, these fringe works can encourage radically individual responses. To each their own. Of course, having to forgo the usual viewer position (which is essentially infantile, the movie parent does all the work while I lie back and am told what to think, and how to react) can make these movie forms appear difficult by comparison.



JENNIFER: You made the short film *Positiv* in 1998 before highly active antiretroviral therapy drugs became available. During this film, you basically let the audience in on what it's like to have HIV during a time when you probably didn't expect to live. What did you want to accomplish with this film?

MIKE: *Positiv* was made a couple of years after the cocktail arrived. It was part of the afterlife, the time I was never supposed to have. Perhaps that's why I appear in the movie. Oh, I'm still here. I had set every watch, reoriented every compass, staked every bet on the endgame. And watched with my doctors the steady decline of T4 cells. The march towards the end was measurable, quantifiable, reliable almost. I had a year left, maybe less, when the new drugs arrived and with them a strange new set of disappointments. How could I forgive myself for outliving the contracted moment, particularly when so many others were dying simply because they were born in the wrong country? I had prepared so well and so long for my death, I didn't know how to receive the unwanted gift of more and more. I think the movie is a kind of grieving for the death I didn't have. Though few others might read it that way.







+

*Hoolboom's new film Buffalo Death Mask takes viewers back to a moment before antiretroviral therapy (ART) became available, when being HIV positive meant certain death. The movie opens to beautiful, haunting music and the grainy black-and-white image of a death mask (a cast of a person's face following death). Seconds later, a gray human face that resembles the mask appears, alive now and looking at the camera. A conversation begins between Hoolboom and artist Stephen Andrews (both men were diagnosed with HIV in the 1980s). While the two men open up to each other about their shared experience of almost dying, hazy light-drenched images appear onscreen. Andrews (who appeared on the cover of the Summer 2012 Positive Side) says: "I hadn't anticipated the difficulty of coming back from the brink. It took me three or four years to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. How do you start again from below zero?"*

+

JENNIFER: With *Buffalo Death Mask* what did you want people to understand about those years before ART?

MIKE: I had chanced across a roll of film exposed many years ago, showing a meeting of three friends in a small Buffalo apartment. When the footage was slowed down I saw that the light came from their bodies, instead of falling onto them. This was something I had learned how to see in the pre-cocktail years of being positive. Of course, I wasn't alone in this, many others opened their eyes in exactly the same way, at exactly the same time, like genius Canadian painter Stephen Andrews. He might have shot these figures himself, because the quality of seeing that resides in his paint is just the same. I can imagine Stephen would put it differently, but that's the cover story I'm offering today. There is a light the body gives off when it's dying, and perhaps you can only see it when you're dying, or at least, when you're dying you feel it in a very particular way. Everything is



fading, and aging, and moving towards death, and this gesture is carried in a particular kind of light. All I wanted to do was to show people what this kind of looking, looks like.

JENNIFER: Who is your ideal audience for your new film?

MIKE: Aren't ideals recrafted from early authority figures like parents? Perhaps an ideal is a parent who says yes. Or is it a sibling who assents?

Movies are so many things, but also a school for dying. The yoga community has taken this up in earnest—many classes end with what they call the practice of death in savasana, or corpse pose. Cinema is corpse pose. Everyone you see in the earliest films—babies and adults alike—are all dead. From crowd scenes to close-ups, the cinema shows us people moving towards their own end.

JENNIFER: Stephen Andrews describes what was unfortunately a common experience for HIV positive people then (watching a beloved partner die), yet your interview with him is often humorous.

MIKE: Stephen is very funny! He could make a brick wall convulse with laughter. We touch upon some difficult moments, including the death of his partner Alex Wilson, who he had been with for fifteen years. He talks about getting shingles, and nearly dying, and resenting others who are dying but not as fast as you are, and the whole while we are laughing our faces off. The laughing makes it possible to hold these stories, don't you find? Despair and depression are also popular options, but there was so much death in that time that we needed to blend up emotional cocktails along with the pharmaceutical ones, and these often included healthy doses of denial, deferral, and gut shaking laughter.

JENNIFER: Your films often pair found images with narration and/or with conversations between people. I'd love to know more about your process for selecting these images.

MIKE: I only wanted to run the dreamy pictures. I thought they said everything. But when I showed them to friends they said: This is something you can see for yourself in private, like a letter. So I turned reluctantly from the silvery material back into the world and found Stephen.

JENNIFER: How many films have you made?

MIKE: I make fewer as I get older. After finishing movies I seem to want to refinish them, and this amendment process goes on until I give up and withdraw them from circulation. I've made many movies, but only a few are left for public viewing.

JENNIFER: Why do you continue to tinker with your films after finishing them?

MIKE: It offers a kind of infantile time travel. Could you go back to a moment in your life, and bring with you everything you know now? And while the analog world of film offered material limits, the digital moment opens a potentially endless horizon of reworking. Digital movies don't end any longer, a certain arrangement is reached, a



certain collaborative interval has passed between maker and material, and this is the result. As this work arrives online in decent quality, if work continues to speak to future generations, new authors will continue to rework and remix.

JENNIFER: It's interesting that in place of a copyright warning in your films, you encourage viewers and other filmmakers to steal and use your material. You also use copyrighted material (parts of Madonna's *Truth or Dare*, for instance) in your own films.

MIKE: Noam Chomsky says that artists should be subsidized for their production so that exhibition can be free—given the amount of downloading at the moment, no-cost culture has already arrived for many. Making pictures is part of what we might add to the commons, in the same way that inventive turns of phrases are added to language.

JENNIFER: How old were you when you started making movies?

MIKE: Twenty.

JENNIFER: What did you love about making films back then?

MIKE: Movies offered a single irresistible promise. They would take the place of the life I was too afraid to have.

JENNIFER: I read that you made twenty seven films in the six years following your HIV diagnosis. That's a lot of movies. Now you make fewer movies. Why is that?

MIKE: I used to believe in short movies and now I need longer ones. Today's telephones have recast their users as digital archivists, street photographers and short video makers. My habit pattern is to race against time, and shorts make that too convenient. Now I want to look at pictures that take a year to inhale and another year to exhale. No doubt this will change. While recounting his many years on a UK lit jury, Ted Hughes said that submissions used to be a couple of hand

written pages, then more than a dozen as typewriters gained favour, and never less than twenty on a computer. Perhaps we are only expanding to fill our media containers.

JENNIFER: Have your reasons for making films changed?

MIKE: I've made movies for more than three decades now, though it is a medium for which I am particularly ill suited. I am technically inept, in a medium that still values some degree of machine esperanto. And my method is fundamentally unsound: I pick at the edges, slowly filling in the frame from the corners until at last the outline of a figure is revealed at the heart of the matter. This requires a lot of time, and being lost, and taking strange turns and tangents. So much is thrown away. It's very inefficient, and often what is revealed is so congested and mysterious that it is unreadable to anyone but my most cherished familiars. Or is it alright to make pictures for two or three friends? It makes me wonder how much is enough, how many faces does it take to create an audience?

+++









## THREE LETTERS ON FAILURE, TEARS AND FORGETTING

BY ALEXANDRA ROCKINGHAM + MIKE HOOLBOOM

*Dear Mike,*

Good lord. I'm so sorry it's taken me this long to respond to your films. It's shameful. We have been away, and then away again, and then away a third time, and now my mother just left after staying with us for a week. To tell you the truth, I would have much preferred a summer of long, quiet, writing days and watching great films at night, but I seem to feel the duty to visit family more acutely than ever. I suppose this is not an unusual trend as one grows older, and one's parents grow older still.

Thank you so much for the films—the DVD themselves which I squeezed out of you. I realized watching them how I have missed films which work idiosyncratic visual languages instead of reinforcing and narrowing the world to the economics of the commercial image. Watching your films I felt that wonder again, that opening up and understanding of experience. Your images seem to hail from the beyond, from the spirit and sensing realms of the truly alive and I am much in need of reminding of those realms these days.

I also loved the soundscape of the films. The freshness of the dialogue in *Buffalo Death Mask* (fantastic title), in particular, where the everyday and casual is conjoined with that other neighbourhood mentioned above in its most extreme bodily manifestation—death—to create a piece which is haunting, ghostly, yet also so real and familiar.

The choices in *Second Nature* were intriguing—again putting two unlikes together, in this case the small, personal concerns of the privileged measured against the victims of historical atrocity. I wonder if I missed something there, in the bringing together of those two things, if I missed some irony (I really only sensed it at the end, and much appreciated it), or an awareness of the dangers of such a choice. I will watch it again, no doubt, and be looking in that direction. As it was, I felt certain strong discomforts—which can



be good, of course—and I wasn't certain that the source of these discomforts was adequately supported and contextualized. I'm very much looking forward to watching it again and feeling deeper into the work.

There was something I tried to say to you at the Giller awards, I think. Something about being a fan regardless of what you make. This sounds a little mindless or sycophantic perhaps, but I don't believe it is. I am a huge fan of everything you do, just for the very you who is doing it. The culture sickens me for the most part. Perhaps I see it, or feel its ugliness more acutely than ever because we live in the country and I am shocked by its transparent crassness and exploitation. Your enormous body of work, across disciplines and interests, is a true antidote. Perhaps the only kind of antidote. More than ever we need to see the world accurately in order to live and act attentively. Your work is primarily about this, for me. It reminds me to see, really see, and to think see, feel see, and to act the rightness you know.

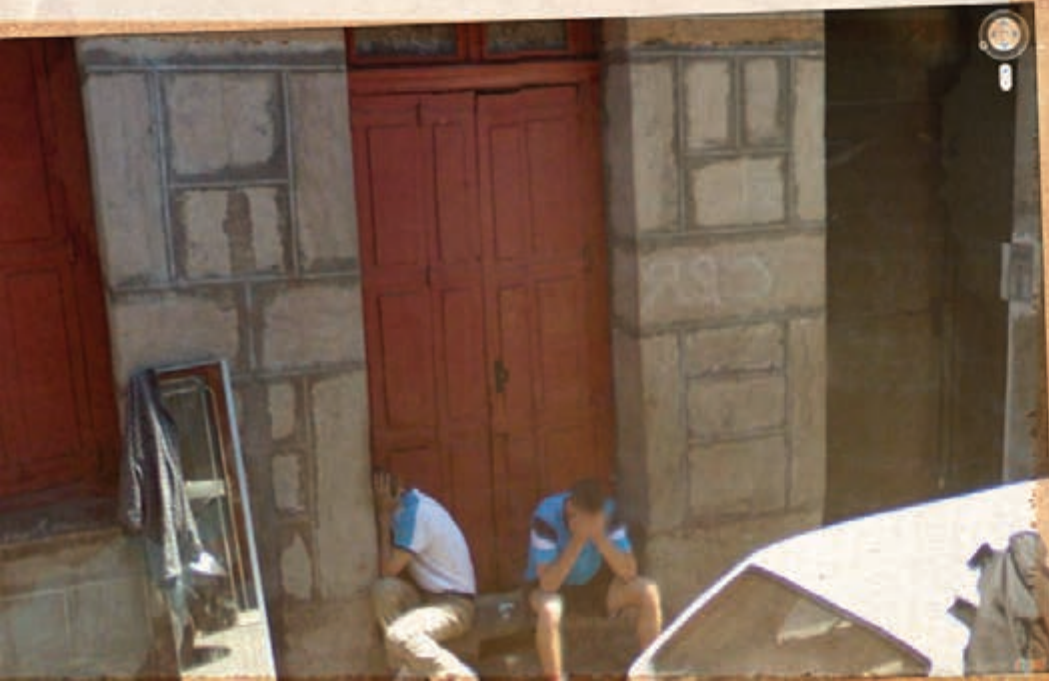
x alex



Hi Alex

Thanks for your thoughts and thoughtfulness, I nearly wrote you to ask, and then thought no, just wait, and as usual waiting was the best road.

The *Second Nature* movie has fault lines I can't see, though I trust that others, like yourself, can see them plainly enough. I'm guessing that the stretch is too far, that the two worlds of the movie (the Palestinians and the North American couple) are simply too far apart to be met, or at least, it wasn't a bridge I could build. What I am trying to swallow now is the unsatisfied task, or failure. Everything in our culture prepares us for success and accomplishment, while so little (perhaps it's only me?) preps us for failure and decline. I don't mean failure in anything but an aesthetic sense, which is also a political sense, that the project might hold these two orbits in a necessary tension. And by surviving failure I mean keeping faith, which I was offered some faraway version of at church, and relearned through drugs somehow, or at least, those teenaged treks and trips offered a glimpse into a world where faith was a necessary and primary attribute, and later there were movies to be made.





But it's harder to have faith now, at least for me. I feel I've grown out of the liberationist narratives that impelled all those hopes in my twenties, and then thirties, and then forties. Now they seem like part of someone else's dream. How to keep going, particularly when the dazzle is more fleeting, and there is a lot of slogging to be done (after the inspiration comes the slog, isn't that the word you used?)? More particularly the trudging through my own blind spots, the necessity to turn to others to allow me to see what I have refused or what I'm unable to see. All that. It has something to do with growing older, or even being an adult, a prospect I've resisted for as long as possible. Perhaps my movies, even particularly these movies, are extending that as an invitation.

I think I'm asking: isn't there an upside to the downside? How to create a new kind of hope and faith, not out of the endlessly unfolding horizons of the young, but from the recognition of limits, difficulties, necessary reconciliations. I think I might start with gratitude, that there are people like yourself who still have eyes attuned to what you named as the realm of the truly alive. Thank you for that and for laying it out so clearly. Grateful for all that. Hope you are finding a way towards your own sentence collection wonderments.

I wonder how holiday family encounters were, your storytelling father, forever crossing the desert. Did you cross that darkness with him, again and again? My father never talks, which masks the extent of his disability, his feelings of confusion, all that he can't face. Though sometimes, very occasionally, when someone is telling a story about a dying friend (an increasing part of the family repertoire) he starts crying. I've never seen my father cry before, it seems he's gained something after all, amidst all of his losses.

*Mike*

*Dear Mike,*

Your father's crying is a beautiful thing. We must view it that way, even if, perhaps, the crying is a sign of loss, an elusive but distinct sense of loss.

For my father, his crying certainly is about loss. He's been a crier for a very long time now, maybe since late middle age—our age now. In the years before we realized he had Alzheimer's his crying increased to an awkward degree in that he could no longer tell stories without crying, and being a big storyteller, it became something of a problem.

Although my dad is a big softie, and always has been, I started to realize that it was not necessarily the story itself that was making him cry, it was story structure. As soon as he started to approach the final third of the story, and the pressure of the ending started to exert its influence over the shape and language of the telling, he would start to cry. It was the pressure of the ending which moved him, I think, not the ending itself.







His stories were conventional, and constructed in a conventional way, but they were good. No more than five minutes long, say. More often around three minutes long I would guess—the maximum length you can hold a loud and raucous dinner table in quiet thrall. There were a few reasons he was a good storyteller, but primary among them was his intuitive understanding of endings—knowing where and how to end. Once all the story elements needed to set up the end were in place, and we had all had our laughs, he would make the turn towards the ending. There was always some little fact that signalled the turn towards an ending that was either sad or funny—the only two possible endings that make for a good story—and that's when he would cry.

In these later years he was often not able to finish the story for weeping. It was frustrating for him, and I think in his tears was an understanding of his loss, the pressure of the end of his own story. He was in the midst of a turn towards his own end.

This Christmas he hardly told one story. Maybe he told none. Because his short-term memory works for no longer than a second, he can't follow cause and effect when others tell stories, and certainly cannot generate cause and effect himself. His storytelling over the past year or so has been reduced to reading newspaper headlines (which often brought him to tears—they too have within their structure the pressure of an ending).

The only time he cried this Christmas was when he read the headline about the Air Asia crash out loud to us. He's most often lost in some ongoing dreamlike present that in fact is composed (from what I can tell) of random confabulations of the past, of things that have not occurred. These visions and fabrications of the past have not passed but just exist, hovering it seems, image-like more than story-like. In that hovering they are very much alive to him, but the pressure of an ending is now lacking and he often seems quite content.

*x alex*

+++



## BEING LOVED AGAIN

A CHITCHAT WITH STEPHEN ANDREWS

August 2012

*When I arrive at Stephen's the new front door opens to a nearly empty house, boxes are stacked discretely in corners. He's just back from an epic global trek with his partner John, and the architects have been busy knocking down walls. Afternoon light pours through the windows. He greets me with an easy smile, his head slightly tilted back as if raised on some permanent perch of bemused ironic hilarity. His droll speech bristles with wit.*

*I plug in the tape recorder and promptly forget to switch the microphone tab to the correct setting, meaning that the five star instrument I've brought to record the session never channels into the recorder, instead the very average, built-in mics absorb the room. Will I never learn to speak the language of machines? I've been working with pictures that remind me of Stephen's paintings, luminous bodies glowing in a light I had learned to see a long time ago, back before the mega pharma companies dished up a combination of drugs we called the cocktail. When the magic elixir arrived, those of us on the way out began a slow crawl back from the exit door. We had been relieved of that certainty as well. I wanted to put a couple of questions to Stephen about that long moment, though as usual had come unrehearsed.*



MIKE: I discovered pine beetles in my apartment. Tiny specks with legs. They're not bedbugs, they're not cockroaches. They don't bite you.

STEPHEN: How do you know they're pine beetles?

MIKE: I looked them up. And then my maintenance supervisor dude from the building came by and announced, "Pine beetles." "Should I be worried about that?" "No, you'll just clean everything here, everything. And it will be fine." I threw out 22 years worth of HIV-medication bottles.

STEPHEN: How come you're saving them, are you a hoarder?

MIKE: No, it was the only thing I've saved.

STEPHEN: Empty pill bottles?

MIKE: I thought one day I would do something with them. And one day never came.

STEPHEN: Well it's interesting because those things have all changed, right? They go in and out of fashion as you wear them out. What number of cocktail are you on? How many have you used?

MIKE: Not many.

STEPHEN: Really?

MIKE: I think I'm on number four.

STEPHEN: I'm on four or five.

MIKE: That's not many.

STEPHEN: Over a ten year period?

MIKE: Ten years?

STEPHEN: No wait, it's more, sixteen years. The drugs came online in 1996, right? September 1996. I know because I was just about toast. CMV (cytomegalovirus) had started and I weighed almost nothing. I was a total disaster area. I jammed my foot in that door as it was closing. I started the drugs when I got back from kayaking with John and went on medication the next day. They didn't work for the first month, I felt just vile, and then on the thirtieth day the light started shining again. (laughs) I was riding in a car and felt strangely happy,







which I hadn't felt in quite some time. I thought, "Oh I don't feel like projectile vomiting." It's amazing what that does for your sense of well being. (laughs) I was on Saquinavir which was not the best of the drugs.

MIKE: None of the early drugs were the best.

STEPHEN: And then I went onto the wasting ones, like 3TC and DDI.

MIKE: Norvir, that was also called something else.

STEPHEN: They always had two names, I've never really understood why. It's like an alias.

MIKE: It's so that the parents can talk together and the kids won't know what they're saying.

STEPHEN: I've given up on the names. They ask me sometimes, "What are you on?" and I have no idea. It's like, you know, you've had so many lovers you can't remember all their names. (laughs) I've been on so many drugs, whatever. What's your name again? Norvir? DDI? Yeah, I've been sleeping around with them all for quite some time. Just like you. When did you seroconvert?

MIKE: 1988.

STEPHEN: Do you know that for a fact?

MIKE: That's when I found out by accident.

STEPHEN: What do you mean by accident?

MIKE: I was giving blood. Afterwards they said: you should talk to your doctor. Do you have a doctor? I said I go to this clinic sometimes. You should talk to someone there.

STEPHEN: Because they're not going to take your blood.

MIKE: They were vague. They didn't say anything more about it than that. Then there were a series of frightening events. I remember at 8:30 on a Tuesday morning I got a call from someone in the Ministry of Health. "Hello, is this Mike Hoolboom?" "Yes." "Hi, this is the Provincial Ministry of Health. So I understand you're HIV positive. Have you informed everyone you've had sex with about your status?" 8:30 in the morning.

STEPHEN: Can I caffeinate before you grill me? That was 1988, the height of the paranoia.

MIKE: People were scared.

STEPHEN: When do you think you seroconverted? It must have been a couple of years before.

MIKE: It's hard to say.

STEPHEN: Are you a transfusion guy? Did you get HIV through transfusion?

MIKE: No, it would have been sex or needles. (laughs) So hard to decide sometimes. So many people have asked, but it's hard to imagine what could be less important now. Why would that matter?

STEPHEN: I think it's about blame, and not accepting responsibility for your own actions. What was the sequence of events? Did they know? Did I tell them? You tend to forget because it was a tempestuous time. Everything was up in the air and very scary. I could always deflect back onto the loved one. I can worry about you, I don't have to worry about myself.



MIKE: Your lover Andrew you mean.

STEPHEN: Alex.

MIKE: Alex, right.

STEPHEN: I'm almost positive I seroconverted in 1982 in Haiti, because we had this very wild sex with a fellow by the name of Ti L'homme, who was anything but petit. I can't imagine it was anywhere else, because the symptoms started showing up in 1985.

MIKE: What were the symptoms?

STEPHEN: I got shingles at the age of 28, twice over the course of two years, in my legs of all places. It's a weird place to get it, right?

MIKE: I don't know what's weird with shingles. People get it on their face.

STEPHEN: Yeah, when they're 90. Not when they're 28. (laughs)

MIKE: I didn't get shingles until I was in my 30s.

STEPHEN: Did you get it on your face?

MIKE: No I got it here, on my chest.

STEPHEN: Isn't it awful?

MIKE: It's fucking painful.

STEPHEN: It goes on for months.

MIKE: There is the magic of Percocet.

STEPHEN: Is that where the needles come in?

MIKE: There's no need for needles when you've got Percocet. The doctor cautioned, "You're not going down to the street and sell these, are you?" "Are you kidding me, give those to me right now."



STEPHEN: I still have neuropathy from it. After half a bottle of red wine it's like being plugged into an electrical socket. The nerve damage is still there.

MIKE: The body remembers.

STEPHEN: The disease is writ large across your body in so many different ways.

MIKE: Did you know in 1985 that you were HIV positive?

STEPHEN: Alex was diagnosed with ARC at the time, an acronym for AIDS Related Complex. He was having night sweats and losing weight. Then it just became obvious that he hosted a series of opportunistic infections on and off until his death.

MIKE: From the mid-eighties to...

STEPHEN: Yeah, from about 1986 until 1993 when he died. I think because I'm a mongrel I didn't get sick until quite late. I have the genetic superiority of mixed blood to get at these things from different angles, whereas he was a thoroughbred and they could take him out right away. But as soon as he died I went down the hill.

MIKE: Do you think there's a relation between his dying and your health?

STEPHEN: Yes, it's very depressing losing someone you've loved so deeply. This is someone I was with for almost fifteen years, someone I went through all of my changes with. It's like having your heart ripped out. It was a very depressing time generally, and then I lost both my roommate and my studio mate in the same week. Suddenly you have all this stuff to deal with; a person's life doesn't stop just because they're dead. It was total reality. Everything was so real every day. I was sharing a studio with Rob Flack. I got a call in the morning that Rob was in the hospital. I got a call at eleven that night telling

me that Rob had died. You know that story. That's what we were living with. You could operate, but it really did affect your world view knowing that every day could be your last. How did you manage?

MIKE: I was on a countdown. Because I'm an optimist, I thought I would have ten years which would make me, in the words of that time, "a long term survivor."







STEPHEN: That was the prognosis. Basically everybody died after three years though. (laughs)

MIKE: I didn't know that. I didn't know anything. I also couldn't tell anymore: am I sick? Am I dying today? There were so many days like that. I'm tired. Am I really tired? Am I dying tired? Years later friends told me how bad I looked for so long but they wouldn't tell me. Why would they tell me? You get used to lower levels of functioning.

STEPHEN: Yes, because the decline is gradual except for the occasional crisis. You normalize things. And you distanciate. Denial is your friend. People would tell me I was in denial. I would ask them: and what is your strategy for dealing with this? Embrace it? "Oh woe is me, I'm going to die today, or the day after." No, I'm like you, glass-half-full guy.

MIKE: I think I would have found it a lot harder to embrace my denial if I was living with somebody who was in such bad shape.

STEPHEN: There was too much work to do to care about oneself. There were diapers to change, medicine to pick up, people to phone, arrangements to be made.

MIKE: Alex was extremely unwell for quite some time.

STEPHEN: During the last year I was basically taking care of him eighteen hours a day. I was running his career because his book had just come out, and we had a landscaping business. And then there was my own career. The physical aspect of taking care of him was very demanding. Six months before he died I had to go away. I had an exhibition, and finally I had to leave and install my show. I left him with Colin Campbell who flipped out. He had no idea how much work it was. Alex was an adult but he couldn't do anything, he had no energy. He couldn't cook for himself, he could barely walk. Nobody knew until then. Then John Greyson mobilized a care team who took over the day time schedule. We went dancing a lot at Go Go's, at the height of House music's popularity, so every Wednesday somebody



would stay at the apartment, while I would go out and take drugs and drink and dance until whenever I wanted to come home. Alex had a pajama party every Wednesday so I could leave. It was the best way to get out of your head. How did you distract yourself?

MIKE: I overworked. I had a job at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, so I thought: why don't I just work seven days a week? It turned out I could share a studio with friends just around the corner, meaning I would never have to go home. Home was a room that was empty except for two milk cartons which held all my clothes and books. No telephone, computer, electronic devices. The important things in my life—film, camera, rewinds—were at the studio. I was forever working on "the last film I'll ever make." One after another.

STEPHEN: It was kind of fabulous, you didn't put up with any guff. I'd already decided that I was going to be an artist, but this period cemented my resolve. I'm going to die tomorrow, so I don't want to be caught up doing things I don't want to do. Life is short, the future is now, let's get on with it. I got the call early and picked up. So many people work their whole lives and save their money thinking, "I'm going to retire, and then I'll do all the things I want to do." Not me. I'm from the hedonistic seventies. It's all about *aujourd'hui*. Tomorrow is just a broken promise, I'm sure.

MIKE: Something they sing about in French songs.

STEPHEN: Exactly. (singing) *Rien de rien...*

MIKE: I found it hard to be clear about the work I was making in that pressure cooker.

STEPHEN: You mean the external pressure?

MIKE: The internal clock. You're dying, you don't have time, finish this now. How can I allow a work to unfold in its own way? It was a

difficult moment to learn patience and abiding. I was filled with fear. When I look back on the movies I made, there were plenty of them, but I don't think they were very good.

STEPHEN: Have you seen them lately? There's nothing like urgency. And there's something so evocative of a moment that can't be translated into nostalgia. That work carries all the subtleties of its era. So it might be interesting to look at it again, just as a document, because you were responding to things as they were happening, and there's probably some kind of honesty there, even if it's not the most aesthetically pleasing. You can always tweak it digitally now.

MIKE: That's definitely what I don't want to do.

STEPHEN: What did you do when you realized you were Lazarus? When they rolled away the stone and said, "Come out."

MIKE: I had a very reluctant relationship to drugs. As my counts lowered, my doctor begged me to go on AZT, the only drug available then, and all I had to go on were my instincts. I refused, which turned out to be a good decision. When the cocktail finally arrived my counts were... I know they're in there somewhere, if we keep looking.





STEPHEN: There were so few you could name them all.

MIKE: My health dramatically improved, I had the initial "I feel shitty" period too, but it didn't last so long. That wasn't the difficulty, as it turned out. I had set myself on a ten year path and it was difficult to let that go. I'm still grieving the fact I'm not dead. In the past couple of years I've had several friends die, and part of what makes that unbearable is that it cuts against my deal. I'll die young, but as the first out the door, I don't have to watch my friends die.

STEPHEN: When Colin was dying I felt he was pissed that I wasn't already gone. He had done all this worrying about me, and then suddenly he was checking out before me. There was a certain kind of animosity directed towards me at the end. It's something I could recognize because I had other friends who were in the same boat, but maybe not as far down the river, and I became angry, even resentful, at their relatively good health.

MIKE: You mentioned a canoe trip with John.

STEPHEN: That was the trip I described before the cocktails arrived. It was in August 1996, the cocktail came a month later. We had heard rumours at the beginning of the summer about a drug cocktail with protease inhibitors. But it wasn't clear whether it would be made available in Toronto. And there was no guarantee that I was going to last that long. I promised John when I went on this trip that I wouldn't get sick, so I was full of Septra and everything else possible to prevent things going sideways.





Everyone was pissed off at John because we were going up to the Queen Charlotte Islands to kayak for two weeks. I was of the mind that you might as well go to heaven first and then die. Who cares? This was obviously completely unfair to John, but he seemed to be a completely willing victim, in case I croaked. What I didn't tell him at the time was that huge chunks of my vision had gone missing. The visual field had spots and dots where there wasn't any information. And because I was on Septra and we were outside all the time I turned red like a lobster.

We had an amazing trip. We had been out in eight foot swells on the Hecate Strait. The waves were too big on the shore to put in anywhere so we wound up paddling forty kilometres that day, and pulled in near Rose Harbour just as the sun was setting. We turned into the strait facing into the sun, and I had a strange hallucination that "going into the light" wasn't about dying, it was about coming out of darkness. It completely retooled my thinking about what was going to take place. I thought "I'm going to go home, go on the drugs, and be ok. It's not a shutting down, it's an opening up." I was completely convinced of this, it was a very beatific moment.

We came home, I went on the drugs, and got better. But what I hadn't anticipated was the difficulty coming back from that brink. It

took me three or four years to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. I had imagined I had finished my (art) work, that it was a good time to go. But when that didn't happen, how do you start again from below zero? It was time to rebuild a rationale.

So much of my sense of self is about being loved and I had lost my love. I thought: I'm down a pint or two or three. Who is going to love me again? How will I live when I can't be loved? It was a very difficult moment. It wasn't until 2000, after John and I got together, that I understood what this Lazarus thing was about, this coming back to life. It's about being loved again. That became an allegory for the stone rolling back. It wasn't just regaining my health, but being loved. That's when I felt alive again in some profound way, and found a new place to work from.

So much of my coping mechanism in the years prior to Alex's death was about reading Rumi and finding spirituality through love; the physical-emotional love articulated by Rumi. Somehow that had gone missing in my thinking about how to regroup. In 2000 I found Rumi again and his thoughts about seeing oneself reflected in the jewel-like eye of the beloved. That's when I could make something again that mattered to me, that wasn't a rehash of old ideas.

Like you, my work defines me; that's what being alive is, it's about working. Processing the world through making things. It's like thinking out loud. Thinking in material ways. You must have gone through some version of that experience to piece it back together again. You described living out a countdown, charging towards an end point. I was doing this aesthetically, and thought about it in mathematical terms. I had done all those AIDS portraits, painting fax portraits that had been made up of zeros and ones. I wondered how that could be further reduced. I was trying to distill experience to its essentials. After taking chiaroscuro out of the line, what is the next logical step? Working at the level of the pixel. And what is a pixel but a numerical representation? So I made drawings using numerical representations. Then you get to zero and there's nothing left, and







that's why I thought I was ready to go. I had reduced the work down to its endgame, which was a trap that I was going to get out of by dying.

When I came back to life, I started to think of the zero as a lens. Everything goes through this focal point and comes out the other side. That's when I became even more interested in materials and processes, and understanding that the gift of life is material. I didn't need to get so caught up in denying oneself materiality. I thought that's all this is, existence is just stuff. Might as well have more nice stuff. Make stuff, get stuff. John and I would laugh because friends from Portland were telling us about Rajneesh who said, "I believe in materiality and spirituality." I totally buy that!


MIKE: The way you've painted light and bodies in the last half dozen years feels familiar to me because I was positive in that pre-cocktail moment. I can't help feeling that all of us were that light, and I'm not speaking metaphorically. Light didn't simply appear on bodies,

it came from us. It's amazed me that you've been able to take this culture of death and dying and transplanted it, using it as a lens to re-view contemporary events like the Iraq War.

STEPHEN: Elle Flanders was at a talk I gave and said something similar. I found it shocking at the time. Is that what I'm doing? I thought the work was about life. But you need contrast, you use darkness to describe light. If you look at the paintings, they are given over to describing nothing, the white blank of the canvas. There's nothing at the heart of the matter. I haven't done anything to this emptiness, I've only described everything around it. It made me think that the earlier work, which was explicitly about death, was made only to describe the light. What is that light? It's intangible, conceptual, ethereal, pregnant with meaning. Everything is described except the thing itself.

There was an Inuit woman who was trying to explain something to western TV producers, and you know TV people, they're waiting on a short cut. This woman described everything around the answer, and if you listened closely, and gathered up all these facts and thought





about them, you'd be able to answer the question yourself. I can't tell you the answer because you won't learn anything. It won't mean anything to you. People felt she didn't answer the question, but I thought this was a great approach; describe everything around the idea, and then others can fill in the blanks.

The metaphor of light is overfreighted, so I've worked to make it more valenced. You, along with a number of other friends, the brotherhood who survived that time, understand this intrinsically through lived experience. I think of this new work as philosophical, while the earlier work is existential.

Now that I'm at the beginning of old age, the prospect of death has been the big "so what?" for so long, that while others are pondering mortality in a new way, our articulations are more sophisticated. We've lived through the possibility of death at a young age, amongst people who thought they were going to live forever. Youth generally behave as if they're bulletproof, but even when we were young, we knew we weren't. It's not like we have more answers, but I think we have better questions.

+++

*Notes*





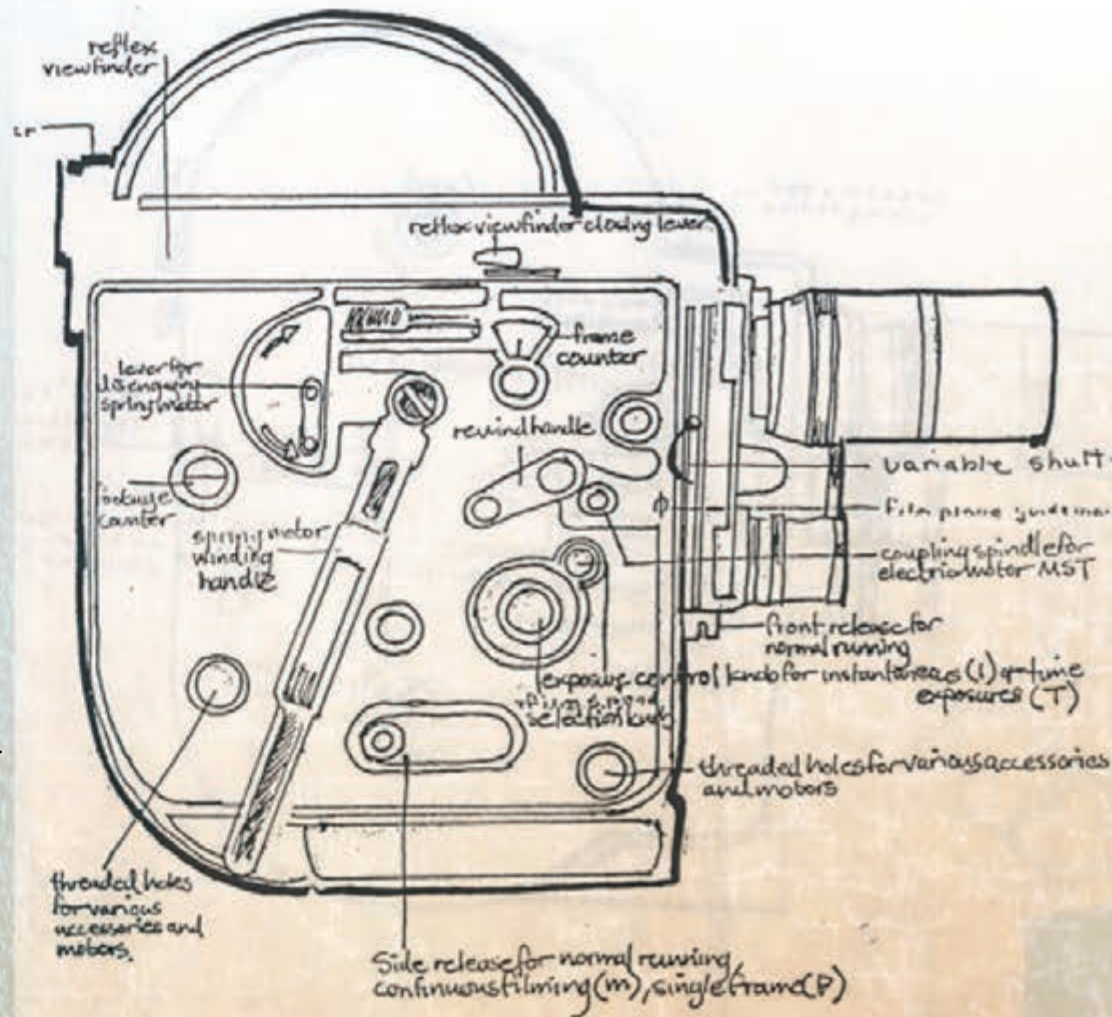
# NOTES ON BUFFALO DEATH MASK

BY MIKE HOOLBOOM

September 2013

It began by accident, I can't underline the importance of that factoid. How to create a practice that might be open to accident, instead of being modeled after so-called conceptual practices where first thought/best thought decisions are introduced in order to foreclose unwanted vulnerabilities? The year was 1996 and Phil Hoffman and I decided to take a road trip south to see Mike Cartmell. Is Mike a friend? Surely, though he knows nearly nothing about me. He's so smart I just try to keep him talking in hopes that some of his intelligence will soak into me via osmosis. His second marriage had ended suddenly and catastrophically and after being summarily ejected from his Alabama home he wound up shipwrecked in a Buffalo rooming house. We drove south with vague notions of cheering Mike up, though perhaps we were the ones requiring cheer. When we arrived at his derelict east end digs, I remember him saying that I looked "remarkably preserved for my age" which startled me a little because I had recently gone on the life saving cocktail of drugs that were keeping me alive as a cyborg. Though Mike didn't know it at the time, "preserved" was an apt word for how I was experiencing myself at that moment.

Through much of the eighties I rarely travelled anywhere without a camera of some kind in tow, today's telephone cams make this a commonplace of course, but back then it was rarer to lug around a wind-up 16mm camera in your knapsack. Phil was part of this tribe of diarists (shoot first, ask questions later), so sure enough, in a gesture of recollection and solidarity, he had brought his never-say-die Bolex camera with him, loaded up with a roll of high-speed, black and white



film. When we found Mike cheered by our approach and after issuing some mutual updates and storytellings it was time to haul out the camera. The light in Mike's grim rooming house was predictably low, but Phil estimated that if we ran the film through the camera three times, there would be enough accumulated light to make visible pictures. Instead of the invisible pictures we preferred to present to each other.



## Camera

The Bolex is an interesting camera to work with because it's not motorized. You have to disengage the crank handle, then line it up with a notch on the camera body and begin winding up the spring. Each wind lasts about twenty eight seconds, though as cameras age the usable part of the spring shortens. In order to rewind the film, the spring mechanism is disengaged, and the film is manually rewound through the camera with a handsome little key. These gestures of cranking and rewinding add considerable time to the operation of shooting, creating spaces where inspirations can condense, necessary pauses and built-in reflection periods collect in these time oases. They are rest stops that help create an approach to the image.

One of the qualities common to many analog devices is that they require some form of twiddling or adjustment or loading before they can carry out their operations. The digital camera, on the other hand, is "always on," and produces pictures before the picture maker can see them. There is no space before the picture, just as the camera is always on, the picture is always already there, and only part of a web of pictures, a temporary selection from infinity. I don't mean to suggest that in the good old days we used to make approaches to our pictures, whereas now, in the sordid digital present, the artless, anyone-can-do-it machines do all the lifting. Each technological moment has its own inclinations, its own forms. This is part of what it means to know the procedure, to know your form. Isn't this how we began as artists? With the injunction to "understand your methods?" The procedure in analog, photo-chemical cinema required

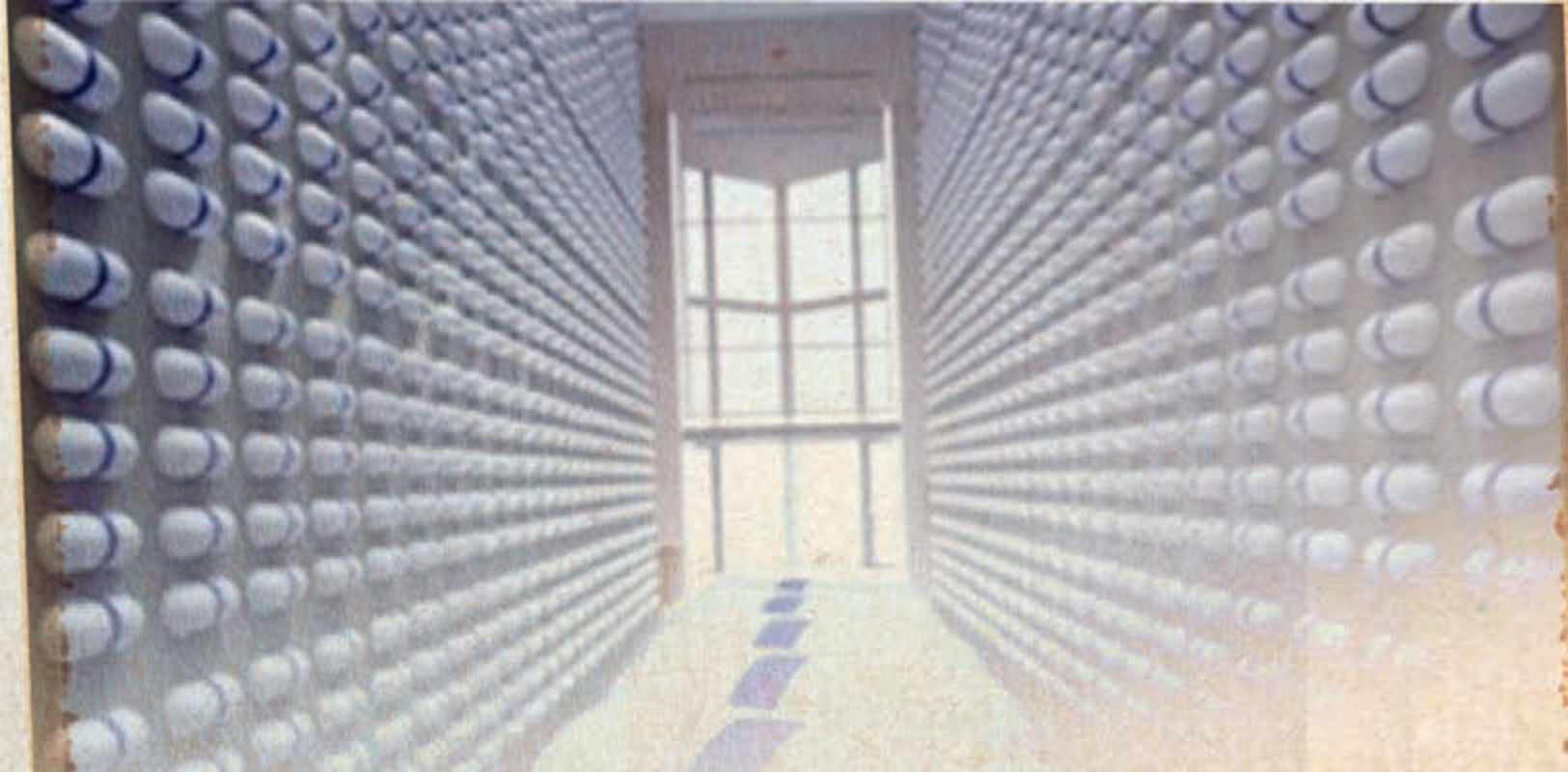
making an approach to an image. What does it mean to make an approach? Perhaps it means that instead of the image arriving all at once, there is some necessary prelude to picture making that must be undertaken. This can happen in many different ways of course. Winding and rewinding the camera are only a couple of ways an approach can be made, loading the camera is another. And the drive that Phil and I took to Buffalo is another way of making an approach. We wouldn't bring the camera out until we had made our pilgrimage to a place where the making of pictures was possible.

## Approach

"When a painting is lifeless it is the result of the painter not having the nerve to get close enough for a collaboration to start. He stays at a copying distance. Or, as in mannerist periods like today, he stays at an art-historical distance, playing stylistic tricks which the model knows nothing about." (John Berger, *The Shape of a Pocket*)

Why is it necessary to speak of making an approach, what difference does it make? I believe that today many movies are made without any pictures in them because people don't know how to look at what they are seeing. This is what John Berger names (in the above quote) as "a copying distance." If you don't know how to look at a face, then you can't make a picture of a face, all you can make a picture of is your inability to look at a face. The camera is pointed in the direction of its ostensible subject, but without a sensitivity to light, without





some understanding of how framing excludes more than it includes, without an intimacy above all that flows from both sides of the camera, pictures are created that are only decoys, or false fronts. They may resemble their subjects, but offer little depth or understanding. The artist “stays at a copying distance.” What the phrase implies is that the question of portraiture is a question of distance, of finding the right distance. In other words, portraiture is a question of ethics.

What making an approach offers (but does not guarantee), is that the picture can be made from both sides of the camera, in stereo. In order to have depth, pictures require stereo, which means that the portrait is not only something on the other end of the camera’s lens, but that the subject also looks back at the picture maker. There is a double look, and a picture with depth and dimension arises out of this exchange, this relationship. When a picture stays at “a copying distance” it is trying to remove the possibility of relationship, it is trying to take the place of relationship. Tourist photographs function

like this. Instead of having an experience, I can have the picture of the experience I might have had. Tourist photos mark the moments the picture maker leaves their body behind. The camera is shield and barrier. A lot of the pictures used to accompany news broadcasts are similar, there is neither the time nor the inclination to look at what is happening in a situation, so pictures are offered in a hasty monotone rhythm (as if every situation were the same), from a copying and touristic distance. That’s why you can see a city or a face on the news hundreds of times, but have no idea of what it looks like until you are face to face with it.

When I write “picture” I’m including sound as well, the conversation that Stephen Andrews and I had that anchors *Buffalo Death Mask* is an example of this stereo seeing, an exchange of viewer and viewed. It’s not a monologue but a conversation, a double seeing or hearing. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s go back to Buffalo.



Face to face. After Phil and I made our highway approach to Buffalo, after Mike made his approach via the ending of his marriage and moving across the country, after we had wound up a camera that newly belonged, owing to Phil's unflagging generosity, to all of us, after we had made all of these approaches we were ready to make pictures face to face. Like every rooming house I had ever lived in, the rooms were small, cramped enclosures, and Mike's penchant for reading was amply in evidence as books spilled out of every corner in every room. People with money are permitted to live their lives at a distance from others that can be negotiated. People without money live face to face, so here we were, having digested our approaches, but not each other, ready to begin filming. What would we film? Well of course, we would film each other. I remember Phil winding up the camera and handing it to me, and I waited for a moment before turning back to Phil and beginning to film him. We handed over our faces with our cameras. The rooms were so small that most of the shots were made in close-up. And we had the courage of our approaches to bolster us, and it helped not a little that we had a cover story about making a film, or at least, we had said yes to a collaboration of exposures.

When the camera's spring wind was up I passed it along to Mike. Perhaps he focused on the smoke, or Phil's fingers, or my face. When his wind was done the camera returned to Phil. We weren't in a hurry, we weren't trying to get anywhere, or tell a story. We were trying to stay with each other in this room, in this moment, but instead of the flowing back and forth of language we would use our camera gestures, our faces, our bodies which were already turning into pictures.

## Later

The next thing that happened in the film's making was the most unrepeatable and most important part of all. After the film was shot it was processed, and put in a bin and left alone for nearly twenty years. The exposures made that night were part of a process of gathering time, of allowing time to accrue on a length of acetate and emulsion. The filmstrip is not only a record of time's passing, but a physical object that bears the marks of time itself, of processing and aging. This time gathering offers many gifts, and chief amongst them was that it enabled me to forget about any impressions, intentions, or interpretations attached to events so long ago. I could watch the footage as if it was made by someone else.

When I reviewed it at normal speed it looked like a shaky, hippie flick, filled with cosmic superimpositions of faces and light that careened from one side of the screen to another. It appeared as a chaos of fragments, as if we were rushing across the rooms of our lives. There were three pictures unrolling at the same time because of the in-camera superimpositions, and these multiple overlays added to the experience of too muchness. And because so much of it was shot in close-up—the camera jammed right up tight to these faces—they appeared inescapable.

Twenty years later, I asked Phil for the roll when I was making *Lacan Palestine* (2012), a movie where Mike appears as a Lacanian expert rolling out personal asides and theoretical implications. When I watched the roll (it lasts just two and a half minutes) projected I felt it was unusable for the project. But when the endless edit sessions



of *Lacan Palestine* were done I returned to it. There was a kind of haunting involved, a ghost whispering, that asked me not only to see it again, but to see it again for the first time. Only this time I ran the footage in slow motion.

## *Slow*

What I had learned in the past twenty years, reluctantly as usual, was how much time it can take to make an approach, to see a face, or make a portrait, which meant also allowing my face to be looked at, to collaborate. These collaborations, between a forgotten material and an artist, or between a pair of artists, can take time. In “real time,” projected at twenty-four frames per second, our faces were a blur of accelerations, a speed mirage. In order to see what was actually happening inside them required slowing down the pictures. The technique of slowing is not a stylization introduced later by the artist, it is a documentary gesture, a necessary technical intervention that wipes the window clean so that we can see through it. The so-called “real time” of these pictures produced a blind, it was only by removing this blind, and rendering these frames at hyper slow speed, that I could at last see these faces as they actually were. After twenty years they had been retrieved.

## *Material Capitalism*

These newly slowed frames are attached to an earlier project of fringe movie named “structural film.” It imagined we might look into the machines of cinema in order to reformulate capitalism itself. In what is arguably the most famous essay in the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin argues that the cinema is an instrument that can be used against capitalism because of the way it renders time, its “unconscious optics” create new spaces of resistance to the capitalist

project. Structural film is an extension of the project that Benjamin laid out in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), particularly in the following passage that I’d like to quote at length.

Walter Benjamin: “By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.”





When Benjamin writes “unexpected field of action,” he is giving us a picture of a battlefield, the battlefield of everyday life, that the motion camera is going to intervene into, creating new spaces dedicated to “action,” meaning, the work of anti-capitalist activity. He goes on to describe a system of economics that has ruthlessly penetrated every aspect of our living, and holds up the cinema as a possible defense against these incursions.

Walter Benjamin: “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.”

The hierarchical duo of boss and worker have turned the gathering places of urban life (bars, streets, offices, furnished rooms) into “prisons.” They are enclosures which have been constructed in order to subject citizens to a bio-politics of scheduling, a “standard time” of strict temporal ordering. And what might release us from these schedules is a device that will re-orient (or dis-orient!) the time of these spaces. Because film is exposed at a very rapid rate, twenty-four times per second, it is able to see what the eye cannot see, and via its careful, frame-by-frame review, we might be able to see what lies in the in-between moments of our lives, and thereby rescue them, liberate them.

“With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.”

Here Benjamin announces the aim of cinema, which structural cinema was delirious enough to take up in earnest. For Benjamin, cinema is concerned with the formation of the subject, the viewer in other words. New kinds of seeing would create new kinds of seers, new forms were necessary to break us out of the perceptual prisons of our streets and workplaces. The piece that structural cinema would add to Benjamin’s formulations was its insistence that the machinery itself would show us how we as subjects were formed, and if you can swallow this then it logically follows that viewers could then be re-formed right along with the radical re-forming of pictures and sounds. It wasn’t simply a question of making movies differently, the liberationist project insisted that these different movies would create different people.

“The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.”





In *Buffalo Death Mask* we see a hand reaching towards a light. We can see the flex of each finger as it opens in hope and towards possibility. It is a hand bathed in light, refinding itself in incandescence, warming itself, relearning its fundamental gestures of grasp and release. What is mine, and what is not mine, what is okay and acceptable and what I believe in, and what I reject. We see a hand opening and reopening. These glimpses of opening are what Benjamin names as “unconscious optics.” In their newly slowed state, these film frames show us, or this is the hope, something about the way a hand operates, something about the nature of this hand. In other words: the physiological roots of desire, of grasping.

Benjamin writes about the way space expands via a close-up, how this expansion and re-orientation of spaces could create new vantages from which to escape the duty and utility of our bodies and faces. *Buffalo Death Mask* slows down a few gestures of the face as a pair of eyes open, as Mike’s face smiles and passes from one side of the frame to the next, as a smoke ring forms and dissolves in his mouth, his entire face wreathed in smoke, dissolving. Could we reconceive “the project” of the face from these few glances? Are these faces refusing the rush of time, the fantastical acceleration of pictures newly available online, are they offering places to rest the gaze, and to scan across the entire surface of the frame, refusing the centering typical of most informational imaging? Is the ability to scan across the surface of a picture itself a political act, or could it be? What does it mean to recast a face in this new time, and to create this time for a queer inquiry into an epidemic that many feel is already over? Are there ways that these faces resist summary and sound bite, that they create a newly necessary time that makes a certain consideration of faces and portraiture, of time and seeing, of grieving and identity, possible?

## *Aids*

The AIDS crisis asked each of us so many questions, including: what is my body? This illness was not like other afflictions or viruses that would be hosted inside the body for a time, this was an illness that had come to stay. Am I the AIDS virus? Where does my body stop and the virus begin? *BDM*’s hand reaching into light poses similar questions about perimeters, boundaries, separations. What is not this body? What does this body not contain? What could possibly be separate from it, now that it has been touched and stained and reconceived by this ingenious virus, that has linked so many of us around the world in a common cause of sorts, as if we were all parts of one body. Is the hand reaching out trying to escape its fate, its status as a hand that has AIDS, that is AIDS? Is it a hand reaching out



to other hands, in solidarity, a hand longing to touch, for one more kiss, as Jarman says with such solemn lightness in his AIDS memoir *Blue* (1993), in which a blue screen (he had gone blind recently, the film features simply the projection of a blue screen and a dazzling series of voices and sound treatments, offering a curious echo of my own *White Museum* (1986), made half a dozen years earlier, which was similarly comprised of a blank screen and voice-over) offers us a documentary corollary for the filmmaker's seeing.

### *Interdependence*

The central trope of the original 16mm footage we shot in *Buffalo* is superimposition. There were several passes of the original strip of acetate through the camera, in order to ensure there would be enough exposure, so one picture was made, and then the camera was rewound, and then a new exposure was made over the old ones. The light builds slowly across each frame, on each pass, and as it does it ensures that bodies are rarely seen in isolation. It is so often our bodies together. Even when it appears that the frame is offering a view of, for instance, a single face, or a single hand, buried in the white light of the "background" are pictures of other faces and hands. Most often though, the frame offers an image of interdependence, a shattering of boundaries, the same way that this illness breaches the body's traditional boundary of the skin. Newly reconvened inside the camera, we became parts of each other. The cinematic treatment mirrors the effect of the plague that is no longer rendered as tragedy but solidarity.





And what was only too clear now that the footage was slowed was how each of us was moving unmistakably towards our own death. Does that seem too heavy a throw down? There is a distinctly funerary air about the proceedings, not only that, these faces do not appear, to me at least, to be looking back from the past, instead they are looking back from the future, from the moment of their own death, when each face is dissolving into light.

In the cinema slow motion is usually used to arrest a gesture, to take some quickly moving form and render it weightless and allow us to see the intervals that comprise each apparently seamless moment. In *Buffalo Death Mask* there is constant movement in the slow motion, but what is being slowed down is rarely a gesture, only the smallest of inclinations, the opening of the eyes for instance, or a smoke ring being blown, or a face passing from the bottom of the frame to the top. And what is being seen, in each of these instances, is the way these bodies are dying, are moving towards their own death. Jean Cocteau famously quipped that in the cinema one watches death at work, and I think it is particularly true in this movie, where you can feel the weight of the body, the mark of the years already passed, the slow rapture of release and final succumbing.

## Light

After I became positive (aka seroconverted) I learned how to look in a new way. Not because of the new divide between those who were and weren't positive, or because of whatever ideas separated the dying and merely unwell from the robustly healthy. I'm speaking in a physiological sense, at the level of sensation and perception. I learned in those years, surrounded by so many who were dying, to be able to see how a body ages and dies in a single instant, the same way a speech glitch or a yoga posture or a DNA molecule synthesize generations of inclination. I learned to see the way that light came from bodies, as well as falling on them. Our dying selves emitted a very particular quality of light that I learned to see while sitting in the waiting rooms of Vancouver General, where an entire generation of men had turned into the walking dead. They were sad and angry and defeated and undefeated and beautiful and terrifying and each emitted a light that I could see when I could get over the sheer difficulty and terror and mirror-holding prophecy that each of us became for each other. We were a promise for each other. Today it's me with the facial lesions and the cane. Three months ago I was bench-pressing four hundred pounds, now I can hardly get out of bed. And one day, only too soon, it will be you. But out of the chests of these cane wielders and bent-over skeletons there was a rare and beautiful light that I learned to trust and was able to find more reliably as the frequency of my visits increased, and I became involved in the local version of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power).

Many of the images of *Buffalo Death Mask* feature this quality of light, they show light coming from the body, and this, more than anything, is what I wanted to share with the film. In fact, in its earliest versions, which lacked any dialogue, the hope was to concentrate the eyes so that they could be trained in these twenty minutes to be able to see what I had learned to see, that the movie would act as a secret workshop for anyone who would watch it, and show viewers what it had taken me a fatal illness to discover. That our bodies transmit light. But when I ran it for the music (Gary and Steve) they assured me that they couldn't see a thing. Yes, sure, there were moments of beauty, but they remained far away. Why should we care? This is what they told me. Turn these faces into something that matters. Apparently, these pictures needed the company of words. As usual, I had come to the end, only to find myself returning back to the beginning.

## Starting Again

The fantasy was purity. I had hoped to make a single gesture, with a single roll of film shot decades ago, newly slowed and reviewed. And this purity was also a salve to my need to Always Be Closing, to find my way to the end of a project as soon as it was beginning. So I recognized immediately what they were saying to me, that the project had an obstacle that I couldn't see, and the obstacle, which like all obstacles was designed to show me what I really wanted, was language. I was holding onto my silence, only to find that what these pictures needed in order to be seen was a relationship in language. There were going to have to be words. But whose? And how?

## Stephen

I knew I wanted to have a conversation. What I hoped for most of all was to have some breezy speaker hold forth in a groove that would be at once personal and philosophical. There was only one person I could think of, and that was Canadian artist Stephen Andrews. Incredibly, he has been positive even longer than I have, and if I write "incredibly" it's because there's not so many of us left from that time. And it had been only too clear for some years now that like me, he had learned to see the particular quality of light from bodies that were dying. In fact, Stephen's work, whether his more recent painting forays, or his faux filmstrips, or his painstakingly rendered animations, are filled with this seeing. Over and over again his subjects were turning into light, becoming light, dissolving. It was as if we were working on the same project, but with different tools in our hands. I didn't really want to ask him about this though, what I wanted to find out, most of all, was how he survived the afterlife. I knew, or at least I could imagine, how he might have reconciled himself to an early death. What I didn't understand, the cover story I'm still looking to absorb, is what Stephen names "the Lazarus story," when a cocktail of pharmaceuticals brought some of us back to life.





We set a date and I showed up one sunny afternoon without much sense of what we might say, or the important questions I should ask. To be honest, I hadn't thought a lot about what was going to happen, though I had approached Stephen before, and saw the frank reluctance he showed to be involved in any project involving pictures that were not his own. I think the fact that I came with a tapeless tape recorder and no camera was a big plus. It's not simply aging that we are wearing on our new faces. The life-saving cocktail has a nearly universal side effect named lipodystrophy which redistributes the body's fat. It sounds like a good time at first, at least for the calorie counters, this drug combo not only saves your life, but it slims away the pounds. For the unfortunate few (and Stephen is one of them), it produces a pouch-like sack of fat in the stomach or the back of the neck (very attractive). Liposuction surgeons have reported that it is a lot like fat, though not quite fat. Fat-like at the very least. Stephen, like many of the similarly afflicted, is big on ab work, but has a little pot belly as if he spent his afternoons swilling beer and eating pizza. Lipodystrophy produces a telltale face that is drawn and shrunken, those of us on the drugs can see right away its effects on the faces of strangers, our faces have been marked so that everyone in the tribe can recognize the signs. Like many others, Stephen had cheek implants laid in, a popular measure for restoring some volume to the face. But this is all to say that cameras are not a friend to our crumbling architectures.

When we spoke it was clear that I wasn't going to be able to sit back and lob questions at him. In fact, as he immediately rang up queries in my direction about how many drug regimens I had been on, it became clear that if I was willing to speak with him, to have a conversation, a dialogue, then he would hold up his end. What we weren't going to do was any sort of formal interview.

Stephen spoke about many things, including the light that he had learned to see at a moment very close to the end of his old (pre-cocktail) life. His partner Alex Wilson had died of AIDS, a slow diapers and dementia death where Stephen was numero uno caretaker, even as his own defenses were crumbling. Stephen's blood counts had begun to plummet, and he was close to death. He had begun to see magical Toronto media artist John Greyson who invited him to take a canoe trip to the Charlotte Islands. It looked like a last gasp, a final trek.

Stephen Andrews: "Everyone was pissed off at John because we were going kayaking for two weeks off the Queen Charlotte Islands. I was of the mind that you might as well go to heaven first and then die. Who cares? This was obviously unfair to John, but he seemed to be a completely willing victim, in case I croaked. What I didn't tell him at the time was that huge chunks of my vision had gone missing. The visual field had holes where there wasn't any information. And because I was on Septra and we were outside all the time, I turned red as a lobster.

We had an amazing trip. We had been out in eight foot swells on the Hecate Strait. The waves were too big on the shore to put in anywhere so we wound up paddling forty kilometres that day, and pulled in near Rose Harbour just as the sun was setting. We turned into the strait facing into the sun, and I had a strange hallucination where 'going into the light' wasn't about dying, it was about coming out of darkness. It completely retooled my thinking about what was going to take place. I thought: 'I'll go home, take the drugs, and be ok. It's not a shutting down, it's an opening up.' I was completely convinced of this, it was a very beatific moment."

We might have spoken for fifty minutes or so, perhaps an hour at most. The point was not to have an exhaustive record of every AIDS moment we could summon, but to let something live between us, and to bring a piece of that living onto the tapeless tape recorder. Stephen and I spoke candidly with one another about the drugs that kept us alive, the moments when we might have become positive, the death of loved ones. Being positive for so long provided a kind of gold card of intimacy, we could instantly step inside some of the most difficult places together with some understanding.



### *Collaboration*

When John Berger writes about portraiture he talks about it as a form of collaboration, and that the art of an artist is the art of receiving. "The modern illusion concerning painting (which postmodernism has done nothing to correct) is that the artist is a creator. Rather he is a receiver. What seems like creation is the act of giving form to what he has received." (Berger, *Shape of a Pocket*) That afternoon, with the portable digital recorder lying between us, Stephen and I did the work of collaboration, of giving and receiving, attuned to one another, finding a form of speaking that lay in the back and forth of the flow between us.

### *Portrait*

At the film's beginning the multiply superimposed roll of Buffalo faces appear in slow motion, and as soon as Stephen finishes talking they reappear, bookending the movie. Between them are pictures drenched in light, moving forms of what might be Stephen's paintings. I needed some pictures of him, what I was hoping for





most of all were images of him at work, and he agreed to make some, providing he could do it himself. He used his iPad. These were collaged with images of Stephen from an early John Greyson movie called *The Perils of Pedagogy* (5 minutes, 1984). It was made years before they became partners (Stephen was still with Alex at the time, his boyfriend who died of AIDS), and shows Stephen as an impossible beauty dancing in a variety of bracing outfits as *To Sir With Love* lays down the backbeat. I wanted to recast into a single frame these prophetic outlines of Stephen's pre-AIDS self, as seen by the man who would bring him back to life, and layer them into auto-portraits that would show him drawing pictures of John, forming a circuit that would compress thirty years into a few seconds.

Here is Javier Cercas in his modernist Spanish masterpiece of a novel, *Soldiers of Salamis*, in a scene where an aging communist looks back at his war years and the village comrades he lived and died beside. "Sometimes I dream of them and I feel guilty. I see them all: intact and greeting me with jokes, just as young as they were then, because time doesn't pass for them, they're just as young, and they ask me why I'm not with them – as if I'd betrayed them, because my true place was there; or as if I were taking the place of one of them..."

I have thrown away nearly everything I've shot on film, many years of spontaneous gatherings and calculated emission tests. One of the few remnants from this twenty year period of filmmaking is a visual diary of my shingles illness, back in 1995. Stephen mentions

shingles as a definitive sign of the passage from being HIV-positive to AIDS (in other words, he is not only infected, but symptomatic), and I was surprised to hear that he put such weight on this particular illness. I had also had shingles, but it didn't seem more significant than the pneumonia that I caught twice, and that was such a reliable killer in those days, or mono, or the host of other illnesses. But Stephen's shingles recollections lured me back into the archive where I could reanimate those long ago days and nights. It became a helpful underlining, showing my pictures with his words, a demonstration perhaps that the virus had produced new lines of interconnectivity and connection, new flows and circulations were possible. It's your mouth and my body, or perhaps a language of the body we held in common.

## Lazarus

Our chitchat was cut into two parts for the movie. In the first we speak about drugs, Stephen's former partner Alex, and the way friends are a living form of memory. When the voices return, after a dreamy impressionistic interlude where crowds of light gather together, Stephen talks about coming back to life, his Lazarus moment. It was only when he could let himself be loved again, he says, that he could find his way back into the world. It's corny until you've lived it and turned it into something firm and foundational. I'm still hoping the day might come. Or is it something only the night can bring?



Lazarus was a man that Jesus brought back to life, at least according to the gospel of John. Wikipedia says: "...the name Lazarus is often used to connote apparent restoration to life. For example, the scientific term 'Lazarus taxon' denotes organisms that reappear in the fossil record after a period of apparent extinction; and the 'Lazarus phenomenon' to an event in which a person spontaneously returns to life (the heart starts beating again) after resuscitation has been given up."

The figure of Lazarus has obvious and necessary affinities with the project of cinema, which is likewise concerned with the project of reanimation. The material has already been filmed, it lies inert and unmoving as an object on a film strip or a digital file. Successive pictures stranded on an unmoving island of emulsion, or a still pool of ones and zeros. But when it is rapidly unspooled on a projector or laid into a media player, these pictures jump into motion, or at least, the illusion of motion. As if they had been granted a second chance to live. The act of filming is a kind of entombing, a funerary rite of embalming, a way of preserving a passing moment. And via the projector, the twinned double of the camera, these remains are raised once more raised to light, and restored to life.

In the early 1900s, a placard advertising the brand new invention of cinema announced that with the advent of colour and sound, movies would ensure that death would be no longer final. Here is the project of cinema most boldly announced: it was a machine that could defeat death by tirelessly reinvigorating moments of the past. And you can imagine how important that might have been for me all those years ago, before and after the arrival of the unwanted chemical rescue squad. I was also trying to reanimate myself through the not inconsiderable haze of fatigue and duress, and to preserve some of the too many sensations so that others might understand a jot of what had gone down in a generation marked by plague.

A.A. Bronson writes in his memoir *Negative Thoughts* about the two men he loved, his comrades in General Idea. Bronson: "In 1994, when Jorge and Felix were dying, I convinced myself that I was dying too, that the HIV was latent, that I had symptoms of illness, that my grief together with my desire to die would rot me through with cancer. I thought through my life as they thought through theirs, and we wrote our wills together. I came to a point of completion, a sense of satisfaction. I was able to say, and did: "If I die tomorrow, I will have lived a full life." I was ready to let go.

But life did not let go of me. It forced me to suffer.

Jorge died, and then through the fog of grief, five months later, Felix died too. I was sitting with him. I said to him, "Felix, It's OK, if you want to go now you can." He looked at me uncomprehendingly and fell into a small sleep. I went to refill my coffee cup and when I returned he was gone.

What is there to say of death? We live and then we die. While we live, we are surrounded by the dying, and by the dead. We are all dying. And the dead walk among us, surveying our decay."



## *New Generation*

And what of the new generation of seropositive conversions? I was floored after speaking with Cheryl, she is Dr. Cheryl to many, who has an all-HIV practice in downtown Toronto. She was describing a young man who had recently become positive and came to see her. The strangest factoid was his address: he called Barrie home. I couldn't help asking: "Why did he come and see you if he lives in Barrie?" (It's an hour and a half drive away on a featurless mega-highway) Cheryl replied, "Because he can't take the risk of being seen in a doctor's office. He doesn't know anyone who is positive, there's no community, he's completely in the closet." As soon as she said the words I realized what a privileged bubble of a community I live in. I can be an 'out' positive person without having to negotiate the labyrinth of societal disapprovals that this young kid will have to manage.

The hope in making this movie is to try and extend the sphere of privilege, or normality, or sanity, so that others like him can be seen as people, instead of being reduced to an illness, a condition, a tagline. For most of my friends, I am the only positive person they have ever met. And similarly, this movie has been shown (so far) in large international festivals, or else experimentalist festivals, where this film is the only one addressing questions of positivity, where there are few

queer movies at all. The people who see it are not part of the lifelong conversation that Stephen and I have been having with everyone around us. This, I have to believe, is a good thing. The point in all this is not simply to have the same chitchat with the same people.

The old liberationist dreams of the avant-garde have been repurposed as the project of fringe movies has become increasingly professionalized. If we once longed to become artists, today a new generation longs to become curators. There are too many artists now, too many movies being produced, what difference can any of it make? For now my work travels across familiar circuits of movie festivals and cinematheques, occasional classroom screenings and libraries. It is still committed to questions of formal difference and political portraiture, creating space for marginalized lives with roots in personal experience and expressions. And while the AIDS crisis may be "over" for some, each year there are millions of deaths, and many tens of thousands of seroconversions, and countless instances of bigotry and misunderstanding. This movie is a small attempt to stand in solidarity with the women and men who are still living and dying inside these plague years.

+++





Scripts



## POSITIV

[SCRIPT]

Last night I had this dream that I'm living in a world where there's just two kinds of people: bodies and minds. Somewhere a bell rings and the whole world stops for recess so we all run out of school heading for the wall on the other side of the yard. I can feel my legs growing as I run and with one giant step I'm there, I'm at the wall watching everyone race towards me. And then I realize omigod, I'm a body.



Which is funny because ever since becoming HIV positive, I've felt like a virus that's come to rest in this body for awhile, that it really doesn't belong to me anymore, like I'm trying on a new suit that won't fit. I couldn't be the one who starts sweating at night for no reason at all until the sheets are so wet I have to ring them out in the morning, or the yeast in my mouth is so bad it turns all my favourite foods, even chocolate-chocolate-chip ice cream, into a dull metallic taste like licking a crowbar. I know then that my body, my real body is somewhere else, bungee jumping into mine shafts stuffed with chocolate wafers and whipped cream and blueberry pie and just having a good time, you know?

There are days I wander through the streets like Michael Jackson, deciding to have that one's nose, those lips and my waiter's perfect clam shaped ears. When I look around my apartment I think that everything has a warranty except my body, everything here can

be replaced or traded in except for the cellulite army which has conquered my thighs, or the small hands which were always too clumsy to play Satie. When I was six and learning the scales I watered my hands everyday without result, until I realized that despite all the chaos and upsets and frustrations my life possessed a shape after all, a unity of design, and that shape was my body.



You've grown apart from your family, you remember the day you decided to hitchhike to Vancouver with a large cardboard sign and a backpack filled with books and candles. Your mother drove you to the end of town saying that's it, you can't come back now, good luck. That was the day you left home, crouched in the cab of a

Molson's Brewery truck headed for Kapaskasing. Since becoming positive the war of silence has been called to a halt, the arguments dissolved beneath the sense that there's no longer time for that now. You are haunted by the image of your own infirmity—bedridden and helpless—that you would once again become a child. This nightmare of dependency, of having to give yourself over to them once again, has kept you from them all these years, and now, strangely, through the agency of this disease, you've managed to return there, to the place where memory comes from, to the history of your failures, in the body of the family.

When I was six or seven my brother David got it into his head that if we could grow a third arm we'd be right for life, and for weeks we'd argue about where to put it. Dave figured it should come straight out of his chest for the surprise knock out punch while I thought it should run out of my butt because furniture was going to be extinct. I thought it would just die out as we got older and that I'd want something to sit on. We made a little lotion out of eggs and arm hair and a little blood and every day we'd rub it into the spot where we wanted our new limb to grow. We never did grow that extra arm—but Dave did have three nipples—just like Goldfinger in James Bond. I guess it's not that unusual. But Dave always said that was the beginning of his double that he was growing from the chest out. He always kept a bandage over it so no one would know, one



day his double would appear in the world to take his place and he could get on with his real business, or maybe, he'd wink at me, maybe he was already gone.

I think I always looked up to Dave a little bit—even during that year when he was painting everyone's car green, it just seemed like the most obvious





thing in the world. Dave said that next to the brain, the smartest part of a guy's body was the balls because they were all wrinkled and veiny like the brain was—only there were two of them —and after jerking off into a petri dish he would study his cum for omens. If it came from his left ball then it was about the past, and if it was from his right ball it was about the future. He wanted me to try it, figuring the more samples he had the more he'd understand, but I was worried he'd mess up the changes going on in my body, that I'd never grow up. Or that somehow, through his experiments, I'd become

more and more like him as I got older. And I guess that scared me some.

He was the first one who was told you were sick, and you'd never seen him cry before, not since he was six or seven and that was just because he caught his hand in the door. As you held each other and whispered I love you, you

knew why it had taken so long to tell him. Your sickness was real now, because it lived independently of you. From now on it would live in your brother as a reminder that we would never be young again, never young enough to change what had already happened. Before you spoke your illness was a professional concern discussed with the doctor, drawn up in charts and tables. If your body had become a danger in your sexual relations, with Dave it had become again a house, a place where blood was thicker than the years we'd grown



apart, a place where the certainty of death was no longer disguised by our youth.

There's not much the doctors can do for you, except draw this blood out for tests. In fact, the more your condition worsens, the more tests are demanded, as they seek ever finer ways to monitor your decline. Your identity is clinging to these numbers, your CD4 counts, the ratios of enzymes and tissues which continue to betray you. At night, when you're alone, you try to visualize them, you try to imagine them as part of you, belonging somehow, but find that you can't. The disease seems always separate, an invader, and you wonder whether this lack of imagination will finally prove fatal. Because you're unable to embrace this intruder, it has no choice but to destroy you. You imagine your body as a military map, with arrows

marking movements of troops and tanks, each constellation of borders remarking some lost bottle. As you turn the globe between your fingers it comes to you: the division of geography into nations is also a map of the dead world, each line signaling a procession of corpses. Because the number of the dead far outweigh the





number of the living, we've divided the world into nationalities in order to mourn it more perfectly. And our mourning together, this must be the thing we call a country.

You think: it's hardest for your friends, when they met you for the first time

there was no way to know that they would have to bury you one day. You all seemed so young, and while they've continued to age at the usual rate, all of a sudden you've grown so very old, so close to the time of your ending. Mostly you would like to apologize for asking so much of them. Because your slide into sickness is slow, monitored by the machines at the hospital, you don't notice at first that you're any different than you ever were, until they come to visit. And while they are gracious and kind and you love them so much, you read the whole cruel truth on their face. You watch yourself dying there. This look hurts you more than all the fevers and sweats and blind panics because where once there was love, now there is only fear, and this vague, terrible sense that all this could have been avoided if only you'd been a little more careful, that somehow you did this to hurt them, or that they weren't enough so you had to go out and get more, and after you crossed that line you were never the same.



Now that I have AIDS I keep tripping over myself, and sometimes when I'm talking with a friend I'll just nod right out. When I come to they have this terrible expression on their face like, "Are you alright?"

and of course I am. I'm fine, I've always been fine, only they can't see that. My body keeps getting in the way.



Last week Donna came to visit, my best friend. She told me that 6,000 cells die in the body every day and that every seven years we're completely new people. Donna's

always coming up with crazy shit like that. So I guess I just have to wait it out. I think I'm gonna remake myself as a fat ice cream queen with perfect skin. Donna says that sounds just perfect and then she kisses me because it's time to go. Visiting hours are over.

+ + +





## DEAR MADONNA

[SCRIPT]

*Dear Madonna,*

What a relief to hear you're not positive! It was so hard to write and tell you after all this time. After the doctor told me I didn't feel anything, it was like he'd given me the weather report for a city I'd never seen. Until I got home and realized I had to call everyone I'd ever slept with. And for the first time I was glad there weren't many. At least you're okay.

I haven't found anyone whose tested positive so I guess I must have got it from one of the strangers. From one of those nights you take off from the rest of your life. And then you realize there are no vacations from your own blood. Funny the way one night can change your whole life. You want to know a secret? Testing positive has been pretty good to me in some ways. While death is inevitable, it's not immediate. AIDS is a disease in stages, a long flight of steps that leads to death, but each step admits a unique apprenticeship. It's a disease that gives death time to live and its afflicted time to die, time to discover time, and in the end to discover life.

Is being photographed the only way to cheat death? I remember the video camera you used when we fucked for the first time. You said, "So our love will never end." Now I never see you anymore, except on TV. Are you the reason for mass communications? Was television invented so we can all tune into you? Listen to you? Fall in love with you?

It's hard to watch you growing older. I know you lift weights and jog and all that, but you just don't look the same now. And it's sad. It's a reminder of what's coming. What's already inside us. Eating us away. When I go I want to look like the Mona Lisa, with that funny little smile on her face. I know what she was smiling at after all this time. It was about death. Knowing how to die. At the end of your days there's only that. Is it any wonder she's on so many postcards? Just like you babe.

Hope you're good.

*Jason*

+++

## STILL HERE

[SCRIPT]

Your face arrived  
so much later  
than the skin  
you grew over your childhood.

Your words. "If you're cold tonight  
you can sleep here. Just sleep."

Wishes always return us  
to the scene of the crime.

I walked over in his direction  
because I liked the shape of him.  
What he said was "Hi."  
And I found myself thinking  
"Here you are at last!"

The question you couldn't ask.  
Why are we still here  
when so many are gone?

You are newly confined to bed  
alert and responsive  
and every day I try to be grateful.

I was rubbing your feet  
which ached with cramps  
as they turned inward  
on your newly useless legs  
when you reached across the table  
to touch my face.

Your hands seemed to say

We're still here!

+++





Bis



## ARTIST BIO

*Mike Hoolboom*

Born: Korean War, the pill, hydrogen bomb, playboy mansion. 1980s: Film emulsion fetish and diary salvos. Schooling at the Funnel: collective avant-geek cine utopia. 1990s: experimentalist features, transgressive psychodramas, questions of nationalism. 2000s: Seroconversion cyborg (life after death), film-to-video transcode: feature-length-found-footage bios. Fringe media archaeologist: copyleft author 7 books, co/editor 12 books. Curator: 30 programs + fringeonline.ca. Occasional employments: artistic director *Images Fest*, fringe distribution *Canadian Filmmakers*. 75 film/vids, most redacted. 10 features. 30 awards, 14 international retrospectives. 4 lifetime achievement awards.  
mikehoolboom.com

+ + +





## FILM + VIDEO

- 1980 *Song for Mixed Choir* (7 minutes)
- 1981 *Now, Yours* (10 minutes)
- 1983 *Life Drawing 1* (10 minutes), *Life Drawing 2* (12 minutes), *Life Drawing 3* (30 minutes)
- 1984 *The Big Show* (7 minutes)
- 1985 *Book of Lies* (7 minutes)
- 1986 *White Museum* (32 minutes)
- 1987 *Fat Film* (4 minutes)
- 1988 *From Home* (60 minutes) *Grid* (1.5 minutes), *Scaling* (5 minutes)
- 1989 *Bomen* (2.5 minutes), *Was* (13 minutes), *Eat* (15 minutes), *Brand* (7 minutes, 16mm)
- 1990 *Southern Pine Inspection Bureau #9* (9 minutes), *two* (with Kika Thorne) (8 minutes), *Install* (8 minutes)
- 1991 *Red Shift* (2 minutes); *Modern Times* (4 minutes), *Man* (with Ann Marie Fleming) (5 minutes)
- 1992 *Mexico* (with Steve Sanguedolce) (35 minutes), *The New Man* (with Ann Marie Fleming) (6.5 minutes), *In the Cinema* (1 minute), *Careful Breaking* (7 minutes)
- 1993 *Kanada* (65 minutes), *Escape in Canada* (9 minutes); *Frank's Cock* (8 minutes), *Indusium* (10 minutes), *One Plus One* (with Jason Boughton and Kathryn Ramey) (3 minutes)
- 1994 *Valentine's Day* (80 minutes), *Justify My Love* (5 minutes), *Precious* (10 minutes)
- 1995 *House of Pain* (50 minutes), *Carnival 1* (3 minutes), *Carnival 2* (3 minutes), *Carnival 3* (3 minutes)
- 1996 *Letters From Home* (15 minutes), *Shooting Blanks* (with Shawn Chappelle) (8 minutes), *Dear Madonna* (5 minutes)
- 1997 *Positiv* (10 minutes)
- 1998 *Panic Bodies* (70 minutes), *In My Car* (5 minutes), *Passing On* (18 minutes), *In the Future* (3 minutes)
- 1999 *Hey Madonna* (9 minutes)
- 2000 *Jack* (15 minutes), *In the City* (10 minutes), *Secret* (2 minutes)
- 2001 *Invisible Man* (18 minutes), *Writing* (18 minutes)
- 2002 *Tom* (50 minutes), *The Disappearance Machine* (21 minutes), *Stormy Weather* (18 minutes)
- 2003 *Imitations of Life* (70 minutes), *In the Dark* (8 minutes), *Amy* (16 minutes), *Ford* (20 minutes)
- 2004 *Public Lighting* (76 minutes)
- 2005 *Fontage* (with Fred Pelon 10 minutes), *In the Theatre* (6 minutes)
- 2006 *Fascination* (70 minutes)
- 2007 *Notes on Fascination* (70 minutes), *Andre* (7 minutes)
- 2008 *School* (30 minutes)
- 2009 *Mark* (70 minutes)
- 2011 *Lacan Palestine* (70 minutes)
- 2012 *Forest Walk* (10 minutes)
- 2013 *Buffalo Death Mask* (23 minutes)
- 2014 *Second Nature* (35 minutes), *Safety Film Collection* (24 minutes)

+ + +

## WRITER BIOS

*Aleksander Fuser* is a Norwegian film critic and journalist, writing for monthly magazine Cinema and online newspaper *Nettavisen*. He holds an M.A. in film studies from the University in Oslo, as well as a Writer-Director Diploma from the London Film Academy.

*Adrian Martin* is Professor of Film Studies at Goethe University (Frankfurt), and Monash University (Melbourne). He has been translated into over twenty languages, with regular columns in *De Filmkrant* (Holland) and *Caiman* (Spain). He is the author of seven books and is Co-Editor of the on-line film journal *LOLA* (lolajournal.com).

*Jennifer McPhee* is a Toronto-based freelance writer who contributes regularly to *The Positive Side*. Her work has also appeared in numerous publications including *Chatelaine*, *The Globe and Mail* and *Childview*.

*Michael Pattison* is a freelance film critic, programming consultant and teacher from Gateshead, England. His writing has been published by *Sight & Sound*, *The Guardian*, *Playboy* and others. He has a BA in Film and English Studies and an MA in Film. He never picks his feet in Poughkeepsie.

*Stephen Remus* is the Minister of Energy, Minds, and Resources at the Niagara Artists Centre in beautiful downtown-St.Catharines-on-the-Parking-Lot. When time affords he screen prints, makes 16mm collage film, and videos. He gets his hair cut a little bit country and a little bit rock 'n' roll.

*Alexandra Lockingham* made independent films as a writer, director and producer for seventeen years. Currently, she is completing her first novel and writing a feature-length film entitled *Apologia*. She lives in the country, west of Toronto.

*Jim Supanick* is an artist and writer whose work has been featured in art spaces and festivals internationally. His essays on film, video, and visual culture have appeared in *Film Comment*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Wire*, exhibition catalogs, and elsewhere. He is also a member of Synthumpers, a quasi-musical collaboration with Josh Solondz, and currently teaches at City College in New York. [supanickblog.blogspot.com](http://supanickblog.blogspot.com)

*Genevieve Yue* is an assistant professor of culture and media at Eugene Lang College, The New School. She is co-editor of *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, and her writing has appeared in *Grey Room*, *Reverse Shot*, *Film Comment*, *Film Quarterly*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. She is currently completing a book on feminism, materiality, and film theory.

+ + +





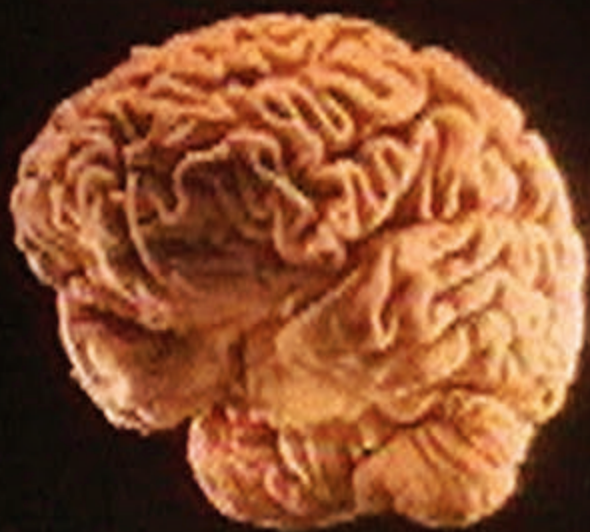




























Your Face Unveiled  
Mike Johnson

For 5 years - June 5, 2014  
Michigan Institute of Art & Culture