

InFlux Magazine

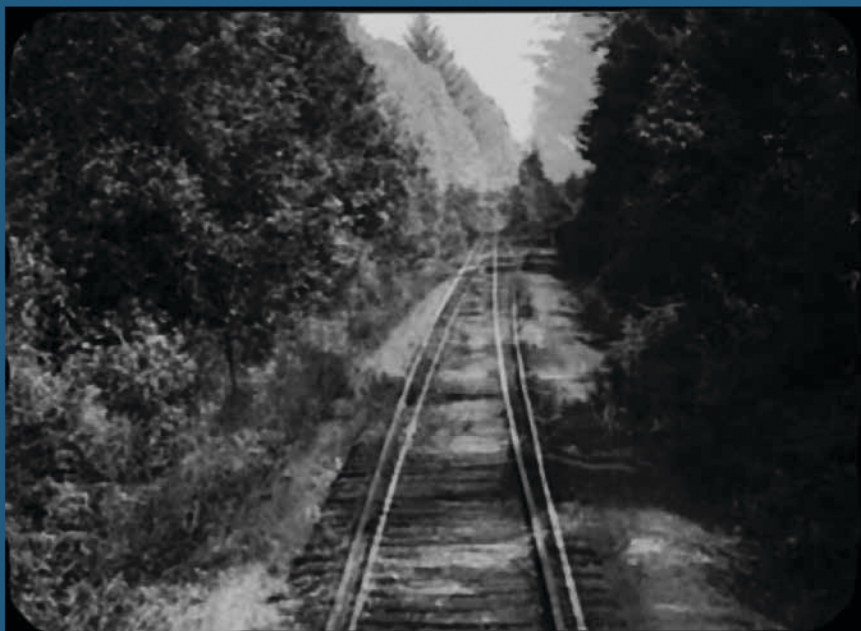
Writings on Media Art



The Film Issue

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Interview with Alex MacKenzie

Peter Sandmark

Alex MacKenzie is an experimental film artist working primarily with analog equipment and hand processed imagery. He creates works of expanded cinema, light projection installation, and projector performance. Alex was the founder and curator of the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images, the Blinding Light!! Cinema and the Vancouver Underground Film Festival. His work has screened at numerous international festivals, including the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the EXiS Experimental Film Festival in Seoul, and Lightcone in Paris. He has held artist residencies in France, and across Canada, most recently at Cineworks' Analog Film Annex in Vancouver. 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).

Peter Sandmark: I know that when I got into studying cinema and making experimental films I reflected back on my childhood and realized there had been certain events—I would call them filmic experiences—that ultimately turned me in the direction of experimental film. It might not have even been watching a whole film, but a sequence that would affect me. Could you talk about any early formative film experiences you may have had, and whether you feel they connect with the work you do now?

Alex MacKenzie: Well, I sure wasn't one of those kids making Super 8 films in the backyard with cardboard time machines or anything like that. I mean, there were cardboard time machines, just no cameras. My interests in any kind of

film besides Hollywood mall movies really didn't take hold until I left high school, but my dad spent some time filming the family when we were kids, so having that camera staring down at me might have had some residual impact. In college I took a class called "Short Story, Short Film" where film versions of stories were compared to their source material with much discussion around this transformation and adaptation. Incidentally, this class was taught by Ronald Mlodzik, best known for his roles in a few early Cronenberg films. In any case, I think the first film that really had an impact on me in this class was *An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge*, based on the Ambrose Bierce short story. The inventive use of sound and the conflation of visual hallucination, fantasy and escape was really fantastic. But it wasn't until I

took a class in Canadian Experimental Film with Peter Harcourt in University that I had a kind of eureka moment as to the possibilities of the medium.

PS: There is an old saying that with their first film, many filmmakers try to make all the films they loved. What was your first film and what was the inspiration behind it?

AM: My first film was also my first real roll of Super 8, a portrait of my Great Aunt Leah Sinclair, upon a visit to her decrepit and monstrous home in Toronto. I didn't really know what I was doing so only a small amount of the footage was useable, but I did record a lot of her somewhat urgent tales of family history. That visit had a bit of Grey Gardens to it, with food gone stale in the kitchen and this poor elderly woman barely able to manage on her own and swallowed up by this big old house. So it was, in the end, a family portrait of a relative I barely knew. I was primarily inspired by the encouragement of my mother to visit this aunt while I was in town. It was a pretty tentative start, but it did move me forward.

PS: Could you recount a bit about how you got involved in artist run centres?

AM: Well, after finishing a degree in film studies and not having any real technical experience, I decided to get involved with the film community in Montreal to get my hands dirty,

so to speak. This involved becoming a member of Main Film, which, as I discovered, was at this time a very active and inspiring place to be. And this is also where you and I first met all those years ago. I managed to work on a variety of films doing sound recording and cutting and some shooting and picture editing as well. This involvement led fairly soon to working on a tour of experimental films around cities and towns across the province which familiarized me with the current work on the circuit, as well as giving me a sense of audience reaction and interest in this kind of filmmaking. Shortly after this phase of my life I decided to move out west, inspired by the work I had studied in film school by several west coast artists. This naturally led to an involvement with a number of film-based arts organizations in Vancouver including The Cinematheque, Cineworks, and Idera Films. I ended up working at the Cinematheque for several years, then moved back to Montreal for a year which I spent hatching a plan to open my own little storefront cinema while also working on a film of my own. Upon my return to Vancouver I found a space and opened the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images which I ran for two years, then moved on to a larger and more full time schedule with the Blinding Light!! Cinema, eight days a week for five years.

PS: In your interview with Mike Hoolboom in the book "Practical Dreamers - Conversations with

Movie Artists” you discussed the Blinding Light. There seems to have been a lively and eclectic variety of work that you would show. Can you talk a bit about how you programmed the screenings?

AM: The Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images (1995-1996) was sort of like a testing ground in some ways for the Blinding Light, and I began programming there with a mix of educational and instructional oddities on 16mm that I was beginning to collect at the time in tandem with short experimental film works. My theory was that thematic odd-ball programming would draw the crowd and expose them to works by artists they would otherwise not be able to see or necessarily have known of. There has always been a real struggle to make this kind of work more visible to audiences, something that unfortunately comes down to economics. In any case, this run of films and moving-image based art installations was a great primer for the Blinding Light, though I clearly wasn’t nearly prepared for the amount of work it took to run the place. The enthusiasm and efforts of friends and volunteers had a lot to do with the success of that project. As things got rolling I organized an Underground Film Festival—the first of five over 5 years—and sought out local works exclusively for the first edition, which worked out to be a great way to get to know the pulse of local filmmakers and who was out there. Programming, as with the Edison, was very much a

word of mouth thing with filmmakers suggesting other like-minded filmmakers, getting in touch and planning shows. Slowly, distributors became a source of works, but the most memorable shows were when artists were able to come to town and present their work in person. This was the late nineties and early two thousands, and the true heyday of microcinemas, so there was an ad hoc circuit that developed over time. None of these other spaces were running work nearly every night of the week though, so planning programs required a lot of forethought and a lot of phone calls. And then there was everything else...and a café out front. A great and very heightened five years, but I am happy not to be slogging away at it still. I think the Blinding Light’s success came to some degree from the fact that it was a limited time project with a pre-determined end (based on a lease agreement) so there was a project quality to it for me, a giant five year film installation.

PS: You have used hand-cranked cameras and projectors in your work. How did you get into hand cranked film gear and why?

AM: I have always been curious about the early days of cinema and the way it developed in tandem with an ever ramping-up economic model at the turn of the century. So much of what we know and see as cinema today simply would not exist if it weren’t for the development of what appears to us now as



(Alex MacKenzie, still from *Shudder*, 2016.)

an inevitable cultural appetite for consumption and the mass market. I think this art form could have looked and behaved quite differently if capital was not so central to its shaping (as with so many things). So my use of hand-cranked film gear is both a hearkening back to this pivotal moment as well as an attempt to revisit it and reinvent it.

My performance *The Wooden Light-box: A Secret Art of Seeing* is presented on a wood-encased hand-cranked film projector, and is very much a gesture of reshaping and highlighting forms and approaches that exist quite apart from the narrative theatre-based model we have now come to accept without question. It is also an attempt to highlight both the labour and mechanics, which are an integral part of this unspooling.

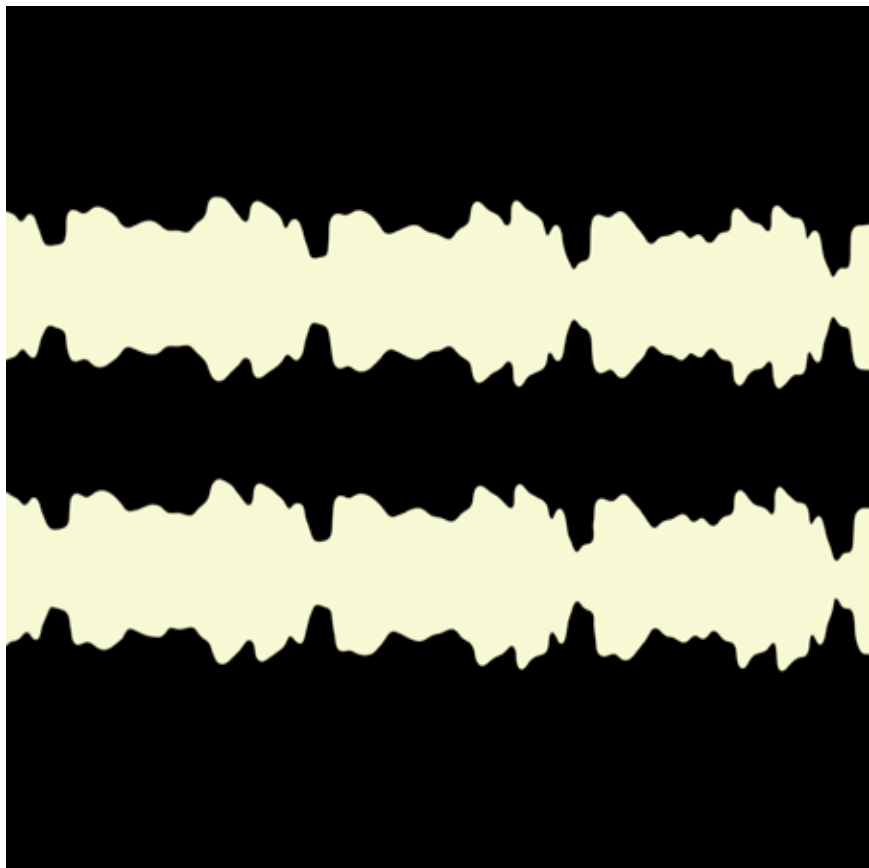
I have made several films shot on Kodak's first 16mm camera, the Cine-Kodak Model A, which is hand-cranked, as opposed to hand-wound. The introduction of this camera in 1923 (paired and sold with a projector) was a moment of standardization put in place to profit, streamline and lead the market. It was clearly an early advancement for amateur filmmaking. Economically out of reach to most people at that time, it also highlighted the increased leisure time for the upper classes. So these two ideas of personal filmmaking (experimental, home movie-making, etc.) and economic drivers continue to be strange bedfellows and of interest to me.

Aside from these historical explorations, in practical terms I like the flexibility of being able to shoot and project at different speeds. While a

wind-up Bolex can run for only 30 seconds, my Cine-Kodak runs as long as I am willing to turn the crank. And with the hand-cranked projector, I am able to speed up, slow down and stop at any time. This creates a very different viewing experience where the shutter flicker can be more pronounced. Typically I am cranking the film at about 8 frames per second, which incidentally and not entirely intentionally cuts my film costs by about 60 percent!

PS: Could you tell us a bit about your current film work?

AM: Lately I have been exploring various historical models of stereo film and creating work inspired by that research. Nothing like the anaglyph or polarized formats, but I do reference this sort of technology that seeks to purportedly enhance the viewing experience. Needless to say I am skeptical! The installation pieces presented at the Flux Gallery in Victoria (February 2016) are a part of that project, and a series of interconnected short performance works are derived in part from the installation works. I will be touring this work in Eastern Canada and the USA later this spring. I am also working with the Iris Film Collective in Vancouver on a few projects including a now completed series of films entitled *End of the World* that was created using a very limited amount of Orwo print stock. Projects that have built-in limitations are always a challenge and I enjoy working this into the equation. I finished a Super 8 film commissioned by Echo Park Film Centre (*Effulgence*) a little while back, and I have been experimenting in the last while with creating still photos from 16mm film strips shot in a landscape format on print stock. One of these was recently included in the anniversary show at Deluge Contemporary Art in Victoria.



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