

Rendered on celluloid or on paper, Mike Hoolboom's daring artistic vision just might be the most compelling of his generation. His tough, compassionate, protean, and intelligent work constitutes, against considerable Canadian odds, an utterly unique and ferocious, defiant and tender, bravely unflinching whirl of hope.

**Tom McSorley, Executive Director,
Cinematheque Canada/Canadian Film Institute**

This is an important book: a moving and compelling chronicle of the creative process. Hoolboom explores a range of responses to AIDS, leading us, ultimately, on a spiritual journey.

Laura U. Marks, Dept. of Film Studies, Carleton University

With more than forty challenging, sometimes brilliant, films to his name, Mike Hoolboom is Canada's most important filmmaker since Michael Snow. He's won the Toronto International Film Festival's prize for Best Canadian Short Film twice in three years, the first time forcing the head of the National Film Board to announce that "the prize goes to *Frank's Cock*." In the decade since he learned he is HIV-positive, Hoolboom's work has taken on a new urgency, going to the dark places suggested by his favourite themes: sex, movies and the Canadian state.

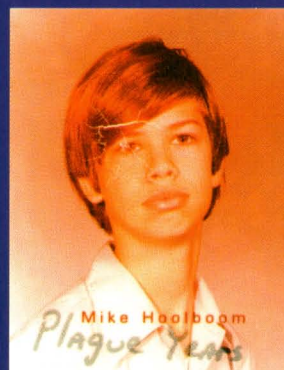
Cameron Bailey, Film Critic

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PLAGUE YEARS

a life in underground movies

Mike Hoolboom

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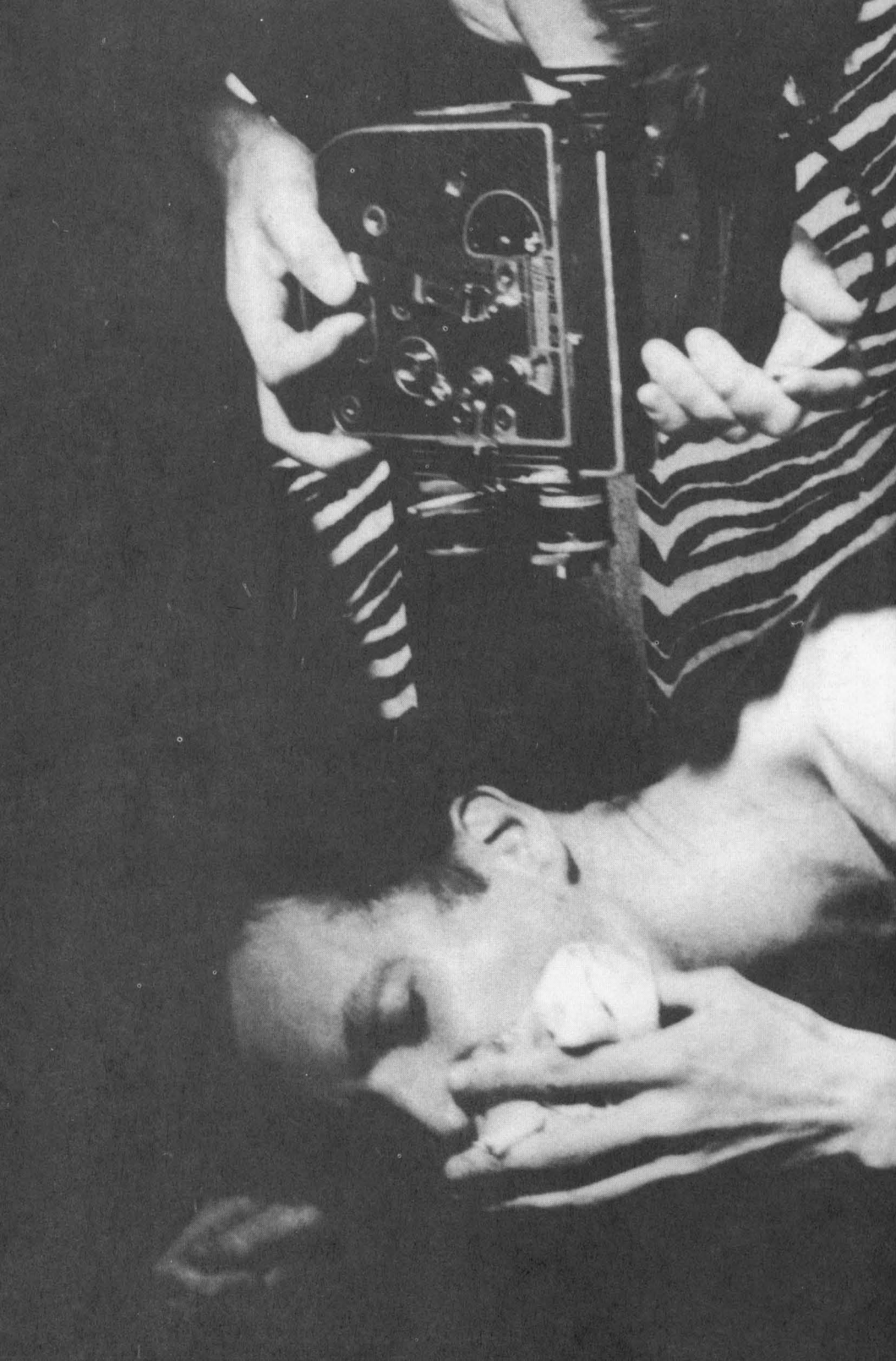
YYZBOOKS

WE LIVE IN THE PRISON OF OUR
WORDS WHEN WE















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Mike Hoolboom

Edited by Steve Reinke

YYZBOOKS

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THE CANADA COUNCIL
FOR THE ARTS
SINCE 1957

LE CONSEIL DES ARTS
DU CANADA
DEPUIS 1957

There comes a time in a man's life and I've had plenty of them. Casey Stengel

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Introduction

Steve Reinke

How did this book come into being? It started, innocently and simply, as a collection of texts and images from Mike's films. Scripts, if you like, but without any camera directions or other script-like stuff. Mike began adding little texts to introduce some of the scripts. And scripts that did not work so well on the page — no matter how well they worked on the screen — were slowly dropped. New texts were composed, added, dropped, shuffled around, revised and over the months a book began to take shape.

What kind of book is this? Not really a book of scripts — although it does contain lots of the texts and images from many of Hoolboom's films. And not really a guide to his prodigious and celebrated body of film work — despite the detailed filmography that acts as an appendix to the proceedings. And not really an autobiography — despite the subtitle *a life in underground movies* — although the book does engage with several notions of the autobiographical.

Notions of the autobiographical? Let's say autobiography begins with self-colloquy: someone writing, not just about, but also to themselves, relating incidents of their life. There's some of that in this book, but not a lot. If we

take *Plague Years* to be the autobiography of an artist through that artist's work, we'll have a better idea of the play of texts that takes place within the volume. This is not a book of scripts with commentary meant to put them (the scripts, the artist's work) in an autobiographical context. Hoolboom obliterates the distinction between script (primary text) and commentary (secondary text), instead giving us a progression of texts that relate to each other on equal footing.

While editing, I was pursued by a sentence which became a kind of thinking-tool to help me with the project. *Whenever I go to the hospital they don't have to take any blood, they just read me like a book.* The sentence begins at the moment when diagnosis and treatment become demographics — the moment when AIDS, say, becomes not a disease but just another compelling symptom of a diseased lifestyle. The sentence also (and endlessly) plays around with the metaphoric possibilities of the body as book, the book as symptom, diagnosis as reading.

John Wayne

For my father's generation, stranger to the electric guitar and computers, the fabulous variety of human possibility had been boiled down to a small roster of Hollywood stars. And none shone brighter than the Duke. For many who'd come to make a home in the New World, he seemed to represent the enduring spirit of the West — he was the law before lawyers got hold of it, a killer with a soft heart, a lady's man who preferred the company of horses.

One night my father announced we were going on a trip though he wouldn't tell us where. "It's a surprise," he said, and we piled in the back of the car hoping to see those mythical fields where chocolate grew wild. All that night and most of the next day we drove until reaching a small theatre devoted to Shakespeare. Years would pass before the words "Hamlet" and disappointment were no longer joined in our vocabulary. What had brought my father here of course was the chance to see his idol, John Wayne, in a rare stage appearance. The Duke had conquered the big screen, it was time for the classics. After a round of milkshakes we sat before a painted army of kings and queens, waiting for the main event. Wayne appeared in a shock of floodlights and made his way quickly to the foot of the stage where he began, "To be or not to be." The audience broke up. It was like watching Shakespeare rope a steer. He started again, "To be or not to be" and we were all laughing by now. Enraged, he retreated to the curtains shouting, "Don't laugh at me. I didn't write this shit!"

At the Movies

On Sunday afternoons our mother would take us, the two brothers, to go see the movies. The factory of dreams. Mornings meant suits that might one day grow small enough to fit, and then a visit to church, where we went through the motions of devouring our saviour. Our duties were rewarded in the cinema, an invention without a future, whose well-stocked candy counter ensured that no matter how obscure its offering, no one minded exactly what was showing.

We have turned our theatres into churches, and our churches into theatres.

We laugh at the opening cartoons. Somehow they'd taken a rat, put it in overalls and white gloves, and made it funny and that was a feat in itself, as anyone who'd ever had to chase one would tell you. I wasn't big on rats. Not like my brother. He'd chased so many down and buried them there was a little plot of yard devoted entirely to the afterlife of rodents. I go out to watch him sometimes, rooting them out with large, reassuring hands. When he was eight he could fix anything in the house. I think that made him Mama's favourite; she was always practical that way, and I couldn't stand him for it. Mama says, "We can control our thoughts, which are nothing, but not our emotions, which are everything." Which meant that we spent our growing up fighting mostly, except on Sundays. Sundays were for church and movies.

We settle back for the main attraction, *Eddie's Cruel Lesson*. It's hard to follow the plot exactly. Good guys and bad seem to find guns everywhere they look and feel obliged to use them whenever someone walks through the door. This is a movie where people don't know how to talk to one another, so they shoot instead. There are so many corpses I get confused but don't mind much, I know I'll see it again, maybe later that day if I can find my favourite hiding spot behind the curtain, so I just let it wash over me, looking into their faces for some

sign of the person I might become. For us, movies were never about the past, but the future.

For a moment the film fills with storm clouds, only there's no sound of rain and thunder, so maybe it's just the house crying, leaving its tears on the big screen. The man we've been watching for the last hour walks into the room, and he thinks he's alone but he's not. There's someone waiting there for him with orders to kill. His father. When Eddie lights a candle he sees shadows coming across the wall, a large hand holding a knife. It looks like he's going to get it all right. And then his body disappears, leaving behind the biggest face we'd ever seen. It made me feel funny, like I was watching something I wasn't supposed to see. Something worse than dying.

A shiver runs through me because something's gone terribly wrong, only I'm stuck, I can't unglue my face from the one on the screen, no one can, even though it feels like we've been pushed into that little basket they use at the guillotine to catch the heads. A moan comes up from the row ahead and it's old Mrs. Simon — fainting. Someone throws a chair at the screen and then the whole place explodes, everyone shocked or angry or both. Mother hustles us out the side door underneath her jacket. That's when I notice she's crying, and so is my brother, and I start too, not knowing why exactly, I just don't want to get left behind. They wouldn't run that movie again, I think the mayor passed a law against it, so it was a few weeks before people came back, and we never talked about it. It just passed over us, like a bad dream in the middle of the afternoon.

In the early days of the movies, people appeared the way you'd see them across the street, all at once. That changed when D.W. Griffith wanted to make a picture of loneliness, a world that belonged to a single face. In later years they'd find a name for it: the close-up. Urging the camera to move forward his assistant pleaded: "But you can't do that Mr. Griffith, you'll cut off his legs." In the evening, when they took the film into the studio and looked at the dailies, there was a cry in the back and Griffith was summoned to the producer's office. The producer said, "Mr. Griffith, here at Universal we pay for the whole actor."

Taking Pictures

When he was young he learned to fear the taking of pictures. Shooting they always called it. "Do you mind if I shoot you?" And no matter what the response the invariable lifting of shutters, the emulsion laid bare in order to absorb his likeness. The truth was: he had never understood the difference between his image and himself. His father, who likened the mind to a supermarket, had long ago cleared the shelves of his own childhood, and so became a tireless recorder of his son's. Everywhere he looked the photographs stared back — of his early experiments with excrement, his midday erections, all memorialized in a museum where he had become one artifact among many.

He felt himself, at the age of five or six, already grown old, terribly far from the Eden of his birth, where he had walked without the shadow of multiplication. Slowly, he was losing the capacity to invent himself, leaning increasingly on gestures studied in pictures. Whole afternoons were spent perfecting the shy smile, the look of abandoned surprise, the delight of his second birthday party, in the darkest corners of his room. For he was afraid to share his secret with the world: that the images that surrounded him conveyed a truth he would only betray. And so he grew increasingly still, locked for hours in a collection of poses that summarized his finest moments.

What grew unsettling was that no one seemed to notice — neither his parents whose continued portraiture produced only copies of photographs already made, nor his friends at school who greeted him with the same excited boredom as before. He realized that he was not the only child raised on pictures, that all around him snapshots of youth, or the Marlboro Man, or sporting calendars were being restaged with the same dedication he mustered to reconcile an impossible present with a bottomless past. That he was living in a photograph without end, in an album whose pages were being turned back, until each of them might appear as atoms circling the invention of photography. And of themselves.

Beginnings

Some folks put together motion pictures like coming home, as if they belong, and while their making might last just a few months, just enough to raise one small corner of their life to light, it is so iridescent, so lovely, that it is instantly embraced, familiar, already become a necessary part of that collective memory we call the cinema.

I arrived as a bastard.

When I was nineteen, my eyes started to fail. A small star no larger than the needle of a cactus appeared in my right pupil. As months passed new stars gathered, smaller even than the original, growing in both eyes. Doctors were summoned, tests ordered, prescriptions filled, but still the world continued to fade.

I think it was then, when the future seemed to belong only to those who had made a science of forgetting, that I first picked up a camera, asking my father if I could borrow it. This was the machine that had reproduced, in the few weeks he had patience enough to hold it, the early moments of assent, the small tribe of family, the acquiescence that is the prelude to any belonging.

I wanted to collect memories the way others gather rare stamps or gems, and began by stalking the habits of my seeing, absorbing the familiar, using the systematic deployment of chance. With each image I waved good-bye, as if the object's commitment to film relieved it of its need to exist, its desire for visibility. Its will.

Out of fatigue, or a lack of imagination, the faces of strangers softened, grew young, eventually becoming the face of my brother, who was soon everywhere, filling the city with his handsome smile. Because our walks often concluded in the Imperial, last of the movie palaces on the old strip, it was hard to tell at first whether I was hearing women from the state home complain about conditions or the new movie by Woody Allen.

"The food here is so terrible. It's a disgrace."

"I never thought I could eat anything like that. And the portions are so small."

As the world continued to shrink my brother showed me the universe that waited behind small moments. How many colours of black flourished for someone who'd never learned the word "asphalt." Taught me the names of those bits of nature that managed to push their way through the concrete. I'd always regarded them with suspicion, as if anything that had managed to survive the punishment of deep city would doubtless bury us all, and so looked upon us, the merely human, as a passing aberration, unaware of our end, casting shadows of premonition. Hummocks of wild roses. Lady-slippers. Bayberries.

When street crossings grew hazardous I restricted solitary walks to my own block, which offered a fruit stand, a public toilet and a statue of the mayor with his head chopped off. History had preserved him as a fine bronzed body, standing over an intersection where strip malls and multinational food corps presented a reassuring continuity among continents. Public monies had been tight at the time of his beheading, the cost of his rehabilitation deemed an extravagance, and in the ensuing years citizens had grown used to the sight of him. Everyone agreed he seemed kinder and more generous today, granted at last, without benefit of his head, a measure of grace which had eluded him in life.

At last operations were performed. Specialists gathered. For months there was only the hospital, the slow drip of convalescence, the sound of machines turning in place of the present. And then one day the bandages were removed, and the blinding white that many report at the end of their days, walking from this world to the next, issued from everything around me, slowly dimming in the weeks ahead, until the nearly unbearable delicacies of a new world appeared ordinary, commonplace. I could see again, but the Eden that presented itself to my new eyes flared only briefly before giving way to habit. Shortly after, I turned to the movies, hoping they might ease grace from its retreat beneath the surface of things. Learn the story of the eye. What was it Godard wrote? That light should be used to illuminate situations, not to film stars. To join the dreams of the day with the dreams of the night.

Baseball, Marx Brothers, and the Beginnings of Documentary

When I was in film school we were taught that shooting movies was a lot like family, only better, because you instantly became part of a tribe, shared everything, learned to speak without words. And then you never had to see each other again. Mom and Dad were the producers. They kept watch over dreams of the past, underlined their demands with cash and always sat in the driver's seat. The eldest child, the one who had to go through all the shit first, who had to ease the folks into a brave new world of drugs and free love, would inevitably turn out to be an experimental filmmaker. Broke the rules just because they were there. The youngest kid, the spoiled pampered brat who was given everything — that was the feature filmmaker. And the middle child? That one made documentaries.

The middle child is never the first. She enters a world where diapers have already been dirtied, where there are already pants to grow into and old bottles to be sucked. She manages early on a keen acceptance of the world as it presents itself. This thought haunts all documentary filmmakers: someone has been here before. Hunters of the familiar, they learn to follow footsteps, which soon become their own. Not to go where no one has gone before, but to return. Revisit. The dress code for documentaries is hand-me-downs.

Some hope computers will quiet the remaining whisper of the origin of our species, our beginnings as apes, while others feel an old drum beating in the need to make doubles of ourselves, and of the world around us. Thousands of years ago, on cave walls dug out of hostile jungles, our ancestors scrawled pictographs of dinner — herds

of buffalo or antelope. Can we find here, at the origins of representation, the project of documentary already realized?

Today the documentary presents itself in a more familiar form — as television. It is not documentary because of its signals, which may be mixed, but in the conditions of reception. For the visitors of our city, television illuminates a population in recline, speechless and isolated. After all the marvellous time-saving machines have been invented — for washing dishes and clothes, providing instant water and sewage — television was provided to occupy our newly won leisure. What we are watching is neither programs nor information but a time grown light as air, air time, where the habit of observation is a passport to the eternally present.

But what of the movies, nostalgic forebear of the small screen, the avant-garde of American capital? On this point my instructors were glad to elaborate, though they distrusted facts of any kind. The scientific method had long ago deserted them for minds more skeptical and so they spoke in detours and parables, reminding us that images were made of small moments of silver, “circles of confusion.” Like every story of origins this one is a myth watered by its listeners, or left to dry and pale until another takes root.

Doc was the first kid in the neighbourhood who learned how to throw a curve ball. That made him something special, though his unfailing generosity led him to reveal his secrets to anyone who asked, and soon the whole school yard was full of those long, lazy arcs that appeared to be aimed at your head, but would invariably wind up in the strike zone. Doc was a middle child, so no one really noticed him much before that — he seemed like part of the furniture, reliable. One day he started to get thinner. Not because he wasn't eating; somehow nothing stuck to his bones. Recently spurned in love (Cynthia had returned his valentine unopened), his parents worried his grieving would shrink him from this world altogether, and while their fears had proved groundless in the past — about their dog digging up family skeletons from the backyard for instance — in this they weren't entirely mistaken.

One evening, while watching a Marx Brothers double bill, Doc left his chair and walked into the picture. He had grown so thin he could pass himself off as one of their own, belonging in this world of

two dimensions. He began life again, wrestling with Groucho and trading punchlines with the brothers. Because he'd seen their films many times, he knew well in advance how every gag would end, and so appeared to them as a prophet. When the movie was over, he would slip quietly from the screen and re-enter our world, the only one the rest of us knew for sure but which Doc understood was only a shadow of that universe of two dimensions. He spent many years shuttling between these two places — between images of reality and the reality of the image — and one day conceived of a new form in film. Because he missed his friends on the team, he finally invited us to join him in the movies. Still young enough to imagine we invented the world through the simple act of our attention, we wandered dazed through the palaces of lost kingdoms, fought invaders from other planets, watched lovers caught in an eternal embrace before turning at last to face one another. Swollen in the lamp of projection, our simplest actions took on a new gravity, and we soon understood that ordinary lives also had a shape, a story to tell, and that this story could be found in the most commonplace occurrences. That there was less a need to cook up new stories than understand the ones we already lived in, which surrounded us everywhere we went. When we returned at last to the place we used to call home, Doc said he'd come up with a name for this new experience in movies. He called it the documentary.

That's about all I recall of the story. My instructors went on, of course, painting a rather bleak life for any who chose the honourable but difficult path Doc had paved for us. Condemned to a life of well-meaning earnestness, of social responsibilities, documentary meant always having to say you're sorry. Because you could never film enough. You would always leave something out. And of course life outside the frame would always be more revealing and beautiful than anything a camera managed. They released us then, flushing us out into the metropolis with cameras of our own in order to continue the great task. To photograph everyone. Always. So that these two worlds — of pictures and what some cynically refer to as real life — could finally merge. We would preside over this marriage like the anonymous builders of the Chartres Cathedral, knowing that we were no longer aiming for a change in images, but in consciousness itself.

Jerry Lewis

Jerry Lewis came in to visit our class today. Like many famous men he never works to be heard — even the way he walks, parts his hair, enters the room is part of the dream — his reassuring banality a secret we make extraordinary by keeping it. He tells us that life viewed in close-up is comedy, while the same scene viewed in long shot is tragedy. As he talked I kept flashing back to *King of Comedy* where Robert DeNiro duct tapes him to a chair like a mummy. And a very young Sandra Bernhard tries to seduce him. I guess it's true what they say: there is no invention that has not become someone's sexual necessity. I think of them out there: Johns and Jills who can't get off without duct tape, Q-tips, vacuum cleaners, fondue forks, or blenders. Warranties instead of marriage ceremonies. The pleasure of machines. I guess it's why I came round to film school. Its raptures were reliable and monogamy was discouraged. Who would ever spend life with one movie?

When I was a kid I didn't have dreams like the others. Never wanted to be a doctor or Jerry Lewis or a fireman. I wanted to be a car. When I was little, it was hard to tell people apart from the machines they used. Some were cash registers and vacuum cleaners. Fry pans and dog whistles. Others were cars. My parents for instance. As soon as my father leaves our house he becomes an Eldorado sedan with four-on-the-floor, still possessed of that distant good humour he doled out when absolutely necessary. Like meal tickets. My mother alternated between a four-car pile-up and a school bus, and I imagined them meeting somewhere on the autobahns of Europe, that free zone where limits of speed and etiquette were casually left behind.

Where cars of every sort, broken from the fleets of their neighbourhood, could seek others of their own kind in search of new merge lanes and intersections. New kinds of love.

Today in film school, in the time he usually reserves for scrubbing away the waxy build-up of expectation, Jerry sends us back to childhood, asking us to scribble something out about our earliest recollections. Jerry says we have two eyes, one to look over the present, the other to keep our past in focus. Hindsight he calls it. Reminds us that the Greeks believed we grew old always facing our past, the future a grave and unknowable concern, the sum of all that could never be understood. Years before Michael Jackson, he grimly intones, they had learned to moonwalk. I look over and see most of the brain trust on the nod, looking like those small dogs you attach to the dashboard, their heads bobbing yes yes yes. Knowing the only thing I'd ever owe to Greek culture was their salad, I let my pen ease out a little memory juice, take me to past times, before walking backwards was a sign of progress.

My family was Catholic.
The church lived in us
like a rumour
so even though my parents
barely spoke
I had seven brothers and sisters.

When I was six
lacking all geography
my father asked me to live
in the family car.

In time
my eyes became the mirror
my feet pedals
my mouth the steering wheel.
This arranged marriage

was not unusual.
My friends had become
fridges and lawn mowers
TVs and telephones.

One night
in the McDonald's drive-thru
I met the devil.
He dared me to race
to the end of town.

The devil sped away
to an early lead
feeding on my fear.
Every emotion I had
made him stronger
until I recalled my eldest brother
dead in a four-car pile-up
and switched gears to mourning.

The devil is a lazy one
he only races
on what you give him.
But there is no grief in hell.

I soon overtook him
and from that day
we collected our tears
to keep the devil
from our door
though a friend insisted
the devil's death
was a tragedy for the imagination.

Cars were another way of saying no. To my friends, to my oversized runners, to the conversations you can feel slipping into the outbin before they're through. The getaway vehicles of Detroit were all I ever craved growing older, their easy departure a passport to worlds beyond this one. Because I figured every ounce of the dull and uninspired had found a home on the street where I lived, it didn't matter where I went, my car would deliver me to cities reared on fascination and speed, their days grown so short there was no room for indifference on the calendar. And then my eyes started leaving me behind, my windshield growing soft, until I had to lift myself from the driver's seat for the last time, ready at last to swap these motion machines for motion pictures.

Jerry is teaching Mike Sparks, the speed freak with a gift for awkward, how to moonwalk. "From the waist up you look as though you're moving forward, but by dragging your heels you send yourself back. The divide between reality and its image, Cain and Abel, all returns to the body. You are history. Everything you need to know is right here." Tapping the wiseguy on the chest. Smiling. It's almost time to leave. Questions? Someone asks him, again, about why the French figure he should be on Mount Rushmore. What did they see that we couldn't?

"Actors quote, that's all. When the French saw *The Nutty Professor* they weren't seeing me, they were seeing America — an adolescent half-wit whose sex was a way to exercise power, rage, jealousy, revenge — everything but pleasure. When I look into my underwear I see America. We all do. We all carry our country in our pants."

And then he gave us one of those patented Lewis smiles so you couldn't tell whether he was kidding or not, and lit out of there. Heading for the next telethon. The next group of kids. We were left to wonder if the borders of this country signalled frontiers of other kinds, ones we might never cross. If our most intimate moments were a crowd scene. Would the pictures we'd come here to make look like ours after all, or was it already too late for that? It was time for all of us to look into our pants and ask: where is here?

Garbo

Garbo still belonged to that moment in cinema when our theatres were called palaces and the simple picture of a human face was enough to plunge its audience into the deepest kind of ecstasy. A few years earlier the appearance of Valentino had caused suicides. Nurses were posted in cinemas so they could ease the shock of these faces, which no one who had lived before the movies had imagined possible. Rilke wrote us: "Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure."

Today these faces have become too familiar to capture our imagination. Today, armed with remotes in a multi-channel universe, the stars are no longer onscreen but in front of it. As someone who watches movies I dream of an infinite cinema, but as a filmmaker I dream of an infinite audience. Hoping to understand more I began to photograph crowd scenes looking for patterns, geometries of the herd. Searching for the person who would summarize an audience the way Brando summarized bikers and fat boys, the way Garbo showed all of us the responsibility, the duty even, of having a face.

That's when I met Bill, managing line-ups at the old Roxy Theatre. He pushes and pulls at the crowd with a practised hand, conjuring shooting stars, a mandala in pin stripes. His actions are so fine no one notices they are part of a larger design, until a passing traffic helicopter began to feature him on the evening news. For two decades he had worked the busy sidewalk that became the entrance ramp for the Roxy, turning down each offer of advancement. His many years before the big screen had taught him the importance of continuity. Changing ownership had turned his beloved theatre from the city's number one movie palace to a grind house and finally to a rep cinema.

Today it was back showing the same movies it had premiered with such splendour twenty years earlier. Bill was busy charting these cycles of change. Soaking in the big picture.

"It's not Garbo they see onscreen. It was never her face."

"Who then?"

"They only see themselves."

Bill thinks that films should simply expose the unfilmed world.

"You know Kuleshov?"

"We never met."

"Russian guy, early part of the century. When they were still figuring how pictures worked."

"So?"

"He made this test. Filmed an actor with no expression on his face, just staring straight into the camera. Then he cuts this face next to a kid crying, a war and a big turkey dinner. And everybody bought it. People figured he was a sympathetic father, a guy going to war and hungry."

"No expression on his face at all?"

"That would just get in the way, wouldn't it?"

When Bill looks at someone, it doesn't matter who, he recognizes himself immediately. So great is his compassion, his empathy, that he is able to enter someone's life simply by looking at them. Another skill he learned at the movies. "Most of us do not follow the actions of the star, for a couple of hours in the dark. We become them." The task he

has set for himself, these long years beneath the marquee, is to be able to enter into the assembled crowds, to extend his understanding past a solitary individual, and into the city itself.

Having exhausted the offerings of Hollywood, he practises his craft on the strange films of Josef Richter, whose cinema is made up entirely of lines, drawn and redrawn on numbered envelopes. Or Fenway Crane's cinema of poverty whose films are invariably white with a great deal of talking on the soundtrack. It is white, Crane claims, because he has no money for the images. Though Bill suspects we are seeing a photograph of the white shirt Crane's grandfather wore the day he died, which the filmmaker repeats in his work like a refrain in music, movie after movie.

Bill looks down at the watch that stopped working hours ago. A habit he can't seem to shake. Runs old fingers through his hair until the line that divides left brain and right is prominent once more.

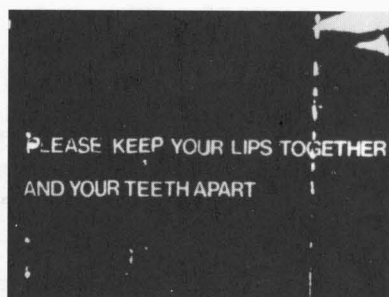
"In the future the most popular people will become president and movie stars will be elected. Academy awards will be given out not for the best films, but the best audiences."

He flips my money back onto the table, waving away my intentions to pay. It's time to go.

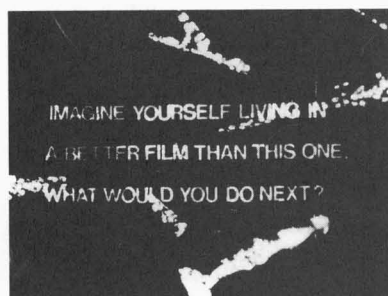
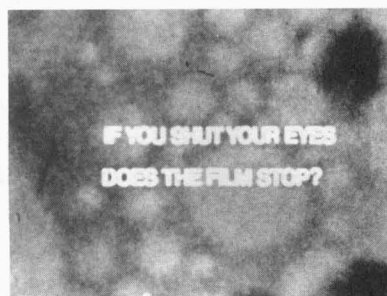
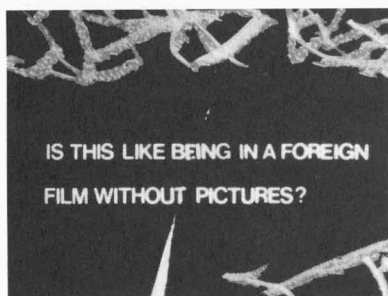
"You made your bed. Now dream in it."



Big Show







White Museum

a movie without pictures

"He recalls an exhibit of Renaissance picture frames at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. The frames were empty, hung against white walls... He sensed that the museum had now become the frame of frames. And the frame of the museum? Finally, of course, the universe!" Hassan

I guess I should begin with an apology for not being able to show you a picture so far. Now that the credits have finished we usually get into the film, and start to see what's happening. But the truth is I just don't have enough money. Even when I told them at the lab how disappointed people would be to have to watch a film without images, they couldn't give me any credit. They said it would look okay when it transferred to video. I feel especially bad about the beginning because it was going to be really special. Maybe you can imagine it. Deep in the Paris underground a large man passes through the turnstiles. Caught between the heartbreak of departure and the guilt of arrival. A young couple approaches and, without warning, throws their baby into his arms, pleading with him to keep it. Stunned, he can only look on while the young man robs him and the mother snatches back her child. Because their own parents are unknown, they seek their inheritance from strangers. It's a true story, Michelle told me when she got back from Paris. I wanted to get Jean Pierre Léaud to play the lead because he's so fat now no one recognizes him, so he has to start all over again. From scratch. Just like me. But there was no hiding the fact I didn't have the money; even Jean Pierre needs to eat. The cinema is all money but the money figures twice. First you spend all your time running to get the money to make the film. But then the money comes back again, in the image. The cost of identity is high when the making of images is determined by their distribution.

I think if not for marriages or funerals a writer would hardly know where to stop. It seems like I'm always caught between the two, between beginning and ending, between never wanting it to start and never wanting it to end. Sometimes when you read a book the writing makes a place for you, and you go to live there for a time, not feeling yourself in the reading so much as looking around in this new place. But even then, even if you like to read the dust jacket after the book's finished, you still have to close the book and then it's over. I think of ending like that, as something you can hold in your hand, as something that closes. Before I was taken to the hospital I thought I was more half-there than all-there. That I was watching instead of living life. People say the way things happen in the movies is unreal, but actually the way things happen to you in life is unreal. The movies make emotions look so strong, but when things really do happen to you, it's like watching television. You don't feel anything. The best atmosphere I can think of is film because it's two-dimensional physically and three-dimensional emotionally.

I lived in all the books I read before I was nine, and then I started to watch TV, and things didn't end so much after that. Even when I had to go to bed I knew it wasn't over because I could hear my parents laughing. And their parents after they went to bed, as if the only thing that separated us was time. My father told me I was descended from them. And their parents, I asked, where were their parents from? He told me their parents were descended from their parents, and their parents from their parents, and so on. So as I thought about the shape of our race, it seemed to describe a large descent, moving from one generation to the next.

Has everyone had a chance to introduce themselves, or is this one of those movie houses where you're supposed to pretend you can't see anyone but the people you came with? Maybe, for the people who came late, maybe we could have the lights turned on for a minute, just to have a look around, just to see who's here. Could the projectionist please turn the lights on for a minute? When Warhol said that everyone in the future would be famous for fifteen minutes I wonder if it wasn't because eventually we all say the same thing, that all of our words come back to the same point.

I started seeing Lisa when I was fifteen and she was really the first one who thought, well, he wears check flannel trousers with paisley

come, but IT never did. And I remember thinking that if IT was here, I could just let go of whatever was holding IT in, and it would be okay. Afterwards David said we weren't there to talk at all but just to look, to see each other in the same place. But without words we might as well be strangers waiting for the light to change, and as a filmmaker there's always that problem. When people go to the movies they want to see these big dramas, or horror, or violence, or sex, but all people really do in their lives is talk. Now we have people we can call up on the telephone and have sex with, so even sex is talking now. I think that's something my friends never understood, that movies were never meant to be watched, they were there to say what we couldn't say. I think it's the reason I can't be close with them anymore, they look when they need to listen. And because they don't know how to listen, they don't know how to look either.

Seeing and hearing are different. Sight divides while sound unifies and harmonizes. You could say that everything in the world was created by sound and analyzed by seeing. God spoke first and saw that it was good second. It was that way with the first people on earth and still is with the newly born. You can see it in the shape of the ears, they're made like a whirlpool, spiraling inside, while the eyes bulge from the socket. We're always at the edge of visual space, looking in with the eye. But we're always at the centre of a sound space, listening out with the ear. Our visual orientation faces front, but sound is always centered. If I want to change the world I have to become visionary, but if I want the world to change me, I need to learn to listen.

If it's true what they say, that a picture is worth a thousand words, then why does it have to be a saying? This tradition we have of silence goes back to the very earliest days of the movies when movies were silent too, and a filmmaker was a person interested only in the part of life that could be kept inside a camera. Even in some of today's independent film, there are filmmakers who have taken this vow of silence, whose films can't be heard at all; they feel their images are enough. Maybe the time has come for a cinema without images, for a movie-house dialogue that will meet us halfway between sound and sight, that will leave us a place for our own pictures.

NO ONE SPEAKS

SOMETHING TO SAY



IT'S JUST THE OPPOSITE

Meeting Madonna

It's funny when you get to know someone and then they become famous. You don't have to call them up and ask how they are anymore. You read all about it in the newspaper. All of a sudden those small things just shared between friends — like what TV program did you watch last night, or how did you get the stain out of that couch — seem important, relevant, a part of the zeitgeist. Because they're coming from the mouths of the famous.

It's like falling in love. When you fall in love with someone they become the most beautiful person in the world. But some people are like that for everyone. All the time. The ones they call stars.

I only met one famous person in my life. Only she wasn't famous when I met her. Does that count? We were duffelbaggers, shuffling through the halls of a Michigan high school that had divided the world into arenas of knowledge and power: history, geography, calculus. I got transferred when my dad was hired on at the General Electric plant and even though I knew better I couldn't help thinking: I can't go down there. I don't know how to speak American.

And her? She was just plain different. Not yet the ambassador to the blonde kingdom, she was still Madonna, working harder than anybody around her at nothing in particular, not yet. She just wanted to get there. Which meant out. Which meant anywhere but Michigan. And we could all relate to that.

I remember the morning Madonna announced on the PA that Kay Sorrento had died. You probably don't remember Kay but she was



work takes us beyond a



a life before I came here

We hung out together after that. You taught me to eat french fries with a spoon, how to read the night sky until we preferred it to the morning paper. Once you showed me the trunk where you kept the remains of your father. All of his parts were there. You lifted out his penis and pushed it between your legs, saying, "Genius is not a gift but the way out you invent when you're cornered." You said the body doesn't stop at the skin but later, after Biology class, you hid with me in the change room, lifted the flaps of your cunt and exclaimed, "You see I am God."

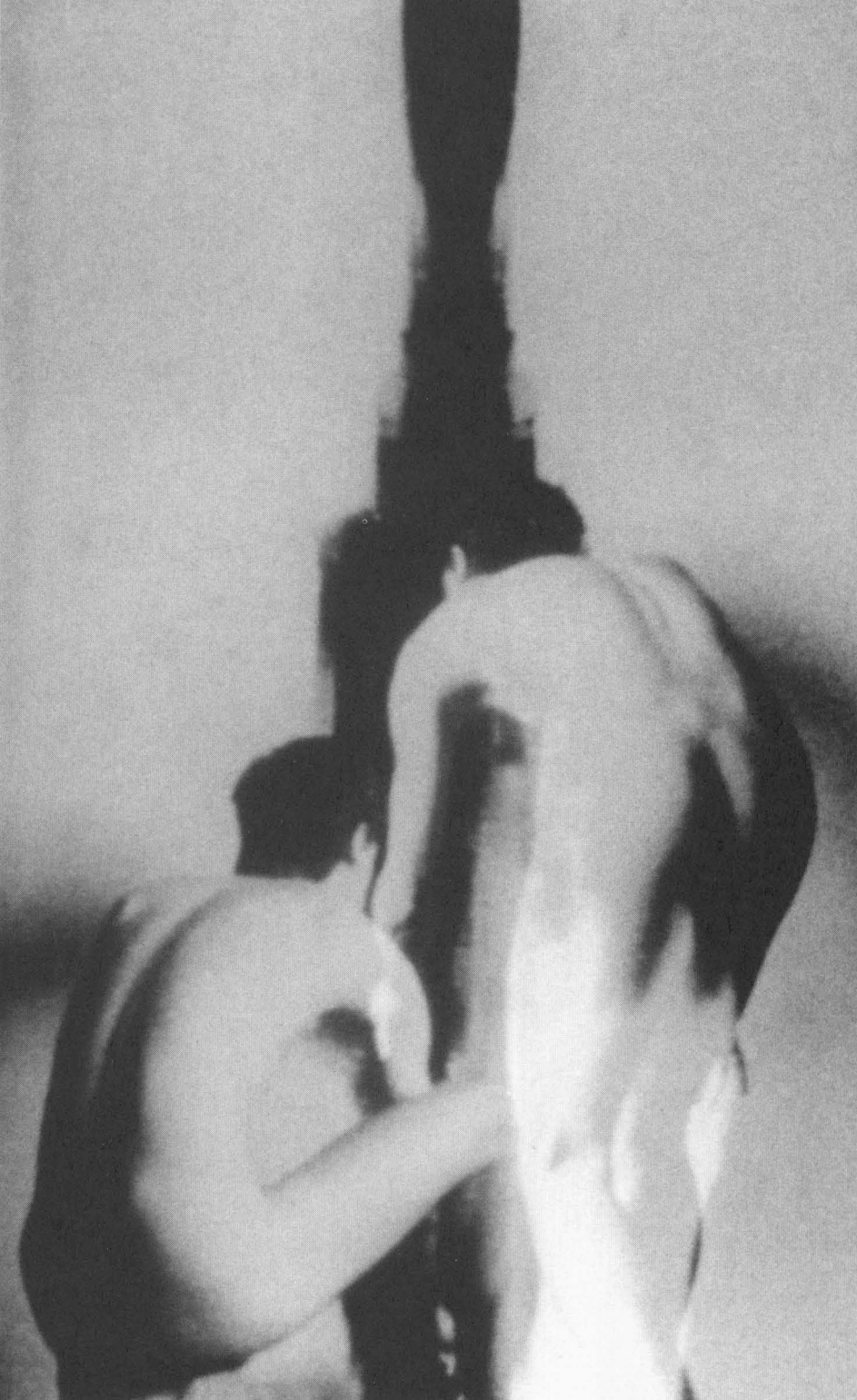
We were together about three months, right up until Christmas break when you left for Cleveland to visit your grandmother. When you got back it was over, we never talked about it, we just knew. That night I had a dream I saw a white coffin. I'm afraid you're inside but I open the lid and it's not Madonna. It's me.

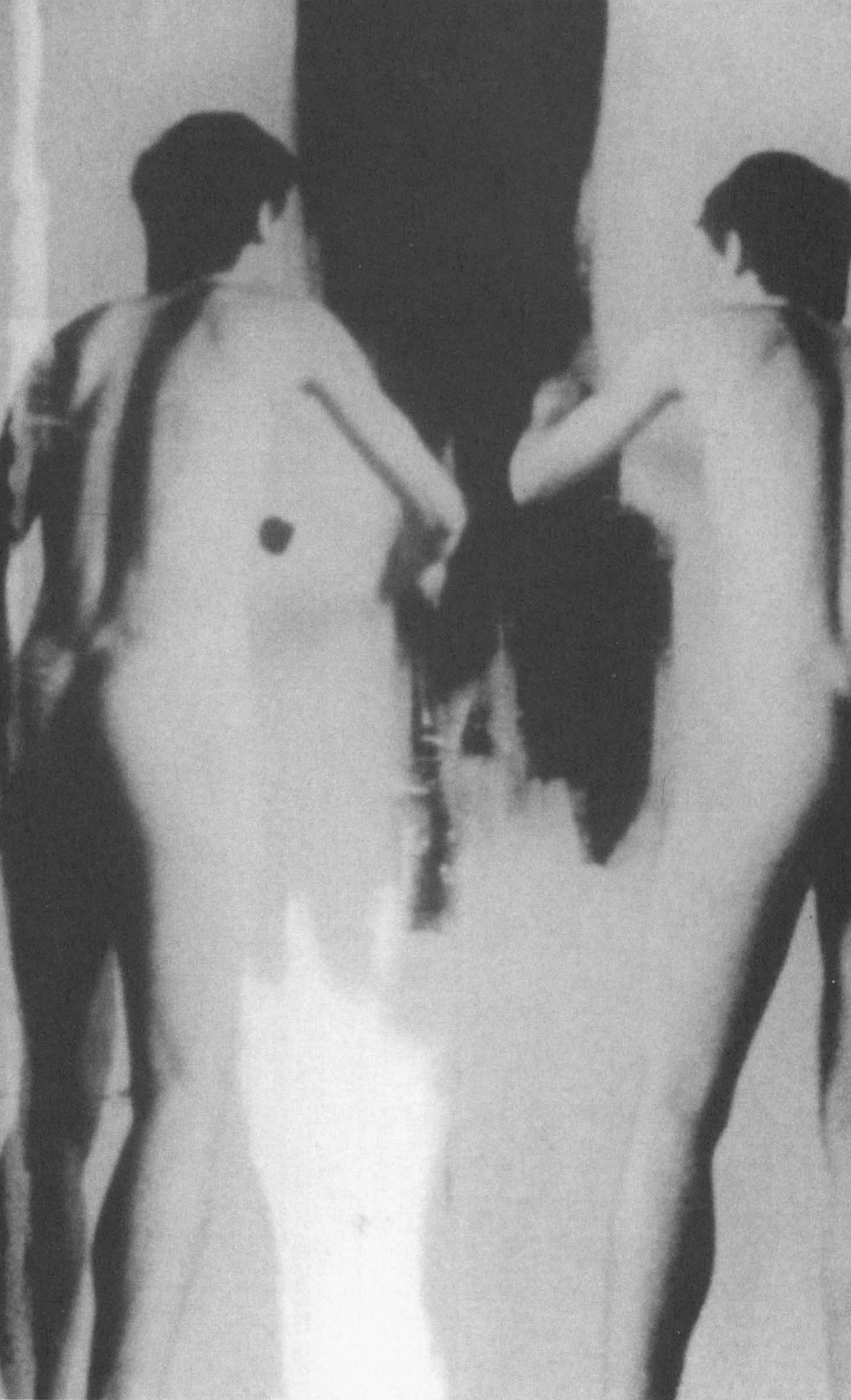
I've kept all your books and records and interviews so when we finally meet again I'll know where you've been. My story won't take long to tell. Not much has happened since you left fifteen years ago. I feel as if I lived my whole life in the three months we spent together. I wonder if you remember me? Wish you were here.

Mike

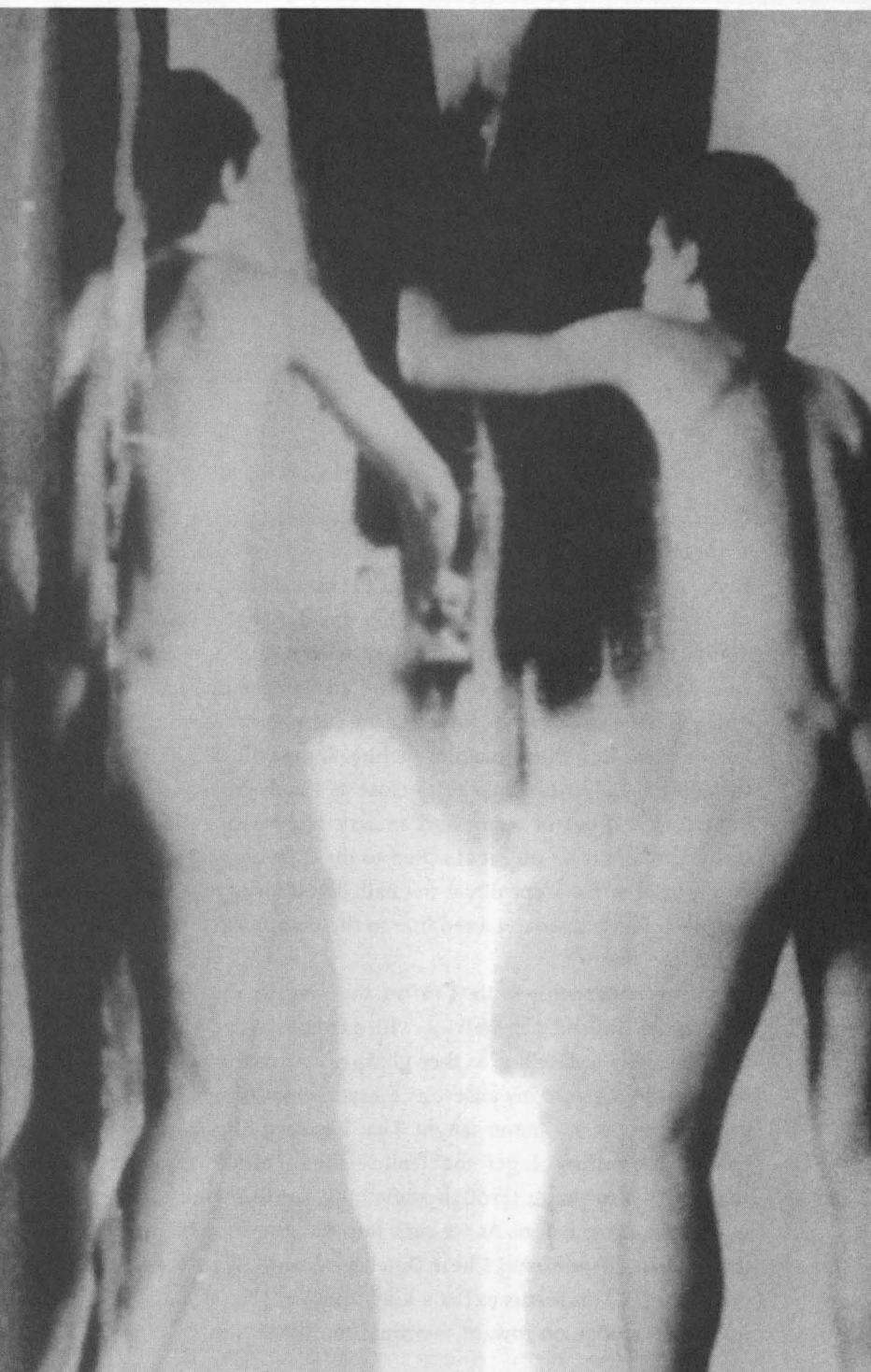
Birth

He wakes feeling himself pregnant. It must be the damp swell of his belly, once the shrunken cavity of a lost innocence, now the veteran of an endless dinner. He is building another life there, a second body which might fulfill his lost childhood ambitions — to grow a tail he could scratch himself with, to discover the truth in clichés, to invent an ice cream that would grow while eating it. As days become weeks he continues to swell and realizes (the obvious always eludes him) that he will never give birth like a woman. A woman grows another life within and somehow finds the strength to separate from it, to let it see for itself, to fail. The child he grows inside is himself, not another being, but another life mapped onto the first, like the world maps of centuries before that changed as each new voyage sailed on past the reaches of the known world.





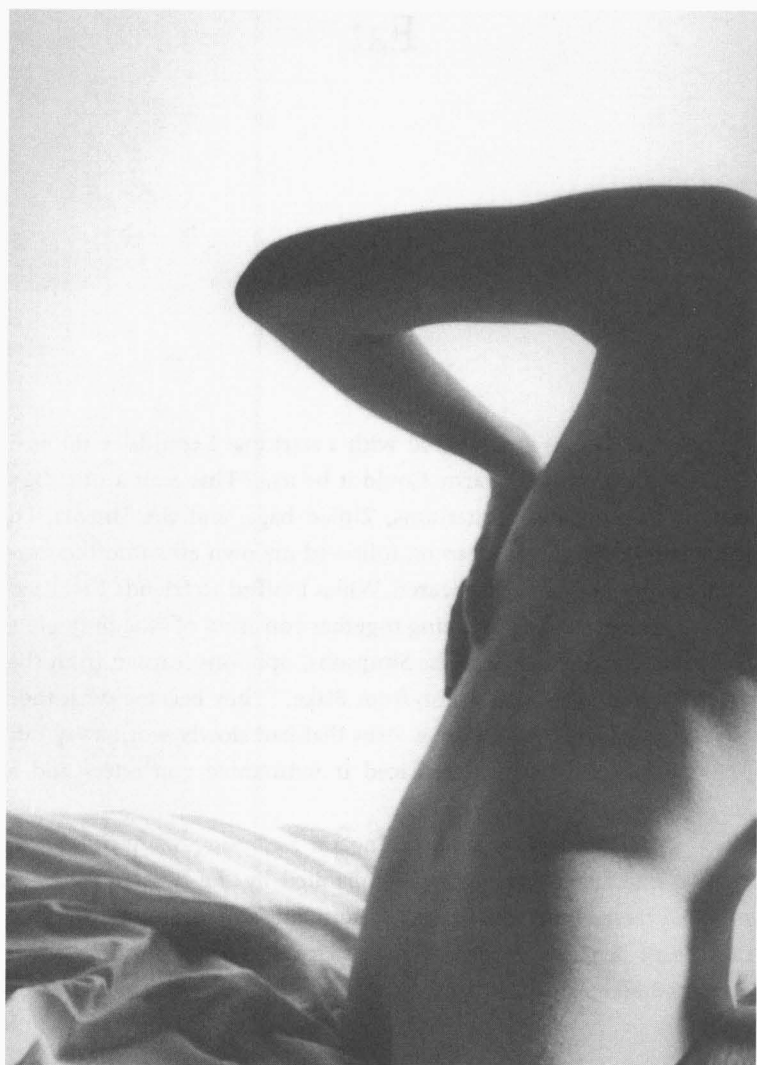




start swinging it in an arc around my body — like I'm making an optical force field. That's how the film starts. You catch a glimpse of this forest, the screen whites out, and then the swinging starts.

By now the other two have given up. They can see me wandering back into the forest and decide to leave me there. I walk so the trees are between me and the sun, so I can see the light burning holes in the chlorophyll. Then I set to work, flicking the camera past the open spaces, repeating patterns repeating patterns repeating patterns with the camera. Moving against the treeline like a painter thickens up a brush stroke, rendering a tree universe in a few turns of the wrist, raising lines of dread in widening circles of repetition.

Then open the camera again, just a little this time, to leak in the white light, which I am feeling as obliteration now, not as the infinite possibility of all images but of dissolution, and begin clicking again to this tune. I film there realizing these trees are my namesake, my hoolbomen (hollow trees). I begin to write my first Dutch fairy tale, my origins in fear, the legacy of my parents' escape from the war and the concentration camps. I find it all written there and follow the long forest shadows into the past. A final flush and it is finished. I'm sweating and hurrying inside where the other two are huddled over tea. Jan asks, "You get what you wanted?" and I nod, looking up at the display sign advertising specials. Only it says, "You are caught thinking about killing anyone you want." It's time to go home.







At first my body retaliated but eventually it understood what I wanted, it could perform on its own and I would just watch. Like going to a show. I was on the scales four-five times a day, recording my progress in a journal. But after awhile I stopped, never looked in the mirror, combed my hair, or bathed. What began by trying to perfect myself wound up in letting go. Maybe it was because I was so tired. Confused. I spent a lot of time alone so I guess it didn't really matter what I looked like anyway. Friends were concerned because my fingernails were turning blue and my hair was falling out.

I'd been skating for nearly ten years, but now just doing the warm-up was too much, and finally I had an accident. I developed a cyst at the back of my spine, and was sent to the hospital to get it removed. But I was really admitted for anorexia. It was convenient for my parents because they didn't have to acknowledge that their child was so afraid of getting fat. No one visited. It was like I didn't exist and that was perfect because it hardly mattered. The important thing was to become as thin as I possibly could. I thought hey, once I hit ninety pounds that's going to be it. I'm going to stop. Look perfect. But when I got to eighty-eight pounds it still wasn't enough. They said it was a mental disorder, but for me it was the only thing I could really control in her life. That belonged to me."





Modern Times

"Tonight, we will take a man apart like a motorcar." Brecht

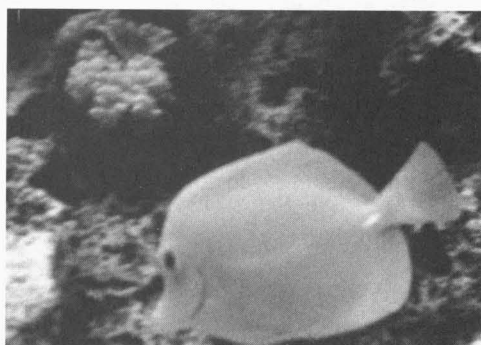
I imagine the young Henry Ford drunk on the ski slopes, racing to impress, plummeting down hills until he hits a small tree where there is only pain and horror and blood as he looks over and sees his right arm dangling off the branches. He passes out. The next morning he wakes to find doctors have sewn his arm back and he has a moment of terrible revelation. His body is made of parts. Like an assembly line. He stops imagining a finished car; now everywhere Henry looks there are only moments stitched together. But Henry Ford was never interested in building cars. He wanted to change the way we lived by making an image of the new human being. Body mirrors that would soon be cruising the streets of every town in America.

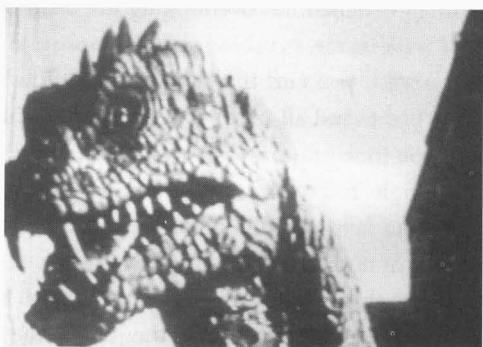
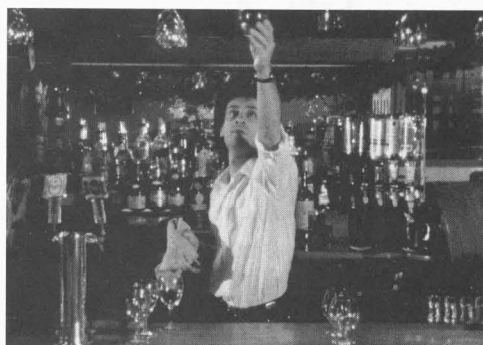
Film is also constructed on a line, like the assembly line in one of Henry's plants, transported by a universe of machines. There is no motion in a motion picture — film is comprised of individual photographs, chained together, and cranked quickly through a projector producing the illusion of movement. These isolated frames also show a body of parts, a Frankenstein body that the camera tears into bite-sized chunks. This is how we've come to see ourselves. As teeth to be brushed, cheeks to be powdered, asses to be wiped, lips to be rouged. An accumulation of products. The movie which drew these ideas together for me was Chaplin's *Modern Times*, where the little tramp is eaten by the assembly line. Taking his title for my own, I made a small essay which suggests that our tools are also pictures. Mirrors that glimpsed only the future.

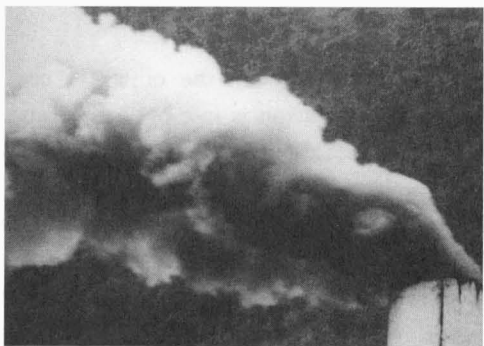
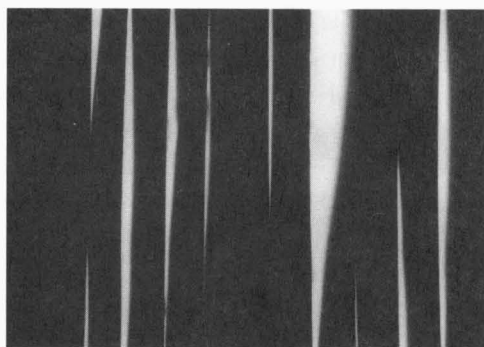


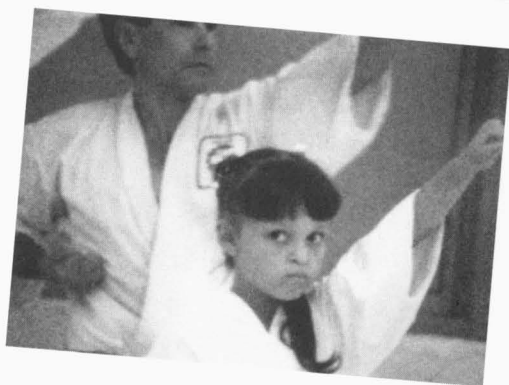


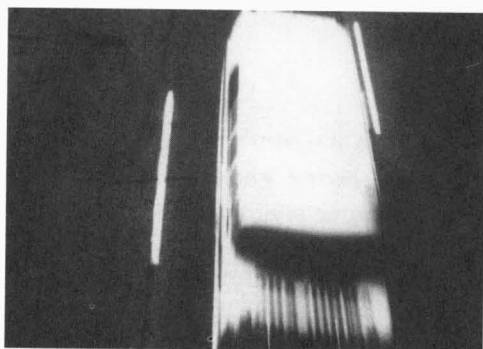
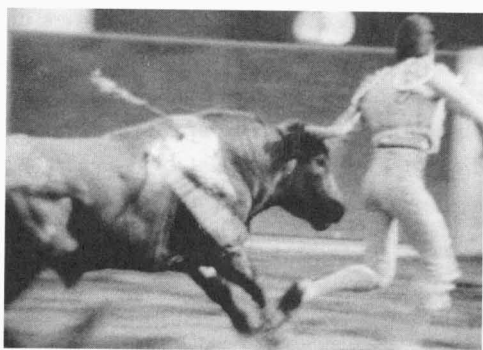








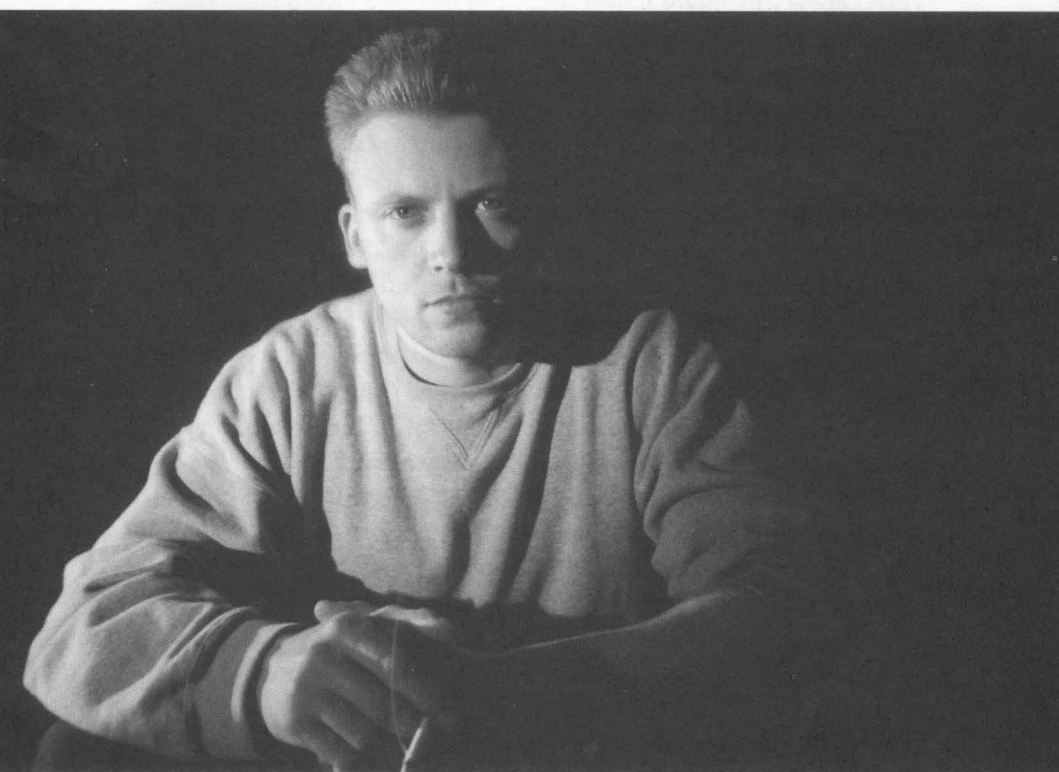






Frank's Cock

Joey was a pal from PWA (People With AIDS), a member-run joint that provides info and services by and for those who've become positive. As usual in places like this there were endless envelopes to be stuffed, medical info to be jammed into the computer, numbers to be counted. We spent most afternoons talking and he related, bit by bit, the story of how he'd come there. He'd met his lover in a bathhouse group fuck, and they'd gone home together even though he didn't like to do that. Liked to keep his sex and life separate. Somehow they fell in love, moved in together, proved inseparable. Until his partner came down with a dry hacking cough that wouldn't quit, and when he booked in to the doc it turned out he had AIDS and there wasn't much time left. We shuffled off to the roof to share a cigarette and cry and he said: you should make a film about this, not one of those dumb flicks where someone becomes positive and everything else in their life drops away, as if they'd never been anywhere but the AIDS ward, but a real movie. About love. This is a film for Joey.



Sorrow

Eric had grown up on a farm in Durham County. “The reason we like to be out in nature,” he would remind me, poking my chest with fingers that could have doubled as table legs, “is because it has no opinion of us.” He was the one who introduced me to a world without concrete, though I wondered why cities could afford to lay out small bits of park, while in the country there were no stoplights or skyscrapers. Not one.

We stripped down to have a swim in the river and that’s when I saw the marks for the first time — deep scars running across his back that still looked angry after all these years. “My father claimed to love his drink, but it always made him mad. At night mom would take my brother and me out to the corn fields to sleep, where he couldn’t find us. Sometimes we didn’t get there fast enough.” I hit the water and felt my body leaving me with the shock of the cold. I’d seen Eric nearly beat a guy to death at the Gasworks, and there seemed something ancient in it, like he’d always been there, punching the past back into its place. Lost in the dream of his body.





A friend of mine has a half-fare transit card that she uses on buses and subways. The other day when she showed her card, the driver asked what her disability was. She said, "I have AIDS." And the driver said, "No you don't. If you had AIDS you'd be home. Dying."



I'm here to speak out today as a Person With Aids who is not dying from, but for the last three years successfully living with, AIDS. Friends who get all their information from reading the newspapers and watching television know two things about me. That I'm going to die and that the government is doing everything in its power to save me. They're wrong on both counts.



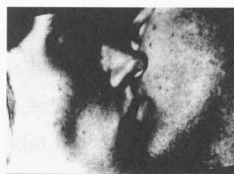
Nothing has changed to alter the perception that AIDS is not happening to the real people in this country. It's not happening to us in Canada, it's happening to them — to the disposable populations of fags and junkies who deserve what they get. The media tells people they don't have to care because the citizens who really matter are in no danger. How many times do we have to read editorials saying, "Don't panic yet over AIDS. It still hasn't entered the general population and until it does we couldn't care less."



And the days and the months and the years pass by. They don't spend their days trying one designer drug after another because the last one gave you fevers, and the one before that made you so dizzy you couldn't walk. You feel lucky to be living in a country where you can see a doctor when things go very wrong. You're there so often it's like a second home, even though he can't do much but change the kind of pills you take to make you sick. And they don't spend their days explaining to their family that it's not your fault, not their fault, it just happened, that's all. Not because someone was brave or handsome or because the cause was noble. It was just a moment, a careless moment, repeated millions of times around the world in all the places where folks won't be hit by cars or starve to death or walk underneath heavy, falling objects. Because we already know how we're going to die. What we don't know, what we're asking you now, is how we're going to live.

After all these years of watching movies even my dreams are filled with title sequences and flashbacks. Six months ago, when I thought I was dying, I kept seeing a marquee with the words, "Show Closing Final Weekend" flashing on it. And then one day the words stopped and I got better. It's funny because I didn't feel relieved or ecstatic, mostly it was just disappointing, because it meant going on and it was easier not to. I started thinking of the 800 breakfasts that waited for me, or the nine months of your life you spend brushing your teeth. How many times I'd have to stand with a big dopey grin on my face in place of conversation because all the words I once knew have flown south for the winter.

Then two weeks ago it happened again, the dry cough and night sweats. Your doctor, Trevor, asks, "I'm not being alarmist am I?" as he sends you off for chest x-rays that show you've got pneumonia. Again. You go home and lie in a small pool of your own sweat before John comes over with flowers he's picked from the police station up the road. "Government buildings," he says, "always have the best flowers." He holds you and makes you promise not to leave. And that's when you realize you don't own your own death. That it really belongs to others as a kind of last gift, as the last thing you're able to chip into the pot. You look into his eyes knowing that death isn't final after all. The angels aren't ready yet. And then you fall asleep.



Unwittingly, you had stumbled across the first law of the Festival: that satisfaction could be had without cost or consequence. It proved there was not a fixed amount of pleasure in the universe after all, the intense happiness of one necessarily balanced by the misery of another. Standing before this bounty you are filled with something that had been a stranger until now: grace.

The year is 1985, and for the past six years I've been trying to catch up with the elusive thrall of experimental film. If there were no rules for this practice, if it had not quite succumbed to Lenin's notion that ethics are the aesthetics of the future, then there was little audience either. Among our narrowing cult of emulsion benders there were few mentions of awards or showtimes; we seemed content enough to share our small yields with one another. The Festival, or the Festival of Festivals as it was then called, was not even a distant dream for the most ambitious among us. It was, simply put, part of a cinematic world that had nothing to do with ours.

I'd been struggling for the past three years to stitch together a diary film which seemed to vanish at a touch. Each approach would render one small moment clear, immediately casting the rest into a hopeless and painful obscurity. The National Film Board had made available a single editing machine, which was used in round-the-clock shifts by every independent filmmaker in the city. So each day, at two or three or four in the morning, I stepped over the heaping ashtrays and tried to find the thread, yearning the while for something simpler. I think that's when *White Museum* took shape — it would be a film without images, just light on the screen, with a voice apologizing (this period is marked by a Canadian cinema of apology) for not having enough money to produce images. Like all detours this one took considerably longer than planned. When I was through I screened it for the faithful and got righteously drunk and fell in love with everyone who had a kind word to say about it, and swore revenge against all those who muttered noncommittally, and then I went to bed knowing it was over.

That's when the call arrived. From someone I'd never met before. He'd seen my film and I wondered how because usually I knew everyone who saw my movies, mostly they were friends I'd lured with promises of free love and pharmaceuticals. But now there was this

frowned upon in the hallowed clubhouses where we usually gather to learn our craft. And then it is over, as if it had never happened at all.

Because its annual incarnation occurs in September, the Festival manages to coincide with the beginning of the school year. For many of us, its glowing screens have taken the place of blackboards, its lessons become a code we practise among ourselves. Was it because we were Canadians that we privileged the bureaucracy of movies, the elegant frame the Festival provided, beyond the movies themselves? Or did it owe more to the dizzying escalation of announcements that preceded the Festival, beginning earlier each year, with ever more extravagant promises? Soon, we knew, the whole city would begin to shake with a delirium that could find release only in this cinematic bacchanal, this orgy of emulsion.

Perhaps, after all, the Festival owed its endurance to its simpler beginnings, to its founding principles laid out a couple of decades earlier: that cinema was the art of the destruction of images. That each film was endowed with an inevitable decay, its emulsion swollen from humidity, its colours fading, its surface mauled by projectors, until at last there would be nothing left. Each movie narrated the tale of its own end, and no one understood this better than the Festival, which would create an event to preside over this demise in a great celebration of disappearance. If the Festival had become, in the years of its maturity, the mirror in which we could all find ourselves, it was our own ends we glimpsed there, and the magic of the Festival, indeed its founding genius, lay in its ability to convert the horror of our own death into joy. Our communal mourning had become, beneath its careful tending, a wonder to behold, and what might be more wondrous than this: thousands gathered to glimpse the possibility of their own decay, standing in ovation.

It's 1993 in Vancouver, on one of those cloudless spring days on which the very tall can see right round the world until they can just make out faintly, at the close of the vanishing point, the back of their own head. I've got an appointment with Dr. Richards and stumble upstairs, bracing myself for the waiting room. With an all-HIV/AIDS practice, his waiting room is a cruel mirror for me, as I watch young men, many barely twenty, moving blind and slow and gutted into one of the many generously upholstered chairs. We stifle raspy coughs and joke

After it got the okay from the Festival my folks asked, like everyone asks, each year: do you have something in the Festival? And I told them I had, but still couldn't tell them what it was about. I had another movie accepted, a short thing called *Frank's Cock*, but that wasn't exactly the kind of thing you want to bring home to your folks either. "Look mom, it's *Frank's Cock*!" When I told my mother the title she asked if it was a movie about farmers. A week before the screening I mailed them tickets with a brief note telling them I was positive and that they should call me. A couple of days before the letter arrived my mom had been sleepless and anxiety ridden, and when we spoke she said the letter came as a relief because she finally knew what it was. We gathered at last beneath the marquee of the Festival, and cried, and held each other, just like a family, and sniffled through a movie that seemed haunted by my declaration. Babz came and made everybody laugh during question period, even those who were thoroughly confused by it, and then we all shook off and had a long drink together. And I wondered how many other secrets were being laid bare because the Festival demanded it. How many other families had grown beneath its call for congregation? After meeting its weathering stare for some twenty years now, what new organizations of the social lie nestled in the womb of its projections, ready to convert our city into light?

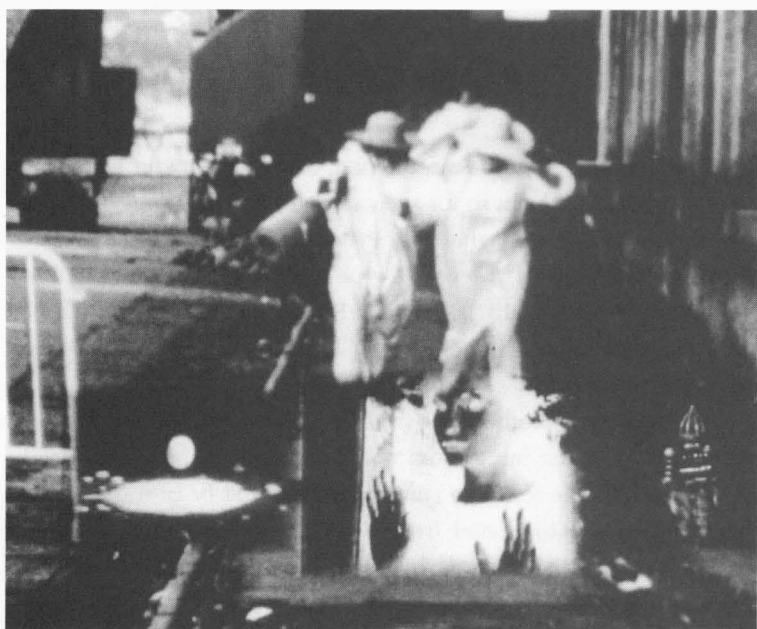












nearly a year before opening your eyes for the first time, and what you saw was so terrible, so horrifying, you've pushed it from memory forever. Was it because of that first painful lesson, that in order to create, something had to be cut out? Or was it some feeling of hopelessness at never being able to return to the warmth of her darkness, that night of nine months?

It's started raining. Not just raining, but really pouring. You take shelter thinking of Noah, tending the first zoo. Legend has it that everything there existed in pairs, except its keeper. You follow a voice from the underground until you find yourself in a small theatre, no more than a basement really, showing films made in Canada. But these movies have no pictures, only voices howling for an image of home. The American cinema began without sound, but the Canadian cinema began without images. And after all this time in the dark, when it finally appears, the Canadian cinema, will we recognize it as our own? Or will it seem like a child grown strange from neglect, an accident of birth? Having cut ourselves to fit an American mirror, when we turn to face our own, is there any way we could see ourselves except as monsters?







NEWSCASTER: We interrupt our regular programming to bring you a special news bulletin. Addressing the nation just moments ago, Prime Minister Wayne Gretzky has ordered an all-out offensive on the province of Quebec. He was joined in the press conference by Mikhael Gorbachev, head of America's Sports Network. Gorbachev promised to suspend all sports programming in order to begin live, around-the-clock broadcasts of the Kanadian Civil War. While Gretzky refused to disclose details of the contract, insiders speculate that the candid camera clause, ensuring that names of the deceased will be revealed to relatives on live television, franchise rights, reruns and special bonuses for body counts exceeding two hundred per day, may bring Kanada as much as five billion dollars in the first month alone. Gretzky cited the war as a return to fiscal responsibility, prime-time television and, referring to troop uniforms, a greener Kanada. Promising to erase the massive national deficit, the Great One retired to the oblong office where he is kept in a state of suspended animation between press conferences.

Prime Minister and Aide

AIDE: Mr. Prime Minister, you look terrific.

PM: It's not enough, in my business I have to look like the future. If you took a photograph of thirty-five million Canadians and put them all together they'd make a single face. Mine.

AIDE: Why so worried about tonight? It's just an old-age rally.

PM: It's been forty years since the boomers tuned in, turned on and dropped out. Over half the population in this country is over sixty.

AIDE: The grey revolution.

PM: Tri-Star's just come out with a wrinkle cream for the under-thirty crowd, women are growing mustaches, canes are a status symbol, and bald is better.

AIDE: You're halfway there.

PM: Yeah, but which half? And who wants to govern a country where the only growth industry is in mortuaries? The polls show that the average ten-year-old has seen over 3,000 murders on TV.

AIDE: It's as if they were preparing for their own end.

PM: Or that with the advent of television, death is no longer final.



Prime Minister and Aide

Prime Minister is seated writing at desk, his aide beside him.

INTERCOM: Mr. Prime Minister?

PM: Yes?

INTERCOM: Three hours to air.

AIDE: And no script, not a word. The polls say the country's ready for war.

PM: But a poll is not a speech, it's what you stick a speech onto. (He walks over to aide with gun in hand and points it at his head) What's the first word that comes to mind?

AIDE: S-sir?

PM: What's the first goddam word that comes to mind?

AIDE: My mind sir?

PM: Open it damn you. Haul the lid off or I'll bore my way through.

AIDE: The first word...

PM: Go on.

AIDE: Life.

PM: Yes.

AIDE: Gives women.

PM: Go on.

AIDE: A purpose.

PM: Harder man, try harder.

AIDE: Death.

PM: That's it.

AIDE: Gives.

PM: Okay.

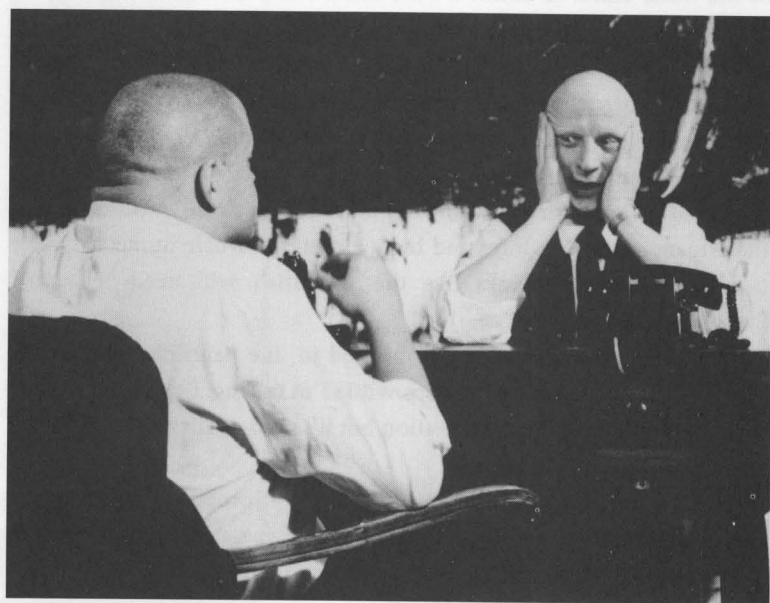
AIDE: Men one.

PM: That'll do for now. Fill it out with platitudes, 800 words and nothing over two syllables, it's for television. Have it on my desk in an hour.

AIDE: Mr. Prime Minister?

PM: Yes?

AIDE: Thank you, sir.





"Thirty years ago we all dreamed of living in the movies. Today we long to live on television. Is it the same in your country?"

"Sure, TV is the hole where pictures come from. If money could dream, it would look like TV. American television insists that images be seen everywhere at once. By everyone. If American movies are broadcast then mine are narrow-cast, inclined always toward a portion of folks who, for very personal reasons of their own, are looking for something else. American movies are like a hose: they spray everything. I water small plants."

"How dull and tedious you are. Tell us about your new film without boring us to death."

"House of Pain is a wordless movie in four parts — like a sitcom without the calm. It began with ideas cribbed from Dante's *Inferno* — he shows the underworld as a descending series of circles with Judas stuck in a frozen lake at the bottom. The lake acts as a mirror, so all of hell is caught in its own reflection. While there is incessant movement, each circle corresponding to some sin committed, the condemned are always doing the same thing. Today we have other words for hell. Like 'day job,' or 'morning routines,' or 'love.' Most of us, most of the time, are repeating, leaning on the received and accepted to get us through the day. This is especially terrifying when it comes to intimacy, when going over an old stroke is how we've learned to fuck, express anger, be happy. We're like actors that way. We repeat."

"What about Shiteater?"

"Like the human heart, House of Pain has four chambers. Shiteater is the last. It shows a man waking, dumping, and eating. Then he dresses in threads copied from medieval plague doctors who dared to enter cities locked in quarantine. Equal parts showboat, religious mystic, and scientist they dressed in bird costumes and performed rituals to heal the sick. When they didn't die themselves. Finishing his dress-up our man begins to play with his body, taking an egg out of his mouth, opening up his underwear to find a rooster, which turns into a cock. He cums."





The film shown that night, the one that came before all the rest, seemed to contain all the short films that would come after because every medium, like the people who go to live there for a time, carries its inventory in a mark or sign, like a fingerprint that traces DNA lines around the contours of the thumb. It was the same with this, the first film ever shown. It seemed to us when we finally saw it, like an act of writing, as if we were reading the writing on the wall of all that was to come.

Already in this first writing of light there is a concern with the autograph, the signature and destiny of the name. The Cinématograph was made by two brothers, Louis and Auguste Lumière, whose projections of still photographs were so rapid they appeared to blend into one another, providing the illusion of movement. Lumière in French means light, and it's as if they could only complete the sentence that began with their own naming by beginning a medium which does little more than vary the play of light against a wall, a wall that they call in French *la mur*, the wall, *l'amour*, the wall of love. And all the filmmakers who would succeed them, who would try to make a name for themselves in this light reading would marry their Christian names with those of the Lumière brothers, the twins of light, whose pictures always double their subject and whose image or imagination would soon make doubles of us all.

4 When I hear the words "short film" I wonder, short of what? There's a kind of despondency to the term, a defeated air that hangs around it that smells distinctly Canadian. It's a kind of confirmation of inadequacy, not so much a statement as a shrug. Movies are short only in relation to other movies that aren't. The "short film" implies something else, something longer, something that isn't just "short." And you want to know, we all want to know, how it might look fully grown because this is just a short form, an abbreviation, an acronym.

Introducing yourself as a maker of short films — isn't this the same as admitting that you didn't make it? Go all the way? The odds were too great so you fell short. Came up short. Was it because we were shortsighted, or short of the vision that would have made of our masterpiece a real movie, the kind of movie that wouldn't have to be

of surrealists devised a radical new movie-going method, so radical that it's taken nearly fifty years to catch on. Their means were simple — walk into a movie theatre when the film is somewhere in the middle, stay until the plot begins to make sense, then rush into the next available theatre and begin all over again. Today we call this channel surfing.

8 When I hear the words "short film" I wonder, short for whom? A new generation of television viewers armed with short attention spans? For these channel zappers all the world's a short film, though it's never short enough. Twenty years ago you couldn't get enough of a good thing, but now you can't get little enough. The short film already implies too much commitment, it's still too much like getting married, what channel zapping has made possible is a glorious series of one-night stands where the present is the only form of life, and the bodies never stop changing. Is this what Oppenheimer feared when he split the atom: that we would grow increasingly microscopic, learn to live in smaller and smaller niches of time? That our nuclear arsenals signalled our inability to mourn because they implied that there would be no one left, no one left to turn the reels of the movie that would show everyone as they once were, watching over the small movies, the small people we've become, huddled together in our private moments. Our movies mark the passage of time. They are time machines, machines built for mourning, and in some moments they are much of what stands between us and our need to obliterate everything, our need to begin again, to wipe the slate clean. There are two kinds of terror here, the terror of annihilation and the terror of remembering. Which will we find more painful? Or more seductive?

Satie. When I was six and learning the scales, I watered my hands every day, without result. Until I realized that despite all the chaos and upsets and frustrations, my life possessed a shape after all, a unity of design, and that shape was my body.

Some days when I go out I fall in love with everyone I meet — do you get that? The way the streetcar driver calls out the name of your stop or the way someone's hair gets caught in the revolving door; there are just some days you wake up and everyone is impossibly beautiful. So you know that while you've been dozing off they've been up all night on the Stairmaster, the tummy tucker, the waist watcher. I walk down the street surrounded by gods, thinking, I don't have to die to go to heaven after all, sometimes just a membership at the Y will do.

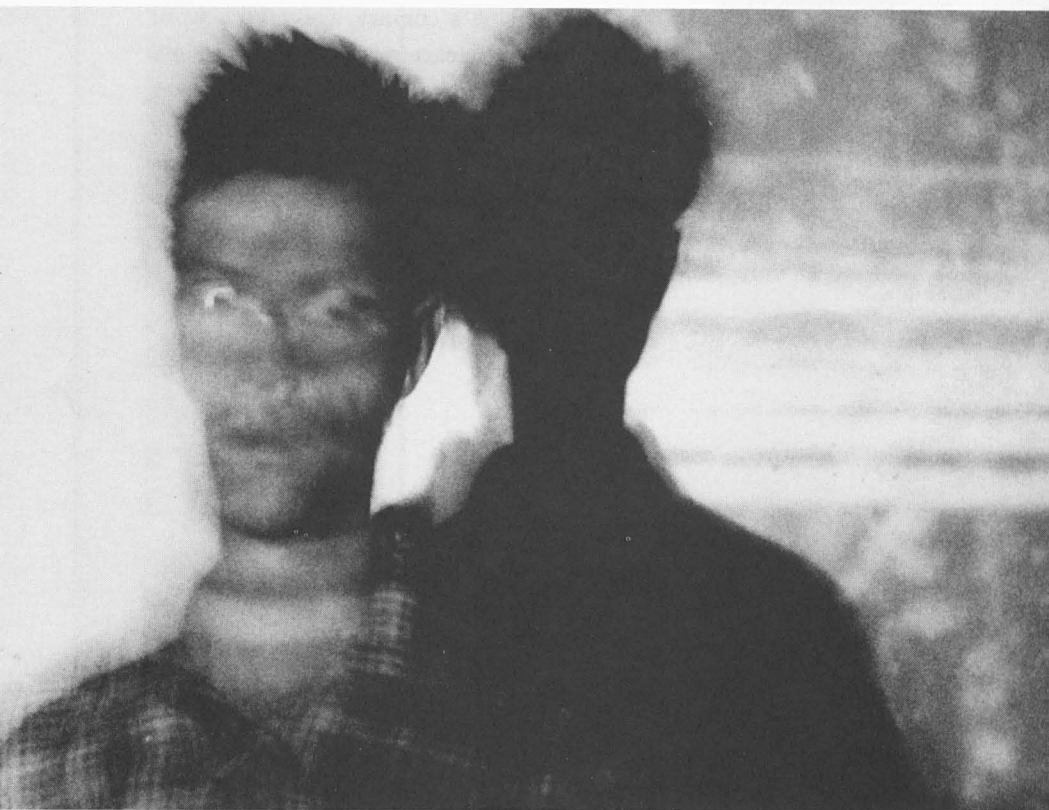
All day long I feel I've undertaken a perilous descent because I've been falling, falling in love, so it's a big relief when I finally get home. As the day's uniform vanishes into the laundry, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror where I appear all at once as one body, one person again. My skin is like a forcefield, it's the place my personality returns to when it's tired of wanting to be a guitar hero or a fireman or the sex slave of the Minnesota Vikings.

Then the doctor tells you there's something wrong with your blood, that you're HIV positive, and all of a sudden the body that melted at the sight of your first chocolate factory isn't yours anymore, there's something else inside and slowly this stranger, this uninvited guest, becomes more important than you. At first it's hard to notice because you don't walk through walls or shatter the Olympic record for embarrassing statements made at a party, just all of a sudden it comes to you — a new word has taken the place of your body. So when you head off to the Madonna lookalike contest the little sticker on your chest doesn't say, "Hi, I'm Mike," it only says "AIDS" because you don't belong to yourself any longer, and as you get older it's not you they're talking to anymore it's the sickness, as if you've become a living memorial to all that might have been.

In the old days, in the past, I was always excited to take up a new sport — synchro swimming, water polo, electric horseshoes — I tried them all, wondering if some slumbering chromosome might

Passing On

In the last year, there has been a lot of talk about the future of the film industry. The industry is facing a lot of challenges, and it's not clear what the future holds. But one thing is for sure: the industry is still here, and it's still making great movies.





When we were little, my brother and I would get up in the middle of the night and sneak downstairs so we could watch the midnight mysteries on television. We loved to watch people dying. In the daytime we'd practise for hours on the front lawn, trying to get it right, crawling and gasping our way toward a perfect ending until our mother would call us, embarrassed the neighbours might see. But every night, as we watched the tube, we knew the secret we shared with broadcast television was that it was preparing us for our own end. Columbo, Kojak, and Charlie's Angels were all employed to solve the mystery of our flesh, that even as children we were already growing old. Dying.

Words were a luxury, an indulgence I never shared with my brother. We tried to find something to put in their place — bowling, fortune telling, board games — before beginning again our mad pursuit of the road. Somehow it was while driving that we could raise again the possibilities of home, rushing from the judgements words always seemed to bring us. Here, in the car's restless overturning of the city, we could find a communion of escape where we might be able to leave behind, if only for an afternoon, the long years apart — the vanishing trail of letters and photographs that only seemed to lead us further from home, and from each other.

My brother wrote that the body was just a bag of water tied together with a fig leaf. This conspiracy of chromosomes we call the family, a nose or knee joint borne for generations, ensured that he would always be a part of the past without being able to remember it,

the Harley shop and the Burger Queen and the statue of the mayor with his head cut off. Everytime we spot an ice cream stand she stops and buys us one, so this is how we reclaim the neighbourhood, floating in the cool dreams of Mr. Sno-Dip and Mr. Softie. We wander through a town we'd lived in all our lives as if we'd never seen it before, explorers of a brave new world fuelled by ice cream and this inscrutable stranger. It's only when they lean together, my mother and her sister, that I can see they're related at all. For all of my mother's stubborn determination to "make it" in the new world, her sister seems the road not taken. She has a lightness somehow, as if the steps she makes leave no impression, manage to disturb nothing in her passing. On the last day she draws me aside, insisting she has a secret to share. "Never get old," she whispers, and then she is gone, managing to take even the smell of her perfume with her onto the airplane.

Today there is less television and more funerals. Eva, Jonson, Marcus, Stan: none of you have managed to survive. It seems easier to lie again beside you, to fall into arms that seem more familiar in death than those who would embrace me here, in the kingdom of ghosts, all of us haunted by what we may become. We the living are the ones left behind, the ones who have come after, left to wonder if a lifetime is time enough to remember all who have passed away. Is there a smile we are capable of sharing, or an intimacy we might reveal, that has not already been offered? If we are condemned to repeat, is it only so that we could come to know you more completely, our dead brothers and sisters? Do the contours of our flesh reveal, in their collection of pores and tissues, the shape of history or only its pressures, as we step quietly towards the grave, where we can rejoin the multitudes of the lost, the buried, and the forgotten.

I reach into my jeans
and buy another.

One day I met Philip Glass
he no longer spoke
but took visitors
in the concert room
at the Brooklyn School of Music.
Instead of talking he played
for him there was no longer any difference
the few notes he favoured
expressed everything he had ever felt,
thought, understood.
His music
revealed a subterranean life to me
that was uniquely his
and I vowed that one day
I would have my own.

Each day he sits
before the blank staves
and patiently enters
the same notes as the day before.
They are so sweet
so satisfying
that the song which belongs to Monday
soon accompanies the entire week
and then every week
for the rest of his life.

He is like the hummingbird
who is so admired
for always singing the same song.

Eternity

New York was the only place I'd ever visited that seemed like home the instant I arrived. Stepping off the bus I fell into a concrete embrace and it's been heaven ever since. That night I trooped off to watch a show of Tom Chomont's small, beautiful diary films in a theatre devoted to these exotic delicacies. Afterward, bursting with enthusiasm and Budweiser, we clambered up to his Manhattan apartment and talked all night, and as the words flowed I noticed the room filling with light. There, in the wee hours of the morning, Tom's postage stamp of a kitchen began to bloom, and I put it down to the Budweiser and walked home. In the years since, this luminous visitation has proved a reliable companion to our speaking, though I travel less now, and most of our contact has been through letters. Recently, I asked Tom to tell me more about that light and his reply became *Eternity*. The letter appears onscreen, scrolled over some dark pictures I'd made in Disneyland.

I felt some apprehension because
entering fully into it seemed
like dying
or leaving the world forever.

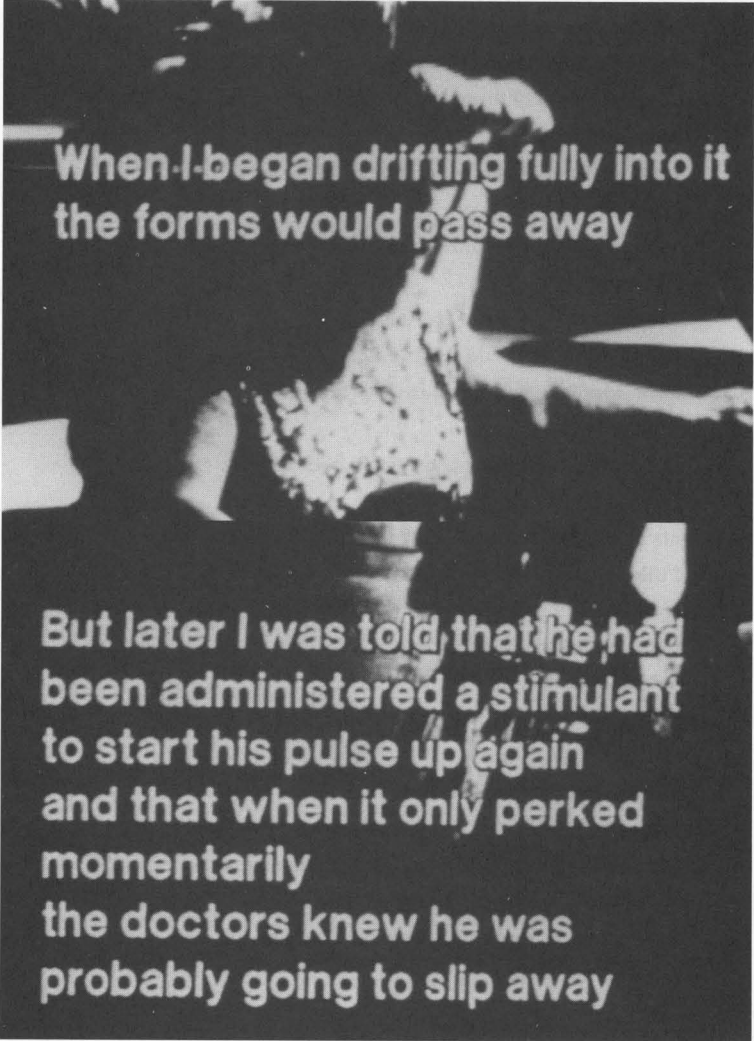
I told him that if he felt
too tired to swim back
he could let

The guards in the hospital always
around the

with him and the other men in the

hospital and the other men in the

hospital and the other men in the



**When I began drifting fully into it
the forms would pass away**

**But later I was told that he had
been administered a stimulant
to start his pulse up again
and that when it only perked
momentarily
the doctors knew he was
probably going to slip away**

He was unconscious
and in intensive care on a respirator.
The hospital staff said
he had reached the point
where they suspended the rules
about only one person at a time visiting
and they encouraged us to talk to him
because they said patients seemed to hear
although they might not respond,
and that voices of loved ones sometimes
brought them back
when nothing could be done medically.
I told him many things
but then began to remind him of our talks
about the light.
I asked him if he could see the light
and told him he could go into it.
I told him he could swim back to the shore
where I was
and Howard and Andy and Andy's friend Peter
(who came to show Ken
his new green-dyed mohawk haircut).
I told him I wanted to show him
some old photographs from when we were children
but if he felt too tired to swim back
he could let himself drift into the light.
I stroked his arm while I spoke.
His pulse raised once
while I was stroking his arm.
But later I was told that he had been
administered a stimulant to start his pulse up again
and when it only perked momentarily
the doctors knew he was probably going to slip away.

Everything in this world is constantly changing.
Eventually everything is gone or not what it was.
Our attachment to it causes pain and joy
satisfaction and frustration.
The light and sound have a feeling of eternity
but they may be only the dot on the TV screen
when it's turned off
fading away.
Practising at non-attachment
is a preparation to deal
with the gradual loss of everything.
I write this as one who cried
and wailed with grief
at the death of my cat Spider.
I am writing these thoughts
because they relate to that moment in my kitchen
when we speak
and what happens to us.
Hope to talk with you soon
and that you're feeling a bit better.

All my love
Tom

absorbed in their games on a playground and lights reflecting in stunning patterns on water merge in a subtle and strong montage which for a moment makes us lose our ordinary sense of time.”
(Miryam van Lier, *Visions du Réel Catalogue*)

In My Car (4 min 1998)

A poem scrolls over a luminously shot portrait of childhood, narrating a life lived in cars, and a last race with the devil.

2. In the Cinema

Now, Yours (8 min 1981)

Imagine a film that longs for privacy, hostile to exposure, shrinking from its audience. A film that begs to be left alone. After a long stretch of pictureless silence it asks:



Do you think I can wait longer than you?
Why am I the only one speaking in the room?
Have you got anything to say?
If you had anything to say, would you be on film?
If you had nothing to say, would you be on film?
Do you think your answers make any difference to me?
Now that it's begun, do you feel an obligation to see me through?
Do you think you're doing the right thing?
If I asked to be alone would you leave?
Is it too late for that now?
What else is too late?
Are you more important than me?
If I stopped talking, what would you do?

These questions are followed by a commercial for television, eleven films “so brutal, so horrifying, they had to be kept from the public for over a century,” a dissolving cityscape, and a game show finale. A “test film” for audiences.

cinema-without-images an engaging, squatter's eye view of the critical landscape. Hoolboom's anecdotal voice-over floats over a soundtrack collage of pop-culture effluvia, television ads, and snippets of rock music. His musings on film, the word, and the workload of trees often resemble a cerebral stand-up routine, built on the conviction that the best thing to do when someone floats a critical balloon is to have a hat-pin ready. Early in the film, he apologizes for the visual tedium ('I just don't have enough money for the images') and mulls over ad hoc ways of alleviating it. Actually, he did find the money to make one image, he says, 'but I'm saving it for later.'

Waiting for the image becomes part of the experience of watching (or not watching) *White Museum*. For Hoolboom, the place to look for the most potent magic of cinema lies at the threshold of sight, just before the image is reached. He rhapsodizes on the blank leader, and even the experience of lining up outside the movie theatre. 'Never getting in is the most exciting,' he decides. 'After that, waiting to get in is the most exciting...' The film ultimately vaults well beyond the level of audio-visual scrapbook in the closing image: a slow-zooming shot of the sun shining through a stand of trees." (Robert Everett Green, *Globe and Mail*)

In the Cinema (1 min b/w 1992)

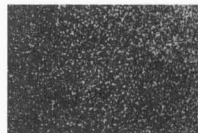
The main character is the title — delivered in a long sequence of intertitles: "In the cinema no one speaks unless they have something to say, while in real life it's just the opposite." After the titles, a man answers a telephone and repeats them. As if our naming were a script to be followed.



3. Closed Eye Visions

Song for Mixed Choir (7 min b/w 1980)

Song is laid over two picture rolls, printed together. The first magnifies the grain of the film, filling the screen with the circling constituents of its material base. The second roll draws a succession of



Blue Highway (4 min silent 1990)

Photographed in the Mexican summer, on the roadside, waiting for the banditos to arrive. In the moments before the end, after the whole of your life flashes before your eyes in movie trailer form, there is a darker seeing, a last descent before the white light.



Towards (4 min silent 1990)

Towards is a variation, another road taken on the way to *Blue Highway*. All of the same images recur but now with a crimson underlay. Angry blood tides. If the first reads as harbinger of disaster then here it is already unleashed, passing red eyes over the Sonora desert.



Careful Breaking (7 min 1992)

"An attempt to evoke the visceral memories of a body. Optically-printed, almost abstract images are cut to a great, discordant soundscape by Earle Peach." (Jim Sinclair, *Pacific Cinematheque Guide*)



Careful Breaking is a film cast in the shape of a body in recall. I'd begun to look back over the runes of childhood, realizing that memory lay as much in the body as the mind — that the carved pine school desks of grammar school were still there beneath the fingers, knees still bore the scars of cycling trips past. As I looked down at my body, it seemed to resemble a map of all it had endured, a hieroglyph waiting to be read. These were not stories in the usual sense, but eruptive moments — hypnagogic, overwhelming, and obsessively repetitive. I imagined a film made by a body recalling itself, a film that might trace the act of memory back onto the body.

4. Dear Diary

Self Portrait with Pipe and Bandaged Ear (1.5 min b/w 1981)

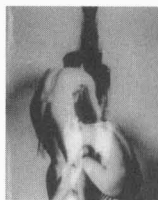
Black-and-white abstracts lifted from the looking glass.



Hoolboom at work in the cutting room. At this point, the notion of overexposure takes on a different meaning, as if Hoolboom were trying to scorch out his own feelings of anger and disappointment by revealing 'all' the images, even those painful to fabricate. There are other probing fictions, farcical in some cases, such as the gumshoe search for Fenway Crane, a preposterous alter ego of Hoolboom's. Crane is not there simply to raise a laugh (though that is something Hoolboom has never scorned to do), but to point out that Hoolboom's onscreen image may also be more or less fictional. *From Home* is a film that grows in fascination the more one thinks about it. It is, finally, a poignant and fearless exercise in self-exploitation, the kind of thing rarely found in the expensive offerings of downtown cinemas." (Robert Everett-Green, *Globe and Mail*)

Scaling (5 min b/w 1988)

"*Scaling* shows the filmmaker painting in an act of double vision. While he paints a rectangular patch of wall black in the first person, his second, his double, patiently unpaints — undoing the efforts of the first, leaving the wall once again unpainted and untouched. The camera's sideways tilt and the filmmaker's area of demarcation call attention to the film frame — the rectangular enclosure he hastens to darken is finally the field of camera vision itself. This double-sided gesture calls attention to the frame's two sides — negative and positive. Each is viewed here as reliant on the other, each the inverse and opposite aspect of the next. What we see reflected in this Rorschach is the way each gesture leads to its undoing, each of us living in an equilibrium of the visible and the invisible, though we may pay heed only to the former." (Jon Haxtan, *Guardian*)



Was (13 min 1989)

"An experimental film in four parts about love and other four letter words. It shows diary images intercut with expressionistic interludes and a hallucinatory Ford commercial from the sixties. A haunting, almost painfully personal work from one of Canada's most prolific and provocative young filmmakers." (Amnon Buchbinder, *Vancouver Festival Catalogue*)



ballad that the Pogues skewed in their own inimitable fashion by having a woman sing it. We scrapped the Pogues tune — keeping only its refrain “I’m a man you don’t meet every day” — and wrote five verses over breakfast one morning. Then we checked into the co-op’s studio, hung the background with black, dressed Ann Marie up in a wig, diamond necklace, glittering bodice and feather boa, threw a star filter over the lens and shot it. Ann Marie made up the melody on the spot. For the music we went to Earle Peach. He gave it a big band sound — all using samplers and a simple four track. In place of a visual chorus we shot black-and-white inserts of me moving through various stages of manhood — being born from a pile of earth, drinking milk from a baby’s bottle, cruising the town in a tux.

The New Man (with Ann Marie Fleming) (6.5 min 1992)

“This new version of 1991’s *Man* includes a wry overview of cross-dressing in the cinema, from *Some Like It Hot*, to *Rocky Horror* to *Tootsie*.” (Jim Sinclair, *Pacific Cinematheque Guide*)



6. Lost and Found

Book of Lies (7 min 1985)

An Air Canada commercial is broken into single frames and then reconstructed to show the movement of the body and the movement of the exotic coming together in a spectacular free fall. Its central figure is a man clambering up an atoll and diving into the surf. He’s intercut with various tropical moments — deep sea diving, blue marlins, hassocks strung between palms, martini mornings. I put twenty frames of black leader between each picture frame twenty times, then nineteen frames of black twenty times, then eighteen frames of black twenty times, and so on, until picture and sound finally join in the film’s final image.





Justify My Love (5 min b/w 1994)

The material girl meets materialist filmmaker in a duet of golden showers and blonde ambitions. Fan mail from the underground.

Originally released by Madonna in 1989 *Justify My Love* was promptly banned by MTV, forcing Her Blondeness to release it as a five minute, home-video-cassette, which would eventually sell in excess of a million copies. Photographed hand-held, in grainy black-and-white, it shows Madonna entering a hotel, pitching against walls that frame a thousand anonymous delights. Each door opens to reveal another form of sexual appetite before she arrives in her hotel room where she gropes a playmate as her lover watches. Eventually they fuck while strangers gather to witness. As her lover slumps exhausted into a chair, she lurches out of the room, laughing, another lost weekend sealed with a kiss.

The 1994 version of *Justify* replays the original intact, along with its breathy invocation to fuck. Added now is a white titled scroll, a letter addressed to Her dated June 24, 1993, which plays over the join of bodies and architecture. The letter describes a high school affair between a young Madonna Ciccone and Jason, his sexual initiation, Madonna's gospel of cunt, and their sudden break-up three months later. It is the letter of a fan, discharge from the comet trail of fame, testimony from part of the anonymous swell that is brandished here like remnants of the true cross, citing a conversion that is at once emotional, sexual, and religious.



Dear Madonna (5 min 1996)

"While we see Madonna being worshipped and exercising her power over slick and handsome men in a fashionable music clip, singing 'Don't go for second best,' the lower part of the screen is taken by a passing text in modest design. It appears to be a letter from Jason, her fictional humble servant, who, in his limitless admiration (there was no life before Madonna), actually takes Madonna's themes a step further: power, sadomasochism, eroticism and sexual desire are reflected upon in blunt language, adding a poignant dose of irony to phenomena which have by now become accepted institutions." (Miryam van Lier, *Visions du Réel Catalogue*)

"The cinema of found footage lifts another's film material out of its original context in order to create new relations. The appropriated material witnesses its origin from a distant shore, pressed towards other ends. This is how old films give birth to new ones, allowing each their time of fermentation and decomposition. The filmer Mike Hoolboom, for instance, recycles in *Dear Madonna* a video clip that has been produced just a few years ago. He addresses this contemporary idol with a personal message directly inscribed into her *Express Yourself* video, answering Madonna's invitation of expression. This reproduction proceeds in an increasingly breathless fashion, as if the film was trying hard to extinguish itself, more detritus in our throwaway society. The found footage film looks back and stops the flow of images, and this arrest, this swan song, is also a eulogy for cinema, at once fascinated and lamenting." (Matthias Müller, *Rundbrief Film*)

7. Essays

Southern Pine Inspection Bureau # 9 (9 min b/w 1990)

Southern Pine is another film made in the forest (in the "bomen" or "boom" of hool-boom). I photographed with a high-contrast, black-and-white stock and projected the original negative, so the trees appear white while the sunlight appears dark.

Every time the wind blows the leaves flutter, as if the world were coming apart. Fragmenting. The treeline smashed into flickering stains of light. The camera zooms slowly, rendering the scene increasingly abstract. Finally the original scene is restored — only now we see someone struggling to climb up toward the trees — looking very small beneath the looming trees. His brief appearance suggests that human intervention is a temporary distraction in the life of the forest.

The soundtrack hails from a couple of folks who call themselves Kaiser Nietzsche (John Kamevaar and Thomas Handy). Occupying a studio they heave bottles, break up the place, throw chairs around, empty bins, all with a Japanese ear for the spaces between sounds, listening to the shatter resound between four



tions of the maker (the body of flesh). *Modern Times* begins and ends in darkness — just like any film screening. At the beginning there is only a voice. A child listens to a war veteran's story who speaks of how he shot people not with a gun, but with a camera. At the end of the film the camera moves towards a drawer which it enters. The drawer is a closed little black box, like the camera. In appropriated images from an old Charlie Chaplin movie (*Modern Times*), we see Chaplin caught within the mechanism of an assembly line. He is drawn along a path which is a painstakingly faithful reproduction of the guts of a motion picture camera, rendered room size, implying that the camera is not neutral, that we end up living inside the machine and seeing the world as the machine sees it." (Martin Rumsby, *Chronicle*)

Mexico (with Steve Sanguedolce) (35 min 1992)

"~~Mexico~~ ruthlessly unmasks and dissects the assumptions and half-truths we tell ourselves about development and progress. Not so much a film as a series of live-action postcards, the images are sustained by an incisive voice-over. The tour ranges from an archaeological museum to a car factory ('a factory which produces only smoke') to a hideously graphic bullfight, linking cultural colonialism to free trade. 'Everything you touch turns into Toronto,' Hoolboom says, and this vacation jaunt ends with the disquieting transformation of Mexico City streets into Highway 401." (Josh Ramisch, *Variety*)



"'You have been here all along...' The film begins and ends at the same time, as if it never existed. The title repeats the gesture when it prints two thick crossed bars over the letters, as if the naming of the goal of the flight would be 'too much.' From the beginning, ~~Mexico~~ denies the images Hoolboom and Sanguedolce brought in their journey to this 'no-image-land': those of the young car-washers, the poor villages and booming towns, the vast cemeteries. The filmmakers have been to Mexico, but they pretend not to have seen anything. They feel like King Midas, because everything they touch (film) becomes Toronto, their home town. Like Midas, the conquistadors

project of creation, now delivered to flesh. At the heart of the factory is a vast oven where the dreams of an industrial consciousness are born. Rubbed up against the church, this flaming pit has an infernal feel, as if the will to manufacture, to create, were a dire inversion of Genesis. The factory has replaced the church. What is being manufactured here are not products, but people. A new idea of how to live. As the montage circles to a close, a last figure is introduced, photographed a frame at a time, and superimposed with oven fires. Now that the task of creation has passed from the church to the factory, it has given birth to something strange and unfamiliar. Behold the new man.

8. Oh Kanada!

Shooting Blanks (with Shawn Chappelle) (8 min 1995)

"Composed as a travelogue of anecdotes: from John Cage's search for silence, birth and the impoverished state of the Canadian cinema, *Shooting Blanks* touches upon a theme seldom presented as a meaningful part of our life: absence. The absence of light and sound are celebrated as the oldest memories of a world to which no return is possible. Flashes of horror, action and porno movies finally culminate in a climax, underlining the false identity Canadian cinema has borrowed from its southern neighbours." (Miryam van Lier, *Visions du Réel Catalogue*, 1997)

One night after too much borscht I stumbled into the video store, looking for something to take my mind off my stomach. I was searching for an image of home, for the cool paranoid interiors of Atom Egoyan's *Adjuster* and finally found it — in the foreign section. Atom lives here in Toronto, like I do, and I was a little taken aback that movies like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Dumb and Dumber* were considered 'Canadian' while the movies we actually make here were stuffed in rows alongside Japanese, Spanish, and Australian movies. I started thinking of a movie without images because we didn't have any here, couldn't find or afford them, with a voice-over that would



In The Dark

Four channels, four stories. A skull-faced anchorman briefs us on the dire straits we've sailed into. Jean Chretien has been replaced by Prime Minister Wayne Gretzky, and Lucien Bouchard is committing atrocities upon anglophone schoolchildren. The PM and his boot-licking aide hammer out strategy, sequestered in a black-and-white hell. A mad bride spray-paints graffiti while fleeing an unseen pursuer. Central to all this is a pair of women lovers, laughing and fighting while the country goes down in flames around them. To play Bobbie and Charlie (a social worker and her hooker girlfriend) Hoolboom had the good fortune to get Gabrielle Rose and Babz Chula. Bits that sound like effortless improvisation alternate with monologues where each woman in turns expounds on men, sex and the state of the union.

Visual technique, often the only thing a good experimental film has going for it, is unconventional to the point of assault. The over-exposed colour shots of Bobbie and Charlie lend an otherworldly air to their remarks, while hairless Prime Minister Gretzky and his aide (actors Andrew Scorer and Sky Gilbert, both familiar from Toronto's alternative theatre scene) emote on Expressionist sets right out of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* — jagged strips in forced perspective, or huge representations of the human brain. The Bride is transmuted by another trick in the experimentalist's repertoire: hand-doctored film emulsion, complete with scratches and tinted stock that blooms and fades with a mind of its own." (David Roche, *Festival Guide*)

9. The Body in Question

House of Pain (50 min 1995)

"The Canadian avant-garde has found its Salo, and its name is *House of Pain*. Mike Hoolboom's new feature must be the most transgressive Canadian film ever made. Shot in black-and-white and printed in colour to achieve its luscious sepia-like tones, *House of Pain*'s four parts simultaneously seem to celebrate and be revolted by that house of pain in which we all reside: the body. Hypnotic, hallucinatory,



one of the groom's eyes and after baptizing it in urine offers it to him... The final part, *Shiteater*, resumes the theme of art and the creative act as a spiritual transformation of physical matter. It reiterates the theme of theatricality (make-up and costume) as a sort of androgyny, but the appliance of simple devices to the face and body take on a suddenly frightening distortion of identity. Feces is again seen as material possession of the other, but the feces itself is here outrageously profuse and baroque, its eating an overtly exhibitionist and defiant act since the lone figure in this episode performs the ritual dressing up before going to the toilet and then sits and shits looking the camera directly in the eye. The episode ends with the angel returning to the water, naked and reborn.

...The film's title recalls the operating room in which Dr. Moreau transforms animals into humans in *Island of Lost Souls* which he called "The House of Pain." The title suggests that the artistic endeavour, like the role of the body, is to render the physical spiritual and the spiritual physical." (Tom Chomont, *Workprint*)

Carnival 1 (3 min 1996)

Each of the carnivals in this series has been photographed a frame at a time, on overlaid rolls of pictures, so that naked strangers might meet "in the dark." Here revellers have gathered to celebrate a great union of flesh, a parade where all that is normally hidden or reserved, or hung beneath a veil of modesty, is now brazenly exhibited. Owing to the speed of the shooting and the layered montage, this congregation of display has left individuation far behind, the whole mass turning in a blur of perimeters, reassembled now in an orgy of secrets, each pore open to admit the desire of another.



Carnival 2 (3 min 1996)

If our flesh could be grown by farmers, this film would be harvest.

"You see that these bodies pressed against other bodies enjoy being held, weighed, caressed by thick indexterous hands. In the contact there is an opaque enjoyment that is not the gratification of a mind, for one has no knowledge and skill to give, no relief to promise. It



On the upper and lower left hand screens a storm of pictures issue, culled from science films, rock videos, horror flicks, and sci-fi movies. This montage of association features bodies grown large and small, frozen and burning, crumbling to ash and reforming, tortured and pleased. On the bottom right hand screen, home movies show children at play, and then visits to the doctor, blood tests, and drug inhalations. Here the body has been divided, cracked open, its myriad reflections in the media allowed to issue like an open wound.

A Boy's Life (15 min 1996)

Featuring Toronto performance artist Ed Johnson, this first-person monodrama shows a man in flight from the sins of his childhood, his attempted escape through a masturbatory revel so shattering he loses his prick, and his ensuing search for the missing organ. An allegory of wholeness, and of the body's fractured unity.



Eternity (10 min 1996)

A movie in the form of a letter I received from New York filmer Tom Chomont. In it he speaks of the white light after death, Parkinson's, and his brother's last moments in a New York emergency ward. The scrolling text appears over pictures shot in Disneyland. Massive underexposure revisits this fabled vacation spot as an underworld, families at play easing into machines that will join a utopian science with a blank psychology. The waters of Dis form the score, finally returning its darkly drawn inhabitants to a housing tract in Vancouver's east end — its architectures designed to stage the family.



1+1+1 (8 min 1996)

"A pixillated couple plays dress-up and undress-up as Earle Peach's industrial-strength audio track pulsates and ebbs with churning tides of sound." (Geoff Pevere, *Images Festival Catalogue*)



Photographed a frame at a time over three days, 1+1+1 casts Jason Boughton and Kathryn Ramey as unlikely lovers, the first appearing as a hovering devil in flight, excreting vegetables, while Ramey

exhales a watch before lifting weights in cheerful self-absorption. Their touch promotes a shimmering aura of light, a celestial force-field which they struggle against, finally retiring to the kitchen with a gaggle of tools to fine-tune desire. To remake their partners into something more like themselves. At last they give in, don each other's clothes, and fly off together to the strains of Strauss's *Blue Danube Waltz*. The images are repeated three times, in hand-processed negative, negative-positive, then finally in "normal" colour tones, miming the process of desire, as each searches through the blindness they call personality to find another.



Moucle's Island (12 min b/w 1996)

I met Moucle in Australia. We'd both been invited to an experimental film festival and huddled after screenings in a nearly perpetual state of jetlag, trying to duck the poisonous barbs of an underground film scene bent on self-destruction. But her astonished expression was not the result of the movies, which were fine, but in feeling herself grow old. How had it happened? While she yearned only for playgrounds and chocolate her body had gone on ahead of her; next year she would celebrate her sixtieth birthday. Later, when she came to visit Toronto, I resolved to make a film of her dilemma, asking her to move again as a child feeling the world for the first time. I suggested she crawl over gravelled roofs and tunnels that appear like the birth canal. These motions of recollection were intercut with scenes from a child's birthday party, Kodachrome moments of a girl trying to climb chairs that appear to her like mountains. Then I introduced an old porn film into the mix, girls innocently frolicking on a boat that takes them to Moucle's island where they paddle each other, toss large balls, and play. Moucle looks on from the far shore of the present, masturbating in recall as ocean waves roll over her in superimposition, until the film's final image is projected onto her genitals, the innocents appearing to step out of her womb, the mother of all memory.

Passing On (20 min 1997)

"Children playing emerge from overexposed film spoiled by time. It is snowing. These solarized images deal with memory in this film of maturity by Mike Hoolboom. The tone is serious; his voice evokes his brother, his parents. The people appear onscreen as though they were disappearing. Hoolboom records the loss of loved ones whose features he stares at with lasting affection. Beautifully simple recurring shots of the white square with black lines crossing it represent the realm of the hereafter, where the ghosts go. With contained and poignant lyricism, *Passing On* addresses itself to death as something familiar, death which prowls and throws into relief the images of a cinema trying to resist another death, no doubt worse, a white death of memories forgotten, without images." (Jean Perret, *Visions du Réel Catalogue*)



11. Plague Years (in six parts: *Frank's Cock*, *Sorrow*, *Fall*, *Hey Madonna*, *Stormy Weather*, *Letters From Home*) 73 min 1999

Frank's Cock (8 min 1993)

"The overwhelming losses brought about by the AIDS crisis have, in recent years, stimulated a body of artwork of extraordinary passion and urgency. In *Frank's Cock*, Mike Hoolboom uses multiple screens as a backdrop to a man, facing the camera, telling the story of a relationship severed by AIDS. The visuals are hypnotic — here, the stark beauty of an individual, shot in black-and-white, is juxtaposed with a stream of impressionistic colour images. In a beautifully modulated performance, Callum Rennie plays a character whose lover, Frank, is dying. The emotional tenor of Rennie's monologue builds delicately but steadily, as the details of his relationship with Frank unfold, an achievement which is particularly significant given the film is only eight minutes long." (Karen Tisch, *Take One*)



Hey Madonna (10 min 1998)

The third in a series of correspondences with Madonna. Cast in the form of a letter, it includes synchronous moments (a doctor's visit, reminiscences about death), narrating a tale of former lovers, one of whom has become postive. A fairytale of grieving.

Stormy Weather (18 min 1997)

"In a future world where soldiers are imprisoning all with AIDS, two women struggle to find love amid the ruins. This is the story of Alex, who works in one of the city's recycling plants, and Barbara Z, a fast talking ex-junkie who works in the city's underworld. They are lovers trying to keep the strains of conflict from entering their home. Unforgettable performances from a stellar cast (Babz Chula and Gabrielle Rose)." (*Chicago Festival Catalogue*)



Letters From Home (15 min 1996)

"Letters is a personal cry of resistance against social acts of containment, especially those that brand and stigmatize. Hoolboom's elaborately fragmented style of filmmaking, multi-textured and aggressively layered, shatters all suspicions of order and certainty. In his hands, this short non-genre, working to place matters under compression, refuses to be absorbed into the mainstream vernacular. To put it plainly, the body of the film comes to represent the body of the man.



What, then, is this body? Well, it is both whole and in pieces, a series of allusive and enigmatic images underscored by fragments of song and text. Threading through these disparate representations of culture, identity and experience are voice-over readings from a 1988 speech by the late AIDS activist Vito Russo. At once cogent, angry and courageous, these epigrammatic passages carry the enormous weight of death about them, but in their performance we hear a wild defiance. A descriptive inventory of the accompanying images scarcely conveys the film's fluid play of irony and grace: home-movie segments of a smiling child at play intercut with archival footage of exploding warships, make-shift planes and ancient automobiles; ghostly shots of civic spaces, bleached of

1980

Song for Mixed Choir 7 min b/w

1981

Self Portrait with Pipe and Bandaged Ear

1.5 min b/w

Now, Yours 8 min

1984

The Big Show 7 min b/w silent

1985

Book of Lies 7 min

1986

White Museum 32 min b/w

1987

Fat Film 4 min b/w

1988

Grid 1.5 min silent

Scaling 5 min b/w

From Home 60 min b/w

1989

Brand 7 min

Was 13 min

Bomen 2.5 min silent

Eat 8 min

1990

Blue Highway 4 min silent

Towards 4 min silent

two (with Kika Thorne) 8 min b/w

Southern Pine Inspection Bureau #9

9 min b/w

Install 8 min

1991

Red Shift 2 min

Modern Times 4 min

Man (with Ann Marie Fleming) 5 min

1992

The New Man (with Ann Marie Fleming)

6.5 min

~~Mexico~~ (with Steve Sanguedolce) 35 min

In the Cinema 1 min b/w

Steps to Harbour 17 min

Careful Breaking 7 min

1993

Indusium 10 min silent

Escape in Canada 9 min b/w

Kanada 45 min

1994

Justify My Love 5 min b/w

1995

House of Pain 50 min

Shooting Blanks (with Shawn Chappelle)

8 min

1996

Dear Madonna 5 min

Carnival 1,2,3 9 min

1998

Panic Bodies (in six parts: Positiv, A Boy's Life, Eternity, 1+1+1, Moucle's Island, Passing On) 70 min

In My Car 4 min video

1999

Plague Years (in five parts: Frank's Cock, Sorrow, Fall, Hey Madonna, Stormy Weather, Letters From Home) 73 min

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