Interview with **Alex MacKenzie** by Matt Rossoni
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Matt: Not only do you hand-process your film, you have also built your own projection equipment, like your wooden, hand-cranked machine used for *The Wooden Lightbox: a Secret Art of Seeing* (2007-12). This methodology dates back to early cinema, when a plethora of image-making machines offered possibilities or alternatives well beyond what we have commonly known, and attendees sought out machines like the Cinematograph rather than specific films. Do you create additional films for your idiosyncratic machines/arrangements, or is each 'film' relative to its specific delivery system?

The Wooden Lightbox: a Secret Art of Seeing (2007-12).
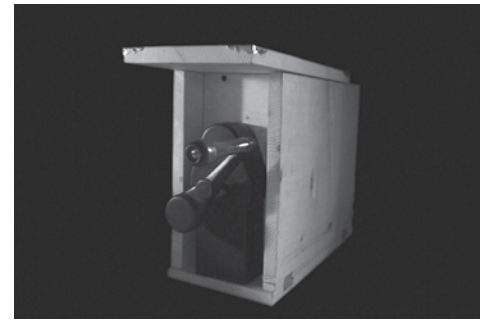
Alex: So far the apparatus has been specific to the work produced for and around it, but I wouldn't say that is a hard and fast rule. And there have been more than one work for a given delivery system. I have actually used the hand-cranked projector in workshops on occasion as it affords an easy way to look at footage more slowly and as a single frame. This works particularly well with photogram workshops. I made two pieces for an oddball analytic projector I found that runs regular 8mm unsplit film (16mm gauge) across the full span of the frame, creating a kind of wide-screen experience. I can only assume there was a custom camera that shot the full frame for this projector, but I have never seen one. Instead, I used it in creating an unsplit R8 film that projects as two frames side by side (instead of the 4 frames in a square we normally see with this technique). There were two works designed around this projector: *Loom* and *Goldenleaf*. Other works I have presented on standard analytic projectors use them in pairs, (*Parallax, Intertidal*) and in a manner far from how they were originally intended to be used (ie sports analysis, science). A few earlier works (*I am Watched/Horizontal Fix, Escape Velocity* and *Nightsky*) are all presented using two or three late '60s era "Technicolor" brand, Super 8 cartridge projectors that I re-loaded with original hand-processed footage across multiple cartridges. So I have definitely taken an interest in "delivery systems" and worked out ways to take advantage of their inherent qualities to create work that elevates or repurposes those features.

Parallax (2004/5).

Matt: Often what excites my interest in projector performances is a deep, almost throbbing visceral experience of sound and image. This seems very musical, like being in a cinematic mosh pit of visual music, and indeed there are many expanded cinema artists and groups who have either used musical instrumentation directly or incorporated musical ideals into their work. How do you shape your performances? How do you find your rhythms?

Alex: The rhythms in my work are determined by the manipulation of the image and the pacing therein through the edit, as well as by frame rate, audible projector sounds (the "chunk-chunk-chunk" of a slowed analytic projector), and of course the soundtrack I work with. The sculpting of the piece is very much like shaping a musical score, where the images and sounds are arranged in a predetermined order, often with an accompanying visual score I can track as I present the work, especially for longer form pieces. Occasionally I am inspired by sounds that inform the image, but mostly the image comes first and I create or collaborate on sound that enhances that visual component. Having said that, I am also very inspired by silent rhythms, films that rely solely on the rhythm of the edit to build a silent soundtrack that feels like it is playing in your head. There is a focus that comes with this sort of viewing experience I find inspiring in its spare and essential nature.

Apparitions (2016).

Matt: Expanded cinema seems to have the potential to communicate something to anyone, be it intellectual, emotional, perceptual, etc., regardless of their background or familiarity with the 'genre.' What is your experience with audiences like? Do you regard your work as open for interpretation, or is there something inherent that you are wanting to communicate? Is there anything you want to say about *Apparitions*?

Alex: I have a fairly clear idea of wanting to communicate something, as abstract or non-verbal as that might be. I don't always know what that is when I begin making the work, but it inevitably starts to take on a shape and a direction. And there is most definitely a harnessing of the medium that takes place in the service of the work and its expression. How that is interpreted by the audience ranges significantly based on their experience with the medium and their openness to that moment of viewing. *Apparitions* began as a research project that shared a common fascination with several of my past works in my desire to re-examine and reinvent the possibilities of
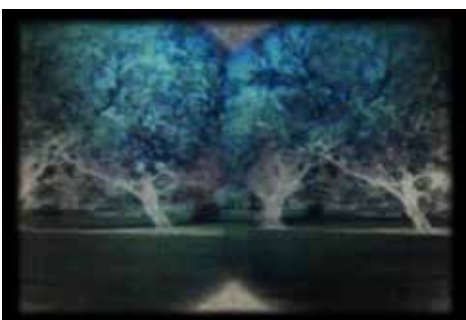
Apparitions (2016).

the cinematic experience outside the conventions and limitations of narrative, theatre-based and commodity-determined forms. Specifically in this case I was interested in the potential of dimensional viewing that steps away from the banalities of "3D" or "Stereo" vision and the commerce that is part and parcel with those approaches. It is also a sort of loose history of the moving image that travels from pure light, to early attempts at image registration, and references to the past while also stepping away from it. I suppose it runs a bit like a parallel history that never was. There is also an ongoing interest in nature and culture for me; where the two might coexist as well as collide. The human drive to tame, settle, and label is at its most interesting when it is unsuccessful.

Apparitions (2016).

Matt: Both expanded cinema and the 'avant' tend to reject the notion of fixed commodities. Performance is often regarded as a way to eschew this kind of staunchness. Does improvisation play a role in your work? What does 'live' mean to you?

Alex: I began performing very much as a way to remain in and with the film, to create a process-oriented body of work that insists upon and thrives in its active nature as well as the presence of the author. Improvisation is what keeps it alive, as much as there is a clear backbone to the work. The variations that come with venue size and shape, audience, and the geography of the room play a big part in my subtle re-interpretations of the work. Being able to coax in new elements within the parameters of the material I have chosen keeps it interesting.

Matt: Can you address medium specificity briefly?

Alex: 16mm film holds substantial and potent qualities that aren't available to me in other media. Its tactile nature, the ability to process and manipulate the materials by hand, and the great potential for reshaping these same elements in a live setting to name a few. Its relative fragility also raises interesting questions around legacy, ephemerality and the passing nature of the work and of life. I like the idea that this work, like a moment in life, will only exist the one time. Sure, you could remount it with a set of instructions for another performer, but that reads to me like a remake of a film or a cover version. Time, circumstance and audience are central to the experience. If you miss it, you miss it. And that's okay too.

Apparitions (2016).

Matt: Though Gene Youngblood's influential 1970 book *Expanded Cinema* was not the unveiling of the term, it was the first extended survey of the subject and the first, I believe, to consider video as an art form. Given your interest in both the history of cinema and machines, have you considered working with video projectors?

Alex: I have worked with video a little bit, actually an early consumer video drawing tablet called My First Sony, where I would layer video drawing and sketching on top of film. But my interest tends toward far earlier mechanical devices. I am not averse to video, and were I to explore it further, this would likely be a function of how I might re-harness or disrupt the intended use of the device. One thing that has kept me away from video is its non-tactile nature, (except for the possibility of manipulating a physical magnetic tape). The gap between the actual visible image and the format feels less enticing and cuts off a relationship with the physical that is pretty central.

Matt: Suppose I am enrolled in a film survey course–what three films would you consider essential viewing? They don't have to be experimental, but they probably should be.

Alex: There are a million answers to that one and so I will defer to a few classics: *Meshes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren, *The Dante Quartet* by Stan Brakhage, and *The Man Who Could Not See Far Enough* by Peter Rose, (three of my favourites that never get old.)

Apparitions (2016).