

the wooden Lightbox: a secret art of seeing

Alex MacKenzie, 2007–2010 (ongoing), 50min, performance, Canada

the wooden lightbox: a secret art of seeing is an exploration and reconfiguration of cinematic apparatus and emulsion. Using the early development of cinema as a marker for cultural, technological and economic change, these film cycles draw from turn of the century cinematic prototypes and long forgotten ideas surrounding the moving image and its early promise. At the core of this approach is the use of a homebuilt hand-cranked projector in an expanded cinema format to present a striking array of handmade and processed emulsion. The vast potential of the film frame is drawn out through imagery both archaic and contemporary in shape and form. Hypnosis, panorama, motion studies, expectation, magic, the dreamworld and sleight of eye conspire in this intimate and immersive framework.

"... this shadowy twilight, the gentle susurrous of the projector, together with an echoey ambient soundtrack... subsumes the observer into numinous hinterland of atavistic images."

–John Smith, Kino Bambino, Newcastle.

"...!MacKenzie's! work often has an otherworldly quality, as if we were seeing images for the first time...his process allows for the re-entry of a sense of wonder, what theorist Walter Benjamin once referred to as the promesse de bonheur, or the utopian promise of technology that can only be reproduced through an artistic reinvestment in the hidden possibilities of a medium. Through his rediscoveries, MacKenzie takes us back to the birth of the moving image..."

–Chris Kennedy, Strategies of the Medium III: In the Dark, Toronto (LIFT/Pleasuredome).

"I am simply trying to figure out a way to live that involves a few creative moments that keep me inspired and alive, and to pursue the belief that beauty is possible, and that you can pass on some ideas that make you excited about life's potential. The work that has moved me the most has at its core a kind of beauty and imperfection of form that is consistent with the world it inhabits, and this kind of beauty—with all its sadness, wonder and impurity—keeps me making things."

– Alex MacKenzie, Live and Letting: Alex MacKenzie Talks about Pictures

Toward an Ecology of Film

An Interview with Alex MacKenzie

By Claudio Cacciotti

Claudio Cacciotti

The lightbox performance connects with some of the earliest practices in the history of cinema (thinking about Muybridge and his Zoopraxiscope, Anschütz and his Electrotachyscope, Edison and the Kinetoscope). What concerns did *the lightbox* address and what difficulties did it solve/create for you?

Alex MacKenzie

I think *the lightbox* piece started to take shape when I began to take an interest in all the models and practical devices that were developed in the period when cinema was in its pre-infancy—not quite born. This was a period inspired both mechanically and philosophically by precisely the kind of devices you mention, but not quite yet established as its own specific entity. I was curious about what qualities of life, technology, economics, social concerns, etc. had come together to result in cinema as we know it today. Along the way—and it was a short period really, in the bigger picture—a raft of camera, film and projector devices were being proposed and manufactured from many disciplines: inventors, magicians, scientists, photographers, entrepreneurs, philosophers, chemists. In retrospect this seems like a flurry of activity all driving towards some cohesive “final version”, when in actual fact a multitude of motivations and interests were happening simultaneously given the zeitgeist and cultural climate of the time. The fact that one or two primary formats rose above all the others in the end has more to do with mass cultural consumption, so-called market demand (and perceived/invented need), than it does with good and bad ideas. The parallel development and proliferation of the internal combustion engine, factories, urbanization, etc. are all precisely aligned with this formatting as very central elements in the development of mass production and the age of consumerism. But my curiosity revolved specifically around what it was “in our heads” that might have been more openly and freely explored had the limits and shape of the market and world at that time not existed. In very simple terms I was going back to square one in order to understand where my interests genuinely lie in the use of film and cinema as a means of expression. Stripping down and returning to that moment seemed like the right approach.

I don't know that it has solved anything for me, though it did allow a place to begin, as slippery as it was, as well as a trajectory. If anything, it has begged more questions, but it has also reinvigorated my interest in the moving image. There is never any clearing away of all the history, but by returning to the beginning, it seems a kind of clarity is possible.

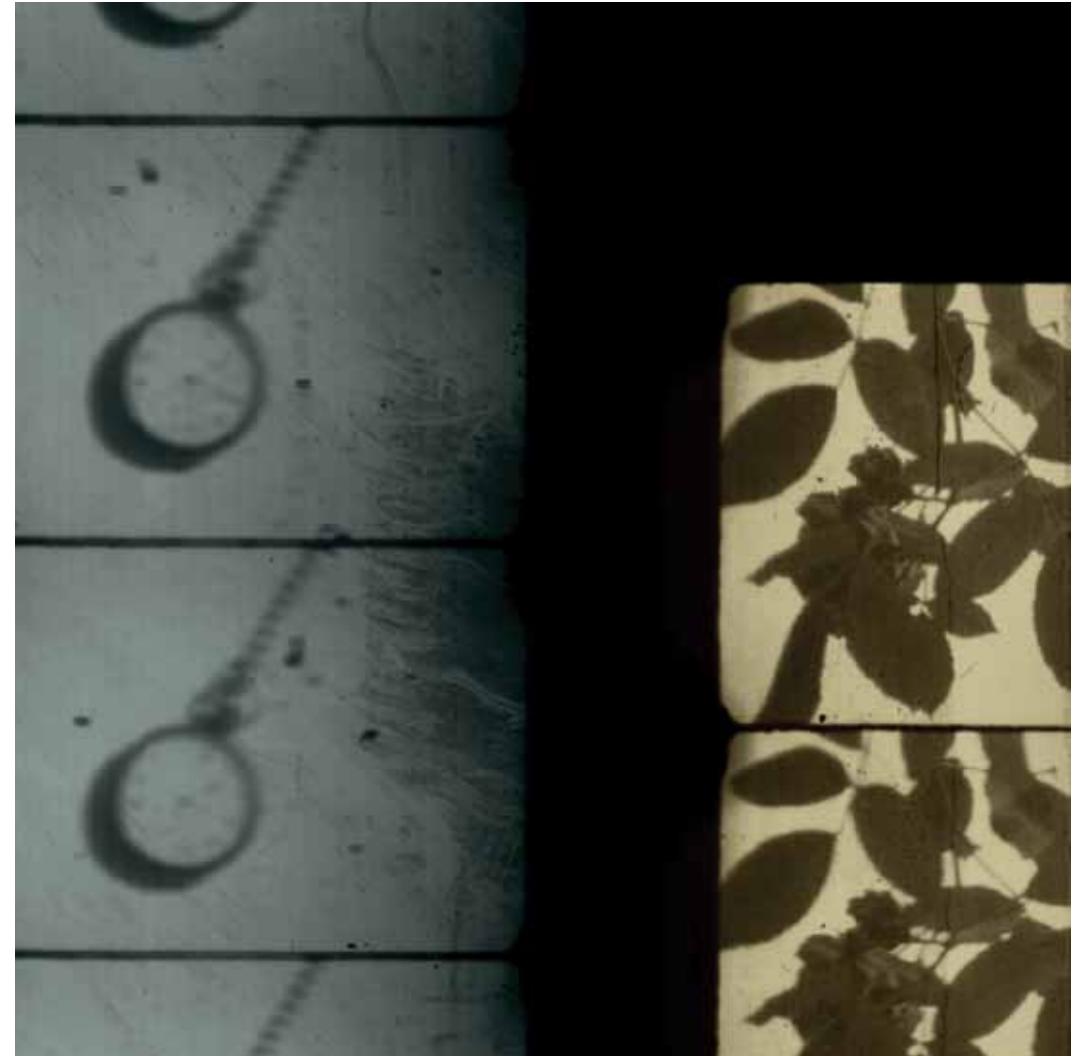
Claudio Cacciotti

One of the themes of modern art has been the "rejection of beauty in the artist's search for the sublime" (Steiner). In the interview Mike Hoolboom did with you, there is discussion of beauty as central to your work. Can you elaborate upon your reconstitution of beauty back into the narrative of modern art and what, if any, other canonical notions of modern aesthetic practices do you reject?

Alex MacKenzie

The sublime can only ever be presented as an expression in art. To actually inhabit it requires a real-world, non-representational experience, moment, observance, etc. I think it can really only successfully exist outside the symbolic in nature itself, as much as we might aspire to it in art. If you create a thunderstorm in a lab, as a sculpture or in a movie—well it just isn't the same thing. The symbolic is a distancing device, not a way in. John Zerzan talks about a period some 10,000 years ago that precedes the symbol. He actually blames art for a lot of the world's ills, or at least points to that emergence as the moment when a reshaping of our relationship to the world began to change the way we inhabit the planet. It's a great little essay that I recommend everybody have a look at. (You can find it online at <http://www.primitivism.com/case-art.htm>).

With all that in mind, I don't actually think I am trying consciously or unconsciously to reconstitute beauty back into the narrative of modern art, but I do think we can all be moved by something that we are drawn into. Film is an incredibly manipulative medium that makes no bones about its manipulations, and so I like to draw attention to that as well as become an accomplice in it, hopefully in the service of some critical thought.



Claudio Cacciotti

In his book *Expanded Cinema*, Youngblood suggests that a syncretic process is at work with many of the filmmakers in this field. In *the lightbox* show what are some of the ideas you are attempting to reconcile?

Alex MacKenzie

Gene Youngblood's book, while a great read, seems to me to pin a lot of hope onto technology as a way out of the perceived limitations of media art. The wonder and awe of the future, the decentralization of power, etc. Well... not really. Nice idea though. Prescient in some ways, but we shouldn't kid ourselves that the power is in any way in our hands. The further we move away from ourselves, the further we move away from any real insight and presence.

With *the wooden lightbox*, I don't think I am really trying to radically redefine or retool familiar tropes or positions in the study and writing on so-called expanded cinema, film as art, or the various manifestations that film can take outside of the narrative realm (experiential, structuralist, sculptural, etc). But I am informed by all of these dialogues and they have motivated my practice. They act as reference points and points of departure most definitely.

Above all I am interested in finding a new relationship with the moving image and presenting an audience with the possibility of another way of seeing; using the senses in a way that might create a critical and engaged involvement in their experience. But I think any art is really seeking to do the same. The tools are certainly different, but the final sensation and the direction that it might turn your head (hopefully in a new direction), is central.

The best art for me has always been work that seems both new and familiar—that moves me as well as challenges my expectations and leaves me feeling like something has just taken place, that a dialogue of sorts has been opened or begun.

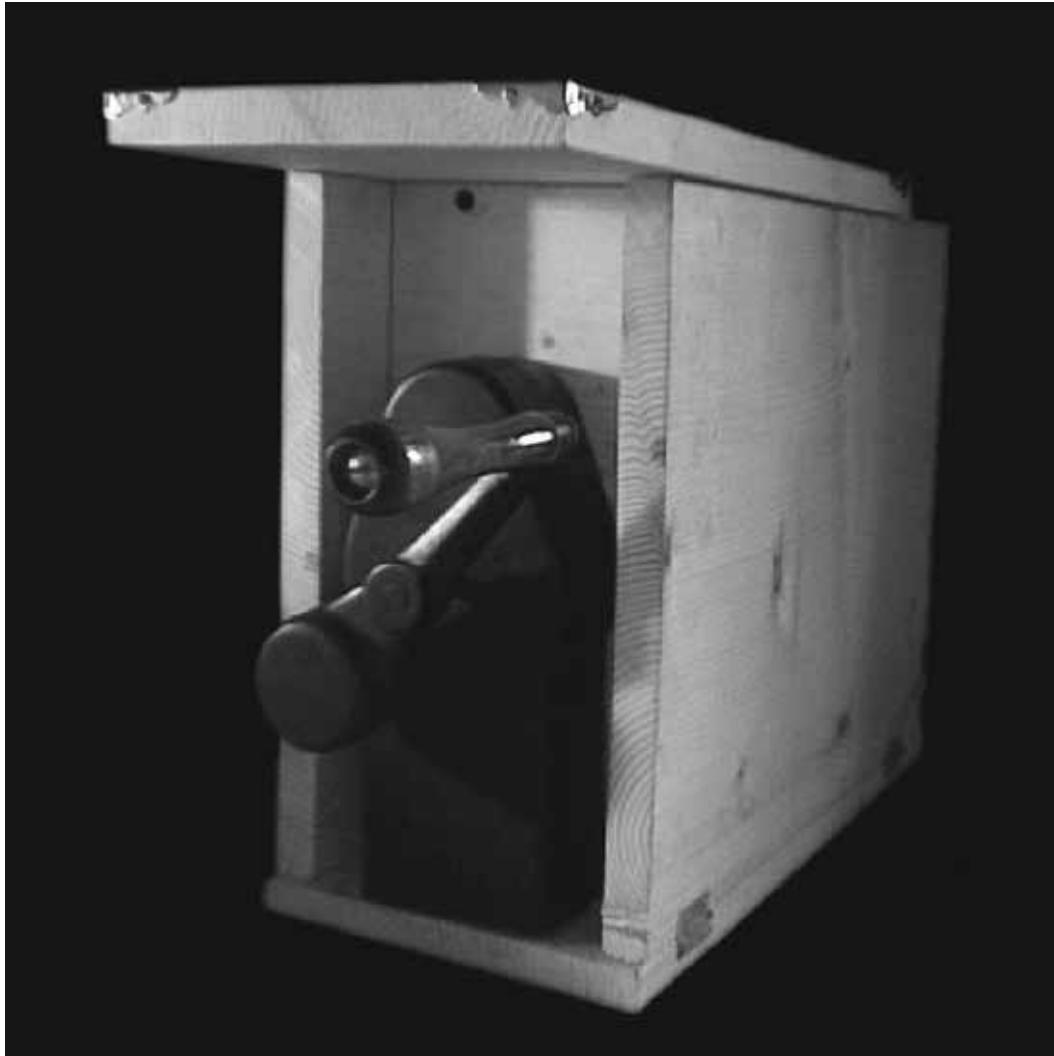
Claudio Cacciotti

In the second part of his book he proclaims "an end of drama through the development of a synesthetic cinema" (Youngblood). Our collaboration on *Parallax* revealed for me an inherent drama in your work. How do you balance the formal, technical elements of your process with the humane and social ones?

Alex MacKenzie

I think this once again speaks to the inherent manipulative nature of the moving image and our long established relationship with it as an audience. We know the rules and we tend to follow them without even thinking about the possibility of another way in. I am always trying to propose another way for myself, but I agree that drama is a part of the experience no matter how you choose to manage the elements at your disposal. The simple passage of time creates expectation. A film has a beginning, middle and end. These two qualities inherent to the form cannot eliminate drama and in fact encourage it.

In theory it seems to me that a synesthetic cinema would in fact be quite dramatic by its very nature. But none of this has to involve narrative or any kind of storytelling. Paintings are dramatic, so are sculptures. The question becomes, what can we do with that drama? How can we turn it on its head to maybe lead the audience into something else? Therein lies the balance. How it is done, both technically and in terms of content, is really a matter of trying out a broad range of gestures, tricks, pacing, contrasts (all the ingredients we find in the cinema), and seeing what might be done to retool them into something new. A painter discovers that two colours placed beside each other in a certain manner evoke something very particular, and they go from there.



Claudio Cacciotti

The label "filmmaker" seems inadequate to describe your artistic pursuits since at varying stages you become a lab technician by hand processing your own images, an engineer in order to build the projector, as well as the projectionist and performer of the show itself. What conditions within contemporary filmmaking led you to pursue such a radicalization of the concept of the auteur?

Alex MacKenzie

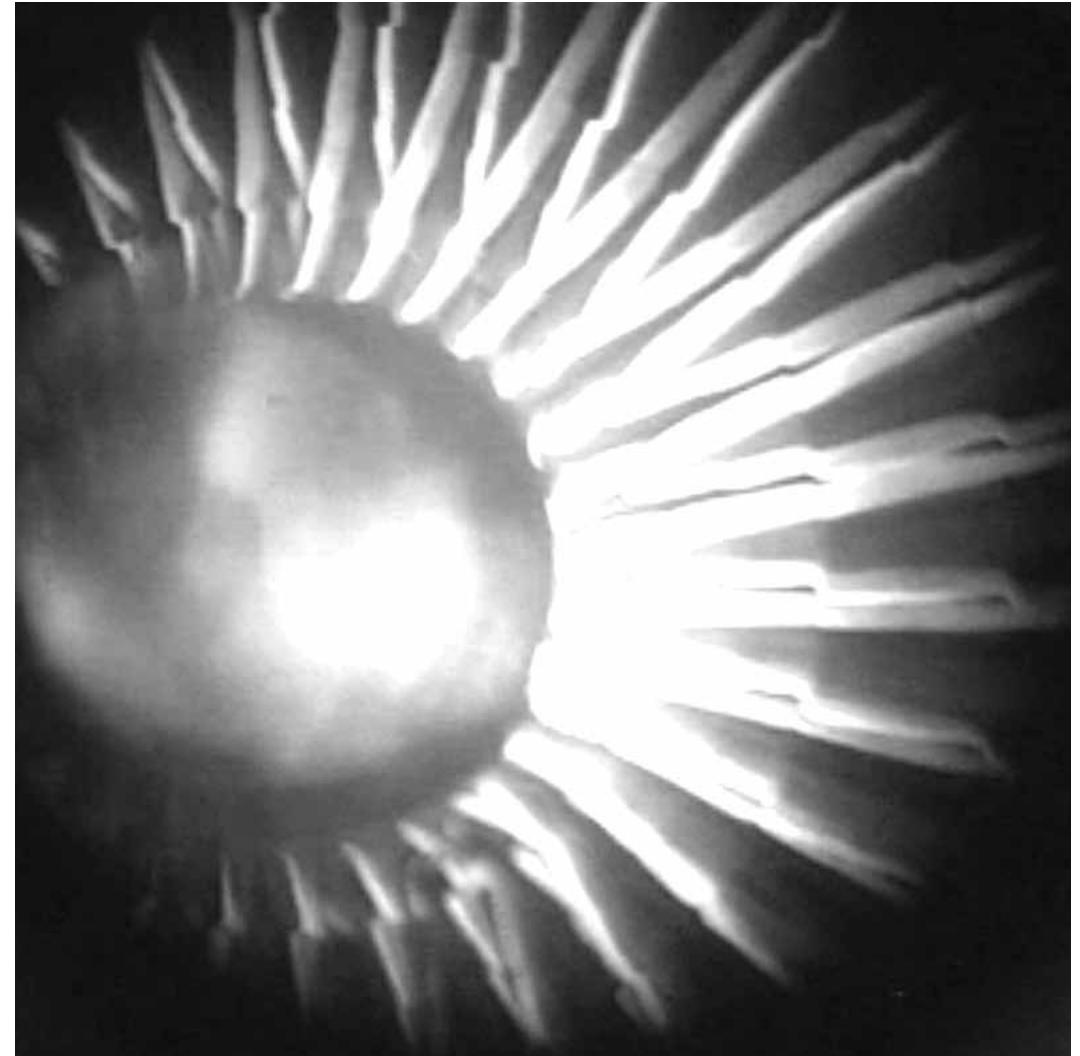
It seems to make a lot of sense to me in retrospect, the more it has become apparent that I am taking this path. A lot of filmmakers coined as "experimental" or "visionary" in the '70s came out of painting and sculpture, seeing film as another material with which to work that took up a different kind of space beyond the physical. I feel like in a lot of ways I have ended up going the other way to the same ends—moving away from cinema as cinema, and leading it more and more towards a space occupied by both painting and sculpture. Shaping it in ways more akin to these art practices while still maintaining the inherent light and time qualities that the moving image inextricably is steeped in and born of. My practice is similar to that of a studio artist in that I am working with and handling materials, constructing elements of the work, and performing the final piece. The auteur theory really stems from exactly that—the voice of the writer/director rising above all the potential noise of studios, the industrial filmmaking system, etc. The final goal for me would seem to be to put the means of production at all levels into the hands of the individual artist/filmmaker. I am really just taking it the next logical step and am able to more easily move in that direction as I am not burdened by interference. Nor in theory is a painter or sculptor. That said, I wouldn't underestimate the influence of the gallery system, nor the manager/artist representative/agent. Again, it is how one chooses to proceed in a field dominated by market interests and trends, and how important "career" becomes along the way.

Claudio Cacciotti

How does the notion that we are living in an ever expanding mediascape, where the co-option of visual imagery seems unstoppable and the way it affects "how people see," problematize the creation and reception of your images, and what strategies did it force you adopt to solve them?

Alex MacKenzie

I think my work is in fact born of this mediascape, and far from problematizing, the mediascape is in many ways responsible for it. I am finally responding to this mediascape. I wouldn't be making this work were it not for this mediascape. I think this is something that is really applicable to any artistic media practice. We can comment upon it, maybe even seek to exist outside it, but I think we tend to straddle these two spaces in the end. I certainly can't make people see how I want them to, I can only suggest ways of seeing, and maybe create work that encourages a critical dialogue with both my interests and then the environment that this audience inhabits outside my shows. That is how it has worked for me: the work I have seen that I like usually informs how I perceive and inhabit the spaces of my daily life. It encourages a different way of seeing, thinking, being. As simple as that might sound, I can't really imagine that art serves any other purpose. And so I wasn't forced to adopt any strategies, they simply had to exist; otherwise, I would only be repeating things.



Claudio Cacciotti

I have had the privilege of knowing you for many years and been able to witness the interplay between the ideas that influence your life and those that influence your art. At the risk of introducing too broad a topic, can you discuss how some of your ecological concerns have informed your media art work?

Alex MacKenzie

I have long been interested in the ways we have chosen to act upon the conditions presented to us as human beings, and what may have triggered these. What got us in this mess... if you know what I mean. When we study the various arms of anthropology and ecology we learn that things were actually really good on this planet for a very long time. Millions of years in fact. Populations were stable, food was plentiful, and contrary to popular belief the natural world was not threatening, but rather abundant and helpful. This is on record—not some fantasy or romantic imagining of the past. When you really start to study this stuff, it becomes apparent that our perceived intelligence has at base done us more harm than good. It is impossible for us to go backwards of course; we can't undo this intelligence or wish away our knowledge. The apple has been bitten. But it begs the question: why did this turn occur? The most convincing theories point to a period when we were actually greedy for the first time and where the individual slowly began to take precedence over the group. Many date this to about 10, 000 years ago and consider the division of labour and the rise of agriculture to have spawned much of our future woes. This has been discussed in detail by such authors as Derrick Jensen and Daniel Quinn, among others. The move from tribal models to those of industry and specialization, technological advancement, etc. It is a lot to go into here, but suffice it to say that this ongoing interest and the reading I have done in this area have in many ways spawned some elements of the work and various approaches I have been pursuing. While the correlation may not be immediately apparent, ways of living and intended trajectories are both wrapped up in these interests: self-reliance in combination with community-oriented approaches (both in teaching and in presenting work), a continued move toward broad knowledge and skill sets in combination with simple lifestyle choices, critical thought and a considered analysis of social and cultural systems. It really comes down to a constant re-evaluation of how and why I am going about things the way I am and how all of these things inevitably connect to one another. As John Muir said, when you try and pick any single thing out, you inevitably find it tied to everything else. At core, an ongoing desire to inhabit and explore the natural world is pretty central to the work I have been making for the past 10 years, as is a conflicted relationship with the city and all the tangents that leads into.

Claudio Cacciotti

Technology and ecology do not always make for comfortable bedfellows but your engagement of them, *the lightbox* performance in particular points to a synthesis rather than separation of these ideas. How did you resolve the tensions, both at the philosophical and practical level, so as to develop your current praxis?

Alex MacKenzie

I don't think I have resolved anything except maybe a recognition that the tool is not to blame, but rather the shaping of the space it occupies. I am still working on the tensions. It may well be that they inhabit the work itself.

Claudio Cacciotti

On your website you link to an interview with John Zerzan, someone who is known for his anti-civilization writings. Can you highlight where anarcho-primitive ideas influence the theory and practice of your art/life?

Alex MacKenzie

I am a big fan of Zerzan's writing, as inconsistent and overblown as it can sometimes be. I think his written work takes radical positions more often than not simply to get people thinking and give them a bit of a kick in the pants. I like this approach, especially these days when so many soft tactics are utterly fruitless. He is willing to entertain possibilities that most people don't even want to begin to think about. The environmental movement is a really tired place to spend time for me, but anarcho-primitivist concepts and philosophy actually snap me into alertness. It seems to me that if we don't consider these ideas, we are closing off promising engagement and dialogue. A move away from technology is primary to Zerzan's thesis, as is an aggressive critique of the tenets of civilization: art, language, numbers. At the core he is interested in eliminating domination. It is hard to speak about this kind of thing with people who have a knee-jerk reaction or uninformed ideas about the concepts of anarchism and primitivism. Suffice it to say that Zerzan is not living in a cave, nor am I. Much as I discussed earlier, it boils down to a constant questioning and inquiry into the things we take for granted, and this inevitably informs how we live and work. Critical thought.



Claudio Cacciotti

You once described yourself to me as an interlocutor in your chosen field but I also know that you have an uneasy (the anxiety of exposure?...no pun intended) relationship with that position. How does this affect the art you produce? How do you resolve the internal conflicts that must arise and how does this resolution play itself out in your films?

Alex MacKenzie

If by interlocutor you mean that I am a voice for a certain kind of artistic practice, then I would say that there is a fairly limited amount of dialogue about this kind of work and I inevitably find myself fairly regularly contextualizing what I do as well as encouraging others to explore these ideas. But by and large the kind of work I make is very much under the radar. I think that speaks to a kind of limited appeal and specificity of interests that have no real intention of capturing the imagination of millions, you know? I prefer not to spend time justifying what I do. Play, self-expression, these ideas of authentic experience that Zerzan is driving at. None of these are built upon or court an economy, which is appropriate and very central to what they are. But certainly there is a community of interest and I am in fact more than happy to explore ideas with this community. I think the excitement is in how that community and the work favour the embracing of the real over the manufactured, the experiential over the predictable, while still allowing for the analytical and conceptual. There is no economy here, so the work tends to inhabit a fairly small space. And small is good.

Words of advice for emerging Filmmakers (Cribbed from advice I have received over the years from sage elder Filmmakers.) :

Keep your overhead low and your aspirations high.

Don't spend too much time in the dark.

You need to have your own experiences in order to have something to say.

Show where you want to show—don't wait for invitations, they may never come.

Remember to eat.

A syllabus for a course in Expanded Cinema:

Find yourself a projector: look at how it works, take it apart a little, and put it back together again as best you can.

Find any old film: hold it up to the light and react to what you see by doing something to it.

Run it through the projector and effect it some more based on what you see there.

Repeat until the film won't run through anymore.

Now let it burn in the gate by running the sprockets the wrong way around and sliding it through slowly by hand.

Remember that this is the oldest trick in the book, but it still looks great.

Go for a long walk and think about what you've done and what you want to do next. Begin again.

If after five cycles of this kind you are fed up, then find something else to do.

If on the other hand you are still interested, keep at it. Something will start to develop.

Definitions (within the context of Expanded Cinema):

1. The Room

Four walls is better than three, but having no fourth wall might be a good way to get out if you have to. At least one white wall is fairly important, unless you have no intention of turning the projector on. Ceilings can make good screens. Doors are better than windows.

2. The Audience

At least one, preferably present for the performance. Remember that this is who you are conversing with, so be courteous. Serve tea if you have to.

3. The Film

Feel free to do whatever you like with it. Light passing through can net results, but is not mandatory. Dispensing with it altogether is okay too.

4. The Projector

A working bulb is nice. A take up reel will prevent a big clean up later. Then again, there is nothing quite like a giant pile of film in a room. Luis Recoder and Sandra Gibson did a nice simple installation of this projectionist's nightmare, and I have experienced it first hand as have many projectionists I have talked to in the past. Just remember the distributor wants it back in the end, unless you own it.

5. The Projectionist

That's you. So know your tools and above all be prepared to improvise.

6. The Frame

Entirely up for interpretation. One person's frame is another person's flashlight. Also—film melts. As one small child once famously said upon seeing the black bubbling and melting frame of celluloid on the giant screen in front of them, "It's like pepsil!"

7. The Filmmaker

See #5

8. The Soundtrack

Optional. Collaboration is encouraged. Avoid synchronization at all costs, it will only take you on a fruitless chase. You will never catch that rabbit before the show is over and then you will have missed all the scenery.

9. The Past

But a memory.

10. The Future

Inevitable.

11. The Present

As long as you are in it, #9 and #10 hold true and take care of themselves.

Alex MacKenzie is an experimental film artist working primarily with relic analog film equipment and hand-processed imagery to create works of expanded cinema, light projection installation, and performance. His live media works have screened at the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the EXiS Festival of Experimental Film in Seoul, Lightcone in Paris, Kino Arsenal in Berlin and others. Alex was the founder and curator of the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images, the Blinding Light!! Cinema and the Vancouver Underground Film Festival. He was an artist in residence at Atelier MTK in Grenoble, France and Struts Gallery/ Faucet Media in New Brunswick. Alex co-edited *Damp: Contemporary Vancouver Media Art* (Anvil Press 2008), and interviewed David Rimmer for *Loop, Print, Fade + Flicker: David Rimmer's Moving Images* (Anvil Press 2009). www.alexmackenzie.ca

Claudio Cacciotti is a media artist and cinephile who has collaborated with musicians and filmmakers on various projects since the 1980s. He has produced and/or co-produced a diversity of work that includes audio recording, live performance, short film and video. He currently lives in Gatineau, Quebec.

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T H E P A C I F I C C I N E M A T H E Q U E

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