

Living, Breathing Images:

Alex MacKenzie's *The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing*

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Alex MacKenzie's *The Wooden Lightbox: A Secret Art of Seeing* is a live performance centered around a wooden, hand-cranked 16mm projector built from various recycled parts. The manual operation of the cinematic device and its strong physical presence amongst the spectators brings us back to the early days of cinema, before the electronic and digital era of moving pictures. In the role of travelling projectionist, the artist accompanies and performs his artwork in various venues in Canada and internationally. On February 15, 2010, MacKenzie presented his piece at the Black Box space, located at the Hexagram Institute for Research-Creation in Media Arts and Technologies (Concordia University, Montreal).

The first part of the piece's title, *The Wooden Lightbox*, highlights the raw materiality of MacKenzie's projector. The beam of light and moving images are not abstractly produced by an anonymous projectionist and invisible projector located in a booth behind and above the public. Rather, they come out of a small, humble wooden projector located unconventionally in the middle of the audience, in intimate proximity with its maker and the spectators. The second part of the title, *A Secret Art of Seeing*, inspires us to reflect upon alternative ways of using our sense of sight. It evokes ways of seeing that are private and sheltered, mysterious and intriguing. It invites us to

employ an 'artful' and creative gaze, engaging not only cognitive understandings but more elusive sense impressions.

This involvement of the senses is augmented by the creation of conditions of total immersion in the dark, one of the pleasures of the cinematic experience. Entering the site of the performance, Concordia's Black Box space, spectators are immediately cut off from the university halls. A different atmosphere reigns here. One moves away from the pervasive presence of the sound of circulating air and of echoing voices, away from the staircases and corridors bathed in fluorescent light. Inside the Black Box, a subtle vacuum exists. One's vision needs to readjust to this dimly lit, vast space. As a cohort of spectators, mostly students, quickly fills the room, the floor absorbs the sound of footsteps and the walls muffle the voices and movements. My body feels, paradoxically, at once pleasantly enfolded and slightly entrapped by the stillness and stuffiness of the Black Box.

The ceiling in the Black Box is very high and equipped with scaffolding to accommodate all sorts of sophisticated lighting equipment. A large projection booth at ceiling level can host high-tech consoles, projectors, and technicians. But today, it is not put to use. Located at floor level, Alex MacKenzie's set-up for his upcoming performance seems, in contrast, extremely modest, rather out of place – almost irreverent – in that high-tech Hexagram space. The small, handmade 16mm projector rests on a table, facing the room's projection wall, with a relatively short throw, which suggests that the projected

images will be of modest size. The artist sits, relaxed and reserved, surrounded on each side by rows of chairs, patiently waiting for us, carefully making final adjustments to his projector. This setting is inviting. It has the simplicity of an amateur family viewing night, and conveys intimacy within this public and somewhat impersonal academic space.

The spectators are at once excited and anxious at the sight of MacKenzie's projection machine, and they quickly fill in the chairs closest to it. Many must have heard that the projection is made to be experienced in proximity. There are whispers of *"It's better to sit in front..."*, *"I want to see the projector and how it works"*, and *"... we can sit over there, close to the screen"*. By the time I find a chair, I turn around and the Black Box is full.

The lights are gradually shut down. The projection begins, accompanied by the sounds of the cranking of the projector, slowly, then more quickly, coming into motion. The soundtrack starts. Almost immediately, two black and white images appear: a drawing of a bird, then a drawing of a cage. I didn't expect this. Right from the start, I experience an intense feeling of recognition, a flashback memory-image of 'the thaumatrope'.

I smile at a lovely, sweet and playful memory. Like the undisciplined spectator that I am, I'm now venturing away from the onscreen space of the MacKenzie projection, turning inwards. I open up and listen to my immediate, pre-reflective and embodied response to MacKenzie's moving images. The thaumatrope is a device consisting of a card

with different motifs on each side, which, when the card is twirled, appear to blend into one; it demonstrates the persistence of vision, on which the cinematic illusion is also based. I imagine the bird and the cage as images on reverse sides of a thaumatrope card. When one spins the card by quickly rolling the stick between one's palms, eventually the bird enters the cage, the cage enfolds the bird, in a continuous movement. The spectator then experiences a strong sense of wonder. There is a surprising aliveness to the illusion, and the spectator is at once the beholder and the producer of this small moving image, controlling it, making it pulsate in her hands. I linger now on this scene... taking pleasure in remembering my own past experience with creating and projecting a thaumatrope.

Back to the screen. *The Wooden Lightbox* is now projecting images of children's hands playing at *ombres chinoises*.¹ I am at once there onscreen and here offscreen. At this moment, I have an unsettling and magical feeling of having *The Wooden Lightbox's* images engage with my memory-images. There is something about the childhood experiences of 'playing' and 'dreaming', and their traces in adult life, that are stimulated by these moving images, which invoke a cross between the thaumatrope and the first cinematic experiences of the magic lantern. The boundary between my embodied thaumatrope memory-image offscreen and *The Wooden Lightbox's ombres chinoises* image onscreen is blurred and unclear. The images interpenetrate in the secrecy of the Black Box's darkness.

¹ Shadow theater.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty was a pioneer in theorizing consciousness itself as embodied. His concept of *flesh* "designates the manner in which subject and object inhabit each other by participating in a common condition of embodied sense [...]. *Flesh* connotes the structure of reversibility whereby all things are at the same time active and passive, visual subjects and visible objects".² Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh* investigates the reversibility of our senses, sight included. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz explains, "in traditional understandings of vision, the seer sees at a distance and is unimplicated in what is seen. But for Merleau-Ponty the seer's visibility conditions vision itself, is the ground the seer shares with the visible, the condition of any relation between them. To see, then, is also, by implication, to be seen. Seeing entails having a body that is itself capable of being seen, that is visible. This is the very condition of seeing, the condition of embodiment [...]. His point is ontological and not interpersonal: the painter sees trees; but the trees also, in some sense, see the painter".³

As a participative 'seer' and cinematic spectator, my body is there, seen and implicated in the moving images' projection, and so is the body of the filmmaker. In another sequence, we see the artist, Alex MacKenzie. His arms are

² Elena del Rio, in Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 286.

³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 101.

fully extended, holding the camera and turning its eye on himself. He seems to be spinning and spinning onto himself, with landscape in the background. It creates a hypnotic effect; his face and presence are insistent, repetitive, reminding us that knowledge is always situated and subjectively produced.

The sonic dimension of *The Wooden Lightbox* is as important as the images. The specific qualities of the sound composition created by MacKenzie accentuate the piece's kinaesthetic sentiment. The soundtrack consists of atmospheric sounds throughout. It modulates different textures and creates multiple, highly evocative moods and ambiances. Sometimes I am carried away, brought forward in a rush when a compulsive, strong and repetitive rhythm comes to the foreground... then suddenly, a single beautiful note pierces through. I follow it, take flight, and drift away. Sometime later – or was it earlier? – in the show, images of trains, moving landscapes and morphing clouds form an association with this forward driving motion and with these unexpected, soothing *rêveries*.

At other times, we are brought back into stillness and pauses. Moments of silence in the soundtrack allow for the gentle cranking of the projector to take back its place in the foreground, bringing us once more into the material space of the Black Box, in the company of the artist, the projector and the audience. Fleeting images from the projection come back to me: sepia-tinted, worn images of windows, some open, with diaphanous curtains covered in floral patterns, some closed and bare, with wooden framings. Silence, then deep chords of haunting music

resonate deep in my chest. The cranking of the projector rocks us. There is a gentleness to this passage; it calms us, repeating, then stopping. Images of passing clouds and daydreams intertwine, change shape, and vanish.

The Wooden Lightbox performance, via its visual and sonic elements, enhances our sense of embodiment. As spectators, we are constantly moving, on a continuum, from a state of bodily activity to a state of bodily passivity, sometimes in-between and back again, 'here' amongst other things: objects, bodies and surroundings. The emergent sonic environment and visual motifs of children and women dreaming and daydreaming, temptingly familiar images of children's games and adults' play, bring us back to childlike moments of experimentation, discovery and wonderment.

Bibliography

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improvisational, and embodied process of interpreting art pieces within exhibition spaces. She proposes therefore that the museum educator be recast as mediator/ animator. To do so, she brings both mediation theory and feminist theories of embodiment into dialogue with her eleven years of experience as a museum *médiatrice/animatrice*.

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