

PICTURES OF HOME: HOFFMAN IN THE 80s, AN INTERVIEW

by Mike Hoolboom

Mike HOOLBOOM: Any early experiences with pictures you can remember?

Philip HOFFMAN: The first one I can think of was my grandmother, Babji, who used to shoot from the hip, without looking through the viewfinder. These low-angle shots always turned out and made us look as big as John Wayne. That was the perfect size when we were little. I didn't think of it until years later when I realized I was shooting like that sometimes, using the body to find the picture. I had a box camera for years but didn't get into photography until I met Richard Kerr. He was a couple of years older than me and was going out with my sister. We set up a darkroom in my basement and figured out how to work it ourselves. I was writing poetry, but never showed it to anyone. The photography was different. It was a language I could use to talk to people because I didn't have words. I was shooting a lot of family stuff—moments of everyday life. I played hockey and tried the accordion unsuccessfully because there were always rules. I was made to play scales, which gave me an ear for rhythm, but killed the play in it. Kitchener was a very business-oriented city; you had to look around to feed your interests. I managed to find small pockets where I could work, and those were private places, caves. That's where I did the writing and the photography. I went into business in my first year of university, which was just remote control—everyone in the Hoffman family went into business. But after one year, that was enough, and I took English literature and some film courses, still trying to decide what to do. To support myself I was working in a factory making boxes and figuring out all week what I'd do at the weekend farm house. I would go up with friends and get blasted and shoot these crazy skits on super-8. There was a rift between what the poet desired and what I thought was desired of me: to be a good citizen of Kitchener-Waterloo. It's just driven into you there.



still: *Opening Series 2.*

HOOLBOOM: Were you expected to work at Hoffman's Meats?

HOFFMAN: My grandfather expected me to. I was Philip the Third, you know. [laughs] I was kind of the heir. My father always wanted to be something else, but he had to work in the factory. His father was one of those staunch Germans, so he never got a chance to do what he wanted. He was quite open to letting me go, giving me the chance he never had. When he was selling the business he asked if I wanted in, and I told him no. Then I decided to go to film school. I tried York and Queen's, which dropped me because of my business marks. Then I called up the chairperson at Sheridan College, and I was so welcomed that it seemed like the place to go. Richard had been there a year already.

HOOLBOOM: That's where you made *On the Pond* (9 min., b/w, 1978)?

HOFFMAN: Yes. It was a personal documentary because it makes sense to begin with something you know. It wasn't so different from the kinds of writing and photography I'd done up to that point, which dealt directly with people around me. *On the Pond* began with a slide show. I was fairly quiet in the family. I had three sisters who were a couple of years older than me—triplets. They garnered lots of attention. But this was my birthday, so I knew I had the full attention of the family. I miked the whole room and showed slides. I constructed another slide show for the film and cut the comments down from a couple of hours to a few minutes. The slides showed moments with the family. There's one picture taken from behind my mother. My dad's looking off in the distance as if he's discovering some new world. We were out in the bush, where we would go for walks. In the film you hear voices saying, "Oh, do you remember when we went out on that walk?" And then to my mother, "Oh, that's when you were feeling lousy." Except it's not "feeling lousy." There's an incredible amount of trauma which is being dismissed, and the photo shows the shadow of her sickness. You can hear the way her memory is being taken away, how her voice is being levelled. We were taking "good care" of her pain. And then someone says, "Oh look, there's Phil and he's smiling," because I'm smiling in the corner of the picture. So, what's taken up isn't my mother's problems, but the face I made for them. The smile has to do with pleasing her, hoping to make things better. So everything's there in that photograph. It was shot from the hip, unposed, and it was exciting going through these photos for clues to a past I'd slept through. I think childhood is so traumatic we sleep through most of it.

HOOLBOOM: Was the whole film going to be photographs?

HOFFMAN: No, I wanted to make a kind of docudrama. I got my cousin to play me as a little boy, getting up early, skating out on the ice, stickhandling with the dog. Then the social space enters in the soundtrack, breaking his solitude—you hear the coach yelling and other voices while the boy does push-ups alone on the ice.

HOOLBOOM: The film moves between these two arenas—between hockey and the family—as if you have to choose one or the other, or that hockey was a way to leave home.

HOFFMAN: That's what happened in my life—the year I made *On the Pond* I quit hockey. I was playing for the college team, and we had an exhibition game at Kent State, where there was a big demonstration. The university was trying to

still: *The Road Ended at the Beach.*



build a gym on the ground where the students had been gunned down. There were cops on horseback trying to gas the demonstrators, and I grabbed a camera and filmed it. That was the point where I left hockey. It was becoming apparent that hockey players weren't the people I wanted to spend time with. The competition was so draining. So I simply transferred the energy I was putting toward sports into filmmaking.

I finished *On the Pond* in a very heavy Marxist time, and some people were taking a lot of knocks for making films about their own experiences. "Personal" filmmaking was considered self-indulgent. But now things have come 'round again. Now you can't just run out and point a camera at someone. Personal work wasn't thought of as political back then, but to my mind it's the most political.

HOOLBOOM: How did *The Road Ended at the Beach* (33 min., 1983) start?

HOFFMAN: Before I went to Sheridan I used to go on trips through Canada. I'd work the first part of the summer, then travel for the last month and go back to school. In those days, in my late teens, I carried a super-8 camera with me just to shoot stuff, not thinking or knowing anything about making films. While I was at Sheridan, I continued travelling and collecting footage and called it Road Journals—it was an ongoing sketch pad. After school ended, I planned a trip with some cameras and sound gear, and this became the central trip the others would weave in and out of. Jim McMurray and I started in Ann Arbor because that's where the van was, then drove north to Kitchener to pick up Richard Kerr. Then we headed east and visited Robert Frank in Cape Breton. And Danny, a friend who'd gone to school with us, wanted to make films, but got dragged down with his life in Nova Scotia. You see this idyllic setting with the dogs playing in the water, and then he says, "Well I have to work in the fish plant—you have to do that if you want to live out here."

still: *The Road Ended at the Beach*. Photo by Richard Kerr.



The trip was staged—we'd travelled together in the past—and we were trying to remake what we'd already done, to recapture that feeling. But that didn't work at all. I'd known Richard for ten years. It would have been different if we'd gone five years earlier, because then we were in the maturity of our relation. The same with Jim. All that comes through in the film. This isn't *Highway 61* or *Roadkill*, because the romance is gone. We're travelling through a cold Canadian summer and not meeting any "girls." [laughs] It's a different kind of journey. By the late 70s the road film was dead. And these three guys can't really talk with each other. We're all waiting on an experience that isn't coming and no one's sure why. It has a lot to do with how men relate to each other, dealing with outer realities, getting the job done. Filmmaker Mark Rappaport said that it's a record of the time: when Kerouac travelled, things were opening up, but by 1980 everyone was hunkering down for Reagan, everything was closing up. Everyone on this trip is alone and isolated: Frank's retreated to Mabou, the guys on the road are caught in dead-end jobs, and nobody's relating to each other in the van.

HOOLBOOM: *Road Ended* pictures a series of imagined homes to which the film attempts to return. Some of these homes are from past trips, or past times spent with folks in the van, and these are presented against a backdrop of 50s Beat writing, especially Kerouac's *On The Road*.

HOFFMAN: Well, that's the myth right there—it's confronted by drawing these different decades together in the editing. The Beats were the fathers I took on the trip, but their roads are closed now. I was attracted to the possibility of spirituality that Kerouac held out through his Zen practice, even though he died an alcoholic far from the lotus tree. But it was one of the first expressions of Eastern culture I'd encountered. It wasn't the drugs or parties, but those simple moments of description of what's there in front of him.

HOOLBOOM: Kerouac's trying to live in the moment, to conjure the present through his writing, and finally to make life that moment.

HOFFMAN: Kerouac was writing while he was on the move, but when you're filming the camera gets in the way. Personal relations become performance when a camera is there. Have you ever seen that old Neil Cassady film when he's on camera? It doesn't work. The mythology isn't there. The camera says, "I'm immortalizing you." The present moment can't be returned; the camera takes it apart. But you can go off alone with the camera and create energy—like the last scene where I'm dancing on the beach. That kind of thing expresses the Kerouac ideal of pure energy in movement. As far as Robert Frank goes, even though nobody was making photographs like him in the 50s, he was still taking the moment and stealing it from someone. I've always had trouble taking pictures of people I don't know. He had a social reason—he was trying to show America's spiritual bankruptcy. I was making a personal film. That's why the photography in *Road Ended* is so careful, so unlike a road movie. There's no barging into strange places and waving cameras around. That was done in *cinéma vérité* in the 60s, and I have problems with that.

HOOLBOOM: How did *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (6 min., 1984) begin?

HOFFMAN: There was a reunion of Beat poets in Boulder at "Jack Kerouac's School of Disembodied Poets," at least that's what Ginsberg called it. I drove down with my sister and a friend. Robert Frank was there, and I wanted to ask him if I could use one of his photographs in *Road Ended*. But every time I tried to talk to him something would happen, some guy would walk up, "Are you really Robert Frank?" Finally, I bumped into him by accident, smashed right into him, and he was his normal humble self. He remembered our dog. So that was fine. I wanted to go to Boulder before going down to Mexico, where I had this romantic notion of shooting very simple events—I had been reading haiku. The Bolex is a camera powered by a spring that you wind up and it runs for twenty-eight seconds. I wanted to use the length of its wind as my frame for these haiku shots. The Bolex was perfect because it's light and doesn't need batteries, and I'd worked with it so often I knew when the shot would end. I used its so-called limitation to my own advantage as a structuring principle. I went with ten minutes of film. I'd met Adriana Peña on one of my *Road Ended* trips and was going down to see her. She was taking me around, and I became involved with her family. It was a bit strange. She was showing her family the man she was maybe going to marry, and then I realized that this was perhaps not such a good idea. [laughs]

HOOLBOOM: Can you explain what a haiku is?

HOFFMAN: Haiku is a three-line poem with a five-seven-five beat structure. It usually describes everyday events. The three images, or lines, go together to form a new expression—Eisenstein used haiku as an inspiration for his ideas about montage. So I shot things for twenty-eight seconds, each shot the same length, and in the midst of this shooting found myself on a bus between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion. The bus stopped, and a woman came screaming across a field. Her little boy had been run over. I watched from inside the bus with the camera in my hand, trying to decide whether to film or not. And that's what the film becomes. When I got back to Toronto, I decided to try and make a film about that moment without the image.

HOOLBOOM: Why didn't you film it?

HOFFMAN: Gut reaction. I can intellectualize it now. I could say: I didn't want the camera to get in the way of the experience, or I wasn't ready, or it would have made a lot of people uncomfortable, or I didn't want to be like some reporter "getting" the scene. In the editing I inserted intertitles, which talk about the boy on the road in a bastardized kind of haiku. It has to do with my own working through death. I've been taught that death isn't part of life—it happens on television, or in life as a theatrical event at the funeral parlour with make-up and masks. The title *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* suggests, for me, the passage from death to birth—the bardo state in Buddhist terms. Between these two places is the death of a boy. Jalostotitlan has, in its centre, an ornate graveyard that we passed by on our way to the death. Encarnacion suggests "incarnation," an embodiment in flesh. Visually the film is bookended with shots in black and white. The death is rendered metaphorically in colour superimposition before the film returns to black and white for the last shot, which shows the passing water of a river, the rebirth.

I was working on the film in my basement apartment when I heard a religious parade pass by. I went out and filmed it, not sure of how I'd use it or which film it was going into. I count on this kind of coincidence to make my work. I was experimenting with multiple layers of pictures—shooting a roll of blue brick wall, then winding the camera back and letting chance have its way. The work I'd done up to that point had been more representational and used static camerawork, even in my Mexico shooting. My ideas of documentary had been quite traditional, but what I'd learned in *Road Ended* was that there's always something outside the frame, and that's what *Somewhere Between* is about.

Bart Testa was the first person to offer this work some public attention. He programmed the Grierson Documentary Seminar in 1984, calling it "Systems in Collapse." The seminar doesn't happen anymore, but back then it was important in my theoretical development as a filmmaker. There were people making television documentaries and others making experimental work, so there were very heated debates. Bart's programming was critical, and he said he wouldn't do the seminar unless he could show *The Falls* by Greenaway. He also invited *Road Ended* and *Somewhere Between*. There were people complaining they only had \$100,000 to make a film, while I was showing *Somewhere Between*, which was shot on three rolls of film. So Bart was making a point by inviting me. At the seminar, my work was paired up with a guy named Don North, a news correspondent who'd made a number of films about Vietnam. There was one bloody massacre after another, and he said that was the stuff they didn't cut. Then my program came on, which also dealt with death but never showed it. Because television and violent movies have conditioned us to see pictures of death in a certain way, when we see it for real it's just the same. My film argued that you could deal with another side of death or that the possibility of mourning lies in the unseen.

HOOLBOOM: There's something very Catholic in this refusal. Death is granted a power because of its secrecy; there's an awe and mystery that its revelation could only trivialize.

HOFFMAN: Not showing death wasn't because of fear, but respect. I didn't want to barge into its territory, to try to exploit it for my own work. It was a cere-

mony that didn't belong to me. I was honoured to be in its presence but, at the same time, it wasn't mine. So after the seminar North approached me and said, "Phil, I really enjoyed the discussion, but you know when you were in the editing room, didn't you just wish you had the footage?" Some things don't change.

I think Peter Greenaway connected with the independent filmmaker in me—the idea of making work with what you have available. He was really moved by *Road Ended*. He talked about the poetry in the images. I asked if it might be possible to see one of his film shoots and he said sure and wrote me a reference letter. The only way I could arrange financing was through an apprentice program, but he's not into "learning from the father." He felt my work would develop on its own. In his letter he said I needed opportunities to make work and that I should get funding to make a film about anything I wanted and that I didn't need to use a script. That was the other thing—I was working without a script, just collecting images over a long period of time and making sense of them in the editing. So in the summer of 1985, I got \$3,500 to go to Rotterdam and spend two or three months gathering pictures. I had about forty minutes of film. I worked the same way as in the past, shooting about thirty seconds a day, whenever the light and my inclinations met. I shot on and off location while Greenaway was making *A Zed and Two Noughts* in the Rotterdam zoo.

?O,Zoo! begins with images the narrator says are made by his grandfather, who was a newsreel cameraman—it's a Greenaway-type ruse. Then it shifts into the making of the film around *A Zed and Two Noughts*. The diary starts with the trip to Holland and fairly mundane images—of animals, a huge, wooden apple in the park, a headless statue—while the narrator speaks of what happens before and after the shot, with what's outside the frame. Then the screen goes black and the narrator speaks:

From a distance I heard the scream of a beast. Moving closer to the source of the sound, I saw that an elephant had fallen down and was struggling to get up. Outside the enclosure, I noticed that a group of people had gathered to watch and inside some elephants and zoo workers had surrounded the fallen animal, trying to give it encouragement as it rocked its huge body in the sand. As I watched, I tossed over and over in my mind whether to film the scene or not. I've come across this problem before. Like the crowd that had gathered, I was feeling helpless; I wanted to assist the beast and filming would make me feel that I was doing something constructive. Maybe the television network would buy the film and show people that tragedy is right at their doorstep.

I took out the tripod, set up the camera and looked through the viewfinder. The compressed image caused by the telephoto lens intensified the sounds coming from the huge rolling body. I pull the trigger, listen to the spring

slowly unwind, and watch the elephant's painful rhythm. I wind the camera tight and press the trigger for another burst of twenty-eight seconds. Now the zoo keeper is shoving bales of hay under the elephant as the others surround it. This only gets the elephant more aroused. The heat is intense and in its excitement the elephant plunges back into the sand and with one last scream, stretches out its body ... and then it stops moving. The attendant says that the elephant has had a heart attack. My throat is parched, and sweat pours off my body; I watch the dust settle. I go looking for a drink, pushing through the crowd, fixed on the image I'd filmed; as if my mind was the film and the permanent trace of the elephant's death was projected brightly inside. Somehow it's my responsibility now. I wonder why I took the film. There seems no reason to develop the negative; my idea of selling the film to the network seems just an embarrassing thought, an irresponsible plan. I decide to put the film in the freezer. I decide not to develop it.

This is another example of the unconscious speaking. I wrote the story after the event happened, then realized it was directly connected to one of the first deaths I experienced. After my grandfather died, my uncle asked me to go to the funeral



still: *passing through/torn formations.*

home and take pictures of him in the casket. I showed up and didn't know what I was doing there. I'd been making photographs for years and didn't want to document him in this fake place. But I took the pictures and put the film in the freezer for eight years. In a way, the film was a way to act this out, to return to my grandfather. It keeps coming back in my films, so whether I've laid him to rest or not ...

HOOLBOOM: How does *passing through/torn formations* (43 min., 1988) relate to your previous work?

HOFFMAN: In terms of my film work, *On the Pond* relates to my boyhood and family. *Road Ended* deals with travelling and friends and adolescence. *Somewhere Between* and *?O,Zoo!* deal with fathers and a documentary tradition brought down by fathers from which I'm trying to make something of my own. *passing through/torn formations* is the first film to deal with my mother's side of the family—it's filled with passion and chaos. The previous work features a locked-down camera in confined spaces. But *passing through* begins with a camera floating through a nursing home, hovering over my mother as she feeds my grandmother Babji. I couldn't show death in my previous work, but here I had a very close connection. I loved my grandmother very much; she was the first to tell me that dreams were important, so her decline had to be dealt with directly. The film unravels from her; she's the matriarch. But it doesn't begin there. It starts with a Chris Dewdney poem called "The Quarry." A boy opens a rock which has a moth inside, destined for fossilization, and as he opens it, the moth flies out "like dust from a dust devil." The moth that's being freed is the uncovering of family history, making it an open, interactive system. My purpose in making the film was to try to return my uncle to the family. He's a street person who's been cast out because his mental instability and violence caused a lot of grief. Idealistically, I felt that I would make a film with him and make an interjection into a family history that never moves, where things aren't spoken.

HOOLBOOM: You remarked earlier that while making *?O,Zoo!* you'd assumed some of the form of Greenaway's work—that this was part of your diary approach. In *passing through* I felt you'd assumed or mimed your uncle's demeanour—the film is rife with splits, multiple exposures, simultaneous address, broken subjects, departures, wars, and arguments.

HOFFMAN: One of the stories my uncle told me was about his accordion. His father made him practice every day because he was going to be a great musician. But the instrument isn't balanced. You play the melody with your right hand and the bass line with your left, so you have to split your mind in two. He felt that's what led to his "manic depressive" or "schizophrenic" behaviour. I have a different take on it. I think he had a great capacity as an artist but wasn't allowed to express it except through the accordion. His parents had come to Canada from Czechoslovakia—at that time, the Austro-Hungarian Empire—and were already in their forties when he was born. He wound up in the pool halls listening to Elvis Presley and playing jazz accordion, but they couldn't accept that, and this rift grew into a psychosis. He thought it was bad to split your mind. But in order to watch the film you have to split, you have to think in a non-linear way. Because many stories are being told at the same time, the viewer has to choose how to move through it. The form relates not only to his ideas about the accordion but to the

way he is, as if I were him.

HOOLBOOM: The film also tries to heal some of these splits, and the central image of this integration is a corner mirror your uncle builds.

HOFFMAN: He made it because he'd heard someone talk about left/right-brain differences. He felt that when you shave in front of a mirror you're actually seeing yourself as a reflection—you don't see yourself as others do. He felt that all the years he'd been shaving helped split him apart, and he could solve this with the corner mirror: two mirrors which reflect into each other. He had to relearn how to shave because the reflection was the reverse of what he'd grown used to. He felt that ritual would exorcise his demons and heal him. He did the same thing in prison, when he rewired an electric organ so all the low notes started at the right and left ends of the keyboard: they were symmetrical and moved to a central note in the middle. Of course, he was the only person who could play that organ. [laughs] He was trying to unlearn conventions of the past, the way he'd conditioned himself to live. That moment of creation and transformation is the moment of freeing the moth from the rock. It's the moment where the image comes to the paper when you're making a photograph. It's magical because you're totally in the present watching what's becoming. That's what I got from him, that living instant, but on the other hand there were other things attached to him that became too difficult. He was like the elephant in *?O,Zoo!*, or the dead boy in *Somewhere Between*—the image that couldn't be looked at because he would be judged. So he's hardly shown.

My brother Phillip died at birth. My uncle Wally wasn't much older than me, so he became the brother I never had. Wally was born during the Second World War, while my grandmother was in great anguish over her brothers and sisters. While she was pregnant she grew a huge boil on her neck, and I use this as a metaphor in the film—as a poison coming to the surface. My grandmother was hearing stories about her brother's wife being raped by Russians and Nazis as they went through the country. After the war, my grandmother, mother, and Wally went back to visit. I guess Wally was about five. There were still blood-stained walls and ruins, and Wally got sick. No one went again until I did in 1984. That's the trip I show in the film, where I asked my grandmother's sister to tell me what happened with Uncle Janyk, who was shot by his brother. There was an argument over land. The son had built a house on land which had been promised to him but the father refused to sell it to him. He wanted to own his son. So the son killed the father. All these stories are strewn through the film, which has been deliberately made so you can't follow it like a *Roots* chronology.

I should say something about Marian McMahon's involvement with the film. With my life. We've been together a long time now, and she's changed the way I look at things, and I thought it was important to have her present in the film. The film ends with her voice making a very simple statement: "When I was eight years old, I skipped a flat stone six times across the smooth surface of Lake Kashagawigamog." This recalls the Dewdney poem at the beginning of the film, which is also spoken in darkness. Her speaking returns the film to Canada, or to a pre-Canadian continent, because Kashagawigamog is a Native word. So even though all these ethnic migrations are going on, both ends of the film deal with a time before the Europeans came. Dewdney's poem refers to geological time, and Marian's to a

time belonging to the Natives. The kind of relentless uncovering that the film attempts is something I learned from her. I had been working with “personal” film, so these interests attracted each other, but she showed me a way to go further. She’s a companion in this uncovering of our own histories. She taught me that our past is living in our present, in our bodies, and that it’s worth the dig. If you don’t uncover the past, you freeze up. There’s pain involved in both states, but the continued uncovering is alive—it feeds a living cinema.

HOOLBOOM: How did *river* (15 min., 1978-89) begin?

HOFFMAN: It started off as a shooting exercise when I was studying film at Sheridan. The idea was simply to make a film that would be edited in-camera. So I went to the Saugeen River with a Bolex and a Rex Fader that allowed me to dissolve from one shot to the next. Richard Kerr steered the boat. The Saugeen goes through Lake McCullough, where my parents have a cottage, and we’d go up there in the summer. I would fish for trout or just drift down the river. I wanted to come back now that I’d decided to work with images instead of fishing poles. To see what was there. I shot parts of the boat, and the water and the light, looked at it and put it away. Three years later I got hold of a black-and-white video port-a-pack, an old Sony half-inch, open-reel deck. I wanted to drift down the river and let the camera run. The microphone was on the bottom of the boat, which amplified the sound in a weird way—it picked up anything the boat hit. This time I went down the river without anyone paddling; the boat just followed the current while I stood up holding the camera. What ensued was the chaos of the trip. The sound is important because every little nudge and scratch is very loud, which contrasts with an idyllic floating-down-the-river scene. To my surprise, when I first showed it, people found this section quite humorous—the person’s struggle in the boat, a confrontation of “romance” with chaos. That became the second section. Then I duped the in-camera edit onto video with a looping soundtrack—instead of seeing the dissolves fade to black, you see the screen it’s being filmed off, which deconstructs the romance of the first scene. That was the third section, and each plays sequentially, one after another, moving on like the river. The last scene is shot underwater. I went with a couple of guys who were helping me because they had underwater housing for the Bolex. On the way up, I phoned my mother to tell her I was coming and she said, “Your uncle was found dead by a river; we think he shot himself.” Pretty gruesome. It really coloured my thinking about the river, deciding what to shoot in this last scene. It’s all filmed underwater with a high-contrast stock, and unlike the other sections, which flow smoothly, it’s fast, almost Brakhage-like. In the editing I worked on the death-rebirth motif. Three times the camera moves up into the light, and the film ends with light. Buddhists believe that the Bardo state is the moment where the spirit dissolves into the universe, and it’s commonly represented as light. I felt I needed to mark the death of my uncle because of the way it happened, the way it came to me. The only guides I’ve had in my filmmaking are these so-called coincidences.

HOOLBOOM: I remember when you started working on *Kitchener-Berlin* (34 min., 1990), you said that you’d spent so long working on your mother’s side of the family that you wanted to turn to your father—to tell his story.

HOFFMAN: I related my visual nature to my father’s side, the silence and image-oriented expression that were a part of my earliest experiments with pho-

tography. I used home movies that my uncle shot (my father's brother). There's no story, just home-movie moments mixed with photographs of Kitchener back when it used to be called Berlin. These are joined with newsreels from the other Berlin during wartime. Then the film revisits both sites in the present, using a Steadicam camera. It floats over surfaces, looking as if it can move without gravity, gliding in space.

HOOLBOOM: Why the Steadicam?

HOFFMAN: There's an obvious kind of spiritual feel to it, because you're floating in a world where the sky and ground are equivalent. It's something we can't do with our bodies, except through technology. So it's a metaphor for the spirit released. I wanted to contrast that with the low technologies—the home movies which take a familiar form and subject. The Steadicam provides a solitary and other-worldly stance, an emptiness and separation from anything it shows. There's something that separates the people sitting in front of these old buildings, that separates the remnants of German history from the present, and the camera signals this. This relates to masculinity. The Steadicam is part of the technology that can take us to far away places or destroy the world. I wanted to show different aspects of technology through the century, using the Steadicam to create a feeling of introspective space where one can look back and account for what's happened.

HOOLBOOM: Juxtaposed with images of the past, the Steadicam is filled with a sense of returning. Because its movement isn't attached to a body or person, and its movement is so uniform, it's as if the ghost of technology had ventured back to visit what it had occasioned, to look over all that's been constructed in its wake.

HOFFMAN: Yes, that's the journey. The Steadicam floats over continents, adding layers until there are three, four, five images over top each other. They show an old Austrian church, Berlin's bombing, an orange crane that looks like some technological beast, the Pope shaking hands with Native peoples, and machineries of the city. It builds to a point where the camera moves toward the sky, and then it breaks, overloaded, and the film dips into another strata. I went to the National Film Archives in Ottawa, looking for images of Kitchener during the war. An archivist named Trap Stevens said, "You should look at this old film—it's quirky." He pulled it out, and I was really moved by it. It touched something in me. The film was made by Dent Harrison, a British immigrant who came to Canada in the early part of the century. He arrived penniless and went into the bakery business, where he figured out how to cook a lot of bread at once by using rotating ovens. He made enough money to travel and own a movie camera. He made what I think is the first, Canadian, surrealist film. It pictured a dirigible flight from England to Canada, which I saw as technology coming to North America. I'd already related Kitchener to its German roots in Berlin and suggested how the philosophical bent of these new technologies related to the rise of fascism—how humans tried to become machines.

At first, I couldn't legitimize using Harrison's footage since it didn't have to do with Germany, but I realized I was neither German nor English, and that the English presence had been very strong in Kitchener. Harrison crosses the Atlantic in a dirigible and on a boat, and speaks of himself and a double making this travel. He's split himself in two in order to shoot the trip from two different perspec-



tives. Later, he begins to edit his film and he uses a superimposition of himself, so you see him and his double in the same space. After that, when he's asleep, his double moves out of his body. Then a subtitle reads: "Have you people seen all that I have in my dreams?" Then my film breaks into another section, which is more meditative, where the technology digs up the earth, using National Film Board footage of miners interspersed with stuff I shot of a more ethereal nature. There are more home movies and wheat fields and footage I shot in a cave, all defying meaning. The way the images arrive is a surprise—they don't seem to connect and, formally, they're hard to follow.

In the first section, you expect certain patterns to recur, while the second section tries to deal with images in a way that's less filled with "meanings"; it moves into a flow of dreams. After screenings of the film some people have spoken about unremembered images from their past. That's an area I'm working with in my new films. Among the images of the underground, the last picture shows a red dress—the little girl slips into the emulsion—which says to me, "Stay tuned. We'll see what comes out." The whole film is a rendering of what I see as my male, Germanic side. The first section is a walk through physical realities connected to the effects of technology, the male hand, so it includes the war and the Pope and the co-opting of Native cultures, all glimpsed through an ethereal camera. The second section is an inward journey. It's that simple. This shift is signalled by Harrison's old home movie, which begins in a very analytical and documentary fashion and then slides into a dream reality of doubles. The voyage over the Atlantic is linear, but once he's home, things begin to unravel. That's the inward journey.



HOOLBOOM: After finishing *Kitchener-Berlin*, you gathered up all of your work and named it as a cycle. This series of films progresses through the familial and the formal, through a number of documentary styles that seem finally bent on shaking off narrative or any traditionally understood sequencing of events.

HOFFMAN: It has to do with transformation. When I named this work as a finished cycle, I had to start again, and was as lost as I'd been at the beginning of my making. That's where I am now. Rick Hancox said the last films I've done all look very different. I feel that recently I've gone through a lot of changes very fast, and that's not always easy. You do it with your work, and then there's your life. So to imagine work in a cycle is useful. Finishing closed a way of working with the past, of dealing with the uncovering of family history. I'll always be able to return to that, but now it's time to make something else.

I went back to shooting super-8 without a plan or film in mind. This started in Banff, where the first films I ever shot—some of the super-8 footage in *Road Ended*—had been made. I returned in 1989 and new ideas came up. Two ways of shooting developed. One came out of the haiku of *Somewhere Between*, shooting events of everyday life in a static frame, but this time in super-8. The other way was a single-frame zoom. Maybe I'm contriving this new cycle, but it's a path to follow in the midst of all this chaos. The single-frame shooting will find its way into *Chimera* (15 min., 1996), while the haiku project is called *Opening Series*. The idea is to make twelve short films, using three shots for every film. They'll all be silent and wordless except for the title *Opening Series* (1992, ongoing project), which is a reference to Olson's "open form" and free association. It can't be pinned down as a static work of art or exhibited as my new film because it's always changing. These twelve films range from a few seconds to three minutes, and each has a picture on the cover of its box. I've been making paintings and xeroxing them and putting them on the covers; these serve as the titles. To decide on the order of the films, you look at the pictures and choose. So the film has many possibilities of flow. Every screening is different because it's connected to the person who picks the drawings, or sometimes the audience decides the order collectively. I was working on the paintings at the same time I was editing the films, so there's an organic connection between the two. I keep track of the different screenings and what I get out of them, the relationships between the films. They're images shot around the world. One begins with a wave cutting the screen diagonally and cuts to a bird sitting in remnants of old Egypt. The bird flies off and then there's a half-second shot of the falcon god. Images in other films have more formal connections. And then there are more "personal" pictures, images of home ...

HOOLBOOM: Will you put this film in distribution?

HOFFMAN: Maybe after a while, but I want to stay with it at this point just to see how it's working, because it all happens in connection with the people who make the choices. I need to see whether that works. I have a lot of fear in pinning down the films. I don't have a drive to repeat what I've already learned.

IN/BETWEEN SPACES

by Darrell Varga

Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice. For this reason, spatial practices concern everyday tactics.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

I think childhood is so traumatic we sleep through most of it.

Philip Hoffman, *Inside the Pleasure Dome*

The play of light and dark in Philip Hoffman's *river* (1978-79) arises from the tension between film and video, water and land, silence and sound, nature and culture, in an invocation to awake from the trauma of personal history. These tensions are not simple dualisms, but dialectical processes enmeshed in the experiences of space and time suggested in my opening quotations. *river* opens with a series of images shot on film from a small boat drifting down the Saugeen River, the sequence suggesting tranquility even as the calm flow is unsettled by the absence of sound.¹ We are presented with the frame as signifier of absence rather than window onto the world. The subsequent sequence realizes this landscape surface in the altogether different texture of black-and-white video, but now our relationship to this framed space is overdetermined by the presence of sound. While the technology of reproduction shifts from tactile and mechanical photography to its electronic counterpart, there is no longer human intervention in the steering of the boat, which now drifts according to the river's current. The boat's surface amplifies the sound waves as it floats over the water's surface in a movement of becoming simultaneously free and confined. The microphone rests on the boat seat recording the bump and grind of collisions with tree branches jutting out from the river's edge. The sound is both jarring in its amplification and hollow in artificiality. Likewise, the images are at once tranquil and interlaced with sudden reframing movements.

The camera frames the liquid surface, which in turn reflects the clouds floating in the sky above, at once an opaque sheen and permeable depth always mediated by the touch of photo-mechanical process. This easy contrast suggesting

1. I am indebted to the published description of the making of this and other of Hoffman's films in: Hoolboom, *Inside the Pleasure Dome*.



human intervention within nature is complicated by the subsequent scene in which the first segment is rephotographed. Here, the edges of the frame are evident, and the space on-screen where the dissolve sutures together transitions from one shot to another is effaced. Instead, we see the white screen onto which this rephotographing process is projected. This deferral of meaning is further destabilized in the final segment, a return to the river to film underwater. In this sequence, silent images move quickly between lightness and dark in an onward flow through the liquid surface and across the textures of sand, rock, and light, marking a reterritorialization of our relationship to this space in front of the camera. Movement no longer confined within the boat merges with the object of the image, the water as both surface and depth, recalling Gilles Deleuze's commentary on Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934):

On land, movement always takes place from one point to another, always between two points, while on water the point is always between two movements: it thus marks the conversion or the inversion of movement, as in the hydraulic relationship of a dive and a counter-dive, which is found in the movement of the camera itself ... Finally, a clairvoyant function is developed in water, in opposition to earthly vision: it is in the water that the loved one who has disappeared is revealed, as if perception enjoyed a scope and interaction, a truth which it did not have on land.

(*Cinema 1* 79)

In drawing out the relationship between Deleuze's thinking and Philip Hoffman's film practice, it is important to recall that for Deleuze, philosophy is not theoretical abstraction but is vital conceptual practice, a kind of "assemblage" in which the engagement with cinema reveals the practice of thought outside the confines of Cartesian dualism. Hoffman's filmmaking practice similarly depends upon the immediacy of intuitive and physical response. For Deleuze, cinema is a primary determinant of our understanding of space and time, and must be met outside of the constraining technical-interpretive methods of psychoanalysis.² Like the hollow sound of the boat bumping into the shore in *river*, Hoffman's films grind up against normative conventions of documentary and genre categorization. They offer a reconfiguration of indexical presence emerging against assumptions of fixedness formed by the borders of the frame, of order, finality, Truth. They can be understood, following Deleuze's fluid metaphors, as experimental process:

... no longer measured except in terms of the decoded and deterritorialized flows that ... [are caused] to circulate

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. The concept of "assemblage" comes from the translator's introduction, page xv, while Deleuze's relationship between philosophy and cinema is best articulated in his conclusion (230).

beneath a signifier reduced to silence ... embracing all that flows and counterflows, the gushings of mercy and pity knowing nothing of means and aims. (*Anti-Oedipus* 370)

By disrupting the ordered measure of images toward a coherent teleology, cinematic experimentation serves a necessary critical function. But its function is not simply as corrective to the positivist tendency of realist narrative and critical discourse; instead, it is the creation of an alternative space in-between that which is simply given and the idea of art as transformative and in which the act of seeing cannot be made co-extensive with believing.

That which is within the frame is never fully known and always points to absences beyond the border; it is this space that is both celebrated and mourned as simultaneous site of possibility and nothingness. While the commonplace understanding of space, of the landscape around us and within our movie frames, is as something that is simply a location for action and in itself simply given and neutral, space must be better understood as something that is socially produced and that can only be understood through our systems of cultural encoding. Hoffman's image-making, as exemplary of experimental practice, does not offer an unmediated window onto the world. Deleuze describes the importance of contemporary cinema as engaging a new mode of thought in three ways:

... the obliteration of a whole or of a totalization of images, in favour of an outside which is inserted between them; the erasure of the internal monologue as whole of the film, in favour of free indirect discourse and vision; the erasure of the unity of [hu]man and the world, in favour of a break which now leaves us with only a belief in this world.
(*Cinema 2* 187)

What cinema offers, when it breaks free from the relentlessness of the culture industry and systems of measure, is an image of thought outside of the commodified and spatialized containment of difference.

Hoffman's films engage this thought-movement by confounding easy distinctions between documentary and experimentation. These films exist in the spaces in-between film forms, in-between image and text, place and space, the body and its absence, photography, history and memory. As Blaine Allan indicates for several films, including *Kitchener-Berlin* (1990):

The slash and the hyphen in the titles suggest both a severance from the past and connections to it, an ambivalence that is especially poignant for the descendants of the area's



German settlers. The history of the area underpins the film, but refuses to bind it or restrict it from free association.

(Program Notes: New Works Showcase, Part III)

The landscape that is the surface texture of Hoffman's films is overlaid with a discourse of territorialism, of personal and political struggles over the domain of space. Prior to World War I, the Canadian town of Kitchener was called Berlin. The juxtaposition of war images with home-town in peacetime elicits a desire to uncover and transform the complicit relation between the name, the regimentation of territory, the onslaught of time, and technologies of mass destruction. This process is not nostalgia for a pre-war law of the father; throughout these films, and especially in the later *Sweep* (1995, co-directed with Sami van Ingen), there is a realization that the binding of a place to a name is an effacement of earlier cultures. The film's title evokes this brutal gesture of erasure—the legacy of colonization under which a discourse of Canadian space must begin.

The performative hyphen of *Kitchener-Berlin* both links and keeps apart these spaces, and it is here that personal history is uncovered through film images that play against the borders of static photography, the moving image, memory and forgetfulness, and through the creative process of immersion engaged by the multiplicity of overlapping images. The personal is complicit with instrumentalized destruction, whereby the silence institutionalized by the change of the town's name is given voice through cinematographic technology, itself enmeshed in the brutality that is the history of the twentieth century. Hoffman explains how this unresolved contradiction is present in his use of the Steadicam for present-day images acting as both free-floating spirit and masculine aggression:

... you're floating in a world where the sky and the ground are equivalent. It's something we can't do with our bodies, except through technology. So it's a metaphor for the spirit released. I wanted to contrast that with the low technologies—the home movies which take a familiar form and subject. The Steadicam provides a solitary and other-worldly stance, an emptiness and separation from anything it shows. There's something that separates the people sitting in front of these old buildings, that separates the remnants of German history from the present, and the camera signals this. This relates to masculinity. The Steadicam is part of the technology that can take us to far-away places or destroy the world. I wanted to show different aspects of technology through the century, using the Steadicam to create a feeling of introspective space where one can look back and account for what's happened. (145)

This process of movement is not a re-writing of history but an evocation of its absences, following Walter Benjamin's demand that we "brush history against the grain" (256-257). The relation to Benjamin is not incidental; his writings are filled with references to the shock effect of images and experiences that flare briefly and then disappear, but which, if recognized, fundamentally transform spatial and temporal understanding. Hoffman's archeological process is a Benjaminian translation of the past and casting forward into an unnameable future. There is no synthesis of this dialectic; instead, it is an offering that includes the necessary absences of forgetting and misconception haunting the reconfiguration of memory, an offering that realizes Hoffman's assertion that "the possibility of mourning lies in the unseen" (142).³ To think critically about Berlin is to look into the disaster of history and, in this case, to recognize the silent complicity in such acts as the erasure of the name Berlin from a place now called Kitchener. The art process that takes memory as canvas requires the failure of recognition (which is not the same as the absences of official history), in order to suspend instrumentalization and engage thought, as Deleuze describes:

When we cannot remember, sensory-motor extension remains suspended, and the actual image, the present optical perception, does not link up with either a motor image or a recollection-image which would re-establish contact. It rather enters into relation with genuinely virtual elements, feelings of déjà vu or past 'in general' ... [as in dream and fantasy]. In short, it is not the recollection-image or attentive recognition which gives us the proper equivalent of the optical-sound image, it is rather the disturbances of memory and the failures of recognition. (*Cinema 2* 54)

Hoffman's use of silence and the abrupt stasis of still photography disrupts the flow of movement as teleology of action and reaction, and acknowledges the unsayable: a mourning that cannot be reduced to the awkward gestures of language, but instead emerges in chance relations.

The overlap of image and experience in the opening segment of *Kitchener-Berlin* confounds the instrumentality of space. Under the simultaneously hypnotic and menacing drone of church bells mixed with intermittent construction machinery sounds, images of nighttime bombing in Berlin are juxtaposed with home-movie footage in Kitchener. The first image we see is of children opening Christmas presents, suggesting, however innocently, the commodification of home space, while the following war images indicate the brutal contestation for the control of nation-state territory—the bloodbath over who gets to name this space as "home." Intercut are still photographs of public spaces in the earlier days of

3. The comment refers to the decision not to photograph the body of a dead boy encountered during the filming in Mexico of *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984) and prefigures the need to reconcile the tragedy of loss that underpins *Destroying Angel* (1998).



Kitchener, and prominent among these are snapshots marking a “successful” hunting expedition, in which we see a row of deer carcasses inverted to bleed dry. Violence looms even in so-called peacetime. Our attention is drawn to both the violence which underpins homosociality and the way photography similarly frames, confines, and captures the subject while signifying absences beyond (and within) itself.

The photographs are ordered in temporal reverse (images of Kitchener appear first, and then those from when the town was called Berlin), while the film images move chronologically. A young boy steps forward to look into the camera and into a future he cannot see, except in fragments of the past. These images overlap the flow of present-era Steadicam shots, which suggest a wandering and free-floating quality while also drawing attention to the relentlessness of Western notions of progress. Frequently, we see the camera operator’s shadow floating through the collage, a reflexive presence engaging a link between past and present, between Kitchener and Berlin. But the shadow darkens the image, making it indistinct and the past irrecoverable.

Circulating through Hoffman’s films are documents from a past that can never be wholly known, while the overlaid present has already begun to fade. Out of what Bruce Elder, in his description of a tendency to investigate the nature of the photographic image in Canadian experimental film, calls this “double-sided nature of the concept of representation”⁽²⁵³⁾ in which presence is always bound to absence, Hoffman’s film practice brushes assumptions of photographic indexicality against the grain. Our relationship to these temporal and spatial domains is determined by structures of power out of which emerges the photographic trace. The towering trees of the Canadian forest circulate beneath images of imposing European cathedrals. Tourists gaze upward while their bodies legitimize the commodity-conquest of space. Simultaneously, Aboriginal peoples gaze into the camera as the Pope moves through the crowd, his image reproduced from television, the relentless flicker of video transferred to film reminding us of the invasiveness of systems of power even as the seductiveness of the image evades naming it as such. In the overlap of these images, the dialectical process of negation forces a recognition of absence without reconciliation.

The notion of cause and effect, of a teleology of history, is blasted apart and recognition is forced in the space of absence. There is no longer a totalizing unity in which thought is contained and experience is managed. Deleuze describes the importance of montage in the contemporary film as engaging the new by evading a causal association of images:

What counts is on the contrary the interstice between images, between two images: a spacing which means that

each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it ... Given one image, another image has to be chosen which will induce an interstice between the two. This is not an operation of association, but of differentiation, as mathematicians say, or of disappearance, as physicists say: given one potential, another one has to be chosen, not any whatever, but in such a way that a difference of potential is established between the two, which will be productive of a third or of something new. (*Cinema 2* 179)

For Deleuze, the cinema frame once allowed a stable system of measure in which disparate elements were brought together, but the contemporary screen is one of chance and simultaneity. Like Robert Rauschenberg's overloaded frames of experience and detritus, contemporary cinema arises out of a social and historical context in which faith in grand narratives has dissolved. Where we may see something new, it is in the unfixed, unstable terrain of the in-between.

The final section of *Kitchener-Berlin* is titled "Veiled Flight," evoking the recurring tension of simultaneous movement and the obstruction of vision. The final image of the film is of an unfocused figure bathed in washed-out red, a home-movie image superimposed over cave walls and appearing at first glance as an irregular beam of light. That which was given in memory and history has dissolved into waves of colour and a deferral of narrative mastery. This image follows a sequence in which the camera moves into a darkened cave where candles and a flashlight illuminate wall carvings, photographs, and other static images. Some of these images are similar to those found in primary school history texts, such as drawings of dinosaurs and early explorers, but from which the concluding dissolve of light sets us free. If we are bound in chains within this Plato's Cave, they are chains of our own making, images of power and discipline cast onto the earth.

This cave, in a town called Maastricht on the Dutch-Belgian border, is a quarry for the local community, and while material is extracted, local people bring images inside to affix to the walls. This space of found objects in turn reflects the collection of material with which the film itself is composed, and likewise reflects Hoffman's cinematic practice of free-moving immersion in the everyday. Following the collage of technocracy in the film's first half, this section can be understood as an inward journey, but it is a journey likewise bound up with the social process of mediation and materiality. The section begins with an inverted rural landscape and hydro-electric structure. The camera arcs downward and the hydro tower penetrates into the earth. Superimposed over this movement is archival footage of an old man awakening from his dream of technological progress (the trans-Atlantic Zeppelin flight of the middle prologue discussed below) to gaze into the disaster of history. What follows is a montage of underground mining footage cut with



home-movie images of Christmas gift-giving, a horse-riding competition, and footage from the making of an Imax film that stages Aboriginal communal life. In this film within the film, we again see the image of animals dead from the hunt, staged for the surveillance eye of the looming, authoritarian camera.

Hoffman has called these complex image-collages “polyphonic recitations” (Cantrill’s *Filmnotes* 41), evoking a contrapuntal multiplicity in the telling of stories through the entanglement of personal memory and history. It is interesting that the term privileges sound within this complex layering of images, perhaps to suggest an ephemeral musicality to the visuals in order to circumvent the instrumentalized relation between word and image common to conventional film reception. Likewise, the collage evokes another kind of absence. If the images from old home movies are obscured by the fading of the film surface and the scratches from many passes through the family projector, they speak as well of the impossibility of figuring the family as united by the law of the father—even as the film is explicitly described as marking the paternal side of the Hoffman family, its patterns of dispersion and settlement (41). The film does not present a simplistic nostalgia for a prelapsarian age, for it is a movement caught up in the blinding gust of the present combined with a masculinist desire to both know father and get out of his house.

The middle “Prologue” of *Kitchener-Berlin* is in fact a masculinist journey/progress narrative. It is composed entirely of edited material from an archival film called *The Highway of Tomorrow* or, *How One Makes Two*, made in the 1930s by a Canadian businessman named Dent Harrison. Hoffman describes being moved by the inventiveness of this film, which depicts a dirigible flight across the Atlantic and in which Harrison photographically creates a double of himself to facilitate photography from both the inside and the outside of the ship. Harrison then falls into a dream in which we see the double moving out of his body, as the final title card asks “Have you people seen all that I have in my dreams?”⁴ The question raised by this quirky film is complex; while serving as a document of flight, it freely embraces non-realist representational strategies, as if to signal that the dream of mobility is co-extensive with an alternative imaginary. The film is neither newsreel nor museum piece, and the opening title announces Harrison’s membership in the “Amateur Cinema League: The Worldwide Organization of Amateur Movie Makers.” As if to signify legitimacy through this internationalism, the title appears over a circulating globe similar to the opening of commercial newsreels. Yet “amateur” indicates a break from commercial or “professional” image-making, and the use of the title here signals an affinity with experimental practices in the true spirit of the term: an energy and practice of discovery unconstrained by commerciality.⁵

Experimental practitioners are likewise accustomed to having their work

4. The film is from the Dent Harrison Collection of the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa. See description in *Inside the Pleasure Dome* (146).

5. Philip Hoffman, personal interview, August, 2000.

derided as “amateur” by some elements of the mainstream. Harrison’s film is a story about travel and technological achievement, engaging Deleuze’s understanding of movement as the central concern of pre-WWII cinema, a reflection of technocratic will-to-mastery combined with a belief in the possibility of unity:

The mobile camera is like a general equivalent of all the means of locomotion that it shows or that it makes use of— aeroplane, car, boat, bicycle, foot, metro ... In other words, the essence of the cinematographic movement-image lies in extracting from vehicles or moving bodies the movement which is their common substance, or extracting from movements the mobility which is their essence. (*Cinema 1* 23)

Hoffman uses this footage to embrace the everyday and the idiosyncratic personal experience of time and space, but he also asks whether Harrison’s dream recognizes the collapse of order that is the consequence of our uses of technology, as reflected in Hoffman’s earlier comments on the use of the Steadicam.

Travel is a recurring motif in Hoffman’s films. His first, *On the Pond* (1978), is a reflection on childhood memory and how photography provides traces of the past while framing absences impossible to recover. His next, *The Road Ended at the Beach* (1983), presents the failure to enact Kerouac’s *On the Road* in the unfreedom of the Reagan-Thatcher-Mulroney era, as Hoffman has explained:

We’re all waiting on an experience that isn’t coming and no one’s sure why. It has a lot to do with how men relate to each other, dealing with outer realities, getting the job done ... The guys on the road are caught in dead-end jobs, and nobody’s relating to each other in the van ... The Beats were the fathers I took on the trip, but their roads are closed now. (Hoffman 141)

One thread of their destination is a meeting with Beat-era photographer Robert Frank to ask about the spirit of those times and the nature of his images. Instead, they end up talking about Frank’s life beside the ocean and lend a hand with the renovations to his cabin. Frank admits to an earlier innocence in the Beats, which allowed a sense of freedom, but then bluntly states that Kerouac is dead. Memories of other journeys intercede. The travellers encounter a man who has been continuously cycling since 1953 and has spanned the world numerous times with only the baggage he can carry on his bike. In contrast, the van these friends are driving in is cercarial and subject to frequent breakdowns. Yet the film persists with the question of what it means to travel, to document, and to exist within homosocial structures of power.⁶ Spontaneity and the poetry of free movement

6. The place of desire in the relationship between homosociality, homosexuality, and homophobia is explored in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

emerge when Hoffman is alone with the camera dancing on rocks at the water's edge. Here the images swirl, making tactile the visual plane in a celebration of looking unencumbered by obligations of language and social discourse. Yet the film refuses an easy privileging of this moment; while it offers pleasure and intensity, it exists within the borders of the social.

Sweep (1995) sifts through the imperialist legacy of travel. It is a journey north to the remote Ontario town of Kapuskasing and then to Fort George, a destination for Robert Flaherty, who was the great-grandfather of Sami van Ingen, Hoffman's collaborator. As the author of a foundational film in the history of documentary, *Nanook of the North* (1922), the spectre of Flaherty is collaborative, like it or not. But where that cinematic father journeyed north with the belief that the cinema can unproblematically capture and thus museumize northern people, Hoffman's desire is to shake off this legacy of colonialism, as he describes the problematic homosocial context of the film: "Two men, on the road AGAIN, sifting through past worlds where there is everywhere, dusty remnants of the 'great white father'. Colliding head on with the passing present we see him living in us."⁷ Past and present, fathers and sons: again, desire exists in-between these limits. This gap is filled with invocations of the everyday, in the gestures of home movies (another kind of hyphen), drawing us to the brink of representation and then dissolving in an overlap of experience.

The camera gazes at the spaces in-between image and text, photography and memory, body and place. The surface texture of the film, like the land north of Lake Superior, is overdetermined by the discourse of territorialism, the cultural divisions of space and place framed and divided amid the ruins of history. An irritating buzz overlays parts of the soundtrack, signifying the hydro-electric development that has irreparably disrupted life in the north, while at the same time extending a modicum of material benefits. The filmmakers understand themselves as embodying this southern technocracy, and choose to turn the camera onto their own presence and process of looking. Here, they work against the tendency, present since the days of Flaherty and in his more recent imitators, to objectify Aboriginal peoples within an unnameable (and thus exploitable) landscape.

The colonial project requires the landscape to be empty and unnamed in order to legitimize the narrative of discovery, conquest, and exploitation. *Sweep's* counter-narrative displaces that prescriptive and exclusionary project of imagining community, in which difference is displaced by the construction of unity under the banner of tradition. In this way, my use of the concept of in-between spaces intersects with Homi Bhabha's use of that term to describe the intersection of theory and practice. For Bhabha, the hybrid subject position within colonialism, where the act of production is overdetermined by the spectre of the West, at the

7. Philip Hoffman, *Sweep* catalogue description, Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, <<http://www.cfmde.org>>.

same time subverts these hegemonic and binary assumptions. As Bhabha states:

Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities. For the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of the irredeemably plural modern space. (149)

Sweep opens with a silent, archival film of white explorers interacting with the indigenous Cree people. They are on the deck of a ship posing for a photo when the white men begin to playfully fight with each other. The image fades to black, but this spectre of homosocial aggression continues to hang over the landscape as the camera pans in a sweeping gesture of our technological view. The final passage of the film weaves together images of the landscape with that of a cultivated flower garden, memories of family and childhood experiences, the looming hydroelectric structures, and the archival footage of the Cree, in front of which stand the filmmakers in silhouette. This intertwining of history and structures of settlement, of looking and landscapes suggests how all of these spaces are produced within a given cultural context and how they overlap and change in the process of engagement.

In-between framed space are the desires and betrayals of the body—caught in the photograph’s decisive moment and in the relentlessness of time. *Destroying Angel* (1998, co-directed with Wayne Salazar) is, on the one hand, a mourning for the death of Hoffman’s life partner and collaborator, Marian McMahon, while also being a celebration of Wayne’s gay marriage. In an early scene, Wayne and Marian are cooking dinner while Hoffman, from behind the camera, implores: “Come on you guys, act.” The photographer-subject power relationship is inverted as Marian asks Phil to explain how he would “act.” The dialogue merges this gap of presence and absence while revealing the performative nature of representation and confounding the possibility of verisimilitude—that which is true is transformed in this process of seeing, remembering, and making into film. These are intensely personal images, which raise questions over the representation of self. The scene follows Wayne’s introductory narration, which reflects on his childhood travels through the American mid-West with his insurance-salesman father, and foregrounds the role of memory in Phil and Marian’s work. Wayne’s reflection is triggered by the spatial similarity of Phil and Marian’s home to those farms he visited during childhood. Childhood is embraced as a place of wonder, but this process of memory simultaneously brings forth an archeology of tyranny. The convergence of space through the figurations of memory allows the emergence here of both art

and mourning, following de Certeau:

Memory derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered—unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position. Its permanent mark is that it is formed (and forms its “capital”) by arising from the other (a circumstance) and by losing it (it is no more than a memory). There is a double alteration, both of memory, which works when something affects it, and its object, which is remembered only when it has disappeared ... Far from being the reliquary or trash can of the past, it sustains itself by believing in the existence of possibilities and by vigilantly awaiting them, constantly on the watch for their appearance. (86)

What de Certeau asserts for memory follows his understanding of space as a network of transformative possibilities that emerge in movement rather than in the fixedness of property, and evokes the treatment of space and travel throughout Hoffman’s films.

What is necessary for Wayne is a movement of reconciliation, which requires confronting and moving away from his father. The camera holds on a close-up of his face against a black background, as we hear (but do not see) him read a letter to his father, in which he expresses his anger for childhood physical and emotional abuse while understanding that in spite of this pain, there remains love between them. The close-up at first appears to be a still image, but the subject blinks a few times and his presence is felt. The purpose of Wayne’s letter is to gain control over his life, to set himself free from the constraints of family by controlling the terms of contact. Here, Wayne tells his father he has AIDS. Earlier shots expose the array of pills he consumes each day. A later scene, again in the kitchen, has Wayne explaining to Marian the purpose of the various medications, while a series of quick cuts of close-ups relates the everyday pleasures of cooking and sharing food. The subject of disease is integrated into the everyday, and formally Hoffman is, in his words, “cooking with the camera.”⁸ These ritual gestures recur throughout Hoffman’s films, as if what can no longer be found in the fixed assertion of language or the disciplinary boundaries of space exists in the margins, in the fluidity of the everyday. The conversation between Wayne and Marian reflects upon the need to exercise individual control in confrontation with disease. It is the flipside to the more formal ritual of Wayne’s gay marriage which, while celebrating and affirming love, is also a public demand for social recognition and legitimacy in the face of homophobic patriarchy.

The father, in a moving speech during the wedding reception, celebrates Wayne’s marriage while at the same time reasserting his own sense of authority,

8. Philip Hoffman, personal interview, August, 2000.

even if only to himself. Wayne's father claims that he has learned to be "liberal-minded," while earlier the film has detailed the tyranny of control hanging over his relationship with Wayne. These gaps are not reconciled in a negation of the past; rather, they acknowledge the coexistence of contradictions—the context for self-discovery and social transformation. The father's speech and its inclusion in this film is a means of passage out from under the difficult memories of childhood. This movement is, unfortunately, met by the painful news of Marian's fatal cancer, a tyranny of the body, which is caught like Walter Benjamin's angel of history:

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257)

As tragic as Marian's death is, the film does not sentimentalize or mystify. Her death is instead put in the context of life as a process that necessarily includes struggle and suffering beyond individual control. The film's title, *Destroying Angel*, recalls Theodor Adorno's comment that Klee's angel is caught up in the destructiveness of the present:

The Angelus Novus, the angel of the machine ... The machine angel's enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it. But, as Walter Benjamin, who owned the drawing, said, he is the angel who does not give, but takes. (194)

I have made earlier references to Hoffman's use of images "caught up in the blinding gust of the present" to express what is a central concern of his work, so well encapsulated in Benjamin's meditation on Klee's angel: the impossibility of totality and reconciliation in any movement into the future.



Like the history of territorialism that constrains the potential for freedom in travel, memory harbours suffering, and its presence can unwrap the protective veil of forgetfulness. *Destroying Angel* concludes with Wayne reading from Marian's journal. In this entry, Marian works through the possibility that her desire to retrieve painful memories has triggered illness:

How can we reclaim memories without them becoming burdensome? I travelled to a forgotten past in order to understand a fragmented present. What I retrieved was a pent-up history of abuse and violence that I sometimes, usually afterwards, thought best left hidden. What I am beginning to understand is that insight does not come suddenly but rather slowly and repetitively.

As we hear Marian's thoughts and accept her absence, we see still images of her walking along the edge of a body of water. The photograph grows larger as it moves through a tunnel-like black frame toward the camera (recalling the background black void of Wayne's close-up, cited earlier). Her body and the landscape are frozen by technologies of looking, transforming earlier images of the shore and the water in motion, forever shifting in form and direction even if understood only through the fixed perspective of the frame. These questions of the space of nature and the place of mourning are forever contained within the structures of the living.



still: *Destroying Angel*.

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THE WORKMANSHIP OF RISK: THE RE-EMERGENCE OF HANDCRAFT IN POSTMODERN ART

by Polly Ullrich

1. Pierre Cabanné, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*.

2. David Pye, quoted in Tanya Harrod's "Paradise Postponed."

3. Joseph Beuys, quoted in Peter Burger's *The Decline of Modernism*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992.

4. Author's interview with Laura Hoptman, fall 1997.

Pierre Cabanné: "What is the cerebral genesis of the 'Large Glass?'"

Marcel Duchamp: "I don't know. These things are often technical."

Cabanné: "It's odd that you, who are taken for a purely cerebral painter, have always been preoccupied with technical problems."

Duchamp: "Yes. You know, a painter is always a sort of craftsman."¹

Craftsmanship is "a word to start an argument with."

British crafts theorist David Pye²

Art is shaping.

Joseph Beuys³

A generation after the advent of conceptual and electronic art, handicrafts—long bound by tradition—have re-emerged as radical and fresh practices. Paul Shimmel, North American curator for the most recent Sao Paulo Biennale, has identified "a concentration of decoration and craft as the new common ground" for the next generation of young artists (Leffingwell 39). Lisa Phillips, curator of the 1997 Whitney Biennial, has also identified increased "attention to handmade things and elaborate processes" as a noticeable characteristic of some of the newest art (Kaufman 12). Laura Hoptman, an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who included works by the painters Elizabeth Peyton, John Currin and Luc Tuymans in a recent show, calls their hand-built surfaces "radical" because of their "unashamed" celebration of the act of painting itself and their lack of postmodern ironic cynicism.⁴ Even the stuffy National Portrait Gallery in London last year reported a record number of entries (689) to its portrait competition for artists under the age of forty.

Much of the disembodied "avant-garde" conceptual art made now no longer seems as fresh as it once did—perhaps because it relies too heavily on conventions devised twenty-five years ago. Indeed, one of the original practitioners of "dema



photo: shooting *passing through/torn formations*, Dachau Concentration Camp, 1984. Photo by Judy Rozenzweig.

terialized” art, Mel Bochner, has now embraced heavily handworked abstract painting. Other artists who once worked in an “old-fashioned” conceptual, deconstructive mode, such as Richard Prince, have followed suit. “Most of the forms that artistic ‘rebellion’ has taken in the last twenty-five years have become academic,” Bochner has said. “Ironically, painting is now a lot less predictable” (qtd. in Meyer 142).

Today, embracing handwork does not necessarily mean abandoning Conceptualism. Bochner, for example, uses his paintings to address philosophical issues as dense as any he worked on in the ‘60s, primarily by recording—via brushstrokes made by hand—the mental processes that go into making art. And Courtenay Smith, curator of last year’s *Post-Pop, Post-Pictures* show at the David and Alfred Smart Museum in Chicago, points out that while younger artists such as Michelle Grabner, John Pomeroy and David Szfranski produce shimmering, compact surfaces, their work still speaks to conceptual and postmodern themes, and is not a regressive revisiting of Modernist purity and formalism.⁵

5. Author’s interview with Courtenay Smith, fall 1997.

How can the handcrafts in art be “radical”? In some circles, the terms seem mutually exclusive. Actually, the synthesis of hand facture and postmodernism has roots in the nineteenth century with the invention of photography, when it became clear that mimesis was no longer the primary function of art. The emphasis on artworks as special, handmade, precious objects conveying a peculiar, individual power, rather than as attempts to replicate reality, began to take hold. The handcraftedness of fine-art objects, downplayed since the Renaissance in an effort



to distance them from less prestigious handcrafted objects such as pottery or textiles, gained new respect. Now, with the postmodern blending and leveling of categories, art and craft have edged closer toward an acknowledged, and not shameful, union. But more than that, the increasing status of handcraftsmanship—and the issues surrounding it in art—subverts some basic philosophical and aesthetic tenets in the West. Handcrafts, with their relation to the body and the physical senses, counteract the drive toward technology and dematerialization in our culture. The traditional identification of handcrafts with minorities and women also allows these processes to reveal alternative voices. Critic Barry Schwabsky commented that the African-American artist Robert Colescott's paintings in the United States pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale were “a reminder that what seems most traditional can be most subversive” (23).

What does it mean to be using hand processes to make art in this postmodern age of the simulacrum? The recent renaissance of handwork can be identified with a wide variety of sources. The following is an attempt to draw on some of these sources to clarify the place of the hand in contemporary art.

THE HAND AND ART AS SENSUOUS IDEA

A sixteenth-century duel, recounted in the memoirs of the Renaissance sculptor Baccio Bandinelli, was fought between Bandinelli's cousin and the Vidame of Chartres because of some particularly rancorous fighting words from the Vidame. The Vidame claimed that Florentine nobles who had taken up painting and sculpture were actually practising the “manual arts” (Mainzer 186). This, of course, was an insult not to be ignored during the Renaissance. Artists were struggling then to separate themselves from hand-oriented crafts such as glass-making or pottery and to ally themselves with poets, architects, and musicians into a new, more refined, intellectual and prestigious category called “fine art.” Historically, sculptors and painters had been classified as artisans and craftspeople—not “artists”—and they therefore suffered from an association with manual labor, a prejudice going back to ancient Greece.

During the Middle Ages, sculptors belonged to guilds that included stone masons and bricklayers, while painters belonged to guilds for gilders and saddlers. Eventually, craft guilds became powerful political forces—powerful enough to challenge the grip monarchs had thus far held over such activities. It was no accident that the advent in the seventeenth century of artists' academies, which drew artists away from membership in guilds, was heavily sponsored by monarchs and those in royal courts who saw an opportunity to break the power of the guilds. This separation—between painters and sculptors and the other craft workers—definitively severed fine art from craft, and also led to a separation of intellect and hand (or

body), a break that was a result of politics rather than aesthetics.

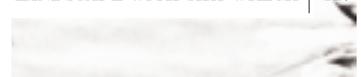
The duality between craft (the hand/body) and art (the mind) came to a head in philosophical and aesthetic debates during the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The foundation of this dualism—the Cartesian split between the mind and the material world (where the act of thinking, rather than feeling or sensing, assures us of our existence)—still reaches into our postmodern culture. The dominance of brainwork over handwork is reflected today in art and cultural theory that privilege language over images and objects. “I often talk about postmodernism as precisely the fulfillment of certain Enlightenment agendas,” University of Chicago art historian Barbara Maria Stafford has said. Nevertheless, she adds, there is a human need to be “anchored in something that isn’t merely simulated, degraded or cerebral ... The body is our locus ... for experiencing the world. So we have to at some fundamental level revalue it again, and say that it is aesthetically spiritual and that it is mental, just as the mind is corporealized and spiritualized” (qtd. in *Sculpture* 13-14). The privileging of the human hand in art-making calls into question Western dualism: what cultural theorist Homi Bhabha calls “binary boundaries,” the domination of either/or polarities in defining the world around us (251). However, the search to reintegrate the hand, the body, and the physical senses in art does not mean a retreat into an essentialism or universalization. The hand, as a sign of the individual, is potentially the ultimate purveyor of idiosyncrasy, personal identity, and spiritual power. Probably for that reason, pre-historic artists covered cave walls with hundreds of hand images.

The synthesis of the hand and the mind as a way of life has a long history in craft art. The potter Marguerite Wildenhain, for example, writes:

This intimate correlation of the quick perception of the eye with the inner concept of the heart and mind, and the sensitive training of the hand, this immediate reaction of all the capacities of a human being, will always be the aim of any training of a craftsman and artist. It is only the potency of these combined abilities that will give the artist the power to convey what he feels in his own personal way. (133)

Contemporary craft theory of the hand also has deep roots in Asian art. Japanese aesthetician and writer Shoetsu Yanagi, whose classic *The Unknown Craftsman* influenced several generations of Western craft artists, calls the question of the survival of handcrafts ...

... not simply technological or economic, but, basically, a spiritual question ... It seems to me that there is something so basic, so natural in the hand that the urge to utilize its



power will always make itself felt ... The chief characteristic of handcrafts is that they maintain by their very nature a direct link with the human heart, so that the work always partakes of a human quality. (107-108)

Yanagi helped popularize the 400-year-old Japanese tea ceremony in the West, an aesthetic outgrowth of Zen Buddhism. The Way of Tea counters Western dualistic notions of beauty and ugliness, asymmetry and symmetry. According to the Japanese custom, the best art shows austerity, humility, depth, simplicity, restraint, intuition, and even imperfection—qualities that are the very opposite of many Greek ideals.

Trying to find the way out of the problem of dualism (beautiful/ugly, mind/hand, art/life, consciousness/world) has been a persistent thread underlying twentieth-century Western philosophy and aesthetics. Two writers—French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and crafts theorist David Pye—have made perhaps the most striking contributions by interpreting the work of art—and its making—as a seamless fusion of the sensual and the intellectual. This radically moves the artwork beyond pure idea or mere intentional act.

Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenologist, countered a dualistic philosophical tradition beginning with Plato by suggesting that human consciousness and perception are fundamentally connected to the world; there is no “inner realm” that opposes, dominates, and organizes an otherwise impenetrable and meaningless “outside” world of matter (including the body). This “theory of embodiment” argues that human perception, rather than being cerebral and transcendental, is incarnated through, and inseparable from, the body and its senses. Humans perceive the world, then, from a position of reciprocity, not domination: when one touches, one is touched in return. Since art is about perception, this interconnection has striking ramifications. While works of art have semantic qualities, “formal configurations which refer, in some sense, beyond themselves,” they are also more than their linguistic structures (Crowther 48).⁶ Art tries to engage “our whole being”—not just cognitively, but by constructing a sensual reality as we might encounter it in perception itself, through the marks, the erasures, and the physical processes left by the artist’s hand in the work. Artworks reflect our own insertion in the world—a blend of transcendental meaning and physical presence—and are “individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed” (44).

The craft world has always intermixed process, material and meaning. The meaning of a traditional ceramic vessel, for example, is deciphered in the complex of associations about it—its clay (and the historical lineage that the use of the clay reflects), its method of making (and the historical alliance with artists who developed the method over thousands of years), as well as its function (the meaning of

6. Crowther’s analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s place in postmodern art is extremely insightful.

the pot is completed only when it is used). This last, of course, was recognized by that great saboteur of art categories Marcel Duchamp, who, although he detested sensual painting, handcrafted his masterwork *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* over a seven-year period.⁷ Duchamp insisted on calling himself a “craftsman,” and maintained that bad craftsmanship in an artwork should never be allowed to detract from the purity of its idea. Like a craft artist, Duchamp combined meaning with use, linking the audience (or user) with the essential meaning of the art: “I consider, in effect, that if someone, any genius, were living in the heart of Africa and doing extraordinary paintings everyday, without anyone’s seeing him, he wouldn’t exist,” Duchamp told the writer Pierre Cabanné. “The artist exists only if he is known ... because, in brief, it’s a product of two poles—there’s the pole of the one who makes the work, and the pole of the one who looks at it. I give the latter as much importance as the one who makes it ... A work is made of the admiration we bring to it” (Cabanné 69).

7. Robert Motherwell was the first to call Duchamp “the great saboteur” in his introduction to Cabanné’s book, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*.

The British architect, designer and craftsman David Pye, who casts a skeptical eye on the moralizing and sentimental aspects of the craft world, also subverts dualism in art theory by identifying a core idea that has—until recent times at least—always been valued both in fine and craft art. Pye, a woodworker, never liked the phrase “done by hand,” saying that it is uselessly restrictive and inexact. “What does ‘handmade’ mean?” Pye asks. “No tools?” What about a hand loom, or a potter’s wheel? He likes to point out that the use of machine processes did not begin with the Industrial Revolution, adding that the water-driven hammer is an ancient tool. Pye’s core value, an essential component in the process of making, is what he calls the “workmanship of risk.” The workmanship of risk

... means simply workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgement, dexterity, and care which the maker exercises as he works ... The quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making. (20)

Pye contrasts this with the “workmanship of certainty,” which is found in quantity production and automation. Speed is usually the incentive behind the workmanship of certainty, and the quality of the product predetermined and predictable. Pye maintains that the workmanship of risk means that the “risk” must be real: “Can the worker spoil the job at any moment?” (61-62)

Why is the workmanship of risk valuable in art objects? The workmanship of certainty can also yield high quality. Only through the workmanship of risk, however, is it possible to reveal the sense of life and moment-by-moment human decision that are recorded in the process of making. The workmanship of risk may



produce subtlety, richness, and variety in a work's formal elements, qualities that deepen upon inspection. Pye writes: "A thing properly designed and made continually reveals new complexes of newly perceived formal elements the nearer you get to it" (61). These slight improvisations and irregularities, with contrast and tension between them, from the smallest visible scale on up, are what vitalize and individualize art.

Although Pye dislikes the term "handmade," the qualities he finds most important in art making are almost always associated with the hand: individuality; variety; facility; close, tactile familiarity with a material; and an emphasis on an intimate visual range in experiencing an artwork. To perceive what Pye calls "diversity" requires the observer to move in close—within hand's reach—and to employ much more than a narrow, Cartesian cerebral capacity.

THE HAND AND THE PROBLEM OF THE "REAL"

Art that is grounded in materials-based handwork holds a special dialogue with a postmodern culture, which negates a firm foundation as a basis for constructing reality. When Belgian artist Luc Tuymans describes his paintings as "authentic falsifications," an apparent oxymoron, he articulates the syncretic position of artists who make handmade postmodern art. Tuymans' pale brushmarks construct aloof, barely legible, abstracted images of troubling subjects, as in his elegant, understated, late-1980s paintings of concentration camps. These pared-down, psychically bland works—which Tuymans calls "unimages"—force the viewer to complete their meanings (Hoptman). But Tuymans' evanescent paintings—like the work of a number of younger and mid-career artists—pointedly remain physical objects that accommodate and reflect their conditional, ever-mutating postmodern environment. Their status as objects is gained through their handmade qualities.

This work elaborates on contemporary art theory inaugurated by Walter Benjamin, who wrote that technology, with its speed and its endless ability to multiply and reproduce, has transformed art irrevocably. Mechanically appropriated images, while undermining traditional assumptions about originality in art (what is real or authentic?), circumvent a direct, physical give-and-take with the art object, for the maker and viewer alike. Even more broadly, deconstructive theories coming out of a French philosophical context and taken up by the art world have challenged the very idea of unequivocal, or grounded, perception itself and have described a dematerialized "everyday surface of life." Finding meaning either in oneself or in the world depends not on a single perceptual standpoint and a bedrock of certain meaning, but on deciphering an unstable, ever-changing network of relations surrounding it (Crowther 5).

While Tuymans' paintings seem to echo the fleeting style of contemporary



photo: Independent Imaging Retreat.

electronic culture, his concentrated hand facture pulls his art into the physical world. Significantly, Tuymans began his art career in film, and carefully culls his images from books, newspapers and snapshots. But the work is obstinately somewhere, of a place. Laura Hoptman calls this a “significantly changed attitude among new painters,” an integration of the conceptual with a serious, passionate and unironic love for the physical act of painting. “This work is about preparing to stun you with the painting,” she says.⁸ Tuymans has called his work so “concentrated” that he compares it to “another type of arousal” (qtd. in Hoptman). While the images may be pulled from standard media sources, these artworks are not merely “representations of representations.” Rather, they unabashedly seduce the viewer into a visual engagement with the material qualities of the art, and as such hold a radical, and rooted, position in the variable play of meaning.

8. Author’s interview with Hoptman.

The combination of a fleeting, transient, postmodern sensibility with the flat-out gorgeousness of handworked material is also apparent in the work of some mid-career artists such as Lari Pittman’s baroque, flamboyantly decorated paintings, for example, or Phillip Taaffe’s Islamic patternings, which involve numerous hand processes that include constructing templates, sanding, painting, hand-inking and collaging. Taaffe describes his art-making as “a search for the ruthless thing,” noting, “what I want to make is something very physical and very perceptually demanding” at the same time (122). The Smart Museum’s *Post-Pop, Post-Pictures* featured work that is “highly conceptual and also a seductive object,” according to curator Courtenay Smith.⁹ In the show, John Pomara’s heavily worked enamel, Varathane varnish, and ink diptychs with images that echo the

9. Author’s interview with Courtenay Smith, fall 1997.



electronic blurs on television; Michelle Grabner's painstakingly hand-replicated household patterns painted with enamel on plywood; and David Szafranski's legal pads minutely and densely covered with tiny prints and hand drawings all expressed edgy postmodern themes while still calling attention to how carefully the pieces were made. This intentional positioning of the artwork in the material world does not deny the complexity—and diffusion of standpoints—in constructing meaning in postmodern culture. But the mediation of meaning through the human hand and body can rehumanize art and provide a powerful embodied reference point—a “real” map—within a provisional experience that has been “analyzed away in a mere play of relations” in much currently fashionable theory (Crowther 17).

THE HAND AND THE CONVERGENCE OF SPACE, TIME AND THE SENSES

Early conceptual art evolved from what was called the “priority of the idea” in art-making, a sense that the idea for the work comes first, and therefore is the most essential part of art. In the early 1970s, Mel Bochner's masking tape and text artworks, for example, were not just straightforward vehicles for communicating ideas, but were actually visual investigations into—and critiques of—ideas as institutions. Bochner, however, had already begun to lose faith by the mid-1970s, noting that there is no primacy to any aspect of experience. What, for example, about ideas that develop while making art? Bochner's transition to intensely hand-worked, sensuous abstract painting allowed him to continue his investigations into watching how the mind works. “For me, painting, because it is in and of the material world, offers an access to the processes of the mind, to the indecisions and uncertainties philosophy can't cope with,” he notes (qtd. in Stuckey 19). His distaste for “literalist” or “declarative” art—“painting is not merely a statement; it is also a question”—allows Bochner to emphasize process in art-making, along with the complexity, ambiguity and doubt that are part of it. In his early work, Bochner explored the intersection of space and language (or ideas) through visual riddles. Now, by recording a “narrative of revisions” through his brush strokes, Bochner's paintings intersect space (or the visual) with time. “In painting, I want to encode time as it evolves” (qtd. in Meyer 101).

The compression of time into an artwork through hand processes turns up in contemporary sculpture as well. Tom Friedman and Gary Justis both use meticulous handwork to produce their conceptually oriented pieces. Friedman's obsessively hand-processed everyday materials—a self-portrait carved out of an aspirin, a piece of bubble gum stretched twenty feet from floor to ceiling, or 30,000 toothpicks glued into a starburst form—skewer Modernist conventions of solemnity and scale. Justis' elegant, hand-made machines echo a Duchampian mixture of

mechanics and mythology. There is no one-liner quality to these works; the sculptures of both artists take time—both to make and to experience. Justis hammers home the message with his sculptures, so to speak: they sometimes contain small gongs that chime in repetitive cycles, lulling the viewer into a meditative wait—with an emphasis on that interval of time—for each successive ring.

The use of the hand in art-making can convey extraordinary psychic depth and physical density when time is part of the process. Vija Celmins' thickly built-up drawings and paintings of galaxies, oceans and deserts exude, for example, what she calls a "fatness" or a "volume." The pieces are "phenomenological investigations," translations of experience into condensed matter beyond a mere idea. Celmins' search for this "rich and complete form" in her work (such as putting eighteen layers of paint on a canvas, and still not being finished) links time and physical matter: "I like to think that time stops in art," Celmins once told an interviewer. "When you work on a piece for a long period it seems to capture time ... when you pack a lot of time into a work, something happens that slows the image down, makes it more physical" (Silverthorn 42). Celmins' hand-made paintings, once again, balance the scale between idea and embodiment, emerging as relentlessly consolidated fields of intellectual and physical matter.

THE HAND AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

Finally, for good or bad, the use of the hand in art has often carried overtly moral and ethical overtones in some art circles. This attitude is often attributed to the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the last century, and especially to one of its British leaders, William Morris. But in practice, Morris, who wrote and lectured frequently about the importance of handcrafts and who founded the Morris and Company craft and design firm, "never made a shibboleth of handwork" and didn't argue against the use of all machinery, especially when workers were not exploited and the quality of the output was good (Harrod 7). Instead, his real aim was social change; for Morris, who was a socialist, handcraft meant work without the division of labour between worker and designer, unlike the rigidly hierarchical and exploitive industrial workplace of the nineteenth century. Morris linked social and political renewal with aesthetics, arguing that the promotion of handwork not only improved society by reorganizing relationships in the workplace, but that it was also a path to personal and moral development for the art worker. Because of Morris and other Arts and Crafts leaders, "the mark of the hand" became a prestigious feature in decorative art and manufactured goods at the time, no matter what their quality—leading to David Pye's ironic story about a potter who, in discussing his teapot adds, "Of course it leaks. It's hand-made" (Pye 123).

A rigorously pure theory of handwork, however, did evolve from the Arts and



Crafts movement and continues to affect the contemporary craft world today. Pioneering studio-craft leaders—among them Bernard Leach, Michael Cardew, and William Straite Murray—began to articulate values that placed less emphasis on Morris’ social crusading and more on craft objects as the equals of painting and sculpture. By the 1930s, craft had broken with the political Left; to socialists, making “luxury” items by hand seemed self-indulgent during an economic depression. No longer part of the industrial or economic base, craft objects evolved into art objects.

Influenced by the modernists Clive Bell and Roger Fry (who democratized art hierarchies), the new craft leaders conveyed attitudes that defined them more as artists than designers or laborers. They emphasized integrity, timelessness and authenticity in their work, with an extreme sensitivity to materials and the desire to work spontaneously and simply with them (Harrod 8-9). Leach, at his Saint Ives Pottery in England, lived out a stringent paradigm of handwork that still influences craft artists, and which extends from the beginning to the end of the art-making process, “from digging the clay himself, to throwing and decorating the pots, to firing them in a kiln he had built, with wood he had collected himself” (35).

This attitude, rather than promising social improvement in general, still carried a high ethical tone: the arduous hand skills (and, consequently, life skills) developed over time by the artist became the standard for his or her character development and moral worth. As craft objects have become more like art objects, a terrible anxiety has arisen in some corners of the craft world: that the crafts are being corrupted by the fine-art world and its marketplace. In a talk titled “Craft as Attitude,” delivered at a forum called *Re-Visioning the Crafts* at the Penland School for Crafts in the mid-1980s, ceramist Wayne Higby complained about the low quality of craft art, saying that crafts were becoming so “slick” that “the maker’s hand is no longer visible.” Higby said that the humanistic, spiritual principles originally at work in crafts because of their thoughtful, handmade qualities are being degraded by an art establishment that rewards artists who are the best marketers, not artists with the most integrity (qtd. in Malarcher 40).

This, ironically, is a complaint often heard from fine artists as well. Eric Fischl, for example, in looking back at what he thought was the shallowness—the inattentiveness to hand skills and art history—in his own early art training, comments angrily:

Part of the problem is that artists of my generation were not educated. We were not given the equipment, because it was generally believed to be irrelevant. Drawing, eye-hand coordination, art history—really relevant stuff—was considered unnecessary ... in fact, it is incredibly disrespectful of the

importance of history that we train people to be amateurs. I deeply resent the kind of flattery that replaced discipline. We were made to feel from day one that we were artists, fully sprung from the womb an artist. What experience has shown me is that it takes your life to become an artist. (qtd. in Tuten, 79)

As categories continue to be dismantled and mixed together, many fine artists and craft artists alike find that they frequently stand on common ground, especially as their work revolves around the issues of process, materials and handwork. In the craft world, this is called “crossover,” and it is often met with consternation—as well as elation. Clearly, a sculptor such as Jim Hodges, who constructs knotted chains of silk flowers and thread into large-scale, delicate webs and floating walls, has direct connections to fiber art through his hand processes and materials. And among politically oriented artists, the painter Sue Williams, who developed a savvy reputation based on her strident, painful images of sexual abuse, has continued those themes, but now through intensely worked oil and acrylic paintings. In fact, the prominence of a number of contemporary painters who are not necessarily affiliated in any other way—Terry Winters, David Ortins, William Wood, Therese Oulton, Hunt Slonem, Juan Usle, Prudencio Irazabal, and Juliao Sarmento—is due in large part to the striking qualities of the hand work in their art.

To acknowledge the importance of hand work in art is not a revelation; early modernist works such as Cezanne’s paintings reveal themselves through heavily hand-applied brushwork and materials. And there is a strikingly handmade quality to much of the avant-garde art of the early twentieth century. But handcrafts have been a frequently ignored undercurrent percolating in fine art since Renaissance artists quit the craft guilds for greener—and more prestigious—pastures in the monarchical courts. Many contemporary artists, however, have deliberately chosen a wide variety of hand processes to develop postmodern themes in their art. This is not a regression to a narrow and purist modernist formalism, but rather continues the postmodern journey toward multiplicity, and acquaints us all with the historical and aesthetic links between craft and fine art.

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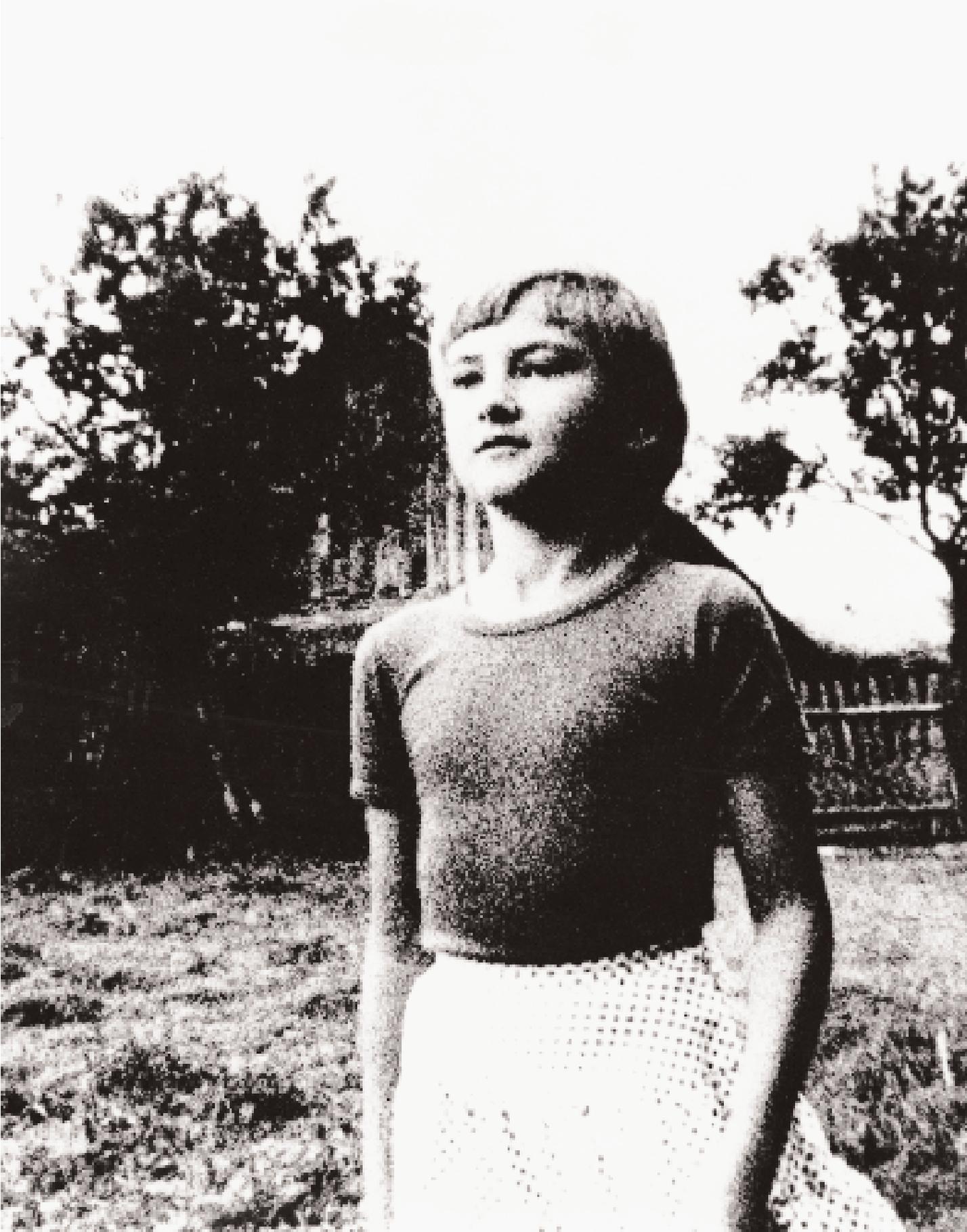
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IMPURE CINEMAS: HOFFMAN IN CONTEXT

by Chris Gehman

At the beginning of cinema's second century, it's instructive to remember how recently proclamations of the "death of the avant-garde" (or "experimental film," or "fringe film") were a staple for filmwatchers concerned with developments outside the realms of commercial and art-house production (e.g., Chicago Reader critic Fred Camper, and Village Voice critic J. Hoberman). This imminent demise was seen as arising from an exhaustion of creative possibilities, and, for Camper in particular, the domestication of a formerly independent and vital movement. In a 1989 statement, Camper wrote that

What began as an anarchic movement with a singular mission—that of changing the viewers' sensibilities and thereby changing the world—is now a fragmented collection of "schools." The phrases "avant-garde film" and "experimental film" no longer denote works that break new cinematic ground; rather, they name a style, almost a genre, which has its own set of defining characteristics. (32)

Towards the end of the 1980s this position seemed to solidify into a consensus, and filmmakers too joined the chorus. Australia's Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, for example, toured with a film performance in which they called themselves "the last filmmakers," and Jean-Luc Godard's television series *Histoire(s) du cinéma* was markedly elegiac in tone. Among many artists who shifted their production mostly or entirely away from film (Jordan Belson, Malcolm Le Grice, Al Razutis), American independent Jon Jost "defected" to digital video—and to Europe. There he became an outspoken critic of what he sees as an irrational fetishization of the medium and a hypocritical institutional/critical environment surrounding experimental film.

During the late 80s and early 90s there were genuine signs that experimental film was in trouble. To begin with, many influential independent filmmakers have died over the past two decades. These include Andy Warhol, Hollis Frampton,

Paul Sharits, Marjorie Keller, Harry Smith, Warren Sonbert, Joyce Wieland, Sidney Peterson, and Kurt Kren. From the mid-80s through the early 90s, most of the institutions that supported artists' work in film, among them Anthology Film Archives and the Film-Makers' Cooperative, the Canadian Film-makers Distribution Centre, the London Filmmakers Coop and Canyon Cinema, experienced crises caused by fractures and antagonism between different factions. These crises were exacerbated by dwindling state support and often haphazard administrative practices. In Toronto, the 1989 International Experimental Film Congress, which was organized partly to respond to the idea that experimental film was no longer a vital force, became the site and the subject of heated debates that broke down roughly along generational lines. A younger, more politically oriented group of artists, theorists and programmers attacked what they saw as an outmoded and elitist conception of the "avant-garde," particularly a purist formalism, that had dominated experimental film production and deformed its discourse. Further, some major art galleries (such as the National Gallery of Canada and Art Gallery of Ontario) appear to have dropped film programming and acquisition from their regular activities, while others have cut them back to almost nothing. Acquisitions of film prints by libraries and educational institutions, once a small but important source of income for at least the better-known filmmakers, have all but ceased and a revival of the practice seems very unlikely. And it is probably true that an increasingly academic environment made for a less vital film culture, at least for a particular segment of the field, and for a particular period of time.

But experimental film did not die. Many of the key institutions mentioned above have recovered their stability over the past several years, and new venues for the exhibition of artists' film have sprung up. Some of these have been short-lived, while others have settled in for a long life. Critical writing on film is almost completely absent from general-interest art journals and magazines, but there are specialized journals that publish serious writing on film. A heartening range of books has appeared over the past several years, including Scott MacDonald's three-volume collection of interviews with filmmakers, *A Critical Cinema*. Ultimately, however, it can only be the healthy, prickly condition of filmmaking itself that proves these proclamations of death to have been premature. What threatens the form now is less a matter of creative exhaustion than the possibility that the basic tools, materials and services needed to complete a film may disappear as the commercial industry turns entirely towards digital media.

What has perhaps passed away is a certain image of the artist as romantic, visionary hero, and an allegiance to large-scale, often highly purist, abstract models of making. Some very interesting film artists of the past two decades (e.g., Jennifer Reeves, Philip Hoffman) have moved between styles and genres in a way that might have seemed confusing or incoherent to an earlier generation. The



characteristic elements of these films are likely to be philosophical, thematic, and personal, unlike the formal “signature style” or clear progression of artistic development that made up the work of respectable artists in earlier decades.

There has, then, been a significant shift since the “heroic” period of the avant-garde that found its critical spokesman in P. Adams Sitney, and its bible in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde 1943-1978* (second edition 1979). This book became a flash point for much of the debate over the canonization of experimental film. Jason Boughton summarizes the critical point of view:

[Sitney’s] book acts and continues to be used as a lexicon of alternative filmmaking practice, not only for the years it claims, but more generally, forward and backwards in history. Like all written history it is not just a locus of memory but also a kind of sleep capsule, an axis of active, official forgetting ... The problem is the form history comes in [in] *Visionary Film*—the confusion of memory and forgetting, the thinly veiled claims of completeness and simple reportage. When one speaks of the Avant-Garde, is it just one era, a single group of friends, great men, a unified field that is referred to? Is avant-garde an idea or an identity? Is it dead, and if not, can we finally let it die, and take with it a back-breaking debt to every other logocentric, exclusionary Avant-Garde ...? (7)

Boughton quarrels with Sitney’s tendency to categorize makers and their works according to major art-historical movements, and takes issue with the staunchly apolitical nature of Sitney’s analysis. He accuses Sitney, for example, of ignoring the radical socialism of Ken Jacobs in his discussion of Jacobs’s works. Boughton points out that Maya Deren is the only woman filmmaker given serious consideration in *Visionary Film*, while Marie Menken is treated primarily as an influence on male filmmakers, and as the wife of Willard Maas. Boughton concludes that “[t]he exclusion of politics in *Visionary Film* would almost be comforting, an easy resting place, were its politics not so visibly exclusionary” (6).

The “death” that the critics of the 80s predicted, then, was perhaps not the death of the experimental film per se, but rather the death of Sitney’s particular “avant-garde.” Since that time we have seen a general cultural shift, in which the coherent psychological, spiritual and sexual identity of the individual allegedly asserted by the Romantic tradition and examined by Sitney has been replaced by a conception of the individual as a collection of interrelated aspects under the influence of an array of social, cultural, and political forces. This shift manifests itself in film in several ways: through an explicit examination of personal and family histories; through an interest in the social construction of gender, race, and

ethnic identities; through a desire to convey journalistic or documentary content without resorting to discredited concepts of neutrality or objectivity; through a renewed use of “staging,” that is, the performance of roles and scenarios, though without an attempt at the kind of realism that characterizes the mainstream dramatic film; through the use of language as an integral communicative element; through the recombination of found/appropriated materials in films made using existing film footage, photographs, consumer objects, etc.; through the live “film performance,” which challenges the idea of film as a mechanical medium of mass reproduction; and through a burgeoning interest in manipulating the chemical surface of the image.

In short, it is a certain purism of purpose and of form that has been given up by the new generations, but not necessarily a desire to see changes in the world. The development of self-financing, underground “microcinemas,” where a good deal of the material shown has both an activist and an experimental character, testifies to the continuing role of film as an art that aims to contest and to challenge social, political, economic and aesthetic hierarchies, as well as conventions of vision and representation. If anything, it is the members of the avant-garde that Fred Camper so fondly remembers who have found their way into the security of academe, while their contemporary counterparts, practising a myriad of hybrid forms, continue to struggle in a social and artistic environment hostile to film art. Yet the degree to which experimental film has not been accepted into the art world as an equal and crucial form, despite its overwhelming cultural importance over the past century, suggests that there continues to be something “indigestible” about the work, something which resists commodification and academicization. As the very idea of a unifying, central identity disappears, the pathways taken by filmmakers become ever more labyrinthine and far-flung, so that the job of the would-be taxonomist becomes difficult, perhaps even impossible. My aim below, then, is to account for some of the disparate elements of contemporary experimental film, creating loose categories that are subject to cross-pollination.

FOUND IMAGES

Critique is implicit in most contemporary found-footage films, and in films which appropriate images through related forms such as collage animation. Recently, we have seen the emergence of the experimental film “remake.” Jill Godmillow’s *What Farocki Taught* (1998), a remake of Harun Farocki’s *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), and Elizabeth Subrin’s *Shulie* (1997), a remake of a 60s documentary about the young feminist Shulamith Firestone, are the best known examples. Implicit in most contemporary found-footage films is a challenge to conventional codes of representation and the social, political and sexual norms that are seen to be sup-

ported by those codes. This political intent distinguishes contemporary uses of found footage from the more poetic, symbolic, or formal uses by film artists who began their work in earlier decades (eg., Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner).

In tiny units of a few frames each, Austrian filmmaker Martin Arnold reworks scenes from Hollywood movies, which he has defined as “a cinema of repression and denial” (Address). Arnold’s work emphasizes the mechanical rhythm of the projected image and hearkens back to the idea of cinema as a machine for the analysis of motion. Arnold’s films may be the fulfillment of Hugo Münsterberg’s 1915 essay describing the possibilities of reordering photographed motion in small groups of frames in order to discover a new rhythm impossible in nature. For Arnold, however, the cinematic machine is primarily an ideological apparatus, and he retools this apparatus in order to draw out every drop of meaning latent in the original material. Arnold’s *Passage a l’Acte* (1993) reworks a scene of several seconds’ length from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), extending it to 12 minutes by repeating every few frames several times. Leaving the original synchronized sound intact, he slowly allows the scene to progress. The effect is vehement, even violent, and creates a portrait of patriarchal family life and racial division from a scene that would pass almost unnoticed in its original context. The actors are transformed into twitching puppets in the throes of an ideological seizure.

Like Martin Arnold, American filmmaker Jay Rosenblatt has a background in psychology, and mounts his critique as a sort of diagnosis of symptoms. Rosenblatt uses found footage for the creation of compact, personal essays on subjects ranging from the construction of masculine identity in childhood (*The Smell of Burning Ants*, 1994) to the idiosyncracies of the 20th century’s great dictators (*Human Remains*, 1998) and the historical conflicts between Christians and Jews (*King of the Jews*, 2000). While Rosenblatt’s deployment of found images may seem relatively straightforward, functioning as illustration to an argument given in voice-over or titles, he often inverts the images’ values, finding sadness, pain and longing in grandiose, aggressive or blustery gestures. In many instances, Rosenblatt isolates and extends brief moments through optical printing, finding in them a nexus of meaning. In *The Smell of Burning Ants*, for example, two boys bouncing up and down on a car seat suddenly look at one another, and this look is extended to emphasize the underlying homoerotic subtext of their shared activity.

Craig Baldwin also uses found footage as a way to mount a critical essay, though his tone is less sombre and his thinking more lateral than Rosenblatt’s. In his instant classic *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991), Baldwin orders the film using a system of substitution: a race of alien invaders called Quetzals stands in for Latin American democratic and communist movements, while historical figures are represented by characters from sundry Hollywood movies (e.g., Blacula as Maurice Bishop). The film’s text as a whole,



which takes the form of a demented, paranoid, right-wing rant about an alien conspiracy, stands in for its opposite: a factual critique of American intervention against leftist movements in Latin America. Filmmaker Craig Baldwin is replaced by his right-wing equivalent, “retired Air Force Colonel Craig Baldwin.” The diversity of Baldwin’s source material and his style of optical printing tend to emphasize the material differences from one shot to the next. Baldwin mixes black-and-white footage with colour and documentary, or educational sources with dramatic sources. Much of the footage is worn, scratched and colour-shifted, so that the seams are emphasized and the result continually reminds the viewer that the film has been “stitched” together, like a patchwork quilt, or Frankenstein’s monster.

The use of found footage can extend to the presentation of intact fragments with minimal alteration. For instance, Peggy Ahwesh’s *The Color of Love* (1994) is presented almost in the same form it was found. Ahwesh has simply made an optical print of the found material and added music. Remarkably, this piece, a fragment of pornography beautifully decaying into organic clumps of colour, fits perfectly into the body of her work. The scene shows two women engaging in sex play over the dead, castrated body of a man, a violent conception of an anti-patriarchal lesbian order. Many of Ahwesh’s other films deal with women’s relationships in the absence of men, and particularly with moments in which acting cannot be distinguished from “authentic” or unstaged behaviour. Ken Jacobs’ *Perfect Movie* (1986) is another noteworthy example of the use of unaltered found images. The film consists entirely of unused 1965 news footage on the assassination of



Malcolm X, with its original sync sound intact.

In contrast, animators and collage artists such as Janie Geiser, Lewis Klahr and Martha Colburn work frame by frame with manufactured objects and images cut from magazines and books, using these as “puppets” of autobiographical or ideological reconstruction in a sense analogous to Martin Arnold’s refashioning of Hollywood actors into puppets of the cinematic apparatus. Where Geiser and Klahr tend to conjure lambent dream worlds that evoke the thoughts of a child confronted with a world it cannot understand, or the reveries of an addled adult in the grip of a fever or hallucination of nostalgia, Colburn’s animated collages proceed at a manic pace, wringing out perverse combinations of animal, vegetable and sexual images from her source material. Colburn uses pictures from slick magazines, especially pornographic and animal images, in brief and briskly paced films with a distinctly “pop” rhythm and distinctly “anti-pop” production values and morals.

THE DOCUMENTARY IMPULSE

One of the fundamental tenets of high modernism was that a work of art be a self-contained object, independent of real-world referents. This idea has arisen in many guises, but for experimental film there are two main forms: the Structuralist/Materialist, and the Formalist. The Structuralist/Materialist argument (distinctly different from Sitney’s concept of “Structural” film) turns primarily on the issue of presentation vs. representation. The argument attacks as reactionary any film that relies on illusion for its process of meaning formation. Peter Gidal, probably the most insistent proponent of this position, wrote in 1974:

Structural/Materialist film attempts to be anti-illusionist. The process of the film’s making deals with devices that result in demystification or attempted demystification of the film process ... An avant-garde film defined by its development towards increased materialism and materialist function does not represent, or document, anything ... The dialectic of the film is established in that space of tension between materialist flatness, grain, light, movement, and the supposed reality that is represented. Consequently a continual attempt to destroy the illusion is necessary. (1)

In Gidal’s conception, documentation and narrative content presume a passive viewer, and most experimental films, including many abstract works, are understood to include some undesirable form of representation. Of the films that make up Sitney’s “Structural film” canon (those by Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, et al.), Gidal writes of how “the discovery of shape (fetishizing shape or system) may become the theme, in fact, the narrative of the film” (1). For all the

revolutionary intentions of filmmakers and theorists like Gidal, these ideas, and the extremely circumscribed possibilities available to filmmakers working within their boundaries, quickly begin to seem like a form of Marxist puritanism: *no dancing, music, or representation allowed*.

The Formalist stream of filmmaking has tended to be less bound by strict rules and formulae, but it shares a generally anti-representational bent with Structuralist/Materialist cinema. In Formalist discourse on film, analogies with music abound. The idea is that film, like music, can engage the audience most intensely when it does not refer to anything outside its own formal system, when it does not rely on representation for its meaning or effect. The conception of film as a kind of “visual music” arose early in the century, and remains an active model for filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, whose non-representational films attempt to embody a type of “pre-linguistic” vision.

If a disavowal of representation was a defining feature of a great deal of experimental filmmaking up to about the mid-70s, a major shift in the postmodern period has been the emergence of a generation of artists whose work engages with a specific “extra-filmic” content. However, these artists are not naive about questions of representation, nor do they subscribe to any particular school (e.g., *cinéma vérité*/direct cinema) that asserts the possibility of a “neutral” or “objective” representation. Rather, there is a general awareness that every work is a construction, an argument, whose formal elements and representational content together constitute the substance of the argument. In a sense, these artists have expanded the interest of many structural filmmakers from strictly visual or aural perception to include questions of social, sexual, and political perception. This process demands that the artist foreground the mechanisms by which meaning in a film is constructed, so that traditional documentary techniques (the sync-sound interview or “talking head,” for example) are generally avoided in favour of a clearly constructivist approach that may combine voice-over, titles, original and found footage.

In keeping with this awareness, many artists choose to focus their documentary explorations on those subjects closest to them: for instance, their family histories or their sexual, racial, ethnic or religious identities. Su Friedrich maintains a rigorous intellectual distance in excavating her childhood memories in *Sink or Swim* (1990), ordering the material according to an arbitrary system akin to those often employed by structural filmmakers—the alphabet in reverse (beginning with z for zygote). Elida Schogt, in *Zyklon Portrait* (1999), uses a similar distancing technique for her elegiac account of the death of her grandparents during the Holocaust, arranging archival footage, home movies and hand-painted film into two parallel narrative strands. The first recounts Schogt’s Jewish grandparents’ lives in the words of Schogt’s mother; the second describes the development of Zyklon B gas, first as an insecticide, then as the means by which concentration

camp prisoners were murdered in vast numbers by the Nazis, the description presented in a neutral tone reminiscent of the conventional documentary. The history of a chemical and the history of Schogt's ancestors inexorably converge in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Other artists use the documentary form to question the "truth value" of the image. Jesse Lerner's *Ruins* (1998) uses the strategy of deliberate and announced falsification to call into question Anglo-European interpretations of pre-Columbian societies such as the Mayan, Aztec and Toltec. Combining found footage with (presumably) scripted interviews, footage shot to look like found footage, etc., Lerner explicitly addresses the difficulty of distinguishing between the "authentic" and the fake, including a brief quote from Orson Welles' *F For Fake* (1973). The film also deals with the problem of authenticating pre-Columbian artifacts when the museums are full of fakes and replicas that stand in for "real" artifacts. William Jones' *Massillon* (1991) combines social landscape photography similar to that of James Benning with personal history (his experiences as a gay youth in a homophobic Midwestern environment) and social history (tracing the development of legal constraints on homosexual behaviour). In the film's final section, these elements are drawn together in a visual and verbal portrait of a new California suburb. Jones' method emphasizes the condition of the unseen, and the need to go beyond pure vision, by slowly "filling" his images with verbal information, so that the film's blank and undistinguished locations become inextricably linked to the history and attitudes of the (unseen) people who inhabit them.

THE MATERIAL IMAGE

At no other time in cinematic history have so many artists been working directly with the chemical surface of the image, using a multiplicity of techniques: hand processing, colour toning and arcane chemical treatments; homemade emulsions; application of paints, inks and dyes; scratching, abrading, and applying various materials to the film surface; collaging of cut-up pieces of film; and organic decay processes. A direct approach to the film surface is not new, having many precedents in avant-garde practice (e.g., Man Ray's inclusion of strips of "rayograph" film in his 1923 *Retour a la Raison*, or Stan Brakhage's 1955 *Reflections on Black*, in which the protagonist's eye-images have been scratched away). Beginning as early as the 1930s-40s there are also examples from experimental animation in the cameraless films of Len Lye, Norman McLaren and Harry Smith. However, partly for economic reasons, but largely because of the enthusiastic interest of a new generation of makers, the sheer amount of this kind of work has vastly increased over the past decade.

Unlike Brakhage, whose cameraless hand-painted and etched films are



still: *Girl From Moush*
by Gariné Torossian.

intended to express an inner reality, a spiritual energy (he could be considered the most prolific abstract expressionist ever), many of these artists emphasize the material of the image in order not only to defeat its illusory qualities, but to draw attention to the physical presence of the film strip in the actual immediate space of the screening room, a concern that derives in part from the earlier Materialist discourse discussed above. This critical intention is confirmed by the frequent use of found footage as a source material for assorted physical alterations. The attack on the chemical surface of the film is implicitly an attack on the intended meaning of the original source images and on the “transparency” of conventional photographic reproduction.

In Germany, in films such as Jurgen Reble’s *Zillertal* (1999), and the Schmelzdahin collective’s *Stadt Im Flamen* (1984), artists subject films to organic decay processes and chemical treatments that create swarming masses of colour, often rendering the original images printed on the film barely legible. The sensory appeal of these films is considerable, given their highly textured and often brilliantly coloured surfaces, but the idea is as much to criticize the meaning of their source material as to provide visual pleasure. *Stadt Im Flamen* (*City in Flames*), for example, humorously exaggerates the source “text” to the breaking point. Here, the filmmakers work from a super-8 print of a disaster film about an uncontrolled urban fire along the lines of *The Towering Inferno*. By burying the film underground for an extended period, colonies of mould and bacteria developed, drawing the pigments in the emulsion into new forms, often intensifying the colours. Under the influence of these processes, the system of representation breaks down, falls into disaster like the crashing buildings and fleeing citizens in the original film’s story.



The Armenian-Canadian filmmaker Gariné Torossian also works directly with the film surface, but in a manner more closely related to Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1964-68) than to the chemical approaches described above. Torossian chops her films up, dyes them, scratches and tattoos them, and tapes them back together in new configurations, mixing super-8 and 16mm footage at will. Often this footage is already refilmed from a video image of an artwork or photograph, so that the number of generations of remove from any real-world referent is multiplied irretrievably. This becomes especially poignant in *Girl From Moush* (1993), a brief, haunting poem in which Torossian's longed-for homeland of Armenia is seen only in borrowed images that have inhabited and fermented in the artist's mind.

FILM PERFORMANCE

Some artists working in film reject its status as an impersonal, mass-reproducible object, mounting live film performances. These works partake of the film projection not as "text," but as event. In these performances it is not enough to run industrially reproduced materials through a projector. The presence of the living artist is required, as in the performance of a piece of music, with the film and the projector as instruments to be played. Prolific Toronto super-8 filmmaker John Porter, in his ongoing *Scanning* series, uses the entire theatre as a screen, moving the projector by hand to create magical illusionist effects which simultaneously make the spectator acutely aware of the theatre space. San Francisco artist Luis Recoder creates cinematic paradoxes and time loops using found footage by the simple expedient of looping a piece of film so that it runs through the projector twice, allowing images from one section of the film strip to overlap with those from a later section. His *Moebius Strip* (1999) uses documentation of sports events: we see a racing car tearing down a track from left to right, the camera panning with it, and simultaneously, the same car racing from right to left. The result is one of frenzied motion that cancels itself out. Recoder's *Magenta* (1997) uses a badly colour-shifted medical film demonstrating the proper methods for bandaging. Again, by running the same film through the projector twice, a visual echo is developed in which each action overlaps upon and repeats itself. The sensation is created of a continuous caress in the context of medical damage, a feeling both soothing and disturbing.

PHILIP HOFFMAN IN CONTEXT

Philip Hoffman's highly diverse body of work in film, beginning with *On The Pond* (1978), shares many interests and approaches with the work discussed here, but is distinct in its relation to the documentary tradition (which is of particular

importance in the Canadian context)¹, and in its concern with personal and family history. From *On The Pond* to *Destroying Angel* (1998), Hoffman has balanced an awareness of film as a constructed object with a desire to explore specific extra-filmic themes. This has led him to a complex, first-person cinema very different from the formal approach of an earlier generation. When Stan Brakhage films his family in his famous *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), or in *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967-70), the viewer does not learn the names of the people shown, does not hear their voices and discovers nothing of their past. The effect is two-fold: on the one hand, unencumbered by language, the film is able to hold in its form the very specific moments and energy of a particular time with particular people. On the other hand, everything is universalized: the children become all children and represent a state of “childness”; a birth becomes every birth, a symbol for all generative efforts.

In Hoffman’s work the drive is very different and this leads to the inclusion of names and places, and the tracing of specific relationships. However, Hoffman’s acute awareness that the medium is never a neutral carrier of information leads to a variety of representational approaches, which often contain contradictory cues about the “truth value” of the material (see for example *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)* (1986)). Alternatively, in a manner analogous to Craig Baldwin’s indirect treatment of his subject in *Tribulation 99*, Hoffman’s “absent presences” refuse explicit visual representation of their subjects. For example, both *?O,Zoo!* and *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984) have at their centres the story of a death, and in neither case is the dead person or animal represented visually. In varying proportions, Hoffman’s films play documentary content against fiction within a complex and shifting formal treatment.

Hoffman engages in an intense process of self-examination that is also an exploration of the capacities of his medium. In finding an appropriate form for his themes and ideas, Hoffman has developed a multiplicity of styles. But these are not arbitrary exercises; in each case, Hoffman demands of a film that it communicate certain crucial ideas to the viewer while promoting an intense awareness of the film’s means of construction. It is ultimately this foregrounding of the means of construction and Hoffman’s casual hybridity of genre, balancing the concerns of documentary, fiction and formal experimentation, that mark Hoffman as a filmmaker allied with the impurities of contemporary practice and engaged in a critical dialogue with the “straight” documentary tradition that has been so important in the Canadian context.

Hoffman’s influence as a teacher at Sheridan College and York University has been as important as his artistic influence. For example, although Hoffman’s films evidence a relatively gentle engagement with the chemically altered image, the summer film retreat he founded with his late partner Marian at their rural Mount

1. Michael Dorland even asserts: “I entertain the thesis that ‘avant-garde’ in Canada is an instance of misprision and that the notion of experimental documentary may prove more productive in a Canadian context” (*International Experimental Film Congress* 33). R. Bruce Elder treats the influence of the documentary tradition on Canadian experimental film in great detail in his book *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989).



Forest home has been inspirational to scores of young makers by teaching the basics of first-person hand processing and other chemical treatments of the film surface. This workshop has been a key catalyst in the explosion of first-person, hand-processed, cameraless and chemically-worked films in North America over the past several years.

The balance of interests in Hoffman's work has shifted markedly from film to film. Much of his work enters into the relationship between documentary, fiction, and formal experimentation described here, while some of his films favour more generally formal visual and aural approaches (e.g., *Chimera*, 1992-3), and still others venture into aleatoric construction (*Technilogic Ordering* and *Opening Series*, 1992 ongoing project). In *Opening Series*, Hoffman gathers together several separate rolls of film, packaging each in its own box with an unrelated image or text on the outside. Audience members are asked to change the order of the boxes as they enter the theatre prior to the screening. Hoffman splices the film together in the order arrived at by the collective choices of the audience members; the film will therefore be projected in a different edit at every screening, moving his work into the realm of "film performance."

The richness and complexity of Hoffman's greatest works, which include *passing through/torn formations*, *Kitchener-Berlin* and *?O,Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film)*, have made him one of the important experimental filmmakers of the past twenty years. The insistent hybridity of Hoffman's practice also marks him as distinctly postmodern, and his particular relation to the documentary tradition as distinctly Canadian. To assert that experimental film is no longer a living force is to ignore the challenge offered by Hoffman's films and those of many other active filmmakers. If an earlier generation found its identity through a purity of form and identity, the strength of today's experimental filmmakers may lie in a canny "impurism" that allows them to traverse the boundaries that separate documentary from fiction, abstraction from representation, and political from personal.

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FILMS AND FAIRY DUST

by Cara Morton

It started with this dream: I am surrounded by lowing cattle. The moon is pregnant, promising, full. The air is sweet and warm and I am on my back, floating in the grass, while Maya Deren pulls a tiny key from her mouth again and again, while Maya Deren pulls a tiny key from her mouth again and again, while Maya Deren ... Kazaam! Hang on a second ... this isn't a dream at all. This is real. I am on a filmmaking retreat taught by Phil Hoffman on his enchanted property just outside Mount Forest, two blessed hours from Toronto.

I'm fully awake and it's the end of the first day. Nine of us, eight women and one guy ("the guy on the girl's trip") have just spent an amazing day playing with the camera. For some it was a time for rediscovery; for others, it was that first glorious encounter between magician and medium, otherwise known as the Bolex. Now it's around midnight, and we are lolling in the grass like the cattle in the field next to us, chewing our cud and watching *Meshes of the Afternoon* flicker off the outdoor cinema (the side of the barn). For me, this is film at its best: fields, forest, cattle, countryside and total immersion in the process of creation.

I went on the workshop in the first place because I hate film. I mean sometimes I have to wonder, what has gotten into me? Why am I putting myself through this agony? I've spent most of my grant money. I'm in the midst of editing and I find myself asking, what is this damn film about anyway? Why am I making it? What am I trying to say? At this point those of you who run screaming from process-oriented work can laugh at me. I don't plan much (what do you mean, storyboard?). I like letting things happen, letting that creative, unconscious self reign. But sooner or later that insightful (not to mention delightful) self turns on me and I'm left stranded in a dark editing suite with the corpse of my film and that evil monster self who thinks analytically, worries about money and who just doesn't get it! So, 'round about May, that's where I found myself. But then, the cosmic wheel turned and I went on the workshop, hoping to exorcise this critical, anti-process, monster side of myself. And it actually worked. I opened up to my instincts, started trusting myself again. (So what if this sounds like a new-age self-help tirade. Just go with it ...)



still: *We Are Going Home* by Jennifer Reeves.

One of the first censors to go was the money-obsessed self—the self that abruptly grabs the camera away when you’re trying to have fun. Now, in the mainstream film world, this may sound subversive, or certainly weird, but if you can shoot without analyzing every detail, without worrying about money, money, money ... Imagine! You can experiment! You can try things, be free with the stock! How? Cheap film! At Phil’s we were shooting the incredible Kodak 7378, at 12 bucks/100 feet. It’s cheap because it isn’t actually picture stock, but optical print stock. It’s black and white and has a varying ASA somewhere between twelve and thirty depending on how you process it. And it’s gorgeous: very high contrast with a fabulous dense grain.¹

1. Despite protest from the independent film community, this stock has been discontinued by Kodak.

OK, so we can shoot cheap! But there’s more! Remember Polaroids? At the workshop it became clear to me that I had been missing that sense of wonder about film—that sense of playing an important role in a magical process. Thanks to Phil’s workshop I got that feeling back. How? Hand processing. It’s better than Polaroids because you can control the process of development. You can develop your film as negative or reversal, you can solarize (a personal fave), you can underdevelop, overdevelop—anything you want—in minutes. Imagine, you wander around the countryside shooting to your heart’s (and wallet’s) content and then run back to the barn, where the darkroom’s set up, and process your film. It’s hard to describe the feeling you get when you hang your film out to dry. It’s a mixture of wonder, accomplishment and connection to the medium. And all this for less than one quarter of what you usually pay.

At this point, you can tint or tone your film with other colours to get some far-out, moody effects. Most of us favoured the potassium permanganate, which



photo: film farm 1999.



eats away at the film emulsion. This brings us to scratching. Imagine not only not worrying about scratches, but trying to make them! Nothing, I mean nothing, beats stomping on your film, rubbing it against trees, rolling around with it in the grass or even chewing on it like bubblegum (OK, no one actually tried that, but it would be fun, no?).

These experiences totally changed my relationship to film as a medium. I became equal to it; no, I became the master of it. No more God-like can of film handled with white kid gloves: I shot it and I can fuck with it, and if I don't like it, well, I can re-shoot for the price of a new pack of crayons. Film can be a truly plastic medium.

Believe it or not, the mythical last day arrives. We have our final screening (most of us have actually finished a short piece) and then a discussion. Later that evening, as we are striking camp, the sun is miraculous, huge and orange, setting over the marsh. It's so beautiful that we stare, but after five days of total immersion in beauty, we are saturated by it. It's too much, all we can do is ridicule how goddamn perfect it all is.

On the way home I realize I've achieved more than I imagined possible. I've found the magic in film again. My next dream goes like this. I'm in Toronto, in a basement, surrounded by streaming ribbons of film I've shot and processed myself. I start chewing on it. I chew and chew until my film turns into a tiny perfect key, until my film turns into a tiny perfect key, and I pull it from my mouth ...

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EAR STONES

by Sarah Abbott



still: *The Light in Our Lizard Bellies* by Sarah Abbott.

For that to which one lacks access from experience, one has no ears. People have the illusion that where nothing is heard, there is nothing. Nietzsche, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*



photo: Sarah Abbott hand processes film.

It was the summer Marian and I walked down the dirt road: June 1996, Mount Forest. A few days before that walk, I had stood next to bookshelves overlooking a pair of flatbeds in the sunroom as Phil and the “film farm” gang buzzed on film questions. I pulled a random book from the shelves, opened it somewhere in the middle and found my finger on Nietzsche.

Marian and I had set off in the heat to try and ease my frustration at not being able to release my feelings into the film that would be *Froglight*. It was a dream-like hour, punctuated by roadside, emerald-green plants, a river sparkling through gaps in a bridge, and an intense, windless sunlight. I was following our conversation, helping to build it, yet our words and the surrounding air were swirling and ungraspable. Something I hadn’t encountered before kept oozing into my breath, but I couldn’t break its surface. All I could do was keep treading under water.

Back at the farm, I scribbled fragments from our conversation into my blue journal.

We have to resist others’ truths about ourselves. Yet we, ourselves, can’t tell or know the truth about ourselves.

The self.

What I was experiencing versus what I was told I should be experiencing.

When what you believe is never validated, your vision becomes limited and you can’t see as far.

As I kept treading under water, Marian spoke of how you walk through life with a stone in your shoe that shapes your gait, informing your every action,

thought and interaction. We don't often think of removing the stone—if we realize it's there at all—and so become paralyzed, blinded by the habits it forms. To remove it would mean we'd have to negotiate unfamiliar territory, and this blindness in ourselves is terrifying.

Film is a neutral zone until we approach it as makers and viewers with our sundry of stones.

I was re-neutralizing film when I first came into contact with it at the age of six. In an obscure craft class, I scratched blackened emulsion off 16mm stock with a pin. Since then, nothing has been that neutral. Countless times I have come pin-width close to jumping on a plane at the close of shooting a film to find a person to fill my soul and a “better life.”

If, as movie viewers, we are enlivened by the illusion of escape, we move only further from ourselves. If, as makers, we lack self-knowledge, we will produce work that reflects the storm of manufactured thought surrounding us, instead of the light and reality of our own worlds. In denying our own worlds, we deny the worlds of the viewers. The magic of film is released when we can move inside it with independence, imagination, and self-reflection to places beyond our habits of hearing and seeing. The magic of film helps us pick the stones out of our shoes.

The innards of what would be *The Light in Our Lizard Bellies* flicker back at us, as Phil and I sit, stuffed as far back in the den as possible, flanking the hum of the projector. It is August 1999. Again, Mount Forest. Susanna Hood had danced alone when I circled her with the camera in Toronto, but now she dances with a light that softly punctuates her movements, licking the space around her and adding rhythms of its own. But I can't see this. In my eyes, I still have pristine pictures of Susanna's body in the jet black of a controlled studio, captured in the crisp perfection of 35mm film frames. Now my film is a leaking, dirty mess that I wish I had not processed by hand.

You've got some beautiful things happening here.

It was only months later that I would actually hear Phil's words and learn how to make film. I had to surrender to the thing itself, listen to its description of my stones and ditch them.



SITE SPECIFIC SYMPTOMS

by Deirdre Logue

stills: *Enlightened*
Nonsense, by Deirdre
Logue.



#1 NIGHT DIARY

The overnight sleep study showed difficulty initiating and maintaining sleep, associated with a significant alpha-EEG disturbance. There was no polysomnographic evidence of significant bruxism on this particular night. Psychologic self ratings indicated considerable emotional distress including symptoms of depression and anxiety, which may require further psychiatric assessment. She indicated an average consumption of twenty alcoholic beverages per week, which may be compounding her sleep-related symptoms. Sleep questionnaires indicated a tendency to restrict sleep, especially during her work week. Please advise as to whether you require further assessment for this patient in this clinic.



#2 THE SKY IS FALLING ... THE SKY IS FALLING ...

I can't remember if it was Chicken Little or Henny Penny or both, but someone spoiled optimism for me with that insane story of the sky falling onto the fragile heads of all the adorable farm animals. I can't recall if the sky falls or if it's bread crumbs, acid rain, a plague of frogs or a swarm of locusts. Or if it's simply the threat of something so final that makes this story so terrifying to me still. Its stupid ideas have set in motion a group of associated symptoms that in turn have set in motion a set of associated films. A syndrome.



It is on uneven ground that I have felt my unconscious body for the first time. My body is alive, and in the moment I discovered this, I also discovered that the harder the ground under my feet, the worse the anticipated fall. A sinister side of me that I have never really known has worked its way out—it grows more beautiful as each day passes, and more threatening still as I move through these ten films.

#3 DIRECTIONS TO PHIL'S FARM

After the Mount Forest exit, things get a little dark no matter how bright the day.

The last half-mile to the farm is the best part. A bridge built for one swings slightly, and it is there that the coolness catches you. Once you have passed the first bend in the dirt road and can't yet see around the second, you leave one place for another. When I travel to the farm I always get a headache, which makes me salivate and think about basketball, and my best conversations of late have all been in the darkroom. These conversations remind me of dreaming, and they leave me unsettled. Standing in Phil's driveway, I realized that a willow tree is glorious when ripped from its root hold and thrown across a pathway, and that it's not just about a place but what happens to you in that place.

CONVERSATION WITH BILL THE BARBER, MOUNT FOREST, FRIDAY, JUNE 23RD, 4PM.

D: Hey.

B: Hey.

D: You got time to give me a quickie?

B: Pardon.

D: A haircut.

B: Don't do women's hair here.

D: Well, I went to the salon across the street but they are all busy, prom weekend you know, so they told me to come and see you, and seein' as you're not busy ...

B: Don't do women's cuts.

D: I don't have women's hair.

B: (pause) Sit down.

D: Are you sure? I don't want you to do it if you're going to give me a half assed haircut. I got a big weekend myself ...

B: I'm sure.

D: Last chance ...

B: Yep.

(Trimming back and sides)

B: Where you from?

D: ... just in town for a couple of weeks, up at Phil Hoffman's farm, you know Phil Hoffman? He's got a nice place out the berry farm way, does these film workshops in the summer. People from all over the world go there to make films.

B: That so.

(Clipping top and thinning sideburns)

B: What kind of farms did you say you make films about?

D: Oh, we make films about all sorts of stuff.

B: You go to different farms?

D: No, we pretty much stick around Phil's farm, but folks go all around Mount Forest to shoot stuff ...

(Shaving neck)

B: Yeah, they came in here last summer. One of them got a haircut ...

D: Yeah, yeah, made a great film too. Shop looks great in it.

B: That right?

D: Yeah.



#4 PLAN A: EXCERPT FROM GRANT TO THE ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL

My work relies on myself as the primary source. This approach to my production, a way of making work “internally,” has contributed not only to the performative style but to the formal aesthetic of each piece. They are process based, further emphasized by hand-processing and tinting techniques, surface manipulation and in-camera editing. The subject matter ranges from gender ambiguity and sexual difference to masochism, psychoanalysis and somatic illness.

Each work begins with a specific physical action, (e.g., a ball hitting a head) which is compulsively developed through repetition and intercutting related images, sound and text. Sexual deception, humiliation, injury, fear and failure are common themes, however humour plays a critical role. Though dark, the works have a curious, nonsensical quality, which provides the viewer with some distance as well as comic relief.



#5 BACKUP PLAN AND OTHER PSYCHIC NOISES

Since my first visit to the farm four years ago I have shot ten films. Having completed six of them to date, over the next three weeks I will finish the remaining four. Now, as I write and edit, I can feel the essay and the films about to collide, like siblings running in opposite directions around the kitchen table, each one thinking they know what the other's strategy is, trying to watch themselves, each other, the floor and the table at the same time, picking up speed and hysteria along the way. When I write all I can think about are the films, and when I work on the films all I can think about is what to say about what I am doing. I start to wonder what I've begun, what I am trying to finish and what will be left when it's over. Or if it ever will be over. What if I'd just spent more time scripting instead of wandering around myself like a tourist? Everything was fine until I started taking pictures: putting myself in between you and me, waiting for the flying object to land and watching the clock, stitching up my wounds, controlling my control, processing my process and trying to fix my mistakes. Now the monsters move and they move faster than my camera can.



#6 TROUBLE

STEP 1: TRY TO CALM DOWN

This can be accomplished in a number of ways, though two are recommended. First, let your body go limp and allow your dead weight to drop directly to the ground. While on the ground try telling yourself over and over that you will sur-

vive this, and that if you really think about it, this is the best time of your life. You are making some really interesting work. It's difficult, yes, but imperative that you keep things in perspective. If this doesn't work, carefully insert one small handful of common garden thistles into your underpants and wait.

STEP 2: CALL A FRIEND OR YOUR LOCAL THERAPIST

Under trying circumstances it can be very useful to pick up the phone and have an intimate conversation with your therapist or an old friend. They will tell you that the ideas you are working with are difficult and hard to manage but that you are doing fine while trying your best, which is what really counts. After all, being a filmmaker is an honourable and fascinating profession and people admire what you do. This conversation may compel you to drink twelve to fourteen litres of ice cold, vitamin-enriched, homogenized milk while lying on your back. (Note: Milk may cause drowsiness).



STEP 3: TRY TO IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

If you don't know what's bothering you sit down for a moment and think. While sitting and thinking, take a three-inch-wide roll of clear, plastic, sticky tape and wrap up your head so that your thoughts can be contained. Hold your breath. Wait several seconds before removing the tape. Upon removal, notice that the problem is stuck to the recently discarded tape. Look at the problem and ask yourself, what is its shape and size? Continue breathing in and out.



STEP 4: FANTASIZE

Creativity is uniquely linked to your imagined self, to fantasies of who you are and who you may wish to be. Let this concept take hold of you for a moment. Inhale deeply and plunge your head into a bucket of cold water. With your head submerged you can imagine that the things you wish for are real and that these things make you feel fulfilled, satisfied, even if it's just for a second or two.



STEP 5: CALL YOUR FRIEND OR LOCAL THERAPIST BACK AND TELL THEM YOU ARE FINE

Having survived all of this, you realize that it's not so bad, that this is the best time of your life, that your films are the most important thing right now, that you have things in perspective, that you have great friends and a terrific therapist, that ideas can be difficult, that internal chaos is part of the process and that you can be anything you want to be. Go directly to the phone and call those in whom you have confided. Tell them that you have figured out a few very meaningful things and that you are back on track and doing fine now, thanks. Thanks a lot.



#7 CURE (A SYNDROME)

I am the primary performer, director and technician. I arrive at the actions and events through fantasy, impulse and intuition. I perform the actions with a repetition that I have come to know so well in myself. I am most often there alone so that I can see myself without your reflection. The films demonstrate that I am permeable. When I am there, I feel relaxed with this idea, even though it frightens me. I have found a place where I can drown out my sorrows, doze off, fall down, lick the ground, bite off more than I can chew, chop off my head, watch it split open, patch it up and tape it back on. Miles and miles of empty fields make it possible for me to hide in the tall grass and sneak up on myself when I least expect it. I can pretend I am the surveillance camera's well-hidden lens, the physician looking for a diagnosis, the patient looking for the cure. I am the moving target, the illness, the antigen and the antidote.



BY MYSELF

by shary boyle



shary boyle 1998

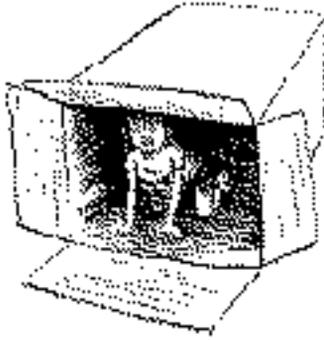




The product of associative play.



As not associative play.

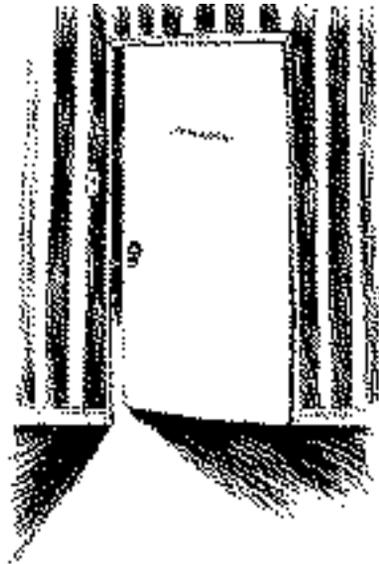


A small portable television set



A woman in a doorway, carrying a bundle







1870-1880





FILMS OF LIFE AND DEATH: REMARKS ON THE DIARY FILM

by Matthias Müller

Diary films pinpoint an “I” so omnipresent that the world fades to a mere etcetera. In the diary videos of Nelson Sullivan, for instance, the wide angle of his hand-held camera seldom allows the maker to slip out of view. Sullivan usually fills the entire image, pushing the reality of the outer world to the edges of the frame. When he tells us, “You can walk in my shoes. I want to share it all with you,” (1989) Sullivan reminds us that diary films invite the viewer to visit a private world. “Welcome to my world, won’t you come on in ...” bubbles an old pop song. Formulated in the first person, diary work dialogues with its viewer using the persona of the maker. As film critic Karsten Witte writes, reducing the film’s focus to its maker “limits the radius, but deepens the perception” (1983).

The written diary is usually hidden, sometimes under lock and key, and it seldom leaves the private sphere. By contrast, the diary film is made for dissemination. Both genres involve the author’s interest in recording personal incidents in order to recall patterns of becoming. Me, myself and I: it’s about the manifestation of the self. But in the cinema, factors that are irrelevant to the clandestine and private journal may come into play, like vanity, shame, or the consideration of others.

Like any written diary, the diary film is created after the fact, distanced in time from the events described. But in the moment of recording, the film demands spontaneity and flexibility. Analysis and reflection lend the raw material structure, but editing follows associative connections rather than classical principles of narrative continuity. It is through editing that these “objective” documents transform into fiction, though they may be all the more “authentic” for it.

Diary film makers such as Sadie Benning or George Kuchar self-consciously employ role-playing, parody and travesty as well as thoroughly conventional rules of narration. Kuchar edits much of his material directly in the camera. In his videos, one senses a boisterous pleasure and virtuosity (resulting from years of experience in working with fictional films) in the dramaturgical editing of his own daily life. As Kuchar suggests, “Most of us see life in the form of a Hollywood



still: Sullivan.

movie anyway. So in diary videos you can add music at just the right time, and orchestrate the shots of mom making potato blintzes so that it looks like she's in a Brian de Palma movie" (20).

There is no unifying code that accompanies the autobiography. For instance, Birgit Hein's challenging *Baby, I Will Make You Sweat* (1994) and Michelle Fleming's sophisticated *Life/Expectancy* (1998) are reflections on the mid-life situations of the filmmakers, and yet worlds lie between these works. Hein defiantly reclaims her right to her own sexuality at the age of fifty-six, simultaneously pushing the limits of "direct cinema." Fleming's eclectic montage combines psychoanalytic intertitles, moments of her own life recast as noir fantasy and the bickering of Taylor and Burton from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Each maker invents a shape for her own experience, as unique and individual as a thumbprint.

Styles from the diary film (first-person narrative, hand-held camera, jump cuts, etc.) have been adopted by other film genres. Faked diary sequences have long been a staple of Hollywood fare, where grainy, home-movie memories become codes of truth and authenticity. As Godard writes, "In order to make fiction, you have to begin with documentary, and in order to make documentary, you start with fiction." Yet many diary films are craftless and crude, deliberately unsophisticated. Mainstream audiences often recoil, in part because these films ignore the usual social distance that regulates our dealings with each other.

In accordance with the formula "low tech, high fidelity," many makers prefer amateur equipment. Super-8, 8mm camcorders, and even the Fisher Price video camera (originally marketed as a children's toy) have been used to make diary work. Easily obtainable, simple to use, and very mobile, this kind of equipment is ideal for unpredictable, extended projects with minimal budgets. The camera becomes the travel escort, the longtime companion, even bedfellow.

The diary film continues to face accusations that it is little more than a vehicle for narcissistic, egomaniacal self-promotion. In our vicarious-living society, all human interests appear to be represented by others (lobbies, clubs, political institutions). It is considered inappropriate, impolitic even, to speak in the first person. In Anne Charlotte Robertson's seventeen-minute litany *Apologies* (1983-90), only the author is shown, endless apologizing for taking herself so seriously and for robbing the viewers of their precious time. For many diary makers, the need for representation arises out of their absence on the public screen. As Yann Beauvais, curator of the diary film series *Le je filmé* ascertained, directing the camera at oneself is often "the liberating act of an individual, who is normally forced into the social background" (198). Due to the close relationship they bear to the amateur film, one could think of many film diaries as emancipatory home movies.

Marginalized groups, such as gays and lesbians (Sadie Benning, Su Friedrich, George Kuchar, Nelson Sullivan, Remi Lange), displaced persons and immigrants

(Jonas Mekas, Robert Frank, Rudy Burckhardt), or the mentally ill (Anne Charlotte Robertson) formulate commentaries about their lives in diary films. For Robertson, who has been diagnosed as “temporarily mentally disabled,” producing a diary film is a daily therapeutic exercise. She writes, “Making my diary has literally saved my life.” Diary filmmakers use film to oppose their social oblivion, and to show themselves as individuals, as opposed to the case studies rendered by more orthodox documentary practice. They want to oppose a neo-scientific objectivity and all-knowing voice-over with an eccentric subjectivity. Even when they appropriate scientific texts, these films add the personal pronoun. One striking example of this kind of subversion is Birgit Hein’s *The Uncanny Women*, where the maker borrows from ethnological and psychological texts, but connects them with a decidedly obscene language.

Diary films are often studies of memory and family. In the films by Robertson or Frank, which appear improvised, one has the feeling of real, unmediated time unfolding. But relics of the author’s past—such as mementos of Frank’s dead children—find their way into the lens. In a scene from Frank’s *The Present* (1996), the filmmaker’s co-worker attempts to wash the word “memory” (which Frank had written a long time ago) from the studio wall. Frank’s camera stops when only “me” can still be read.

Lawrence Green’s *Reconstruction* (1995) is also a melancholy meditation on memory. With the aid of old home-movie clips, the filmmaker conjures up moments from a distant childhood, though this is not an escapist longing for a deceptive idyll. Green allows these images to collide with the report of his sister’s adoption into the family. Kept for many years, this secret was uncovered in the making of the film. So these family documents are never quite what they appear to be, and this overturning of heritage and repression is typical of much autobiographical practice.

We are accustomed to images that show the diary filmmaker shouldering the camera in order to begin a journey of discovery. The delegation of camera work, so we imagine, might harm the material’s authenticity. Since the beginning of the 1980s, however, there has been a growing interest in exploring the possibilities offered by found footage. This most anonymous of film processes appears to stand in sharp contrast to projects centered in a unique and steadfast individuality. But those diary films that admit scraps from the media world cast doubt upon the naive belief in the unity of identity. Dissolving the borders between inner and outer worlds, these films place their protagonists in a tense situation between self-insistence and the dissolution of self in a surplus of media stimuli.

In my own films, appropriated material often serves to expand the autobiographical, to tie introspection to a world of collective images. Drama, dynamics, pathos and sentimentality—found footage is used without irony to tease the latent

still: *The Memo Book*
(1989) by Matthias Müller.



content out of my own pictures. In *The Memo Book*, it would have been natural to counter the lavish production values of the appropriated Hollywood films with the impoverished circumstances of my own production. Instead, I balanced their inequities by subjecting each citation to my aesthetic agenda. This was done by color matching, editing according to the direction of movement, and the use of my own body as a sliding screen in front of the TV monitor.

The Memo Book is my most personal film. It began after a friend died suddenly of AIDS. Working on the film clarified how strongly my own feelings are determined by traditional media images, no matter how toxic these might appear. The fear and self-loathing, the insistent quest for a story (Why did it happen? Why now?) were all borrowed emotions, but no less real. The long period of gathering and revising made it possible to distance myself, to consider my own creations as if they were found in a flea market. This raises the fundamental question of where one's own images begin.

Working on *The Memo Book*, I recreated myself in crisis, with the camera acting as interlocutor and intermediary. Cameras can change the visible, and restage even the spontaneous and unprepared. Take a diary project such as Sophie Calle's and Greg Shephard's *Double-Bind* (1992), which was conceived as a human experiment with unknown results. Calle drives with a stranger across America, trying to persuade him to marry her. Shephard has no idea what is going on, and the audience is welcomed as Calle's accomplice. The camera is used as a magnifying glass to heat up their relationship: its presence fuels the intensity of the clash between the protagonists.

The use of the camera as an intrusion into the personal realm shifts our

attention from the content of the work to the terrible complicity at stake in the act of looking. Yet the shamelessness with which George Kuchar's camera cruises the men around him produces an openness unattainable through subtler strategies. Using tactics of intrusion, Robert Frank's insistent questioning of his son Pablo in *Conversations in Vermont* (1969), or Abraham Ravett's merciless and unceasing demand that his old mother remember the Holocaust in *The March* (1999), are painful attempts to drive the exploration of the self to the edges of confrontation with the Other.

Filmmakers have rarely gone as far as Tom Joslin and Mark Massi in traversing the divide between self and the world. In *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1997), the makers document their slow death of AIDS and the strength of their love. Cocteau's definition of film as the only art that can show death at work finds its painful confirmation here. When Tom dies, Mark wants to close his eyes, just like in the movies. But this is not possible, because real death is different. In diary films, perhaps we have only the practice of life and death, and as Montaigne ironically instructs us, "To begin to strip death of its greatest advantage over us, let us take an entirely different way from the usual one. Let us rid death of its strangeness, come to know it, get used to it. Let us have nothing in our minds as often as death ... It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us await it everywhere" (60). To practise death, Montaigne propounds, is to practise freedom. In *Silverlake Life: The View From Here*, the gap between industrial cinema and the diary film, and between life and death, has seldom been more intensely presented.

Translated by Allison Plath-Moseley

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3.

EXCUSE OF THE REAL

by Steve Reinke

Steve Reinke's 100 videos began in 1989. This monumental project has altered the face of Canadian video, spreading like a stain, changing everything. Reinke's intention was "to complete one hundred videos before the year 2000 and my thirty-sixth birthday. These will constitute my work as a young artist." *Excuse of the Real* is the first of the 100 videos. In it, the following text is read by Reinke in voice-over while a series of home-movie excerpts, originally shot in super-8 and transferred to video, play in looped succession. They show a family on Christmas morning, children mugging for the camera in delight, all smiles.

Mike Hoolboom

I've made a few documentaries before and I like making them. Documentary material is usually more interesting than anything I could imagine and I don't have to be bothered with all the tiresome specifics of a fictional creation. Also I can't be held responsible for material which purports to an actual reality. I'm not personally implicated and therefore can't be blamed. I call this the excuse of the real.

Like everyone else I wanted to do something on AIDS, a close, personal look at a guy dying. Wanting the work to be as effective a documentary as possible, that is, as visceral as possible, I would want to include my subject's death. In fact, the video would not be complete without his death. So I set out in search of a subject. These were my initial parameters. In order not to confuse or blur issues: a white, anglophone, homosexual male, and for added empathy, he should be under thirty. Due to budget restrictions, I would prefer one who would die six to eight weeks after taping was to begin, yet would be strong enough in the initial days of taping that I could get his basic life story in a few days of interviews before settling down to watch whatever complications the guy has play themselves out. What I had in mind seemed fairly simple. Him talking of his childhood and adolescence, his emerging identity through a series of stories, personal remembrances, anecdotes, dreams. The audience would be constructing an image of him even as he himself crumbles away. I would need some home movies, flickering super-8. I would use these as visuals. If my subject didn't have any, another's could be used. Everyone's

photo: Marian McMahon
and her father in 1956.



home movies are basically the same. It would simply be a matter of matching hair colour and body types.

This is something else I'd want to show. The steady degradation of his body and mind. Medical charts would be included, reports on blood cells. I would want to provide a record of each lesion over time, a shifting map of epidermal sores.

This became my problem. As my search continued, I began imagining with increasing specificity the things I would like my subject to say and do. That is, the longer my search took, the more specific my criteria became. And the more specific my criteria, the more difficult, and therefore longer, my search. It seemed an unending spiral. Two sets that might never overlap or share any common points. And even if there were specific points of juncture, how could I find the individual that would be at each point? My project risked degenerating into fiction.



DAMNED IF YOU DON'T: 4 NOTES ON HERSELF

by Su Friedrich

1. *Sink or Swim* was completed in June 1990. It runs forty-eight minutes and was shot in black and white. The film consists of twenty-six stories and an epilogue, which are read in voice-over by a thirteen-year-old girl, Jessica Lynn. These stories proceed alphabetically, in reverse order, with title cards that begin with Zygote and end with Athena, Atalanta and Aphrodite. The only story that is re-enacted is the chess game, Pedagogy, while the rest are accompanied by images shot from daily life, street life. These usually function on a symbolic or metaphorical level, providing an additional commentary to the ideas conveyed in the text. All of the stories are based on my experience but were written in the third person, so that the distance provided by a less subjective voice might allow the viewer greater access to the material. Here are four excerpts:

JOURNALISM

On her tenth birthday, the girl's sister gave her a diary with a green cloth cover. It came with a lock and a small key, which she carefully hid under her bed. On the first page she scrawled a large note that declared: If anybody reads this diary, they are very mean! It is personal.

For the most part, the girl filled it with stories about doing punishment assignments, fighting with boys and playing with her friends. Because she didn't write every day, there were still empty pages left when her parents told her they were getting a divorce. The girl was too ashamed to tell anyone, and even kept it a secret from her best friend for more than a year, but she did confess it to her diary. It felt as if the act of writing it down would make it really come true, so she used a pencil instead of her favorite cartridge pen. The next time she looked inside, the entry had been erased. Her mother was the only possible suspect.

INSANITY

The girls were out of control, the house was falling apart, nothing made sense anymore. In the middle of dinner, their mother would burst into tears and say

“Maybe I should kill myself. Then he’d realize what he’s doing to us.”

Early one evening, her father came over to pick up a few things. The girl hoped he would stay for awhile, but her parents got into a fight and he left a short time later. Her mother was furious, and called the girl and her sister onto the front porch. She opened one of the casement windows and had the two girls climb onto the sill. As she held her arms around their waists, they stared in fear at the sidewalk far below. Their father was halfway down the block by now, and their mother had to scream to get his attention. He stopped, turned around slowly and looked up at them. The girl had an urge to wave, but she felt her mother’s grip tighten around her waist. Then her mother leaned forward and began to shout down at him, “You think you can just leave us like this—just walk away from your home and your kids. But what if we all jumped out the window now and landed in a pile at your feet? How would you feel then?”

The girl waited for her father to do or say something, but he just stared at them for another long moment and then shook his head and walked away.

HOMEWORK

One of the first things to enter the house after her father left was a black-and-white TV. And because her mother had gone back to work, the girl could come home every afternoon and spend hours watching her favorite shows. She also started getting a small allowance, which she spent entirely on candy.

GHOSTS

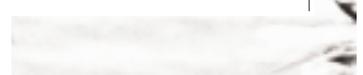
(This one is shown being typed rather than being read as a voice-over.)

Dear Dad,

After you left us, Mom used to come home from work, make us dinner, send us to our rooms and then sit in the living room in that dark orange armchair and play an album of Schubert Lieder over and over again.

There was one song I particularly loved. I never knew what the lyrics meant, but it was the one that made Mom cry the most. We would come in and tell her we loved her, and we promised to be good so that you would come back again. I recently got a translation of that song, “Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel.” Do you know it already? It’s the one about a woman who yearns for her absent lover and feels she cannot live without him. It’s so strange to have such an ecstatic melody accompany those tragic lyrics. But maybe that’s what makes it so powerful: it captures perfectly the conflict between memory and the present.

P.S. I wish that I could mail you this letter.



2. Letter to a filmmaker about *Gently Down the Stream*

March 4, 1983

Dear Leslie,

I thought I would write in my journal but then I decided to write this to you. Tonight, *Gently Down the Stream* was shown at the Lucky Strike, a club on Stuyvesant Street (across the street from where A. lived after we broke up, down the street from where A. and I lived when we first moved to NY and were happy together, and where we lived also when we split up). It was a group show—I think I earned seventy-five cents for it. Manuel DeLanda, Benning/Gordon, Kobland, von Zeigesar, et al. Two women from the Heresies Film issue whom I really like were there—and the monitor (E.) from the Millennium which, in some way, rounded out the picture. I was extremely nervous before the film, and got stoned, and hence got more nervous. I was worried about what C. and G. would think. But secretly I felt as if I was going to surprise them with the film—as if the film’s strength wouldn’t be determined by their response to me, but by their ability to fall prey to the film. It was as if I’d laid a trap for them and was waiting to see if they’d fall into it. I watched the film, clutching at my sides, with a secret smile on my face (embarrassed to show my cowboyish Yippee! Attago! Waowiee! Looker that frame, looker that cut!) because for once I was enjoying the film. I felt as if I’d made it for myself. That it was a gift to myself. That every choice was made completely for my pleasure. And yes, it was. But I also started feeling strange, as if the film had its own determined, predetermined trajectory. One that I couldn’t see before, because I was making it. And so it took me, forced me, dragged me headlong through the paces until the moment that I knew it was complete (when the words MY TONGUE first appear in the last dream), and whatever that means, I was forced to stare it straight in the face, though I felt like a kid pulling HARD in the other direction from where “grown up” is trying to drag me. So then of course I got the shakes with a vengeance, and when the film ended I was so embarrassed. G. was the first to give me a good word. C. eventually admitted that she thought it was good. And yes, I was pleased and flattered to hear that; I started stuttering and reached for my beer, and we spoke a bit more. But I suddenly felt very apart from them, settling away and down into some private, noisy little corner of myself. Because I knew beforehand that they’d probably like it (though of course I left the possibility wide open that they wouldn’t like it or would have strong objections to something in it, and I could even relish that event), and I felt discouraged. I knew that I was beyond the experience of that film: not in quality, but in some more horizontal manner. It had done its work on me, I had given it all I had, and so necessarily it would speak some truth to those who would want to hear or enjoy hearing what I needed to hear and what I enjoyed hearing when I made it. But somehow, tonight, seeing through the film to the essence of what it offered me in certain pleasures, I felt as if I’d suddenly turned my hunchback away and started plodding on to the next thing, which at first will/would (must?) seem like a torment until I can find what specific pleasure it will offer me. Because I can’t go back to that old film for any (unfamiliar, surprising, unnerving) pleasures anymore—I know them, and I’m still afraid and ignorant of the next ones. I’m in a no-man’s land right now.

When I know what delight or spark of thought I can give or share with someone, I get bored. When I know pretty much how a film can or can’t affect someone (what its strengths and weaknesses, limitations, failings are), I get bored. There always must be something that’s unfamiliar, if only so that one can overcome fear enough in order to make it familiar. Yes?
much love. susi

P.S. Has anyone ever talked literally about what happens when they “break up” with a film they’ve made?! And what we stand to learn and suffer from that?



stills: *Gently Down the Stream*
by Su Friedrich.



3. *Gently Down the Stream* (1981)

The text of *Gently Down the Stream* is a succession of fourteen dreams taken from eight years of my journals. The dreams were shuffled out of their original chronological order for the purpose of coherence, and because often we know/dream something long after, or before, we can use it in our lives. The text is scratched onto the film (with approximately eighteen frames per word) so that you hear any voice but that of a recorded narrator. The images were chosen for their indirect but potent correspondence to the dream content. I am not interested in recreating a “dream sequence” on film: dreams do it infinitely better themselves.

I chose to work with dreams that were the most troubling to me, that expressed my deepest fears, anxieties and longings, or ones that had forced a sudden awareness about a nagging problem. Anything repeated often enough loses its mysterious ritual power, and so I hoped that I might exorcise certain personal obsessions while using a language that was direct enough to allow others to recognize their own demons (assuming that our desire for attachment, and our fear of it, can be equally demonic).

What intrigues me about the dream state is that our self-generated “special effects” initially disguise the basic meaning of the dream, but then, paradoxically, we are enticed by the dream’s fragmented and flashy form into admitting hard truths we might not have been willing to confront more directly. The fireworks we create are a necessary seduction, but we must recognize our own heartbeats in those explosions.

4. “Radical Content Requires Radical Form”—panel¹

Making films has been a way for me to periodically grab hold of the elusive world, untangle the questions surrounding my past and articulate the fears, disappointments, and aspirations I have about life. With a camera, I’m able to sort through the incessant stream of images that life offers, and by framing and movement I’m able to show life as I see it. In addition, I have language—the text I generate and the words others give me—as well as music. While I’m writing and shooting, I don’t know how these disparate elements will work in relation to each other, but through the trial and errors of editing, I work to make the images and text so dependent on each other that they form a meaning utterly their own and quite different from what each means by itself.

My urge has always been to make my interior sense of life (that bundle of ruminations, memories, and desires) become part of the exterior world expressed through images that I find in the present: in this city I inhabit and those I visit, among many different people and buildings and trees and animals and bodies of water. I like to take what I find in the world and then make of it what I will. But I’m not a purist, and there are times when the world has its limits, so sometimes I

1. The Second New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, September 13-18, 1988, Millennium Film Theatre.

depend on images made by others or ones fabricated by myself.

A lot of experimental films have portrayed alternative ways of living and asserted that there's more to perception or experience than linear narrative can ever convey. There's a great freedom in seeing these films. But just as often, experimental films portray, if through a radical use of the medium, things that are fairly mundane or familiar. Stan Brakhage is a good case in point. His use of the medium has been truly radical; he has forced us to see through a lens as few others have, but I couldn't say the same for his content. He's made a few too many films about his family, his wife as Muse, and himself as the artist-as-genius. I've felt as aggravated and oppressed watching some of his films as I feel watching a sitcom, even though these feelings are often mitigated by my interest in Stan's formal devices. In the long run, I appreciate the risks he's taken with form enough to allow, somewhat grudgingly, for his conservative sexual politics and his self-mythologizing. Stan Brakhage and many others stand as good examples of the split between radical form and content, defending—by the very nature of their genre—the superiority of a radical approach to form. On the other half of that divide exist many fine documentary and narrative filmmakers. It's hard for me to choose an example, but suffice to say that during the past fifteen years, I've seen innumerable films that have exposed me to the lives of people with whom I might never be in direct contact. I've been taught about how others live, think and feel, and this experience has made me re-evaluate my own prejudices, taught me the narrowness of my own thinking and experiences, and compelled me to put my life in the context of all those other lives out there. I'm grateful to those films for giving me so much.

Yet, just as I feel after many experimental film screenings, I come away from these other films distressed by their inconsistency. How can they push me so hard, work such a transformation in my thinking without even beginning to address, let alone challenge, my sense of narrative structure or the alleged veracity of film as a “realistic” medium? It's such a weird feeling to sit at one of those films and watch myself be worked on, watch as the film gradually feeds me all the familiar narrative hooks, pulls me in and keeps me going until we arrive together, breathlessly, at the long-awaited conclusion. If this sounds a bit like having sex, it's no coincidence ...

I go away from these films with a sense of loss, a sense of potential only half realized, and continue to imagine that the combination of transformative experience through the content and a radical approach to form would take me halfway to heaven. But unfortunately we live on earth, and I still believe in the separation between church and state. Hence I've come to accept, albeit reluctantly, that there are, and will be, many good films made that do provide a fairly radical content without giving the least hint of a radical form. And so it goes.



Every subject has a mind of its own and needs to be treated with a respectful and sympathetic understanding of its intrinsic properties. The form it takes—the choices, the images, and how they're combined—grows out of a collaboration between my propensities and the subject's nature. I cannot force it to be shot or written in only one way: just as we expect to be treated as complex beings, the subject usually has to be approached from many angles. It may require that I employ all my means: that I call on the fantastic, the factual, the quotidian, the passionate and lyrical, though sometimes only a few of these are required. It may be sufficient just to call upon my own history, or I may need to include many other voices. The subject may sometimes need an actor, because it can't express itself through what I find on the street or in the voices of the living, the real. Each subject has its own degree of vanity: one may want to be made more beautiful while another is best when it's hand made and a little grubby. And, like all living things, it always needs more love and attention or courage and anger than I thought I had to give.