

LIVE AND LETTING:

ALEX MACKENZIE TALKS ABOUT PICTURES

Mike Hoolboom: Some artists who work with ready-made pictures (made by strangers, already in circulation) feel that there are already too many images in the world, their work functions as recycling. Others have more political agendas, and aim to point the mainstream back at itself. Why do you use found footage?

Alex MacKenzie: I saw work that used found footage and appreciated the emotions and false nostalgia they evoked, but also respected the untouched industrial and educational films that were the source for many of these artist's works. They possessed a touching utility, and helped fine tune interests in movie making that were not based on drama or storytelling. No attempt was made to seduce or convince, these films assumed there were things I needed to know and were bent on demonstrating them. Drilling techniques in coalmines, clearing the lungs of newborn infants, methods for closing a deal.

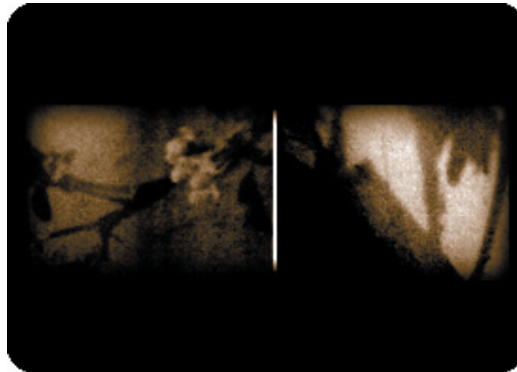
MH: Each movie is a marker in time, evidence that someone passed this way once, as well as superego doggie biscuit, career stepladder, capitalist object of transmission. You don't produce these objects much, preferring performance. Can you explain why?

AM: Here I am, now, and that is all I've got. Psychically, I can't afford to believe anything else. Legacy has never much interested me, and I fear investing these objects with too much power, power that could move me in directions I may not want to go, or may bind me in some way. It is most definitely induced by fear more than some grand statement. When I was making "finished" work, I would send it out to festivals and get no feedback besides form letters of thanks or rejection. I realized that this part of the making was uninteresting and meaningless. Creating a store of work was sucking me into commodity-think (How many have I got now? What is this arc looking like?), which I feel limits my ability to move past and forward. So I wondered how I could keep the development of the work alive, and performance seemed the obvious way. It also required my presence at screenings and enforced communication with audiences.

I struggle with trust. I have seen so many "movements," and the judgments for and against are interpreted in a manner which best suits the needs of those doing the interpreting. History has a way of lying to cushion the blow of truth for the latest reader. Still, I am glad for traces of the past that help to build strategies for managing my world. I am insecure with my work, and enjoy the idea of it existing only in the moment of its presentation. Maybe memory is kinder than document.

MH: The avant world is a place of refusal (of audience, venue, narrative conventions). Can you discuss this in terms of your work?

AM: 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. What the avant world does with it, be it refusal or acceptance, is largely secondary. We can't escape the narrative imperative, it seems we need to attach it to most anything we see or experience. So pursuing it in a conscious way, overtly, seems unnecessary to me and maybe a little bit of an obvious and uninspired strategy really.



goldenleaf, 2006

My interests lie almost entirely in finding my path in what could be called a spiritual way, as flaky as that sounds to some, and self-expression and the exploration of ideas is one way to do that. It is not the core of my being. I am not naturally driven at all times to make work. Sometimes I worry I should be doing more, but then see that I can only do as much as I do, and that is my lot. I distrust the institutions that rally around art and art making. I see personal

agendas and a lack of genuine selflessness, which makes me feel cautiously skeptical and at odds with the economy of art. Working in the avant world, as you call it, is a place where the rules of economy (of money) play a much less central role. A reasonable living cannot be made in this zone without doing a whole lot of grotesque self-aggrandizing, running around and pushing your "thing" on the current tastes. This strategy doesn't seem to bring a lot of pleasure in the end, nor satisfaction. And given that my ideas and message are humble and very personal, it doesn't make much sense either. Why attempt to throw these things at everyone? Seeking approval and dollars from a system I have little regard for seems pointless and self-defeating. Do I take it all too seriously when I am being serious? Maybe. I don't see how else to do it though, when I am doing it.

MH: Do you feel that you are part of an avant-garde? What about other people?

AM: I really don't think about it much. I know there are a handful of folks on the planet pursuing like-minded ideas

and forms (projector performance, film manipulation, etc), but I never feel the need or pressure to fit into a grouping or system. Maybe by situating myself where I have, I can avoid that. Is it an avant-garde? I imagine so, as it sits on the edge of a cliff with an ocean far below, always ready to topple over, risking failure, error, missteps and death. But the edge offers a view I don't find anywhere else.

Mostly I feel quite alone in my practice. Certainly I can relate to others, enjoy and discuss their works, but more often than not, I create in a vacuum of my own design. The majority of those I'm close to either don't get my work or don't take an interest in it. Rather, they take an interest in me, and I in them. The work is secondary at best. When I go to festivals and discuss my work with strangers, it feels more connected to a world view, that it might, in fact, "fit in" somewhere.

MH: Could you talk about your theatres and how you started and closed them?

AM: I started the Edison Electric Gallery of Moving Images in 1995 after returning from a year in Montreal. I was becoming more and more interested in uncovering old, ephemeral films. I was in touch with Rick Prelinger at that time, and visited his huge archive of works down in New York City's meat district. I had also been trying to correspond with Amos Vogel about the works he discussed in his book *Film as a Subversive Art*, trying to locate some of these prints. I thought that programming the so-called avant in concert with entirely obscure, ephemeral works that had the potential of "fun," might draw more folks out to discover both of these invisible cinemas.

These were my two primary interests at the time: films once made for industries that no longer held any value and were now living very far from their intended forum if at all, and films made for personal reasons that had a very small (if any) audience. When you read the history books on the avant-garde, you quickly recognize that these films never had significant audiences. Even in the heyday of the American "Sitney" period in the center of New York City, audiences were usually made up of a few dozen at most. Have you ever read Mekas's old Village Voice columns? He was ranting and raving at how crucial and potent and life-altering this stuff was, all the while acknowledging that five people showed up. So for me, arriving at a moment when interest was clearly waning, I was trying to create a space and atmosphere that felt inclusive, unpretentious, non-academic, but took the work seriously (ephemeral, avant and otherwise).

Why start a space in Vancouver? It had potential at the time, very much the untamed west, without a lot of cultural competition. I also didn't know what else to do with myself. I was making the occasional film, doing graphic design to get by, and trying to imagine "what next?" A new space seemed like a good idea. So I programmed this stuff along with a mix of other live

shows, performance work, retrospectives, etc.

It was at this time I met Owen O'Toole who came up to do a show. He definitely planted the seeds of inspiration for pursuing projector performance, as well as hand-processing. I ran shows mostly on weekends, barely getting by, living in the back room in less-than-desirable conditions: no heat, rotting floorboards, etc. I did this for two years and considered the experiment a success. When the lease was up the landlord wanted way more money and I was getting tired of the living conditions. I closed up shop and put the seats in storage. I don't know that I really thought about reopening with a new plan at that time, but I didn't sell the seats, so it must have occurred to me.

I worked on films and continued with the graphic design for a while, then happened upon a space in Chinatown that looked promising. There were a grouping of studios surrounding a large central room on the second floor of a two-floor building. Next door was a booze can and downstairs a Chinese grocery store. I decided to dive in headfirst. A few friends and I cleared the place out (it was filled with junk from past storage, artists, etc) and started painting and planning the space. I rented out the studios

which surrounded the central space to artists with the understanding that the central room would be used for screenings and events half the week, that they were welcome to attend and participate, but that noise levels had to be nil during shows. A few artists rented the first couple of studios with a promise of others to come. By opening day I had a schedule printed for the coming months, fully distributed and a big opening night party planned (Halloween) with a haunted maze, bands, films and more, with lots of publicity to

boot. That afternoon, as I was wiring something under a platform I saw these two feet approach me from across the room. It was the city engineering department and the fire marshal, come to close me down before I even opened. The space was not zoned for assembly and if I dared to go ahead with the opening they would close me down and slap me with a heavy fine, so they strongly recommended I don't have the opening party, or anything else, ever. My heart sunk lower than low (though I have to admit to a simultaneous and strange lifting of my spirits too. All the weight of the project was suddenly gone and I was free of this monstrous responsibility of my own making).

Heather (my girlfriend at the time) and I spent the next week at city hall with planners, the cultural sector and the building code people learning a huge amount about the rise and run of stairs, heritage building status, selling off building height to developers—a load of things I didn't care to know and that, finally, didn't help me an ounce. After much anxiety and soul searching, I decided (or finally initiated) the inevitable fate of the space: pull out, cut my losses and regroup. The experience left me extremely gun-shy of trying the "illegal space" idea again, and what little funds I had to spare were gone. My memories of that space now are the smell of the Chinese



Blinding Light!! Cinema audience, 2003

grocery store, the low ceilings that nagged me from the start, and the piles of programs I left in the middle of the room for the next tenant to deal with. (I actually know one of the folks who ended up renting the space, and he complained of the mess when he moved in. Had he only seen it before we cleaned up! He didn't last long there. The booze can is still next door, untouched.)

Half a year later a friend of Heather's mentioned an empty theatre space in Gastown I might want to have a look at. I never set foot in Gastown except for the occasional rock show at what was then The Town Pump. The theatre stood on the very edge of Gastown, it was really part of the downtown eastside—a rough area full of homeless people, junkies, prostitutes, old men, ex-fishermen and loggers, many living in rooming houses and cheap hotels. Of course, there were also housing cooperatives, low-rent apartments, and a community of people interested in addressing the atrocious state of this neighborhood that remains—famous, even, for being the poorest postal code in Canada. There were also artist studios nearby, and a strange oil-and-water mix of condo owners who never left their lofts, ordering take-out and watching their huge TVs while the living dead roamed the streets below.

The space itself was perfect for what I had in mind: a black box with risers, a front end area that could act as a café during the day and a concession at night, and an office area in the basement for film storage, computers and dry goods. Some paint, a few fridges, coolers, a coffee machine and the construction of a booth were the primary concerns. Relatively speaking, not that big a deal. The rent was high for me but cheap for the area—with the strata fees and property taxes it came to about \$3000 a month. Looking back now it made absolutely no sense to move forward given where I sat financially, but I had some kind of blind faith that this would work out. I signed a five year lease and made myself a promise: that if I was around in five years I would decide if it was still something I wanted to pursue beyond the lease. And if, on the other hand I sank... then I sank. Well, we—and that "we" includes a list of about 50 volunteers all told, to say nothing of the moral support of friends—managed to sustain it for the whole five years, sometimes running credit cards to their max as we awaited funding or prayed the weekend shows would do well enough to make the rent. Those who came to the popular shows saw a place that was wildly successful, while those who came to the more rigorous, "difficult" and unknown films and videos or live presentations saw just a handful of people and must have scratched their heads at how we could possibly keep things afloat. I also ran the Vancouver Underground Film Festival out of this space for five years with tremendous success, garnering a reputation all around for uncompromising programming, an absolute lack of pretension, and a spirit of will and refusal to falter (even with numerous thefts—a few with bricks through the window, a few more by infected needle-point). The only folks getting paid were the café daystaff. I never pulled a salary in the entire five

years except for a small symbolic stipend for running the film festival (four days a year). Somehow, I managed to find space for a few design contracts, lucked into a few personal art grants, and actually squeaked by while running the cinema full time—seven days a week—as well. The website for the space still stands as an archive for film reference and as a testament to a very intense five years.

www.blindinglight.com

And then it was over. Contrary to popular mythmaking, it wasn't burn-out that stopped me, though I worried that was coming. Better to stop while I still liked the place, I figured. And enough with administration, I needed to get back to my work and see what it felt like to make it without this weight over my head every day. A few folks came forward with a desire to keep the place going, wanting to take over. But after explaining the finances involved and the massive workload, it became clear that the task was far too overwhelming and financially daunting. The smart people whom I approached at the outset of my decision to close shop with the idea of taking over didn't need to be convinced of anything. They knew the job was too much and wisely refused my "generous" offer outright.

I ran the place in a fairly unconventional way, in that I managed the bulk if not all of the creative and primary administrative tasks myself: programming, design, advertising, marketing, projection, café management and ordering, accounting, etc. Had I tried to hand it off to someone else, they would likely and sensibly want to piece this work out. But the place was so tightly run that handing tasks around to volunteers would have meant a major restructuring and a heck of a lot of time commitment on each of their parts, all for no pay of course. My thinking had always been "I will do it myself or else it won't get done on time or to

my satisfaction." Yes, it was somewhat megalomaniacal, or at least in line with the "great man" theory, but it worked and kept things humming. Finally, with two major problems haunting us endlessly—the extremely high rent and noise issues with upstairs neighbours—the space itself was starting to feel less and less viable. I recommended that those interested in pursuing something like The Blinding Light do so in a cheaper space where noise levels would not interfere with shows. A few places have come up since, but finding good space in Vancouver has always been a trial.

MH: Did you notice overarching trends or themes in the work you were seeing while you were programming The Blinding Light?

AM: As far as the moving image is concerned, there seems to have been a move away from new ideas and "ways of seeing," and a move toward revisiting ideas we have already seen or felt. Maybe a period of clarification or confirmation? Work has become more overtly political, and personal politics seems less central. Gender and



volunteer card graphic

body politics still hold sway, but is of less interest to larger audiences. There is so much material out there, and so little manages to make it to our eyes that any kind of generalization about trends is precisely that—a gross generalization. There was a brief period where it seemed hand-made, hand-processed movies were having a resurgence, but that seems to have subsided, looking more like a sub-trend in retrospect that crops up every now and then. I still believe that older technologies and mechanical apparatus will come into their own eventually as artists' tools, but again, this may sound very quiet in the larger halls...

MH: Didn't having to watch too many movies (mostly bad ones) provoke a terrifying anxiety of influence when it came time to making your own?

How did you find your own voice after being so attentive to other's needs?

AM: Making didn't precede or follow the job of programming, it occurred simultaneously, so as I saw these works, good and bad, I was also working on my own materials, projecting ideas and ideals. The primary impacts this simultaneity had were time constraints and focus. Now I find it difficult to get started at all. The lure of soaking up information and literature and the catatonic state I manage to get into regarding self-expression keeps me from producing much. But then I remind myself that if pace is forced, it usually shows. And I think I prefer to keep any bad ideas in my head.

MH: Why did you first get interested in movies?

AM: I took a college English course called Short Story/Short Film, where the two forms were compared. *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* was the first film I saw that dreamed out loud, showing another way of seeing and thinking through film. This course piqued my interest enough that when I went to university I registered in a first year film course, and as luck would have it, Peter Harcourt was the professor. I followed that course with another in Canadian avant-garde cinema with Peter, and declared my major in film studies. This was more of a focus on cultural and political studies: semiotics, Marxism, Heath, Bellour, Durgnat, etc. This left me both filled up and drained. I moved back to Montreal and looked for work while getting involved at the local film co-op and eventually landed a job there creating a tour of independent short works around the province.

MH: Why is a smart guy like you still living in Vancouver? How would you describe Vancouver as a cultural anthropologist?

AM: What is a smart guy like you still doing living in Toronto might be a better question, but the answers to these kind of inquiries are generally dull: economics, familiarity, friends... and by the way, there are smarter people than me living here! I am held here by relationships and cheap rent, mountains and ready access to nature. I don't think too much about Vancouver's

cultural qualities, it is getting more and more expensive here, but I continue to manage my way on the cheap. I don't consume much besides food and am working towards getting rid of "stuff." It is a good place to make work for me, far from any sense of pressure, but also lacking in any real dialogue around this sort of work. I can count Vancouver's experimental filmmakers and fans on one hand, though the number would be even smaller if I lived in the woods, which feels appealing. I also travel and as much as I am not a big internet flag waver, it certainly opens up windows.

MH: Do you worry about getting older, money and savings, the ability to work, losing your looks and body, illness and death?

AM: I am ready to die right now, so anything beyond today seems like a gift. As for future fiscal planning, something always comes along. And I could always get a job.

MH: Could you talk about how *Parallax* was developed?

AM: *Parallax* began with a daily ritual of hauling four or five reels up from the basement and throwing them on the Steenbeck to see what they were, sometimes fast forwarding, sometimes getting completely wrapped up in the subject matter. It has been a curious education to say the least. Thanks to this process, I now feel equally confident about delivering a baby at home, managing sales employees and knowing what to do in case of hypothermia on the trail. I was looking for images that moved me in some way, often completely divorced from their content. Turning the sound off helps. Over time I compiled lists

of images I wanted to work with, not knowing how they would sit together.

Then I began the process of working with the images via re-photography and optical printing (partly at a residency in Grenoble, France with Atelier MTK), trying different film stocks and multiple re-photography to kick up the contrast, varying techniques of hand-processing (all the material in *Parallax* is hand-processed at home, and the originals are projected). Then I began the ordering and assembly of images. All of this happened in fits and starts, between long periods of navel-gazing and confusion. As I assembled the piece, I was looking for analytical projectors, having decided this piece would be performed using variable speed projectors I could control on the fly. This would create a kind of spontaneous optical printing effect, allowing me to layer negative and positive images with a range of lens "interference": gels, hand masking, lens changes, etc. These projectors were designed for use in laboratories to study micro-organisms, for sports teams to analyze football plays, and by the military to study future targets... I spent a lot of time on EBay searching out auctions, as well as asking around at university audiovisual cages to see if they might have a few kicking around. Finally, I managed to cobble together a set that worked fairly well and needed



performing *parallax*, 2005

only a little coaxing and fixing. The next stage was running through the images and testing and re-testing timing, speed and effects.

Once I felt comfortable with the estimated length of each segment, I began the soundtrack. In the recent past I have used a sampler I play live using pre-recorded samples mixed with a CD burn. In this instance, I realized that my attention would need to be so focused on image management that handling a sampler would be out of the question. I decided to create a number of distinct "tracks" that would be played with each segment, and would act as my guide for the images. If the sound was finishing and I was behind on the image work, I would need to speed up, if the images were nearing their end, I would need to slow down to allow the music to catch up. With many rehearsals and shows behind me now, I have managed to find a pacing and strategy that works. Every time the piece is performed the material slowly degrades—an erosion I take pleasure in, both aesthetically and conceptually. Eventually it won't be possible to perform this piece any longer.

There's a man who appears two-thirds of the way into *Parallax* who sits at a desk and seems to speak from a position of authority—he gesticulates with precision, and speaks with confidence—but his words are muddled and indecipherable, a blur and muffling of sound—is this man a sage or a snake oil salesman? Should we seek him out, trust him, or do we have to find a way to make our own decisions? He appears both in negative and positive and the two projectors move him in and out of phase and focus. The appearance and disappearance of his face into his own shadow speaks to a sense of simultaneous trust and fear we put in authority—when we have nowhere to turn we hope this is the right choice—the ghosting of this figure seems to foreground his illusory nature—an invention of our own making; a spirit presence...

While working on this film I was reading a bit about Buckminster Fuller, and was taken with a pact he'd made with himself after his daughter died at a very young age. He promised to better the world with the tools he had, which meant architecture mostly, new spaces for living that had little environmental impact on the world as well as available to all, lightweight and simple to build, etc. It was a promise of utopian ideals, but a genuine gesture nonetheless. I found a documentary where he discusses this at length, and have always liked his voice, which has an almost Burroughs-like, mumbled quality. It was this explanation of his paradigm shift, his vision, which I use over the image of the man behind the desk—this figure also physically resembles Bucky Fuller, so it fell together quite nicely.

This segment originally played out four times as long as it now stands in the film, and even now it's quite long. This was actually the one area I worried about, I feared using it because of its clear sourcing from educational films, and its potential for falling into humour. But I think the

extended length and the time we are given to ruminate over it and the time I am given to develop its sculptural shape in the performance helps it move away from that potential pitfall. I really didn't want to fall into the trap of easy and familiar uses of found footage. Conversely, there are other moments, in the nature footage for example, where I wanted to embrace those clichés precisely because of their beauty and familiarity. To see a single water droplet, or a flower opening, these are moments for me that deserve returning to.

MH: How do you get through the cliché?

AM: By spending time with the material, and remaining open to it beyond standard impressions. Things become clichés precisely because they are effective and ring true somehow in their conception. If I am trying to express some moment of wonder or beauty, then they can be recalled, but reshaped. In their original settings these pictures find their function according to familiar strategies, whereas in my work these moments are re-displayed within a new context. It's simpler than it sounds. For example, I have a film about life in the woodlot, which explains why farmers preserve a chunk of forest in otherwise razed prairie areas; the wildlife

and plant varieties that occur, and how these are both useful and necessary to the maintenance of such a property. The movie has a very functional purpose, but the person who is making these images is seeking out beauty because they have an eye for it, and so the subject falls away, and the beauty—the truth of these images, and not the broader subject—becomes the focus.

When a baby is first born it is brought into a room where every orifice in its body is penetrated

by a tube to make sure all passages are clear: that it can shit, piss, hear, breathe. These pictures occur in an educational film made for doctors and nurses, demonstrating the standard process that takes place in the first five minutes of life when child gets pulled away from mother to make sure everything works. In some ways it's a horrifying procedure, but it is deemed a necessity, and as aggressive as it is, there is still a beauty to be found in it. These pictures appear at the beginning and end of my film. They run in metaphoric parallel with a CPR segment where there is an attempt to resuscitate a woman—yet another medical procedure which looks absolutely violent but is similarly built to give or resuscitate life. These particular film segments were shot in actual hospitals and are originally shown to demonstrate a failure of technique—in the case of the CPR, the woman dies. This made me very tentative about using this footage, especially because it looks like the doctors are pressing life out of her (even though they're trying to save her). *Parallax*, for me, is about this clash between life giving and life taking. My intention is never violent, though there is most definitely a violence in the imagery.

MH: Can you talk to me about the salamanders?



parallax, 2005

AM: A salamander is an amphibian that is poorly adapted to both land and water. It doesn't swim well because it lacks fins, but it needs to be in the water in order to breathe and maintain its moisture. On land its body is too long—its stomach drags and it doesn't move very efficiently. And so it finds itself caught between these two spaces and has to bridge them constantly with no one place it can settle. The newborn and the CPR patient each performs a similar bridging, which is returned to and developed in much of the imagery throughout.

Moving through nature, places which have an initial sense of peace and safety are quickly interrupted by factors which make it risky, dangerous and confusing. This is what *Parallax* finds in the natural world. The struggles of a bird feeding its young and abandoning them while it searches for food. A lone squirrel hiding below ground, a scattering of insects moving across space, another cluster of bugs taking apart their prey. Then there is a shift into so-called civilization with the movement of a car heading directly towards us, filling the screen with its grill. Cars are emblematic of our culture, creating new spaces and pictures of the space we inhabit—the so-called "grid". Following the baby at the film's beginning, the next human we see (much later) is heralded by a car - a startled young girl turning to look. It is this look that brings us into the city. At this point there is a long shot of the city glimpsed across the water, a bridge, and then the city itself, its characters in motion, surrounded but alone, trying to make their way. Nature and civilization each have a necessary brutality. When a robin comes to its young and drops a worm into their mouths, those babies are fed but unsafe, they're left exposed and crying out.

MH: Your use of two projectors suggests a duality that is echoed in the title.

AM: The physical displacement of the image plays off one of the meanings of parallax, that a subtle shift of perspective can change everything. If I close one eye that painting on the opposite wall shifts, if I close the other eye, again it shifts. This perspective shifts with only inches of adjustment from the viewer's perspective. The greater the distance away, the larger that angle reaches; in this way there is something of the butterfly effect here too. I also want to play with the tension between identical images, their movements towards and away from each other, and our innate desire for things to come together. I show paired 16mm reels, one negative the other positive, and when these images meet in sync there is a containment, but it is fleeting and mostly they remain apart and that tension drives the piece. That containment, or labeling, or knowing, is always temporary. The answer we're looking for is difficult to grasp and we can't keep it. In theory, the perfect superimposition of negative and positive would produce an image of nothing. This relates to the performative aspect as well, the moment I decide to make *Parallax* a single channel work it would be contained and repeatable, and that cuts completely against the theme of the piece.



parallax, 2005

There's something similar at work in *Night sky*, the projection materials are taken out of their original context and rebuilt to celebrate the potential never manifested in the original. *Night sky* is a film performance for three super-8 cartridge projectors, which were invented and marketed to encourage the use of super-8. These units are about the size of a slide projector, and load from the rear with an endless loop cartridge of super-8 film potentially running anywhere from a few seconds to about three minutes. The idea was that teachers could more efficiently load and unload the projector "instantly" for classroom use. This simplification and the looping format is precisely what appealed to me. And so I took these cartridges, cracked them open, removed the original film and reloaded them with my own hand processed black and white super-8. For *Night sky*, there are about 25 cartridges loaded and unloaded throughout the piece. There were a lot of different projectors marketed in super-8's heyday—slow motion and high speed, bookcase style, rear screen, portable, multi-format, cartridge, etc.—all intended to guarantee and enforce the economics of the medium. The more the merrier. Not unlike the range of video cameras and monitors available today. To make these mechanisms useful in a new way was very much a part of both *Night sky* and *Parallax*. The irony is that they're in direct opposition to original economic imperatives. I'm using these projectors because they're cheap and available, not because they're the cutting edge of technology the way they once were. The reinvention of these tools through re-use finds a strong thematic parallel in the use of found footage.

MH: Both the delivery system and the material on display is found.

AM: Yes, but also and more specifically the actual hijacking of their originally intended uses and the reinvention that comes with this. There is now an ever-growing sub-genre of found footage films which rely almost exclusively on E-bay, as people seek out particular kinds of films instead of working with what they have simply found or stumbled across. Some might begin with a small bit of film that triggers an idea, and then seek out footage that can enhance and move the idea forward.

MH: But you're reacting to footage you find?

AM: I've seen about two percent of the material in my basement and the selection process comes initially from what the canister reads and what I think I might find in there. It arrives through curiosity. Then the process takes on a shape familiar to me from more traditionally experimental approaches. You go out and shoot a bunch of film over an extended period, then months pass during which you review footage and try to uncover common threads. The common thread is your own living: you shot it, and that provides a continuity of attention or concern. With the basement footage I choose images I am drawn to, catalogue them, then set them aside and continue looking. I'm not thinking of how they move together at all, not until months later.

MH: Aren't there a pair of eyes which cut a figure for us to follow in *Nightsky*?

AM: The eyes are preceded by a title card which reads, "Close Your Eyes." The eyes enter and cross with churning river water that's slowed down and flipped, so it runs backwards and upside down. The eyes are an entrance, and lead us into the work symbolically and gently. If I instead simply show you images of space without those eyes then it might seem we are in space, as opposed to looking at space, or looking at our imaginings of space.

MH: Does the film performance narrate a lost utopia of science?

AM: It uses images from a period of history where space is treated with wonder and awe, albeit in a romanticized way. These pictures also depict a frontier of knowledge and human potential, hope and other worldliness.

MH: Can you describe the three-projector performance?

AM: I can at least describe one version. We open with a centre screen title credit: *Nightsky*. The left screen shows the blowing branch of a tree with a green filter, on the right screen is a homemade wind chime made of forks and knives, sepia filtered. The centre screen switches to a candle blowing in the darkness, the side screens go dark, then there are a number of variations. In one version the card *Close Your Eyes* appears on the left, and on the right the churning water. In the centre screen the title gives way to the close-up eyes. These three images merge to the centre, and we spend time on the churning water and the eyes with some hand-manipulated filtering bringing the water and eyes in and out of sight and in combination with one another.



nightsky, 2002

The water disappears, and we're presented with the first of a series of loops depicting space technology: satellites spinning in orbit (in negative) and then a pan across dozens of radio telescopes, remarking the play between the earth and space. Then the second layering begins containing clusters of meteorites, close-ups of artist renditions of Saturn's rings, sometimes in negative, sometimes positive, images from left and right projectors are both layered onto the eyes. Then they pull apart, one to the left, the other one to the right, and the centre eyes are replaced with slow motion phases of the moon in black and white. The two outside screens switch to very short loops of a close-up face of an astronaut with a coloured gel layed on top of each projector lens. The centre image shifts to a positive image of the astronaut with a blue filter, these three images (all showing the astronaut) slowly merge, achieved by my moving the projectors together to create a pseudo-three dimensional version of the astronaut.

On the soundtrack we've moved from sparse wind sounds to technological blips and radio frequencies, and looping radio tones, and a short sampling of the well known space radio broadcast, "One small step for man..." which loops

incompletely until all three images merge one on top of another.

Then the screens pull apart, each picture appears separately as the imagery shifts towards a study of sunlight, the impact of solar radiation, the deflection of heat off the earth, etc - the material becomes less about wonder and more about information - the science of the universe. Then we return to material from the original mechanisms of space (satellites, dishes and telescopes) and more natural materials, rock formations, planetary surfaces and meteorites. The centre image shifts into an extreme close-up of a television screen that reads as abstract noise, the right screen shifts to a close-up of a radio telescope with raked shadows, while on the left the eyes from the beginning return. These three images merge, the visual noise disappears, and we end with a play between the radio telescope and the two eyes, and then back to the *Nightsky* title card loop. The end.

MH: Were you concerned working with this material that it would be overtaken by nostalgia? That there is already too much meaning attached to some of these moments?

AM: I wonder about this fear of nostalgia. How do you see it as problematic?

MH: Nostalgia can provoke an easy sentimentality, a glaze of received associations which prevents thinking or seeing. Nostalgia can short circuit attention, and part of your project requires opening the material on display for new arrangements and new meanings. There are certain pop songs, for instance, which are already my songs, attached to moments of my life, so when I encounter them in a movie the song never makes its way all the way over from the

speakers.

AM: But the fact is, I *need* it to be your song if I'm going to do anything with it, as nostalgia is a prerequisite for meaning to shift. I want to maintain the wonder these images once evoked, but also question meanings that we may have missed the first time around through recontextualization. *Nightsky* brings a subject back that we haven't looked at for a while, asking questions about the loss of that wonder, those frontiers, those hopes. Where are they now? Today's images of space exploration—for instance transmissions from the surface of Mars—don't carry the same potency because they're less aesthetically rendered, they're videotaped surfaces of a dull red planet, so the magic is also lost. What we are seeing, in fact, is more true and less an attempt to capitalize on our imaginations. There will be a generation of children who carry no fascination with space (or at least a different kind) because of these kinds of images.

MH: Does your project want to redress the inadequacy of the images that are around us?

AM: Not redress, but to pose the question: What did those images finally do for us? Or were they empty promises? Like a lot of things that carry nostalgia, there's

a melancholic aspect to it. We miss the things we never had in the first place.

Part of the appeal of space is that there is nobody out there. It is unspoiled. The images that followed the ones I chose show us utopian ideals of cityscapes and new social orders which don't have the same appeal. These pictures were followed by television shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and *Space 1999* but they were only earthly situations transplanted into space stations. To boldly go where every man has been before.

MH: You have produced performances which are played and played again, but others which have a much shorter life.

AM: Most of the one-night stands are inspired by events or collaborations. In 1999, Western Front had a year dedicated to the experimental film image as a thematic, called ~scope and they invited me to do an installation as well as a live performance. I collaborated with two other filmmakers (Brad Poulsen and Brian Johnson) and a musician (Claudio Cacciotti) to create a six projector, three-screen piece entitled *Solar Radiation* that inspired *Nightsky*.

Strand 2 was made for a festival version of a regular monthly event organized by the now-defunct Vancouver-based collective Multiplex Grand. It was built around found footage animation of a DNA strand on a black background. This was run through the projector then re-introduced into the same projector, bi-packing the material.

In a related work, I ran one film through a projector, then instead of taking it up on a reel, ran it into a second projector. In this way the viewer is presented with a comparable image on both projectors with a delay of three feet of film, about seven seconds. I played with focus and the colouring of the images while they ran together.

Some one-offs are more playful and precisely about taking the opportunity to experiment with an audience's expectations as well as developing new ideas and techniques. With *The Wallpaper Horizons* I discovered a perfect matchpoint between an instructional film on hanging wallpaper and Norman McLaren's *Lines Horizontal*. About five minutes into the film a string is tautly stretched to level the wallpaper and all that appears on screen is a red string on a white background. At this moment McLaren's film is cut in on the same shot, albeit animated. The soundtracks are combined as we get inextricably lost in some alternate reality well outside our (assumed) aspirations to redecorate...

Another experiment which I returned to many times was a visuals exercise which I would play with as audience members entered the cinema prior to a screening (at the *Blinding Light*). Often I would layer a found footage 16mm film with a simple digital painting toy (*My First Sony Electronic Sketchpad*) run into the video projector

so that the frame of the video projector matched that of the film. In this manner I could "draw" over the 16mm images as they appeared, marking off and surrounding characters with Haring-esque thick lines, interrupting the images with drawn text, and dropping symbol stamps into the scenes.

At the invitation of Maija Martin for her project entitled *The 100 Greatest Books of All Time*, (where she asked twenty participants—filmmakers, videomakers, friends, performers—to each make a thirty second video representing their five favourite books) I used a film which was originally intended to teach speed-reading. A cluster of words meant to be read appears on an otherwise blurred screen, jumping across the lines and down the screen/page. The selected portion of the text references cinema and the frame is videotaped smaller and centred, but at 24 frames per-second instead of 18. It all moves too quickly even for speed readers, playing on Maija's theme of "exploring the impossibility of creating cohesive superlatives at the end of the 20th century". The project was created for Pleasuredome's *Blueprint*, a Post-Millennial touring collection of commissioned works.

MH: Was *I Am Watched* (1998) your last 'single-channel' movie? The quality of attention is very familiar from your performances, this movie appears as a bridge of sorts between two kinds of practice. Is it a bridge?

AM: *I Am Watched* isn't single channel: it is two cartridge projectors, performed with lots of tricky masking. I have made few single channel films since focusing more on projector performance works, and if there is a switchover point it is likely *A Current Fear of*

Light, which was made by videotaping a performance (albeit one I performed in a dark room by myself). This piece was created entirely of scratched, scraped and punctured black leader, looped in a projector and videotaped while altering the framing (zooming in and out) as well as the shutter speed—a sort of instant optical printing.

I Am Watched begins in the dark with an alarm that never quite stops ringing throughout the film and low, slowed tones. A found footage woman appears approaching and gently touching a door, over and over, in stunned recognition, her face seems to say, "Oh." She finally understands. Slowly, from the right, a new picture wipes in, showing clouds running past a tower which holds the letter 'W.' All the re-filmed footage is hand-processed so uneven development, dirt, scratches and cinch marks are very much in evidence. The mysterious W wipes into an aerial view of a sidewalk where people walk, this view as if from the point of view of the W. A found footage policeman (keystone kops?) scampers down an alley fourteen times, caught in a loop which searches for meaning perhaps, some order in these proceedings. Then a projector lens appears in close-up with a dark disc sliding over it (almost like an eclipse) and inside the lens a super-8 aging magenta porn film



phosphene at western front, 1999

appears, a close-up of penetration. The motion is so repetitive it's hard to know if this is also a loop but at last she takes out his cock and jerks him off on her chest. These images blend back into the first pictures of the woman by the wall, recoiling from the primal scene.

MH: You make a new narrative from these looped picture fragments. Is the aim to show that the tyranny of one-way mainstream flow can be re-imagined via re-ordering? Is it an examination of sexual hysteria?

AM: There is something of sexual hysteria here, most certainly, and also of a fear of the gaze—both in its ownership and its reception. The woman is actually tentatively looking into the next room through the door she is approaching, only she never reaches that door, while the imposing and brittle-aging W (a well-known landmark here in Vancouver and possibly the W of "watched" in the title) seems to speak of an ever-watchful Orwellian state control, observing all actions on the street below. The looping of our keystone cop effectively renders any potency he may have had to nothing, and yet his presence is constant. The porn element comes as a shock to most audiences and is unexpected, but in fact plays right into this self-conscious paranoia that has rendered even the most intimate act into performance and cliché. The performance is built of loops and is in fact one giant loop itself, in the end. This is one piece I thought about reworking for galleries with this looping in mind...

MH: Is there a relationship between your work and DJ culture?

AM: I just read somewhere that the turntable now outsells the electric guitar in the UK, and so turntable as instrument has most definitely hit the mainstream and the economic potential rolls on as kids continue to buy new records (at least with a guitar there were only so many effects pedals you could care about). But the relationship to my work is tenuous. The crucial difference is that the material I'm working with isn't available or even marketed. If DJs took their source material from music no one listened to anymore, made recordings of them, then recorded those recordings, then pressed their own vinyl and put those records on some sort of relic turntables and accompanied it with contemporary visual material, we'd be more eye to eye.

MH: You are very sensitive to small details in the picture world, like a lover who comes to know every moment of a body, every possible response. This sensitivity requires a mutual openness, which leads, inevitably, not all the time but sometimes, to heartbreak, new forms of pain. Could you speak about this wounding in terms of the pictures you see? Or the pictures you form of those around you?

AM: While working I develop a deepening relationship with pictures, much like time spent with another human being. We learn to separate the impossible from what can reasonably be hoped for, recognize the fault lines. How do we manage the impossible? The limit. A delicate step and loving respect is requisite if we hope

to maintain mutual growth. This is the hardest thing about any relationship. The pain comes when we don't have the tools or understanding to recognize the change that is always happening. The same can be said for my relationship to moving pictures—how best to cradle these images without sheltering them too much, how to draw them together without sacrificing autonomy, how best to create true relationships that allow weakness, fragility, strength and beauty, all at the same time.

MH: I remember seeing Abigail Child's work for the first time at the Collective in NY. She showed *Covert Action* amongst other things, a movie that beautifully and disturbingly reworks home movie footage to underline shifting relations of power, and Jonas Mekas castigated her for not preserving the original footage. In his eyes, all ' footage' or movies were born equal, part of a vanishing past. How would you respond to this?

AM: As dramatic as this may sound, it actually pains me to cut films up. I tend to agree with Mekas, that each of these films regardless of intent or content, deserves to retain its integrity. But for me that doesn't mean we can't use these images in new contexts, we just have to respect its first version—treating it with the wisdom it

occupies and develops through its very existence and the passing of time. While the film is inanimate, our relationship to it brings it to life.

MH: How do the pictures you work with relate to the pictures of your own life, the pictures you have of your own life?

AM: I choose my images based on personal impact, though I am the sum of a grouping of outside influences. But there is an integrity to that grouping I hope to explore as well as dismantle. These

pictures are the result of that process.

MH: There is a marked disparity between the solitary of your making, and the collectivity of presentation (people gathering to watch), unlike a book for instance, which is written and read alone. Does this disparity trouble you?

AM: No matter how many come to the theatre, I'm always alone when I watch a film, and I believe the rest of the audience feels this way too. It is a way of gathering with others yet maintaining a solitary position, in the dark, preoccupied with your own emotional reactions. This is why we all find it so troubling when that focus is broken by someone's phone going off or incessant whispering—the tacit agreement of aloneness in a group of people has been broken, and threatens the magic of a very fragile relationship. When the lights come up there is a sense of loss, but also a quick (but still-gradual) reintegration into the room, and the world. This format—this way of seeing and being—is very specific to the presentation of film. It doesn't strike me as a disparity at all, but rather a way of presenting a solitary and personal expression to a group that remain individuals.

MH: Do you feel (a la Freud) that something is missing in



this fleeting, 2003

most artists, and art is the means to fill the hole? If there was/is something missing in you, what would it be?

AM: I wouldn't dare to speak for most artists, as I believe everybody has their own reasons or inevitable struggles that are wholly specific. I have looked at prolific or focused artists in the past with envy, wishing that my muse visited with more frequency. Now I see more clearly that for every apparent edge or plus, there are as many minuses, and we all manage our output and creativity in the best way we know how. Asking for more, or whining with less, seems only to augment what can already feel like a burden if not carefully managed and fairly treated.

MH: If you were happier would you stop making movies?

AM: They would be different. My discomfort with the world most definitely plays a major role in artistic output, and if I was more comfortable with it, I would be less inclined to look inward so much for some kind of spiritual peace. I am beginning to become more interested in drawing and writing lately, so who knows where things may lead...

MH: How has the fringe managed to respond to the politics of empire? How does your work respond to it?

AM: I think the more personal a work can be, the more universal it becomes. By not bogging down in fashion and current politics, a work can speak more clearly, unfettered by a reactionary methodology. We cannot help but respond to the politics of empire: we sit inside it, blood is on our hands from the moment we are born. How we choose to do that, by finding beauty in our midst, for example, or granting value to a different path, is the best any of us can hope for. In my work, I feel that by looking into the past, the way we have imagined ourselves and our world, reflects upon other ways to live. It might provide tools with which to rise out of traps of an entirely personal nature and form.

I sometimes distrust the romantic clichés which equate solitude with beauty, but there is a reason the cliché exists. When I am alone, I feel most capable of understanding myself and the world around me. The balancing act of the world outside ("civilization") and inside is what occupies my life.

MH: Is it difficult to name desire as your own, to sign a piece of work?

AM: It gets easier as time goes by through some combination of a sense of helplessness and a need to know that desire.

MH: Do you ever fly in your dreams?

AM: I've had only one dream about cinema, which I remember vividly. I am standing on loose grey rock creating a shoreline that falls off in the distance, beyond is forest on all sides. On my right stands a new shed or

large boathouse with oversize windows in front. A number of people—maybe thirty in all—start to file out of it, solemn and naked. They seemed healthy and attractive, but normal-bodied as well, not generically good looking at all. Real. A bit confused, I realize that a few hundred more people are emerging from the woods and are converging in one area. Suddenly the ritual/movement ends and they all break from their focused activity, loosening up and talking among themselves.

Two women are walking back from the proceedings. I casually ask what is going on, trying to be confident and relaxed with everyone's nudity, especially theirs, as they are very close to me now. They tell me they are shooting a movie (I think they have accents-Dutch?). I say something like "So... looks like maybe a B-movie, something low budget?" Trying to make them feel comfortable with the fact that it isn't anything special and hey—ya gotta work right? They stop and say quite directly that no, in fact, it is a very important film. The fact that these aren't trained actors is somehow central.

I turn away and head up the hill from the water, arriving at my granny's house. I come around to the front and see that a new scene is being set up. More naked people at one end of the lawn (toward the garage) are mixed in with others in maid/servant clothing. Someone says "OK!", and they all start to move across the lawn towards the woodshed at the other end. I notice the director for the first time, an older Ingmar Bergman-looking guy, a woman with a clipboard and three or four middle-aged others surround him, all looking serious.

The camera is 35mm I think, housed in what seems like a mixture of fiberglass and plastic, a relic from past camera ideals, beautiful and

stylish like a big old American car. I study the director as the camera glides in my direction, filming in the direction of the garage. A woman in a dark blue denim dress with a pen strung around her neck walks across the action, very close to the camera. The woman with the clipboard breathes in sharply, obviously upset this has happened. She says turn the camera off, but the director quickly interjects, asking that the lens cap be put on slowly, and only then to turn the camera off. It seems this woman was not part of the scene and they are concerned they will now have to get permission. This has been difficult in the past. It turns out that the director has a policy of using everything he shoots. If the stranger does not agree to participate for whatever reason, the entire film is lost.



the natural world (work in progress)

This interview was conducted primarily during the 2005 edition of Mediacity, a festival of experimental film and video in Windsor, Ontario.