



No. 69 | SPRING 2019



# DEEP CUTS

ARTHUR Jafa JODIE MACK FLAHERTY SEMINAR  
PAT O'NEILL MARIANNA SIMNETT JACK SMITH

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No. 69 | SPRING 2019

**DEEP CUTS**



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**Cover**  
FRONT Arthur Jafa, *Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures* (May 4 – June 10, 2018) at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York, installation view.  
BACK Pat O’Neill, Self Portrait. Frame enlargement from *Water and Power* (1989), 35mm film.

**Title Page**  
Christopher Harris, *still/here* (2001), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

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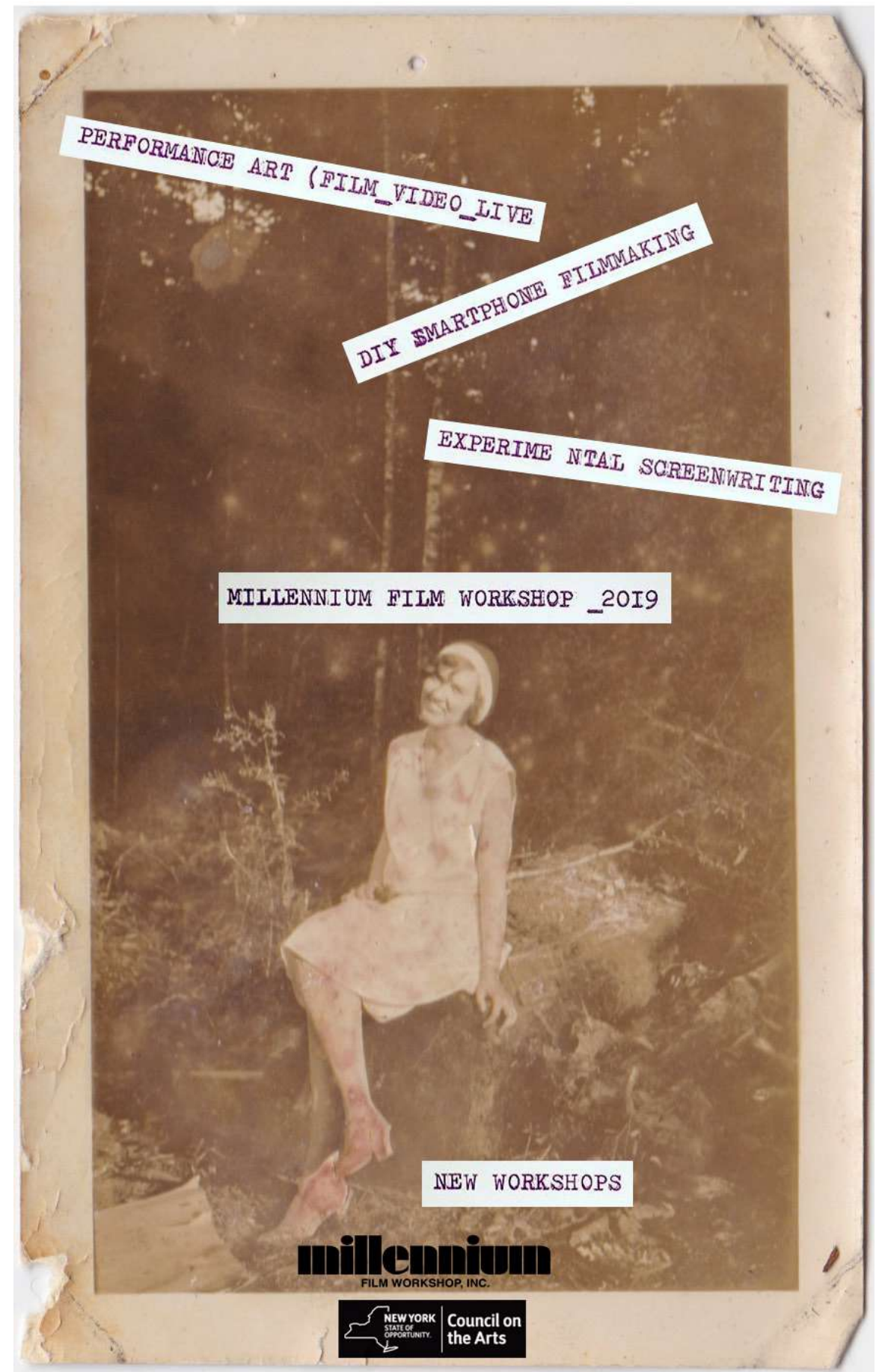
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This issue engages an impressive array of contemporary film and video practices marked by substantial formal, cultural, financial, and political differences. Yet the contributions that comprise this issue also interface in intriguing ways. The issue's title, "Deep Cuts," seeks to draw out thematic correspondences between these contributions, illuminating points of contact that emerge across a collection of reviews, articles, and conversations structured by recurring themes of music, montage, and obscurity, as well as experiences of intense and lasting violence (whether ecological, political, bodily, representational). We leave it to the reader to determine whether such intersections are the result of blind chance, or of the shared historical situation inhabited by the artists and authors featured in this issue.

As with previous issues of the *MFJ*, "Deep Cuts" continues to devote substantial space to reviews of contemporary films, exhibitions, and festivals. New features by Jodie Mack, Donal Foreman, and Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer mingle in the review section with the "expanded" practices of Marianna Simnett, Tony Oursler, and Pat O'Neill, a posthumous exhibition of the work of Jack Smith, a film series in Venice, and a festival in Rome. The reader will also find a review of Anocha Suwichakornpong's 2016 feature, *By the Time It Gets Dark*, which is appearing relatively late in this film's exhibition cycle. Suwichakornpong's work has received renewed attention in the last year (particularly at venues in New York and Boston), so we felt justified in soliciting a review of her astonishing, disorienting meditation on the traumatic legacy of the 1976 Thammasat University massacre in Bangkok, which we missed on its initial run through the festival circuit.

Suwichakornpong was one of ten artists featured at the 2018 Flaherty Seminar, "The Necessary Image," co-programmed by Kevin Jerome Everson and Greg de Cuir Jr.

The program was of immediate relevance to our readership, so we are pleased to have a pair of contributions that relate to it directly. As Teresa Castro discusses in her review of "The Necessary Image," the 2018 seminar featured experimental practitioners from diverse backgrounds and locations whose work emphasizes the ethical dimensions of artistic practice. It was also an important seminar in the Flaherty's organizational history. In the midst of Everson and de Cuir Jr.'s program, as Castro notes, representatives of the Flaherty chose to act on conversations the organization had conducted for several years about reassessing the Flaherty's official logo. Since 2000, the logo has consisted of an iconic silhouette of the Inuit man Allakariallak (star of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* [1922]) thrusting a harpoon. When Indigenous artists and participants at the seminar voiced concerns about this logo and the way it perpetuates the stereotype of Indigenous peoples as inhabitants of a romanticized past, the Flaherty responded by removing posters displaying the logo from the seminar space. Representatives of the Flaherty also read a statement that explained this decision and announced the organization's commitment to reckoning with "the inextricability of the history of the Flaherty and the ongoing histories and legacies of settler colonialism."<sup>1</sup> Though this announcement met with some resistance on social media, the majority of participants who were present in the room understood it as a necessary gesture of recognition in a seminar structured by principles of dialogue and inclusion.

The second contribution on "The Necessary Image"—a transcript of a group discussion that followed a screening of Robert Flaherty's *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1927), Cauleen Smith's *H-E-L-L-O* (2014), and Christopher Harris's *still/here* (2001), and which featured Smith and Harris in conversation with Pablo de Ocampo—is presented here as an example of the kinds of discussions that developed in the context of the 2018

seminar. For many seminar participants, this discussion session was among the more energizing to occur in a week marked by long, intense conversations. In addition to providing substantial insight into a pair of remarkable works, as well as the broader production methods of these two filmmakers, Smith's and Harris's conversation unfolded within an atmosphere of openness and mutual appreciation that may not be immediately evident in the transcript, though it is indexed in the many expressions of gratitude voiced by filmmakers and participants throughout the session. De Ocampo's decision to invoke the convention of land acknowledgments in his opening remarks is also notable in the context of the broader conversations about Indigenous rights that occurred at the 2018 seminar. Those who are familiar with the Flaherty film that began this program—a tribute to the architecture and industry of New York City that references one of that city's favorite origin stories, in which Dutch merchants are said to have purchased Manhattan Island from "the Indians" for \$24—will understand the significance of de Ocampo's gesture, which (along with the program itself) set the stage for the ensuing remarks about the politics of place in New Orleans, Chicago, St. Louis, and New York. We are grateful to the Flaherty for allowing us permission to publish this transcript, and to Smith, Harris, and de Ocampo for reviewing it prior to publication.

Several themes that structure Smith's and Harris's conversation reappear in different contexts in the two articles featured in "Deep Cuts." Ryan Conrath's article, "The Ecological Cut," engages issues of land and locality by examining a vital strand of contemporary experimental landscape films that deploy montage—rather than the long take—as an ecological device. In the work of Daïchi Saito and Peter Bo Rappmund, Conrath finds a latent proposal for thinking cinema's ecological potential through an aesthetic of separation, rather than interconnection. Soyoung Yoon's analysis of Arthur Jafa's *akingdoncomethas* (2018) also foregrounds questions of editing, particularly in her discussion of what Jafa terms "black visual intonation," an editing method modeled on the expressivity of black music, and intended

as a response to "the precarity of black existence in the United States" (Yoon). Jafa's investment in adapting musical strategies affiliated with blues and jazz resonates productively with Smith's and Harris's remarks about the musical cultures of New Orleans and Chicago, and the ways in which *H-E-L-L-O* and *still/here* dialogue with those cultures.

Rounding out this issue, Grahame Weinbren's visit to Pat O'Neill's studio in Pasadena celebrates the artist's upcoming 80th birthday in June of this year. "Pat O'Neill: Studio Visit" offers a personal glimpse into O'Neill's working methods amidst a prolonged period of transition. O'Neill is known for his innovative deployments of optical printing in films including *7362* (1967), *Saugus Series* (1974), *Water and Power* (1989), *Trouble in the Image* (1996), and *The Decay of Fiction* (2002). In recent years, he has set aside photochemical film for digital media, producing a number of digital films that employ the same combinatory aesthetics as his earlier analog work (such as *Where the Chocolate Mountains* [2015] and *An Extra Wander: For Chickie* [2016]). He has also reworked some of his single-channel films as multi-screen installations (as Jennifer Peterson discusses in her review for this issue). Weinbren's first critical appraisal of O'Neill's work in this journal appeared in 1979. We are pleased to feature his studio visit here as the most recent manifestation of a creative and critical dialogue that has spanned four decades.

A final note to the reader. The production of this issue has been punctuated by the deaths of three artists whose impact on the world of avant-garde cinema cannot be overstated: Jonas Mekas; Carolee Schneemann; and Barbara Hammer. Their deaths occurred after materials for this issue had been finalized. We look forward to presenting memorial texts on their lives and work in a forthcoming issue.

FOR THE EDITORS, JOSH GUILFORD

1. Flaherty Seminar, Statement on Removal of Posters, Facebook, 23 June 2018.

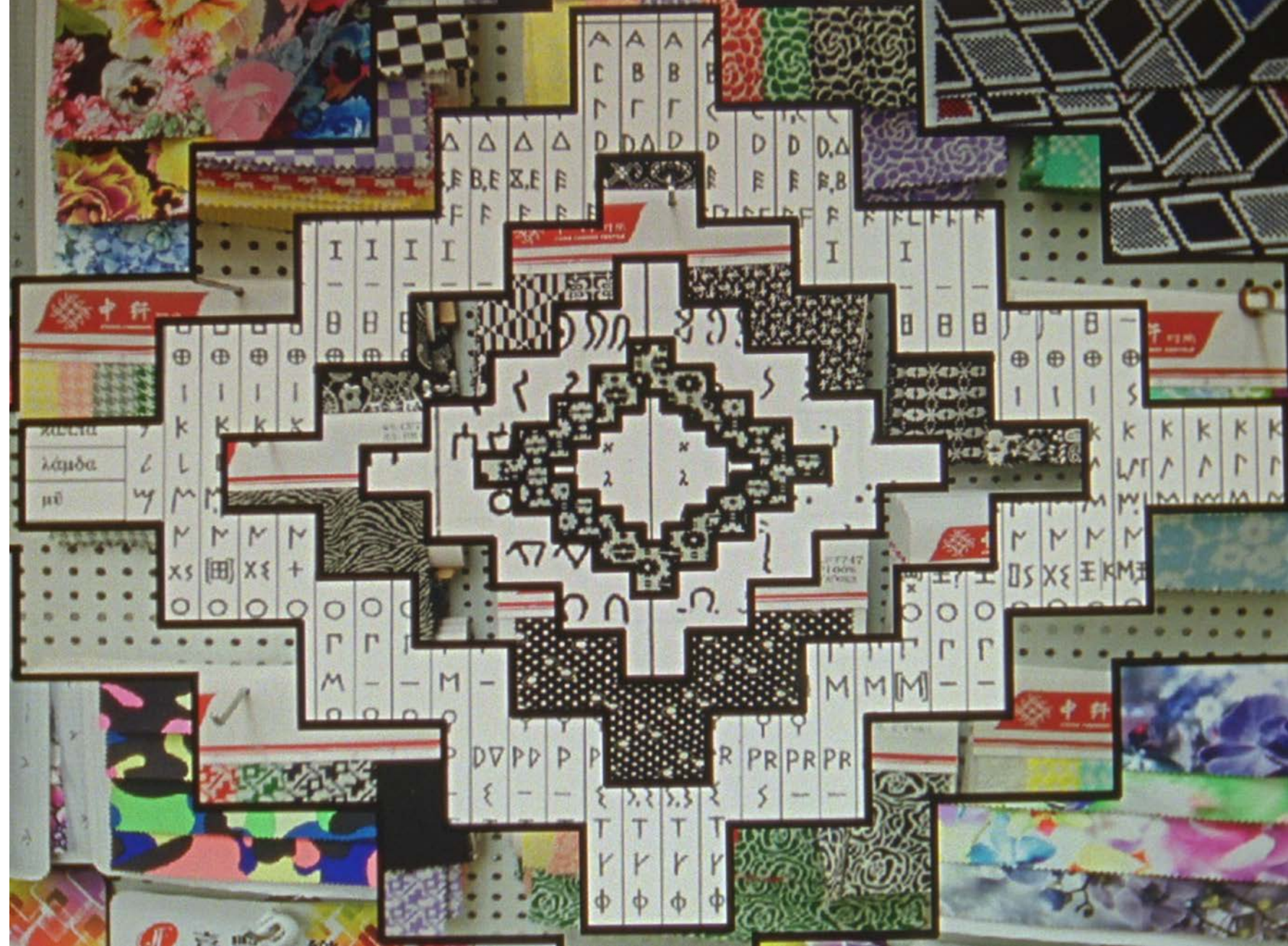


## JODIE MACK'S *THE GRAND BIZARRE*

New York Film Festival Projections Series  
2018

Jodie Mack has been making 16mm, stop-motion animated short films for over a decade, honing and refining a style drawn from the history of avant-garde animation into her own distinct practice. Taking influence from the hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage and the kinetic animation of Len Lye, Mack works in painstakingly choreographed 16mm and commits to an aesthetic of hyperactivity. Defined by rapid movement and vibrant patterns synchronized to beat-heavy music, Mack's films are controlled cacophonies of light, color, texture, and sound. Her first feature, *The Grand Bizarre*, made its US debut at the 56th annual New York Film Festival in the Projections series. The 2018 Projections program showcased 60 shorts and seven features from established filmmakers and unknowns alike in the Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center over the first weekend of October. Mack's film was a standout, blending formal pyrotechnics with an insightful probing of questions equally pertinent to both art and commerce in an increasingly interconnected world.

As her longest work to date, *The Grand Bizarre* expands some of Mack's enduring motifs—textiles, technology, language—to a global scale. Before the screening Mack introduced the film as “the enduring resilience of pattern and movement against the homogenizing forces of global commerce,” a credo which could very well summarize Mack's oeuvre as a whole. Living up to its title, *The Grand Bizarre* is a symphony of specificity, a dense deluge of images and music that overwhelms with its scale and the sheer amount of effort it clearly took to make. The film charts the journey of a gang of brightly-colored textiles around the world—twisting, squeezing, expanding, shrinking, brought to jittery life by Mack's restless energy. Beginning in overflowing suitcases, the textiles travel by plane, boat, car, sometimes stopping in villages or cities, but always moving forward in spasmodic bursts. Borrowing



Jodie Mack, *The Grand Bizarre*, frame enlargement, All images courtesy the artist.

filmic language from sources ranging from travelogues to anthropological and educational films, the only consistent visual factor is movement: each shot is brimming with shimmering stop-motion flux, either between whole frames (as with the classic Mack montage of close-up textures, flashing through textile patterns, pages of language textbooks, and computer chips in endless permutations) or a small part of it (as in the mesmerizing shots of cycling textiles reflected in car mirrors). Likewise, the soundtrack pulses and hums with music that transforms

found sounds into urgent beats. Moving effortlessly between repetition and variety, the film maintains a whip-quick energy for its entire 61-minute runtime, never overstaying its welcome.

Textiles are highly charged theoretical objects, a favorite topic of academic disciplines from anthropology to art history, but Mack forgoes the temptation to make any of these resonances verbally explicit. Acknowledging that the film went through a number of different versions, including voiceover-heavy and more narrative routes, Mack wisely settled on the form



of a musical. This wordlessness allows the montage to drive an associative approach to meaning, pushing form to the point that it becomes its own content. There's certainly a lot baked into the film about vernacular language and commerce, culture and labor and globalization, but it's all conveyed through visuals—and aided affectively by the score. Touches like a Skype jingle-sampling beat help to situate the film in a time and place, and guide the viewer's emotional connection to the oft-hectic visual palette.

Shown on a 16mm print, *The Grand Bizarre* is, by design, woven together like the textiles it depicts: composed of tens of thousands of still frames, perfectly stitched together in time to the music to become a tapestry both ornate and

overwhelming. The one piece of the film that seems out of place, interestingly enough, is the very beginning—a preface consisting of a burning pile of cardboard, a bright orange conflagration on a dark night. Responding to an audience query, Mack explained that the footage originated from an abandoned idea from the film, a miniature replica city, which she spent countless hours crafting and animating before deciding to scrap it. The fire is her burning the remains of the city, and in its meaninglessness and disconnection from the rest of the tightly crafted film, the clip introduces a certain underlying tension around the limits of sequence. The bonfire, a funeral image, suggests a wake for the other possible films that *The Grand Bizarre* could have been or contained, a specter that hangs over the rest of the proceedings



Jodie Mack, *The Grand Bizarre* (2018), frame enlargement.

as a reminder of what has been left out, what choices must necessarily be excised to bring any artistic work to completion. In an interesting temporal twist, the preface (as illuminated by the post-film Q&A) undercuts the perfectly crafted stitching of the film's colorful frames, and instead emphasizes the gaps.

Mack noted that the film's 61-minute runtime was chosen partially because it is the longest that will fit on a single 16mm reel. Mack's commitment to an increasingly rare format seems inextricably tied to the project's stance against the homogenizing monoculture: it provokes thoughts of an imaginary journey taken by the canister of *The Grand Bizarre* itself, traveling from Locarno, to Toronto, to New York, continuing the journey of the cloth protagonists held within it. There was another way in

which the screening at Projections offered a reminder of both the materiality of film and the site-specific potentialities of exhibition. At one jarring moment in the middle the screening, the percussive score dropped out, leaving the images twirling forward, naked of their auditory accompaniment. Without missing a beat, Mack, seated in the audience, improvised an acapella rendition of the soundtrack's bleeps and bloops until the issue was fixed. It was an unpredictable but apt illustration of Mack's style, handmade until the very end.

VINCENT WARNE





# FILM NIGHTS ON THE VENICE LIDO: THE SPACE BETWEEN PAINTING, FILM, AND THE DIGITAL

Pluff Moving Images, Venice, Italy  
September 5-6, 2018

It was one of those beautiful summer nights on the Venice Lido. I was on my way to the Caserma Pepe, a military barrack completed in 1595 that functioned across the centuries to house troops in the defense of Venice, and then in the service of Italy, and finally closed in 1999. The abandoned building has now been re-activated to host cultural experiences. In collaboration with the Biennale Urbana, the Architectural Biennale French Pavilion recently mounted a thought-provoking two-night series of film screenings. The works of international artists, Basir Mahmood and Peter Miller were shown in the

central outdoor courtyard of the Caserma on the first night, and on the second night, in a smaller interior room, were the works of Juliana Borinski and Jean-Baptiste Lenglet. These moving image works engaged boundaries between various mediums, especially in relation to space, time, and history.

The work of Basir Mahmood, a young Pakistani artist living and exhibiting internationally gives us an important point of entry. Mahmood remembers his father inspiring him to view the world calmly and at length, an attitude Mahmood has embodied in his cinematic work. Allowing the world to reveal itself through

the slow observation of the camera has a considerable history on film, from neo-realism to the avant-garde. In *A Message to the Sea* (2012), Mahmood encourages a new set of considerations. A long take of a fisherman at sea results in a conflict of visual surfaces, a contemplation that takes us from depth to flatness, while letting the reality of the off-screen emerge.

*A Message to the Sea* was filmed in a fishing village in Turkey. In this primarily single-shot 6-minute film, a fisherman wades into the still clear water and sets an empty motorboat out toward the horizon. Annette Michelson had once claimed that Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) is a metaphor for the movement of consciousness, taking us from uncertainly to certainty by means of a 45-minute zoom to a focal point, a photograph of the sea on the opposing wall. Now *A Message to the Sea* encourages us to go visually into the space of the image, our eye following the slow unsteady course of the motorboat, but

also to stay at its surface, with the fisherman positioned centrally in the frame. The film also allows us to move historically outward, beyond the limits of the screen. As a Turkish fisherman, this man's relationship to the sea is vital, and in the present screening context of the Caserma, he is metaphorically positioned in the caesura between Europe and the East, resonances still important today.

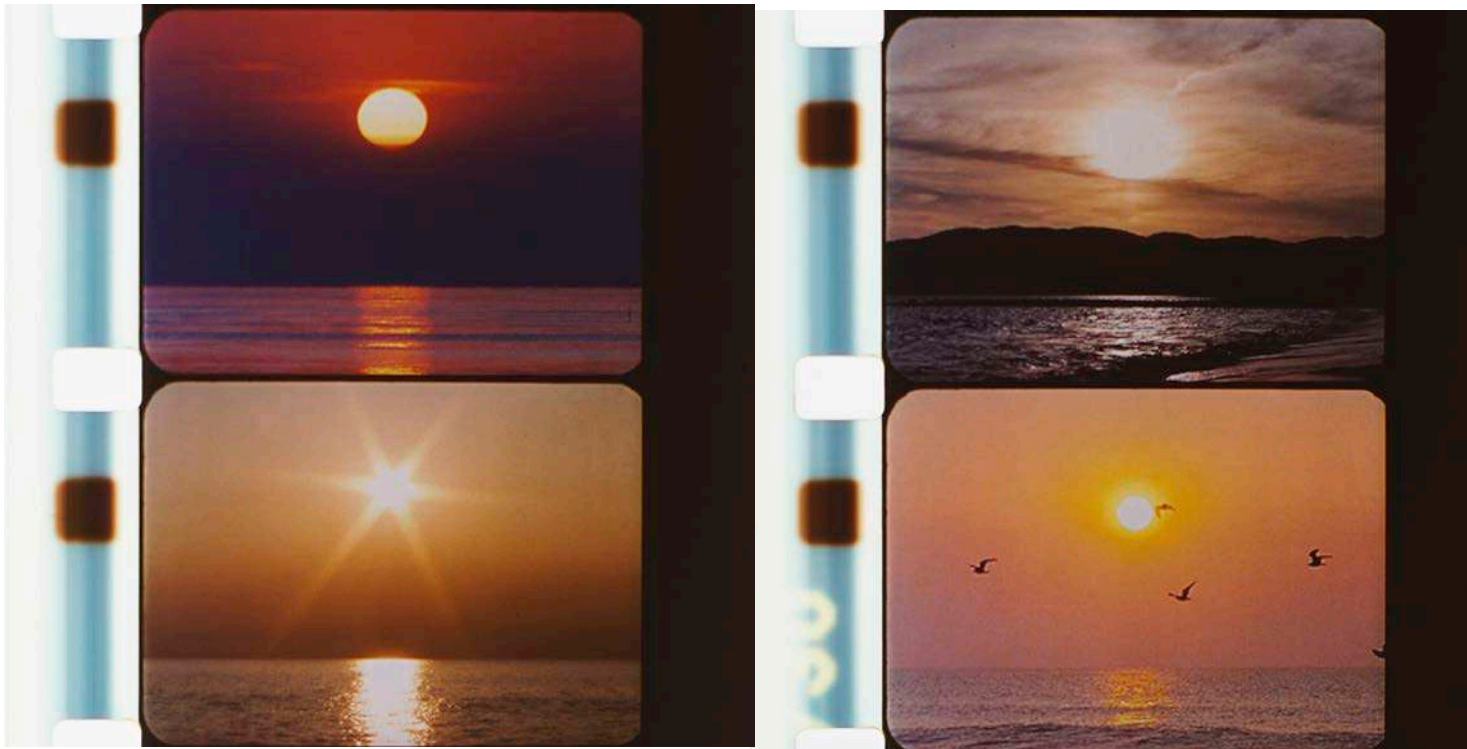
The concerns of Mahmood's work, as well as the others presented, engage the tension between mediums, while engaging historical concerns. For Philippe-Alain Michaud, for example, who curated the screenings along with Enrico Camporesi and Jonathan Pouthier, Mahmood's work brings a temporal dimension to the condition of painting by juxtaposing stillness and the measured movements of filmed bodies. This is seen in Mahmood's *Monument of Arrival and Return* (2016), with the sculptural surfaces of the Pakistani men's poses, held for an

PREVIOUS PAGE Basir Mahmood, *A Message to The Sea* (2012), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

Jean-Baptiste Lenglet, *Amnésie générale* (2012-2016), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.







Peter Miller, *SET* (2016), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.



Juliana Borinski, *The Getty* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

extended moment, implying the imminence of a narrative that is never fully completed. Color is also brought to the fore, with the bright red of their garments, the rich brown of their skin, and the delicate lavender of the flowering plant they exchange.

The exploration of movement with historical implications is also present in the work of French artist Jean-Baptiste Lenglet, with his computer animated collage video *Amnesie Generale* (2012-2016). Lenglet takes us into a world where the traditional views of painting have lost their moorings. Like with a collage, or a video game, the view presented to us is transformed across layers, creating a moving tension between the fragmented flatness and depth of the digital image. Here the eye of nature, as Gilles Deleuze described it, has been replaced by the brain city, a play of information. In Lenglet's work, we are given digitally captured views of city streets, architecture, and nature, superimposed, emerging, and exfoliating from various locations on the screen. The images presented are documents of the city of Phnom Penh, beginning with the White Building, a symbol of

Khmer Rouge era architecture. Also included are ancient cultural artifacts, new building construction, and Cartier shops, none of which can erase the memory of brutal massacres in the 1970s, nor the earlier history of French colonialism in Cambodia.

The work of American artist Peter Miller and Brazilian Juliana Borinski, both working in Europe, is often concerned with the material and formal conditions of their mediums, and the testing of these boundaries. Peter Miller's *SET* (2016), for example, explores the video image's depth of field in tension with its representational surface, using methods of rapid image oscillations to impede the illusion. A fast series of downloaded single shots featuring a sunset over a horizon, all in different geographical locations, creates a point of focus. Viewing 10,000 images in 10 minutes, we can visually shift our attention from the center of the frame on the sun, to the left, the right, or up or down, to capture fragments of representations and surface-penetrating color.

As in painting, the out-of-frame is closed to us, and here, so too is narrative. We are locked in the image, in the present, while expelled outward into the history of film and art, and its reformulations. Earlier flicker films by Paul Sharits, for example, gave us the single frame material presence of film, and like the color field paintings of Mark Rothko, both artists articulated each frame/canvas in sumptuous abstract color. Miller alludes to this history with a digital, representational image—not celluloid, a material substance like the body, but an informational stream generated by light.

Juliana Borinski's work often tests the tension between light, celluloid, and the digital image. But in *The Getty* (2018) she elaborates these concerns through a representational moving image that is on the verge of both abstraction and meaning. Borinski enters the illusory depth of a video image from a first-person camera perspective on a moving tram ride through the Getty Museum compound. The recorded narration on the tram

recounts the museum's holdings, easily traversing the vast history of civilization, from Egypt, to India, to Paris, now set within the disorienting space of Los Angeles. The image has been shot and reshot, image over image, to blur boundaries, making the representation diaphanous, metaphorically lifting it out of history. The tram proceeds unimpaired, gliding inward to the center of the image, to the end of the line, finally resting in flatness. The location of the Caserma Pepe itself, silent and serene, resonates with its history, yet plays host to this new cinematic content.

VERA DIKA

Notes and citations are online at:  
<http://www.mfj-online.org/film-nights-lido/>



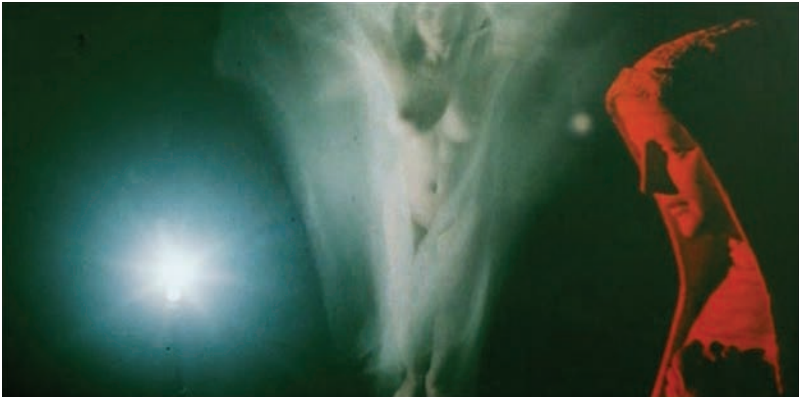
# PAT O'NEILL STUDIO VISIT



## GRAHAME WEINBREN

A Madonna figure guards the glass doors of the O'Neill studio, rust eating away at her arms and clothing. Like a movie actor one passes in the street and recognizes but can't place, she seems to emerge from the mists of a half-forgotten memory. I scanned several of Pat O'Neill's films for an image of the statue, and finally found her while re-viewing *The Decay of Fiction* to select frame enlargements for this studio visit report. Fixing my memory, the Madonna's head and shoulders briefly cross a frame toward the end of the film, partly obscuring a full frontal nude woman. She presents a moment of calm in a section of the film that is particularly wild and anarchic. Maybe this sense of calm is what the Madonna offers a visitor as she stands, disintegrating, outside the studio.

On entering, one is confronted with an impressive triple-head optical printer festooned with dials, cogs, shafts and reels, standing at attention against the wall, abandoned and partially disassembled, like a leftover from the Industrial Revolution. Pat O'Neill nourishes a fantasy of loading the machine into a pickup and driving it to the Mojave Desert, digging a deep hole and tossing it in. He may actually do it, and I suppose he will document the internment as an art performance, perhaps to be seen in an upcoming moving image work. One wonders what a future archaeologist will make of the buried behemoth, given its dependencies on a panoply of other devices and technologies such as electricity, incandescent light bulbs, photochemical film, and the movie theater, all of which may also be obsolete by the



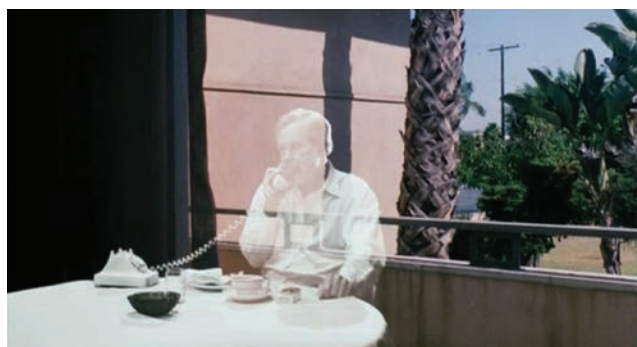
Pat O'Neill, *The Decay Of Fiction* (2002), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

time the metal monster is retrieved. And, our future archaeologist may ask, what ceremony, religious or heretical, was associated with the burial of the mysterious machine? In keeping with his signature style, O'Neill invents an enigma, in this case projected into a distant future. The optical printer was last utilized to transfer the artist's films frame-by-frame to digital video sequences. One of the last films submitted to this treatment was *The Decay of Fiction* after the 35mm print was screened in festivals and art cinemas. The resultant digital video files were reworked and reconfigured as a five channel installation, first exhibited along with some of O'Neill's sculptures at the Philip Martin Gallery in Los Angeles in Fall 2018 (reviewed by Jennifer Patterson in this issue). The closing week of the exhibition coincided with my visit to Pat O'Neill's studio in Pasadena. As a single channel 58 minute film, *The Decay of Fiction* is an idiosyncratic investigation of the powers and limitations of

narrative in cinema. It is brimming with references: to film noir narratives, to the elegant disrepair and exquisite deterioration of the formerly glamorous Ambassador Hotel, to the tragic 1968 Robert Kennedy assassination (which took place in the hotel), and, on a more abstract plane, to time itself, both personal and historical. A highly sexualized, not young, naked woman is one of the guides in the film, leading the camera and the viewer through the labyrinths and ballrooms of the hotel, fulsome breasts in motion as she cartwheels and shimmies between the locations. She is out of reach, a figure from the past like all the characters in *Decay*, transparent grey-scale phantasms set against saturate color images of the Ambassador Hotel. For the production of *Decay*, O'Neill's collaborator George Lockwood programmed a computerized motion-control camera system to track through interior and exterior spaces of the hotel. Filming at a very slow frame rate, the mobile camera accentuates patterns of changing light in abandoned suites and deteriorating







*The Decay of Fiction* (35mm, 2002), frame enlargements.

corridors, traverses former four-star restaurants and star-studded ballrooms, relishes moldy toilets and rusting kitchens, flows around a light-flecked empty swimming pool and ripples across formal gardens turning to seed, shadows of the residual plants lengthening as morning becomes afternoon and afternoon evening. A full moon races across the Southern California night sky, and through a curtained window, beams of endless traffic define the currents of highway that map the city.

After the time-lapse sequences of the derelict Ambassador and its environs were developed and organized, Lockwood and team reactivated the programmed dolly moves in a large dark room deep within the hotel, this time setting the camera at a standard 24 frames per second. There O'Neill directed a cast of actors, lit against black backgrounds, to perform scenes reimagined from scripts of thrillers and romances of the 1930s and 40s, when the Ambassador was a premier hotel of the burgeoning movie industry. Like the classic Hollywood films they reference, the dramatic scenes were shot in black and white and, by means of the motion control apparatus, filmed with tracking shots that replicated the time-lapse sequences. A video feed from the 35mm camera allowed the director to match the blocking of the actors to the camera moves on the background scenes that had been transferred from film to video for this purpose. After months

of shooting in this way, O'Neill and team assembled sequences utilizing the triple-head optical printer, the dramatic scenes superimposed on the time-lapse backgrounds and the resultant composite recorded onto 35mm film.

The concatenation of two incompatible time-rates in a single image is profoundly unsettling. With the accelerated time of the hotel backgrounds juxtaposed with semi-transparent characters enacting scenes in natural time, it is almost impossible to comprehend the overall temporality of the sequences. Once one becomes accustomed to the effect, the scenes convey a powerful sense of the inevitability of time's passage, even as the past is enfolded into the present, but there remains an aspect beyond rational assimilation, evocative but never quite determinate. As I suggested earlier, the enigma is a fundamental component of the O'Neill aesthetic. It is generated not only through the combination of incongruous elements, but, even more relevantly, in the extraordinary ways the combinations are realized. This approach characterizes the artist's oeuvre in both moving and still image works, and equally in his sculptures, drawings and assemblages.

A wall of boxes each labelled "DF" bisects the O'Neill studio. Each contains neat coils of film, the very components that were digitized and reworked for the installation version of

TOP RIGHT Pat O'Neill, *The Decay of Fiction* (Installation version, Philip Martin Gallery, October 2018) (2018), installation view. Courtesy the artist and Philip Martin Gallery.



*The Decay of Fiction*. Throughout his filmmaking practice, the artist has treated moving image elements, often found footage, as raw material to be re-interpreted through compositing. In this case the archive was composed of his own earlier work rather than appropriated materials, and the compositing achieved through digital graphic blending modes instead of optical printer re-photography of layered film elements. The resultant *Decay of Fiction* (Installation) is breathtaking: an enveloping environment composed of five silent dancing images, occasionally coming together for a few seconds to form a magically synched unit, but largely operating independently. The work is a paean of longing, for youth, for fulfillment, dark and joyful, sweet and bitter, for lost time, for beauty, and yes, for finality and closure.

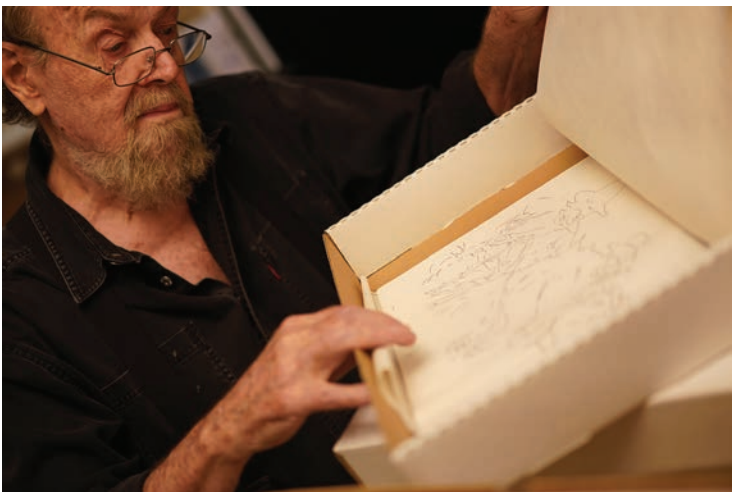






Though a splicer and synchronizer are still laid out on an editing bench, O'Neill no longer works with photochemical film, having discovered several years ago that digital media suit his artistic requirements, and that he can continue to create his fractured moving images using the built-in features of a non-linear editing application. He told me that the Apple nonlinear editing app Final Cut Pro provides all the tools he needs to construct his works—the fact that it is digital video rather than analog film is irrelevant to him. His primary interest has always been the creation of images.

Another neat stack of labelled boxes. Pat opens one. It contains drawings that appear to be fragmentary and abstract. In fact they are tracings from individual film frames, roto-scoped by his collaborator Daina Krumins on a jerry-rigged animation stand. These sheets were used for *Trouble in the Image*, in which faces speak eerily in sync, achieving the presence of an on-screen 'talking head' (an expression I abhor, but in this context an accurate description). The compositing of outlined heads with distorted voices against disjointed backgrounds offsets the precise correspondence of line-drawn, yet still photographic, lips



to spoken words. Superimposed on busy TV or movie scenes or color fields, the traced line drawings capture actors' expressive faces speaking with the assurance of sync sound, anchoring the image to illusion and emphatically to presence. Though much of O'Neill's work is grounded in making the familiar strange by means of unlikely combinations, the clichés of surrealism (sewing machine/umbrella/dissecting table and melting clocks) are undermined by his use of multiple contradictions and ambiguities. He creates a world of sumptuous desert and urban landscapes, crass commercial icons, appropriated imagery of all kinds from multiple sources, and precisely crafted sculptural objects with fine surface finishes, all brought together by sophisticated procedures of analog and, for the last ten years, digital technologies. Meanwhile, the drawings in the boxes remain line fragments with depictive potential, emerging as images snatched from the real world only when sequenced,



Pat O'Neill, *Trouble In The Image* (1996), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.





TOP Pat O'Neill, *Where The Chocolate Mountains* (2015), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.  
 BELOW Pat O'Neill, *British Columbia Sweep* (1970), fiberglass, wood, lacquer surface, installed in Pat's apartment,  
 BOTTOM, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Martos Gallery, New York, and Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles.

photographed on monochromatic (hi-con) film, and transposed into the temporalities of the cinematic.

A nearby rack holds a collection of props, masks, and objects, some of them marketing figurines, including a Bob's Big Boy sourced from a junk shop, a partially crushed metal Mobile Oil Pegasus found on a roadside, alongside other commercial icons and mysteries including a Bill Clinton mask that hangs in front of a pair of mannikin buttocks. O'Neill draws from this stash to make new sculptural objects. While I was there he assembled the antler bomb, attaching the antlers of a moose his grandfather shot to a bomb casing he purchased at the LA army surplus store. Death times two. Another is the Balthazar figure, once a cast member in a Christmas crèche, whom O'Neill has re-conceived as a film editor working on an upright Moviola. And there is Romulus (or Remus), founder of Rome, prostrate before an electric fan.

O'Neill's fine craftsmanship in moving image media extends to his work with wood and other materials. Finally sanded and finished wood sculptures—including cones and rectangular based pyramids—are numerous. The recent digital film *Where the Chocolate Mountains* is populated with the cones. They are digitally planted in unlikely places, such as the intersection of LA Freeways or in the bed of the LA (concrete) river. In the studio these objects are stable and grounded, whereas in the film they are cast as aliens in unwelcoming landscapes.

In the living room of the house adjacent to the studio there is a resin-coated sculptural fiberglass assemblage, a speared leviathan that disappears into the ground, as if caught below the surface





in a tangle of pier pilings. This work, entitled “British Columbia Sweep” was produced in 1970, and in January 2019 was exhibited for the first time at Martos Gallery in New York City. O’Neill is turning 80 this year. His partner for his entire adult life, Beverly O’Neill, film and art historian, professor and former provost of CalArts, passed away in 2017 after an extended illness. Yet he continues to produce films, sculptures, installations and drawings, as fresh and distinctive as ever, even if the most recent work is tinged with sadness.

View from the door of the O’Neill Studio towards his house.



REVIEWS



PAT O’NEILL, *THE DECAY OF FICTION*

Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles, September 8 - October 27, 2018

Los Angeles-based filmmaker and artist Pat O’Neill (b. 1939) is renowned for his masterful use of moving image technologies, especially composited images made using an optical printer, along with motion control, mattes, superimposition, time lapse, and more. But as any admirer of his work knows, O’Neill’s films are not about technique for its own sake; rather, they operate on a more elusive, intuitive plane to render uncanny environments and fragmented affective encounters. O’Neill’s work interrogates cinema’s potential as a plastic art, exploring its material, spatial, and sculptural dimensions. A deeply felt sense of Los Angeles as a place, along with what we might call an ecological sensibility, are two of the major themes running through his work. These elements are all on display in the new five-channel digital installation of *The Decay of Fiction*, in which O’Neill has completely reimagined his 2002 feature film of the same name. Installed at the Philip Martin Gallery in Los Angeles September 8 through October 27, 2018, this is a new *Decay* for the digital era. The work’s fantastical images of sex, death, and the crumbling Ambassador Hotel feel like the wake of 20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood history rippling behind us. O’Neill is one of the rare

filmmakers with a career spanning the analog and digital eras who has mastered the aesthetic effects of both grain and pixel. This reinterpretation of *Decay* is a major landmark in O’Neill’s career. It not only crystallizes certain ideas underpinning his larger body of work; it also provides an opportunity to consider the broader shift from analog to digital moving image technologies in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In recent years, O’Neill has been reimagining some single-channel works—*Runs Good* (1970), *Saugus Series* (1974)—as multi-channel digital pieces, working in collaboration with sound designer George Lockwood, who provided sound for O’Neill on *Water and Power* (1989) and many of his other films. O’Neill has now completely reworked his single-channel *Decay* into a five-channel installation. This shift to multiple screens is not exactly new—he had experimented with live multi-screen presentations of certain films (not *Decay*) on 16mm over the years—but digital technology has enabled him to work with multiple screens in new ways. Each screen of the new *Decay* features a unique 11-minute sequence, except for one riveting moment when they all synch up. If you watch each screen individually,





PREVIOUS PAGE AND ABOVE Pat O'Neill, *The Decay of Fiction* (September 8 - October 27, 2018), installation views.  
All images courtesy Philip Martin Gallery®. Photo credit Jeff McLane.

the work takes 55 minutes to view, which is still a substantially shorter duration than the original 74-minute single channel version. But as an installation, the new *Decay* works best if you let it all wash over you at once. This new *Decay*—radically truncated and fragmented across multiple screens—is in some ways a completely new work. While all of the footage in the 2018 *Decay* is from the first (multi-year) shoot, a good amount of the footage we see here was not used in the original film.

The original *Decay* was completed in 2002 after eight years in production, and it became known for its use of actors and flirtation with narrative. Shot on 35mm in the legendary Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles several years before it was demolished, the feature version is a non-narrative probing of architectural space through the residue of Hollywood film noir and gangster pictures, using O'Neill's signature layering effects techniques. As a single-channel feature, the film screened at a few film festivals, including New York in 2002 and Rotterdam in 2003, and was shown in limited venues including Anthology Film Archives in 2006, but it was never given a full release. Another

iteration of the work appeared as an interactive DVD-ROM called *Tracing the Decay of Fiction* in 2003, but then it mostly disappeared. Actorly performance remains unusual in so-called experimental film, and this coupled with the original *Decay*'s feature length seems to have proved perplexing to its audiences. The trappings of narrative in the first *Decay* created such powerful expectations that some viewers mistakenly evaluated it as an inadequate indie feature in the *Eraserhead* vein. Indeed, this is perhaps O'Neill's only film to be reviewed by *Variety*, who remarked that its "lack of a progressive narrative telescopes the film's running time into infinity." By moving the work from the theater to the gallery space, O'Neill has solved some of the problems that seem to have bedeviled *Decay* in its earlier life. The new version of the work dispenses with storytelling devices—the "names, backstories...protagonist...[and] secondary players deployed in parallel strands" described by Paul Arthur in one of the best overviews of O'Neill's work published at the time of the first *Decay* – and holds more strongly to an exploration of character as a kind of deliberately flat material. Instead of playing

with the promise of narrative, O'Neill has reshaped *Decay* for the different attention demands of the gallery space, where nonlinearity and lack of character development become assets rather than thwarted expectations.

O'Neill's work is not narrative in any traditional sense, but it exploits cinema's narrative heritage nonetheless. Beginning with *Water and Power*, we might say that O'Neill treats narrative like another plastic element of the cinematic form, not to tell linear stories but to allow characters and bits of dialogue to flow in and out of the spaces he creates. Whether using found or original footage, settings are typically granted more authority than figures in his films, and this scrambling of the usual background/foreground hierarchy of fiction films is a primary device in *Decay*. Haunting, starting/stopping narrative gestures are a characteristic of both versions, but the passage of time has given the actors and the setting new meaning today. The 2018 *Decay* feels like a commentary on the end of the analog era (the late 1990s and early 2000s when the footage was shot), as much as it also telescopes back to comment on the classical Hollywood

era. Noir-like moments are enacted without dialogue: a man and a woman argue. Waiters carry food through the kitchen. People lounge around an empty pool. In our era of endless quotation and remixing of media history, these narrative fragments inhabit their multiple screens like familiar ghosts. But if *Decay*'s noir characters seem comfortably distant, a second set of ghostlike male and female figures, many of them naked, feel more ominous but perhaps closer to ourselves as they flit through these spaces at super-fast speeds. Not yet departed but perhaps more doomed than the others, this second set of figures seems to exist outside of time, haunting the long-gone Ambassador from some other, unimaginable dimension.

JENNIFER PETERSON



# MEMORIES SILENCED, UNSPPOOL

Anocha Suwichakornpong's *By the Time it Gets Dark*



Anocha Suwichakornpong, *By the Time it Gets Dark* (2016), frame enlargement.  
All images courtesy the artist and Kim Stim.

Anocha Suwichakornpong's 2016 feature *By the Time it Gets Dark* begins with seemingly innocuous mourning—Ann, a filmmaker, holds up joss sticks, leading her crew to prayer. Shots and figures linger; the camera holds an illusory stillness mimicking the stasis of photography. The assistant director behind Ann holds up her camera, and suddenly, we shift to the cusp of violence—armed soldiers pacing amongst half-clothed students facedown on the ground. “Hands down in the front row,” the assistant director shouts. The camera pulls back, revealing a staged photoshoot of the 1976 Thammasat University massacre. Black and white photos from the shoot are centered in the frame—stillness no longer illusory—signaling that it is not merely reenactment, but photography itself that is at stake.

These photographs alert us to the particular violence occupied by photography during the Thammasat massacre—an event that is the haunting pulse beneath Suwichakornpong's film. In 1973, student-led demonstrations across Thailand ousted the

military regime of General Thanom Kittikachorn, leading to three years of democracy until the exiled regime returned. Military propaganda labeled students peacefully protesting Thanom's return enemies of “Nation, Religion, Monarchy,” and on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976, the press published a photo of a Thammasat student play reenacting the death of two activists hanged for protesting Thanom several days earlier, which the press framed as a mock-hanging of the Crown Prince (many believe the photograph was doctored to support this accusation). In response to the report, the military instigated a massacre of the students on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976. The camera and the assumed authenticity of the photograph thus participated, violently, in the making of this historical trauma.

The photographs that document the actual Thammasat massacre reveal scenes of shocking public antipathy and violence toward the students. One famous photo shows a man beating the body of a hanged student with a chair as the crowd looks

on in shock, terror, glee. This photo encapsulates the event's unspeakable violence in a society that still euphonizes and silences the massacre as “the 6 October Event.” It also bears a haunting resemblance to the original catalyst—the doctored photograph of the staged hanging. Staging and actuality blur in the massacre, exposing the camera's role as creator of both event and memory.

A deep awareness of this blurring drives *By the Time it Gets Dark* to interweave a multitude of stories and characters with varying fidelities to the 1976 trauma. More than forty years later, the title illuminates a future dependent upon the past—a moment prior to, yet cognizant of, an impending darkness. Most of the film takes place in daylight, patiently observing mundane acts: people in the midst of transit and physical tasks; time slipping by relentlessly as bread grows moldy, or as tobacco leaves are harvested then dried. Daytime's mundanity imbues the few night scenes with significance. When the power goes out, a second Ann—also a director—confesses her reason for

interviewing Taew, a former student protester involved in the massacre: “Maybe because my life is quite mundane.” Taew's reply is piercing: “I'm not living history. I'm just a survivor.” Unlike the directors looking at the massacre through their lenses, and unlike the photos distilling the event's violence, Taew does not allow herself to become representation.

This conversation unravels Ann's anxious yet cognizant participation as a filmmaker in the violence of representation. Soon after, she sets up her camera to emotionally confide a childhood experience with telekinesis. “Maybe because I told my best friend at school,” she reasons, she could never do it again. “Since then, I've never talked about it.” Resonant of Taew's hesitancy to speak, the act of telling made the event untrue, committed it as a private, unspeakable trauma—yet, the camera, in Ann's hands, becomes her confidant. Framing the confession with intimacy, she looks into the camera and speaks because she trusts its silent, documenting role.



As the film self-consciously unspools the filmmaking process alongside the artifice of representation, it fatefully comes to embody the very tensions it seeks to interrogate—the effort of historical memory necessitating ambivalence and trust in its own process. Filmmaking is demystified, exposing its ordinariness, staging, labor, and deceptions. The aforementioned actor, Peter, shares an intimate scene with an actress who he later greets politely in real life; colors and faces are manipulated in a color grading theater, where the first Ann finds out about Peter’s sudden death but must continue editing; a third Ann, played by a heavily made-up actor, reenacts Ann’s conversation with Taew. Characters and scenes are repeatedly subverted and revealed as staged, so we begin to anticipate the cuts, their unveiling.

The behind-the-scenes revelations bring us to Nong, who seamlessly morphs into various background service roles. She speaks only once, to assert her position regarding Ann’s interview: “You should give it to [Taew] to write... it’s about her life, so it’s her story.” While Nong reappears as different service workers, her singularity becomes the link between otherwise unrelated film industry characters—who, in contrast, appear interchangeable, even deceptive. At last, we find Nong a nun,

calmly gazing into a TV. Nong’s interconnected lives embody a Buddhist way of perception—hinted metaphorically through bubbles and hallucinogenic mushrooms—that continues in its mundanity, even as the film and its participants grapple with historical and personal traumas that fracture role from reality, past from present.

Back in the color-grading theater, we find out alongside Ann about Peter’s death, revealing the source of her mourning in the opening scene. Yet, the camera’s stillness had already observed her private grief—had followed her into the darkness to mourn with her. Her crew seems too young to have memory of the massacre, but precisely so they are tasked to remember—to mourn those who did not share their lives—in a Thailand that took twenty years to publically cremate its victims, and where the massacre remains, in the words of Thammasat survivor Thongchai Winichakul, “unforgettable, unrememberable,” even as Thailand’s political climate resembles that of 1976, now more than ever.

JINJIN XU

Anocha Suwichakornpong, *By the Time it Gets Dark* (2016), frame enlargement.



Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer, *Empty Metal* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artists.

# THE IMAGE YOU MISSED & EMPTY METAL AT RIDM

Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montreal  
Montreal, November 2018

The field of documentary is vibrant and the genre ripe for experimentation and interpretation. The overwhelming array of films on offer at RIDM showcased a multiplicity of ways that representation and ‘the real’ play together. There were rich portraits of people in a place, like the film *Inland Sea* (2018) by Kazuhiro Soda, in which the filmmakers drift around the Japanese island fishing village Ushimado to follow its aging residents and plentiful cats. There were reenactments: *Bisbee ‘17* (2018) by Robert Greene dredged up tensions around labor rights, immigration and belonging as it restaged a traumatic event from 100 years ago with inhabitants of the town as actors. *Yours in Sisterhood* (2018) by Irene Lusztig engaged contemporary women of various identities and circumstances to read aloud letters sent

to the editor of *Ms. Magazine* in the 1970s, underscoring a diverse, but collective experience that proves to be perennially contemporary. Technologies played conceptual roles in films: In *Your father was born 100 Years Old and So Was the Nakba* (2017) by Razan AlSalah, Google Street View is the only means by which the filmmakers Grandmother, a Palestinian Refugee in Lebanon, can visit Haifa, her hometown. In the VR piece, *Biidaaban: First Light* (2018) by Lisa Jackson, Mathew Borrett and Jam3, high-tech means and Indigenous language texts are deployed to deliver a hopeful feeling as nature appears to overtake a dystopian, decayed future Toronto. The festival winner, and now academy award nominee *Hale County, This Morning, This Evening* (2018) by RaMell Ross, a film that weaves an intimate and rhythmic



portrait of the everyday lives, struggles and aspirations two young African American men in Hale County, Alabama, is even touted with birthing “a new cinematic language” (Bilge Ebiri, *The Village Voice*).

Two films that certainly experiment with form and genre, and are inherently in dialog with one another are *The Image You Missed* (2018) by Irish filmmaker Donal Foreman and *Empty Metal* (2018) by Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer. Both films animate legacies of radical political movements, touching upon questions around political action and the use of violence. Both explore parameters and configurations of community and family while posing urgent and philosophical questions, but employ quite different strategies and aesthetics.

*The Image You Missed* is an essay film that weaves together a political archive and a personal backstory. When his estranged filmmaker father Arthur MacCaig died, Foreman gained access to an apartment full of tapes, notebooks, audio recordings—material his father generated over several years as he covered the political crisis and resistance in Northern Ireland. The film is a somewhat frenetic collage tempered by a reflective voiceover that takes us along on the filmmaker’s journey of trying to know the absent father.

The archival images of the Struggles themselves are remarkable. The VHS-quality and seeming intimate access to

the IRA, neighborhoods and meetings generates a current of authenticity. But the well-orchestrated movements of gun-toting Irish freedom fighters imply a calculated performance of revolution, conviction and masculinity. Foreman has searched through this archive to find rare images or other traces of his father. The father’s archival materials are cut against Foreman’s own youthful filmmaking experiments and contemporary images of the remnants of the Troubles in Northern Ireland—or, rather, images of images—young tourists make selfies in front of iconic murals and other revolutionary propaganda that has entered into mainstream global media circulation.

The material from Foreman’s own early oeuvre, his first forays into filmmaking, cleverly mirrors the performances of IRA members captured by his father as he and his friends point fake guns at one another, fall over with fake blood and even, at one point, hug. In contrast to the estrangement experienced by the son, the intimacy and devotion of the father with his chosen revolutionary community is brought into focus. The film contains a critique of an uncritical embrace of the politics of the past, and also reveals the younger filmmaker’s envy: “You have been able to reach conclusions. My narratives are partial, incomplete...” Throughout his personal and political investigation Foreman keeps returning to the question of the image, which allows us to step back from familial emotionality.



In contrast to the more contemplative essay film, *Empty Metal* is a proposition, or a provocation. Billed as a “docu-fiction,” the film’s mere presence in a documentary festival already pushes the boundaries. The live-action narrative follows three disaffected members of the band Alien—charismatic yet caricatured hipsters coming to terms with the possible meaninglessness of their art and therefore their lives. The story of their awakening from navel-gazing toward a call to action is full of magnetic characters representing philosophies alternative to the mainstream: Native American, Rastafarian, Buddhist, survivalist militia ...and takes us to some dark places. Speculative fiction meets a surveillance state.

Recent unjust and unpunished police actions rendered with animated 3D models, a bubbling, simmering stew, and animals under containment point to an undercurrent of helpless rage pervading contemporary American culture. Odd relationships and interactions between characters—adjacency through playing in a band, speechless mind-meld communications about a master

plan, training one another in survivalist exercises—suggest kinship and solidarity, but not necessarily intimacy. *Empty Metal*’s absurdist, somewhat surreal and deadpan humor is reminiscent of films by the Coen brothers and it sometimes employs a pop Quentin Tarantino gloss. Many of the film’s vivid scenes and characters crystallize into iconic images—survivalists hiding in camouflage mounds as they are belittled by a Buddhist monk, the band member Rose’s spacey sneer with braces, an alligator wrangled by a Native American man in Florida—and some of these images resonate in multiple ways. The stew suggests something brewing, but also community, coming together.

While *The Image You Missed* looks into the past, parsing an archive, *Empty Metal* looks into an imagined future and the violence it portrays is more pointed. The rehearsal and performance of violent acts gives the plot its momentum, and drives its characters to a state of apocalypse, delivering them from their apathetic alienation to yet another kind of alienation, if not annihilation. This speculative thriller is shocking as it visualizes a vigilante justice revenge fantasy and one hopes it is made from a place of political urgency, perhaps leveraging the grotesque in the way that Brecht might. Both films knowingly play with representations, poking holes in any assumptions we might have that what you see is what you get, and have made striking contributions to the dizzying catalog of ways to make a documentary.

RACHEL STEVENS

THIS PAGE AND RIGHT TOP Donal Foreman, *The Image You Missed* (2018), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.  
RIGHT BOTTOM Adam Khalil and Bayley Sweitzer, *Empty Metal* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artists.





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# Ann Arbor Film Festival

Film still from: *The Attack of the Robots from Nebula-5* by Chema Garcia Ibarra (48th AAFF)



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Ann Collins	Adekunbi Oni	Alex Yuan





Tony Oursler, *Tear of the Cloud* (2018), multi-channel installation. All Images courtesy the artist.  
Photo credit Nicholas Knight, courtesy Public Art Fund, NY.

## TONY OURSLER *TEAR OF THE CLOUD*

Public Art Fund, October, 2018

The Lenape name for the Hudson River is “Muhheakantuck,” which translates to “river that flows both ways.” The freshwater that flows from upstate mixes with the salty Atlantic as the tides ebb and flow. The cultural and technological histories along this tidal estuary’s banks similarly swirled together in Tony Oursler’s *Tear of the Cloud* (2018), a multi-channel nocturnal public artwork realized by Public Art Fund on and around the ruins of the 69<sup>th</sup> Street Transfer Bridge last October. Named for both Lake Tear of the Clouds, New York state’s highest pond in the Adirondacks (formerly believed to be the source of the Hudson), and remote “cloud” computing, the project was a labyrinthine investigation of Oursler’s extensive research into the history of technology, his hometown of Nyack,

and the surrounding Hudson region. To walk through the work and experience its overlapping sights and sounds was to conjure ghosts from the margins of history and plot the multidirectional flows between them.

*Tear of the Cloud* employed many signature elements of Oursler’s practice, such as the excavation of irrational and spiritualist beliefs underpinning technological history explored in *The Influence Machine* (2000), his major precursor in a public park, and the forced dialogue, over-the-top performers, and “soap opera effect” high-definition video of *Imponderable* (2015-2016), a feature-length theatrical installation. The site-specificity and peripatetic experience in a quiet park on the city’s limits, however, distinguished *Tear of the Clouds* in Oursler’s oeuvre. Projected

onto the transfer bridge and river, the work’s backdrop was Trump Place, a sprawling high-rise condominium development of the 45th President of the United States separated from the park by the elevated West Side Highway, a constant reminder of the social divisions that persist into the present.

The five digital projections and three audio tracks drew viewers along the walkways of Riverside Park South. Some projections were timed together, but others cycled through asynchronously, making each experience a new combination. The rich lexicon of imagery and historical referents in *Tear of the Cloud* connected along syllogistic and thematic lines, evoking the uncatalogued yet instantly accessible nature of information in the age of the cloud. Non-linear mixing and sampling defined the spatial experience of work itself, underscored by the projection

of Bronx-born hip-hop legend Grandmaster Flash riffing about Nyack-native appropriation and collage artist Joseph Cornell. Intentionally labyrinthine and non-linear didactic materials in the form of a poster and an online glossary mapped the work’s thematic topology and offered viewers access to the work’s obscure historical referents.

The intertwined histories of technology, culture, and ecology explored in the moving images and sounds paralleled the work’s assemblage of the industrial transfer bridge’s rusting metal, the projections’ digital immateriality, and the river’s living ecosystem. A land acknowledgement written in collaboration with the artist collective New Red Order scrolled up the gantry’s half-sunken surfaces, setting the tone for the work’s investigation of regional history through the lens of its horrors and injustices.





Tony Oursler, *Tear of the Cloud* (2018), multi-channel installation.



A willow tree along the banks hosted ghostlike images of facial recognition software, dramatic and musical performers, and a computer animated chess piece, alluding to IBM's Deep Blue. These images dematerialized upon moving down the park's path, and the front of the gantry came more completely into view.

Obscure characters appeared on the monumental rusting forms against a black background, an homage to the early films shot in Thomas Edison's Black Maria Studio in West Orange, New Jersey. Shot on a green screen, the figures floated in a black ether, speeding up, spinning, and darting across the industrial surfaces in vignettes from history's margins. The bearded king of the Millerites, a 19<sup>th</sup> century upstate doomsday cult, made proclamations amidst cryptic numbers; Pauline, Edison's early

cinematic rebel and damsel in distress of the Palisades, swung on a rope; Susan Walker Morse, daughter of the famous inventor and painter, sat for a portrait made concurrently with the invention of the telegraph; and a man performed a "talking drum," a West African coded telecommunication device used by enslaved people in New York long before Morse Code—just to name a few.

Projections onto the waters of the Hudson were viewable only from the pedestrian pier, like a secret reward for traversing the entire cinematic path. In one projection, a woman whose body was found in the Hudson River reached out from the depths, a tragedy that inspired Edgar Allen Poe's story "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), the first murder mystery based on true crime. Poe's merger of horrors found in fact and fiction had an even more unsettling parallel when the bound bodies of two

Saudi sisters who recently attempted to claim asylum were found in the park during the same weeks as Oursler's show. This tragic collision of current events and historical reference mirrored the project's many narrative and iconographic superimpositions, revealing a history of technology that is not a product of reason and science, but rather a complex tapestry of legend, violence, and specters that continue to haunt the present.

The interlacing of the digital and immaterial, the analog and industrial, and the organic and ecological culminated in Oursler's short animation of a figure who jumps, falls, then gets back up—his metaphor for the act of creating art. Shown as a pixelated, looping GIF, the frames were encoded onto DNA of Hudson River bacteria then extracted back out, a process first tried on a scene from film's photographic history: Muybridge's

famous study of a galloping horse. DNA lasts thousands of years longer than celluloid, video tape, or digital infrastructures, making it a potentially rich archival material, but manipulating it within living organisms opens an ethical Pandora's box. The same CRISPR process used to record this allegory for artistic production would soon lead to the troubling "gene edited babies" headlines, another timely parallel in current events that pointed to the interconnection between bio-logical processes, scientific innovation, and the potential for horror.

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Jack Smith, *Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis* (June 22 - September 16, 2018), installation view. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo credit Daniel Pérez.

## JACK SMITH: ART CRUST OF SPIRITUAL OASIS

Artists Space, New York

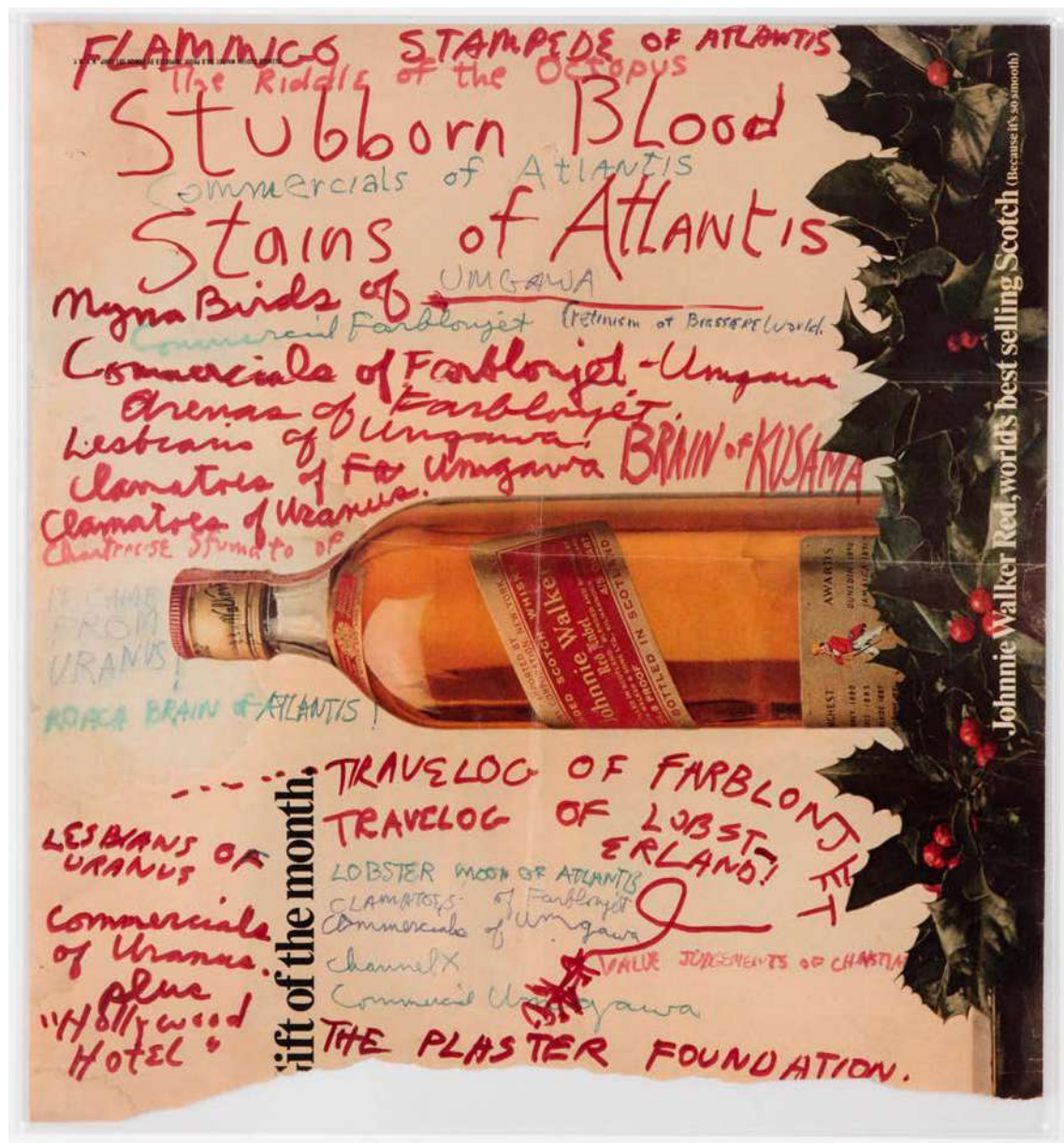
June 22 - September 16, 2018

Entering *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*—the recent survey of Jack Smith's work at Artists Space curated by Jay Sanders and Jamie Stevens — one is greeted by Smith's iconic hollow-throated voice reading one of his many diatribes about the plight of artists against art's institutions (and their scions). On the wall are a series of Smith's headshots hung in pyramidal formation. They form something of an alter—like the many Smith made to the “Technicolor Goddess” Maria Montez, his muse, whose star-quality Smith's work attempted to embody, eventually in his later years casting a stuffed penguin named Yolanda La Penguina in Montez's place. But the images also memorialize Jack Smith, who died in 1989 of AIDS-related illness—a strange gesture given the artists unceasing demands that neither he nor his art should be “cemented into a museum treasure.” Split between these

charming photos and the sounds of an aggressive speech—the tension of this first moment marks the (ir)rational logic one must adopt in order to enter the world Smith created for and out of his art, surging as it does with a desire to unearth the contradictions we tend to conceal from ourselves. “Struggle though we may to keep all this out,” he writes, “it is in our own rooms, in our walls that the plaster of religion, the cement of the courts and the icing of art meet—in those very pie crust walls...It is as difficult as the art of Andy Warhol to be critical of—because it surrounds us.”

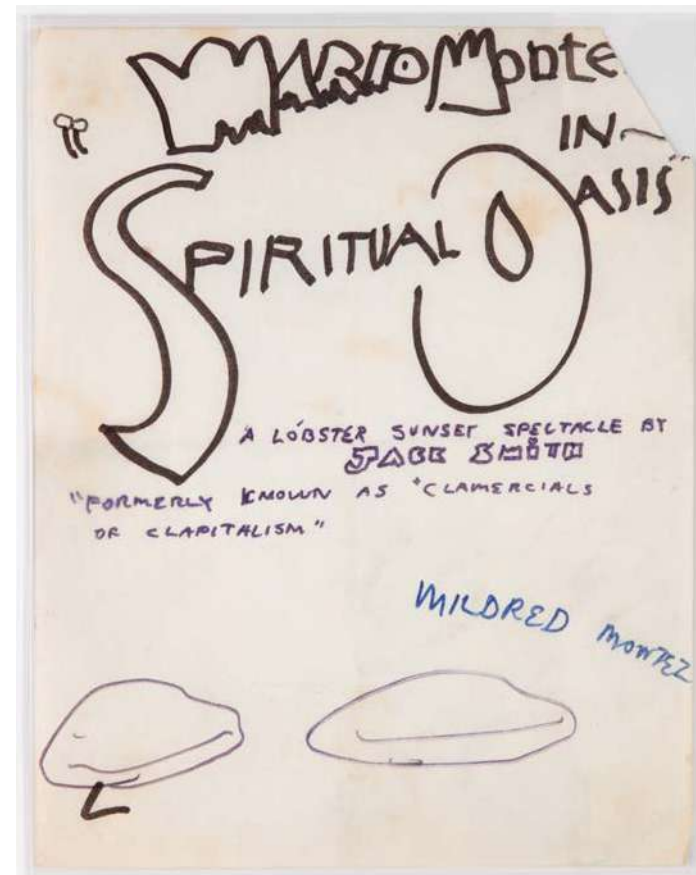
Jack Smith is best known for *Flaming Creatures* (1963), but *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis* attends to his lesser known artworks of the 1970s and 80s when his efforts were largely in performance. Much of this work began at The Plaster Foundation, a two-story live/work loft at 89 Greene Street (not





five blocks from Artists Spaces former location), which Smith transformed into a landscape of detritus, filled with remnants of New York's deindustrialization, against which he performed "midnight lobster pageants" for nearly two years until he was evicted in 1972 owing to the rising rent. Rent begins *Art Crust* as well—next to the Smithian alter is a slideshow of color-saturated images showing the artist sending, writing, receiving, delivering rent checks in various found locations throughout New York City. Trespassing on demolitions sites or simply performing in the street, these works mark a period in of Smith's color photography when he would coordinate the shoot but insist on performing for the camera. These works are about the literal demands to pay

rent, as well as about broader rentier economy (what Smith called "landlordism") and its ramifying effect of creating sinkholes, cites of debt, in which not only money, but art's political imaginary and capacity is trapped. The results of these photoshoots were rarely prints, but rather an archive of thousands of slides used in Smith's theatrical slideshow performances—ephemeral actions which, though they were suffused with props, costumes and concepts, attempted to avoid leaving any property behind. No prints to be sold, or official films to be circulated, only the sprawling array of art/ephemera/trash—categorical divisions that Smith's art seems to intentionally leave opaque.



FAR LEFT Jack Smith. *Notes on oversized ad for Johnnie Walker* (c. 1970), pen on magazine cut-out.

LEFT Jack Smith. *Mario Montez in Spiritual Oasis* (c. 1969), original drawing, marker on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches.

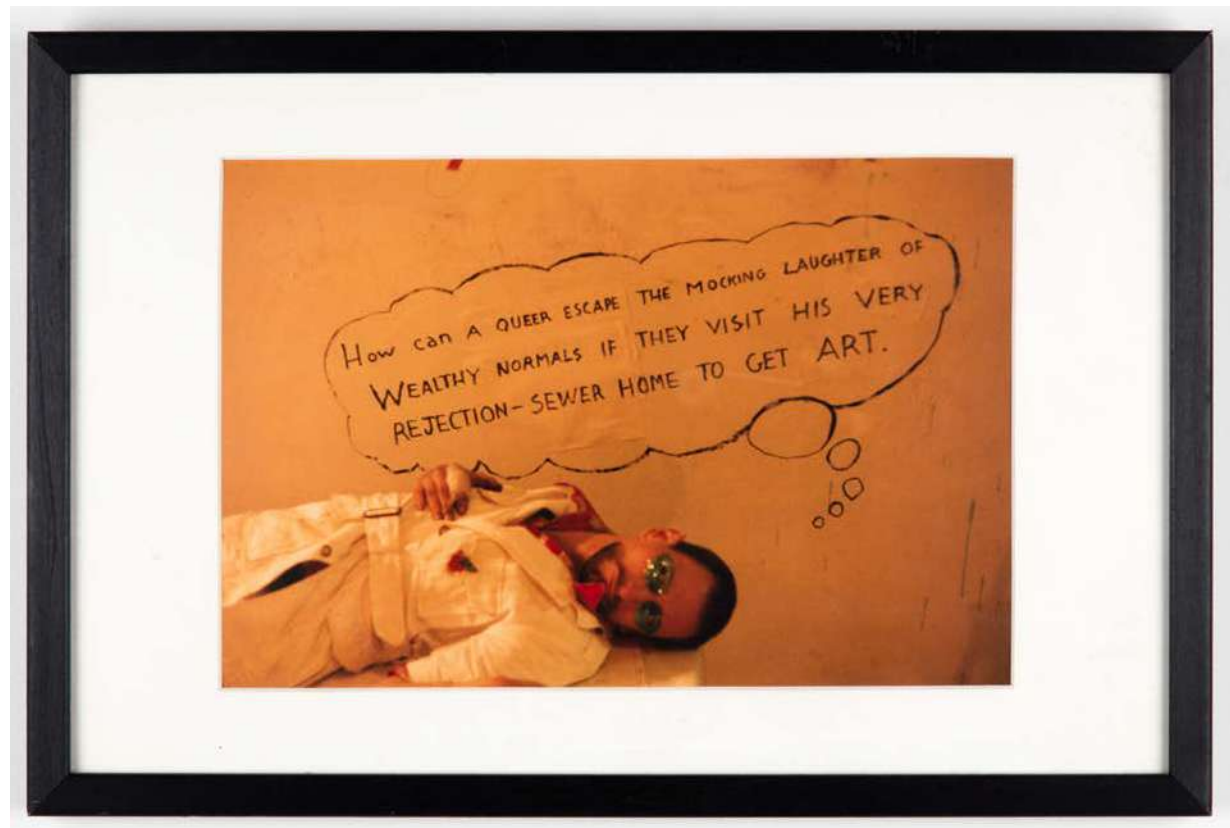
ABOVE Jack Smith. *Miracle of Farblonjet or Technicolor Sunset Easter Pageant at The Plaster Foundation, 36 Greene Street* (n.d.), original poster, photocopy, 8 1/2 x 11 inches.

Images courtesy Artists Space, New York and Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University. Photo credit Jean Vong .

The rest of *Art Crust* unfurls with the brilliant chaos one has come to expect of a Jack Smith production. Instead of boiling down Smith's legacy to certain quintessential objects, or reducing his trajectory to a more traditional chronology, Sanders and Stevens organized an overwhelming array of drawings, writing, photographs, videos, and other materials into palimpsests that highlight the recursive, obsessive, thoughts that animate Smith's practice. Walls and vitrines are filled with materials which repeat the same critique, each time repeated slightly differently, of a world gripped by capitalism and normalcy. Crustacean metaphors abound across this period of Smith's work, most notably in the figure of the lobster, at once a culinary delicacy and oceanic

bottom-dweller. Lobster drawings, writing and references suffuse the walls and vitrines of the first floor. Among them, drafts of letter to some unspecified "John" read: "Why is it that theaters and auditoriums of schools are closed tight as clams at 3:00? ... for the same reasons museums and galleries close at 5:00pm." Is this a (bad) joke? A riddle? A "Dear John" letter that complains about the daytime-only hours of theaters and museum? Maybe, especially if one considers to whom those hours cater and what it means for art's accessibility to be circumscribed to the working day. Smith's work never failed to critique the ever-tightening grip of both cultural and capitalist institutions. Alongside the letter, a drawing suggests the nightmare of this lobster city—a parking lot





outrageousness of his actions hampered by the fact that, as his character muses, “rent remains rent—the builder of the building can be dead and the building paid for a thousand and one times but that rent can never be paid must be paid—long after anyone remembers why. I think it must be to pay the taxes that support the scaffolding of the brassiere world and nation boundaries. Otherwise people would be traveling around the world freely and wouldn’t be staying home to support—the rent.” Smith travelled a fair amount, especially after he began to insist that any request to screen *Flaming Creatures* involve flying the artist along with his film. Through the 1980s he continued to perform, rehashing old themes, and working towards one final masterpiece, the never completed filmwork *Sinbad In The Rented World*.

Perhaps it’s true that Jack Smith never completed another work after *Flaming Creatures* (1963), leaving his art unfinished in an attempt to avoid its commodification. But there is another story buried in *Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*, in an audio recording from 1984 that fills the backroom of the basement gallery. Addressing the notion that his aesthetic was premised on

not giving museums or galleries something they could steal, he doesn’t cite a desire to make unfinished work. In fact, he says, “we live in a world of mostly half finished things . . . but in the process of doing anything completely is where anything can become art. No matter even if it does take an awful lot of time.” Smith’s works look unfinished because the world isn’t finished with the revolution his art tried to foment, a world of socialistic impulses in which “everything could be free and it could begin with art!” The “stairway to socialism” he tried to climb as he was building it remains blocked, and we just kept putting art crust on top of art crust, picking apart the present from the past by covering things over in layers of plaster. Will we get to see Smith’s work when the crust crumbles, when all those layers of plaster come tumbling down? Maybe not, but in another corner of the gallery Yolanda La Penguina is perched. She’s the stuffed penguin, put to death in a number of Smith’s performances from the 1980s, and a star who will undoubtedly outlive us all.

JOSH LUBIN-LEVY

LEFT Jack Smith, *Untitled or How Can a Queer Escape the Mocking Laughter...* (1974), color photograph. Courtesy Artists Space, New York and Penny Arcade. Photo credit Jean Vong.

BELOW Jack Smith, *Jack Smith: Art Crust of Spiritual Oasis*, (June 22 – September 16, 2018), installation view. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo credit Daniel Pérez.

and cocktail lounges are marked on an otherwise generic outline of a skyline. A single high-rise reaches its spire impossibly up into the clouds above, where its vertical line also serves to illustrate the antennae of lobster looming overhead, its monstrous claw plucking the moon from an otherwise starry sky.

More than a critique of Art’s prevailing institutions, Smith sought to build them otherwise. The Plaster Foundation is one example, but *Art Crusts* collects others featuring, for instance, drawings for an imaginary “Brassiere Museum.” Designed as a museum without walls (no plaster allowed) it nonetheless has an arched doorway, on the threshold of which stands an ambiguous figure carved out of negative space. Creating the surreal effect of a portal within a portal, Smith drawing transports the viewer through an impossible passageway. Illuminating moments of dialectical impossibility was something Smith was particularly good at. My own favorite example is a photograph of Jack Smith laying on a table against a wall, a thought bubble drawn in red behind him reads: “How can a queer escape the mocking laughter of wealthy normals when they visit his very rejection-sewer home to get art?” In the photo we see Smith flattened into the very art object he seems to be trying to think his way out of. But the photo also speaks to Smith’s attunement to commercialization

of queerness long before today’s queer theorists, throwing a wrench in idealized fantasies of gay liberation. The world needs its queers, he would say, to love and hate. An index card near the photo reads, “What is more fairy like than normals with their spirituality of miracles and supernaturalism?” Rolodex Cards were Smith’s preferred method for cataloguing such aphoristic insights, particularly about normalcy. Kept in an actual Rolodex, alongside the names and phone numbers of various contacts, one can hardly think of a better way to frame the subtlety often missed in Smith’s work, his way of not merely overthrowing but of inhabiting the indexing, cataloguing and systemizing of the information age that so many conceptual and performance arts of his generation would similarly invoke.

No time to rest—the overwhelming number of works *Art Crusts* displays feels like a deluge even for the initiated Smithian reader—as downstairs the controlled chaos continue. The basement galleries highlighting Smith’s travels through Europe (mostly along the 1970s well-worn line from New York to Germany). *Fear Ritual of Shark Museum* may be the best known, a performance unofficially staged at the Cologne Zoo in 1974. In the performance Smith picks up and delivers rent checks from one caged animal to another—monkey to crocodile to lion—the







# MARIANNA SIMNETT: BLOOD IN MY MILK

New Museum, New York

September 4, 2018 – January 6, 2019

Installed as a five-channel looping video piece in the basement at the New Museum, *Blood in My Milk* weaves together a survey of Marianna Simnett’s most important works to date—*The Udder* (2014), *Blood* (2015), *Blue Roses* (2015), and *Worst Gift* (2017). The red carpet and malformed bean bag chairs strewn across the large room make one feel as if they are entering some kind of subterranean womb that is both inviting and cold. As one enters her filmic universe, it becomes immediately clear that such viscerally opposed sensations are the very plane upon which Simnett activates her narratives.

At the beginning of the segment taken from the *Udder* we see a young girl walking towards the camera along a sloppy mud path in a field. It is morning, and the farm appears to be conducting its daily activities. The father waves from his tractor and the mother cleans the windows of the house from the inside. This satisfying display of routine is undercut by the voiceover of the girl, which harbors a sort of horror in its fairytale like cadence: “Head down, she says. I’m too beautiful to leave the farm. I must never wear hair long. Attracts the wrong kinds of minds.” This cuts to an udder being closely shorn while her mother’s voice details the importance of removing all hair from the udder to prevent infection.

Already, Simnett is lining up the relationships she traverses, muddles and rewires

throughout the film: young and old, clean and contaminated, inside and outside, male and female, right and wrong. By tying seemingly unrelated narratives together through allegory—such as mastitis and the girls’ corrupted innocence—Simnett performs her own sort of contamination in the viewer. In doing so, she reveals something not seen but felt, that is difficult to shake off long after one has left the space.

These references to biological phenomena and their various anthropomorphisms root this world back in some sort of primary ground where raw feeling and the irrational logic of children are the only constants. Simnett’s use of theatrical scrim to create the set for the farm reference the simultaneously hermetic and porous nature of membranes, where the daughter and father can leave but the mother and boys cannot. In the segment adapted from *Blood*, turbinate bones personified as mean childhood friends act out revenge on a giant Papier-mâché nose for being removed, and a similarly tragic scene from *Blue Roses* depicts a pulsating varicose vein that erupts into an oozing gelatinous mass.

However, far from taking us away from reality, this beautifully theatrical world of song, scrim and art house horror

sharpen our focus onto the aspects of the reality it interweaves, comprised of bright lights, serenely sterile doctor’s offices, syringes and vials, that interest Simnett most. Suddenly, our knee-jerk reactions and primal fears are activated and the horror and violence of medicine that we endure unquestioningly—and even volunteer for—becomes impossible to ignore. But it is not just for cheap thrills. Simnett awakens a perception that pushes meaning beyond language and into the sensory. Her choice to edit the footage so that each screen shows a different clip of the current scene forces one to abandon any reliance on a single linear story structure or source, further activating the psychophysical nature of the work.

In this way Simnett’s style has a curiously subversive power to it. In *Blue Roses*, which features a woman undergoing a varicose vein reduction, the childlike voice-over says: “He said it was because I crossed my legs too long” as if the doctor was scolding her like an imprudent child. Then, in the end she contradicts what he says about it not hurting, and her vein explodes. Similarly, in the *Worst Gift* Simnett pushes a doctor to give her a voice reduction “so my voice can be low like all the boys”. When he refuses, she threatens him saying that if he doesn’t

Marianna Simnett, *Blood In My Milk* (2018), (September 04, 2018 to January 6, 2019) at New Museum, New York. LEFT Frame enlargement. BELOW installation views. Courtesy the artist and New Museum, New York. Photo credit Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio.







Marianna Simnett, *Blood In My Milk*  
(Worst Gift) (2017), frame enlargement.  
Courtesy the artist and Matt's Gallery.

he will never see a neck again. His cowering acquiescence suggests that he has a weakness for piercing necks that she succeeded to use against him.

In both cases, the central authority is weakened by something terrifying and violent that it created but is now beyond its control. This can be seen in *Udder*, where the girl cuts off her own nose as a way to preserve the patriarchal notion of her chastity. The very apt phrase, “to cut off your nose to spite your face” cannot be ignored here, along with the childlike foreboding behind its power. “The nose knows” is repeated throughout the piece, echoing the way that Simnett anthropomorphizes parts of the body as a way to enter, activate and perhaps attempt to take back control of it.

In a time where boundaries that traditionally demarcate balances of power and gender identity are being redrawn, while privatization and advancements in biotechnology are changing the face of healthcare, how we relate to and shape our bodies are undergoing dramatic shifts. By connecting and interweaving disparate elements tied to these various themes, Simnett's work suggests an opportunity for these relationships to be reexamined and retold.

LUCEA SPINELLI



BOUQUETS II-20  
The NOTEBOOKS of ROSE LOWDER

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BOUQUETS II-20: The Notebooks Of Rose Lowder

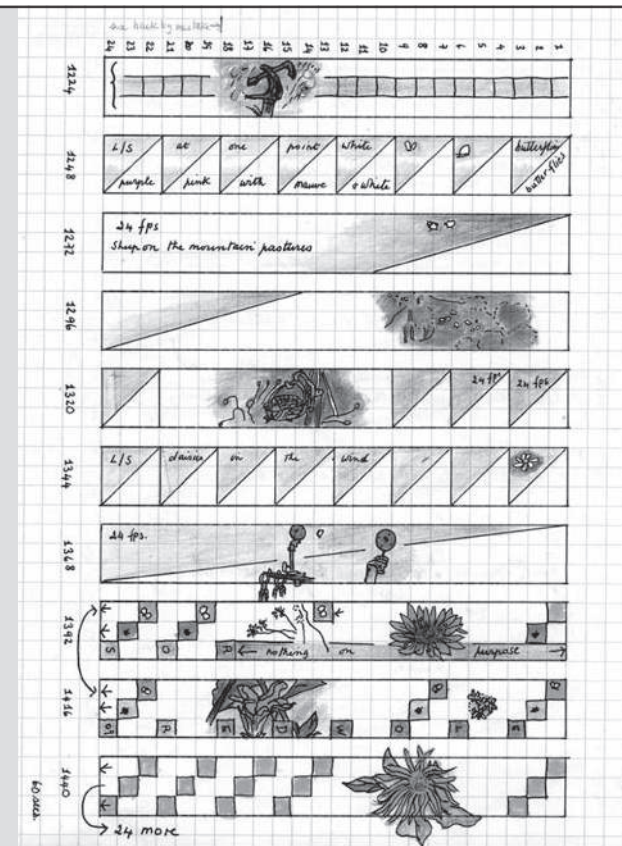
includes 88 pages of images and texts from the voluminous notebooks of French experimental filmmaker Rose Lowder. Focusing on ten films from the Bouquet series, this book includes direct facsimiles of the intricately hand drawn pages that Lowder creates in parallel with her films, as well as an eBook companion with embedded videos of the films represented in the Notebooks.

The book was designed by Joan Lyons, founder of VSW Press, and edited by Tara Merenda Nelson, Curator of Moving Image Collections at the Visual Studies Workshop.

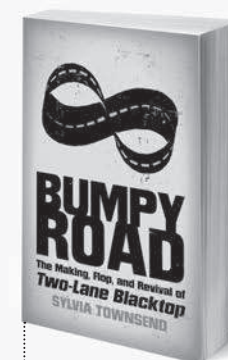
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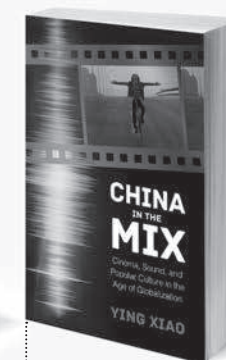
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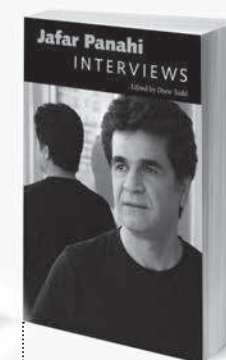
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# MAGIC LANTERN FILM FESTIVAL

Cinema dei Piccoli, 21-23 May 2018  
Rome, Italy

Established in 2016, the bi-annual Magic Lantern Film Festival explores the interstitial relationship between cinema and visual art. Conceived and curated by Maria Alicata, Adrienne Drake and Ilaria Gianni, Magic Lantern recently presented its fourth edition, *Do Re Mi*, with a three-day program that examined the conventions of the musical genre and the various incarnations through which contemporary artists appropriate this cinematic form.

As part of the festival’s leitmotiv, to rework relationships between traditional genres of cinema and the visual arts, Magic Lantern attempts to reimagine the form of the film festival itself. Choosing one genre for each edition, the festival’s first iteration in October 2016 focused on noir and horror, with a varied

program that ranged from work by Cindy Sherman to the duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss. There is no call for entries and the curators assemble works regardless of year of production or format, even mixing film trailers with the expected line-up of full videos and films. For example, the noir edition featured a trailer for the feature-length film *Reminder* by Omer Fast, an artist who already experiments with narrative structures and cinematic forms. Subsequent editions in March and September 2017 focused, respectively, on the biopic, with a heavy presence of docufictions, such as radical feminist Elisabeth Subrin’s *Shulie*; and on children’s imagery, including animation, fairy tales and a fictional TV spot by Ryan Gander.

The Magic Lantern festival endeavors to re-

contextualize the works of these artists by presenting them in a traditional cinema setting, thus jumping the rails of the gallery or exhibition location. Perhaps, however, this idea has already been surmounted by technological developments—it is no longer taken for granted that a film is seen in the dark, with a community of people that shares a common experience and set of emotions. Today, every film, video, commercial, TV series, naturally foresees the possibility of being inserted into a personal palimpsest that each of us creates daily. Each moving image can now be reproduced on Instagram, on a cell phone, it can be shot horizontally or vertically, projected on the flat-screen TVs in our homes—which are often larger than the screens of some arthouse cinemas. Perhaps it’s necessary for the festival to rethink the

discourse around the contextualization of images in another way, and on the effect that they create in relation to the places in which they are shown.

“The visual arts are constantly looking at, inspired by and riffing off dance, music, literature, cinema”, the curators say. “Contemporary art has a freedom that the others do not; it can easily use and upend the codes of other imageries.” Artists therefore have an enormous freedom of expression and form.

What makes the Magic Lantern festival interesting is precisely this freedom, its power (and desire) for each edition to be a theoretical path rather than a film screening. In this edition, the musical, one of Hollywood’s film genres par excellence, was under the spotlight. As the curators explain, “the musical is





Ryan Gander, *Imagineering* (2013), frame enlargement.  
Copyright Ryan Gander. Courtesy the artist.

Pipilotti Rist, *I'm a Victim of this Song* (2005), frame enlargement. Copyright 2018 Pipilotti Rist.  
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

NEXT PAGE  
Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Búrca, *Estás vendo coisas* (*You are seeing things*) (2017), frame enlargement.  
Courtesy the artists and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.



envisioned as a ‘total spectacle,’ a genre that exploits the two basic elements of cinema—moving image and sound—more than any other genre. Its morphology has been studied and borrowed by the visual arts on many occasions, thereby often upending the essential norms, including narrative and a dramaturgical development traditionally structured on music and choreography. Song and dance, activated by the characters in the story, become for artists a lexicon to rethink both formally and conceptually. The elements of the classical musical constitute a rich grammar with which to question, develop, affirm and, on occasion, give rise to potential new linguistic deviations.”

Among the works presented in *Do Re Mi*, Pipilotti Rist sings her heart out in *I'm a victim of this song* (1995); in *The Music of Regret* (2006) the puppets of Laurie Simmons sing of heartache and trouble between feuding families; paper cut-out figures recount the adventures of an all-female punk band as they move in a sort of diorama from a smoky practice room, to various exotic locations where they perform live in Nathan Carter's *The DRAMASTICS are Loud* (2016). In *Wonders* (2016), Carles Congost examines the phenomenon of the “one-hit wonder”—those singers who achieved success thanks to a single song,



or musical tracks that become part of a year's soundtrack and then quickly disappear from our memory, like those who sing them also disappear, simple images, holograms of the real authors of the music—the producers. The 2017 work by Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Búrca, *Estás vendo coisas* (*You are seeing things*), focuses on Brega music: pop music, often in bad taste, with banal melodies, but that makes a strong socio-political impact—so much so that it was persecuted by the Brazilian military junta.

The only Italian artist included in *Do Re Mi* was R&D Martino, whose 2014 video, *The Show Mas Go On*, is a parody centered around a well-known Roman department store (Mas) destined for imminent closure. The peculiarity of Mas, located in the center of Rome, was the extreme affordability of the items for sale, which allowed for the most diverse groups of people to meet within its walls: from movie costume designers, to nuns, to the poor, and the most marginalized communities of the population. Mas stands as a monument to a certain Rome and a certain way of being Roman—a sort of Italian aesthetic equivalent to the Brega music of Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Búrca. *The*

*Show Mas Go On* is impregnated with a strong dose of irony, present not only in the interviews, but also in a surreal cover of Lou Reed's “A Perfect Day,” sung by one of the protagonists of the film, Italian actor Filippo Timi, while immersed in a huge container for granny panties. *The Show Mas Go On* has—with the same freedom that we referred to previously—traversed the halls of the Venice International Film Festival, art galleries, screenings, a multitude of spaces. It is a clear example of a work that moves freely between genres, projection sites and fictions. It is a work that stratifies and dubs with a new voice that which already belongs to us, like how Pipilotti Rist yells the words of Chris Isaak's “Wicked Game” in *I'm a victim of this song*, snatching Isaak from the clutches of MTV to bring him into the halls of contemporary art.

ANTONIO PEZZUTO



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Želimir Žilnik, *Logbook Serbistan* (2015), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

## THE NECESSARY IMAGE: ON THE 64TH FLAHERTY SEMINAR

Colgate, New York, June 2018

Having acquired over its six-decades of existence something of a legendary status, the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar has become an inescapable rendezvous for documentary film lovers. Established in 1955 by Frances Flaherty, Robert Flaherty's widow and lifelong collaborator, The Flaherty (as the event is known among its regular attendees) brings together filmmakers, artists, programmers, critics, scholars and cinephiles during an intense week of communal living and film viewing. The schedule is heavy: there are usually three screenings every day (sometimes more, the audience not knowing in advance what they're going to watch, since the film programs are kept secret), followed by hour-long group discussions with the filmmakers, alternated

with shared meals and much-prized social events that make space for informal exchanges. Curated by a different programmer (or programmers) every year, The Flaherty has made of Frances Flaherty's theory of 'nonpreconception' its founding credo: in her own words, "wiping our minds clean... like unexposed film," in order to approach every subject without rigid and inflexible views.<sup>1</sup> Participants are not always up to the seminar's laudable intentions, as is attested by the Flaherty's famously-difficult relationship with experimental filmmaking.<sup>2</sup> Yet the Flaherty has played an undeniable role in the history of independent film and video, in particular in North America.



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Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (1922), frame enlargement.

Held on the grounds of Colgate University in Hamilton, New York, from 16-22 June 2018, the 64<sup>th</sup> seminar was programmed by two African-American curators: artist and filmmaker Kevin Jerome Everson and writer and curator Greg de Cuir Jr. Under the theme “The Necessary Image,” they brought together an extremely diverse panel of ten artists and filmmakers: Karimah Ashadu (UK / Nigeria), Ephraim Asili (USA), Christopher Harris (USA), Sky Hopinka (USA), Kitso Lynn Lelliott (South Africa), Beatriz Santiago Muñoz (Puerto Rico), Cauleen Smith (USA), Anocha Suwichakornpong (Thailand), John Torres (Philippines) and Želimir Žilnik (Serbia). In addition to the screenings, each artist had a work installed in an exhibition especially conceived for the event and to which an indispensable and much-appreciated afternoon of viewing and discussions was dedicated. Attesting to The Flaherty’s

current openness to alternative exhibition modes, the exhibition constituted an essential complement to the film program, since many of the invited filmmakers and artists often produce images to be installed rather than screened in a film theater. Finally, and as is the custom, some of Robert Flaherty’s own films were also screened: *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1927), *Industrial Britain* (1933) and *A Night of Storytelling* (1935).

Along with the bold filmic dialogues orchestrated by the curators, the Flaherty’s 64<sup>th</sup> edition witnessed two important events: the reading of a poignant land acknowledgement by The Flaherty honoring the Indigenous people who originally inhabited the grounds now occupied by Colgate University; and the removal of posters bearing the organization’s logo from the space of the seminar (the logo is based on a still from Flaherty’s 1922 film *Nanook of the North* depicting the film’s protagonist, played by

an Inuit man named Allakariallak, holding a harpoon).<sup>3</sup> Having attended the previous edition (“Future Remains,” programmed by Nuno Lisboa), which was marked (if not marred) by violent discussions around the choice to program Dominic Gagnon’s polemic and problematic *Of the North* (2015)—a compilation film that appropriates YouTube videos by or about Inuit people—it seems clear that these two choices stem from a more complex and long-running debate around Robert Flaherty’s conflicting legacy.<sup>4</sup> Flaherty might be the seminar’s tutelary figure—and, in addition, one of the so-called “founding fathers” of documentary cinema—but he is not exempt from criticism. Appearing today as blatantly patronizing, even racist to some, his seminal *Nanook* provided a surprising, if not insensitive, emblem to a film seminar so deeply haunted by issues concerning representation and its politics. Questions and comments around these matters were rife at the last two editions, evincing how apparently worn-out debates on the politics of representation have been invigorated by the mainstreaming of intersectional theories that originated in black feminism in the late 1980s. Whatever one’s opinion on

*Nanook’s* stereotyping or Flaherty’s attitude towards his subjects, the choice to remove posters displaying the logo was perfectly coherent with the seminar’s current spirit. Moreover, and as the organization’s statement rightly underlined, symbols matter—and they’re not eternal (the logo was not adopted until 2000).

In many ways, Everson and De Cuir Jr’s program appears as a sensible answer to some of the questions raised during the 2017 discussions, particularly those concerned with race, representativeness, privilege and experiential authority. In the program description, the curators posit that “The necessary images are those in the service of building a better, more humane, more open world,” thereby intelligently displacing the debate from a moral to an ethical ground.<sup>5</sup> Against the moral “oughts” and their matching interdictions, Everson and De Cuir invited seminar participants to reflect upon the “ethics of aesthetics,” i.e., the way in which artists and filmmakers engage with and construct their subjects. They also encouraged viewers to become “active” and to bring their own “tools.”

Želimir Žilnik, *The Most Beautiful Country in the World* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.







LEFT AND CENTER Christopher Harris, *still//here* (2001), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

RIGHT Sky Hopinka, *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

The inextricable link between ethics and aesthetics was particularly evident at the 2018 edition. The most striking example was perhaps Harris's outstanding *still//here* (2001)—a moving portrait of Saint Louis' decaying north side, an area almost exclusively inhabited by working class African-Americans. The impact of Harris's film depends entirely on the filmmaker's brilliant mastery of filmic language and his understanding of filmic time. Combined with an original soundtrack marked by the sound of footsteps and a continually ringing telephone, the careful editing of his grainy 16mm long takes of boarded-up properties, rubble-strewn lots and deserted streets brings about a sense of desolation, rupture and absence that makes the film much more than just another haunting portrait of inner-city decay. Likewise, Žilnik's unusual choice of the docudrama format to address the contemporary migrant crisis in *Logbook Serbistan* (2015) or *The Most Beautiful Country in the World* (2018) is clearly strategic—the docudrama's inherent performativity allows the illegal migrants and asylum seekers in these works to emerge

as political subjects. Overall, strong formal choices such as these characterized many of the screened works, as in Karimah Ashadu's voluntary obstruction of the film frame with intriguing blue sticks in *Makoko Sawmill* (2015), Sky Hopinka's continuous play with superimpositions, text and the spoken word in films like *Jaaji Approximately* (2015) and *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2017), and Beatriz Santiago Muñoz's use of mirrored objects in *Otros Usos* (2014). These experimental strategies, as well as their very strong sensorial dimension, refer as much to ethics as to aesthetics, though the seminar's collective discussions did not always venture into these connections, frequently focusing on content instead, or on the literal relationship between filmmaker and subject.

"The Necessary Image" cannot be approached solely from the angle of representativeness—a dimension to which the two curators were indisputably very attentive, using the program in one sense as an occasion to build a coalition across racial, gender, geographical and generational criteria. Beyond its politics of

representation, the 2018 seminar took the viewer on an audacious *filmic* journey, creating communicating vessels between extremely different works, from Žilnik's docudramas to Lelliot's or Ashadu's installation pieces. Surely, common interests connect some of the artists (as with Asili's, Lelliot's and Smith's shared concern with the African diaspora) and sometimes the works screened together shared a more or less vague thematic plot (as in a session that might have been titled "markets and merchants," which featured Žilnik's *Market People* [1977], Muñoz's *Marché Salomon* [2015] and Ashadu's *Lagos Sand Merchants* [2013]). Most of the time, however, and to the curators' honor, the connections between the films were to be found elsewhere than in simple subject (or geographic) matter. One of the sessions associated Žilnik's aforementioned docudrama *Logbook Serbistan*, which focuses on asylum seekers living in refugee centers in Serbia, with Muñoz's *La Cabeza Mató a Todos* (2014), a film imagined as a spell against the military-industrial complex in Puerto Rico, which features a dance performed by the Caribbean artist Michelle

Nonó intended to convey the power inhering in an androgynous body. Through this combination, the curators emphasized the performative force of bodies and language as a political strategy in very different contexts. Another session dauntingly combined Ashadu's *King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)* (2015), a short piece filmed at Makoko's abattoir, in Lagos, and John Torres's *Lukas the Strange* (2013), a poetic coming-of-age story about an awkward adolescent in a rural village in the Philippines. More than just a session on the lives of young men across the globe (the butchers in Lagos are all young males), the program seemed to explore the porosity of boundaries between reality and fiction. This is an explicit aim of Torres's film. But when *King of Boys* screened together with *Lukas the Strange*, the sheer violence of the abattoir and the rhythmic precision of gestures in the former acquired an almost staged, if not supernatural quality.

Everson and De Cuir Jr write in their curatorial statement that the "curator is a polemicist, not a prospector." What transpired during the screenings was not only their belief





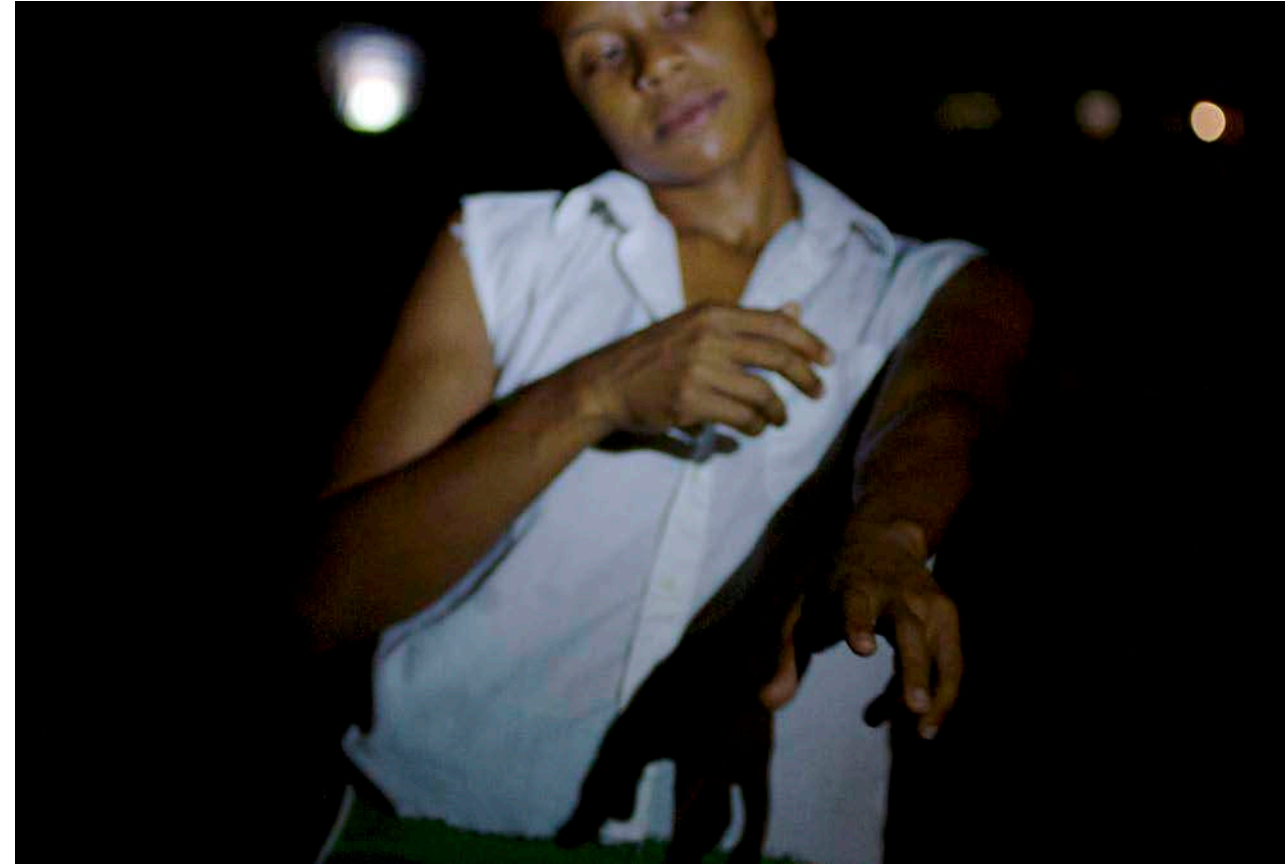
John Torres, *Lukas the Strange* (2013), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

Karimah Ashadu, *Lagos Sand Merchants* (2013), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



in the filmmakers’ ability to portray and to engage with the world, but also their love of the moving image and their trust in film’s capacity to *move* us—an aspect frequently pointed out by the audience during the discussions. Nowhere was this latter aspect more visible than in their choice to program Suwichakornpong’s *By the Time it Gets Dark* (2016), a beguiling feature-length film telling the story of a filmmaker trying to write a script about the traumatic massacre of Thammasat student protesters in 1976. Multiplying its narrative threads, *By the Time it Gets Dark* collapses the past into the present and offers a poignant reflection on the nature of memory, where the personal, the political and the cinematic become closely entangled. Moreover, one of the picture’s red threads is precisely the pure magic of film, as is symbolized by an important allusion to Georges Méliès.

While individual sessions explored distinct types of relations between the films, the week-long program brought about a number of surprising, but meaningful connections. One particular example concerns the works of two apparently very different makers: Harris and Santiago Muñoz. The first is a confirmed experimental filmmaker, whose films—in particular his already mentioned *still/here*, an avant-garde gem—evoke the likes of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, James Benning or Kevin Jerome Everson himself. The second develops an almost ethnographic approach in some of her pieces, which are mostly



Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *La Cabeza Mató a Todos* (2014), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

shown in galleries and museum spaces. At first, very little seems to bring them together. Harris deals mostly with African-American history, as in the two-part video installation *A Willing Suspension of Disbelief + Photography and Fetish* (2014), which gives voice to the daguerreotype of a woman slave, or the short film *Halimuhfack* (2016), which features a performer lip-syncing to archival audio of an interview with Zora Neale Hurston against a rear-projected film loop about Maasai tribesmen and women. Muñoz, on her side, has recently been exploring Caribbean syncretism—as in *La Cabeza Mató a Todos* or *Marché Salomon*—and the Puerto-Rican anti-colonial movement—a concern of works like *Otros Usos* and *Oneiromancer* (2017). But despite their different interests and distinctive visual styles, both artists display a thorough method of research that attests to their committed political engagement, as well as an astounding sensorial flair, illustrating perfectly that “necessary images” are first and foremost temporal artifacts made

of light, textures and sounds. To put things differently, and to return to the question of “the ethics of aesthetics” at the center of the 2018 edition, Muñoz’s and Harris’s works brilliantly recalled to an audience often more preoccupied with subject matter that formal choices are already political. If the curators chose to remain relatively silent about their beliefs, their program seems, retrospectively, to suggest that a true understanding of “necessity” is not only about what an image represents, but also the way it chooses to represent.

TERESA CASTRO

Notes and citations are online at:  
<http://www.mfj-online.org/castro-64th-floaherty/>





Christopher Harris and Cauleen Smith, post-screening discussion, The Flaherty Seminar 2018. Courtesy The Flaherty Seminar. Photo Credit Robert Goodman.

# CAULEEN SMITH & CHRISTOPHER HARRIS

at the 2018 Flaherty Seminar

*The following is a transcript of the post-screening discussion that followed the evening program on June 18th at the 2018 Flaherty Seminar. The program included three films: Robert Flaherty's *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1927), Cauleen Smith's *H-E-L-L-O* (2014), and Christopher Harris's *still/here* (2001). Smith and Harris were present for the discussion, which was moderated by Pablo de Ocampo. When possible, other speakers who contributed to the conversation have been identified in the text below. In keeping with the convention established in previously-published transcripts, speakers who could not be identified are designated "F" (for Flaherty participant). This transcript has been edited for clarity and length. It appears courtesy of *The Flaherty*. —Ed.*

**Pablo de Ocampo:** Hi everybody. I'm Pablo de Ocampo. As a curator, I don't often have original ideas, I just use other people's ideas. That's why I want to begin by borrowing some words from Sky Hopinka. These are some ground rules. Well, they're not really rules—I'm not authoritarian in that way. But what we do in these discussions is an ongoing process, and it's something we have to learn, it's something we have to practice. Even people who have been here multiple times aren't going to be able to just *deliver* in every discussion, or they might get up and say something, and later be like, "Man, that was a really fucking stupid thing I said—I didn't mean to say that." But that's part of the process of doing the work that we do.

Sky wrote a really beautiful op-ed on the Walker Arts Center's website recently. I want to share a sentiment from the end, where he's talking about a list of names he keeps, which I won't go into. He says: "That list serves as a reminder that the difference between learning and knowing is little more than asking questions without the entitlement of an answer and honoring the vulnerability in saying and hearing, 'I don't know.'" Let's just keep that one—it's a good one. Because the artists know *some* things. A lot of things, actually—more things than I do. But you all know a lot of things, too, so I implore you to express and perform what you know, but also to keep in mind that what you know might be wrong, and you may not actually know the things that you know. It's important to work through those things, because we don't just pop out in the world fully-formed, knowing things. We don't walk out of a screening and go, "Bam! I get that shit!" It's practice, these things. So when we start to talk, we can talk amongst each other, we can talk to the filmmakers, we can make statements, and we can also talk about things that we want to work out together.

If we were in Vancouver, where I live, I would begin this whole event by making what's called a territorial acknowledgment. People who don't live in Canada might not know what that is. When I come up and introduce an event, before I even necessarily say my name, I would say—and I'm going to pretend that we're

in Vancouver, because I don't live here, so I don't want to pretend to make an acknowledgement of the territory we're on, because I don't know anything about it. But in Vancouver, I would say, "I want to acknowledge that we're gathered here together on the unceded land of the Squamish and the Musqueam and the Tsleil-Waututh First Nations." What that's saying, where I live—it's a gesture, it's a performed gesture. And we can talk about whether performed gestures are meaningful or empty, but for me, what that gesture does is—it doesn't point to a history, it's not trying to remind us of something that *has* happened. What it does in its best embodiments, and what I try to do when I say those words, is to recognize a position that has multiple points of time. It recognizes not only that the past is not past—or as my favorite Dutch anarchist punk band, The Ex, would say, "History is what's happening"—but that the past is something that lives. It's not a resolved thing, it's not a closed chapter. It's something that we have to work through, and that we have to continue to practice, to figure out how to make it better or how to come to resolutions.

We began tonight with Robert Flaherty's *Twenty-Four Dollar Island*, a film that I've seen many times. It's kind of goofy in a way, but one of the things that we learn at the beginning of the film—a proclamation that the film makes—is that Manhattan Island was bought for twenty-four dollars. And in the worst form of colonialist apologies, it's like, "Well we bought it, so it's all cool, right?" It's this idea that a transaction somehow voids the work that needs to be done after the transaction, or that a transaction can be genuine, or that a transaction doesn't need to be accompanied by other things. When I say that I live on an unceded First Nation, it's different from other parts of Canada where there have been actual treaties that were enacted between the Canadian federal government and the First Nations in any particular location. It's different in that there was never any territorial ceding, any treaties, any agreements that were made, but it's also not different, in a way, because treaties are broken, treaties remain unacknowledged, and a transaction doesn't necessarily mean that it's all okay.





Robert Flaherty, *Twenty-Four Dollar Island* (1927), frame enlargement. Courtesy “Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941” in cooperation with Anthology Film Archives, EYE Film Institute Netherlands, Robert and Frances Flaherty Film Study Center and Gosfilmofond of Russia.

I say this just because we began this program with the Flaherty film, and because it’s important to think about the way that history is not necessarily history, or the different ways that time is manifested in cinema. Cinema is a time-based medium, so it has the inherent quality of always engaging with time—the time that is filmed, the time that is represented, the time that’s on the goofy screen that lets you imagine yourself in the past. But these things aren’t closed. These aren’t history books that we put on a shelf and forget about. These are actually things that we live in our day-to-day life. So that’s where I wanted to start. Does anyone else want to say anything?

**Adam Khalil:** The twenty-four dollar thing—it’s a popular misconception. The Lenapes signed three treaties: one with the Dutch, one with the English, and then one with the Americans. All of those treaties have been broken and are still broken. The Lenapes now live in Oklahoma on Cherokee territory; they’re refugees. The other part of that acknowledgment that I want to bring up is that the United States is an ongoing settler colonial regime, as is Canada, so it’s not something even historical. It’s also in the present, right now.

**Adam Piron:** Just going off that, we’re on Oneida land. That’s all.

**PO:** [To the filmmakers] What are you guys thinking about?

**Christopher Harris:** Well, I’ve just been thinking a lot, like we all have been, of course, about those kids that are in cages, and that made me think about Flint, and then that made me think about Standing Rock, and then that made me think about Katrina and the Superdome. [To Cauleen] That’s why it was really wonderful to see your film, because I was already thinking about New Orleans, so your film was really pertinent and poignant for me. I also wanted to thank Kevin and Greg for their programming.

Every last one of the programs, but especially this past one, because having the Flaherty film and Cauleen’s film together with *still//here*—it was just a privilege to be a part of that. Cauleen said the same thing I said, that when we saw the Flaherty film at the beginning of the program, we already knew what they were doing. The program was just—they were blowing, you know, they were blowing. I also wanted to acknowledge that Cauleen is someone who I have admired for a really long time now. I really feel it’s an honor and a privilege to be seated next to her tonight. She’s someone whose mind and intellect inspire me endlessly, and [to Cauleen] I feel a great deal of respect and admiration for you [applause]. That’s what I’m thinking about.

**PO:** Cauleen, what are you thinking about?

**CS:** I was actually sitting and thinking about gratitude as well. [To Pablo] I’m really happy that you pointed to this interesting performative gesture in Canada, because I’ve been thinking about it since I got here. There’s something about upstate New York that always makes me think about who isn’t here. It seems intensely vacant to me, this part of the world, even though I live in a deeply contested place as well. That’s what I was thinking about, so it was really great that you brought it up, and I’m really grateful for the people who offered some support to our understanding. I’m also deeply grateful to Greg and Everson.

May I make a comment about Chris’ exquisite film? It’s the first time I’ve ever seen it, and I was frequently just breathless with the moment that an image changed. I thought that I was looking at a kind of filmmaking that was sort of high order, considered, and just... Wow. I was sitting next to Chi-hui [Yang] and we had this moment where we started getting extremely giddy when we saw Tatsu Aoki’s name, who is someone I’m really grateful to. When I first moved to Chicago, he made time and space to break down the lay of the land for me, and he’s a

stellar musician, and he’s made some of my favorite recordings. [To Chris] But I just wanted to start by talking about the way that your film—it was the cuts, man, they were just like... Then sometimes inside of the shot when things shifted, and then that one time you see the human in the background just for a moment—that gave me chills. I wish I could watch it again, right now, but I was actually just really, really stunned by this movie. Thank you.

**PO:** Folks out here?

**Lana Lin:** I want to thank you two, so much, for showing those incredible films. Cauleen, I’ve seen *H-E-L-L-O* many times and it’s one of my favorite films, but I had never thought of pairing it with *still//here*, so I want to thank Greg and Kevin for that brilliant pairing, which brings out these beautiful echoes between the two works. I also want to follow Cauleen’s comment because I think one of the reasons that the transitions and the cuts in *still//here* are so powerful is the way that Christopher uses flash frames and flares. Christopher, could you say more about the function of the flare and the flash frame for you, which is so present in this film, but also in the installation and the triptych? [*A Willing Suspension of Disbelief* + *Photography and Fetish* (Harris, 2014)] For me personally, I feel the flare and the flash frame speak to a kind of exposure of the flesh of the film, but I would like to hear your thoughts about it.

**PO:** Let’s get a couple more ideas and then we’ll hit this.

**Victor Guimarães:** I was wondering about music and the Flaherty film. I wanted to watch it silently, because it’s like a musical film without music. When the other two films were

shown together with it, it reminded me of the visual music that was really important in the ‘20s. Cauleen’s film has music performed on screen, but with Christopher’s film, I was out of breath when I exited the screening room. It was like a piece of avant-garde music: when it was silent, it was even better, you know? All the rhythm that you construct was really amazing. I just want to thank both of you, and maybe you can comment on this relationship between your visuals and music.

**Christina Phoebe:** Thank you so much for your films. I felt like sound played such a big role in both of your films that it was almost the protagonist of the films. I’m still hearing the doorbells in your film, Christopher—they are so present in my head. Together with the instruments in Cauleen’s film, and the brass and the movement of the camera, and how the sounds appear also within a presence and an absence, where you see the city and then you see the source of the sounds—that was really powerful to see. The other thing that really stuck with me was the female voice at the end of *still//here*. That was so moving to me, in part because of how many films we’ve seen on the program where we haven’t heard a voice, or where we’ve heard more of the male voice, or voices in different languages. It was really nice to hear that specific voice, and the tone of it, and the pace of it, and to see you make space for the voice, but also for it to go away.

**PO:** [To the filmmakers] Would someone like to start?

**CH:** I’d like to take the question about music first. When I made this film I was going to school in Chicago, but I was kind of commuting because my significant other had remained in St. Louis. She had a full-time job at the time and was really supporting us, and we owned a home there, so being in Chicago



Flaherty participants, post-screening discussion, The Flaherty Seminar 2018. Courtesy The Flaherty Seminar. Photo Credit Robert Goodman.





Christopher Harris, *still//here* (2001), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

was really important for me to make this film, even though it's made in and about St. Louis. And that's because I had lived in Chicago for a really long time before moving back to St. Louis, as the film sort of intimates in some of the monologue. While I was in Chicago, the AACM [Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians] had a really profound influence on me, not just as an artist, but in terms of what I think of as me becoming a human being. I was in my 20s at the time and I wasn't even fully-formed, and seeing them meant so much to me because they gave me a model of how to live, not just how to be an artist. I saw them up close because I worked at a jazz record store in Chicago, The Jazz Record Mart. I worked there for a long time and people from the AACM would come into the store and buy music. But because it was *the* jazz record store in Chicago, I also got into every concert and every club for free, so I got to see them up close on a regular basis. I realized that they were doing things that—I didn't know what I wanted to do until I saw them. I didn't know what kind of way I wanted to be in the world until I saw them.

Roscoe Mitchell, particularly—his music and his use of space and attenuation and microtonality—was a real major influence on me in making this film. I was trying to find a language and a form for what I wanted to say, so I took the model from their music and particularly Roscoe Mitchell. He used the

space that the AACM generally used. Albert Ayler and the New York school would really fill up everything with sound, and I love that music, too, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted a space like the space of Chicago. Chicago makes space in a way that New York doesn't. You can get it in in Chicago and do your thing and be underground and nobody bothers you, and you don't have to be hustling. You can just be shedding instead—wood shedding, right? At least that's how I treated Chicago. For that whole decade in the '80s, I just soaked up their music and went to every... That's where I saw Lorna Simpson's work for the first time, where I first heard of Lorna Simpson. I just used Chicago as my finishing school, and by the time the '80s had lapsed, I had already soaked all this up, and I was ready to make *still//here*. I put all that in there, particularly Roscoe Mitchell's use of space, sound, silence. I tried to use that formally in terms of attenuation, duration. A lot of what the AACM's music does is expand space and retard time in different ways, like the way they stretch notes and then leave space.

This kind of gets to the flares someone asked about. The flares for me work as accents almost, in a way like Roscoe Mitchell. There's a way that he would hold a tone and then drop it with a squawk or something. That squawk for me might be like the flare: it's kind of a mic drop of the note that's just been held,

in a way, or a punctuation on that note, to trouble it right at the end, to make it unstable. Not that I was thinking in *this* concrete a way about flares, but I was explicitly thinking about that music and trying to find a form for what it was that I needed to say, so I used those models.

**PO:** Cauleen? Would you like to talk about the music in your film?

**CS:** Actually sound is the driving conceptual force of the film. The entire film is structured around a map that is called the “bass map.” It is a map of sites in New Orleans in which the low end, however we understand “the low end,” is present and roiling or was at some point. The map is in a book by Rebecca Snedeker and Rebecca Solnit called *Unfathomable City*.<sup>2</sup> It's maybe too long of a story, but I ended up not being able to do one project in New Orleans, and then I was just sort of handed this map. I was handed the book, but that map in particular—thanks to my well-known obsessions with tubas and brass bands—seemed like a place to start. The sites on the map are everything from the Colored Waifs Home for Boys to the Mississippi itself and its sediment, to that vacant lot in the film where we see the man in the turquoise shirt. The Glass House used to be there before the waters, and that's where the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, of which he is a member, just sort of made themselves and made their audience, and changed the way that brass bands conducted themselves henceforth in New Orleans. They literally changed the sound of the brass band, and that tuba player at the end, Kirk Joseph, is also in Dirty Dozen. You can kind of hear this funk bottom in his bass riff, which did not exist before Dirty Dozen.

Sound is characters, it's players, it's sites—things like lion roars that you would hear at Audubon Park, which are an extremely low frequency. There's a zoo there and there are also elephants who can communicate with each other by stomping the ground and sending vibrations. Our actual sixth sense is the ability to feel vibrations, and when low-end sounds of the contrabassoon—when he played and it started to sound like he was purring, what you're experiencing is the soundwave dropping beyond our ability to hear energy at that speed. It's dropping below, into the realm of the sixth sense, which is vibration, so you're feeling that purr, which is the energy being understood by our bodies in a different way. I am intensely fascinated with that—that moment where the sense dips from one into the other, that low, low end.

**PO:** Could you talk a little bit more about the structure of the music from the beginning to the end? At the beginning, we're hearing specific tones and tone is a communicative device, as it was in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977). At the end, it's almost like a Creolization of the language, like what was being spoken and listened to was being spat back out as this other, new thing.

**CS:** Oh, well, I asked all of the musicians to simply play five notes and to please play them in sequence [laughter]. I sent them the YouTube link to *Close Encounters*, and then they showed up and did whatever they wanted to do, and it was spectacular, it was wonderful. The gentleman in the turquoise shirt, in particular. This is a little bit anecdotal, but he showed up really irritable, just hostile. I hadn't met any of them. I had a fixer, basically, who knew all the musicians and corralled them for me. And so, Mr. Joseph [Charles Joseph] shows up and he's just mean already. We haven't even started, and he says, “Do you know where we are?,” and I'm like, “Um, I think I do. Good morning,” you know [laughter]. He says, “This is where the Glass House stood,” and I said, “Oh, I know—that's why I asked you to come here this morning to play here.” And he's like, “Oh.” Then he said, “You know those five notes? I can get down with those five notes” [laughter]. But he was still ornery, so he would play them for a few moments and then he would just take off, and then I'd literally have to glare at him like, “Mr. Joseph, really?,” and then he would come back. All of them, to varying degrees, took those five notes as a project, as a provocation, and all of them left like, “I think I got a song out of this thing.” I ended up realizing in the editing room later that what was actually occurring was a composition, a procession. The procession part I was already sort of on about, but because they were playing G-A-F-F-C, all of them, I could then make another map for my composition.

**PO:** More questions?

**Matthew Barrington:** Cauleen, there was some sort of reference to the Caribbean or to Caribbean funding at the end of your film. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that, and whether there was just Caribbean funding, or if there's a wider connection in some way with the space of the Caribbean.

**CS:** The piece was a commission, which is what that very embarrassing card was about, which was not up long enough for anybody to read it. Tacky, but I was required contractually to include it. It was a commission for a show that traveled quite a bit called *En Mas*, with “mas” being short for masquerade. The curators' conceptual thesis was about the Caribbean and the culture of processions as a performative art, as a performance art, and that the Caribbean actually *ends* in New Orleans—that's the last stop on the Caribbean.

**F:** Cauleen, I have a question for you building off of what you just said about Mr. Joseph. I remember when the woman with the cello is playing, it's super clear how frustrated she is with the notes. I was wondering actually about the feeling of frustration, and its relationship to the spaces in the film. Did you think about using in the montage the other kinds of sounds that they were making?



**CS:** I did use the sounds they were making. Everything.

**F:** No, no, no—I know. I really liked it. I’m just wondering what you thought about the relationship between them sometimes wanting to go somewhere else...

**CS:** But they did—it’s in the film. They go wherever they want. The film is a container for their performances, is what I’m saying. I didn’t censor them. I just asked them to play five notes. I feel terrible that Monica [McIntyre] was frustrated, because I didn’t have any sense of that when I was working with her, but I’m not a musician, so that’s some new information for me.

**Bianka Alexandria Bell:** Cauleen, I’m wondering, given the complex environmental and political history of New Orleans, if your inspiration for this film was driven by despair or hope.

**PO:** There were a few other hands that were popping up.

**Jeanne C. Finley:** I want to go back to a question that was asked earlier about the voice over. I had the very same question, and I don’t want to lose that question. If you have a chance to address that, I would appreciate it. Thank you. And thank you both for your films. I loved them both.

**CH:** Could you repeat that question about the voice over please?

**CP:** It was just an observation. It’s a really beautiful voice over of this woman’s voice and what she was saying and how she was saying it. But I do have a question, about the choice of putting it at the end. Actually, when I heard it, I thought the film would finish right after the voice over—that was just my sense of it, the pace. Another question I have is a general question to everyone. I feel like there is an assumption sometimes that using a voice necessarily means that you’re guiding, or that you’re overpowering the film, and I disagree with that. I think it really depends on the voice and what the voice is saying and how it’s saying it and how often. To mention something someone said earlier, about the “vulnerable observer,” there’s a vulnerable voice and there’s a voice of authority and I felt that this woman’s voice was very powerful because it was vulnerable, in a way that we haven’t seen in the other films on the program.

**CH:** I’ll start with talking about the placement. I know what you mean about expecting the film to end there and that’s precisely why it doesn’t end there, because what I wanted to do was to end the film and then have the film keep going on without me, so to speak, without us. That’s why even the sound bleeds over the end credits like that, just unceremoniously. And that sound’s still going on—I think you even said that, that those doors are still ringing *now*. I didn’t want to give that closure. I didn’t want the film to be a container for that experience of that time and

those spaces—I wanted them to exceed the film itself. The film is part of the experience, but it’s not the whole experience—I guess that’s what I was trying to do. You know, on your first day at graduate school, you start understanding that the forms and structures of certain types of cinema are about closing down and containing and limiting experience, and so your whole method is to subvert that. That’s what I was trying to do is subvert any sense of, “Oh, I’ve seen that, now I guess I know all about that. Time to move on.” I don’t want it to be something you can move on from—that’s why.

I also just want to say, that person reading... I don’t know how personal to get. I’m generally a very, very private person, but I feel like now is not the time to be very private [laughter]. The person reading the voice over is—well, I’ll say “was” because she’s no longer with us—was a dear, dear friend of mine. And I was telling Cauleen immediately after the screening that the credits hit me because Shelly Fleming was my mentor at graduate school and she’s no longer with us, and there’s another close friend from undergraduate college, where I recorded a lot of the domestic sounds, in Chicago, and he’s no longer with us. And absence and loss are of course built into time itself, but they’re so of a piece with the making of the film. This has nothing to do with the question you’re asking, but I feel like I just want to bear witness to her. That particular person whose voice you hear was someone that I loved, not just a hired voice actor—that was someone that I loved. And in fact, everything that I loved at the time of the making of the film is in that film. Everything. Now, my children weren’t born yet, so that’s why I say “at the time,” but everything else is in there. My partner’s footsteps are in that film. The puppy we raised, that is no longer here, you hear barking in that film. Everything that I loved is in that film. Miles Davis is in that film. You don’t hear him, but he’s there [laughter]. It’s his silence that you’re hearing. Miles Davis is in that film. East St. Louis or Alton, Illinois, and playing in the clubs that are no longer there when Charlie Parker came through with Dizzy and took him away—that’s what that voice over is about for me.

**PO:** I wanted Cauleen to talk about the question about despair in New Orleans. I think it’s also something that’s really pertinent to your film, Christopher, and I think you just talked about it in a personal sense, maybe not in the civic sense of the city. The question was about New Orleans as a site of despair, and the possibility of hope in a city that has had so much tragedy unfold in it.

**CS:** The film is made in 2014, but I wouldn’t have been able to make it if I hadn’t been there around 2007, I think two years after Katrina, to do another project where I had to live there for about five weeks. Two years after Katrina, it was still not cleaned up entirely and it was very empty, but there were people just trying to be there. When I came back in 2014 and went to the neighborhoods where I had spent all this time before, I didn’t



Cauleen Smith, *H-E-L-L-O* (2014), frame enlargement. Courtesy of the artist, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

even realize where I was because of the level of gentrification. I was in a neighborhood at a place I had been many times to drink coffee, but it was a different café with completely different coffee [laughter]. I was so disoriented. It was a kind of cognitive estrangement. It was a terrifying feeling to think that New Orleans was going to be vanished, and it felt, at that particular time, like the new residents of the new New Orleans were very content to have the residents who made the culture of New Orleans, and who made New Orleans the city that made it cool for them to be there, live across the river in Metairie so they could bus in their cultural production for their weddings or whatever else they thought they needed it for. I was more outraged than anything, but I was kind of alone in that because my dear friends who lived in New Orleans were like, “This is better than it was,” and they were like, “I’ll take this creepy hipster café over the pile of rubble any day,” and I was like, “Absolutely, that’s true.” So I had to find a way to talk about my anxiety about what seemed like it was going to be an erasure and an absence, and that’s where the aliens came in.

In *Close Encounters*, if you’ve seen that film—it’s really the only Steven Spielberg film you need to see [laughter]—these benign aliens are desperately trying to communicate with humans. They’re literally trying to say, “Hello.” They figured out how to do it in math and they’ve translated it to sound, and they

keep saying it, and the humans just start bringing in more and more military. I felt like, in that sort of inability to just look or listen or see, and in the insistence on a kind of protection, a kind of buttressing, a kind of installation of an infrastructure even if it’s at the expense of culture—that just seemed like an easy overlay for that city at that time. Now, I don’t feel that way. I feel like New Orleans’ black people are coming back, too. It’s too expensive for many, many people, and many, many people got jobs in other cities, and New Orleans would never give them one, so it’s a different situation. But it doesn’t feel as vacant as it did then.

**CH:** Not to turn it too much, but I wish there could be a format where the filmmakers interview each other. The reason I say that is because New Orleans is another special place for me. I’m sorry, but—[to Cauleen] I’m wondering, how do you know Kalamu?

**CH:** Kalamu ya Salaam.

**CH:** Yeah, and also, I just think of Louis Armstrong when I think of the Colored Waifs Home.

**CS:** Yeah.



**CH:** Yeah, and then second line parades and the brass bands, and I'll have to tell you some time over coffee or drinks about that.

**CS:** Oh yes, please.

**CH:** Because I lived in New Orleans briefly. Between moving back to St. Louis and leaving Chicago, I had been six months in New Orleans, but things happened during that six months that are some of the most important things that ever happened in my life. This was pre-Katrina, and for me, New Orleans was not that place, it was those...

**CS:** People.

**CH:** The black people in New Orleans was New Orleans to me.

**CS:** Yeah. People. Kalamu. Kalamu ya Salaam. An amazing writer, a music critic. I was introduced to him through an anthology of black science fiction called *Dark Matter*, I think.<sup>3</sup> This was before people even believed that dark matter existed.

**CH:** Right.

**CS:** He wrote a couple of the stories in there that really blew me away because he didn't really need to play around with, or put on a technological skin to become circuitry—kind of like imaginative circuitry in this way. I don't know how else to explain it.

Alright, so, the project that I went to New Orleans for seven years earlier was a commission by Paul Chan who did an epically amazing project—well, he produced a play called *Waiting for Godot* in the Lower Ninth Ward with the Classical Theatre of Harlem as the cast. He was supposed to make videos but he didn't want to because he was busy making a play, so he was like, "Cauleen, I'll just give you the money they gave me to make the video and you make whatever you want." When I was doing the research in New Orleans before going, I was like, "I don't know how to be down there just as a tourist, some girl from California—I just don't know how to do that. I need a mentor." I had some friends there, but they weren't going to be the kind of guide that I felt like I needed, so I called Paul and I was like, "I don't know who you're talking to down there, but if you could track down this fellow named Kalamu ya Salaam, I would be so grateful to talk to him." Paul just burst out laughing. He's like, "Man, I just left his house."

**CH:** Wow.

**CS:** He's like, "Hang on a second," and he just walked back in and put him on the phone. So that was my first stop off the plane to Kalamu's joint, and I just never let go of him.

**CH:** Yeah.

**CS:** I clung to him.

Karimah Ashadu, *Lagos Sand Merchants* (2013), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



**CH:** The reason I ask is, I've never met him, I don't know him, but the first time I went to New Orleans, I heard him read at the Jazz and Heritage Festival with Kidd Jordan. Did you ever hear Kidd Jordan play?

**CS:** No.

**CH:** Anyway...

**CS:** Amazing?

**CH:** It's still—I can still remember the words to Kalamu's poem.

**CS:** Right.

**CH:** After that one time—never read it, never saw it again. Kalamu is serious for me in New Orleans.

**CS:** Yeah, he's a really under-recognized creative force.

**CH:** Right.

**CS:** He also makes films, and he teaches young people how to make films.

**CH:** Oh my! I didn't know that.

**CS:** Yeah. I needed to make a film so he just handed over his students to me. He literally turned and said, "You're gonna help Cauleen make her film," and I was like, "Wow, okay."<sup>4</sup>

**CH:** Oh, wow.

**CS:** Yeah.

**CH:** Okay. We'll have this conversation later [laughter]. I'm sorry.

**CS:** Sorry.

**CH:** Just a little detour but it had to be done.

**PO:** Well, I was just going to cut it, but we have four hands up, so we'll go with it.

**Larry Loewinger:** My question has to do with sound as well. I'm really interested, Christopher, in the sound in your film, which does tell in many ways the story of this film, because it animates the mournful, sorrowful, desolate images that we see continually throughout the film. The footsteps, for instance—and you tell me if I'm making any sense to you at all—might lead to doors opening. The ringing of the phone makes us wonder what conversations occurred in those buildings. It's a very imaginative

and very powerful force in the film, and I'm wondering about your intentionality with sound.

**Lynne Sachs:** I just wanted to riff a little bit on the fact that all three of the films we saw today were in answer to a question that Cauleen asked the first day, "What is a requiem?" To me, these films were trying to deal with how we speak about death, and I think death is one of the most impossible things to speak about in film, and I actually turned to Karimah's piece that we saw today [*Lagos Sand Merchants* (Karimah Ashadu, 2013)], because she deals with negative space in a kind of brilliant way. One of the most fundamental things we learn about in art is that negative space defines what's gone, so, in your film, Christopher, I felt like you were having us look at what wasn't there, and it was interesting to see it after Flaherty's film of New York City, because the air looked so horrible, and I thought, "Oh, thank goodness something happened and it *is* still here, because it could've died." Then, Cauleen, in your film you spoke about breath, and we had footsteps and breath and doorbells, and all of those things gave me some hope that, as you said, it was still going on—there's still this living being even though the buildings have essentially died. I felt like the music in your film, Cauleen, was part of that, part of a resurrection. Thank you.

**Toby Lee:** Not really a question, but just some thinking about two words that came up earlier: despair and hope. Alongside those words, there's also the word mourning, which is neither despair nor hope, but it kind of exists parallel to hope in some way. It seemed to me that your films were doing what Christina Sharpe might call "wake work." Christopher, what you said earlier, "I don't want it to be something you can move on from"—that doesn't necessarily mean that you stay in the past. Mourning has a particular temporality that is this kind of radical present, which is both past and future. Both of your films are very beautiful as acts of mourning, and I wonder if that might actually bring us back to Adam and Adam. Because for me, the Flaherty film—the absurdity of that epic "yadda yadda yadda" [laughter]. Three centuries later, right? It seems like what would be really great is a kind of prying open of the "yadda yadda yadda." What you guys are doing is kind of dwelling in that and saying, "Wait a minute, not so fast," and dwelling in that, but with a kind of gentle pace. It's not despair and it's not rage necessarily, but I wonder if we can think about how your films actually help us to pry open Flaherty's "yadda yadda yadda" in that absurd film.

**Darian Stansbury:** My question is about division of labor. Are there films in either of your filmographies where you let go of the edit? For instance, [to Cauleen] in your film, you let someone do the camera. [To Christopher] You let someone do the sound. I haven't seen a film shown so far where either of you let someone else edit. Why or why not?



**CH:** Are we answering now?

**PO:** Yeah, go ahead.

**CH:** Short answer, no. I never let anybody touch my edit [laughter]. I don't know what else to say. For me, that's where I make the film. That's where the film lives and comes alive. Until then, I just have footage, you know? So, no. And did you say "Why or why not?"

**DS:** Yes.

**CH:** Yeah, because that's the only—if somebody else is going to edit it, then I don't need to be around. I don't even understand. Then they're making the film, as far as I'm concerned. And it's okay if they make the film, but we could both make films [laughter], and they can make their film and I can make my film. It's not like I'm being all proprietary and, "It's *my* film," and all that. It's just—this is a personal work, and the thing is, only I could edit this film. This particular film could only be edited by me. And it's not because I'm some genius. It's just that it came out of me. This is my life, it was part of my life—that's why.

**CS:** Yeah, for me the filming process is a gathering of materials, and the making is in the edit—that is where the film is made. Everything else is materials.

**PO:** Last one.

**Lee Anne Schmitt:** I've been waiting to ask a question for a while. There's two things: there's the thing that I was originally going to say, but then as I was waiting, listening to you talk about Chicago, which I know really well, and about the AACM and Roscoe Mitchell and New Orleans—that was really moving. It's actually really sad to me to listen to you because, one thing I think about is, as cities die and as we watch cities die and transform, it's such a tremendous loss for so many people, both in terms of the development of our communities, and just ways of life. That really overwhelmed me in the middle while I was waiting for the microphone.

What I was originally going to say is for Christopher, though it's true of Cauleen's film, too. The easiest way to talk about it would be in terms of duration. There's a sense of time in the film that's almost unlike anything I've ever seen. This is going to sound like an insult and it's not at all, but there's a moment in the middle of the film where I feel like the film could go on forever or is going on forever. So when you say, "It's still there and it's still happening," it's so architectural in some way—this architecture of a kind of ghost image, and this architecture of experience. That was so profound to me. There's that one moment where the film goes silent or near-silent, and you're like, "What? What's happening?," and then the phone rings. It's just unbelievable. I just want to thank you for that, both of you. Cauleen's film also has that aspect, but it's so linked to breath for me, and it's not *quite* breath because there's the cellist who—I mean, she's probably breathing.

**CH:** She breathes [laughter].

**LAS:** But just something to think about in terms of all of the conversations about these "necessary images," and these ideas of how you create. We can talk about work that's a sort of personal articulation, but there's something about where form meets history and where form meets content to create this space for us to be in, and this architecture of thought. I just want to thank you for that.

**CS:** Thanks, Lee Anne.

**CH:** Thank you.

**PO:** We're at time. But we have the bar.

**CH:** Really quick, I want to thank you all as an audience because the stuff you were saying tonight is beautiful. Thank you [applause].

- 1 Sky Hopinka, "The Centers of Somewhere," *Walker Reader*, 16 April 2018, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/sky-hopinka-op-ed-uncertainty-authority-indigenous-representation>.
- 2 Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker, eds., *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (Oakland, CA: Univ. of California, 2013).
- 3 Sheree R. Thomas, ed, *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (New York: Warner Books, 2000).
- 4 The film being referenced here is *The Fullness of Time* (2008).



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# MOVING IMAGE REVIEW & ART JOURNAL

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## Aims and Scope

The *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRA)* is the first international peer-reviewed scholarly publication devoted to artists' film and video, and its contexts. It offers a forum for debates surrounding all forms of artists' moving image and media artworks: films, video installations, expanded cinema, video performance, experimental documentaries, animations and other screen-based works made by artists. *MIRA* aims to consolidate artists' moving image as a distinct area of study that bridges a number of disciplines, not limited to, but including art, film and media.

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# KING'S SPEECH:

On Arthur Jafa's *akingdoncomethas*

SOYOUNG YOON

I wondered, when I was little, how [my father and my mother] bore it—for I knew they had much to bear. It had not yet occurred to me that I also would have much to bear; but they knew it, and the unimaginable rigors of their journey helped them to prepare me for mine. This is why one must say *Yes* to life and embrace it wherever it is found—and it is found in terrible places; nevertheless, there it is, and if the father can say, *Yes, Lord*, the child can learn that most difficult of words, *Amen*.

— James Baldwin, *Nothing Personal*, 1963

Memory quakes me.

— James Triptree, Jr., *Love is the Plan, The Plan is Death*, 1973



The film *akingdoncomethas* (2018), the centerpiece of Arthur Jafa's recent solo exhibition *Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures* at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem, begins with a long clip from the Reverend Al Green's legendary live performance of *Jesus is Waiting* on the television program *Soul Train* on April 6, 1974. Projected now in cinematic scale onto a wall of the gallery's second floor, cropped and re-formatted into widescreen aspect ratio, Green's performance is even more electrifying. The singer starts the set with a rousing, mesmerizing delivery of the Lord's prayer. He transforms the prayer into a sequence of surprising rise and falls ("Give US... THIS day... Ourdailybread"), till, amidst the *yeses* and *amens* of the studio audience, it seamlessly precipitates itself into soul: "That's why we are a living witness today, to say that *Jesus is waiting*..." As exemplified in the extended clip of Green's opening act, the continuity of prayer and song is at the crux of Jafa's 100-minute found-footage film, which focuses on the voice of the black church and the profundity of its persistence, continuity, and flow. We watch the preachers' mastery over language, as enunciation becomes singing, word becomes pitch, volume, rhythm, and timbre of voice, as the force of the delivery becomes further magnified by the fluidity of the call and response of the choir, of the audience, in the churches, in the theaters or clubs, in television studios and living rooms. The film puts on display a verbal tense: a continuous process of coming into being.

If the black church played an important but intermittent role in Jafa's earlier and much shorter, seven-minute found-footage film *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2016), the church now takes center stage as the foundation of black culture. In contrast to the speed and propulsive drive of the cuts in *Love is the Message*, the authorial presence of the filmmaker in *akingdoncomethas* appears upon first view much more modest. Except for two short, montaged sequences, the overall clips of found-footage are much longer, the cut from one clip to another defers to the rhythm not of editing but of the pro-filmic performances on view. No additional sound has been added to the performers' sermons and songs. Emphasis is on continuity. The filmmaker privileges the carrying over and superimposition for a few brief seconds of one voice over another, a momentary logical disjunction that is made sense of and related through the affect of the performances: a continuity that we not so much see as *learn* to feel.









ABOVE Arthur Jafa, *Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures* (May 4 – June 10, 2018) at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, installation view.

BELOW AND RIGHT Arthur Jafa, *akingdoncomethas* (2018). frame enlargements.



Throughout the exhibition *Air Above Mountains*, across all three exhibition floors of the gallery, via works in video, photography, sculpture, plus a massive tome of an exhibition catalog and a print-out of text message dialogue, there is an unpacking of the pedagogy of Jafa's editing. We could argue that the 100 minutes of *akingdoncomethas* is a slowing down and drawing out of the lessons and stakes of shorter, faster montaged found-footage films such as *Love is the Message* or *APEX* (2013). The high-speed, techno-music driven eight-minute film *APEX* re-appears in the exhibition as a photographic archive accumulated over the three decades of Jafa's career as a filmmaker, cinematographer, artist, and writer, now installed as a grid of 841 found images on the wall of the gallery's first floor, for the quiet contemplation of one still image after the other. Part of this photographic archive also re-appears at the front desk as a book of 848 pages, the exhibition catalog *Arthur Jafa: A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, which accompanied the eponymous Serpentine Gallery exhibition in 2017.<sup>5</sup> Like the size and heft of the book, the length of the film *akingdoncomeethas* and its slow and cumulative pace challenges the concentration and the stamina of its viewers, especially our ability to link one extended clip to another. "It's my *Empire*," Jafa declares in an interview, referencing Andy Warhol's eight hour and five minutes black-and-white film of a single, silent, and stationary shot of the Empire State Building.<sup>6</sup> And in contrast to the "eight-minute epiphanies" of *APEX* or *Love is the Message*, the continuity of works such as *akingdoncomethas* is not given but earned.<sup>7</sup>

In particular, *akingdoncomethas* draws out the implication of a famous scene included in *Love is the Message*, a moment from President Obama's eulogy for the South Carolina State Senator and Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, who was killed in the Charleston church massacre—the mass shooting by twenty-one year-old Dylann Roof of a Bible-study meeting at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church on June 17, 2015, in which Roof murdered eight black parishioners and their pastor after they had welcomed in the stranger and closed their eyes in prayer. The scene from Obama's eulogy in Charleston shows the president pause for a few brief seconds to launch very softly into the opening refrain of the hymn *Amazing Grace*. The historian George Blaustein suggests that this eulogy is distinctive amongst Obama's many—too many—speeches about domestic shooting, as the repetition of one mass shooting after another reflects a political impasse in which official, political rhetoric increasingly becomes but a routinized, redundant expression of bad faith.<sup>8</sup> The eulogy in Charleston proves to be a turning point in such exhaustion of rhetoric, where Obama delivers not a speech but a sermon. "How strange and sad that after countless speeches," Blaustein writes, "Obama's pinnacle would not be his own words or the words of a speechwriter, or even a speech at all, but an





ABOVE AND RIGHT Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* (2016), frame enlargements.

18th-century English hymn. It is beautiful and also a last resort.”<sup>9</sup>

And there is a renewed, added urgency of the black church as a site for the struggle over the authority of speech in the context of a Trump presidency that has raised to the Word of the State the type of rhetoric of white supremacy that incited the Charleston church massacre. In journalist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah’s Pulitzer-award-winning profile of Dylann Roof, Ghansah describes how she was motivated to write about Roof as she is confronted by the historical weight of Roof’s silence in court, his refusal to explain himself, his refusal to answer the questions or even respond to the testimonies of the survivors: his knowledge that he did not *need* to explain himself.<sup>10</sup> After “573 days to think about his crime,” she observes, “Dylann Roof stood in front of the jurors and, with that thick, slow tongue of his, said without any hesitation whatsoever, ‘I felt like I had to do it, and I still feel like I had to do it.’”<sup>11</sup> Through Ghansah’s reporting, Roof comes into focus as representative of a younger generation of white

supremacists, who are indoctrinated via the Internet and armed with an arsenal of guns, who thrive off of “subtexts” as coded messages and call to arms, as they weaponize their alienation and lack of opportunity, education, or any real sense of history. And it is a growing community (“an approaching storm”) that is further emboldened by the rise of Trump’s Republican Party and fueled by the president’s rallies and tweets. The latter’s rhetoric is notable not only for its racism but for its grammatical errors, its utter lack of coherence or sense of consequence, its bullying, self-defensive, laziness of tone, and its glut—an all-consuming emptiness, a hollowing out of language, that is full of subtext, amplified and acted upon.

In a review of *Love is the Message*, the literary scholar Peter L’Official points to Jafa’s striking appropriation of the scene from Obama’s eulogy in Charleston, particularly how the filmmaker manipulates frame rates to draw out a complex choreography of improvised movement in the AME pastors’

almost-immediate response as they affirm the president’s call—and stand up and join him in song. The complexity of the improvisation is impossible to perceive in real-time, but is “bent and stretched like a musical blue note” in *Love is the Message*.<sup>12</sup> Through Jafa’s editing, we learn to see improvisation as a mode of history, the telling of the story inscribed into the body as its sense and sensibility, its amazing grace, as in the pastors’ seemingly-instinctive affirmation of the president’s call to song, of the necessity of this last resort, of the *need* to carry over one voice over another—and continue. The continuity is a display of the kind of profundity and strength, “the genius of black America’s survival and the nature of our overcoming,” which Ghansah recognizes in Mother Emanuel that continues to keep its door open after the massacre, the same door that let the terrorist in, in order to invite in the stranger who is always welcome: “The long life of a people can use their fugitivity, their grief, their history for good. This isn’t magic, this is how it was, and how it will always be. This is how we keep our doors open.”<sup>13</sup>

Jafa dubs his method of editing with the neologism “black visual intonation.”<sup>14</sup> He proposes a re-definition of black film that offers an alternative temporal and spatial paradigm to Hollywood’s standardized continuity system of editing—an experimentation that draws on lessons about the “irregularities” of film form in Yasujiro Ozu’s breaking of the 180 degree rule or Oscar Micheaux’s “bad” films. Black film as new film form would aspire to approximate the expressivity and power of black music: “How can we interrogate the medium to find a way Black movement in itself could carry, for example, the weight of sheer tonality in Black song?...How can we analyze the tone, not the sequence of notes that Coltrane hit, but *the tone itself*, and synchronize Black visual movement with that?”<sup>15</sup> Jafa coins black visual intonation to refer to “the use of irregular, non tempered (nonmetronomic) camera rates and frame replication to prompt filming movement to function in a manner that approximates Black vocal intonation.”<sup>16</sup> It is a mode of editing comparable to the irregularities not only of hand-cranked film from the silent cinema era but also of black music’s tendency in blues and in jazz to “worry the note.” To worry the note is to trouble the standard of harmony in Western music, performing at a slightly different pitch, underscoring the instability and emotive possibilities of a note. To worry the note is also a mode of improvisation and, as Jafa asserts, a signification of agency by the black artist on stage, standing before a white audience, expressing not so much an individual identity, a self, as performing a *state* of being and composure, a state of “self-possession”: “And, ‘self-possession’ is *the* existential issue for black Americans.”<sup>17</sup> Jafa reminds us black music is also a “Western music,” tracing its origin back to the violence of four hundred years of transatlantic slavery, throughout and beyond which the various, rich traditions

of African oral storytelling survived and persisted, mixing and mutating, carrying over, and flourishing, as part and parcel of the habits of black America, especially via the commons of the black church. If Jafa’s found-footage films and photographic archives seek to show the logic of black visual intonation, the effect upon its viewers and its readers is not only an encounter with the rich capaciousness of black life but also a recalibration of our senses, a heightening of our sense, feel, and gut knowledge of “blackness.”<sup>18</sup> Through what the filmmaker John Akomfrah describes as the principle of “affective proximity” at work in Jafa’s editing, we are made more aware of the singularity of “blackness” as an aesthetics and an ethics.

“Can blackness be loved?” In *Dreams are Colder than Death* (2013), Jafa’s film about the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech, the literary scholar and poet Fred Moten asks, “Can black people be loved? Not desired, not wanted, not acquired, not lusted after...” The exhibition *Air Above Mountains* is bookended, at the entrance to the first floor and the last room of the third floor, by a series of large photographs that present a monarchical self-portrait of Jafa cross-dressed as a woman, staring us down in a long, magnificent white skirt, a black leather bodice, and a thick, flowing dark weave. We are offered a reconfigured figure of royalty. Jafa has modeled himself after Mary Jones, born Peter Sewally, a black transgender sex worker in New York City from the 1830’s who was labeled “man-monster” after she was arrested for stealing from her clients.<sup>19</sup> Jafa’s drag performance as Mary Jones underscores the discrepancy between the label of monster and its accompanying illustration of a petite, elegantly-dressed black woman, playing up the fantasy and the projection of desire, fear, and revulsion at work. The performance is part of a particular reclaiming of otherness: monstrosity. For instance, there is Jafa’s long-standing



interest in the blackness of the monsters in science fiction or horror genres such as the *Alien* film series. And the title of the film *Love is the Message, The Message is Death* refers not only to MFSB’s 1970’s disco album, but also to a short story by the science fiction writer James Tiptree, Jr. (aka Alice Sheldon aka Raccoona





LEFT  
Arthur Jafa, *La Scala* (2018),  
digital C-print.

THIS PAGE  
Arthur Jafa, *Dreams  
are Colder than Death* (2013),  
frame enlargement.



Sheldon), which won the Nebula Award in 1974: “Love is the Plan, The Plan is Death.” The latter is a tragic love story narrated in first-person perspective by Moggadeet, a spider-like monster that seeks to overcome the violent, cyclical destiny of his species, to outthink and break “the Plan,” through his intellect, hyper self-awareness, and gift of storytelling. The tale is fervently addressed to his mate Lilli, the “you” who he will guard, take care of, and love, until Lilli (“*Lilliloo, Lovely Leely, Leelyloo*”) grows into the Mother that, according to the Plan, devours him at the end of the tale. “Great is the Plan. I felt only joy as your jaws took me. As I feel it now... Will you remember, my heartmate? Will you remember and tell them?...”<sup>20</sup>

In sympathy with the monster, Jafa’s performance is also a rebuke of fantasies of restoration, of ownership, territory, and identity, of the return. In a print-out of a text-message dialogue, we read Jafa and his friend discuss their second viewing of the Marvel film *Black Panther* (2018), particularly their ambivalence about the origin fantasy of “Wakanda” as a futuristic African country that has never known colonialism or slavery. (At an initial display of the exhibition, a wall decal at the entrance stated “Wakanda Never.”) Rather, Jafa’s bid for “blackness” is in what we could describe following Hartman as the legacy of the fugitive. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman reflects on her travels along a slave route in Ghana, from the hinterland to the Atlantic Coast, to trace the history of the transatlantic slave trade as well as her own history. Addressed as *obruni*, a stranger from across the sea, from her very first step in Ghana, she poses how her journey to Africa,

her “return to the source,” did not lead her to the restored identity of a sovereign past, but rather to the fugitivity and rebelliousness of the struggles aboard the slave ships.<sup>21</sup> Not the lost son, but the stranger.<sup>22</sup> “It was the fugitive’s legacy. It didn’t require me to wait on bended knee for a great emancipator. It wasn’t the dream of a White House, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood. It was the dream of an elsewhere, with all its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, at last, thrive.”<sup>23</sup>

I’d add that there is another need, an added urgency in our contemporary moment of fascistic specters, to reclaim monstrosity, to insist upon our sympathy with and allegiance to monsters. In “Theses on Monsters,” the science fiction writer China Miéville elucidates the reactionary tendency to ostracize and project the charge of monstrosity upon the other; however, “when those same powers who enmonster their scapegoats reach a tipping point, a critical mass, of political ire, they abruptly and with bullying swagger enmonster themselves. The shock troops of reaction embrace their own supposed monstrousness.” Miéville reminds us that these reactionary apparitions are far more horrifying than monsters precisely because they are *not* monsters: “They are more banal and more evil.”<sup>24</sup> Against such banality of evil, its all-consuming emptiness, we might claim à la Jafa the utterly improbable yet extraordinary act of keeping the door open daily, to refuse walls, in order to invite in the stranger, the other, who is always welcome.

Notes and citations are online at:  
<http://www.mfj-online.org/yoona-jafa-notes/>





# THE ECOLOGICAL CUT

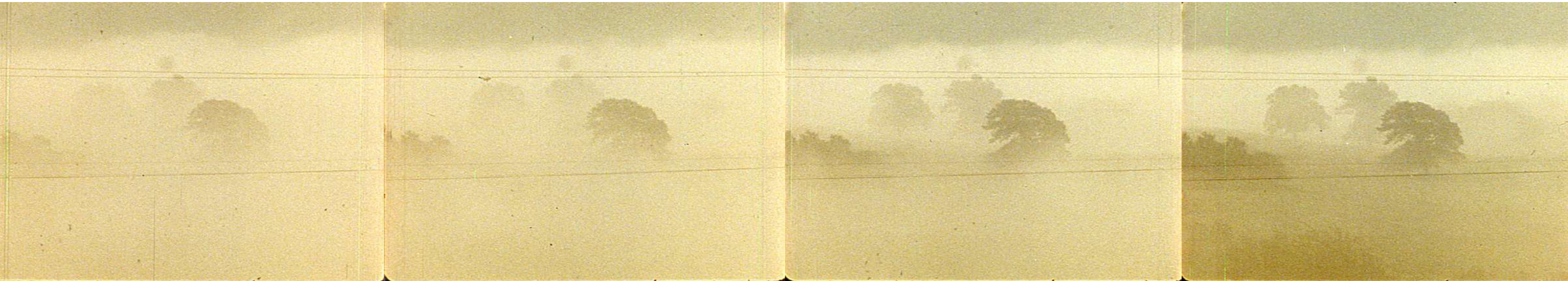
RYAN CONRATH

James Benning's 2011 video *Nightfall* comprises a single, ninety-eight-minute take of a forest scene. Within the frame, which remains static throughout, little transpires beyond the gradual withdrawal of light as night descends upon the scene. Benning's films have trafficked in extremes of duration and attention since the mid-1970s, though with more recent exercises in ascetic maximalism as *Nightfall*, the filmmaker appears to be flirting with self-caricature. Much of the appeal of Benning's films undoubtedly lies in how they enlist and train the viewer's attentive, disciplined gaze; his works teach us to look and listen.<sup>1</sup> Remarking on *Nightfall*, Benning claims that the experience of watching such a scene in nature is qualitatively better than in the cinema. "We have the discipline to sit and watch this in the theater," he observes, "but if I took you to that mountaintop, you'd probably have difficulty sitting there for an hour and a half. But it would be a much richer experience because of course it's much more real."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the demands *Nightfall* places on the viewer's time and attention betray a planned obsolescence coded therein. Put differently, Benning's cinematic landscapes aim to abolish the screen itself, their extended duration and perspectival intensiveness at once suggesting presence at the level of the signified (the event as what matters) and lack at the level of the signifier (the projection event as mere substitute). If *Nightfall* finally wants to *place* its viewer anywhere, it is not within the experiential field of cinema but rather its outside: the great outdoors. Enlisting the cut here would foreclose on a more fundamental interruption when the spectator, perhaps midway through the screening, flees the cinema for the forest, favoring the presence of nature over the poverty of the screen with its punitive frame.

While landscape and duration may have found their most acute point of convergence in Benning's work, this is hardly foreign territory to the cinematic avant-garde. Two pioneering films bear mentioning in this regard: *Fog Line* (Larry Gottheim, 1970) and *Sky Blue Water Light Sign* (J.J. Murphy, 1972), both single-take works that nevertheless appear as action-packed miniatures alongside *Nightfall*. More recently, films by Sharon Lockhart, Peter Hutton, and Nikolaus Geyrhalter have built upon this tradition, furthering the sense of extended duration as practically imperative to the cinema's treatment of place. It is thus unsurprising that experimental film scholarship has come to regard the long take as an expression of ecological consciousness. Scott MacDonald, a leading authority on the treatment of place in avant-garde cinema, exalts the long take for how it inverts the "fundamentally hysterical approach" to the environment seen in popular cinema and advertising, where the sheer glut of images onscreen mirrors commodity fetishism and environmental instrumentalization alike.<sup>3</sup> For MacDonald experimental films comport themselves as ecologically conscious texts by modeling "patience" and "mindfulness" before the natural world, corroborated at a formal level in their temperance of the cut. That cinema's capacity for being ecological consists in its ability to defer (if not foreclose on) the cut is a notion that can be traced at least as far back as André Bazin, who famously saw montage as thwarting the screen's ability to reflect "the spatial density of something real."<sup>4</sup> Such a sentiment resonates in the work of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, filmmaker and founder of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), who endorses a mode of observational filmmaking that honors "the homogeneity of space" over the ersatz spatiotemporal constructions of

James Benning, *Nightfall* (2011), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.





Larry Gottheim, *Fogline* (1970), frame enlargements. Courtesy The Film-Makers' Coop.

montage, thereby “preserving the *relationships* between objects.”<sup>5</sup> Here again, to favor relation over separation is to repel the lure of the cut.

The premise that montage obscures rather than clarifies ecology, however, is itself the byproduct of a more fundamental separation anxiety animating much of ecological discourse: namely, that nature *is* something indelibly outside, apart, other. In defiance of this notion, ecological discourse tends to place overarching emphasis on interconnectedness, but in doing so elides *separation* as a process fundamental to relation in the first place. While this insight grounds diverse branches of continental thought—from psychoanalysis to deconstruction—it has material and historical bearing as well.<sup>6</sup> Consider for example that ecosystems were only “discovered” in the decades following the Second World War by ecologists who, working under the auspices of the US Atomic Energy Commission, first visualized species interaction via fallout from nuclear weapons detonated in the Pacific Proving Grounds. It is this historical concurrence between ecological and military discourses that has led environmental historians like Laura J. Martins to contend

that “violence made ecosystems manifest.”<sup>7</sup> Ecological relation, understood in its properly political and historical sense, is perforce a function of separation. How might such a thought bear upon cinema? What if separation were seen not as a threat to cinema’s ecological capacity but as animating it? That montage is so uniquely capable elucidating and even enacting separation suggests a way of regarding the cut ecologically, of thinking the ecological cut.

All of this finally comes down to a question of place: of how films depict, constitute, and set viewers in place. Place, in turn, is a matter of relation. In one highly problematic sense, place implies a continuity of beings with their environment. To be in place, in this imaginary sense, is to be synonymous with one’s environment. This is place as absolute attunement, which knows nothing of separation and forgets division. It is ecology as a long take. That the cut troubles this environmental “suturing” distinguishes its ecological program, but it is worth clarifying why its *absence* would register as ecological in the first place.

What is commonly referred to as the Anthropocene is the logical outcome of a mode of production and thought

that seeks to render the world and its constituents knowable, retrievable by operating a series of separations between human and non-human, nature and culture, inside and outside. The environmental movement has countered this, in part, by insisting upon the indistinguishability between nature and culture. While this imbrication of the human and the natural is itself a central feature of the Anthropocene, in ecological discourse it reflects an ethical program that has interconnectedness and interdependence as its central tenets. The ecologist Christopher Uhl, for instance, explicitly views the eradication of separation as a precondition to ecological consciousness. Only once “separation consciousness” gives way to “relational consciousness,” Uhl insists, will humanity be capable of thinking and acting ecologically, from the starting point of interdependence.<sup>8</sup> Uhl frequently emphasizes the discipline and patience required for this web of interconnectedness to disclose itself, a central lesson here being that ecological consciousness takes time—that the key to the whole is duration. Such a notion would seem to find its most obvious cinematic manifestation in the long take. But cinema is capable of thinking ecology otherwise.

Consider Kurt Kren’s *3/60 Trees in Autumn* (*3/60 Bäume im Herbst*, 1960), made nearly fifty years prior to *Nightfall*. Though ostensibly aligned in their subject matter, it is difficult to imagine two films so diametrically opposed as *Nightfall* and *Trees in Autumn*. One decisive difference lies in the dizzying succession of images in Kren’s piece, where a shot encompasses one to eight frames and a second marks the passage of two to six shots. Kren’s film is an exercise in rigorous inattention, refusing as it does to settle on any particular view or part of this landscape. And yet, it would be a mistake to understand the film’s seemingly perpetual movement, its ceaseless diversions and detours, as implying some undifferentiated flux or totality. As Peter Gidal aptly notes, the frenetic movement in Kren’s film challenges viewers to “make of the *possible* jumble of images discreet and separate segments.”<sup>9</sup> That is, the sheer onslaught of images and the seeming arbitrariness of their sequencing becomes an occasion for the viewer’s partaking of separation.

Malcolm LeGrice once singled out *Trees in Autumn* as “the first film in general that I would call Structuralist.”<sup>10</sup> It is curious to imagine structural film, whose aim is precisely to





denaturalize connections (especially between content and form, viewer and screen), as having begun in a forest—an environment which, perhaps more than any other, implies interconnectedness—and yet in Kren’s film it provides the setting for radical division, less between the trees themselves than between film and forest, spectator and nature. The film’s blustering soundtrack, hand-drawn in ink by Kren, parodies the will to synthesize and order the natural world by providing an unlikely sonic bridge across a surge of cuts. And while the sheer additive quality of *Trees in Autumn*, its restless accumulation of shots, likewise reflects an almost analytical mania, the relentlessness of this visual onslaught simultaneously articulates an excess, a point of separation animating the desire to dominate and structure nature in the first place. Each cut thus expresses an irresolvable dialectic between perceiver and perceived, aligning ecological consciousness not with attunement but with a perceptual agitation capable of measuring the limits of technologies, their attendant representations, and the relations they enable.

Enlisting a cut here could situate us in yet another forest—or rather, a park located in Montreal, where Daïchi Saito staged his 2009 film *Trees of Syntax, Leaves of Axis*. The numerous trees on display here, which appear in rapid bursts of images amid passages of black leader, were initially filmed using 8mm and 16mm film stock, which Saito then hand-processed and recaptured using an optical printer.<sup>11</sup> Here again, the forest manifests as a radically *interstitial* and *intervallic* space: an ecology characterized as much by separation and division as interconnection and continuity. Such tensions are reinforced in Saito’s film by an erratic interplay between figure and ground.<sup>12</sup> In one shot, a tree trunk bifurcates the image vertically along its central axis, while a subsequent shot depicting two trunks literally substitutes the forest for the trees. This undecidability between figure and ground in turn operates a turbulence at the level of the sign, as the multitude of tree trunks and intervals of black leader come to mirror one another, effecting a confusion between the divisional labor of the cinematic cut and the syntactic function of the trees.

What to make of such trees that figure both as presence and lack, at once positively and negatively charged? In his short monograph, *Moving the Sleeping Images of Things Towards the Light*, Saito writes: “Though there may be trees in my films.... they are not real. They have become something else.... To say that film depicts nature is therefore a contradiction. Nature is natural only when it is not seen. Close your eyes, and nature will restore its naturalness.”<sup>13</sup>

Strikingly absent from Saito’s discourse is any prevailing sense that attentive observation will open up onto *more* connections, *more* nature, *more* world. Instead, Saito insists that wherever nature is sensuously perceived is where it has taken flight, has become something other. “Close your eyes,” he writes, as if to imply: make a cut, and you will find nature. Rather than as continuity or presence, nature manifests here in the interstices of representation. This is not to posit the natural world as some irresolvable plurality or metaphysical substrate, but rather as a space for interrogating the means by which we

J.J. Murphy, *Sky Blue Water Sign* (1972), frame enlargements. Courtesy The Film-Makers’ Coop.



perceive and represent the world in the first place. It is to acknowledge nature's capacity to denaturalize: to effect a cut in the procession of images, media, and technologies that have become second nature.

Historically, the axiom of interconnection has been complemented and reinforced by a view of ecological systems as tending toward harmony and equilibrium. This idea was already taken as gospel by the dawn of the modern environmental movement in 1970. By the 1990s, however, a new generation of scientists began challenging the orthodox view that ecological succession—the process of change in an ecological community over time—is a march toward balance. Scientific study gradually revealed nature's fundamental tendency toward chaos rather than harmony, and forests provided critical staging grounds for this theory. In ecology, the term “climax community” reflects an understanding of complex ecological communities like forests as having equilibrium as their end. This model was gravely undermined as early as 1973, when scientists observing New England's temperate forests concluded that, “the phenomena of succession result from *differential* growth, *differential* survival, and perhaps *differential* dispersal of species.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, while they perceived patterns underlying the activities of individual species, they observed no such patterns between species, nor any collective effort to achieve some final, balanced system. What this revealed, in the words of environmental historian Donald Worster, was a picture of forests as “nothing but an erratic, shifting mosaics of trees and other plants.”<sup>15</sup>

At last, the story of Earth as all-encompassing totality tending toward harmony may have less bearing on the natural world than humanity's technological imaginary, manifesting today as a cybernetic regime aspiring to project a seamless web of connections upon the planet: one that makes few (if any) distinctions between clouds of data and clouds in the sky, between trees in a forest and decision trees structuring machine intelligences. In this sense, where humanity and ecology are truly at odds may come down to the former's *idée fixe* of interconnection.

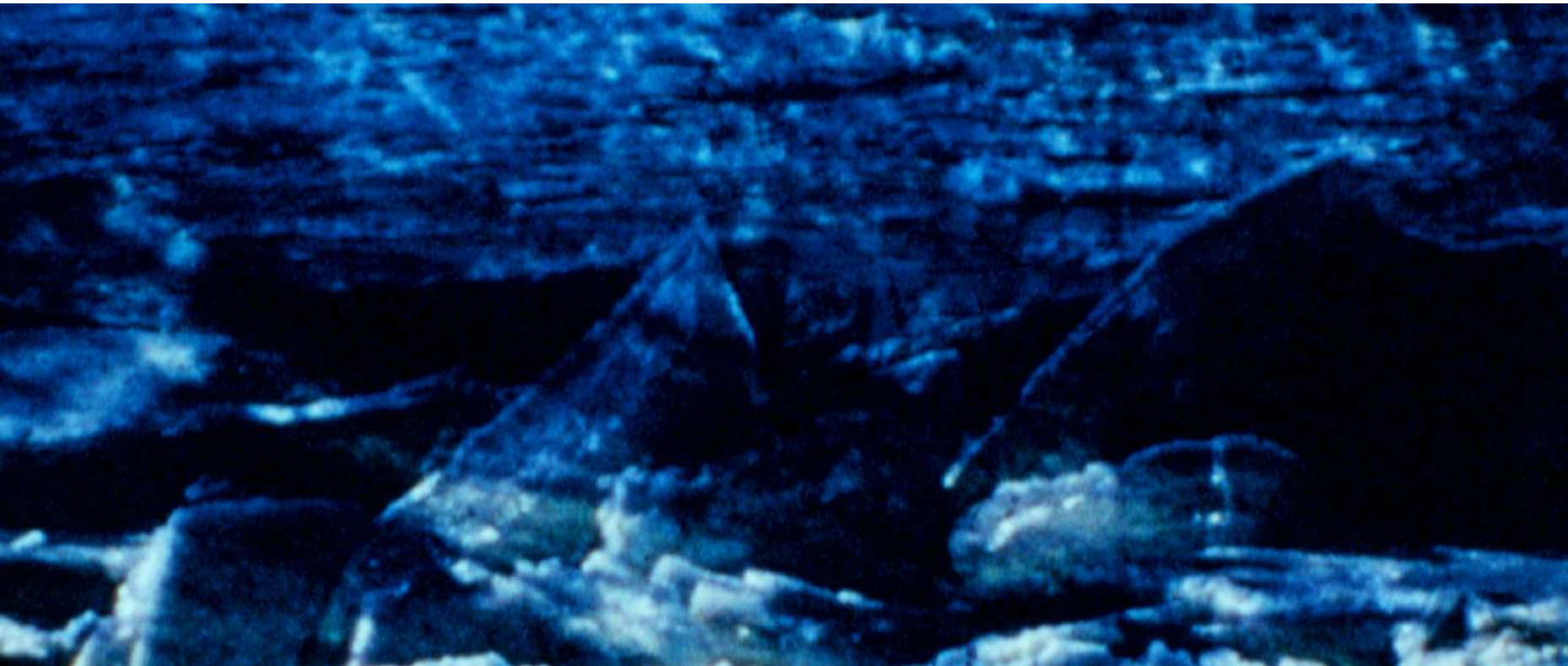
Against both the utopian fantasies of late-capitalist technocrats of an Earth 2.0 and organicist myths of a self-regulating planet, the philosopher Frédéric Neyrat has called for new conceptual and technological frameworks capable of thinking nature beyond the dominant ideological paradigm of interconnectedness and process. Contrary to the prevailing notion that “everything is interconnected,” Neyrat advances an “ecology of separation” founded on the assumption that “every relation is founded upon separation.”<sup>16</sup> For as Neyrat attests:

Without separation, that is, without the capacity to produce a distance within the interior of a socio-economic situation, no real political decision is possible, no technological choice is truly conceivable, no resilience—understood in the first instance as the capacity to draw back—can be expected.<sup>17</sup>

Kurt Kren, *Baum im Herbst* (*Trees in Autumn*) (1960),  
frame composite. Courtesy Six-Pack Film, Austria.







Daïchi Saïto, *Engram of Returning* (2016), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

RIGHT Daïchi Saïto, *Trees of Syntax, Leaves of Axis* (2009), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



Rather than view nature as “an element folded into a permanent process of transformation” or else as “something *immediate* (continuous, enveloping, perhaps even maternal),” an ecology of separation perceives nature locally, or as Neyrat intriguingly puts it, as a “detour.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, nature functions as a spatiotemporal bypass capable of introducing “a gap within the global technological system” in and through which humans may “measure the relations they produce and the material limits belonging to these relations.”<sup>19</sup>

We could see the long take as the cinematic paradigm of the axiom of interconnection, for it suggests *natural* and *cinematic* processes as being bound together within a larger spatiotemporal system. At the same time, the long take also betrays a view of nature as an all-encompassing “immediation” for which the cinematic experience is a necessarily impoverished substitute, even if it is capable of approximating nature (provided

that montage is kept at bay). An ecology of separation naturally allows for a starkly different view of things, for it suggests that cinema’s capacity for thinking ecologically lies expressly in those gaps that montage is uniquely capable of figuring.

Saïto’s most recent film, *Engram of Returning* (2016), positively dwells in such gaps. To create this piece, the filmmaker repurposed a collection of travel footage shot on Kodak’s now-defunct 16mm film stock, Kodachrome. He re-photographed and developed much of this material by hand, subjecting it to subsequent mutation through chemical intervention, optical printing, and editing, before ultimately bringing everything together on 35mm CinemaScope.<sup>20</sup> Though what is precisely figured in *Engram* is often difficult to ascertain given the film’s numerous mediating strata, one can deduce a number of relatively discrete environments encompassing mountains, oceans, rivers, trees, hills, and fields. What is ecological about *Engram*, however,

is less a question of its depiction of the natural world *per se* than the kinds of relations it produces between the images themselves. As is often the case with Saïto’s work, *Engram* consists of a relatively rapid (if temporally inconstant) shuttling between black leader and visual material. As such, some measure of obscurity invariably attends each image, taking flight precisely at the point where it risks crossing over into meaning. *Engram*’s images, and by extension its landscapes, are further imbued with a sense of restless movement, for unlike *Trees of Syntax*, most of the footage here involves camera movement or was shot from a moving vehicle (cars, planes, trains). At the same time, another crucial development that occurs between *Trees of Syntax* and *Engram* is that the interval slows down. Whereas *Trees of Syntax* comprises images of a single wooded area seen in rapid bursts, *Engram* encompasses shots of multiple landscapes that would otherwise unfold as continuous takes if not for the frequent passages of

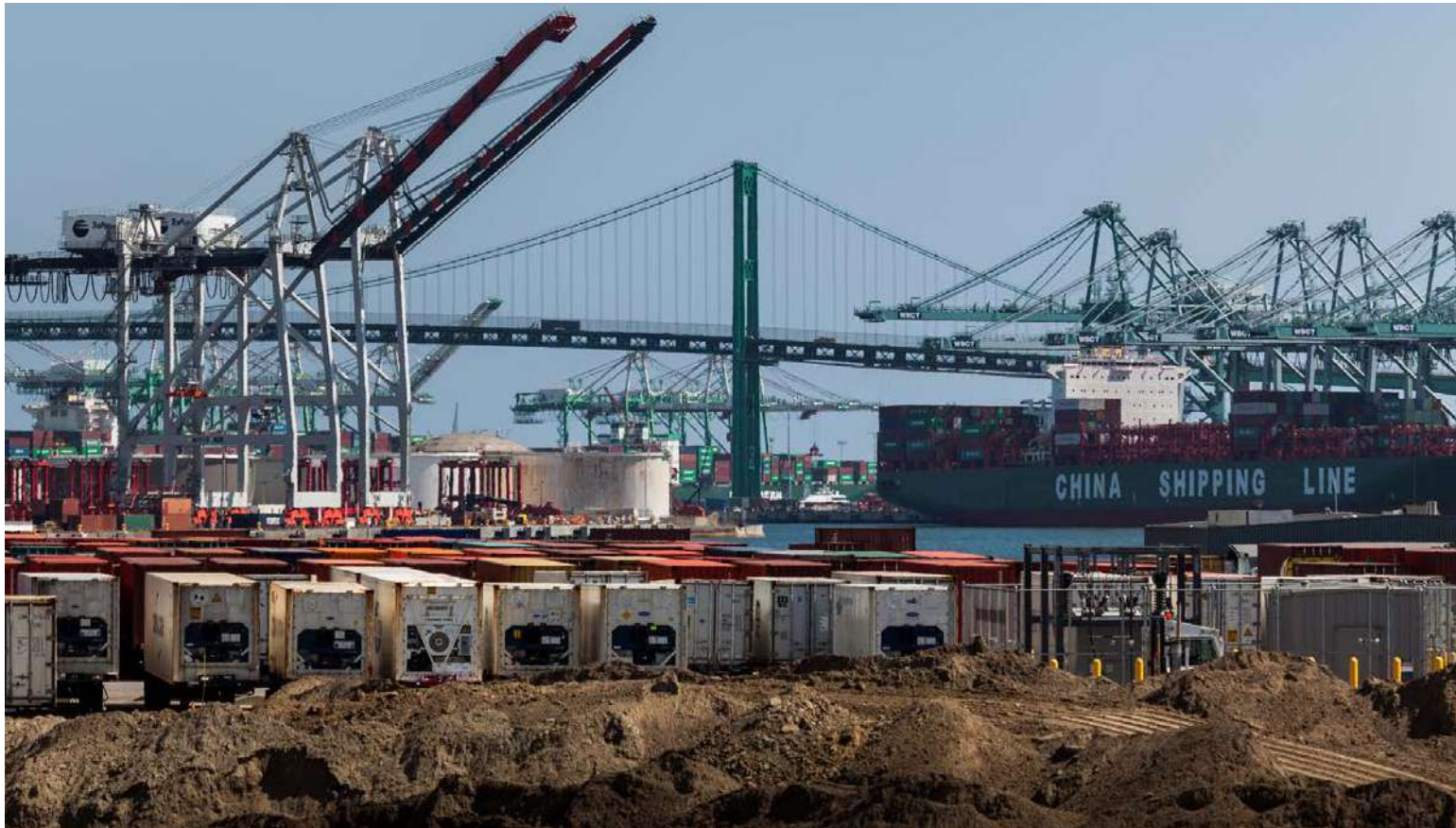
black leader into and out of which the film frequently (and more gradually) fades, as if to suggest a sleeping traveler opening their eyes only intermittently to catch brief glances of a passing landscape before falling back into ocular repose. In this way, *Engram* envisions the spectator as a kind of itinerant passenger who is attentive to a particular image or landscape even as they are able to withdraw, take leave, let go. Ecosystems are often measured in terms of *resilience*, a word that, as Neyrat reminds us, implies drawing back. As such, *Engram*’s ecological thought may reside in how it orchestrates, through its numerous devices of abstraction and its extension of the interval, a kind of *resilient interchange* between the screen and the viewer.

If a primary consequence of the Anthropocene is, as Neyrat observes, that “we no longer know how to maintain a distance, how to separate ourselves,” then we must devise ever-new means of drawing back from the closed circuit of our environment,





ABOVE AND RIGHT Peter Bo Rappmund, *Topophilia* (2015), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.



must plot novel detours around and away from it. Peter Bo Rappmund’s 2015 video *Topophilia* engages with landscape on such terms. Like *Engram*, *Topophila* is a kind of travelogue, having emerged out of thousands of photographs taken during the filmmaker’s trek along the 800-mile expanse of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. These high definition photographs captured at intermittent speeds were later painstakingly arranged by the filmmaker through various sequencing techniques. Partly because Rappmund’s process foregrounds technological mediation so insistently, his landscapes register as the products of an unstable, almost physical reaction between observer and observed. At the same time, *Topophilia* suggests a highly differential, even combustible relationship between the pipeline’s infrastructure and its surrounding environment. This is not merely to suggest that the pipeline has somehow thrown off the equilibrium of the natural environment, for if anything it is the manmade

infrastructure in this instance that betrays aspirations to stasis and balance. Everywhere, Rappmund’s questing eye locates signs of division and difference, whether in how an expanse of pipe segments the landscape, or in the juxtaposition of motion and stasis among various elements in the mise-en-scène. The pipeline itself even resembles some vast, alien infrastructure, with so many uncanny clicks, cracks, pops, and hums populating Rappmund’s soundtrack, which can never quite be stabilized as either organic or synthetic.

Temporality also assumes a highly differential structure in *Topophilia*. Rather than charting out a straight trajectory, time here bends and twists, expands and contracts. It even circles back on itself, for many of Rappmund’s “shots” are not, strictly speaking, time-lapse, but repeated phrases of intermittently captured photographs placed alongside one another: in other words, serial loops. All this temporal disorderliness extends to

the film’s spatial purview as well, for while much of *Topophilia* is structured around the pipeline and its immediate surroundings, the film takes frequent detours, its attention repeatedly drifting to the periphery where the pipeline’s presence is less conspicuous. Some of these brief intervals bear out microcosms, as in a sequence where the motion of plants at the margins of a wide shot seems to catch the attention of the film as it morphs into a series of dissolves between close-ups of a miniature, vegetal world. Later, as if hypnotized by the strange and untidy movement of trees, the film takes flight again into a prolonged forest detour. These subsequent images are uncannily still, as if to suggest a forest frozen in time. As each new shot draws us further into this wooded space, darkness gradually takes over until the forest is almost entirely shrouded. A strange hum fills the soundtrack, and just before this detour proves too strange, the film takes leave, continuing along its circuitous path toward the pipeline’s terminus.

If the Anthropocene is even remotely conceivable as a place, it is one where the two otherwise distinct domains of geology and humanity appear continuous, and in whose twisting, imbricated movement we are caught as if in some “strange loop,” as Timothy Morton aptly puts it.<sup>21</sup> How to escape such a loop? The films I have explored here imagine the natural world as a site of radical difference, of separation and division. They enlist montage at once to emphasize the differential aspects of a given landscape *and* to posit nature itself as a differentiating medium. In this way, the function of montage, or what we might call the ecological cut, is to effect a kind of environmental estrangement, allowing us to separate ourselves from what we’re doing, if only temporarily, and break out of this strange loop.

Notes and citations are online at:  
<http://www.mfj-online.org/conrath-ecological-cut-notes/>



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