THE THICKNESS OF CINEMA

COLLECTED INTERVIEWS AND PRESENTATIONS
FROM THE AUGUST 2017 CIRCUIT SYMPOSIUM
AND ARTIST WEEK

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OTAUTAHI / CHRISTCHURCH
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Motte performs a live soundtrack to Alexandre Larose's St Bathans Repetitions 1/2/16–12/2/16, Wednesday 23 August 2017. The Gym, Christchurch Art Centre.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Mark Williams.

The Thickness of Cinema was the 5th CIRCUIT Symposium and the first of our annual events to be programmed in the South Island, this year at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. Taking Mercedes Vicente's cinema programme *Thick Cinema* as it's conceptual basis, the symposium brought together academics and practitioners to explore the potential of a critically-based moving image practice informed by the sensorial, the embodied and the haptic.

This publication reproduces selected academic papers and discussions from the event. Several of the artists in *Thick Cinema* spoke to their work, and those conversations are reproduced here. Others who could not be present in Christchurch (John Di Stefano and Sam Hamilton) are represented through external links to a pre-symposium podcast and an essay by Georgina Tarren-Sweeney.

The Thickness of Cinema symposium was prefaced by the Artist Week, which included installations, screenings, talks and a writing workshop led by Megan Dunn at The Physics Room. Amongst Christchurch's post-quake rebuild, several off-site venues took turns to play host, mapping the cities history of cultural and political thought and adding potency to the work presented.

Founded in 1915, the Canterbury Workers Education Association (WEA) is part of a worldwide network of organisations established to make education available to the working class. Operating from a bungalow opposite the Christchurch Art Gallery, the WEA hosted an installation by Peter Wareing and Kevin Jerome Everson's film *Tonsler Park* (2017). Both projects addressed democratic participation in action, and took their place at the WEA alongside workshops on 'great faiths', belly dancing, 20th century political history and 'healing emotional wounds through fairy tales'. Across town in Lyttelton, Ursula Mayer's *Gonda* (2012) screened in the back room of the Wunderbar. What better place to explore a radical reinvention of the self than on a rock n'roll stage?

In CIRCUIT's 5th year *The Thickness of Cinema* continued to affirm our links with a network of international friends and colleagues.

Our 2015/16 artist in residence Alexandre Larose returned for a third successive CIRCUIT Symposium and the South Island premiere of his installation work *St Bathans repetitions 1/2/16 - 21/3/16 (portraits de Jacques à St Bathans, avec interlude de paysages, sur écran translucide)*. Larose's work was given an added element of local collaboration with a live soundtrack performed by Christchurch musician Motte. This years keynote speaker, by UK-based Canadian academic Dr. Erika Balsom was agreed to be a highlight of any symposium past or present, and we are pleased that Erika has accepted a position as CIRCUIT's 2018 Curator-at-large.

A final thanks to all our many supporters and sponsors, and CIRCUIT staff Callum Devlin, whose fine design work produced the programme and this publication. Thank you to all our presenters, all the staff at our venues; The Wunderbar, Canterbury WEA, The Free Theatre as well as Amy Marr and the fantastic Christchurch Art Gallery team. Jamie and Hope at The Physics Room for their invaluable support and advice. John Christoffels. Priscilla Howe. Erika Balsom's visit was supported by the Govett Brewster Art Gallery / Len Lye Centre and Creative New Zealand.

Mark Williams is the founding Director/Curator of CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand (established 2012).

2. THICK CINEMA

Dr. Mercedes Vicente.

Commissioned in 2017 by CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand with support from Creative New Zealand, these films and videos examine forms of cinematic experience that engage with film's sensorial capabilities and notions of embodiment and affective experience, placing emphasis on the body and the senses, the visceral and the haptic. Their phenomenological approaches can be seen as an expression of culture and identity, as addressing ethical, social and political narratives, or as challenging film's anthropomorphic perspective in representing the animate or inanimate world.

Lucian Castaing-Taylor, founder of Sensorial Ethnographic Lab (SEL) at Harvard University, proposes: "What if film not only constitutes discourse about the world but also (re)presents experience of it? What if film does not say but show? What if a film does not just describe but depict? What, then, if it offers not only 'thin descriptions' but also 'thick depictions'?"[1] Thickness, notes Christopher Pavsek, lies "in the voluminous depiction, in the sheer layering and sequencing of … visual and auditory and rhythmic sensory input as the films devote their attention to the 'affective and embodied' aspects of 'social existence and subjectivity'." [2]

Kim Pieters' *Philosophy* is a single, static, wide shot of the Dunedin Botanic Gardens at dusk, characterized by an eerie unnatural darkness (it was shot purposefully underexposed and altered in post-production). Shot from an elevated position in the walkways above the garden, Pieters' continuous long shot provides an unfolding visualization of the park, letting life happen within it. As a painter, Pieters experiments with the materiality of light, which is a thing in itself: dusk offers her deep shadows, 'to capture the strength in the light or deepen colour'. In her video work, the stressed darkness and stasis of the shot conveys a stillness to the image within which the senses become ever more aware of everything being in constant flux, the same way a whisper can expand our aural sensitivity. Pure presence, the immensity of the moving whole, an almost excess of movement; the prominent trees stand

1 Lucian Taylor, 'Iconophobia', Transition, no. 69 (1996), 64-88, p. 86.

2 Christopher Pavsek, 'Leviathan and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography', Visual Antropplogy Review, Vol. 31, Issue 1, pp. 4-11 (p.5).

Stills: Sam Hamilton, FOR THIRTY YEARS, NANCY WOULD SIT OUT ON THE STREET CORNER AND WATCH THE SUNSET (2017).Image courtesy of artist. http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/for-thirty-years-nancy-would-sit-on-the-street-corner-and-watch-the-sunset-excerpt still but their leaves shimmer, fluttering in the wind.

The basic elements of time, space and movement are conveyed in this 'plain' image which is presented as continuous, in a Bergsonian sense of durée, representing the constantly changing 'whole' that is the 'open' universe. For Deleuze also, the universe is always in movement and cinema gives us moving images that reflect this constant moving universe/whole. It is in this sense, William Brown argues, that cinema for Deleuze — as possibly for Pieters— is a philosophical tool because it visualizes the open universe. Light is movement too, and in Philosophy everything is perceptually altered by the effects of the subtle changing light caused by the movement of clouds (off the frame but present in the continuous space) or by the almost imperceptible dimming sunset.

Philosophy's observational approach is reductive, which, according to Pieters, induces a 'generative state of being', rather than 'falling into an act of recognition'; film is thus aimed at being experiential and apprehended by the senses rather than purely intelligible as thought. She seems to share with Bergson the belief that everything is an image, including ourselves, and that every image acts and reacts to other images —in her own words, 'the humming of relation between things in the world'— whereby we are not voyeurs as we too are part of the changing whole. While *Philosophy* engages with the world represented in the image, one senses an equal awareness to the film's materiality, our attention shifting between what is happening 'in' the film and the film itself. The sudden jolt in the camera movement (a chance accident) is a Brechtian disruption of this 'state of being' that introduces reflexivity, redirecting our attention towards the film itself. We actively switch between the world in movement captured by the film and the film itself, which, not unlike the world it captures, is also subject to the law of movement.

This is partially stressed also by the soundtrack, composed by experimental musician William Henry Meung, which sits in disjunction with the visuals. Meung composed the sound piece after seeing some of Pieters' raw footage, and she edited the video over the sound. Extracting from the captured reality its external natural sounds and placing over it a soundtrack with its particular mood and tonality draws us to an internal state. Pieters stresses the importance of this disjunctive 'humming' effect between two autonomous elements brought together. To her, this 'humming' can be generative to the viewer, becoming aware of oneself discovering a new sense to it and triggering 'a personal reverie'.

Fiona Amundsen's *A Body that Lives* presents testimony from one of 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war who participated in the 1944 breakout from a camp in Cowra, Australia. Structurally composed in three sections, the work opens with silent archival footage from an American produced WWII propaganda film employed to justify US military actions within the Asia Pacific. Amundsen has cropped the image to emphasize the violence of bodies at war and to decontextualize its location. This is followed by a black frame, over which we hear the a sample of the modern day tourist audio guide to the Cowra campsite, introducing the official story and providing historical context. The central section is Amundsen's interview with 96-year-old POW Teruo Murakami. The closing shots are still-like images of the bonsai trees and outdoor grounds of 'Cowra Japanese Gardens', built in commemoration of the Japanese soldiers who lost their lives in the breakout.

A Body that Lives captures Murakami's inability to speak about his traumatic experience, unable to remember because of his age, but also unwilling to encounter his memories, still torn by ambiguity about his choice - not to die - during the breakout. What the testimony lacks in verbal articulation, so revealing in its incompleteness, is countered by the expressiveness of a body that is unable to stay still. Murakami bows the head, his gaze remaining inaccessible to us, and many times bends his body, exiting Amundsen's frame. His body is a surrogate for the absence of memories, and externalizes what his mind conceals from him, giving

3 Laura Marks, The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xvii

away visual signs of his internal struggles, the ambiguity and the traumatic forces that are trapped within his body (an entrapment that is stressed by the extreme closeness of the camera). Seeing Murakami reminds us of Laura Marks's claim about 'how meaning occurs in the body, and not only at the level of signs' [3]. What this film visually offers is not an image of what happened, but the lasting embodiment of a trauma carried across 72 years of the life of an individual.

The opening film images of war and the campsite voiceover clash against the dramatic force of Murakami's presence, making patent their visual and textual inadequacy and the impossibility to represent (and stand for) personal suffering. It questions the function of memorials representing the state official history, suggesting instead a more ethical act of 'memorialising', the gathering of personal testimonies that are individually subjective and that might have been silenced due to ideological or political reasons. Amundsen's portrayal painfully fails (and recognizes the failure) of representing the subjective past of Murakami. Sensibly, the artist respects this void. The struggles of this intercultural, interlinguistic, intergenerational, inter-gender exchange between Amundsen and Murakami suggest the complex politics of representation and the ethics of speaking for the other. The film succeeds in capturing an embodied experience and the mediation between two human beings whose different cultures, life experiences and generations have informed different forms and regimes of knowledge.

Undoubtedly the most tactile film of this programme is Joyce Campbell's *Company Stream*, a work whose content is not revealed to us until halfway into the film. The fragmented, abstracted, mutilated subject escapes us; all what the camera captures are flashes of light refracted in water, glared and bleached surfaces, movement and light.

The film's disorienting effect is enhanced by the fast paced montage as well as by its experimental soundtrack composed by the artist with Jon Behar and Colleen Brennan. Instead of the use of natural sound (that would reinforce the logical connection between visual and audio), this ambient and textural soundtrack serves to intensify the immersive experience of the film and retains an autonomous distance to the image. Losing our visual and audio bearings, sense and meaning is not consciously constructed but materially embodied. The visual saturation allows no thought, no mental recognition, seeping instead into bodily and other sensual registers. Jennifer M. Barker proposes that cinema offers us an intimate connection, rather than the 'distance' experience of observation; we are 'touched' by cinema, 'we share things with it: texture, spatial orientation, comportment, rhythm and vitality"[4]. In *Company Stream*, we are engaged intimately (claustrophobically) with the work's haptic visuality, with the perceptual disorienting experience of a water world cinematically reflected. Touch, according to Barker, is not strictly reduced to skin but enacted and felt through the whole body, so 'tension, balance, energy, inertia, languor, velocity, rhythm' can be experienced as 'tactile'. There is a bodily sense of relief when we finally come to recognize the 'revealing' shots; the movement of an eel. Recognition anchors the image intelligibly and the embodiment of our sensorial encounter to the film abates.

4 Jennifer M. Barker, The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 2.

The inspiring source for this film was the 1972 experimental photo-essay *La prosa del observatorio* (From the Observatory) by Julio Cortazar. In Cortazar's equally disorienting prose (a meditation on the life cycle of the eel among other things), the reader is faced with constant poetic shifts that challenge the lethargic conventional logic of our mind. Rather than the camera depicting the world of the eel as we see it, *Company Stream* embodies the brisk physical experience of the artist being with the eel in the water. It represents an experience of contact, wherein the eel might have as much 'control' over the camera movements (if not more) caused by the unpredictable interaction, than the artist's wilful framing. The result is kinaesthetically rich and fickle. One could argue that the images represent the environment of the eel, and as such, an experience that is viscerally animalistic rather than human. Perhaps Campbell's aim is not to provide a 'fleshed out' experience, but rather, in acknowledging cinema's anthropocentric vision, to redress this by capturing a 'mutual' encounter between the artist and the eel, by which she surrenders control over the camera to the eel's kinetic behaviour. This does not claim that *Company Stream* reproduces the eel's 'point of view', which itself would be an anthropocentric thought.

John Di Stefano's essayistic and lyrical video *Murmurations (Rome)* is a meditation on fascism through Di Stefano's encounter with two historical sites in Rome: Foro Italico (formerly Foro Mussolini), an sports complex, example of the Italian fascist architecture instituted by Mussolini and built between 1928 and 1938; and Fosse Ardeatine, a cave where a mass killing of innocent Italian civilians was carried on 24 March 1944 by the German occupation troops as a reprisal for a partisan attack conducted against the SS Police.

Di Stefano's work interweaves three elements with poetic subjectivity and affective perception. It opens with footage of flocks of starlings flying in the sky —which gives the film's title, *Murmurations* —the name given to the congregation of these birds flying in patterns. This true wonder of wildlife populates the sky of Rome during the birds migrating season in the fall and winter months. We hear the evocative voice of Pier Paolo Pasolini reading fragments of his poem "*Le ceneri di Gramsci*" ('The Ashes of Gramsci'). This epic revolutionary poem, written in 1954, is an homage to Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist and co-founder of Italy's Communist party who died in 1937 after ten years in fascist jails. His reading is interwoven with footage of Di Stefano's bodily encounter of the two historical sites in Rome. The sites are shot as Di Stefano walks through them, creating an action-image that is also strongly tactile and within which the trace of the filmmaker is portrayed by his shadow.

The film's allegorical references are multiple: murmurations evoke the notion of collective power, both vital and generative, but also potentially fatal and destructive; the sky (a recurrent theme in Di Stefano's work) symbolizes a lifting freedom and hope against the backdrop of massacre and death, and so on. Once Pasolini denounced the vanishing of fireflies from the Italian countryside as genocide. Di Stefano might also be pointing to the vanishing of the murmurations from the Roman skies due to climate change, suggesting that the destiny of life's diversity, of birds and people, is at the mercy of mankind, and ultimately our responsibility.

Pasolini's voice reading in Italian resonates intellectually, emotionally and viscerally, even for the non-Italian viewer who silently reads the English subtitles; the co-existence of languages is a reminder of the filmmaker's intercultural condition. As a 'civic poet' who embraced art and activism, Pasolini reiteratively condemns silence and indifference in these verses; indeed, his poem ends with his struggle to live with a conscious heart (cuore cosciente). Perhaps Di Stefano aims to create an image that has the power to revive memory; in Deleuzian terms, a 'fossil' image. Recognising that memory works multi-sensorially, Di Stefano recreates a cinematic embodied experience. His insistent walking (walking, which in turn stimulates thinking) urges the awakening of the memories of Italy's fascist past, ever more resonant and pressing today under the rise of fascist ideologies in Europe and the world.

Sam Hamilton's *FOR THIRTY YEARS NANCY WOULD SIT OUT ON THE STREET CORNER AND WATCH THE SUNSET* pays homage to the artist's former next-door neighbour in Portland, Oregon, for her laureate daily ritual. The film re-enacts this scenario in the very same spot but instead of Nancy, Hamilton asked four adolescents to watch the sunset (coincidentally on the June summer solstice).

The single long take of 11:25mins (equivalent to the 400 feet length of the 16mm anamorphic film reel), using a static camera, natural light and sound, and shot without rehearsals, affords the scene a sense of presentness. The frontal middle shot captures these adolescents staring at the sunset, mostly engaged in their own musings: one girl seems romantically drawn to the moment, the boy pleasantly engaged, another girl clearly uneasy at being on camera, and one bored and eagerly distracted, exchanging glances with the camera, a passerby or whatever little happens outside the frame. Hamilton banned the participants from using cell phones. He gave them no directions, although just before the camera started rolling he spoke about meditation and listening practices to set the mood.

Pasolini believed that the substance of cinema is "an endless long take, as is reality to our senses for as long as we are able to see and feel (a long take that ends with the end of our lives)"[5]. Nancy's solitary practice, contemplative at the end of her life, is proposed to these young adults almost as a rite of passage or as a group observational inward exercise. For many of this generation daily life is mediated by mobile phones and social media, where screen images are as prevalent as the experience of the natural world. Hamilton's proposal might be a counter to digitally-affected sensation, restoring a capacity for sensory affect via 'real' experience. For us as viewers, the film's observational long take allows us to see into and linger on the scene. The adolescents seated pose mirror's us sitting in the cinema, and their time is ours too. We are brought alongside to this experience, in communion, they while looking at the sunset, us while looking at them. They/us surrender to the slowness of the scene and become immersed in the surrounding sounds (birds singing, a train whistle, the wind blowing through the trees or rustling leaves, etc): the continuous sounds of an influx real universe out of their view/outside the frame. Their/our senses become magnified; their/our patient spectatorship rewarded, sensitive to subtle changes in the light and sounds of an environment where we all are ever more present. Hamilton's film does not disrupt the flow of time and as such it captures the substance of time —cosmic time, individual time, film material time—beautifully transversal.

5 Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Observations on the Long Take" [1967], October 13 (Summer, 1980), 3-6, p. 5.

LIST OF WORKS

Kim Pieters, *Philosophy* (2017)
8 minutes 38 seconds
Digital Video, Sound

Fiona Amundsen, *A Body that Lives* (2017)
13 minutes 54 seconds
Digital Video, Sound

Joyce Campbell, *Company Stream* (2017)
10 minutes 23 seconds
Digital Video, Sound

John Di Stefano, *Murmurations (Rome)* (2017)
10 minutes 51 seconds
Digital Video, Sound

Sam Hamilton, *FOR THIRTY YEARS, NANCY WOULD SIT OUT ON THE STREET CORNER AND WATCH THE SUNSET* (2017)
11 minutes 25 seconds
16mm anamorphic film transferred to Digital Video, Sound

Commissioned by CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand with the assistance of Creative New Zealand 2017.

Dr. Mercedes Vicente is a curator, writer and researcher based in London. She has just completed an AHRC-funded PhD at the Royal College of Art in London on the work of New Zealand video artist Darcy Lange. She is contributing editor of Darcy Lange: Study of an Artist at Work (Govett-Brewster and Ikon Gallery, 2008).

3. … A LIMINAL JOURNEY…

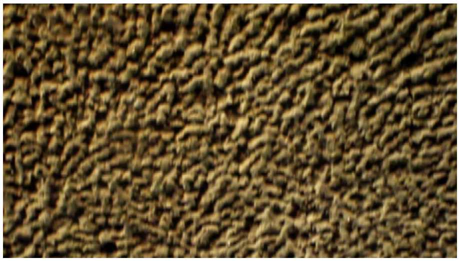
Georgina Tarren-Sweeny on John Di Stefano's Murmurations (Rome) (2017).

1 Pier Pasolini Speaks retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IA1b-S1MRzw

Murmurations (Rome) (2017) is a John Di Stefano single channel digital video and sound work (10:51). Commissioned by Mercedes Vicente as part of her curatorial project *Thick Cinema*, the film premiered in the auditorium of Te Puna O Waiwhetu-Christchurch Art Gallery on Friday 25 August. Watching *Murmurations (Rome)* in the gallery evoked certain shared resonances of trauma and it's aftermath. Where Di Stefano's work addresses the legacy of fascism embedded in architecture, Christchurch City continues to rebuild after the 2011 earthquakes. And just as Di Stefano's work considers the history of public space, I'm reminded of the gallerys recent history. Deemed 'safe to occupy' in the aftermath of the earthquakes, it ceased to be an art gallery and became a day-glow moving picture of high-visibility-vested civic leaders, military, first responders, cordons and road cones. Screened in this site (now returned to us as an Art Gallery) John Di Stefano's liminal journey through Rome offers us a sister in celluloid, an overlay, gesturing toward cinematic and cultural courage in the face of many silences. *Murmurations (Rome)* opens in graphic darkness. In the quiet of that darkness, light enters in the form of an ambient soundscape, close muffled steps and the far away sounds of life being lived by two small things – a child and a bird. From within the sounds of life, Pasolini's voice speaks softly in Italian, gently urging us to be aware of our time above the ground:

> *"Here death's silence confirms the civic silence of men who remained men, a tedium that in the graveyards tedium is quietly transformed …while the indifferent city…"*

Suddenly we are looking at a grey sky with black specks; the specks become birds soaring to the edge and beyond the frame – *Murmurations*. They are starlings soaring across the sky. The framing is fixed; cinema as the lens framing our lives. If we try to follow individual patterns, the flight is swift and the bird suddenly gone from sight, the disappearance complete. Reflexively, the birds may leave the frame, but we are



Stills: John Di Stefano, Murmurations (Rome) (2017).Image courtesy of artist.
http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/mumurations-rome

on while the birds still sing and the muffled city moves.

'…silence…'

An intertitle breaks the visual silence of our mosaic journey. We are in The Foro Italico, a sports complex built 1928-1938 by Mussolini to celebrate his Fascist regime. Contextually this intertitle is a time piece, time out, a place to pause and make sense of where we are and what we have experienced.

This is not a reverential articulation of Mussolini's monument. Reference replaces reverence. Theorists and references, filmic and textual, fly into the mind, like emoticons when a social media post blows up; Godard, Vidal, Sala and Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (1954) wilfully persist. But Pasolini is there before us, within the work, within the frame. His words and ideas materialised in a contemporary reading. Pasolini viewed the world as miraculous and phenomenological while identifying himself as Mystic, Marxist, Catholic and Atheist. But what we feel here is his expression of these philosophies as a filmmaker; celluloid intersections of his faiths. His voice, as he speaks *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (1957) has an imagistic capability, sending fragments from his films soaring like the birds, in and out of our sensorial frame – *Murmurations*. Gramsci is the subtext, questioning us, "Are we participating in own subjugation? Are we willing actors in the mystification of our own consciousness?"[2] But the work is moving on and we cannot remain behind, we need to keep going.

The walking resumes and the ground has changed. We are no longer in The Foro Italico, built by Mussolini for aspiring Olympic heroes, gods. The ground is now uneven earth. The light moves towards darkness, catching a shadow, possibly the cinematographer and faint outline of a camera. The shadow, however fleeting, is the closest we have come to figuration, and it is a welcome intrusion into meditative abstraction. But we have been well prepared, and it is with ease that we feel it embody the demystification of in-

2 Hegemony of Common Sense: Interview Of Dean Manders 6:42 retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0gp4tQ6OxM

contained, our lives discursively produced by cinema and mediated by social screens. A cut to black and the film's title:

> *Murmurations (Rome)*

Into the light, we become aware of the camera pointing towards a ground of mosaics, patterns, patches. We are permitted to feel the walking of the cinematographer as the framing idles left to right, moving forward always forward. Pasolini's voice has already planted a whisper in our ear – the beginning of his poem. And in its absence we hear our own whispered thoughts, our own poem, and birdsong. Meshes and melds of chalk coloured mosaics and individual tiles pass below. Di Stephano plays with the languages of our visual literacies; the beginning of a clip uploaded to social media; academic abstraction of continuous recording to produce a static image; the domestic video camera inadvertently left on between shots. Here in the auditorium, the speeding image is putting us at risk of vertigo, but sharp cuts to black pull us back from the edge. Finally we look up to see the birds, now in greater numbers soaring in open patterns – *Murmurations*. The sounds of life continue and Pasolini returns:

> *It carries all the greyness of the world¸ the close of a decade Where we saw our keen and naïve attempts to remake life end up among the ruins*

We return to the mosaics walking over those proclaiming Mussolini's title 'CDUCEDUCE' as Pasolini recites:

> *and a sodden sterile silence…*
> *…this silence…*

Di Stephano's framing muddles the letters that invested Mussolini as hero and leader, obscuring any remnant power resident in the clay. The camera marches across them, dismissive of their once monumental status. And while the camera is directed to the ground, we feel our faces looking upward and forward; Pasolini pushing us dustrial cinema and mediated messages – its presence a Foucauldian brush stroke in Di Stefano's depiction of the perils of our social times and virtual worlds.

His touch is light but unswerving, alluding to the notion that images have a point of issue and a purpose. We enter a dark place where wall and ground have become indistinguishable from each other. Our senses have been alerted. We do not know the answer but we should ask the question. This dark place is Fosse Ardeatine, a catacomb, a below ground city of secrets for the living and the dead. Those who died for their beliefs in early Rome, and those who died for not believing, as our second millennium closed, massing its military might against soldier and civilian alike. This is both Memorial and Monument. And now we are on notice that awareness and engagement is essential for survival. These heroes were not aspiring Olympic athletes but ordinary men who paid dearly. These facts are literal, set in the stone; mosaics and catacombs. It is now that we remember the cinematographer's shadow and this time it is not Pasolini's images that visit us but those of Leni Riefenstahl and her cinematic accompaniment to the rise German fascism.

Out of this darkness we burst into the light of dusk, a half light of silhouette trees and birds soaring; the energetic noise of birds and families, of life:

Flocks of up to a million starlings
- called murmurations -

Sound of wind across a microphone and we are moving fast, along and across mosaic lines. This time speed induces vertigo and the need to look away becomes overwhelming, as is the wish to look back. There is no respite, no cut to black. A Brechtian distanciation is at work; we must look away to see more clearly, subjectively. As I look away, I see the 110,000 people experiencing one event as my city crumbled and the speed as we walked and ran to find our families. The city moved as one, in different directions. Auditoriums darkened, cell phones jammed and heels snapped. On the banks of a river a flock of ducks stood in staunch formation, a perfect triangle, heads and eyes resolute and towards the south west, unflinching as we teemed past. Now, here in this auditorium, I am pleased to escape, back towards Di Stefano's speeding mosaics, to take the guidance offered.

As the journey continues we are in the darkness of a tomb. Colour emerges – hues of violet and gold confer respect and honour on its occupants and the stonemasons whose chisel marks remain from their lives above ground – they are all unknown and unknowable to us. Are they the same as those anonymous men and women who dig, hammer and chisel our City into life again? We are taken up above the ground by colours of almost tangible textures; gold, pale gold giving way to pale pink. We are offered colours as we move between the past and the present. It is dusk and the sky is striated with pink and blue. The starlings fill the sky in continuous harmony with each other. They perform their sublime *Murmurations*, their song and the sounds of family life being lived. And just as we feel no longer contained within the camera's gaze, their flight becomes a frame of film stock and we can walk through it. The end credits, a black graphic, Pasolini and Gramsci, they are leaving now but we still hear the birdsong, the sounds of life… *Murmurations (Rome)* lives, inside us… a tone poem.

Georgina Tarren-Sweeney's interest in the languages of visual culture has led to a number of projects that combine elements of performance, music and dance; but always Cinema. She moved to Christchurch in 2006 where she lives with her husband and three children. She has a BA in Art History (University of Canterbury) and would like to dedicate her essay to Associate Professor Ian Lochhead who always remains a voice in the Silence.

4. A BODY THAT LIVES

Fiona Amundsen and Mercedes Vicente in conversation.

nb. portions of this session were not documented due to the recordist having to leave the room in order to take the lunch order.

FIONA

Kia ora everyone. Firstly, thank you Mercedes and Mark for this opportunity. It is really amazing to be here and to being able to work on this project.

I guess I want to start first by positioning myself. Why is a Pakeha woman working with histories that are not hers? I certainly haven't lived them and I don't whakapapa to them. I'm talking about the Asia Pacific theatre of World War II.

For the last five plus years I've worked on these histories. It comes through a connection that I have with a Japanese family, which has changed over time, but the way that that connection has impacted has not changed and continues to resonate in me. And that family is originally from an area called Kokura. Kokura would have been bombed by the second atomic bomb which ended up being dropped on Nagasaki. The only reason Kokura wasn't bombed was because of cloud cover. And when I found that out about this family, it changed me and it made me think about not only those histories but also the histories of colonisation in Aotearoa. I found some sort of a connection.

So that's why I am so interested in these histories, and also how the histories of unresolved social violence live in the present, but we don't necessarily see them.

In terms of the actual work (for *Thick Cinema*), it's titled *A Body That Lives*. It's looking at a particular history that occurred in Australia in Cowra, New South Wales where there was a massive prisoner of war camp during World War II. At one stage it had 7,000 prisoners in it. And in 1944, just over 1,000 Japanese prisoners attempted a mass breakout so that they could literally take their own lives, in terms of the codes of honour and what that meant in terms of capture. 235 were killed, gunned down by Australians. Now on that site is a huge memorial both to the Australians that died, and the Japanese who died.

I found out about this story from an elderly Japanese woman who acted in a play about it. I am yet to meet an Australian who is not from the area that

Still: Fiona Amundsen, A Body that Lives (2017). Image courtesy of artist.
http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/a-body-that-lives-excerpt

knows that history. And so I am really interested in what histories get told and what histories get visualised both officially and unofficially.

MERCEDES

The film has three components, the main part being the interview, or the testimony. Could you talk about how the elements were constructed and [describe] the other elements of the film?

FIONA

It starts with silent archival footage, which I purchased from the American archives in its raw form. It was eventually edited into a documentary that was called *The Last Bomb*, which was released after World War II and just prior to the atomic bombs as well as the aerial flight bombings of Japan.

It starts with this shot in the Pacific, it's not in any specific location and it's not identifiable. I've cropped into it, so it showed these bodies in the service of collective violence, operating in violence together. And they are relatively rapid cuts. It's completely silent. And then that moves to black screen.

MERCEDES

You crop the image but you also re-edit it.

FIONA

I totally re-edit it. Then it moves to black screen and you hear an official voice over which is actually triggered by your body as you enter the memorial site in Cowra. It talks about what the site is, "you're looking at such and such", but in the film you don't get to see it. I was really interested in this silence, but a very, very strong visual and a strong visual violence, bodies collectively working together, flipping to black and listening and that kind of attunement of the senses.

MERCEDES

It also prepares you to listen to the testimony that comes right after it.

FIONA

That's the second section, the discussion with Mr Murakami, who is the only living survivor now of that event. He is 96. I met him earlier this year and it's really a discussion between him and a woman Mami San who has a PhD on Japanese POW experience in Cowra.

MERCEDES

And the films ends with...

FIONA

The very last section ends with close up shots of the bomb zone. [The film] slowly reveals that you are actually looking at this huge memorial garden in a very Australasian type setting.

MERCEDES

When I was thinking of inviting you to do the project I knew you had long history as a photographer and had recently turned to moving image. What is it that moving image offers you that photography does not?

FIONA

That's a good question. Prior to 2013, I had never worked with a human being in my work either. I simultaneously picked up working with a moving image camera as well as working with a live human. And there was an obvious connection in the sense that the body moves, the image moves, the body moves in time, the image moves in time.

Moving image allows me to care for the people I am working with in a way that I found still photography a bit restricted. It allows a connection that occurs across the time and space of capturing the interview and the discussion on camera. And there is an immediacy. When I am setting up the camera, that's it. I set up the camera, I don't look through the camera. Whereas in my still photo practice I am by the camera, I am very much behind and underneath the hood of the camera.

So there is something about our bodies, my body and the body of the person I am working with, being alive and connected in that space together and the camera actually allowed that. Also I think the moving image camera - to reference Barry Barclay – allows listening, whereas a still camera, it's much harder.

MERCEDES

In the testimony of Murakami the camera is very close to him, to the point that when he bends, the restlessness of his body constantly moves outside the frame. It is very claustrophobic, very imposing to put the camera on him but also on us because it is a very extreme close up of him. I know that wasn't intentional, can you talk about it?

FIONA

Mr Murakami is extremely deaf, hence his constant ducking in and out of frame. And we were filming in a very tight space. At first I tried to control that. Actually how it's shot is much wider, but he is still rocking in the frame.

Whilst that discussion was occurring I wasn't looking through the camera, so I didn't know that his ear was perfectly in frame, as we were talking about sound. And I think in the editing process I realised that actually by cropping in on that imagery and the ducking in and out enabled that kind of connection between the discomfort in his body and the discomfort in our bodies as we view him trying to remember but also not wanting to remember.

MERCEDES

It has a bodily effect. Also because it picks up almost random events in the image, like suddenly we find ourselves listening looking at his ear or the texture of the wall. There is a certain element of chance in the image that is not intentional. It works away from the convention of the perfect headshot that concentrates everything on the facial expression. Instead it allows for that wandering of your eyes and mind while he is actually talking. In certain ways it creates a claustrophobic, very emotional state in encountering his testimony but also moves away from the conventional framing.

FIONA

I also think it releases us as an audience from worrying about the testimony and how we can access it or its truth value, it's 'actual-ness'. That testimony is something you can never grasp. For me that's not the motivator of the words, it's not about how accurate a testimony is or isn't, it's actually about what we do with ourselves as we listen. And his constant shifting and awkwardness and bows in and out of frame actually enables that connection or that wandering into a different space, away from the truth value of the testimony.

MERCEDES

You also talk about the care of the reality.

FIONA

I actually have a quote from (Eve Kosofsky) Sedgewick which I wrote out this morning. And in terms of this idea of a "reparative reading" which is contrary or in contrast to a paranoid known and critical exploding, if you will,

I am really interested in moving from the rigidity of that and this is the central quote:

"So rather than asking is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know, rather ask the questions of what does knowledge do, the pursuit of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows. How, in short, is knowledge informative and how best does one move in its causes and effects."

And it's that latter part, the causes and effects. But it's also not just knowledge, it's moving amongst relationship and that relationship is with me and Mr Murakami but it's also for the audience and the work and it involves a trust. It's a trusting in that there has been a connection made, but it doesn't operate as a material property in the artwork.

MERCEDES

It's also a commitment, no? To continue an activity that perhaps will not be fulfilled completely, it is incomplete, it is insufficient, but still intends to be a witness of that reality, no?

FIONA

Absolutely. I have a real issue with this term secondary witness that is used a lot, particularly in relationship to still photography. I don't want to be a secondary witness. I want to be a witness now, connected now. And then how you take that connection into the wayfinding of your life? Because when somebody shares that sort of, a story like that with you, I think it's a real responsibility in what one does with that, both as for me the art maker, but also for the audience.

AUDIENCE

I was interested in your relationship with him and the other interviewer. It's almost like he was being interrogated again and was it emotional stress… I couldn't really tell from the artwork whether… or maybe it was just a Japanese way of speaking, but how did he feel about reliving that? Did he really want to tell it?

FIONA

They have known each other for 13 years. She is a friend of his. She is a scholar on that particular topic. They have travelled many times together back to Cowra. We are still all in communication. Mr Murakami has seen the film. His response was "Why is my head chopped off?" But you will never, ever know any of that in the work. So I guess I'm wanting, as an audience, you to be faced with your own need to know. What is it you want to see that satisfies all that?

MERCEDES

Fiona doesn't speak Japanese. She is familiar with Japanese, some words she can pick up but she couldn't understand the extent of the conversation. In a way she's a witness, but she cannot understand the exchange that is happening between them. So she also has to trust. Do you want to talk about that?

FIONA

My Japanese is like that of an eight year old, but weirdly I understand some concepts. I knew the word for nostalgia, so as soon as he said it I got that sense. I didn't know that she was pushing and pushing and pushing. I didn't know the nuance of that until I had it translated. And that's where I am really interested in this kind of back and forth between Mr Murakami and I and Mami San around what gets included, because obviously there's hours of footage, hours of audio.

MERCEDES

It is a testament as well to the fact that we could perceive lots of information but not necessarily comes through the verbal testimony. So while you were there you could sense, with your little Japanese, but also with the body language, a sense that you were picking up enough to follow what was happening throughout that conversation.

FIONA

Yeah and the connectedness in that moment and the moments that preceded, and the evening that preceded that first meeting and the breakfast in the second meeting and going to the train station and all of that connectedness. And I am really interested in how an artwork, how a film alludes to that without necessarily showing it.

AUDIENCE 3

How many people have seen this film so far?

FIONA

You are the first.

AUDIENCE 3

As a viewer you feel quite implicated. It was very affecting, but it was affecting almost like you were in a room where you were seeing violence performed. His actions are fragmenting himself, and it wasn't so much that I was weeping but it's emotionalising me now to recall. I felt like you were observing a bug that was pinned. He was getting out of the frame, he is looking at you, all of the body language which you can feel and read was like, *get me out of here*. So that was a feeling. So my emotional response to it was get me out of here, it wasn't so much… I didn't feel like I understood this story better, well I could imagine his story and it made me feel like his emotion and my emotion therefore became… and that is just one person. But iI responded to it quite strongly.

FIONA

I don't think these histories, even over a seventy-three year timeframe, should be any easier.

I also think that the ethics are also put back on the audience rather than just "Who am I to work with this person to tell his story?"

AUDIENCE 3

Well it's an inevitable question. Do you sit there or do you remove yourself from it. It's almost like what I'm doing now, to go "Hey but do you understand the implications of this?"

FIONA

My obligation is to Mr Murakami. That's all I care about. That's my primary obligation. A better example is other people I've worked with who have asked for things to be changed or taken out. But again, as an audience you'll never know that.

AUDIENCE

Was it justified to put an elderly man who's been through such a terrible experience through that much emotional pressure?

FIONA

But I think the emotional pressure, a lot of it's your assumption.

AUDIENCE 2

Yeah, we don't know.

MERCEDES

But I think that pressure ... I felt the same, a defensiveness, in witnessing the way that Mami San pushes him. She doesn't let him go. I could never do that. And I don't know if that's cultural. It could be the relationship that they have or it could be that there is a need to know, there is a need to get an answer from him.

What we are witnessing is a relationship between them, where Fiona is there to record it, but that conversation is a conversation that has taken place between them and it's a conversation that's been happening for 13 years. So it's just that Fiona makes it public. But that conversation seems to be something that has happened, because [Mami San says] “you told me this and you told me that, can you tell me this again…”

AUDIENCE 4

Has he got dementia?

FIONA

No, he’s just deaf. There was a lot of repetition. When he’s ducking out of frame, he’s going eh?, he’s asking. Cause she’s [over] there, I’m there, the camera’s there, she’s there, he’s here.

AUDIENCE 5

So you edit out those pauses, those “eh?”

FIONA

No they’re in there. And the repetition. They are repeating the same question again so he can hear it.

AUDIENCE

My response was a whole lot of respect [for what] you were showing for this man and his humanness. Yes, he’s 96, he’s totally cogent and he’s fully able and he’s choosing to be there, so it honoured him as full intellect, which he clearly is. I read it that way.

MERCEDES

Thank you so much.

Fiona Amundsen is a New Zealand based artist, who utilises photography and moving-image to question paradigmatic socio-cultural histories and narratives associated with how the Asia Pacific Theatre (WWII) is officially memorialized across parts of Asia and the Pacific. She works with archival and present day imagery to question what it might mean, along with how, to make sense of such narratives now. Fiona is senior lecturer in the School of Art and Design at AUT University. She has exhibited and held residencies/fellowships both nationally as well as internationally in Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, the United States and Europe.

5. BECOMING AWHERE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND: Vincent Ward's exhibition Breath - The Fleeting Intensity of Life (2011), Alexandre Larose's St Bathans Repetitions 1/2/16 - 21/3/16 (portraits de Jacques à St Bathans, avec interlude de paysages, sur écran translucide) (2016), and Rachel Rakena's Haka Peepshow (2011).

Dr. Catherine Fowler.

This presentation is written in dialogue with Mercedes' curatorial project and discussion in the CIRCUIT podcast in which she observed that last year's CIRCUIT commissions tended toward the conceptual and she offered this year's selection as an adjustment in the direction of the sensory, which might provide us with a different kind of knowledge.[1] My interest is in the kind of knowledge that comes from experiencing moving images when they are outside of the movie theatre. More specifically, I want to argue that while the body is present in both the conceptual and the sensory realms that Mercedes sets up, its experience of media has shifted and this is a shift that can be mapped through the replacement of a notion of awareness to one of a*where*ness. I'll be talking from the perspective of my own experiences of particular artworks and I'll focus upon the assaults, demands and impressions that moving images are able to make on bodies at rest and in motion in art spaces.

My focus in this presentation is upon three examples of artistic moving images exhibited in New Zealand. The first comes from Vincent Ward's exhibition *Breath - The Fleeting Intesity of Life* at the Govett-Brewster gallery, December 2011, subsequently shown in a different form at Gus Fisher Gallery and the Wallace Arts Centre in 2012.[2] The second is Alexandre Larose's commission for CIRCUIT 2016, which was briefly installed in Wellington for the last symposium. The third example is Rachel Rakena's *Haka Peepshow* installed in the Octagon, Dunedin, during the Rugby world cup in 2011. Obviously, there is no way I can possible do justice to the variety of debates that these works raise. Instead, I have chosen these examples because they broadly relate to currents in contemporary artistic moving image practice around the globe, and because they allow me to contemplate the other issues I introduced schematically above.

The first thing to say is that they all follow from and build upon the physical relationship between bodies and moving images that comes about because of the expansion of moving images beyond the movie theatre.

1 See http://www.circuit.org.nz/the-thickness-of-cinema as well as the podcast http://www.circuit.org.nz/blog/circuit-cast-episode-67-an-interview-with-mercedes-vicente

2 Full details for these exhibitions are: 2011-12, Breath: The Fleeting Intensity of Life. Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. 2012, Inhale. Gus Fisher Gallery, The University of Auckland. Exhale. Wallace Arts Center, Auckland. Inhale/Exhale. Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland. 2013-14, Breath: The Fleeting Intensity of Life. Aratoi, Wairapa Museum of Art and History, Masterton.

Still: Alexandre Larose, St Bathan’s Repetitions 1/2/16 - 21/3/16 (portraits de Jacques à St Bathans, avec interlude de paysages, sur écran translucide) (2016). Image courtesy of artist.
http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/trailer-st-bathans-repetitions-1216-21316

The body of the visitor is conceived of, addressed and involved differently in the experience of art making. The kind of experience that each of these works offers is nothing new, rather it follows on in a lineage of artistic engagements which address embodied visitors. To illustrate where the difference lies we can compare two canonical avant garde works - Michael Snow's film *Wavelength* (1967) and Anthony McCall's 'solid light film' *Line Describing a Cone* (1973).

Where *Wavelength* is ironic, *Line Describing a Cone* is playful; where *Wavelength* reminds us that we are spectators *Line Describing a Cone* offers us other roles, where Snow's film is linear, McCall's is circular, where *Wavelength* is climactic, *Line Describing a Cone* creates a spiral of thickets of meaning in which we get lost and eventually abandon trying to find our way. Both could be thought of as conceptual exercises that do something with the cinematic apparatus, but they are made for different bodies. With *Wavelength* Snow chooses to critique the temporality and spatiality of film viewing from within, creating, as Gene Youngblood puts it, "a pure drama of confrontation."[3] By contrast, with *Line Describing a Cone* we are no longer the forward-looking seated spectators of the Plato's cave analogy. Both works put the projector at their centre, but only McCall's uses it to encourage us to imagine other things. The cone demands interaction, so we must move our bodies. And once we do move, into, out of or through the cone so the experience of the work becomes synaesthetic, as the smoke particles touch our skin and get up our nose.

Of interest to me for this presentation is the way in which, by emphasizing the sensual, sensory and sensational, the lineage descending from McCall creates experiences that seize our imaginations, because they leave gaps for us to fill in. As Martine Beugnet puts it in relation to the French cinema of sensation: "to open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an art work or a spectacle is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment."[4]

3 Rees, A. L. (2011), 'Expanded Cinema and Narrative: A Troubled History'. in: Rees, A. L., White, Duncan, Ball, Steven & Curtis, David (eds.), Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film. London: Tate,12-21

4 Beugnet, Martine (2006), Cinema and Sensation – French Film and the Art of Transgression, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 3.

Beugnet could well be describing Vincent Ward's exhibition at the Govett Brewster in 2011. In *Breath* Ward combines extracted scenes from several of his films with new footage of female figures cocooned and submerged in water. The experience of this installation, *was* intense, because of the ever-changing screens that surrounded the visitor and more particularly, the sound cues that choreographed our visit. Rather than the awareness of an apparatus and our role within it, awhereness is produced here because the moving images are conceived with the material spaces of the art gallery in mind. Composition, framing and other creative choices are made so that the images connect with the space for installation. The images Ward extracts from his film, composed for the cinema, address a different body to those he creates specially for the installation. The film-images are centripetal: composed around the clearly defined centred spectator, whose presence operates in terms of systems of point of view and identification. Whereas the embryonic images are more centrifugal: they have no centre and no sense of that cinematic trope: on-screen and off-screen space. They float, dangle and shimmer; I use these terms to express precarious states that flit between form and formlessness; representational images and abstraction. And as they come and go – across and inside different screens – so they leave marks on the body of the visitor. In my own visit, I remember that even as I turned my head to new sounds, I was aware of colour and light washing across my back and sides. Such assaults create a kind of thick atmosphere that will colour our experience; in other words, it moves outside and inside the body. In this respect, we have seen Ward's aesthetics before in the gallery – in the drowning, rising figures created by Bill Viola for example for his *Five Angels of the Millennium* (2001) series of work; which is not to accuse Ward of copying, but instead to compare atmospheres. Gernot Bohme has offered the term 'atmosphere' as a way to encompass a new aesthetics, he writes: "as regards reception it is a theory of perception in the full sense of the term, in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments.” More importantly, Bohme asserts, atmosphere is non-judgemental.[5]

5 Gernot Bohme “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics” Thesis Eleven 1993, 36, 113-126: 126.

Listening to Beugnet and Bohme we might be persuaded to believe that images that appeal to the senses, and the triangulation of body image and space to create atmospheres, dissolve our intellect and suspend our judgement. But the difference between Ward and Viola suggests otherwise. Ward certainly mimics Viola’s use of sound cues to orient us around a space, but there is a kind of dramaturgy to Viola’s organisation of our time that matches the monumentality of his art, which reaches toward sublime, primal experiences. As Youngblood puts it:

> *“every reference to some property of the medium, every innovation in some cinematic strategy is meant to be read simultaneously as a metaphor for consciousness or perception, as a spiritual allegory, or as a reflection on the individual in society.”*[6]

6 Youngblood, Gene (1988/89), ‘Metaphysical Structuralism: The Videotapes of Bill Viola’, Millennium Film Journal, 20/21: Fall/Winter,81-114: 108.

There is more corporeality to Ward’s embryonic figures and the shift in gender – Viola’s five angels are all male, Ward’s floating figures are visibly female – was troubling to me. I found myself trying to grasp Ward’s reasoning and this prevented me from being fully grasped by them and carried away to reverie. Beugnet again can help us here when she reminds us that “the senses are cultivated”.[7]

7 Beugnet, Martine (2006), Cinema and Sensation - French Film and the Art of Transgression, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 12.

If our senses are informed by culture then it’s also true to say that they will have been affected by the channels of information and visual signals that are now dispersed across the cultural landscape and which can transform the modes of sensory experience in public spaces. In my next two examples awhereness refers not simply to a situated encounter but also to art work operating within the proximity of the city.

The first is Alexander Larose’s *St Bathans Repetitions 1/2/16 - 21/3/16 (portraits de Jacques à St Bathans, avec interlude de paysages, sur écran translucide)* (2016),[8] installed at ‘The Young’, Wellington. At first glance this work bears similarities with Laura Marks’

8 A trailer for the work can be found here: http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/trailer-st-bathans-repetitions-1216-21316

notion of haptic images which she argues: "can give the impression of seeing for the first time, gradually discovering what is in the image rather than coming to the image already knowing what it is."[9] The effect is such that an exploration of the sedimentation of time, and of the absence-presence of the figure as expressing the material in the immaterial would seem worthwhile. But my interest is instead in the spillage of the projection onto the wall behind the screen.

9 Marks, Laura U. (2000), The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses, Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 178

Installation shot: St Bathans Repetitions 1/2/16 - 21/3/16 (portraits de Jacques à St Bathans, avec interlude de paysages, sur écran translucide) (2016), The Young, September 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.

The Young is a space that has to be sought out, since signage is minimal, and even once we are inside the muffled sounds of the streets are never fully excluded. I found that the effect of these intrusions upon *St Bathans Repetitions* created in me a desire to give it my full attention as, coupled with its environment, its images seemed ready to vaporize at any moment; indeed, the seepage of the projections across the wall behind suggested that this was already happening. In another sense, this seepage was an invitation to move, to look behind the frontal screen and walk around the space. From this new angle a corridor was formed, a passage that offered to enfold the visitor. Stepping into the corridor I asked myself "*is this how the visual is felt*"? This is Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik's question. They are interested in approaches to the visual and visuality embedded in the field of sensory formation. How, they ask, is the visual felt emotionally and physically as well as intellectually at the interface “between vision and language, vision and audition, and vision and the invisible, between the seen and the overlooked”.[10] Standing behind the screen of *St Bathans Repetitions* I couldn’t help remarking upon the way in which it is the corridor of vaporizing, chromatic intensity that is producing different controlled forms of visual experience, or, embodied modes of seeing. Returning to our question of the kind of knowledge that comes from experiencing moving images outside the theatre, *St Bathans Repetitions* suggests that there are other experiences that may come between seeing and knowing and once gripped by these experiences we may be less interested in the latter.

10 Edwards, Elizabeth & Bhaumik, Kaushik (2008), Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader, Oxford: Berg, 3.

Once again, it is worth reflecting here upon how awhereness is supplanting awareness. We can think of foundational 1970s examples by Bruce Nauman in *Live taped video corridor* (1969-70) or Dan Graham in *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay* (1974). Nauman and Graham both explored the live feedback abilities of video to play with viewers’ sense of time and space. In the 1990s we have corridors created by Bill Viola and filmmaker Atom Egoyan which are more illusionist, with the corridor becoming a more confined, claustrophobic space which places us too close to the images. In Viola’s *Passage* (1988) slowed down home movie-like footage of a child’s birthday party can be seen at the end of a narrow corridor. If we walk down the corridor we find ourselves in a small space, with little room to move back from the screen.

Egoyan amplifies the awkward proximity established by Viola’s artwork by placing the video screen on one side of the corridor, making it impossible to get an over-view. We barely make out glimpses of body parts. Our experience of the images in *Closer* is physical, sensual and haptic. It is hard to focus upon their actual content because we are so close to them and they dissolve into lines and pixels, they blur and then re-emerge. While the early video corridors seemed designed to make us aware of how recording could fragment our sense of space and time, in Egoyan’s corridor it is as if our body itself has dissolved into its sensory parts. Equally, while early corridors made us aware of our position as viewers being viewed, in Egoyan's corridor we become entangled in the space. There is no separation between the space of the artwork and our physical space and we are therefore made *awhere*: unable to separate our experience of the images from our experience of the space itself. Whilst the corridor in *St Bathans Repetitions* is more my construction than the artists, I've used it as a tool to allow us to write, talk or think about our encounter with the work. From a distance – the polite distance in this video – the assaults, demands and impressions may not have an affect, so we need to move closer.

My final short example is Rachel Rakena's *Haka Peepshow*[11], and I have chosen it not only because it introduces a different kind of, more public, space into the discussion but also because, in contrast to my starting point with Vincent Ward's *Breath* it wears its politics on its sleeve, while the effects it produces on its visitor-viewers' bodies could go overlooked. Nikos Papastergiadis has observed how "the proliferation of screens and other platforms has meant that artistic encounters are now dispersed across the whole of the urban landscape, and this has the potential to transform the modes of sensory experience in public spaces"[12], such is the power of Rakena's artwork. Rakena explained that the viewing booths take the form of a 'pou' or in her words 'post, upright, support, pole, pillar, goalpost or teacher or expert'. But the more popular connotations of this structure were that it references the shape of the black 'Rexona for men' aerosol deodorant – a product endorsed by the All Blacks. More popular still and the source of much outrage was the conclusion that the structure was a five metre high phallus. This interpretation also fits with Rakena's stated desire to critique the sexualisation and commodification of Māori sportsmen, and the representation of their masculinity and culture in the media.

Upon whatever level we choose to view it, *Haka Peepshow* certainly created trouble in the Octagon, where it was situated mid-way between the Dunedin

11 For images of the work visit the artist website here: https://hakapeepshow.co.nz/

12 Papastergiadis, Nikos, Barikin, Amelia, McQuire, Scott and Yue, Audrey "Introduction: Screen Cultures and Public spaces" in Papastergiadis, Nikos (ed.) Ambient Screens and Transnational Public Spaces, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016: 6.

Public Art Gallery and the popular drinking holes where the Rugby World Cup would be watched on huge screens. Indeed, the shop and bar windows that encircle the Octagon operate almost like the screens that surrounded us in Ward's exhibition at the Govett Brewster, since they too create a particular kind of atmosphere, albeit one divided between the multiple uses of the large space – shopping, dining and art.

The act of approaching the pou has to be seen within this spatial environment. Anyone who did so was on display to those sitting out on the pavement or passing by. What is more, to peer into one of the peep-holes was to make oneself physically uncomfortable, as they were positioned too high or too low for an average stature, causing visitors to have to stoop or stand on tiptoes. If Ward's exhibition assaulted visitors with ever-changing screens and a punctuating audio-track and Larose's installation created an ever-expanding impression on its visitors then Rakena's sculptural structure made particular demands upon those courageous enough to peep at the show.

To conclude: in this presentation I have attempted to explore Mercedes' proposition: that the inclusion of a sensory realm might produce new knowledge. While the kind of critical awareness of earlier artists Snow, Nauman and Graham focused upon privileged the intellectual acts over the sensual and sensational, then the awhereness I have been arguing for engages and involves our bodies and our senses. In so doing awhereness creates experiences that seize our imaginations and assault our bodies. If Ward's exhibition leaves marks on the visitor, Larose's installation poses the possibility of really feeling the visual, finally Rakena's sculptural structure interweaves social and aesthetic experiences in public space.

Catherine Fowler is an Associate Professor in Film at Otago University. She is editor of The European Cinema Reader (Routledge, 2002) co-editor with Gillian Helfield of Representing the Rural: Space Place and Identity in Films about the Land (Wayne State University Press, 2006) and author of Sally Potter (Illinois University Press, 2009). Her articles on artists' moving image work have been published in Cinema Journal, Art Journal, Screen and Miraj.

6. PHILOSOPHY

Kim Pieters and Elle Loui August in conversation.

ELLE

Kia ora koutou katoa, thank you Mark. It's a great pleasure to be here with a long time conversation and spirited partner in argument, Kim Pieters. Is there anything you would like to add here before we begin Kim?

KIM

No, no, go.

ELLE

Well, perhaps before we move into our discussion of your cinematic practice, I thought it would be good to invite you to speak to your broader practice and daily routines.

KIM

Okay. I live in Dunedin New Zealand and it is there I have made a life that allows me to make my work. In the morning, the first thing is coffee; then I will either paint or draw. The morning is a sacred time now and I make sure of it. As I've got older my practice has become more intense so almost every day I will be working on something in the morning, but by the afternoon I cannot do anymore. In the afternoon three or four days of the week a friend will call by and we will go for a drive to favourite places around Dunedin for an hour or so, which is magnificent. It depends on the weather, the wind and tides as to where we decide to go. We have special places we return to. The Botanic Gardens is one of them, which the film was shot in. But within 10 to 20 minutes of Dunedin city there are many striking landscapes to choose from. So it's a real oxygen break from the studio to go into that environment. It's very good for the work. I hardly go into the city. In the evening I generally read.

ELLE

One thing which you do during these journeys is photograph.

KIM

Yes. As my friend drives, I take photographs out the car window of whatever is going by and of course many shots of the places we end up in with their various moods. I have collected these photographs for a

Still: Kim Pieters, Philosophy (2017). Image courtesy of artist.
http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/philosophy-excerpt

long time and about a year ago I started an Instagram account. Thank god, I've got a fast and uncomplicated way to present and share these miles and miles of photographs that I've just gathered over the years. I've got somewhere to put them. I was a bit worried about them piling up before. It's been an interesting exercise in the experience of choice and a return to thinking more about photography.

ELLE

But you are also engaging in a rich language, or relationship, with colour on those journeys, and a vibration between your perceptions, your body, and the world around you accumulates during those times. This is something that follows you home and is developed in your studio practice…

KIM

Yes sure, and also what the camera sees, what it gives you. The camera is an amazing instrument. It moves way beyond the human eye. I like the chance effect when you're driving through the world and taking pictures. I vaguely frame but I am always unsure what the shot will give me. I very rarely slow frame nowadays. The film was a different type of chance happening within a considered framing.

ELLE

To briefly form a bridge across some of your practices, and the influence they have on one another before speaking directly about the film… you began your formal art practice with photography in your 20s, or in your late teens, and then this begins to extend into a painting practice?

KIM

Yes.

ELLE

And then moves into a slightly different phase as you pick up sound and experimental music.

KIM

Yes I have worked with experimental music, photography, film at different times. These other genres which I have been involved in with more or less intensity have always been secondary to painting. However the way I work with all of those genres is very similar. It's a matter of instinct and intuitive working with the material at hand, whatever it is.

ELLE

But at the same time it's not necessarily 'spontaneous', it is a compositional practice.

KIM

Totally yes, yes. So choices have been made but with what becomes available to me at any one time. So, I might take a lot of photographs out the window but I will only choose certain ones. Only certain ones are going to work. Same with the drawings. Same with the films. So decisions are made and also when you're making music only certain music. I've always worked, when I did do music, in an improvisational way, but not all things worked. What makes something work and what makes something not work is the decision of the artist.

ELLE

I think that in terms of what I've heard from you over the years is that there is a sort of turn towards sensuality that is present in your work. I think it does come with the practice of sound, and through working in music, this articulation of a 'compositional' approach to your practice.

KIM

Composition, well sensuality did you say?

ELLE

Yes.

KIM

It hasn't been written like that.

AUDIENCE

[Laughter]

ELLE

Well, there is a background of intellectual rumination certainly... and you yourself do write as well.

KIM

Yes I do write. Image composition has always been important to me. In a way composition is the architecture that allows me to make choices with what comes my way, be it the gestures of film or drawing or sound. I would say that my choices have always included the sensual. I have a very strong compositional sense whether it's with drawing or painting or film or with photography. The compositional space interests me very much. I build with it but I'm not determining it beforehand.

ELLE

But it is not without structure…

KIM

No it has a structure but it is an adaptive one. I love this discussion that's come up recently in some sciences about linear and non-linear processes, these ideas have strong resonance with my practice. With a non-linear process you have a starting state and you apply certain simple rules to that state. You get a result and then you make more choices and then you get another result and you make more choices until you decide that that's the end. The thing is finished like a piece of music is finished or a painting is finished. What is especially happy for me when I first start the process is that I do not know what qualities I will finally end up with. And that's what I want. That surprise. The choices are not arbitrary as I move through the process but the end result is not in any way predetermined.

ELLE

But it is formed by feeling wouldn't you think?

KIM

Yeah, sensuality. Everything is beautiful.

AUDIENCE

[Laughter]

ELLE

I don't want to force a connection between the painting and filmic practice, but I do want to ask you if you could articulate your ideas about what you refer to as 'autonomous structures'. Within your painting and drawing practice the 'compositional' is pitched against a tightly framed ideational register, and in your filmic practice it takes a form which relates directly to the film we saw last night.

KIM

Yes the relations between autonomous phrases is vital. I will always put two or more autonomous phrases beside each other. Whether it's the autonomy of a language phrase beside a painting image or with film, it's the dissonance between moving image and sound. I always want the sound to be autonomous, made by somebody without any reference to the image and then by putting them together I put them in relation. I'm interested in the open and I feel the dissonance that is created when you put two autonomous phrases together is an important space, it always interests me what happens in there. This gesture is all over my practice, even with the photography, even my Instagram account has a photograph and then beside it in the comment section, some sentence from somewhere nearby; some poetic or philosophical thing. I seek out a tonal relation but not always...the disjunct is purposeful because it is what can initiate new thinking for me and for anyone paying this sort of attention.

ELLE

So with the film that we saw last night, there is the 'base' layer of the image, and then the layer of sound, but there is also the layer, or framing, that comes with the term *Philosophy*, the title of the film. While I can see that the title draws from the engagement that you have with philosophy, and equally with poetry, I find the name of the film affronting. Can you talk a little bit about how and why you chose that term?

KIM

Well I found it really friendly. Philosophy is a beautiful form to me. I read a lot of philosophy and I enjoy it very much. It's full of all sorts of provocations

I suppose and ideas about ethics, about politics, about art, about history. There's always some discussion going on which I find quite fascinating so philosophy feels like a warm blanket for me as a title. However, of course it is a little jarring and out of the blue. It seems like it comes from nowhere. It is one of the dissonances in the piece. It was certainly deliberate. There was something about taking that footage at the gardens, oh God look at this humanity in front of you. The kids, the people wandering around... but then also what interested me more was the trees and the movement and light and also the birds. When you looked at that one shot, there were so many different human and non-human things moving beside each other, not necessarily interacting but instead moving about in the one space. I just thought it was great.

ELLE

It is quite different to your previous films, do you have any thoughts about that?

KIM

You thought it was really different? I thought it was very similar. Mostly when I've done films before I've taken a shot and I've slowed it down so it's really slow.

ELLE

But there's also a moving camera in your other films.

KIM

True, this is a held shot. When the commission came in I thought, there's an old idea of mine, let's just set up a camera in a public space and just allow whatever came within the frame of the camera. I had often thought about it but I'd never done it. And then the commission came through and I thought, "I'm going to do that. Now where am I going to do it. I think I'll do in the park." So I went there and took quite a few shots.

ELLE

It indexes quite a different subject matter or environment from your earlier films. A lot of your (film)work captures grand agricultural scenes, large earthworks or industrial sites – these are visual themes that figure consistently in your film work. This one was really fixed down on a different colonial setting. The botanical pleasure garden.

KIM

Oooooo

AUDIENCE

[Laughter]

KIM

I am not sure it is that different. I am dealing with the world in a similar way. There is a reversal in the movement of the camera but that is about all. My intention was not loaded with colonial history, though of course that can be read into it. I am not particularly dealing with that narrative, not here anyway. What the garden represents for me is a park open to all things in it. If I had considered it a contested site perhaps I would not have used it. I was thinking about the bigger world; the philosophy inherent in this particular constellation laid out within the film; which of course includes a colonial discussion.

ELLE

In mind, I have been trying to decide whether to ask a more difficult question, or rather draw a connection, between this work and your (series of paintings) 'Meditations on New Zealand History'. These paintings do approach this, and they do that by creating a series of 'autonomous layers' which are conflated with the sensual experience of the body – as the films do. For those in the audience who know Kim's work well, I mentioned to her this morning that I really love Magnet, which is an earlier black and white film of water powerfully cascading over a large dam in slow motion. Which dam is it?

KIM

It is in the Waitaki Valley, driving from Oamaru towards Twizel, there are a series of dams. It's not the first one, or perhaps it was, it's a very small one.

ELLE

It's a very powerful image.

KIM

Yeah the wind was blowing against the water so it caused these patterns going down. It's beautiful, very beautiful.

ELLE

I can see a connection between the quality of that image and the way in which the sound for this work accentuates the shimmering quality of the movement of the trees. Perhaps an interesting point to add is that William who made the sound worked in the gardens for a number of years.

KIM

Ten years.

ELLE

The shimmering image..

KIM

Yes, yes, the shining of things

ELLE

…which is shattered by the shudder.

KIM

Yes. The brechtian moment. Excuse me, here's the camera.

ELLE

I don't know, I think when I look at that moment in the image rather than being a pure 'brechtian' moment where you become aware of yourself looking at the film projected large, for me, it's more a sense that something slips backwards in space. My relationship to the body of the film changes, I become physically aware of the apparatus or body of the camera, and the body and hand that holds the camera.

KIM

I don't know. That's a lovely response of yours but at the time I was just thinking "Damn, I've banged the camera. I've banged the tripod and made a shudder, but when looking back on the footage I liked it." I like all those little incidents which belong to the world. I want to keep it in there. I'm not pretending it to be other than what it is.

ELLE

So how do you see the film when you watch it now?

KIM

I'm fascinated because it's a wide shot and I realise that if I focused on one part of the film I would miss activity in another part and so I ended up going through it over and over again and watching different parts and discovering different things each time. I went through it and was amazed. I loved the shimmering leaves. The material of the world.

ELLE

There's something about the movement of the humans in the film that breaks a sense of magical time that is otherwise generated through the relationship of the sound to the movement of the non-human figures in the image.

KIM

I was really happy that the humans were small in the piece. They feature too strongly in the world.

ELLE

Would you like to ask a question?

AUDIENCE (MERCEDES)

I've been thinking about what you said about the slowness that you have often in your films, this slowness as an intervention in the image. It just sort of occurred to me, this association... Do you think that in this case because its not the slowness but the stillness of it, that you made a parallel intervention to the stillness where you kept changing the lightness of the image? Sometimes it probably is naturally made, because of the clouds perhaps changing, but there is certainly a colour produced by post-production or something. Is there a parallel between the slowness and darkness?

KIM

No, no in that film, a cloud came over and it went dark but I didn't manipulate that.

AUDIENCE (MERCEDES)

It looked at one point some of the kids were moving faster or the ducks were moving faster.

KIM

No I didn't do that. It was real time unless something went wrong with the video.

AUDIENCE

[Laughter]

Elle Loui August is a writer and curator currently based in Tamaki Makaurau. Elle has previously held professional roles at The Physics Room in Christchurch and Elam School of Fine Arts where she completed her MFA in curatorial practice through the postgraduate research programme. She has written for a number of local publications and initiatives including Art New Zealand, Artspace NZ, and split/fountain, and presently divides her time between independent writing and curatorial projects and her role as assistant curator at Objectspace in Auckland.

Kim Pieters lives and works in Dunedin, New Zealand. She is predominantly a non-representational painter. For many years she has also produced photographs, experimental film, writing and music, from her Dunedin studios. The ethical implications surrounding the enigma of the thing itself, is a fundamental premise that informs all of these practices. Her work is represented in private and public collections including the Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery, Toi O Tamaki, Christchurch Art Gallery, Te Puna O Waiwhetu, Victoria University Collection, Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Circuit.

7. 'THICKNESS' AND DECENTERING CINEMA: CINEMATIC TOPOLOGIES

David Green

In this talk I will describe an installation I made earlier this year as one way of thinking about 'thickening' the cinema through embodied engagement. But first I'd like to discuss some of the interdisciplinary ideas that inform my current work. For the last few years I have been following contemporary developments in neuroscience with a particular interest in the parallel distributed processes we use to interpret and navigate the world on the fly. Certain ideas from emerging literary and critical theory, psychology, and philosophy also inform my thinking.

In her book *Installation Art*[1] critic and art historian Claire Bishop argues that employing multiple strategies to activate the body of the viewer in conjunction with a decentring of the content delivery disrupts the hierarchical models of single point perspective and single perspective delivery. I think that fragmenting and distributing cinematic content into a navigable space is one way to encourage a more fully collaborative dynamic between the viewer and the work of art. There are some compelling arguments for this position.

Neurobiology and developmental psychology both make it abundantly clear that we learn to understand the world using our whole body. I find myself in agreement with many of the ideas associated with embodied cognition and enactivism.

In my installations I hope to extend the moment that Charles Sanders Pierce called *Firstness*[2]. This is the initial period of reception when we are absorbing and responding intuitively to new stimuli – the period of uncertainty when we sense meaning with our whole body and before we begin to reconstruct it analytically. This is the space of qualia, affect, and the ineffable present.

As António Damásio wrote wrote in *Descartes' Error*:

"The mind exists in and for an integrated organism: our minds would not be the way they are if it were not for the interplay of body and brain during evolution, during individual development, and at the current

1 Bishop, Claire, (2007). Installation Art: A Critical History, Taylor & Francis Ltd, London, United Kingdom.

2 Peirce, Charles Sanders, On a New List of Categories, presentation to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A, 14 May, 1867

moment. The mind had to be first about the body, or it could not have been."[3]

3 Damásio, António. (1994). Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain, Putnam Publishing

For these and other reasons I believe that mobilising the body of the viewer makes a difference in the way they engage with visual information.

Even so, it goes without saying that human vision is a major neural investment and different levels of activation are prompted by vision alone.

This argument about viewership is not new but recent experiments reveal wider arrays of "mirror neurons" in the human cerebral cortex; these are neurons that fire either when an animal physically acts or when it observes the same action in another animal. There has been much postulation as to the significance of these findings. I think they certainly attests to the power of the traditional cinema and speak to its quality as a sort of waking dream where we may experience ourselves mysteriously inhabiting the lives of characters that are nothing like us on the screen. As when we are dreaming, inhibitory processes largely keep us from physically enacting the gestures that are lighting up our neurons. I wonder if there is an argument here for a certain sort of passivity that may come with this phenomenon in relation to stationary observing.

As we look, neural processing of visual content is subdivided and distributed throughout the extrastriate visual cortex. Each associated process requires a different amount of processing time (colour, motion, contour). Given this time difference unanswered questions remain about how we actually perceive objects in motion as cohesive things. What is very clear is that we can instantly process small fragmented details that are highly relevant to our survival as creatures. As an example of this Neuropsychologist Eric Kandel writes:

> *'the human brain devotes more area to face recognition than to the recognition of any other visual object.'*[4]

4. Kandel, Eric. (2012). The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present, Random House

It is also true that, given very little information we are highly proficient at recognising and assessing intentionality in human and animal motion.

It is perhaps no surprise that these remain cinematic focal points.

By disarticulating cinema, redistributing scenes from a linear narrative into a space (think 'stations of the cross') one begins to sculpt quite a different topology. It calls for a sort of soft looking. Slowly feeling your way in to the content. In constructing this space I try to make room for the viewer's engagement.

Kurt Lewin was a gestalt psychologist who contributed significantly to the nascent field of social psychology during the 1930s and 40s.

He proposed that the best way to understand an individual's "life space" and social behaviour was by charting the psychological environment around them as a set of topological maps with boundaries, impediments, and paths of least resistance. The topologies he described were cultural, physical, psychological, emotional, historical, and societal. Like Deleuzian space these fluid topologies overlay each other. This space is defined by a 'constellation of forces' relating to specific affordances, limits, and absences both individual and societal. His concept is useful in considering the phenomenology of perception, and how we experience the world, from an embodied perspective, as individuals.

In the cinema these topologies would be considered aspects of *mise-en-scene* and I think this idea can be extended to curating the gallery space.

An example of this can be observed in the work of Ulla von Brandenburg who constructed a topological model of a refugee's experience. Her installation at the Sydney Biennale titled: *Street, Play, Way* (2014) required the viewer to walk a trail of impediments in order to reach her film: a winding path over stairs, ramps, around boat sail boundaries. Von Brandenburg constructs a maquette of the refugee topology: travelling through is purposefully disorienting, drawn forward by gentle talk/singing voices you climb and descend without knowing your destination. The embodied, activated and de-anchored viewer is primed

Documentation of Street, Play, Way (2014), Ulla von Brandenburg.

for their encounter with her stylised black and white film: a haunting theatrical parable centred on a dark stranger's encounters as he journeys through a European town inhabited by Jungian archetype.

Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser wrote a great deal about the importance of making room. He uses the word 'aesthetic' to describe a shared space of collaborative play between the author and the reader, referring to this place of creative convergence as the 'virtual'. Iser suggests that to achieve this level of engagement with the reader the author must avoid over-determination in the writing and must also provide an occasion disruption to the reader's flow.

Of course in art world the 'beholder's involvement' and the 'viewer's share' were also described by Alois Riegl and then developed more fully by Ernst Gombrich. I think Iser's idea of intentionally leaving gaps readily applies to encouraging the relationship between the artist and viewer.

Perhaps it was fortunate that blobby liquid chemistry preceded dry rectilinear electronics in being the first technology to solve the problem of motion picture image capture.

What is not to love about motion picture film emulsion?

When I was shooting in a motion control studio in New York during the 1980's I would send 35mm film to the lab every night and watch my 'dailies' projected every morning. While I can mourn the warm material dialogue of film - I love the accessibility and flexibility that has come with digital video.

But unlike dry digital technology, I think memory is wet. There is something about the chemical solution that is sympathetic with our biotic wetware for processing, storage, and retrieval.

It goes without saying that on a micro-scale overlaying random arrays of silver halide crystals, replete with gaps and disruptions, contributed to the creaturely pulse of cinema's first century.

Wet photography afforded a gentle bridge between the grubby cosiness of the handmade mark and the sterile striation of the machinic pixel.

retrieved from: http://www.processreversal.org/report-handmade-baltimore/

I found this beautiful material posted at the website above by a group of movie film enthusiasts who hand-make their own raw stock. This footage, cut together from one from their weekend workshops, performs all the magic beauty of film emulsion. Artists like Len Lye and Stan Brakhage responded instinctively to the unique material attributes that we see so clearly in this footage. At this event we have seen these film's rich qualities performed in Alexandre Larose's *St. Bathans Repetitions* (2016) installed at the Gym.

There are a growing variety of filters and techniques for approximating the artefacts of film emulsion and slavishly applying them onto digital video. But if making work involves a material dialogue then applying the artefacts of film to digital images misses the entire point of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958).

There may be less fetishistic ways to invite organic voices into the digital dialogue.

In the mid 1920's Max Ernst invented a technique he called 'grattage' in order to capture organic patterns in his paintings. The technique involves applying and then scraping away pigment on a canvas that has been laid over a textured surface. This breaks up the image field, invokes memory, and contributes to the content and feel of the work. Over the past couple of years I have been experimenting with the application of this idea to digital video. Video grattage adds another voice, disrupts the clean flow of images by introducing gaps and obstructions. The viewer then completes fragmented images by drawing on memory and imagination.

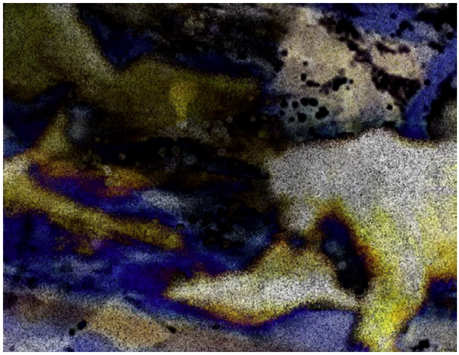
It has been estimated that 12 Trillion photos will be taken in 2017.

As Guy DeBord said fifty years ago:

> *"The world is already filmed. It is now a matter of transforming it."*[5]

5 Guy DeBord, The Society of the Spectacle, Buchet-Chastel (1967)

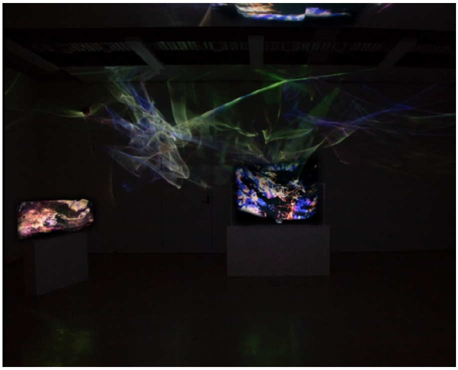
My work often begins with appropriating low resolution digital video. In an effort to make room for the viewer I try to thrash it within an inch of perceptibility.

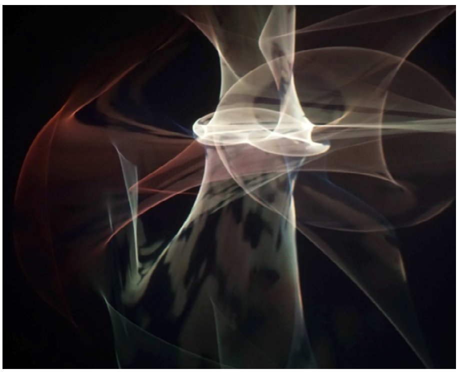


Segment from Zoo (2016), David Green.

This is an image from a single channel video work that I made in 2016 offers an example of my approach.

As I mentioned in my installations I'm interested in encouraging an extended moment of '*Firstness*' in the viewer. From that point of view, as I describe the next work to you, some of the ideas I relate to it might seem to belie that position. Although I encounter a number of interdisciplinary ideas in my research and writing, when making work I try to operate intuitively: to feel then respond. I like to avoid wall text. I want the viewer to feel their own way in.





Documentation stills from <u>Emergence</u> (2017), David Green.

The ideas I associate with this next work emerge for me from the material, evolving through iterative experimentation and response.

Still from Babies, David Green 2017.

For the installation, *Emergence* (2017), I appropriated images from a documentary style feature film released for theatrical distribution in 1933. Structured like a dysfunctional home movie, *Untamed Africa* (1993) is the typical 'orientalist' documentary film of the Hollywood depression era. It portrays African cultures and ecosystems as disposable amusements for any male with white skin, trinkets, and a gun.

Daniel Bender's 2016 book The Animal Game (Harvard University Press) 'traces the global trade and trafficking in animals that supplied U.S. zoos' through most of the 20th Century. According to Bender, this movie's auteur, Wynant Hubbard was a Harvard educated geologist who took his young family to central Africa on an asbestos mining venture that, luckily for the locals, was a no starter.

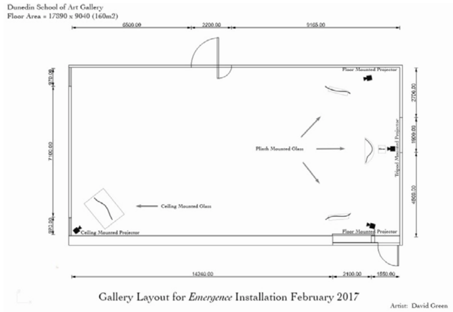
Rather than jumping on the next boat home, he decided to have a go at making money by generating exotic film shorts. Intended for the US market they generally featured Hubbard engaging in a number of sadistic activities ostensibly to capturing the animal all-sorts he also intended to sell to US Zoos.

Bender reports that few animals survived his attentions. Eventually Hubbard ran out of money and drifted home.

A few years later, Warner Brothers assembled Hubbard's footage into a feature length, loosely woven piece of ethological and ethnographic pornography.

Inverting production I more or less reverted the shots back into their 'dailies' rolls.

The shots seemed to divide themselves into a colonial binary and in response the gallery was divided into two parts:



Documentation still from Emergence (2017), David Green.

From a Deleuzian perspective one side, shown on the left of the diagram, offers a smooth vision of the open veldt with the wild herds running free. On the other side of the gallery is a triptych containing three views of the striated space: Shown on the right side of diagram on the centre screen animals are netted, snared, or bound. On the top screen captive offspring are used as living playthings, while in the lower screen captured predators are entrapped into a Romanesque cage.

One can also consider the two areas of the gallery using a Lacanian filter : At one end of the gallery images resonate with our primordial love of the animal form in motion as seen from a myth-cultivating distance. Distilled down to simple contour and motion you can imagine how these formidable beings might induce you to drag yourself deep into a cave, in a burning desire to signify, and in that evolved way, attempt to capture the essence of their majesty.

The opposing triptich describes three reductionist responses to the complex feelings these wild creatures excite in us.

Our desire to make ourselves whole again drives us bring them to ground, cage them, kill them, objectify them, and take something of them home to show the kids. Once we've managed that, unsatisfied, our desire must be redirected towards other conquests.

This behavioural loop could be described as one landscape on the Anthropocene topology.

Redistributing the evidence from a linear cinematic argument through grattage and disarticulation, I then use glass as an intermediate. It splits, transmits, and bounces the projected images into the peripheries of the gallery.

The complex patterns that engulf the space could be described as an emergent property of light and glass: A physicist would call these folds of light caustic projections, a mathematician would describe them as cusp catastrophes.

One could also imagine them as the retinal image remapped onto the convolutions and folds of our visual cortex – from a neurobiological perspective: our real world view.

At first the link between the caustics and the projected images are not readily apparent to the viewer: the same projector creates both.

Viewers in the gallery would often explore the installation by disrupting the reflected light to make sense of the relationship. Due to the complex topology of the glass the reflected projection virtually wraps itself around the viewer – counterintuitively the caustic offers only a soft trace of shadow until a body part comes close to the gallery wall.

By pulling apart a cinematic construction and disarticulating it into stations, the viewer is invited to collaborate with the work, feel their way through a multivalent place. Responding as mobile bodies in space it is my intention that individually and intuitively, rather than see things my way, the viewer will forage, move towards or away from content, and call upon their whole sensorium to process meaning in the installation space.

David Green is a filmmaker, special effects artist and motion control specialist. David lectures at the Dunedin School of Art in the department of Photography and Electronic Arts. His essays have been published in Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue, The South African Journal of Art History, and Scope: Contemporary Research Topics.

8. COMPANY STREAM

Joyce Campbell and Mercedes Vicente in conversation.

MERCEDES

Company Stream is hard to describe. It is very experiential, very sensorial, very abstract. Could you tell us a little bit about how you started this film?

JOYCE

I didn't have a huge amount of time and I went into the process not knowing what would happen. It was really fun actually, not knowing. I knew that I wanted to engage with the piece of land where I had lived for the past eight years. I'd just moved away, it often takes me that long to get into a productive relationship with a place.

I proposed to you several different potential (ideas) that had to do with entangling or having a relationship with other forms of consciousness. I did a few tests and it was clear that the consciousness that I was going to be able to interact with was an eel that was living in the stream at the bottom of my neighbours property. It's called The Company Stream because back in the 19th century the Company, whoever they may have been, completely logged out all the kauri in a particular part of Karekare and they used the dams to flood them down the stream.

My property had one of these dams on it, the residual mechanisms were still somewhat there, and also on my neighbours property. My neighbour throws rotten eggs into the eels. I wouldn't say that they're tame, they're actually quite wild, but they are present. And she allowed me to go down there.

I really didn't know what I would get from them, how easy or hard in the middle of winter it would be to interact with them. Eels often go to ground in the winter. I worked for many years off and on with eels and with a collaborator, with the concept of taniwha and I had my family, whom I have to say actually are eel activists, so (eels) are a creature I know quite a lot about.

I went down there and there was a particularly strident, large, female eel (when they're large they're probably female), she was probably around 40 years

Still: Joyce Campbell, Company Stream (2017). Image courtesy of artist.
http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/company-stream-excerpt

old, who has occupied this small pool. It is her territory. In fact, even after the considerable release of rotten eggs and chicken mince and hearts, other eels were really not keen to come into her circle. She's actually scared off the original friendly eel, having a fight with it. She's claimed this space and she has a cave there.

MERCEDES

And you were shooting at night?

JOYCE

Late afternoon / evening, so it was fairly dark, and working with a very macro lens, very, very close proximity and feeding her and being with her. As evening approached she was pretty erratic. She bit me really hard actually. She got my foot and wrapped her body around my leg. She bit my foot. It's like being bitten with a serrated bread knife. It's not deep. It's just serrated. And then she went for my assistant, she bit him several times. So after that I was wearing gumboots full of water, and a wetsuit which went up to my stomach. And he wasn't, he wouldn't wear shoes. She would just follow his feet around like food while we shot her. She was going for him the whole time, so the (original) soundtrack is really funny, because he's like "Arrgh!"

MERCEDES

The film has a section where it is very abstract and almost like a flicker film. There is just light and textures and blacks and glares. You sense that it could be light going through water. And it's only when you arrive half the way through the film where your eyes recognise there is actually an eel. Then it goes into abstraction again but then you start seeing the skin and recognising it.

So when you first enter into the film it is so disorienting. You are so incapable of recognising what is it that you are looking at. And I was interested in those types of experiences where your senses are actively trying to discern, but then you go into a state where you abandon trying to find meaning in the image and immerse yourself into that experience, until you hit that moment where you recognise what is it that you are looking at.

The film, when you look at it, you are not sure if there are cuts or no cuts. Tell us about how you constructed the film and also how do you also manage to capture those images. The issue of light is important. And how do you edit them.

JOYCE

Okay. First I would like to say my interest in cinema comes a lot from being in Los Angeles, (and) I wanted to mention in the previous session the work of Ken Jacobs. (He) would probably be the apex for me of experiential phenomenological cinema. And also in terms of the way he controls his audience, in the Nervous Systems films. I don't know who has seen him here. You have to kind of be in the presence of the filmmaker to see them so it's difficult, but that will give you some sense of where I'm coming from in terms of perception and cinema - although certainly I do not place this work in the realms of Ken Jacobs' mastery.

So I was working with a macro lens at extreme proximity to the body of the creature. She didn't want to hang around and she would go away and come forward and constantly out of shot and back in shot. I was working with an assistant, we had digital video - if we had used hundreds of feet of film, it would have been impossible - because we needed a lot of footage to compress it.

What I didn't want to do was to produce something that was layered, either in terms of sound or the visuals. So there are very few fades of any kind in the film. Actually they're usually hard cuts. But they happen at moments of overlaps, of over-exposure or underexposure. We're working with a torch flashing through the space. We're trying to follow the eel. The eel is moving very, very swiftly, often spinning, roving, flicking, it likes to keep its head up in the stream. You don't know what you're getting. You are meeting the subject halfway. You can't really see the screen. You have very little idea of what you are shooting. You are just putting it out there and being receptive.

At the same time I was going home and editing on my laptop and getting into the barn, my studio basically, where my husband has all of his electrical cords and we have all of our instruments and we were having these little sessions making noise at the same time. And so all of the three processes, shooting, editing and making the sound were overlapping and feeding off each other.

Another thing that happened during this period of time was that my 96-year-old grandmother died. I knew that she was dying and I went down and spent some time with her, which in some ways impacted the process, but I think emotionally totally fed into the work. I know that to be true.

So I was having this intense kind of visceral experience with the eel, and we would be down there for hours. We would be really cold and it was very intense. And then I was with this very, very old dying lady who I loved dearly. I spent two whole nights keeping watch over her and just listening for the shift in her breath, which was a very hard process but also really important.

I could do one more recording session before I had to get back to Wairoa for her funeral. And I was full of this vision of her breath. I was thinking a lot about just life, just the vivid breath.

MERCEDES

It is also interesting that you were using an Indian harmonium for one of the instruments. The harmonium is something that uses air and it has that sort of (breathing) rhythm to make sound. Can you talk a bit about some of the Indian instruments that you were using in making the soundtrack for the film?

JOYCE

Again, with sound, I didn't have a clue what I wanted. Although when we actually got into the process I found out very rapidly that I did know what I wanted, even though I didn't know where I was going with it. My husband had been playing guitar perpetually at home for the last twenty years, never in public, but I personally have an experience of it that was quite wonderful. So I really wanted to work for him. So he played guitar and that is the only consistent thing to the sound track.

And the thing that shifts in three or four phases is the breath instrument. In the first instance it was the harmonium. That was the first instrument that we recorded and I love it. It is a beautiful thing, this harmonium. We bought it on TradeMe years ago and it has mother of pearl keys and wooden keys. I learnt piano for eight years as a kid and I just love piano based things. And it has this beautiful panting quality and there was this intensity to the eel, this kind of tensile vibrancy, and I just wanted to pick up on the rapidity of what I imagined in terms of its physiology and the speed of its physiology. So the harmonium was a really great way to get into that. I am not playing it slowly as a harmonium, I am just having this really fast rhythm.

MERCEDES

There is a lot of tension.

JOYCE

A lot of tension. And I didn't want refined sound. I didn't want layered sound. I just wanted improvisational sound. I have a lot of friends that are wonderful musicians and I had worked with extraordinary sound artists in the past. So I had access to that. But I actually spoke to one of them and he was like "it sounds like you and John are in your own heads right now" and in some ways he just gave me permission to go back into our own thinking and I just did it.

The other instruments are an autoharp, which I am just playing with the microphone itself. An autoharp is very clanging kind of (instrument) it has a real tensile quality. The third instrument is an electric bass, but played with a slightly under-tensed bow, so really difficult to extract sound from it. That was the sound that was recorded in that moment between my grandmother passing away and going back to her, and even as we were doing it, I was still in a state of grief. So in this particular instance I didn't feel like I could ask for sound because I was just having this very specific experience with these two different directions with life on some kind of edge.

MERCEDES

When we were discussing possibilities, you talked about three potential subjects and they were all related to animals. I (would) argue that the way that we encounter the film, the way that you approach the depiction of the eel, it's almost animalistic, it's almost like non-human. It's almost like it is the recording of the encounter between you and the animal. And because there is so much stuff that you can't control, because of the dynamic unpredictable way the animal behaves, the conditions, because there is no light, you give us an experience of that mirror world that somehow belongs more to the eel than to us. Perhaps to digress from the anthropocentric nature of cinema you are proposing a different point of view. Can you talk a little bit about this?

JOYCE

I really like your interpretation because you picked up I am not trying to give the viewpoint of the eel. As you pointed out, that would be presumptuous. But I am very interested in my own animality. I am thinking a lot about that at the moment, writing a little bit, trying to think through portal experiences that refresh our awareness of our own animality. (In the film) it becomes like a dance with this other consciousness in the water. "Is she back with us? Is she gone? What is she going to do now? Is she over it? What are we doing? How much more can we do this with her, we've been doing this for hours, this crazy dance with her.

Editing was like that too. Editing is really instinctive. Are you looking for a feeling or a tensile something? I can't convey the experience in the water which is so rapid without compressing the video. The video needs to be absolutely distilled. So it was a really long editing process, which I wasn't expecting. I'm not very efficient, I am not very good at it. I work in lots of different mediums and I am not expert in any and I am definitely not expert at Final Cut Pro. And so it's really basic at some level but it's also the business of distillation.

I wanted the same thing with the sound as well, not too cleaned up, just quite immediate. I chose tracks that often we hadn't practiced at all.

So the process of editing was quite instinctive as well. It is just sort of a tensile feeling… a kind of shimmering feeling.

That was the wonderful thing about this particular invitation. It came at a time when I finished a bunch of work and I (was) about to go and do a whole bunch of other work. It had no intention. I just wanted to be receptive. So thank you, because it was fun to do and it just opened up some permission to try something fun.

MERCEDES

I am getting signs that we have to wrap it up, but it would be unfair not to allow the audience to throw a couple of questions very quickly.

AUDIENCE 1

Following on from what you said, about how you did not intend these things but of course there are constraints that you intended, and that you were open to being receptive, how do you feel about it now?

JOYCE

For me, it's opened up a new arena and that is always great. But I was listening to that conversation just before about Vincent Ward and I was sitting there thinking, "Hell, I hope we do have the permission to go into what are really, really deep refined areas of specialisation, for example sound, noise." We are in a room of people that have extraordinary histories and practices in that regard. And when you go there... and as an artist you know that you are stepping out of your territory … that is both liberating and slightly worrying. But part of me was (thinking) you don't want to get beyond the point where you can't try something out. You don't ever want to get to a point in your practice where you can't actually take a chance with another medium. You may as well just retire or give it up. I did really enjoy trying that out, so I'm okay with it.

MERCEDES

Any other questions very quickly?

AUDIENCE 2

Two questions. You mentioned you have a long relationship with eels, so why eels? And what do you think links your practice going back all these years now? Do you see a recurring theme or substance, some quality?

JOYCE

That's not a quick question. I am going through a phase where I am thinking about that. I am going to need to think about that in the next year and a half. Obviously I am interested in living systems. I am interested in perception. I am interested in consciousness. I am quite interested in instinct and how light hits various surfaces and how we make images and what images do, so all of that stuff tends to reoccur in my work over very many decades now. But eels ... hell, this is going to get you reading. This is our moment. You read it in Spanish and I'll read it in English. I'll read my bit and you read your bit.

MERCEDES

A cacophony of languages. You are going to be interpreting through a cultural lens. Well, give me a chance to open it up.

JOYCE

I mean this says it all for me.

MERCEDES

Oh that's going to be very difficult because you hear Spanish and it doesn't mean anything for you but I hear English and …. so what are we doing?

JOYCE

I am going to start with "Lovely is the science, sweet the words…"

MERCEDES

Oh, no… You're not going to understand anyway so…

AUDIENCE 2

Joyce you go first, then Mercedes.

JOYCE

Okay;

"Lovely is the science, sweet the words that follow the course of the elvers and tell us their saga, lovely and sweet and hypnotic like the silvery terraces of Jaipur where an astronomer in his day wielded a vocabulary just as lovely and sweet to conjure the unnameable and pour it onto soothing parchments, inheritance for the species, school lesson, barbiturate for essential insomniacs, and comes the day when the elvers have entered into the deepest depths of their hydrographic copulation, planetary spermatozoa already inside the egg of the high pools, in the ponds where the rivers settle down and dream, and the winding phalluses of the vital night calm down, bed down, the black columns lose their lithe erection advancing and probing, the individuals are born of themselves, separate off from the common serpent, feel their own way and at their own risk along the dangerous edges of ponds, of life; the time begins, no one can know when, of the yellow eel, the youth of the species in its conquered territory, the finally friendly water compliantly encircling the bodies at rest there." And then later it says, "suddenly, by night, at the same time, all rivers are downriver, all sources are to be fled, tense fins tear furiously at water's edge: Nietzsche, Nietzsche. What is it I love about eels?"

MERCEDES

I can't find your section…. It has a velocity that is just amazing. Alright well I'll just pick it up... [reading in Spanish]

It goes on and on and on…

[applause]

It’s a beautiful piece because of the punctuation… there is no commas so it just keeps racing through the text and there’s all these beautiful ideas and shifts. It’s fantastic. It’s like an eel.

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9. THE REALITY-BASED COMMUNITY

Dr. Erika Balsom.

for KW

Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? —Bruno Latour

Have you heard that reality has collapsed? Post-truth politics, the death of facts, fake news, deep-state conspiracies, paranoia on the rise. Such pronouncements are often feverish objections to a nightmarish condition. Yet inside the echo chamber of twenty-first-century communication, their anxiety-ridden recirculation can exacerbate the very conditions they attempt to describe and decry. In asserting the indiscernibility of fact and fiction, the panicked statement that reality has collapsed at times accomplishes little but furthering the collapse of reality. Proclaiming the unreality of the present lifts the heavy burdens of gravity, belief, and action, effecting a great leveling whereby all statements float by, cloaked in doubt.

Against this rhetoric, a different proclamation: I want to live in the reality-based community. It is an imagined community founded in a practice of care for this most fragile of concepts. My desire, to some, is pitifully outmoded. Already in 2004, a presidential aide—widely speculated to be Karl Rove, deputy chief of staff to George W. Bush—told *New York Times* journalist Ron Suskind that any attachment to the considered observation and analysis of reality placed one hopelessly behind the times:

> *The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality."*[1]

Faced with such imperial fabrication, the likes of which have only intensified in the years since Rove's

1 Ron Suskind, Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush, New York Times Magazine, October 17, 2004 http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html

Film still from Kevin Jerome Everson’s Tonsler Park (2017). 80”, 16mm, b&w, sound.

statement, the "judicious study of discernible reality" becomes a task of the greatest urgency—not despite but because so many claim it is not the way the world really works anymore. I, too, attended all those graduate school seminars in which we learned to deconstruct Enlightenment principles and mistrust empiricism, but given the state of things, it's starting to look like they might need salvaging.

Imagined communities are called into being through media, and the reality-based community is no different. Documentary cinema is its privileged means of imagination. Why? With a frequency not found in other forms of nonfiction image-making, documentary reflects on its relationship to truth. And unlike the written word, it partakes of an indexical bond to the real, offering a mediated encounter with physical reality in which a heightened attunement to the actuality of our shared world becomes possible. But precisely for these same reasons, documentary is simultaneously a battleground, a terrain upon which commitments to reality are challenged and interrogated. To examine the vanguard of documentary theory and practice over the last thirty years, for instance, is to encounter a deep and pervasive suspicion of its relationship to the real and, more particularly, a robust rejection of its observational mode, a strain that minimizes the intervention of the filmmaker, eschews commentary, and accords primacy to lens-based capture.[2] In the glare of the present, these arguments must be revisited and their contemporary efficacy interrogated.

In the 1990s, the advent of digitization sparked new fears that photographs could no longer be trusted. The spectre of easy manipulation hovered over the digital image, threatening its evidentiary value. Reality was seen to be an effect of images rather than their cause; photographic truth was debunked as a discursive construction, the power of the indexical guarantee deflated.[3] Postmodernism heralded a realignment of epistemological foundations, with notions like historicity, truth, and objectivity coming under interrogation. Textualism reigned. If all images are the

2 Bill Nichols aligns the observational mode with direct cinema and cinéma vérité, characterizing it as stressing the nonintervention of the filmmaker, relying on an impression of real time, the "exhaustive depiction of the everyday," lacking retrospective commentary, and providing the "expectation of transparent access." See Bill Nichols, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 38–44.

3 For the paradigmatic critique of photographic truth as socially constructed, see John Tagg, The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

product of convention, of the play of codes, then what is the difference between fiction and nonfiction? As the argument went, reality, fiction, it makes no difference, everything is a construction, we live in a forest of signs. Jean Baudrillard infamously posited that we were experiencing a fading of the real, a pervasive derealization he saw as intimately linked to technology and in particular to technologies of image reproduction like cinema and television, which offer powerful-yet-bogus impressions of reality in the absence of reality itself. In a chapter called "The Murder of the Real," Baudrillard offered his diagnosis in a typically totalizing manner: "In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer even be posed."[4]

These conditions understandably provoked a crisis for documentary. As Brian Winston put it in 1995, "Postmodernist concern transforms 'actuality,' that which ties documentary to science, from a legitimation into an ideological burden."[5] The assault on documentary came from both sides: its authority was eroded by simulationism's liquidation of referentiality, but occurred equally in the name of a progressive politics, as part of a critical project that sought to dismantle false, ideological notions like objectivity, authenticity, and neutrality—spurious concepts that had long denied their constructedness, masquerading instead as essences that concealed complicity with a will to power.

This crisis was, like so many are, a catalyst of rejuvenation. An efflorescence of "new documentary," as Linda Williams called it in a landmark 1993 text, responded to technological change and epistemological uncertainty by turning to reflexivity, artifice, and performativity.[6] These films took seriously postmodern critiques, but rather than succumb to cynicism, they foregrounded the construction of contingent truths. They took up strategies of reenactment, essayism, heightened subjectivism, and docufiction, delighting in precisely those forms of contamination once deemed anathema, and were accompanied by an efflorescence of critical writing that sought to take stock of these

4 Jean Baudrillard, The Vital Illusion, ed. Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 62.

5 Brian Winston, Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and its Legitmations (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 243.

6 Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," Film Quarterly 46, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 9-21.

developments. The "blurring of boundaries" was held to be an inviolably noble goal. As the new millennium began, critics would repeatedly point to precisely these characteristics as typical of contemporary art's "documentary turn." For some, these strategies were evidence of a sophisticated approach to questions of truth that favorably differentiated them from that poor straw man, "traditional documentary."[7]

7. See, for instance, Linda Nochlin, Documented Success, Artforum, September 2002, 161-3; Hito Steyerl, Art or Life? Jargons of Documentary Authenticity, Truth, Dare or Promise: Art and Documentary Revisited, eds. Jill Daniels, Cahal McLaughlin, and Gail Pearce (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 6-7.

Eric Baudelaire, Also Known as Jihadi, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Paul Arthur has noted that each period of documentary is engaged in a polemical contestation of the one before it,[8] and the 1990s are no exception. Through all of these calls for impurity, through all of this lobbying for the salience of precisely those techniques once outlawed by documentary orthodoxy, a bad object emerged: the observational mode, indicted for an apparently positivist belief in the real and a disavowal of mediation. The problem with this form of "traditional documentary" was that it was understood as asserting, rather than questioning, its relationship to reality. It lacked the requisite reflexivity. Or so the argument went—in propping up observational documentary as a bad object, its aims and strategies were at times prey to oversimplification. Whether implicitly or explicitly, critics, artists, and filmmakers positioned at the intersection of documentary and art decried the naturalistic capture of phenomenal reality as a stupid fetish: stupid, because it relied on the machinic dumbness of copying appearances rather than the creative transformations associated with artfulness; a fetish, since its impression of immediacy was a mystification in desperate need of unveiling by the non-duped who know better and acknowledge the constructedness of all representation. The notion that cinema suffers

8 Paul Arthur, Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments), Theorizing Documentary, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 109.

when it simply duplicates appearances goes back to Grierson's renowned dictum that documentary is the "creative treatment of actuality," and even farther, to 1920s film theory, where it is deeply tied to claims for film as art.[9] It is unsurprising, then, that when documentary entered contemporary art, a similar phobia of the facticity of recording accompanied it, amplified by a theoretical climate still indebted to postmodernism and poststructuralism. Of course, lens-based capture persisted as a means of making images, but its unadorned primacy, the idea that it offers privileged access to unstaged reality, was the sacrificial lamb at a postmodern slaughter. The very title of Williams's essay, "Mirrors Without Memories," underlines the historical unavailability of the observational mode at her time of writing: she proposes that the photographic image is not, as Oliver Wendell Holmes suggested in 1859, a mirror with a memory but rather "a hall of mirrors."[10] Winston went even farther, wagering that documentary's very survival depended on "removing its claim to the real"; it was best to "roll with the epistemological blow, abandoning the claim to evidence."[11]

More than twenty years later, nothing and everything is different. The toxic erosion of historical consciousness continues unabated. The constructivist pressure on truth and objectivity feels stronger than ever—indeed, such notions lie in ruins—but the emancipatory potential that initially accompanied the articulation of this critique has dissipated. We live in an age of "alternative facts," in which the intermingling of reality and fiction, so prized in a certain kind of documentary practice since the 1990s, appears odiously all around us. Questioning documentary's access to the real was once oppositional: it broke away from a pseudoscientific conception of documentary that saw truth as guaranteed by direct inscription. When Trinh Minh-ha wrote in 1990 that "there is no such thing as documentary," she wrote against this ingrained tradition.[12] But many of the things for which Trinh advocated are now commonplace. Experimental documentary did largely follow Winston's call to abandon its claim to evidence, foregoing fact for "ecstatic

9 This attitude is particularly pronounced in the writings of Ricciotto Canudo. For an extended consideration of this question, see Erika Balsom, "One Hundred Years of Low Definition," Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty, eds. Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

10 Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories," 20.

11 Winston, Claiming the Real, 259; and Brian Winston, "The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription," Theorizing Documentary, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1995), 56.

12 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," October 52 (Spring 1990): 76.

truth," Werner Herzog's term for a truth "deeper" than that offered by the observation of reality, accessible only through "fabrication and imagination."[13] There is a lurking Platonism here: appearances are understood as deceptive seductions incapable of leading to knowledge. Meanwhile, essay films—with their meditative, questioning voice-overs—are everywhere, a veritable genre. The notion that we best access reality through artifice is the new orthodoxy.

13 In his 1999 "Minnesota Declaration," Werner Herzog calls the truth of cinéma vérité "a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants," and opposes to it the "deeper strata" of "poetic, ecstatic truth" that "can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization." See Werner Herzog, "Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema," http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/1999/minnesota-declaration-truth-and-fact-in-docum

Eric Baudelaire, Also Known as Jihadi, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

No one assumes any longer, if they ever did, that there is a mirrored isomorphism between reality and representation or that the act of filming can be wholly noninterventionist. To assert such things is to tell us what we already know. And so why does it happen so often, whether explicitly or implicitly, in documentary theory and practice? What does it accomplish? Perhaps it is just inertia, a repetition of received ideas that stem from a paradigm by now firmly established. Perhaps. Yet it also reconfirms a smug and safe position for maker and viewer alike, guarding both against being caught out as that most sorry of characters: the naive credulist. We all know better than to believe. This might be called media literacy, but it also contains a whiff of the cynicism Williams hoped the "new documentary" would ward off. We breathe the stale, recirculated air of doubt.

Already in 1988, Donna Haraway recognized that though the critique of objectivity had been necessary, there were dangers in proceeding too far down the path of social constructivism.[14] She warned that to do so is to relinquish a needed claim on real, shared existence. Our planet is heating up. In the realm of

14 Donna Haraway, Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, Feminist Studies 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575-99.

documentary, too, there is a visible world "out there," the traces of which persist in and through the codes of representation. It is a world that demands our attention in all its complexity and frailty. A pressing question emerges: Is putting documentary's claim to actuality under erasure through reflexive devices in all cases still the front-line gesture it once was, or have such strategies ossified into clichés that fail to offer the best response to the present emergency? In light of current conditions, do we need to reevaluate the denigration of fact inherent in the championing of "ecstatic truth"? This is not to diminish the tremendous historical importance of such strategies, which can remain viable, nor to malign all films that engage them. At best—and there are countless examples of this—departures from objective reality are enacted in order to lead back to truth, not to eradicate its possibility. At worst, the insistence that documentary is forever invaded by fictionalization leads to a dangerous relativism that annuls a distinction between truth and falsity that we might rather want to fight for. And across this spectrum, we find an underlying assumption that today requires interrogation: namely, that the task of vanguard documentary is to problematize, rather than claim, access to phenomenal reality.

Instead of taking for granted that there is something inherently desirable about blurring the boundary between reality and fiction and something inherently undesirable about minimizing an attention to processes of mediation in the production of visible evidence, we must ask: Do we need to be told by a film—sometimes relentlessly—that the image is constructed lest we fall into the mystified abyss of mistaking a representation for reality? Or can we be trusted to make these judgments for ourselves? If, recalling Arthur's formulation, every age of documentary rejects and responds to the last, perhaps now is the time for a polemical contestation of the denigration of observation. To echo Latour, the critique of documentary constructedness has run out of steam.[15]

The interest of documentary lies in its ability

15 Bruno Latour, Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern Critical Inquiry 30 (Winter 2004): 225-48.

to challenge dominant formations, not to conform to or mimic them, and yet uncertainty and doubt remain its contemporary watchwords, especially as it is articulated within the art context. What would it be to instead affirm the facticity of reality with care, and thereby temper the epistemological anxieties of today in lieu of reproducing them? How might a film take up a reparative relation to an embattled real?[16] It might involve assembling rather than dismantling, fortifying belief rather than debunking false consciousness, love rather than skepticism. As a rule of thumb, bad objects do not stay bad objects forever; they make unsurprising returns to favor when the time is right. In the work of a number of important artists and filmmakers, a commitment to a reconceived observational mode is visible. These works leave behind a pedagogy of suspicion and instead assert the importance of the nonhuman automatism of the camera as a means for encountering the

16 As a practice of love that seeks to repair damage and move beyond negative affects, this attitude shares aspects of Eve Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51.

Film still from Libbie D. Cohn and J.P. Sniadecki's documentary People's Park (2012).

world. Departing from the now dominant paradigms of ecstatic truth and the essay film, they look to the facticity of phenomenal reality and demand belief in it. I can hear the objections: this is a return to positivism, a guileless trust in the transparency of representation, a forgetting of all of the lessons we have learned. In fact, no. This is no simple throwback to the positions of direct cinema, which have, in any case, been unfairly characterized. Abstaining from techniques that pry open the interval between reality and representation, including voice-over commentary, these films revive key elements of the observational mode while challenging the epistemological claims that historically accompanied it through strategies of partiality, blockage, and opacity. They seek not to master the world but to remain faithful to it,[17] creating for the viewer a time and space of attunement in which a durational encounter with alterity and contingency can occur, with no secure meaning assured.

17 Haraway, Situated Knowledges, 593–94.

The films made by individuals affiliated with Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab manifest diverse concerns and take up divergent formal strategies. Nonetheless, across works such as *Leviathan* (2012, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel), *People's Park* (2012, Libbie D. Cohn and J.P. Sniadecki), *Manakamana* (2013, Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez), and *The Iron Ministry* (2014, J. P. Sniadecki), one encounters a shared reassertion of the possibilities of observation. These practices pursue ethnography through cinema rather than through the written discourse privileged by disciplinary anthropology, and thus it is fitting that the conception of the moving image one finds within them seizes on the non-coded powers of lens-based capture rather than the reductive linguistic paradigm of codedness proper to theorizations of film inspired by Saussurean semiotics. These films retreat from any posture of domination to instead provide thick description of the irreducible complexity of the world, its vital excessiveness and ambiguity. The modalities of vision one finds within them are never that of a dislocated camera-eye that would assert possession of the profilmic through the agency of the gaze. They are, rather, eminently situated and specifically cinematic. In *Leviathan*, GoPro cameras are strapped to laboring bodies and thrown into the ocean. In *People's Park*, a seventy-eight-minute long take is filmed from a wheelchair that winds its way through a park in Chengdu, grounding the unfolding images within a spatiotemporal continuity and asserting the primacy of the filmed object over and above the subjective interventions of the filmmakers. In *Manakmana* and The Iron Ministry, the cable car and the train carriage, respectively, form enclosures that assure the mutual implication of filmmaker and subject. And in all four films, an unobtrusive acknowledgement of mediation is discernible in strong yet varied assertions of structure that intensify, rather than erode, their claims on actuality.

To say that observation is today experiencing a rehabilitation is not to suggest that commitments to it have been wholly absent in recent decades. Harun Farocki is often closely associated with the tradition of the essay film, but maintained for over thirty years a consistent practice of observational documentary, often, as Volker Pantenburg has noted, filming situations "marked by a sense of repetition and rehearsal" so as to install a degree of reflexivity at the level of the filmed scene.[18] Even though many of these works were television commissions, this investment by no means waned following Farocki's entry into the art context. He deemed *Serious Games* (2009–10) a "Direct Cinema film,"[19] and in many ways it is: Farocki carefully details the use of video game simulations for solider training and post-combat rehabilitation without intervening and refrains from offering any commentary until the limited intertitles of the fourth and final segment, "A Sun With No Shadow." In an interview with Hito Steyerl, he rather unfashionably proclaimed himself a "devotee of *cinéma vérité*," just as he was beginning the observational project *Labour in a Single Shot* (2011–14), a collaboration with Antje Ehmann.[20] The pair conducted filmmaking workshops in fifteen cities around the world in which people made single-shot films, one to two minutes in length. Aside from taking labor in a broad sense as their subject, these films were governed

18 Volker Pantenburg, 'Now that's Brecht at last!': Harun Farocki's Observational Films, Documentary Across Disciplines, eds. Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (Berlin/Cambridge: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and MIT Press, 2016), 153.

19 Harun Farocki, On the Documentary, in Supercommunity, special issue, e-flux journal 65 (May 2015) http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/on-the-documentary/

20 Harun Farocki and Hito Steyerl, Cahier #2: A Magical Imitation of Reality (Milan: Kaleidoscope Press, 2011), 20.

Eric Baudelaire, Also Known as Jihadi, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. Installation view at Contour Biennale 2017.

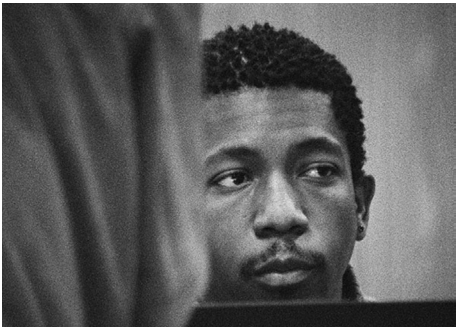
by only one rule: as the title of the project suggests, there could be no cuts, a parameter that forges an association with the preclassical actualité and preserves the continuity of time. Despite this policy of montage interdit, there is no presumption of total capture: the films' short lengths bespeak a rejection of totality. They are but fragments of larger processes that remain largely out of frame.

When shown at the eighth edition of the Contour Biennale in Mechelen, Belgium, Eric Baudelaire's *Also Known as Jihadi* (2017) was presented in the sixteenth-century Court of Savoy, once the seat of the Great Council and now the home of the lower civil and criminal courts—a setting that underlined the film's engagement with the production of truth. In one regard, the film is a remake of Masao Adachi's 1969 masterpiece *A.K.A. Serial Killer*, in which the director tests his notion of *fûkeiron*—landscape theory—which posits that social forces become visible through observation of the built environment. Following Adachi, Baudelaire's film is composed of a series of long shots of locations once traversed by a pathologized protagonist, in this case, Abdel Aziz Mekki, accused of travelling from France to Syria to participate in jihad. But Baudelaire departs significantly from the Japanese filmmaker by adding a second component to his filmic vocabulary: legal documents from the investigation into Mekki's activities, introduced between the landscape shots. The film thus engages in a comparative staging of two apparatuses tasked with the production of truth—observational documentary and the legal system—both of which are grounded in an evidential recording of reality that Baudelaire shows to exist at a remove from any guarantee of understanding. We are presented with evidence, yet Mekki's motivations remain elusive. *Also Known as Jihadi* poses the epistemological potential of *fûkeiron* as a question rather than taking it as a given, but the film's very existence demonstrates Baudelaire's conviction that this is a question worth asking. There is no overt manipulation of the image, no voice-over to direct the viewer through a poetic meditation on the impossibility of truth, no reenactment. *Also Known as Jihadi* is an open inquiry into how the media of law and documentary might—the conditional tense is fundamental—produce knowledge and how they might fail. The film's empty landscapes and reams of documents lead not to the arrogance of singular truth but to a suspended interval in which a humble reckoning with the limits of comprehension and the inevitability of unknowing occurs.

If there is one film that most powerfully underlines the stakes of rehabilitating observation, it is *Tonsler Park* (2017), Kevin Jerome Everson's eighty-minute portrait of workers at a polling station in the titular area of Charlottesville, Virginia, on November 8, 2016—the day the current president of the United States was elected. Using black-and-white 16mm film, *Tonsler Park* consists of a series of long takes of the mostly African-American women who facilitate the voting process for members of the local community. For privacy reasons, Everson did not record synchronized sound; instead, images shot with a telephoto lens are accompanied by wild sound captured in the same place and on the same day, though not at precisely the same moment as the image. This slight cleavage of image and sound ruptures any possible impression of total capture, ushering the film away from discredited notions of immediacy. This refusal of mastery is buttressed by the position of Everson's camera, which is out of the way, at some distance from the poll workers who form the ostensible focus of the scene. People pass frequently in front of the lens, close enough that only their torsos are visible. They intermittently fill the frame with vast fields of grey and black, creating what Everson has called, with reference to that most reflexive of avant-garde film genres, a "human flicker." The fullness of this reality does not yield to the camera. It is grainy, monochrome, obstructed. Vision is blocked, yet the film demands that we look nonetheless, that we look closely at an event at once quotidian and historic, at people and activities that might otherwise never be held up to view.

Foucault was right when he deemed visibility a trap. Exposure is violent; it makes the surveilled subject vulnerable to capture by apparatuses of power. Moreover, to see something clearly, fully, can easily slide into the mistaken assumption that it is known, comprehended in its totality—which is itself a form of violence, as Glissant has shown. But before romanticizing the escape of invisibility, we must remember that to be invisible is also to be cast out of the body politic, into the precariousness of ungrievable life. Visibility is, then, deeply ambivalent, particularly for populations more subject than others to police harassment and violence and more excluded than others from myriad forms of representation, as African-Americans are. *Tonsler Park*'s dialectics of revelation and concealment gets to the heart of this ambivalence and does so, no less, by capturing a day that would inaugurate a regime that would only exacerbate this double violence.

To watch *Tonsler Park* is to give oneself over to a phenomenology of gesture, comportment, and detail achieved through the presentation of images shorn of any great eventfulness. Through this heightened attunement, the film opens a protracted duration in which the concrete specificity of the represented event shares mental space with farther-reaching thoughts to which it gives rise: the first presidential election after Barack Obama's two terms, of which we know the disastrous results but the onscreen figures do not; the racialized and gendered dimensions of work; widespread voter suppression through the implementation of registration laws that disproportionately affect African-Americans; the permanent disenfranchisement of convicted felons in many states, once again disproportionately affecting African-Americans; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its place within the Civil Rights Movement, many demands of which we must continue to levy. None of these threads enter *Tonsler Park* as information supplied directly by Everson or his subjects. Rather, through its clearing of time and presentation of a world to be witnessed—an encounter markedly different from the experience one might have if present at the filmed event—the film activates a labor of associative thought on the part of the spectator. Here, observational cinema facilitates a form of *thinking with appearances* that depends simultaneously on the image's ties to phenomenal reality and the image's differences from it.



Film still from Kevin Jerome Everson's Tonsler Park (2017). 80", 16mm, b&w, sound. Copyright: Kevin Jerome Everson; Trilobite-Arts DAC; Picture Palace Pictures.

The documentary claim on the capture of life has historically been tied to domination, and in many cases still is, but this is not its only possibility. Following the devastation of World War II, critics such as Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin found in the registration of reality possibilities of reparation and redemption; in our moment of ecological, humanitarian, and political crisis, the nurturing of this capacity possesses a comparable urgency. That documentary practices take up this task with vigor is all the more crucial given that the importance of profilmic reality is swiftly diminishing in much popular cinema. Even far beyond the genres of science fiction and fantasy, in apparently "realistic" films, computer-generated images fill screens with dreams of a world wholly administered, controllable down to the last pixel, drained of contingency. As the anthropocentric perfection of the CGI simulacrum is increasingly dominant, and as the rhetoric of a collapse of reality serves only those who seek to further it and benefit from it, there must be a thorough rehabilitation of the viability of observation in vanguard documentary. To be sure, there is ample evidence that this is already well underway in practice, in the films mentioned here and in recent works by Maeve Brennan, Chen Zhou, Ben Russell, Wang Bing, and many others. This is by no means to call for an invalidation of those strategies associated with the "new documentary"; let one hundred flowers bloom, so long as they avoid the pestilence of postmodern relativism. Rather, it is simply to insist that the aspersions cast for so long on the facticity of recording must cease. Creativity and sophistication are not found only in fictionalization, intervention, and proclamations of subjectivity. The appearances of the world need our care more than our suspicion. Giving primacy to the registration of physical reality can do something that "ecstatic truth" cannot: reawaken our attention to the textures of a world that really does exist and which we inhabit together.

There is nothing naive about the relationship to reality found in the examples mentioned here; in fact, they place an immense trust in their viewers. Truth is not out there waiting to be captured—but reality is. In the encounter with facticity made possible by these films, it becomes clear that to believe in reality is to affirm that we live in a shared world that is at once chaotic and unmasterable. The formal vocabulary of these films differs greatly from that most associated with direct cinema: they do not spontaneously track reality through a roaming camera, as if it could be fully encompassed by the representational act, but engage in strong, deliberate assertions of structure that assert a bond to reality while also marking limits that are at once visual and epistemological. The significance of what one witnesses may remain uncertain, one's understanding may remain incomplete, and yet there is no doubt as to the reality of what is presented to view, nor of cinema's ability to provide valuable access to it. All objectivity is situated; all vision is partial. Simple truths and totalizing meanings are the real fictions. Although this may sound like poststructuralism, here these acknowledgements lead not into any hall of mirrors, not to any infinite regress, but assert rather the power of cinema as window, however dirty and distorting its panes may be. According to Hannah Arendt, the preparation for totalitarianism

> *has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought. The ideal subject for totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.*[21]

Looking closely at images that affirm their status as traces of actuality provides one way that we can begin to reestablish the reality of experience and the standards of thought that Arendt rightly deems so important. Within this durational experience, we find ourselves faced with what James Agee called the "cruel radiance of what is."[22] Let us imagine the reality-based community together.

21 Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1979), 474.

22 James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, (1941) 2001), 9.

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10. WHO SPENDS THE TIME?

Peter Wareing and Jamie Hanton in conversation.

1 Peter Wareing's installation, Who spends the time? Some practical questions concerning the democratic process and personal responsibility (Parts A, C and B) was installed at the Canterbury Workers Education Association from Tuesday 22 - Friday 25 August, 2017.

JAMIE

Earlier today Peter we were talking about the possibilities of parallel universes. And when I was watching the installation here at the WEA the other day I had a great conversation with Ivan Hibbard who is involved with the New Zealand Labour Party and campaigning for water rights. So watching these films and having conversations in the WEA is quite productive and meaningful.

PETER

The opportunity to present it in a social space (like the WEA) is amazing. The content, particularly this interview (gestures to interview with Bess Frimodig) is really in keeping with the institution here.

JAMIE

I thought I'd let you introduce the form this work takes. There's a pair of videos in here, a single work at the other end of the building and how they connect to one another or not.

PETER

Thematically, this work is really interested in the idea of the title, Who spends the time?, and questions around democratic process and social responsibility. But the first thing to note is that the project is not finished yet. This installation at the WEA is a test of an approach I've taken, which is to juxtapose actual interviews with political activists against fictional scenes featuring the interviewers as characters. I'm testing whether different film registers could work in the same kind of space. I realize now that each interview has to be paired with scenes of Dagenham and the actor.

I took inspiration from Italo Calvino's book Six Memos for the Next Millennium (1988). He writes on Borghese who described the idea of infinite simultaneous universes, "in which all possibilities are realised in all combinations isn't a digression from the story but the very reason the protagonist allows himself to commit the absurd…"

I thought of applying that idea to democracy and the idea of participation. Both people being inter-

Jamie Hanton (left) and Peter Wareing in conversation at the CWEA, Friday 25 August 2017.

viewed are adamant about volunteering their time and passionate about the cause, in this case the political campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. It seems almost absurd now to get up and go out and knock on people's doors because the democratic process has been seriously undermined by very powerful moneyed interests. Many who do not partake in the often difficult and often confusing debates that constitute a democracy, because they feel it leads nowhere.

That's why you have Trump and that's why you have large corporate bodies investing money in the Tories. Both have shown a fondness for exercising their political capital in the service of large corporate bodies, or their own political survival and self interest. But there are people who are speaking and asking; how do we manage our culture, how do we manage the poor, how do we manage housing, how do we manage conditions or, in the case of ecology, global warming? All those kind of things demand us to take action and these people have taken action.

In terms of the juxtaposition of the two registers, in the fictional scene you see here, the interviewee from the non-fiction interview, Nayan Kulkarni, is sitting passively in a place that seems to be in continual flux. Trucks go by, people walk by. All the characters sit or walk back and forth. But they don't move from that particular situation. So I have this conceit that maybe this inaction could mirror our condition.

JAMIE

It's a mirroring of the inability to potentially act in a political system that is stacked against you, or you don't have the time or the economic power to take time away from work to volunteer.

PETER

Right. Or you don't feel like you have advocacy because nothing changes, as if it's rigged if you will. Nyan asked in the interview, "Why would you go out and do this?" Leslie said, "I actually experienced advocating for anti-fracking and it worked." Then that moved into her relationship to Bernie Sanders' campaign and volunteering for that . Which was not successful, but she felt it was successful. Bernie Sanders is still part of the political process and still being a strong voice for his movement.

The other interesting thing is that Sanders and Corbyn are both older men who reinvigorated the youth vote by using old terms that were basically disappearing or considered not functional. They were instrumental in getting youth to start voting again so it wasn't a failure at all.

JAMIE

Why Dagenham, why this site?

PETER

Dagenham was the first and biggest housing estate in the world. It was planned in a very schematic way; concentric circles, ring roads with roads that divide those ring roads. It was in some ways a social experiment offering new housing for the working poor from East London, offering a new residential space where they had a small front lawn and a little garden at the back, and on shining a lease there were conditions that they had to adhere to. They had to clean their windows, they had to mow their lawns, they had to clip their hedges and they didn't have as many pubs per block as in older East London, so the idea was the landlord, in this case the London City Council was encouraging a model community, modifying the idea of the underclass being rowdy, dirty, uncouth, or whatever.

JAMIE

You've used the word 'props'. Could you extrapolate the idea of 'a prop' in this?

PETER

A 'prop' is the term for the performer, a term coined by Robert Bresson from his written reflections on cinema. They're placed (the prop's) in the situation of either not moving from a position and doing some activity that's mundane and repetitive. They are not central actors to the environment that they are placed in. Example, Bess Frimodig staring down into her

Still: Who spends the time? Some practical questions concerning the democratic process and personal responsibility (Parts A, C and B). Image courtesy of artist.
http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/trailer-who-spends-the-time-some-practical-questions-concerning-the-democratic-process-and

disposable coffee cup for an extended period of time, and Nayan in his parked car. As part of the filmic process I would shoot the train and bus journey out to Dagenham from central London, but I decided against using that material. Coupled with the character scenes are scenes of everyday life on the edges of Dagenham, focusing on places of passage, a main road, footpaths to and from buses stops, a waterway, locations where the protagonist is surrounded by the movement of people and goods.

AUDIENCE 1

But not people? You intend for them to be seen as sort of ciphers, or something, or shifters or something like that?

PETER

In the fiction scenario, they are people without advocacy. Whereas in the non-fiction (the interview) scenario, they present themselves as people who want to know, who are serious about their role as the interviewer.

AUDIENCE 2

Rather than non-people I was thinking of non-places. These corridors, highways and walkways, they're not meant to have any significance. And talking about Brexit, the fear of larger multi-cultural populations is that (those already there) will lose something that has no significance.

PETER

They're spaces of transit. You get off a bus, you walk home with your groceries. You negotiate passage ways that are often dirt tracks or very noisy passageways along side the M13 or you take muddy short cuts worn over time. Their significance is their utility, perhaps being on the margins of central London did make voting for Brexit easier.

AUDIENCE 3

You don't stop, you go through.

PETER

Yeah, and you don't stop and meet and greet, these public spaces are inhospitable due to their proximity to heavy traffic, train tracks, a dirty waterway, and the distance from services and peoples homes.

AUDIENCE

In terms of the performers, are they being directed? How is that process of who these people are and how you selected them and what's happened?

PETER

They're all people I know personally, and so I take the liberty to direct them as if I was placing a prop in a location. The point for them is to follow the instruction without inflection or as expressionless as they can manage. You sit there and you hold that and do it very slowly or look out the window etc.

AUDIENCE

Is what you're asking them to do modelled on actual observation?

PETER

In the case of Nayan in this video, hanging the towel on the car window so he could rest was modeled off some of the truck drivers who parked and rested in that location. And the sardines, I saw a road worker do that, not in Dagenham but somewhere closer to Barking on Ripple Rd. Just simple ordinary street behavior that would be a common sight for that location. Pumping up a cycle tyre, and then finding something small and curious on the street, in the case of the swan. Bess bought with her in a paper cup with coffee, she looked at it or awhile and just tossed it, something I observed several weeks before in the same location.

MERCEDES VICENTE

But there's certainly some elements there that are very absurd, that I don't think you can even answer the question of why.

MARK WILLIAMS

I always read it like it was a kind of journey into radicalization, the evolution of a white jihadi. Finding portents, signs and symbols that hinted at some kind of disruption and a kind of call to action. And that guy

Peter Wareing, Who spends the time? Some practical questions concerning the democratic process and personal responsibility (Parts A, C and B) (2017)

I felt he was on the edge of some sort of violence. And he stands on the side of the road and the trucks are going by, and what's he going to do?

PETER

I took him as that character who is the person who was going to cross the road, but got stuck in place for a reason not presented to us, again a scene like this is repeated daily. I watched further up the road near an underpass, people having to wait quite a long time in order to cross through very fast moving traffic, strangely to take short cut to or from a nearby bus stop.

JAMIE

And that's where it came back for me to the title of the work, Who spends the time? Time is being spent here in a myriad of ways that we question, but we can't see what's going on. Something can be seen and not seen at the same time, there's cognitive dissonance.

JAMIE

Would you consider a similar installation aspect to this or would you kind of go for a cleaner conventional display? Will this play into it or inform those decisions?

PETER

Yeah I think so. It would be really good to have a space like this that is operating as a place of conversation and debate, particularly around social issues.

MERCEDES VICENTE

The Marx Library just around the corner from us, that's a space very much like this. I think they are the kind of people that would get their teeth on it.

PETER

They'd rip it apart.

11. 'BUILDING A TOWER OF CINNAMON': The kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia considered as a cinema of pure means.

Dr. Bruce Russell.

1 G. Marcus. Lipstick Traces: a secret history of the twentieth century. Secker and Warburg, London, 1989. p.328. 2 F. G. Lorca. Poema del Cante Jondo. City Lights, San Francisco CA, 1987. p.106-115

2 F. G. Lorca. Poema del Cante Jondo. City Lights, San Francisco CA, 1987. p.106-115

I. SOMETHING IS HAPPENING, BUT YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS

> *It was poetry that brought the unsettled debts of history back into play.*[1]

This phrase from Greil Marcus' remarkably insightful reconstruction of the 'Lettrist moment' in history points directly to an earlier era, a time when poetry directly addressed matters of life and death. That time was the early 1930s, with fascism on the march across Europe, and in Spain ('the country open to death') the heated cauldron of civil war was about to boil over. In his verse F. G. Lorca addressed the contradictions of his time, emphasizing the plight of the excluded, those whom Patti Smith was later to memorably describe as 'outside of society', who were personified for Lorca as the Gypsy: the eternally- excluded. In Lorca's dramatic dialogue The Lieutenant Colonel of the Civil Guard[2] (1925), the eponymous officer interrogates a mysterious gypsy who answers the brusque demands of power with bafflingly poetic imagery, with meaningless words that refuse to obediently engage power's taxonomic tyranny; refusing its need to identify and to definitively explicate, and by so doing also refusing power's drive to limit, to harness and to deny. The gypsy claims that when he was apprehended by the Sergeant he was not on any particular bridge, but 'on all the bridges', and on being asked what he was about, he replies that he was 'building a tower of cinnamon'. His responses are so opposed to the intentions of his interrogator, and his poetic use of language so removed from the uses of commerce, the strictures of law, and the propositions of logic; that the Colonel suffers a seizure in mid-interrogation, and his very soul evaporates.

But once again we now live in a time in which the chips are down, and poetry once again advances existential imperatives, pointing Marcus' accusatory finger directly at us; posing the question that, if you're not always certain how you are busy being born, are you not simply busy dying? As artists we need to have an answer to those imperatives, because the unsettled debts of global climate, of relentlessly unequal austerity and of an endless war on intangible concepts; are well and truly due. In order to clearly see a way out of the ideological Fun House of mirrors which is late capitalism, we need to think backwards, to explore discarded ideas that from the present standpoint appear 'unworkable' or even 'illogical'. If capitalist ideology defines even logic in class terms, then to break out of it we are going to have to invert a lot of premises and predicates; to stand reality 'on its head'. My attempt to 'build a tower of cinnamon' will involve a reconsideration of certain practices of International Lettrism and its off-shoot Situationism as a form of contemporary kabbalah, a yoga of the mind which is a sacred practice only in the sense that it critiques capitalism considered as the contemporary religion of death.

My starting point is Giorgio Agamben's challenge that, if we consider how under capitalism all social forms are sacred apparatuses for capturing and neutralizing use in a sphere beyond the control of humanity, then profanation is the operation through which; 'we must always wrest ... from all apparatuses - the possibility of use that they have captured'.[3]

3 G. Agamben. Profanations. Zone Books, New York, NY, 2007. p.92 4 Op. cit. p.82

II. SACRED CONSUMPTION - CAPITALISM AS RELIGION

> *If to profane means to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable.*[4]

4 Op. cit. p. 82

Agamben has argued, following Walter Benjamin's lead, that capitalism is a parasitic cult of Christianity, one that universalizes destruction, elevates guilt to the object of the cult, and which seeks to convert everything to a 'sacred condition', beyond social use. There is, in this extreme phase of capitalism, as everyone now knows thanks to Margaret Thatcher; 'no such thing as society'. In Agamben's analysis, since the religion of capitalism seeks to convert everything to a commodity (including time and the human body), all commodities

become in effect: sacred. In a virtuoso display of linguistic analysis, he explores the theological arguments surrounding the sacred/profane dichotomy, demonstrating how capitalism 'generalizes in every domain the structure of separation that defines religion'.[5]
He expands this argument by a consideration of the Situationist critique of separation, in which capitalism separates every real thing from its image, and elevates the images to the realm of ultimate reality, rendering things in themselves inaccessible to real use. This is what Debord meant when he described the Spectacle as 'the material reconstruction of the religious illusion'.[6]

Profanation once retrieved offerings to the Gods, returning them to the sphere of human use. As a form of utopian rebellion against the capitalist religion, it is the operation that returns commodities to the free use of the people. In Agamben's words: 'profanation... deactivates the apparatus of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized'.[7] The key word in that statement is 'use'. Agamben goes on to unpack the origins of capitalism's perversion of use into consumption through an analysis of the thirteenth century dispute between the Papacy and the Franciscan order. The Franciscans were rebelling against materialistic values in the church, responding to rampant simony and other forms of ecclesiastical corruption with their concept of 'highest poverty'. Pope John XXII argued that there could be no use outside the right of property, and that use as property entailed consumption of the thing used; thereby implying its destruction, its cessation of being. There is thus in the Church's view, which not coincidentally corresponds to the realities of capitalism, no concept of 'pure use'; only destructive use within a relation of property. Agamben's argument is that profanation, the removal of a thing from the realm of the sacred and its return to us is followed by 'pure use' (or, in the language of the original theological debate, *usus facti* - 'de facto use').

This concept of 'pure use' is associated in the realm of creativity with the concept of the 'pure means'.

5 Op. cit. p. 81

6 G. Debord. The Society of the Spectacle. Zone Books, New York NY, 1994.p.18

7 Op. cit. p. 77

8 G. Agamben. 'Difference and Repetition in Guy Debord's Films', in T. McDonough (ed). Guy Debord and the Situationist International. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004. pp. 313-319.

Agamben has elsewhere argued that a pure means is a medium that does not disappear into the artwork that it supports.[8] The expression that it enables does not render the medium invisible (which is the condition to which art aspired in the aesthetic philosophy of Hegel). The image which the pure means presents as such is not an image of anything, it simply communicates 'imagelessness', because the one thing a sign cannot communicate is the fact that it is in the process of signifying. He goes on to argue that play is vital in enabling the profanation of means (or apparatuses), and their consequent return to pure use. He cites the example of the cat chasing a ball of yarn, which deactivates the original uses of the yarn (now 'mouse') through the 'knowing use' of the 'characteristic behaviours of predatory activity'.[9] Agamben seems to envisage that such ludic strategies could short the sacred logic of capitalism and enable, however briefly, a practice to exist outside the closed circuit of the commodity.

9 G. Agamben. Profanations.p.85

Significantly he is here following Benjamin again, in privileging experiential activity as the way out of the ideological impasse; it is the unity of theory and practice that enables a potentially utopian action. The resulting pure means thus 'represent[s] the deactivation and rupture of all separation',[10] one that furthermore:

10 Op. cit. p. 87

11 Op. cit. p. 86

> *thus becomes a pure means, that is, a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end; it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself off as such, as a means without an end.*[11]

This description could apply to a range of creative practices, but for me, this is a highly relevant and accurate description of improvised sound work (ISW) in its relationship to music. Music in my reading is a goal-directed or teleologically-anchored activity under capitalism, a relation inverted by the gratuitously ludic pursuit of improvisation with sound. In making this assertion, I can draw on several relevant historical antecedents, some of them (as noted earlier) quite counter-intuitive in their significance.

III. HOKHMATH HA-TSERUF - COMBINATION WITHOUT END

> *The purpose of [Abulafia's] discipline then is to stimulate, with the aid of methodical meditation, a new state of consciousness; this state can best be defined as an harmonious movement of pure thought, which has severed all relation to the senses.*[12]

12 G. Scholem. Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. Thames and Hudson, London, 1955. p.133

The thirteenth century of the Christian era saw a great flowering of mystical practice within the Jewish faith in Spain, now collectively known as 'the tradition', or kabbalah. Gershom Scholem has furnished a fascinating portrait of one of the most unusual of these practices, a form of practical (ie. magical) kabbalah invented by Abraham Abulafia. Taking as his starting point the divine nature of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, Abulafia developed a technique of yogic meditation focused on the endless permutation of letters into combinations outside those required for any language whatsoever, within a clearly-described form of practice (which moreover Abulafia himself compared to the practices of music). The object of this meditative practice was to attain an elevated spiritual understanding based on mystical experience in union with the divine principle. The end-point of this (which Abulafia himself wisely sought to downplay) was cosmic insight, prophecy, and the consequential ability to make changes in the fabric of space-time.

Abulafia's method extended the established techniques of *gematria* (numerical transposition), *notarikon* (forming anagrammatic utterances from the letters of individual words) and *temurah* (systematic exchange of letters within texts) – he also went radically further than most of his contemporaries in applying permutation to words of other languages than Hebrew, and also in explicitly and intentionally abandoning language altogether, in favour of endlessly permutable phonemes. In conducting these permutations, which we might describe as lettrism *avant la lettre*, Abulafia advocated a striking form of free association involving what he termed *dillug* and *kefitsah* – jumping and skipping. Concepts and affective states were called to mind in a totally improvisational game of guided thought, with the view of expanding consciousness. To grasp how improvisational sound practice might be a kind of 'kabbalah of the senses' is not a great leap, as we have already seen *Poésie Sonore* and its various Dada antecedents using exactly the same strategies, albeit within a sharply contrasting cultural framework.

Abulafia's work has divided religious authorities as to its conformity to scripture, but this is not really relevant to us here. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that while his own utterances were orthodox, his method allegedly gave adepts powers that mere humans should strongly abjure. The utopian charge in all this is impossible to ignore, and its influence has been wide, arguably extending from his contemporary the Catalan Franciscan Ramon Llull (*Ars Magna et Combinatoria*) to moderns such as Henri Chopin (Fluxus fellow-traveller), Gil Wolman (International Lettrist) and the sui generis Brion Gysin (who was propelled into radical calligraphy as artform by a written curse visited on him in Morocco, which he regarded as a 'form of kabbalah'). Indeed, Gysin at least explicitly aspired to magical powers, and his last completed visual art work was a painting sequence entitled *The Calligraffiti of Fire*).[13]

13 J. F. Kuri (ed.). Brion Gysin - Tuning in to the Multimedia Age. Thames and Hudson, London, 2003.

Regardless of his religious orthodoxy, Abulafia's influence as a proselyte for the psychically-enhancing power of the experience of improvisation is hard to miss, once you reflect on his spiritual practice. It is not such a great leap from mystical meditation with randomized letters and syllables to lettrist poetic practice around the psychogeographical *dérive* and the radical montage cinema of Guy Debord. The impulse driving the cut-up into literature (another of Gysin's inventions) as well as into sound (or 'machine') poetry is a strong sign of the direction in which the waters of influence were flowing. In this respect Gysin is a key figure, as he embodied the improvisational/combinatorial virus as it infected all the arts based on media, both ancient and modern. It is no accident that he was associated with the literary wing of International Lettrism,

14 G. Marcus. Lipstick Traces. p.275

admittedly only once the Situationist International had definitively split from figures like Gil Wolman and Jean-Luis Brau, two of the leading Lettrist sound poets, whose 'pre-phonetic explosion', Marcus felt, 'defies lexical description'.[14]

Gil Wolman's account of those days lines him up clearly alongside the most radical Beats. He has argued that he and his fellow Lettrists: 'were against the power of words – against power'.[15] This is directly analogous to Burroughs and Gysin's efforts to 'rub out the word', a desire driven by the necessity to find a way out of the Western straitjacket of post-war conservatism. Lettrism was the sole youth movement of the late 1940s to 'take up the burden of thought'. Excluded from mass consumption in the post-war France of the early 1950s, they had to seek out 'units of gratuitousness', opposed to meaning and value, focuses of contemplation for no external purpose, with the avowed if megalomaniac intention of totally renewing culture.[16] In this way we can see the International Lettrists as post-Hegelian Beats, albeit Beats who had no literary aspirations whatsoever, eschewing works in favour of an ultimate hoodlum perspective on an artform without works.

Isidore Isou, the charismatic con-artist at the forefront of 'classical' Lettrism was the first to advance the radical thesis that in modern Western culture: 'Youth = proletariat'. In this he anticipated Zizek's formulation that the post-Modern proletariat consists of three fractions, the intellectual workers, the manual workers and the Apaches, the outcasts of society: 'Excluded = proletariat'[17]. At Easter 1950, when the Lettrists began their operations against French society, they sought, almost despite themselves, to profane Notre Dame de Paris. A man whom the papers described as a 'false Dominican' proclaimed from the pulpit to the Easter congregation that God was dead (ironically enough, since in the thirteenth century the Dominicans were founded specifically to preach against heresy). Whatever they thought they were doing, what these young Lettrists did pointed directly (at the precise moment when French society began to shift towards an

15 Op. cit. p. 368

15 Op. cit. p. 368

17 S. Zizek. First as Tragedy, Then as Farce. Verso, London, 2009. P.147

18 K. Ross. Fast Cars, Clean Bodies. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995.

economic base of consumerism) towards profanity as the pre- eminent tactic of the oppositional tendency in capitalist society.[18]

IV. JUST PUT SOME BLEACHERS OUT IN THE SUN...

You're a ghost
I'm the Church, and I've come
To claim you with my iron drum
Lala la, lala, lalalalala...[19]

With regard to conceiving of a cinema of pure means, one which foregrounds the medium and aspires to a condition of 'imagelessness', it does not take much casting about in the undergrowth of the Lettrist years in Paris, in the early-to-mid 1950s, before one chances on Guy Debord's first film *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*. In this flagrantly scandalous effort, no images whatsoever are offered and the screen alternates white and black, depending on whether the soundtrack is playing any audio. The words consist of disjointed quotations détourned from other works and fragments of banal dialogue between the voice artists. Result: raised voices, riots, punch-ups.

This goes a long way towards living up to Benjamin's famous assessment that 'film is ... the artwork most capable of improvement',[20] as well as pointing towards the centrality of montage in cinema, since the production was entirely constructed by edits, no camera being employed. It is as Benjamin foresaw, at base, 'a work of art produced only by means of montage'.[21] He went on to argue that in fact film was not even an artwork, but a test apparatus. Its value lies in offering us an opportunity to assert our humanity in the face of this apparatus – a dilemma familiar to anyone who has seen a Warhol screen- test; or Debord's Hurlements. And in that way, Debord's film, which aimed squarely at producing a 'situation' in the cinema itself, while it was shown, represents a pinnacle of cinematic technique; producing a work of art literally 'opposed to itself'. This returns us to Agamben's starting point, his exhortation for us to 'wrest... from all apparatuses – the possibility of use that they have captured'.[22] But how

19 J. Cale. Paris 1919, Reprise LP, 1973.

20 W. Benjamin. The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological reproducibility and other Writings on Media. Belknap Press, Harvard MA, 2008, p.28

21 Op. cit. p.29

22 G. Agamben. Profanations. p.92

23 G. Debord. Complete Cinematic Works: Scipts, Stills, Documents. Oakland Ca, AK Press, 2003

to transform this from a *sui generis* cinematic succès de scandale; into a viable tactic for artistic creation?

Debord's exit from Lettrist cinema was instructive in this regard. He made no more films for seven years, devoting himself instead to a regime of drinking and dérives or psychogeographical urban pedestrian excursions[23]. During these extended periods devoted to the 'creation of situations', all senses are deployed as organs of research, seeking data for the systematic understanding of affective states of being. It is easy to imagine these as ephemeral films without cameras, sequences of impressions and real experiences. Next, subtract the subject of the artwork out of the 'moment' by recording sound, and disseminating its playback in space and time without visual representation or accompaniment. This sound work also functions as a science of combinations (Hokhmath ha-Tseruf): an overwhelming number of combinations of frequency and timbre, of electro-acoustic traces, elisions of time through the magic of the razor blade. Making performative time literally 'come again' in the repetition of playback.

So perhaps it is the use of optical media which may limit newly-emergent apparatuses. Our totally contrasting point of vantage on culture is accessed by simply conceiving of sound as an apparatus for cinema which is sufficient in itself to carry the weight of an entire medium. The ancient Greek etymology of cinema is after all from kinematos – movement – and sound is movement as much as light is, and listening human subjects move in space, orienting themselves in acoustic space like deaf bats. While Guy Debord was concocting his first public situation by showing Hurlements at Le Musée de L'Homme,[24] across town Pierre Schaeffer (with Pierre Henry)[25] was striving to establish the conditions for a new art of noises, or concrete music; one which we 'like because it does not mean anything'.[26] He quickly realized that collaging sounds and subjecting them to many and varied permutations produced a surprising outcome, the sounds 'escaped like the words from a dictionary'. He noticed that musicians instantly closed their ears, but (as we

24 30 June 1952

25 Recently deceased: 5 July 2017

26 P. Schaeffer. In Search of a Concrete Music. University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 2012. p.3 27 Op. cit. p.33

27 Op. cit. p.33

28 B. Grenville. 'Parascience and Permutation: the Photo-based Work of Brion Gysin, in J. F. Kuri (ed.). Brion Gysin – Tuning in to the Multimedia Age. pp.99-139

have already discussed) poets opened theirs up, despite (or perhaps because) of the fact that 'these sound objects resisted all syntax, express[ing] nothing'.[27] The poets were already seeking to subvert 'control' through a breaking down of the idea of the author, and the creation of new and free technologically-mediated art-forms.[28] In this way – by inventing new media and their supporting technical practices - art itself defines 'the tendencies of the development of art under the present conditions of production'.[29] This is what Agamben was referring to when he argued that profanation 'does not simply restore something like a natural use... but, thanks to the substitution of the yarn for the mouse... open[s] up to a new, possible use'.[30]

While Schaeffer expended most of his intellectual capital in establishing sound as a vocabulary in contradistinction to music, with fraternal relations to the extreme linguistic games of literature; he might also have reflected on the relationship between his project and the cinematic medium, indicated even earlier in the inter-war period through works such as Walter Ruttmann's 1930 'sound film' Weekend. To do this would have cast light on the relationship of an audible artform to the long- established visual arts, as a tool to forensically examine many of the presuppositions of 'art' through the prism of a substitution of one sense for the other. Regardless, this work has fallen subsequently to others to undertake, often within the try-pots of mixed media experimentation.[31]

Thinking this way makes the bridge between Abulafia's combinatorial 'skipping and jumping' and improvisation with sound. Like the practices of International Lettrism and the Situationists they train the mind to follow different, less 'instrumental' paths, arriving unexpectedly at insights not otherwise obviously accessible through the 'Imperial logic' of capitalism. Improvised sound work brings this psychic training within reach of a wider group through the viral replication of a medium operating wholly within a Bourdieusian field of restricted production, with artists creating work primarily for an audience of other artists and 'art world

29 W. Benjamin. The Work of Art. p.19

30 G. Agamben. Profanations. p.85

31 Cf. the entirety of Tony Conrad's career

32 The links between this phase of Gysin and Burroughs' work and classical universal language theory are obvious. They were seeking a true 'logopandocy'.

insiders' who already grasp the syntax of the field. This scenario points squarely at the wormhole Brion Gysin saw in the Beat Hotel; the one that led between practical kabbalah and an art which would dissolve 'control' and enable the true meanings of words to escape.[32]

This points further, to Agamben's drive to universal profanation. He states that 'pure means' are by their nature 'fragile and precarious', and thus easily recuperated by capital, which in its extreme phase he argues: 'is nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means'.[33] So the challenge is: to work in a pure means that resists capture; an improvisational practice that profanes the sacred procedures of yogic logos, 'rubbing out the word', and makes the self-knowledge of the kabbalist available to all. This exploits the origins of all games of chance in oracular procedures; returning to play the power originally residing in religion, and removing from things their aura,[34] thereby returning them to new social uses.[35]

Of all the various media of art, sound is the one with the least current potential for appropriation by capital. It is the one most quintessentially characterized by the 'imagelessness' which shows that there is nothing more to be seen.[36] Considered from the standpoint of cinema, what means could be purer than sound; more foregrounded, and less apt to disappear behind the thing that it 'makes visible'[37] – and what more analogous praxis could we find for the gratuitous employment of Lorca's Gypsy: in 'building a tower of cinnamon'?

What is the possible social return on such an art practice; one that refuses both aesthetic validation and any multiplication of exchange value? Here again, it is the inexhaustible Benjamin who rides to our rescue, armed with words he wrote in 1935: 'theses defining the developmental tendencies of art can therefore contribute to the political struggle in ways that it would be a mistake to underestimate'. These theses, he went on to say: 'are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art'[38]. The benefit then is in the affective realm of thought. By making us

33 Op. cit. p.87

34 Or, as I have argued elsewhere, their habitus.

35 Op. cit. p.76-77

36 G. Agamben. 'Difference and Repetition in Guy Debord's Films'. p. 319.

37 Op. cit. p.318.

38 W. Benjamin. The Work of Art. p.19-20

39 G. Debord. Panegyric: volumes 1 and 2. Verso, London, 2004. p.23

think, feel, and thus act, in different ways; this practice wrests free the 'apparatus' of our activity and returns it to 'common use'.

The value of such a practice was similarly, if more poetically, conveyed by Debord; the man who sought to place the revolution at the service of poetry, when he reminded us in his autobiographical reflections on his days as a teenage Lettrist: 'that there is rebellion [even] in imagining that one could rebel'[39].

Dr. Bruce Russell is a practitioner in sound, who since 1987 has been a member of the Dead C. This internationally feted genre-dissolving New Zealand trio mixes rock, electro-acoustics, noise and improvisation in equal measures. He has also directed two of New Zealand's vanguard independent labels, Xpressway and Corpus Hermeticum. His solo guitar practice reconfigures the blues as a form of improvisational auto-destruction - not for nothing has he been described as 'the Jimi Hendrix of no-technique'. He is also a noted rock critic and published author. In 2016 he gained a practical PhD in Fine Art from RMIT. His dissertation was entitled: 'What true project has been lost?': Towards a social ontology of improvised sound work.

THE THICKNESS OF CINEMA

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